



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

VOLUME - 15 | ISSUE - 7 | APRIL - 2026



RATIONALIZATION OF RESERVATION POLICY IN INDEPENDENT TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Reservation refers to the action or fact of securing certain rights, powers, privileges, etc. The concept of reservation was introduced in the Tamil region, specifically Tamil Nadu, due to the hierarchical and stratified nature of society. This stratification was a consequence of the caste system that existed within Tamil society. Tamil Nadu was among the pioneering states in India to implement a reservation system. The Dravidian Movement significantly influenced the development and establishment of the reservation policy in Tamil Nadu. The Justice Party devised the reservation policy through the Communal Government Orders.

With the involvement of the Dravidian Parties in the independent Tamil Nadu, the reservation policy was effectively nurtured. When the Congress Movement emerged, the influence of non-Brahmin leaders in independent Tamil Nadu prompted the Congress Party to also express interest in maintaining the reservation policy.



KEYWORDS: Reservation, Tamil Nadu, Justice Party, D.M.K., A.I.A.D.M.K., B.C., M.B.C., S.C., S.T., Mandal Commission, Sattanathan Commission, V.P.Singh, M.G.Ramachandran, M.Karunanidhi, J.Jayalithaa, K.Veeramani, Dr. Ramadoss.

INTRODUCTION :

In accordance with the First Amendment of 1951, the Madras Government, led by Chief Minister Kumaraswamy Raja who took over from Omandur Ramaswamy Reddy, a proponent of the established scheme-set the Backward Class (B.C.) quota at 25 percent. Alongside the constitutionally required 16 percent reservation for Scheduled Castes (S.C.) and 1 percent for Scheduled Tribes (S.T.) at its inception, the total reservation in the State amounted to 41 percent.¹ Following the national increase of the S.C. quota from 16 to 17 percent, the overall reservation rose to 42 percent.² After assuming office in 1969, succeeding the party's founder C.N. Annadurai, the D.M.K. Chief Minister M.Karunanidhi established the First Backward Classes Commission in the State, led by the experienced civil servant A N

Sattanathan, to evaluate the effectiveness of the quota system and propose new recommendations.³ This initiative marked the initial effort to identify the 'Progressive section (creamy layer)', a concept later elaborated upon by the Supreme Court in the 'Mandal case' ruling many years later.⁴

Based on the recommendations of the Sattanathan Commission, the Karunanidhi Government increased the B.C. reservation from 25 to 31 percent. At that time, the Karunanidhi Government also raised the S.C./S.T. quota to 18 percent, resulting in a total of 49 percent, which included 31 percent for Backward Classes.⁵ Subsequently, the succeeding Government led by A.I.A.D.M.K. Chief Minister M G Ramachandran, commonly known as M.G.R., further raised the B.C. reservation from 31 to 50 percent, bringing the overall total to 68 percent.⁶ After M.G.R., the Karunanidhi Government established a distinct quota for the 'Most Backward Classes' (M.B.C.) by designating an internal quota of 20 percent from the total 50 percent allocated for Backward Classes.⁷ Additionally, he allocated 18 percent reservation for Scheduled Castes and set aside another 1 percent following a Supreme Court ruling (EV Chinnaiiah vs State of Andhra Pradesh and Others). Consequently, the total reservation in Tamil Nadu increased to 69 percent.⁸ Technically, this figure remains unchanged; however, following the Supreme Court's decision in the 'Mandal Case' in 1992, it should have been capped at 50 percent, which is the legal standing even today.

In a manner of speaking, the Sattanathan Commission was examining the success rate at the grassroots level and identifying any problem areas in the execution of the 1951 scheme. In its report presented on 26th November 1970, the Commission highlighted the existing discrepancies and proposed a remedy. It discovered that the benefits of reservation were primarily reaching only a select few communities from the extensive list. To address this issue, the Commission recommended the establishment of a new category, 'Most Backward Classes' (M.B.C.), under the law. It advised that 16 percent of reservations be allocated for M.B.C. communities and 17 percent for the other B.C. communities. Consequently, the B.C.-M.B.C. quota would increase from 25 percent to 33 percent.⁹

The efforts of the Sattanathan Commission established a benchmark for the Government to evaluate the effectiveness of the original quota scheme over the two decades since its implementation in 1951. The D.M.K. Government adjusted the new total to 31 percent, rather than the 33 percent suggested by the Commission for B.C.-M.B.C. With an additional one percent added to the S.C. quota, the overall total rose to 49 percent, compared to the 51 percent proposed by the Commission. In this regard, the leadership of Karunanidhi appeared to be forward-thinking, as the Mandal verdict set the upper limit at 50 percent.

