



RESERVATION WITHOUT POWER: DALITS, PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT, AND THE HOLLOWING OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE IN INDIA, 1960-2022

Dr. Krishna Swamy Dara

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of Dalits—Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)—in India's public employment from 1960 to 2022, drawing on government reports, parliamentary committee findings, census data, and the disinvestment record of the past decade. It advances two connected arguments. First, that six decades of compensatory reservation have produced numerical inclusion without any redistribution of institutional power: SCs and STs are heavily over-represented in the menial Group C and Group D grades and structurally scarce in the decision-making Group A cadre, a pattern of hierarchical inclusion that inverts B. R. Ambedkar's conception of reservation as a means of sharing sovereignty rather than distributing subsistence. Even on the most recent available returns, SC and ST representation in that decision-making cadre has stayed below the reserved quotas, seven decades after reservation began. Second, that the very instrument of Dalit mobility—the public sector—is being hollowed out. Liberalisation after 1991 arrested and then reversed the growth of reserved public employment; privatisation, disinvestment, the outsourcing of Group C and D work, the reservation-free lateral entry scheme, and the introduction in 2019 of a 10 per cent quota for the (largely upper-caste) economically weaker sections together amount to a slow de-reservation of the Indian state. The result is a double displacement: Dalits are admitted to the public sector chiefly at its base at the very moment the base itself is being dismantled. The article concludes that formal quota compliance has become compatible with the substantive reproduction of caste power.



KEY WORDS: reservation; Scheduled Castes; Scheduled Tribes; bureaucracy; representation; privatisation; Ambedkar; affirmative action.

1. INTRODUCTION

For most people, employment is the principal source of the sustenance a decent life requires; to deny it to a group is to deny that group its material foundation and, with it, its social standing. In India the line between public and private employment carries a weight it does not carry in most economies. Government service confers not merely income but security, status, and—crucially—a share in the authority of the state. The officer of the elite all-India services wields a social power no comparable private salary can buy, because that power is an attribute of the state itself. It is this feature that made public employment the central battlefield of the Dalit movement, and it is why the fate of caste-based reservation has to be read against the changing shape of the Indian public sector rather than apart from it.

The article asks a deceptively simple question: after seventy years of constitutional reservation, where within the state do Dalits actually sit, and what is happening to the state that was meant to hold them? It answers by tracing the representation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in central government services, public sector enterprises, nationalised banks, and public insurance from 1960 to 2022. The empirical spine of the analysis is a body of official data—annual reports of the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) and line ministries, census figures, and the findings of parliamentary committees—supplemented, where the official series has gone silent, by replies tabled in Parliament and by independent research.

Two arguments organise the paper. The first concerns the internal structure of Dalit public employment. The aggregate figures are reassuring: taken together, the SCs and STs now approach, and in several sectors exceed, their combined reserved share of 22.5 per cent. But the aggregate conceals a rigid vertical stratification. Reservation has been overwhelmingly effective at the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy and negligibly effective at the top. Dalits crowd the sweeper, peon, and clerical grades; they thin out dramatically as one climbs toward the cadres that make policy and command resources. This is not inclusion in Ambedkar's sense. Reservation in the services was never, for him, a poverty-relief scheme; it was a device for placing Dalits inside the apparatus of governance so that the caste character of that apparatus might change. A bureaucracy in which Dalits drive the cars and clean the offices while upper castes write the rules has satisfied the letter of the quota and defeated its purpose.

The second argument concerns the container. Since 1991, and with gathering speed since 2014, the public sector on which reservation depends has been shrinking, privatised, contractualised, and reorganised in ways that quietly withdraw the reservation guarantee. Liberalisation halted the expansion of reserved employment; privatisation extinguishes it outright, since the quota does not survive the transfer of a public enterprise to private hands; the outsourcing of Group C and D functions—the very grades in which Dalits are concentrated—removes those jobs from the reservation regime altogether; the lateral-entry route into senior administration carries no reservation; and the 2019 constitutional amendment creating a 10 per cent quota for the economically weaker sections opened reserved space to groups from which the SCs, STs, and OBCs are by definition excluded. Each measure is defensible on its own managerial terms. Their cumulative effect is a de-reservation of the state that no legislature has ever voted for.

