

WORKPLACE EQUALITY IN INDIA: BRIDGING THE CASTE GAP IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Doddi. Hariprasad,
hariprasadgvpally@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Despite India's progressive constitutional mandate for social justice, caste-based exclusion persists beyond the realm of public employment. With liberalization and the rise of private enterprise as a major employment provider, concerns about equitable access to economic opportunities for marginalized communities—especially Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC)—have gained renewed urgency. This study explores the feasibility and policy implications of implementing affirmative action in India's private sector. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research draws upon legal analysis, secondary data from government and academic reports, and primary data from surveys and expert interviews. It examines the extent of caste-based discrimination in corporate hiring practices, stakeholder attitudes towards reservation policies, and international best practices in diversity and inclusion. Findings indicate that systemic bias continues to hinder access for historically disadvantaged groups, while support for affirmative action in private employment is notably high among marginalized communities. However, resistance from industry stakeholders, primarily grounded in concerns over meritocracy and operational autonomy, poses significant challenges to policy enforcement. The paper concludes that while legal hurdles remain, a combination of voluntary inclusion targets, transparency norms, and regulatory incentives may offer a balanced policy pathway. Bridging caste and capital in 21st-century India requires a nuanced framework—one that ensures social equity without undermining private sector innovation and growth.

Keywords: Equality In India, Caste Gap, Private Sector

1.0 INTRODUCTION

India's constitutional democracy was built on the promise of equality, justice, and social transformation. Central to that vision was the recognition of deep-rooted caste-based hierarchies and the introduction of affirmative action—primarily in the form of reservations in education, public employment, and political representation—to uplift historically marginalized communities such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, with the economic liberalization of the 1990s and the shift from a state-led to a market-driven economy, a growing share of employment opportunities has moved to the private sector—where constitutional mandates of reservation do not currently apply.

This transition has raised critical questions: Can affirmative action be extended to the private sector? What would be its economic, legal, and ethical implications? How can a balance be struck between the goals of social equity and corporate autonomy?

Although the public sector has played a significant role in empowering marginalized groups through quotas, the private sector—now the dominant force in job creation—remains largely outside the purview of such policies. This has resulted in a widening opportunity gap, with reports and empirical studies revealing patterns of implicit caste bias in hiring, promotion, and workplace culture. Several government committees, including the Sachar Committee (2006) and Ranganath Misra Commission (2007), have acknowledged this issue and recommended the introduction of inclusive practices in private enterprise. However, there has been limited legislative progress, largely due to opposition from industry groups and ambiguity around the constitutional feasibility of such a policy.

This study aims to examine the policy rationale, stakeholder perspectives, and socio-economic implications of extending affirmative action into the private sector. By analyzing legal frameworks, labor market data, and international models of workplace inclusion, it offers a holistic policy perspective on how caste, capital, and careers intersect in contemporary India.

Ultimately, the study contributes to an evolving discourse on economic justice in a rapidly changing society. It recognizes that while market forces are essential for growth, equity must remain a parallel objective to ensure that India's economic development is inclusive and socially just.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on caste-based discrimination and affirmative action in India is both rich and evolving. While initial scholarly focus was predominantly on public sector reservations and educational quotas, recent studies have shifted toward examining the **private sector's role** in perpetuating or alleviating social inequities. This review synthesizes key contributions from academic literature, policy reports, and legal interpretations relevant to private sector affirmative action

Historical and Constitutional Context

Galanter (1984) introduced the concept of “competing equalities” to highlight the tension between formal equality and compensatory discrimination. He emphasized that caste, while not explicitly mentioned in early constitutional debates about the private sector, remains a **deeply entrenched social hierarchy** that necessitates proactive policy interventions. Similarly, Basu (2020) and the Indian Constitution's Articles 15 and 16 provide the legal foundation for state-supported affirmative action, but these are confined largely to public employment.

Caste Discrimination in Employment

One of the most influential empirical studies by Thorat and Attewell (2007) used a correspondence audit method and demonstrated that Dalit and Muslim job applicants with identical qualifications received significantly fewer callbacks from private employers. This landmark study exposed **systemic bias** in hiring processes, challenging the perception that the private sector operates solely on meritocratic principles.

