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Rethinking Affirmative Action in India: A Marxian Analysis of Merit, Class, and Elite Capture

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Abstract

India's reservation system was designed as a constitutional mechanism to address historical injustices and expand access to opportunities for marginalized communities. However, changing socio-economic conditions have increasingly complicated its contemporary relevance. This paper presents a theoretical analysis, guided by a Marxian perspective, to examine how economic class now plays a growing role in shaping access to education and employment in India. While caste continues to remain a significant marker of social identity, material resources such as income, education, and social networks have become crucial in determining life chances. Drawing on parliamentary debates, judicial interpretations, and existing scholarship, the study argues that the continued reliance on caste as the primary basis of affirmative action risks overlooking emerging forms of inequality. It highlights the issue of intra-group disparities, where relatively privileged sections within reserved categories continue to access state benefits, while economically disadvantaged individuals across all social groups often remain excluded. These patterns raise concerns about fairness, institutional trust, and the long-term effectiveness of redistributive policies. The paper contends that a recalibration of affirmative action is necessary to better align it with present material conditions. It proposes a more balanced framework that incorporates economic criteria alongside social disadvantage, ensuring that benefits reach those most in need. By shifting the analytical focus from identity alone to the interaction between caste and class, the study contributes to ongoing debates on equity, merit, and social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords

Karl Marx, Meritocracy, Economic determinism, Caste, Elite capture, Affirmative action.

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1

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1. Introduction

Meritocracy is often celebrated as a system that rewards individuals based on talent, effort, and achievement, regardless of background. In theory, it promises efficiency, fairness, and equal opportunity, ensuring that the most capable individuals rise to positions of responsibility. However, in deeply stratified societies like India, the ideal of meritocracy is complicated by historical and structural inequalities, particularly those related to caste and economic class. Affirmative action in the form of caste-based reservations was introduced as a constitutional measure to correct entrenched social injustices by ensuring access to education, employment, and political representation for historically marginalized communities. Yet, over time, critical questions have emerged: Who truly benefits from these policies today? Have caste-based reservations reached their intended beneficiaries, or have they been appropriated by a small segment of already privileged individuals within these groups? This paper interrogates these questions through the lens of Karl Marx's theory of economic determinism, which posits that material conditions—not identity alone—primarily shape social relations and institutional structures. In modern India, economic capital has become the decisive force in determining life outcomes. Increasingly, it is not caste but financial resources, access to private education, and embedded social networks that enable upward mobility. Despite this shift, caste continues to dominate the logic of reservation, often to the detriment of economically disadvantaged individuals—both within and outside the reserved categories—who lack the necessary forms of capital outlined by Pierre Bourdieu, including cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Moreover, elite capture within reserved categories has become a recurring pattern, whereby the benefits of affirmative action are disproportionately claimed by a limited, often urban and economically secure subset of the population. These beneficiaries frequently retain their reserved status across generations, despite having accumulated significant privilege. Meanwhile, general category individuals from impoverished or rural backgrounds are denied comparable support, perpetuating a new form of exclusion. This structural imbalance challenges both the ethical and practical foundations of the reservation system. In this context, the paper argues that a Marxian re-evaluation of affirmative action is necessary—one that aligns with contemporary material realities and aims to ensure justice for the truly disadvantaged, regardless of caste identity.

2. Objective of the Study

This study aims to critically examine India's reservation framework through a Marxian lens, with particular attention to the growing role of economic class in shaping access to opportunities. It analyses patterns of elite capture and resulting inequalities, and advocates for reforms that reorient affirmative action toward economically disadvantaged groups in line with distributive justice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in Marxian political economy to examine the relationship between caste-based reservations, economic class, and meritocracy in India. The analysis is primarily based on secondary sources, including parliamentary debates, judicial decisions, academic literature, and policy reports, which provide the broader empirical and conceptual foundation for the study. In addition, the paper is informed by qualitative insights derived from discussions with students, educators, and participants across multiple academic and public settings in different states. These interactions, while not structured as formal focus group discussions, offered valuable perspectives on lived experiences, perceptions of fairness, and contemporary debates surrounding reservation. Observations from these discussions were thematically noted and used to support the analytical arguments of the paper. The study emphasizes the role of economic factors in shaping access to opportunities, highlighting how material resources mediate outcomes in education and employment. As a theoretical and analytical inquiry, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization but to contribute to ongoing debates on equity, merit, and affirmative action in India's evolving socio-economic context.

4. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in Karl Marx's theory of economic determinism, which posits that the material base of society—particularly the modes and relations of production—fundamentally shapes its superstructure, including politics, education, and ideology. In this view, class struggle, not identity alone, drives historical change. Marx argued that the ruling class, by controlling the means of production, also dominates institutions and social norms, often cloaking inequality in narratives of fairness, merit, and individual responsibility. Applied to contemporary India, this framework reveals that economic capital has increasingly supplanted caste as the primary determinant of life outcomes, particularly in education and employment. Complementing this is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, which identifies not only economic but also social, cultural, and symbolic capital as forms of power that are inherited and reproduced across generations. While caste continues to mediate access to certain resources, the decisive factor in determining who can convert these capitals into mobility is often economic in nature. For instance, a reserved-category student from an affluent family with access to elite schooling, coaching, and professional networks is significantly better positioned than a general-category

student from a rural, low-income background with none of these assets. Thus, Bourdieu's theory helps expose how inter-generational privilege operates within reservation categories, often hidden behind a static caste label. The paper also draws from Michael Young's critique of meritocracy, where merit becomes a legitimizing ideology that obscures systemic inequality. In India, merit is frequently defined by exam scores or institutional credentials, without accounting for the vastly unequal starting points of candidates. The result is a false dichotomy between merit and reservation, when in fact both are deeply shaped by structural advantages. By combining Marx's economic determinism with Bourdieu's multi-capital model and critiques of meritocracy, this framework exposes how caste-based reservations, in their current form, risk reinforcing inequality when economic privilege goes unchecked. It offers a lens through which to reimagine affirmative action not as static compensation for historical identity, but as a dynamic tool of economic justice rooted in material reality and class struggle.

5. Historical Context of Reservation Policies

India's reservation policy emerged as a response to centuries of caste-based exclusion, designed to integrate historically oppressed groups—particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and later Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—into the structures of state, education, and employment. These measures were rooted in a framework of compensatory justice, assuming that caste identity was a stable indicator of disadvantage. Over time, the policy was codified through constitutional provisions such as Articles 15(4) and 16(4), and later expanded by judicial interventions, including the landmark *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India* (1992), which established the 50% ceiling on caste-based reservations and introduced the concept of the “creamy layer” within OBCs. While these policies were framed as tools of social inclusion, they were also shaped by the political economy of post-colonial India. In Marxian terms, early reservations were an attempt to integrate marginalized castes into the state apparatus without fundamentally altering the relations of production. They redistributed access to state-controlled jobs and educational opportunities, but left broader economic structures—such as land ownership, industrial capital, and market access—largely untouched. Over time, reservations became a politically managed mechanism to absorb demands for redistribution without disrupting class hierarchies rooted in material accumulation. The 103rd Constitutional Amendment in 2019, which introduced a 10% quota for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among the general category, marked a paradigmatic shift: it recognized economic deprivation as a legitimate basis for affirmative action. However, this remained a parallel track rather than a structural integration with existing caste-based systems. Furthermore, the evolving political discourse around the proposed caste census underscores deep-seated anxieties within India's affirmative action framework. Critics argue that without a parallel socio-economic survey, a caste census alone is unlikely to yield actionable justice. The enumeration risks becoming symbolic unless grounded in

current material deprivation. Additionally, fluid regional caste structures and the absence of a uniform varna classification system make any such attempt highly contentious. In practice, caste and class increasingly intersect in complex ways. A significant portion of SC/ST and OBC beneficiaries now belong to middle- or upper-income strata, while many general-category individuals remain trapped in poverty. This disconnect between policy design and lived economic conditions reflects what Marx described as the ideological function of the state—to maintain the appearance of equity while real material disparities persist. Thus, while reservation was historically justified, its current architecture demands critical re-evaluation. It must respond not only to inherited stigma but to contemporary modes of exclusion, particularly those rooted in economic structure, capital distribution, and class relations that Marx and his successors have long identified as central to justice.

