

Internal Reservation Classification among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka: A Sociological Analysis of Constitutional Perspectives

Dr. Nagaraja H. R

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Government First Grade College,
Bagepalli

Abstract:

Internal reservation classification among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has emerged as an important issue concerning social justice, equality, and equitable distribution of constitutional benefits in Karnataka. This study examines the constitutional perspectives underlying internal reservation and analyses its sociological implications for historically disadvantaged communities. It explores the issues of social and economic inequalities within Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the need for equitable representation in education, employment, and political participation. The study further examines the debates surrounding constitutional provisions, affirmative action, social backwardness, and the principle of substantive equality. It argues that an appropriately designed internal classification mechanism can contribute to more equitable access to reservation benefits while strengthening the objectives of social justice and inclusive development.

Keywords: Internal Reservation; Scheduled Castes; Scheduled Tribes; Constitutional Perspectives; Social Justice.

Introduction

Reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) is one of India's most significant instruments of affirmative action and social justice. It was introduced to address the historical consequences of caste-based

discrimination, social exclusion, educational deprivation, economic disadvantage, and inadequate representation in public institutions. The constitutional framework of reservation seeks not merely to provide formal

Please cite this article as: Nagaraja, H. R. (2026). Internal Reservation Classification among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka: A Sociological Analysis of Constitutional Perspectives. *SRUJANI: Indian Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 5(3), 31–39

equality but also to promote substantive equality by creating opportunities for communities that have historically remained disadvantaged.

In Karnataka, reservation policies for SCs and STs have developed within a complex social structure characterized by considerable diversity among caste and tribal communities. Although SCs and STs are constitutionally recognized as broad categories, they are not socially or economically homogeneous. Differences in education, employment, political representation, access to resources, geographical location, and socio-economic mobility exist within these categories. Consequently, questions have emerged regarding whether the benefits of reservation are distributed equally among all communities included within the SC and ST categories.

The demand for internal reservation or sub-classification arises from these intra-group inequalities. Supporters argue that relatively disadvantaged communities within the reserved categories may remain underrepresented if reservation benefits are distributed without considering internal differences. The debate therefore concerns the manner in which constitutional equality can be translated into equitable outcomes for diverse communities.

Karnataka provides an important case for examining this issue because of its long history of affirmative action, the recommendations of various commissions,

community mobilization, and recent legal and policy developments. The Justice A.J. Sadashiva Commission and the Justice H.N. Nagamohan Das Commission have contributed significantly to discussions on the internal distribution of reservation benefits. At the same time, judicial developments have strengthened the constitutional debate surrounding sub-classification.

This article examines internal reservation classification from a sociological and constitutional perspective. It focuses on the rationale for internal classification, the socio-economic inequalities within SC and ST communities, developments in Karnataka, the legal and political dimensions of sub-classification, and the challenges associated with its implementation.

Constitutional Framework of Reservation

The Constitution of India provides several provisions to promote the educational, economic, social, and political interests of historically disadvantaged communities. Article 15 provides the constitutional basis for special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, including SCs and STs. Article 16 provides for reservation in public employment under specified constitutional conditions. Articles 330 and 332 provide for reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

Articles 341 and 342 provide the constitutional framework for identifying Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The President specifies the communities that are recognized as SCs and STs through constitutional orders, subject to the procedure prescribed by the Constitution. Article 335 also recognizes the claims of SCs and STs to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union and the States.

The constitutional philosophy underlying reservation is closely connected with equality, social justice, representation, and the removal of historical disadvantage. Reservation is therefore not simply a welfare measure; it is an instrument for correcting structural inequalities and facilitating participation in institutions of the state.

From a sociological perspective, however, constitutional categories may contain substantial internal differences. Communities placed within the same constitutional category may have unequal access to education, employment, land, political power, and other resources. This has generated the argument that equality within a category may sometimes require differentiated treatment rather than identical treatment.

Evolution of Reservation Policy in Karnataka

Karnataka has a long history of affirmative action. The princely State of Mysore introduced measures for the representation of socially disadvantaged

communities in education and public employment even before Independence. These initiatives later developed within the constitutional framework of independent India.

Over the years, reservation became an important mechanism for improving the representation of SCs and STs in educational institutions, government employment, and other areas of public life. However, the experience of reservation also revealed significant differences among communities within the reserved categories.

Some sub-groups achieved relatively greater educational and occupational mobility, while other communities continued to experience severe social and economic deprivation. These differences resulted in demands for a more equitable distribution of reservation benefits. Communities that perceived themselves as underrepresented argued that a uniform reservation system could reproduce inequalities within the reserved categories.

The debate consequently shifted from the question of whether reservation was necessary to the more complex question of who benefits from reservation and to what extent. This represents an important sociological transformation in the understanding of affirmative action.

Internal Reservation and the Question of Sub-Classification

Internal reservation refers to the distribution or sub-division of an existing reservation quota among different

communities within a constitutionally recognized category. Its primary objective is to ensure that the benefits of affirmative action reach communities that have remained comparatively disadvantaged or underrepresented.

