



# Reservation Policy for the excluded: Situating Pierre Bourdieu

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## **Abstract:**

*Reservation is a policy to overcome the multiple deprivations of the marginalized social groups and to provide protection against exclusion and discrimination by encouraging their effective participation in the economic, social and political processes of the society (Thorat and Senapati, 2006). But the policy of reservation has evoked considerable controversy in recent times. On one hand the policy is consistent with equalitarianism and social justice. On the other hand it is a policy which allows creamy layer to take advantage of the reservation and benefit unduly while depriving fellows of their own community. Thus, the paper examines the theoretical orientation associated with Pierre Bourdieu to have an inbuilt understanding about the practice of reservations, what it is and why we need to care about it. In the Bourdieu's notion of social and cultural capital, the opportunities of life chances that is available to some but not to others acts as an agency for reproduction of both inequality and social classes in the society.*

**Key words: Exclusion, Reservation policy, cultural capital, social capital.**

## **Introduction**

Equality and social justice form essential elements of the betterment for society. Equality does not mean that everybody is equal or can be made so. But it does mean equal opportunities for all and no political, economic or social barrier. The backwardness or degradation of any group is not due to inherent failings in it but principally due to lack of opportunities and long suppression by other groups (The World Bank, 2011). For centuries, society has been compartmentalized on the basis of caste, class, disability, ethnicity, age and location and a particular segment of the society has been the victim of oppression and exploitation at the hands of dominant groups in society. One of the initiatives tried to offset the inequalities and discrimination of society by bringing excluded groups in the mainstream society through special measures and provisions is in the form of reservations intended to grant substantial socio-economic and political space to the weaker sections of the population (Ambedkar, 1979). Reservation strategy was secured throughout the decades to review the established socio-economic disparities of the distraught segment of the social order due to past societal discrimination (Singh, 1985). Equality and social justice were the driving motive for the inclusion of reservations in the form of preferential treatment in education, employment and electorate. Thus the question arises whether the reservation policy has benefited only a small section of the SCs, STs and Socially and educationally backward classes particularly the

dominant class without allowing benefits to reach the truly backward members of that class. The policy of reservation has increased the disparities between and within target groups which has divided the people in two categories pro reservationists and anti-reservationists and has emerged as an issue. Thus the issues that occurred in the wake of the preferential treatment for SCs, STs, and Socially and educationally backward classes provided an opportunity to examine the reservation policy in the notion of Bourdieu's understanding of social capital and cultural capital.

### ***Reservation policy***

History testifies the presence of cleavages in every society characterized by atrocities, discrimination, exploitation and subordination in terms of caste, class, disability, ethnicity, age, location etc. Such cleavages have changed the entire social fabric of society, whereby the exploited sections, be it the Dalits, Adivasis or women, have been systematically pushed to the periphery by the traditional Brahmanical structure of oppression and exploitation (Sutradhar, 2014:91). This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by the age old caste hierarchical tradition in the society. Any society that is hierarchical and highly skewed follows not only the division of labor but also the division of people into inferior and superior. Thus segregating a group of people from the social, political, economic, cultural, educational and religious domains of societal life provides a base for a sense of superiority and inferiority among members of the same society or culture. In this way some communities were subjected to historical, ritualistic discrimination, deprivation of resources at every sphere of social, economic and political lives. Such condition is connected to the deprivation they suffer in relation to the higher status groups and to the differential treatment they receive from the power elites among themselves. The system proceeded to assign rights and duties across caste according to hierarchy whereas some were exposed to the geographical and cultural isolation resulting in distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. They are also more likely to be poor, and this likelihood is passed down through the generations (World Bank, 2011). Further the identity-based forms of disadvantage reflect the cultural devaluation of groups and categories of people in a society. The identity may relate to a distinct and bounded group of people who are defined by their distinct cultural practices and shared ways of life. In practice, the dominant sections of society construct and re-construct the members of these groups or categories as persons of lesser worth through beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior which, stigmatize, stereotype and discriminate. Group based disadvantages give rise to the inequalities which cut across socially and economically defined strata and differentiate the ability of different groups and categories within society to access valued resources and opportunities (Sonowal, 2008:124).

