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Impact of Indian Reservation Policy in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Proposed by the United Nations

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ABSTRACT

The Indian reserve policy, a fundamental element of affirmative action, has been instrumental in addressing past injustices and promoting social inclusion. This research study looks at how the reservation policy contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN. The study examines how certain SDGs, such as gender equality, poverty reduction, high-quality education, and reduced inequality, are supported by political representation, employment, and educational reservations. In connection with India's SDG objectives, it also highlights the reservation policy's drawbacks, criticisms, and possible future directions. The findings show that in order to achieve fair and sustainable growth in India, a comprehensive approach combining affirmative action with broader socioeconomic improvements is required. The historical context of reservation policies is also examined in this study, which tracks their evolution from before independence to the present. It evaluates the effectiveness of these initiatives in bridging socioeconomic gaps and enhancing disadvantaged communities. The report underlines that while reservation rules have significantly contributed to social mobility, long-standing institutional inequities have not been entirely eradicated. The essay argues that reservation rules should be modified to address many layers of discrimination by examining the intersectionality of caste, gender, and economic status. The study highlights the importance of dynamic policy frameworks that adapt to changing socioeconomic circumstances. It encourages data-driven policymaking and continuous impact evaluations to ensure reserve policies align with the broader sustainable development agenda. The study's conclusion emphasises how crucial the reservation policy remains to achieving the SDGs and promoting social fairness. Its effectiveness may be raised, nonetheless, by comprehensive socioeconomic reforms, targeted capacity-building initiatives, and the inclusion of economic considerations in eligibility frameworks. To build a more sustainable and inclusive society, reserve rules must be included into business sectors and governing bodies.

Keywords: Reservation Policy, Sustainable Development Goals, Social Inclusion, Affirmative Action, India.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Following the SDGs, which were approved by the UN in 2015, might lead to a more promising and sustainable future. Social justice, education, poverty, inequality, and climate change are just a few of the significant concerns that these 17 global objectives address. It is challenging to accomplish these goals in India due to its large population and diverse socioeconomic structure. A kind of affirmative action is crucial to the Indian Reserve policy's efforts to reduce socioeconomic inequities and advance inclusive development. This paper looks at how India's reservation policy affects achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Early in the 20th century, quota laws were introduced in India to address the social and economic disparities caused by decades of caste-based discrimination. These regulations have evolved over time to incorporate caste-based reservations as well as affirmative action initiatives based on gender and disability. Women, SC², ST³, and OBCs⁴ are among the historically under-represented groups that the reservation system aims to provide equitable access to in terms of political participation, employment prospects, and education. India's dedication to achieving the SDGs is directly tied to the effective implementation of the reservation policy. One of the most important instruments for lowering inequality, encouraging social mobility, and supporting inclusive growth is the policy framework. However, the success of these programs hinges on their appropriate execution, ongoing assessment, and adjustment to the shifting socioeconomic environment. There are ongoing disputes over the efficacy, sufficiency, and if economic criteria should be included in addition to social ones, despite the fact that reservation laws have significantly remedied historical injustices. By critically evaluating the connection between the Indian reservation policy and the SDGs, this article aims to investigate how affirmative action policies could further the more general sustainable development objective. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how reservation policies promote social justice, reduce inequality, and foster inclusive growth in the Indian setting.

II. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) IN INDIA

India's national policies and developmental activities demonstrate the country's commitment to achieving the SDGs. These Goals were created by the UN and serve as a global roadmap for addressing environmental, social, and economic problems while promoting sustainable growth. India has made significant progress in a number of areas, but achieving all 17 goals is challenging due to the size and diversity of the people. The following significant SDGs are

² Scheduled Castes.

³ Scheduled Tribes.

⁴ Other Backward Classes.

given top attention in India's development strategy:

(A)SDG 1: No Poverty

The first Goal of the UN is to end poverty in all of its manifestations worldwide. To achieve this goal, India has implemented a number of social welfare programs aimed at reducing poverty and raising the standard of living for its people. MGNREGA⁵ is one of the most important initiatives the Indian government has put in place to fight poverty. In order to give rural households guaranteed wage employment, this historic law was passed in 2005. This program guarantees marginalised communities a consistent source of income by guaranteeing every rural household at least 100 days of paid work within a fiscal year. MGNREGA has been instrumental in raising rural households' earnings, alleviating financial hardship, and raising their general level of living by offering steady employment possibilities. To further support rural development, the initiative also focusses on building long-lasting assets including irrigation systems, roads, and water-saving structures.

The Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system, which guarantees that government subsidies and financial help are delivered straight to the bank accounts of qualified recipients, has become a potent instrument to combat poverty in addition to MGNREGA. The DBT method has greatly reduced corruption, leaks, and fund delivery delays by doing away with middlemen. This simplified process has increased openness and made sure that assistance payments are distributed to the right people in an effective manner. DBT strengthens the social safety net for economically disadvantaged groups by covering a number of areas, including as pension plans, scholarships, and subsidies for necessities. Furthermore, poverty has decreased as a result of India's reservation rules in the areas of employment and education. Under these laws, underprivileged groups like SCs, STs, and OBCs are granted quotas in government employment and reserved seats in educational institutions. Reservation policies encourage people to improve their socioeconomic circumstances and end the cycle of poverty by providing these marginalised groups with greater educational and job options. When taken as a whole, these programs demonstrate India's multipronged strategy for reducing poverty, which combines direct cash aid, wage employment, and affirmative action to improve underprivileged areas and promote inclusive development. A more egalitarian society and the accomplishment of SDG 1's main objective depend on such initiatives.

