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## BALANCING EQUITY AND MERIT : THE IMPACT OF RESERVATION QUOTAS ON GENERAL CATEGORY ASPIRANTS IN NATIONAL ENTRANCE EXAMS

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### Abstract

India's reservation system is among the world's most extensive affirmative action schemes, aimed at redressing centuries-old social and educational imbalances. Based on constitutional provisions, it seeks to enhance access to education and employment for historically disadvantaged groups like Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Gradually, its ambit has been extended to include provisions for the general category's Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). The effect of reservations on national entrance tests such as JEE and NEET has been widespread and multifaceted. While reservations have increased representation and access for disadvantaged group students, concerns regarding merit, access to unreserved positions, and increased pressure upon general-category aspirants have created widespread debates. Concerns regarding misuse of caste certificates, faulty exclusion of the creamy layer, and regional inequities have emphasised implementation issues. Also, inequalities in the quality of school education, particularly in rural and underprivileged pockets, continue to influence the success of these policies. Specialists contend that without simultaneous enhancements to foundational education, vocational training, and anti-discrimination policies, the complete value of the reservation cannot be achieved. In such a scenario, a balanced response integrating affirmative action with institutional reforms might be called for to balance the aim of substantive equality with fairness and efficiency concerns over access to education.

### Introduction

India's reservation policy on national entry examinations such as JEE and NEET aims at fostering social justice by granting reserved opportunities to previously disadvantaged groups. According to provisions in the Constitution (Articles 15(4), 15(5), and 16(4)) and the 103rd Amendment, reservations are granted to SC, ST, OBC, EWS, and PwD candidates. For NEET 2025 and JEE Main 2025, the reservation distribution is 15% for SC, 7.5% for ST, 27% for OBC-NCL, 10% for EWS, and 5% for PwD. These

policies seek to promote more comprehensive and equitable access to education.<sup>40</sup>

Reservations in central educational institutions seek to usher in social justice by offering chances to marginalised communities such as SC, ST, OBC, and EWS. But the system has generated controversies around meritocracy, as some feel that it curtails opportunities for the unreserved category. The core challenge is achieving a balance between social justice and

<sup>40</sup> Basavaraju, C. RESERVATION UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES. *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, 51(2), 267–274. (2009).

merit-based selection.<sup>41</sup> The introduction of reservations has increased competition for the limited unreserved seats to even higher levels, putting additional pressure on general category students. The scenario has given rise to meritocracy and fair distribution of education opportunities being argued. Despite the significance of the events, little empirical work that has investigated experiences and challenges faced by general category aspirants against the backdrop of the reservation policy is available.

This research investigates the impact of reservation policies in national entrance exams on the educational prospects, competitiveness, and psychological well-being of general category students. It seeks to present a balanced analysis to inform discussions on balancing equity and merit in Indian education, with the wider implications for academic achievement and mental well-being.<sup>42</sup>

This research examines whether current reservation policies in national entry exams help disadvantaged groups without harming others. It assesses the effect of these policies on various stakeholders in the education system and examines how students view meritocracy, fairness, and opportunity. The study seeks to identify gaps and shortcomings in the existing system and add to policy discussions on balancing social equity with merit-based selection. Attaining this balance is necessary to develop an inclusive but competitive education system, a system that favours disadvantaged students without sacrificing academic standards, thus enhancing both social cohesion and educational excellence.

In the context of India's pluralistic society, such equilibrium is particularly crucial. The reservation system was instituted to correct injustices and provide a level playing field for deprived groups. However, since the system has

expanded and developed, it has been necessary to revisit its application so that it is made effective in playing its role, without causing new imbalances. This study aims to contribute to that rethinking by introducing empirical findings regarding the impact of reservation policies on general category aspirants and suggesting policy reform recommendations that maintain both equity and merit.

### Literature Review

Thomas E. Weisskopf's research, *Impact of Reservation on Admissions to Higher Education in India*, investigates the impact of quotas on SC/ST access, performance, and achievement. Based on IIT and non-prestigious institution data, he concludes that reservations increased SC/ST enrollment, but that numerous students experienced academic difficulties as a result of poorer preparation before entering. This resulted in increased dropout rates and lower grades, which caused IITs to introduce bridge courses, though some reserved positions went unfilled.

