IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)
Volume 31, Issue 8, Series 1 (August, 2026) 116-121
e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.
www.iosrjournals.org

Who Deserves Success? A Sociological Analysis of Merit, Privilege, and Caste in India's Digital Reservation Debate

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Abstract
Arguments about caste-based reservation in Indian colleges usually get described as a fight between "merit" and "social justice." That description quietly assumes everyone means the same thing by merit. This paper starts from the opposite assumption. Its question is: how do Indian social media users build their ideas of merit and fairness when they argue about caste-based reservation in higher education? To answer it, the paper draws on three sources. One is Michael Young's critique of meritocracy. Another is Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural capital. The third is Indian research on caste and inequality in education. From these it puts together a design for a thematic discourse analysis of roughly 150–200 top-level YouTube comments, taken from six to eight Indian news and debate videos posted between 2023 and 2026. Young matters here because he never meant "meritocracy" as a compliment. He coined it as a warning about a society where doing well in school gets read as proof that you deserve more, so inequality starts to look fair (Young, "Down with Meritocracy"). Bourdieu lets us ask how much of what looks like individual achievement is really built on money, culture, and connections that were never shared out equally. Writers on Indian higher education make a similar point: exams and the talk of merit can hide the social conditions that produce an advantage in the first place (Deshpande, "Exclusive Inequalities"; Subramanian, "Making Merit").
From there, the paper sketches six competing "moral grammars" of merit that the comments can be checked against: procedural merit, effort-based merit, contextual merit, reparative fairness, economic-need fairness, and a targeting or anti-entitlement view of fairness. The main argument is that the reservation fight is really about three questions underneath it. Where does a fair race actually start? Should justice be judged person by person, or group by group? And does an exam score measure what someone achieved, or what they achieved plus everything they were given along the way? So the paper treats online arguments about reservation less as evidence on whether the policy "works" and more as evidence of people's different pictures of what a fair society should reward.

I. Background and Theoretical Framework

Reservation in Indian higher education isn't one single rule. It sits inside a wider set of constitutional and legal provisions for affirmative action. Under the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, covered central institutions reserve 15 percent of seats for Scheduled Castes, 7.5 percent for Scheduled Tribes, and 27 percent for Other Backward Classes, with some exceptions written into the law ("Central Educational Institutions"). The framework has also moved past caste alone. The 103rd Constitutional Amendment created a quota for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), and in November 2022 the Supreme Court upheld it by a 3–2 vote in *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* (*Janhit Abhiyan*). Having caste-based and income-based quotas side by side matters for sociology, because the state is now running on two different ideas of disadvantage at once. One is about exclusion that built up over history. The other is about being poor right now.

The issue was very much alive in 2026. The "Reservation Hatao Andolan" began as an online campaign and later took to the street, with a demonstration at Jantar Mantar in Delhi. It tied its opposition to caste-based reservation directly to the language of merit and to calls for economic criteria. The *Times of India*, covering the protest, ran YouTuber Ajeet Bharti's line that India could not "sell [the] dream of developed India by compromising on merit" ("Cannot Sell Dream"). In *Newslaundry*, Pooja Prasanna summed up the campaign's core demand as reservation by economic status instead of caste, and argued that this gets wrong what reservation is for (Prasanna). None of this tells us what most Indians think. What it does show is how much weight the word "merit" carries. People on every side use it to say who deserves what.

Young gives us the first way into this vocabulary. He made up the word "meritocracy" in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, and the book was a dystopian satire, not a case for letting the most talented run things (Young, *Rise of the Meritocracy*). Years later he complained that politicians had picked the word up as praise. His satire, he explained, had warned about a school-based order in which a successful minority could see its position as earned and pass it on, while failing became something shameful (Young, "Down with Meritocracy"). So the real problem isn't just that outcomes are unequal. It's that the inequality gets a stamp of legitimacy. Once rankings are accepted

as the result of a fair contest, the winners can treat their rewards as proof of their own worth, and the people who lose are pushed to see it as their own fault.

Reservation debates show this problem clearly, because entrance exams are so often treated as machines for sorting the deserving from the undeserving. A test score looks objective. Everyone answers questions marked by the same rules. But being equal on exam day doesn't mean the road to the exam hall was equal. Families differ in income, in how good the local school is, in what languages a child grows up hearing, in neighborhood infrastructure, coaching, parents' education, how familiar they are with competitive exams, who they know, and whether they can afford to let a child spend years doing nothing but prepare. So the useful question isn't whether a score is "real." It's what social history has been squeezed into that one number.