(B)SDG 4: Quality Education

Ensuring that all residents have access to high-quality education is one of the most crucial

⁵ The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

elements of India's development plan. Education is essential for empowering people, promoting economic expansion, and propelling societal advancement. India has taken a number of steps to increase educational access and enhance learning results in line with Goal 4, which places a strong emphasis on inclusive and equitable quality education. India's reservation system, which was created to support underprivileged groups like SC, STs, and OBCs, is a key tool that helps achieve this objective. The government guarantees these groups' inclusion in mainstream education by assigning a specific number of seats in educational institutions to them, therefore resolving social obstacles and historical disparities. For underprivileged populations, this strategy has been crucial in raising enrolment rates, retention rates, and general academic achievement.

The Indian government has launched a number of financial aid initiatives to help students from disadvantaged families even more. The Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme and the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme are two noteworthy examples of this. Students seeking further education are the focus of the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme, which offers financial assistance to pay tuition, living expenses, and other educational expenditures. This program has made it possible for students to continue their education uninterrupted by drastically lowering the financial load on families with lower incomes. Similar to this, the Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme encourages early registration and lowers dropout rates by providing financial aid to students at the school level. To supplement conventional schooling, the government has also started a number of skill-development and vocational training initiatives. By giving students real-world skills, these programs hope to improve their employability and get them ready for a variety of professional options. India aims to develop a workforce that can spur innovation and support the expansion of the country's economy by encouraging both academic and technical education. In summary, inclusive development has been greatly aided by India's initiatives to advance high-quality education through targeted policies, reservation schemes, and financial support mechanisms. In order to achieve SDG 4 and guarantee a better future for its people, the nation keeps making great progress by tackling educational inequalities and establishing chances for everyone.

(C)SDG 5: Gender Equality

Although the reservation policy's main goal is to alleviate caste-based disparities, it also significantly contributes to the advancement of gender equality. Sustainable development and social justice both depend on gender equality, and India's constitutional framework has taken proactive measures to guarantee women's involvement in politics. In this sense, the 1992 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have been crucial. These revisions require local government organisations, including municipalities and panchayats, to reserve seats for women.

By giving them the chance to actively engage in political decision-making, this progressive initiative seeks to empower women. The constitutional provisions promote increased female representation in leadership positions by giving women a specific percentage of seats in various municipal bodies. Women from under-represented and marginalised groups especially benefit from this as it guarantees their perspectives are heard on issues of governance that affect their daily lives and the environment. Diverse viewpoints are brought to the table when women participate in decision-making processes, which promotes more inclusive and well-rounded policy results.

Additionally, this program has increased social participation by challenging traditional gender norms and empowering women to take on active roles in their communities. Women leaders often act as role models, inspiring more women to enter the corporate, academic, and political spheres. This positive development helps to build a more equitable society and gradually lessen gender disparity. A deliberate intervention in support of Sustainable Goal 5, which aims to promote gender equality and empower all women and girls, is India's reservation policy. By eliminating systemic barriers and promoting inclusive governance, the strategy significantly advances the broader goal of sustainable social and economic growth.

(D)SDG 8: decent work and economic growth

India's reservation policies play a key role in supporting fair economic growth by ensuring that traditionally marginalized and under-represented populations have access to stable and secure job opportunities, notably in the public sector. By giving marginalised groups access to opportunities that were previously unattainable, affirmative action programs aim to rectify past injustices and societal disparities. Reservation policies help increase social mobility by promoting greater workforce engagement, which helps people from under-represented groups raise their standard of living and financial situation. Additionally, bringing under-represented groups into the workforce helps to lessen income inequality, which is a major obstacle to attaining long-term economic growth. Reservation policies encourage diversity in government agencies and public sector businesses by expanding the talent pool, which improves creativity and decision-making. In the end, this increased involvement fosters inclusive growth by enabling underprivileged populations to make more active contributions to the country's economic advancement. Additionally, social well-being is impacted by reservation policies. Members in marginalised groups have better access to housing, healthcare, and education as they land steady jobs. Future generations' human capital is subsequently improved, creating a positive feedback loop that propels economic growth. Therefore, reservation laws greatly aid India's progress towards attaining UN Development Goal 8, which places an emphasis on

inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, by fostering social inclusion and financial stability.

