



Evolution of Reservation System in India: Contemporary Discourse and Debates

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Abstract

The reservation system in India has undergone significant transformations since its inception, evolving through various socio-political landscapes. This paper delves into the historical context, tracing the origins of the reservation policy from the pre-independence era to its present form. It examines the constitutional provisions, legislative measures, and judicial interpretations that have shaped the system. The contemporary discourse surrounding reservations is analysed, highlighting the debates on its efficacy, equity, and impact on social justice. The paper also explores the challenges and criticisms faced by the reservation policy, including issues of meritocracy, reverse discrimination, and the need for economically based reservations. Through a comprehensive review of literature and empirical data, this study aims to dispense a nuanced understanding of the reservation system's role in addressing historical injustices and promoting inclusive growth in India.

Keywords: *Reservation; Castes; Economical Reservations; Inclusive Growth; Socio-Political Landscape*

1. Introduction

The reservation system in India is among the most robust and persistent quota systems in the world. It represents one of the most significant constitutional mechanisms aimed at addressing deep-rooted social inequality caused by historical injustices.

The evolution of the reservation system in India is deeply entrenched in the country's socio-historical fabric, shaped by centuries of caste-based rejection, ostracization, and inequality. Historically, the caste system relegated large segments of the population—particularly the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and

Scheduled Tribes (STs)—to the periphery of society, depriving them of access to education, property, and public life. The reservation system was established as a mechanism for affirmative action, aiming to expand opportunities in public employment, education, and political representation to communities that have faced systemic discrimination and marginalization. It is not merely a legal framework—it reflects a broader national effort to undo centuries of structural injustice by providing retrospective justice. The following section provides an insight into operational definitions for the study. For this purpose, I have defined in the appended paragraph.

1.1 Operational definitions of SC, ST, OBC, and SEBC

The reservation system primarily targets three broad categories of historically disadvantaged groups: Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC).

- Scheduled Castes (SCs) are communities that were once confined to the bottommost rungs of the caste hierarchy or considered “Avarna” (without a Varna or outside the caste system). Historically subjected to untouchability, social exclusion, and violent oppression, SCs faced persistent barriers to education, employment, and public life. The Constitution recognised the particular severity of the injustices faced by these groups and accorded them special protections and entitlements under the reservation policy.
- Scheduled Tribes (STs) comprise various indigenous communities, many of whom have lived in remote areas, with minimal connection to the rest of the community, and subsequently minimal access to resources. These groups have often remained isolated from mainstream development processes and have faced displacement, cultural erasure, and economic marginalisation. Although SC and ST are often grouped together by those who are either uninformed or ignorant, they are two very distinct categories; reservations for STs are designed to integrate these communities into the larger socio-economic framework without erasing their unique cultural identities, whereas for SCs, one can argue that reservations are more of a form of social justice.
- Other Backward Classes (OBCs) refer to a broad and diverse set of communities that have historically been socially and educationally disadvantaged, though not necessarily subject to untouchability or extreme isolation. The identification of OBCs, largely systematised through the Mandal Commission in 1980, broadened the scope of reservations to include groups beyond SCs and STs, recognising that inequality in India is both deep and varied.
- Socially and Educationally Backward Classes or Socially and Economically Backward Classes (SEBC)

2. Literature Review

This review synthesizes research on the evolution of the reservation system in India in various dimensions, showing the complex interplay of socio-legal factors shaping affirmative action policies. The review aimed to taxonomize the historical and constitutional foundations, evaluate social and cultural influences, benchmark judicial interpretations, and identify contemporary challenges affecting marginalized groups. A systematic review of multidisciplinary studies employing qualitative, quantitative, and legal-analytical methods was conducted, focusing on Indian socio-political contexts from colonial origins to recent constitutional amendments.

Findings reveal a robust historical and legal framework underpinning reservations, persistent social exclusion driven by caste endogamy and intersectionality, and a judiciary balancing equality with affirmative action mandates. The review highlights ongoing debates, such as meritocracy versus social justice, alongside challenges that undermine effectiveness. Synthesizing these dimensions underscores tensions between social justice objectives and practical implementation, with evidence supporting nuanced, data-driven, and intersectional policy reforms. These insights inform theoretical understanding and practical policymaking, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enhance equity and inclusion within India's caste-based society.

Research on the evolution of the reservation system in India has emerged as a critical area of inquiry due to its profound impact on addressing historical social inequalities and promoting representation for marginalized communities. Since its inception during the colonial period and formalization in the Indian Constitution, the reservation system has undergone significant transformations, expanding from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) to include Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and, in recent times, Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). This policy framework is central to India's efforts to reconcile social justice with democratic equality, influencing integration and participation in educational, occupational, and political spheres for millions (Hasan, 2022). Despite these advances, caste-based disparities persist, with data revealing ongoing gaps in higher education and occupational mobility, particularly among SCs, STs, and women within these groups. (Dumont, 2023)

The reservation system faces complex challenges, including debates over the criteria for backwardness, the balance between merit and social justice, and the inclusion of economic factors alongside caste identity (Kumar & Behera, 2025). A critical knowledge gap exists regarding the effectiveness of recent policy shifts, such as the introduction of EWS quotas, and the judiciary's evolving role in interpreting these provisions (Wankhede, 2022). Controversies also surround the misuse and inefficiency of reservation benefits, the exclusion of certain religious minorities like Dalit Christians and Pasmada Muslims, and the political dynamics influencing reservation expansions (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024). These unresolved issues have significant implications for social equity and the legitimacy of affirmative action in India, as well as the reception and attitude towards such compensatory discrimination.

Conceptually, the reservation system is grounded in compensatory discrimination aimed at rectifying historical caste-based oppression, with affirmative action policies designed to enhance substantive equality by ensuring representation and opportunity for disadvantaged groups (Anthony, 2024). The interplay between caste, economic status, and gender forms a multidimensional framework that shapes access to education and employment, necessitating nuanced policy responses (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024). This framework underpins the critical examination of reservation policies' social, legal, and political dimensions.

The purpose of this systematic review is to comprehensively analyze the evolution of India's reservation system, focusing on various aspects. By synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives, this review aims to clarify ongoing debates, assess the judiciary's role, and propose informed policy suggestions to enhance the system's efficacy and equity. This contribution addresses the identified gaps by integrating empirical evidence and theoretical insights to inform future affirmative action strategies. This review employs a rigorous methodology, incorporating a wide range of recent academic literature, legal analyses, and empirical studies. It systematically excludes non-peer-reviewed sources and organizes findings thematically to elucidate the multifaceted nature of reservation policies.

2.1 Chronological Review of Literature

The literature on the genesis and growth of the reservation system in India reveals a progressive deepening of scholarly focus from foundational historical and constitutional analyses to nuanced examinations of socio-economic, political, and legal complexities. Early works emphasize the origins and rationale of caste-based affirmative action and the balancing act between equality and compensatory discrimination. Over time, research increasingly explores judicial interpretations, policy expansions including economic criteria, and the multifaceted challenges such as misuse, intersectionality with gender, and intra-group disparities. Contemporary studies focus on the lived experiences of marginalized groups, systemic inefficiencies, and the evolving political dynamics shaping reservation debates and reforms.

Table 1: Decadal classification for review of literature.

Year Range	Research Direction	Description
1990–2000	Foundational Theories and Political Debates	Early research concentrated on the philosophical and political foundations of caste-based reservations, examining the tensions between social justice and meritocracy. Discussions included the role of affirmative action in democratic representation and the challenges posed by political contestation and social conflict. The initial balancing of constitutional equality with compensatory discrimination was a primary theme.
2001–2010	Policy Implementation and Social Justice Discourse	Studies during this period analyzed the implementation challenges, effectiveness, and political ramifications of reservation policies. The discourse expanded to include debates on social justice rhetoric, electoral impacts of reservations, and the complexities of caste and community identities. Attention was given to understanding how reservations fit within broader democratic processes and the resistance encountered from dominant social groups.
2011–2015	Socioeconomic Impact and Institutional Change	Research shifted toward evaluating the socioeconomic outcomes of reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. Scholars explored disparities in education and employment, the intersectionality of caste with economic status, and the transformation of public institutions. Institutional representation and human development through reservations gained prominence, alongside critiques of persistent caste-based inequalities.
2016–2019	Legal Frameworks and Judicial Interpretations	This phase emphasized the constitutional and legal dimensions of the reservation system, including landmark court rulings and legislative amendments. Analyses focused on the legal definitions of backwardness, the implications of reservation caps, and sub classification within reserved categories. The judiciary's pivotal role in interpreting affirmative action policies and addressing intra-group equity concerns was a significant focus.
2020–2022	Expansion to Economic Criteria and Political Challenges	Research highlighted the introduction of economic criteria through the 103rd Constitutional Amendment and its contentious implications. Studies debated the compatibility of economically based reservations with traditional caste-based policies, the challenges of creamy layer exclusions, and the political pressures influencing reservation expansions. Discussions also included the rise of reservation demands from new social groups and the political instrumentalization of the policy.
2023–2025	Contemporary Challenges, Intersectionality, and Policy Reforms	Recent literature centers on complex challenges such as misuse, corruption, inefficiency, and debates over merit versus social justice. There is a strong focus on intersectional analyses incorporating caste, class, gender, and geography, highlighting the experiences of Dalit women and marginalized communities. Judicial analyses continue alongside empirical studies on education and employment access, with policy suggestions aimed at refining affirmative action to address systemic inequities and promote inclusive mobility.

