



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed Edition :

www.ijlra.com

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ISSN

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AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: **PERSPECTIVES FROM INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

Affirmative action in India has been a crucial strategy meant for addressing historical injustices and promoting social justice. This paper examines the implementation and impact of affirmative action policies in India, focusing on reservations in education, employment, and political representation. It explores the historical context that necessitated affirmative action measures, the legal framework supporting them, and their effectiveness in addressing socio-economic disparities. The paper also discusses challenges and criticisms surrounding affirmative action, including issues of meritocracy, and backlash from privileged groups. This paper also discusses the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation policy in India which serves as a form of affirmative action meant for providing opportunities to those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, it analyses the role of affirmative action in fostering inclusive growth, empowering marginalized communities, and advancing social cohesion. This paper offers insights into the complications of affirmative action in the Indian context and its implications for social justice.

KEYWORD: Affirmative Action, Reservation Policy Social Justice, Marginalized Communities, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Affirmative Action incorporates policies and programs that aim to address discrimination by providing special treatment or opportunities to groups who have been historically marginalised or disadvantaged, in areas of employment, education, and political representation . The goal of affirmative action is to encourage diversity and opportunity by actively considering factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, or other characteristics in decision-making processes. Affirmative action in India is commonly referred to as "reservation" or "quota system." The roots of affirmative action are found in the Indian Constitution, which was adopted in 1950. The

Constitution of India includes provisions for affirmative action to address historical discrimination and social inequalities faced by certain groups, primarily to other backward classes, Scheduled tribe, Scheduled caste. Over time, the scope of reservations has expanded to include other disadvantaged groups such as economically weaker sections . In 2019, the Indian government introduced a 10% quota for EWS in educational institutions and public employment, in addition to existing reservations for SCs, STs, and OBCs. Social justice means fair and equal distribution of opportunities, resources in the society, regardless of individuals' social status. It incorporates the idea that all members of society should have equal access to essential goods and services, as well as fair treatment and opportunities for advancement. Social justice seeks to address and correct systemic inequalities, discrimination, and injustices that exist based on race, ethnicity, gender, social and economic status.

At its core, social justice aims to promote fairness, inclusion, and dignity for all individuals, particularly those who have been historically marginalised or disadvantaged. It involves challenging and dismantling structures of oppression and privilege that perpetuate inequality and advocating for policies and practices that promote equity and empowerment.

Social justice includes the following important principles:

- **Egalitarianism:** Securing equal distribution of resources and opportunity to all irrespective of their social status.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Recognizing and valuing the diversity of human experiences and identities, and actively working to create inclusive environments where everyone feels respected and included.
- **Human Rights:** Upholding the inherent dignity and rights of all human beings , as given in international human rights treaties ,conventions.
- **Unity :** Standing in unity with the marginalised, oppressed communities, and working together to remove injustice and promote social change.
- **Redistribution:** Redistributing resources and wealth to address systemic inequalities and ensure a more equitable distribution of opportunities and outcomes.

Overall, social justice seeks to create a social order where every person gets the chance to lead a dignified life, free from discrimination, oppression, and injustice. It is a fundamental principle of a fair and democratic society and requires ongoing commitment and action from individuals, communities, and institutions to achieve.

1. HISTORY OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

During the Vedic period in ancient India (around 1500 BCE to 500 BCE), the caste system, or varna system, laid its early foundations. The Rigveda, one of the oldest Hindu scriptures, mentions the concept of varna, which categorised society into four varnas : Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras . This classification was based on occupation and social status, with each varna assigned specific duties and responsibilities. Brahmins were considered the highest caste due to their role in performing religious rituals and imparting knowledge, followed by Kshatriyas responsible for protecting society, Vaishyas engaged in commerce and agriculture, and Shudras who provided services to the other three varnas. The varna system was believed to be ordained by divine law, with individuals' social status determined by birth. While the caste system during the Vedic period was not as rigid or hierarchical as it later became, it laid the groundwork for the social stratification and discrimination that characterised Indian society for centuries to come.

The advent of British colonial rule in India significantly impacted the caste system, introducing both changes and continuities in caste dynamics. Initially, the British sought to govern India by exploiting existing social divisions, including the caste system, for administrative purposes. They relied on collaboration with local elites, often from higher castes, to facilitate governance, reinforcing existing social hierarchies and caste-based power structures.

