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EXPLORING THE RESERVATION SYSTEM AS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN INDIA: IDEA, IMPLEMENTATION, AND SOCIETAL IMPACT – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of social status on perceptions of the reservation system in South India, focusing on four key states: Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. The study uses a survey-descriptive research design, incorporating a sample of 400 respondents selected through quota sampling, with 100 participants from each state. A mixed-methods approach combines qualitative techniques such as non-participant observation, and in-depth interviews with quantitative methods, including semi-structured interview schedules and statistical analyses (chi-square and ANOVA tests). The findings reveal significant variations in the rationale behind support for reservation policies among different social groups (EWS, BC, SC, OC), with each group citing different reasons, including historical deprivation, economic concerns, and physical weakness. The study also finds significant differences in perceptions regarding the impact of reservations on access to education, employment, healthcare, government administration, and other key societal areas. Notably, social status was found to influence perceptions of financial inclusion, discrimination, and societal unrest, while areas such as social acceptability and scientific temper showed no significant variation across groups. Additionally, a Chi-Square test revealed diverse opinions across demographic groups regarding the need for more flexible reservation policies, emphasizing the need for policymakers to consider these varying perspectives when discussing potential reforms to the reservation system. This research highlights the complexity of the reservation system's impact and underscores the importance of considering social status in policy evaluations.

KEYWORDS: *Reservations: Caste-based-Reservations; Affirmative Action, Social Transformation; Social Change; South India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian caste system, an ancient social hierarchy based on notions of purity and pollution, has long shaped the socio-economic and political conditions of millions, particularly marginalizing Shudras and Dalits (Bheenaveni, 2023; Holcombe, 2020). These communities were historically denied access to education, resources, and dignity, enduring systemic exploitation by upper castes (Siddique, 2011). In response, the reservation system was introduced as a constitutional remedy to address this inequality. The system evolved over time from pre-colonial reforms to contemporary legal frameworks, reflecting a blend of social justice, political necessity, and ideological conflict (Bansal & Nath, 2010).

The foundation of reservations was laid during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with key figures like Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur pioneering caste-based quotas in government jobs and education (Raj & Gokulraja, 2015). Social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy also advocated for education and self-respect for lower castes, supporting reservations as a means to challenge Brahminical hegemony (K. S. Kumar, 2016; Suri, 1995) Under British colonial rule, policies like the Communal Award of 1932 inadvertently spurred affirmative action, granting separate electorates to Dalits and other minorities, leading to the Poona Pact of 1932, which created reserved legislative seats for Dalits within a unified Hindu electorate (Biswas, 2018; Nugent, 1979).

India's post-independence Constitution, shaped by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, institutionalized reservations for SCs and STs as a means of reparation for historical injustices (Bhaskar, 2021; Ilaiah, 2006). However, OBCs were initially excluded, sparking demands for broader inclusion, which culminated in the Mandal Commission's recommendations in 1990 for 27% reservations for OBCs (Ramaiah, 1992). The implementation of these recommendations ignited protests, but the Supreme Court upheld the OBC quota with a 50% cap on total reservations, emphasizing the balance between social justice and administrative efficiency(Rao & Padmanabhan, 2013; Somanaboina, 2021).

The Mandal Commission's legacy reshaped the reservation landscape, with states like Tamil Nadu implementing higher quotas in defiance of the 50% cap (Raju, 2014). However, the introduction of the 103rd Constitutional Amendment in 2019, which provided a 10% quota for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), shifted the focus towards class-based affirmative action, sparking debate over its impact on caste-based reparations (A. Sharma & Garg, 2020). This, along with debates on gender-based reservations and sub-categorization of SCs and STs, further complicated the reservation system,

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reflecting its dynamic and evolving nature (Kaur & Philips, 2025).