In recognition to the peripheral status of the marginalized social communities and groups, various legislations and statutes have been consistently promulgated to overcome the multiple deprivations of the marginalized social groups inherited from exclusion in the past, and, to bring them at par with others and also to provide protection against exclusion and discrimination in the present by encouraging their effective participation in the general economic, social and political processes of the society (Thorat and Senapati, 2006). It has been argued that policies are necessary in societies which have laws against discrimination or which have attained formal equality. The laws against untouchability, segregation and discrimination are essential, but they cannot possibly eliminate the impact of prejudice, or compensate for group disabilities caused by historical circumstances, or otherwise ensure the achievement of equal opportunity between individuals. The structural obstacles to mobility may be most formidable where there has been a long history of prejudice, discrimination and exclusion (Nesiah, 1997). One of the responses advocated as a strategic tool for bringing the excluded communities and groups in the mainstream society is reservation policy conceived as an institution to redress past injustices, discrimination and exploitation (The World Bank, 2011). It is one of the mechanisms of protective discrimination as an inclusive policy of the state enshrined in the constitution to ensure the participation of the traditionally neglected sections of the society. It mainly focuses on increasing participation through employment of marginalized people in government and related services as well as in education system and political bodies (Dhaka, 2010). Reservations are part of a much larger policy package. It comprises a series of legislations, ameliorative programmes and preferential schemes designed to benefit the weaker sections of the society. The package has evolved over a long period of time and has been administered by the central as well as the state governments. The overall package is addressed to the following three sets of policy goals (Sheth, 1987).

- To remove social and religious disabilities of certain specified groups suffering disabilities on account of their social segregation and spatial and cultural isolation;
- to facilitate and promote equal participation of all socially disabled and disadvantaged groups with others in social, economic and political life. This is sought to be achieved through provisions for preferential treatment in education, government employment, reservation of seats in parliament, state legislatures and local bodies and through other ameliorative measures and schemes designed to improve their life chances and
- to protect from all forms of social injustice and exploitation. Reservations, along with other measures of protection and upliftment of the weaker sections of society, is viewed as an instrument of a larger social policy of the state addressed to a long-term goal of creating a civil society through extending effective citizenship rights to the vast sections of the population who have been historically deprived and marginalized.

### ***Need for Reservation Policy***

Reservation policy is a manifestation of social justice. It is concerned with the distribution of benefits and burdens throughout a society as it results from social institutions, property systems, public organizations etc. Therefore, there are three criteria to judge the basis of distribution, namely rights, deserts and needs. These three criteria can be put under two concepts of equality, 'Formal Equality' and 'Proportional Equality'. Formal Equality is known as the Jeffersonian concept of equality; it stipulates that each individual is to be protected in the exercise of his civil liberties so that each is afforded equal opportunity to fulfill his capabilities. This concept leans in favour of liberty and tends to guarantee equality of opportunity, not the equality of achievement (Anand, 1987). This form of equality concedes that human beings are diverse and unequal in most respects and that all such differences are irrelevant for purposes of distributing benefits and burdens among members of society. This model seeks to treat men identically in public sector regardless of inequalities in private situation. Proportional Equality known as the Jacksonian concept of equality, it postulates that it is not sufficient that law treats each person alike but the law should afford to each individual all those opportunities of basic nature which are important preconditions to the realization of the full value of available liberties. People are equally entitled to all that facilitates their development as rational persons. This concept of equality ensures, for each individual, the existence of a broad class of external circumstances that facilitate full development and expression of the capacities involved in rational life and which afford unrestricted access to available goods. Thus, while formal equality guarantees equality of opportunity and leans in favour of liberty, proportional equality tries to gain equality of achievement which results in some infringement of liberty in order to secure a maximum of equality of condition, without which it is argued that opportunities cannot be equal. While formal equality has a negative or no role for the state, proportional equality necessitates a positive role for the government so that equality of conditions or results is produced. Although the concept of proportional equality tilts in favour of equality, it does not favour to eliminate liberty. The concept of proportional equality is advocated by liberal democratic governments and writers who favour a welfare state, contending that statutory equality is meaningless unless a level playing field is provided (Thiagarajah, 2015). Thus the need is to bring the all the marginalized to the mainstream for the equal, just and fair society through reservation policy.

