

Reservation in India Tool for Social Justice and Equality in Education and Government Services

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Abstract:

Indian society has long been characterized by structural inequality and discrimination rooted in the caste system. This system, based on principles of purity and pollution, assigns economic and civil rights hierarchically by birth. The Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas occupy the highest positions in this hierarchy, while the so-called lower castes, or "Avarnas," who fall outside the traditional four-fold Varna system, continue to face the stigma of untouchability and social exclusion even today. Although the reservation system was introduced during British rule as result of social reform movements that emerged alongside the freedom struggle, caste-based discrimination persisted. The reservation policy was designed to ensure the inclusion of historically deprived groups by providing quotas in education, government employment, and legislative bodies at both the Union and State levels. On January 26, 1950, the Indian Constitution formally prohibited caste-based discrimination and abolished untouchability. It also empowered the Union and State governments to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward communities, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). However, since the 1990s, the reservation policy has remained a contentious issue, debated extensively in Parliament, State Assemblies, and the public sphere.

This paper examines the implementation of reservations for Scheduled Castes in education and government employment, from primary levels to higher education institutions. It argues that, despite constitutional provisions, the actual beneficiaries among SC communities have not fully received the intended support due to improper implementation of the policy.

IndexTerms: India, Scheduled Caste, Affirmative Actions, Reservation, Education, Government Jobs, Justice and Equality

INTRODUCTION:

Indian society has historically been marked by deep-rooted structural inequality and discrimination, primarily stemming from the caste system. This system, based on the principles of purity and pollution, assigns social, economic, and civil rights hierarchically by birth. The three highest Varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—are regarded as "twice-born" according to Hindu scriptures, granting them access to religious ceremonies and reinforcing their perceived superiority over Shudras and the so-called "polluting" untouchables. This notion of purity and pollution has traditionally governed interactions between castes, with the touch of an untouchable considered defiling to an upper-caste Hindu [1]. The lower castes, collectively referred to as "Avarnas," fall outside the four-fold Varna system and have historically endured untouchability and social exclusion—discriminatory practices that persist in many forms today. Recognizing these systemic inequalities, the concept of reservations was introduced during

the British colonial period as part of social reform movements that paralleled the freedom struggle. The primary objective of reservation is to increase representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs), improve their socio-economic status, and promote social equality by enhancing their standard of living, literacy rates, and political participation [2]. The reservation policy facilitates the inclusion of marginalized communities by guaranteeing quotas in education, government employment, and legislative bodies at both the Union and State levels. With the adoption of the Indian Constitution on January 26, 1950, caste-based discrimination was officially abolished, and untouchability was outlawed. Additionally, the Constitution empowered the government to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward communities, particularly SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs) [3]. The origins of India's reservation policy can be traced back to colonial rule, beginning with the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909. This process was further strengthened under the Government of India Act of 1935, which laid the groundwork for affirmative action policies. With the promulgation of the Indian Constitution in 1950, these provisions gained constitutional legitimacy. However, since the 1990s, reservation policies have been a subject of intense debate, not only in Parliament and State Assemblies but also in public discourse. The policy continues to face criticism, particularly from upper-caste students, academicians, and sociologists, as it remains a contentious issue between the reserved and non-reserved sections of society. Moreover, the question of who should qualify for reservation benefits remains a complex and unresolved matter.

This paper examines the implementation of reservations for Scheduled Castes in education and government employment, from primary schooling to higher education institutions. It argues that, despite constitutional provisions, many of the most disadvantaged SC communities have not received the intended benefits due to ineffective implementation. While the policy was designed as a mechanism for social justice, its proper execution remains a crucial challenge in achieving true equality in education and government services.

Review literatures:

The literature on affirmative action, reservation policies, caste discrimination, social exclusion, and justice provides an overview of the reservation system within India's parliamentary democracy. Several sociologists have deeply analysed Indian society, highlighting the ethico-philosophical aspects of inequality, social hierarchy, and injustice. They argue that caste-based exploitation, deprivation, and atrocities have been an enduring reality in the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years, severely impacting historically oppressed and marginalized communities [4]. Ray Haynes and Meera Alagaraja have compared the legal foundations of affirmative action in the United States with the reservation system in India. While both focus on education and employment, they operate under different legal frameworks [5]. Education is a fundamental prerequisite for employment, and gainful employment is essential for individual dignity, financial security, and active participation in society. Thus, ensuring access to government jobs through reservation policies is critical to addressing historical injustices [6]. Sociologist André Béteille describes reservation as a constitutional protection designed to shield weaker sections from social injustice and exploitation. However, he critiques that existing Scheduled Caste (SC) programs focus more on welfare rather than long-term development, limiting their effectiveness in addressing systemic inequalities [7]. Noted economist Sukhadeo Thorat advocates for extending reservation policies to the private sector to combat discrimination in labour, capital, and other economic markets. He suggests that discrimination is an inherent feature of economic systems and emphasizes the need for equal opportunity laws to provide legal safeguards against such biases [8]. Several researchers have explored Dr. B. R.

Ambedkar's perspective on social justice, particularly his theories on caste and untouchability. Their analyses contribute to theoretical frameworks that could inform practical strategies to address caste discrimination [9]. These scholars primarily focus on the socio-political aspects of reservation, evaluating legal provisions and critically assessing their impact on marginalized communities. Other studies examine the structure, challenges, and potential solutions related to reservation policies [10]. Given India's cultural pluralism and the complexity of Hindu social structures, the country has historically demonstrated a capacity to reconcile conflicting interests and adapt to evolving social challenges. Considering over six decades of experience with caste-based reservations, the need for a new national consensus on reservation policies has become increasingly relevant.

Reservation in Education:

Since gaining independence, the Government of India has taken several steps to promote the educational development of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Key constitutional provisions, such as Articles 15(4), 29, 30, 45-46, and 350(A), specifically address the need to strengthen educational opportunities for these marginalized communities. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, abolished untouchability and forbade its practice in any form. Additionally, the Directive Principles of State Policy mandated universal education for all children up to the age of fourteen years, along with special provisions to reserve seats for SCs and STs in public educational institutions. On September 14, 1950, the government issued an order reserving 12.5% of government jobs for SCs, reinforcing its commitment to uplift historically disadvantaged groups [11]. Education plays a crucial role in fostering national progress, and the Indian government has maintained a strong focus on uplifting weaker sections of society, recognizing that SCs and STs remain socio-economically marginalized. Over the past six decades, these communities have undergone a transition through various welfare and development programs aimed at their educational and social advancement. Recognizing education as a key driver of empowerment, Article 15(4) of the Constitution empowers the State to make special provisions for the educational development of SCs. As part of this commitment, the Indian government reserves 15% of seats in universities and colleges for SC students, with state-specific reservation quotas varying based on the SC population in each region. In addition to seat reservations, both Central and State governments have introduced various initiatives to support SC students. These include scholarship programs, stipends, free textbooks, mid-day meals, stationery, and uniforms to alleviate financial barriers. A significant scheme, fully funded by the Central government, offers four years of special and remedial tutoring to selected secondary-school students, enhancing their chances of admission to universities and technical institutions. These measures reflect the government's continued commitment to fostering educational equity and ensuring better access to opportunities for SCs and STs in India.

General Literacy Development of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the General Population in India:

The progress of literacy among Scheduled Castes (SCs) compared to the general population in India over the decades highlights the impact of government policies on education. The table below presents literacy rates from 1961 to 2011, showing a consistent increase in literacy among SCs. However, despite improvements, a gap remains between SCs and the general population.

Table 1: Literacy Rate of SCs vs. General Population in India (1961-2011)

Year	SC Literacy Rate (%)	General Population Literacy Rate (%)
1961	10.27	28.3
1971	14.68	34.45
1981	21.38	42.17
1991	37.41	52.21
2001	54.69	65.38
2011	63.89	74.04

Source: Census of India (1961-2011).

Analysis of Literacy Trends:

- **Steady Improvement:** The literacy rate for SCs has risen from 10.27% in 1961 to 63.89% in 2011, demonstrating significant progress.
- **Persistent Gap:** Despite these improvements, the literacy rate for SCs remains lower than that of the general population, with a 10-18% gap persisting over the decades.
- **Impact of Reservation and Welfare Programs:** The increase in SC literacy rates reflects the effectiveness of government policies, including reservations in education, scholarships, and mid-day meal schemes.
- **Need for Further Efforts:** Although SC literacy has improved, targeted interventions are still required to bridge the gap and achieve parity with the general population.

This data underscores the importance of continued affirmative action and educational reforms to ensure inclusive development and equal opportunities for SCs in India.