Bourdieu's theory of capital helps sort this out. For Bourdieu, advantage isn't only money. It also comes as cultural and social capital: knowledge, habits, the right way of speaking, credentials, contacts, and an ease with institutions, all of which can be turned into success at school. Cultural capital can be embodied through years of upbringing, objectified in books and other resources a family has, and institutionalized in degrees (Bourdieu). In his wider work on how schooling reproduces inequality, he looks at how institutions can treat the culture of advantaged groups as natural ability while seeming perfectly neutral (Bourdieu and Passeron).

This matters a lot in India, where caste and class can't simply be swapped for each other. Being poor obviously matters, and poverty can badly limit a student's chances. But caste isn't just another word for low income. It's about status handed down over generations, about networks, social respect, discrimination, segregated neighborhoods, the jobs families have done, and unequal access to institutions. At the same time, you can't assume every member of a historically disadvantaged caste lives the same life. That's why fights about the "creamy layer," income limits, families that benefit generation after generation, and better targeting keep coming back. They're all about how to spot real disadvantage when caste and class overlap but aren't the same thing.

Indian scholars have pushed back hard on the idea that "merit" sits outside caste. Satish Deshpande, writing about what he calls "exclusive inequalities," argues that merit, exams, and the way higher education is organized have to be looked at together, since supposedly neutral tools end up justifying unequal access (Deshpande, "Exclusive Inequalities"). Ajantha Subramanian's work on the Indian Institutes of Technology looks at how elite technical education turned socially rooted privilege into the language of casteless individual merit. Her research moves the focus from caste disadvantage to something people name far less often, caste privilege: the way advantaged groups come to see what they inherited as just normal preparation or personal talent (Subramanian, *Caste of Merit*).

That doesn't mean every criticism of reservation is wrong. It doesn't mean every reservation policy is well designed, either. The research actually allows for more mixed judgments. In their study of engineering-college admissions, Bertrand, Hanna, and Mullainathan found that affirmative action reached poorer students in a real way: the upper-caste applicants who lost seats to it generally came from better-off families than the lower-caste applicants who got in through it (Bertrand et al.). That cuts against the common online claim that caste quotas and economic need always pull in opposite directions. It still leaves fair questions open about how the policy is designed, how students are prepared, and how benefits are spread within the groups that qualify.

The core claim of this paper, then, is that merit isn't only measured in these debates. It gets built through the way people talk. Whenever someone brings up "merit," "hard work," "fairness," "privilege," "poverty," or "historical discrimination," they're making assumptions about which causes of success should count morally and which ones can quietly drop out of the picture.

II. Methodology and Coding Framework

The study this paper proposes is a thematic discourse analysis of about 150–200 top-level, public YouTube comments posted under six to eight Indian news, interview, or debate videos about reservation in higher education. Searching for material from 2023–2026 turns up a good spread of videos, from India Today's 2026 conclave debate on OBC reservation ("India Today Conclave") to long interviews and debate shows billed outright as "reservation vs. merit," plus coverage of the 2026 Reservation Hatao movement. That spread matters. If we only sampled a clearly anti-reservation channel, or a clearly pro-reservation one, we could mistake one audience's politics for the whole debate.

The final corpus should use eight videos, with 24 usable top-level comments from each, for 192 comments in total. Every video should have been posted between 1 January 2023 and 30 September 2026, should be mainly about caste reservation, merit, admissions, exams, or something close to them, and should have a sizable public comment section. Replies are left out, because a reply is usually arguing with the comment above it rather than with the reservation question itself. Comments that are only emoji, plain spam, duplicates, or off-topic are left out too.

Comments should be picked by a fixed rule, not because they sound dramatic. One way is to save a set pool of eligible top-level comments for each video and then take every kth comment until there are 24. Giving every video the same quota stops one viral video from swamping the sample. The YouTube Data API has tools

for pulling comments and paging through results ("Comments: List"), and YouTube's Researcher Program gives eligible academic researchers, including those at qualifying institutions in India, wider access to public YouTube data ("How It Works"). The platform and the date of collection need to be written down, since what comments are visible, and how many likes they have, can change.

