

On the Taming of State: Dominant Caste Elites and Caste-based Reservation in India

Raj Deol, Simon Fraser University*

* Biography : Raj Deol is a Master's candidate at the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University, his current research focuses on caste, social inclusion and development. He is a development practitioner who has previously worked with several UN agencies in South Asia on issues of gender equality, disaster resilience, and migration. Raj's research interests include gender-responsive development, labour migration, transformative social inclusion in governance and state-building and the nexus between transnational social movements and equitable development.

Biographie : Raj Deol est candidat à la maîtrise à la School for International Studies de l'Université Simon Fraser. Ses recherches actuelles portent sur les castes, l'inclusion sociale et le développement. Praticien du développement, il a précédemment travaillé avec plusieurs agences des Nations unies en Asie du Sud sur les questions d'égalité des sexes, de résilience aux catastrophes et de migration. Les recherches de Raj portent sur le développement sensible au genre, la migration de la main-d'œuvre, l'inclusion sociale transformatrice dans la gouvernance et la construction de l'État et le lien entre les mouvements sociaux transnationaux et le développement équitable.

Abstract: In India, state builders' vision was to create a caste-equal society, which was institutionalized by including a reservation policy in the Indian Constitution. However, scholars from various disciplines have demonstrated that caste-based reservations have been ineffective and insufficient in achieving social equality. This paper argues that dominant caste elites played an influential part in taming the state to their caste-based interest, undermining caste-based reservation policy. Adopting a historical approach, this paper examines the role of dominant caste elites in the state apparatus and analyzes how elites tamed the state to undermine caste-based reservation policy. Rather than elite capture of the state broadly, the terminology of "taming" is used to showcase how various categories of elites limit the Indian state's capacity for caste equality. The essay is structured into three sections, each focusing on a distinct historical period shaped by the state ideology: British Raj, characterized by colonial rule; Independent India, represented by Nehruvian state-directed development; and Neoliberal India, characterised by market reforms and liberalization.

Keywords: Caste, Elite Capture, Social Exclusion, State-building, State Capacity, Reservation Policy, Affirmative Action

Résumé: En Inde, les bâtisseurs de l'État avaient pour objectif de créer une société où les castes seraient égales, ce qui a été institutionnalisé par l'inclusion d'une politique de réservation dans la Constitution indienne. Toutefois, des chercheurs de diverses disciplines ont démontré que les réserves fondées sur la caste ont été inefficaces et insuffisantes pour parvenir à l'égalité sociale. Cet article soutient que les élites dominantes de la caste ont joué un rôle influent dans l'adaptation de l'État à leurs intérêts de caste, sapant ainsi la politique de réservation fondée sur la caste. Adoptant une approche historique, cet article examine le rôle des élites de caste dominantes dans l'appareil d'État et analyse la manière dont les élites ont apprivoisé l'État pour saper la politique de réservation basée sur la caste. Plutôt que la capture de l'État par les élites au sens large, la terminologie de "domestication" est utilisée pour montrer comment diverses catégories d'élites limitent la capacité de l'État indien à assurer l'égalité entre les castes. L'essai est structuré

en trois sections, chacune se concentrant sur une période historique distincte façonnée par l'idéologie de l'État : Le Raj britannique, caractérisé par la domination coloniale ; l'Inde indépendante, représentée par le développement dirigé par l'État de Nehruv ; et l'Inde néolibérale, caractérisée par les réformes du marché et la libéralisation.

Mots-clés: Caste, captation des élites, exclusion sociale, construction de l'État, capacité de l'État, politique de réservation, action positive.

Just before India awoke to freedom, Jawaharlal Nehru (1946, p. 520) proclaimed equality to be fundamental in the making of modern India – “She must get rid of the exclusiveness in thought and social habit which... has stunt[ed] her spirit and prevent[ed] growth, today caste... has no place left in it.” Nehru’s vision, together with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s hard-fought struggle for Dalit rights, led India to enshrine caste-based reservation in the Indian Constitution. Caste-based reservation is an affirmative action policy that provides quotas for oppressed castes⁴ in areas of political representation, public education, and government postings. The intent of affirmative action was to provide redressal to oppressed castes for age-old traditions of oppression propagated through casteism (Chandola, 1992).

Much of the state-building and caste literature on India reveal a tension between three discourses – this tension presents a puzzle. First, modern Indian state-builders demonstrated a clear commitment to creating a just and caste-equal society (Nehru, 1946; Tashneem, 2021; Ramesh, 2022). Second, the vision of a caste-equal society was institutionalized through the inclusion of reservation policy in the Indian Constitution. Third, however, caste-based reservation has failed and rendered an ineffective and insufficient measure for achieving social equality (Vasavi, 2018; Mukhopadhyay, 2015; Virmani, 2014). The puzzle is thus: given that there was a clear intent to create a caste-equal society and the subsequent institutionalization of affirmative action, why did the implementation of caste-based reservation fail? In this paper, I argue that the dominant

⁴ Though there are hundreds of caste communities, for the purpose of this paper, I categorized them into two groups. In this paper, I refrain from using terminologies such as upper or lower caste; rather, I use dominant and oppressed caste to signal caste groups based on power relations. Dominant caste groups include people of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas castes who had greater power and access to resources than the oppressed castes. I use the terminology *oppressed caste* to describe caste communities that are fell outside of the Hindu varna system and are marginalized based on caste understanding of impurity and pollution. In legal language, caste-based reservation provisions were given to Schedule Castes (Dalits) and Tribal Castes (Adivasis).

caste elites⁵ played an influential part in taming the state to their caste-based interest, undermining caste-based reservation.

Before diving into the analysis, it is crucial to clarify the conceptual definitions and theoretical inspiration behind this paper. This paper takes inspiration from subaltern studies scholars, such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Anupama Rao (2009), to understand that caste is not just a social institution but also a political institution. Through this lens, the Indian state is an agent in shaping and managing caste hierarchies and inequalities. In this regard, caste-based reservation is understood as a state-led mechanism to undo the historical injustices of caste inequality. Therefore, a goal of Indian state-building is the ability to address the caste inequality problem. By articulating it in the Indian Constitution, caste-based reservations were imagined providing a foothold for caste emancipation through oppressed caste representation in the state realm. The vision was that politicians, bureaucrats and scholars from oppressed castes would have a strong influence on the state to implement more caste emancipatory policies.

