



CASTE AND RESERVATION IN INDIA: A SWOT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The structure of Indian society has been such that caste has become not just an identity but a measure of access to opportunities and resources. The policy of reservation is seen as a corrective measure to achieve social justice. The reservation system under Articles 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution was implemented to redress historical injustices and bring marginalized communities (SC, ST, and OBC) into the mainstream. For centuries, this large section of society was denied access to education, property, and a dignified life. Reservation is a way to mitigate this historical discrimination. Although reservation is a powerful tool for social justice, it is not the only solution. Until caste discrimination is eradicated from society, the goal of social justice will remain unfulfilled. Even today, there is controversy in society regarding the social and economic aspects of the reservation. Therefore, this research examines the benefits of reservations and the obstacles the government faces in implementing them. To determine this, we use a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis method. The SWOT analysis indicates that the issue of reservation is more sensitive. The caste system is so deeply rooted in Indian society that formal equality alone is not enough; it requires 'substantive equality' with a changing mindset.

Keywords: Affirmative Action, Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), Reservation Policy, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Social Justice, SWOT analysis

Introduction

The structure of Indian society has been among the most complex in the world. For thousands of years, Indian society has been divided based on the 'Varna' and 'Caste' systems (Malhotra & Viswanathan, 2023). This system not only caused social division but also profoundly influenced the distribution of resources, education, and power. This social division has been considered a natural division in India (Gupta, 2000). In this hierarchical system, some classes enjoyed privileges. At the same time, a large section of the population (Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Classes) was deprived of education, property, and a life of dignity. Edmund Burke criticized it as follows: *in that century, the laws of religion, the laws of the land, and the laws of honour are all united and considered in one, and bind a man eternally to the rules of what is called Caste* (Dirks, 1992). During the colonial period, social reformers like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and later Dr. B.R. Ambedkar challenged this inequality (Kumar, 2021). The concept of reservation was first introduced by Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj of Kolhapur in 1902, who provided reservations in jobs for backward classes. Subsequently, the 'Poona Pact' of 1932 paved the way for the reservation of legislative seats for the Dalit communities (Nirala, 2025).

The *Pune Pact* has been a watershed moment in Indian history and the politics of reservation. It was signed between Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on September 24, 1932, in Pune's Yerwada Central Jail. This pact was not merely a political document, but it also determined the political participation of Dalits (then known as the "untouchables" or *Depressed Classes*) in independent India. In 1932, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced separate electorates for Dalits, known as the "*Communal Award*". This meant that only Dalit voters would vote for a Dalit candidate. Dr. Ambedkar strongly supported this, believing that Dalits would never win general elections. Gandhi was strongly opposed to this. He believed that separate electorates would permanently alienate Dalits from Hindu society and further divide the country. In protest, Gandhiji began a fast unto death in Yerwada Jail. Seeing his deteriorating condition, pressure mounted across the country, and Dr. Ambedkar was eventually forced to come to the table for a compromise. Under this compromise, Dr. Ambedkar gave up his demand for separate electorates, and in return, he received the following benefits: The number of seats for Dalits in the provincial legislatures was increased from 71 to 148. The *separate electorate* was now replaced by a *joint electorate*. People of all castes would now vote for a Dalit candidate, but that seat would be reserved only for a Dalit candidate (as is the case today in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas). 18% of seats were also reserved for Dalits in the Central Legislature. It was also agreed that Dalits would be given adequate opportunities and grants for government jobs and education. According to Gandhi, this kept Dalits within Hindu society and prevented division.

This *Pune Pact* is the basis for India's current electoral reservation system (SC/ST Reservation). Dr. Ambedkar, however, felt that a joint electorate would leave Dalit leaders vulnerable to "pressure from upper castes," as they would need everyone's (general and reserved categories) votes to win. Some thinkers believe this slowed the process of Dalits becoming an independent political force. Ambedkar called this a political bluff. Upendra Bakshi says that 'in 1932, Gandhi bet on Ambedkar's self-restraint and won' (Jaffrelot, 2005).

After independence, the framers of the Indian Constitution realized that the '*Right to Equality*' alone would not be sufficient, as different sections of society were not starting from the same point. Affirmative action was necessary to make equality a reality. Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution empower the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The fundamental philosophy behind reservations is not to ensure "equality among equals," but to "bring unequal's to an equal level" (Sharma, 2011). Although Dr. Ambedkar could not reach an agreement with Sardar Patel on the issue of reservation, and Dr. Ambedkar considered it better to resign from the post of Chairman of the Constitution's Drafting Committee and Law Minister of India. He said, '*I have laboured for three years preparing the constitution at the cost of my health so that I could do something for the welfare of the marginalized castes... if seats were not kept reserved for the depressed classes in the constitution, I would walk out of the constitution assembly so that in the pages of history it would remain written how the Hindus opposed the question of welfare of untouchables, when it came before them*' (Raju, 2022). Since then, reservations have been a hot issue in Indian politics.

