

# BALANCING CASTE AND ECONOMIC RESERVATIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S POLICY SHIFTS

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolution and impact of affirmative policy in India, particularly following the 103rd Amendment Act of 2019, which extended quota benefits to economically weaker sections (EWSs) of the upper castes. By delving into existing literature and analyzing census data from 1961 to 2011 alongside Annual Reports of the Department of Personnel & Training from 2013-14 to 2022-23, this research traces the historical development of reservation systems from pre-Independence to post-Independence eras. It examines the socio-economic disparities faced by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the original beneficiaries of these policies. The study critically assesses the effectiveness of the 103rd Amendment in enhancing educational and employment opportunities for EWSs, juxtaposing this with the enduring caste-based inequalities. Findings indicate that while there have been significant improvements in literacy rates among SCs

and STs, gaps persist when compared to the overall population. Additionally, the new amendment has not significantly improved public employment opportunities for non-beneficiaries. The study underscores the need to realign reservation policies with their original objectives of addressing caste-based inequalities while also considering economic disparities to foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

**Keywords:** affirmative; discrimination; economically weaker; scheduled castes; scheduled tribes World Count: 4150

## INTRODUCTION

The Indian caste system organizes people by their caste, an ingrained tradition that determines social ranking and individual identity (Sankaran et al., 2017). This type of social hierarchy is replicated in many forms among different human communities, a result

of a general tendency among humans to classify people into hierarchical categories according to heredity, occupation, or economic standing (Mosse, 2018). Yet, when caste alone is used to determine resource distribution, it creates inequality. In India, for instance, the initial occupational order of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras developed into a strict system of stratification (Deshpande, 2015). Such social inequalities, which originated in the caste system, essentially divided society into higher and lower levels, with the latter having unequal access to resources (Agarwal & Levien, 2020). It is through this seed of discrimination that the need for positive policy, focused on creating positive action, began (Prasad et al., 2020). Such policies try to alleviate the injustices that the caste system brings and instead advance a better society (Thorat & Tagade, 2016).

### **Affirmative Policy in India**

Affirmative policies in India date back to the British colonial period, where they were mainly driven by pragmatic concerns regarding governance and political expediency, rather than a genuine commitment to rectifying social inequalities or historical injustices (Jaffrelot, 2006). Following India's independence in 1947, the government actively pursued affirmative action policies, including the implementation of caste-based reservations, as a crucial component of its social justice agenda (Haq & Ojha, 2010). These measures were introduced specifically to address the needs and upliftment of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes populations (Xaxa, 2001). Initially introduced for a period of

ten years, affirmative policy in India has persisted and has now become an entrenched and permanent aspect of government policies (Kumar, 2008). Rather than simply reviewing the government's policy, it was expanded to include other backward classes based on the Mandal Commission's Report (Kumar, 2021).

### **Reservation for Economically Weaker Sections**

The subject of reservation for economically weaker sections is a relatively new area of study, emerging prominently with the passage of the 103rd Amendment Act in 2019. The strong support from both houses of Parliament highlights the significant shift in policy towards addressing economic inequalities in addition to traditional caste-based disparities. As this policy continues to be implemented, it is expected to generate a growing body of literature and analysis, contributing to a deeper understanding of its effects and effectiveness in achieving social justice in India. While the quota-based reservation has always been a significant concern for various caste groups and policymakers, especially in India, the primary focus here is to delve into existing literature to uncover the roots of India's affirmative action policy and the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in society.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **Pre-Independence**

The system evolved from early colonial initiatives and social reformers' advocacy to

constitutional safeguards post-independence, later expanding to include OBCs and economically weaker sections. The concept of caste-based quotas in India was initially proposed by W. Hunter & Jyoti Rao Phule (Shyam, 2021). However, the genesis of today's affirmative policy in India can be traced back to the introduction of separate electorates under the Morley-Minto Reforms, initially for Muslims and later extended to Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans (Bapu, 2012). The idea of separate electorates for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was deliberated during the Round Table Conferences in 1930–32, following a demand by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to ensure adequate representation for these minority communities in government (Verma, 2019). Eventually, the Poona Pact was signed, reserving seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes communities in specific constituencies, after opposition from Gandhiji, who believed that such separate electorates would lead to the disintegration of Hindu society (Weiner, 2001).

