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Reservation as a Constitutional Tool for Bridging Poverty, Inequality and Fostering Inclusive Development in India

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates how reservation laws function as a legal mechanism which transforms Indian constitutional laws to rectify historical wrongs and solve systemic discrimination. The Constitution's authors intended reservation policies in educational and governmental and legislative fields to serve as routes which lead to both equality and justice restoration. The study establishes reservation as an essential constitutional instrument which enables society to reach its full potential by eliminating the gap between wealthy and poor groups. The document traces how reservation rights began in the Constitution through Articles 15 and 16 which were later developed through major court rulings that increased and reduced their legal boundaries. The study assesses how these policies affected the economic progress of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes while examining current discussions about the exclusion of 'creamy layer' members and economic criteria and the reservation requests from dominant community groups. The paper demonstrates that legal requirements become effective when implemented with political support and social attitude transformation while reservation programs support inclusive development. The study concludes by examining how reservation programs remain relevant today for India's mission to establish a fair and balanced society that includes all citizens. The upcoming challenge requires policy adjustments to maintain their ongoing ability to respond to current conditions while supporting the long-term goal of sustainable and inclusive development. The system of reservation maintains its constitutional function to create a more equal Indian society by providing opportunities that depend on individual potential rather than social class.

Keywords: Reservation, Constitutional Law, Social Justice, Inclusive Development. Inequality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adopted on January 26, 1950, the Indian Constitution marked not just a political shift but also

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a significant social compact intended to change a very hierarchical society into one based on the values of justice, liberty, equality, and brotherhood. The reservation system, a type of affirmative action that allots quotas for historically underrepresented groups in public employment, education, and legislative bodies, is one of the most important and contentious tools created to accomplish this change. Reservations serve as a constitutional tool calibrated to address the structural disadvantages acquired from centuries of caste-based oppression and exclusion, far from being a straightforward welfare measure.

All people are to be guaranteed "JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity" (India Const. pmbl.) according to the Preamble of the Constitution. This tripartite commitment acknowledges that in a society where historical adversity has produced extremely unequal starting positions, formal equality before the law—treating all people equally—is insufficient. The chief architect of the Constitution, B. R. Ambedkar, notably emphasized that equality necessitates not only the removal of barriers but also the establishment of conditions that allow the disadvantaged to participate on equal terms (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949). This view of substantive equality, which requires the state to take proactive steps to uplift individuals who have been routinely denied access to resources, education, and social capital, gave rise to reservation policies.

This paper looks at reservations as a constitutional tool for promoting equitable development in India and bridging poverty and inequality. It follows the constitutional underpinnings of reservations, examines how judicial interpretation has changed over time, evaluates how these policies affect underprivileged groups, and participates in current discussions about how to improve them. The fundamental contention put up is that reservation is still an essential instrument for achieving the constitutional goal of an inclusive society, despite its drawbacks and the disputes it causes. However, its sustained applicability hinges on the creation of flexible policies that adjust to shifting social conditions while staying true to the fundamental goal of uplifting the most disadvantaged.

II. RESERVATION'S CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS

A. The Conceptual Structure: Transitioning From Formal To Substantive Equality

The Indian Constitution's stance on equality deviates from traditional liberal ideas that associate equality with formal neutrality. In order to address historical disadvantage, it is necessary to understand Articles 14, 15, and 16 collectively as reflecting a holistic vision that permits—indeed, mandates—differential treatment. Although equality before the law and equal

protection under the law are guaranteed by Article 14, this promise has been construed to allow for justifiable classification (*State of West Bengal v. Anwar Ali Sarkar*, 1952). In addition to forbidding discrimination, Articles 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution allow the state to provide special treatment for women, children, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and socially and educationally disadvantaged groups (India Const. arts. 15, 16).

This constitutional design represents what legal academics refer to as "corrective distributive justice"—the idea that justice necessitates both active remediation of historical wrongs and non-discrimination in the present. The framers understood that opening doors to opportunity alone would not be sufficient to offset the cumulative disadvantages brought about by centuries of exclusion. In the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar (1949) clarified that reservations were intended to be short-term measures, initially intended to last for ten years, after which it was hoped they would no longer be required. The fact that they have persisted for more than 70 years indicates that the disparities they were intended to rectify still exist.