On the other hand, the reservation system has also sparked significant controversy, particularly regarding caste-based affirmative action. Various communities, including Patidars in Gujarat, Jats in northern India, Gujjars in Rajasthan, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, and Marathas in Maharashtra, have demanded inclusion in reserved categories like OBC or ST(A. K. Rai & Kumar, 2025). These demands have led to protests, legal disputes, and violent clashes. For instance, the relatively affluent Patidar community sought OBC status, citing economic disadvantage, while Jats and Gujjars, though socially and economically better-off than other backward communities, demanded reservations for equality (Chakraborty, n.d.; Jani & Parmar, 2021; A. K. Rai & Kumar, 2025). The Maratha community, despite political power, also pushed for OBC status due to economic challenges in rural areas (Patidar & Kashyap, 2024). Critics argue that granting reservations to such more prosperous or politically influential groups undermines the system's purpose of uplifting historically marginalized communities. The Kapu community in Andhra Pradesh, with significant political and economic clout, also sought OBC status, adding complexity to the debate (Meenakshi, 2024). Legal challenges have emerged, with the Supreme Court intervening in cases like that of the Marathas in Maharashtra, reducing their reservation from 16% to 12% in education and 13% in employment (The Hindu, 20024).

However, the nature and purpose of the reservations as affirmative action is multifaceted — entailing legal, social, political, and economic dimensions. Some view reservations as an essential tool for empowering marginalized communities and fostering social integration (Osborne, 2001; Sanjeev. C, 2020), while others argue that it entrenches caste-based distinctions and undermines the meritocratic ideals of fairness and equality (Chakrabarty, 2022; Verma & Barua, 2021). Moreover, as India has evolved politically and socially, the reservation system has faced new challenges, including the question of caste-based versus economic-based reservations and the role of intersectional identities, such as gender and caste, in shaping policy outcomes, therefore, one has to explore it from diverse scholarly interpretations and critiques. This paper aims to systematically review the literature surrounding India's reservation system, exploring the historical context, constitutional framework, socio-economic implications, and contemporary debates, while highlighting the evolving nature of the policy and its implications for social justice in India.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review systematically explores key themes related to India's reservation system, focusing on various dimensions such as Historical and Constitutional Foundations, Social Justice vs. Meritocracy, Economic and Identity Dynamics, Gender and Political Representation, Regional and Implementation Challenges, and Global Comparisons and Theoretical Insights.

Historical and Constitutional Foundations

The reservation system in India is deeply rooted in the country's constitutional framework, particularly Part XVI, which mandates quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in legislative bodies and public sector institutions (Jangir, 2013; A. K. Rai & Kumar, 2025). The system was initially envisioned as a temporary remedy to address the social exclusion and discrimination faced by these communities, with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar playing a pivotal role in its formulation (Bhaskar, 2022). However, due to the persistence of entrenched caste hierarchies and political mobilization, reservation policies have endured far longer than originally anticipated (Chaudhary et al., 2022; Soren, 2021). Following independence, subsequent commissions such as the Mandal Commission (1990) extended reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), thereby institutionalizing caste-based affirmative action as a cornerstone of India's social justice framework (Chopra, 2021; A. Kumar, 2021; Saxena et al., 2023). This expansion of reservations has entrenched caste as a central criterion for addressing inequality, while simultaneously shaping the discourse around social justice and affirmative action in India.

Social Justice vs. Meritocracy

The tension between social justice and meritocracy remains a central theme in the scholarly debate on reservations. Proponents argue that the system plays a crucial role in countering historical discrimination, improving social mobility, and promoting greater representation for marginalized communities (Imam, 2024; Soren, 2021). Scholars such as (Ambagudia, 2019) and (Weisskopf, 2004) highlight the positive impacts of reservations in enhancing the political and economic representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs. However, the system is not without its critics. (Basu, 2021) and (Singha, 2012) contend that reservations may perpetuate caste-based identities, creating a "creamy layer" within these communities that disproportionately benefits the more privileged individuals, thereby undermining the policy's intended goals. The 103rd Constitutional Amendment (2019), which introduced economic criteria for reservations, has further polarized the debate by deviating from the traditional caste-based compensatory justice framework (Dhanya & Balu, 2022; Sethuraman, 2023). This shift raises fundamental questions about the balance between equity, merit, and the principles of affirmative action.

