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Understanding Students' Attitudes Towards Affirmative Action Policy in Higher Education in India

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Abstract

To mitigate the severe educational horizontal inequalities in India, affirmative action (AA) measures in higher education (HE) have been implemented for socially excluded groups, such as the Scheduled Castes (former "untouchables"), the scheduled tribes (whose status resembles indigenous groups in other countries), and other classes lower in the caste hierarchy. Despite the introduction of AA measures, societal attitudes generally remain resistant to caste-based reservation policies. Interestingly, very few studies in India have examined AA support among the most directly affected group of people when it comes to AA measures in HE—college students. The current article aims to fill this gap. It asks: Which factors (such as students' background characteristics, pre-college credentials, experience in college, and caste-based beliefs) underlie college students' attitudes (support or resistance) towards AA? This study builds on a large-scale survey conducted among 3200 students studying in 12 public higher education institutions across six provinces in India. The results of the empirical analysis indicate that students' attitudes towards AA are shaped and influenced by their social identity and educational experiences in college. It is also noteworthy that caste-based biases and prejudices affect students' attitudes particularly and may explain opposition to AA.

Keywords

caste; higher education; India; quota system; reservation policy

1. Introduction

Given the recognition of the role of higher education (HE) in increasing inter-generational mobility, inequalities in opportunities to pursue HE can become a significant driver in the persistence of inequalities across generations (Langer & Kuppens, 2019). Affirmative action (AA) policies consider variations in opportunity structures in society and aim to provide equality in opportunities to pursue HE (Varghese, 2019).

In India, AA policy in HE is the constitutionally mandated reservation policy that gives preference for HE admissions to members of socially excluded groups (SEGs). The caste and ethnicity-based group preference in the policy aims to enable a greater proportion of members from SEGs into HE than would otherwise have been possible (Borooah, 2017). The SEGs comprise the Scheduled Castes (SCs)—the former "untouchables" of the caste system—and castes that are socially and economically lower in the caste hierarchy, i.e., the officially termed "other backward classes" (OBCs). These groups have faced historical denial of human and educational rights, are viewed as inferior, and have experienced untouchability—resulting in limited participation in society and economy (Thorat & Sabharwal, 2015). Being placed lower in the caste system is India's most predominant form of enforcing social disadvantage (Ambedkar, 1987). Also included in the SEGs are the scheduled tribes (STs), who face physical isolation and exclusion from mainstream society.

Public HEIs are mandated to apply reservation-based quotas proportionally to the group's share of the population. While the SEGs (SCs, OBCs, STs) account for roughly 66.5% of India's population (Thorat & Newman, 2010), India's Supreme Court has capped the caste and ethnicity-based reservations at 50%. Fifteen percent of HE seats are allocated to SCs, 7.5% to STs, and 27% to OBCs in HE admissions (Borooah, 2017; Government of India [GOI], 1950). The implementation of reservations in HE is facilitated through relaxing entry-level qualifications, scholarships, fee reductions, and accommodation.

Access to HE in India has increased dramatically in recent decades across all groups (Varghese, 2015). As a result of the reservation policy, SEGs have been able to access HE opportunities crucial to their upward social mobility. However, social inequalities in access to HE persist. In 2021, the GER of India was 27.3% (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2021). However, in the case of the SC group, it remained lower (at 23.1%) and it was even lower (at 18.9%) for the ST group (MOE, 2021).

Students from SEGs continue to face significant barriers to pursuing HE due to a combination of factors, including stigmatised social identity and inequitable study conditions (Borooah et al., 2015; Sabharwal, 2020). Despite being initially created as a temporary measure in 1949 (GOI, 1950), the reservation policy in India remains necessary due to the continuing prevalence of caste-based discrimination (Borooah et al., 2015) and the persistence of inter-group inequalities in access to HE.

