

# Reservation in India after 75 Years: Social Justice or Political Compulsion?

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## Abstract

India's social structure has historically been shaped by caste-based inequalities. To address these injustices, the Constitution of India introduced reservations to ensure representation and opportunities for marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and later Other Backward Classes. Although initially intended as a temporary measure, the policy has continued for more than seventy-five years.

This paper examines whether the reservation system still serves its original goal of promoting social justice or has increasingly become influenced by political considerations. Using qualitative analysis of secondary sources such as academic literature, policy reports, and judicial decisions, the study evaluates the impact of reservations on different social groups and explores the ongoing debate between caste-based and economic criteria for affirmative action. The paper aims to assess the relevance and future direction of reservation policy in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Reservation, Social Justice, Affirmative Action, Caste Inequality, Political Mobilization, EWS.

## Introduction

India is widely recognized for its vast social, cultural, and religious diversity. Beneath this pluralism, however, exists a deeply stratified social order historically shaped by the institution of caste. For centuries, marginalized communities were subjected to systemic exclusion, economic deprivation, and restricted access to education and employment opportunities. In response to these entrenched inequalities, the framers of the Constitution of India incorporated the principle of affirmative action through a system of reservations to promote equality and social justice.<sup>1</sup>

The reservation policy was envisioned as a corrective mechanism to ensure adequate representation for historically disadvantaged groups, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and later extended to Other Backward Classes (OBCs). It sought to redress historical injustices by reserving seats in educational institutions, government employment, and legislative bodies. Although originally intended as a temporary provision for a period of ten years, the reservation system has persisted and expanded over the past seventy-five years.<sup>2</sup>

A landmark moment in the evolution of reservation policy came with the Supreme Court's judgment in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, popularly known as the Mandal case.<sup>3</sup> In this case; the Court upheld the constitutional validity of reservations for Other Backward Classes while introducing significant doctrinal principles. It established the "creamy layer" exclusion to ensure that the benefits of reservation reach the

truly disadvantaged sections within backward classes. Additionally, the Court imposed a general ceiling of 50 percent on total reservations, emphasizing the need to balance affirmative action with the principle of equality.<sup>4</sup> This judgment remains a cornerstone in shaping the contours of reservation policy in India.

Further refinement of reservation jurisprudence occurred in *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India*, where the Supreme Court examined the constitutional validity of amendments enabling reservation in promotions for SCs and STs.<sup>5</sup> The Court upheld these provisions but imposed important conditions: the State must demonstrate backwardness, inadequacy of representation, and maintenance of administrative efficiency before granting such reservations.<sup>6</sup> This judgment underscored the need for empirical justification and introduced a layer of judicial scrutiny over affirmative action policies in promotions.

In recent years, the scope of reservation policy has undergone a significant transformation with the introduction of economic criteria. The Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019 inserted Articles 15(6) and 16(6), enabling the State to provide up to 10 percent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) of society, thereby marking a shift from purely caste-based affirmative action.<sup>7</sup> This amendment was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, where the Court recognized economic disadvantage as a valid basis for affirmative action while generating significant debate regarding its implications for the equality principle.<sup>8</sup>

Over time, reservation policy has emerged as one of the most debated aspects of Indian public policy. Proponents argue that reservations remain indispensable for achieving substantive equality and addressing structural discrimination. Critics, however, contend that the policy has increasingly been shaped by political considerations, particularly vote-bank politics. The expansion of reservation categories and recurring demands for the inclusion of new groups have further intensified debates concerning its effectiveness, fairness, and long-term sustainability.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, the present study seeks to examine whether the reservation system in India continues to function primarily as an instrument of social justice or whether it has gradually evolved into a political tool. By analyzing academic literature, policy frameworks, and judicial pronouncements—including landmark cases such as *Indra Sawhney*, *M. Nagaraj*, and *Janhit Abhiyan*—the study explores the historical evolution, contemporary challenges, and future trajectory of reservation policy in India. It also engages with the ongoing debate on whether affirmative action should remain caste-based or increasingly incorporate economic criteria to address emerging forms of inequality in contemporary society.<sup>10</sup>

## Research Questions

1. To what extent has the reservation system in India succeeded in achieving its core objective of promoting social justice and substantive equality for historically marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes?
2. How has the reservation policy evolved since its constitutional inception, and what socio-political and legal factors have contributed to its expansion and continuation beyond the originally envisaged time frame?
3. To what extent has the growth and expansion of reservation policies been influenced by political considerations, electoral strategies, and vote-bank dynamics in India?