Economic and Identity Dynamics

The economic impact of reservations has generated mixed findings, with some studies indicating modest improvements in employment outcomes for SCs and STs, while others emphasize the role of reservations in facilitating elite capture within marginalized groups. (Borooah et al., 2007) found that reservations led to a modest increase of 5% in formal employment for SCs and STs, suggesting that the system has had some success in integrating these communities into the formal economy. (Weisskopf, 2004), on the other hand, argues that reservations have contributed to the emergence of a "new elite" within these groups, which may dilute the original goals of social justice. Moreover, the interplay between caste and other dimensions of identity, such as gender, further complicates the outcomes of reservation policies. (R. Kumar, 2022) observes that dominant castes often claim backward

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status to gain access to reserved benefits, while studies by (Cassan & Vandewalle, 2021) suggest that gender norms within caste groups shape the effectiveness of reservations. Social network analyses (Saxena et al., 2023; Sinha et al., 2020) further indicate that while reservations have reduced intergroup distances, they require complementary policies to achieve sustained social and economic equity.

Gender and Political Representation

The implementation of gender-based reservations, particularly at the local governance level, has led to notable gains in women's political participation, particularly in informal economic sectors (Ghani et al., 2014). However, despite these gains, women remain significantly underrepresented in national politics, with critics arguing that patriarchal structures often co-opt reserved seats for women, reducing the substantive impact of the policy (Bose et al., 2020; Pal, 2014; S. M. Rai, 2022; K. Sharma, 2000) further highlight the persistence of tokenism in women's political representation, suggesting that the reservation system, while facilitating access, has not fully disrupted entrenched gender norms or fostered true empowerment for women within the political sphere.

Regional and Implementation Challenges

The implementation of reservation policies at the state level has revealed significant regional variations, with some states, such as Karnataka, exceeding the 50% cap on total reservations (Thomas & Kamath, 2023), while others, like Bihar, see reservation policies heavily influenced by caste-based political mobilization (Imam, 2024). These regional disparities underscore the challenges of reconciling state-specific political dynamics with national constitutional mandates. Additionally, technical critiques of the reservation system point to inefficiencies in the OBC de-reservation process (Aygün & Turhan, 2023) and the lack of comprehensive data, particularly for OBCs, which complicates policy design and implementation (Mohanan & Netto, 2023; Pani & Iyer, 2015).

Global Comparisons and Theoretical Insights

Global comparative studies have drawn parallels between India's reservation system and affirmative action policies in other countries, notably the United States, revealing shared challenges in balancing equity and meritocracy (Haynes & Alagaraja, 2016; S. M. Rai, 2022). Theoretical frameworks, such as entropy models (Pandey & Pandey, 2023) and liberation paradigms (Massey, 2013), have been employed to advocate for adaptive policies that address the multidimensional disadvantages faced by marginalized groups. These theoretical insights suggest that the reservation system must evolve to better address the complexities of intersectionality, encompassing not only caste but also gender, class, and other identity factors in the pursuit of true social justice.

3. THE CONTEXT, NEED AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This present paper tries to explore the reservation system as affirmative action in South India, focusing on its impact on social justice, caste-based inequality, and economic mobility. While designed to uplift marginalized communities like SCs, STs, and OBCs, the system has sparked debates about its effectiveness, fairness, and impact on merit. The study aims to assess the implementation of reservations, its influence on political participation, and community identity in South India, offering empirical insights into the ongoing discussions on its equity, sustainability, and potential reforms.