While constitutionally guaranteed reservation policies have been implemented to ensure fair representation of the SEGs, contemporary societal reactions generally remain resistant to caste- and ethnicity-based reservation policies (Deshpande, 2019; Raina, 2006). Public protests have showcased widespread disapproval of caste-based AA policies (Akella, 2012) and there have been demands from political spheres that economic criteria should replace caste in reservation policy (Thorat et al., 2016). Studies show that students from the SEGs experience feelings of resentment toward the reservation policy as expressed by their upper-caste (UC) peers and teachers (Deshpande, 2019; Sabharwal, 2020; Sharma & Subramanyam, 2020).

Scholars (e.g., Thorat et al., 2016) have argued that caste-based prejudicial attitudes underlie public opinion against reservation policy and there is growing evidence that public opinion can significantly influence educational policies (Busemeyer et al., 2018). An indication of this can be seen in a recent amendment to the Constitution in India: The 2019 103rd Amendment Act now requires that 10% of seats in HEIs be reserved for non-SC/ST/OBC students who come from economically weaker sections (GOI, 2019). Continued resistance to AA could lead to more changes that may worsen inter-caste inequalities in access to HE.

As individuals among the public who are influenced by and influencers of public opinion (Steele & Breznau, 2019), students provide valuable insights into public attitudes towards AA in HE. Moreover, examining students' attitudes towards AA can help uncover the underlying basis of exclusionary behaviour experienced by students who benefit from AA (Thorat, 2007). There have been few studies conducted in India that explore AA attitudes among college students, who are most directly impacted by AA measures in HE. This article fills this gap by asking which factors (such as students' background characteristics, pre-college credentials, experience in college, or caste-based beliefs) underlie college students' attitudes (support or resistance) towards AA. This study is based on empirical evidence drawn from a large-scale student survey across six provinces in India. The results of this empirical analysis show that students' attitudes towards AA are associated with their social identity and educational experiences while in college.

2. Attitudes of College Students Towards AA: Literature Review, and Hypotheses

2.1. Literature Review

In addition to the scant literature in the Indian context, this study's conceptual framework draws on constructs from research undertaken mainly in the West to analyse predictors of college students' attitudes toward race-based AA. Four constructs that predict college students' attitudes emerge in the literature, which are discussed in this section.

2.1.1. Groups' Self-Interest

Studies have shown that student attitudes towards AA policies are influenced by groups' self-interest (Lowery et al., 2006). Amongst the demographic characteristics, support or opposition to AA depends on one's group affiliation or membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) and the degree to which the policies affect one's group. Many studies have found that students of colour who gain from AA policies are more likely than whites to support AA policies (Oh et al., 2010; Park, 2009; Sax & Arredondo, 1999). In India, the likelihood of admission to HEIs is directly linked to students' caste and ethnicity identity. Students from the SEGs (SCs, OBCs, STs) are expected to be more supportive of the reservation policy than their UC, privileged peers. In terms of religion, individuals from SEGs who identify their religion as Hindus are eligible for reservation policy, with scholars arguing that this practice gives preferential treatment to the majority religion by excluding non-Hindus from the benefits of these policies (Fazal, 2017).

Related to gender, in India, women are considered a disadvantaged group and the government reserves the right to pass legislation or administrative orders designed to provide them with special provisions to support their progress. In HE admissions, these special provisions take the form of horizontal reservations for women across all social groups (SCs, STs, OBCs, and UCs). While caste remains the primary basis of AA policy in India, through such special provisions, a multiplicity of disadvantages along gender and caste dimensions are considered. The proportion of seats reserved for women across caste groups in HE varies across provinces and is determined by provincial government policies (Munusamy, 2022). There is expected to be an association between students' gender and AA attitudes in this context.

Another important characteristic that reflects group identities and material self-interest includes students' socio-economic status (SES, measured by parents' educational level and family income level). Research has

shown that students from high SES families tend to have a more negative attitude towards AA (Sax & Arredondo, 1999). Scholars (e.g., Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989) have also proposed that individuals from higher SES tend to oppose AA as they are more likely to identify with the ideology of economic individualism and express principled moral objections. Those who hold this ideology view government interventions that support or redistribute opportunities as promoting dependency and being morally unjust.