4. What has been the impact of reservation policies on access to education and employment opportunities for both reserved and non-reserved categories, particularly in terms of equity, merit, and competition?
5. In the context of contemporary socio-economic inequalities, should India continue to rely primarily on caste-based reservations, or should greater emphasis be placed on economic criteria and policy reforms to enhance fairness and effectiveness?

## Research Objectives

1. To examine the historical background and constitutional basis of the reservation policy introduced under the Constitution of India.
2. To analyze the role of reservation in promoting social justice and improving the socio-economic conditions of marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes.
3. To evaluate the political dynamics that has influenced the expansion and continuation of reservation policies in India.
4. To examine the impact of reservation policies on other social groups, particularly the non-reserved categories.
5. To explore the ongoing debate between caste-based and economic criteria for affirmative action in contemporary India.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative and analytical research design** to examine the evolution, objectives, and contemporary relevance of the reservation policy in India. The research primarily relies on **secondary sources of data**, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and newspaper articles that discuss the development and impact of reservation policies.

The study also analyses important constitutional provisions and judicial interpretations related to reservation under the Constitution of India. In addition, landmark judgments delivered by the Supreme Court of India have been examined to understand the legal framework governing affirmative action and its limits. Reports of important commissions, particularly the Mandal Commission, are also reviewed to analyze the expansion of reservations to socially and educationally backward classes.

The methodology involves **descriptive and interpretative analysis** of available literature in order to understand the historical background, policy objectives, and socio-political implications of reservations. By comparing different scholarly viewpoints and policy debates, the study evaluates whether the reservation system continues to function as a mechanism for social justice or whether it has increasingly been influenced by political considerations.

## Historical Evolution of Reservation in India.

The origin of reservation policies in India:

The origin of reservation policies in India can be traced to the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which sought to address the deep-rooted inequalities created by

the caste system. Several social reformers highlighted the need for state intervention to uplift marginalized communities who had historically been excluded from education, employment, and political participation. Among them, B. R. Ambedkar strongly advocated special safeguards and political representation for oppressed communities.<sup>11</sup>

During the colonial period, the demand for representation of marginalized communities gained prominence. A significant development occurred with the Poona Pact, which provided reserved seats for depressed classes in legislative bodies.<sup>12</sup> Although the British colonial administration introduced limited forms of representation, the idea of affirmative action gained stronger institutional support during the framing of independent India's constitutional framework.

After independence, the framers of the Constitution of India incorporated provisions for reservations in education, government employment, and political representation. These measures were intended to promote social justice and equality by providing opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The policy was initially conceived as a temporary arrangement for ten years, with the expectation that social inequalities would gradually diminish.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, however, the scope of reservations expanded. One of the most significant developments occurred following the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, which recommended extending reservations to Other Backward Classes.<sup>14</sup> The implementation of these recommendations in the early 1990s marked a major turning point in India's reservation policy and intensified debates over social justice, merit, and political mobilization.

In recent years, the reservation framework has continued to evolve with the introduction of new categories such as the Economically Weaker Sections reservation, introduced through the Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, which provides reservation based on economic criteria rather than caste alone.<sup>15</sup> This development has further expanded the debate regarding the appropriate basis for affirmative action in India.

Thus, the historical evolution of reservation policy in India reflects a continuous effort to address social inequalities while balancing competing demands for representation, fairness, and merit. Over the past seventy-five years, the policy has transformed from a limited constitutional safeguard into a central element of India's socio-political landscape.<sup>16</sup>

### **Statistical Analysis of Reservation in India:**

A statistical examination of demographic and institutional data helps to better understand the impact of reservation policies on representation and social mobility in India. Data from the Census of India, government reports, and educational statistics provide insights into the socio-economic status of marginalized communities.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Census of India, Scheduled Castes constitute approximately 16.6% of India's population, while Scheduled Tribes account for about 8.6%. The population belonging to Other Backward Classes is estimated to be around 40–45%, based on various government and academic studies.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of constitutional provisions, reservations in central government employment and educational institutions are currently structured as follows:

