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IMPACT OF RESERVATION POLICIES ON THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Reservation in education for Scheduled Castes (SCs) is a policy supported by the Indian Constitution to promote social justice and equality. It aims to correct historical discrimination and help disadvantaged communities gain access to education. This paper uses secondary data from sources such as the Census of India, books, Journals, Newspaper reports, the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Sample Survey (NSS) and government policy documents to study the impact of reservation on the educational progress of Scheduled Castes. The analysis focuses on literacy levels, enrolment, retention, and participation in higher education. The study finds that reservation has significantly improved access to education for Scheduled Caste students, especially at the higher education level. However, equal outcomes have not yet been achieved. Many SC students continue to face challenges such as poor school quality, economic hardship, lack of academic support, and institutional barriers. The paper concludes that while reservation remains an important tool for educational inclusion, it must be supported by wider social and educational reforms, including better schooling, financial assistance, and institutional support, to ensure long-term and meaningful equality.



KEYWORDS: Reservation Policy, Education, Social Justice, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as the most powerful instrument for social transformation and human development, serving as a foundation for equality, mobility, and democratic participation. In a country like India, historically shaped by rigid caste-based hierarchies and deep-rooted social exclusion, access to education has never been evenly distributed. For centuries, large sections of society—particularly marginalized castes, tribes, and women were systematically denied opportunities

for formal learning due to entrenched social norms and institutional barriers. Reservation policies emerged as a deliberate corrective mechanism to address these historical injustices by expanding access to education and fostering inclusive growth. In contemporary India, education plays a crucial role not only in individual empowerment and skill development but also in national economic progress and social cohesion. Although the country has witnessed rapid expansion in educational infrastructure, enrolment, and institutional diversity—especially in higher education—significant disparities based on caste, tribe, gender, region, and socio-economic background continue to shape educational participation and outcomes. Unequal access to quality schooling, financial resources, and academic support remains a persistent challenge for disadvantaged groups. Consequently, reservation policies continue to occupy a central position within India's educational governance framework, functioning as an essential policy tool for promoting social justice, correcting structural inequalities, and advancing the constitutional vision of equality of opportunity.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL RESERVATION IN INDIA

The origins of reservation in India are deeply rooted in the caste system, which historically regulated access to education, land, and occupations through rigid social hierarchies, largely privileging the upper castes while excluding lower and marginalized communities. During the colonial period, social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule challenged these inequalities by advocating universal education and affirmative measures for the socially oppressed. Parallel to these reformist efforts, several princely states—notably Kolhapur under Shahu Maharaj and Mysore—introduced early forms of reservation in education and public employment to enhance the participation of backward classes in public life. By the early twentieth century, the demand for institutional safeguards gained political momentum, particularly through leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who emphasized constitutional protection and representation for marginalized groups. These demands culminated in landmark developments such as the Communal Award of 1932, which initially provided separate electorates for the depressed classes, and the subsequent Poona Pact, which replaced separate electorates with reserved seats within a joint electorate. Collectively, these historical developments transformed reservation from a social reform initiative into a structured policy of representation and laid the groundwork for the reservation framework adopted in post-independence India.

RESERVATION POLICIES UNDER THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

After independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution formally institutionalized reservation as a means to achieve substantive equality and social justice. Article 15(4), introduced through the First Constitutional Amendment (1951), empowers the State to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, including Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). In the sphere of public employment, Article 16(4) enables the State to provide reservations in appointments and promotions for these disadvantaged groups. Complementing these enabling provisions, Article 46, a Directive Principle of State Policy, mandates the State to promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs, and other weaker sections and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation. Over time, the scope of reservation policies has been expanded through constitutional amendments to address emerging dimensions of inequality. The 93rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2005 (effective from 2006) authorized reservations in admissions to educational institutions, including private unaided institutions, while exempting minority institutions. More recently, the 103rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019 marked a significant shift by introducing a 10 percent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in higher education and public employment, thereby extending affirmative action beyond traditional caste-based criteria to include economic disadvantage.

EVOLUTION OF RESERVATION POLICY THROUGH EXPERT COMMISSIONS

Several expert commissions have played a decisive role in shaping and refining India's reservation framework by providing empirical and conceptual foundations for affirmative action policies. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission, constituted in 1953, represented the first systematic post-independence effort to identify socially and educationally backward classes in India. Although the Commission proposed a set of social, educational, and economic indicators to determine backwardness, its recommendations were only partially accepted due to methodological concerns and political resistance. Nevertheless, the Commission laid the groundwork for subsequent debates on backward class identification and policy intervention. A major turning point occurred with the establishment of the Mandal Commission in 1979, which adopted a more comprehensive approach to assessing social and educational disadvantage. The Commission estimated that Other Backward Classes constituted approximately 52 percent of India's population and recommended a 27 percent reservation for OBCs in public employment and educational institutions. The implementation of these recommendations in the early 1990s led to a substantial expansion of access to higher education and government employment for OBC communities. At the same time, it sparked intense political mobilization, judicial scrutiny, and public debate over issues of merit, equality, and social justice—debates that continue to influence policy discourse and constitutional interpretation in contemporary India.

