

## **Affirmative Action and Its Limits: Reassessing Dalit Rights in Contemporary India**

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### **Abstract**

Affirmative action in India, particularly through reservation policies, has played a pivotal role in addressing historical injustices and systemic exclusion faced by Dalits. While constitutional safeguards and state-led initiatives have expanded access to education, employment, and political representation, contemporary debates reveal both progress and persisting inequities. On one hand, reservations have facilitated the emergence of a Dalit middle class and contributed to dismantling some social barriers; on the other, significant sections of Dalit communities remain marginalized due to entrenched caste hierarchies, socio-economic disparities, and uneven policy implementation. The discourse on the limits of affirmative action highlights challenges such as inadequate quality of education, restricted upward mobility, and exclusion within Dalit sub-groups. Moreover, the neoliberal turn in India's economy has reshaped opportunities, raising questions about the adequacy of caste-based reservations in addressing multidimensional forms of disadvantage. Reassessing Dalit rights in this context requires a broader framework that integrates social justice, economic equity, and dignity to ensure transformative inclusion beyond policy quotas.

**Keywords:** Affirmative Action, Dalit Rights, Reservation Policy, Social Justice

### **Introduction**

The question of Dalit rights has occupied a central place in the social, political, and constitutional history of modern India. For centuries, Dalits—historically referred to as the “untouchables”—were marginalized through rigid caste hierarchies that denied them access to education, land, political power, and even basic human dignity. This entrenched exclusion was not simply the outcome of individual prejudice but was deeply embedded in the social order, determining relationships of power, labor, and hierarchy. The independence of India in 1947 brought with it not only the promise of political freedom but also a moral responsibility to confront caste oppression and to build a more egalitarian society. It was in this context that B. R. Ambedkar, himself a Dalit and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, ensured the

incorporation of safeguards to abolish untouchability and to create affirmative action policies that would address centuries of structural disadvantage. The Indian Constitution enshrined several provisions designed to dismantle caste-based discrimination. Article 17 formally abolished untouchability, while Articles 15 and 16 prohibited caste-based discrimination in education and public employment. Affirmative action, in the form of reservations in legislatures, government jobs, and educational institutions, became the cornerstone of efforts to promote equality of opportunity for Dalits. These policies sought not only to compensate for historical injustice but also to create pathways for political representation, economic mobility, and social inclusion. Over the decades, affirmative action contributed significantly to the emergence of a Dalit middle class, the rise of Dalit political parties, and the increased visibility of Dalit voices in public discourse. Yet despite these gains, the persistence of caste violence, discriminatory practices, and economic disparities demonstrated that structural inequality could not be easily dismantled through quotas alone.

The rise of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to national power in 2014 marked a significant moment for Dalit politics and rights in contemporary India. Modi, who often emphasizes his background as belonging to an “Other Backward Class” (OBC), projected an image of inclusivity that extended across caste lines. At the same time, the broader ideological project of the BJP, rooted in Hindutva, raised concerns about how Dalit identity and rights would be accommodated within a Hindu nationalist framework that often seeks to downplay caste divisions in favor of religious unity. The period from 2014 to 2025 has therefore become a critical time for examining Dalit rights. On the one hand, the Modi government has promoted welfare programs, entrepreneurship schemes, and symbolic gestures toward Dalit figures like Ambedkar. On the other hand, this era has also witnessed recurring instances of caste violence, debates over the dilution of protective legislation such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and questions about the future of reservations in an increasingly privatized economy.

The study of Dalit rights in the Modi era is significant for several reasons. First, it allows for a reassessment of how affirmative action functions in the twenty-first century, when the Indian economy and polity are undergoing rapid changes. The expansion of the private sector has limited the scope of reservations, which are constitutionally mandated only in public institutions, leaving Dalits at a disadvantage in emerging areas of employment. Second, the political landscape has shifted, with the decline of traditional Dalit-led parties such as the

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the incorporation of Dalit leaders into the broader Hindu nationalist framework of the BJP. This raises questions about the autonomy of Dalit political representation and the risk of co-optation. Third, the persistence of caste-based violence, ranging from atrocities in rural villages to discrimination in urban spaces and universities, underscores the gap between legal protections and lived realities. Examining these dynamics in the context of Modi's leadership allows us to evaluate not only the successes and failures of current policies but also the deeper structural issues that continue to shape Dalit experiences.