Consequently, reservation in India is mainly implemented in three areas: (1) Legislative reservation—in the form of reservation of seats in Parliament and State Legislatures, (2) Educational reservation—in the form of reservation for admission to government and government-aided educational institutions, and (3) Public employment—in the form of reservation of posts in government jobs (Upadhyaya, 1998).

Between 1947 and 1990, reservations were implemented on paper, but their implementation on the ground was very slow and limited (Jain & Venkata Ratnam, 1994). In particular, there was no national-level reservation for OBCs (Other Backward Classes) until 1990. Article 340 of the Constitution called for a commission to identify backward classes, but no concrete action was taken for decades. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission (1953), the first backward classes commission, submitted its report, but the central government shelved its recommendations (Singh & Donald, 2019). Before 1990, higher positions (Group A and B services) were dominated by a particular class. Seats were often declared "unreserved" or left vacant, citing the lack of qualified candidates from reserved categories. It took decades for information and education about reservations to reach Dalits and Tribals living in rural and remote areas. 1990 was a watershed moment in the history of reservations. The commission headed by B.P. Mandal submitted its report in 1980, recommending 27% reservation for OBCs. No government had the political will to implement this report. Finally, on August 7, 1990, the V.P. Singh government decided to implement it, completely transforming the country's political and social structure (Gang et al., 2011). Many attacked the Mandal Commission for adopting 'Caste' as the criterion for determining social and educational backwardness. Then, *it was considered that a reservation system based on economic factors rather than caste or religion would be ideal* (Jha, et al., 2013). With the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations in the 1990s, which granted 27% reservation to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), the landscape of Indian politics and social discourse was fundamentally altered (Gang, et al., 2011).

In recent years, the provision of 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) through the 103rd Constitutional Amendment Act 2019 has added a new dimension of 'economic criteria' to this debate (Jose, et al., 2023). EWS reservation is a revolutionary change in the Indian reservation system, as it, for the first time, makes 'economic status' the basis for reservation, rather than 'caste.' To implement EWS reservation, the government amended two key articles of the Constitution:

Article 15(6): It empowers the state to make special provisions for economically weaker sections in educational institutions (including private institutions).

Article 16(6): It provides for a maximum of 10% reservation on economic grounds in government jobs.

The central government has set strict economic criteria for availing EWS reservation. It is available only to those who do not fall under the SC, ST, or OBC categories (i.e., poor people from the general category).

The biggest controversy surrounding EWS reservation was whether it violated the Constitution's "Basic Structure." In 2022, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court upheld it by a 3:2 majority. *The court held that Reservation can be based on poverty, not just caste.* The 50% limit (Indra Sawhney case) was only for caste-based reservations; EWS may be excluded. Critics argue that the ₹8 lakh limit is too high, disproportionately benefiting the lower-middle class rather than the truly poor (Kumar, 2025). Many question why, when the income limit for both OBCs and EWS is ₹8 lakh, the land and housing requirements for EWS are different. EWS reservation has redefined the definition of "equality" in India. It recognizes that poverty can exist in any caste and is a significant obstacle to individual progress (Kumar, 2025; Verma, 2023). The conclusion of the proposal should focus on the fact that reservations are not merely a poverty alleviation program, but a means to ensure representation. Through a SWOT analysis, we can move towards a balanced system that upholds both social justice and efficiency.

Review of Literature

Literature on the subject of reservation and caste can be broadly divided into three categories:

Historical and Constitutional Perspective

This category includes studies that focus on the origins of reservations and the constitutional debates surrounding them. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's renowned work, "*Annihilation of Caste*", is a sharp and revolutionary critique of the caste system in Indian society. In this book, Dr. Ambedkar clarifies that reservations are not merely a means of economic advancement, but a political and social weapon against caste-based humiliation, exclusion, and inequality. Dr. Ambedkar believed that the caste system in India was not merely a "division of labor," but a "hierarchical division of laborers." According to him, the purpose of reservations was not simply to provide economic benefits, but to restore the human dignity that had been denied for centuries. *Even if a Dalit individual becomes wealthy, society still views him through the lens of his caste.* But when that same individual becomes part of the government or administration (bureaucracy) through reservations, he gains the 'legal power' that directly challenges social discrimination. Reservation is not charity, but a right for those communities that have been excluded from the mainstream. Dr. Ambedkar argued that if all the people running the country belonged only to the upper castes, they would never understand the pain and problems of Dalits or other backward communities. He said that only by becoming a part of the administration could people from these communities ensure better laws and policies for themselves. Their presence in the government machinery would help prevent atrocities against their communities (Ambedkar, 1936/2004).