### **Post-Independence**

The concept of quotas had its roots before independence and was constitutionally validated post-independence. Following independence in 1947, the Constitution of India was framed and adopted in 1950 to ensure equality before the law and freedom from discrimination based on caste, creed, religion, sex, or place of birth in matters of higher education and public appointments (Sripati, 1998). The Constitution specifically abolished untouchability and provided

special provisions (Galanter, 1969). Part XVI of the Constitution, titled “Special Provisions Relating to Certain Classes,” includes Articles 330 to 340. Article 330 reserves seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People (Deane, 2011). Article 332 provides for the reservation of seats in the Legislative Assemblies of states for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Article 335 allows for the consideration of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in appointments to public services, ensuring that efficiency in administration is not compromised (Patnaik, 2013).

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of the study is to assess the need for the expansion of the benefits of affirmative policy to economically weaker sections (EWS) in alignment with the original intent of addressing caste-based inequalities in India.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This research is important because it critically analyzes the changing dynamics of affirmative action policies in India, especially the transition to the inclusion of economically weaker sections (EWS) under the reservation system. Traditionally, caste reservations were implemented to deal with deep-seated social disparities and give marginalized groups a chance, specifically Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). However, the 103rd Constitutional Amendment of 2019 marks a departure from this traditional

approach by introducing reservations based on economic criteria rather than caste-based historical disadvantages. The study, by analyzing census data from 1961 to 2011 and employment reports from 2013-14 to 2022-23 for literacy and employment trends respectively, offers empirical evidence on the socio-economic impact of reservation policies on SCs and STs. This comprehensive evaluation helps in understanding whether EWS reservations address economic inequality without undermining the core objective of caste-based affirmative action.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review within the research helps researchers think conceptually and consider the research subject of study under a broad background of academic discipline,

facilitating their comprehension of study phenomena through a systematic approach to reviews. A systematic and transparent method is used that follows the PRISMA framework. Research involves diving into various databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, as well as peer-reviewed articles. By using positive policy, education, employment, and marginalized keywords, we initially found 372 articles. Subsequently, we displayed them against our inclusive criteria, focusing on articles from scholars published between 2005 and 2023, who discussed positive policy in education and employment for all marginalized groups in English. This process helped us to eliminate non-relevant studies and duplicates, leaving us with 155 articles. We then reviewed a complete citation to assess the functioning quality and thematic relevance, eventually selecting 15 articles for our analysis.