2.2 Literature Review Theoretical Implications

The synthesized findings reinforce the conceptualization of the reservation system as a complex, historically rooted mechanism aimed at rectifying entrenched caste-based inequalities, supporting theories of compensatory discrimination and substantive equality embedded in the Indian Constitution (Deshpande, 2024). This affirms the foundational role of caste as a primary axis of social disadvantage, challenging purely economic or meritocratic frameworks. The literature highlights persistent tensions between meritocracy and social justice, illustrating that merit cannot be disentangled from socio-historical contexts of caste discrimination. This challenges classical liberal theories that prioritize formal equality and merit, emphasizing instead the necessity of affirmative action to achieve substantive equality (Kumar & Behera, 2025).

Judicial interpretations and constitutional amendments, such as the inclusion of economically weaker sections (EWS), reveal evolving theoretical debates about the criteria for backwardness, expanding beyond caste to include economic factors. This shift complicates traditional caste-based frameworks and raises questions about the coherence of affirmative action theory in India (Wankhede, 2022).

The intersectionality of caste with gender, class, and religion, as discussed in several studies, advances theoretical understanding by illustrating how multiple axes of identity compound disadvantage and influence the effectiveness of reservation policies (Singh & Dubey, 2023). This supports intersectional theories in social justice scholarship. Theoretical critiques also emerge regarding the internal heterogeneity within beneficiary groups (e.g., creamy layer phenomenon), which problematizes uniform affirmative action approaches and calls for more nuanced subclassifications and targeted interventions (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024).

The role of stigma and social exclusion attached to reservation's beneficiaries, challenges assumptions of policy neutrality and highlights the socio-psychological dimensions of affirmative action, suggesting that theoretical models must incorporate cultural and identity-based factors alongside legal and economic considerations (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024) (Singh & Dubey, 2023).

Practical Implications

Policymakers must recognize that reservation policies, while constitutionally mandated and socially necessary, require continuous refinement to address intra-group disparities, like the 'creamy layer' predicament, and to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits within marginalized communities. (Gupta, 2023). The inclusion of economic criteria through EWS reservations introduces practical challenges related to the constitutional cap on total reservations and the risk of diluting caste-based affirmative action's original intent. This necessitates careful policy design and judicial oversight to strike a balance between social justice and legal constraints (Rahi & Kachar, 2024). Implementation inefficiencies, misuse, and corruption identified in the literature underscore the need for robust monitoring mechanisms and transparency in reservation processes, particularly in educational institutions and public employment (Singh & Dubey, 2023).

The documented social stigma and discrimination faced by reservation beneficiaries, especially Dalit women in educational settings, call for institutional reforms that promote anonymity in admissions and foster inclusive environments to mitigate psychological harm and social exclusion. (Singh & Dubey, 2023).

The judiciary's pivotal role in interpreting reservation policies suggests that ongoing legal engagement is essential to navigate emerging challenges, such as subclassification and expanding beneficiary categories, ensuring that affirmative action remains aligned with constitutional principles.

Finally, the intersectional nature of disadvantage highlighted by the research implies that affirmative action policies should be complemented by broader social and economic reforms, including targeted skill development, economic empowerment, and anti-discriminations measures, to enhance the overall efficacy of reservation systems. (Ajax, 2024) (Dumont, 2023)

2.3 Gaps in the Review of Literature

Table 2: Area of limitations after review of literature.

Area of Limitation	Description of Limitation
Limited Intersectional Analysis	Many works insufficiently address the intersectionality of caste with gender, socio-economic status, and geographical factors, which is crucial for understanding compounded disadvantages. This gap weakens the comprehensiveness of social equity assessments and policy recommendations.
Lack of Empirical Assessment	A predominant focus on constitutional provisions, judicial rulings, and political debates often overshadows empirical assessments of reservation outcomes, limiting insights into lived experiences and the practical efficacy of policies, thereby constraining holistic understanding.
Methodological Constraints	Several qualitative studies rely on small or purposive samples, which may introduce bias and limit the representativeness of findings. This methodological constraint affects the robustness and replicability of conclusions regarding reservation impacts.
Insufficient Longitudinal Data	A lack of longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of reservation policies impedes understanding of sustained social mobility and intergenerational impacts, thereby limiting the ability to evaluate policy effectiveness over time.
Neglect of Private Sector Dynamics	Most literature concentrates on public sector reservations, with limited exploration of the private sector's role and challenges in implementing affirmative action, which restricts the scope of policy analysis and overlooks significant employment sectors.
Data Limitations and Lack of Caste Census	The absence of comprehensive and updated caste census data hampers accurate identification of beneficiary groups and assessment of intra-group disparities, thereby constraining evidence-based policy formulation and evaluation.

2.4. Gaps and Future Research Directions

Table 3: Gaps and future research suggested after the literature review.

Gap Area	Description	Future Research Directions	Justification
Intersectional Impact on Marginalized Groups	Limited longitudinal and large-scale quantitative studies on how intersectionality (caste, gender, class) affects the socio-economic mobility of marginalized groups, like Dalit women.	Conduct longitudinal mixed-method studies incorporating intersectional frameworks to track the educational, occupational, and social mobility of marginalized groups over time.	Intersectionality critically shapes reservation outcomes, yet current research lacks comprehensive data on compounded disadvantages, limiting policy effectiveness (Ajax, 2024)(Singh & Dubey, 2023).

Economic Criteria vs. Caste-Based Reservation	Insufficient empirical evaluation of the impact of shifting reservation criteria from caste to economic status, especially post-103 rd Amendment.	Empirically assess the socio-economic and legal consequences of economic-based reservations compared to caste-based ones, including effects on social justice and inclusion.	Recent policy shifts toward economic criteria risk undermining Compensatory discrimination principles foundational to Indian reservations (Rahi & Kachar, 2024).
Misuse, Corruption, and Creamy Layer Issues	Generalized claims of misuse and corruption lack robust empirical substantiation, and the creamy layer concept's operationalization is inconsistent.	Develop rigorous empirical studies to quantify misuse and corruption in reservation implementation and refine creamy layer identification criteria with socio-economic data.	Addressing misuse is critical to policy legitimacy, but current discourse often relies on anecdotal evidence, risking stigmatization of beneficiaries. (Kalsi 2024)
Intra-Group Inequities within Reserved Categories	Limited research on subclassification and intra-group disparities among Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes beneficiaries.	Explore intra-group socio-economic heterogeneity and design sub-classification frameworks to assure egalitarian distribution of reservation benefits within SC/ST groups.	Subclassification debates highlight the need to address uneven benefit distribution and intra-group inequalities (Gupta, 2023).
Exclusion of Religious Minorities from Reservation Benefits	Underexplored impact and policy implications of excluding groups like Pasmanda Muslims and Dalit Christians from Scheduled Caste reservations.	Conduct constitutional, socio-political, and empirical studies on the exclusion of religious minorities from reservation benefits and propose inclusive policy frameworks.	Exclusion based on religion raises questions about the scope and fairness of affirmative action policies (Kumar, 2023).
Meritocracy and Reservation Outcomes	Empirical evidence on the impact of reservations on merit and efficiency in education and employment remains inconclusive and polarized.	Design comprehensive studies measuring reservation effects on meritocratic outcomes, employer perceptions, and human capital development.	Balanced understanding is needed to reconcile social justice goals with concerns about meritocracy (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024)
Data-Driven and Regional Policy Customization	Lack of region-specific, data-driven analyses to tailor reservation policies addressing local socio-economic and caste dynamics.	Develop regionally disaggregated datasets and policy simulation to customize reservation frameworks responsive to local disparities and social structures.	Regional variations in caste disadvantage necessitate localized policy adaptations for effectiveness (Dumont, 2023)

The collective literature on the evolution of the reservation system in India reveals a deeply rooted and dynamic policy framework that originated from colonial legacies and has continuously adapted to the socio-political realities of a stratified caste society. Historical analyses emphasize the constitutional foundations laid to rectify entrenched caste-based inequalities. The recent introduction of reservations

based on economic criteria marks a notable shift, sparking significant debates about the balance between compensatory discrimination and meritocracy, as well as the constitutional limits of affirmative action.