PATTERNS AND FORMS OF RESERVATION IN INDIAN EDUCATION

At the central level, reservations in higher education are structured to promote inclusive access for historically disadvantaged groups. These include 15 percent for Scheduled Castes (SCs), 7.5 percent for Scheduled Tribes (STs), 27 percent for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and 10 percent for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). Collectively, these provisions bring reservations close to the judicially prescribed 50 percent ceiling, although variations exist across states due to differing demographic compositions and state policies. Recent national higher education surveys indicate that students from reserved categories now constitute more than half of total enrolment in higher education institutions, signalling a significant expansion of access compared to earlier decades. However, increased enrolment does not automatically translate into equal educational outcomes. Persistent disparities are evident in dropout rates, representation in elite institutions, faculty diversity, and access to advanced research opportunities, underscoring the limitations of access-based measures alone.

Reservation in Indian higher education operates through multiple mechanisms. Constitutionally mandated caste-based reservations apply to SCs, STs, and OBCs, while minority institutions enjoy special protections under Article 30 to preserve religious and cultural rights. In addition, gender-based quotas have been introduced by several institutions and states to enhance women's participation in higher education. Private institutions often operate management and NRI quotas, and special provisions are also extended to students from tribal, remote, and geographically disadvantaged areas. While these mechanisms collectively broaden access, critics argue that management and NRI quotas disproportionately benefit economically privileged sections, thereby reinforcing inequalities and contributing to the commercialization of education. This tension highlights the need to balance affirmative action with principles of equity, merit, and social justice.

ACCESS AND REPRESENTATION OF SCs AND STs IN EDUCATION

Despite notable improvements in student enrolment under reservation policies, the representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in faculty and administrative positions within educational institutions remains significantly limited. Empirical studies of public universities and higher education institutions consistently reveal a disproportionately low presence of SC/ST faculty members, particularly in senior academic, research, and decision-making roles. This persistent

underrepresentation not only restricts career advancement opportunities for scholars from marginalized communities but also weakens mentorship structures, limits diverse academic perspectives, and adversely affects the inclusiveness of institutional culture. The absence of adequate representation at leadership levels further reinforces structural inequalities within academia and undermines the transformative potential of reservation policies. Moreover, students from marginalized backgrounds continue to face multiple and intersecting challenges that extend beyond mere access to education. Financial insecurity, inadequate preparatory schooling, language and digital divides, limited academic guidance, and experiences of overt or subtle social discrimination significantly influence their academic performance and retention rates. Many students also encounter psychological stress and a lack of supportive campus environments, which can lead to higher dropout rates despite formal admission through reservation quotas. These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive institutional support systems—such as scholarships, mentoring programs, remedial instruction, and inclusive campus policies—to ensure that increased enrolment translates into meaningful educational attainment and long-term academic inclusion.

RESERVATION POLICY: CURRENT CONCERNS AND DEBATES

Reservation policies in India continue to provoke intense debate concerning their implications for meritocracy, administrative efficiency, and distributive fairness. Critics contend that extensive reliance on reservations may compromise academic standards and institutional performance by prioritizing social criteria over competitive merit. In contrast, supporters argue that merit cannot be evaluated in isolation from social realities, as unequal access to quality schooling, economic resources, and social capital significantly shapes educational outcomes. From this perspective, reservations are viewed not as a dilution of merit, but as a corrective mechanism designed to level an inherently uneven playing field. In recent years, policy discourse has increasingly shifted toward refining rather than dismantling the reservation framework. Key areas of focus include the periodic review of beneficiary lists to reflect changing socio-economic conditions and prevent the monopolization of benefits by relatively privileged groups within reserved categories. Greater emphasis is also being placed on identifying and prioritizing the most disadvantaged sub-groups to ensure more equitable distribution of opportunities. Additionally, policymakers and scholars have highlighted the importance of strengthening foundational education at the primary and secondary levels, with the objective of reducing long-term dependence on reservations in higher education by addressing inequality at its source. The concept of the “creamy layer,” along with the growing demand for evidence-based and data-driven evaluation of reservation outcomes, has gained prominence as a means to enhance transparency, efficiency, and public trust in affirmative action policies.

CONCLUSION

Reservation policies in India's education system have been instrumental in widening access to educational opportunities and addressing centuries of structural exclusion faced by marginalized communities. By lowering institutional barriers, these policies have enabled millions of students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and economically weaker sections to enter schools, colleges, and universities that were historically beyond their reach. As a result, reservations have contributed significantly to social mobility, enhanced representation, and the democratization of knowledge within Indian society. Nevertheless, it is increasingly evident that reservation policies alone are insufficient to achieve substantive and sustainable educational equality. To ensure long-term impact, future reforms must move beyond access-based interventions and focus on improving the overall quality of public education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels where foundational disparities originate. Strengthening financial assistance, academic mentoring,

remedial education, and student support services is essential to enhance retention and performance among disadvantaged learners. Equally important is increasing diversity within teaching faculty and academic leadership, which can foster inclusive institutional environments and provide meaningful role models for marginalized students. Transparent, data-driven, and periodically reviewed policy implementation is also necessary to ensure that benefits reach the most deserving sections of society. When integrated with broader social, economic, and educational reforms, reservation policies can continue to function as a powerful instrument of social justice, contributing to inclusive growth, national development, and a more equitable education system.

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