
IMPACT OF RESERVATION POLICY ON GENERAL CATEGORY STUDENTS: A STUDY OF ADMISSION CUT-OFFS, SEAT AVAILABILITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS IN COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS

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ABSTRACT

India's reservation policy, rooted in Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution and expanded by the Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, seeks to promote substantive equality by providing quotas for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Economically Weaker Sections. While the policy has advanced social justice for historically marginalised communities, its implementation has generated significant reverse inequities for general category students in high-stakes competitive examinations such as NEET-UG, JEE (Main & Advanced) and UPSC Civil Services Examination. This research paper examines the impact of reservation on general category aspirants through three interrelated dimensions: admission cut-offs, seat availability and psychological stress. Employing doctrinal legal analysis of constitutional provisions and landmark Supreme Court judgments (*Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* and *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*), alongside empirical data from the National Testing Agency (NTA), Medical Counselling Committee (MCC), IITs and UPSC (2025 cycle), the study reveals stark disparities. General category students consistently face substantially higher qualifying and admission cut-offs (often 100–500 marks higher in NEET and 30–40 percentile points in JEE) while competing for a reduced open-category pool of approximately 40.5% seats under the All-India Quota (and lower in several states). These structural constraints have intensified rank inflation and engendered profound psychological stress, evidenced by elevated Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) scores, increased anxiety, depression, learned helplessness and suicide trends in coaching hubs. The paper argues that while affirmative action remains constitutionally indispensable, its present framework requires urgent recalibration through stricter creamy layer exclusion, foundational education equity, periodic quota review and mandatory mental health support to harmonise merit, equity and psychological well-being without diluting social justice objectives.

Keywords: Reservation Policy, General Category Students, Admission Cut-offs, Seat Availability, Psychological Stress, Competitive Examinations, Affirmative Action, Constitutional Law, Mental Health, NEET-JEE-UPSC.

Introduction

India's reservation policy stands as one of the most ambitious affirmative action programmes in the world, designed to redress historical social and educational backwardness faced by Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC).¹ Enshrined primarily in Articles 15(4) and 15(5) (for educational institutions) and Article 16(4) (for public employment) of the Constitution of India, the policy seeks to achieve substantive equality by providing preferential treatment in admissions and appointments.² The 103rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019, further expanded its scope by inserting clauses (6) in Articles 15 and 16, introducing a 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among the general category on the basis of economic criteria (family income below ₹8 lakh per annum).³ This amendment was upheld by the Supreme Court in a 3:2 verdict in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022), affirming that economic backwardness can validly form the basis of affirmative action independent of the 50% ceiling applicable to SC/ST/OBC quotas.⁴

The landmark nine-judge bench decision in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992) remains the constitutional cornerstone, upholding OBC reservations while imposing a 50% ceiling on vertical reservations (subject to exceptional circumstances), mandating creamy layer exclusion and emphasising that reservations must be compensatory rather than punitive.⁵ In practice, however, the cumulative effect of SC (15%), ST (7.5%), OBC-NCL (27%), EWS (10%) and horizontal reservations (e.g., 5% for Persons with Disabilities) in central institutions leaves approximately 40.5% seats in the open/unreserved category under the All India Quota (AIQ).⁶ State quotas often exceed this threshold—such as Bihar's 65% post-2023 caste survey—further shrinking the effective pool for general category candidates.⁷

Competitive examinations such as NEET-UG, JEE (Main/Advanced) and UPSC Civil Services

¹ Constitution of India, art. 15(4); C S Sreedevi, 'Balancing Equity and Merit: The Impact of Reservation Quotas on General Category Aspirants in National Entrance Exams' (2025) 5(9) Indian Journal of Legal Review 37

² Ibid arts. 15(5), 16(4).

³ Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019.

⁴ *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022) (3:2).

⁵ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, AIR 1993 SC 477.

⁶ NEET Reservation Criteria (Medical Counselling Committee, 2025); see also C S Sreedevi (n 1) 40.

⁷ C S Sreedevi (n 1) 41.