Contemporary debates focus heavily on issues of misuse, corruption, and administrative inefficiency, with concerns about the ‘creamy layer’ and political manipulation undermining policy goals. Discussions around meritocracy versus social justice reveal a polarized discourse, sometimes overlooking structural barriers that reservations aim to dismantle. The literature calls for more nuanced, data-driven, and intersectional policy designs that incorporate periodic socio-economic evaluations and address intra-group disparities. Overall, the reservation system in India remains a crucial but contested tool for social justice. While it has enabled notable progress in representation and upliftment, persistent gaps and emerging challenges necessitate reforms. Future policy considerations must balance constitutional commitments, social equity imperatives, and practical implementation challenges to sustain and strengthen affirmative action’s role in fostering a more equitable Indian society.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative and historical-analytical design, relying exclusively on secondary sources to examine the evolution of the reservation system in India from the pre-independence period to 2025. A year-wise chronological approach has been employed to trace the origins, transformations, and contemporary debates surrounding affirmative action. Rather than generating new empirical data, the study synthesizes insights from scholarly literature, government reports, and media analysis to construct both a historical narrative and a critical evaluation of ongoing debates.

3.2 Scope of Study

The paper is divided into distinct chronological phases to capture shifts in policy and discourse:

1. Pre-Independence Era (British Raj) – This section reviews early forms of positive discrimination introduced under British rule, such as communal electorates under the Government of India Acts, the Poona Pact (1932), and various provincial-level policies that set the stage for caste-based representation.
2. Constitutional Framing (1946–1950) – This period focuses on debates within the Constituent Assembly, examining how leaders like B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others envisioned reservations. Emphasis is placed on the rationale behind prioritizing reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), the initial 10-year ceiling for political reservations, and the vision of utilizing quotas as a temporary tool for social justice.
3. Post-Independence to 1980s – This phase analyses constitutional amendments, Supreme Court judgments, and the gradual extension of quota provisions to Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
4. Mandal Commission and Its Aftermath (1980s–1990s) – Special attention is given to the Mandal Commission Report (1980), its delayed implementation in 1990, and the subsequent nationwide protests and judicial responses (notably *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992), which redefined the scope of reservations.
5. Contemporary Developments and Debates (2000–2025) – This phase captures ongoing expansions and debates, including the extension of political reservations beyond the 10-year limit, the 93rd Constitutional Amendment (2005) enabling reservations in private educational institutions, the 103rd Constitutional Amendment (2019) introducing 10% reservations for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), and more recent controversies and legal challenges that continue to shape discourse.

3.3 Data Sources

The research draws on a wide range of secondary materials. Scholarly articles were accessed through academic platforms such as JSTOR, ResearchGate, and Mendeley. Economic and Political Weekly provided valuable insights into both historical and contemporary scholarly debates. Opinion pieces and long-form journalism from outlets like The Indian Express, The Hindu, and The Wire were used to capture public discourse and contemporary reactions. Government publications, including census reports, National Sample Survey (NSS) data, and official commission reports (e.g., Mandal Commission, Sachar Committee), were consulted to provide statistical grounding.

3.4 Limitations

The study is constrained by its reliance on secondary data, which may reflect biases in existing scholarship or limitations in government reporting. While these are credible, they inherently reflect the perspectives, biases, and methodological choices of their authors. This limits the possibility of independently verifying data or incorporating primary perspectives. Moreover, the dynamic nature of policy debates—particularly from 2019 onwards—means that some developments remain ongoing and subject to judicial review, which may limit the conclusiveness of contemporary analysis.

3.5 Strengths

Despite these limitations, the methodology adopted in this study offers several notable strengths. By employing a chronological framework from the pre-independence era to 2025, the research presents a holistic analysis of the evolution of reservations in India, situating contemporary debates within a broader historical trajectory.

4. *Evolution of the Reservation System*

4.1 Ancient India

Contrary to popular opinion, the opposition against the caste system is not recent. In fact, in the 6th-5th BCE, parallel schools of thought of conformist traditionalists and anti-Varna system reformists formed, Buddhism and Jainism being the reformist streams. (Sharma, 2021). In the 6th-7th centuries, the Bhakti movement also emerged in Tamil Nadu, presenting personal devotion as the true form of salvation and rejecting the other restrictive or discriminatory practices. The Bhakti movement gradually spread to northern India until the 16th-17th centuries. (Sharma, 2021) These pre-existing movements, rejecting the treatment perpetuated by the caste system, ultimately gave rise to the 19th-century movements, which became the building blocks of our current reservation system.

4.2 Early Activists and Princely States

All the way back in the 15th century, activists like Haridas Thakur emerged. Thakur was a Vaishnava saint and convert from Islam, who questioned the doctrinal basis of Brahmanical literature that upheld caste hierarchy and formed the Matua sect in 1860 Bengal, to improve conditions for the Chandalas, amongst other lower caste Hindus. Similarly, Guru Ghasidas (1756-1850) also founded the Satnami movement in central India (present-day Chhattisgarh) to improve the social status and conditions of leatherworkers, who were also a part of the lower- caste Hindu community.

In 1882, Jyotirao Phule, in his representation to the Hunter Commission, demanded universal free and obligatory education in India, in addition to proportional representation for marginalized communities in government jobs. (Raj & Gokulraja, 2015). His actions are widely regarded as the precursor to the discourse of positive discrimination and implementation of reservation policies in India. As early as 1874, reservations were introduced in civil services for backward classes in the princely state of Mysore (Jensenius, 2013) (Bayly, 1999). In 1921, a formal reservation was established, subsequent to the recommendations of the Justice Miller Committee in 1919.

In 1902, the Maharaja of Kolhapur in Maharashtra, Shahu Maharaj, established 50% reservations in services for non-Brahmin and backward classes (Raj & Gokulraja, 2015). This is widely considered the first official government mandate sanctioning reservations for depressed classes in India. In 1891, demands for reservations in government jobs were made in the princely state of Travancore, protesting the appointment of non-natives into public service instead of qualified locals, leading to social movements like the Malayali Memorial (1891). Further, in 1896, a petition was submitted to the King of Travancore by the Ezhava community, led by Dr. Padmanabhan Palpu, demanding equal civil rights and access to government jobs for the Ezhava caste.

In Madras, complaints arose about Brahmin predominance in government, where they held a disproportionate number of key positions due to better access to education. In response, in 1916, the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party) was founded to be a proponent for non-Brahmins in the administration of the Madras Presidency. In 1921, Chief Minister Akaram Subbaroyalu Reddy issued a government order to establish quotas. This order faced resistance and was initially suspended. Following rallies and advocacy by social reformer Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, the 'Communal Government Order' was passed in 1927 by Chief Minister P. Subbaroyan. This order allocated posts – 44% for non-Brahmin Hindus, 16% each for Brahmins, Muslims, and Christians, and 8% for scheduled castes. (Yoganandham et al., 2023).

4.3 Role of the British Colonial Government

Following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the British realized that public opinion had been terribly misconceived before the rebellion (Montagu and Chelmsford, 1918) and recognized the need to include Indians in the policy-making process. Therefore, the initial representation of Indians in the colonial legislature was established and secured by the Indian Council Acts of 1861 and 1892; despite the number of representatives being limited and appointed, instead of being elected, this development marked a significant milestone. In 1882, the Hunter Commission was established. It provided a formal platform for early social reformers to advocate for educational and employment rights for underprivileged groups, laying some of the foundational arguments for what would evolve into India's comprehensive reservation system. (Raj & Gokulraja, 2015)

In 1909, the concept of communal electorates was introduced through the Morley-Minto Reforms. They granted separate electorates to Muslims, who believed their interests were compromised due to underrepresentation, in a bid to strengthen British interests. The decision to confer political safeguards to Muslims was based on a notion of community-wise representation, as the British considered a Western-style popular representation unsuitable for India (Jensenius, 2014). This initial step created a path-dependent process – later, when the question of safeguards for other groups, like the depressed classes, arose, it was difficult for British administrators to resist these claims, having already established the precedent with Muslims. This established a system of separate electorates and group-based representation; Mahatma Gandhi, years later, referred to these reforms as the 'undoing' of Indian society, suggesting they laid the groundwork for future political divisions. Therefore, these reforms were a critical juncture that established a precedent for group-based representation, which profoundly influenced the subsequent development of India's reservation policies, including those for Scheduled Castes (SCs).

