

The Evolving Landscape of Anti-Caste Movements and Reservation Policies in India: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract

The anti-caste movement in India represents a protracted struggle against deeply entrenched social hierarchies and discriminatory practices that have evolved over millennia. Rooted in ancient origins and significantly transformed by colonial rule, the caste system has historically denied dignity, resources, and opportunities to marginalized communities. In response, visionary leaders and reformers spearheaded diverse movements, laying the groundwork for a constitutional framework designed to dismantle caste-based discrimination and promote substantive equality. Post-independence, the Indian Constitution emerged as a pivotal instrument, incorporating robust provisions for non-discrimination and affirmative action, notably through reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The implementation and evolution of these policies have been marked by a dynamic interplay of legislative reforms and landmark judicial pronouncements, continually shaping the contours of affirmative action. Recent decades have witnessed significant shifts, including the introduction of economic criteria for reservations and a growing push for a comprehensive caste census. These developments reflect persistent inequalities and the changing socio-economic landscape, prompting new demands for expanded reservations, including their extension to the private sector and sub-classification within existing categories. While reservations have demonstrably improved access to education, employment, and political representation for many, they remain subjects of intense contemporary debate, facing criticisms related to meritocracy, administrative efficiency, and concerns about reinforcing caste identities. This article provides a detailed examination of these facets, concluding with forward-looking recommendations for policy refinement and fostering broader social inclusion.

I. Historical Trajectory of the Anti-Caste Movement in India

Origins and Evolution of the Caste System and Early Resistance

The caste system in India, a complex and enduring form of social stratification, boasts ancient origins but has undergone profound transformations across various historical epochs, including the medieval, early-modern, and modern periods. A significant inflection point occurred in the aftermath of the Mughal Empire's collapse and the establishment of the British Raj, which fundamentally reshaped its structure and impact. The systemic oppression inherent in the caste structure led to the severe degradation of communities now known as Dalits. This degradation stemmed from a monopolization of resources and knowledge by dominant groups, which denied Dalits their livelihood and relegated them to a status akin

to animals, enforced by the practice of untouchability. Early forms of resistance to this oppressive system emerged during the medieval period through devotional (Bhakti) movements. Saints like Kabir, Ravidas, and Chaitanya, often from lower-caste backgrounds, preached spiritual equality, attracting followers from across caste lines and challenging the prevailing caste orthodoxy.

Pivotal Figures and Their Contributions

The anti-caste movement in modern India was shaped by a constellation of visionary leaders who dedicated their lives to challenging social hierarchies and advocating for justice. The anti-caste struggle manifested through various movements, each with distinct ideologies and objectives, collectively striving for social justice.

Jyotirao Phule, an influential social reformer from Maharashtra, organized a powerful movement against upper-caste domination and Brahminical supremacy. He advocated for the complete abolition of the caste system and socio-economic inequalities, promoting women's education—including opening a girls' school in Poona with his wife, Savitribai—and spearheading the widow remarriage movement. **Satyashodhak Samaj**, founded by Jyotirao Phule in 1873, campaigned for the rights of women, Shudra, and Dalit communities. Its ideology opposed idolatry, denounced the caste system, and promoted rational thinking, rejecting the need for priests. Phule's works, *Sarvajanik Satyadharma* and *Gulamgiri*, became sources of inspiration for the masses.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker initiated the Self-Respect Movement in the mid-1920s in Tamil Nadu. This movement aimed to reject Brahmanical religion and culture, empower lower castes, and directly challenge the authority and practices of Brahmin priests, whom he considered perpetrators of oppression. Periyar advocated for alternative wedding ceremonies that did not involve Brahmin priests, promoting egalitarianism and reducing dependence on Brahminical influence in social and religious matters. The **Self-Respect Movement**, initiated by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar), sought to achieve transformative goals by rejecting Brahmanical religion and culture and empowering lower castes. It questioned the authority of Brahmin priests, aiming to dismantle the cultural hierarchy based on birth and promote egalitarianism by advocating for alternative wedding ceremonies that bypassed Brahminical influence. The **Dravidian Movement**, originating in the southern states and primarily led by Periyar, aimed at eradicating social inequalities and promoting self-respect and empowerment among the Dravidian community by questioning the dominance of Brahmins. The **Vaikom Satyagraha**, launched in Kerala in 1924 and supported by Mahatma Gandhi, was a significant agitation demanding the opening of Hindu temples and roads to untouchables.