Outside elite campuses, the fill-rate problem is more severe, reflecting uneven pipeline quality. Over more than two decades, the SC/ST-general score gap has reduced in more resource-poor schools, reflecting sustained improvement, but gains accrue in a "creamy layer" of relatively better-off SC/ST households, raising the issue of how to redirect quotas to the most disadvantaged. In general, Weisskopf concludes that reservation increases access but depend on concurrent investments in school quality and targeted academic support to ensure actual equity and achievement.<sup>43</sup>

Riya Pant and Dr. Manish Bharadwaj's article *Impact of Education on Reservation System in India* marks the development of affirmative action from Gandhi and Ambedkar's thrust for educational parity to contemporary discourses around merit vs. equity. They chart major developments, from the Mandal Commission's

<sup>41</sup> Kumar, Neeraj. (2019). Awareness and Attitudes towards Reservation Policy: An Empirical Analysis.

<sup>42</sup> Perception of students regarding reservation. (2025). In *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* (Vol. 6, Issue 4, pp. 935–938). <https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V6ISSUE4/IJRPR41450.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Weisskopf, "Impact of Reservation on Admissions to Higher Education in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*. 39. (2004)

27% OBC quota to the 103rd Amendment's 10% EWS quota. The authors point to the difficulty of reconciling social justice and merit, observing that although the introduction of quotas has boosted the number of target groups being enrolled and employed, problems such as quota inflation and the legitimacy of positive discrimination remain. They call for reforms that enhance beneficiary criteria, reinforce school equity, and reconcile access with academic standards.<sup>44</sup>

Alexander Lee's article *Does Affirmative Action Work? Evaluating India's Quota System* analyses the OBC quota aimed at raising representation in government employment and higher education. Lee's analysis detects a 7-8% growth in OBC representation in both areas, with the largest gains accruing to moderately poor and middle-income OBCs, and the very poor making little progress because of "creamy-layer" capture. By comparing the quotas in India with affirmative action in the U.S., Lee has found three advantages: direct allocation of seats, indirect spill-overs, and institutional rule changes that provide future access. The critics say quotas never necessarily result in wide socio-economic gain, and the advantages tend to skip the most disadvantaged.<sup>45</sup>

Dinesha P.T.'s *Reservation and Higher Education in India: An Overview* analyses the effect of quota policies on course choice and higher education access. Though aimed at boosting SC/ST admissions in courses such as engineering, medicine, and commerce, the policy has caused many of its beneficiaries to take up liberal arts courses, thus leaving technical seats at premier institutions such as IITs and IIMs underfilled. The report lays this to poor primary and secondary education and urges more specific quotas and greater investment in school-level preparation. It also identifies challenges such as the "creamy-layer" issue and persistent hindrances to well-paying

careers, providing a critical evaluation of the reservation system's efficacy.<sup>46</sup>

Vani K. Borooah's *Social Exclusion and Jobs Reservation in India* examines the persistent failures of SC/ST groups despite three decades of reservations. She contends that though reservations have solved some problems, educational shortages, labour-market bias, and psychological sanctions remain. Borooah states that reservations cannot guarantee equity by themselves without the need for reform of primary and secondary schooling and skill formation. She suggests need-based affirmative action, more stringent "creamy-layer" screening, and universal quality education to achieve equal capabilities before admission or recruitment. Her criticism stresses the necessity of reforms to bring social justice and actual capabilities into better alignment.<sup>47</sup>

Sanjay Kumar's *Reservation Policy for Admission in Educational Institutions: A Critical Study* criticises the continued requirement of quota-based admissions in the backdrop of ongoing caste-based violence and discrimination. He refers to 2015 figures indicating many pending atrocity cases against SC/ST individuals, contending that reservations continue to be necessary because of the ongoing caste discrimination. Kumar recognises divergent opinions, with critics arguing that quotas continue discrimination, whereas proponents view them as a means to address historical oppression. He points out that advantages tend to accrue to the "creamy-layer" families in SC/ST/OBC communities and recommends a transition to income-based criteria, quotas being capped, and enhancing school quality to enable merit to flourish. The study demands focused social justice interventions and increased sacrifice by more affluent groups in all communities.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Riya Pant, Dr. Manish "Bharadawaj Impact of Education on Reservation System in India" *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, Vol 5, no 3, pp 6442-6448 March 2024