Put together, the two arguments describe a double displacement. Dalits were admitted to the public sector largely at its base; that base is now being dismantled. The commanding heights, meanwhile, were never conceded. The article therefore reads the seemingly technical story of quota compliance as a political story about how caste power reproduces itself under conditions of formal equality. The remainder proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the conceptual distinction between presence and representation on which the analysis turns. Section 3 describes the constitutional and legal architecture of reservation and its recent mutations. Section 4 addresses data and method, including the deterioration of official reporting that is itself a finding. Section 5 establishes the demographic baseline. Sections 6 through 8 present the sectoral evidence for central government, public enterprises, and banking and insurance. Section 9 turns to the private sector and the problem of discrimination. Section 10 draws the threads into an interpretation of de-reservation, and Section 11 concludes.

2. PRESENCE, REPRESENTATION, AND THE AMBEDKARITE WAGER

The distinction between being present in an institution and being represented within it is the analytical hinge of this article. A group may be numerically present in an organisation while exercising no influence over its conduct; representation in the fuller sense implies a capacity to shape decisions, to occupy the offices where discretion is exercised, and so to alter the institution's orientation. Theorists of representation from Hanna Pitkin onward have insisted that descriptive presence—having members of a group in the room—is neither identical to, nor a guarantee of, substantive representation, which requires the group's interests to weigh in outcomes. In a bureaucratic setting the gap between the two

is measured vertically: it is the difference between the grades that execute orders and the grades that issue them.

Ambedkar grasped this with unusual clarity, because he theorised reservation not as welfare but as a transfer of power. His wager was that the Indian state, staffed and steered by the upper castes, would remain structurally hostile or indifferent to Dalit interests for as long as its personnel were drawn from the groups that had historically subordinated them. Reservation in the public services was to be the instrument by which Dalits entered the apparatus of rule and, from within, changed its character. The point was representation in the services that “deal with the distribution of resources or social benefits and of delivering justice”—the bureaucracy proper, its elite cadres, the offices of command—not employment as such, and emphatically not employment in the drudgery grades. A higher representation of Dalits at the lower levels, Ambedkar’s logic implies, does nothing to change the character of the bureaucracy so long as the upper castes monopolise its heights.

This is why the concentration of Dalits in Group C and Group D is not, as it is sometimes read, a partial success awaiting completion. It is a specific configuration of power that can persist indefinitely, and one that is, in a sense, functional for the existing order: it supplies visible proof of inclusion and quota fulfilment while leaving the caste composition of the offices that matter untouched. The sociological complement to this configuration is the durable upper-caste belief that Dalits are fit for manual and subordinate work and unfit for tasks requiring judgement, creativity, and command—a belief the employment data both reflect and reinforce. The measure of reservation’s success, on the Ambedkarite standard, is therefore not the aggregate percentage but the distribution of Dalits across the vertical hierarchy of the state. It is to that hierarchy that the evidence in this article is addressed.

3. THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL ARCHITECTURE

Reservation in public employment rests on a cluster of constitutional provisions whose interpretation has itself become a site of struggle. Article 15(4) permits the state to make special provision for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes and for the SCs and STs. Article 16(4) is the operative employment clause: it provides that nothing in the guarantee of equality of opportunity in public employment “shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State.” The language matters. The constitutional trigger is inadequate representation in the services—not poverty, and not backwardness in the abstract—which confirms that the framers conceived reservation in employment as a remedy for exclusion from the state, exactly the Ambedkarite reading advanced above.

Later amendments extended the architecture to protect reservation through the career, not merely at entry. The Seventy-seventh Amendment (1995) inserted Article 16(4A), enabling reservation in promotion for the SCs and STs. The Eighty-first Amendment (2000) added Article 16(4B), which allows unfilled reserved vacancies of one year to be carried forward as a distinct class in later years, exempt from the 50 per cent ceiling on total reservation. The Eighty-fifth Amendment (2001) further strengthened promotion reservation with consequential seniority. Alongside these, Article 46 directs the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, and in particular the SCs and STs; Articles 330 and 332 reserve legislative seats; and Article 335 makes the claims of the SCs and STs to services and posts a matter to be taken into consideration consistently with administrative efficiency. The current reserved shares—15 per cent for SCs and 7.5 per cent for STs, 22.5 per cent together—derive from this framework and are keyed loosely to population.