Sree Narayana Guru Swamy (1856-1928) initiated the Sree Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam among the Ezhavas, a backward caste of toddy-tappers in Kerala who faced untouchability and denial of education and temple entry. His symbolic act of installing a Sivalinga at Aruvippuram in 1888, despite being from a lower caste, sparked a revolution against prevalent discriminations. He advocated for the equality of all religions, denounced animal sacrifice, and spoke against divisions based on caste, race, or creed.

Other significant pioneers included **Gopal Baba Walangkar**, regarded as one of the first Dalit ideologues in western India, whose 1888 pamphlet *Vital Vidhvansak* openly criticized caste oppression.

Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur State, pioneered reservations for non-Brahmins and Dalits in education and employment well before India's independence.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stands as one of the most prominent anti-caste voices, widely recognized as a social reformer, jurist, and the chief architect of India's Constitution. He relentlessly fought for the eradication

of the caste system, emphasizing that untouchability would vanish only with the dissolution of the entire Hindu social order. Ambedkar's approach prioritized law, political power, and education as indispensable tools for the upliftment of marginalized communities. His activism began with his evidence before the Southborough Committee in 1919, where he advocated for separate electorates for untouchables to ensure effective political representation. His seminal work, "The Annihilation of Caste" (1936), remains a foundational text articulating his core philosophy for dismantling the caste system.

The **Ambedkarite Dalit Movement**, formally shaped from 1927, focused on generating social and political consciousness among untouchables. It utilized publications like *Mooknayak* (1920), *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927), and *Janata* (1930), and formed organizations such as the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha (1924) and the Samata Sainik Dal. Key actions included the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) to secure the right to use public water and the Kalaram Temple Satyagraha (1930) to gain temple entry, both challenging caste restrictions on access to public spaces and religious institutions.

The **Dalit Movement**, prominently led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, centered on the rights and upliftment of Dalits, who had historically endured severe discrimination and untouchability. Ambedkar advocated for the abolition of untouchability, the implementation of reservation policies, and the securing of equal rights for Dalits, emphasizing education, economic empowerment, and political representation as crucial means for their upliftment. A more radical phase emerged with the formation of the **Dalit Panthers** in 1972, inspired by the Black Panther Party in the U.S. This movement, based in Maharashtra, combined Ambedkar's intellectual legacy with a militant approach to combat atrocities against Dalits, using anti-establishment poetry and self-defense.

The anti-caste movement was not monolithic, but rather characterized by diverse ideological underpinnings. Ambedkar's focus on legal and political rights, Phule's emphasis on education and social reform, and Periyar's direct challenge to Brahmanical culture and religion illustrate varied yet complementary approaches. This multi-faceted approach underscores the pervasive nature of caste oppression, which manifested across social, economic, religious, and political spheres, necessitating a comprehensive array of interventions.

A critical evolution in the movement's strategy involved the interplay of social reform and political mobilization. While early reformers like Phule and Narayana Guru initially focused on social service and the spread of education, Ambedkar's experiences, particularly the incomplete success of initiatives like the Mahad and Kalaram Temple Satyagrahas, led him to the conviction that securing political rights was the only effective pathway to fundamental social transformation.

II. Constitutional Provisions for Equality and Affirmative Action

The Foundational Principles of Equality and Non-Discrimination

Upon achieving independence in 1947, India embarked on a transformative journey, banning discrimination based on caste and enacting extensive affirmative action policies to uplift historically marginalized groups. These measures were enshrined and enforced through the newly adopted Constitution of India in 1950. The Constitution lays down foundational principles of equality and non-discrimination through fundamental rights.

Beyond prohibiting discrimination, the Indian Constitution actively empowers the state to undertake affirmative action to rectify historical imbalances and promote substantive equality. This demonstrates a deliberate constitutional balancing act, where formal equality (treating everyone the same) is complemented by substantive equality (providing special treatment to historically oppressed groups to

enable fair competition). This design recognizes that centuries of discrimination cannot be erased by simply treating everyone equally; positive support is necessary to level the playing field and ensure inclusive development.

