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RETHINKING RESERVATION POLICIES: BALANCING SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH MERITOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Reservation in India is a constitutionally recognized mechanism of affirmative action aimed at addressing historical discrimination and promoting substantive equality for socially and educationally disadvantaged communities. Over the years, however, the reservation system has become the subject of intense debate concerning its impact on meritocracy, administrative efficiency, and social cohesion. This article examines the historical evolution, constitutional foundations, and judicial interpretation of reservation policies in India, with particular reference to landmark constitutional amendments and Supreme Court decisions. It further analyses the continuing tension between the constitutional commitment to social justice and the principle of merit-based selection in education and public employment. The article argues that merit must be understood within the broader context of social and economic inequalities rather than as a purely academic measure. It also explores contemporary challenges, including the creamy layer doctrine, demands for broader inclusion, and the need for evidence-based policy reforms. The article concludes by advocating a balanced and constitutionally aligned reservation framework that combines affirmative action with improvements in education, transparency, and periodic policy review to promote both equality of opportunity and institutional excellence.

INTRODUCTION

According to the oxford dictionary, the word ‘Reserve’ means something that you keep for a special reason or to use at later date and the term reservation means a seat, table, room, etc. that

you have booked. Reservation in the Indian Constitution is a system of affirmative action designed to address historical injustices, ensure social inclusion, and provide equal opportunities to historically marginalized communities.

The idea of caste-based reservation in India can be traced back to the efforts of social reformers such as **Jyotirao Phule** and **William Hunter**¹ in 1882, who advocated measures for the upliftment of socially and educationally disadvantaged communities. However, the modern reservation system took shape in **1933** when British Prime Minister **Ramsay MacDonald**² introduced the **Communal Award**, which provided separate electorates for various communities, including Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and the Depressed Classes (Dalits). This proposal led to significant political debate and culminated in the **Poona Pact of 1932**³ between **Mahatma Gandhi** and **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**, under which separate electorates for Dalits were replaced with reserved seats within a common Hindu electorate⁴. After India attained independence, the Constitution provided reservations primarily for **Scheduled Castes (SCs)** and **Scheduled Tribes (STs)** to address historical discrimination and ensure social justice. Subsequently, based on the recommendations of the **Mandal Commission**⁵, reservations were extended to **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)** in **1991**, significantly broadening the scope of affirmative action in India.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND JUDICIAL EVOLUTION OF RESERVATION

The constitutional validity and scope of reservation have been shaped through several landmark judicial decisions. In *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan* (1951), the Supreme Court held that caste-based reservations violated Article 15(1), prompting the First Constitutional Amendment and the insertion of Article 15(4)⁶, which enabled special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes. Subsequently, in *M.R. Balaji v. State of Mysore* (1963), the Court emphasized that reservations should remain reasonable and introduced the principle that they should generally not exceed 50 percent⁷. The landmark judgment in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992), popularly known as the Mandal Commission case, upheld

¹ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* 31–35 (Oxford Univ. Press 1984).

² Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* 179–83 (Oxford Univ. Press 1966).

³ M.P. Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* 1087–90 (8th ed. 2018).

⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* 311–18 (1945).

⁵ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp. (3) SCC 217; Mandal Comm'n Report, vol. I (1980).

⁶ *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan*, A.I.R. 1951 S.C. 226.

⁷ *M.R. Balaji v. State of Mysore*, A.I.R. 1963 S.C. 649.

reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), introduced the concept of the creamy layer, and reaffirmed the 50 percent ceiling⁸. Later decisions such as *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* (2006) and *Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta* (2018) further clarified the constitutional requirements governing reservations in promotions. Collectively, these judgments have sought to balance the constitutional goals of social justice, equality of opportunity, and administrative efficiency.⁹¹⁰

RESERVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Reservation is an important tool for achieving social justice in India. It seeks to improve the representation of marginalized communities in education, public employment, and political institutions. By providing opportunities to historically disadvantaged groups, reservation helps ensure their participation in decision-making processes.