Jodhka and Newman (2010) expanded this discourse by interviewing HR professionals, who often denied the existence of caste bias yet failed to provide evidence of inclusive hiring practices. Their findings revealed an implicit **cultural bias against affirmative action**, viewed as an infringement on managerial autonomy.

Policy Recommendations and Commissions

The **Sachar Committee Report (2006)** and **Ranganath Misra Commission (2007)** highlighted that private sector exclusion disproportionately affects Muslims, SCs, and STs. These reports called for the establishment of an **Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC)** and suggested incentives for companies that implement diversity practices. However, implementation has been limited due to political and corporate resistance.

International Models and Comparative Insights

Comparative research has looked at models from South Africa, Brazil, and the United States, where affirmative action exists in various forms, including **diversity quotas, scorecards, and tax incentives**. Hasan (2011) and UNDP reports argue that such frameworks have not only improved representation but also enhanced innovation and productivity. These examples underscore that **affirmative action and economic efficiency are not mutually exclusive**.

Critiques and Counterarguments

Opponents of private sector reservation, such as Bhagwati and Panagariya (2013), argue that it could distort market functioning and lead to inefficiencies. They advocate for skill-based interventions, such as better education and training for marginalized groups, instead of quotas. While their concerns about operational freedom are valid, critics point out that **purely voluntary diversity programs have not yielded measurable equity outcomes** in India.

Gaps in the Literature

Although numerous studies establish the existence of caste-based disparities in the private sector, **there is limited research on policy implementation strategies**, impact assessments of corporate diversity initiatives, and longitudinal studies tracking career outcomes of marginalized employees in private firms.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **mixed-methods approach** to explore the feasibility, challenges, and policy implications of extending affirmative action to India's private sector. The research design integrates both **quantitative and qualitative** techniques to capture empirical evidence, stakeholder perceptions, and legal-policy dimensions comprehensively.

Research Design

The study is structured around three core research questions:

- What is the extent of caste-based exclusion in private sector employment?
- What are the attitudes of key stakeholders (employers, employees, policymakers) towards affirmative action in the private sector?
- What policy models (domestic and international) can be adapted to suit the Indian context?

To address these, the research is divided into three phases:

Data Collection Methods

A. Quantitative Analysis

Secondary Data:

- Employment data from the **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)** and **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** was analyzed to assess representation of SC/ST/OBCs in different employment sectors.
- Use of data from the **Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)** and **State of Working India Reports** to track wage disparity and employment patterns.

Surveys:

- Structured questionnaires were administered to 150 respondents from Tier I and Tier II cities, including HR professionals, SC/ST/OBC jobseekers, and recent graduates.
- Likert-scale items were used to gauge attitudes toward reservation, meritocracy, and diversity.

B. Qualitative Analysis**In-depth Interviews:**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 stakeholders including:

Corporate HR heads

Policy experts

Activists

Representatives from Dalit entrepreneurship forums and industry bodies (e.g., CII, FICCI)

Case Studies:

Analysis of diversity initiatives in select Indian companies (e.g., Tata Group, Infosys) that have voluntarily adopted inclusive hiring policies.

Comparison with international affirmative action programs in **South Africa, Brazil, and the U.S.** to identify adaptable policy models.

Legal-Policy Review

A thorough review of constitutional provisions (Articles 15, 16, 19, 46) and landmark judicial decisions (e.g., *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*).

Analysis of government committee reports (e.g., **Sachar Committee, Ranganath Misra Commission**).

Examination of the **Equal Opportunity Commission draft bill** and its policy implications.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical tools in **SPSS and Excel**, with cross-tabulation, mean comparison, and correlation analysis.

Qualitative data from interviews was analyzed using **thematic coding**, enabling identification of recurring patterns, attitudes, and policy perspectives.

Limitations

Limited access to HR data due to confidentiality concerns.

Sample size constrained by resource and time limitations.

The survey may be subject to **response bias**, especially from corporate participants hesitant to express views on caste openly.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is found that the level of innovative behavior is low for 50 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderate in the case of 40 percent of the respondents and high in the case of 10 percent of the respondents.

Table Risk taking behavior

Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low	127	63.5	63.5

Moderate	55	27.5	91.0
High	18	9.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their risk taking behavior. It is found that the level of risk taking behavior is low for 63.5 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderate in the case of 27.5 percent of the respondents and high in the case of 9 percent of the respondents.