The central research problem is whether affirmative action policies, as they currently exist, are adequate to address the systemic exclusion and discrimination faced by Dalits. While reservations have opened up spaces in education and employment, they have not fundamentally altered the structural inequalities of land ownership, social stigma, and caste hierarchies. Moreover, the benefits of reservations are not evenly distributed within the Dalit community itself, with certain sub-castes often gaining more access than others, leading to internal debates about equity. The introduction of new policies such as the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota for upper castes has also fueled anxieties about the dilution of caste-based affirmative action. These developments highlight the limits of an approach that relies heavily on quotas without addressing broader questions of social justice and redistribution. The aim of this study is to examine the limits of affirmative action and to reassess Dalit rights in contemporary India. By situating the analysis in the Modi era, the discussion seeks to highlight both the continuities and ruptures in the state's approach to caste. Affirmative action remains a necessary tool for promoting inclusion, but it is not a sufficient remedy for centuries of systemic exclusion. A reassessment requires looking beyond quotas to consider issues such as quality of education, healthcare, housing, entrepreneurship, and protections against discrimination in the private sector. It also requires paying attention to the ways in which Dalit movements themselves are rearticulating demands for dignity and equality, often outside the framework of mainstream party politics.

The scope of this inquiry extends across constitutional provisions, government policies, and the lived experiences of Dalits in contemporary India. It engages with theoretical debates about equality, justice, and representation, drawing on Ambedkar's vision as well as more recent critical and postcolonial perspectives. It also situates Dalit rights within the broader global discourse on affirmative action, minority rights, and social justice. By analyzing the Modi era, the discussion highlights the contradictions of a government that simultaneously promotes

welfare schemes while presiding over an environment where caste atrocities persist. This tension raises fundamental questions about the nature of democracy, the resilience of caste, and the challenges of achieving substantive equality in India. In reassessing Dalit rights, it is important to recognize both the achievements and the shortcomings of affirmative action. The rise of Dalit professionals, intellectuals, and activists is a testament to the transformative potential of reservation policies. At the same time, the ongoing marginalization of Dalit agricultural laborers, manual scavengers, and those excluded from the benefits of education and formal employment points to the limits of policy interventions that do not address deeper structural inequities. The Modi era provides a lens through which to explore these contradictions, as it combines new forms of political symbolism with enduring patterns of exclusion.

### **Historical Context of Dalit Rights and Affirmative Action**

The history of Dalit rights and affirmative action in India is inseparable from the struggle against caste oppression, which for centuries shaped the exclusion of marginalized communities from land, education, and positions of social power. At independence in 1947, India inherited a deeply stratified society where Dalits were systematically denied access to dignity and equality. Recognizing the need for structural reforms, the framers of the Indian Constitution, led by B. R. Ambedkar, sought to create a framework that would not only abolish untouchability but also actively promote the inclusion of Dalits in public life. Constitutional guarantees and affirmative action policies thus became central instruments of social justice, designed to challenge entrenched hierarchies while fostering a more egalitarian democracy. The Constitution explicitly addressed caste-based discrimination through multiple provisions. Article 17 abolished untouchability in all forms, declaring it a punishable offense and thereby rejecting one of the most pernicious practices of caste-based exclusion. Article 15 prohibited discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, while Article 16 guaranteed equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Importantly, both Articles 15(4) and 16(4) provided the basis for affirmative action by allowing the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, including Scheduled Castes. Article 46 further obligated the state to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and to protect them from social

injustice and exploitation (Austin, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. Together, these provisions reflected Ambedkar's vision that formal equality would remain insufficient unless the state actively intervened to dismantle caste hierarchies.