Three developments since the original version of this study have reshaped the legal terrain, and each bears on the argument. The first is the jurisprudence of promotion reservation. In *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* (2006) the Supreme Court upheld Articles 16(4A) and 16(4B) but conditioned their exercise on the state’s collecting quantifiable data showing backwardness, inadequacy of representation, and the absence of harm to administrative efficiency—conditions that in practice stalled promotion reservation across many services. In *Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta* (2018) a Constitution Bench removed the requirement to demonstrate the backwardness of the SCs and STs,

holding it contrary to the presumption established for these groups, but at the same time extended the “creamy layer” exclusion—previously confined to the OBCs—to the SCs and STs in the context of promotion. Extending the creamy layer to communities defined by ritual untouchability and historic stigma rather than by mere economic position marked a conceptual shift with significant consequences for the reach of reservation at senior levels.

The second development is the reservation-free lateral entry into senior administration. From 2018 the Union government began recruiting specialists directly into joint secretary and other senior posts from outside the career services, on the reasoning that these are deputation-type posts to which the reservation roster does not apply. Because these are precisely the decision-making cadres in which Dalit representation is already lowest, the absence of reservation in lateral entry drew sustained criticism as a route by which the upper reaches of the bureaucracy could be replenished from outside the quota system.

The third development is the most consequential for the logic of reservation. The One Hundred and Third Amendment (2019) inserted Articles 15(6) and 16(6) to authorise a 10 per cent reservation in education and public employment for the “economically weaker sections” (EWS)—defined so as to exclude the SCs, STs, and OBCs, and therefore, in effect, a quota for the poorer strata of the forward castes. In *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022) the Supreme Court upheld the amendment by a three-to-two majority, holding that reservation on purely economic criteria did not violate the basic structure and that breaching the 50 per cent ceiling for the EWS was permissible. The dissent warned that decoupling reservation from social backwardness and admitting a purely economic quota inverted the constitutional rationale, which had always tied compensatory discrimination to caste-based social exclusion rather than to income. Whatever its constitutional merits, the EWS quota introduced into the reservation edifice a category from which Dalits are excluded, and it did so at the very moment the public sector in which Dalit quotas operate was contracting.

4. DATA, METHOD, AND THE PROBLEM OF OFFICIAL SILENCE

The evidence in this article is drawn from official and quasi-official sources: the annual reports of the DoPT and the Ministries of Personnel, Finance, and Heavy Industries; the Public Enterprises Survey; census abstracts of the Office of the Registrar General; and, for the most recent period, replies furnished to Parliament. The long time series for 1960 to roughly 2004 reproduces and re-analyses the data assembled in the earlier version of this study; the extension to 2022 relies on the sources just named.

One methodological caution must be stated plainly, because it is also a substantive finding. The dense, group-wise, year-by-year reporting that made the detailed tables for 1960–2004 possible has thinned markedly since. The DoPT's comprehensive statement of SC, ST, and OBC representation across ministries, disaggregated by Group A through D, appeared only intermittently after the mid-2000s; the last such comprehensive account, for 2018–19, implies a multi-year gap in systematic public reporting. Where continuous official series exist they are used; where they do not, the analysis relies on snapshot figures for particular reference dates and on parliamentary committee findings, and flags the resulting discontinuities. The deterioration of transparent, disaggregated reporting is not a neutral inconvenience. Monitoring is the precondition of enforcement, and the retreat from public, comparable data on the caste composition of the state is itself part of the de-reservation this article describes.

Two further caveats apply. First, the reserved-category figures conventionally exclude the sweeper (safai karamchari) establishment; because Dalits dominate sanitation work, their true concentration in the lowest grades is understated in the tables that follow, and the vertical skew documented below is therefore, if anything, sharper than the numbers show. Second, all figures refer to representation among directly recruited and regular employees; the growing contractual and outsourced workforce, to which reservation does not attach, is largely invisible in these series—another reason the official picture flatters the reach of the quota.

