**How are the affirmative-action appeals of ethnic pride, poverty alleviation, and reparations connected?**

Affirmative action is a policy tool used in order to improve the opportunities of groups associated with historical oppression such as but not limited to minority and ethnic groups, and women. If implemented properly, the affirmative action program should negatively discriminate towards the people who prior found themselves in a position of privilege, historically white people, and offer greater access to those formerly oppressed and subjugated, e.g., women and black people. This can be done through different methods such as quotas, increased governmental support or even targeted outreach.

In order to improve the opportunities of these groups through affirmative action, there must first be a recognition of an existing short-coming in the equitable distribution of values. For example, in India the historical caste system created a hierarchy of social class dominated by the brahmins and the kshatriyas. The lowest of the rung were the Dalits or the untouchables, who were mostly manual laborers. The Dalits, who are considered a scheduled cast (SC), and two other groupings, the scheduled tribes (ST) such as the Adivasi and the Other Backward Classes, faced a lack of opportunity in education and in vocational roles due to their socio-economic status. In order to improve the circumstances of these groups multiple policy steps were taken.

Firstly, the new constitution of India abolished untouchability with article 17.[[1]](#footnote-1) Secondly, India started the reservation policy in 1950. The reservation policy is an affirmative action program positively discriminating against the aforementioned groups. Before 2019, the policy used socio-educational deprivations as a measure to decide on whether a group was deserving or not. In 2019 the Indian parliament passed the 103rd constitutional amendment, which added the measure of economic backwardness (EWS) in determining the deservingness of reservations.[[2]](#footnote-2) This effectively added a 10% reservation quota for public sector jobs and seats at educational institutions for the EWS.

Now, how does the case of India illustrate how the affirmative action appeals of ethnic pride, poverty alleviation, and reparations are connected. First off, as an outcome of the caste system the marginalized classes were strongly value deprived. This is clearer when we look at the reservation policy through Lasswell’s policy framework. Lasswell outlines eight different value categories through which we can analyze different situational contexts and preferred outcomes. These categories are power, enlightenment, wealth, well-being, skill, affection, respect, and rectitude.[[3]](#footnote-3) Participants in the framework are assumed to act based on the maximization postulate, as in deciding on whether to act based on whether they perceive they will be better off or not, trying to maximize these preferred outcomes and enjoy value indulgences.[[4]](#footnote-4) The participants can use institutions, such as government, schools, banks etc., in order to achieve gratifying outcomes. However, it is the deficiency of these preferred outcomes among the marginalized and the interactions through which they improve that connects the three affirmative-action appeals. Although all of these value outcomes are interconnected, I am going to focus on the most relevant to the case study of India.

The implementation of the quotas through the reservation policy is, to an extent, an attempt by the state to correct the historical injustice done to the marginalized groups by the ruling classes. The exclusion gravely affected the opportunities and development of the lower castes for thousands of years. The affirmative action program has an aim of empowering lower caste members by reserving spots, for example, in government positions. As they assume positions in the government sector, they are involved in or at least closer to the decision-making processes, which increases one’s perception of power. Furthermore, rather than being shunned away because of their status, they hold a certain type of privilege over so-called “normal castes.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The reservation policy as a whole or the quota system specifically can be viewed as means of reparation while also contributing to the cause of poverty alleviation. As the Indian society historically considered the backwards classes as unworthy and thus repressed said classes, the reparation, or the act of making amends for a wrongdoing in the past, comes in the form of reserved positions in the everyday functioning of society, in the public sector as well as in education.

The reparations are aimed at improving the socio-economic status of the aforementioned groups, that due to their status were only allowed to perform jobs that were attributed to their rung. This limited social mobility and inadvertently forced people into poverty. In 2004-05 the STs and the SCs accounted for a disproportionate number of the country’s poor. STs made up 8.6% of the entire population, but 14% of the poor, and SCs 20% of the population but 27% of the poor.[[6]](#footnote-6) As greater social mobility is provided and people feel freer to pursue whatever they choose, the reservation policy offers a means of poverty alleviation. Using data from 1960-2000, Chin and Prakash determined that increasing political reservation for STs by one percentage point reduced poverty in India by 1.1 percentage points.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, the poverty alleviation effects were almost exclusively seen for the STs with little to no change encountered by the SCs.