Marc Galanter is a renowned American legal scholar and sociologist who has conducted extensive research on the Indian reservation system and the judiciary. His famous book, "*Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*," (1984) is considered one of the most authoritative works on the subject. Galanter's analysis primarily focuses on how Indian courts have balanced "formal equality" and "affirmative action" (or compensatory discrimination). According to Galanter, two types of equality clash in the Indian Constitution: first, *individual equality*, which means every citizen should have equal opportunities (Articles 14, 15(1), 16(1)); and second, *group-based equality*, which involves special provisions to uplift historically disadvantaged groups (Articles 15(4), 16(4)). Galanter explained that the judiciary has determined that reservations do not violate the 'right to equality' but are, in fact, a means of fulfilling it. Through a detailed examination of judicial interpretations of Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution, Galanter demonstrates that reservation policies are not an exception, but rather a constitutional instrument for bringing historically disadvantaged groups into the mainstream. Galanter analyzed how the courts defined "backwardness." Initially, the courts objected to considering only caste as the basis for defining backwardness. However, later (especially after the Mandal Commission), the courts accepted that in India, "caste" and "class" are often two sides of the same coin. According to Galanter, the judiciary considered caste a significant "indicator" of social backwardness (Galanter, 1984).

Granville Austin, in his renowned book "*The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*," described the Indian Constitution as a "social document." He believed that the primary objective of the Indian Constitution was to bring about a "social revolution." According to Austin, for the members of the Constituent Assembly, reservations were not merely about allocating government jobs, but rather a tool to fundamentally transform India's centuries-old, deeply entrenched social structure. Austin argues that the Constituent Assembly aimed to achieve three goals simultaneously: national unity, democracy, and social revolution. He believed that neither democracy nor national unity could be sustained unless special opportunities (reservations) were provided to the oppressed sections of society. Therefore, reservations were considered the foundation of "social justice" (Austin, 1999). Austin explained that there was extensive discussion in the Constituent Assembly on the fact that mere "legal equality" (the same law for everyone) was not enough. Inequality in India was so deeply entrenched that it was necessary to treat "unequals unequally" to bring the disadvantaged up to par. Reservation was the instrument that had the potential to transform "formal equality of opportunity" into "substantive equality of opportunity." According to Austin, social revolution meant including those in the decision-making process who had been excluded for thousands of years. He argued that reservations had broken the monopoly of the elite. Reservations in administration and politics challenged the dominance of the upper castes. Austin believed that when a Dalit or Tribal person sits in the corridors of power, it transforms the psychological framework of the entire society (Compton, 1968).

Mandal Commission and OBC Reservation

Since the 1990s, a significant portion of the literature has focused on OBC reservation and its political impact. Christophe Jaffrelot explains that for decades after independence, Indian politics, particularly within the Congress party, was dominated by upper castes (Brahmins, Baniyas, Rajputs). Lower castes had the numbers (votes), but not the power. The recommendations of the Mandal Commission (OBC reservations) awakened a consciousness within these castes that they too were entitled to govern. Jaffrelot argues that democracy in India initially existed only at the superficial level. After the Mandal Commission recommendations, the focus of politics shifted from 'development' to 'representation' and 'identity'. This wave gave rise to leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and Mayawati in North India, who, through regional parties, directly challenged the political dominance of the upper castes. Jaffrelot calls it the "Silent Revolution" because this change occurred without any bloody conflict or civil war, yet it completely transformed the centuries-old political and social structure of India (especially North India). According to Jaffrelot, the Mandal Commission proved that the backward classes no longer simply wanted "welfare" from the state, but rather wanted to "govern" the state. Reservation gave them the confidence and legal basis to challenge the traditional power structure. For Jaffrelot, this revolution was "silent" because it came through the ballot box, but its consequences were "explosive" because it overturned India's centuries-old caste hierarchy on the political stage (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Satish Deshpande's argument is considered one of the most important theoretical contributions to understanding "caste and privilege" in modern Indian sociology. In his book "*Contemporary India: A Sociological View*," he analyzes how the facade of

'merit' conceals the historical advantages enjoyed by upper castes. He argues that caste has "disappeared" in today's urban, educated, and upper-caste society, but only for those who benefit from it. An upper-caste person often says, "I don't believe in caste" or "Everyone is equal to me." Deshpande explains that they can say this because their caste no longer bothers them; in fact, their caste has already provided them with everything they needed (education, wealth, connections). In contrast, for a Dalit person, caste remains "visible" because they face discrimination or taunts about reservations at every turn. Deshpande questions the concept of "merit." He argues that what we call "ability" is often simply "cultural capital". Cultural capital is a crucial concept in sociology, introduced by the renowned French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s. Simply put, cultural capital refers to the non-financial assets that help a person achieve a higher status in society, obtain a better education, and achieve success. Just as money allows us to buy goods, cultural capital allows us to gain respect and opportunities in society. Upper castes have historically possessed a wealth of education, language skills (English), and social connections. The environment, books, and discussions a child from an upper-caste family is exposed to at home naturally prepare them for competitive exams. The conclusion is that when such a child succeeds, they attribute it to their "personal effort," while conveniently forgetting the "launch pad" provided by their caste background. According to Deshpande, society assumes that merit is something that is inherent in a person, whereas in reality, it is constructed through social resources. He demonstrates that modernity has not eradicated caste but has rather reinscribed it in new and subtle forms. His writings help us understand that the "merit versus reservation" debate is fundamentally linked to unequal structures of power and privilege. His work is crucial for understanding social justice and contemporary India (Deshpande, 2013; Kamra, 2023).