4. METHODS AND METEIRALS

The study adopts a survey-descriptive research design, focusing on South India, specifically Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. A quota sampling technique is used to select 100 respondents from each state, totaling 400 participants. The study combines qualitative methods (non-participant observation, and in-depth interviews) with quantitative approaches (semi-structured interview schedule) to provide a comprehensive analysis. Data analysis involves both descriptive statistics (percentages, means, median, mode) and inferential statistics (chi-square and ANOVA tests) to summarize findings and explore relationships between variables.

5. RESULTS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings are categorized into three key areas: (1) socioeconomic status of respondents, (2) public perceptions of reservations as affirmative action, and (3) the impact and implementation of reservations on society.

5.1 Socioeconomic Status

The study's sample of 400 participants represents a range of socio-demographic characteristics across South India. A majority of respondents are male (61.3%, 245), with females accounting for 38.8% (155). Geographically, most respondents live in rural areas (84.3%, 337), followed by urban areas (14.3%, 57) and tribal regions (1.5%, 6). Socially, Backward Classes (BCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) make up 41.3% (165) and 48.3% (193) of the sample, while Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and the General category are smaller groups (7% and 3.5%, respectively). Religiously, Hindus comprise the majority (78.8%, 315), followed by Christians (7.8%, 31), Muslims (6.8%, 27), and non-religious/atheists (6.8%, 27).

Educationally, the sample is highly qualified, with 36.5% (146) holding or pursuing PhDs or research degrees, 59% (236) being postgraduates, and only 3.5% (14) having bachelor's degrees, with a small illiterate population (1%, 4). Housing conditions indicate 66.3% (265) own their homes, 32% (128) live in rented accommodation, and 1.8% (7) share housing. Housing types are varied, with 56.8% (227) living in single-storied RCC structures and smaller percentages in other types of dwellings.

The sample reflects a diverse range of occupations, with the majority in the private sector (40.8%, 163), followed by self-employment (19.8%, 79), and government jobs (17.5%, 70). Agriculture remains significant in rural South India, with 12.5% (50) of participants employed in the sector. Family structures show a prevalence of nuclear families (61.3%, 245), with joint families still representing a significant portion (33.8%, 135). The data also reveals a disparity in land ownership: 45.3% (181) of households own no land, and among landowners, smallholdings are common.

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5.2 Awareness and Perspectives of Respondents on Reservations

The study identifies historical social deprivation as the most widely accepted reason for reservations, followed by economic factors. Respondents largely agree that addressing past social injustices is essential for achieving equality in modern society. The focus remains on historical and economic contexts, with less emphasis on political and physical factors.

During the interviews, many respondents explained the justification for reservations in terms of correcting past wrongs. One respondent stated, *"Reservations are needed to address the centuries of oppression faced by the marginalized communities. Without these measures, equality cannot be truly achieved."* Another interviewee added, *"It's about economic justice, not just social standing. They need a boost to catch up with the rest of society."* However, when asked about the role of political or physical factors, a respondent remarked, *"I don't think politics plays a role here. It's about righting the historical wrongs and offering equal opportunities."*

Most respondents associate the start of reservations with post-independence policies, recognizing them as crucial tools for reducing social inequalities in a newly independent India. However, there is limited awareness of earlier origins, such as the Communal Award by Ramsay MacDonald before independence. Many respondents attribute the reservation policy to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, with a smaller group crediting the Indian government.

When interviewees were asked about the origins of the reservation system, the majority pointed to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. One interviewee shared, *"Dr. Ambedkar was the man behind it all. He fought for our rights and made sure that the reservation system was in place to protect us."* Another respondent commented, *"The government did make it official, but Dr. Ambedkar was the one who truly advocated for it."* However, when asked about the Communal Award, one interviewee admitted, *"I've never heard of the Communal Award. Most people I know just associate reservations with post-independence India and Ambedkar's efforts."* This limited awareness indicates that while Ambedkar's contribution is well-recognized, earlier historical events that influenced the reservation system remain largely unknown.