(E) SDG 10: Reduced Inequality

India's reservation system, which has been crafted as an essential instrument for social justice, is based on the idea of minimising inequality. Addressing and reducing the system's long-standing inequalities within Indian society is one of its main goals. Through the implementation of reservation rules, the government hopes to provide underprivileged and marginalised populations with fair chances so they may actively participate in a variety of fields, including politics, the workforce, and education. Reservation rules in India are essential to the advancement of historically marginalised groups, such as SC, STs, and OBCs, who have endured social isolation and institutional discrimination for many years. The goal of these initiatives is to close the socioeconomic divide between these marginalised communities and the general public. The Goal 10, which highlights the need to lessen inequality within and between nations, is closely aligned with the reservation system. Through encouraging inclusive growth, expanding educational options, creating job chances, and guaranteeing equitable representation in government, India's reservation system actively helps to accomplish this worldwide goal. In addition, reserve policies empower marginalised populations, encourage social inclusion, and advance a more equitable and balanced society in addition to addressing economic inequities. India's dedication to creating an egalitarian future where no person or community is left behind is demonstrated by its alignment with SDG 10.

(F) SDG 3: good health and well-being

Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for people of all ages is the third Sustainable Development Goal. By addressing social injustices that frequently prevent marginalised groups from attaining the best possible health results, reservation policies significantly contribute to the advancement of this objective. These policies pave the way for better living circumstances by giving underprivileged groups better access to education and steady work, which tangentially enhances health and well-being. Education equips people with the information they need to maintain good health, including preventative healthcare practices, diet, and cleanliness. Higher degrees of education also increase a person's chances of finding steady work, which raises income levels. Families with more financial stability may afford better access to healthcare, hygienic food, and sanitary facilities all of which are critical for fostering well-being.

Reservation laws not only provide indirect advantages through employment and education, but they also make it easier for disadvantaged populations to access government healthcare

programs. These initiatives frequently include preventative healthcare campaigns, maternity and child health services, necessary immunisations, and free or heavily discounted medical care. Regardless of their socioeconomic background, marginalised populations benefit from these focused efforts, which help close the healthcare gap and guarantee they receive quality medical treatment. Additionally, reservation policies enable underprivileged people to live healthier lives by enhancing their access to opportunities and vital services. Reducing health inequities and increasing general well-being are made possible by the combined effects of improved education, higher incomes, and focused healthcare initiatives. As a result, these programs strongly correspond with SDG 3's goals, which promote a society that is healthier and more just.

(G)SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable urban settlements is a key component of SDG 11. By giving marginalised groups, the chance to actively engage in urban planning and governance processes, political reservations are essential to their empowerment. Scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other marginalised people are among the historically under-represented groups that these reservations are intended to provide representation for. Political reservations aid in bridging socioeconomic disparities and constructing inclusive, sustainable cities by giving these groups a say in decision-making. To achieve fair urban development, under-represented communities must actively participate in urban planning. It is more probable that marginalised populations' particular needs and concerns will be acknowledged and taken care of when they are included in governance processes. This engagement guarantees that important elements like disaster preparation, affordable housing, access to essential services, and environmental sustainability are incorporated into urban development plans. Cities are therefore more able to support a variety of demographics and adjust to environmental, social, and economic shifts.

By encouraging social inclusion and economic advancement, reservation rules and social welfare initiatives in India significantly contribute to the advancement of SDG 11. For example, affordable housing initiatives and urban revitalisation projects that give priority to underserved populations contribute to the improvement of living circumstances and the reduction of inequality. Reservation laws also give local leaders from under-represented groups the ability to have an impact on choices that directly impact their communities. Urban settlements become more resilient as a result of this participative strategy, increasing their ability to endure issues like resource shortage, socioeconomic inequality, and climate change. In conclusion, the achievement of several SDGs, including SDG 11, has been greatly aided by India's dedication

to combating poverty, injustice, and social exclusion through reservation legislation and social welfare programs. However, it takes consistent work, ongoing policy changes, and better implementation techniques to achieve comprehensive and equitable growth. India can create sustainable, socially equitable, and economically viable cities by encouraging inclusive growth and giving representation to under-represented groups in government.

III. THE RESERVATION POLICY IN INDIA

The reservation policy in India is a basic and legally approved program intended to promote social justice, equity, and inclusion among different societal groups. In order to guarantee socially and educationally disadvantaged populations fair access to political representation, job opportunities, and educational resources, this strategy aims to rectify past injustices and structural prejudice. The government works to improve marginalised groups, close socioeconomic gaps, and integrate them into the national mainstream by enacting affirmative action policies. One of the most important instruments for encouraging inclusive growth and a more equitable and just society is the reservation policy.

(A) Educational Reservations

For historically underprivileged groups to have fair access to high-quality education, the reservation policy in the education sector is essential. Reservations for Scheduled Castes & Tribes, and Other Backward Classes are made for a specific percentage of seats in government-run and government-aided educational institutions. By lowering the educational gaps between affluent and impoverished groups in society, this clause seeks to improve their social mobility. Furthermore, the goal of reservation rules in higher education, such as universities and professional institutions, is to guarantee that students from under-represented groups may obtain the institutional and academic assistance they need to advance academically and professionally. The policy advances human capital and the general advancement of underprivileged populations by promoting more representation in esteemed educational institutions.