- Scheduled Castes – 15%
- Scheduled Tribes – 7.5%
- Other Backward Classes – 27%
- Economically Weaker Sections – 10%<sup>19</sup>

The introduction of the Economically Weaker Sections reservation through the 103rd Constitutional Amendment in 2019 expanded the reservation framework by incorporating economic criteria.<sup>20</sup>

### **Representation in Government Employment**

Government employment data shows that representation of marginalized groups has improved over the decades. For example:

- Scheduled Castes: 17–18%
- Scheduled Tribes: 8–9%
- OBCs: 21–22%<sup>21</sup>

These figures indicate that reservation policies have helped increase representation of historically excluded groups in public sector employment.

### **Representation in Higher Education**

Reservation policies have also influenced access to higher education. According to data from the All India Survey on Higher Education:

- Scheduled Castes: 14–15%
- Scheduled Tribes: 5–6%
- OBCs: 36–37%<sup>22</sup>

These statistics show a gradual increase in participation of marginalized communities in universities and professional institutions over the past two decades.

### **Socio-Economic Indicators**

Despite improvements in representation, socio-economic indicators reveal persistent inequalities. Literacy rates among marginalized communities remain lower than the national average:

- National Average: 74%
- Scheduled Castes: 66%
- Scheduled Tribes: 59%<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, poverty rates among these communities continue to be higher than those of other social groups. These disparities highlight the continued relevance of policies aimed at social inclusion.

## Interpretation of Statistical Trends

The statistical evidence suggests that reservations have contributed to improving representation in education and public employment. However, the data also indicate that structural inequalities remain significant, particularly in areas such as literacy, income levels, and access to opportunities. While reservations have helped create opportunities for upward mobility, broader socio-economic reforms are still required to achieve substantive equality.<sup>24</sup>

### Analysis and Findings:

#### 1(a) Improvement in Representation:

The analysis indicates that the reservation system has made a significant contribution to improving the representation of historically marginalized communities in public institutions. Data from government employment and higher education demonstrate a steady increase in the participation of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) over the decades.<sup>25</sup>

Reservation policies have enabled these groups to gain access to opportunities that were historically denied to them, thereby promoting inclusiveness in state institutions. This enhanced representation is particularly visible in public sector employment, legislative bodies, and educational institutions.<sup>26</sup>

#### 1(b) Advancement of Social Mobility:

Reservation has also played a crucial role in facilitating upward social mobility among marginalized communities. By providing access to education and secure employment, it has contributed to the emergence of a growing middle class within SCs, STs, and OBCs.<sup>27</sup>

This process has had a multiplier effect, improving not only individual livelihoods but also the socio-economic status of families and communities over time. However, the benefits of mobility have not been uniformly distributed across all sections within these groups.

#### 1(c) Persistence of Structural Inequalities:

Despite these achievements, the findings reveal that structural inequalities continue to persist. Socio-economic indicators such as literacy rates, income levels, land ownership, and access to quality education show that marginalized communities still lag behind the national average.<sup>28</sup>

These disparities indicate that while reservation has improved access and representation, it has not fully addressed the deeper structural causes of inequality rooted in caste-based discrimination and social exclusion.

### 1(d) Judicial Recognition of Substantive Equality:

The constitutional and judicial framework has consistently supported the role of reservations in achieving substantive equality. In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court affirmed that formal equality is insufficient in a society marked by historical disadvantage and that affirmative action is necessary to ensure real equality of opportunity.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, subsequent judgments have reinforced the principle that reservations are a legitimate means of addressing social and educational backwardness within the framework of the Constitution.<sup>30</sup>

### 1(e) Limitations in Achieving Comprehensive Social Justice:

While reservation has succeeded in improving representation and enabling mobility, it has certain limitations in achieving comprehensive social justice also. Issues such as inadequate implementation, regional disparities, and the concentration of benefits among relatively advanced sections within backward classes (creamy layer) have reduced its overall effectiveness.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, reservation alone cannot address broader socio-economic challenges such as poverty, lack of quality education, and unemployment, which require complementary policy interventions.

The analysis demonstrates that the reservation system in India has been **partially successful** in achieving its core objective of promoting social justice and substantive equality. It has significantly improved representation and created avenues for upward mobility among historically marginalized communities.