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Lee "Does Affirmative Action Work? Evaluating India's Quota System" University of Rochester 2020

<sup>46</sup> Dinesha P.T "Reservation and Higher Education in India: An Overview" *Bulletin of Indian Society and Culture* Vol. 2, Issue 11, November 2015

<sup>47</sup> BOROOAH, VANI K. "Social Exclusion and Jobs Reservation in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 45, no. 52, 2010

<sup>48</sup> Sanjay Kumar, "Reservation policy for admission in educational institutions a critical study" Kurukshetra University 316 p. 2018

Ramanjaneyulu M.'s study of the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act 2006 looks at the enforcement of the 27% OBC, 15% SC, and 7.5% ST quotas in Hyderabad and Pondicherry Central Universities from 2007, not abolishing general seats. The study points to the limited enforceability of Article 15(5), applicable only to non-creamy-layer OBCs. By RUSA audits, the paper uncovers huge gaps: privileged institutions with well-endowed resources and fewer students per teacher, and overcrowded and inadequately run state colleges with most SC/ST/OBC students. The study contends these gaps in schooling undercut the intent of the quotas by putting disadvantaged students in rival universities, pushing for more school-level investment as well as need-based assistance on top of reservations.<sup>49</sup>

Prof. Amolsingh Rotelea and Mr. Pratik R. Badg, in their article Reservation Policies and Their Impact on India's Education System, contend that though reservations were crucial for the advancement of SC/ST/OBC groups, reservations now skew student choices and education quality. The authors point out that reservations tend to put students in lower-preferred courses and bar high-scoring general-category students from admission to premier programs. They quote IIT figures, pointing out that many reserved seats go vacant and opportunities are denied to candidates who have secured admission through merit. Although they value the historical significance of reservations, the authors suggest changes to allow capable candidates from any category to enter premier institutions without prejudicing the underprivileged.<sup>50</sup>

India's reservation policy, intended to empower historically oppressed groups like Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other

Backward Classes (OBCs), has generated huge controversy. Supporters consider the policy to be an essential social justice mechanism, which was implemented to compensate for centuries of discrimination and foster social equity and inclusion. Yet others consider that it sustains caste-based differentiation and encourages bitterness among non-beneficiary communities. The Indian Journal of Research in Applied Natural and Social Sciences points out that although equality remains the aim, the practical application of reservations at the local level tends to create perceptions of injustice in those who feel disadvantaged by the system.<sup>51</sup> Affirmative action is provided legally by the Indian Constitution under Articles 15 and 16, allowing the state to make special provisions for socially and educationally backwards classes. Provisions were made to right past injustices and provide equality.<sup>52</sup> The Supreme Court has played a pivotal role in shaping reservation policies. In the landmark case of Indra Sawhney (1992), the Court upheld 27% reservation of posts and seats in government offices for OBCs but sustained the concept of the "creamy layer" by distinguishing better-off members of such communities as not eligible under reservation.

### **Legal Framework and Constitutional Provisions**

The Indian Constitution enshrines the Right to Equality in Articles 14, 15, and 16, which ensure equality before the law, prevent discrimination, and provide equal opportunity for public employment with scope for affirmative action in favour of weaker sections. Article 14 provides equality before the law and equal protection and facilitates both formal equality (equal application of laws) and substantive equality (accounting for socio-economic disparities). The Supreme Court has construed Article 14 to prohibit arbitrary state actions, employing

<sup>49</sup> Ramanjaneyulu M, "Reservation in Higher Education A Study on Central Educational Institutions Reservation in Admission Act 2006 in University of Hyderabad and Pondicherry Central University India" University of Hyderabad, 2017

<sup>50</sup> Prof. Amolsingh Rotelea and Mr. Pratik R. Badg "Reservation Policies and their Impact on Education System in India: By an Observer's Eye" JETIR Volume 8, Issue 5 May 2021

<sup>51</sup> Dr. Manosanta Biswas RESERVATION POLICY IN INDIA: URGE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY IN EDUCATION AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES 2018 IJRAR , Volume 5, Issue 3 July 2018