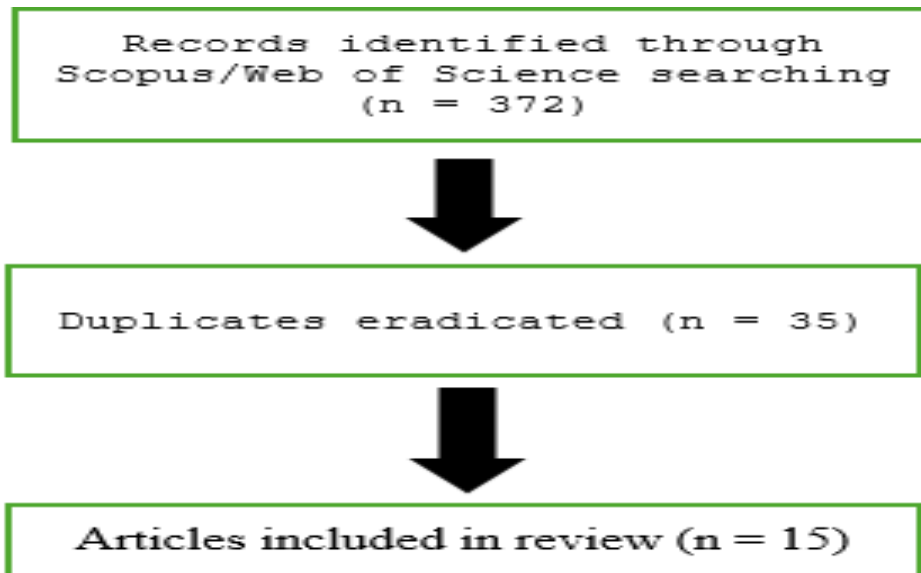


Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart

The 15 papers reviewed give a comparative account of affirmative policy's influence on education and work, specifically on Scheduled Castes in India. In education, the quota system reserves 15% of higher education places (Ovichagan, 2015) with the intention of reducing historic discrimination (Haynes & Alagaraja, 2016). Though this policy has enhanced the rate of enrollment (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008; Prakash, 2020), challenges like constrained access to quality education and poorer academic performance remain (Tierney et al., 2019). These educational challenges, in turn, influence employment outcomes. While positive policies have raised Scheduled Castes' participation in public sector jobs, they still face higher rates of unemployment, lower earnings, and poor career advancement opportunities (Thorat et al., 2023). A major challenge is the skill and qualification gaps among reserved category persons, which makes them less marketable in the job market (Ahmad, 2020). Discrimination is still a major obstacle across

both fields (Mosse, 2018), and there is a need for structural changes to strengthen policy impact and enhance long-term prospects in work and education (Weisskopf, 2004).

A comparative analysis of India's census data from 1961 to 2011 was conducted to examine the literacy rates achieved by these groups. Table 1 reveals a significant increase in literacy rates for Scheduled Castes, from 10.2% in 1961 to 66.1% in 2011, and for Scheduled Tribes, from 8.5% to 59.0% over the same period. Despite these improvements, a gap remains when compared to the overall literacy rate. Additionally, the Annual Reports of the Department of Personnel & Training from 2013-14 to 2022-23 were analyzed and presented in Table 2 to illustrate the public employment conditions of non-beneficiaries compared to those of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The comparison clearly shows that there has been no significant improvement in public employment opportunities for non-beneficiaries following the enactment of the 103rd Amendment in 2019.

**Table 1. Literacy Trend among SCs and STs (1961 to 2011)**

| Year | Literacy Rate in % |                  |                  |
|------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|
|      | Overall            | Scheduled Castes | Scheduled Tribes |
| 1961 | 28.3               | 10.2             | 8.5              |
| 1971 | 34.5               | 14.6             | 11.3             |
| 1981 | 43.6               | 21.3             | 16.4             |
| 1991 | 52.2               | 37.4             | 29.6             |
| 2001 | 64.8               | 54.7             | 47.1             |
| 2011 | 73.0               | 66.1             | 59.0             |

Source: <https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/>

**Table 2. Public Employment Trends among SCs and STs (2013-14 to 2022-23)**

| Period    | % in Public Employment |     |     |
|-----------|------------------------|-----|-----|
|           | Other than SCs/STs     | SCs | STs |
| 2013-2014 | 58                     | 17  | 8   |
| 2014-2015 | 57                     | 18  | 8   |
| 2015-2016 | 55                     | 17  | 9   |
| 2016-2017 | 56                     | 18  | 8   |
| 2017-2018 | 52                     | 17  | 8   |
| 2018-2019 | 52                     | 17  | 8   |
| 2019-2020 | 56                     | 16  | 7   |
| 2020-2021 | 55                     | 17  | 8   |
| 2021-2022 | 53                     | 17  | 8   |
| 2022-2023 | 54                     | 17  | 7   |

