



Affirmative Action in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

In India, the affirmative action policy is commonly known as the reservation policy, which applies to legislature, education, and employment. The reservation policy attempts to mitigate the adverse impact of the historical deprivation faced by India's socially and economically backward classes. Although it helped some of the marginalized groups to improve their economic conditions by ensuring equal opportunities in higher education, it might fall short in terms of their impact on social integration.

Recently, on the 19th of September 2023, India passed a historical bill that reserves 33 percent of seats in the parliament for women. This kind of affirmative action policy is commonly known in India as *reservation policy*. Apart from legislatures, it also applies to education and employment. Reservation policy attempts to mitigate the adverse impact of deprivation and oppression faced by the socially backward classes in India. The policy mostly covers the officially recognized marginalized groups, i.e., scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), other backward castes (OBCs), and economically weaker sections (EWS). Currently, 27 percent of seats are reserved for OBCs, 15 percent for SCs, 7.5 percent for STs, 10 percent for EWS, and 4 percent for persons with benchmark disabilities. In India, reservation policy has been at the center of debates in sociopolitical and judicial circles since its introduction. Here, we discuss emerging issues around reservation policy, focusing on the higher education sector.

Impact of Reservation Policy in Higher Education

Due to limited places in elite public higher education institutions, reservation policy in higher education has always been a contentious issue. The debates have taken more critical turns with the introduction of reservation for OBCs in higher education in 2006.

Thanks to the reservation policy, the representation of students from disadvantaged communities in Indian higher education has improved over time. According to the 2020–2021 All-India Survey of Higher Education, the gross enrollment ratios (GER) for SC and ST communities have increased by 28 percent and 47 percent respectively compared to 2014–2015. The overall increase in OBC student enrolment is 31.67 percent.

In the case of higher education faculty, the situation is highly skewed in favor of privileged groups. The percentage of SC teachers is only 9 percent, while it is only 2.5 percent for the ST community. The representation of OBC teachers is relatively high in Indian universities (around 32 percent). At the administration level, there is a severe underrepresentation of vice-chancellors and registrars from marginalized communities. As of August 2022, out of 45 vice-chancellors in the central universities, only two belonged to socially backward classes.

Emerging Issues

Let us explore the main emerging issues one by one.

Public vs. Private Institutions

In India, public-funded higher education institutions must abide by the reservation policy. There is no obligation for private unaided institutions to follow the reservation guidelines. However, with the rising number of private higher education institutions receiving no government financial support, a large majority of students enrolled there do not fall under the purview of this reservation. There were a few attempts from the policymakers to extend the scope of the reservation policy in the private unaided higher education institutions, but they failed. Reportedly, a group of leading private higher education institutions have resisted the move. They felt that regulatory restrictions would pose challenges to financial sustainability for them. Instead of asking the private unaided higher education institutions to implement the reservation policy, the group argued in favor of offering scholarships and fellowships to those who need them. The recent move to invite international branch campuses to India may add fuel to this regulatory challenge.

Lack of Social Integration in the Higher Education Institutes

During the last few years, increasing numbers of student deaths and dropouts in premier institutions have raised serious questions about the limitations of reservation policy in higher education institutions. In 2014–2021, out of 122 students who died by suicide in India's premiere institutions, 24 were from ST communities, 41 from OBC, and three from SC communities. This points out the lack of integration of marginalized sections into the larger body of students in higher education institutions. The University Grants Commission issued guidelines for establishing equal opportunity centers in higher education institutions to effectively implement reservation policy. Even then, it failed to create a safe space for the socially deprived students in these institutions. Lack of sensitivity among the unreserved groups in Indian institutions is one of the primary reasons for this dismal situation.

Diversity Within the Beneficiary Groups

Although access of marginalized groups to higher education has improved over the years, there are still widespread disparities across genders, regions, and streams of study among reserved students. The demographic proportion of OBCs seems to overshadow the representation of the SC and ST communities in higher education institutions in India. However, the situation is more complex because of the interplay between social and economic backwardness. The economically better-off part of the OBCs (known as the "creamy layer") has been excluded from reservation policy. But the SC and ST communities do not have such exclusions. There is a demand for introducing subquotas under the SC quota to prevent overrepresentation of influential SC communities in higher education. The government is currently reviewing the proposal.

Federalism and Politicization

In India, apart from the federal government, provincial governments also have the right to grant reservations to certain unprivileged groups based on their respective demographic conditions. The reservation for EWS is left to provincial governments to decide on. Even after the supreme court's judgment on a cap of 50 percent on caste-based reservation, certain ethnic groups often demand reservation under the educational and socially backward classes (ESBC) quota. This leads to social unrest in various provinces in India. However, when the pool of reserved seats exceeds the pool of open or unreserved seats in educational institutions, it inadvertently creates tension in society and disrupts social harmony. This defeats the very purpose of reservations in Indian society.

The reservation policy plays a crucial role in electoral politics in India.

Concluding Remarks

The reservation policy has been successful in infusing a sense of inclusion among marginalized groups in Indian higher education, though it might fall short in terms of its impact on social integration. The reservation policy plays a crucial role in electoral politics in India. Hence, revising and restructuring the reservation policy with the aim of ensuring effectiveness is an extremely sensitive topic for policymakers. However, there is a need for an evidence-based objective analysis before deciding to continue the existing policy in its current form. There is an increasing demand for conducting a caste-based census across India, which would provide the base for further revisions in the reservation policy. In addition, it is essential to focus on integrating and creating a safe democratic space inside higher educational institutions to make the policy more effective. Alongside social stigma, obsession with meritocracy is another reason that contributes to the juxtaposition of the "reserved" versus "deserving" in higher education. The reservation policy undoubtedly helped a section of the marginalized groups improve their economic conditions, but they still face a lot of discrimination from the upper strata of Indian society. ▲

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