6. Economic Determinism and Reservation Policies

Karl Marx's theory of economic determinism asserts that material conditions—ownership of capital, access to resources, and control over labour together form the foundation upon which the superstructure of society is built, including its laws, culture, and institutions. In this framework, it is not identity, ideology, or morality that shapes life outcomes, but the distribution of economic power. When applied to the Indian context, this insight reveals a growing contradiction: while reservation policies remain tied to caste, the most decisive barrier to opportunity today is economic class. Caste and class were historically intertwined in India, with lower castes occupying economically subordinate positions. However, the acceleration of capitalist development, privatization, and urbanization over the last three decades has reshaped the terrain of inequality. Economic marginalization now cuts across caste lines. Many individuals from the general category remain trapped in poverty, excluded from state support, while a sizable elite within reserved categories continues to benefit from state-sponsored affirmative action despite accumulating substantial wealth, assets, and cultural capital. This is a classic case of elite capture, where a policy originally designed to rectify structural exclusion is leveraged by a relatively advantaged minority to perpetuate inter-generational mobility and privilege. Moreover, in a system where access to quality education, coaching centres, technology, and language proficiency is increasingly commodified, it is economic capital—not social identity—that determines who can prepare for and excel in competitive exams. The reliance on caste as the primary axis of affirmative action thus overlooks the more immediate determinant of social exclusion: lack of material resources. In Marxian terms, the failure to restructure the base—economic conditions—renders the superstructural correction (reservation) insufficient and, at times, regressive. The reservation system, while well-intentioned, risks becoming a symbolic concession rather than a transformative force if it ignores these shifting material dynamics. A growing section of the population now experiences relative deprivation not because of inherited caste stigma, but due to systemic poverty and absence of economic

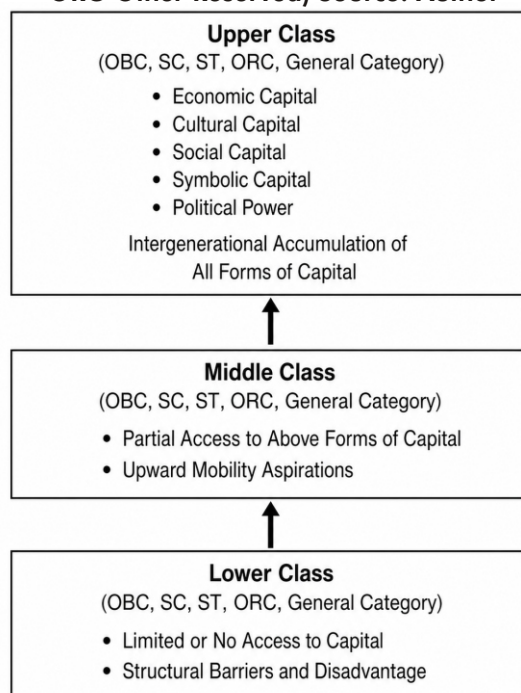
capital-factors Marx would identify as foundational to class struggle. Hence, unless policies evolve to reflect the economic realities of modern India, the state risks entrenching a new form of stratification under the guise of social justice.

7. Mechanisms of Elite Capture

The concept of elite capture describes a structural process wherein policies intended for marginalized populations are appropriated by a relatively privileged subset within those groups. In the context of India's reservation system, this manifests as the recurring access to state-sponsored opportunities—education, employment, promotions—by families and individuals who have already transcended the socio-economic vulnerabilities the policy was designed to address. A Marxian analysis frames this as a bourgeois consolidation within oppressed groups, whereby the initial beneficiaries accumulate material and symbolic capital and, over generations, reconstitute themselves as a dominant class within their own caste category. Recent debates have also highlighted how dominant groups within the OBC category, such as Yadavs and Reddys, may now wield economic and political capital rivalling that of forward castes. Yet, they continue to benefit from quotas, crowding out lower-tier OBCs. The Rohini Commission's recommendation of sub-categorization attempts to address this, but implementation remains fraught with legal, administrative, and political challenges. Such elite resistance illustrates Marx's thesis: the ruling strata within any category manipulate policy to perpetuate class advantage. This phenomenon is evident in public sector employment, where repeated access to reserved quotas has allowed certain families to secure high-ranking positions across generations. Rather than uplifting the broader community, these opportunities are often concentrated among those already possessing educational, economic, and social capital. These actors leverage their state-mediated privilege to secure coaching for competitive exams, place children in elite institutions, and form social networks with gatekeeping power. In Bourdieu's terms, they command a convergence of economic, social, and cultural capital, which reproduces their class advantage, even while retaining the formal status of being "backward". Meanwhile, truly disadvantaged individuals within both reserved and general categories—those without access to quality schooling, professional mentoring, or even nutritional security—are effectively excluded. The consequence is the emergence of a dual exclusion: poor general-category individuals are denied support altogether, while the poorest within reserved categories are displaced by their better-off counterparts. Marx would interpret this as the internal stratification of the proletariat, where segments of the oppressed class are co-opted into the existing power structure, thereby weakening the potential for class solidarity and systemic reform. Moreover, this cycle is perpetuated by the absence of exit norms in the reservation framework. Unlike time-bound welfare mechanisms, caste-based entitlements are often accessed indefinitely, even by those no longer economically vulnerable. This distorts both equity and merit, compromising institutional efficiency and public trust. In this context, elite capture is not merely a bureaucratic

loophole—it is a systemic feature of the state's failure to recalibrate affirmative action in line with contemporary economic stratification.