Based on these constitutional foundations, affirmative action—or reservations—was introduced as a concrete policy mechanism. Initially, reservations were implemented in legislatures to ensure Dalit political representation. Over time, they were extended to public employment and higher education, providing Dalits with opportunities previously denied to them. The logic behind reservations was twofold: first, to rectify historical injustices, and second, to enable Dalits to participate in nation-building on equal footing with other citizens. (Galanter, 1984)<sup>2</sup>, in his seminal work *Competing Equalities*, argued that affirmative action in India represented one of the most ambitious efforts in the world to redress structural inequalities through state policy.

The early decades after independence witnessed some notable successes of affirmative action. Reservations in political institutions enabled Dalits to secure representation in local bodies, state legislatures, and Parliament, ensuring that their voices were at least formally included in governance. Educational quotas opened avenues for Dalits to enter universities and professional courses, producing a growing Dalit middle class that could articulate demands for justice more forcefully. Employment reservations allowed Dalits to secure positions in government services, breaking the monopoly of upper castes in state institutions. (Jaffrelot, 2003)<sup>3</sup> has noted that these measures contributed significantly to the politicization and mobilization of Dalit communities, particularly from the 1970s onward, when movements and political parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party began to transform Dalit assertion into electoral power.

Yet these successes must be viewed alongside the persistent challenges that have limited the transformative potential of affirmative action. Despite constitutional guarantees and policy interventions, caste-based violence has remained a grim reality. Dalits continue to face atrocities ranging from social boycotts and physical violence to massacres in rural areas, often in response to their attempts to claim rights or assert dignity. The implementation of laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 has been

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<sup>1</sup> Austin, G. (1999). *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a nation* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Galanter, M. (1984). *Competing equalities: Law and the backward classes in India*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Jaffrelot, C. (2003). *India's silent revolution: The rise of the lower castes in North India*. Permanent Black.

uneven, with frequent reports of under-enforcement and resistance from dominant castes (Teltumbde, 2018)<sup>4</sup>. Economic inequality has also persisted despite reservation policies. Land ownership among Dalits remains disproportionately low, with most Dalits concentrated in agricultural labor or informal urban work. Even where education has opened doors, economic mobility has been uneven. (Thorat and Attewell, 2007)<sup>5</sup> have demonstrated through field experiments that Dalits face significant discrimination in labor markets, with lower call-back rates for jobs even when their qualifications are equal to those of upper-caste applicants. Such findings suggest that structural stigma continues to undermine the efficacy of affirmative action, which by itself cannot eliminate deep-rooted social prejudices.

In addition to economic challenges, the stigma of caste identity continues to shape Dalit experiences in both rural and urban contexts. Educational institutions, for instance, often remain spaces of discrimination where Dalit students face segregation, humiliation, or pressures that contribute to high dropout rates. The tragic cases of student suicides, such as that of Rohith Vemula in 2016, highlight how systemic exclusion extends beyond access to representation into questions of dignity and belonging (Guru, 2011)<sup>6</sup>. Affirmative action provides access but does not guarantee social acceptance, leaving Dalits vulnerable to forms of exclusion that are symbolic and psychological as well as material. Moreover, the scope of affirmative action has been limited by structural changes in the Indian economy. While reservations apply to government jobs, the expansion of the private sector since the 1990s has left Dalits increasingly marginalized in new domains of employment. Demands for extending reservations to the private sector have grown stronger, but resistance has been significant, raising questions about the adaptability of affirmative action to contemporary economic realities. This structural shift has intensified debates on whether quotas alone are adequate instruments of justice or whether broader redistributive policies are required.

Despite these limitations, affirmative action remains a crucial tool in the struggle for Dalit rights. It has provided opportunities for education, employment, and representation that would otherwise have been inaccessible. More importantly, it has enabled Dalits to challenge the ideological dominance of caste, asserting dignity and citizenship in ways that have reshaped

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<sup>4</sup> Teltumbde, A. (2018). *Republic of caste: Thinking equality in the time of neoliberal Hindutva*. Navayana.

<sup>5</sup> Thorat, S., & Attewell, P. (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(41), 4141–4145.

<sup>6</sup> Guru, G. (2011). *Humiliation: Claims and contexts*. Oxford University Press.