The constitutional framework also demonstrates an evolving definition of "backwardness." While the initial focus was predominantly on caste-based social and educational backwardness for SCs, STs, and later OBCs (through the Mandal Commission), the introduction of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation via the 103rd Amendment marks a significant shift towards including economic criteria. This development indicates a recognition of new forms of inequality that cut across traditional caste lines. However, it also creates a new layer of debate about whether economic backwardness should supersede or merely complement caste-based criteria, especially given the documented persistence of social discrimination even for economically well-off Dalits.

III. Legislative and Judicial Evolution of Reservation Policies

The journey of reservation policies in India is a testament to a continuous interplay between legislative intent, judicial interpretation, and societal pressures.

Pre-Independence Affirmative Measures

While modern reservation policies are often associated with post-independence India, rudimentary quota systems favoring certain castes and communities existed even under the British Raj. Notably, Chatrapati Shahu, the Maharaja of the princely state of Kolhapur, introduced a significant 50% reservation for backward communities in 1902, alongside initiatives like free education and hostels to facilitate their upliftment. In 1918, the Mysore Raja Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar also implemented reservations for non-Brahmins in government jobs and education. The Justice Party government in the Madras Presidency made history in 1921 by passing the first Communal Government Order legislating reservations and setting a precedent for affirmative action across the country. The Imperial Parliament at Westminster also incorporated elements of reservation in the Government of India Act of 1909, with increased seats for depressed classes in 1919 and 1925. Social unrest during the 1920s further propelled a shift in colonial policy towards affirmative action, acknowledging the need for such measures.

Post-Independence Milestones

India's independence in 1947 marked a new era for affirmative action, with the Constitution providing a robust framework. However, the implementation and interpretation of these provisions have been a complex process, significantly shaped by landmark legislative and judicial interventions.

The First Constitutional Amendment (1951): This amendment proved crucial for legalizing caste-based reservations. It was enacted in direct response to the Supreme Court's ruling in *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan* (1951), where the Court struck down a reservation policy for violating equality under Article 15(1). The amendment paved the way for constitutional provisions to protect affirmative action, notably by inserting Article 15(4), which allows for special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes. This amendment also introduced the Ninth Schedule to protect land reform laws from judicial review, highlighting the early recognition of the need to safeguard social justice measures from legal challenges.

The Mandal Commission Report (1980) and its Transformative Implementation (1990):

The Mandal Commission, officially known as the socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC), was established in 1979 by the Janata Party government under Prime Minister Morarji Desai. Its mandate was to identify "socially or educationally backward classes" across India. The

commission identified 3,743 backward castes, estimated to constitute 52% of India's population (excluding SCs and STs), based on 11 criteria spanning social, educational, and economic indicators. The report recommended a 27% reservation for OBCs in central government jobs and public sector undertakings. Although completed in 1980, Its implementation in August 1990 by the V.P. Singh government, however, triggered widespread and often violent student protests across the nation, known as the 1990 Mandal Commission protests, with upper-caste youth expressing concerns about their job prospects.

Landmark Supreme Court Judgments Shaping Reservation Jurisprudence:

The Supreme Court has played a significant role in shaping reservation policies, often acting as a key policy actor through its interpretations and pronouncements. This judicial activism has created a dynamic interplay between legislative intent and judicial review.

- ***Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) (Mandal Commission case):*** This landmark judgment upheld the 27% OBC reservations, affirming the validity of caste as an indicator of backwardness. Crucially, it introduced the "creamy layer" concept, mandating the exclusion of economically advanced OBCs from reservation benefits to ensure that the benefits reached the most disadvantaged within the community. Furthermore, the judgment established a 50% cap on total reservations, to be exceeded only in "extraordinary situations," a principle that became a cornerstone of reservation policy for decades.
- ***R.K. Sabharwal v. State of Punjab (1995):*** The Court ruled that reservations must be based on the total sanctioned posts in a cadre, rather than merely on vacancies arising in a given year. This led to the adoption of post-based rosters by the government to ensure that reserved posts were pre-marked and that the 50% cap was maintained across the cadre.
- ***M. Nagaraj v. Union of India (2006):*** This judgment upheld constitutional amendments allowing reservation in promotions but imposed stringent conditions. It required states to provide quantifiable data demonstrating the backwardness and inadequate representation of the concerned groups, and to ensure that such reservations did not adversely affect administrative efficiency.
- ***Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India (2022):*** This landmark judgment upheld the constitutionality of the 103rd Constitutional Amendment, which introduced a 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in the general category. This decision marked a significant shift by formally incorporating economic criteria into affirmative action and, notably, breached the long-standing 50% reservation cap established in *Indra Sawhney*. The upholding of EWS reservation, despite exceeding the 50% ceiling, indicates a new flexibility in judicial interpretation regarding reservation limits, potentially opening the door for further expansion of reservations beyond traditional categories and percentages.
- ***Davinder Singh v. State of Punjab (2024):*** This judgment further advanced the concept of substantive equality by recognizing the constitutional validity of sub-classifications within SC and ST categories for reservation purposes. This allows states to provide more targeted benefits based on empirical data and historical evidence of systemic discrimination, ensuring that benefits reach the truly disadvantaged within these broad categories, though it clarified that 100% reservation for any sub-class is not permissible. Crucially, this ruling also stated that the 'creamy layer' principle, previously applied only to OBCs, should now also be applied to SCs and STs, aiming for a more equitable distribution of benefits within these groups.