B. Important Clauses in the Constitution

The following interconnected clauses form the foundation of the constitutional framework for reservations:

The First Constitutional Amendment of 1951 added Article 15(4), which gives the state the authority to make "any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes" (India Const. art. 15, cl. 4). The Supreme Court's ruling in *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan* (1951), which invalidated caste-based reservations as a violation of Article 29(2), prompted this change. The constitutional authority to carry out affirmative action policies was reinstated by the amendment.

The state may create "any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State" (India Const. art. 16, cl. 4). This clause particularly addresses representation in public employment, acknowledging that working for the government is a place of symbolic acknowledgment and involvement in governance as well as a means of subsistence.

The Seventy-Seventh Constitutional Amendment of 1995 added Article 16(4A), which gives SCs and STs seniority in terms of promotion (India Const. art. 16, cl. 4A). Judicial rulings that restricted reservations to initial appointments were addressed by this amendment. The Eighty-First Amendment of 2000 included Article 16(4B), which allows unfilled reserved posts to be carried over and considered as a different class from the current year's vacancies

(India Const. art. 16, cl. 4B).

The state is required by Article 46, a Directive Principle of State Policy, to safeguard the economic and educational interests of the weaker groups, especially SCs and STs, against exploitation and social injustice. According to Article 335 of the Indian Constitution, claims made by SCs and STs for positions and services must be evaluated in a way that maintains administrative effectiveness. In order to guarantee political representation commensurate with their numbers, Articles 330 and 332 of the Indian Constitution reserve seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies (India Const. arts. 330, 332).

The One Hundred and Third Constitutional Amendment of 2019 added Articles 15(6) and 16(6), which allow the state to make provisions for the advancement of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), up to 10% reservation in public employment and educational institutions, in addition to existing reservations (India Const. arts. 15, cl. 6; 16, cl. 6). This constitutional framework shows that reservation is a distinct collection of rules that address many aspects of disadvantage, including economic deprivation (EWS), geographic isolation (tribe communities), and social backwardness (caste). Every category has a constitutional foundation and logic of its own.

C. The Ambedkarite Vision

Understanding reservation as a constitutional tool requires engagement with Ambedkar's philosophical framework. For Ambedkar (1936), caste was not merely a hierarchical system but a mechanism of exclusion that denied entire communities access to education, wealth, and dignity. In his undelivered speech "Annihilation of Caste," he argued that social reform must precede political reform—that without dismantling caste hierarchies, political democracy would become merely a "top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 37).

This insight led Ambedkar to advocate for reservations in the Constituent Assembly. He saw that access to the two institutions that shaped contemporary opportunity—public employment and education—was more important than political representation alone. Reservations in government service guaranteed both economic security and representation in the state apparatus; reservations in legislatures guaranteed marginalized communities a voice in lawmaking; and reservations in education guaranteed access to the credentials required for participation in contemporary economic life (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949).

Importantly, Ambedkar (1949) saw reservations as short-term fixes rather than long-term rights. He said that the 10-year limit was "a decision which has been arrived at with their (members of SC community) consent" during the August 25, 1949, Constituent Assembly debates. He added

that "it will not be beyond their capacity or their intelligence to invent new ways of getting the same protection" if the Scheduled Castes' status remained unchanged after ten years (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949, p. 702). His hope that reservations would someday become unneeded and his understanding that their continuation would depend on proven need are both evident in this statement.

III. RESERVATION JURISPRUDENCE'S JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Supreme Court of India has been crucial in determining the parameters of reservation policy by striking a balance between conflicting demands of equity, efficiency, and merit and the constitutional requirement for affirmative action. The conflicts present in any system of preferential treatment are reflected in this judicial evolution, which has resulted in a complicated body of precedent that still directs the application of policy.