Enrolment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Higher Education (1992):

The enrolment of Scheduled Caste (SC) students in higher education in India during March 1992 highlights key trends regarding gender representation and course preferences. The table below presents the enrolment distribution across different levels of higher education, indicating disparities between boys and girls.

Table 2: Enrolment of SCs at Various Levels of Higher Education in India (1992)

Course	Boys	% (Boys)	Girls	% (Girls)	Total	% (Total)
Ph.D./D.Sc./D.Phil.	724	0.28	208	0.28	932	0.28

Course	Boys	% (Boys)	Girls	% (Girls)	Total	% (Total)
Post-Graduation (MA, M.Sc., M.Com.)	27,341	10.59	6,494	8.87	33,835	10.20
Undergraduate (General)	2,07,799	80.46	60,943	83.03	2,68,742	81.09
Undergraduate (Engg., Medicine, Edu.)	22,371	8.66	5,515	7.53	27,886	8.41
Total	2,58,235	100	73,160	100	3,31,395	100

Source: India, 1993, *Selected Educational Statistics: 1991-92*, MHRD, New Delhi.

Key Observations:

- **Undergraduate Dominance:** Most SC students were enrolled in general undergraduate courses (81.09%), with boys at 80.46% and girls at 83.03%.
- **Low Representation in Doctoral Programs:** Only 0.28% of SC students pursued Ph.D./D.Sc./D.Phil., indicating limited access to higher research opportunities.
- **Gender Disparity in Higher Studies:** While girls outnumbered boys percentagewise in general undergraduate courses, their representation in postgraduate (8.87%) and professional courses (7.53%) remained relatively lower compared to boys.
- **Need for Policy Interventions:** The data underscores the need for targeted measures to enhance SC participation in postgraduate and doctoral programs, as well as to encourage female enrolment in professional education.

This analysis highlights the continued challenges in higher education access for SCs and emphasizes the importance of affirmative action policies to bridge these gaps.

Employment of Scheduled Caste in Government Jobs:

The Indian Constitution, through provisions at both the Central and State Government levels, has introduced various schemes and initiatives aimed at improving the social and economic status of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). These measures are designed to enhance employment opportunities, particularly in All-India Services and other government sectors. As part of these initiatives, reservation policies have been implemented as a safeguard for these communities. Additionally, pre-examination training centres have been established to provide coaching and skill development in areas such as confidence building and interview techniques, specifically for SC and ST candidates [12]. This training aims to equip candidates with the necessary skills to compete for government positions effectively. However, despite these efforts, the impact of these policies remains

limited even after six decades of independence. According to B.K. Roy Burman, “Even twenty-five years after independence, the promotion of Scheduled Castes in Class I, II, and III services remains meagre despite reservations” [13]. In many public sector organizations, a significant number of reserved positions remain unfilled due to the lack of qualified SC/ST candidates, even with relaxed eligibility criteria. This highlights the challenges in implementation, suggesting the need for stronger support systems to ensure that reservation policies lead to meaningful inclusion rather than just numerical representation.

Representation of SC Employees in Central Government Jobs:

The percentage of Scheduled Caste (SC) employees in Central Government jobs has gradually increased over the years across all job categories. However, the representation remains lower in higher administrative roles (Class I and II) compared to lower categories (Class III and IV).

Table 3: Trends in SC Employment in Central Government (1959–1995)

Year	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV
1959	1.18%	2.38%	6.95%	17.24%
1965	1.64%	2.82%	8.88%	17.75%
1974	3.2%	4.6%	10.3%	18.6%
1984	6.92%	10.36%	13.98%	20.2%
1995	10.12%	12.67%	16.15%	21.26%

Sources: National Commission for SC/ST, Seventh Report, April 1984 - March 1985, 5; Commissioner for SC/ST, Sixteenth Report, 1966-1967, 15; National Commission for SC/ST, Fourth Report, 1996-1997 and 1997-1998, Volume I, p.14

Key Observations:

- **Higher Representation in Lower Classes:** The percentage of SC employees in Class IV jobs (such as manual and clerical roles) has always been significantly higher than in Class I and II jobs.
- **Slow but Steady Progress:** Over the decades, SC representation in higher job categories has increased but remains relatively low, indicating barriers to upward mobility despite reservation policies.
- **Need for Skill Development and Training:** The gap in representation at senior levels suggests a requirement for better access to education, training, and leadership opportunities for SC candidates.