The Debate on Merit and Efficiency

This literature analyzes the arguments for and against affirmative action (reservations).

Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Madhav Khosla's argument is based on their recent research paper, "*Caste Formalism: The Law and Politics of Equality in India*" (2025), published in the journal *Law and Contemporary Problems*. They use the term "caste formalism" to describe a situation where the law, rather than eliminating caste, has deepened and solidified it. According to Mehta and Khosla, Indian law no longer views caste as a historical and social form of discrimination, but rather as a rigid administrative category. The Constitution initially intended to treat caste as an "evil" to be eradicated. The current situation is that the law has made caste a "permanent identity" (Mehta, 2017). The state now views citizens not as individuals but as members of "caste groups." This is what they call "caste formalism." They argue that the reservation system was originally meant to be an exception—only for those who were most exploited (such as Dalits). But now it has become the norm. Today, a large segment of society falls under some form of "quota" or reservation. With almost every group claiming backwardness, reservation is no longer a tool to rectify "historical injustice," but rather a means of distributing political power and resources. Mehta and Khosla argue that instead of becoming a "caste-less society," India is becoming a "federation of castes." The framers of the Constitution intended that individuals should not be identified by their caste (individualism unmediated by caste). However, the current system has divided society into separate compartments (Khosla, 2020; Khosla & Mehta, 2016/Updated 2024). Now, each caste competes with the other for its share. This has further naturalized caste identities. The most worrying thing is that this system has closed the doors to escaping caste. 'If you have a 'caste certificate' to receive state benefits (education, employment), you can never give up your caste. The law has made caste the most important part of your identity. You can't simply remain an 'Indian citizen' even if you want to; you have to fit into one caste or another' (Gupta, 2000). Their conclusion is that the law (reservation) that was intended to eliminate casteism has inadvertently given caste a modern and legal form. Therefore, instead of moving towards a casteless society, we are moving towards a society where caste determines everything. This study offers a new perspective on the ongoing debates surrounding reservations, equality, and constitutional morality, and demands serious introspection from policymakers and scholars alike (Khosla & Mehta, 2025).

Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze argue that India has approached the fight for "social justice" from the wrong end. They are not opposed to reservations, but they believe that focusing solely on higher education without a foundation will not eliminate inequality. Amartya Sen's most famous theory is the '*Capability Approach*' and he argues that true poverty is not a lack of income, but a "lack of capabilities." If a Dalit or tribal child is malnourished or doesn't receive a good education in primary school, their 'capability' has already been lost. By the time they reach college age, they are already out of the race. As such, the benefits of university reservations will never reach them. Sen and Dreze argue that India's education system is like a pyramid with a weak base and a heavy top. Governments spend lavishly on institutions like IITs and IIMs, but leave government primary schools to fend for themselves. The result is that reservations in higher education only benefit a select few (creamy layer) who have somehow managed to escape the broken school system. The poorest and most disadvantaged are filtered out at the school level itself. Jean Dreze often makes the comparison that countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, whose economies were smaller than India, have achieved better Human Development Index (HDI) than India by investing in health and education. In India, reservation has been considered the "sole instrument" of social justice, whereas it should have been only a "supplement". Without providing good education and health to all, reservation only serves the purpose of "redistribution of opportunities", not "creation of opportunities". One of their key arguments is that unless all citizens (especially lower castes) are guaranteed health and education, they cannot effectively participate in democracy. Education and health are not just "services," but rather instruments of "empowerment." Simply reserving university seats does not confer the agency or power that comes from a good upbringing and education from childhood. In short, Sen and Dreze argue that India must address "Radical Needs" for social justice. The right formula, they argue, is universal healthcare plus a common school system plus effective nutrition programs. Until this

happens, reservations in higher education will only “treat the symptoms,” not the disease (caste and economic inequality) (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

Contemporary Issues: Creamy Layer and Sub-categorization

Recent Supreme Court judgments (such as the 2024 judgment on sub-quotas within quotas) and Academic articles are now discussing whether sub-categorization within Scheduled Castes (SC) is necessary to ensure that the most backward castes benefit.