A. Initial Court Interventions: Setting Boundaries

State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan (1951) was the first significant conflict between legislative intent and judicial interpretation. A communal G.O. reserving places in engineering and medical colleges based on caste was issued by the Madras government. Because it violated Article 29(2), which forbids discrimination in admission to educational institutions, the Supreme Court overturned the order. The First Constitutional Amendment, which added Article 15(4) and essentially overturned the ruling, was triggered by this ruling.

The Court discussed the amount of reservation in *M. R. Balaji v. State of Mysore* (1963). 68% of seats in educational institutions were set aside for underprivileged groups by the State of Mysore. The Supreme Court established what became known as the "ceiling limit" by ruling that reservations should not be greater than 50%. In *M. R. Balaji v. State of Mysore* (1963), the Court reasoned that although Article 15(4) allowed for special measures, they shouldn't be so broad as to undermine the fundamental objective of equality of opportunity.

The carry-forward rule, which allowed unfilled reserved positions in one year to be added to the quota for succeeding years, was discussed in *T. Devadasan v. Union of India* (1964). The Court emphasized the significance of preserving a balance between affirmative action and open competition by ruling that this method could not be utilized to surpass the 50% cap in any given year.

B. The Mandal Commission and its Repercussions

A turning point in the history of reservations was the Mandal Commission's appointment in 1979. The Commission's job was to identify socially and educationally disadvantaged groups

and suggest ways to improve them. 3,743 castes were classified as OBCs in its 1980 report, which also suggested a 27% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions (Mandal Commission, 1980). Widespread demonstrations and a number of legal challenges followed the execution of these recommendations in 1990, leading to the historic ruling in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992).

In *Indra Sawhney*, the nine-judge panel considered several issues:

- Confirmation of the 50% ceiling:

The Court upheld the general rule that reservations shouldn't go above 50%, but it also accepted that there may be exceptions due to exceptional circumstances.

- Exclusion of the "creamy layer":

According to the Court, the more advanced members of the backward classes, or the "creamy layer," must not be eligible for the reservation benefit. The most vulnerable members of beneficiary communities should receive reservation benefits, according to this principle. • Rejection of reservation in promotions: The Court determined that Article 16(4) only required reservation in initial appointments, not in promotions.

- Establishment of backwardness indicators:

In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992), the Court established criteria for determining backwardness, stressing that caste could be a starting point but not the only factor. The most thorough judicial explanation of reservation law can be found in the *Indra Sawhney* ruling. It struck a balance between the necessity of affirmative action and issues with efficiency, merit, and benefit targeting. It was noteworthy for introducing the idea of the creamy layer, which would play a major role in later discussions over reservation policy.

C. Constitutional Amendments and Legislative Reactions

Parliamentary action was motivated by the *Indra Sawhney* ruling's denial of promotion reservations. Article 16(4A) was added by the Seventy-Seventh Amendment (1995), allowing SCs and STs to be given preference in promotions. Article 16(4B) of the Eighty-First Amendment (2000) allowed for the carryover of open positions. Consequential seniority in promotions was established by the Eighty-Fifth Amendment (2001) (India Const. arts. 16, cl. 4A, 4B).

In *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* (2006), these revisions were contested and confirmed by the Supreme Court, which determined that they did not go against the fundamental framework of the Constitution. In *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* (2006), the Court placed restrictions on states,

requiring them to provide measurable evidence of the community's backwardness, insufficient representation, and the preservation of administrative efficiency.

In *Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta* (2018), the Court extended the creamy layer principle to SCs and STs in promotions, requiring states to collect data to identify and exclude the advanced sections within these communities from promotion benefits.

D. Current Advancements: Sub-Classification and EWS Reservation

In *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022), the One Hundred and Third Constitutional Amendment (2019), which provides a 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections among general category residents, was affirmed. By a 3:2 majority, the five-judge panel decided that economic factors might serve as the foundation for reservations, exceeding the 50% cap. According to the majority, the EWS category was a distinct class that needed affirmative treatment, and the 50% cap was not unchangeable (*Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, 2022).