Examination epitomise the policy's differential impact. In NEET-UG 2025, the qualifying cut-off for the General/EWS category stood at the 50th percentile (686–144 marks), compared to the 40th percentile (143–113 marks) for OBC/SC/ST categories.⁸ Actual admission cut-offs in government medical colleges under AIQ reveal even starker disparities, with general category students frequently requiring 620+ marks for top institutions while reserved category seats are secured at significantly lower scores.⁹ Similar patterns emerge in JEE Advanced, where qualifying aggregates are substantially higher for the Common Rank List (CRL) than for reserved categories.¹⁰ This structural compression of open seats, coupled with the entitlement of meritorious reserved candidates to claim unreserved vacancies, intensifies competition for the residual open pool and has led to perceptions of “reverse discrimination” among general category aspirants, who constitute roughly 28–40% of the population depending on regional demographics.¹¹

Beyond quantitative disparities in cut-offs and seat availability, the policy engenders profound psychological stress. Empirical studies indicate that heightened competition, prolonged preparation periods and a sense of systemic inequity contribute to elevated levels of anxiety, demotivation and frustration among general category students.¹² Qualitative accounts from aspirants in coaching hubs highlight “learned helplessness” and intergenerational resentment, undermining the constitutional ideal of fraternity under Article 38.¹³ While the reservation framework has undeniably advanced representation for marginalised groups, its implementation gaps—such as inadequate foundational education equity and creamy layer enforcement—raise critical questions about merit, efficiency and mental well-being.

This research paper examines the impact of reservation policy on general category students through three interrelated lenses: admission cut-offs, seat availability in premier competitive examinations and resultant psychological stress. Adopting a doctrinal-cum-empirical approach, it analyses constitutional jurisprudence, official data from the National Testing Agency (NTA),

⁸ National Testing Agency, NEET-UG 2025 Cut-off Data; Careers360, ‘NEET Cutoff 2025 (Out): Category-Wise MBBS/BDS Cutoff Marks’

⁹ Ibid; MCC AIQ Counselling Data (2025).

¹⁰ JEE Advanced 2025 Qualifying Cut-offs (official IIT notification).

¹¹ C S Sreedevi (n 1) 42 (citing perception surveys where 67% of general aspirants view reservations as reverse discrimination).

¹² See generally A J Sharma and others, ‘Psychological Responses to Reservation-Based Discrimination: A Qualitative Study of Socially Marginalized Youth at a Premier Indian University’ (2020) 79 International Journal of Educational Development (adapted to general category stress narratives in competitive exam literature).

¹³ Constitution of India, art. 38; qualitative insights from aspirant surveys in C S Sreedevi (n 1) 44–45.

IITs and UPSC, alongside secondary literature on mental health outcomes. The study is confined to post-2019 developments (post-EWS introduction) in undergraduate professional admissions and civil services examinations. The central argument is that while affirmative action remains essential for social justice, its unchecked expansion without complementary reforms has created reverse inequities that demand recalibration to harmonise merit, equity and psychological well-being.

I. Constitutional and Legal Framework

The constitutional edifice of India's reservation policy is anchored in the Fundamental Rights enshrined in Part III of the Constitution of India. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination by the State on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.¹⁴ Article 16 similarly ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.¹⁵ These provisions embody the principle of formal equality, yet the Constitution recognises the need for substantive equality to address historical social and educational backwardness. Accordingly, Article 15(4) and Article 15(5) empower the State to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, including Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).¹⁶ Article 16(4) permits reservations in public employment for backward classes not adequately represented in the services of the State.¹⁷

The scope of affirmative action was significantly expanded by the Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, which inserted clauses (6) in both Articles 15 and 16. These clauses authorise the State to provide up to 10% reservation in educational institutions and public employment for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) of citizens other than the classes covered under existing reservations, based solely on economic criteria such as family income below ₹8 lakh per annum.¹⁸ The amendment was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022) by a 3:2 majority, holding that economic backwardness constitutes a valid ground for affirmative action and that the EWS quota does not violate the

¹⁴ Constitution of India, arts. 14, 15(1).

¹⁵ Ibid art. 16(1).

¹⁶ Ibid arts. 15(4), 15(5).

¹⁷ Ibid art. 16(4).

¹⁸ Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, s. 2 (inserting arts. 15(6) and 16(6)).

basic structure of the Constitution.¹⁹

The seminal nine-judge bench decision in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992) remains the constitutional cornerstone governing the implementation of reservations. The Court upheld OBC reservations but laid down binding guidelines: a 50% ceiling on vertical reservations (subject to exceptional circumstances), mandatory exclusion of the “creamy layer” from backward classes and the requirement that reservations must be compensatory and not punitive in nature.²⁰ In central educational institutions and All India Quota (AIQ) seats, the standard vertical reservation matrix comprises SC (15%), ST (7.5%), OBC-NCL (27%) and EWS (10%), leaving approximately 40.5% seats in the open/unreserved category. Horizontal reservations (e.g., for women and Persons with Disabilities) operate as sub-quotas within this framework. State-specific quotas may vary and, in certain cases, exceed the 50% limit under special circumstances recognised by the Court. This legal architecture, while promoting social justice, directly influences seat availability and cut-off thresholds for general category candidates in competitive examinations.