The reservation policy has also shown to decrease the gap between the higher castes and the lower castes in the odds of completing primary school, while such improvement was not seen for Muslims, a minority group that doesn’t reap the benefits of affirmative action.[[8]](#footnote-8) It has to be noted that the reservation policy doesn’t have a quota for primary schools, but rather the effect was attributed to the stability of employment of the parents who obtained jobs in the government sector through the quota system.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Furthermore, evidence from a study of admissions of an engineering college in India suggests that the reservation policy does redistribute resources to the groups targeted by the reservation policy.[[10]](#footnote-10) The study shows that contrary to belief, the reservation policy doesn’t crowd-out economically disadvantaged students from upper caste students in preference of the disadvantaged students from lower castes. However, for every 1 rupee lost to the upper caste, the lower caste members who received education from the engineering college gained 0.4 to 0.6 rupees, raising a question of whether the program is economically efficient in redistributing resources.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rather than just affecting the individuals preferred under this policy, we can look at the effects of this program on the perception of the whole group, by themselves and by others. In theory, the removal of the caste system as way to organize society and the empowerment of the formerly marginalized should give rise to the increase in self-esteem of the OBCs, scheduled tribes and scheduled castes. This ties to the value outcome of respect in Laswell’s policy framework. As these value outcomes should be looked at as interactions, we see the respect being given to the groups by three different factors. By banning discrimination based on caste, recognizing the historical subjugation of the lower castes, and setting up quotas through the reservation policy providing reparations and alleviating poverty. This newly acquired respect interacts with other value outcomes such as power mentioned before, as with more respect tends to come more power and vice versa.

The final appeal that hasn’t been considered yet is ethnic pride. The sense of ethnic pride is best seen from the in-group out-group dynamics of the reservation policy. The in-group being the lower castes and the out-group people who are left out by the reservation policy. One would assume that that people take pride in not being from a backwards caste, but this illusion has been shattered by the attempts of excluded classes from the reservation policy seeking recognition or reclassification as OBC in order to benefit from the quota system set in place. That is ethnic groups such as the Meena and the Gujjar, not originally listed as OBCs, fighting each other in order to determine who is more backwards.[[12]](#footnote-12) They as well want to benefit from the easier access to government jobs and to universities. In the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where 69% of the places in universities and in government jobs are designated for backwards classes, there are examples of Brahmans, considered the highest caste, who seek to pass themselves off as Dalits, or the untouchables.[[13]](#footnote-13) This seems to hint at the willingness to forego notions of ethnic pride sustained over thousands of years of Hindu culture in order to have an easier time getting a job or getting accepted into a university. However, from the definition of reparations and the aim of the reservation policy, justified as a means of making up for millennia of discrimination based on birth, the out-group does not meet the criterion of deservingness as they have not faced discrimination based on what kind of caste or tribal ethnicity they’ve born into.

In conclusion, the reservation policy appeals of ethnic pride, poverty alleviation and reparations are connected by the value outcomes of power, wealth and respect and their interactions. We see that the policy through reparations has contributed to poverty alleviations and empowerment as the STs have seen decreases in poverty levels as quota percentages increase. Furthermore, the example of the engineering college illustrates how the targeted groups enjoy greater levels of wealth given the opportunity even if the non-targeted groups would have seen greater absolute changes. Finally the ethnic pride appeal is emphasized by the changes of attitudes towards being considered backwards, as ethnic groups such as the Meena and the Gujjar seek equal consideration under the reservation policy.

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12. “Why India Needs a New Debate on Caste Quotas.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Why India Needs a New Debate on Caste Quotas.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)