The 2024 Supreme Court judgment (*State of Punjab vs. Davinder Singh--Civil Appeal No. 2317 of 2011*) is a watershed moment, overturning the 2004 *E.V. Chinnaiiah judgment* (*E.V. Chinnaiiah vs. State of Andhra Pradesh 2005, 1 SCC 394*). It is now accepted in academic and legal circles that ‘sub-classification’ is not only constitutional but also essential for ‘distributive justice’. Earlier (notably in the Chinnaiiah judgment) it was believed that Scheduled Castes (SCs) were a “homogenous class”. In the 2024 judgment, the Court acknowledged that the castes included in the SC list are not homogenous. There are vast differences in historical and social backwardness between them. For example, the Valmiki and Mazhabi Sikhs in Punjab, or the Madiga community in Andhra Pradesh/Telangana, argue that the bulk of reservations are already being taken by empowered Dalit castes (such as Chamar/Jatav or Mala).

This is a major point of debate in academics. (1) Formal equality, such as treating all SCs with the same stick and treating them all equally. (2) Substantive equality, such as the Supreme Court (CJI Chandrachud and Justice Gavai) arguing that “treating unequals equally is inequality.” If the state feels that the benefits of reservation are not “trickle down,” it has the right to give preference to the most disadvantaged section (most backward). This is being called “Preferential Treatment,” not discrimination (Rao & Vijaisri, 2024).

This is the most controversial aspect of the decision, and has generated considerable academic scrutiny. Justice B.R. Gavai, in his opinion, stated that a “creamy layer” should be recognized within SCs so that reservation benefits are not limited to those who have advanced socioeconomically (Teltumbade, 2025). However, many Dalit thinkers and scholars (as we can find in the writings of Anand Teltumbde or Suraj Yengde) oppose this. They argue that SC reservation is not a poverty alleviation program, but a right to representation against untouchability and historical exclusion (Yengde, 2019; Teltumbde, 2025). Even the son of an IAS officer can be a victim of caste discrimination, so implementing a “creamy layer” based on economic status may be constitutionally invalid. This decision is also important from a political science perspective. It restored the power to the states to decide the distribution of reservation benefits without disturbing Article 341 (which empowers the President to finalize the SC list). This gives states greater power to ensure social justice in Indian federalism.

Research Gap

Although extensive research is available on caste and reservation, there is very little integrated study of its internal strengths and weaknesses and external threats through SWOT analysis.

Research Questions

- Has affirmative action truly reduced caste-based discrimination?
- Is a combination of economic criteria (EWS) and caste-based criteria feasible?
- How much will sub-categorization benefit the most backward communities?

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the current status of the reservation system.
- To analyze the social and economic impacts of reservations using the SWOT model.
- To suggest policy reforms.

Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis H0: The reservation system in India has significantly improved the socio-political representation of marginalized communities (Strength), but the unequal distribution of its benefits and increasing politicization are diminishing its effectiveness (Weakness & Threat).

Sub Hypotheses

(H01): The benefits of reservation have largely been limited to a ‘creamy layer’ (privileged class) within each reserved category, as a result of which the most backward people within the same category remain outside the mainstream of development.

(H02): While caste-based reservations have empowered marginalized sections of society, they have also deepened caste identity within society, posing a threat to the constitutional ideal of a ‘caste-less society’.

(H03): Due to the increasing privatization of the economy, there is a shortage of jobs in the public sector, which is gradually reducing the actual impact and relevance of the current reservation system.

(H04): The ‘sub-categorization’ of quotas within reserved categories (such as SC/ST) presents an important opportunity to make social justice more precise and inclusive.

(H05): The introduction of 10% EWS reservation has shifted the traditional principle of reservation from ‘social backwardness’ to ‘economic status,’ which will form the basis for a reassessment of reservation policy in the future.

Research Methodology

The present research adopts SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) as a qualitative research methodology to understand the multidimensional impacts of reservations. This framework provides a balanced analysis of the policy's internal strengths and external challenges.

Strength: The benefits of caste-based reservation cannot be limited to just “getting a job.” It must be seen within the broader framework of “affirmative action” and “compensatory discrimination.”

1. *Redressing Historical Injustice:* The “Varna system” and “caste system” in Indian society deprived a large section of the population (Dalits and backward classes) of education, property, and a dignified life. Reservation has become the most powerful means of atonement for this historical sin and of bringing these sections into the mainstream (Narula, 2010).
2. *Representation, Inclusivity and Power Sharing:* Democracy is incomplete unless decision-making bodies (Parliament, Legislative Assemblies, and the bureaucracy) reflect every segment of society. Reservations ensured that a particular class did not monopolize the collector's chair or the corridors of the ministry. This is decentralized soft power. This is the biggest and most direct benefit of reservation. Democracy means not just voting, but also participation in the bureaucracy and decision-making process. Moreover, at the time of independence, India's bureaucracy was completely dominated by certain upper castes. Reservation has broken this “monopoly.” In political theory, this is called “representative bureaucracy.” When a Dalit or tribal person becomes a Collector or SP, the character of the State becomes more inclusive (Ambagudia, 2022).
3. *Social Mobility:* From the perspective of sociology and economics, reservations have created a “Dalit/Backward Middle Class” for the first time in India. Communities that had been deprived of property or land rights for thousands of years received government jobs through reservation, thereby gaining economic security. This economic security empowered them to provide better education for their children and to raise their voices in politics. The rise of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati's politics was made possible by this “reservation-beneficiary middle class.” Reservations have acted as a catalyst. When a Dalit or a person from a backward family secures a government job, they not only alleviate their own poverty but also open doors to education and respect for their future generations. This creates a multiplier effect (Jayal, 2013).
4. *Dignity and Self-Respect:* Amartya Sen and other scholars believe that the psychological impact of reservations is profound. The presence of Dalits/OBCs in public spaces, universities, and offices has weakened the inertia of untouchability. When a Dalit person occupies a high position, it directly challenges the age-old notions of “purity and pollution.” This is called “assertion of identity” (Gudavarthy, 2012).
5. *Diversity and Administrative Sensitivity:* This argument is often overlooked, but it's crucial for governance. An administration that includes people from all sections of society is more sensitive. For example, if a community official is involved in formulating policies on manual scavenging or sanitation, they will understand the ground realities better than an “elite” official. This is called the advantage of “lived experience” (Thirupathi, 2021).