The "**creamy layer**" principle, introduced in *Indra Sawhney* to ensure benefits reached the most

disadvantaged within OBCs, has faced an ongoing conundrum regarding its application. Its initial exemption for SCs/STs, followed by the *Davinder Singh* ruling applying it to them, highlights an persistent struggle to balance broad group upliftment with targeted support for the most needy within those groups.¹⁶ This internal stratification within reserved categories poses a significant challenge to the equitable distribution of benefits and fuels debates about "elite capture."

Key Constitutional Amendments:

The constitutional provisions have been periodically amended to adapt to evolving social realities and judicial interpretations.

- **77th Amendment (1995):** Inserted Article 16(4A), empowering the state to provide reservations in promotions for SCs and STs.
- **81st Amendment (2000):** Permitted the government to treat the backlog of reserved vacancies as a separate and distinct group, exempting them from the 50% ceiling.
- **82nd Amendment:** Inserted a provision in Article 335 to enable states to give concessions to SC/ST candidates in promotion.
- **85th Amendment (2001):** Modified Article 16(4A) to provide consequential seniority to SC and ST candidates promoted through reservation.
- **103rd Amendment (2019):** Introduced 10% reservation for EWS in the general category.
- **126th Amendment (2019):** Extended the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies by another 10 years, until January 25, 2030.

IV. Latest Demands and Ongoing Movements for Expanded Reservations

The landscape of affirmative action in India is continually shaped by new demands and ongoing movements, reflecting persistent inequalities and evolving socio-economic dynamics.

The Call for a Comprehensive Caste Census and Its Potential Implications

A central and long-standing demand, spanning over four decades, has been for a comprehensive caste census in India. This demand gained significant political momentum, leading to the Union government's recent agreement to include caste data in the next nationwide population census, scheduled for 2026-27. This will be the first such exercise in the post-independence era to enumerate all castes across religions, beyond the existing categories of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

Proponents argue that a caste census is indispensable for modern India, providing essential empirical grounding to accurately assess the socio-economic situation of various marginalized caste groups and to map the power and privileges of upper castes. The overwhelming demand for a caste census is not merely for enumeration but is driven by the explicit goal of providing this empirical data to reassess and potentially restructure existing reservation policies, including the 50% cap and creamy layer criteria. This highlights a discernible shift towards a data-driven approach to social justice, acknowledging that current policies may not accurately reflect contemporary demographic and socio-economic realities.

Recent state-level surveys in Bihar (2023) and Telangana (2024) offer preliminary glimpses into the potential impacts of such data. Bihar's survey revealed that Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (27%) and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) (36%) together constitute 63.13% of the state's population. This finding prompted the Bihar government to attempt to increase OBC reservation to 43%, a move subsequently struck down by a high court for exceeding the Supreme Court's 50% cap. This illustrates how new data can immediately trigger demands for proportional representation and challenge existing policy limits.

Demands to Remove the 50% Reservation Cap

Following the findings of state-level caste surveys and the precedent set by the EWS quota, major opposition parties, including the Congress, are reiterating demands for the removal of the Supreme Court's 50% reservation cap. A key argument supporting this demand is that the 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), upheld by the Supreme Court in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022), has already demonstrably breached the 50% ceiling, thereby setting a precedent for its removal. The striking down of Bihar's attempt to increase OBC reservation to 65% due to the persistent 50% cap further fuels this demand, as political parties and social justice advocates argue that the cap is an arbitrary barrier to achieving true proportional representation for backward classes.

