

From Quota to Cutoff, From Card to Citizenship

A Post-Protest Reform Package for the Prime Minister's Mann Ki Baat Address

1. Why Now

The protests currently on the streets are not a crisis to be managed with a press statement. They are a signal that two of the Republic's founding-era instruments — the reservation system and the undifferentiated Aadhaar identity card — have quietly stopped doing the job they were built for. Both were correct answers to 1950s and early-2000s problems. Neither is a correct answer to today's problem.

This is the moment to say so publicly, on Mann Ki Baat, in the PM's own voice — not through a ministry circular, not through a committee report shelved for eighteen months. The country is already listening. The proposal below gives the PM two structural reforms to announce, and the language to announce them in.

2. Part I — Replacing Reservation with a National Basic Cutoff

2.1 The Diagnosis

The reservation system was built for a country where caste-based exclusion was the dominant barrier to opportunity and where the state had almost no capacity to means-test anyone. Seventy-five years on, the instrument has ossified: it sorts citizens by birth category rather than present need, it has been captured by dominant sub-groups within reserved categories, and it no longer maps cleanly onto who is actually locked out of opportunity — a poor upper-caste student in a flood-prone district and a wealthy reserved-category student in a metro are treated as opposites when their real starting points may be reversed.

The two systems worth studying: China's gaokao produces a single national cutoff score, with only narrow, transparent bonus-point categories (ethnic minorities in specified regions, martyrs' families, rural border counties) — never a blanket caste-style quota. South Korea's Suneung does the same: one national exam, one cutoff per institution, with need-based support layered on top through KOSAF, not built into the admission formula itself.

2.2 The Replacement Architecture

A. National Basic Cutoff (NBC)

A single national qualifying score, set annually by subject and stream, replacing category-wise reserved-seat percentages at every level: schools, colleges, and government recruitment.

The cutoff is the only gate for admission or selection. No category of birth raises or lowers it.

States retain limited, transparent, non-caste bonus points for genuinely disadvantaged geography — flood-prone blocks, LWE-affected districts, border and island regions — capped low enough that they cannot function as a shadow quota.

B. Needs-Based Scholarship Layer (replacing the quota, not the support)

Every student who clears the NBC is automatically assessed against a household income-and-asset means test — not caste — administered through the existing Aadhaar-linked financial DBT rails.

Four support tiers: full fee waiver + stipend, three-quarter waiver, half waiver, and a subsidised education-loan-only tier for the comfortable end of the middle class.

SC/ST/OBC households remain statistically over-represented in the lower-income tiers today, so the scheme continues to reach most of the same families the old quota reached — but through verified need, not inherited category, and it also now reaches the poor of every community.

A ring-fenced transition fund guarantees no currently-enrolled reserved-category student loses their existing seat or funding mid-course; the NBC applies from the next admission cycle onward.

C. Recruitment

Government hiring (UPSC, state PSCs, PSU entry) migrates to the same single-cutoff-plus-needs-scholarship logic over a five-year glide path, with age-relaxation (not score-relaxation) retained for the lowest-income tier to offset years lost to family labour or informal work.

2.3 What Stays, What Goes

3. Part II — Splitting Aadhaar: Citizens and Foreigners on Separate Cards

3.1 The Diagnosis

Aadhaar was designed as a residency-based biometric identity number, deliberately not a citizenship document — anyone resident in India for 182 days, citizen or not, has always been eligible to enrol. That design choice made sense when the goal was simply to plug leakages in subsidy delivery. It stops making sense once Aadhaar becomes the backbone for voter-adjacent processes, welfare entitlement, and long-term benefit accumulation — because a single undifferentiated number cannot tell a bank, a school, a pension office, or a returning officer whether the person in front of them is a citizen or a foreign national.

The model to copy: Singapore does not use one card for everyone. Citizens and Permanent Residents hold the pink/blue NRIC. Foreigners on long-term passes hold a separate Foreign Identification Number (FIN) card, visually and numerically distinct, feeding into different downstream entitlements. The distinction is made once, at issuance, so it never has to be reconstructed later.

3.2 The Replacement Architecture

A. Bharat NRIC — for citizens and OCI-equivalent permanent residents

Reissued to every existing Aadhaar holder who can establish citizenship through the existing citizenship-verification layer already built for the NRC/CAA processes — no new enrolment drive, only a re-verification pass on the existing database.

Carries full entitlement to welfare DBT, voter-roll linkage, land records, and the scholarship means-test described in Part I.

B. Bharat FIN — for foreign nationals resident in India

Replaces the current practice of issuing standard Aadhaar to any foreign resident who clears the 182-day threshold.

Number series and card design are visibly distinct from the Bharat NRIC, the way Singapore's FIN is visibly distinct from its NRIC, so no downstream system has to guess which category a number belongs to.

Grants only the entitlements a resident foreign national should have — banking KYC, tax ID, employer registration, medical access — and is structurally excluded from welfare DBT and voter-roll linkage rather than relying on a separate eligibility check every time.

C. Institutional Fit

This split sits naturally inside the existing restructuring already agreed for UIDAI's move to the Ministry of Home Affairs: Home Affairs continues to own who may hold which card and what each card unlocks, the Digital India Corporation continues to run the engineering and hosting for both series under one platform, and the Ministry of Digital Development & Information continues to regulate the digital-economy services that consume identity verification. No new ministry is required — only a new

bifurcation inside a transfer that is already underway.

4. Sequencing

Months 1–3: PM announces both reforms on Mann Ki Baat; Home Affairs and the Education & Science ministry issue the enabling notifications; existing beneficiaries formally grandfathered.

Months 4–9: Bharat NRIC/FIN re-verification pass runs against the existing Aadhaar database; National Basic Cutoff formula published for public comment.

Year 2 admission cycle: NBC + needs-based scholarship live for all new entrants; Bharat NRIC/FIN live for all new enrolments and renewals.

Year 2–5: government recruitment glide path completes; full Aadhaar base migrated to NRIC/FIN.

5. Framing for Mann Ki Baat

The address should not open with the mechanics. It should open with the two feelings the protests are actually expressing: that hard work should decide a young person's future, not the year and family they were born into; and that being a citizen of this country should mean something distinct and specific, something a document can show at a glance. The technical architecture in this proposal is what makes both feelings true in practice — but the PM's own words should carry the feelings first, and let the reforms follow as the answer already being built, not a concession being extracted by the street.

6. Open Risks to Flag Before Announcement

Removing caste as an explicit category, even with income-tiered scholarships preserving most of the same beneficiary families, will be read by some as abandoning a constitutional commitment to representation — the address needs language on why the outcome, not just the mechanism, is being protected.

The NRIC/FIN split requires a citizenship-verification pass at national scale; any error rate in that pass becomes a citizen wrongly filed as a foreign resident, which is the single highest-risk failure mode in the whole package and needs a visible appeals mechanism before launch, not after.