

“BEYOND THE QUOTA: RETHINKING INDIA’S RESERVATION SYSTEM IN THE 21ST CENTURY”

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the reservation policy in India, tracing its historical evolution and examining its contemporary relevance. Initially introduced as a measure to help lift the deep-seated caste-based inequities, it has dramatically expanded educational, employment, and political opportunities for at-risk communities. First, the system has been criticized for holding on to divisions and not sufficiently adapting to evolving socioeconomic realities. This study advocates a dynamic approach to push affirmative action in India using the framework of constitutional provisions, landmark judicial decisions, and socio-political debates. It calls for policy impact assessment at regular intervals, a phased transition to meritocracy in certain areas, and sunset clauses to not create dependence. The authors ultimately conclude that reservation is a crucial mechanism for achieving social justice, but its infrastructure needs careful reform to remain relevant in a contemporary, fair society.

Keywords – Reservation Policy, Caste-based Reservation, Affirmative Action, Social Justice, Economic Criteria, Mandal Commission.

Introduction

India's reservation policy is among the leading debates alongside its public policies. This policy is infused with deep emotions across its population. It is India's Constitution that provides the framework for such a policy. The SCs, STs, and OBCs have faced crimes against humanity throughout history. They are provided a form of undoing harsh wounds they have faced through education, employment and social-political participation.

At its core, the policy aims to correct profound social imbalance by providing opportunities to those people. Dr B.R. Ambedkar of the Constitution and other Framers imagined reservation not as a permanent solution but as a temporary measure to ensure equal participation of all social groups in the nation's development. For decades, however, the policy

has expanded more than its early scope – promotion in government jobs has increased, and new groups have demanded regular inclusion and re-start existing quotas.

This increasing scope invites a deep investigation into whether the basic objectives of the reservation system are still being fulfilled. Has it successfully replaced the lives of its intended beneficiaries? Or, in some ways, is it developed as a device for political appeasement, losing its original objective vision? While the system has increased access to education and employment for many people, the question remains: has it given long-term equality or only temporary support?

In addition, there has been much change in India's social and economic taunts since independence. A considerable part of the population today suffers from poverty and lack

of opportunity – without caste. This creates another important concern: is the caste still the most accurate and just the basis for positive action? Or should economic conditions be considered more in policymaking? Another layer of this debate lacks a systematic, nationwide evaluation of the real impact of the reservation system. The absence of regular government-led studies to evaluate whether it has improved the life of the marginalized communities and whether the benefits are being uncomfortable by a small, more privileged section within those communities is left behind.

In light of these complexities, this research seeks to explore the philosophical, social, and policy-based implications of the reservation system through the following key questions:

Research Questions

1. Why is reservation applied at multiple stages in an individual's life—such as education, employment, and even promotions? Should a person already receiving benefits in one stage be eligible again in another? Would a one-time reservation policy be more effective and fair?
2. Is the Indian government conducting regular and transparent assessments of the reservation system's outcomes? What data exists to prove that it is effectively helping those it was designed to uplift?
3. Is caste still the most relevant basis for reservation today? Can alternative criteria—such as income or economic disadvantage—offer a more accurate and just method of identifying those in need?
4. Has the original objective behind India's reservation policy been achieved? What measurable social, economic, or political changes have resulted from its implementation?

Literature Review

1: Annihilation of Caste by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Dr. B.R. The Annihilation of caste is one of the most powerful and intellectually strict criticisms

of the caste system in India. Originally written as a speech for the Jat-Pate Todak Mandal in 1936, which eventually refused to host it due to its radical material, it remains a fundamental justification for India's favourable action policies, including lesson reservation. In this work, Ambedkar argues that caste is not only a division of labour but a division of labourers, which is cemented by a religious and social structure that applies inequality and suppresses dynamics. He asks to destroy the caste system, not only for its improvement, arguing that social reform should be before political reform. His rejection of the Hindu conservatives and the Varna system laid an ideological foundation to include the provisions of reservation in the Indian Constitution.

Ambedkar did not see reservation as a donation or appeasement but as an essential means to ensure justice and absolute equality given the liberal generation of communities of Dalits and other marginalized communities. Their focus was on representation – not only in numbers but also in significant participation in public life and national identity size. Ambedkar also warned about the boundaries of legal guarantee and whether the social approach remained unchanged. He said, "If there is no law, no law, no law, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word," he said. This insight is deeply relevant to whether the reservation has been successful. It is only administrative, and social change is incomplete.