The coding works in two directions. Some codes are set in advance, drawn from Young, Bourdieu, and the reservation literature (see Table 1). Others get added along the way, whenever commenters keep making an argument the framework didn't see coming. Braun and Clarke describe thematic analysis as a flexible way of finding patterns of meaning in a systematic way, as long as researchers are open about the assumptions they bring to it (Braun and Clarke).

Table 1
Deductive Coding Frame for Reservation Comments

Code	Operational question
Merit as score	Is merit equated with marks, rank, cutoff, or examination performance?
Merit as effort	Does the comment emphasize hard work, sacrifice, studying, or personal discipline?
Contextual merit	Does it argue that achievement must be interpreted relative to unequal starting conditions?
Historical inequality	Are untouchability, caste exclusion, inherited discrimination, or intergenerational disadvantage invoked?
Caste privilege	Are schooling, networks, family education, coaching, social status, or upper-caste advantage discussed?
Economic disadvantage	Is income or poverty presented as a fairer basis for affirmative action than caste?
Formal equality	Is fairness defined as identical rules or cutoffs for everyone?
Substantive equality	Is unequal treatment defended as necessary to counter unequal starting positions?
Representation	Is reservation discussed as enabling participation of historically excluded communities rather than simply transferring seats?
Targeting / capture	Are creamy-layer exclusion, repeated family benefits, policy reform, or better targeting demanded?
Stigma / competence	Are reserved-category candidates represented as less capable, or is such stereotyping challenged?

Source: Author's coding frame, derived from Young, Bourdieu, and the reservation literature discussed above. Inductive codes are to be added during analysis.

The final paper should never show a username, profile picture, channel handle, or anything else that identifies a person. When a particular comment is important to the argument, it's better to paraphrase it than to quote a sentence someone could paste into a search engine and trace. A comment being public doesn't mean the researcher has no ethical duties. The Association of Internet Researchers sees online research ethics as depending on context and as running through the whole project, start to finish ("Ethics").

Scope of This Paper

There's an important difference between a dataset someone plans to collect and one that has actually been collected and coded. This paper sets out the research design and a typology grounded in theory. The comments described above haven't been collected or coded yet. So the paper reports no comment counts and no quotations from comments. The typology in the next section is a set of expectations, drawn from the research literature and the public debate described above, and it's meant to be tested using the sampling plan just laid out.

III. Expected Findings: Competing Moral Grammars of Merit

Going by the research and the public debate, the reservation argument can't really be coded as a simple split between "pro-reservation" and "anti-reservation." We should expect at least six different ideas of who deserves what. It helps to think of them as moral grammars, meaning repeated ways of deciding what achievement means, which inequalities count, and what institutions owe to individuals.

Procedural Merit: Fairness as Identical Treatment

The first view treats exam performance as the best sign of merit. Its moral rule is simple. Everyone sits the same exam, so everyone should face the same cutoff. Anything done after the test to change that looks like a break from equality.

This argument carries a lot of force because it puts the start of the fair race at the exam itself. Everything before the exam gets left out of the comparison: the quality of the school, the family's money, caste, the parents' education, language, coaching, discrimination. Seen this way, two candidates with different marks are just two people measured by the same neutral ruler.

Procedural merit appeals because it rests on a principle most people like: the rules shouldn't bend depending on who you are. Where it falls short is that identical rules don't tell us whether the conditions behind the scores were comparable. Deshpande's line between competence and excellence helps here. He warns against

mixing the two up, since opponents of reservation usually treat rank in a competitive exam as the measure of who deserves a seat (Deshpande, "Changing Social Composition"). A ranking sorts students who were already prepared unequally. It doesn't, on its own, show who is capable of doing the course.

Effort-Based Merit: Fairness as Rewarding Hard Work

A second view, close to the first but not the same, equates merit with effort. The deserving candidate here isn't just whoever scored higher. It's the person pictured as having studied harder, given up free time, pushed through the competition, or spent years getting ready for a small number of seats.

This way of talking loads the score with moral meaning. A rank stops being a result and turns into proof of character. That's very close to what Young warned about: once success is put down to talent plus effort, the rewards can look morally earned, and failure becomes easier to pin on the individual (Young, "Down with Meritocracy").