Understanding AA attitudes by SES in India is complex, as economic status intersects with the traditional caste system; income distribution is generally skewed across caste lines, with SCs/STs suffering from relatively high levels of poverty (Thorat et al., 2016). The source of poverty of SEGs, scholars argue, is a consequence of the customary rules in the caste system, where access to sources of income and economic rewards is determined by the unequal assignment of educational, social, and economic rights (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Scholars demand not only continuing caste-based AA to protect SEGs from discrimination but also reform AA to address the consequences of past discrimination (Thorat et al., 2016).

The self-interest hypothesis also applies to students' academic scores, with those scoring at a higher level more likely to oppose AA than those with lower scores who may stand to gain from AA (Park, 2009). Studies conducted in India have shown significant differences in the entry scores of students from SEGs, such as the SC group and UC students when they apply for HEIs (Deshpande, 2019; EPW, 2007). This difference in entry scores is expected as the reservation policy mandates that a certain percentage of seats be reserved for students from specific caste groups, which can't exceed 50%; the beneficiary caste groups are admitted by relaxing the entry examination scores. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of such reservation policies is that students from the SEGs are often negatively evaluated by their peers and stigmatized as incompetent (Deshpande, 2019).

Research further demonstrates that the selectivity of HEIs at the admission stage influences students' attitudes toward AA (Park, 2009). In India, selective public HEIs have highly competitive test-based admissions. Scholars have argued that rank ordering in such institutions comes to be viewed as a measure of "differential intelligence" (Subramanian, 2019, p 165), with students from the SEGs facing the stigma of gaining admission through reservation. Students in elite HEIs with higher selectivity may hold negative attitudes toward AA as they may consider it to violate merit-based selection.

2.1.2. Socialisation Through Inter-Group Contact at Home, School, and College

Allport's (1954) theory of inter-group contact with diverse peers provides the theoretical basis for understanding how social interaction between different groups can positively impact reducing prejudice towards outgroups. The theory suggests that interaction with diverse peers is beneficial for cognitive development and is critical for reducing prejudice. Research suggests that family and school can provide opportunities for inter-group contact that can play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of children and young adults towards inequalities and social injustices (Mijs, 2018; Steele & Breznau, 2019).

The effects of family as a socialisation space can be seen through students' place of residence and their neighbourhood's racial composition. In India, the distinction between rural and urban areas is significant; in many parts of rural India, SEGs in villages continue to be socially segregated. Migration of these groups to towns is encouraged for them to escape their caste identity, which is a source of discriminatory practices

living in the village (Ambedkar, 1987). Although greater diversity exists in urban areas, significant caste-based residential segregation persists at the neighbourhood level, impeding inter-group contact (Bharathi et al., 2019).

Concerning schools, India has a stratified school system with socially and economically homogenous student composition in each stratum. Government schools serve a large population of SEGs, with student fees being subsidised by provincial and federal governments. On the other hand, private schools are mostly selective and have an elite status, charging high fees and catering to students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Rao, 2019). These features indicate a prevalence of homogenous high schools in India, where students have limited opportunities for cross-group interactions.

When opportunities for cross-racial interactions for students from families residing in homogenous neighbourhoods are limited, this can influence their knowledge of and perspective toward the prevalence of racial disparities or discrimination (Jayakumar, 2015). Likewise, students' prior high school is where pre-college-going adults develop their beliefs towards fairness through inter-group contacts with their peers, which shapes attitudes toward AA policies in college (Bullock, 2021). Studies indicate that segregated white neighbourhoods and homogenous high schools where students have limited cross-racial interactions promote conservative racial attitudes (Jayakumar, 2015), which can continue in college.