Evidently, the Government received appropriate legal counsel regarding the principle that a segment of the whole - which the reservation scheme represented - cannot exceed its half. This reasoning was employed by the Supreme Court in establishing the 50 percent cap for all reservations, as articulated in the Mandal verdict. The Tamil Nadu scheme set the overall quota at 49 percent, which is 2 percent lower than the Sattanathan recommendation. Over the years, practical realities have demonstrated that the scheme has positively impacted the designated communities. The list of beneficiaries also grew, as did the total quota, increasing from 49 percent to 69 percent - initially when M.G.R. raised the B.C. quota from 31 to 50 percent (Total: 68 percent), and later when M. Karunanidhi added one more for S.C./S.T. (Total: 69 percent).¹⁰

Thus, when the Supreme Court mandated the identification and elimination of the 'creamy layer' in the Mandal case verdict two decades later, in 1992 (Indra Sawhney vs Union of India, AIR SCW 3682, 1992), it was akin to presenting old wine in a new bottle at one level - yet it remained distasteful and unacceptable in other respects.¹¹ Some observers noted that Sattanathan had laid the groundwork for the Supreme Court to introduce the 'creamy layer' concept. However, the former advocated for an increase in the existing quota to fulfill the objective. In contrast, the latter mandated a reduction in the quota and the exclusion of communities that had already experienced relative benefits, ensuring that the 'trickle-down' effect of social justice reached those who were further down the queue.

INCOME CEILING

The D.M.K. Government, nonetheless, did not respond to the Sattanathan Commission's identification of what could retrospectively be recognized as the 'creamy layer' within the context of

Tamil Nadu. It sought an alternative, if any existed, within the prevailing socio-political landscape. The Commission made recommendations, leading the State Government to establish a distinct M.B.C. category and increase the overall B.C.-M.B.C. quota from 25 percent to 31 percent. It failed to eliminate communities that the Sattanathan Commission had identified as having already benefited from the quota system and were obstructing opportunities for others. This situation was akin to the Brahmin community being previously accused of monopolizing all employment and university placements, thereby excluding others, which the Mandal verdict later identified as the 'creamy layer'.¹² History was repeating itself, with no questions raised and no leniency offered.

The responsibility to address the issue of the 'creamy layer' was entrusted to the succeeding M.G.R. Government, which did so without formally naming it. Drawing from the recommendations of the Sattanathan Commission, the M.G.R. Government established a maximum family income threshold of Rs 9,000 for communities previously recognized as B.C.-M.B.C. to qualify for the advantages of the reservation scheme.¹³ It is incorrect to characterize M.G.R.'s initiative as 'pro-Brahmin' or 'pro-upper castes', a notion propagated by both supporters and detractors. Neither group reaped benefits from this scheme. In fact, the Brahmin community and other upper or forward castes were likely to incur greater losses due to the transition from the 'General Quota' to the 'Reserved Quota', particularly with the augmented quota for B.C.-M.B.C. It is well understood that those included in the reservation scheme gained in two significant ways. Firstly, they were allocated their own quotas. Secondly, they retained the ability to compete for positions within the 'Open / General' quota. This distinction highlights how the First Amendment schemes diverged from the Justice Party model, which solely imposed a freeze on the quotas for all communities or their respective groups.