The argument for internal classification is based on the observation that SC and ST communities are internally diverse. Differences in historical occupation, geographical location, literacy, income, access to government employment, political representation, and social mobility may influence the ability of particular communities to benefit from reservation.

From a sociological perspective, therefore, treating all communities within a broad category as equally situated may overlook important differences in their lived experiences. Internal reservation attempts to address this problem by introducing a more differentiated approach to affirmative action.

The issue received renewed legal importance following the Supreme Court's 2024 decision concerning sub-classification among SCs and STs. The judgment recognized the possibility of sub-classification subject to constitutional requirements and the use of empirical evidence to establish differences in backwardness and representation.

The significance of this development lies in its emphasis on evidence-based policymaking. Internal classification cannot simply be based on political claims

or assumptions about the relative position of communities. It requires reliable data demonstrating differences in social and educational backwardness and representation.

Justice A.J. Sadashiva Commission and Internal Inequalities

The Justice A.J. Sadashiva Commission occupies an important place in Karnataka's debate on internal reservation. The commission examined inequalities within the Scheduled Caste category and attempted to classify communities according to their relative levels of disadvantage.

The significance of the commission's work lies in its recognition that the SC category contains communities with different historical and socio-economic experiences. The demand for internal reservation emerged partly from the perception that some communities had obtained a larger share of the benefits of reservation while others remained inadequately represented.

The debate surrounding the commission demonstrates the complexity of implementing affirmative action within a socially diverse category. While supporters viewed internal classification as a means of achieving greater distributive justice, critics expressed concerns regarding intra-community divisions and the possible weakening of collective representation.

From a sociological perspective, this tension reflects two competing principles:

collective equality and intra-group equity. The former emphasizes the common historical experience of discrimination shared by SC communities, whereas the latter emphasizes differences in present levels of deprivation and representation.

Justice H.N. Nagamohan Das Commission

The Justice H.N. Nagamohan Das Commission further advanced the debate by examining the socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Caste communities in Karnataka. According to the material in the present study, the commission conducted a large-scale survey of SC families and examined differences among the 101 recognized SC sub-castes.

The commission's findings were presented as evidence of unequal distribution of reservation benefits among different SC communities. The study highlighted differences in educational, economic, and social indicators and argued that reservation distribution should take account of population proportions, relative backwardness, and representation.

The commission proposed a 6:6:5 internal distribution within Karnataka's 17 percent SC reservation. Under this proposal, six percent was assigned to one group, six percent to another group, and five percent to other communities. The objective was to create a more equitable distribution of opportunities among different sections of the SC population.

The proposal has generated both support and criticism. Supporters consider it an important attempt to address internal inequalities and ensure that relatively marginalized communities receive adequate opportunities. Critics, however, have raised concerns about the classification of individual communities, the adequacy of available evidence, and the possibility of increasing competition among communities.

These debates demonstrate that internal reservation is not merely an administrative exercise. It is closely connected with identity, representation, political mobilization, social mobility, and perceptions of justice.

Socio-Economic Inequalities within SC Communities

The central sociological argument for internal reservation is the existence of intra-group inequality. Although all SC communities have historically experienced caste-based exclusion, their contemporary social and economic conditions are not identical.

Differences may be observed in literacy, educational attainment, access to higher education, government employment, occupational mobility, land ownership, income, urbanization, political participation, and access to welfare programmes. Communities with greater access to educational institutions and government employment may have greater capacity to utilize reservation opportunities.

In contrast, communities experiencing multiple disadvantages may remain underrepresented despite the existence of reservation. Geographical isolation, occupational vulnerability, low educational attainment, poverty, and limited political influence can reduce their ability to compete for available opportunities.

Internal reservation is therefore based on the argument that formal equality does not always produce substantive equality. If communities with significantly different levels of disadvantage compete for the same limited reserved opportunities, historically better-positioned groups may continue to receive a greater proportion of the benefits.

However, internal reservation should not be understood as a replacement for broader social justice measures. Reservation must be supported by quality education, scholarships, skill development, employment opportunities, land and livelihood programmes, and effective implementation of welfare schemes.

Internal Reservation among Scheduled Tribes

The question of internal classification also has relevance to Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka. The ST category includes communities with diverse cultural traditions, geographical locations, occupations, levels of education, and degrees of integration with wider society.

Some tribal communities have comparatively better access to education,

government employment, land, infrastructure, and political institutions, while smaller or geographically dispersed communities may continue to experience poverty, educational deprivation, livelihood insecurity, and social isolation.

The growing discussion of internal reservation among STs reflects the recognition that tribal communities are not socio-economically homogeneous. The argument for internal classification is therefore based on the need to identify communities that remain particularly disadvantaged within the broader ST category.

At the same time, the issue requires careful consideration because tribal identity has important cultural, political, and constitutional dimensions. Excessive fragmentation may weaken collective representation and create new forms of competition among tribal communities.

