

# HISTORICAL ROOTS, SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF RESERVATION POLICIES IN TAMIL NADU – AN ASSESSMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the historical evolution, social justice movements, and contemporary challenges of reservation policies in Tamil Nadu. Rooted in early 20th-century reforms by the Justice Party and movements like Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, Tamil Nadu has pioneered expansive affirmative action measures aimed at addressing caste-based inequalities. The state's reservation framework, protected under constitutional safeguards, currently stands at 69%, spanning SC, ST, and backward classes, complemented by universal welfare programs such as midday meals and subsidized distribution systems that have significantly advanced health, education, and poverty alleviation. Recent legal debates, including Supreme Court rulings on internal reservations and the implementation of the EWS quota, highlight ongoing complexities in balancing caste-based affirmative action with socio-economic criteria. Challenges persist in data accuracy, intra-caste tensions, and societal prejudices, especially amplified in digital spaces.

The article explores policy debates on equity versus efficiency, emphasizing the need for data-driven, sustainable strategies that promote social cohesion while ensuring growth and administrative flexibility. Future directions advocate for targeted welfare, skill development, gender inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Tamil Nadu's experience underscores the importance of continuous policy innovation, societal engagement, and constitutional safeguards in realizing social justice goals. The findings contribute valuable insights into designing equitable, inclusive, and sustainable reservation frameworks, vital for inclusive development in India and similar socio-economic contexts. The study investigates critical and swiftly emerging issues that are gaining prominence in our interconnected era, underscoring their importance in the contemporary global context.

**KEYWORDS:** Reservation Policies, Social Justice, Skill Development, Affirmative Action, Societal Engagement, and Gender Inclusion.

## 1. THE THEME OF THE ARTICLE

Reservation policies in Tamil Nadu have deep historical roots tied to the Justice Party's 1921 communal G.O., which introduced reservations to ensure representation for non-Brahmin communities. The Dravidian movement further strengthened these policies, arguing that caste-based inequalities limited access to education and jobs. Over time, Tamil Nadu expanded its reservation framework to 69% (18% SCs, 1% STs, 30% BCs, 20% MBCs/DNCs), exceeding the Supreme Court's 50% cap, and placed it under the Ninth Schedule for legal protection. Evidence shows its impact: Gross Enrollment Ratio for SC students in higher education rose to 27.6% in 2020–21 (AISHE), reflecting improved access. However, challenges remain, critics highlight intra-caste inequalities, exclusion of the poorest forward caste families, and tension between caste-based and income-based quotas (like EWS). Balancing social justice with merit and efficiency continues to be a pressing policy debate in the state.

Tamil Nadu's reservation policies and social justice initiatives stand as a testament to the state's long-standing commitment to addressing caste-based inequalities and promoting inclusive development. Rooted in early 20th-century efforts by the Justice Party and social reform movements like Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, these policies have evolved over decades to become some of the most expansive in India. The state's pioneering affirmative action measures, beginning with the 1921 communal Government Order, laid the groundwork for a system that ensures broad-based representation in education, employment, and public services for marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes. This framework has been further reinforced through constitutional safeguards, notably the protection of reservation quotas under the Ninth Schedule, enabling Tamil Nadu to sustain high levels of affirmative action, currently at 69%, among the highest in India.