State-focused scholars have theorized elite dominance to explain the disparity in social development; they have also reviewed dominant elites' reaction to the process of social transformation to retain their economic, social, cultural and symbolic power (Chibber, 2003; Pal & Ghosh, 2007; Desai & Dubey, 2012). Institutional scholars have roughly defined elite capture as powerful groups in the state and society that use their influence to capture public institutions and resources for their benefit (Fukuyama, 2014; Robinson & Acemoglu, 2012).

Much has been written about elite capture of the state and its role in weakening state capacity. Though I take inspiration from the above definitions, I explore the novel argument that dominant caste elites "tamed" the Indian state to weaken caste-based reservation. Rather than elite capture broadly, dominant caste elites disciplined the state

⁵ Caste is fundamental in understanding the nature of elites in India. The power and organization of economic, social and political Indian elitism are defined by caste. As such, they are unique and different to the elite makeup in other regions, which are predominantly defined by class.

during the 20th century to limit the outcomes of caste-based reservation. I argue that the act of taming the state is a case specific to India. While the concept of elite capture, in a broad sense, pertains to interest groups using the state to advance their own economic and social interests, as discussed by Fukuyama (2014) and Robinson & Acemoglu (2012), the notion of elite taming represents a more nuanced perspective. Elite taming can be better understood as interest groups strategically manipulating or constraining the state to limit economic and social benefits for others. More specifically, this practice of taming necessitates that elites take measures to restrict the state's influence in a manner that hampers the ability of other groups to garner influence on the state. In India's context, I argue that the primary objective of caste elites is to thwart the advancement of caste emancipation, enabling them to maintain their dominance while preventing any alteration of the existing elite status quo by the state. Consequently, taming the state can be categorized as a form of elite capture, albeit one with distinct characteristics and objectives.

I take a historical approach in this article to examine the role of dominant caste elites in the state apparatus and analyze how elites tamed the state to undermine caste-based reservation. The sections laid out in this essay discuss three distinct historical periods divided between state ideology, namely: *British Raj* – state based on colonial rule, *Independent India* – state based on Nehruvian state-direct development and *Neoliberal India* – state based on market reforms and liberalization. The first section reviews how caste was institutionalized in state structures during British colonial rule and highlights the making of dominant caste elites in colonial governance. The second section starts by portraying the statist visions of two modern Indian state-builders, Nehru and Ambedkar, on the issue of caste inequality. The section then explains the political settlement struck between elites and subalterns. It goes on to discuss how dominant caste elites in the Nehruvian state sought to minimize the implementation of reservation policy through patronage politics and bureaucratic capture. Finally, the third section demonstrates how elite caste-class power in the 1990s supported the Indian state's neoliberal integration and how this undermined caste-based reservation.

British Raj: Institutionalization of Caste and the Making of Caste Elites

In 1857, the first independence rebellion by Indians took place against colonial rulers. The shocking challenge to their power left an impressionable mark on British colonial governors. The Mutiny of 1857 brought revelations: the British rulers' ignorance of local context and culture and a lack of local elite support needed to be rectified (Bandopadhyay, 1990). Though the rebellion resulted in the British colonial victory, the British knew a new strategy for governing India was needed. Subsequently, India was officially placed under the sovereign control of the British government. The British's strategy of controlling and governing the Indian masses hinged on understanding how Indian society functioned and seeking support from local elites. At the center of their policies was the institutionalization of caste and administrating rule through dominant caste elites.

South Asian historians have pointed to colonial structuring and formalization of caste to explain caste divisions throughout 20th century and contemporary India (Bayly, 1999; Cohn, 1987; Drik, 2001). British Raj transformed caste from a loosely defined social hierarchy into a rigidly structured and officially sanctioned system backed by the authority of "science" (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). It is important to note, however, that the caste system existed prior to British rule. Caste is a construct of Hinduism, and it has made its mark across religious, ethnic, and cultural identities (Sana, 1993; Guha, 2013). It structured a stratified society (Mencher, 1974). Importantly, the nature of the caste system was not homogenous across the sub-continent; it functioned differently in different regions during different periods. The institutionalization of caste changed that (Srinivas, 1957). This rigid and singular classification of caste had a profound impact on the governance, policies, institutions, and bureaucracy of the colonial state.

In their pursuit to understand Indian society, the state of British Raj commissioned ethnographic studies and a census to count the Indian population based on their caste. British officials believed understanding caste and religion was the key to ruling India well (Cohn, 1987). To them, if they were to govern effectively, they

needed to collect systematic information about the nature of caste (Cohn, 1987). With their newfound modes of scientific classification, the British Raj officials became the masterminds behind a rigid hierarchy of social ranking for the caste system (Javed, 2021). Amid the complex chaos of caste in Indian society, the British became the pioneers of a caste ranking system that suited their own agenda (Javed, 2021). Not only did the explicit display of the caste system bring forward the caste discourses of purity and pollution, but it also made caste a fundamental tool of colonial governance and state development. Javed captures the importance of caste at the heart of British colonial governance:

State operations were run keeping the caste system as the centre of gravity. This enhanced the presence and value of the caste system in the life of a common individual because it was backed by institutions and authenticated by authorities. The caste system did not see the limelight this much before being recognised by the British in [the] legitimate form. (2021, p. 52679)

In this context, the colonial rule period remains relevant to the evolving role of dominant caste elites in the Indian state. Particularly relevant are the following questions: how might the colonial policies favor the dominant caste elites, how might the colonial fixation on caste shape bureaucracy, and how might colonial context necessitate the origins of caste-based reservation? And what would the colonial legacy mean to the failures of caste-based reservations to come? Most importantly, I argue that this period is particularly relevant to study as the colonial state machinery was to be inherited by independent India.