5. THE DEMOGRAPHIC BASELINE

The reserved shares are anchored, however loosely, to population, so the demographic trajectory frames everything that follows. Across the census decades the Scheduled Castes have hovered between roughly 14.5 and 16.6 per cent of the national population, and the Scheduled Tribes have risen from about 6.9 to 8.6 per cent. By the 2011 Census—the most recent enumeration, since the decennial census due in 2021 was postponed and had not been conducted at the time of writing—the SCs numbered about 201.4 million and the STs about 104.3 million, together roughly a quarter of India's 1.21 billion people (Table 1). The reserved employment share of 22.5 per cent thus sits a little below the groups' combined demographic weight of about 25 per cent, and the ST quota of 7.5 per cent sits below the ST population share of 8.6 per cent.

Table 1. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population, 1961–2011

Census year	Total pop. (millions)	SC (millions)	SC %	ST (millions)	ST %
1961	439.2	64.4	14.7	30.1	6.9
1971	547.9	80.0	14.6	38.0	6.9
1981*	665.3	104.8	15.7	51.6	7.8
1991**	838.6	138.2	16.5	67.8	8.1
2001***	1028.6	166.6	16.2	84.3	8.2
2011	1210.6	201.4	16.6	104.3	8.6

*Sources: Primary Census Abstracts, Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001 and 2011. Notes: *1981 excludes Assam; **1991 excludes Jammu and Kashmir; ***2001 excludes three sub-divisions of Senapati district, Manipur.*

Two points deserve emphasis. First, the census figures underline that the SCs and STs are not a small minority to be accommodated at the margin but a quarter of the population, whose systematic under-representation at the apex of the state is a fact about the distribution of national power, not a rounding error. Second, the absence of a post-2011 enumeration means the population denominators against which representation is judged are now more than a decade stale, and that the policy debate—including the introduction of the EWS quota and recurrent demands for a caste census—proceeds without current population data. The evidential fog noted in the previous section reaches, in other words, all the way to the demographic base itself.

6. REPRESENTATION IN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Consider first the aggregate. In 1960 the SCs held about 12.2 per cent of central government posts and the STs about 2.0 per cent; the non-SC/ST categories held the remaining 85.7 per cent. Over the following three decades reservation pushed these shares upward. By 1990 the SCs reached their historic peak of about 17.0 per cent and the STs about 5.3 per cent. The trajectory then flattened and, for the SCs, reversed: between 1990 and 2003 the SC share drifted down to about 16.5 per cent even as the absolute number of SC employees fell by roughly fifty thousand—a decline that coincides exactly with the onset of liberalisation and the freeze on public hiring. The ST share, starting from a far lower base and further below its quota, continued a slow climb to about 6.5 per cent by 2003 (Table 2).

Extend the series to the present and the aggregate picture appears, at first glance, to have improved. As of 1 January 2016 the DoPT reported SC representation in central government service at about 17.5 per cent and ST representation at about 8.5 per cent—the SCs above and the STs at last above their respective quotas. On the headline number, then, central government employment now meets the combined 22.5 per cent benchmark. Were the aggregate the whole story, one might conclude that reservation in the central services had done its work.

Table 2. SC and ST share of central government employment, selected years, 1960-2022

As on 1 Jan	SC %	ST %	Non-SC/ST %
1960	12.24	2.02	85.74
1990	16.97	5.33	77.70
2003	16.52	6.46	77.01
2016	≈17.49	≈8.47	≈74.04

Sources: *Annual Reports, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions; DoPT consolidated representation statements. Recent figures are approximate and drawn from intermittent reporting; see Section 4. OBC representation, reported separately since the 1990s, stood at roughly 21-22 per cent in the available reporting.*

But the aggregate is precisely what conceals the structure. The central services are graded into four classes. Group A comprises the elite cadres—the Indian Administrative, Foreign, Police, and Revenue Services and their peers—that hold both power and prestige. Group B supplies the officers who assist them. Group C is the clerical and supervisory establishment recruited largely by direct examination. Group D—drivers, peons, sweepers, and the like—is the lowest. The reservation story is radically different in each, and it is the disaggregation that reveals what the aggregate hides.