When interviewees were asked about the Communal Award, many responded with confusion or a lack of recognition. One participant, when hearing the term for the first time, appeared puzzled and said, *"I'm not sure about that, but I've always known that Dr. Ambedkar was behind the reservations."* This was a common theme during interviews, suggesting a gap in historical knowledge. The enthusiasm shown when discussing Ambedkar's contributions indicated that, for many, his leadership in shaping the reservation system is considered the defining moment in its history.

When the researcher wants to make an Observation Comment discussing Ambedkar's contribution to the reservation system, many respondents showed a sense of pride. One participant even referred to him as "the father of our rights." The reverence for Ambedkar was palpable, with interviewees expressing admiration not only for his role in shaping the reservation system but also for his overall efforts toward social justice. This emotional and respectful tone, coupled with the frequency of his name in the discussion, illustrates the central role he plays in the collective memory and understanding of the reservation system.

While most respondents link the inception of reservations to post-independence policies, recognizing them as essential for addressing social inequalities in a newly independent India, there is limited awareness of their earlier origins, such as the Communal Award by Ramsay MacDonald before independence. The majority attribute the reservation policy to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, with a smaller group acknowledging the role of the Indian government.

The study also reveals that most respondents view reservations as a democratic measure, with fewer seeing them as affirmative action and an even smaller group linking them to the independence movement. Additionally, most respondents credit the Indian Constitution for establishing the reservation system, rather than the Presidential Order, underscoring the Constitution's central role in shaping the policy.

Regarding the duration of reservations, most respondents believe they were initially intended for 10 years, although there are varying opinions on the ideal duration. There is widespread awareness of the constitutional provision for SC reservations, with respondents recognizing them as a key element of India's social justice framework. Similarly, the majority acknowledge reservations for STs and OBCs in the Constitution, though a small minority remains indefinite or opposed.

Moreover, most respondents are aware that the Constitution provides reservations for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and women. The data shows that respondents generally understand the current reservation percentages for SCs (15%), OBCs (25%), and women (33%), though some respondents express differing views, likely due to confusion or varying interpretations.

The data also reveals diverse opinions on the reservation system across the four states. While most respondents are aware of the current 10% EWS reservation, a significant minority feels the policy is unfair, arguing that it undermines the original purpose of reservations and is politically motivated rather than focused on social reform. A large majority (82.5%) supports proportional reservations for SCs based on their population, while opinions on proportionality for STs and OBCs are mixed. A slight majority (56%) favours proportionality for OBCs, and 72% support it for EWS.

In terms of awareness, 30% of respondents have a moderate understanding of the reservation system's history, with most recognizing the concept of positive discrimination. The majority also express some awareness of the policies, with 39.5% having a basic understanding. A significant portion (75.5%) acknowledges the benefits of previous reservation

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policies, especially in education, with 81.9% attributing the greatest benefits to the education sector.

When evaluating the effectiveness of the reservation system, 35.3% of respondents believe it is moderately effective in promoting social equality, while 36.5% think it addresses historical inequalities to some extent. A large majority (90%) agree that reservations have significantly improved access to education, employment, and healthcare for marginalized groups. Additionally, 82.5% believe reservations have enhanced political access for these communities, and 77% think it has improved their economic opportunities.

Despite general support for the positive effects of reservations, concerns about the fairness of the current system remain. While 32% of respondents express moderate confidence in its fairness, a considerable number still harbour doubts. The findings highlight both the recognition of reservations' benefits in improving access for marginalized groups and ongoing debates about the system's fairness and relevance in today's society.