Thus, reservation is not just a poverty alleviation program in India, but a historic process of deepening Indian democracy. It has brought marginalized communities out of a “culture of silence” for centuries and provided them with a “political presence” in Parliament and administration. It has not only led to the “democratization of bureaucracy,” bringing diversity and sensitivity to administration, but has also created an “educated and active middle class” within the deprived sections that is now capable of fighting for its “dignity” and constitutional rights; in short, reservation has played a decisive role in transforming India from a merely “procedural” to a “substantive” democracy.

Weaknesses: Any policy that is decades-old is bound to have some inconsistencies. The reservation also faces some major weaknesses:

1. *Concentration of benefits and the ‘Creamy Layer’:* The biggest criticism of reservations is that their benefits have been limited to certain families or castes within a single category. Those who have benefited once and become empowered continue to benefit repeatedly, while the poorest within the same caste remain disadvantaged (Yoganandham, 2025).
2. *The Debate of Merit vs. Social Justice:* It is often argued that the wide gap in marks in competitive examinations compromises efficiency. Although the Supreme Court has repeatedly stated that efficiency does not depend solely on marks, this remains a source of deep discontent and brain drain in society.
3. *Political Appeasement:* Reservation has become more of an electoral weapon than an administrative tool. Instead of addressing real development issues (such as privatization of education and health), parties promise to increase the reservation limit, which creates divisions in society (Roy, 2012).
4. *Social prejudice and mental inertia:* Social prejudice and mental inertia have been identified as the most significant threats regarding reservation. Structural reforms like sub-categorization can only succeed if they are supported by social restructuring. If society's attitude towards the beneficiary remains negative, then despite representation, that person will continue to be a victim of institutional discrimination. Therefore, this policy should become a tool for mental transformation, not just an administrative allocation.

Opportunities: There are several ways to make reservations more effective and equitable in the future:

1. *Inclusion of Economic Basis (EWS Reservation):* The 103rd Constitutional Amendment (EWS) has changed the definition of reservation. Now, not only caste, but also poverty is the basis for reservation. This presents a major opportunity to reduce the growing discontent among the upper castes and bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.
2. *Sub-categorization:* Recent Supreme Court decisions have called for sub-categorization within the SC/ST category. This is

a revolutionary opportunity that will enable castes (such as Valmiki or Musahar) that have been marginalized until now to receive special benefits from reservation.

3. *Private Sector Engagement:* India's economy is now moving away from government jobs and toward the private sector. If the government, in collaboration with private companies, develops policies for voluntary inclusion or skill development, the scope of social justice can be further expanded.
4. *Data-driven Governance:* Through modern technology and the Caste Census, the government can obtain accurate data. This will help determine which castes truly need reservations and which no longer need it.

Threats: The reservation system faces some serious threats such as:

1. *Social Animosity and Polarization:* Reservation issues often lead to violent clashes and hatred between reserved and unreserved categories. This weakens the social fabric and fosters bitterness among young people (Sharma, 2012; Kumar, 2022).
2. *Privatization and Decreasing Government Jobs:* In today's times, the government sector is shrinking, and public sector undertakings (PSUs) are being privatized. In such a situation, the constitutional right to reservation can only remain on paper, as jobs will disappear. This poses an existential threat to the entire purpose of the reservation (Mandal, 2009).
3. *Judicial Activism and Legal Complexities:* Issues such as the 50% reservation limit (Indira Sawhney case) and reservation in promotions are constantly entangled in the courts. The conflict between judicial decisions and political will makes this system uncertain (Nath & Lakshmi, 2025).
4. *Institutionalization of Caste:* Reservation was intended to eliminate caste, but ironically, it has further strengthened caste identities. Instead of abandoning their caste, people are now clinging to it even more tightly for political and economic gain (Gupta, 2005).