Beyond reservation, Tamil Nadu has pioneered universal welfare programs, including midday meals and subsidized distribution systems, which have significantly improved health, education, and poverty indicators. Social justice movements, from the Justice Party to the Self-Respect Movement, have deeply influenced state policies, fostering a culture of social equity and reform. However, recent legal debates, such as the Supreme Court's rulings on internal reservation within backward classes and the introduction of the EWS quota, have added complexity to the policy landscape. Challenges persist in balancing caste-based affirmative action with economic criteria, ensuring data-driven decision-making, and addressing intra-caste tensions and digital-age prejudices. As Tamil Nadu navigates these issues, its experience underscores the importance of sustained policy innovation, societal engagement, and constitutional safeguards to realize the ideals of social justice and equitable growth.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The reservation policies in Tamil Nadu have historically aimed to address deep-rooted caste-based inequalities and promote social justice through affirmative action. While these policies have contributed to increased access to education, employment, and social mobility for marginalized communities, they have also generated complex challenges. A significant problem lies in balancing the state's high reservation quota (currently 69%) with legal constraints, socio-economic disparities, and concerns over efficiency and meritocracy. Court rulings, such as the invalidation of the 2021 Special Reservation Act and debates over internal sub-quotas, highlight the lack of up-to-date caste and socio-economic data necessary to justify internal reservations and intra-category allocations. Additionally, the persistent social prejudices, caste-based violence, and online hate incidents signal ongoing societal tensions despite legal reforms. The implementation of new provisions like the EWS quota further complicates the landscape, especially given Tamil Nadu's already substantial reservations and the potential for inter-group conflicts.

Moreover, the challenge of ensuring equitable representation while maintaining administrative flexibility and private-sector growth remains unresolved. Collectively, these issues pose a critical question: how can Tamil Nadu sustain its legacy of social justice and inclusive development amidst evolving legal, social, and economic contexts? The core problem is to design a fair, data-driven, and sustainable reservation framework that addresses intra- and inter-community disparities, upholds constitutional mandates, and promotes social cohesion without undermining efficiency or merit-based growth. Achieving this balance requires continuous policy innovation, robust data collection, and societal engagement to ensure that reservation policies effectively foster long-term social equity and stability. The research examines urgent and fast-changing challenges that are increasingly vital in today's interconnected world, emphasizing their relevance in the present global scenario.

### **Objective of the article**

The overall objective of the article is to examine the historical development, policy frameworks, and socio-economic implications of reservation policies in Tamil Nadu. It highlights the state's pioneering efforts in social justice, analyzes recent legal and administrative reforms, and discusses ongoing challenges. The article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these policies impact social equity, economic development, and future prospects for inclusive growth. Ultimately, it emphasizes the need for data-driven, sustainable strategies to balance social justice with efficiency with the help of secondary sources of information and statistical data pertaining to the theme of the study.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE ARTICLE**

This article is based on a descriptive and analytical research design. The study relies mainly on secondary sources of information to understand the historical development, policy frameworks, and socio-economic impacts of reservation policies in Tamil Nadu. Data and evidence are collected from government reports, census records, policy documents, legislative acts, research publications, academic journals, and credible online databases. Statistical information from sources such as the Census of India, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), NITI Aayog reports, and Tamil Nadu government publications has been used to support the analysis. A historical method is adopted to trace the evolution of reservation policies in the state, while a comparative approach is used to examine how Tamil Nadu's framework differs from the national context. The analysis also incorporates case studies, policy reviews, and recent judicial developments to highlight legal and administrative changes.

The methodology ensures that the article not only describes the policies but also critically analyzes their social equity outcomes, economic implications, and political relevance. By combining qualitative insights with quantitative evidence, the study provides a balanced understanding of the challenges and future directions for inclusive growth in Tamil Nadu. The collected data and information will be carefully analyzed and interpreted to generate practical insights that guide the formulation of informed, evidence-driven policies.

#### 4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RESERVATION POLICIES IN TAMIL NADU

Reservation in Tamil Nadu has a long and distinct history, rooted in the state's socio-political struggles against caste-based inequalities. The foundation was laid during the Justice Party era (1921), when the government introduced the first communal Government Order (G.O. No. 613, 1921), reserving 44% of government jobs for non-Brahmins, 16% for Brahmins, 16% for Muslims and Christians, and 8% for Scheduled Castes. This was one of the earliest affirmative action measures in India, preceding national-level policies. After Independence, the First Backward Classes Commission (Kalelkar Commission, 1955) and the Second (Mandal Commission, 1979) influenced national policies, but Tamil Nadu had already institutionalized reservations. In 1969, Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai's government fixed 31% for Backward Classes (BCs) and 18% for SCs/STs, totaling 49%. Subsequently, under M.G. Ramachandran in 1980, reservations were expanded to 50% for BCs/MBCs and 18% for SCs/STs, making it 68% in total.