In 1911, however, separate electorates for Muslims were removed. Ten years later, British administrators regretted the actions taken within the reforms, and the Montagu-Chelmsford- Reeves Report (1918) stated, “It is probable that the far-reaching consequences of this decision [to grant separate electorates] and the difficulties which it would create at a later stage were not fully foreseen”.

4.4 Early Institutionalization of Minority and Depressed Class Representation (1916-19)

In 1916, the Lucknow Pact – a landmark agreement between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League – was signed. It agreed upon establishing a framework for constitutional reforms in India and suggested that all 'important minorities' should be accorded reserved seats in legislative bodies. Hence, it can be said to have consolidated the principle of reserved seats for minorities, a key feature that persisted in later constitutional reforms, including the Government of India Acts and eventually the Indian Constitution.

In 1917, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was tasked with mobilizing the Depressed Classes as a representative of the Indian National Congress. However, he soon diverged from the Congress's position and began advocating for separate representation for these communities.

In January 1919, Dr. Ambedkar made a formal representation to the Southborough Franchise Committee, which had been appointed to review proposals from the Montagu-Chelmsford Report. He was consulted not as a representative of a political party, but as one of the few university graduates belonging to the Depressed Classes in the Bombay Presidency at the time. Ambedkar contended that while other minorities like Muslims and Christians were relatively like-minded, Hindus were fundamentally divided between 'touchables' and 'untouchables'. He contended that the Depressed Classes had been treated unjustly for so long that only they could truly represent their own distinct interests. Ambedkar asserted that under a system of territorial constituencies, the Depressed Classes would never be elected to office because they constituted a minority group and were perceived as inferior; he proposed two potential solutions to this problem: either reserve seats for the Depressed Classes in plural constituencies or grant them separate communal electorates. Ultimately, effectively persuaded the Franchise Committee that the SC community needed separate representatives.

Based on the recommendations in the committee's report, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were implemented in the Government of India Act of 1919 – not only continuing the existing distinct electorates for religious minorities, but also establishing a mechanism for the designation of seats for select representatives from the depressed classes. The Depressed Classes were thus formally recognized as a separate social group. (Jensenius, 2014)

4.5 Evolving Frameworks of Minority and Depressed Class Representation (1927–1942)

In 1927, a British-led body, called the Simon Commission, was appointed to recommend constitutional reforms for India. The commission recommended continuing the policy of guaranteeing political representation for Muslims and the depressed classes, viewing it as an obstacle to common citizenship but a necessary measure. The report was a key event that led to the recognition of the depressed classes as a distinct political community requiring safeguards. However, its all-British composition led to a boycott by the Indian National Congress and other major political parties; hence, the Commission's report was rejected by most major political contenders in India.

Following the Simon Commission, the All-Parties Conference met and constituted a committee under Motilal Nehru to draft an alternative constitutional framework. The resulting Nehru Report, formulated in 1928, was fundamentally opposed to political quotas or reserved seats for any community;

instead of quotas, the report suggested several other mechanisms to protect minority interests. These included safeguarding language rights and, most notably, presenting the concept of a Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system. However, the proposals were rejected by representatives of the depressed classes, including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as they insisted that either reserved seats or separate electorates were essential to secure political presence and voice for their community. Moreover, the British authorities also opposed the idea of a PR system, deeming it too complex for the largely uneducated Indian electorate at the time.

The First Round Table Conference took place in London between November 1930 and January 1931 to negotiate political reforms and the future of India. The Indian National Congress was notably absent because of its leaders being imprisoned due to their involvement in the Civil Disobedience Movement; meanwhile, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Bahadur R. Srinivasan represented the Depressed Classes, whose political standing was strengthened because of the absence of Congress. Dr. Ambedkar tabled a memorandum before the Minorities Committee demanding several safeguards for the depressed classes; these included – a cabinet seat, equal rights, "adequate representation" in the legislatures, adult suffrage, and a separate electorate for depressed classes for the first decade post-independence (Jensenius, 2014).

The Second Round Table Conference convened from September to December 1931. Representing the depressed classes, Ambedkar again demanded quotas in legislatures, civil services, and the executive. He argued for safeguards to prevent the majority from enacting discriminatory laws. However, as the only delegate from the Congress party, Gandhi promoted a vision of a united India; though he reluctantly conceded them to Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Anglo-Indians, Gandhi firmly opposed separate electorates for any group and was vehemently against granting them to the depressed classes, threatening to fast unto death if this occurred. Instead, Gandhi presented a 'Communal Settlement' memorandum to the Minorities Committee, which proposed constitutional safeguards for cultural and linguistic identity, freedom of religion, adult franchise, and joint electorates designed to ensure proportionate representation for all communities.

In response to the demands from the conferences, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald presented the Communal Award, which allocated separate electorates to several religious and social communities. This granted the depressed classes distinct electorates in 78 constituencies where their population was concentrated, along with the right to vote in general unreserved areas, which became a central point of contention between political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Mahatma Gandhi strongly opposed the provision of separate electorates for the depressed classes, viewing it as a move that would divide Hindu society; therefore, he began a hunger strike in protest following the announcement of the Award. This led to intense negotiations between Congress leaders and Dr. Ambedkar, who represented the depressed classes. To end Gandhi's fast and resolve the crisis, intense negotiations transpired between Ambedkar and Congress leaders, after which Ambedkar was pressured to relinquish the demand for separate electorates.

September 24, 1932, marked the signing of the Poona Pact as a compromise, replacing the separate electorates with a system of reserved seats elected through joint electorates. In return for abandoning separate electorates, the number of seats reserved in provincial assemblies for the depressed classes was significantly raised from the 71 allocated in the Communal Award to 151, and also stipulated that 18% of seats in the central legislature be reserved for these communities. The agreement also included a system of primary elections where Dalit voters alone would elect a panel of four candidates for each reserved seat, and these candidates would then contest in the final election with a joint electorate of both Dalit and caste Hindu voters.

Many viewed the Poona Pact as a success for Ambedkar, on account of the notable increase in the number of reserved seats he procured for his community (Jensenius, 2014). However, Ambedkar viewed the Poona Pact as a failure because he believed that under a joint electorate system, elected representatives of the depressed classes would be beholden to the majority caste Hindu voters, making them 'slaves of the majority' rather than true champions of their community. Regardless, the Poona Pact shifted the justification for reservations from being about representing a distinct community to uplifting a deprived segment of society, and this compromise, born from a political struggle, has had a lasting, path-dependent influence on India's system of electoral quotas.

From these negotiations, the Government of India Act of 1935 was eventually introduced. The Act introduced the term 'Scheduled Castes' to replace the previously used 'Depressed Classes' as specified by His Majesty in Council – this definition was later elaborated in the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1936. (Negi, 2024). The Act was a landmark piece of pre-independence legislation that formalized reserved seats by including provisions for reserving seats for the poorer classes, continuing the system of political safeguards for these communities. Moreover, it also established communal reservation in public services, a move intended to strengthen the status of Muslims and appease other minority groups in India.

Notably, in 1942, Ambedkar and N. Sivaraj founded All-India Scheduled Castes Federation to advocate for the rights of the Dalit community, representing a stronger Indian advocacy for the same than in the Congress.

4.6 Drafting the Constitution

The Government of India Act of 1935 acted as the final pre-independence constitution. (Jensenius, 2014). In 1946, the Constituent Assembly was elected, chaired by Ambedkar, to officially draft the Constitution of India. From the beginning, the issue of reservations for disadvantaged communities was a central and contentious topic, shaped by decades of prior negotiations, colonial-era policies, and the competing ideologies of national leaders – ultimately resulting in the specific reservation system enshrined in the constitution.

The Advisory Committee, tasked with making recommendations, rejected demands for separate electorates for minorities. The violence during the partition of India heavily influenced this decision, as separate electorates were seen as a 'poison' that sharpened communal differences and hindered the development of a 'healthy national life'. Despite opposition to group-based representation, reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) were retained, largely due to the commitment made in the Poona Pact of 1932 and a sense of obligation to uphold past promises. The justification shifted from recognizing SCs as a separate community to viewing them as a deprived and backward group needing assistance.

The drafters, while granting reserved seats, were adamant about having joint electorates where all castes could vote. This design was a deliberate choice to incorporate SC politicians into mainstream politics and prevent them from becoming champions of only SC interests, which they feared would exacerbate social cleavages. However, prominent SC leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and S. Nagappa did outline the need for stronger protections in their arguments. Nagappa, for instance, argued that merely being a SC member did not suffice to qualify as a legitimate representative; one also had to be elected by and accountable to the SC community, otherwise other SC members might not consider the representative to be on their side at all.

