AI's Impact on Meritocracy

This editorial is based on **"Recalibrating merit in the age of Artificial Intelligence"** which was published in The Hindu on 19/02/2024. The article discusses how adapting meritocracy to AI advancements requires a nuanced grasp of how technology interacts with societal frameworks because it necessitates a careful reassessment of how merit is conceptualised and rewarded, especially as AI can both enhance human abilities and exacerbate current inequalities.

The concept of meritocracy, rewarding individuals based on abilities and achievements, is debated for its impact on society. Critics foresee dystopian consequences, while the proponents of meritocracy see potential for reform. The evolution of meritocracy, influenced by these critiques, faces new challenges with the advent of **Artificial Intelligence (AI),** reshaping the idea of merit.

What is Meritocracy?

- **Definition:**
  - Meritocracy is a system in which individuals advance and are rewarded based on their abilities, achievements, and hard work, rather than their social status or background. In a meritocratic society, success is earned through personal effort and talent, and opportunities are theoretically open to all, regardless of their starting point in life.
  - The concept suggests that those who work hard and demonstrate skill should rise to the top, while those who do not, remain in lower positions.
- **Principles and Values:**
  - At its core, meritocracy values fairness, equality of opportunity, and the idea that individuals should be judged on their own merits, rather than external factors beyond their control.
  - It promotes a level playing field where everyone has the chance to succeed based on their abilities and efforts, rather than inherited privilege or nepotism. Meritocracy also emphasises the importance of education and personal development, as these are seen as key pathways to success.
- **Criticisms and Challenges:**
  - Critics of meritocracy argue that it can lead to a number of negative outcomes. They suggest that in practice, meritocracy often fails to provide equal opportunities for all, as individuals from privileged backgrounds may have access to better education and resources, giving them an unfair advantage.
  - Critics also point out that meritocracy can create a sense of elitism among the successful,

leading to a lack of empathy or understanding for those who have not been as fortunate.
- **Evolution and Adaptation:**
    - Over time, the concept of meritocracy has evolved and been adapted to address some of these criticisms and challenges. Efforts have been made to increase access to education and opportunities for disadvantaged groups, in order to level the playing field.
    - Additionally, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusion in meritocratic systems, to ensure that a wide range of talents and perspectives are recognized and rewarded.

What are the Different Views Regarding Meritocracy?

The concept of meritocracy, wherein individuals are rewarded and advanced based on their abilities, achievements and hard work, rather than their social status or background, has been extensively debated. Proponents and critics of meritocracy offer compelling arguments about its impacts on society, highlighting its virtues and shortcomings. The evolution of meritocracy has witnessed significant transformations, influenced by the critiques and analyses of thinkers such as **Michael Young, Michael Sandel, and Adrian Wooldridge.**

- **Michael Young's View:**
    - Young, a British sociologist, foresaw a dystopian meritocratic world in his satirical book, The Rise of the Meritocracy (1958). He envisioned a future, specifically 2034, as a society where social class and mobility were determined solely by intelligence and effort, as measured through standardised testing and educational achievement.
        - It was a critique of the then-emerging trend towards a merit-based system, which he feared would lead to a new form of social stratification.
- **Michael Sandel's Stand:**
    - Sandel's critique focuses on the divisive consequences, arguing that meritocracy fosters a sense of entitlement among the successful and resentment among those left behind, thereby eroding social cohesion.
    - Critical theorists also argue on similar lines by critiquing meritocracy for masking deeper power dynamics and inequalities. They say that meritocracy can perpetuate social hierarchies by legitimising the status of the elite under the guise of fairness and neutrality.
- **Post-Structuralists Views:**
    - Post-structuralists challenge the notion of merit, questioning who defines merit and how it is measured. They argue that concepts of merit are socially constructed and reflect the biases and interests of those in power.
    - Post-structuralism highlights the fluidity and contingency of merit, suggesting that meritocratic systems are inherently subjective and can reinforce existing inequalities.
- **Adrian Wooldridge:**
    - In contrast to Young's dystopian vision of meritocracy leading to a rigid class system and Sandel's emphasis on its moral and social repercussions, Wooldridge lays stress on the practical evolution of meritocracy and its potential for reform.
    - In his book, The Aristocracy of Talent, he explores how meritocracy, initially a force for progress and social mobility, has inadvertently fostered new inequalities by becoming somewhat hereditary, with privileges being passed down generations.
    - Despite recognising the potential for meritocracy to create a new elite, Wooldridge believes in its intuitive fairness and proposes reforms that include making selective schools as "escalators into the elite" while improving access for underprivileged students and advocating better technical education.

What is AI?

- **About:**
    - AI is the ability of a computer, or a robot **controlled by a computer to do tasks that are usually done by humans** because they require human intelligence and discernment.
    - Although there is **no AI that can perform the wide variety of tasks an ordinary human can do,** some AI can match humans in specific tasks.
- **Characteristics & Components:**
    - The ideal characteristic of artificial intelligence is its **ability to rationalise and take**

actions that have the best chance of achieving a specific goal. A subset of AI is **Machine Learning (ML).**

- Deep Learning (DL) techniques **enable this automatic learning** through the absorption of huge amounts of unstructured data such as text, images, or video.