While at college, how students are guided to navigate academic and social spaces can shape their attitudes toward AA (Park, 2009). This includes friendships with peers from diverse backgrounds and teaching practices that promote intergroup interaction between students. Such forms of pedagogy indicate teachers' influence on students' views toward support for AA policies. The duration of exposure to diverse peer experiences offered by staying in education for longer, such as undergraduate or postgraduate levels, can affect AA attitudes (Bullock, 2021). However, it is important to recognise that the presence of elite faculty can also uphold status quo privileges (Gelepithis & Giani, 2022), as is the case in India. In India, contemporary demographics show that teachers in universities and colleges are typically from privileged social groups (non-SC/ST/OBC). This social mismatch with students from SEGs often leads to a disconnection between the curriculum and pedagogical approaches, which fails to address the legacy of discrimination in the caste system. As a result, institutional culture tends to normalise prejudicial practices. Consequently, scholars have called for better preparation of teachers to teach in diverse classrooms (EPW, 2007).

2.1.3. Academic Orientation of Students

The field of study in college can significantly influence students' views on AA. Research suggests that students in social sciences and liberal arts are more supportive of AA policies compared to those in technical sciences (Park, 2009). Two mutually non-exclusive explanations in the literature explain how students' attitudes may relate to their field of study (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2009). Students choose a field of study based on pre-existing attitudes (selection hypothesis) or develop attitudes that align with the discipline ("discipline socialisation" hypothesis). Studies indicate that taking courses in the social sciences or liberal arts can enhance moral reasoning and foster respect for diverse individuals (Freedman, 2010; Hagendoorn, 2018). A study conducted in India that included both a public and a private university (Deshpande, 2019) found that UC students attending the private university had a more favourable attitude towards AA. The reasons attributed to the differences in attitudes were twofold: On the one hand, the self-interest of the majority

wasn't directly under threat because AA in private universities is not mandated by law and SEGs form a minority on campus; on the other, progressive attitudes were attributed to the liberal arts education focus of the UC students.

2.1.4. Race-Based Prejudicial Beliefs

Studies suggest that prejudice and racist beliefs can become a source of opposition to AA—for instance, whites will oppose policies designed to assist African Americans because they view them in an inferior and prejudicial light (Awad et al., 2005; Kinder & Sears, 1981). Research also suggests that prejudiced beliefs can manifest as feelings of hostility towards individuals who belong to different groups (Bowman & Denson, 2012). Studies on race have suggested that racial prejudice in contemporary society is reflected covertly as a combination of beliefs in group-based hierarchies, in the dominance of one group, and in the notion that "discrimination is in the past" (Mconahay, 1986).

Scholars in India (Thorat et al., 2016) argue that the caste system's group dominance ideology significantly influences the political ideology behind AA. This influence stems from the belief in the purity of UCs and the impurity of lower castes, which leads to caste-based prejudices. These prejudices serve the interests of the higher castes, who benefit from their material wealth and high social status. Consequently, dominant castes resist AA policies designed to provide opportunities for SEGs.

Some studies have also linked opposition to AA with students' belief that AA violates the principle of meritocracy (DiTomaso et al., 2011; Lowery et al., 2006). However, the merit-based justification to oppose AA is often seen as a form of racial prejudice since prejudice is believed to be the underlying cause for such opposition. Scholars have argued (Knowles & Lowery, 2012) that the notion of meritocracy can suggest a lack of acknowledgement of one's racial privilege. In the Indian context, research indicates that beneficiaries of the reservation policy experience a stigma of incompetence (Deshpande, 2019).

Concerning attitudes towards AA, perspectives towards diversity play a prominent role in explaining attitudes towards AA. Aberson (2021) suggests that those students who valued diverse perspectives and believed in the benefits of diverse student composition for their college were more likely to support AA policies. Similarly, research conducted in elite schools in India has shown that having an economically diverse student composition in classrooms can make wealthy students more pro-social (Rao, 2019).

2.2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

This study's conceptual framework draws on constructs from the literature review to analyse predictors of college students' attitudes toward AA. The study's conceptual framework includes these four constructs: (a) groups' self-interest, (b) socialisation through inter-group contact at home, school, and college, (c) academic orientation, and (d) caste-based beliefs.