Result: The SWOT analysis of the presented research indicates that while sub-hypotheses (H01), (H02), and (H03) provide sufficient evidence to support the null hypothesis (H0), the results for (H04) and (H05) are inconclusive. Therefore, the latter two hypotheses are partially rejected, though not fully accepted.

Discussion

Often, supporters of reservations believe that reservations are not just a 'means to get a job' but a democratic right. The main argument of Teltumbde and other supporters is that reservation is not a "poverty alleviation program," but a mechanism to "ensure participation." If only members of a certain class occupy India's decision-making institutions (Parliament, judiciary, bureaucracy), they will never be able to properly understand the problems of other sections of society. Reservation ensures that every class has a presence in the machinery that runs the country. Proponents argue that upper castes have a "historical cumulative advantage." Centuries of monopoly over education and wealth have allowed them to build such "cultural capital" that they can easily succeed even without reservations. Dalits and backward classes, on the other hand, have a "historical cumulative disadvantage." Reservations offer a way to correct this imbalance. It is also argued that diversity does not diminish institutional efficiency but rather enhances it. When people from different backgrounds work together, new ideas and different perspectives emerge. Teltumbde emphasizes that 'merit' is not something innate, but rather a result of resources and opportunities. Teltumbde's strong argument has been that if the state has failed to provide equal and high-quality primary education to all, it must provide reservations in higher education and jobs (Teltumbde, 2025). Reservations are a means of compensating for that failure. If you can't provide equal opportunities to everyone at the beginning, you must provide special concessions at the end (at the time of selection). Moreover, reservation acts as a catalyst. When a person from a reserved category becomes a doctor or engineer, they not only improve their family but also become a role model for their entire community, breaking the centuries-old inferiority complex. But Teltumbde says that reservation cannot be abolished as long as the caste system exists. He famously argued: "*The goal of reservation should be to eliminate caste, but as long as caste-based humiliation and exploitation exist, caste-based protection (reservation) is essential*" (Teltumbde, 2025).

An analysis of government data and various reports (such as DoPT annual reports) reveals that despite reservation, the representation of SCs, STs and OBCs, especially in higher echelons (higher bureaucracy), is far below their population ratio (Doner, 2022). Data shows that as we move up the ranks, the number of reserved categories decreases. In Groups C and D (lower positions), SC/ST/OBC representation is often close to or equal to their quota. The biggest problem is in Groups A and B (officer tiers). SC/ST and especially OBC representation is very low in the positions of Secretaries and Joint Secretaries of the Central Government (ANI, 2018). OBC reservations were implemented after 1990, so their situation is even direr than that of SC/STs. According to recent data (such as reports by P.S. Krishnan), the number of OBCs in central government jobs has remained well below their 27% quota (approximately 17-21%) (Krishnan, 2017). This is primarily because OBC reservations were introduced later and the "creamy layer" provision excludes many qualified candidates. Thousands of positions in government departments are vacant, known as the "backlog." Often, positions are left vacant citing the "None Found Suitable" (NFS). This situation is particularly prevalent in universities (Professor/Associate Professor) and scientific institutions (Sukumar, 2022; Hasan, 2022).

Furthermore, there are several other reasons for not fully benefiting from reservations. These include (1) in recent years, the government has made direct recruitment to higher positions (Joint Secretary Level) through lateral entry, where reservations are not applicable. This is seen as a step that reduces the benefits of reservations. (2) Privatization of public sector undertakings (PSUs) is eliminating jobs where reservations were mandatory. (3) Contract recruitment is increasing, rather than permanent employment, where reservation rules are often not strictly followed. (4) Legal complexities surrounding issues like reservation

in promotions prevent many officers from reaching higher positions. Data proves that while reservations exist on paper, there is still a severe lack of diversity in the power centers. This is why there is a growing demand for a caste census to determine who has benefited and who remains excluded, relative to their population (Mandal, 2009).

Professor Sukhdeo Thorat is a leading Indian economist and former UGC Chairman. He has conducted extensive research on the economic aspects of reservation and social discrimination. Thorat believes that reservation is not merely a social issue, but an economic necessity. They argue that since liberalization, government jobs are declining and the private sector is expanding. Without reservations in the private sector, SC/ST and OBC communities will virtually lose employment opportunities. He suggests the government provide incentives to private companies that embrace diversity, or enact legislation to ensure representation there (Thorat, 2023). Thorat believes that reservation alone will not suffice, but rather that attention must be paid to capacity building for students from reserved categories. He advocates for special remedial coaching and increased financial support for backward classes in higher education institutions. Thorat's research has proven that the Indian market is not completely "free" or "independent," but rather discriminates on the basis of caste. He demonstrated through audit studies that, despite having equal qualifications, candidates with upper caste names are more likely to be called for interviews than those with Dalit names (Shukla, 2025). He suggests enacting strict anti-discrimination laws to prevent this "invisible discrimination" in the market. He believes that reservations in jobs alone are insufficient, as a large population in rural India depends on agriculture. He advocates for land reforms and reservations in government contracts (public procurement) for Dalit and backward-class entrepreneurs so that they can have their own capital (Prakash, 2026). *Thorat often emphasizes that the debate on reservations should be based on facts rather than emotions.* He suggests periodically collecting data on the socio-economic status of different communities and reviewing the extent and beneficiaries of reservations based on that. Thorat's core principle is that "unless opportunities are equal, competition cannot be fair." He sees reservations not as a "charity" but as a "constitutional reform" that ensures the participation of backward classes in India's GDP and development (Thorat, 2005, May).