Source: <https://dopt.gov.in/sites/>

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method approach, which focuses special attention on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, using a literature review through PRISMA as the primary tool to assess the educational and employment outcomes generated from positive policy in India. Additionally, it analyzes census data from 1961 to 2011 and annual reports of the Department of Personnel and Training from 2013-14 to 2022-23 to assess educational and employment trends among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The use of a mixed-methods approach in research provides a more comprehensive analysis of complex social issues, particularly in policy evaluation (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Mishra et al., 2019). The study, which examines the impact of positive action policies in India with

specific attention to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and recently involved the economically weaker sections (EWS), requires a methodical structure that integrates both qualitative and quantitative insights. Affirmative action policies are socio-politically driven interventions that require a thorough understanding of both numerical trends and qualitative insights from the existing literature (Maxwell, 2013). A qualitative approach enables researchers to explore policy implications, societal perceptions, and historical contexts, whereas quantitative methods offer empirical validation through statistical analysis (Rai, 2022).

The role of historical constitutional provisions in shaping contemporary reservation policies through qualitative analysis, as well as the use of statistical data, highlights socio-economic

inequalities (Galanter,1969). Similarly, Sharma and Jenkins (2014) used a mixed-methods approach to delve into caste-based reservations. They pointed out that we need to look beyond just the numbers in education and employment; we should also consider the surrounding policy discussions and public sentiment. David (2017) added that relying solely on education and employment statistics gives us an incomplete view, as we miss out on the qualitative stories that shed light on the systemic discrimination faced by Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). By integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights, this research offers a well-rounded perspective on how positive policies impact marginalized communities. The study's approach aligns with existing literature that champions mixed methods in research, ensuring a thorough and balanced assessment of the reservation system established in India.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A look at the census data from 1961 to 2011 reveals a remarkable rise in literacy rates among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). As indicated in Table 1, the SC literacy rate jumped from 10.2% in 1961 to a remarkable 66.1% in 2011, and among STs, it improved from 8.5% to 59.0%. This indicates that affirmative action policies in education have contributed significantly to enhancing access and participation for these traditionally disadvantaged groups. But even with these improvements, SCs and STs remain behind the general literacy rate, indicating that there

are persistent inequalities in educational attainment.

The public employment pattern from 2013-14 to 2022-23 shows that SCs and STs are still under-represented in government service despite affirmative action. The percentage of SCs in public sector employment has been moderately consistent at between 16% and 18%, whereas STs have remained between 7% and 9%. While SC/ST representation in public sector jobs has remained between 52% and 58% during these years, with little reflection of reservation policies on their employment status, the fairly flat employment levels indicate that affirmative policies have opened up opportunities for SCs and STs.

The literature review and empirical data indicate that although affirmative action policies have been helpful to education and employment trends among SCs and STs, there remain enormous gaps. A comparative analysis of the performance of affirmative policies indicates serious challenges:

- Education: Despite rising literacy rates, disparities in access and quality of higher education persist, with SC/ST students facing academic disadvantages due to low-quality resources (Tierney et al., 2019).
- Employment: Even though positive policies have granted reserved jobs in government service, genuine career progress and salary equality remain difficult due to skill disparities and continued discrimination (Thorat et al., 2023; Mosse, 2018).
- Impact of EWS Reservation: The 103rd Amendment, introduced in 2019 to implement reservations for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), remains to see

substantial impact in bridging economic divides. Evidence indicates that non-beneficiaries have not experienced enhanced job opportunities, raising doubts regarding whether economic criteria alone are enough to address social disparities. The inclusion of additional castes only on the basis of economic factors under the pretext of bringing social equality is disfavored, mainly due to the fact that the quota system introduced under British rule was used for political and administrative advantage, which ultimately resulted in divisiveness and misinterpretation of its intended purpose (Sharma, 2014). The wanton misuse of affirmative policies for political advantage has weakened their logical application, leading to deserving castes not being able to reap the benefits of the policy and instigating unrest among some sections aspiring to come under quota schemes (Assadi, 2006). The recent 103rd Amendment of 2019 further strays away from the original idea of reservation by giving economic reservations to affluent members (Jain and Goel, 2019). The aim of affirmative policies is to provide equal representation to marginalized groups in those sectors where they are underrepresented. The 103rd Amendment, 2019, providing 10 percent seats in higher education institutions and public services to upper castes on the basis of economic conditions, must be reconsidered.

