

Reservation Policy in India: Balancing Social Justice and Meritocracy

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Abstract: As a Foundation of socio-political landscape in India, the reservation policy seeks to create a more equitable society by addressing past inequalities. The dynamic nature of India's reservation policy reflects India's ongoing journey towards social justice, it's crucial to understand its role in promoting equality of opportunity for all. Reservation have played a pivotal role in promoting social inclusion and representation fir marginalized communities. Yet, this policy has ignited a debate regarding its effects on merit and efficiency. This article discharges its Constitutional roots, landmark judgements, and pivotal milestones, analyse changes through the reservation policies the landscape of opportunities. Examine its constitutional basis, key legal milestones and the debate between reservation policy and merit.

Keywords: Reservation Policy, Social Justice, Meritocracy, Affirmative Action, Equality, Marginalized Communities

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

— Jr. Martin Luther King

Introduction

The Reservation policy in India represents a significant effort to address historical injustice of caste system. By providing quotas for certain communities like Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Caste (OBC), it seeks create a more equitable society, ensuring uplift and representation of marginalized communities in India. This policy designed as an affirmative action measure, powerful tool for social and economic upliftment. So, by providing access education and resources, it empowers SCs, STs, OBSs and Socially and Economically Weaker Section (EWS) to overcome historical disadvantages. The Journey towards equitable opportunities in society and fostering an environment ripe for innovation and growth, India has catalysed a much-needed transformation in the workforce through the implementation of reservation system in constitution. But, as the debate around meritocracy continues, Supreme Court stance on merit challenge.

Historical Background

Reservation policy in India reflects a complex history intertwined with caste, religion and social equity, dating back to British rule and evolving

through significant reforms.

1. In 1882 the Hunter Commission called for free and compulsory education and government jobs for everyone.
2. In 1902, Kolhapur took a significant step forward with 50% reservation for backward communities in state service.
3. 1908 marked in Indian history as reservation were introduced for communities participating in British administration.
4. In 1909, Morley-Minto reforms aimed to address representation.
5. The Government of India act 1919, laid the ground work for reservation policy, that shape the socio-political landscape for India.
6. In 1921, The Madras Presidency introduced 44% reservation for non- Brahmins, 16% for Muslim, 16% for Anglo-Indian and Christians and 8% for Schedule Caste.

Poona Pact

The Communal Award sparked intense debate, despite Mahatma Gandhi's fierce opposition, which stemmed from the concern for Hinduism, known as Poona Pact. This pact stands as a testament to the power of negotiation and compromise in the pursuit of justice. This agreement between B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi redefined political representation for depressed classes, moving away from separate electorates with reserved seats which was a significant step towards ensuring representation and non-discrimination in public service. The discrepancy in seat allocation for classes in the central province raises important questions about equity. With a population of the depressed class at 25%, the contract promised 28 seats, yet only 20 were provided.

The debate surrounding reservations often overlooks the profound contributions of Dr. Ambedkar, who, as the law minister and chairman of the drafting committee, wielded both symbolic and actual authority. His appointment by the Indian National Congress, it was a strategic move that highlighted his unparalleled legal expertise. The debate on reservations during the Constituent Assembly was pivotal in shaping Indian democratic framework. It highlighted the need for social justice and equality, ensuring that marginalized voices were heard and represented. In the Constituent Assembly debate, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar highlighted the important provisions for reservation in education and public employment.

Constitutional Provisions

Indian Constitution lies a commitment to social justice, ensuring that historically disadvantaged groups receive equitable representation. These foundational provisions pave the way for reservation policies and affirmative action, fostering a more inclusive society.

Article 15(4) and 15(5): The provisions under Article 15(4) and 15(5) are vital for the advancement of SEBCs, SCs, and STs.

Article 15(4), introduced by the First Amendment Act of 1951, marked

a significant milestone in the fight for educational equity. By reserving seats for SEBCs, SCs, and STs in educational institutions, including private ones, it opened doors to countless opportunities.

Article 15(5) through the 93rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2005, the landscape of higher education has transformed. This amendment allows for special provisions in private institutions for SEBCs, SCs, and STs, reinforcing our commitment to equality and access.

Article 16(4) and 16(4A):

Article 16(4) serves as a crucial mechanism for the state to reserve appointments for backward classes, ensuring they are adequately represented in public services.

Article 16(4A), introduced by the 77th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1995, plays a crucial role in ensuring that SCs and STs receive fair opportunities in promotions.

Article 46: The Directive Principles of State Policy is to safeguard the rights of weaker sections, especially SCs and STs, from social injustice and exploitation, cornerstone for developing effective reservation policies and welfare measures.

Article 338: Article 338 paves the way for the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), a vital body dedicated to addressing the challenges faced by Scheduled Castes.

Article 340: It empowers the President to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes (SEBCs) and recommend measures for their advancement. This provision laid the foundation for the formation of the Mandal Commission, whose recommendations in 1980 led to the introduction of 27% reservations for OBCs in government jobs and educational institutions.

Landmark Judgement

The landmark case of **State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan** (1951), emphasizing the importance of equality under article 15(1) of the Constitution. The Supreme Court's ruling against caste-based reservation sparked a pivotal shift, leading to the first amendment of the constitution, it challenged the caste-based reservation in education institution. This case led to the first amendment of the Constitution in article 15(4).

MR Balaji v. State of Mysore (1963) related to reservation in educational admissions could exceed 50%. But Mysore had introduced 68% reservation for various categories of students, reservation exceeding 50% in educational institutions was unconstitutional.

Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992)- The Mondal Commission Case, dealt with the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations to provide 27% reservation for OBCs in government job and educational institutions, exclude creamy layer.