The M.G.R. scheme allegedly caused discontent among the B.C.-M.B.C. grouping, as its upper limit of Rs 9,000 aimed to create a division among them. The A.I.A.D.M.K., led by M.G.R., suffered a defeat in the parliamentary elections of 1980¹⁴, which followed the notification, to a more formidable D.M.K.-Congress coalition, with Indira Gandhi as the candidate for Prime Minister. The unsuccessful 'Janata Party experiment' (1977-1980) fostered a desire for political stability at the national level throughout the country. Tamil Nadu was not an exception to this trend. This situation arose after Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was unexpectedly ousted in the post-Emergency elections of 1977. She lost her Rae Bareilly seat in Uttar Pradesh by a significant margin of 55,000 votes. Additionally, her son Sanjay Gandhi was defeated in the neighboring Amethi constituency by an even larger margin.¹⁵

In the Lok Sabha elections which was held in Tamil Nadu in 1980, the A.I.A.D.M.K. was able to secure only two out of the 39 Lok Sabha seats available in the State.¹⁶ The party's defeat likely had no connection to the M.G.R. Government's policy regarding the income ceiling for B.C.-M.B.C. reservations. Furthermore, the State Government's directive did not affect the S.C.-S.T. reservations, which were based on a specific constitutional mandate. Nevertheless, individuals such as D.K. General Secretary, K Veeramani and some members within the A.I.A.D.M.K. appeared to have persuaded M.G.R. to think differently. K.Veeramani and his D.K. Party conducted protest meetings and publicly burnt the copies of the Government Order and the ashes were sent to the authorities on 26 November 1979.¹⁷

On 24th January 1980, the Government annulled the 'economic reservations' that had been associated with M.G.R.'s earlier scheme, which was inaccurately labeled.¹⁸ In a commendable effort, M.G.R. also raised the combined B.C.-M.B.C. quota to an unsustainable 50 percent.¹⁹ When factoring in the constitutionally mandated S.C./S.T. reservation, the total in Tamil Nadu reached a significant 68 percent. Furthermore, M.G.R.'s 68 percent scheme was based on an independent study commissioned by his Government, although it was not entirely endorsed by them. Subsequently, the later Karunanidhi Government added an additional 1 percent for S.C.-S.T., raising the total to 69 percent. At this juncture, Karunanidhi appeared to have persuaded himself that he would not face repercussions if the higher judiciary were to establish a cap on all reservations at 50 percent. In fact, even with his 1 percent addition, the total would still be 50 percent if M.G.R.'s contributions were disregarded, without implicating anyone specifically. In the mid 1990s, J.Jayalalitha took the lead in providing legislative support to the scheme of 69% reservation. Till then the quota scheme was in operation only through the executive orders. The 69% quota is meant for Backward Classes (30%), Most Backward Classes / Denotified Communities (20%)²⁰, Scheduled Castes (18%)²¹ and Scheduled Tribes ((1%).²² In

November 1993, the Assembly adopted the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of seats in educational institutions and of appointments or Posts in services under the state) Bill, then known as Tamil Nadu Act of 1994. In June 1994, J.Jayalithaa, the Chief Minister, led a delegation of parties and persuaded P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Prime Minister, to send the Bill to Shankar Dayal Sharma, the President of India. She also stepped up pressure on the Centre to bring in a constitutional amendment to include the Tamil Nadu Act in the Ninth Schedule so that the validity could not be changed. Subsequently, it was inserted in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution by the 76th Amendment Act of 1994 which was passed by the Indian Parliament.²³ On returning to power in May 2011, Jayalithaa took one more decision. Two months later, her Cabinet accepted the recommendation of the State Backward Class Commission for continuing the quota without excluding the creamy layer.²⁴ No doubt, the concept of the creamy layer among the scheduled and backward communities is a veiled move by the opponents of the policy of Communal Reservation with an ulterior motive to divide the oppressed people by creating rivalry.²⁵

VANNIAR AGITATION

In the years leading up to the establishment of a new electoral entity, Pattali Makkal Katchi (P.M.K.), the 'Vanniar Sangam', a caste-based organization associated with the later party founder Dr. S. Ramadoss, a medical professional, initiated a significant protest. They demanded a distinct 20 percent quota for their community, arguing that it constituted a considerable segment of the State's population yet suffered from insufficient representation in employment, resulting in persistent poverty.²⁶ The demonstrators obstructed the national highways linking the State capital, Chennai, with various other regions, towns, and cities, as well as with neighboring States. They engaged in 'road blockades', felled large, ancient trees along the highway, and ignited bonfires with them in certain areas.²⁷