In line with the premise that groups' self-interest influences attitudes towards AA, it is expected that students who are affiliated with a group that gains to benefit from AA are more likely to support AA than those who are not beneficiaries. The following is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: There is an association between AA attitudes and students' caste and ethnicity background, religion, gender, family SES, high school exam scores, and level of HEI selectivity.

College students' attitudes toward AA can also be shaped by the socio-cultural context of their family backgrounds and previous school experiences. As discussed in the previous section, prior research indicates that socio-cultural context is influenced by opportunities for inter-group contact that can significantly shape AA attitudes. Consequently, it is postulated that:

Hypothesis 2a: Students residing in urban areas where opportunities for group interaction are limited due to segregated neighbourhoods will be less supportive of AA than students from rural areas.

Hypothesis 2b: Related to prior schooling, it is hypothesised that there is an association between prior school type (government or private) and college students' AA attitudes.

Hypothesis 2c: In India, it is on college campuses that young adults from diverse backgrounds come together. Thus, it is expected that college students who interact with diverse peers will be more supportive of AA than students with homogenous peer groups.

Hypothesis 2d: The same is true for college students who are encouraged by their teachers to study in mixed peer groups.

Hypothesis 2e: Finally, it is hypothesised that postgraduate students are more supportive of AA than undergraduate students.

Concerning academic orientation and its influence on AA attitudes, there is a demonstrable association between the field of study and students' attitudes. Thus:

Hypothesis 3: It is expected that students studying social science and humanities, which offer more occasions to discuss societal issues, are more likely to support AA policies as compared to those studying science and engineering subjects.

Finally, we propose that prejudicial caste-based beliefs are a source of opposition to AA:

Hypothesis 4: Students with prejudicial caste beliefs (such as holding beliefs of caste superiority and hostility towards diversity) are less likely to support AA than those who do not hold such beliefs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Description and Sampling

This article is based on a large-scale survey which was part of a mixed-method research study (Sabharwal & Malish, 2016) on student diversity and inclusion in HE in India. Given the limitations of detailed data sets related to students' AA attitudes, this study forms the critical basis for studying this phenomenon. The study was conducted in 12 public HEIs in six states (Bihar, Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Uttar

Pradesh). Case study states were selected to represent different regions of the country (north, west, south, and east). The research employed a multi-institutional case study approach. In each state, two HEIs were selected as case studies. The study also employed a purposive mixed-method sampling selection technique (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) where 12 HEIs were selected to represent those funded by the provincial and federal governments. Since the focus of the study was to understand the HE experiences of students from SEGs, public HEIs were selected as they are mandated by law to carry out AA measures. These institutions also varied in their admission policies, including qualifying high school examination marks and entrance tests.

Students selected for the survey were studying in the second year at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as this is the year when students are best placed to evaluate their college experience critically (Schaller, 2005). A stratified sampling technique was used to select students. Students were selected across three disciplines: social sciences, humanities, and STEM. Informed consent was obtained from the students. The survey was completed in one hour in classrooms. All students present in the class were approached, and all completed the survey. Hence the final sample matched the target. It took two weeks to conduct the survey, and all those students present participated in that period. The data was collected in 2015. It followed ethical procedures, including obtaining institutional approvals and anonymising the data collected. The sample of students in the survey is 3,200 (see Table 1 for student background descriptive statistics). The percentage distribution of students from HEIs located across the six states is as follows: Bihar = 15.6%; Delhi = 16.7%; Kerela = 16.8%; Karnataka = 15.8%; Maharashtra = 19.5%; Uttar Pradesh = 15.6%. Most students identified themselves as OBCs (42%, vs. national 35.8%), SCs (14%, vs. national 14.2%), STs (5%, vs. national 5.8%), and non–SC/ST/OBC (39%, vs. national 44%; see MOE, 2021).

3.2. Variables

What follows is a discussion of the dependent and explanatory variables tested to account for support or opposition to the reservation policy.