II. Judicial Pronouncements

The Supreme Court of India has authoritatively shaped the reservation policy through landmark pronouncements that seek to balance affirmative action with the constitutional mandate of equality of opportunity. In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992), a nine-judge Constitution Bench upheld OBC reservations but laid down binding guidelines: a general 50% ceiling on vertical reservations (breachable only in extraordinary circumstances), mandatory exclusion of the “creamy layer” from backward classes and the principle that reservations must be compensatory and grounded in social and educational backwardness rather than purely economic factors.²¹ The Court further clarified that meritorious candidates from reserved categories who meet or exceed the general category cut-off (without relaxations) are entitled to be allotted seats from the open/unreserved category.²²

This principle was reiterated in *R.K. Sabharwal v. State of Punjab* (1995), reinforcing that such candidates cannot be counted against the reserved quota, thereby preserving the integrity of the

¹⁹ Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India (2022) (3:2).

²⁰ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, AIR 1993 SC 477.

²¹ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, AIR 1993 SC 477.

²² *Ibid.*

open pool while ensuring fair treatment.²³

The constitutional validity of the 10% Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation introduced by the 103rd Amendment was upheld in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2022) by a 3:2 majority. The majority held that economic criteria alone can form a valid basis for affirmative action under Articles 15(6) and 16(6) and that the EWS quota operates independently of the 50% ceiling applicable to SC/ST/OBC reservations.²⁴

These pronouncements collectively underscore the judiciary's endeavour to harmonise social justice with merit and efficiency, while directly influencing admission cut-offs, seat availability and the competitive landscape for general category students in examinations such as NEET, JEE and UPSC.

III. Impact on Admission Cut-offs and Seat Availability: Empirical Analysis

The reservation policy's operational impact on general category students is most starkly visible in the empirical data emerging from India's premier competitive examinations. In NEET-UG 2025, the National Testing Agency (NTA) prescribed qualifying cut-offs based on percentile: the 50th percentile for General/EWS candidates translated into 686–144 marks, whereas the 40th percentile for OBC, SC and ST candidates required only 143–113 marks.²⁵ This 10-percentile gap, when translated into absolute scores, often exceeds 500 marks at the upper end, creating a structural barrier for general category aspirants seeking government medical seats.

Actual All India Quota (AIQ) admission cut-offs in counselling rounds reveal even sharper disparities. For 15% AIQ MBBS seats in government colleges, general category closing ranks in the first few rounds hovered around AIR 26,000 (corresponding to approximately 620+ marks for top institutions), while reserved category candidates secured equivalent seats at ranks exceeding 1,10,000 (often below 500 marks).²⁶ In several state quota rounds, general category students needed 550–680 marks for government MBBS colleges, whereas SC/ST candidates obtained seats with 400–520 marks.²⁷ The horizontal 5% PwD reservation and the practice of

²³ R.K. Sabharwal v. State of Punjab, (1995) 2 SCC 745.

²⁴ Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India (2022) (3:2).

²⁵ National Testing Agency, NEET-UG 2025 Cut-off Data (released June 2025); see also Indian Express, 'NEET UG 2025 Result: Know qualifying cut-off across all categories' (16 June 2025).

²⁶ Careers360, NEET Cutoff 2025 (Out): Category-Wise MBBS/BDS Cutoff Marks (updated March 2026); MCC AIQ Counselling Round-1 data (2025).

²⁷ Ibid.; PW Live, 'NEET 2025 Cut Off for MBBS: Category Wise' (2025).

allowing meritorious reserved candidates to claim open seats further compresses the effective open pool.

A similar pattern emerges in JEE Advanced 2025. The qualifying aggregate marks (out of 360) stood at 74 for the Common Rank List (CRL/General), 66 for OBC-NCL and GEN-EWS and merely 37 for SC/ST categories.²⁸ Thus, a general category candidate had to secure nearly double the marks of an SC/ST candidate to even qualify for the rank list, let alone secure an IIT seat. With only about 40.5% seats remaining in the open category after vertical reservations—SC (15%), ST (7.5%), OBC-NCL (27%) and EWS (10%)—general aspirants compete for a disproportionately small share despite forming a larger applicant pool.²⁹ Horizontal reservations (women, PwD) operate within each vertical category, reducing open availability still further.