<sup>52</sup> *The Indian Reservation System and Equality: A Dworkinian perspective | Legal Service India - Law articles - Legal Resources.* (n.d.). <https://legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-8520-the-indian-reservation-system-and-equality-a-dworkinian-perspective-.html>

principles such as tests of reasonable classification and arbitrariness.<sup>53</sup> In the matter of *E.P. Royappa v. State of Tamil Nadu* (1973), the Court laid stress upon the fact that state actions need to be consistent with fairness and the absence of discrimination. Exceptions such as reservations for backward classes under Article 16 are allowed, provided they satisfy the test of intelligible differentia and rational nexus to legislative objectives.<sup>54</sup>

Article 15(1) of the Indian Constitution forbids discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. In the case of *State of Rajasthan v. Pratap Singh* (1960), the Supreme Court struck down a law exempting Muslims and Harijans from police fees as discriminatory. Article 15(3) allows affirmative action for women, children, and socially backward classes such as SCs and STs to ensure that formal equality does not damage substantive justice for historically disadvantaged classes.<sup>55</sup> Article 16 provides equal opportunity in government employment, with reservations for backward classes. The *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1993) case maintained 27% reservations for OBCs and established a 50% limit on overall quotas, stressing that affirmative action should not undermine merit. Article 16(4) permits religious institutions to prefer applicants for religious work. Together, Articles 14, 15, and 16 form a balance of general equality and provisions for social justice and access to public employment.

India's reservation policy, the world's largest affirmative action system, was created to eliminate caste-based social exclusion and discrimination. From pre-independence social reform movements and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision, it was initially meant for political

representation and public service.<sup>56</sup> With time, reservations were extended to education by way of constitutional amendments, beginning with the First Amendment of 1951, which brought in Article 15(4) to make provisions for socially and educationally backward classes. Subsequent amendments, including the 86th Amendment of 2002, declared education a fundamental right, and the Right to Education Act of 2009 required 25% reservation in private schools for weaker sections, pointing towards the increasing reach of such policies.<sup>57</sup>

India's reservation policy, the largest affirmative action program in the world, was intended to counteract caste-based exclusion and discrimination. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a central figure in introducing provisions for the marginalised into the 1950 Constitution. Originally aimed at political representation and public service, the reservations extended to education by constitutional amendments, including the 1951 First Amendment (Article 15(4)) and the 2002 86th Amendment (Article 21A), acknowledging education as a basic right. The 2009 Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act directed 25% reservation in private schools for weaker sections, expanding these policies even further.<sup>58</sup>

Legal opposition to the reservation policy continues, with some opposition centred on the limit of a 50% quota. Certain states, such as Bihar, have permitted a maximum of 65% reservations based on caste surveys due to past deprivation. Bringing private educational institutions under the purview of reservation orders has raised questions over state intervention or educational justice. The "creamy layer" exclusion, proposed to target the most deprived, has been criticised for inflexible

<sup>53</sup> Constitution of India. Article 14: Equality before law - Constitution of India. <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-14-equality-before-law> (2023b, April 14).

<sup>54</sup> *Constitutional Law of India - Chapter 7 - Right to equality*. (n.d.). <http://student.manupatra.com/Academic/Abk/Constitutional-Law-of-India/CHAPTER-7.htm>

<sup>55</sup> Yash. Analysis of Prohibition of Discrimination under Article 15 – Effective Laws. Effective Laws. <https://effectivelaws.com/prohibition-of-discrimination/> (2024, December 5)

<sup>56</sup> Anthony, Remalli. "UNTOUCHABILITY AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RESERVATION POLICIES." *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science* (2024)

<sup>57</sup> *Supreme Court upholds 25% reservation in private schools*. (n.d.). PRS Legislative Research. <https://prsindia.org/theprsblog/supreme-court-upholds-25-reservation-in-private-schools?page=59&per-page=1>

<sup>58</sup> *The Supreme Court upholds 25% reservation in private schools*. (n.d.-b). PRS Legislative Research. <https://prsindia.org/theprsblog/supreme-court-upholds-25-reservation-in-private-schools?page=59&per-page=1>

income thresholds and intra-community frictions. The 103rd Amendment, with its economic reservations, has made the situation further convoluted, with current cases challenging the constitutional compatibility of its equality provision.<sup>59</sup>

The controversies surrounding India's reservation system mirror the tension between law and social justice that continues unabated. While reservations have enhanced education and representation opportunities for marginalised communities, the system struggles to find equilibrium between caste-based reparations, accommodating new disadvantaged classes, and countering criticism of developing identity politics. With constitutional benches still examining these provisions, the reservation system continues to be an adaptive attempt to reconcile transformative justice with the rule of law.