Figure-1: Class Stratification Across Caste Categories and the Intergenerational Accumulation of Capital (SC-Schedule Caste, ST-Schedule Tribe, OBC-Other Backward Classes, ORC-Other Reserved) Source: Author



The above diagram illustrates the interplay between caste and class in the Indian socio-economic context. It categorizes individuals into Upper Class, Middle Class, and Lower Class, each of which includes members from historically marginalized (OBC, SC, ST) and non-marginalized (General Caste, ORC/Other Reserved Categories) communities. The classification emphasizes that caste identity alone does not determine social location; rather, access to various forms of capital plays a decisive role.

Across caste groups, individuals in the Upper Class possess a disproportionate accumulation of:

- Economic Capital (wealth, assets),
- Cultural Capital (education, lifestyle, language),
- Social Capital (networks and affiliations),
- Symbolic Capital (honour, prestige),
- Political Capital (influence, representation).

These forms of capital reinforce each other and are transmitted inter-generationally, leading to what Bourdieu describes as class reproduction. Consequently, elite capture is evident not only in the general category but also within

reserved categories, as successive generations consolidate their socio-economic advantages. This stratified accumulation challenges the assumption that caste-based reservations automatically benefit the most marginalized. Instead, it calls for a nuanced understanding of intra-category inequality, where upwardly mobile members of reserved groups increasingly resemble their general category counterparts in terms of capital accumulation and social power.

8. Illustrative Cases of Elite Capture across Social Contexts

Elite capture is not unique to India but reflects a broader structural pattern in which redistributive policies are appropriated by relatively advantaged actors. In a Marxian sense, this process represents the consolidation of class power within beneficiary groups, where emerging elites use institutional mechanisms to reproduce their socio-economic advantages.

Comparative evidence highlights this dynamic across contexts. In Mali, development interventions such as unconditional cash transfers have been shown to be mediated by local elites, who reframe and control access to resources while maintaining their social dominance. In Mexico, elite capture within security institutions has enabled political and criminal actors to redirect public resources toward private interests, undermining redistributive goals. Similarly, in India, local governance structures often involve informal intermediaries or “fixers” who regulate access to welfare schemes and employment opportunities, reinforcing patronage networks rather than equitable distribution.

These cases demonstrate that elite capture is a structural feature of redistribution systems, where existing hierarchies shape the flow of benefits. In the context of India’s reservation policy, this pattern is reflected in the repeated access to affirmative action by relatively privileged sections within beneficiary groups, thereby limiting its reach to the most disadvantaged.

9. Social Mobility, Class Inequality, and Access to State Opportunities

India’s reservation system was conceived to enhance social mobility for historically marginalized communities through access to education, employment, and state institutions. However, from a Marxian perspective, its transformative potential is constrained by the failure to distinguish caste identity from material deprivation. While it initially expanded representation, upwardly mobile families within reserved categories have increasingly used it to consolidate access to higher education and public employment across generations. In the absence of economic filters, this has created a cycle of privilege, where beneficiaries possessing economic and cultural capital continue to claim reserved status, crowding out the most disadvantaged.

Simultaneously, economically weaker individuals from general categories—often rural, first-generation learners lacking access to coaching, digital

infrastructure, and quality schooling—remain excluded from both state support and competitive opportunity. In Bourdieusian terms, they lack the economic, cultural, and social capital required to convert merit into mobility. This unequal access has intensified perceptions of unfairness, weakened institutional trust, and fostered fragmentation within the working class. Rather than dismantling inequality, the system risks reproducing it, with mobility increasingly shaped by accumulated capital rather than policy intent.

The “creamy layer” principle recognizes that caste alone is an insufficient proxy for disadvantage by excluding economically advanced sections within OBCs. However, its limited application—excluding SCs and STs—permits inter-generational privilege within key beneficiary groups. From a Marxian standpoint, this reflects class consolidation within caste-based affirmative action, where individuals with access to elite education, state employment, and material assets continue to benefit from redistributive policies while retaining symbolic capital derived from their legally protected status.