Today, Tamil Nadu has one of the highest reservation quotas in India (69%), safeguarded under the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution (1994) to prevent judicial review. The current distribution includes 30% for BCs, 20% for Most Backward Classes (MBCs) and Denotified Communities (DNCs), 18% for SCs, 1% for STs, and 10.5% for Vanniyars (special internal quota introduced in 2021). Statistically, the relevance of these policies is underscored by persistent disparities. As per the 2011 Census, Scheduled Castes form 20.01% of Tamil Nadu's population, while Scheduled Tribes account for 1.1%. Yet, reports such as the Tamil Nadu State Human Development Report (2017) highlight continuing gaps in education and employment, with SC/ST communities having lower literacy (SC: 73.26%, ST: 63.70%) compared to the state average of 80.09%. Thus, Tamil Nadu's reservation framework is not only historically pioneering but also central to addressing entrenched caste inequalities and promoting social justice.

#### The Emergence of Social Justice Movements and Policy Frameworks

Tamil Nadu's social justice ethos emerged from early 20th-century non-Brahmin mobilizations, the Justice Party and, later, Periyar E.V.R.'s Self-Respect Movement (1925), which challenged caste hierarchy, patriarchal norms and ritual authority, and normalised "self-respect" (non-priestly) and inter-caste marriages. These currents translated into state policy, beginning with the Madras Presidency's landmark Communal G.O. of 1921, the first legislated reservations in India. Post-Independence, this lineage produced robust affirmative action and universalist welfare. The state's 69% reservation policy, protected by the Constitution's 76th Amendment placing Tamil Nadu's 1994 law in the Ninth Schedule, has sustained broad-based representation in education and public employment.

Welfare delivery was similarly shaped by social-justice goals. The nutritious noon-meal programme, pioneered in Tamil Nadu (expanded statewide in 1982 under M.G. Ramachandran, with roots in earlier initiatives), boosted enrolment and child nutrition and became a national template. The Universal Public Distribution System (PDS) ensures subsidised staples for nearly all ration-card holders, and is being modernised with doorstep delivery for elderly/PwD beneficiaries and UPI roll-out across 37,000+ fair-price shops. Outcomes reflect these frameworks. On human development, NFHS-5 shows 80.4% of women (6+ years) have ever attended school and the state's sex ratio is 1,088 females per 1,000 males; births attended by skilled personnel exceed 99%, indicating strong maternal-health access. Multidimensional poverty fell sharply: the State Planning Commission reports the headcount ratio declined from 4.89% (2015–16) to 1.57% (2019–21), with the MPI dropping from 0.020 to 0.006, among India's steepest improvements. In short, Tamil Nadu's social movements institutionalised a policy model that marries affirmative action with universal, rights-oriented welfare, producing measurable gains in inclusion, education, health and poverty reduction.

#### EWS Quotas: Constitutional Provisions and Implementation Challenges in Tamil Nadu

The 103rd Constitutional Amendment (2019) inserted Articles 15(6) and 16(6) to enable 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in admissions and public employment, in addition to existing quotas. In *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022), a 3–2 Supreme Court majority upheld the amendment, including the exclusion of SC/ST/OBC from EWS and the use of purely economic criteria. The Union's EWS criteria include family income < ₹8 lakh plus asset limits (≤5 acres agricultural land; residential flat <1,000 sq ft; plot <100/200 sq yd in notified/non-notified areas). These norms drive the 10% seat/job carve-out in Union institutions and

services. Tamil Nadu already provides 69% reservation (BC/MBC/DNC/SC/ST), protected via the state's 1994 law placed in the Ninth Schedule. In April 2024, the State told the Madras High Court that about 89% of Tamil Nadu's population is eligible under existing quotas, hence it cannot be compelled to add an extra 10% EWS in the state sector.