Indian democracy. At the same time, the persistence of caste violence, economic inequality, and stigma illustrates the limits of a policy that addresses representation without fundamentally transforming social and economic structures. The historical context of Dalit rights thus reveals a paradox. On one hand, affirmative action has created unprecedented opportunities and contributed to Dalit empowerment. On the other hand, the endurance of systemic discrimination demonstrates that affirmative action, while necessary, is not sufficient. The trajectory of Dalit rights in India therefore underscores the need for a dual approach: maintaining affirmative action while simultaneously pursuing broader structural reforms aimed at economic redistribution, cultural transformation, and social dignity. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for reassessing Dalit rights in the contemporary period, particularly under the Modi government, where questions about the adequacy and future of affirmative action have become especially pressing.

### **Dalit Rights in the Contemporary India**

The period of Narendra Modi's leadership, beginning in 2014, represents a critical phase in the trajectory of Dalit rights in the contemporary India. The Modi government has overseen significant shifts in policy, economy, and politics, many of which have had direct implications for Dalit communities. On the one hand, the state has advanced welfare programs, educational initiatives, and symbolic gestures toward Dalit icons such as B. R. Ambedkar. On the other, the Modi era has also coincided with rising concerns about caste-based violence, the weakening of protective legislation, and the impact of neoliberal reforms that have eroded the scope of affirmative action. These contradictions highlight both the promises and limits of Dalit rights under contemporary governance.

One of the central features of the Modi government has been its focus on welfare schemes, many of which have been framed as inclusive of marginalized communities. Programs such as *Stand-Up India* and *Mudra Yojana* were designed to encourage entrepreneurship, including among Scheduled Castes. Educational schemes like the *Post-Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Caste Students* and the emphasis on skill development were promoted as ways to bridge inequalities. At the symbolic level, the government invested in memorials to Ambedkar and repeatedly invoked his legacy to signal a commitment to Dalit empowerment (Jaffrelot, 2021)<sup>7</sup>. Yet critics argue that many of these measures were underfunded, inconsistently implemented,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

or used more for political signaling than for substantive structural change. The persistence of dropout rates among Dalit students and the challenges of accessing scholarships reveal the limits of such interventions. At the same time, the expansion of neoliberal reforms has deeply affected the scope of reservations. Since reservations are constitutionally mandated only in government jobs and public universities, the shrinking of the public sector has reduced opportunities for Dalit representation. Privatization and contractualization of labor have meant that Dalits are disproportionately excluded from secure, well-paying employment. This shift has prompted demands for the extension of reservations into the private sector, a proposal resisted by industry groups and only cautiously addressed by policymakers (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The Modi government has promoted the vision of a globalized, market-driven economy, but this orientation has exacerbated structural inequalities, leaving Dalits at the margins of new labor markets. In this sense, neoliberal reforms have undermined the effectiveness of affirmative action, exposing its limits in an economy no longer dominated by the state.

Hindutva politics has further complicated the question of Dalit rights. The ideology of Hindutva seeks to promote unity among Hindus across caste lines, but in practice, it often reproduces traditional hierarchies. While the BJP has made strategic efforts to incorporate Dalit leaders and voters—sometimes described as a form of “social engineering”—this inclusion has been more symbolic than structural (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020)<sup>8</sup>. By emphasizing religious identity over caste identity, Hindutva politics risks suppressing Dalit-specific grievances, framing them instead within a broader Hindu nationalist agenda. The rise of “cow protection” vigilantism during this period illustrates the tension: Dalits engaged in traditional occupations such as leather work or cattle skinning were often subjected to violence by so-called cow protection groups. Such incidents reveal how Hindutva politics has not erased caste but has reinforced it under the guise of cultural nationalism.