How colonial knowledge of Indian society and caste was produced is particularly important to the role dominant caste elites would play in Indian statecraft. In their quest for knowledge production, the Raj sought help from the dominant caste group of Brahmins in the census and ethnographic exercises. This gave dominant caste elites an upper hand and a certain status in colonial governance. Such significance and privilege over other local populations in many areas, especially South India, had not been enjoyed by Brahmins before (Javed, 2021). During the caste enumeration exercise, the Raj

started determining which castes commanded higher social ranks (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). It is no surprise that the resulting social ranking of caste, which dictated the colonial impression of India, was based on the dominant caste's knowledge and interests. It is equally no surprise that the British already looked at dominant caste groups as more educated and sophisticated than the general population. Fundamentally, the colonial state "...highlighted everything related to caste and its norms, reproduced and displayed the languages of the caste, and made the caste look like the only ladder to gain power and influence..." (Bayly, 1999, as cited in Javed, 2021). By relying on Brahminical interpretations of Indian society, colonial knowledge production structured how the state would be governed based on caste hierarchies.

The British officials were not overly concerned with fighting social injustice nor with "bringing civilization" to India, as they claimed. Instead, their underlying aim was to extract as much revenue as possible from their imperial possession (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). As a result, spotlighting caste and fostering caste divisions were tactics in their infamous divide-and-rule playbook. At the core of British intent was the distraction of the masses away from the exploitative nature of colonial rule. Moreover, the creation of thousands of competing caste groups was a calculated benefit for the Raj, making a united anti-British front unlikely and allowing for continued colonial exploitation (Riser-Kositsky, 2009).

The British colonial administration in India sought support from dominant caste elites to quell dissent and legitimize their rule, perceiving them as culturally superior and more receptive to British ideals. This reliance on dominant caste elites was rooted in the colonial state's internalization of Brahminical superiority, as well as a recognition of these elites' pivotal role in maintaining social stability and mitigating anti-colonial sentiments (Bayly, 1999; Javed, 2021).

One concrete outcome of this administrative inclusion was a cardinal shift in hiring practice in the British Indian military state apparatus. In the late 19th century, recruitment in the military was practiced based on caste classification. This was a result of the British's awareness of dominant caste anxieties. Since the beginning of their colonial expansion in India, the British army recruited significant military

personnel from oppressed castes and Dalit communities, providing them with a steady income and opportunities for advancement (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). The East India Company ensured their recruits learnt English, and free education was provided to both soldiers and their families (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). By 1856, a third of the Bombay army was made up of the Mahars, who were considered “untouchables” (Kshirsagar, 1994, as cited in Riser-Kositsky, 2009). However, following the 1857 Mutiny and fearing backlash from dominant caste Hindus, the British government changed its military policy and ceased recruitment of “untouchables” (Kshirsagar, 1994, as cited in Riser-Kositsky, 2009). In their military recruitment, the colonial officials required applicants to declare their caste (Farooqui, 2014). More sinisterly, the official policy of the British Indian military was for their soldiers to maintain distinctive caste identities and foster animosity toward other ethnic groups (Farooqui, 2014). Not only did the colonial state apparatus uphold dominant caste elite interests, but it also actively nurtured caste-based hostility.

The bureaucratic state apparatus, known as the steel frame of British rule, also started incorporating dominant caste groups into service. Ranajit Guha (1998), in his book *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, describes how the British colonial state was able to dominate Indian society without hegemony (cultural leadership or moral authority). His answer was the role of dominant caste elites supporting the colonial power to administrate India (Guha, 1998). The colonial machinery trusted the ability of the dominant caste elites to implement colonial policies. As stated earlier, the British administration felt close to dominant caste Hindus not only because their support was necessary but also because they were seen as educated and loyal to the British Raj. By appointing the dominant caste to positions of authority, the colonial state subsequently made them into elites with influence on the state. To this end, elites in colonial bureaucracy solidified the dual colonial-Brahminical dominance over British India. The steel frame of colonial rule left a stubborn legacy that would challenge caste-based reservations.

By the start of the 20th century, caste elites had amassed status within the colonial government. They started to tame the state to their interest since the elites actively sought to limit opportunities for other

caste groups. Though the Indian civil service exams were based on merit and open competition from the late 19th century, it was the Indian Christians and dominant caste Hindus who performed well (Kirk-Greene, 2000). The reason being caste elites had and were given access to classical Western education. Furthermore, dominant caste elites ensured that other caste groups did not have access to the same English education, hindering efforts to expand primary schooling. Since the main source of revenue for public schooling came from land tax, landed elites had no interest in supporting public education expansion (Chaudhary, 2012). Bureaucratic and urban-educated elites did not want mass education to occur as it would increase competition for government administration jobs (Chaudhary, 2012).

Despite formalizing dominant caste power in colonial machinery, the British did not altogether ignore the plight of the oppressed caste. By the early 20th century, the Raj started granting more rights to oppressed castes in areas of education and social welfare. Colonial governors were more sympathetic to the cause of oppressed caste communities to gain representation as well. In 1915, new rules were introduced to reserve seats and scholarships in the education system, to the extent that education expenses targeting “backwards castes” nearly doubled between 1915 and 1916 (Bandopadhyay, 1990, as cited in Riser-Kositsky, 2009).

To be clear, the interest of the British colonial state was not the emancipation of caste, but rather the intention to educate the “uncivilized” and mold them to adopt English values. Additionally, Bandopadhyay (1990) wrote there was a calculated intention behind the British government's actions, linked to their historical strategy of divide and rule (as cited in Riser-Kositsky, 2009). For Bandopadhyay (1990), it is not shocking that, at a time when nationalist sentiments were gaining momentum, exemplified by Gandhi and the Congress Party, the British increased measures that appeared to be directed towards helping the oppressed caste (as cited in Riser-Kositsky, 2009).

In 1932, then-British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald granted *the Communal Award*, which sought to establish separate electorates for oppressed castes. This decision caused political turmoil in the

independence movement; Gandhi, who was already imprisoned, pledged to go on a hunger strike until death if the ruling was not overturned (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). With the keen support of Dr Ambedkar (a national Dalit leader), separate electorates would have ensured oppressed caste folks could vote exclusively for oppressed caste candidates. Gandhi was concerned that separate electorates would permanently divide Hindu society, perpetuate the stigma of untouchability, and hinder the eventual assimilation of untouchables into the Hindu community (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). Ultimately, Dr Ambedkar agreed to the Poona Pact, which retained a set percentage of seats for the oppressed castes but eliminated entirely separate electorates, largely because he feared being held responsible for Gandhi's death (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). The Poona Pact marked the origins of caste-based reservation, thus laying the groundwork for future reservation efforts in Independent India's state-building efforts.