Advocacy for Extending Reservations to Private Educational Institutions and the Private Sector

A significant and growing demand is for the extension of reservations to private educational institutions and the private sector. The Congress party, for instance, specifically advocates for the implementation of reservations in private educational institutions under Article 15(5) of the Constitution. The primary rationale underpinning the call for private sector reservations is the shrinking share of the public sector in overall employment. The private sector now accounts for over 90% of jobs in India, while only 4-5% of the total workforce benefits from affirmative action through public sector reservations. This situation reveals a critical socio-economic challenge: if affirmative action remains largely confined to a diminishing public sector, its overall impact on social mobility and equality will be limited. This reality is pushing the anti-caste movement to advocate for broader systemic changes in the dominant employment landscape.

Proponents argue that caste discrimination is not confined to government institutions but persists in private sector hiring practices, workplace culture, and access to professional networks. Many private companies rely on informal channels, such as friends, family, and alumni networks, which systematically exclude underprivileged groups, necessitating corrective mechanisms. Data indicates that SC/ST/OBCs remain significantly underrepresented in top-tier private jobs, leadership roles, and high-income brackets. Furthermore, it is argued that private companies, which thrive by utilizing public infrastructure, subsidies, tax incentives, and land provided by the government, should share the responsibility of social justice through inclusive hiring. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has explicitly demanded the extension of reservation policy to the entire organized private sector, including all registered institutions and companies.

Movements for Sub-Classification within Existing Reserved Categories (OBCs, SCs, STs)

There is a growing concern that the benefits of reservations within the broad OBC, SC, and ST categories have disproportionately accrued to the relatively more affluent or dominant sections, leaving smaller and more marginalized groups within these categories underrepresented. This has spurred movements advocating for sub-classification, or "quota within quota," to ensure that benefits reach the "truly disadvantaged".

The Supreme Court's *Davinder Singh v. State of Punjab* (2024) judgment represents a significant development in this regard, allowing states the authority to sub-classify SCs and STs for reservation purposes based on empirical data and historical evidence of systemic discrimination. This ruling reflects a maturation of the reservation debate, moving beyond broad categories to address the specific needs of the "most backward" within backward classes, aiming for more precise and equitable distribution of benefits. Specific groups, such as Nomadic and De-notified communities within OBCs, are actively demanding separate schedules to protect their unique interests and ensure they are not overlooked within the larger OBC umbrella. The application of the "creamy layer" principle to SCs and STs, as mandated by

the *Davinder Singh* judgment, further reinforces this commitment to addressing intra-group inequalities.

Specific Demands for Scheduled Caste Status for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims

Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims have long advocated for their inclusion in the Scheduled Caste list, asserting that their conversion to Christianity or Islam does not alter their social and economic status or erase the historical discrimination they continue to face. The 1950 Presidential Order initially restricted SC status to Hindus, though it was later amended to include Sikhs (1956) and Buddhists (1990). The Ranganath Misra Commission (2007) recommended extending reservation to marginalized Muslims and Christians by deleting Para 3 of the 1950 Order, which imposes this religious restriction. However, the government has historically opposed this, citing a lack of comprehensive field study by the commission and arguing that Christianity, as an egalitarian religion, does not adhere to a caste system, thus negating the basis for SC status for converts.

Emerging Demands for Reservations from Dominant Communities

Paradoxically, the evolving socio-economic landscape has also witnessed several dominant communities, such as the Marathas, Kappu, Jats, and Patels, initiating movements demanding reservations for themselves. These demands are often predicated on claims of increasing material deprivation or changes in their socio-economic conditions, further complicating the reservation landscape and frequently leading to social unrest and political polarization.

V. Socio-Economic Impact and Contemporary Debates

The reservation system in India, a cornerstone of its affirmative action framework, has generated extensive debate regarding its effectiveness, socio-economic impact, and long-term implications.

Effectiveness

Reservations have demonstrably contributed to greater representation and inclusivity for marginalized communities across various sectors. There has been a significant improvement in access to education and employment, leading to increased literacy rates and higher education enrollment for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). For instance, literacy among Dalits rose from under 10% in 1950 to over 70% today, and their representation in central government jobs increased from approximately 1.6% in 1951 to over 17% by the 2010s, nearing their population proportion.²⁵ These policies have enabled individuals from Dalit communities to achieve high-skilled professional roles, including IAS officers, doctors, and scientists, fostering social mobility for many first-generation graduates.