Justice S. Ravindra Bhat's dissenting opinion expressed concerns that the amendment "othered" socially and educationally disadvantaged classes and undermined the foundation of social justice by excluding SCs, STs, and OBCs from its scope (*Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, 2022, Bhat, J., dissenting).

A seven-judge panel ruled by a 6:1 majority in *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024) that it is acceptable to subclassify Scheduled Castes in order to allocate distinct quotas. This ruling acknowledged that there are notable differences in the degree of disadvantage among SC communities, with some groups having benefited more from reservations than others. In *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024), Justice B. R. Gavai said that in order to exclude SCs and STs from affirmative action benefits, the state must develop a program for identifying the creamy layer among them.

The Court's recent ruling in *Ramnaresh v. State of M.P.* (2024) made it clear that deserving candidates from the reserved category are not limited to the horizontal reservation compartment and can be evaluated against unreserved seats on the basis of their qualifications. This decision upholds the general framework of reservation while defending the rights of individual achievers from reserved categories.

E. A Synthesis of Judicial Principles

Several principles emerge from this vast body of jurisprudence:

1. Reservations are not a fundamental right: According to *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India* (2006), reservations are an enabling clause rather than a constitutional imperative, and the state is

not required to supply them.

2. The usual guideline is the 50% ceiling: Reservations shall not surpass 50% of available seats or posts, unless there are exceptional circumstances (*Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992).
3. The most disadvantaged members of beneficiary communities should be the focus of benefits; the creamy layer must be eliminated (*Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992).
4. Quantifiable evidence is required: Before imposing reservations, states must show that they are underrepresented and backward (*M. Nagaraj v. Union of India*, 2006).
5. Sub-classification is acceptable: According to *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024), greater distinction based on relative disadvantage is constitutionally admissible within wide categories.
6. Maintenance of efficiency: According to Article 335 of the Indian Constitution, reservations must be in line with administrative efficiency.

IV. EVALUATING THE EFFECTS OF RESERVATIONS AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

A. Social Mobility and Economic Empowerment

Reservation policies' effects on economic empowerment must be evaluated from a variety of angles, including socioeconomic mobility, public employment representation, and educational access. Although the distribution of benefits is still uneven, the information that is now available indicates that reservations have played a major role in the development of a middle class within SC, ST, and OBC populations.

Reservation policies have opened up higher education opportunities to marginalized groups in society. Central educational institutions report that SC and ST and OBC student enrollment has grown significantly since reservation policies started (Ministry of Education 2023). The process has produced a workforce of qualified professionals who have helped multiple industries.

Reservation policies have enabled marginalized groups to obtain public sector jobs which help them achieve representation within government bodies. Government service offers two main benefits which include both financial security and dignity through public recognition of their work. Government employment has seen significant growth for SC and ST workers since independence according to studies which show current levels remain lower than their population percentages (Department of Personnel and Training 2022).

Neoliberal economic policies have decreased public sector jobs which has reduced the

effectiveness of reservation as an instrument for achieving economic inclusion. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] (2025) reported that government employment decreased from 2 crore in the 1990s to 1.7 crore in 2012 with Group C and Group D positions experiencing the largest declines since those positions offered the most access to reservation benefits. The implementation of privatization and contractualization practices in public services has resulted in the loss of reservation eligibility for numerous jobs that were previously subject to such requirements.

B. Political Representation and Participatory Democracy

The implementation of reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Indian legislative bodies has resulted in significant changes to the democratic system of India. The reservation of seats for SCs and STs in Parliament and state assemblies, proportionate to their population, has ensured that marginalized communities have a direct voice in lawmaking. The policy debates now include Dalit and Adivasi viewpoints because their political leaders have developed from their community members.

Oxfam's (2026) recent report about inequality used India's reservation system as an example that shows how common people can achieve political power according to its findings that "political reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other marginalised groups create opportunities for economically disadvantaged and socially excluded communities to gain legislative representation and push redistributive policies" (p. 45).

The Panchayati Raj system has enabled local bodies to adopt reservation policies which have resulted in more citizens participating in democratic processes. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which require SCs and STs to receive panchayat and municipal reservation based on their population size, have created pathways for marginalized groups to join local governance systems through which they can become decision-making members who shape their everyday environment (India Const. arts. 243D, 243T).