Proposals for reserving a proportion of cabinet positions for minorities were also debated and rejected. Instead, it was suggested that the President and Governors should be encouraged to include

members of prominent minority groups in cabinets, 'as far as practicable'. It is noteworthy that the Constituent Assembly was composed of a majority of Congress supporters, with nearly half the members being Brahmins. This composition may have influenced the rejection of more extensive demands for minority safeguards, such as separate electorates or a minimum percentage of SC voters in reserved constituencies. Regardless, an agreement was reached between the members of the Constituent Assembly.

The reservation system was also initially intended to last for only a decade. The goal was to help the SC community achieve electoral competitiveness and integration into the political system, after which the provisions would expire. However, they have been extended every ten years since.

4.7 Post-Independence Consolidation of Reservation Policies (1950s)

The Constitution of India came into effect in 1950, establishing the legal basis for reservation policies. As discussed earlier, it included provisions to reserve seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in state assemblies and the national parliament.

In 1951, only a year after the Constitution came into effect, the first constitutional amendment was made. *State of Madras v. Smt. Champakam Dorairajan* (1951) was a landmark Supreme Court case and the first major constitutional challenge to reservation policies. The court ruled that caste-based reservations in educational establishments in the Communal Government Order of 1921 by the Justice Party government in the Madras Presidency violated the fundamental right to equality guaranteed under the Constitution (Gupta & Arora, 2025). In direct response to the Supreme Court's ruling in the case, the Indian government passed the First Amendment, introducing Article 15(4) to the Constitution, which explicitly permitted the state to make special provisions for the progress of socially and educationally backward classes, thereby providing a firm legal foundation for reservations in educational institutions. Following the First Amendment, the Madras state government (present Tamil Nadu) continued its reservation policies – in 1951, a 25% allocation was made for underprivileged groups, which was increased to 41% by 1954.

Meanwhile, the 1951-52 elections marked a significant period for India's reservation system, particularly in how reserved constituencies were structured and represented. Reserved constituencies in India are single-member districts where only candidates from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) or the Scheduled Tribes (STs) are permitted to stand for elections, although the entire population votes for them regardless of caste.

In 1953, the first backward class commission, popularized as the Kalelkar Commission, was established. Its mandate was to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes, understand the difficulties they laboured under, and recommend steps for their improvement. The committee's report was submitted on March 30, 1955, concluding that traditional occupations, professions, and adult literacy were relevant factors in determining backwardness, and recommended giving priority to classes that were socially neglected. While the commission's report concerning Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was accepted, its recommendations for the Other Backward Classes (OBC) were rejected by the government.

In 1954, India's Ministry of Education established a reservation policy for educational institutions to uplift the lower classes, specifically the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs). The policy mandated the reservation of 20% of seats in educational establishments for SC and ST students (Darshan et al., 2018). A condition was attached to this reservation, allowing for the minimization of qualifying marks or grades for these students compared to those from the previous class. This policy marked a significant step in post-independence affirmative action measures in the education sector.

Moreover, the practice of reserving positions in promotions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes was first introduced in 1955 (Yoganandham et al., 2023), though it was subject to numerous changes and debates over the following years.

In 1956, a significant socio-political and religious movement emerged in India, led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. This movement, often called the Buddhist or Dalit Buddhist movement, saw nearly half a million Dalits and members of other backward classes convert from Hinduism to a contemporary variant of Buddhism, popularly known as Narayana Buddhism or neo- Buddhism. The conversion was a direct response to the caste system and the exploitation faced by lower castes within Hinduism.

In 1959, the Minister of Home Affairs, G. B. Pant, moved to extend reservations, arguing that the reasons that led to the Constituent Assembly making such provisions hadn't ceased to exist. Hence, the 8th amendment was introduced to extend reservations for another ten years, postponing the deadline from 1960 to 1970.

4.8 Debates, Extensions, and Institutional Reforms in the 1960s–1970s

During the 1960s, India's reservation system, particularly concerning political representation for Scheduled Castes (SCs), underwent significant evaluation and debate. The electoral system, which previously had multi-member constituencies for reserved seats, was terminated by the Two-Member Constituencies (Abolition) Act in 1961. Reserved seats have, since then, been designated in single-member constituencies. Data from the late 1960s shows that voter turnout was, on average, considerably lower in reserved constituencies compared to general ones.

Moreover, it became standard practice to have at least one SC cabinet minister in the centre and in each state. Data from 1953-1965 shows a consistent presence of SCs in state cabinets, with the number of ministers, deputy ministers, and parliamentary secretaries fluctuating slightly year to year (Jensenius, 2014). In 1969, the Minister of Law and Social Welfare, Mr. Govinda Menon, sought to extend reservations again. However, a debate in the same year featured arguments against such extension, with some members of Parliament, such as M.R. Masani, arguing that reservations had not led to “concrete advance and benefits for this (scheduled) class” and instead created a complacent “upper crust” of beneficiaries. Nonetheless, the 23rd Amendment Act, 1969, extended reservations until 1980.

In 1973, a Delimitation Commission was established, following the Delimitation Act of 1972, to redraw political boundaries on the basis of 1971 Census data. This commission was responsible for selecting which seats would be reserved for SCs and STs; the principal criterion stipulated that the proportion of SCs ought to be elevated in designated constituencies, which should be geographically spread out within the state. National Election Study data from 1971, just before the major delimitation, showed that non-SCs residing in reserved constituencies did not seem to feel frustrated or less represented. However, the implementation of quotas in the 1970s led to a notable decline in voter turnout in the newly reserved constituencies, a gap that narrowed over the subsequent decades.

In 1976, in *State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas* challenged the constitutionality of allowing temporary exemptions in promotions for members of scheduled castes and tribes, as being violative of the principle of equal opportunity in public employment guaranteed by Article 16(1). In the ruling, Justice Krishna Iyer pointed out that in reservation systems, benefits are often taken by the 'creamy layer' of the backward classes, while the most vulnerable members remain deprived. This case highlighted the injustice that can occur when equals are treated unequally and vice versa within the reservation framework. At the end of the 1970s, similar to the previous two decades, reservations were extended for another 10 years again, by passing the 45th amendment in 1980 and setting the deadline 1990.

4.9 The Mandal Era and Expansion of Reservation Policies (1979–1990s)

The Mandal Commission, officially the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission, was a pivotal body in the advancement of India's reservation policy. It was established in 1979, chaired by B.P. Mandal, to assess the circumstances of socially and educationally backward classes. Its main goal was to recognise these classes and suggest steps for their upliftment, including reservations in government jobs.

In its 1980 report, the Mandal Commission identified 3,743 backward classes, finding that Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constituted approximately 52% of India's population, according to the 1931 Census. It recommended a 27% reservation for OBCs in government jobs and educational institutions (Gupta & Arora, 2025), in addition to the existing 22.5% reservations for scheduled castes and tribes, bringing the total to 49.5%.

In 1982, the Constitution specified that 15% and 7.5% of vacancies in the public sector and government-aided educational institutions would be reserved for SC and ST candidates, respectively (Raj & Gokulraja, 2015). This quota system was initially set for five years, after which it was to be reviewed, but it was routinely extended by subsequent governments.

In Tamil Nadu, after the AIADMK party narrowly lost the 1980 general election, its leader M. G. Ramachandran increased the backward classes' reservation allotment from 31% to 50%, raising the state's total reservation to 68% (Yoganandham et al., 2023). The justification for extending reservations began to shift during this period; debates in the late 1980s and early 1990s started framing reservations as a tool for the socio-economic development of the SC community, rather than just for political integration. However, reservations also started being used as a political tool, manipulating caste sentiments for vote-bank politics.

At the end of the decade, in 1989, the 62nd amendment was passed to extend the reservations until 2000. In 1990, the government, led by Prime Minister V.P. Singh, implemented the commission's recommendations of the Mandal Commission, issuing an office memorandum that reserved 27% of seats in government jobs and educational institutions for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The implementation triggered massive protests, particularly from upper-caste groups who opposed what they saw as a threat to meritocracy, and threw the nation into turmoil, culminating in a legal challenge in the Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*.

The Supreme Court's landmark judgment in the *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* case in 1992 upheld the 27% reservation for OBCs. However, the court also established a 50% ceiling on total reservations – meaning the combined quotas for SCs, STs, and OBCs could not exceed half of the available seats or positions – and introduced the 'creamy layer' concept, which excludes the more affluent members of OBCs from benefiting from the reservation policy.

The court's ruling addressed the constitutional validity of reservations and established critical principles that continue to guide affirmative action in the country. Since its introduction, the 'creamy layer' concept has remained one of the most debated aspects of India's reservation policy, and some states, like Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, have proposed reservation quotas as high as 68% and 87% respectively, instead of the prescribed 50% ceiling. (Verma, 2020). Regardless, the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission significantly altered India's political landscape, empowering backward classes and leading to the rise of new political leaders and parties representing OBC interests, especially in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, in addition to improving their interests in the education sector and employment.