It also promotes social mobility by enabling access to education and employment opportunities that were previously difficult to obtain. Over time, reservation can help reduce social inequalities and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

SOCIAL JUSTICE, MERITOCRACY, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The debate surrounding reservation, social justice, and meritocracy remains one of the most significant constitutional and sociological issues in contemporary India. Proponents of reservation view it as an essential instrument for achieving social justice by addressing historical discrimination, promoting representation, and creating opportunities for marginalized communities. Critics, however, argue that opportunities in education and public employment should be determined primarily by merit, talent, and performance, contending that reservation may compromise efficiency and competitiveness. Nevertheless, scholars emphasize that merit cannot be evaluated in isolation from social and economic realities, as access to quality education, financial resources, and social capital significantly influences individual achievement. Reservation, therefore, seeks to create a more level playing field by addressing structural inequalities and advancing substantive equality. Despite its contributions,

⁸ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, A.I.R. 1993 S.C.

⁹ *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India*, (2006) 8 S.C.C. 212.

¹⁰ *Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta*, (2018) 10 S.C.C. 396.

the reservation system continues to face several contemporary challenges, including concerns regarding the creamy layer phenomenon, the growing debate between caste-based and economic criteria for affirmative action, the politicization of reservation policies, and recurring demands for inclusion in reserved categories. Questions relating to efficiency, fairness, and the adequacy of existing reservation frameworks also continue to shape public discourse. Consequently, the challenge before policymakers is not merely to choose between social justice and meritocracy, but to develop a balanced and inclusive framework that upholds constitutional values while ensuring both equal opportunity and excellence in public institutions.

TOWARDS A BALANCED AND CONSTITUTIONALLY ALIGNED FRAMEWORK

The continuing debate surrounding reservation highlights the need for reforms that reconcile the constitutional ideals of social justice, equality, and meritocracy. A more balanced approach requires redefining merit in a manner that acknowledges the social and economic realities shaping individual achievement. Academic performance alone cannot fully capture a person's potential, as access to quality education, financial stability, family support, and social opportunities significantly influence outcomes. Consequently, evaluation systems should adopt a broader perspective that considers socioeconomic background, educational disadvantage, leadership qualities, resilience, and problem-solving abilities alongside measurable academic performance.

At the same time, reservation policies should be made more dynamic and evidence-based. Since social and economic conditions evolve over time, periodic reviews are essential to assess whether existing policies continue to serve their intended purpose. Such reviews should rely on objective indicators, including educational attainment, employment representation, and access to essential services, thereby ensuring that affirmative action remains responsive to changing realities.

Reservation alone, however, cannot eliminate deep-rooted inequalities. Greater emphasis must be placed on strengthening public education, expanding scholarship opportunities, providing mentoring and coaching support, and improving access to digital learning resources. Educational institutions should also foster inclusive environments through academic assistance, sensitivity training, and effective grievance redressal mechanisms to ensure that beneficiaries are able to thrive after gaining access.

Furthermore, efforts should be made to reduce social polarization and misconceptions surrounding reservation. Public awareness initiatives and informed dialogue can help promote a better understanding of the constitutional rationale behind affirmative action while encouraging social harmony. Equally important is addressing the stigma often associated with reservation by recognizing the achievements and contributions of individuals from historically disadvantaged communities.

Transparency and accountability must also remain central to any reformed framework. Regular socioeconomic data collection, publication of disaggregated statistics, and independent monitoring mechanisms can improve policy effectiveness and public confidence. Finally, the judiciary must continue to play a crucial role in balancing equality with fairness by ensuring that reservation policies remain consistent with constitutional principles and are guided by evidence, reason, and constitutional morality. Through such reforms, India can move towards a reservation framework that promotes both social justice and excellence, thereby fulfilling the transformative vision of the Constitution.

CONCLUSION

Reservation remains one of the most significant instruments of social justice in India, designed to address historical discrimination and promote the inclusion of marginalized communities in education, public employment, and public life. While concerns regarding meritocracy, efficiency, and fairness continue to shape public discourse, it is important to recognize that merit cannot be divorced from the social and economic realities that influence individual opportunities. The constitutional vision of equality extends beyond formal equality and seeks to achieve substantive equality by addressing structural disadvantages.

At the same time, the evolving social landscape necessitates periodic review and reform of reservation policies to ensure that their benefits reach those who need them most. Measures such as effective implementation of the creamy layer principle, evidence-based policy assessment, improved educational opportunities, and greater transparency can strengthen the effectiveness of affirmative action. Ultimately, the objective should not be to create a dichotomy between social justice and meritocracy, but to harmonize these principles in a manner that upholds constitutional values, promotes equal opportunity, and fosters an inclusive and equitable society.