## DISCUSSION

Reservations for economically weaker segments of the upper castes would impact

seats reserved for other castes, excluding the upper caste poor. Although it is stated that the EWS quota would not affect the existing quotas for SC, ST, and OBC, the overall quota for the unreserved category is shrinking. The EWS quota is taken from the existing merit-based quota, which is open to all and not exclusively reserved for the forward castes. Reserved class candidates can also claim seats in the unreserved 50.5% quota. This unreserved quota has been reduced from 50.5% to 40.5% to accommodate the 10% EWS reservation, affecting the rights of SCs, STs, and OBCs, as well as reducing the unreserved category's quota. With the introduction of a 10% quota for economically weaker sections from the upper castes, unreserved category candidates are now competing only for 40.5% of the seats, down from the earlier 50.5%. This has been brought about as 59.5% of the seats are now reserved—15% for Scheduled Castes (SC), 7.5% for Scheduled Tribes (ST), 27% for Other Backward Classes (OBC), and 10% for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). Similarly, ST candidates now have opportunities to contest 48% of seats, which was 58%; SC candidates now have the opportunity to contest 55.5% rather than 65.5%; and OBC candidates have the opportunity to contest 67.5% instead of 77.5%. Therefore, SC, ST, OBC, and unreserved category candidates are being left behind by 10% of opportunities. Most consider the EWS reservations to be an attempt to water down the current caste-based reservations, which could reverse the very purposes of these policies.

## **CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATION**

### **CONCLUSION**

The research underscores the historical significance and role of affirmative action policies in India. Literacy and employment trends analysis demonstrates that although these affirmative policies have indeed improved educational chances and access to government jobs among marginalized communities, there still remain substantial gaps in both dimensions. Literacy rates for SCs and STs have seen considerable improvement over the years, but they still fall short compared to the general population. Similarly, despite reservations in government posts, SCs and STs face inequalities, which speaks to the requirement of further structural reforms. The introduction of the 103rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 2019, extending a 10% reservation to the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) of higher castes, is a watershed shift in India's affirmative action landscape. But the report suggests that a purely economic parameter may not suffice to address the entrenched social imbalances. Redistribution of reserved quotas is a concern for the dilution of caste-based reservations, thereby jeopardizing the very objectives of these affirmative measures. The curtailment of the unreserved category quota from 50.5% to 40.5% has heightened competition within backward communities and affected the choices available to SC, ST, and OBC candidates in the field of

education and employment. Secondly, the research acknowledges the unforeseen implications of affirmative action policies being used politically to lead to inefficiency and misinterpretations of their real purposes. Whereas caste reservations were originally meant to address systemic discrimination and social exclusion, reserving positions on the sole basis of economic class might not have enough depth to destroy deep-rooted social hierarchies.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The research portrays the dynamic quality of affirmative policy in India by the inclusion of economically weaker sections (EWS) through the 103rd Amendment. Affirmative action, although it has led to elevated literacy and job levels among the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs), unequal exposure to quality education and career prospects continues. Economic criteria for reservation is a source of worry that is linked with the dilution of affirmative action based on caste and with the possibility of impacting the representation of historically underprivileged groups. Based on the analysis, policy realignment is needed so that economic reasons are addressed along with the underlying objective of reversing the inequalities based on caste in India.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The study relies heavily on government data and census reports, which may not account for the various realities of informal work and

socio-economic mobility. This limitation means that we can only consider earnestly a limitation on the fullest evaluation of positive policy impacts on marginalized communities beyond the existence of public sector opportunities.

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## DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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