In contrast, the “poverty layer”—those facing acute economic deprivation across caste groups—remains inadequately supported. Despite widespread poverty, eligibility for affirmative action continues to be determined primarily by social identity rather than material need, producing a structural disconnect. Relatively affluent beneficiaries access state resources, while economically vulnerable individuals, particularly from general categories, remain excluded. This results in a dual inequality within the working population, reinforcing class divisions under the framework of caste-based policy.

Government employment remains a central pathway to economic security and upward mobility, yet the scale of competition—over 220 million applicants for fewer than one million posts between 2014 and 2022—reveals a structural imbalance between labour supply and secure employment. In Marxian terms, this reflects the expansion of a reserve army of labour, where large sections remain in conditions of precarity.

Within this context, caste-based reservations without corresponding economic filters intensify perceptions of inequity. Candidates from relatively affluent reserved-category backgrounds, supported by superior educational and institutional resources, secure positions through quotas, while economically disadvantaged general-category applicants compete under uniform merit criteria despite structural constraints. This disparity exposes the limits of both meritocratic and identity-based frameworks, as access is shaped by unequal resource distribution. Continued allocation of scarce public employment along caste lines risks undermining institutional trust and reproducing class advantage. A more equitable framework would align access with material need, ensuring that state employment functions as an instrument of genuine social mobility rather than selective advantage.

10. Policy Analysis and Recommendations

India's reservation policy was designed to address historical exclusion and expand equitable access to education, employment, and representation. However, as argued in this paper, the material base of inequality has shifted: economic capital increasingly shapes life chances more than caste identity alone. Without acknowledging this transition, affirmative action risks enabling class consolidation under the guise of equity. A Marxian approach requires that redistribution respond to actual material deprivation rather than inherited social categories.

While proposals such as the caste census aim to refine policy, they risk reinforcing identity-based divisions unless combined with robust socio-economic indicators. Meaningful reform must therefore be evidence-based, class-sensitive, and aligned with constitutional limits such as the 50% cap, while also addressing intra-group inequalities highlighted in policy debates.

To restore distributive justice and institutional credibility, the following reforms are proposed: introducing sub-quotas within reserved categories to target the most disadvantaged and prevent elite capture; establishing uniform income and asset thresholds across categories to identify genuine need; limiting eligibility to individuals educated in public or resource-constrained institutions; and excluding those who have already accessed elite educational advantages from repeated benefits. Further, restricting reservation to a single lifetime use can prevent inter-generational accumulation of advantage. Minimum eligibility benchmarks should be maintained to safeguard institutional standards, alongside academic support for disadvantaged candidates.

In addition, a centralized poverty registry and family-based allocation system can reduce duplication and ensure targeted distribution. Public communication is also essential to reframe reservation as a corrective mechanism rooted in justice rather than identity entitlement. Collectively, these measures shift affirmative action from symbolic representation toward material redistribution, consistent with Marxian principles of equity.

11. Conclusion

The reservation system in India was envisioned as an instrument of social justice to counter caste-based exclusion. However, its continued reliance on caste as the primary basis of redistribution increasingly fails to reflect contemporary socio-economic realities. This paper has argued, through a Marxian lens, that class position and access to economic capital now play a decisive role in shaping inequality.

In its present form, the system facilitates inter-generational elite capture within reserved categories, allowing relatively privileged groups to repeatedly access benefits while the most deprived remain excluded. At the same time, economically disadvantaged individuals from general categories are denied support due to identity-based criteria. This misalignment between deprivation and redistribution

weakens both equity and institutional legitimacy. The perceived dilution of merit in critical sectors further erodes public trust and reinforces social fragmentation.

A reorientation toward class-sensitive affirmative action is therefore essential. Incorporating economic thresholds, sub-quotas for the poorest, and limits on repeated access can better align policy with material realities. Such reforms would preserve the ethical foundation of affirmative action while enhancing its effectiveness. This analysis does not question the historical necessity of reservation but seeks to examine its evolving outcomes in light of changing socio-economic conditions. Ultimately, a shift from identity-based entitlement to need-based redistribution offers a more sustainable path toward equality. By grounding affirmative action in economic justice, the policy can move beyond symbolic correction and function as a meaningful instrument of social transformation, aligned with the evolving political economy of India.

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