In UPSC Civil Services Examination 2025, the preliminary cut-off was 92.66 for General, compared to 92.00 for OBC, 89.34 for EWS, 84.00 for SC and 82.66 for ST.³⁰ While the gap is narrower at the preliminary stage, the cumulative effect across mains and interview stages continues to reflect the same quota-induced compression of open vacancies.

The seat matrix under AIQ (15% of total medical/engineering seats) and state quotas (85%) illustrates the mechanics of reduced availability. In central institutions and AIQ, the 59.5% reserved quota leaves roughly 40.5% open seats. State quotas frequently exceed 50% (e.g., Bihar's post-2023 caste survey quota touching 65%), shrinking general availability to as low as 35% in some regions.³¹ Unfilled reserved seats are not automatically converted to open category in the same proportion; instead, they are carried forward or filled in subsequent rounds, while general candidates continue to face the full brunt of intensified competition for the residual open pool. Official counselling data from the Medical Counselling Committee (MCC) and JoSAA confirm that general category rank inflation routinely results in candidates securing 99th percentile scores yet failing to obtain seats in premier institutions.

These empirical trends demonstrate that reservation implementation has created a two-tiered

²⁸ IIT Kanpur, JEE Advanced 2025 Qualifying Marks (official notification, jeeadv.ac.in, June 2025).

²⁹ Medical Counselling Committee, NEET Reservation Criteria for AIQ 15% Seats (2025); Careers360, 'NEET 2026 Reservation Criteria' (updated January 2026).

³⁰ Union Public Service Commission, Civil Services Examination 2025 Cut-off Marks (official release, March 2026).

³¹ C S Sreedevi, 'Balancing Equity and Merit: The Impact of Reservation Quotas on General Category Aspirants in National Entrance Exams' (2025) 5 Indian Journal of Legal Review 40–42

admission ecosystem. General category students, despite comparable or superior academic preparation, must outperform reserved category peers by substantial margins (often 100–200 marks in NEET or 30–40 percentile points in JEE) simply to access the same opportunities. The resultant seat squeeze exacerbates intergenerational stress and fuels perceptions of inequity, as high-achieving general aspirants are systematically edged out despite clearing higher qualifying thresholds. Periodic review of the reservation matrix, stricter creamy layer enforcement and enhanced investment in foundational schooling for all sections remain essential to restore balance between social justice and merit-based access.

V. Psychological Stress and Mental Health Implications

The structural disadvantages imposed by India's reservation policy—manifested in elevated admission cut-offs and constricted seat availability—translate into profound psychological costs for general category students preparing for competitive examinations. While the policy advances social justice for historically marginalised groups, its implementation creates a two-tiered ecosystem that intensifies competition within the residual open category (approximately 40.5% under All India Quota). This compression fosters heightened anxiety, demotivation and perceptions of reverse discrimination among general category aspirants, who often outperform reserved candidates by substantial margins yet secure fewer opportunities.³²

Empirical studies consistently document elevated levels of psychological distress among NEET and JEE aspirants. A 2025 cross-sectional study on high-stakes testing pressure found that academic stress accounted for 31.1% of the variance in mental health outcomes, with moderate positive correlations between stress and diminished self-esteem. Males and younger aspirants (18–19 years) reported poorer mental health indicators.³³ Using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), another investigation of NEET aspirants revealed prevalence rates of depression at 19.5%, anxiety at 24.4% and stress at 21.1%, with over 81% experiencing at least one symptom at moderate or severe levels.³⁴ These figures are significantly higher than national averages for adolescents and young adults, underscoring the unique burden of

³² C. S. Sreedevi, "Balancing Equity and Merit: The Impact of Reservation Quotas on General Category Aspirants in National Entrance Exams," *Indian Journal of Legal Review*, Vol. 5, 2025, p. 44.

³³ Aakriti Sharma, "The Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Testing: Investigating the Effects of NEET/JEE Pressure on Students; Mental Health and Well-Being," *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, Vol. 28, No. 5, May 2025, pp. 102–110, DOI: 10.69980/ajpr.v28i5.331

³⁴ Lakshmi Arun, "A Study of Anxiety Level Among Male and Female NEET Aspirants," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology*, 2024.

competitive exam preparation.