- **Types of AI:**

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Based on Capabilities	Description
Weak AI or Narrow AI	AI designed for specific tasks like playing chess, recognizing faces, or making recommendations. Examples include Siri, Watson, AlphaGo.
General AI	AI with the ability to perform any intellectual task that a human can, including reasoning, learning, and planning. No current examples, but researchers are working on it.
Super AI	Speculative AI that surpasses human intelligence, excelling in tasks with cognitive abilities like creativity, self-awareness, and emotion. No current examples, only future possibilities.

Based on Functionality	Description
Reactive Machines	AI that reacts to the current situation but lacks memory or past experience storage. Examples include Deep Blue, AlphaGo.
Limited Memory	AI that stores some data or past experience for a short time, using it for decision-making. Examples include self-driving cars, chatbots.
Theory of Mind	AI that understands and simulates the mental states, emotions, and beliefs of others. No current examples, research is ongoing.
Self-Aware	AI with a sense of self, consciousness, and self-reflection. No current examples, subject to philosophical and scientific debates.

What are the Different Impacts of AI on Meritocracy?

Introducing AI into this equation completely complicates the idea of reforming meritocracy. AI, with its rapidly evolving capabilities, will be reshaping merit and the idea of meritocracy in following ways:

- **Enhances Human Abilities:**
    - **First,** by its very nature, AI questions the basis of human merit by introducing a non-human entity capable of performing tasks, making decisions, and even 'creating' at levels that can surpass human abilities.
        - If machines perform the majority of tasks previously deemed as requiring human intelligence and creativity, the traditional metrics of merit become less relevant. OpenAI's Sora is evidence that creativity is not an exclusive human trait any more.
    - **Second,** the advent of AI challenges the traditional notion of individual merit by prioritising access to technology. Individuals with access to AI tools gain a significant advantage, not necessarily due to their personal abilities, but because of the enhanced capabilities of these tools.

- **Exacerbate Current Inequalities:**
    - **Third,** AI systems trained on historical data can perpetuate and even exacerbate biases present in that data, leading to discriminatory outcomes in areas such as hiring, law enforcement, and lending. These biases can disadvantage groups which are already marginalised.
    - **Fourth,** a recent paper published in Nature Medicine showed that an AI tool can predict pancreatic cancer in a patient three years before radiologists can make the diagnosis.
        - Capabilities such as this can lead to the displacement of jobs that involve routine, predictable tasks. This also means that AI would impact high-wage jobs.
        - Regardless of these, AI would push the workforce towards either high-skill, high-wage jobs involving complex problem-solving and creativity or low-skill, low-wage jobs requiring physical presence and personal interaction, which AI cannot replicate yet.
        - This polarisation will exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, as individuals without access to high-level education and training are pushed towards lower-wage roles.
    - **Fifth,** the opaque nature of many AI algorithms, coupled with the concentration of power in a few tech giants, poses significant challenges to accountability. In a meritocratic society, individuals must understand the criteria by which their efforts and talents are evaluated.
        - However, the 'black box' nature of many AI systems can obscure these criteria, making it difficult for individuals to know how to advance or challenge decisions made by AI, thus eroding the meritocratic ideal.
    - **Sixth**, at the organisational level, the core of AI's power lies in data and algorithms that process this data. Tech giants with access to unprecedented volumes of data have a distinct advantage in training more sophisticated and accurate AI models.
        - This data hegemony means that these entities can set the standards for what constitutes 'merit' in the digital age, potentially sidelining smaller players who may have innovative ideas but need access to similar datasets.

What are India's Different Initiatives Related to AI?

- **INDIAai.**
- **Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI).**
- **US India Artificial Intelligence Initiative.**
- **Responsible Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Youth.**
- **Artificial Intelligence Research, Analytics and Knowledge Assimilation Platform.**
- **Artificial Intelligence Mission.**

Conclusion

The concept of meritocracy has sparked intense debate, with proponents highlighting its virtues in rewarding abilities and achievements, while critics point to its potential for fostering entitlement and exacerbating social divides. The evolution of meritocracy, as discussed by thinkers like Young, Sandel, and Wooldridge, illustrates various perspectives on its impacts and challenges. With the advent of AI, the idea of merit is further complicated, raising questions about human versus machine merit, access to technology, biases in AI systems, job displacement, and data hegemony. Addressing these complexities requires a nuanced approach to redefine merit and ensure fairness in the digital age.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the implications of Artificial Intelligence on the concept of meritocracy, considering its impact on social stratification, biases, and workforce dynamics. Examine potential reforms.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Q1. With the present state of development, Artificial Intelligence can effectively do which of the following? (2020)

1. Bring down electricity consumption in industrial units
2. Create meaningful short stories and songs
3. Disease diagnosis
4. Text-to-Speech Conversion
5. Wireless transmission of electrical energy

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

(a) 1, 2, 3 and 5 only
(b) 1, 3 and 4 only
(c) 2, 4 and 5 only
(d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans: (b)