Internal Factors

Table Poor access to knowledge

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	24	12.0	12.0
Moderately agree	120	60.0	72.0
Agree	56	28.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely poor access to knowledge. It is observed that poor access to knowledge is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 12 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 60 percent and agreed by 28 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Language problem

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	24	12.0	12.0
Moderately agree	56	28.0	40.0
Agree	120	60.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely language problem. It is observed that language problem is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 12 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 28 percent and agreed by 60 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Communication problem

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Disagree	24	12.0	12.0
Moderately agree	64	32.0	44.0
Agree	112	56.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely communication problem. It is observed that communication problem is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 12 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 32 percent and agreed by 56 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Cost of coaching is beyond means

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	20	10.0	10.0
Moderately agree	72	36.0	46.0
Agree	108	54.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely cost of coaching is beyond their means. It is observed that the cost of coaching is beyond their means is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 10 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 36 percent and agreed by 54 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Inability to distribute time

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	20	10.0	10.0
Moderately agree	116	58.0	68.0
Agree	64	32.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Source: primary data

Table-6.58 refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely inability to distribute time between regular classes and coaching classes. It is observed that inability to distribute time between regular classes and coaching classes is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 10 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 58 percent and agreed by 32 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Family responsibilities

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	124	62.0	62.0
Moderately agree	60	30.0	92.0
Agree	16	8.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely family responsibilities. It is observed that family responsibilities is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 62 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 30 percent and agreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Inability to wait for a job

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	110	55.0	55.0
Moderately agree	69	34.5	89.5
Agree	21	10.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely inability to wait for a job. It is observed that inability to wait for a job is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 55 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 34.5 percent and agreed by 10.5 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Lack of required skills

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	18	9.0	9.0
Moderately agree	75	37.5	46.5
Agree	107	53.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely lack of required skills. It is observed that lack of required skills is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 9 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 37.5 percent and agreed by 53.5 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Brought up in a backward family

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	20	10.0	10.0
Moderately agree	60	30.0	40.0
Agree	120	60.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their internal problems and prospects for public employment namely brought up in a backward family. It is observed that brought up in a backward family is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 10 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 30 percent and agreed by 60 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table No reference points

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	16	8.0	8.0
Moderately agree	60	30.0	38.0
Agree	124	62.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

It is observed that no reference points is considered to be an internal obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 30 percent and agreed by 62 percent of the sample OBC students.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Table Uneven distribution of competitive examination resources

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	20	10.0	10.0
Moderately agree	118	59.0	69.0
Agree	62	31.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely uneven distribution of competitive examination resources. It is observed that uneven distribution of competitive examination

resources is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 10 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 59 percent and agreed by 31 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Mismatch between curriculums of different exams

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	27	13.5	13.5
Moderately agree	55	27.5	41.0
Agree	118	59.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely mismatch between curriculums of different examinations. It is observed that mismatch between curriculums of different examinations is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 13.5 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 27.5 percent and agreed by 59 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Employment is adversely affected by technology

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	24	12.0	12.0
Moderately agree	64	32.0	44.0
Agree	112	56.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely employment is adversely affected by technology. It is observed that employment is adversely affected by technology is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 12 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 32 percent and agreed by 56 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Employment notifications are irregular

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	16	8.0	8.0
Moderately agree	60	30.0	38.0

Agree	124	62.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely employment notifications are irregular. It is observed that employment notifications are irregular is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 30 percent and agreed by 62 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Part time job market is narrow

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	16	8.0	8.0
Moderately agree	112	56.0	64.0
Agree	72	36.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely part time job market are narrow. It is observed that part time job market are narrow is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 56 percent and agreed by 36 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Earning while learning programs are conspicuously absent

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	16	8.0	8.0
Moderately agree	69	34.5	42.5
Agree	115	57.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely earning while learning programs are conspicuously absent. It is observed that earning while learning programs are conspicuously absent is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 34.5 percent and agreed by 57.5 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Low level mobility

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	116	58.0	58.0
Moderately agree	68	34.0	92.0
Agree	16	8.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely low-level mobility. It is observed that low level mobility is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 58 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 34 percent and agreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table Mismatch between abilities and pre requisites

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	16	8.0	8.0
Moderately agree	56	28.0	36.0
Agree	128	64.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely mismatch between abilities and pre requisites. It is observed that mismatch between abilities and pre requisites is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 8 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is moderately agreed by 28 percent and agreed by 64 percent of the sample OBC students.