TN has not implemented a separate 10% EWS quota in state admissions/jobs and even directed officials in June 2020 to stop issuing EWS income-asset certificates (later contested). The Madras High Court (Aug 2021) disallowed applying 10% EWS to AIQ seats surrendered by TN in medical/dental admissions, pending Supreme Court clarity then; the broader EWS regime was subsequently upheld by the SC in Nov 2022. In May 2024, the Madras High Court directed TN to issue an EWS certificate to a UPSC aspirant (a community not in the Union OBC list), enabling access to central EWS benefits. The main challenges in Tamil Nadu include legal frictions between the State's 69% reservation framework and the former 50% cap, a policy focus on caste-based disadvantage rather than purely income-based criteria, and administrative ambiguities in certificate issuance and coordination between State and Union OBC lists.

### **The 2021 Special Reservation Act (Tamil Nadu): Key features & objectives**

Passed on February 26, 2021 as Act 8 of 2021, the law created an internal split within the existing 20% quota for Most Backward Classes (MBC) and Denotified Communities (DNC) in education (including private institutions) and state services. It earmarked 10.5% for Part-MBC (V), popularly associated with the Vanniyar community, 7% for Part-MBC & DNC, and 2.5% for Part-MBC (Others), all within the 20% MBC/DNC reservation (not in addition to it). The stated aim was to ensure equitable distribution of benefits inside the broad MBC/DNC block, responding to long-standing claims of under-representation among specific sub-groups and to prevent relatively larger or politically mobilized communities from cornering the entire MBC share. The Act extended to all of Tamil Nadu and took effect immediately upon notification. Tamil Nadu's total reservation remained at 69% (SC 18%, ST 1%, MBC/DNC 20%, BC 26%, BC(M) 3%), the Act only reallocated the internal 20% MBC/DNC slice. Petitioners highlighted that carving out 10.5% for a single sub-group would substantially diminish opportunities for about 115 other MBC castes and 68 DNC communities, underscoring the distributional stakes across ~183 groups within the MBC/DNC umbrella.

On November 1, 2021, the Madras High Court struck down the law as unconstitutional for lack of contemporary, quantifiable data justifying the sub-quota; on March 31, 2022, the Supreme Court upheld that decision. While the policy objective of fine-tuning representation within MBC/DNC was acknowledged, courts required fresh, caste-wise data to sustain such internal reservations. The key feature was a 10.5% internal quota within MBC/DNC; its objective was intra-category equity. Its invalidation turned on evidence standards, not on rejecting the principle of internal reservation per se. The Act's key feature was a 10.5% internal quota within MBC/DNC; its objective was intra-category equity. Its invalidation turned on evidence standards, not on rejecting the principle of internal reservation per se.

### **Impact on Marginalized Communities and Intra-Caste Dynamics**

The recent caste-based killing of Dalit youth Kavin Selvaganesh in Tirunelveli sparked political outrage. At their state-level conference, TVK demanded a dedicated law against caste killings, criticizing the government's inaction. The Madras High Court directed the government to issue "No Caste, No Religion" certificates, allowing individuals to register without caste or religious identity, upholding constitutional values and promoting a casteless society. The School Education Department has set up district-level monitoring committees (including education officials, police, and child protection officers), and launched helplines (14416, 104) for students facing caste-based abuse. These guidelines target caste markers like colored wristbands, enforce student counseling, and ensure reporting via a confidential "Students' Minds" box. Tamil Nadu amended its Prison Rules (2024), banning caste entry in prisoner records and ensuring no caste-based work allotment or inquiry upon admission, a step toward institutional neutrality. The Fifth Police Commission recommended removing the "caste/community" field from police Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) to curb bias, and suggested intelligence cells in caste-sensitive districts. Between 2024 and 2025, 69 people were arrested in Tirunelveli district for posting caste-provocative content on social media, signaling growing digital caste tensions. Awareness programs are underway to curb this trend.