However, the persistence of structural inequalities and uneven distribution of benefits indicates that reservation, while necessary, is not sufficient as a standalone mechanism for achieving full social justice. A more comprehensive approach—combining affirmative action with broader socio-economic reforms—is essential to realize the constitutional vision of equality and inclusive development.<sup>32</sup>

### 2(a). Constitutional Foundation and Initial Objectives:

The reservation policy in India was conceived as a temporary measure under the Constitution to address historical injustices and ensure representation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The framers envisioned reservations primarily as a short-term corrective mechanism, initially limited to ten years, particularly in the context of political representation.<sup>33</sup>

However, the persistence of deep-rooted social inequalities and the slow pace of socio-economic transformation necessitated the continuation of these provisions through periodic constitutional amendments.<sup>34</sup> This indicates that the original assumption—that caste-based inequalities would diminish within a decade—proved overly optimistic.

### 2(b). Expansion through Social and Political Mobilization:

A major phase in the evolution of reservation policy occurred with the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, which extended affirmative action to Other Backward Classes (OBCs).<sup>35</sup> The implementation

of these recommendations in the early 1990s marked a decisive shift from a limited framework focused on SCs and STs to a broader system encompassing a larger segment of the population.

This expansion was significantly influenced by social justice movements and political mobilization by backward classes. The rise of regional political parties and caste-based movements played a crucial role in shaping public policy, making reservation an important instrument of political representation and empowerment.<sup>36</sup>

### **2(c). Judicial Intervention and Doctrinal Development:**

The evolution of reservation policy has been profoundly shaped by judicial interpretation. In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court upheld reservations for OBCs while introducing key principles such as the exclusion of the “creamy layer” and a general ceiling of 50 percent on total reservations.<sup>37</sup>

Subsequently, in *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India*, the Court upheld reservation in promotions for SCs and STs. But imposed conditions requiring the State to demonstrate backwardness, inadequate representation, and administrative efficiency.<sup>38</sup>

These judicial interventions have both legitimized and regulated the expansion of reservation policy, ensuring that it operates within the broader framework of constitutional equality.

### **2(d). Shift toward Economic Criteria:**

In recent years, the introduction of the Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019 marked a significant shift in the evolution of reservation policy by incorporating economic criteria.<sup>39</sup> This amendment enabled up to 10 percent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among the non-reserved categories.

The constitutional validity of this shift was upheld in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, where the Supreme Court recognized economic disadvantage as a legitimate basis for affirmative action.<sup>40</sup> This development reflects an attempt to adapt reservation policy to changing socio-economic realities beyond traditional caste-based frameworks.

### **2 (e). Factors Contributing to Continuation and Expansion:**

The analysis identifies multiple interrelated factors that have contributed to the continuation and expansion of reservation policy beyond its originally intended time frame:

- **Persistence of Social Inequality:** Structural inequalities based on caste continue to shape access to education, employment, and social mobility.<sup>41</sup>
- **Political Dynamics:** Electoral considerations and the need to mobilize support among diverse social groups have encouraged the expansion of reservation categories.<sup>42</sup>
- **Judicial Legitimization:** Supreme Court judgments have provided constitutional backing while imposing regulatory limits.<sup>43</sup>

- **Policy Adaptation:** The inclusion of economic criteria reflects an evolving understanding of disadvantage in contemporary India.<sup>44</sup>

The evolution of reservation policy in India reflects a dynamic interplay of constitutional ideals, social realities, political pressures, and judicial interventions. What began as a limited and temporary measure has gradually transformed into a comprehensive and enduring framework of affirmative action.

The continuation and expansion of reservations are not merely the result of political expediency but also a response to the persistent nature of social and economic inequalities. At the same time, the increasing role of political considerations highlights the need for periodic review and rationalization to ensure that the policy remains aligned with its मूल constitutional objective of promoting equality, justice, and inclusive development.<sup>45</sup>

### 3 (a). Reservation as a Tool of Political Mobilization

The analysis reveals that reservation policy has increasingly become a significant instrument of political mobilization in India. Political parties have frequently used the promise of extending reservation benefits to specific communities as a means of consolidating electoral support. The rise of caste-based political parties and regional movements has further reinforced the centrality of reservation in electoral politics.<sup>46</sup>

The implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the early 1990s marked a turning point, as it led to large-scale political realignment and the emergence of backward class politics at both state and national levels.<sup>47</sup>

### 3 (b). Vote-Bank Politics and Policy Expansion

The findings indicate that the expansion of reservation policies has often been influenced by vote-bank considerations. Political actors have supported the inclusion of new groups within the reservation framework to secure electoral advantages.<sup>48</sup>

Demands for reservation by various communities—such as dominant castes seeking backward status—demonstrate how affirmative action policies have become intertwined with political competition. This trend has contributed to the periodic expansion of reservation categories, sometimes beyond purely socio-economic criteria.