Independent India: Modern State-Building and Elites' Taming of State

As the colonial rulers departed, Nehru and Ambedkar were given the trusteeship to build a modern Indian nation-state. Nehru and Ambedkar represented two major forces in Indian state-building. Nehru was the maiden Prime Minister and leader of the independence movement. Meanwhile, Ambedkar was the first Law and Justice Minister and a significant figure in both the independence and Dalit movements. Both state-builders contended with the caste issue, Ambedkar more so as the leader of the Dalit movement. There is a convergence in their ideas of state action in response to the caste question. However, there is also a fundamental divergence between their approach. Reviewing Nehru and Ambedkar's statist views reveals the intention and approaches used in the making of modern India. Subsequently, the understanding of Nehru and Ambedkar's vision of the state explains what kind of political settlement was formed between elites and subaltern representatives that led to the enactment of caste-based reservations.

Nehru, India's inaugural Prime Minister, envisioned a democratic India where every citizen would be afforded equal opportunities. At

the same time, he acknowledged caste politics and the entrenched nature of caste in society would be the primary barrier to the realization of his vision (Tashneem, 2021). Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, dedicated his life to fighting for an emancipated caste society. He saw caste as a social evil rooted in religious dogma that perpetuated the marginalization of oppressed castes. The vision of both men was the same: a caste-equal society — one that required state action to redress inequality and free Indian society of caste (Tashneem, 2021; Ramesh, 2022).

However, their approaches were drastically different. Nehru believed modernization and state-direct development would render India caste-equal. He foresaw a future India as a nation with advanced technology and industry, where development would serve as the binding agent that unites the country's diverse population (Khan, 2011). The process of state-led development would modernize not only the Indian economy but also reform people's caste-ist way of thinking (Khan, 2011). This transformation would eventually reduce the significance of caste, religious, and linguistic differences (Khilnani, 2003; Khan, 2011). Meanwhile, Ambedkar saw the state as the guarantor of social justice and believed in the "...sheer transformative capability of the state as an instrument to refashion caste society" (Ramesh, 2022, p. 740). His approach involved a substantial and activist state that deployed institutional tools to coercively remake caste society (Ramesh, 2022). As such, Ambedkar connected the coercive power of the state with the provision of guaranteed representation for Dalits and other oppressed groups (Ramesh, 2022).

The divergence in approach between Nehru and Ambedkar reflected how the negotiation between elites and subaltern representatives played out. For state durability and institutional formation, political economists have emphasized the importance of an "elite bargain" (Dercon, 2022) or a "political settlement" (Khan, 2010). In India's case, the Nehruvian state was based on a political settlement. Some scholars saw the negotiation as a political consensus or compromise (Kothari, 1970; Kaviraj, 2005), implying reservations was merely short-term concession or was not intended to shape the rules of distribution. However, political settlement is more appropriate to describe the pact between elites and subalterns' representatives

because reservation policy was enacted in the constitution – a sign that affirmative action was intended to have a long-term impact on the distribution of power and resources in Indian society. Importantly, the concept of political settlement should not be seen here as different political groups coming to an agreement that has been inked on paper on mutually agreed upon principles. Instead, the political settlement involved a trade-off based on a historic convergence of vastly different expectations of elites and subalterns (Kaviraj, 2005).

To the economic and social elites (predominantly from the dominant caste), the modern centralized Indian state presented an opportunity to expand its power over society in a way that fragmented forms of domination could not satisfy (Kaviraj, 2005). Therefore, they were attracted to the modern state as it mediated their ambitions for economic control. The political and intellectual elites recognized that it was necessary for national groups to engage with the international order of states (Kaviraj, 2005). They understood that this mandatory form of political organization was essential for the viability of any nation. Similarly, subaltern groups, such as oppressed castes and untouchables, saw the modern state as the only means of emancipation from traditional subordination from dominant caste groups (Kaviraj, 2005).

The political settlement involved a trade-off. Dominant caste elites agreed to affirmative action caste policy for the creation of modern centralized India from which they could reap economic benefits (Kaviraj, 2005). Caste-based reservation was essential for state formation to gain legitimacy among the substantially large, oppressed caste population, which was not only socially but also economically deprived (Ahmed, 2009). As a result, the abolition of untouchability and caste-based reservation were enshrined in the Indian constitution — at the same time, caste elites got the chance to govern India, and Nehru was able to roll out state-directed development.

Nehru's administration was entrusted with caste-based reservation and state-directed development as policies for a modern caste-equal India. Why, then, did the independent nation-state fail to redress caste inequality through reservation effectively? The answer is connected to how the Nehruvian state was also characterized by the

pinnacle of the power of India's elites, most of them from dominant caste groups (Sherman, 2022). Clientelism, patronage politics, bureaucratic inertia, and reliance on local kinship networks for policy implementation were tools of state taming used to undermine reservations during the Nehruvian period.

Although Nehru was a Brahmin, there is no doubt that he was committed to increasing the political power and representation of Dalits in India. However, the political motivation that kept him in power and drove the Congress Party's electoral gains undermined his commitment to caste-based reservations. Jaffrelot (2021, p. 6), a political scientist focusing on India, explains that "...when it came time to contest elections, the prime minister resigned himself to relying on local leaders and regional heavyweights, the only ones capable of handing him a victory owing to their patronage networks". These patronage networks were based on not only traditional economic motives, such as land ownership by landed elites or the financial influence of the business elites, but also their caste status, for many of the elites belonged to the dominant castes (Jaffrelot, 2021). By adopting a strategy of clientelism, the Congress party was able to emerge victorious in the elections of 1952, 1957, and 1962 — but this approach compelled Nehru to support conservative figures who did not share his socialist and caste eradication beliefs (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Elites came to tame the state through clientelism during Nehru's time. As Nehru relied on patronage politics to maintain his and the Congress Party's rule, his reliance on elites clouded his commitment to caste emancipation and caste-based reservation. Dominant caste elites within politics and bureaucracy knew affirmative action threatened their status quo positions; they needed to diminish state leaders' political will to effectively implemented reservation or any other policy that could harm their caste-based status. As evidenced, patronage politics prevented Nehru from carrying out land reforms, which was one of the pillars of his election campaigns (Jaffrelot, 2021). Nehru succeeded in garnering the support of the landed elites and safeguarding their interests (Sarker, 2020). For example, under pressure from the landowners' lobby in the Congress Party, led by

Sardar Patel, Nehru abandoned the idea of abolishing *Zamindari*⁶ and distributing land in pre-1952 India (Sarker, 2020). Scholars have demonstrated that land distribution is the only institutional reform that could have provided equal representation and equal opportunities at that time. (Sarker, 2020).