Moreover, studies indicate that diversity within institutions, often facilitated by reservations, can improve overall performance. Research on employee performance in the Indian Railways, a large public sector employer, found no significant difference in productivity between general and reserved category employees. Similarly, studies on IIT graduates suggest that while SC/ST students may initially face some academic disadvantage, their outcomes converge with those of general category students by graduation and in the job market, challenging the notion of compromised efficiency.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite these positive impacts, reservation policies continue to face significant challenges and criticisms.

Debates Surrounding Meritocracy and Administrative Efficiency:

A persistent argument against reservations is that they lead to the admission or appointment of "less qualified" candidates, resulting in underperformance, reduced productivity, and a compromise of institutional efficiency. This argument often frames "merit" as an objective measure solely based on test scores or academic performance. However, counter-arguments emphasize that "merit" is often a product

of privilege, influenced by access to quality schooling, private coaching, stable home environments, and cultural capital, rather than innate ability. Data indicates that many reserved category candidates qualify on merit even without availing reservations, and empirical studies often show no significant performance gap in jobs. The Supreme Court's consistent emphasis on "merit" has, at times, been observed to dilute the empowering nature of reservation by framing it through a narrow, test-score-driven lens, which critics argue serves as a rhetorical device to defend existing privileges and resist structural changes that would redistribute opportunities.

Concerns about the Perpetuation of Caste Identity and Social Divisions:

Paradoxically, despite their intent to dismantle caste, reservations can inadvertently exacerbate caste divisions and perpetuate social inequality. The focus on caste for quotas can reinforce caste identities, potentially undermining efforts to create a truly merit-based society and leading to the stigmatization of beneficiaries, whose achievements may be perceived as outcomes of preferential treatment. This dynamic often results in increased competition and resentment between different caste groups for limited reserved resources. The politicization of caste identity, where caste becomes a central axis of political mobilization and competition for resources, can hinder true social cohesion.

The "Creamy Layer" Principle and Its Application across Categories:

A significant criticism is that the benefits of reservations tend to be disproportionately captured by the relatively better-off sections within backward communities, leaving the most disadvantaged within those groups still marginalized. The inconsistent application of the "creamy layer" principle, which historically exempted SCs/STs from its purview until recent judicial interventions like *Davinder Singh* (2024), has been a point of contention. This issue highlights the ongoing challenge of ensuring that affirmative action genuinely reaches those most in need.

Analysis of Social Mobility Trends in the Context of Reservations:

Despite extensive social engineering through reservations, overall social mobility rates in India are reported as "extremely low". This persistent immobility is hypothesized to stem from deeply ingrained societal practices such as strong marital endogamy. Caste affiliations determined centuries ago still strongly predict current outcomes, indicating the presence of deep-seated structural barriers that reservations, while effective in providing access, may not fundamentally alter. This creates a paradox: while reservations demonstrably improve access to education and public sector employment for many marginalized communities, leading to increased representation and literacy, they may not fundamentally alter deeper structural barriers to overall social mobility. This suggests that the effectiveness of reservations is limited to certain spheres (public sector, formal education) and that broader societal structures continue to impede comprehensive social mobility.

The Politicization of Reservation Policies and Its Consequences:

Reservation policies have become a "lightning rod for political polarization" in India. Political parties frequently leverage caste affiliations for electoral gain, further entrenching caste identities and complicating policy reform. The demand for a caste census, while aimed at providing data for more equitable policy, also carries the inherent risk of deepening existing caste divisions by making caste a more salient political identity. This feedback loop means that a policy designed to alleviate caste issues can, in its implementation and political contestation, reinforce caste as a central identity, leading to new forms of social friction and competition.