### 3(c). Role of Social Movements and Pressure Groups

Social movements and organized pressure groups have played a crucial role in shaping reservation policy. Mobilization by backward classes, Dalits, and other marginalized communities has compelled governments to respond through policy measures, including expansion of reservation benefits.<sup>49</sup>

These movements have not only influenced policy decisions but have also contributed to the democratization of political power by increasing the participation of previously excluded groups.

### **3(d). Judicial Regulation of Political Expansion**

While political factors have driven expansion, judicial intervention has acted as an important check. In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court introduced limits such as the 50 percent ceiling and the creamy layer principle to prevent excessive politicization of reservations.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, subsequent judgments have emphasized the need for empirical justification and constitutional compliance, thereby restraining arbitrary political expansion.<sup>51</sup>

The analysis demonstrates that political dynamics have played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of reservation policy in India. While political mobilization has facilitated greater inclusion and representation, it has also contributed to the expansion of reservations in ways that are sometimes driven by electoral considerations rather than purely social justice objectives. Thus, reservation policy reflects a complex interaction between democratic politics and constitutional ideals.<sup>52</sup>

### **4(a). Perceived Reduction in Opportunities**

The findings indicate that reservation policies have generated concerns among non-reserved categories regarding reduced access to opportunities in education and public employment. Since a fixed proportion of seats is reserved, competition for the remaining unreserved positions becomes more intense.<sup>53</sup>

This has led to perceptions of relative disadvantage among sections of the general category, particularly in highly competitive sectors such as higher education and government jobs.

### **4(b) Debate on Merit and Equality:**

Reservation policies have sparked an ongoing debate on merit versus social justice. Critics argue that reservations may compromise merit by prioritizing social background over performance. However, this argument has been critically examined in judicial and academic discourse.

In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court clarified that merit cannot be understood in isolation from social context and that affirmative action is necessary to create a level playing field.<sup>54</sup>

### **4(c). Inclusion through Economic Criteria**

The introduction of the Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, which provides reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), has partially addressed concerns of non-reserved categories by extending benefits based on economic disadvantage.<sup>55</sup>

The constitutional validity of this provision was upheld in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, thereby recognizing that economic hardship among non-reserved groups also merits policy intervention.<sup>56</sup>

#### **4(d). Contribution to Inclusive Institutional Structure**

Despite criticisms, the analysis suggests that reservation policies have contributed to creating a more inclusive and representative institutional structure. By ensuring diversity in educational institutions and public services, reservations have helped reduce historical monopolies of privileged groups.<sup>57</sup>

This broader inclusiveness strengthens democratic governance and promotes social cohesion, even though it may generate short-term competition-related concerns among non-reserved categories.

The impact of reservation policies on non-reserved categories is characterized by both challenges and adjustments. While reservations have intensified competition and raised concerns about fairness, they have also played a crucial role in democratizing access to opportunities and promoting inclusive representation.

The findings suggest that rather than viewing reservations as a zero-sum policy, they should be understood as part of a broader framework aimed at achieving substantive equality. However, complementary measures—such as expanding educational and employment opportunities—are essential to mitigate tensions and ensure balanced outcomes.<sup>58</sup>

#### **6(a). Continued Relevance of Caste as a Basis**

The findings indicate that caste remains a deeply entrenched determinant of social and economic disadvantage in India. Historical exclusion, social discrimination, and limited access to resources continue to disproportionately affect Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Empirical data on literacy, land ownership, and occupational mobility show that caste-based disparities persist despite decades of affirmative action.<sup>59</sup>

Judicial recognition of caste as a valid basis for affirmative action, particularly in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, reinforces the argument that caste is not merely an economic category but a structural and social marker of disadvantage.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, eliminating or diluting caste-based reservations at this stage may risk undermining the constitutional goal of substantive equality.