None of this means effort doesn't matter. Students obviously work hard. The trouble is that you can't see effort apart from opportunity. Ten hours of study in a settled home, with private coaching, fast internet, educated parents, and no need to earn money, isn't the same thing socially as ten hours squeezed in after housework or a job. Bourdieu's ideas don't deny effort, then. They explain why the same effort can pay off very differently depending on what a student had before they ever opened a book.

Contextual Merit: Achievement Relative to Unequal Starting Points

A third view doesn't throw merit out. It redefines it. Contextual merit asks what a student managed to achieve given the conditions they were working under. A lower raw score can still reflect real ability or effort if it was earned despite weaker schools, fewer resources, discrimination, or a family that knew nothing about how elite education works.

This is where Bourdieu pushes hardest against purely individual readings of exams. Cultural capital includes knowing the codes that institutions reward. A competitive test can put the same questions to everyone while candidates have had very unequal access to the settings that build up test-ready knowledge and confidence (Bourdieu).

Contextual merit changes the picture we use. The exam stops being the starting line and becomes a checkpoint partway through a much longer race. Then fairness can't be judged just by asking whether everyone got the same paper on the same day.

Reparative and Representational Fairness

A fourth view goes past individual hardship altogether. It sees reservation as an answer to exclusion that was organized over history, and as a way to bring more people into institutions that certain communities were long kept out of.

Here the question isn't "Which person is the poorest?" It's "How have chances, status, education, and power inside institutions been shared out between groups over generations?" Caste still matters, then, even when a particular beneficiary isn't among India's poorest people. The case rests on social exclusion and representation, not just on household income.

Subramanian's work helps a lot here, because it shows why upper-caste success can't automatically be treated as casteless while only reserved-category students are seen as "having caste." *The Caste of Merit* argues that elite technical education has long helped present upper-caste advantage as plain universal merit, while reservation makes lower-caste identity stand out (Subramanian, *Caste of Merit*).

So the representational view rejects the idea that reservation is basically an anti-poverty scheme. If the problem is underrepresentation caused by social structures that have lasted a long time, then swapping caste for income doesn't just target the policy better. It changes what the policy is for.

Economic-Need Fairness: Poverty as the Legitimate Disadvantage

The fifth view accepts that some groups should get extra help but says the disadvantage that counts should be economic, not caste. It often comes up as a comparison: a poor student from the general category set against a well-off student from a reserved category. That hypothetical feels unfair, and the feeling is used to argue that income is a more personal and more up-to-date basis for fairness.

This argument matters politically because it doesn't have to reject affirmative action. What it changes is the way people get sorted, from a social category you're born into toward your current financial situation. The constitutional backing for the EWS quota gives this view official standing as well as rhetorical weight (*Janhit Abhiyan*). The 2026 Reservation Hatao campaign was built around the same demand, that reservation should depend on economic status and not caste (Prasanna).

But replacing caste with class depends on a factual assumption, namely that income picks up the disadvantage caste reservation was meant to deal with. Research makes that assumption shaky. Bertrand, Hanna, and Mullainathan's study of engineering admissions found that caste-based affirmative action did, in practice, move seats toward applicants from poorer backgrounds than the upper-caste candidates who lost out (Bertrand et al.). Caste and class overlap enough that they can't be treated as unrelated. They don't overlap so fully that one can simply stand in for the other.

Targeting Fairness: Support for Correction, Suspicion of Permanent Entitlement

The sixth view matters most if we want to avoid a false pro-versus-anti split. Commenters might accept that caste discrimination is real and support reservation in principle, while also questioning families that benefit generation after generation, wealthy beneficiaries, the creamy-layer rules, or whether the policy should be reviewed from time to time.

In this view, fairness means correction that is well aimed. It parts ways with strict procedural merit because it accepts unequal treatment where real disadvantage exists. It also parts ways with unconditional group entitlement, because it worries that the better-off members of eligible groups end up taking most of the benefit.

Comments like these would be very important for the analysis, because they would show that the online debate isn't made up of two neat, consistent camps. One person can back caste-based affirmative action, an income filter, better government schools, more seats, and stronger anti-discrimination rules all at the same time. If we only coded whether someone was "for" or "against," we'd lose the most interesting question: what principle makes this commenter see a particular split of seats as fair?

IV. Discussion

The six views can be boiled down to three deeper points of disagreement, and these are the paper's main contribution: where the competition starts, what unit justice is measured in, and what yardstick decides who deserves what.