Cases of caste violence and exclusion during the Modi era further highlight the fragile state of Dalit rights. The Una flogging in Gujarat in 2016, where Dalit men were publicly beaten for skinning a dead cow, sparked nationwide protests and renewed debates about caste oppression in the context of Hindutva vigilantism. The suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad in 2016, exposed the pervasive discrimination in academic institutions and galvanized a new wave of student activism. Dalit atrocities have continued

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<sup>8</sup> Jaffrelot, C., & Verniers, G. (2020). Castes, communities, and parties in Uttar Pradesh. In R. Mukherji (Ed.), *The Indian economy since 1991: Economic reforms and performance* (pp. 281–304). Oxford University Press.



across rural India, ranging from everyday humiliations to mass violence, often with inadequate legal redress. While the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act remains on the books, its implementation has faced political challenges. In 2018, a Supreme Court ruling that diluted the Act's provisions against immediate arrest in atrocity cases triggered widespread Dalit protests, forcing the government to amend the law and restore its strength (Teltumbde, 2018)<sup>9</sup>. These episodes illustrate both the resilience of Dalit activism and the limits of state protection under the Modi regime.

The Modi era has also witnessed the rise of digital and urban Dalit movements, which have expanded the scope of resistance and visibility. The Bhim Army, founded by Chandrashekhar Azad in Uttar Pradesh, emerged as a prominent force mobilizing Dalit youth through both street protests and online platforms. Social media has become an important space for articulating Dalit identity and contesting mainstream narratives, allowing activists to bypass traditional media that often marginalize caste issues (Guru, 2011)<sup>10</sup>. Student organizations, Ambedkarite collectives, and intellectual forums have also redefined the terrain of Dalit politics, situating caste oppression within broader struggles for social justice, democracy, and equality. These movements reflect a generational shift, where younger Dalits use digital tools to build solidarity and amplify their voices on issues ranging from university discrimination to rural atrocities.

In a nutshell, the period from 2014 to 2025 demonstrates the contradictory nature of Dalit rights under Modi's leadership. On one hand, there has been greater symbolic recognition of Dalit icons and targeted welfare measures. On the other, neoliberal reforms have eroded the material base of affirmative action, Hindutva politics has suppressed caste grievances under the banner of Hindu unity, and caste violence has continued to undermine the promise of equality. The rise of new Dalit movements, particularly in digital and urban contexts, suggests that while state policies remain limited, Dalit agency continues to find expression in innovative and powerful ways. These dynamics highlight the urgent need to reassess the adequacy of affirmative action and to situate Dalit rights within the broader transformations of India's political economy and cultural politics.

### **Affirmative Action and Its Limits**

Affirmative action has been one of the most significant tools of social justice in post-independence India, providing Dalits access to education, employment, and political

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

representation. Yet, while reservations have undoubtedly created opportunities, they have also revealed important limitations in addressing the deeper structural exclusions that continue to shape Dalit life. The persistence of inequalities in land ownership, economic mobility, and social dignity suggests that quotas alone cannot dismantle caste hierarchies, which are embedded in both material and cultural structures. One of the key structural exclusions lies in the question of land ownership. Despite decades of policy interventions, Dalits continue to own disproportionately small shares of cultivable land. This exclusion limits not only economic independence but also social dignity, as land remains a primary source of status in rural India. (Thorat, 2009)<sup>11</sup> emphasizes that without addressing land redistribution and rural inequality, reservations in education and employment cannot substantially alter Dalits' economic position. In this sense, affirmative action provides entry into state institutions but leaves untouched the agrarian foundations of caste-based power. Another major limitation concerns the reach of reservations in the era of economic liberalization. Since quotas apply only to public sector jobs and educational institutions, the expansion of the private sector has created a parallel domain largely insulated from affirmative action. As (Thorat and Newman, 2010)<sup>12</sup> demonstrate, Dalits face persistent discrimination in private employment, often being excluded from higher-paying jobs despite equivalent qualifications. Similarly, access to elite higher education remains uneven, as Dalit students often enter institutions with fewer resources, face stigma, and experience alienation that can lead to high dropout rates. These challenges reveal that while affirmative action opens doors, it does not guarantee either social acceptance or equal treatment within institutions.