### ***Theoretical insights of Pierre Bourdieu***

The society is being characterized by socio-economic and cultural inequalities in which the oppressed groups also suffer from socio-economic inequality, lack of social justice and exclusion (Johnston, 2000: 69). Committed to social justice and addressing social inequalities, Bourdieu as one of the critical social theorist, interests in uncovering the subtleties of oppression (Carspecken, 1996:7). He explains how injustices and inequalities are produced, reproduced and sustained in the society (Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994:123). The mechanism which tends to perpetuate and reproduce structured social inequalities in society is based on the effective transmission of family-based parental endowments in terms of physical, human, social and cultural capital to the offspring (Tzanakis, 2011:1). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus assumes central importance in the process of social and cultural reproduction which actively reproduces social class inequalities (Bodovski, 2013). The cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1977:494). It embodies the sum total of



investments in aesthetic codes, practices and dispositions transmitted through the habitus. Habitus is an important form of cultural inheritance, reflects class position in a variety of fields and is geared to the perpetuation of structures of dominance (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 204-205). Habitus and cultural capital varies by class, knowledge and possession of culture. Capital is argued by Bourdieu to be unequally distributed according to social class and inequalities in cultural capital reflect inequalities in social class which forms the basis for social and cultural exclusion (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). The reproduction of these inequalities is to be facilitated through the education system which promotes the cultural capital and habitus of the dominant class by legitimating certain cultural practices through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage (Bourdieu, 1997). This makes it very difficult for lower-class pupils to succeed in the education system. "By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture." (Bourdieu, 1977a: 494). The cultural capital inculcated in the higher-class enables them to gain higher educational credentials than lower-class individuals to maintain their class position, and legitimates the dominant position. In this way social inequalities are legitimated by the educational credentials held by those in dominant positions. But despite the fact that lower-class pupils are seriously disadvantaged in the competition for educational credentials, the results of this competition are seen as meritocratic and therefore as legitimate (Sullivan, 2002). Thus, Bourdieu claims that social inequalities are legitimated by the educational credentials held by those in dominant positions. This means that the education system has a key role in maintaining the status quo. "Education in fact one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one." (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 32)

Along with cultural capital and habitus, social capital also actively reproduces social inequalities. Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119). Bourdieu uses the concept to describe the social networks used by elites to protect their position in the class system, and the system is reproduced across succeeding generations (Tzankis, 2011:2). Social capital, an asset of individuals draws its value from the power of the social connections available to them (Tzanki, 2013). In this way those who are at the top of social hierarchies can hold onto their position through a range of subtle techniques which cumulatively form an iron grip (Gauntlett, 2011:2). Thereby social capital is one that gives a causal mechanism for both accesses to power and privilege as well as the inability to access power that results in social exclusion (Bexley, et al., 2007). Thus, inequality fuelling the predispositions of actors is rooted in the differential distributions of cultural, social and symbolic capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world.

### ***Reservation policy, cultural capital and social capital***

Reservation policy is a mechanism of socio-economic mobility, an act of deliberately designed social engineering. Such policies are in observance in both the developed and developing countries to compensate for persistent discrimination or inequality in the social or geographical system (Maheshwari, 1997:1). In modern era, the body of knowledge associated with reservation policy and its practice opines that the reason behind the policy has somewhere lost its essence, and the marginalized groups that should be actually benefitted are not being benefitted and others are availing the benefits of the reservation policy that are actually not meant for it. One possible explanation for the opportunities and life chances that are available to some but not to others, is the quality of relationships and social networks, that are engaged in and the cultural experiences that they are open to. Social and cultural capitals are concepts that have been used in recent years to describe these relationships and experiences. They aim to explain the linkages between social and cultural capital and reservation policy which has undeniably succeeded in accelerating the growth of a middle class within the marginalized groups who are urban, educated and largely in government services. Members of these groups can utilize these opportunities and confer advantages on their next generation as well (Galanter, 1986). Thus the marginalized groups that should actually benefit are not being benefitted and others are availing the benefits of the reservation policy that are actually not meant for it.