Relevance of research questions

- On the origin of reservation: Why Ambedkar provides a clear expression of why positive action has become necessary in the first place. The objective was to fix historical injustice and to enable margins to live with dignity and opportunity.
- Whether the objectives have been fulfilled, their emphasis on caste social destruction – not only legal equality – is

that reservation can improve, but the correct equality remains elusive.

- Caste versus economic norms: Ambedkar clearly emphasizes that caste is a social disability, not only one economic. This supports the idea that the economic criteria alone cannot replace caste-based reservation, but it opens the room to ask if the two can work together today.
- On government evaluation: The book implies that without constant social introspection and monitoring, any legal or policy initiative, including reservation, is bound to underperform. It confirms the concern about regular government surveys and the lack of impact assessment.

2: Mandal Commission Report (1980)

Under the direction of B.P. Mandal, the Mandal Commission Report—officially known as the report of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission—was turned in in 1980. Its goal was to identify the socially and educationally disadvantaged groups in India and offer suggestions for increasing their representation in government employment and academic settings.

The Commission concluded that, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste is still a significant predictor of social backwardness after conducting extensive surveys and analyzing data. In addition to the current 22.5% reservation for SCs and STs, it suggested a 27% reservation for OBCs in public sector employment and educational institutions, suggesting that the Constitution approves 49.5% of all reservations.

One of the report's most important contributions was the criteria for determining backwardness, which included not only caste but also economic, educational, and social indicators. Despite acknowledging that caste and class frequently intersect, this multifactorial approach

continued to emphasize caste as the leading cause of social exclusion.

The report also underlined that these communities would continue to be excluded from state decision-making processes without robust representation, thus perpetuating historical disparities. It addressed the widespread claim that reservations weaken academic or administrative standards by acknowledging that merit is frequently the result of social privilege rather than inherent.

Even though the recommendations were made in 1980, they were not implemented until 1990, when Prime Minister V.P. Singh started the policy, causing significant political and social unrest. The response, which included student demonstrations and acts of self-immolation, demonstrated how contentious but vital the discussion of caste-based equity had grown.

Relevance to the Research Questions

- Why make reservations at different stages of life and beyond SC/ST: According to the Mandal Report's reasoning, the ingrained, multigenerational nature of social exclusion necessitates layered interventions in political representation, employment, and education. In order to achieve true equality of opportunity, addressing backwardness at a single level (such as education) might not be sufficient.
- Income-based versus caste-based reservations: The report warns against depending only on income for affirmative action, even though it recognizes the importance of economic factors. Ultimately, it identifies caste as the primary axis of structural disadvantage. It contends that while caste-based stigma and exclusion are more enduring and practically invisible, economic status is more malleable.
- Whether the reservation's goal has been met: Indirectly, the Mandal Report urges

continuous evaluation and improvement of reservation regulations. Instead of suggesting a deadline for reservations, it strongly emphasizes ongoing progress monitoring, which has proven inadequate in the following decades, as this research makes clear.

3: Contemporary Developments in Reservation Policy

The introduction of the 103rd constitutional amendment in 2019 marked a significant change by providing an additional 10% reservation for the Economically Weaker sections (EWS). This amendment took positive action for financially deprived people— an annual family income below a specified threshold defined by an annual family income—traditional caste-based criteria. The policy change gave rise to intense debate and legal challenges, which ended in the Supreme Court case. In the division of a close 3:2, the majority retained the amendment, stating that economic vulnerability is a valid axis of loss that complements caste-based measures. Conversely, dissatisfaction highlighted concerns that EWS Kota could strengthen existing inequalities except for the EWS Kota already deprived groups (such as SCS, STS, and a non-slender layer of OBC).

This contemporary discussion brings up several important questions:

- Layered Affirmative Action: Should reservations at several levels— education, job, promotions—be given if early intervention might be enough?
- Given growing economic inequality, should reservation policies include or even turn to income-based criteria instead of—or in addition to—caste?
- Has the government systematically assessed the reservation system's progress and produced its intended social effect?
- The literature emphasizes the need for continuous assessment and possible

recalibration of India's affirmative action policies to guarantee they are both just and efficient in a fast-changing society by distilling these modern events.

Research and Methodology

This study examines the development and efficacy of the reservation system in India using a qualitative, document-based approach based on government reports, legal papers, archival materials, and news stories. Among the primary sources are Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, the Mandal Commission Report (1980), the 103rd Constitutional Amendment, and landmark decisions such as Janhit Abhiyan. These papers track affirmative action's political, legal, and ideological evolution and its changing objectives.