Related to the dependent variable, to assess students' attitudes towards AA, the student survey included a four-point Likert scale response to the statement: "Reservation policy for the SCs/STs/OBCs is no longer needed." Response ranged from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*.

The following are the independent variables related to the four constructs tested to account for support or opposition to the reservation policy:

1. Groups' self-interest: Independent variables that reflect the group's self-interest include: students' gender, caste, ethnicity, and religious background; students' SES; students' high school examination scores; and the admissions selection process of the HEI (competitive/test-based/based on high school academic scores).
2. Socialisation through inter-group contact at home, school, and college: Whether students were residing in urban or rural areas was included as an independent variable. Students' pre-college schooling is determined by whether they attended a private or a government (or government-aided) high school. To assess the level of inter-social group contact in college, independent variables included the social background of students' closest friends and teachers' encouragement to work in diverse

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: Student background characteristics.

Variables	Share (%)
%	
Social groups	
SCs	14.00
STs	5.00
OBCs	41.20
Non-SC/ST/OBC (upper castes)	39.80
Gender	
Male	46.34
Female	53.66
Religion	
Hindu	78.51
Muslim	13.78
Other religious minorities	7.71
Level of study	
postgraduate	33.48
undergraduate	66.52
Location of permanent residence	
Rural	43.91
Urban	56.09
Parents' education (father)	
Undergraduate & above	40.60
High school graduate	13.40
Less than high school school	41.00
No education	4.30
Monthly household income	
High (INR 50,001 & above)	14.99
Middle (INR 10,001–50,000)	43.00
Low (less than INR 10,000)	42.01

groups; on the duration of exposure to college experiences, the independent variable included students' level of study (undergraduate/postgraduate).

3. Two independent variables were used to assess students' academic orientation: high school subjects and college subjects in social sciences, commerce, sciences, and engineering.

4. Caste-based prejudicial beliefs: Students' opinions on the following statements were measured: "Discrimination against SC/ST/OBCs is no longer an issue in India"; "Certain castes are superior to others"; "Due to reservation policy, less talented students are admitted to HEI." To assess how negative beliefs towards diverse social and cultural backgrounds might affect AA attitudes, we also included statements that asked students' level of agreement on the following: "Diversity in population groups in a country leads to conflicts and tensions."

3.3. Method of Analysis

The following research question is proposed: What are the factors that underlie college students' attitudes (support or resistance) towards AA? To answer this question, the method of analysis involved a two-step process involving chi-square tests and logistic regression.

The first step involved chi-squared tests to examine statistically significant differences in students' attitudes towards reservation policy by group self-interest variables, variables to capture socialisation effects of inter-group contact, and academic orientation and variables to assess caste-based prejudicial beliefs. Correlations among all the variables were conducted to identify inter-relationships and account for multicollinearity.

In the second step, binary logistic regression analysis was used to discern which variables significantly predict opposition to the reservation policy. As mentioned above, the dependent variable is an item that gauges students' attitudes toward AA. The attitude is measured through students' level of agreement with the statement "Reservation policy for the SCs/STs/OBCs is no longer needed" (measured on a scale of 1 = *disagree strongly* to 4 = *agree strongly*).

The current study adds up the four response categories into two broad ones—agree (as the sum of *strongly agree* and *agree*) and disagree (as the sum of *strongly disagree* and *disagree*)—as per Deshpande (2019). Thus, in binary logistic regression analysis, the dependent variable is in a binary response variable, Y = {1, if "agree" and Y = 0, if "disagree"} with the statement that asked, "Reservation policy for the SCs/STs/OBCs is no longer needed."