Nehru's political background motivated him to protect political elites and create a social habitus for party supporters and decision-makers, which allowed him to maintain governmentality for two decades (Sarker, 2020). Precisely because Nehru fostered the concentration of power among social elites, Nehru's actions solidified a class of power elites from dominant caste groups in India (Sarker, 2020). Additionally, Nehru's government engaged in activities that destabilized its own institutions for electoral gains (Sarker, 2020). To this end, Nehru was complicit in solidifying the elitism of the dominant caste and their power in the state. Sarker gave his verdict on Nehru:

Nehru's affirmative actions uplifted the economic lives of millions [of] Indians, but he himself invoked the death of the dream of an economically [caste] equal India by adjoining his dream of socialism with [an] elitist model of power. (2010, p. 55)

Beyond national elites, local elites were also involved in taming that state to limit caste-based reservation. Due to the central government's lack of "infrastructural power" (Mann, 2008), Nehru was forced to decentralize policy implementation and rely on local elites. He knew that implementation of ambitious programs by the central government was contingent upon the cooperation of state and local actors since the central government lacked the power to do so on its own (Chakraborty, 2017). However, the cooperation of state and local actors meant the support of local elites was needed to effectively implement Nehru's state-direct development.

⁶ Zamindari refers to a system of land tenure that was prevalent during the colonial period in India. Under this system, wealthy landowners (known as zamindars) were granted large tracts of land by the colonial government. Landowners has the right to collect rent from tenant farmers who cultivated the land, part of the revenue collected from tenants was given to the colonial government.

This posed significant challenges to Nehru's caste abolition vision – even in the provinces where his party held power, they did not always share Nehru's priorities, and he struggled to force cooperation through federal or national party pressure (Chakraborty, 2017). This was evident in the ineffective land reform in Congress-led provinces, where powerful local politicians came from the landholding class and dominant castes (Chakraborty, 2017). On caste-based reservation, decentralization diluted the federal state's vision of caste equality, and local elites had influential power over the effectiveness of caste-based reservation. Local elites often resisted the implementation of caste-based reservations.

In the vision of Nehru and Ambedkar, the state is the protagonist in India's pursuit of caste redress. If we were to examine the failures of caste-based reservation, the implementation arm of the state — bureaucracy with its bureaucratic elites — requires significant attention. Nehru's will and any policy implementation heavily depended on the state's bureaucratic machinery. As a result, the reservations based on caste and developmental policies that Nehru pursued were undermined by the fact that he often had to operate through the elitist bureaucracy (Chakraborty, 2017).

Although the colonial bureaucracy (the Indian Civil Service) was abolished in independent India, the modern bureaucracy (the All-India Administrative Service) was essentially the remnant of its colonial predecessor with a new name. Why was this the case? The answer lies in the context of independence. India did not inherit the administrative machinery of the Raj as a deliberate strategy but rather because of the challenges faced by the government in the aftermath of independence. Due to the upheavals caused by partition, the integration of princely states, and the need for socialist nation-building, the new Indian leaders were not able to undertake significant reforms of the inherited bureaucracy (Sherman, 2022).

Colonial bureaucracy was characterized by the extensive makeup of dominant caste elites. This was no different in the aftermath of independence; the All-India Administrative Service mirrored their elitist backgrounds inherited from the colonial setting (Wilcox, 1965, as cited via Chakraborty, 2017). Members of the civil services were

seen as strong repositories of conservatism and were drawn from a small, educated, and often landed elite, which had little in common with poor Indians and Dalits (Chakraborty, 2017).

Beyond the makeup of bureaucrats, Nehru also chose to largely continue with the institutional culture and training processes of the old Indian Civil Service (Chakraborty, 2017). Unfortunately, as a result, the modern bureaucratic institution inherited the design of authoritarian stability rather than democratic reform, which came to hinder Nehru's implementation of caste-based reservation (Chakraborty, 2017). Any attempts at caste redressal, whether within bureaucracy or implementation of caste policies, were impeded by dominant caste bureaucratic inertia, unwilling to change or give up their caste-based power. The bureaucracy itself thwarted attempts at reform by using common tactics of delaying and deflecting (Brown, 1999, as cited in Chakraborty, 2017). Nehru lacked this foresight as he was more inclined towards grand ideas and vision rather than the intricate details of bureaucratic changes (Chakraborty, 2017).

Dominant caste elites utilized bureaucratic inertia to tame the state. One aim of reservation was to create bureaucratic representation for oppressed castes through quotas for government jobs. Bureaucratic elites actively undermined caste-based reservation; they created barriers that prevented the entry and promotion of oppressed caste populations (Doner, 2022). These barriers were rooted in stereotypical caste discourses and elite resistance, perpetuating the stigma and disrespect towards oppressed caste individuals (Doner, 2022). Overlooking institutional inequalities, the bureaucratic elites claimed Dalits suffered from intrinsic deficits and were 'unfit' and 'unsuitable' for civil service (Doner, 2022). As a result, bureaucrats from oppressed castes were relegated to menial posts with minimal promotion opportunities (Doner, 2022).

Further evidence suggests bureaucratic elites had an affinity for an elitist positionality during the Indian bureaucracy application process. The requirements, such as application fees, preparatory services, human capital, a college degree, investments in schooling, and caste-based social/kinship networks, created a caste-class advantage — this inhibited oppressed caste individuals from accessing government postings (Doner, 2022). The kinship

prerequisite and the reliance on preparatory access and financial means favored individuals from elite caste backgrounds (Doner, 2022). Despite the “meritocratic” process and quota system, traditional kinship networks based on caste played a significant role. Brahmins and Kayasthas were the largest caste groups in the Indian Civil Service during the British colonial era, and this continued even after Independence (Baru, 2021). A study conducted in the mid-1980s revealed that over 60 per cent of Indian Administrative Service officers belonged to the dominant castes, with Brahmins making up 37.67 per cent, Kayasthas 9.56 per cent, and Kshatriyas 13.33 per cent (Baru, 2021).