The British introduced administrative practices such as censuses and classification systems that categorised Indians by caste, leading to the codification and perpetuation of caste identities. While these practices aimed to facilitate governance, they also institutionalised caste differences and informed policies and resource allocation based on caste demographics. Legal reforms under British rule aimed to abolish certain caste-based practices, such as sati (widow burning) and infanticide, which were associated with specific castes. However, British legal norms inadvertently reinforced aspects of the caste system, such as discrimination, through various laws and regulations. Education policies introduced Western education in India, challenging traditional caste hierarchies by providing opportunities for individuals from lower castes to gain education and access professions outside their traditional roles. Yet, access to education remained limited for many lower-caste individuals due to socio-economic barriers and discrimination. Social reform movements also emerged during British colonial rule, advocating for social equality and the abolition of caste-based discrimination, often drawing inspiration from Western democratic ideals. Figures like Raja

Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotirao Phule played significant roles in challenging caste-based injustices and advocating for social reform.

Despite these changes, British colonialism also reinforced caste identities and divisions, leading to their politicisation as different caste groups vied for power and representation. The legacy of British colonialism continues to shape caste dynamics and social inequality in contemporary India, with the caste system remaining a significant social and cultural force. Overall, the advent of British colonial rule in India brought about complex changes in the caste system, combining elements of challenge and reinforcement to existing caste dynamics. Post-independence, affirmative action policies such as reservations in education, employment, and political representation were introduced to uplift marginalised communities, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs. These policies aim to promote social justice and equality by providing chances to historically disadvantaged communities to access education, jobs, and political power. However, the implementation of reservation policies has been a subject of debate and controversy. While reservations have undoubtedly benefited many individuals from marginalised castes, they have also led to concerns about meritocracy, efficiency, and fairness. Additionally, reservations have sometimes exacerbated caste tensions and fueled identity politics, particularly in electoral politics.

Despite legal and policy measures to address discrimination based on caste, it still continues to play a key role in Indian society, influencing social interactions, marriage practices, economic opportunities, and political dynamics. Discrimination and violence against Dalits and other marginalised castes persist, highlighting the enduring challenges in achieving social justice and equality for all. Moreover, caste identities continue to shape political mobilisation and voting patterns, with political parties often seeking to appeal to specific caste constituencies to secure electoral support. This has led to the emergence of caste-based political parties and alliances, further entrenching caste divisions in the political landscape.

2. NEED FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN INDIA

Affirmative action plays an important role in achieving social justice by addressing systemic inequality and promoting equal opportunities for historically marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Here are some ways affirmative action can help achieve social justice

- a. **Reducing Discrimination:** Affirmative action aims to combat discriminatory practices and prejudices that have historically disadvantaged certain groups based on characteristics

such as race, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. If these factors are actively considered in decision-making processes, affirmative action helps level the playing field and reduce systemic barriers to equality of opportunity

- b. **Promoting diversity and Inclusion:** Affirmative action promotes diversity and inclusion by ensuring representation of diverse backgrounds and perspectives in educational institutions, workplaces and other areas of society. By promoting diversity, affirmative action enriches environments with diverse perspectives, experiences, and talents, leading to more innovative and equitable outcomes.
- c. **Addressing Historical Injustice:** Affirmative action seeks to redress past injustices and injustices by providing opportunities for individuals and communities that have historically been marginalised or marginalised. Positive measures such as quotas, awareness programs and targeted recruitment efforts help to address the legacy of discrimination and disadvantage that persists in society.
- d. **Empowering Marginalised Groups:** Affirmative action enables marginalised groups to access resources, education, employment, and other opportunities that were previously unavailable or limited. By creating opportunities for social and economic progress, affirmative action empowers individuals to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion, leading to greater independence and autonomy.
- e. **Promotion of social cohesion:** By promoting equality and inclusion, affirmative action increases social cohesion and solidarity in communities and society as a whole. When people of different backgrounds have equal opportunities to succeed and participate in society, it increases a sense of belonging and common purpose, which leads to stronger bonds and greater social stability.

In general, affirmative action is an essential tool for promoting social justice . tackling inequality, promoting diversity and inclusion, increasing opportunities for influence for marginalised groups, and increasing social solidarity and cohesion. Although it is debatable and open to criticism, affirmative action remains an important mechanism for creating a fairer and more just society for all

3. CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN INDIA

India ensures social justice through reservation policies, which are designed to provide opportunities and representation to historically marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Here's

how India ensures social justice through reservation:

- a. **Constitutional Provisions:** The Indian Constitution incorporated provisions for supporting affirmative action that were originally implemented for SC and ST groups. Eventually it was expanded to include other castes. Several initiatives are taken by the government to uplift the underprivileged groups by providing better education and employment opportunities through reservation policy. Generally, reservation is given to Scheduled tribes and castes and other backward classes in the proportion of 15%. 7.5% and 27% in public employment and education. After the addition of Article 15 clause 6¹ of the Constitution of India and Article 16 clause 6² of the Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act, 10% reservation was extended to groups belonging to the economically weaker section along with above reserved classes in education and employment. This amendment was challenged by more than twenty petitioners stating that it was against Article 14³ of the constitution. However, in *Janhit Abhiyan v Union of India*⁴ The supreme court of India upheld the constitutional validity of the 103th amendment.
- b. **Reservation in Education:** The Indian Constitution under Article 15(4)⁵ gives special powers to make provision for reservation in educational institutions. This is an important aspect of the reservation policy. This clause was added after the first amendment act after the case of *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan* 1951⁶ According to the said provision, seats are reserved for SC, ST and OBC students in central and state institutions and in government aided educational establishments. In addition to reserving seats for students, the state government offers financial aid options such as scholarships, tax breaks, free books, uniforms, monthly/yearly scholarships and grants, complimentary training, and financial support for attending conferences at national and international levels.
- c. **Reservations in Employment:** Reservation is made for SCs, STs, and OBCs in employment and promotions. The percentage of reserved seats varies by state and

¹ enables the State to make special provisions for the advancement of any economically weaker section of citizens, including reservations in educational institutions.

² Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any economically weaker sections of citizens other than the classes mentioned in clause (4), in addition to the existing reservation and subject to a maximum of ten per cent.

³ The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.

⁴ Writ Petition (Civil) 55 Of 2019, (2022) SCC 1540

⁵ enables the State to make special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes

⁶ AIR 1951 SC 226

category, with the central government typically reserving around 15% of vacancies for SCs, 7.5% for STs, and up to 27% for OBCs. Article 16 (4)⁷ The Constitution authorises the State to legislate "any provision for the reservation in appointments in favour of any backward class of citizens", and "provision for the reservation to any class or classes of posts, in the services under the State in favour of the SCs and STs." Reservation increases their odds of getting admission and public employment. Affirmative action also makes provisions to relax the certain other eligibility criteria. These criteria include age limit , education qualification etc. Article 16(4) was added after the Ninety-Third Amendment Act, 2005. This amendment was challenged in *M. Nagaraj & Others v. Union of India & Others*⁸ but the supreme court upheld the validity of the amendment with certain restrictions on providing reservation.

- d. **Political Representation:** Reservation of seats in legislative bodies, both at the national and state levels, ensures political representation for SCs, STs, and OBCs. The Indian Parliament reserves seats for SCs and STs, while state legislatures reserve seats for SCs, STs, and OBCs based on their population proportions. Articles 330⁹, 332¹⁰ and 334¹¹ of our Constitution reserves seats for SCs and STs in the Central legislature and State legislatures and also at local levels for all marginalised groups. *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*¹² and *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India*¹³ Both these cases indirectly touched the topic of adequate representation of marginalised groups in politics.

3.1 IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISM

Various governmental institutions are tasked with ensuring the fair implementation of reservation policies in India. the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the Backward Classes Commission, as well as the Ministries of Social Justice and Empowerment, and Tribal Affairs. These bodies work autonomously within their designated areas. the National Commissions have the power to investigate complaints regarding the violation rights of the

⁷ Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State

⁸ AIR 2007 SC 71

⁹ the reservation of seats in the House of People for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

¹⁰ Reservation of seats for Scheduled caste and tribes in the Legislative Assemblies of the States

¹¹ grants reservations in the Lok Sabha and State Legislatures to Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and the Anglo-Indian community.

¹² AIR 1973 SC 1461, 1973 4 SCC 225

¹³ AIR 1994 SC 1918

marginalised communities in matters of recruitment and promotion, with powers similar to civil courts. Since 1950, Parliament has annually deliberated on the reports issued by these commissions. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs are responsible for the complete development of the communities through various socio-economic development schemes. Additionally, a committee is made in the parliament for the Welfare of SCs and STs. The member of this parliamentary committee belongs to the schedule tribe and caste member from the parliament . they evaluate the schemes made polices made for the marginalised groups . this committee also evaluates the representation of schedule tribe and caste and other backward class in legislature .

4. BENEFITS FROM AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Affirmative action policies have yielded several positive socio-economic effects, particularly in addressing historical injustices, promoting diversity, and fostering inclusive growth. Firstly, these policies have provided opportunities to marginalised groups to receive education, employment, and political representation. By increasing the representation of these groups in various spheres, affirmative action has empowered individuals to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, affirmative action has contributed to the diversification of educational institutions and workplaces, enriching environments with different perspectives and talents. This diversity fosters innovation and creativity, leading to more dynamic and inclusive societies. Additionally, by addressing systemic inequalities and discrimination, affirmative action has promoted social cohesion and solidarity, reduced tensions and fostering a sense of belonging among different communities.