6.1 The vertical skew

At the base, reservation has not merely succeeded but overshot. In Group D the SCs crossed their 15 per cent quota as early as the 1960s and rose above 23 per cent by the early 1980s, settling thereafter in the high teens—and this is before the sweeper establishment, overwhelmingly Dalit, is added back. Once sanitation workers are included, Dalits form an outright majority of the lowest grade. In Group C the SCs climbed from about 9 per cent in the mid-1960s to roughly the reserved 16 per cent, meeting the direct-recruitment target. The STs followed the same pattern one register lower, over-represented in Group D relative to their far smaller quota and steadily approaching it in Group C.

At the apex the picture inverts. In Group A the SCs stood at a negligible 1.6 per cent of the cadre in 1965 and had reached only about 12 per cent by 2003—still well short of the 15 per cent quota after four decades. The STs in Group A were at 0.3 per cent in 1965 and about 4 per cent in 2003, barely half their entitlement. Group B tracked Group A closely. The extension to the present confirms the skew rather than dissolving it. Drawing on returns from fifty-six ministries as of 1 January 2019, SC representation in Group A stood at about 14.2 per cent and ST representation at about 6.4 per cent—both, after seven decades of reservation, still below their quotas at the very level where the quota matters most (Table 3).

Table 3. SC and ST representation by service group, central government (per cent)

Group	SC 1965	SC 2003	SC ~2019	ST 1965	ST 2003	ST ~2019
A (elite cadres)	1.64	11.93	≈14.15	0.27	4.18	≈6.40
B	2.82	14.32	—	0.34	4.32	—
C	8.88	16.29	—	1.40	6.96	—
D (excl. sweepers)	17.75	≈17.00	—	3.50	—	—

Sources: *Annual Reports, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions; DoPT returns from 56 ministries as on 1 Jan 2019. Group D figures exclude sweepers; including them, Dalit shares in Group D exceed 50 per cent. Dashes indicate years for which comparable disaggregated figures are not available in the consolidated reporting.*

The meaning of the pattern is unambiguous. Reservation has been effective in inverse proportion to the power attached to the post. Where the work is menial and the authority nil, Dalits are over-represented; where the work is command and the authority real, they remain scarce. This is the empirical signature of hierarchical inclusion, and it is exactly the outcome Ambedkar warned would leave the caste character of the state intact.

7. REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC SECTOR ENTERPRISES

The public sector enterprises (PSEs)—the heavy industries, transport corporations, defence undertakings, and infrastructure concerns that the framers' socialist model placed at the centre of development—were meant to be the great engine of Dalit employment, and for three decades they were. In 1971 the SCs held about 7.4 per cent and the STs about 2.3 per cent of PSE jobs. Public-sector expansion then drove those shares up steeply: by 1990 the SCs reached about 19.6 per cent and the STs about 9.9 per cent, both comfortably above their quotas—the strongest representation Dalits achieved anywhere in the public economy (Table 5).

Table 5. SC and ST employment in central public sector enterprises, selected years

As on 1 Jan	SC %	ST %	Non-SC/ST %
1971	7.42	2.25	90.33
1980	17.44	7.60	74.96
1990	19.58	9.88	70.54
2000	18.00	8.09	73.91
2004	16.03	7.76	76.21
2020 (executive cadre)	≈16.28	≈6.93	≈76.79

Sources: Public Enterprises Survey, Ministry of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises, various years; DoPT/DPE returns on managerial-executive representation as on 31 March 2020. The 2020 row refers to the managerial/executive cadre and is not strictly comparable with the total-employment rows above.