Apart from reservations covered in the Mandal Commission's report, in 1993, a constitutional amendment was passed to reserve one-third of the seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions (village councils) and municipalities with the 73rd and 74th amendments. These amendments established a 33% quota for women at every level of local governance, from the village-level panchayat to the district-level zilla parishad, including for the position of chairperson. Since the introduction of these quotas, over one million women have entered local bodies, with some states even exceeding the mandated 33% quota. (Heyer et al., 2009)

Following the local-level initiatives, the Women's Reservation Bill was tabled during H.D. Deve Gowda's governance in 1996, proposing reserving one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and in all State Assemblies for women. It also included a provision to reserve one-third of the seats allocated for scheduled castes and tribes for women from those communities. However, the bill ultimately lapsed when the 11th Lok Sabha was dissolved. Notably, though, during the 1990s, there was a notable increase in the percentage of female MLAs in reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes.

In 1995, the 77th Amendment to the Constitution was passed, which introduced Clause 4(A) to Article 16. This amendment protected reservations in promotions for SCs and STs in public sector employment. In 1994, the Ranvir Sena, mainly comprising upper-caste Bhumihari landlords, was formed in Bihar, emerging during a time of intense agrarian and caste-based conflicts, especially between landowning upper castes and landless backward classes. The Sena represented a violent backlash by upper castes, who felt threatened by the growing assertion of backward classes under the umbrella of reservations and land rights movements. They carried out massacres targeting Dalits, such as Bathani Tola in 1996 and Laxmanpur-Bathe in 1997, to suppress Dalit assertion, discourage demands for land reform, and undermine the confidence that reservations and political mobilization had given to marginalized groups.

The violence perpetrated by the Ranvir Sena underscored exactly why reservations were still necessary, and that the integration and upliftment of the backwards classes was still to be achieved. Therefore, in 1999, the 79th amendment was passed to extend the reservations until 2010.

4.10 Judicial Scrutiny and Constitutional Amendments in the 2000s

The 2000s were a critical period for India's reservation system, marked by significant legal clarifications from the Supreme Court and continued debate over the policy's effectiveness. In 2000, the 81st amendment introduced clause (4-B) to Article 16 of the Constitution, incorporating the 'carry-forward rule', allowing unfilled reserved vacancies from one year to be carried over to the next, treating them as a separate class of vacancies. The 82nd amendment, also passed in 2000, modified Article 335, specifying that nothing would prevent the state from making provisions to relax qualifying marks or lower evaluation standards in matters of promotion for SCs and STs. Further, in 2001, the 85th amendment provided for consequential seniority in promotion matters for SC and ST candidates who were promoted through reservation.

In 2002, a Delimitation Commission, with its work culminating in a new delimitation that came into force in 2008, altered political constituencies for the first time since the 1970s. Additionally, in the *M. A. Pai Foundation v. State of Karnataka* (2002), the Supreme Court ruled that the state could not compel unaided private educational institutions to implement reservation policies, though it allowed for reservations in postgraduate courses where the state provided funding; essentially, the case established institutional autonomy as a key element in conversations about reservation policies.

In 2006, the landmark case of *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* questioned the constitutional validity of the 81st and 85th amendments as being violative of the basic structure of the Constitution and the

principle of equality under Article 14. The Court upheld the amendments, stating that while there is no fundamental right to reservation in promotions, states have the discretion to pass laws to this effect. However, the ruling also established mandatory conditions for states wishing to provide reservations in promotions – they must collect quantifiable data to demonstrate the backwardness of the group, the inadequacy of their representation in public employment, and compliance with Article 335 (maintenance of efficiency) (Chadha-Sridhar & Shah, 2017). The ruling also stipulated that any reservation policy must not breach the 50% ceiling, obliterate the 'creamy layer', or extend indefinitely. The Central Educational Institutions Act was also passed in 2006 to provide reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central educational institutions.

In 2008, Lachhmi Narain Gupta vs. Jarnail Singh was brought to court, concerning reservations in promotions. The Supreme Court held that the 'creamy layer' exclusion applied to SCs and STs, meaning the state cannot provide reservation in promotions to members of these communities who fall within the creamy layer in their local areas.

In 2009, even after nearly six decades of affirmative action, the Parliament once again extended reservations through the 95th Amendment, pushing the deadline forward to 2020.

4.11 Community Agitations and Expanding Dimensions of Reservation (2010s–Present)

“ The 2010s witnessed several major protests from different community groups demanding reservation status, like Jat agitators in Haryana (2016) and Patidar activists in Gujarat (2015) led large-scale protests seeking inclusion in the reservation system. These movements, often led by agriculturally prosperous and dominant caste groups, created social tensions and raised concerns about the growing demand for reservation benefits.

The discussion on the women's reservation bill also reappeared. This time, however, despite being passed by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house) in March 2010, the bill lapsed in 2014, following the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha, without the consent of the Lok Sabha. The primary reason the bill could not be passed was a lack of political consensus among the various parties; opponents argued that the bill would disproportionately benefit wealthy, upper-caste women who were more educated than women from lower castes, thereby worsening existing inequalities.

The debate over economic versus caste-based criteria for reservations reached a critical turning point, becoming increasingly prominent as various groups, scholars, and policymakers emphasized the absence of safeguards for low-income sections of society. This concern extended even to segments of upper-caste Hindus, many of whom argued that their economic conditions were often worse than those of the 'creamy layer' within SCs, or at best comparable to other marginalized groups, yet they remained excluded from avenues of affirmative support. Therefore, in 2019, the Indian government introduced a 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in admissions in higher education and government employment, through the 103rd amendment. This marked a significant expansion of the reservation system beyond caste-based criteria to include economic disadvantage for individuals in the general population, irrespective of their caste.

Following the introduction of EWS reservation, and nearly 30 years after it was first proposed, the Women's Reservation Bill was finally passed in 2023 with the 128th amendment. As per the bill, one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, and the Delhi assembly will be reserved for women. This reservation will also apply to seats set aside for SCs and STs in these legislative bodies, reserving one-third of such seats to women from these communities. In 2020, the 104th amendment extended reservations by another 10 years, making the deadline 2030.

5. Current Debates and Discourses

The social impacts of India's reservation policies are complex. While they have been instrumental in providing social, educational, and political opportunities to historically oppressed communities, they have also contributed to social divisions and tensions.

5.1 Political Impact and Electoral Dynamics of Reservations

Reservations facilitated the rise of new political leaders from marginalized communities, who used their communities' electoral power to win elections, strengthening the political position of backward classes and challenging the dominance of upper-caste politicians.

Studies show that when leadership positions are reserved for women or members of SC/ST groups, there is a notable shift in public spending towards the preferences of those groups, such as investments in drinking water or local infrastructure. For Scheduled Tribes, for instance, political reservation has been linked to a reduction in rural poverty, as their elected representatives can better advocate for the community's economic needs. This reaffirms that the identity of the elected representative significantly affects policy decisions.

On the other hand, the reservation system has made caste a primary axis of political competition, with reservations being heavily politicized and often used as a tool for 'vote-bank politics'. Political parties frequently cater to specific caste groups to secure votes, which can perpetuate caste-based identities in political discourse and polarize voters along caste lines, undermining national unity; parties like the Indian National Congress (INC), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) have built their foundations on caste-based affirmative action policies to secure electoral support.

Therefore, critics argue that political parties often manipulate the reservation issue for electoral gain, promising or creating quotas to attract votes rather than focusing on genuine social justice. This can lead to the perpetuation of caste-based power dynamics and inhibit broader social mobility.

Joint electorates, a system where candidates from a specific community are voted on by the entire electorate of a constituency, have been a subject of significant debate, particularly in the context of ensuring genuine representation for marginalized groups like the Dalits in India. Critics, most notably Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, argued that this system could undermine the very purpose of political reservations by making minority representatives beholden to the majority community, rather than their own. A primary criticism is that joint electorates make representatives from reserved seats answerable to the majority of voters, who are often from different communities (e.g., non-SCs), leading to a situation where the elected representative is merely a nominal representative of their community, not a real one. In constituencies where the reserved group is a numerical minority, their votes alone are insufficient to secure an election; hence, the candidate would have to cater to the interests of the majority to win.