Due to grabbing the opportunities of reservations, many times, people of the general caste get fake certificates made (PTI, 2006, Jan.29). The fundamental purpose of reservation is to advance those classes that have been left behind for centuries. When a wealthy or upper-class individual resorts to a fake certificate, they snatch a seat or job that should have gone to someone truly in need (Mishra, 2024). This goes against the principles of social justice. But it is a harsh reality. Such actions make the issue of reservation more sensitive (Mahapatra, 2008, July 29). On the one hand, India wants to create an 'egalitarian society'. On the other hand, the caste system is so deeply rooted that formal equality alone is not enough; it requires 'substantive equality' (Dhotrekar, 2022). Thus, equality of opportunity must be considered along with equality of outcome. Sub-categorization, or "classification within classification," may be an administrative solution, but it's not a magic wand (Singh & Pushpam, 2025). But states will now have to collect empirical data to sub-classify which castes have remained backward (Tyagi & Bahuguna, 2024). Basically, unless society's and the system's mindsets change, its benefits won't reach those at the back of the queue. As mentioned earlier, people obtain fake certificates. If sub-categorization is implemented, there's a risk that privileged individuals will also obtain fake documents for those "most backward" categories. Until the integrity and mindset of officials in the system change, the truly deserving will continue to be deprived of their rights. Moreover, even if someone gains a high position by taking advantage of a reservation, the social mindset often tries to belittle them through the lens of "merit." Until a mindset is developed that measures merit not just by "marks" but by "struggles and circumstances," the true purpose of reservation (self-respect and representation) will remain unfulfilled. The castes for which this sub-classification is being implemented often lack awareness of it. The government makes the rules, but people in villages and remote areas are unaware of them. The mindset that reservation is merely a "job" must change; in reality, it's a "share." Sub-classification is a weapon, but if the hands wielding it (the administration) and the society accepting it (all of us) continue in the same old ways, the results will remain unchanged. The law can show the way, but it is society's thinking that must lead the way.

Conclusion

In short, it may be said that as long as caste exists in the society and the general caste continues to exploit the lower castes, that is, until its mentality does not change, the neglected classes will not get the full benefit of the reservation or any protective measures. As long as this continues, it will remain used for political power. As long as it continues to be used for power, caste will not be eradicated. Reservation is merely a means of providing employment, but it cannot provide "social acceptance" (Lavish, 2024). Until the mindset of the general category or dominant classes changes and they recognize equal status for backward castes, individuals from reserved categories will continue to face "mental and subtle discrimination" even if they hold high positions (Mahajan, 2025). This is often referred to as the "glass ceiling," where position is achieved but influence is not (Deshpande & Darity Jr, 2016). As long as reservation continues to be used for vote-bank politics, political parties will only exacerbate caste identities rather than eliminate them. Politicians consider caste unity essential for their electoral alignment. This overshadows real issues (such as quality education and equal opportunity), and only quota politics prevails. Dr. Ambedkar believed that eliminating caste requires eliminating caste consciousness (Ramakrishnan & Pallavi, 2023). Ironically, caste identity is essential for accessing reservation benefits. Caste polarization is essential for gaining power. As a result, instead of eliminating caste, it leads to the institutionalization of caste.

This study presents a SWOT analysis of the caste and reservation system in India, demonstrating that reservation has simultaneously empowered people and posed policy challenges. The study confirms that reservations have significantly increased the representation of marginalized groups, thereby strengthening democratic inclusion and political participation. This constitutes its primary strength. However, the research also indicates that resource distribution has not been equitable. The

problem of the 'creamy layer,' inequality within reserved categories, and the need for sub-categorization highlight the weaknesses of the reservation system. Furthermore, increasing privatization is limiting opportunities in the public sector, gradually diminishing the effectiveness of reservation. The study also underscores that transparency and targeted policies can make social justice more precise and inclusive, representing a significant future opportunity. Conversely, the deepening influence of caste identity and the shift from social backwardness to economic criteria through EWS reservation present serious ideological threats to the fundamental spirit of the reservation policy. Ultimately, this article concludes that the reservation system cannot be considered static or entirely unacceptable. It can only be advanced towards a more equitable and inclusive society through continuous reassessment, adherence to constitutional morality, and comprehensive social reforms.

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