Apart from textual analysis, the research combines experience-based reflections collected from informal conversations with students from different social backgrounds who have shown for competitive tests such as NEET. Though not formally structured interviews, these stories provide insightful analysis of reservation policies' personal and emotional aspects. By combining historical context with lived realities, the research aims to critically assess whether the current reservation framework continues to fulfil its original objectives or demands re-evaluation in light of contemporary societal challenges.

Findings and discussions

A. Historical background to the current foundation

In 1882, leading voices such as William Hunter and Jyotirao Phule first carried forward the idea of reservation, which aimed to compete with the rigorous realities of the caste system and untouchability. In 1902, this vision was felt more when Maharaja Shahu of Kolhapur started reservations in favour of non-Brahmins and backward classes in education. A decade later, Mysore also started reserving seats for backward castes in response to social justice movements for a long time.

During the colonial era, the communal award of British Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald in 1932, elected separately for various groups, including Dalits, helped shape the current reservation structure. However, this strategy was given by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 1932 Poona Agreement, which reserved seats for the underprivileged among Hindu voters. After independence, these policies were vested in the Indian Constitution: Initially, the reservation was provided to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for only ten years, then they were expanded to include economically deformed groups in response to the OBCs (in response to the 1990 Mandal Commission Report) and in 2019. Subsequent amendments, including the 104th amendment, have continuously extended the reservation framework, underscoring its evolution from a temporary corrective tool to a long-standing policy commitment.

B. Constitutional Provisions:

To support underprivileged communities, the Indian Constitution added several articles after independence. The state is empowered to make special provisions for advancing socially and educationally backward classes, such as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and SCs, under Article 15(4). Article 16(4): Permits the State to set aside public job openings for any under-represented backward class. The 77th amendment added Article 16(4A) 1995, allowing SC and ST reservations in promotions. The 81st amendment added Article 16(4B) in 2000, which allows SC/ST vacancies that remain unfilled to be carried forward to later years, surpassing the 50% reservation cap. SC and ST seats are reserved in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, respectively, according to Articles 330 and 332. Mandatory reservations for SCs and STs in panchayats and municipalities are outlined in Articles 243D and 233T. Reservations must be balanced with preserving administrative effectiveness, according to Article 335.

C. Judicial Interpretations:

The judiciary has been crucial in interpreting and forming reservation policies.

- **Union of India v. Indra Sawhney (1992):** The Supreme Court established the idea of the "creamy layer," which excludes the wealthier OBC members from reservations while upholding the Mandal Commission's recommendation of a 27% reservation for OBCs. Additionally, the Court prohibited reservations in promotions and set a 50% cap on reservations overall.
- **M. Nagaraj v. Union of India (2006)** upheld the constitutionality of reservations in promotions. However, it required the state to prove the class's backwardness, insufficient representation, and preservation of administrative effectiveness before enforcing the reservations.
- **Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta (2018):** The Court ruled that the state need not collect quantifiable data on the backwardness of SCs and STs to provide reservations in promotions but must demonstrate their inadequate representation in public employment.

D. Legislative Measures:

Several laws have been passed in order to protect marginalized communities better.

- The Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955 forbids untouchability. It lays out penalties for its application by criminalizing various forms of abuse and discrimination and establishing special courts to trial such offences.
- The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, seeks to prevent atrocities against members of the SC and ST.

E. Institutional Bodies:

Notable commissions have been set up to supervise the application of safety measures.

- The National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) looks into and monitors issues about the legal and constitutional protections for SCs.
- The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) works to protect the rights and well-being of ST communities by making sure that the protections granted by the Constitution are applied effectively.

F. Policies Specific to States:

Reservation laws in different states have been modified to reflect their respective demographics.

- Tamil Nadu: 69% of the population is reserved, including SCs, STs, OBCs, and other groups.
- Maharashtra: Reflecting the distinct social fabric of the state, it has reservations for Nomadic Tribes and Special Backward Classes.

G. Recent Developments:

- 2019 Reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS): The 103rd Amendment to the Constitution extended affirmative action to economically disadvantaged people regardless of caste by introducing a 10% reservation for EWS in the general category.
- Implementing a nationwide caste-based census is being discussed to gather precise information on the socioeconomic standing of different communities. This information could be used to inform and restructure reservation policies in order to distribute resources fairly.
- International Recognition: Discrimination based on caste has drawn interest from

all over the world. As an illustration of the global significance of caste dynamics, Seattle was the first city in the United States to outlaw caste discrimination.