First, people disagree about where things start. Procedural arguments begin the moral comparison at the exam or the admission decision. Structural arguments start much earlier, with childhood, schooling, what a family inherited, or even histories of exclusion going back generations. So two commenters can look at the exact same cutoff and come to opposite conclusions, because they're looking at different stretches of time.

Second, they disagree about the unit of justice. Individualist arguments ask whether candidate A got exactly the same treatment as candidate B. Economic arguments often widen that to the household. Caste-based arguments bring in the social group and its history. None of these units is silly in itself; each one answers a different question. The trouble starts when one of them is treated as the only legitimate one.

Third, they disagree about the yardstick. Is merit a test score? Effort? Ability in spite of hardship? Clearing a minimum standard? Adding to the diversity of an institution? The reservation debate starts to look impossible to settle when everyone uses the same word, "merit," for different things.

This helps explain how talk about hard work can show inequality and hide it at the same time. Hard-work talk is right to stress individual agency. But once exam results are put down entirely to effort, the resources that made the effort pay off vanish from view. Privilege gets hard to see exactly because privilege that has been turned into results no longer looks like privilege. It looks like achievement. That's where Bourdieu's account of reproduction meets Young's critique of meritocracy as a moral story.

Still, sociological criticism shouldn't just flip the moral order and call individual achievement meaningless. That would make the same mistake from the other side. Scores, discipline, ability, poverty, caste discrimination, and inherited advantage can all matter at once. The job of the empirical study is to see which of these commenters put up front, which they push to the back, and which they won't accept as legitimate at all.

YouTube suits this purpose well, since the platform hosts long public arguments around news and political videos, and researchers can study public comments through YouTube's data tools ("How It Works"). It isn't a representative survey, though. The people who watch political videos, choose to comment, come across particular channels, and get likes and replies are a self-selected online public. A sample of 192 comments can't back up a claim like "X percent of Indians oppose reservation." What the study can speak to is how people talk, not what the nation thinks.

Identity is another limit. A username or a comment doesn't reliably tell you someone's caste, class, age, gender, education, or even what country they live in. The study should therefore look at what commenters say about caste and merit, not guess at who they "really are." Highly visible online talk also tends to boost provocative, heated, or polarized positions. That makes YouTube good for studying the edges of the argument, what people treat as fair or unfair, but much weaker for working out how common those views are across the population.

Even so, the design has something real to offer. Reservation debates are usually set up as policy questions. Does reservation hurt merit? Has it gone on too long? Should it be based on income? This study asks an earlier, sociological question: what does someone have to believe merit and fairness mean before any of those arguments make sense? Once you ask that, the debate looks less like a technical quarrel about cutoffs and more like a clash between competing theories of how society works.

V. Conclusion

At bottom, India's online reservation debate is a debate about who deserves what. "Merit" works less as a neutral description than as a moral category people fight over. Some participants will probably see fairness as identical treatment on exam day. Others will see it as a reward for personal effort, and others as judging

achievement against unequal starting points. Still others will understand reservation through historical repair and representation, through economic need, or through demands for sharper targeting.

Young's critique shows why this fight matters. A meritocratic society doesn't only hand out rewards according to achievement. It can turn achievement into proof that unequal rewards are deserved (Young, "Down with Meritocracy"). Bourdieu shows why success in education can't be separated from the uneven spread of the resources institutions recognize and reward. Indian scholars like Deshpande and Subramanian carry this over to caste, showing how exams and elite education can turn advantages that built up socially into what looks like individual merit (Deshpande, "Exclusive Inequalities"; Subramanian, *Caste of Merit*).

The most useful conclusion, then, isn't that merit is a myth, or that reservation is above criticism. It's that every definition of merit carries a theory about which inequalities should count. A view built around cutoffs treats the exam as the place where things start. An economic view treats lack of money as the main injustice. A caste-conscious view stretches the timeline back to exclusion across generations and to representation. These positions clash because they start from different baselines, compare different units, and measure deservingness in different ways.

A careful analysis of 150–200 YouTube comments, done the way this paper lays out, can bring these hidden assumptions to the surface. Its value wouldn't be in announcing whether India is "for" or "against" reservation. It would be in showing how an online public builds several competing versions of a fair society, and how a word as simple-looking as *merit* carries a whole sociology of inequality inside it.

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