Tamil Nadu is witnessing pivotal judicial and administrative reforms: from prohibiting caste identifiers in prisons and police appraisals, to setting up anti-discrimination schools' monitoring, and issuing "no caste" certificates. These moves tackle both entrenched systemic bias and emerging intra-caste tensions. While structural changes gain momentum, youth-instigated caste content online underscores the need for sustained cultural and educational interventions to genuinely transform social attitudes. The recent reforms in Tamil Nadu



show progress, but the real challenge lies in practice. Policies like banning caste markers in schools or removing caste from prison records are strong steps, yet deep-rooted biases cannot be erased overnight. The low conviction rates in caste violence cases and recurring incidents prove that social attitudes remain unchanged despite laws. The rise of caste-based online hate among youth is worrying, as it signals a digital extension of old prejudices. To create lasting change, education, strict law enforcement, and community-level awareness must work together, otherwise discrimination will only shift forms instead of ending.

### **Balancing Equity and Efficiency: Policy Debates and Criticisms**

Tamil Nadu's policy debate over equity vs. efficiency centers on whether redistributive measures (reservations, subsidies, universal welfare) correct historic disadvantage without unduly hurting economic performance, or whether they entrench rent-seeking and inefficiency. Key facts shape that debate. The state's 69% aggregate reservation (cemented by the Special Reservation Act and Ninth Schedule moves) is defended as corrective justice for entrenched caste disadvantage, but it faces legal and economic scrutiny over possible impacts on merit, administrative flexibility and private-sector hiring. Pro-equity evidence: Tamil Nadu shows strong social outcomes, a subnational HDI around 0.69 and sharp reductions in monetary and multidimensional poverty (the Economic Survey reports the headcount poverty ratio fell from ~36.5% in 2005–06 to 1.43% by 2022–23; the national MPI for Tamil Nadu's headcount dropped from 4.76% to 2.20% between 2015–16 and 2019–21). These improvements are often credited to broad welfare provisioning (food, health, education) and targeted reservations.

Efficiency concerns: Critics argue high reservation ceilings, poorly targeted subsidies, and complex internal quotas can reduce labour market flexibility, raise compliance costs for employers, and distort public spending priorities, potentially slowing private investment and skills-based growth. Recent political calls for new or expanded quotas (and demands for state caste data) intensify uncertainty for employers and courts, complicating long-term planning. A balanced policy approach should integrate reservations and welfare transfers with strong skill development, affirmative outreach, and merit-based support programs. Targeting and means-testing must be improved to ensure efficiency without significantly excluding deserving groups. At the same time, comprehensive caste and socio-economic surveys should be strengthened to design defensible quota systems within legal boundaries. Such measures would enable Tamil Nadu to sustain its long-standing equity achievements while addressing efficiency concerns and ensuring fiscal sustainability. This evidence-based strategy balances social justice with economic pragmatism, ensuring inclusive growth and equitable opportunities without undermining developmental efficiency.

### **Future Directions: Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Welfare Policies in Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu has long been recognized as a pioneer in social welfare, with policies addressing education, healthcare, nutrition, and social security for marginalized groups. However, evolving socio-economic realities demand a future-oriented approach to ensure inclusivity and sustainability. First, welfare programs must increasingly shift from universal subsidies to targeted, data-driven delivery systems that minimize leakages and ensure benefits reach the most vulnerable. Integrating digital platforms with robust social and caste-economic surveys will improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Second, convergence of welfare with skill development and employment generation is essential. Moving beyond entitlement-based welfare, the state should strengthen initiatives such as Naan Mudhalvan and vocational training programs to enhance employability, particularly among rural youth and women. Linking welfare support with capacity building can reduce long-term dependency and promote self-reliance.