(B) Employment Reservations

Another important aspect of the reservation policy is employment reservation, which aims to give underprivileged groups in society financial security and economic empowerment. The government requires that SC, ST, and OBC candidates be given preference for a certain proportion of open positions in government services, public sector enterprises, and affiliated institutions. By ensuring that disadvantaged people find steady work, this program lowers economic disparities and improves their general quality of life. Long-term professional growth is also made possible by reserves in employment, which go beyond initial hiring and include

prospects for promotions and career progression in certain industries. These actions support workforce diversity and inclusiveness in public institutions while also improving economic stability for underserved populations.

(C) Political Reservations

In order to guarantee that historically under-represented groups are adequately represented in governance and decision-making processes, political reservation is a crucial part of India's affirmative action programs. This clause reserves some seats for SCs, STs, and occasionally women in state legislative assemblies, local governing bodies like panchayats and municipal corporations, and Parliament. By allowing them to directly participate in the legislative process, this strategy aims to empower marginalised communities and provide them the ability to alter laws that impact their political and socioeconomic well-being. In order to ensure that historically marginalised populations have leadership opportunities, democratic inclusion, and a sufficient representation of their views in the political discourse of the country, political reservations are essential.

(D) Reservation for persons with disabilities

The Indian government has also implemented reservation laws for people with disabilities in the fields of employment and education in line with the values of social justice and inclusion. These rules, which are required by laws like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, are designed to provide equal opportunities and enable people with disabilities to fully engage in society at large. The strategy aims to reduce the obstacles that people with disabilities confront and ensure their integration into a variety of academic and professional sectors by establishing job quotas in government and public sector organisations and assigning reserved seats in educational institutions. Additionally, additional accommodations are offered to help their overall development and improve their quality of life, such as assistive devices, financial aid, and accessible infrastructure.

India's commitment to social justice, fairness, and inclusive growth is still based on the country's reservation policy. It is essential to nation-building and the realisation of a more equitable society because it addresses systematic disadvantages and promotes equal possibilities. To guarantee that the reservation system's specified purposes are successfully met while striking a balance with more general developmental objectives, ongoing assessment and policy changes are necessary.

IV. CONNECTING THE RESERVATION POLICY WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

A comprehensive framework of Sustainable Development Goals has been designed by the UN to address global issues and build a more sustainable, fair, and equitable society. By encouraging social inclusion, fair chances, and economic empowerment especially for historically underprivileged and marginalised communities the reserve policy plays a crucial part in furthering these goals. The reservation policy is a social justice strategy that directly supports gender parity, increases educational access, ensures inclusive economic growth, and lessens inequality. The reservation system supports the larger global goal of sustainable development by ensuring that marginalised groups are adequately represented in the political, economic, and educational arenas.

Reservation policies have a direct impact on a number of SDGs, including as Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). Through tackling structural inequalities and empowering underprivileged groups, this strategy acts as a stimulant for cultivating a society that is more socially just and equitable. The parts that follow go into further detail on how the reservation strategy relates to particular SDGs and emphasise how important it is to sustainable development.

(A) SDG 1: No Poverty

SDG 1's primary goal is to eradicate poverty in all of its manifestations. Through improving marginalised populations' access to jobs and educational opportunities, the reservation policy is essential to reducing poverty. Affirmative action in the public and commercial sectors helps end the intergenerational cycle of poverty by guaranteeing job stability. Furthermore, the establishment of educational reserves guarantees that underprivileged groups obtain the credentials and abilities required to land steady jobs, so raising their socioeconomic standing. This structural intervention fosters long-term economic resilience and makes a direct contribution to the sustained elimination of poverty.

(B) SDG 4: Quality Education

Human development and socioeconomic advancement are mostly fuelled by education. In elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education, the reservation policy greatly improves the accessibility and retention rates of students from under-represented areas. By guaranteeing fair access to high-quality education, the policy rectifies past injustices and promotes an inclusive educational setting. Improved employability, social mobility, and economic independence are the results of higher educational attainment among disadvantaged populations. Additionally, increased literacy and skill levels among marginalised groups

support national innovation and productivity, which advances sustainable development goals.

(C)SDG 5: Gender Equality

Gender equality is a fundamental aspect of sustainable development, and reservation laws play a critical role in reducing the gender gap in several domains. For example, political reserves for women allow more women to participate in decision-making and government. Better social welfare and economic possibilities for women result from gender-sensitive policies and activities that are fostered by this representation. Reservations in employment and education also provide a climate that allows women to seek further education and land professional positions, which advances gender parity and financial independence in the workforce. The reservation policy actively promotes the objective of attaining gender parity and women's empowerment by tearing down systemic impediments.

(D)SDG 8: decent work and economic growth

Sustainable development depends on economic inclusion, and reservation rules help achieve this aim by guaranteeing historically under-represented communities have access to worthwhile job opportunities. The program lowers unemployment rates among under-represented groups by promoting equitable representation in positions in the public and commercial sectors. Consequently, this fosters general economic growth and stability. Additionally, diverse workplaces promote social cohesiveness, creativity, and productivity. In addition to improving the quality of life for marginalised groups, economic empowerment boosts local economies and has a positive knock-on effect on society at large.