Meanwhile, Chief Minister M.G.R., hospitalized in a distant part of the U.S. due to a stroke that had left him with a blood clot the size of a tennis ball in his brain, had a ministerial team receive petitions from different communities and conduct discussions with them. The intention was to reassess the reservation scheme, albeit without a definitive objective. The ministerial committee had to conclude discussions with individual community representatives after the population figures presented by those they met in the initial days reportedly exceeded the State's Census figures. Ultimately, the exercise proved to be a farce. Nevertheless, it also revealed the true worth of the leaders of individual communities and trivialized the more serious claims and justifications.²⁸

In addition to the various commissions and committees established in the past, the Union Cabinet, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appointed a panel in 2017 under the leadership of Justice G Rohini, a retired judge of the Delhi High Court, to examine 'internal reservations' or 'sub-categorisation' within the 27 percent allocated for the M.B.C.s in India.²⁹ In 2020, S. Ramadoss, the founder of P.M.K., stated that Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami has not adequately addressed the party's request for separate reservation for Vanniars in Tamil Nadu.³⁰ With only a few months remaining before the Assembly elections scheduled for May 2021, there is a growing demand, initiated by P.M.K. founder S Ramadoss, for the early release of the Rohini Committee Report. However, the Commission itself had requested and received approval for a thirteenth time extension.³¹ Ramadoss has since called for new protests, advocating for 20 percent reservations for the Vanniar community in advance of the State Assembly elections due in May 2021.

The Supreme Court's ruling in the Mandal case in 1992 altered the landscape for Tamil Nadu as well, although this change did not occur earlier. Even the protests against Mandal, which were pro-Mandir and led by student groups largely associated with or sympathetic to the B.J.P., escalated into street violence, particularly targeting the beleaguered V.P.Singh Government's swift execution of the Mandal Report. In a situation that remains difficult to comprehend, and for which there was no prior or subsequent example in the Hindi heartland, apart from the abhorrent practice of 'Sati', reports indicated that both male and female students, including those in schools, had set themselves ablaze in protest against the implementation of Mandal.³²

Before this stage, only Tamil Nadu had documented such incidents, which revolved around the demise or severe health issues of its political figures, whether from the film industry or not. West

Bengal experienced similar occurrences with Anand Margis in the 1960s.³³ However, this was not the case in central and heartland northern India. Since B.C.-M.B.C. reservation was an established matter in Tamil Nadu, and successive administrations have conducted periodic review committees, the Mandal report did not significantly affect the State.³⁴ In contrast, the Mandal verdict had a considerable impact. In Tamil Nadu, the anti-Mandal backlash from the upper castes, akin to that in North India, was restricted to a teenage school dropout in the lignite town of Neyveli who set himself on fire. Neither the news of the suicide nor 'protest' gained traction within the State.

In conclusion, the implementation of reservation in independent Tamil Nadu has led to significant structural social changes within Tamil society. The proportional representation of all communities in government and educational services is the most effective solution for achieving social and communal justice for every community. Conducting a caste-wise census is crucial for the equitable distribution of reservations. Nevertheless, experiences have shown that the benefits have not reached the grassroots level of society; instead, they have primarily been enjoyed by the more privileged individuals among the backward and lower sections. Despite this, there is a prevailing argument that such reservation may result in a decline in the quality of individuals within society. This perspective cannot be universally accepted, as the purpose of reservation is to promote social justice and equality. In fact, allocating sixty-nine percent of reservations to the weaker sections of Tamil society is quite reasonable, and its continuation, along with some internal quotas for a limited period, is essential at this juncture. Indeed, the expansion of the reservation system in Tamil Nadu is a direct result of the Dravidian parties and their courageous leaders. Despite facing criticism, the reservation system has fostered a spirit of unity and advancement across various public domains by diminishing disparities.

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