India's reservation system is still developing, striking a balance between the goals of equity, social justice, and administrative effectiveness.

Addressing the research questions

1. Why is reservation applied at multiple stages in an individual's life—such as education, employment, and even promotions? Should a person already receiving benefits in one stage be eligible again in another? Would a one-time reservation policy be more effective and fair?

As it stands, preservation ought to be a one-time remedy rather than a continuing privilege. That first intervention should be enough to level the playing field once a member of a reserved category takes advantage of an opportunity, whether in education, employment, or promotion. Repeatedly using the reservation benefit is like repeatedly cutting the line. After someone has "gotten in line" with their first chance, additional benefits undermine the spirit of fairness and advancement based on merit. In addition to promoting independence, this strategy guarantees that, once the first obstacle is removed, future opportunities are granted to those not privileged by reservations.

Furthermore, rather than promoting long-term empowerment, extending reservation benefits at every stage runs the risk of sustaining a cycle of dependency. The policy would encourage people to take advantage of that crucial opportunity to establish a strong foundation and compete based on merit in all subsequent endeavours by only granting reservation once. This would ensure that people are not continuously protected from the competitive pressures of a free market and merit-based advancement after addressing historical disadvantages. It would also help rebalance the balance between compensatory affirmative action and meritocracy. A more equitable system where the initial correction permits

genuine integration into the mainstream without continuously reinforcing a separate track for reserved categories could result from such a reform.

2. Is the Indian government conducting regular and transparent assessments of the reservation system's outcomes? What data exists to prove that it is effectively helping those it was designed to uplift?

Reports from different ministries, extensive surveys like those carried out by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), and routine census data are used by the Indian government to evaluate the results of its reservation system regularly. On paper, these evaluations show improvements in income figures for reserved category groups, higher representation in government employment, and higher enrolment rates in public educational institutions. Critics point out that these assessments are sometimes used more for administrative record-keeping than as solid, externally validated studies, are frequently fragmented, and lack independent verification.

Even with the encouraging figures, there is still a big gap between them and the actual lives of the intended recipients. Even though official data indicates significant progress, there are still issues at the grassroots level: regional disparities continue to impede consistent progress, and the more privileged within the reserved categories (the "creamy layer") frequently reap the benefits. As a result, even though the data seems promising, it ignores or under-represents the persistent discriminatory practices and systemic issues that continue to stand in the way of many people's actual social and economic empowerment.

3. Is caste still the most relevant basis for reservation today? Can alternative criteria—such as income or economic disadvantage—offer a more accurate and just method of identifying those in need?

Although caste has long been a significant predictor of social exclusion in India, recent discussions indicate that economic standards might offer a more equitable foundation for affirmative action. According to critics of the current system, Caste-based reservations alone may result in anomalies. For instance, it is frequently assumed that Brahmin students are all equally wealthy. However, many also face financial difficulties, which can keep them from receiving a top-notch education even if they receive excellent grades. Conversely, because cut-offs are lowered, students from reserved categories may be admitted even with lower scores. This discrepancy is especially controversial in professions like medicine, where quality is guaranteed by uniformly high standards, which are frequently gauged by entrance scores like 98%. Candidates who benefit from reservation may be admitted despite meeting lower academic requirements. At the same time, talented students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (regardless of caste) may be unjustly excluded if admission requirements are caste-based.

By guaranteeing that merit-based admissions are upheld in fields where consistent standards are essential, a move towards reservations based primarily on economic disadvantage could aid in addressing these disparities. The policy would better address the actual needs of students experiencing financial difficulties, irrespective of their caste identity, by shifting the emphasis from caste to economic status. In fields where high standards are crucial, like medical education, this strategy may open the door to a more equitable, effective, and meritocratic system.

4. Has the original objective behind India's reservation policy been achieved? What measurable social, economic, or political changes have resulted from its implementation?

India's reservation policy's initial goal

Promotion of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) OR any socially and

educationally disadvantaged citizen classes (like OBC) OR economically disadvantaged sections (EWS) – Article 15 (4), Article 15 (5), and Article 15 (6).