#### **6(b). Limitations of a Purely Caste-Based Approach**

At the same time, the analysis identifies certain limitations in an exclusively caste-based framework. The benefits of reservation have not been evenly distributed within backward classes, leading to the emergence of relatively advanced sections—commonly referred to as the “creamy layer.”<sup>61</sup> This has raised concerns regarding intra-group inequality and the need for better targeting of benefits.

Furthermore, economic deprivation exists across caste groups, including among sections of the so-called “general category,” who may not be covered under traditional reservation policies. This highlights the limitations of caste as the sole indicator of disadvantage in contemporary India.<sup>62</sup>

#### **6(c). Emergence of Economic Criteria**

The introduction of the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation through the Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019 represents a significant policy shift toward recognizing

economic disadvantage.<sup>63</sup> Its constitutional validity, upheld in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, marks an important development in broadening the framework of affirmative action.<sup>64</sup>

However, the analysis suggests that economic criteria alone may not adequately capture the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion in India. Unlike caste, which encompasses social stigma and historical marginalization, economic status is more fluid and may not fully reflect entrenched patterns of discrimination.<sup>65</sup>

#### **6(d). Need for a Balanced and Multi-Dimensional Approach**

The findings strongly suggest that a **hybrid model** combining caste and economic criteria is more appropriate for addressing contemporary inequalities. Caste-based reservations should continue to address structural and historical disadvantages, while economic criteria can complement them by targeting poverty across all social groups.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, reforms such as stricter implementation of the creamy layer principle, periodic review of beneficiary groups, and improved data collection mechanisms are necessary to ensure fairness and efficiency.<sup>67</sup>

#### **6(e). Policy Implications**

The analysis underscores that the effectiveness of reservation policy depends not only on its criteria but also on its implementation and complementary measures. Expanding access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities is essential to reduce long-term dependence on reservations.<sup>68</sup>

Rather than replacing caste-based reservations with economic criteria, the policy direction should focus on refinement, rationalization, and integration of multiple indicators of disadvantage.

In conclusion, caste continues to be a relevant and necessary basis for reservation policy due to the persistence of structural inequalities. However, the growing importance of economic disparities necessitates the inclusion of economic criteria as a supplementary measure. A balanced, evidence-based approach that integrates both caste and economic factors offers the most effective pathway toward achieving social justice, equity, and inclusive development in contemporary India.<sup>69</sup>

### **Findings**

The study reveals several important insights regarding the nature, evolution, and impact of reservation policy in India:

**1. Enhancement of Representation:** The reservation system has significantly improved the representation of historically marginalized communities, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), in public institutions. Increased participation in government employment, higher education, and legislative bodies indicates that reservation has been effective in breaking historical barriers of exclusion.

**2. Contribution to Social Mobility:** Reservation has facilitated upward social mobility by providing access to education and stable employment. It has contributed to the emergence of a new middle class within marginalized communities, thereby reducing absolute deprivation. However, the benefits have been unevenly distributed, with relatively advanced sections within these groups capturing a disproportionate share.

**3. Persistence of Structural Inequalities:** Despite improvements in representation, deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities continue to exist. Indicators such as literacy, income, and access to quality education show that marginalized communities still lag behind national averages. This suggests that reservation alone cannot dismantle structural inequalities embedded in the social system.

**4. Influence of Political Dynamics:** The expansion of reservation policies has been significantly shaped by political considerations. Electoral competition, caste-based mobilization, and vote-bank strategies have influenced policy decisions, often leading to the inclusion of new groups within the reservation framework. This demonstrates that reservation policy operates within a broader political context.

**5. Judicial Balancing of Equality and Affirmative Action:** Judicial intervention has played a crucial role in maintaining a balance between social justice and constitutional equality. Principles such as the 50 percent ceiling and the exclusion of the “creamy layer” reflect efforts to prevent excessive or arbitrary expansion while preserving the core objective of affirmative action.

**6. Emerging Debate on Caste versus Economic Criteria:** The introduction of reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) has expanded the discourse beyond caste-based disadvantage. While caste continues to be a significant determinant of social exclusion, economic deprivation across social groups has highlighted the need for a more inclusive and multi-dimensional approach.