M. Nagraj v. Union of India (2007), Court held that reservation in promotions should be implemented if the state could prove that there was

inadequate representation of SCs and STs in their service.

In **Maratha Reservation Case**, Supreme court's decision in 2020 to strike down 16% reservation for Maratha community in Maharashtra has sparked significant discussions about equity and access education and employment. Maharashtra government has introduced this reservation under socially and educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) category.

State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh (2024), State had the power to sub-classify the groups under reserved categories for SCs and STs.

Sukanya Santha v. Union of India (2024), highlights the urgent need to address caste-based discrimination in prison. Supreme court reaffirmed the principle of equality enshrined in article 14. Reservation in prisons could not be justified based on caste, reinforcing the constitutional mandate for equality.

The Social Justice and the Meritocracy Argument

Social Justice is necessity for thriving democracy in context like India, where entrenched caste systems create barriers to equality. The pursuit of social justice is essential for a balanced society; it champions the rights of disadvantaged groups while encouraging the privileged to contribute positively to society. The essence of social justice in India is rooted in affirmative action mandated by Indian constitution. Indian Constitution lays the groundwork for a society that prioritize social, economic and political equity for all. To create a truly equitable society, must acknowledged the disparities faced by certain groups and implement preferential treatment where necessary. In pursuit of true equality, the need for preferential treatment for those who face social and economic disadvantages. By reserving seats in education and government for under representative communities, pave the way for social and economic justice.

Achieving social justice, requires that wealth and opportunities are shared fairly across society. By embracing both meritocratic ideals and need-based perspective, address past inequalities while fostering a society that values every individual potential.

In a landmark decision, the Supreme Court has taken a bold step in addressing the long-standing 'merit versus reservation' debate by ruling extend reservation for OBCs in the all-India quota for medical and dental courses, emphasizes the importance of 'substantive equality' over the outdated notion of 'formal equality'. This shift acknowledges that true equality requires addressing social disparities and empowering background. Justice DY Chandrachud eloquently point out, true merit is influenced by various factors, the narrative of merit often overlooks the significant advantages that come from social and cultural capital, hard work alone does not equate to merit.

Navigating the intricate landscape of affirmative action and meritocracy, the 103rd (10% reservation for economically weaker section on educational institution and government jobs) and 106th (one-third reservation of

women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies and Delhi legislative assembly) Constitutional amendment present both challenges and opportunities, highlight the ongoing debate between social justice and meritocracy.

As India navigates the complexities of reservation policy, the conversation around equality versus equity of outcomes becomes increasingly important. Supporters of this policy argue that without these policies, structural discrimination will continue to hinder progress for marginalized group. Opponents argued that, the intersection of merit and reservation policy in professional roles raises important questions about institutional performance.

A foundation stone of democracy the Indian Constitution embodies the spirit of social justice an equality. Its commitment to dismantling the caste system and integrating marginalized voices is a testament to collective journey towards equity. The Preamble of the Constitution is not just a statement also a commitment to justice and equality for every citizen. The Preamble serves as a reminder that true progress can only be achieved when every segment of society is induced. So, in a nation as diverse India, reservation policies play a pivotal role in addressing systematic discrimination and fostering opportunities for marginalized communities, while debate continues, these measures have undeniably fostered greater equality.

Reservation policy has played a crucial role in promoting social equity, However, the challenges it faces today, ranging from legal constraints to debates on socio-economic criteria. The debates about equity versus meritocracy highlight the complexities of this policy.

1. Despite Constitutional safeguards, the promise of reservation policy is being compromised by corruption, inefficiencies and exploitation by bureaucrats. Fraudulent caste certificate acquisition is robbing deserving individuals of opportunities, while political agendas overshadowed genuine upliftment.
2. As Supreme Court navigates the complexities of reservation policies, the 50% cap remains a pivotal point of contention. The introduction of the EWS quota has raised questions about the balance between economic and caste-based justice.
3. The debate around reservation policy is complex and multifaceted. Critics argue it can lead to reverse discrimination.

Contemporary Issues

Patna high court has made headlines by overturning the 65% reservation cap in government jobs and educational institutions, reigniting discussions on equity and opportunity. This decision opens the floor for renewed dialogue on the balance between opportunity and equity in public service.

Telangana government implemented in 2025 a caste survey and passed a bill, proposed 42% OBCs reservation, aiming for data driven reform and a potential national model for equity, empowerment and representation for marginalised communities.

11.25% reservation in higher educational institutions, extending quota benefits beyond government jobs for socially and economically backward classes, exclude admission in medical and engineering colleges in Odisha.

Internal reservations for Schedule Castes, allocating 6% to Madigas, 6% to Holeyas and Alemani caste and 5% for Bhovi, Lambhani and other communities by Karnataka government, aims for balanced representation which is crucial in social justice policy making.

Way Forward

1. Embracing a hybrid approach to reservations can create a more equitable landscape for all candidates from reserve categories to compete in the general category when they achieve higher cut-offs, through this India can foster a fairer and more diverse environment.

2. The call for time-bound reservations is a pivotal step towards ensuring that social justice and economic development remain dynamic and responsive. By evaluating this policy every year for better assess their impact and make necessary adjustments.

3. The future of India's reservation policy hinges on its adaptability to the evolving socio-economic landscape, for reforms that prioritize economic based criteria and quality of education of marginalized community, ensure that everyone competes on equal footing.

Conclusion

As India strides towards progress, the reservation policy remains a keystone of social justice and addressing historical inequalities. Striking a balance between meritocracy and social justice through support for disadvantaged is essential. By reforming the system to prioritize economic backwardness and educational opportunities are crucial to create a more inclusive society. Balancing these two ideals, social justice and meritocracy, it shapes the very fabric of Indian Society.

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