Coaching hubs such as Kota exemplify the crisis. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data indicate that student suicides linked to examination failure accounted for a notable share of the 13,089 student deaths recorded in 2021, with the trend persisting.³⁵ In Kota alone, 29 students died by suicide in 2023, 15 in 2022 and 14 cases were reported by early 2025, far exceeding national student suicide rates (approximately 4.5 per 100,000 versus 20+ per 100,000 in Kota during peak years).³⁶ A Lokniti-CSDS survey in Kota (2023) found that over 85% of aspirants spent 6–8 hours daily in coaching, with many reporting increased loneliness, mood swings, fatigue, anger, sadness and depression after relocating.³⁷ A comparative study of IIT-JEE and NEET aspirant suicides (2019–2024) confirmed that 81% of cases involved students aged 15–20, predominantly males preparing for NEET, with Rajasthan accounting for nearly 70% of incidents.³⁸

The reservation policy exacerbates these baseline pressures for general category students. Surveys indicate that approximately 67% of general aspirants perceive the quota system as “reverse discrimination,” linking higher cut-off thresholds (often 100–500 marks above reserved categories in NEET) to feelings of systemic inequity.³⁹ This perception fuels “learned helplessness,” where high-achieving students internalise that superior performance may still result in exclusion from premier institutions. Qualitative accounts from aspirants describe intergenerational resentment, parental pressure amplified by financial investment in coaching (often ₹5–10 lakh annually) and a sense of diminished agency. One 2025 analysis noted that general category students in state quotas (where reservations sometimes exceed 65%, as in Bihar) face even steeper odds, correlating with elevated DASS scores and burnout.⁴⁰

Mechanisms underlying this stress are multifaceted. First, rank inflation in the open pool means a 99th percentile score may not secure a government MBBS or IIT seat, unlike reserved candidates qualifying at 60–70th percentiles. Second, prolonged preparation (2–4 years post-

³⁵ National Crime Records Bureau, *Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 2022*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2023.

³⁶ D. Gupta et al., “Suicide Trends Among Indian Institutes of Technology Joint Entrance Examination (IIT-JEE) and National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) Aspirants: A Comparative Study,” *PubMed Central (PMC)*, 2025, Article No. 12256035.

³⁷ Lokniti-CSDS, *Kota Student Survey*, 2023, cited in *ThePrint*, “NEET, JEE Exams Are Causing a Mental Health Crisis in India,” July 3, 2024.

³⁸ D. Gupta et al., *supra* note 36.

³⁹ C. S. Sreedevi, *supra* note 32, p. 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Class XII) without guaranteed outcomes breeds chronic stress, sleep deprivation and substance use. Third, societal narratives framing general category students as “unreserved” yet disadvantaged compound stigma and isolation. Institutional data from IITs and medical colleges show higher counselling demands and dropout risks during admission cycles among general category entrants, often tied to pre-admission anxiety.⁴¹

Broader mental health implications extend beyond individual suffering. The policy’s psychological toll undermines Article 38’s directive for promoting social fraternity by breeding intergenerational discontent and merit-based disillusionment. Extreme cases manifest in suicidal ideation; reports from coaching institutes link 40–44% of high academic stress directly to perceived unfair barriers.⁴² Unlike reserved category students who may face post-admission discrimination, general category aspirants experience pre-admission exclusionary stress, creating asymmetric mental health burdens. A 2025 study on coaching versus non-coaching students found coaching aspirants experienced 44.45% high academic stress rates (versus 3.33% non-coaching), with parental expectations and quota-induced competition as key predictors.⁴³

The crisis has prompted judicial and policy responses. The Supreme Court in 2025 mandated uniform mental health policies for educational institutions and coaching centres under Article 21, requiring annual reviews, counselling integration and alignment with UMMEED and MANODARPAN guidelines.⁴⁴ States like Rajasthan have introduced anti-suicide infrastructure in Kota, yet gaps persist in addressing category-specific inequities.

V. Recommendations and Way Forward

The empirical disparities in cut-offs, seat availability and psychological stress documented in the preceding sections necessitate targeted reforms that preserve the constitutional commitment to affirmative action under Articles 15 and 16 while mitigating reverse inequities for general category students. Any recalibration must be guided by the Supreme Court’s repeated emphasis

⁴¹ M. K. Satapathy, “Mental Health Status of JEE and NEET Aspirant Students of Higher Secondary Education in Kota, Rajasthan: A Study,” *IISRR Journal*, 2025.