While reservation policies have improved SC representation in government jobs, the uneven distribution across job categories highlights structural challenges that still need to be addressed. Policies focusing on education, leadership development, and training programs can help bridge this gap and create more equitable employment opportunities.

Representation of SCs in Teaching and Non-Teaching Positions in Central Universities (as of 01/01/1993):

The representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Central Universities across teaching and non-teaching

positions shows a significant disparity. While SC employees form a larger percentage in lower non-teaching roles, their presence in faculty and senior administrative positions remains extremely low.

Table 4: SC Representation in Teaching & Non-Teaching Roles

Position	Total Employees	SC Employees	% of SC Employees
Professor	1,155	2	0.17%
Reader/Associate Professor	1,774	6	0.34%
Lecturer/Assistant Professor/Director of Physical Education	1,491	35	2.35%
Research Assistant	257	3	1.71%
Group-A, Non-Teaching	756	26	3.44%
Group-B, Non-Teaching	1,525	49	3.1%
Group-C, Non-Teaching	9,001	414	4.60%
Group-D, Non-Teaching	10,635	2,368	22.27%

Source: National Commission for S.C & ST Annual Report, 1996-97 and 1997-98, excludes Indira Gandhi Open University.

Key Observations:

- Severe Underrepresentation in Teaching Positions: SC faculty members account for less than 3% across all academic positions, with only 0.17% of professors belonging to the SC category.
- Higher Representation in Lower Non-Teaching Roles: SC employees make up over 22% of Group-D non-teaching jobs (such as clerical and support staff roles), indicating a concentration in lower-paid, non-academic positions.
- Need for Academic Inclusion: The low SC representation in professorship and research roles highlights the lack of access to higher education, promotions, and research opportunities for SC candidates in academia.

Despite reservation policies, SCs remain underrepresented in academic and senior administrative positions in Central Universities. The data suggests a need for proactive measures, such as:

- Enhanced scholarships and mentorship programs to increase SC participation in higher education and research.
- Transparent and accountable recruitment processes to ensure fair opportunities for SC candidates in faculty positions.
- Skill development and leadership training to improve career progression for SC employees in academic institutions.

Conclusion:

One of the primary challenges of the reservation policy is that while it is based on caste as a criterion for preferential treatment, the benefits do not extend to the entire caste but rather to select individuals. Since caste-based discrimination was historically collective, compensatory justice has also been structured around caste. However, the extent to which reservation benefits reach the most marginalized within a caste

remains a concern. The persistent caste-based exploitation, deprivation, and atrocities in Indian society continue to have long-lasting negative effects on historically oppressed and marginalized communities. This raises a critical question: how long should reservation policies remain in force? Compensatory discrimination carries both self-perpetuating and self-liquidating aspects. Reservations seem irreversible if caste-based inequalities persist, and parity in education and public employment has not been achieved. Historically, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and women have faced exclusion across various spheres, including education. Despite government interventions post-independence, the progress in improving their educational status has fallen short of expectations. The Indian government, upon independence, inherited a legacy of educational backwardness alongside other systemic disadvantages [14]. The Constitution of India serves as a 'Magna Carta' for SCs, STs, OBCs, and women, ensuring special provisions such as reservations in employment and education, along with legal safeguards against discrimination [15]. Importantly, reservation and nation-building are not conflicting concepts but rather mechanisms for inclusive growth and social justice. An interesting contrast emerges when examining women's reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies, where 33% reservation for women has not been met with the same level of opposition from the upper-caste, non-reserved intelligentsia and media as caste-based reservations. The argument of meritocracy often used against caste-based reservations seems absent in the discourse on women's political representation. Many SC students entering higher education come from disadvantaged backgrounds, often as first-generation learners in their families. The investment in their education has shown positive returns, as most of them aspire to graduate-level education and seek upward mobility beyond traditional caste-based occupations. This trend suggests a significant shift in social orientation among SC students, demonstrating that higher education plays a crucial role in breaking caste-based economic confinement. For SC students from lower educational backgrounds, higher education is seen as a pathway to securing better employment opportunities. Meanwhile, those from families with professional and highly educated backgrounds view education as a tool for uplifting their community and improving socio-economic conditions. This underscores the transformative potential of education in reducing caste-based inequalities and advancing social mobility.

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