5.3 Impact and Implications of Reservations on Society

A study conducted across four Indian states — Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh — reveals varied and nuanced views on India's reservation system. While 32% of respondents consider the system moderately fair, 41% believe it has slightly improved the socio-economic conditions of marginalized groups. Reservations are viewed as moderately effective in promoting upward mobility (30.3%), reducing social and economic inequalities (32.8%), and combating intergenerational poverty (34%). While 37.7% acknowledge their role in fostering inclusivity and 34.5% recognize their contribution to cultural preservation, 42% remain neutral about their impact on institutional diversity, and 34.5% are uncertain about their effect on social cohesion. Economically, 31% credit reservations for promoting growth, but only 24.5% fully agree they improve resource access for disadvantaged communities, with a small minority (9%) questioning their role in entrepreneurship. Politically, 26.5% support reservations' effectiveness in enhancing representation for marginalized groups, while 32.5% link them to a stronger democracy and social justice. However, neutrality prevails when it comes to governance transparency (38.8%) and policy improvements (39.8%), suggesting reservations are not strongly tied to administrative reforms. In education, 30% strongly affirm their positive impact on marginalized groups, and 29.3% moderately agree they raise social awareness.

A large majority of respondents recognize the transformative effects of reservations on marginalized communities: 89.3% attribute improved financial inclusion to reservations, 82.5% note increased social acceptability, 79% observe enhanced human dignity, 85.3% see greater freedom of movement, and 79.5% associate them with promoting scientific thinking. However, significant criticisms emerge, with 64% feeling that reservations discriminate against non-reserved groups, 60.8% citing dependence on government aid, 50.5% linking them to reduced competition, and 66.3% arguing they create new inequalities. Views on governance and societal impact are mixed: 31% reject claims of systemic corruption, 33.8% deny reservations generate societal resentment, and 40% disagree that they restrict access to education and employment. While 28% completely dismiss perceptions of unfairness and 27.8% reject the notion that reservations fail to address underlying disparities, many respondents remain uncertain. For instance, 27% are unsure about alternative measures for social equality, and 32% are neutral on whether historical injustices are adequately addressed. Debates over sub-categorization arise, with 26.3% acknowledging internal divisions within SCs/STs, and 27.5% viewing reservations as a driver for an OBC caste census. Despite 32.5% strongly agreeing that reservations ensure social equality, 36.8% disagree that they should influence parliamentary seat allocations.

A notable 35.5% of respondents agree that current policies effectively include marginalized groups, while the same percentage (35.5%) supports the role of technology in monitoring these policies. Reservations are seen by 30.5% as effective in tackling emerging socio-economic challenges, although 34.8% remain neutral on the effectiveness of alternative economic empowerment approaches. Urban-rural disparities remain a debated issue, with 35.8% remaining neutral, reflecting a lack of consensus.

Looking forward, 34.8% anticipate that global trends will influence reservation policies, and 36.5% believe they will promote diversity in emerging industries. However, uncertainty remains: 32% are neutral about whether long-term benefits will outweigh the drawbacks, and 38.3% are undecided on adapting policies to accommodate intersectional identities (e.g., caste-gender overlaps). While 34.5% agree that reservations will foster social harmony, there is uncertainty about structural reforms, with 44.5% calling for greater policy flexibility to address demographic changes.

5.4 Testing of Hypotheses

The chi-square analysis conducted to explore the relationship between respondents' social status (EWS, BC, SC, OC) and their views on the rationale for reservation policies showed significant results. The null hypothesis, which assumed no relationship, was rejected ($\chi^2 = 122.48$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.05$), indicating a strong association between social status and reasons for reservations. EWS respondents predominantly cited historical social deprivation (75%) and emphasized physical weakness (25%), a rationale not found in other groups. BC and SC respondents also cited historical social deprivation (60.6% and 78.2%, respectively), while BC individuals additionally highlighted economic factors (27.3%). OC respondents attributed reservations entirely to historical deprivation. Intellectual backwardness and political reasons were minimally cited, showing their limited relevance in current discussions.