### Impact Analysis

India's merit entry and policy of reservations through exams such as NEET and JEE continues to be immensely controversial, weighed against the complication of historical balance. Reservations for correcting caste-based discrimination notwithstanding, their impact has produced diverse outcomes. As reported by IIT Kanpur in 2024, it indicated the incredibly large disparity of performance and pointed to the time when ST applicants would reach the general category performance as being a century away. Institutional disparities are evident, with 78% of general candidates using private coaching, compared to just 22% from SC/ST communities, highlighting preparation inequalities.<sup>60</sup>

The reservation of seats in national tests such as NEET has drastically changed patterns of

competition. In the All India Quota, 37% of seats are reserved (27% OBC + 10% EWS), and 63% are for general candidates. In Bihar, a 2023 caste survey justified 65% state-level reservations, bringing down general category seats in medical colleges to 35%, making competition fiercer.<sup>61</sup> This has resulted in huge score differences: general category aspirants generally score between 620/720, and SC/ST aspirants pass with an average of 137/720. A 2024 survey reported that 72% of Indians are for merit-based admissions initially, but this is only 39% for those who have been informed of caste-based disadvantages in academic preparation. SC/ST students overwhelmingly perceive reservations to be reparative justice (89%), whereas 67% of general category students perceive it as "reverse discrimination."<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, longitudinal evidence indicates that while 68% of reserved students need initial academic support, 82% of them catch up at graduation, implying that institutional efforts can buffer preparation gaps.<sup>63</sup>

Merit is still a controversial term. While reserved category students enrich classrooms, unconscious bias in corporate hiring continues, with 41% of recruiters doubting their credentials. Peer dynamics also show exclusion, as 55% of reserved IIT students are initially excluded from study groups, though this falls to 18% by graduation after diversity workshops.<sup>64</sup>

The Preparation Inequality and attitudes of the public are key issues. Costly coaching is still beyond the means of most shy candidates, but Tamil Nadu's low-cost coaching programs have made top institutions such as IITs more accessible. A report in 2024 showed 447

<sup>59</sup> Supreme Court Observer. *What is the Bihar government's 65 per cent reservation quota challenge in the Supreme Court?* - Supreme Court Observer. <https://www.scobserver.in/journal/what-is-the-bihar-governments-65-percent-reservation-quota-challenge-in-the-supreme-court>. (2024, July 29).

<sup>60</sup> Chhapiya, H. (2024, July 27). 'It'll take 400 years for ST category to match general scores for IITs.' *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/challenges-faced-by-sc-st-and-obc-students-in-joining-iits-without-reservation/articleshow/112052893.cms>

<sup>61</sup> Supreme Court Observer. (2024b, July 29). *What is the Bihar government's 65 percent reservation quota challenge in the Supreme Court?* - Supreme Court Observer. <https://www.scobserver.in/journal/what-is-the-bihar-governments-65-percent-reservation-quota-challenge-in-the-supreme-court/>

<sup>62</sup> Sabharwal, N.S. *Understanding Students' Attitudes Towards Affirmative Action Policy in Higher Education in India*. Social Inclusion. (2024).

<sup>63</sup> Devapujyula, P., & Devapujyula, P. *Caste reservation in India: Effects on education and jobs*. *Fortage - Delivering the Truth*. (2025, January 5).

<sup>64</sup> M S Sriram, & M S Sriram. *Reservations have their own merit: inclusion*. Deccan Herald. (2023, November 23). <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/reservations-have-their-own-merit-inclusion-2783184>

students from such programs secured IIT/NIT admissions, from 75 in 2021.<sup>65</sup> Though a 2024 APA study demonstrates support for meritocracy decreases upon learning about disparities in caste-based preparation, an emphasis on increased communication regarding reservations is necessary.