Furthermore, affirmative action has led to the emergence of a new generation of leaders from historically marginalised backgrounds, who bring diverse perspectives and experiences to positions of influence. This not only enhances the representation of marginalised groups but also strengthens democracy by ensuring that diverse voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes.

4.1 NEGATIVE ASSUMPTION TOWARDS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Negative assumptions surrounding affirmative action include concerns about reverse discrimination, where individuals from privileged backgrounds feel unfairly disadvantaged in access to education, employment, or other opportunities due to affirmative action policies

favouring historically marginalised groups. Critics argue that affirmative action could prove to be more beneficial for less qualified candidates over more qualified candidates solely based on their demographic characteristics, undermining meritocracy. *Indra Sawhney & Ors. v. Union of India*¹⁴ dealt with the implementation of reservations for OBCs in public employment. The Supreme Court maintained the implementation of reservations for OBCs but imposed a cap of 50% on reservations. It also ruled that creamy layer midst other backward class should be not be included in receiving the benefits of reservation . In *Jarnail Singh & Ors. v. Lachhmi Narain Gupta & Ors.* Supreme Court held that the principle of excluding the creamy layer from reservation benefits in promotions should include SCs and STs as well, not just OBCs.

Additionally, there are concerns that affirmative action may perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatise beneficiaries, leading to resentment and backlash from other groups. Some argue that affirmative action policies create a sense of dependency among beneficiaries, detracting from efforts to promote self-reliance and empowerment.

Furthermore, affirmative action policies may be seen as addressing symptoms rather than root causes of inequality, as they do not address broader structural issues such as poverty, inadequate education systems, or systemic discrimination. Critics also suggest that affirmative action policies may lead to bare minimum, where individuals from marginalised groups are included superficially without addressing underlying structural inequalities. Overall, these negative assumptions highlight the complex challenges and controversies surrounding affirmative action.

5. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE GO HAND IN HAND

Affirmative action measures in India have yielded tangible results in advancing social justice, as evidenced by several key data points. Firstly, there has been a noticeable increase in the representation of marginalised communities, such as Scheduled Castes and Tribes , within higher education institutions and government sectors. This claim is supported by data provided by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, indicating a steady rise in enrolment among SC/ST students in higher education over the years. Similarly, government records from the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions reveal a corresponding uptick in the presence of SCs, STs, and Other Backward Classes within central government jobs, indicating improved employment opportunities facilitated by affirmative action policies. Moreover, political

¹⁴ SCC (L & S) supp. 1, cross-citation 1992 supp. (3) SCC 217.

representation for these marginalised groups has been significantly bolstered through reserved seats in legislative bodies, as evidenced by data from the Election Commission of India. Beyond numerical representation, affirmative action has also contributed to social mobility, with beneficiaries of reservation policies experiencing enhanced socio-economic status. This positive trajectory is further reinforced by widespread public support for affirmative action, as indicated by various opinion polls and surveys. Overall, these data points underscore the effectiveness of affirmative action in fostering social justice by providing avenues for empowerment and inclusion for historically marginalised communities in India.

CONCLUSION

Historically, it was clear that minorities face obstacles for work and education; as a result, they continue to be significantly underrepresented in significant roles in public service and in higher education. This segregation was mostly because of caste system practised in the society but as time passed, this discrimination varied in nature and started discriminating people on based on their economic and social status in the society. Affirmative action was initially implemented for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in order to minimise the effects of this discrimination, but it was eventually included economically and socially disadvantaged classes as well. The government's policies take the shape of reservation policies, which give SC, ST, OBC, and EWS reservation in employment and education. Additionally, the affirmative action policy complies with the rights to equality guaranteed by Articles 16(4), 15(4), 330, 332, and 334 of the Constitution. In addition to eliminating social injustices based on caste, race, and socioeconomic status, affirmative action has become essential in promoting the literacy rate, raising people's standards of living, changing people's attitudes toward minority groups, providing welfare to the economically disadvantaged sections of society, and more. It is also known that certain sections of the society who resist affirmative action, in particular with respect to the quota system, see it as a form of inverse discrimination towards individuals who do not get any reservation, compromise on merit. Thus, it is important for the legislators and policymakers to come together and frame policies which are focused on the most vulnerable groups of society. Otherwise, discrimination will continue in society and various actions undertaken by the government in the form of reservations will lose their purpose.

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