Affirmative action has also been shaped by internal hierarchies within Dalit communities themselves. Not all Dalit sub-castes benefit equally from reservations. More advantaged groups within the Scheduled Castes are often better positioned to take advantage of educational and employment quotas, leaving others further marginalized. (Jaffrelot, 2003)<sup>13</sup> notes that this has led to intra-Dalit tensions, with demands for sub-categorization of reservations to ensure equitable distribution. This dynamic complicates the picture of Dalit empowerment, suggesting that affirmative action, while designed to address historical injustice, can reproduce new forms

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

of inequality within the community. The politics of reservation has further exposed policy loopholes and contradictions. The introduction of the 10 percent quota for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among upper castes in 2019 marked a significant departure from the original caste-based rationale of affirmative action. While presented as a measure of economic justice, it has been criticized for diluting the focus on historically disadvantaged groups (Jenkins, 2021)<sup>14</sup>. Coupled with the shrinking number of secure government jobs due to privatization, this has raised concerns that reservations are losing their transformative potential. Finally, societal resistance to affirmative action has remained strong, particularly from upper-caste groups. Movements such as the anti-Mandal protests of the 1990s illustrate the deep resentment affirmative action generates among privileged communities. Even in contemporary India, Dalit students and employees often face stigma, being labeled as “quota candidates” regardless of their competence. (Galanter, 1984)<sup>15</sup> argued decades ago that this backlash reflects a deeper unwillingness of dominant castes to share power and resources, a problem that continues in modern contexts. The persistence of such resistance underscores the cultural limits of affirmative action, which cannot by itself transform attitudes entrenched in centuries of hierarchy. Affirmative action has therefore achieved significant gains while simultaneously revealing its limits. It has created opportunities for mobility and representation but has not addressed structural exclusions such as landlessness, economic insecurity, and caste stigma. Its reach has been curtailed by privatization and undermined by political maneuvering, while its benefits have been unevenly distributed across Dalit sub-castes. Most importantly, societal resistance continues to erode its legitimacy in the eyes of many, making it both a necessary and contested policy. To move toward substantive equality, affirmative action must be complemented by broader redistributive measures, protections in the private sector, and cultural transformations that address caste prejudice at its roots.

### **Conclusion**

The trajectory of Dalit rights in India reflects a long and complex struggle for justice, equality, and dignity. From the constitutional moment shaped by B. R. Ambedkar to the present political era under Narendra Modi, affirmative action has remained the most visible and contested tool of empowerment. It has opened the doors of schools, universities, government jobs, and

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<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, L. D. (2021). *Affirmative action matters: Creating opportunities for disadvantaged groups*. Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Galanter, M. (1984). *Competing equalities: Law and the backward classes in India*. Oxford University Press.

legislatures to those who had for centuries been denied access. Yet the persistence of violence, humiliation, and inequality demonstrates that while reservations are necessary, they are not sufficient. The challenge of Dalit emancipation in the twenty-first century is to go beyond quotas, to reimagine social justice in ways that address structural exclusions, cultural hierarchies, and economic transformation. A reassessment of Dalit rights requires first a recognition of the limits of existing affirmative action frameworks. Reservations have produced a visible Dalit middle class, but they have not fundamentally changed the life chances of the majority of Dalits who remain landless agricultural laborers, informal workers, or engaged in stigmatized occupations. Economic liberalization has further reduced the scope of reservations by shrinking government jobs and expanding the private sector, where protections do not apply. Without broader redistributive policies that address land, housing, healthcare, and entrepreneurial support, the reach of affirmative action remains confined to a narrow segment of the community. Strengthening social justice therefore demands that the state invest in public education of high quality, provide targeted healthcare, and promote Dalit entrepreneurship so that economic mobility is not limited to those with access to quotas.