Reforms proposed seek to reconcile equity and merit by structural means. Programs such as Karnataka's "Kiran Scheme" provide subsidised coaching to level pre-exam opportunities. Holistic admissions processes that take into account extracurricular activity and socio-economic adversity can lower dependence on exam scores. Adjustable reservation percentages by current socio-economic measures can compensate for changing disparities. Post-admission support, such as IIT Madras's bridge programs, has worked well in eliminating performance gaps and demonstrates scalability.<sup>66</sup>

Placement and wage outcome data from the 2024 AICTE report reflect only slight variations in placement rates (general: 78%, SC/ST: 74%, OBC: 76%) and wages (general: ₹12.5 lakh, SC/ST: ₹11.2 lakh), signaling that reservations lead to career parity in the longer term. Still, problems exist, such as economically well-off OBC candidates' admissions due to ineffective creamy layer screening, as in the case of IIT Bombay's 2023 audit.<sup>67</sup> The 2024 Supreme Court Madhya Pradesh MBBS judgment reaffirmed reservations as an instrument of social justice, yet their success hinges on tackling underlying issues such as poorly funded schools, caste-based discrimination, and uneven resources.<sup>68</sup> While reservations enhance access to quality

education, they must be complemented by primary education and anti-discrimination policies. The controversy represents tensions between remedying past injustices and contemporary fairness. Success in the long term demands systemic reform to close preparation gaps, cultural bias, and economic gaps, reconciling reparative justice with merit principles.

### **Policy Review and Suggestions**

India's reservation laws under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) seek to counter imbalances based on caste but are implementation-challenged. Even though reservations enhance representation in employment and education, preparation deficits continue due to institutional imbalances, with weaker students not having access to quality tuition, strengthening dependence on quotas rather than treating the causes of inequality.<sup>69</sup>

Job outcomes reveal moderate advancement, with cautionary notes providing 5% improvement points for SC/ST employment, though underrepresentation continues in high-level jobs.<sup>70</sup> The "creamy layer" problem remains, as affluent OBCs control the advantage intended for the poorest. The 103rd Amendment's EWS quota (2019) incorporated economic conditions but left out SC/ST/OBCs, weakening social justice initiatives and raising competition between lower-income general applicants. Regional differences make it harder to implement; Tamil Nadu and Kerala have achieved success, with Tamil Nadu's subsidised coaching and Kerala's internship programme enhancing access and employability among

<sup>65</sup> Tnn. (2024, August 2). CM Stalin highlights success of state's model school students. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/success-of-tamil-nadus-model-school-students-highlighted-by-cm-stalin/articleshow/112235276.cms>

<sup>66</sup> Devapuijula, P., & Devapuijula, P. (2025b, January 5). Caste reservation in India: Effects on education and jobs. Fortaze - Delivering the Truth. <https://fortaze.com/caste-reservation-in-india-effects-on-education-and-jobs/>

<sup>67</sup> *Annual Report | Government of India, All India Council for Technical Education.* (n.d.). <https://www.aicte-india.org/reports/overview/Annual-Report>

<sup>68</sup> Sucheta. (2024, August 27). SC decision on Compartmentalised Horizontal Reservation by State of MP for MBBS admission. SCC Times. <https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2024/08/22/compartamentalised-horizontal-reservation-sc-holds-restriction-on-meritorious-reserved-category-candidates-migration-to-unreserved-seats-unsustainable/>

<sup>69</sup> Sandeep Harugade, Deepali. "The Development of Reservation Policies Under Article 15 of the Indian Constitution and Social Justice in India." *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research* (2024): n. pag.

<sup>70</sup> Raj, P., Singh, S., & Dubey, H. (2024). A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESERVATION POLICIES IN INDIA'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT SECTORS. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED LEGAL RESEARCH*, 5(1), 1. <https://ijlr.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/A-QUANTITATIVE-ANALYSIS-OF-RESERVATION-POLICIES-IN-INDIAS-EDUCATION-AND-EMPLOYMENT-SECTORS.pdf>

SC/ST students, and legal wars regarding quotas and the 50% cap remain ongoing.<sup>71</sup>

The judiciary has influenced policy, with the Indra Sawhney verdict (1992) limiting reservations to 50% and establishing creamy layer exclusions, and the M. Nagaraj judgment (2006) demanding evidence of backwardness for promotion quotas. The 2024 Madhya Pradesh MBBS judgment placed importance on the consideration of earlier disadvantages in merit calculations for reserved candidates. Suggested recommendations are OBC sub-categorisation (Rohini Commission, 2022), holistic admissions with socio-economic screening, and more stringent creamy layer implementation.<sup>72</sup> Periodic caste surveys and anti-discrimination workplace policies are critical to tackle system-wide inequalities.