Table The problem of scale versus skill

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	18	9.0	9.0
Moderately agree	71	35.5	44.5
Agree	111	55.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	

Table refers to the distribution of the sample OBC students by their perceptions about their external problems and prospects for public employment namely the problem of scale versus skill. It is observed that the problem of scale versus skill is considered to be an external obstacle for their employment which is disagreed by 9 percent of the sample OBC students and the same is

moderately agreed by 35.5 percent and agreed by 55.5 percent of the sample OBC students.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The intersection of caste, economic opportunity, and corporate autonomy presents one of the most pressing policy dilemmas in contemporary India. As the private sector becomes the dominant engine of employment in a liberalized economy, its continued exclusion from the framework of affirmative action undermines the very goals of equity and social justice envisioned by the Indian Constitution. This study finds substantial evidence of caste-based discrimination in private sector hiring practices, alongside strong support for inclusive policies among marginalized communities. At the same time, there exists significant resistance from industry stakeholders, who raise concerns about operational efficiency, meritocracy, and the legal implications of mandated quotas. Through legal analysis, survey data, and expert insights, the research highlights that a one-size-fits-all reservation policy may not be feasible. However, complete inaction is no longer tenable. The growing inequality in access to employment and career mobility calls for a balanced, innovative, and multi-pronged policy approach. This includes voluntary diversity targets, affirmative outreach programs, public disclosure norms, and possibly, incentive-linked frameworks tied to CSR or tax benefits. International experiences from countries like South Africa, Brazil, and the United States suggest that affirmative action, when carefully designed, can coexist with corporate growth and innovation. For India, the path forward must be rooted in its unique socio-economic and constitutional context, but informed by a global understanding of equity in employment. In conclusion, achieving caste equity in the private sector is not merely a political or legal challenge—it is a moral imperative. The future of India's democracy and economic inclusiveness depends on bridging the gap between capital and caste, ensuring that careers are shaped by competence, not caste identity.

FUTURE WORK

While this study provides a foundational analysis of the policy landscape, stakeholder attitudes, and socio-economic implications surrounding private sector affirmative action in India, it also opens several avenues for future research and intervention:

1. Sector-Specific Case Studies

Future research can conduct **industry-specific analyses** (e.g., IT, manufacturing, finance, services) to understand how different sectors perceive and potentially implement diversity practices. This would help in designing **customized inclusion frameworks** rather than uniform mandates.

2. Longitudinal Studies on Employment Outcomes

There is a need for **long-term tracking** of employment patterns among marginalized groups in the private sector. This would help quantify the impact of voluntary inclusion policies and assess whether they reduce inequality in career growth, promotions, and wages.

3. Experimental Hiring Studies

Building on audit studies like Thorat & Attewell (2007), **real-world experiments** (e.g., blind resume trials, anonymized hiring processes) can be conducted to measure implicit caste bias in recruitment and how it changes over time with policy interventions.

4. Legal Framework and Constitutional Reform

Further exploration is needed on how **constitutional amendments or reinterpretations** could legally enable affirmative action in the private sector without violating Article 19(1)(g) (freedom of trade). Future legal scholarship can model **hybrid frameworks** combining state incentives and corporate responsibility.

5. Role of Technology and AI in Inclusive Hiring

The growing use of **AI in recruitment** brings new challenges and opportunities. Future work could explore how algorithms may unintentionally reproduce caste biases and how **ethical AI** can be leveraged to promote fair and inclusive hiring.

6. Comparative International Policy Studies

Drawing from Brazil, South Africa, and the U.S., further comparative studies can explore the **transferability of global affirmative action models** to the Indian context, including their successes, failures, and cultural adaptability.

7. Awareness and Education Campaigns

Research can also focus on designing and evaluating **inclusion awareness programs** for HR professionals and leadership in the private sector, as a soft approach to shifting mindsets and corporate culture.

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