The ANOVA analysis further revealed that social status significantly influences perceptions of reservations' impact on access to various areas, including education, employment, healthcare, media, government administration, economic opportunities, and public spaces. Statistically significant differences were observed in most areas, with p-values for Access to Education (0.014), Access to Employment (0.001), and Access to Healthcare (0.007) all indicating significant variations. The exception was Access to Politics ($p = 0.256$),

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where no significant difference was found. These results suggest that people from different social statuses perceive the effectiveness of reservations differently across various sectors, with a strong emphasis on how reservations affect access to resources and opportunities for marginalized communities.

The ANOVA also revealed significant findings in areas like financial inclusion, human dignity, and free mobility, with p-values of 0.001, 0.009, and 0.027, respectively. However, social status did not significantly influence views on social acceptability ($p = 0.226$) and scientific temper ($p = 0.222$). In contrast, social status had a considerable effect on perceptions of discrimination against non-reserved groups ($p = 0.000$), with differences across groups in views on government dependency, reduced competition, and new inequalities. These findings highlight the complex relationship between social status and perceptions of the reservation system's broader societal impact.

Lastly, the Chi-Square test for the statement, "Reservation policies will need to be more flexible to address changing demographics," showed a significant relationship between demographic group and perceptions of policy flexibility ($\chi^2 = 47.784$, $df = 12$, $p = 0.000$). While OC respondents unanimously supported flexibility, the EWS group displayed more diverse opinions, and BC and SC respondents largely favoured more flexibility, though a notable proportion remained neutral or disagreed. These results suggest that perceptions of reservation policy flexibility vary across social groups, emphasizing the need for policymakers to consider these differences when discussing potential reforms.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study conducted across four Indian states — Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh — offer a complex and multifaceted view of the reservation system in India, revealing both its achievements and limitations. The majority of respondents associate the reservation system with post-independence policies, recognizing it as a critical tool for addressing social inequalities in a newly independent India. However, there is limited awareness of the system's historical roots, such as the Communal Award introduced by Ramsay MacDonald before independence. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is widely credited as the architect of the reservation policy, though a smaller group attributes the policy to the Indian government, indicating a divergence in perceptions of its origins.

The study reveals that the most widely accepted justification for reservations is historical social deprivation, followed by economic factors. This suggests that respondents view reservations primarily as a corrective measure to address past injustices, with less emphasis on political or physical factors. The consensus points to the idea that addressing historical social inequalities is essential for promoting equality in contemporary society. The findings highlight those reservations are widely viewed as a necessary mechanism for uplifting marginalized communities and redressing centuries of social exclusion.

In terms of effectiveness, respondents acknowledge that the reservation system has had a moderate positive impact on socio-economic mobility, including improving access to education, employment, and healthcare for marginalized groups. The education sector is particularly noted as a key beneficiary of reservations, with respondents indicating that it has provided enhanced opportunities for disadvantaged communities. However, there are significant concerns, notably about the creation of new inequalities, reduced competition, and the potential for fostering dependency on government support. These critiques reflect a broader debate about whether the reservation system, while achieving its goals, has unintended negative consequences that might undermine its long-term success.

The social and political benefits of reservations are widely recognized, with respondents noting improvements in financial inclusion, social acceptability, and human dignity. Reservations are also viewed as contributing to greater political representation for marginalized groups. However, despite these positive perceptions, there remains hesitant about the political motivations behind reservations, with some respondents viewing the policy as politically driven rather than purely socially reformative. This perception points to a larger concern about the politicization of social justice policies in India and the challenge of maintaining their integrity and focus on marginalized communities.

The study also sheds light on internal conflicts within specific social groups, particularly within Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the emerging debate about the OBC caste census. These intra-group divisions highlight the complexities of implementing a one-size-fits-all policy across diverse social groups. While there is significant support for proportional reservations based on population figures, there is also a call for more nuanced approaches that take into account the internal disparities within these communities.

The chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between social status and views on the rationale for reservation policies ($\chi^2 = 122.48$, $p < 0.05$). EWS respondents highlighted historical social deprivation and physical weakness, while BC and SC groups focused more on historical deprivation, with BC also emphasizing economic factors. OC respondents attributed reservations entirely to historical deprivation. This shows that social status influences the perceived reasons for reservations, with economic factors more prominent among certain groups.

The ANOVA analysis found significant differences in perceptions across social groups regarding the impact of reservations on education ($p = 0.014$), employment ($p = 0.001$), and healthcare ($p = 0.007$). However, no significant difference was found in perceptions of political access ($p = 0.256$). Social status also influenced views on financial inclusion ($p = 0.001$), human dignity ($p = 0.009$), and free mobility ($p = 0.027$), but not on social acceptability ($p = 0.226$) or scientific temper ($p = 0.222$). Additionally, social status played a role in perceptions of negative outcomes like discrimination, dependency, and competition, with significant differences observed across groups ($p = 0.000$).

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The Chi-Square test on policy flexibility ($\chi^2 = 47.784$, $p = 0.000$) revealed that OC respondents strongly supported flexibility, while EWS respondents showed more varied opinions. BC and SC groups generally favoured flexibility, though many remained neutral or disagreed. These findings suggest that social status significantly shapes opinions on the rationale, impact, and potential reforms of reservation policies, emphasizing the need for policymakers to consider these differences when discussing reforms.

Looking to the future, respondents suggest that global trends will play a role in shaping reservation policies, with many acknowledging that emerging industries will require diverse representation. There is also a belief that technological advancements can enhance the monitoring and implementation of reservation policies to ensure fairness and transparency. However, there remains a degree of uncertainty about whether the benefits of reservations will outweigh their drawbacks in the long term, especially given the evolving socio-economic landscape. A significant proportion of respondents also express ambivalence about the system's ability to address intersectional identities, such as caste-gender overlaps, indicating a gap in how the reservation system currently addresses the complexities of social identity.

7. CONCLUSION

The reservation system in India, rooted in the country's caste-based social structure, has been a critical tool in addressing historical discrimination and promoting social equality for marginalized groups, such as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Backward Classes (BC). Initially proposed by social reformers like Jyothirao Phule and William Hunter, the system evolved over time, with significant milestones including the Communal Award of 1932, the Poona Pact, and the establishment of the Mandal Commission in 1979, which led to the inclusion of OBCs in the reservation system. Despite the challenges and debates surrounding its implementation, the reservation system has undeniably contributed to improving the social, economic, and political standing of historically disadvantaged communities. The introduction of the 103rd Amendment Act in 2019, providing 10% reservations for economically weaker sections (EWS), highlights the continued evolution of the system to address emerging socio-economic disparities. However, the varying reservation policies across states and the ongoing debates about the fairness and effectiveness of the system indicate the complexity of balancing equity and inclusion in a diverse society like India.

The data reveals distinct differences in the reasons for reservation implementation, with respondents from different social categories offering varied justifications for its existence, such as historical social deprivation, physical weakness, and economic concerns. Additionally, the analysis demonstrates how social status influences perceptions of reservations' impacts on access to key sectors like education, employment, healthcare, and government administration. However, it is important to note that not all areas were influenced by social status, such as Access to Politics, social acceptability, and scientific temper.

Furthermore, the Chi-Square analysis on the need for flexibility in reservation policies highlights those respondents from different social groups perceive the necessity for policy reforms differently, particularly in response to changing demographics. While the OC group showed unanimous support for flexibility, other groups like EWS, BC, and SC respondents displayed more diverse opinions. These results emphasize the importance of considering demographic differences in policymaking, suggesting that any proposed reforms to the reservation system should account for the varying perspectives held by different social groups. Ultimately, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between social status and perceptions of the reservation system, providing valuable insights for future discussions on its effectiveness and potential reforms.

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