(E)SDG 10: Reduced Inequality

SDG 10 is centred on reducing social and economic inequality, and the reservation policy is a crucial tool for accomplishing this goal. Systemic discrimination against historically marginalised populations has restricted their access to political representation, work opportunities, and education. Reservation policies aid in bridging these gaps and levelling the playing field by putting affirmative action measures into place. By promoting social inclusion, closing wealth disparities, and fostering parity in opportunities, ensuring proportionate representation in government, education, and employment advances the ideas of sustainable development.

(F)SDG 3: good health and well-being

Health and well-being are directly impacted by the socioeconomic advancement made possible by reservation policies. Better health outcomes result from higher living standards brought

about by easier access to steady work and education. Better living conditions, wholesome food, and easier access to healthcare are all made possible by economic stability. Furthermore, presence in policy-making committees guarantees that inclusive healthcare policies effectively address the health issues of underserved areas. Reservation policies help to improve public health and well-being by addressing the general socioeconomic determinants of health.

(G)SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Inclusion in decision-making is essential for sustainable urban development. Under-represented populations are guaranteed a say in urban development and governance through political reservations. Because of their active participation, policies that address problems like accessible transit, affordable housing, and fair resource allocation are developed. Reservation policies support the growth of inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities by encouraging social inclusion in urban government.

Because it addresses systemic disparities and promotes social inclusion, the reservation policy is an essential tool for achieving sustainable development goals. The strategy strengthens marginalised groups and advances social and economic justice by guaranteeing fair access to government, work, and education. Reservation policies' importance in creating a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable society is highlighted by their relationship with the SDGs. Going forward, attaining sustainable development and long-term socioeconomic advancement will need fortifying these policies and incorporating them with more comprehensive developmental frameworks.

V. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

The reservation policy has played a significant role in improving the lives of marginalised groups and promoting social inclusion. Nevertheless, it has faced several challenges and criticisms. One of the primary criticisms is that it inadvertently perpetuates caste identities rather than eliminating caste-based inequalities. By giving individuals preferential treatment based on their caste, the policy is perceived to further the very divisions it aims to eradicate. This has led to debates over whether the program has been successful in fostering social harmony or if it has made social divisions wider. There is also a growing movement to replace the caste-based quota system with one based on economic standing. Caste-based reservations may not always assist the most economically disadvantaged individuals, according to critics, even while wealthier members of the protected group typically continue to benefit. Establishing income-based standards will ensure that assistance reaches people who are actually in need, regardless of caste. In addition to making the reserve policy more inclusive and equitable, this

approach may help solve the more general issue of economic disadvantage in all areas. The policy has been blamed for disparities within the limited categories. The 'creamy layer' the more wealthy and privileged portions within the protected categories often receives disproportionate benefits from the strategy, while the more disadvantaged segments have less opportunities. This internal discrepancy highlights the need for frequent reviews and modifications to the reservation system in order to ensure that all members of the restricted groups receive the same benefits. Another significant concern is the potential deterioration of merit-based selection practices, particularly in the domains of employment and education. Critics argue that prioritising social categories above talent may have negative effects on performance and productivity in a variety of businesses. Supporters argue that reservations are essential to levelling the playing field and providing historically impoverished groups with opportunities they would not otherwise have. Striking a balance between social justice and meritocracy is a significant challenge for policymakers. Reducing socioeconomic inequities in all fields of employment is hampered by the reservation policy's limited use in the private sector. The absence of affirmative action in private companies has sparked discussions about extending reservation regulations to industries where under-represented minorities are located. Another challenge has been the frequent politicisation of the reserve strategy by political parties in an attempt to win votes. This has occasionally resulted in the intended benefits being withheld to people that are actually disadvantaged, highlighting the need for realistic socioeconomic assessments when developing legislation. The reservation approach, which was initially meant to be a temporary fix, has been extended over time without a comprehensive evaluation. Regular reviews are becoming more and more necessary to assess the effectiveness of the policy and make any necessary modifications. Regular assessments would help ensure that the plan continues to achieve its objective of social and economic progress. Despite these criticisms, the reservation policy remains a vital instrument for promoting social justice and inclusiveness. Addressing these concerns through careful modifications, transparent implementation processes, and frequent evaluations may improve the policy's effectiveness in fostering fair development.

VI. THE FUTURE OF RESERVATION POLICY IN ACHIEVING SDGS

The reservation policy in India is essential for promoting social justice and redressing past wrongs. However, if the policy is to help reach the SDG in the future, it must adopt a more holistic approach that addresses social and economic inequality. To align the reservation system with SDG targets, inclusive policies and reforms that offer equal opportunities to all social groups are required. A vital first step is to extend reservation benefits to economically

disadvantaged groups (EWS) in all communities, regardless of caste or religion. This will reduce economic disparity and help people who are struggling financially. Improving the quality of education and skill-building programs for marginalised groups is also essential. Their work opportunities and socioeconomic development will be enhanced if they have access to high-quality educational programs, career training, and digital literacy. Increasing the political representation of women, Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and other marginalised groups is another essential step. Special efforts to encourage women's participation in politics at all levels of government will promote social inclusion and gender equality. If suitable data collection and monitoring procedures are established, it will be simpler to assess how reservation regulations are influencing SDG targets. Regular evaluation and transparent reporting will highlight what works and where adjustments are needed. Additionally, more all-encompassing inclusive growth measures like social security programs, better access to healthcare, and poverty alleviation must be combined with reserve policies. These programs will provide a supportive environment for marginalised groups. It is possible to provide equal employment opportunities in both corporate and emerging industries by granting the private sector reservation powers. By implementing these measures, India might increase the efficiency of its reservation policy in achieving the Sustainable Development Goal, fostering social justice and economic progress for everyone.