It is acknowledged that there may be limitations in some of the measurements of attitudes of AA. For instance, how the outcome variable (reservation policy is no longer needed) is assessed may not imply that students are principally against AA—they might think it is no longer needed in today's society. Additionally, the variable used to evaluate meritocratic principles ("Due to reservation policy, less talented students are admitted to HEI") carries a negative connotation. This aspect could have been assessed using alternative measurements (for example, "Admission to universities should be solely based on high school performance"), which would better illustrate how objections to AA based on meritocratic principles are insensitive to inequalities based on group membership. Even if there were misunderstandings about AA, it was important to gather students' perspectives on the reservation policy and gauge their AA attitudes, regardless of their level of knowledge on the topic.

4. Results With Discussion

4.1. Analysis of Differences in AA Attitudes by Group Affiliation

The association between various variables and AA attitude in college admissions is assessed in this section.

Regarding Hypothesis 1, on differences between caste/ethnic groups' attitudes towards AA, support or opposition to AA has a significant association with the social background of students. The strongest support towards AA is from SCs (71%) and STs (66.4%), followed by OBCs (56.5%), and the UC category (41%; Pearson X^2(3, N = 3200) = 90.518, p = .000). Students from SEGs who benefit from AA are more likely to support and have a positive attitude towards AA than those who do not. Of interest in the analysis is an intra-group difference in response of students from SEGs to AA policy. Not only UCs but also a lower proportion of students from the OBCs, compared to SCs and STs, expressed support for the reservation policy. This can be explained by whether students were admitted in the open-merit or reserved categories. A lower proportion of students from the OBC group (87%) were admitted in the reserved category than

students from the SC group (98.2%). This implies that the OBC group was less likely to benefit from the reservation policy. Thus, OBC students were less supportive of AA, as their self-interest may affect their attitudes towards AA.

Opposition to AA attitudes is also significantly associated with the SES of students' families, with opposition to AA coming from students from high SES backgrounds, such as families' income (X^2(2, N = 3137) = 15.390, p = .000) and parent's (father) educational level (X^2(3, N = 3176) = 33.747, p = .000). Students from high socio-economic backgrounds oppose reservation policies; students from high SES families may feel less likely to benefit from the AA policy, as they are more likely to belong to UCs than SEGs (see Supplementary File, Table A).

Regarding the association between attitudes towards AA and final high school examination scores, which indicate levels of academic preparation, students who scored higher in high school are more likely to oppose the AA policy (X^2(3, N = 3091) = 22.397, p = .000). This suggests that opposition to the reservation policy may be driven by self-interest and concern for missed opportunities resulting from the policy. As highlighted, the reservation policy involves lowering entry-level scores. Similarly, the association between the attitudes towards the AA policy and the admissions selection process was significant (X^2(1, N = 3200) = 6.221, p = .007).

Students from highly competitive and selective HEIs following test-based admissions were more likely to oppose (48%) the AA policy than students from less selective HEIs (43%). These selective HEIs represent those public HEIs in India that offer technical courses with highly competitive admissions—less than 3% of students who take the test are accepted into these HEIs (Subramanian, 2019). These statistics suggest that opposition to AA may arise from the fear of one's group losing out. Additionally, scholars have argued that students from selective HEIs tend to oppose AA since they believe it contradicts the principle of merit-based admissions (Park, 2009).

However, students' gender and religion do not significantly affect AA attitudes at a 5% significance level. There appear to be minimal differences between attitudinal support to AA between male and female students (X^2(1, N = 3200) = 0.419, p = .270), or those from different religions (X^2(2, N = 3190) = 3.197, p = .653). The lack of association between AA attitudes and religion may be because, besides the Hindu religion, other religions such as Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity have been included in the reservation list of SCs, OBCs, or STs (GOI, 2011, 2016; Ministry of Law and Justice, 1990). This could be a contributing factor as students of all religions can feel that they are receiving benefits from the reservation policy.

Regarding Hypothesis 2a (neighbourhood effect), it appears that students from urban areas tend to oppose the reservation policy (X^2(1, N = 3194) = 7.476, p = .003), indicating that the location of their family residence plays a role in shaping their attitudes towards it. Since UC students are more likely to reside in urban areas than rural (see Supplementary File, Table A) and considering the prevalence of socially segregated residential areas in urban India, living in socially segregated urban areas may not provide them with enough chances for socialising with people from different ethnic or social backgrounds. Thus, a lack of inter-social group interaction in urban areas may contribute to AA opposition.