Another concern was that under a joint electorate system, political parties would select candidates who are 'palatable' to the majority community. This could result in the election of 'stooges' or 'sycophants' who would act as tools in the hands of the upper castes rather than as genuine advocates for their own community's interests. SC politicians might be discouraged from working exclusively for SC interests, or even do less for them, out of fear of losing the votes of the non-SC majority, while also being forced to adhere to the 'party line'. For instance, an analysis comparing development patterns in reserved and general constituencies between the 1970s and 2001 found no systematic difference in outcomes like literacy rates, the percentage of workers, or the percentage of agricultural labourers among SCs or non-SCs.

Moreover, SC politicians who ran for election between 2004 and 2009 were found to be much poorer than other politicians, and despite gaining political experience, SCs rarely won elections in general constituencies.

Regardless, surveys indicated that voters who have lived in a reserved constituency for a longer period tend to have a more positive impression of SC politicians, pointing to a potential reduction in caste discrimination in areas with long-standing reservations. Between 1977 and 2007, SC politicians gradually also received more cabinet positions, stabilizing at around 12- 13% of the seats, though this remained below their proportional representation in the assemblies. (Yoganandham et al., 2023)

5.2 Educational Impact, Meritocracy, and Implementation Challenges

Reservation of 15% of seats for SC members and 7.5% for ST members, primarily in public institutions, has improved educational access for marginalized communities, redistributing them upward in the university quality hierarchy and integrating them into elite occupations. Studies have linked these quotas to higher educational attainment among SC and ST children, particularly in regions like Karnataka, where political reservations in local governments serve as role models, encouraging educational investment (Cho, 2014).

By the late 1990s, SC and ST student representation in higher educational institutions reached roughly one-half and one-third of their representation in the population, respectively; for instance, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, the SC proportion rose from 7% to 7.8%, and the ST proportion from 1.6% to 2.7% (Weisskopf, 2004).

Moreover, in highly selective government institutions, SC and ST students typically require significantly lower minimum exam scores to enter universities compared to general entry applicants, reflecting less adequate academic preparation, often correlated with socio- economic disadvantages. For instance, reserved category candidates in IIT JEE scoring about 65% of the last admitted general category candidate's score are offered admission directly (Raj & Gokulraja, 2015).

Despite these policies, SC and ST reserved seats often go unfilled, especially at more selective schools, due to an insufficient number of applicants who have completed secondary education and met admission requirements. For instance, at IIT Delhi, RTI data show only 6% of SC/ST PhD seats were filled in 2022–23. This underscores a significant issue in the implementation of these policies – the disparity in primary education quality. Students from underprivileged communities often receive insufficient primary education, making it difficult for them to close the merit gap, even with reservation opportunities in higher education. On average, the academic performance of SC and ST students is well below that of their peers, and they tend to attend less prestigious universities, concentrate in less promising fields, take longer to complete degrees, drop out at higher rates, and score lower on exams (Weisskopf, 2004).

In this context, a central debate revolving around meritocracy versus social justice arises. Critics argue that reservations in education can lead to declining academic performance, thereby lowering academic standards, while proponents contend that merit cannot be separated from social background and that reservations are necessary to create equal opportunities for those facing historical disadvantages.

Either way, concerns that reservations may dilute the quality of human capital, potentially affecting India's economic growth and global competitiveness, persist. Reservation policies, according to several scholars, are the primary adversary of meritocracy, which is considered the bedrock of a developing nation. For instance, a survey in 2023 found that 60% of the respondents knew someone who had moved

abroad to pursue higher education or a job due to the reservation system in India, and 62% would be willing to stay in India if it didn't exist (Thampi et al., 2023). This represents the problem of 'brain drain', where students from unreserved categories are seeking higher education in foreign institutions by emigrating, resulting in the loss of human capital and capacity.

Moreover, since students from unreserved categories, even those from humble backgrounds, may be denied admission despite having higher scores than reserved category students, it may foster feelings of resentment and unfair treatment among upper-caste members and perpetuate caste identities and discrimination.

Implementation also presents the problem of the 'creamy layer', where affluent and socially influential individuals from reserved categories often take advantage of the system, leaving behind the truly marginalized, unable to access assistance and often unaware of the policies. Evidence shows that those SC and ST students who complete secondary education and apply to higher education are more likely to come from the uppermost socio-economic strata of their communities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, himself a member of these marginalised communities and the principal architect of the Constitution, ensured that reservations were framed not as charity but as a corrective measure to undo structural oppression. This leads to calls for more finely subdivided categories for reserved seats and stricter application of the 'creamy layer' concept to ensure benefits reach the least well-off, instead of becoming unrequired charity.

Positively, however, while initial performance may be lower, an impressive proportion of SC and ST students do ultimately graduate, with studies at elite institutions like the IITs showing consolidated average graduation rates of 84% for SC and ST students (Weisskopf, 2004). Studies also suggest that SC and ST students who graduate from relatively elite institutions tend to achieve a much higher socio-economic status than their parents, though perhaps not as high as their non-SC and ST peers. Additionally, there is evidence that the success rate for SC and ST students has likely increased over time, as cut-off marks for reserved seats have been rising; institutions have also improved recruitment, preparation, and retention efforts, including remedial programs, which have positively impacted graduation rates (Weisskopf, 2004).

Ultimately, reservation is considered necessary to increase the representation of depressed and marginalized castes, thereby promoting diversity in educational institutions as well as the integration of highly disadvantaged and underrepresented communities into elite occupations and decision-making positions.

5.3 Reservations in Public Employment: Impact and Challenges

Reservation policies have successfully increased the representation of SC, ST, and OBC individuals in government jobs, including prestigious services like the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Police Service (IPS). By providing access to stable government employment, the reservation system has contributed to the economic empowerment and upward social mobility of many individuals from marginalized backgrounds, helping them move out of poverty.

However, again, a primary criticism is that job reservations may compromise meritocracy by prioritizing caste over qualifications, potentially affecting the quality and productivity of the workforce in critical sectors. Subsequently, critics argue that such quotas can lead to inefficiencies in public administration and create obstacles to professional excellence in key areas like administrative work and medical services, as reservations may place individuals in roles without the required qualifications, potentially lowering standards in critical sectors.

Another significant issue is 'elite capture', where more affluent and socio-economically advantaged individuals within the reserved categories benefit from the policies, often at the expense of the most deprived members of the same groups. This calls for similar solutions, with making application of the 'creamy layer' principle stricter and subdividing reservation categories more finely. Moreover, despite initial employment, caste-based discrimination may not cease upon entry-level employment and can persist within the workplace, with members of SC communities sometimes being denied promotions to higher positions. Statistical evidence has shown a lack of members from marginalized communities in top-level employment hierarchies (Chadha- Sridhar & Shah, 2017).

Ultimately, making the requirement for reservations in promotions necessary. However, it has been argued that reservations could amount to a 'double promotion', leading to feelings of despondency among the open competition category and potentially harming administrative efficiency.

6. Key Contemporary Debates and Discourses

Since its inception, the reservation system has been the subject of various debates and discourses, stemming from different perspectives on the very logic behind how and why it exists and whether we truly need or benefit from it as a society.

6.1 Meritocracy versus Social Justice

India's reservation system, a form of positive discrimination, is at the centre of a persistent debate that pits the principles of social justice against those of meritocracy. Proponents argue that these policies are a necessary corrective measure to address centuries of caste-based discrimination and ensure equitable representation for marginalized communities. Critics, however, contend that reservations compromise merit, undermine efficiency, and perpetuate caste-based divisions.

At the heart of the criticism is the idea that reservations dilute merit. Yet, scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the notion of "merit" is not as objective as it appears. Sociologist André Beteille has argued that while meritocracy is important, it often rests on the assumption that individuals operate on a level playing field, which rarely holds in caste-based societies. Similarly, Anand Teltumbde, a noted scholar and Dalit intellectual, highlighted that what is often labelled as "merit" is in fact the product of privilege—access to quality schooling, secure environments, tutoring, and networks that are largely unavailable to many marginalized communities. As philosopher John Rawls also argued in *A Theory of Justice*, fairness cannot be achieved by simply treating everyone as equal if the starting conditions are grossly unequal – Rawls' idea of "fair equality of opportunity" requires that systemic disadvantages be addressed to give individuals a genuine chance at success.

Ambedkar's vision of justice aligned with these ideals – it was not about replacing one elite with another, but about creating the conditions in which every individual, regardless of background, could thrive. From this perspective, reservation is not about lowering standards— it is about redistributing opportunity in a society where centuries of oppression have structurally undermined the potential of millions.

These arguments align closely with the rationale for reservations. In India, caste is not just a social identity—it is a structure that determines access to land, education, healthcare, and dignity. Without intervention, the promise of equality remains a hollow one. Reservations aim to create substantive equality, recognizing that formal equality is insufficient to overcome deeply entrenched social hierarchies.

They are viewed as a tool to level the playing field, providing equal opportunities to those who have been historically disadvantaged.