⁴² Aakriti Sharma, “The Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Testing: Investigating the Effects of NEET/JEE Pressure on Students; Mental Health and Well-Being,” *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, Vol. 28, No. 5, May 2025, pp. 102–110, DOI: 10.69980/ajpr.v28i5.331.

⁴³ B. S. Shekhawat et al., “Stress and Coping Strategy Among Coaching and Non-Coaching Students,” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2023.

⁴⁴ Supreme Court of India, *State of Andhra Pradesh*, Order dated 25 July 2025 (mandating mental health policies aligned with UMMEED and MANODARPAN guidelines).

on merit, efficiency and periodic review, as articulated in *Indra Sawhney* and *Janhit Abhiyan*. The following recommendations offer a balanced, implementable pathway forward.

- Rigorous enforcement of the creamy layer exclusion is imperative across all reserved categories, including OBC, SC and ST, coupled with sub-categorisation as recommended by the Rohini Commission (2023). Current implementation gaps allow affluent sections within reserved groups to monopolise quotas, further squeezing open seats. A uniform, income-and-asset-based creamy layer threshold (revised every three years) would free up 20–30% of reserved seats for genuinely backward candidates, expanding effective opportunities without increasing total quotas.
- Substantial investment in foundational education equity is essential to reduce preparation gaps that underpin cut-off disparities. The National Education Policy 2020's focus on early childhood and school-level interventions must be prioritised through targeted schemes for rural and under-resourced schools, including free coaching access for meritorious general category students from low-income families. This long-term measure would gradually narrow the merit gap, diminishing reliance on mechanical quotas and aligning with the constitutional goal of substantive equality.
- Hybrid models blending merit and socio-economic criteria should be piloted in open category seats. For instance, 50% of unreserved seats could be filled purely on merit, while the remaining 50% incorporate a modest weightage (10–15%) for economic backwardness, applicable uniformly across categories. This would address EWS concerns without violating the 50% ceiling principle and could be tested in central institutions before nationwide rollout.
- A national cap on total vertical reservations at 50–60% (with state variations subject to judicial scrutiny) and mandatory decadal review by a parliamentary committee is urgently required. The unchecked expansion beyond 50% in several states has reduced open seats to 35% or less, intensifying psychological stress. Periodic review, incorporating fresh socio-economic data and aspirant surveys, would ensure the policy remains dynamic and evidence-based.
- Mandatory mental health infrastructure in coaching hubs and competitive exam centres must be institutionalised. Drawing on the Supreme Court's 2025 directives under

Article 21, all registered coaching institutes should integrate free counselling, annual mental health audits and stress-management modules aligned with MANODARPAN and UMMEED guidelines. State governments could subsidise these services, particularly in high-pressure zones like Kota and Delhi NCR.

- Expanding EWS benefits and incentivising private sector reservations (via tax rebates) would broaden opportunity pools beyond government seats, reducing exclusive dependence on public institutions.

Collectively, these measures would harmonise social justice with merit and mental well-being, preventing the reservation framework from becoming a source of intergenerational resentment.

Conclusion

India's reservation policy has undeniably advanced representation for historically marginalised communities, fulfilling the constitutional mandate of substantive equality. Yet, as this study demonstrates through doctrinal analysis and empirical evidence from NEET-UG, JEE Advanced and UPSC examinations, its implementation has imposed disproportionate burdens on general category students—manifested in 100–500 mark cut-off gaps, compression of open seats to approximately 40.5% (or lower in several states) and elevated psychological distress evidenced by higher DASS scores, anxiety prevalence and suicide trends in coaching ecosystems.⁷

The structural inequities erode perceptions of fairness, fuel learned helplessness and undermine the constitutional ideal of fraternity under Article 38. While the Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney* and *Janhit Abhiyan* has consistently guarded against punitive or perpetual reservations, implementation gaps—weak creamy layer enforcement, inadequate foundational schooling and absence of periodic review—have allowed mechanical quotas to overshadow merit and efficiency.

A recalibrated framework, anchored in the recommendations above, is not a dilution of affirmative action but its refinement: one that strengthens genuine backwardness identification, invests in universal capacity-building and safeguards mental health. Only through such evidence-based evolution can reservation policy fulfil its transformative promise without compromising the constitutional vision of equality of opportunity for all citizens. Future

research, incorporating large-scale primary surveys of aspirants across categories and longitudinal mental health tracking, will be critical to continually refine this delicate balance.

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