Then came the reversal. Between 1990 and 2004 the absolute number of SC employees in the PSEs fell by roughly one lakh and the ST number by about seventy thousand, as liberalisation, the closure of loss-making units, voluntary-retirement schemes, and the recruitment freeze took hold. This was not a Dalit-specific loss—non-SC/ST employment fell too—but it fell hardest on the group with least to fall back on, since Dalits, largely landless, lack the agrarian cushion available to other castes and depend on public employment as their principal avenue out of hereditary occupation. The group-wise pattern within the PSEs, moreover, reproduced the central-government skew: Dalits massed in Groups C and D and remained scarce in Group A, where together they stood below 15 per cent even in 2004, against a combined entitlement of 22.5 per cent.

Since the mid-2000s the PSE story has been dominated by two processes the older data could not anticipate: contractualisation and privatisation. Take the first. The composition of the public-enterprise workforce has been transformed from within. The share of contract staff in central public sector enterprises rose from roughly 17 per cent in 2013 to about 42 per cent by 2021–22, while regular employment fell by more than a quarter. Contract and outsourced workers fall outside the reservation roster; as regular posts are converted into contractual ones, the jobs to which the quota attaches simply disappear, and the reserved categories feel it first because they are concentrated in exactly the Group C and D functions most readily outsourced. The managerial-executive cadre figures for 2020—SC about 16.3 per cent, ST about 6.9 per cent—show the familiar shape: the SCs near their mark, the STs below, and the whole edifice resting on a shrinking base of regular posts.

As for the second process, privatisation extinguishes reservation outright. When a public enterprise is sold, the reservation obligation does not transfer to the private owner; there is no

provision to preserve reserved posts on the transfer of ownership, and future recruitment to those posts leaves the quota regime for good. The disinvestment programme of recent years has therefore been, in effect, a programme of de-reservation by other means. The sale of Air India to the Tata group in 2021—the first outright privatisation of a central PSU in nearly two decades—together with the disinvestment of Bharat Petroleum, the Shipping Corporation, and others, and the partial privatisation of the Life Insurance Corporation through its 2022 public offering, transferred large blocks of once-reserved employment beyond the reach of Articles 16(4) and 16(4A). Each such transaction removes from the reservation regime jobs that took decades of struggle to bring within it, and does so without any legislative decision to narrow reservation as such.

8. PUBLIC SECTOR BANKS AND INSURANCE

The nationalised banks and public insurers, brought into the reservation fold by the bank nationalisation of 1969 and the insurance nationalisations of 1956 and 1972, display the same twin pattern of eventual aggregate compliance resting on a skewed distribution. In the banks, SC representation climbed from about 10.2 per cent in 1978 to roughly 17.6 per cent by 2004, crossing the quota; ST representation rose from a very low 1.6 per cent to about 5.7 per cent, still short of the 7.5 per cent mark more than three decades after nationalisation. Disaggregated by cadre, the banks reproduce the vertical skew in their own vocabulary of officers, clerks, and sub-staff: Dalits are heavily present among sub-staff, approach the quota among clerks, and remain thin among officers, where the STs in particular stayed around 5–6 per cent into the 2000s. The public insurers told a compressed version of the same story, with SCs reaching their quota and STs lagging, and with the now-familiar over-concentration in the Group D grades.

Two contemporary developments extend the pattern. First, the consolidation of the public banking sector—the merger of associate banks into the State Bank of India and the amalgamation of ten public sector banks into four in 2020—reduced the number of banking entities and, through rationalisation, the number of posts, contracting the reserved space even where ownership stayed public. Second, and more fundamentally, the stated policy of privatising public sector banks and the market listing of LIC point banking and insurance down the same de-reservation path as the industrial PSUs: what is privatised ceases to reserve. And it is at board level that the decisions to merge, list, and privatise are taken—decisions from which Dalits, structurally scarce in the senior cadres, are effectively excluded even as those decisions reshape Dalit employment.

9. THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND THE PERSISTENCE OF DISCRIMINATION

The retreat of the public sector would matter less if the expanding private sector absorbed Dalits on equal terms. The evidence is that it does not. Reservation does not apply to private employment, and the private labour market carries forward the caste discrimination the public quota was designed to counteract. The most rigorous demonstration remains the correspondence study by Sukhadeo Thorat, Paul Attewell, and Firdaus Rizvi, who submitted matched applications—identical in qualification but differing in the caste or religious signal of the applicant's name—to private-sector vacancies advertised in the national press. Applicants with recognisably Dalit names were significantly less likely to be called for interview than equally qualified upper-caste Hindus; the odds of a Dalit applicant reaching interview were roughly two-thirds those of a high-caste applicant, and the odds for Muslim applicants lower still. Discrimination, in other words, operates at the very first gate of the private hiring process, before merit can even be assessed.