6.2 Social Division

It is argued that the reservation system reinforces caste-based identities and divisions, hindering the development of a casteless society. By entrenching caste identities, both of advantage and disadvantage, the system is seen as undermining the project of universal citizenship, as it can lead to social unrest and resentment among communities that do not benefit from reservations.

Reinforcement of perceptions of inequality makes it difficult to bridge the gap between different caste groups, leading to conflicts. Upper-caste members may sometimes feel they receive unfair treatment regarding access to opportunities, fostering feelings of resentment and discrimination.

There are also further divisions within reserved categories, such as the differentiation between 'backward' and 'most backward' within OBCs. This leads to arguments that the most marginalized sections do not receive the same level of benefits as others.

6.3 Criteria for Reservation: Caste versus Income

The 103rd amendment, introducing EWS reservations, has sparked intense academic and political debate, raising the question of whether it represents progress toward a more inclusive model of social justice or if it dilutes the foundational purpose of reservations in India.

Supporters of the amendment argue that economic deprivation, regardless of caste, is a genuine barrier to opportunity and upward mobility. An argument, which appeared since the beginning of the reservation system itself, is that poverty can be marginalising, and a poor upper-caste individual may struggle as much to access quality education or secure a job as their lower-caste counterpart. In this view, the amendment is an attempt to depoliticize this discourse, make reservations more inclusive, and extend its benefits to a broader cross-section of disadvantaged citizens. This move also represents an evolution in the Indian reservation system – one that recognises class-based inequalities too.

However, scholars questioned whether economic hardship alone can be equated with social discrimination—the foundational justification for reservation under Article 15(4) and 16(4). They argue that caste-based exclusion is structural and multigenerational, not circumstantial, and that reservation was never merely about poverty—it was about institutionalised marginalisation and denial of dignity, neither of which is experienced in the same way by economically poor upper-caste individuals.

The core question, then, is whether the 103rd Amendment redefines affirmative action in a way that expands access and fairness or whether it reverses the moral foundations upon which the reservation system was built. While poverty undeniably affects people across castes, it is crucial to distinguish between economic hardship, which may be temporary and individual, and social exclusion, which is historical, inherited, and systemic.

6.4 The “Creamy Layer” Debate

In its rulings, the Supreme Court made it clear that the rationale for reservation was meant to uplift the disadvantaged, not to create a new elite. Since reservations maintain caste as a primary factor for accessing opportunities, a sense of social entitlement can appear and hamper efforts to address the root causes of disparity.

Therefore, the creamy layer test was introduced as a means to internalise equity within the backward classes. It aimed to ensure that the benefits of reservations trickled down to those truly in need, rather than being unfairly monopolised by the privileged few within backward classes. Initially, it applied only to OBCs, not to SCs or STs. This distinction soon became the subject of deep constitutional and political debate.

The creamy layer is determined primarily through income thresholds; however, it also considers occupation, parental status, and access to state power. Over the years, the income ceiling has been revised multiple times, with the current limit set at ₹8 lakh per annum. However, these criteria have come under criticism for being too simplistic, failing to capture the complexity of social capital and privilege. A significant concern raised by scholars is that economic wealth alone does not erase social discrimination – even well-off OBC individuals may face subtle and overt caste-based exclusion in professional and academic spaces. This suggests that creamy layer exclusions, if based solely on income, might overlook other crucial factors and risk prematurely cutting off deserving individuals from affirmative action.

The core controversy lies in whether the creamy layer exclusion should also apply to SCs and STs. Some argue that within SC and ST groups, there exists a small, upwardly mobile segment that repeatedly benefits from reservation policies, often at the expense of more marginalised subgroups. On the other hand, many scholars and activists strongly oppose this extension, arguing that economic advancement does not shield SCs and STs from caste-based stigma and discrimination, which remain deeply entrenched in Indian society.

Moreover, opponents of the creamy layer extension often point to intersectional disadvantage. An SC woman from a rural area, for instance, may face gendered, regional, and caste-based barriers simultaneously, regardless of her family's income; hence, to deny her the benefits of affirmative action on economic grounds alone would be to ignore the complex layers of marginality.

6.5 Significance of Endogamy and Gender

The significance of endogamy, and the sexist notions used to perpetuate it, are also incredibly significant to explore- not only in the context of the beginning of the caste system but also its lasting impact on social structures and the subtle ways in which casteism persists.

Endogamy refers to the concept of marrying within one's community, or in this case, "jati" (sub-castes) or "gotra" (clan). Despite the great strides in reservation and anti-discrimination policies in India, the concept of endogamy remains strongly ingrained in Indian society, especially due to arranged marriages being a common cultural practice.

Endogamy, traced back, can be easily tied to "caste-purity" and marrying within one's own group to prevent "dilution and pollution". (Chakravati, 1993) (Bidner and Eswaran, 2014).

Traditionally, castes represented hereditary occupations, with the deviations creating sub-castes later. In their research, Bidner and Eswaran presented the possibility that because Brahmins were tasked with preserving and orally transmitting the tremendous knowledge for over a millennium with no script, endogamy possibly became the basis of preventing the "dilution of skills and stock of knowledge over time" (Bidner and Eswaran, 2014). Studies also show that in ancient Vedic society, women were economically almost as involved as men (Chakravati, 1993), in addition to being tasked with raising the children, therefore becoming involved both in hereditary occupations and moulding children to conform to the practice of their caste or sub-caste. Hence, endogamy probably began to become more rigid over time, with texts like Manusmriti presenting women as impulsive, wicked, hyper-sexual beings that had to

be kept in check by men (Chakravati, 1993), and punishments for endogamy became asymmetrically harsher on upper-class women and the progeny from the marriages between upper-class women and lower-class men.

This, partly, could also be attributed to the skewed gender ratio, which still persists in India due to the patriarchal preference for a son. With more men and fewer women, there would be less marriageable women available, which could be another factor for treating exogamy as one of the greatest crimes, especially for women.

Although we have since experienced modernisation, the rigid social structure for arranged marriages remains, and exogamy continues to cause ostracization. Andre Beteille once referred to arranged marriages as the “sole oppressive institution” (Sharma, 2024), and while it may not be the only one, arranged marriages do present oppression - not just for the individuals being limited in their choice to decide who to marry, but also because it still subtly continues the concept of “caste purity”.

Even in modern India and in urban cities, one will still see hesitance or reluctance of individuals towards exogamy due to societal pressure, risk of ostracization, or simply traces of casteism, which allow one to accept lower caste members as a part of the same social community in a broad sense but not in a close one. Arranged marriages often happen within long-standing social networks that usually happen to be within the same sub-caste or caste, and in a way, continue to enforce the exclusion of lower caste members and perpetuate caste identities.

This analysis also showcases the interconnection between caste and gender in shaping our current socioeconomic world, which is often overlooked.

6.6 Policy Suggestions and Recommendations

- **Shift to Economic Criteria:** A key recommendation is to shift the focus from caste to economic status for determining reservation eligibility. This would help target a broader range of individuals in need, regardless of their caste. The introduction of the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota is a step in this direction.
- **Grievance Redressal:** To address ongoing caste-based discrimination, especially for the 'creamy layer' who are excluded from reservation benefits, institutional and local-level grievance committees should be created.
- **Improved Implementation and Targeting:** To be more effective, reservations must reach the truly marginalized. This requires better data collection to identify genuine beneficiaries and improved implementation to prevent misuse. Policymakers should invest in studying the specific needs of different caste groups in various regions to formulate more precise policies.
- **Time-Bound and Merit-Based Systems:** Some proposals suggest that reservations should be time-bound and reviewed periodically to assess their relevance. Once communities achieve a certain level of development, the need for reservations could be diminished.
- **Focus on Foundational Education:** Rather than focusing only on higher education and government jobs, reforms should improve the quality of primary and secondary education for underprivileged communities. This would better equip them to compete on merit and reduce the need for extensive reservation policies later on.
- **Strengthen Screening Methods:** To combat the misuse of benefits through false documentation or by those who are not genuinely in need, the government should introduce stricter screening methods to verify caste and economic status.

- Electoral System Reform: Moving to a Proportional Representation (PR) voting system could be the best way to ensure fair representation of more diverse interests in the future, as the current system has not made SC candidates competitive enough to win in open elections.

Conclusion

The reservation system was designed to rectify historical injustices against marginalized communities and has had a profound and complex effect on Indian society. While it has successfully provided opportunities for social and economic mobility for many, it also faces significant criticism for perpetuating caste-based divisions, being misused by affluent members of reserved categories, and potentially compromising meritocracy. The debate continues whether the system should be reformed to better target the truly disadvantaged and balance social justice with merit-based progress.

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