C. Beyond Government Employment: New Frontiers

The traditional focus of reservation has been government employment and education. The economic changes which have occurred over time have created new opportunities for affirmative action implementation. The Bombay High Court decision in *Public Interest Litigation v. State of Maharashtra* (2025) established SC ST and Micro and Small Enterprises reservation rights through public sector transport contracts which extended affirmative action principles into economic procurement activities. The court established that public sector companies must enable equitable economic participation because public sector contracts serve

as instruments for constructing an equitable economic system while they also function as business operations (Public Interest Litigation v. State of Maharashtra 2025 para. 45).

Political discussions currently include public sector reservation extension proposals which have gained increasing support in two political groups. The CPI(M) (2025) has demanded that reservation policy be extended to the entire organized private sector, arguing that privatization and contractualization have eroded the reach of affirmative action. The political environment makes certain proposals controversial yet they demonstrate that reservation needs to be expanded because its present scope only covers public sector areas which continue to diminish.

D. The Limits of Reservation: Persistent Challenges

The policy of reservation has accomplished its objectives yet it suffers from significant operational challenges. The policy directly assists only individuals who participate in educational programs and work in formal job markets which exclude most of India's economically disadvantaged population. As Singh (2025a) said most of India's poor people never attended higher education because they did not pursue government jobs which resulted in their exclusion from benefits (para. 8). Reservation policy does not apply to these groups because they must fight every day to stay alive.

The system of reservation has created benefits which different groups in the beneficiary communities experience. The better-off segment of the population approximately 10 percent gathers all available chances while those living in poverty face total exclusion (Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2019). The members of the SC and ST groups demand sub-classification together with creamy layer exclusion because intra-community inequality exists within their communities.

The system of reservation creates pathways for people to access opportunities but it does not solve the root causes which create disadvantageous situations through social discrimination and inadequate healthcare facilities and poor nutritional standards and deficient educational systems. A child who cannot read or write due to the failures of primary education cannot benefit from reservation in higher education.

V. CONTEMPORARY DEBATES AND POLICY CHALLENGES

A. The Creamy Layer Question within Sc/St Reservations

The current debate about SC and ST reservations includes one major contentious point which studies whether SCs and STs should use the creamy layer principle. SC and ST reservations have maintained their exemption from creamy layer exclusion because this principle only

applies to OBC reservations which became established through the Indra Sawhney decision. The researchers determined that Dalits regardless of their wealth status will face social exclusion because society discriminates against them based on their caste background (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

The public and judicial system have raised new objections against this existing position. The Supreme Court case *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024) required Justice Gavai to define which state should create a policy that identifies SC and ST people who belong to the creamy layer. The Supreme Court petition demands that economic criteria be added to SC/ST reservations because the existing regulations create unfair advantages for wealthier members of these communities (Outlook India, 2025).

The petitioner contends that every SC/ST family member who holds government power because of reservation benefits plus financial power and educational access drives economic disparity among their community (Outlook India, 2025, para. 6). The proposal seeks to create two different reservation systems for SC/ST categories, which will first distribute benefits to economically weak members, and then provide advantages to more prosperous members of the group.

The opponents maintain that SC/ST reservations need economic criteria to maintain constitutional protection against discrimination-based social disadvantages which the law protects. The Tribune (2026) editorial noted that "SCs and STs needed reservations to fix their historical exclusion from society, which happened because of caste-based discrimination." The SC/ST quotas exclude the creamy layer principle because OBC reservations established this principle as a fundamental rule (para. 4).

The debate needs precise measurement methods which will deliver benefits to the least advantaged groups while showing that economic status does not eliminate ongoing caste-based disadvantages.

B. Economic Criteria and the EWS Reservation

The 103rd Constitutional Amendment establishes EWS reservation as an economic requirement which extends the existing reservation system beyond its traditional social backwardness requirements. The amendment grants 10% educational and governmental job opportunities to economically weak general category Indian citizens (India Const. arts. 15, cl. 6; 16, cl. 6).