For this reason, any future internal classification of STs should be preceded by a comprehensive socio-economic study. Such a study should examine population, literacy, educational attainment, employment, income, land ownership, geographical isolation, access to welfare schemes, political representation, and other relevant indicators.

Constitutional and Sociological Perspectives

The debate over internal reservation can be understood through the broader principle of substantive equality. Formal equality treats members of a constitutional

category uniformly, whereas substantive equality recognizes that individuals and communities may begin from different social positions.

Internal classification attempts to reconcile these two dimensions. It does not necessarily reject the common constitutional identity of SCs or STs; rather, it seeks to recognize differences within those categories for the purpose of equitable distribution of benefits.

From a sociological perspective, reservation has both distributive and transformative functions. Its distributive function concerns access to education, employment, and representation. Its transformative function concerns the restructuring of social relations and the reduction of historically produced inequalities.

Internal reservation can strengthen these objectives if it is based on reliable evidence, transparent procedures, and periodic evaluation. However, if classification is based primarily on political considerations, it may produce new inequalities rather than resolve existing ones.

Therefore, the principle of evidence-based affirmative action should remain central to internal reservation policy.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its potential benefits, internal reservation presents several challenges. First, there is a possibility of increasing competition among communities within SC and ST categories. Reservation may

become a source of intra-group conflict if communities perceive classification as unfair or politically motivated. Second, the quality of data is crucial. Internal classification requires reliable information concerning population, educational attainment, employment, socio-economic status, and representation. Without adequate data, classification may not accurately reflect actual levels of disadvantage. Third, classifications may become outdated. Social and economic conditions change over time, and a community that is disadvantaged today may experience considerable improvement in the future. Periodic review is therefore necessary. Fourth, there is a concern that internal reservation could weaken collective political representation. SC and ST communities have historically mobilized around shared experiences of exclusion. Excessive internal differentiation may affect this collective identity. Finally, implementation requires administrative capacity. Government departments and educational institutions must maintain accurate data and monitor the distribution of reserved opportunities among different sub-groups. The Supreme Court's emphasis on empirical evidence and differential backwardness makes data collection and periodic evaluation particularly important.

Policy Recommendations

To make internal reservation more equitable and effective, the following measures are suggested:

1. The socio-economic conditions of SC and ST communities should be periodically assessed using transparent and scientifically designed surveys.
2. Internal classification should be based on measurable indicators such as education, employment, income, representation, and socio-economic deprivation.
3. Internal reservation categories should be reviewed periodically to identify changes in the relative position of communities.
4. The government should publish relevant data concerning representation in education and public employment while protecting individual privacy.
5. Representatives of affected communities, scholars, civil society organizations, and experts should be involved in policy consultations.
6. Internal reservation should be accompanied by scholarships, educational support, skill development, livelihood programmes, and other measures addressing the structural causes of deprivation.
7. Communities experiencing multiple forms of deprivation, including geographical isolation and low educational attainment, should receive appropriate policy attention.
8. A permanent institutional mechanism should monitor the implementation and outcomes of internal reservation

and recommend evidence-based modifications. These measures can help ensure that internal reservation becomes an instrument of substantive equality rather than a source of further social fragmentation.

Conclusion

Internal reservation classification among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes represents an important development in Karnataka's affirmative action policy. It recognizes that these broad constitutional categories contain significant internal differences in social, educational, economic, and political conditions. The recommendations of the Justice A.J. Sadashiva Commission and Justice H.N. Nagamohan Das Commission, along with recent judicial developments, have strengthened the debate on equitable distribution of reservation benefits. From a sociological perspective, internal reservation should be guided by social justice, substantive equality, representation, and inclusion. Its implementation must be based on reliable empirical data, transparent classification, community participation, and periodic review. While internal reservation can improve the representation of highly disadvantaged groups, it should not weaken the collective rights or social solidarity of SC and ST communities. Ultimately, reservation alone cannot eliminate structural inequality. It must be supported by quality education, employment, livelihood opportunities, and broader social development programmes.

Karnataka's experience demonstrates that effective social justice requires continuous, evidence-based policy reform that responds to the diverse experiences and needs of marginalized communities.

References

- Galanter, M. (1984). *Competing equalities: Law and the backward classes in India*. University of California Press.
- Government of India. (1950). *The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
- Government of India. (1950). *The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
- Government of India. (1950). *The Constitution of India*. Ministry of Law and Justice, Legislative Department.
- Government of Karnataka. (2022). *The Karnataka Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation) Act, 2022*. Government of Karnataka.
- Mendelsohn, O., & Vicziany, M. (1998). *The untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (n.d.). *Statistical profile of Scheduled Tribes in India*. Government of India.
- The Indian Express. (2025, August 21). *Karnataka to classify SCs under three groups for internal reservation, set up permanent SC Commission*.
- The Indian Express. (2025, August 5). *Internal reservation in Karnataka: Nagamohan Das Commission recommends classification of SC communities*.
- The New Indian Express. (2025, May 5). *Internal reservation to put equals in one basket*.
- Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.