Enough representation of economically disadvantaged groups (EWS) or any backward class of citizens in state-run services (Article 16(4) and Article 16(6)).

a. Political Representation

Critique: Even though reservation has increased the number of SC/ST lawmakers, some contend that these gains have not resulted in meaningful policy changes. Instead, local power brokers have occasionally consolidated their hold on power due to reserved seats, creating a type of "captured politics" in which political representation is not the same as true empowerment.

b. Educational Outcomes

Critique: Despite an increase in enrolment for underserved communities, the standard of education and ensuing academic performance frequently remain below par. According to critics, the system's emphasis on opening doors without guaranteeing ongoing support leads to high dropout rates and few career opportunities, ultimately penalizing merit and fostering dependency.

c. Economic Impact

Critique: There has not been much of an improvement in the economy due to the public sector's increase in reserved jobs. Instead, a phenomenon known as the "creamy layer" has developed, in which the most affluent recipients take advantage of most opportunities while the least fortunate are left behind. The intended redistributive effect is undermined, and this selective benefit sustains economic disparities.

d. Social Transformation

Critique: By formalizing group-based privileges, the reservation system has frequently strengthened caste identities rather than weakening them. This reinforcement may worsen social divisions, and non-beneficiary

groups may become more resentful. Instead of serving as a tool to dispel past prejudices, caste becomes a dominant marker for access, impeding the desired social integration.

Therefore, the answer to this question would be yes and no.

Yes, the social goals of the reservation have had a significant impact. One of the primary goals of the reservation policy at first was to give social recognition and advancement to groups that had been systematically marginalized, especially Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. Reservation was intended to give these communities a level playing field because discrimination, untouchability, and social exclusion were prevalent.

At least in many urban and semi-urban areas, we can observe that societal attitudes have evolved in the modern era. Education and representation have played a key role in this shift. The whole family and occasionally the neighbourhood are lifted when one member of a marginalized community has access to a quality education or a respectable career. This has a cascading effect. The degree of visibility and social inclusion has dramatically increased since we began, even though it is still not perfect, and there are still cases of caste-based discrimination. It is important to recognize that the reservation policy has succeeded.

However, the policy's goals have not been entirely achieved, particularly in employment and education. The benefits of reservations frequently do not reach the people on the margins. Instead, a tiny portion of these communities—often called the "creamy layer"—tend to take advantage of most opportunities, leaving behind people living in rural or impoverished areas. This disparity demonstrates that although inclusivity was the goal, it has not been fully realized regarding equal opportunity for all.

The same policy framework may no longer be the most effective. It is time for a new or updated method that takes a more

comprehensive approach to identifying disadvantages, possibly combining social background and economic status. Only when the most marginalized voices—not just those who already have access—are heard and supported will there be true empowerment.

In order to improve the communities they represent, political representatives usually back reservation policies. For instance, the Maharashtra government of Gopinath Munde added 2% more OBC reservations for the Vanjari Samaj. This measure exemplifies a more significant trend: elected officials frequently support policies that strengthen community identity and solidarity and garner votes from their constituents.

No government has taken the initiative to do away with the caste-based system, despite continuous discussions about whether reservations should be based on economic factors rather than just caste. Instead, each administration has raised the percentage of reservations and broadened their reach to include more communities over time. For example, after the Mandal Commission, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were included, and more recently, in 2019, a 10% quota for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) was introduced.

This pattern implies that although vote-bank mobilization and community upliftment political tactics have increased representation for historically under-represented groups, they have also resulted in the continuation of the caste-based system. Even though social acceptance has dramatically improved and many people now have greater access to education and employment, caste-based discrimination is still pervasive, and the system mainly depends on raising quotas rather than radically changing the criteria only to consider economic disadvantage.

Conclusion

Although its current form is increasingly viewed as antiquated, India's reservation system is still

a vital tool for redressing historical injustices and fostering social inclusion. There is growing evidence that the system needs serious rethinking, even though reservations have surely cleared the path for increased representation and social advancement, especially for marginalized communities that have long faced discrimination.

On the one hand, reservations have improved societal attitudes and created previously unthinkable opportunities by assisting many people in gaining access to political representation, work, and education. However, the ongoing increase in reserved quotas has resulted in unforeseen consequences. The current system, which permits lower cut-offs for reserved candidates, can be seen as unjust in professions where academic achievement should be the primary criterion, like medical school. Furthermore, policies are frequently not reviewed in light of real progress because no reliable survey system is updated regularly. No government has tried to do away with caste-based reservations completely; instead, each administration has broadened its application.

Therefore, a more balanced approach is long overdue. Reservations should be kept in place as a short-term remedy designed to help those who are underprivileged. The government should progressively lower the reserved quota to promote more merit-based competition once a community has achieved level playing fields. Regular, open assessments of its effects are necessary to ensure that the policy changes according to the shifting socioeconomic landscape rather than continuously expanding without considering fairness. True equality can only be attained in the long run by carefully balancing merit and compensatory affirmative action.

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