The supporters of the argument state that poverty creates opportunities which become inaccessible to people from all social groups. The Supreme Court's majority in *Janhit Abhiyan* (2022) upheld this reasoning by declaring that EWS status as a separate classification represents

"reasonable classification" (Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India, 2022, majority opinion, para. 78).

Critics state that using economic factors as assessment tools does not permit complete understanding of how caste systems create disadvantaged situations. The judges who dissented in Janhit Abhiyan (2022) declared that the amendment "destroys social justice systems which form the core of constitutional law" by preventing SCs, STs, and OBCs from receiving its benefits (Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India, 2022, Bhat, J., dissenting, para. 12).

The EWS reservation system brings about new challenges for implementing the 50% reservation limit. The current central Indian institutions now have total reservations which exceed 59.5% because they include 15% SC, 7.5% ST, and 27% OBC reservations together with the 10% new EWS quota. The Supreme Court's decision to accept this reservation breach demonstrates that the 50% ceiling becomes flexible when urgent situations demand it (Singh, 2022).

C. The Dominant Communities Demand Quotas from the Authorities in Power

Communities that used to be called "forward" societies have started to request reservation rights more than before. The Maratha reservation controversy in Maharashtra exemplifies this trend. The Maharashtra legislature passed a law in 2018 which established 16% reservation rights for the Maratha community. The law later changed the reservation rights to 12% for education and 13% for employment purposes. The Supreme Court cancelled the Maratha reservation in Dr. Jaishri Laxmanrao Patil v. Chief Minister (2021). The court found that the quota exceeded the 50% limit and the community members did not meet the requirements of socially and educationally backward status.

Jats in Haryana and Patidars in Gujarat and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh have made similar requests. These movements reflect both genuine economic distress among sections of these communities and the political logic of caste mobilization. The situation shows how reservation systems fail because they have to control admission requests that total more than their permissible admission capacity.

The response to such demands cannot be simply to expand the reservation umbrella. The Supreme Court has made clear that reservation programs exist to help communities who have faced historical oppression. The government should use welfare programs and educational scholarships and employment creation initiatives to address economic distress among dominant communities instead of extending reservation rights which exist for historically marginalized communities.

D. Time-limited or perpetual?

The current debate about reservation time limits develops from previous discussions regarding this issue. The framers originally envisaged a 10-year period yet reservations have continued for over seven decades. Justices Bela Trivedi and J. B. Pardiwala identified this problem in their EWS reservation judgment because they believed that "at the end of seventy five years of our independence, we need to revisit the system of reservation in the larger interest of the society as a whole" (*Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, 2022, Trivedi, J., concurring, para. 45). Justice Pardiwala explained that reservations should "not be permitted to transform into an established entitlement" while society should work towards helping people escape from disadvantaged status (*Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, 2022, Pardiwala, J., concurring, para. 67).

The position acknowledges that reservation functioned as a temporary solution which Indian society should not use as a permanent system. The program has remained active for 75 years because it continues to exist as a solution for social inequality through which it operates. The situation requires neither instant suspension of operations nor total program termination because ongoing evaluation with controlled adjustments will achieve optimal results by providing targeted support to eligible recipients while gradually diminishing reservation requirements until equality is reached.

VI. RESERVATION AND THE BROADENING CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

A. Beyond Caste: Multi-Dimensional Deprivation

The social justice discussions which people hold today in India show that people experience multiple forms of deprivation which include caste and class and gender and geographic location and their work status. As Singh (2025a) argued, "social justice in India must no longer be seen as a narrow category of caste-based reservation. The system requires transformation into a complete system which provides dignity-based welfare solutions and maintains financial accessibility and supports business development and fosters regional development" (para. 3).

The expanded understanding of this concept recognizes that caste-based discrimination still exists in society but denies its existence. The approach recognizes that different types of deprivation require different policy solutions. Reservation addresses one dimension of disadvantage—access to education and public employment—but cannot by itself remedy all forms of exclusion.