In 1963, though the government job quota for suppressed castes was 12.5 per cent, it was only one to seven per cent filled (Chakraborty, 2017). Bureaucratic elites claimed that there was a shortage of qualified Dalit candidates; however, Dalit representatives argued that this was due to ongoing discrimination, particularly in cases where personal interviews are part of the hiring process (Isaacs, 1967; Chakraborty, 2017). There is evidence that interviews were affected by caste-related bias. Interviewers from dominant castes, acting on their prejudice, preferred candidates from a certain caste-class background (Doner, 2022). It is worth noting that these interviews were required for only the upper echelons of bureaucracy, while manual and menial government jobs had no issues with incorporating Dalits. It is particularly contrasting that Dalits filled more than 17.5% of “low” grade jobs, which included messengers, menials, and flunkies (Isaacs, 1967; Chakraborty, 2017). Elites co-opted the bureaucracy to ensure genuine outcomes of caste-based reservation, such as equitable representation, were not realized.

To end, a political settlement was the basis on which the modern Indian state was founded — the Congress Party and its political elites obtained legitimacy from the subaltern masses, and caste-based reservation was provided in return as hope for emancipation from caste oppression. However, reservation policy never had the support of the dominant caste population for the simple reason that it cut into elites’ near-complete control over politics, government jobs, and educational institutions (Ahmed, 2009). Dominant caste elites felt public realms (including governance, bureaucracy, and public education) rightfully belonged to them, and affirmative action

hindered meritocracy. Though, during the Nehruvian state, dominant caste elites did not oppose reservation in any notably organized and sustained form (Ahmed, 2009), they did, however, tame the state through clientelism and bureaucratic co-option to undermine caste-based reservation.

How post-colonial elites saw the state is pertinent to the bigger picture of why the state had to be tamed. By choosing to apply Partha Chatterjee's (1993) and Frantz Fanon's (2004) post-colonial critiques, it is evident that dominant caste elites were not interested in a radically different design of nation-state, but rather they wanted to inherit the colonial state. Elites wanted to solidify their power through a centralized state by upholding colonial bureaucratic structure and logic of governance. Gopal Guru (2011) makes a point that Indian elites, while attracted to liberal democracy for its potential to reclaim and expand their influence post-colonial rule, primarily prioritized their own interests in contrast to a broader commitment to emancipation for all. Rather than freeing India from the chains of colonial logic, the Nehruvian state was tamed by the elites to replicate the logic to preserve their caste power. This is evidenced by their clientelist approach and inheritance of a colonial bureaucracy that was dominated by dominant caste elites. Through this lens, dominant caste elites were the new colonizers, and oppressed castes continued their role as the colonized. It seems caste-based reservation was merely a tool used by the elites to gain legitimacy from the subaltern masses in the making of a centralized modern Indian state. They had no interest in the emancipation of caste. At the end of the day, the elite taming of the state only solidified the state's inability to challenge the existing structures of caste power and privilege.

The outcome of caste-based reservation in the decades that followed independence was limited. It is no surprise elites maintained their dominance and disciplined the state to undermine affirmative action. The Nehruvian state did not yield a single oppressed caste millionaire, nor did it produce a real layer of bureaucrats from the oppressed castes (Kavraj, 2005). Kavraj describes the limited achievement of reservations, which resulted in "...[a] small segment of upwardly mobile elite from the lowest castes secured for their

communities a symbolic dignity, a staged equality with other bearers of power in state institutions” (2005, p. 13).

Despite their many negative outcomes due to elite taming, caste-based reservations were somewhat successful in yielding a Dalit political representation capable of making demands on the state. Because of reservation, in the late 1970s, parliamentary politics in India underwent a significant transformation. Nehruvian dominant caste politicians espousing ideologies like liberalism and socialism were slowly being replaced by politicians from oppressed castes with vernacular education (Kavraj, 2005). The language of political contestation shifted from Western ideologies of state-led development to a focus on dignity and resentment towards the slow progress of caste emancipation (Kavraj, 2005). As a result of the political representation of oppressed castes, they were able to make demands on the state to study the situation of affirmative action and institute recommendations from the study. Oppressed castes’ influence on the state threatened the dominance of dominant caste elites.

Neoliberal India: Dwindling State and the Revolt of Caste Elites

During the early 1990s, India was engulfed in a deeply divided caste debate; widespread protests, municipal shutdowns and riots were common backdrops in the Indian political landscape. This was primarily a reaction to implementing the *Mandal Commission* recommendations. Eleven years prior: in 1979, the Indian state created the Mandal Commission, which was tasked with studying the underrepresentation of lower castes in the country's public sector. In 1980, it released its report recommending increasing the scope and coverage of affirmative action for traditionally disadvantaged groups in government jobs and educational institutions. However, for the subsequent ten years under the elite-dominated Congress government, those recommendations were ignored (Joyal, 2015). In

1990, another government, led by the National Front coalition⁷, instituted the *Mandal Commission* recommendations.

The Mandal Commission was an outcome of the surge in political mobilization by the oppressed caste population in India. Their increasing representation in electoral politics facilitated their mobilizations, thanks to caste-based reservation (Ahmed, 2009). Any positive outcome from affirmative action threatens the dominant caste elites' power. Elites saw the Mandal recommendations as an attack on their privilege and a dilution of merit-based selection; they were primarily concerned with losing their monopoly over prestigious government jobs and academic institutions. The backlash was a revolt of the dominant caste groups as they took to the streets, holding massive rallies and staging hunger strikes to demand that the government rescind the commission's recommendations.

Dominant caste elites needed a new strategy to tame the state. Liberalization and market reforms were their new game plan. Their new form of disciplining the state involved chipping away at the Indian state's power and scope. To maintain their dominance, elites look to increase the power and scope of the market. Despite the ongoing contestation of caste-based reservations in the public sector realm, the private sector continued to be dominated by the dominant caste population (Ahmed, 2009). The private sector did not and was not required to adopt the social responsibility of providing affirmative action in employment for oppressed castes. Thus, the corporate sector emerged as a realm that the caste elite could occupy without sharing with historically disadvantaged groups (Ahmed, 2009). Furthermore, elites were able to leverage private corporations' influence within the government and political arena, allowing them to undermine efforts to enforce affirmative action policies in the private sector (Ahmed, 2009). To this end, the private sector was a safe sanctuary for dominant caste elites, and they sought to increase the market's power in relation to the state.