Political representation has been one of the key achievements of the reservation system, yet its potential has also been undermined by co-optation and tokenism. Dalit leaders often find themselves absorbed into mainstream political parties where their capacity to act independently is constrained. The decline of autonomous Dalit-led movements and parties further raises concerns about the future of Dalit political autonomy. For genuine empowerment, it is vital that Dalit voices retain independence and the ability to articulate demands rooted in their lived experiences. This means supporting grassroots leadership, strengthening Dalit women's participation in politics, and ensuring that representation is not reduced to symbolic presence but translates into real influence over policy and governance. The persistence of caste-based discrimination in both public and private spheres also underscores the need for legal and institutional expansion of protections. While the Constitution and laws such as the Prevention of Atrocities Act provide safeguards, their enforcement has often been weak or politically manipulated. At the same time, new arenas of exclusion, especially in private employment and housing, remain unregulated. A forward-looking approach must consider extending anti-discrimination protections into the private sector, ensuring that caste bias is treated with the same seriousness as other forms of inequality. Mechanisms for redress, affirmative hiring

practices, and stronger monitoring of workplace discrimination are crucial steps toward ensuring Dalits can compete on equal terms in the modern economy.

Beyond the state, civil society and Dalit movements remain essential drivers of transformation. Dalit rights have historically advanced not only through constitutional guarantees but also through sustained struggles by grassroots activists, social reformers, and Ambedkarite organizations. In the contemporary era, new formations such as the Bhim Army, student protests in universities, and digital mobilizations have reinvigorated Dalit activism. These movements demonstrate the power of collective action, often outside formal political institutions, to challenge caste hierarchies and demand accountability. Civil society also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, providing legal aid, and building solidarities across marginalized groups. Strengthening these spaces ensures that Dalit emancipation is not left solely to the state but becomes a broader societal commitment.

Ambedkar's thought remains central to envisioning the future of Dalit rights. His vision of social justice extended far beyond reservations. He argued for equality of opportunity, redistribution of resources, and the annihilation of caste as the true precondition for democracy. Contemporary strategies must return to this foundational vision. Affirmative action must be seen not as an end in itself but as one element within a broader framework of social transformation. This includes creating spaces for critical education, fostering inter-caste solidarity, and addressing gendered dimensions of caste oppression. Dalit women, in particular, face multiple forms of exclusion, and future directions must foreground their agency and leadership. The Modi era illustrates both opportunities and setbacks in this ongoing struggle. On the one hand, Dalit icons have been publicly celebrated, welfare schemes have been launched, and Dalit leaders have been incorporated into mainstream politics. On the other hand, incidents of caste violence, attempts to dilute protective legislation, and the broader impact of neoliberal policies have exposed the fragility of Dalit rights. The contradictions of this period reveal that symbolic recognition and piecemeal welfare are not substitutes for structural transformation. If anything, they demonstrate how easily Dalit issues can be absorbed into broader narratives of national development or religious identity, while the core problems of exclusion remain unresolved.

The comparative lesson from the history of affirmative action and the experiences of the Modi era is that reservations alone cannot dismantle systemic oppression. They remain necessary as guarantees of representation and access, but they must be embedded in a larger project that

tackles inequality at its roots. Substantive equality requires redistribution of resources, transformation of cultural attitudes, and expansion of anti-discrimination protections into new social and economic domains. Without these, affirmative action risks being reduced to tokenism—providing limited mobility to a few while leaving the majority in precarious conditions. The future of Dalit rights thus depends on moving beyond narrow frameworks of representation to embrace a holistic vision of justice. Education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, political autonomy, and civil society mobilization must all become pillars of a broader strategy. At the same time, cultural transformation is equally vital. Unless caste prejudice and stigma are challenged at the level of everyday practice—whether in villages, workplaces, or universities—the promise of equality will remain unfulfilled. Dalit dignity cannot rest solely on legal safeguards; it requires recognition, respect, and solidarity from the larger society. In summary, the historical trajectory of Dalit rights demonstrates both remarkable achievements and enduring fragilities. Affirmative action has created spaces of opportunity, but structural exclusions persist. Dalits remain vulnerable to systemic oppression, despite constitutional guarantees. The Modi era has revealed the contradictory nature of contemporary governance—combining symbolic inclusion with substantive setbacks. Looking forward, the challenge is to build on the gains of affirmative action while simultaneously addressing its limits. This calls for a reimagined framework of social justice that integrates quotas with broader redistributive reforms, robust protections, and cultural transformation.

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