VII. ROLE OF JUDICIARY IN ACHIEVING THE SDG'S

In India, the court plays a crucial role in interpreting, defending, and enhancing reservation rules that are intended to promote social justice and fairness. The affirmative action requirement, which is included in Articles 15, 16, and 46 of the Indian Constitution, has been subject to ongoing judicial review in order to ensure that it is implemented harmoniously and in line with the objectives of the document. Over the years, the Honourable Apex Court has issued several significant decisions that have had a significant impact on the course of reserve policy. *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992) was a seminal case that instituted the 'creamy layer' exclusion to prevent rich members of the backward classes from benefiting from reservations while also establishing the legitimacy of reservations in public employment. This decision not only set a 50% cap on the total reservation quota, excluding exceptional circumstances, but it also established that the constitution does not need reservations for promotions. The Supreme Court upheld constitutional amendments that allowed reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in promotions in the 2006 case of *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India*, provided that the state could produce substantiated proof of administrative efficiency, backwardness, and inadequate representation. The need for frequent evaluations to ensure that

only really disadvantaged groups receive reservation privileges was brought to light by this verdict. Furthermore, the 2008 *Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India* case emphasised the exclusion of the creamy layer while confirming the legitimacy of OBC reservations in educational institutions. The court emphasised that administrative efficacy and quality must not be compromised for affirmative action, and that a balance between merit and social justice must be struck. The *Jarnail Singh v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta* (2018) verdict enhanced the parameters set in the *M. Nagaraj* case by removing the requirement that SCs and STs prove backwardness in quota promotions. It did, however, retain the need to use quantifiable evidence to show inadequate representation and administrative effectiveness. Affirmative action is a step towards substantive equality rather than merely legal equality, according to earlier verdicts like *State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas* (1976), which also upheld the legitimacy of giving backward groups preference in promotions. The 1997 ruling in *Union of India v. V. Chandra Shekaran* provided more evidence for the need for affirmative action as a way to address historical wrongs and social disparities. The court has played a crucial role in avoiding the misuse of reservation laws by excluding the creamy layer and ensuring that the benefits reach the communities that are actually marginalised. It has created guidelines for the routine assessment of backwardness, quantitative data for inadequate representation, and administrative efficiency in order to prevent the perpetuation of privilege among specific groups under the guise of affirmative action. As a result, court decisions have expanded the use of reservations, provided a framework to ensure their equitable implementation, and maintained a delicate balance between social justice and meritocracy. By continuously updating reservation rules to reflect contemporary socioeconomic realities, the judiciary remains a pillar in the struggle for an inclusive and equitable society.

The Supreme Court considered the legality of giving backward classes preferential treatment in public employment under reservation legislation in the seminal case.⁶ When the Kerala government temporarily excused candidates from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) from departmental exams for promotions in government service, a conflict resulted. The petitioners contested this exception, claiming it went against Article 16(1) of the Constitution, which protects equal opportunity in public employment. Whether giving SC/ST applicants special treatment in promotions violated Articles 14 and 16 and whether such privileges were required to provide true equality or amounted to caste-based discrimination were the main questions on the court's agenda. The Supreme Court ruled that giving backward classes preferential treatment does not infringe upon their right to equality under Article 16(1), upholding the legitimacy of the reservation policy. The court stated that real equality does not

⁶ *State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas* (1976 AIR 490).

include treating unequals equally and underlined that affirmative action is an essential instrument for improving socially and educationally disadvantaged groups. By reaffirming the substantive equality concept, this ruling significantly influenced Indian jurisprudence. It acknowledged that, in order to attain true equality as opposed to merely legal or theoretical equality, some marginalised populations need particular measures.

The Mandal Commission Case⁷, started when the government adopted the Mandal Commission's suggestion to provide Other Backward Classes (OBCs) a 27% quota in government positions. Widespread public outcry over this ruling ultimately led to a court challenge. Whether the government's decision violated Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution, whether backwardness could be determined solely by economic factors, whether reservations could be applied to promotions, and the appropriate upper limit for reservations were the main questions on the Supreme Court's agenda. The Supreme Court's nine-judge panel maintained the 27% OBC reservation while introducing important new rules. By establishing the "creamy layer" approach, it made sure that reservations would not benefit economically affluent OBCs. Additionally, the Court decided that, absent exceptional circumstances, the cumulative reservations under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) should not surpass 50%. Furthermore, it ruled that Article 16(4) prohibited reservations in promotions. The Court also required a regular assessment of backwardness to guarantee that reserves only help those who are actually disadvantaged. India's reservation rules were established by this historic ruling, which balanced merit-based selection with affirmative action. It continues to be a significant precedent in constitutional law, influencing how judges will interpret reservation laws in the future and guaranteeing that affirmative action fulfils its goals without sacrificing overall administrative effectiveness.