⁷ The National Front coalition was a coalition of several parties that sought to provide a third option for voters, it did not include two major parties in India at that time: the Indian Congress Party or Bhartiya Janata Party.

Indian history scholars argue that there is no evidence to suggest that elites' animosity towards *Mandal Commission* directly caused elite preference for market reforms (Babu, 2004). I only agree partly – yes, caste elites' support for neoliberalism has been brewing since the mid-1980s (Ahmed, 2009). But, most importantly, institutionalizing the Mandal recommendations was the breaking point that saw elites heavily rely on liberalization to tame the Indian state and maintain their caste-based dominance.

India's balance of payment crisis in 1991, with heavy pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, saw India officially take up the neoliberal path. Like elsewhere, liberalization reform entailed the reduction of the Indian state's role in the economy. Consequently, the government's control over industries and subsidies ceased to exist. India deregulated industries, reduced trade barriers, and allowed for foreign investment. Additionally, the state was subjected to fiscal discipline, focused solely on reducing the national budget deficit. Most fundamentally, within this context, the role of the state shifted from being a provider of public goods and services to a facilitator of private enterprise. Liberalization was perhaps the most aggressive tool that saw the state tamed and in retreat.

Within this overarching context, how did caste elites concretely see liberalization as a means for undermining caste-based reservation? Jaffrelot explains how dominant castes saw in liberalization a new avenue for dominance where they could succeed:

...the [dominant] castes are losing ground in the political sphere and in the administration, but the liberalisation of the economy—which coincided with the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report—has opened new opportunities for the [dominant] castes in the private sector, and hence they may no longer regret their traditional monopoly over the bureaucracy being challenged. (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 494, as cited in Babu, 2004).

In other words, since oppressed caste groups were able to garner influence over the state, the state was no longer the avenue for caste

elites to maintain dominance. As a result, the state had to be aggressively tamed and constrained, and hence power shifted from the state to the market. For elites, a dwindling state meant caste-based reservation was constrained. To this end, caste elites were now less worried about being challenged in the state realm; rather, they were concerned with solidifying their dominance over society through the market.

On the other hand, what did liberalization have in store for the oppressed caste population? As mentioned earlier, the subaltern population saw the state as a guardian of their rights and placed their hope for caste emancipation with the state. This was also the vision of Dr Ambedkar. In contrast to the state, oppressed castes saw society as the source of their persistent marginalization and saw the market as an extension of society (Babu, 2004). So, when liberalization forced the retreat of the state, oppressed castes saw the retreat of their hopes for caste emancipation. Dalits believed the emasculating of the state would lead to the erosion of affirmative action, apathy for Dalit protection and human rights and to the free will of the market to discriminate (Babu, 2004).

To drive the point home, taming the state through liberalization meant constraining the state, which then meant restricting genuine outcomes of caste-based reservation. Since caste-based reservation provides quotas in spaces managed by the state, the retreat of the state means that those spaces were in retreat as well. State and oppressed caste representation in spaces of the state were envisioned as a source to uplift oppressed caste groups and refashion caste society. With the state's power and scope limited, its power over society is then limited as well. This brings us to an essential question – if the original vision is that Dalit representation in state spaces provided a foothold for caste emancipation, then what is left for the emancipatory potential of reservation policy when the state no longer yield influence in society?

Since the Indian constitution guarantees oppressed castes' right to equality, protection and caste-based reservation, the withdrawal of the state is then a direct assault on the rights of oppressed caste groups. The retreat of the state meant caste-based reservation did not provide the basis for caste emancipation. Since the state has less

power and capacity, and affirmative action is only subjected to in the areas of public education, government jobs and political representation, any Dalit representation through quotas within the state will not yield effective policies that could provide the basis for caste equality. What is more, market reforms rendered the Indian state-builders' values of equality, socialism and self-reliance obsolete. To this end, oppressed castes understood liberalization as a dominant caste elite process which sought to diminish their safe haven, the state.

More concretely, caste elites' liberalization strategy of undermining caste-based reservation primarily occurred in two of the three spaces – government employment and public higher education. Prior to market reforms, elites and oppressed castes alike saw employment in government administration as a matter of prestige. Working in the civil service was the epitome of professional success in Indian society. However, as liberalization subjected the state to fiscal discipline, government jobs were limited. Additionally, privatization opened spaces for elites and dominant caste groups to gain well-paid employment in the private sector. Post-reform, public sector employment was no longer as enticing as it used to be, and there was a shift in employment preference and valued jobs from the public realm to the private realm.

The shift to the private realms undermined the intent of caste-based affirmative action precisely because employment quotas did not exist in the private sector. Where current quotas provisions reserved some limited government jobs for the oppressed caste, the growing private sector and its rise in job positions did not cater to the oppressed caste population. Furthermore, elites' dominance in the private sector meant that the private sector did not adopt the social responsibility of taking affirmative action in providing corporate jobs to oppressed caste populations. This is evidenced by the strong opposition from Jamshed Irani, an economic elite and the national president of the Confederation of Indian Industry, in the early 1990s. Speaking for much of the dominant caste elites, he expressed strong opposition to quotas and reservation, stating that it would be unfortunate if legislation were to be introduced (Ahmed, 2009).

Much of Sukhdeo Thorat's research underscores the pervasive presence of economic discrimination within the market realm (Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Thorat & Newman, 2012). These discriminatory practices encompass a wide array of formal and informal barriers that obstruct the entry of subordinate groups into the market and often involve their selective inclusion with unequal treatment (Thorat & Newman, 2007). In essence, the labor market has been and is rife with caste discrimination, occurring in areas such as hiring, wage differentials, working conditions, and access to opportunities for upward mobility (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Furthermore, it can be inferred from Thorat's literature that shifting power to the market realm would have exacerbated economic discrimination, as the market mechanisms themselves perpetuate and intensify caste discrimination, particularly to the advantage of caste economic elites.

There were calls from Dalit politicians and civil society actors to extend affirmative actions in the private sector. However, the extreme influence that corporations have in the state and political landscape thwarted any efforts to expand caste-based reservation in private-sector employment (Ahmed, 2009). Consequently, the rising corporate sector emerged as a space for caste-class elites where they no longer had to contend with caste-based reservations which had tried to threaten their status quo and their monopoly over renowned and well-sought jobs. As a result, with the state constrained, the market was the elites' new safe haven in which caste elites did not have to share with oppressed caste populations (Ahmed, 2009).