Ashwini Deshpande's work reinforces and extends the finding. Tracing Dalit and non-Dalit graduates from comparable elite institutions into the labour market, she shows that similar credentials do not translate into similar outcomes: Dalit entrants lack the networks, social capital, and informal advantages that shape private-sector careers, so that formally equal qualifications yield unequal results. The upshot is that the private sector cannot be relied on to substitute for the public sector as a vehicle of Dalit mobility, because the private sector is itself a primary site of caste disadvantage. This is the deeper reason the shrinking of public employment falls with special weight on Dalits. For groups that

face discrimination in private hiring and that lack land or inherited capital to fall back on, the reserved public job is not one option among many; it is often the only institutionally guaranteed avenue into secure, non-hereditary work. To contract that avenue is to close, disproportionately, the door the Constitution deliberately opened.

10. DE-RESERVATION BY OTHER MEANS

The pieces can now be assembled. Read as a whole, the evidence describes a state that has grown adept at satisfying the form of reservation while withholding its substance, and that is at the same time narrowing the terrain on which reservation operates. The vertical skew documented across every sector—over-representation at the base, scarcity at the apex—means that aggregate quota compliance coexists with near-total exclusion from the offices of command. The persistence of Dalit under-representation in the Group A cadre—still short of quota after seven decades, at the very level where the quota matters most—is the summary statistic of the entire analysis: seventy years of reservation have not produced a Dalit share of executive power remotely proportionate to the Dalit share of the population, because reservation was allowed to succeed only where power was absent.

Layered on this old skew is a newer dynamic that the original study, written from the vantage of the early 2000s, could only glimpse: the systematic withdrawal of the reservation guarantee through a series of measures no one of which is presented as an attack on reservation. Privatisation removes public enterprises, and with them their reserved posts, from the quota regime entirely. Contractualisation and outsourcing convert regular reserved posts—concentrated in the very Group C and D grades where Dalits are numerous—into contractual and outsourced work to which no reservation attaches. Lateral entry and the deputation-based Central Staffing Scheme staff the senior cadres through reservation-free channels, sealing the apex against the quota at exactly the level where Dalit representation is lowest. And the EWS amendment of 2019 inserts into the reservation structure a 10 per cent share reserved for economically weaker sections defined so as to exclude the SCs, STs, and OBCs—expanding reservation as a category while contracting the space available to its original beneficiaries.

It is the cumulative and mutually reinforcing character of these measures that constitutes de-reservation. Individually each is defended in the neutral language of efficiency, expertise, fiscal prudence, or economic justice. Together they achieve what an open repeal of reservation could not achieve politically: a steady erosion of the reserved public job as an institution, accomplished without any legislature ever voting to reduce the SC or ST quota. The retreat of transparent, disaggregated official reporting, noted in Section 4, is the connective tissue of the process, for a de-reservation that proceeds by a hundred administrative decisions rather than one legislative act depends on the absence of the very data that would let it be seen and named.

Against this reading two objections should be weighed. The first holds that the concentration of Dalits in the lower grades is a transitional artefact—the natural leading edge of a class that entered the services late and is steadily working its way up as education spreads. There is something to it: the slow rise of SC representation in Group A from under 2 per cent to about 14 per cent over four decades is real, and it reflects the genuine emergence of an educated Dalit middle class. But the transitional reading strains against the arithmetic of the apex. If, after seventy years, SC representation in Group A still falls short of its 15 per cent quota and ST representation short of 7.5 per cent, the timescale of convergence is measured not in decades but in generations, and it now runs directly against the countervailing withdrawal of posts through privatisation and reservation-free recruitment. A leading edge that advances more slowly than the ground beneath it recedes does not converge.