The reservation of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) personnel for promotions within government services was at the centre.⁸ Reservations for promotions under Article 16(4A) of the Constitution were instituted by the Union of India through constitutional modifications. Whether such reservations in promotions violated the equality of opportunity principle enshrined in Article 16(1) and whether the government had to present quantifiable proof of the under-representation of SC/ST employees prior to enforcing such reservations were the main questions before the Supreme Court. According to its ruling, the Supreme Court confirmed that reservations in promotions under Article 16(4A) were constitutionally allowed. The court stressed the need to periodically examine these restrictions to prevent misuse, while

⁷ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992 AIR 477).

⁸ *Union of India v. V. Chandra Shekaran* (1997 AIR 2560).

acknowledging the significance of such measures to empower historically marginalised people. The decision upheld the idea that affirmative action ought to be used as a short-term strategy to achieve equality rather than developing into a long-term privilege.

The constitutionality of the 77th and 81st Amendments was contested in the case.⁹ These changes allowed for the carryover of open reserved jobs and provided reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in promotions under Article 16(4A). Whether reservations in promotions violated the fundamental framework of the Constitution, whether the state had to gather quantitative evidence to support such reservations, and whether the "creamy layer" notion extended to SC/STs were the main questions on the Supreme Court's agenda. The Supreme Court established three crucial requirements that the government must meet before allowing reservations in promotions while sustaining the constitutional modifications. The state was required to prove that the class requesting a reserve was socially and educationally backward, that public employment was under-represented, and that administrative effectiveness was unaffected. Because it required the gathering of quantifiable facts to support reservations in promotions, this ruling had a substantial influence on affirmative action programs by making the procedure more transparent and evidence-based.

The constitutionality of the 93rd Constitutional Amendment was contested in the case¹⁰. This amendment made it possible for educational institutions, including private aided schools, to make reservations for members of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The court's main concerns were whether these restrictions infringed against the right to equality guaranteed by Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution and if OBCs should be excluded from school under the "creamy layer" theory. In order to guarantee that reservation benefits reach the truly disadvantaged parts rather than the wealthier members of the backward classes, the Supreme Court maintained the constitutionality of the amendment while emphasising the need to implement the creamy layer exclusion. By ensuring that affirmative action measures efficiently benefit those who need them the most, this ruling was essential in improving the way reservations were implemented.

The M. Nagaraj principles pertaining to reservation in promotions for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were reconsidered in the case.¹¹ The Supreme Court's key concerns were whether SCs and STs had to demonstrate their backwardness in order to be granted reservations for promotions and if gathering measurable evidence of their poor representation

⁹ M. Nagaraj v. Union of India (2006 8 SCC 212).

¹⁰ Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India (2008 6 SCC 1).

¹¹ Jarnail Singh v. Lachmi Narain Gupta (2018 10 SCC 396).

was still required. According to the Supreme Court's ruling, SCs and STs are assumed to be socially and educationally backward and do not require more evidence of this in order to be considered for promotions. Nonetheless, the Court maintained the need for the state to gather measurable evidence of insufficient representation and to make sure that reservations don't impair administrative effectiveness. By removing the requirement to prove backwardness, this decision greatly lessened the burden on SCs and STs while upholding the need for measurable data and striking a balance between administrative efficacy and reservation regulations.

Sub-classification within Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) for reservation reasons was the subject of the case.¹² The Supreme Court's main concern was whether governments may establish subcategories within SCs and STs to guarantee that the most disadvantaged members of these communities received reservation advantages. The 2004 ruling in *E V Chinnaiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh* addressed this matter before and determined that this kind of sub-classification was not acceptable. In a 6:1 majority ruling, the Supreme Court overturned the *E V Chinnaiah* ruling and decided that SCs and STs might be subdivided for reservation reasons. The Court recognised the heterogeneity of these groups and the potential for sub-classification to guarantee affirmative action benefits the most underprivileged. According to the ruling, permitting sub-classification will address the various levels of social and economic backwardness within SCs and STs, and the main goal of reservations is to achieve substantive equality. It also made clear that states are free to use this kind of subcategorization based on reasonable standards as long as it is backed up with data that can be measured. However, to avoid their execution being capricious or discriminatory, any such measures would still be subject to court scrutiny. India's reservation rules would be significantly impacted by this decision. It makes it possible to implement affirmative action in a more focused manner, guaranteeing that the most under-represented subgroups within SCs and STs are fairly represented. Furthermore, it gives governments the authority to reword affirmative action regulations to better accommodate a range of demands by redefining policies that subcategorise reservations. Additionally, the ruling creates a new legal precedent that provides a foundation for upcoming laws and regulations pertaining to reserves. In her dissenting opinion, Justice Bela M. Trivedi warned that sub-classification may further polarise already marginalised populations, so weakening the rationale behind reservations. She stressed the need of following existing legal precedents and cautioned against using such measures to divide the SC and ST populations. This ruling represents a change in the Supreme Court's stance on reservation laws,

¹² *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024).

reaffirming the goal of making sure that affirmative action programs benefit the SC and ST communities' most vulnerable members.