Third, the growing challenges of an aging population necessitate elderly-centered policies focusing on healthcare access, financial security, and social inclusion, especially in rural areas where vulnerability is high. Similarly, welfare planning must address environmental sustainability, ensuring schemes such as housing, public distribution, and healthcare are climate-resilient. Fourth, fostering gender-inclusive policies remains critical. Expanding women's self-help groups, leadership roles, and access to credit can strengthen economic empowerment while simultaneously addressing gender-based inequalities. Finally, Tamil Nadu must adopt evidence-based policy reforms by investing in research, monitoring, and periodic evaluation of welfare schemes. Collaborative governance involving panchayats, civil society, and private partnerships can further enhance outreach. In essence, the future of welfare in Tamil Nadu lies in transitioning from a subsidy-driven model to a transformational approach that combines social protection with empowerment, inclusivity, and sustainability. Such a strategy will safeguard equity gains, reduce disparities, and build a resilient welfare state responsive to the demands of a changing society.

**Contemporary Socio-Economic and Political Implications of Reservation Policies in Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu's reservation system plays a major role in the state's social, economic, and political life. At present, the state provides 69% reservation for SC, ST, BC, MBC, and DNC communities, well above the 50% cap followed in most other states and by the Supreme Court. This system, which has expanded since the 1950s, has improved access to education and government jobs for disadvantaged groups. Data shows that SC and OBC student enrolments in higher education have grown steadily in recent years, raising literacy levels and representation in professional fields. However, challenges remain in ensuring entry into top institutions and quality jobs. On the legal side, reservations have often become political and judicial issues. For example, the Supreme Court struck down Tamil Nadu's 2021 law giving a special 10.5% quota for Vanniyars within the MBC category, arguing that such divisions need strong data-based proof. At the national level, the Centre's 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), upheld in 2022, has added more complexity, since Tamil Nadu already has a very high quota and strong political opposition to changing existing shares. A key issue is the lack of recent caste and socio-economic data.

The SC population in Tamil Nadu is around 14.4 million (Census 2011), while STs form just about 1.1% of the population. Without updated surveys, the state struggles to defend its quota structure, and demands for fresh internal divisions, such as the Vanniyar case, keep surfacing. While reservations have clearly helped uplift disadvantaged groups, they also create tensions within backward classes who compete for limited benefits. Too much focus on caste sometimes leaves out poor groups who do not fall under quotas. Courts have also made it clear that Tamil Nadu's 69% reservation cannot remain unquestioned without strong evidence. Moving forward, the state will need to combine caste quotas with socio-economic surveys, skill development, and targeted welfare to balance fairness and efficiency. In short, Tamil Nadu's reservation policy has promoted social justice, but its future will likely depend on better data, legal caution, and political negotiation.

**5. CONCLUSION**

Tamil Nadu's reservation policies and social justice initiatives have historically positioned the state as a leader in inclusive development and affirmative action. Rooted in a legacy of caste-based mobilizations and progressive reforms, these policies have achieved notable improvements in education, health, and poverty reduction, reflecting a comprehensive approach that marries universal welfare with targeted affirmative action. The state's high reservation quotas, protected under constitutional safeguards, aim to address entrenched social inequalities and promote social cohesion. Recent legal and administrative reforms, including measures against caste-based violence and efforts to eliminate caste markers in public institutions, demonstrate a continued commitment to fostering a more equitable society.

However, these policies also face ongoing challenges, legal debates over internal reservation quotas, tensions between caste-based and economic criteria, and the persistent presence of social prejudices, especially among youth in digital spaces. Balancing equity with efficiency remains a critical concern, requiring nuanced policy adjustments, robust data collection, and targeted interventions to ensure sustainable social progress. Future directions must focus on transforming welfare delivery through data-driven, digital platforms, enhancing skill development, and addressing demographic shifts like an aging population. Emphasizing gender inclusion, environmental sustainability, and community participation will further strengthen Tamil Nadu's social fabric. Ultimately, Tamil Nadu's experience underscores that social justice is an evolving pursuit, requiring continuous policy innovation, societal engagement, and unwavering commitment to inclusivity. By integrating these elements into a strategic framework, the state can sustain its legacy of equitable growth, reduce disparities, and build a resilient, inclusive society responsive to the aspirations of all its citizens.

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