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and evolving nature of reservation policy in India, revealing both its transformative potential and its structural limitations. The discussion situates these findings within broader theoretical, constitutional, and political contexts.

At the outset, the evidence confirms that reservation has functioned as an effective instrument of **corrective justice**, enabling historically marginalized communities to gain access to education, employment, and political representation. This supports the constitutional vision of substantive equality, which recognizes that formal equality alone is insufficient in a society marked by deep historical inequalities. The increase in representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes reflects a partial restructuring of institutional access that was previously monopolized by socially dominant groups.

However, the persistence of socio-economic disparities indicates that reservation has not fundamentally transformed the underlying structures of inequality. While it has improved access at the entry level, it has not adequately addressed broader issues such as quality of education, regional disparities, and unequal access to resources. This suggests that reservation operates more effectively as a **facilitator of opportunity** rather than as a comprehensive solution to social injustice.

Another important dimension emerging from the analysis is the **politicization of reservation policy**. The expansion of reservation categories and the increasing demands from various social groups point toward the role of electoral incentives in shaping policy decisions. In a democratic framework, such mobilization can be seen as an expression of political participation and empowerment. However, it also raises concerns about the potential dilution of the original objectives of affirmative action when policy expansion is driven more by political considerations than by empirical assessments of backwardness.

Judicial intervention has played a crucial mediating role in this context. By introducing doctrinal limits such as the 50 percent ceiling and the principle of excluding the “creamy layer,” the judiciary has attempted to balance competing claims of equality and social justice. These interventions reflect an effort to prevent the excessive politicization of reservation while maintaining its legitimacy within the constitutional framework. Nevertheless, the implementation of these principles remains uneven, indicating a gap between legal doctrine and administrative practice.

The debate between **caste-based and economic criteria** represents another significant dimension of contemporary discourse. The introduction of reservation for Economically Weaker Sections marks a shift toward recognizing economic disadvantage as a relevant factor. However, the findings suggest that economic criteria alone cannot substitute for caste-based considerations, as caste continues to operate as a structural determinant of social exclusion. At the same time, the existence of poverty across caste groups necessitates a more inclusive approach.

In this regard, the study supports the argument for a **multi-dimensional framework of affirmative action**, combining caste and economic indicators. Such an approach would better capture the complex realities of disadvantage in contemporary India. Additionally, there is a need for periodic review of reservation policies, improved data collection, and more targeted implementation to ensure that benefits reach the most disadvantaged sections within beneficiary groups.

Finally, the discussion underscores that reservation policy must be viewed as part of a broader strategy of social transformation. Without parallel investments in education, healthcare, and employment generation, the long-term effectiveness of reservation will remain limited. Thus, the challenge lies not only in reforming reservation policy but also in strengthening the socio-economic foundations necessary for achieving substantive equality.

## Conclusion

The analysis of reservation policy in India after more than seventy-five years reveals a complex and evolving reality. The policy has undeniably played a transformative role in promoting inclusion, enhancing representation, and enabling social mobility among historically disadvantaged communities. It has helped democratize access to education and public employment, thereby advancing the constitutional vision of social justice.

However, the persistence of structural inequalities indicates that reservation has not fully achieved the goal of substantive equality. Social and economic disparities rooted in caste hierarchies continue to shape opportunities and outcomes, suggesting that affirmative action must be complemented by broader socio-economic reforms.

At the same time, the study highlights that reservation policy cannot be understood solely as an instrument of social justice. Its expansion and continuation have also been influenced by political dynamics, including electoral strategies and social mobilization. This dual character reflects the interaction between democratic politics and constitutional ideals.

The growing debate between caste-based and economic criteria further underscores the need to reassess the framework of affirmative action in contemporary India. While caste remains a critical marker of historical disadvantage, economic inequality has emerged as an important dimension that cannot be ignored.

In conclusion, reservation in India is neither purely a tool of social justice nor merely a product of political compulsion; it represents a dynamic synthesis of both. The way forward lies in refining the policy through a balanced and evidence-based approach—retaining caste-based safeguards while incorporating economic criteria, ensuring equitable distribution of benefits, and strengthening complementary measures such as education, employment generation, and social welfare.

Only through such a comprehensive and adaptive framework can the objective of achieving genuine equality and inclusive development be realized in the long term.

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