B. Complementary Approaches: Welfare and Empowerment

The expansion of welfare schemes targeting basic needs has created new avenues that help

people achieve dignity alongside existing reservation systems. Programs providing cooking gas connections (Ujjwala), household toilets (Swachh Bharat), housing (PM Aawas), health insurance (Ayushman Bharat), and bank accounts (Jan Dhan) reach populations that reservation policies cannot access (Singh, 2025a). These schemes establish common ground between diverse communities by bringing people together who benefit from enhanced living standards.

The second approach involves financial inclusion through entrepreneurship programs which offer different benefits. The MUDRA loan program and Stand-Up India initiative together with Dalit Venture Capital Fund enable new entrepreneurs to access unsecured funding which helps them build their businesses outside government jobs. More than 11 crore people have launched their own micro-businesses through these initiatives which mainly support people from communities that traditional financial institutions have historically excluded (Singh, 2025a).

Backward districts receive dedicated regional development programs which acknowledge that their geographic location creates particular disadvantages. The Aspirational Districts Program focuses on developing India's most underdeveloped districts through its development programs which protect people from being limited by their geographic location (NITI Aayog, 2023).

C. The Neo-Middle Class and Transformative Aspirations

India has developed its current status through a development process which created a new middle class that includes over 25 crore people who left extreme poverty between 2010 and 2020 (Singh, 2025a). The group has achieved a financial status which keeps them from identifying as poor people who lack basic needs. The group obtains dignity through better living standards while they pursue their goals for future development.

People of diverse caste and religious backgrounds represent this new middle-class population. The new social structure which emerged through poverty reduction efforts shows that people can change their social status without needing special caste-based advancement initiatives. Economic development establishes resources and skills which enable marginalized citizens to participate fully in all aspects of life.

Social hierarchy remains intact because people still experience discrimination based on their caste despite economic development. Dalits who achieve economic success may still face social exclusion, violence, and discrimination (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The system of reservation functions to establish representation while it breaks the correlation which exists between caste and specific job roles.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF RESERVATION

The reservation system in India functions as one of the world's most extensive and longest-running experiments which tests constitutional affirmative action. The principle of substantive equality which framers established as its foundation has developed into a complicated policy system which treats several forms of disadvantage after judicial interpretation and political conflicts took place throughout multiple decades.

The evidence demonstrates that reservation has played a crucial role in creating middle classes inside historically marginalized groups while helping them gain public institutional representation and achieve social hierarchy reforms. The program has distribution problems because some benefits go to particular individuals while others remain inaccessible to formal employment sectors which exclude most impoverished people and the program lacks capacity to deal with every aspect of deprivation.

The constitutional vision of an inclusive society requires both the continuation of reservation and its constant refinement. The introduction of the creamy layer principle for OBCs, the ongoing debate about its extension to SCs and STs, the recognition of sub-classification within beneficiary communities, and the incorporation of economic criteria alongside social backwardness—all represent efforts to ensure that reservation serves its intended purpose of reaching the most disadvantaged.

Societal justice needs more than reservation because that system acts as a single social justice tool. Social justice requires reservation to receive specialist support from universal welfare programs which satisfy essential needs and from financial inclusion and entrepreneurship initiatives which enable people to work outside government positions and from regional development programs which solve location-based disadvantages and from anti-discrimination laws and enforcement which safeguard marginalized community rights across every section of society.

The framers envisioned reservation as a temporary solution which would eventually become unnecessary. The hope which existed 75 years ago remains partly unfulfilled at this time. Caste-based discrimination continues to exist while economic gaps between communities stay extensive and several fields still lack adequate representation. Policymakers must use reservation rights to create equality between social classes while changing the current societal framework which still contains more privileged groups.

The process demands existing systems to conduct routine evaluations which need data collection to detect the most disadvantaged groups and evidence-based sub-classifications

which lead to refined sub-classifications and reservation systems to solve all inclusive development requirements. The process also requires people to understand that the ultimate objective involves creating a society where personal ability enables success instead of social background while society requires no reservation because its purpose has been achieved. The constitutional system needs reservation as a vital instrument which creates links between poverty and equality while promoting the inclusive development which the framers planned until that moment arrives.

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