Bourdieu theoretical insights provides a frame of orientation that how reservation system through the provisions for preferential treatment in education ensure the participation of the neglected section of the society and how educational credentials help the dominant group to reproduce and legitimate social inequalities. Education acts as an important agency for the reproduction of both inequality and social classes in the society, as preferential treatment in education system provides higher-classes access to other ameliorative measures and services and deserve their place in the social structure by experiencing an upward mobility, while the lower class still suffered from multiple deprivations and were the victims of cumulative domination which has left them socially, educationally and economically disadvantaged. In this way the dominant classes take all the benefit from the policy of reservation and have left various unanticipated consequences, the acceleration of class polarization, the emergence of a rich class, crystallization of hatred and enmity towards the well-off sections among the SCs, STs and OBCs. Thus, reservation system plays key role in maintaining the status quo and has tended to increase rather than reduce disparities, inequalities between and within targets groups.

## ***Conclusion***

Reservation is one of the inclusive policies which imply that people of all sections and regions get an opportunity to participate in different socio-economic processes of a society. It has been realized over the years that a common consensus and loyalty to the nation-making project were behind the acceptance of reservation as a unanimously adopted public policy. But subsequent implementation or execution of the policy of reservation was not marked by the enthusiasm which was designed to favor members of groups who are under-represented in various socio-economic spheres of the society and the feeling of accommodation and generosity have turned into that of competing equalities in a situation of scarcity leaving the society divided into pro-reservationists and anti-reservationists.

The benefits of reservation policy favour those who attain education upto that level where they can avail the benefits of reservation policy. The usefulness and value of education depends upon the accessibility of higher levels of education to different sections of the community and access to educational institutions and knowledge depends more on the socio-economic background of the weaker section of the society (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). There is ample evidence that children of better educated parents more often go to school and have less drops out tendencies (Huisman and Smits, 2009). Parents who have reached a certain educational level might want their children to achieve at least that level (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). In this way, the beneficiaries of reservation in educational institutions are more among those that access to educational institutions and knowledge which depends more on the socio-economic background. It is a matter of fact that the policy of reservation, instead of providing benefits for the upliftment of weaker section of society, the dominant class belonging to reserved category are taking undue advantages while marginalizing the actual deserving people. Beneficiaries of reservation policy tend to form a network of relations who remain at receiving end in taking the benefits from the policy, while as people with poor educational attainment and lack of awareness remain excluded from taking the benefits of reservations. In the notion of Pierre Bourdieu it is the social capital which comes from the network of relationships and groups of which one is member. Such network of relations tends to perpetuate class-division within the reserved categories. The relationship one has within ones network provides access to information that may not be available otherwise. This, in turn, has implications for access to education and other ameliorative measures and services and deserve their place in the social structure by experiencing an upward mobility while the lower income group class still suffers from multiple deprivations and are the victims of cumulative domination which leaves them socially, educationally and economically disadvantaged (Coleman, 1988). Thus reserved category population belonging to dominant class foster quality educational opportunities to their children and tends to transform social capital into human capital for their children. In this way, social capital tends to combine with other forms of capital (such as cultural capital) which promote social mobility. The transmission of cultural capital (educational credentials) from one generation to another generation maintains the class hierarchy in society. The dominant cultural capital possessed primarily by middle and upper class individuals and non-dominant cultural capital can be found in lower class communities (Carter, 2003). The structure prevents those in lower classes from accessing the requisite economic and cultural capital and constantly shifts requirements to keep the dominant class in power.

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