India's reservation policy, although intended to rectify historical imbalances, suffers from the weakness of implementation and alterations in socio-political situations. The creamy layer problem, wherein successful members of reserved classes avail benefits, dilutes the redistributive purpose of the policy. Studies indicate that successful OBCs and SC/ST elites usually fill reserved seats, increasing intra-group disparities.<sup>73</sup> The 103rd Amendment's EWS quota (2019), based on the exclusion of SC/ST/OBCs, makes social justice more difficult and stresses economically weaker general candidates further. Caste statistics that are outdated and fixed OBC lists cannot keep up with current realities, leaving the ascending backward groups underprivileged. Regional variations in implementation further complicate the picture, as southern states benefit from improved access to education and jobs compared to northern states, where infrastructural constraints block marginalised groups.

<sup>71</sup> Nagesh, P. (2025). Reservation System in India: A Comparative Study of Implementation and Implications in Southern States. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*.

<sup>72</sup> Basu, S. An economic analysis of the reservation policy in India. *Policy Perspectives*, 28. (2021).

<sup>73</sup> Kaur, D., & Sarao, J.K. "Unpacking Inequality: Examining the Reservation System in India's Social Fabric". *European Economic Letters*. (2024).

Instrumentalisation of the reservations for political purposes is a major challenge, with states such as Maharashtra<sup>74</sup> And Rajasthan is going beyond the 50% cap on quotas, putting electoral calculations ahead of empirical backwardness. Judicial disputes, like the Indra Sawhney judgment (1992), underscore social justice versus constitutional limits tensions. Additional issues flow from the exemption of private-sector jobs from reservation policies, reinforcing caste discrimination in corporate cultures. The absence of intersectional attention to Dalit women and religious minorities perpetuates their disadvantage, while institutional loopholes such as poor real-time audits and lax enforcement of creamy layer exclusions weaken the reservation system. Forgery of caste certificates is a major issue, undermining the integrity of the policy.

Reservation policies need adaptive revisions in line with changing socio-economic information. The Rohini Commission (2022) suggested sub-categorising OBCs to avoid affluent beneficiaries' monopolisation of advantages, tackling intra-group disparities.<sup>75</sup> Periodic reviews (10–15 years) are required to evaluate policy success, as stressed in the Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) judgment. A national caste census would offer empirical evidence to improve beneficiary lists and distribute resources equitably.<sup>76</sup> Including composite scoring systems that take into account caste, income, quality of schooling, and backwardness of regions can more effectively balance merit and equity. Initiatives such as Tamil Nadu's subsidised coaching fill gaps, allowing marginalised groups to compete on an equal footing.

<sup>74</sup> Shrivastava, H. (2023, October 22). Two 'Unequal' Policies on 'Equality' of Opportunity: Comparing the USA's Affirmative Action Policy with the Indian Reservation System, *Oxford Political Review*. <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2023/10/22/two-unequal-policies-on-equality-of-opportunity-comparing-usas-affirmative-action-policy-with-the-indian-reservation-system/>

<sup>75</sup> Sandeep Harugade, D. The Development of Reservation Policies Under Article 15 of the Indian Constitution and Social Justice in India. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research* (2024).

<sup>76</sup> Krishna Gupta, R., & Bhawna Arora, D. A Legal Analysis of India's Reservation Policies and Their Constitutional Ramifications. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*. (2025).

Inclusion of means-testing in caste-based reservations would keep affluent beneficiaries (creamy layer) out, as affirmed in *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* (2006). Increasing the quota under EWS to cover economically disadvantaged SC/ST/OBCs, instead of framing special systems, would avoid fracturing efforts of social justice. OBC sub-categorisation controversies emphasise a need for prudent economic inclusion.<sup>77</sup> Strict enforcement of the 50% reservation cap, with exceptions granted only for empirically established backwardness, would check politically driven increases in quotas. The Supreme Court's 2022 EWS verdict facilitates review at regular intervals to prevent economic indicators from dominating castewise historical disabilities. Expanding anti-discrimination legislation to the private sector is important to safeguard reserved candidates against bias in the workplace.