The second objection is the familiar charge that reservation benefits only a Dalit “creamy layer” that monopolises the elite posts and blocks poorer Dalits below. The evidence inverts the claim. The elite Group A cadre was filled by Dalits only recently and remains below quota; in several sectors the top-level quota has never been met at all. There is no Dalit capture of the commanding heights to speak of—those heights remain overwhelmingly upper-caste—and so the premise of the creamy-layer argument, that affluent Dalits crowd out the rest at the top, is empirically false at the level where it is

usually advanced. The extension of the creamy-layer exclusion to SC and ST promotions in Jarnail Singh thus addresses a problem the data do not show to exist at the apex, while adding a further filter to Dalit advancement precisely where advancement is already most difficult.

11. CONCLUSION

This article set out to locate Dalits within the Indian state and to assess what is happening to the state that reservation relies upon. The answer is sobering. Measured by aggregate percentages, reservation in central government service, public enterprises, banking, and insurance has largely met its targets; measured by the distribution of Dalits across the vertical hierarchy of the state, it has installed them at the base and left the summit almost untouched. The Ambedkarite wager—that reservation would place Dalits inside the apparatus of rule and thereby change its caste character—has been honoured in numbers and defeated in power. A bureaucracy whose sweepers and clerks are disproportionately Dalit and whose elite Group A cadre remains below the reserved quota after seven decades is not a transformed bureaucracy; it is the old caste order administering the forms of inclusion.

Worse, the instrument itself is being withdrawn. The public sector that was the great vehicle of Dalit mobility is contracting under privatisation, disinvestment, contractualisation, and outsourcing; the reservation-free channels of deputation and lateral entry seal its apex; and the EWS quota redirects reserved space toward groups from which Dalits are excluded—all while the private sector, unbound by reservation, goes on discriminating at the hiring gate. The double displacement is the article's central finding: Dalits were admitted to the public sector chiefly at its base at the very moment the base was being dismantled, and were never admitted to its heights at all.

Two implications follow. The first is analytical: the health of reservation cannot be read from aggregate compliance figures, which have become compatible with the substantive reproduction of caste power, but only from the vertical distribution of Dalits across the grades of the state and from the shrinking or expanding size of the reserved public sector itself. The second is normative, and it returns to Ambedkar. If reservation is to serve its original purpose—the sharing of sovereignty rather than the distribution of subsistence—then the debate must move from the entry gate to the commanding heights, and from the size of the quota to the size and reach of the public sector the quota governs. That would require, at a minimum, extending the reservation obligation to survive privatisation and to bind outsourced and contractual work; opening the deputation and lateral-entry routes to the roster; restoring transparent, disaggregated, and timely public reporting of the caste composition of the state at every grade; and conducting the long-postponed census, without whose population data the entire edifice of proportionate representation is being administered in the dark. Until then, India will continue to reserve without redistributing power, and the quota will remain, at the top of the state where it matters most, a promise unkept.

REFERENCES

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1979-). Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra.
2. Deshpande, Ashwini (2011). *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
3. Deshpande, Ashwini (2013). *Affirmative Action in India*. Oxford India Short Introductions. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
4. Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India. Annual Reports and Consolidated Statements on the Representation of SCs, STs and OBCs in Central Government Services (various years).
5. Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India (2022). Supreme Court of India, judgment upholding the One Hundred and Third Amendment (EWS reservation).
6. Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta (2018). Supreme Court of India, on reservation in promotion and the creamy layer.
7. M. Nagaraj v. Union of India (2006). Supreme Court of India, on Articles 16(4A) and 16(4B).

8. Ministry of Finance, Government of India. Annual Reports (banking and insurance representation), various years.
9. Ministry of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises, Government of India. Public Enterprises Survey, various years.
10. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India. Primary Census Abstracts, 2001 and 2011.
11. Pitkin, Hanna F. (1967). The Concept of Representation. Berkeley: University of California Press.
12. Thorat, Sukhadeo and Katherine S. Newman, eds. (2010). Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
13. Thorat, Sukhadeo, Paul Attewell and Firdaus F. Rizvi (2007). "The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India." Economic and Political Weekly.