The reservation regulations for postgraduate medical admissions were challenged in the case.¹³ In order to guarantee the application of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in postgraduate courses, the petitioners contended that the current reservation structure was capricious and requested court intervention. They argued that the Chandigarh Administration ought to offer matching admissions reservations as it issued OBC certificates. The court's main concerns were whether the Chandigarh Administration's issuance of OBC certificates created a duty to extend reservations in admissions and whether the lack of OBC reservations in postgraduate medical admissions violated the equality principles outlined in Articles 14 and 16 of the Constitution. The Punjab and Haryana High Court ruled that special measures for the improvement of socially and educationally backward strata are permitted under Article 15(4) of the Constitution, but that these provisions are optional rather than required. The court made it clear that the state alone has the authority to make reservations and that the courts cannot force a state to do so for a particular group. Furthermore, it decided that the Chandigarh Administration's issuing of OBC certificates alone does not obligate it to make reservations for admissions because such choices are within the purview of state policy. This ruling upholds the idea that the state has the authority to decide whether to enact reservation regulations. It highlights that although states are able to grant caste certificates, this does not entail that they have an obligation to make reservations in jobs or educational institutions. The decision underlines how the Indian Constitution's affirmative action policies are discretionary.

A ruling of the Madhya Pradesh High Court that prohibited candidates from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) from running for general (unreserved) seats, even if they were qualified on the basis of merit, has been overruled by the Supreme Court. This ruling, which was appealed to the Supreme Court, brought up important constitutional questions, mainly whether deserving SC/ST candidates could be excluded from unreserved seats merely because they belong to a reserved category and whether this went against the Constitution's cherished ideals of equality and meritocracy. The Supreme Court ruled that deserving applicants from SC/ST backgrounds can run for seats that are not reserved. It ruled that it is illegal to deny them this chance merely because they belong to a reserved group. The Court underlined that although reservations are in place to give people who have historically been disadvantaged opportunity, they shouldn't compromise the merit principle. Affirmative action should not be used to exclude

¹³ Vyom Yadav vs. Union of India and Others (2024).

deserving members of underprivileged communities, but rather as a vehicle for empowerment. This ruling supports the idea that reservation laws should promote social fairness without preventing worthy applicants from taking advantage of opportunities that are open to everyone. The decision guarantees that the actual goal of reservations is maintained, elevating marginalised communities without erecting needless obstacles for those who qualify on merit, by making it clear that affirmative action should enhance meritocracy rather than undermine it. All things considered, this ruling demonstrates the Supreme Court's impartial stance on reservation laws, which seeks to preserve the values of justice, equality, and merit. Assuring that reservation regulations fulfil their intended function while adjusting to the latest socioeconomic realities, the Indian court has been instrumental in developing the nation's affirmative action framework.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In line with the larger goals of the Sustainable Development Goals established by the UN, India's reservation policy is a pillar of the nation's initiatives to advance social justice, equity, and inclusive development. The policy is essential in resolving the historical injustices and socioeconomic divides that marginalised groups, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, have endured for a long time. The reservation system aims to empower underprivileged groups and encourage their active involvement in the growth of the country by giving them preferred access to political representation, work opportunities, and education. Several SDGs, including Goal 1: No Poverty, Goal 4: Quality Education, Goal 5: Gender Equality, Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities, are directly impacted by this empowerment. Notwithstanding its noteworthy accomplishments, the reservation policy's existing framework has to be continuously updated in order to adequately address the new socioeconomic issues of the contemporary day. Social backwardness associated with caste-based discrimination has been the policy's main focus, but growing problems like economic inequality, regional disparities, urban poverty, and the exclusion of marginalised groups in the informal sector call for a more dynamic and all-encompassing approach. Furthermore, a more comprehensive perspective is necessary to guarantee that the advantages of affirmative action reach the most marginalised groups in society, such as women, people with disabilities, and minority communities, given the interconnectedness of poverty, gender, and social exclusion. Policy changes that strike a balance between social justice and economic empowerment are desperately needed if the reservation policy is to have the greatest possible impact on achieving the SDGs. Enhancing the socioeconomic mobility of marginalised communities will require a combination of affirmative

action policies and focused economic interventions, including social welfare programs, financial inclusion plans, entrepreneurship promotion, and skill development programs. The policy will also continue to be applicable and support those who need it the most if clear, merit-based procedures are put in place and reservation benefits are reviewed on a regular basis. Additionally, promoting inclusive development techniques through equitable resource access, community-based interventions, and capacity-building initiatives would enable marginalised groups to fully engage in the economic and social growth of the country. Building a more just and equitable society will need active cooperation between the public and business sectors as well as civil society organisations. In summary, the Indian reserve policy is a potent instrument for advancing economic equality and social inclusion, which is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals. A more dynamic, inclusive, and open strategy that tackles both past injustices and new disparities is necessary, nevertheless, given the changing socioeconomic environment. Realising India's commitment to the SDGs and creating a society where everyone has access to social justice, equitable opportunity, and sustainable development would need a synergistic blend of affirmative action, economic reforms, and inclusive development methods.

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