

4.1 An Essay on Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit*: What's Become of the Common Good?

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Abstract

Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* critiques the arbitrary and unjust rule of meritocracy in contemporary society, where social rewards and opportunities are increasingly allocated based on merit. Sandel argues that the rise of neoliberal economics since the 1980s has led to the pull back of the welfare state and the growing dominance of markets as determinants of value and worth. This market-driven economy has promoted hyper-individualism and the belief that individuals entirely “deserve” their success or failure. While this economy has benefited professional elites, it has simultaneously alienated large sections of the non-professional classes, resulting in resentment, democratic distrust, and weakening solidarity. The book also critiques technocracy, credentialism, and deservedness-based approaches to social security that increasingly shape governance and public policy. Further, Sandel proposes a communitarian solution rooted in dignity of labour, democratic dialogue, and the idea of the common good, wherein work is valued not merely through market logic but through its broader social contribution and mutual well-being.

Keywords

Meritocracy; Neoliberalism; Globalization; Technocracy; Solidarity

It was difficult to reconcile the fact that my academic grades were generally solid, yet I never truly cherished life as a student right from school through university. The journey was marked by validation through marks and awards, dread of scoring less, chronic perfectionism-ridden anxiety, and alienation from fellow students.

Post academia, UPSC became another hoop one must painstakingly cross to be viewed as “deserving”, often resulting in burnout. Michael Sandel calls this the damaged psyche of the “winners”.

Yet, we continue to aspire and fight for a meritocratic society. The question is why?

Sandel in his book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, considers meritocracy to be one of the dangerous moral indoctrinations of our times. He does acknowledge the allure of a merit-based society vis-à-vis an aristocratic society; a meritocratic society gives a sense of achievement and pride to an individual as he/her gets resources based on merit compared to an aristocratic society which is based on one's birth, which is beyond one's control. I do relate to the sense of pride by civil servants who had cleared the UPSC exam after years of perseverance.

However, inequality is justified if it is based on differences in talent and effort, unlike inherited aristocratic privilege. Further, the fundamental arbitrariness of categorising people into “deserving winners” and “deserving losers” based on something as morally arbitrary as talent is hardly questioned. For instance, under neoliberal thinking, unemployed people are often blamed for not working hard enough instead of considering structural factors such as caste/disability.

Therefore, the winners take pride in receiving a larger share of the pie based on their perceived merit, while the losers suffer from humiliation and resentment. Recognizing the element of luck and other favourable circumstances cultivates gratitude for one's success and compassion for others. However, this intense individualism tears apart any semblance of gratitude and acknowledgment of luck in human life, thereby undermining solidarity which is essential for any egalitarian society concerned with the well-being of the community.

According to Sandel, this meritocratic common sense has been embraced in the neoliberal era by both centre-left and right-wing political parties. The difference between them increasingly lay in making meritocracy more inclusive rather than questioning it altogether. In the process, the centre-left alienated large sections of the working class by continuously selling the dream of upward mobility through talent and credentials despite widening inequalities produced by globalization. Sandel sees this disconnect as one of the reasons behind the rise of populist right-wing movements backed by those who felt excluded from the promise of meritocratic success.

In this context, since 1980's welfare state has pulled back and the market has been the central mechanism to allocate resources. The domain of the market has expanded to include public goods such as health and education, which are often inaccessible to the people with fewer resources. This leads to them being left behind in the development process. Also, in an individualistic society, this weakens community bonds as it is socially perceived that the market is a fair allocator of resources to people based solely

on their merit.

Interestingly, Sandel also critiques technocracy which attempts to resolve social and political disagreements through expert-sanctioned knowledge and technology. Further, the professional class elites are believed to deserve authority because of their “credentials” such as upper middle-class upbringing, private schooling, Ivy League education, and professional success. This class increasingly dominates elite professions including public policy. Decisions made by technocrats do not necessarily consider civic virtue, lived experiences, or the democratic understanding of the common good. This was evident in the way the financial crisis of 2008 was resolved, through Wall Street bailouts instead of empowering the local community

I can personally attest to this contradiction. As a bureaucrat from a privileged background, I recognise that I lack deeper insights into rural India and therefore may not fully understand the complexities involved in enabling digital connectivity in such regions. Sandel's critique therefore becomes not merely theoretical but deeply relevant to contemporary policymaking.

However, the critique need not obscure the benefits of technology's democratization. The spread of tele-density has resulted in increased access to information via technology to remote and poor populations. It has empowered them to connect and participate in the economy and polity.

At the same time, Sandel attempts to restore dignity and pride to the non-professional classes. His solution is not to merely integrate everyone into the professional elite. Rather, it is to collectively rethink what society truly values i.e. whether it is endless GDP growth driven through consumption and speculation, or mutual well-being achieved through producing socially useful goods and services. Such questions require democratic dialogue rather than accepting market logic.

The book's critique of meritocracy also extends meaningfully beyond America. India, too, is a deeply meritocratic society which places enormous value on being perceived as “talented”. Regarding reservations, the privileged often justify access to educational institutions through talent while discounting caste and class advantages. On the other hand, the deprived demand distributive justice to correct historical wrongs. Yet, the deeper question i.e. why allocation of resources should primarily be based on “merit” itself is rarely interrogated.

Similarly, technocratic responses to collective social problems such as unemployment

and healthcare increasingly promote individualized solutions like entrepreneurship or market-based insurance systems, implicitly suggesting that the worst-off are themselves responsible for their suffering.

Sandel argues that a society committed to the common good must also recognise the dignity of labour and accord equal respect to all forms of work, irrespective of their social or economic status. He contends that social hierarchies which devalue certain occupations undermine both individual dignity and social cohesion. From this perspective, fostering equal respect for all forms of labour remains an important consideration in building a more inclusive society.

Sandel's perspective may be critiqued for privileging our identity as citizens over our identity as autonomous individuals. Being a citizen in a postcolonial society is a varied and unequal experience. In reality, a marginalized citizen may face more barriers to participate fully in the society due to intersectional identities of caste, gender, class, religion compared to a privileged citizen.

However, I find his understanding of citizenship as a collective democratic project very meaningful. It encourages open-minded dialogue, mutual responsibility, and shared attempts to arrive at collective well-being. In doing so, it challenges the dominant belief that society is merely a competitive race between isolated individuals struggling endlessly to prove themselves “deserving”.

Personally, I now realise that much of my own pursuit of becoming “deserving” emerged from a fragile sense of self-worth conditioned by a deeply meritocratic society. Post burnout and therapy, I increasingly feel that what truly matters is not endless competition, but collective well-being through dignity and solidarity with one another

References

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Author's Profile

Ms. Tanvika Singh is Assistant Director General at LAF Wing, Department of Telecommunications. She has been working in the non-tax revenue domain of telecommunications for several years, with experience in license fee assessment of major telecom operators, spectrum usage charge related policy, litigation, and audit. She enjoys the analytical nature of regulatory and financial assignments and engaging with diverse stakeholders. She has a keen interest in policy research and aims to explain complex legal, financial, and regulatory issues in a manner that is accessible to a wider audience. Her academic interests include feminism, postcolonialism, political economy, and public policy. Through her writing, she seeks to connect contemporary theories with lived experiences while maintaining an interest in yoga, reading, and cooking.