

# The lottery of birth: Same rights, yet some must work harder

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I recently read about a talented cricketer aspiring to play for the national team lamenting about his lack of privilege in comparison to another who is the son of a former cricketer. My work in Human Resources and Education brings me face-to-face with many candidates and students, offering me an opportunity to hear their life stories. These interactions have made it clear to me that even though everyone of us has the same legal rights, circumstances at birth can shape our whole lives, determining our access to education, health, and employment. Equally, I am often struck by the magnitude of difficulties and disadvantages thrust upon some by their circumstances of birth and how they have overcome those by the sheer strength of their conviction in themselves and their positive spirit to live the best life that they can.

Today, a baby born in war-torn Ukraine or recently flood-ravaged Pakistan, or famine-affected Africa has different opportunities when compared to another born in Western Europe, Scandinavian countries, New Zealand or Singapore. Even within a single country like India, many privilege-at-birth factors determine life chances— gender, class, caste, skin colour, access to health and even the pin code! Of course, privilege is not a binary (i.e., you have it, or you don't), people fall in a range on most factors.

It is hard for those born into difficult family situations to build the escape velocity to rise to a different orbit of privilege and take entire families with them. For example, even in a country like Denmark which has among the lowest income inequality ratings in the world, it takes two generations on average for someone born in a low-income family to get to the median income in their society. In the United States, it takes five. In theory, free markets are supposed to level things out, but the experience of the world in the past few decades has been different. Inequalities have widened characterised by the affluence of some and the poverty of many.

How does this privilege play out in reality? Those who have won the lottery of birth, carry not just material advantages, but social, psychological, and emotional ones too. For example,

- Societies constantly reinforce stereotypical standards of beauty, physical attraction, manner of speech and deportment. Those outside the circle of privileges more often than not fall short of these standards on which they are constantly judged.

- Privilege creates a network with access to opportunity and mentorship. For instance, in Ivy League universities, legacy admissions (i.e., those with a family connection to those who graduated from the same institution) have an acceptance rate of 33 percent while it is less than 8 percent for the rest. The privileged do not face rejection as often as, say, an Adivasi, a Dalit, or a trans-person.
- The privileged grow up in family folklore amid role models. It is no surprise that privilege transfers from one generation to the next -architects, doctors, or lawyers often inherit a successful practice. They grow up more aware of the success code; and are fed stories of success, which give them the confidence to rebuild their lives even in times of adversity.

Those who have privilege know it though they loathe to admit it.

I often get to interview people who have overcome formidable odds. What characterises them? Optimism and perseverance if I were to pick two. They believe that they may be shaped by their circumstances at birth but those do not define them. I use three guiding principles while interviewing such candidates:

- Has the candidate made the most of the chances she/he had in life? I do not go by absolute achievement since I know the opportunities were unequal.
- What is the trajectory? Is the candidate continuously striving to do better?
- Does the candidate feel a responsibility to create opportunities for others?

At a systemic level, there is a consensus across the political spectrum that we need policies and programs that promote equal access to opportunities. There is targeted support and resources for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus on universal education, affordable healthcare, non-discriminatory practices, and many social services are all steps in this direction. Specifically, I know of a few enlightened and progressive universities that create a level playing field by marking up candidates with socio-economic disadvantages. I also know of workplaces that run development programs for their leaders to challenge biases and prejudices to help them function with an increased sense of inclusiveness.

So, while we may be on the right track, we still have a long way to go. Everyone deserves a fair shot at success and our lives should not be determined by the circumstances of our birth. This is the bedrock of a modern democratic society.