Annual reviews of reserved seats and beneficiaries, based on Aadhaar-linked income verification, would stem fraud and creamy layer concerns. Reports such as the Justice G.D. Sharma Commission would make sure that there was transparency and accountability. Making grievance redressal mechanisms for marginalised applicants stronger is important to address gaps in implementation.<sup>78</sup> Backward area educational reforms like the upgradation of STEM infrastructure in rural schools would minimise reservation dependence for university entry.<sup>79</sup> Southern states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala have been able to merge reservations with social reforms, while northern states are hindered by geographical and political constraints. Jammu and Kashmir's 70% reservation quota, which is above the 50% limit, highlights the importance of evidence-based

policymaking to avoid reverse discrimination against general-category candidates.<sup>80</sup>

Bridge courses to fill government school academic gaps can make students more competitive. Tamil Nadu's subsidised coaching scheme, which raised IIT admissions by 22% for SC/OBC students, illustrates the effectiveness of interventions that are targeted interventions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), but localised curricula specific to places of backwardness must be developed. Online learning content, tried and tested during emergency remote education, can support classroom learning in rural, resource-constrained locations.<sup>81</sup>

Adding vocational training, as encouraged by NEP 2020, will improve employability. Upgrading STEM facilities in government schools in SC/ST dominant districts will lower dependence on reservations for higher education. Anti-discrimination cells at schools and colleges must deal with caste-based bias, while the SPRF report emphasises community outreach to fight social stigma.<sup>82</sup> Mobile learning applications and virtual classrooms, launched amid the pandemic, will be able to provide quality education to everyone, while individual gaps in preparation for competitive exams will be covered by personalised AI-driven learning systems.

### Conclusion

India's reservation policy, which has been reinforced by Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution, has promoted social equality but is also marred by systemic problems. The creamy layer drain permits better-off members in reserved classes to benefit at the expense of

<sup>77</sup> Rahi, A., & Kachar, V. UNDERSTANDING THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF RESERVATION FOR EWS (ECONOMIC WEAKER SECTION) IN INDIA. GLOBAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH ANALYSIS. (2024).

<sup>78</sup> Rethinking reservations: Balancing social justice and merit in Jammu and Kashmir. (2025, January 23). Kashmir Reader. <https://kashmirreader.com/2025/01/23/rethinking-reservations-balancing-social-justice-and-merit-in-jammu-and-kashmir/>

<sup>79</sup> Kaur, D., & Sarao, J.K. "Unpacking Inequality: Examining the Reservation System in India's Social Fabric". European Economic Letters. (2024).

<sup>80</sup> Jamal, U. (2025, January 28). *Refining reservation: Balancing equity with meritocracy*. Kashmir Observer.

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<sup>81</sup> Dr. Kiran and Geo Pellissery, Assessing the impact of National Education Policy 2020 on Backward Classes. Afr. J. Bio. Sc. 6(Si2) ISSN:2663-2187 (2024)

<sup>82</sup> Paliwal, P. & Social and Political Research Foundation. (2021). Caste and education in India: linkages, promises, and obstacles. In CURATED VOICES. [https://sprf.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SPRF-2021\\_Caste-and-Education\\_Final\\_Updated.pdf](https://sprf.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SPRF-2021_Caste-and-Education_Final_Updated.pdf)

the most deprived. Flaws in design, including keeping SC/ST/OBCs out of the EWS quota, distort efforts towards social justice and aggravate competition between economically weaker general candidates. Implementation problems, such as fake caste certificates and poor monitoring, undermine the system, particularly in states above the 50% reservation limit. Regional differences remain, with southern states such as Kerala integrating reservations more effectively with social reforms than northern states. Other problems include the marginalisation of the private sector, ignoring Dalit women, and the politicisation of quotas.

India's reservation system continues to face the equity-merit conundrum. Reservations have boosted representation, but they are faulted for perpetuating caste identities and diluting merit. Social tensions ensue from quota-related agitations (e.g., Marathas), inspired by political interests rather than evidence of backwardness. Economic mobility for marginalised communities continues to be constrained by substandard educational infrastructure and private-sector prejudice. Judicial remedies, such as the 50% ceiling of the Indra Sawhney case, are meant to reconcile equality and affirmative action, but are viewed as intruding into the domain of the legislature. Even though reservations are necessary to counteract historical discrimination, they must be harmonised with education reform, economic empowerment, and anti-discrimination legislation to reach full equality. Evidence-based policies and inclusive growth may convert reservations into a systemic equality tool.

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