VI. Conclusion and Forward-Looking Recommendations

Synthesis of Key Findings and Their Implications

The anti-caste movement in India, a testament to centuries of resilience against systemic discrimination, has traversed a complex path from early social reform to a robust legal and political struggle. Visionary leaders, most notably Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, laid the intellectual and constitutional foundations for dismantling caste hierarchies. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, stands as a unique document that deliberately balances formal equality with substantive affirmative action, aiming to rectify historical injustices through provisions for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The evolution of reservation policies has been marked by a dynamic interplay between legislative amendments and landmark judicial pronouncements. The Supreme Court, through cases like *Indra Sawhney*, *M. Nagaraj*, *Jarnail Singh*, *Davinder Singh*, and *Janhit Abhiyan*, has not merely interpreted but actively shaped the contours of affirmative action, adapting to new socio-economic realities and, at times, challenging established norms such as the 50% reservation cap. The introduction of the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) quota and its judicial affirmation has notably breached this long-standing cap, signaling a potential shift in the flexibility of reservation limits and the inclusion of economic criteria.

Contemporary demands, including a comprehensive caste census, the removal of the 50% cap, the extension of reservations to the private sector, and calls for sub-classification within existing reserved categories, underscore the persistence of inequalities and the changing economic landscape. These demands reflect a desire for more nuanced and proportional affirmative action, driven by the recognition that current policies may not fully address intra-group disparities or the realities of a shrinking public sector job market.

While reservations have demonstrably improved access to education, employment, and political representation for many marginalized communities, leading to increased literacy and professional mobility, they continue to face significant criticisms. Debates persist regarding meritocracy and administrative efficiency, often serving as proxies for underlying resistance to privilege redistribution. Concerns about the inadvertent perpetuation of caste identity and social divisions, coupled with the inconsistent application of the "creamy layer" principle, highlight ongoing challenges in equitable implementation. Furthermore, despite these measures, overall social mobility in India remains remarkably low, suggesting that while reservations address access, deeper structural barriers, such as pervasive social discrimination and marital endogamy, continue to impede broader societal transformation.

Recommendations for Policy Refinement, Equitable Implementation, and Fostering Broader Social Inclusion

To navigate the complexities of caste-based affirmative action and foster a more equitable and inclusive India, the following recommendations are put forth:

- **Data-Driven Policy Refinement:** The upcoming comprehensive caste census must be meticulously conducted to provide accurate, empirical data on the socio-economic status of all caste groups. This data should serve as the foundation for a thorough reassessment of existing quotas, enabling the identification of the truly disadvantaged within and across categories. Such a data-driven approach can help depoliticize reservation discussions by grounding them in current realities and facilitating more precise policy interventions.
- **Harmonizing Caste and Economic Criteria:** Future policy debates should explore a balanced approach that effectively integrates both caste-based and economic criteria for reservations. A hybrid

model could ensure that benefits reach those most in need, addressing both historical social disadvantage and contemporary economic vulnerability, while still acknowledging the unique challenges faced by caste-oppressed communities.

- **Expanding Affirmative Action to the Private Sector:** Given the shrinking share of public sector employment, mechanisms for extending reservations or promoting diversity in the private sector must be explored. This could involve a combination of incentives for private firms that meet diversity targets (e.g., tax benefits), mandatory diversity reporting, and collaborative training and mentorship programs. Such an expansion is essential to ensure that affirmative action remains relevant and impactful in India's evolving job market, where the majority of opportunities now reside.
- **Strengthening Pre-Admission Support and Skill Development:** Reservations should not be viewed as a standalone solution. They must be complemented by robust educational and skill development programs, including bridge courses, coaching, and mentorship initiatives. These support systems would empower reserved candidates to compete effectively and excel in their chosen fields, thereby addressing concerns about "merit" and underperformance and ensuring that access translates into genuine success.
- **Addressing Regional Imbalances:** Reservation frameworks should be flexible enough to adapt to local socio-economic realities. The nature and extent of backwardness can vary significantly across different regions and states, necessitating customized policies that are responsive to specific local contexts rather than a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Promoting Social Cohesion:** Continuous efforts are needed to foster dialogue, understanding, and empathy across communities to mitigate the caste divisions that are sometimes exacerbated by reservation politics. The ultimate aim of affirmative action is to build a truly inclusive society, and this requires sustained focus on upholding the constitutional vision of fraternity and integrated development.
- **Periodic Review and Time-Bound Mechanisms:** While the constitutional framers, including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, envisioned periodic review rather than outright removal of reservations, regular, transparent reviews of these policies are essential. Such reviews would assess their effectiveness, adapt them to changing societal dynamics, and ensure their continued relevance and fairness, preventing stagnation and fostering public trust.

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