The second element of caste-based reservation that caste elites targeted was higher education. Education was held close to Dalit movements. However, the presence of liberalization severely undermined affirmative action in higher education. Higher education was seen as the avenue where oppressed castes groups could gain the agency and qualification needed to work for the state and gain status in society. Historically, educational institutions were elitist caste spaces that excluded oppressed caste groups. The exclusion was based on the notion that oppressed castes were "polluted" based on their traditional occupations. Meanwhile, since education is for the "pure", the right only belonged to dominant castes. To correct this exclusion, quotas in higher education institutions were instituted.

Thus, in recognition of the historical injustices and education as an emancipatory tool, the state was then the guarantor of Dalit higher education.

From the Nehruvian period, higher education was moving from an elite model of higher education to a mass model – there was an increase in India's gross enrollment rate from 1.5 per cent in 1961 to 5.9 per cent in 1991 (Jamkar & Johnston, 2021). Despite the presence of elite dominance post-independence, the state was designed to be the provider of higher education. In the making of a modern nation-state, Nehru emphasized mass education and ensured education was provided to everyone. Specifically, Nehru recognized the role of higher education and research in state-building. As such, his policy expanded higher education through the creation of more technical universities and the expansion of university networks. His policy was mindful that since higher education is made public, the caste-based reservation would increase oppressed caste representation in higher education.

However, liberalization brought with it the privatization of public goods – in which higher education was especially targeted and privatized. During the 1990s, the Indian state allowed more private educational institutions to be established. Furthermore, federal and provincial governments implemented policies that allowed private education institutions to have more financial and policy autonomy to mobilize resources without government regulations (Jamkar & Johnston, 2021). Most importantly, in a ruling, India's supreme court allowed private institutions to eliminate institutional reservation quotas aimed at increasing enrollment of oppressed castes population (Jamkar & Johnston, 2021). Furthermore, state funding for oppressed castes and low-income students was also diminishing; the gradual drop in scholarships, fee waivers and loan policies reduced opportunities for affordable private education (Jamkar & Johnston, 2021). This marked the shift in Indian education, which went from a public good to an increasingly private commodity, without any avail to oppressed caste students.

By making higher education a private commodity, reservation policy was no longer contended with in educational institutions. Higher education was privatized, and prestigious institutions such as the

Indian Institute of Management or the Indian Institute of Technology no longer needed to provide mandatory placements to oppressed caste groups. This meant that caste-class elites now had exclusive access. Higher education was now a space for the dominant caste groups, and they no longer had to share spaces with others. Due to the dwindling opportunities for higher education, oppressed castes had even fewer chances to be competitive in the private sector job market. Not to mention, the lack of higher education also means a limited opportunity to join the Indian bureaucracy. To this end, avenues for mobility in the state and market are further restricted for oppressed caste groups.

Interestingly, discourses of meritocracy were salient; caste elites weaponized the argument of merit against affirmative action. A diverse set of state-focused scholars, from Weber to Fukuyama to Sen, have analyzed the role of meritocracy in making a strong state based on good governance. The argument is that a merit-based bureaucratic system can ensure individuals are given positions of power based on their abilities and qualifications; this would then lead to better decision-making and more efficient governance. However, in India's case, due to a highly stratified society based on caste, merit is exclusively accessed and obtained by dominant caste groups. In India, abilities and qualifications are privileges that are gained based on caste status. Merit is largely accessible only to dominant caste groups through education and caste social networks, while oppressed caste groups are restricted from accessing it. Where the goal of India's state-builders was a caste-equal society, the discourse of meritocracy fails. In India's case, meritocracy fails to recognize the entrenched nature of caste and the marginalisation of the oppressed caste population. To this end, it is rather a contradiction in India's case that meritocracy will help the Indian state to reach its goal of a caste-equal society.

The weakening of affirmative action in government employment and higher education was a result of liberalization. The neoliberal turn ushered in by caste elites was the most aggressive form of state taming as it retreated the state from society. Where the state was envisioned as a power to guarantee the emancipation of oppressed castes, caste elites have rendered the state unable to provide any

promise of caste emancipation. The state now no longer in any serious manner threaten elite dominance.

Conclusion:

The making of modern India is founded on the political settlement that was struck between caste elites and subaltern leaders. The bargain struck was a consequence of elites and oppressed castes viewing the state as an entity that could uphold their interests. The trade-off in the settlement involved two agreements: first, caste elites were given the legitimacy to govern India and the opportunity to initiate state-led development; second, oppressed castes were given assurances that the state would lead the promise of caste justice through caste-based reservations. The state was the guarantor of caste emancipation – the hope and intended outcome for affirmative actions were that Dalit representation in politics, bureaucracy and education would produce state initiatives and policies that would refashion caste society in India and emancipate oppressed groups from caste marginalization.

Caste-based reservation and its intended outcome threatened caste elite dominance. Since Dalit representation within the state structure would yield policies that tried to challenge caste hierarchy, this threatened the status and power of caste elites. Elites' fears resulted in their intention to restrict the state from being influenced by oppressed caste groups and make sure the state did not have the ability to seriously challenge the caste status quo. In other words, their intention was to undermine the outcomes of caste-based reservation. Since the state was based on the promise of caste emancipation and was also responsible for implementing affirmative action, the caste elites needed to tame the state. Taming meant that the state was disciplined to not provide a serious basis for caste emancipation and ensure oppressed caste groups could not influence the state. Thus, taming the state is actioned through undermining caste-based reservations and limiting its outcomes.

Overall, this paper speaks of the conditions that hindered state-led affirmative action and the promise of caste emancipation. The success of reservation policy is not just about policy design or implementation but rather how other powerful forces in society, the

market and even within the state act against it. Specific to India, economic, social, and bureaucratic elites act against caste-based reservation by taming the state. For affirmative action to yield emancipatory outcomes, not only should the state be a guarantor of justice, but also the state should have a strong capacity and power to combat elites' challenges to the state. The nation-state should be built and developed in a way that any attempt to tame the state is rendered unsuccessful.

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