Regarding Hypothesis 2b (the effect of high school attended before joining college), college students who have studied in private high school are more likely to oppose the AA policy in HE than students from government

(or government-aided) schools (X^2(2, N = 3179) = 16.095, p = .000). College students with limited prior interaction with diverse peers may develop conservative caste beliefs. UC students are more susceptible to developing such beliefs as they are more likely to have studied in private schools than in government schools (see Supplementary File, Table A).

Hypotheses 2c and 2d are related to the association between attitudes towards AA and the experience of interacting with diverse peers in college. A significant association is found between AA attitudes and interaction with diverse peer groups (Hypothesis 2c). Those subsets of students who reported their closest friend being from the SEGs, indicating exposure to peers from diverse backgrounds, were less likely to oppose the AA policy (X^2(4, N = 2977) = 32.756, p = .000). UC students were more likely to form friendships within their own group and thereby had fewer opportunities to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds (see Supplementary File, Table A). Related to Hypothesis 2d, students who were encouraged by their teachers to study with students from diverse backgrounds were less likely to oppose the AA policy (X^2(1, N = 3109) = 6.190, p = .007). However, students' levels of study, that is, whether they were studying at undergraduate or postgraduate levels (Hypothesis 2e), do not significantly affect attitudes towards AA (X^2 (1, N = 3200) = 0.006, p = .940).

The association between students' attitudes towards AA policy and the field of study (Hypothesis 3) is significant. This association shows that, on average, subsets of students studying commerce or sciences subjects in high school were significantly more likely to oppose AA policy than those studying humanities or social sciences (X^2(2, N = 3109) = 9.188, p = .027). Similarly, in college, sub-sets of students studying commerce or engineering subjects were significantly more likely to oppose the AA policy (X^2(3, N = 2813) = 21.536, p = .000). It is worth noting that UC students are more likely to pursue science and engineering courses during their high school and college years (see Supplementary File, Table A). This indicates that they may have had less exposure to subjects related to social sciences or liberal arts that promote egalitarian beliefs.

Finally, a significant association is found between opposition to the reservation policy and students' caste-based prejudicial beliefs (Hypothesis 4), which include a negative attitude towards social diversity in society. Opposition to AA came from subsets of students who believed that AA lowers academic quality (X^2(1, N = 3046) = 121.924, p = .000). However, students' belief in meritocracy was influenced by their caste background, with UC students more likely to view AA as lowering academic standards (see Supplementary File, Table A). Previous research (Deshpande, 2019) has also found that students from UC groups are less likely to consider students admitted through the quota system as hardworking and competent. Students who believed that caste discrimination is not a problem in India were significantly more likely to oppose AA policy (X^2(1, N = 3028) = 62.482, p = .000). Results further show that those subsets of students who believed in caste superiority were significantly more likely to oppose AA policy (X^2(1, N = 3036) = 15.421, p = .000). Students who viewed social diversity leads to tension in society were significantly more likely to oppose the AA policy (X^2(1, N = 3148) = 52.737, p = .000). Students who believed in meritocracy were also more likely to disregard the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in India, believe in the superiority of castes and hold negative views towards diversity (see Supplementary File, Table A). These results suggest that caste-based prejudicial beliefs are interconnected and, in combination, reflect covert casteism.

The descriptive results of this sub-section show that attitudes towards AA vary by student characteristics, which are influenced by multiple factors, including self-interest, inter-group contact, academic orientation, and caste-based beliefs. However, determining the key drivers of attitudes towards AA is complex, as these factors are not mutually exclusive. To identify key determinants of AA attitudes, the next sub-section presents a logistic regression analysis.

4.2. Estimation Results to Explain Opposition to AA: Binary Logistic Regression Analysis

This sub-section provides binary logistic regression analysis results of the variables predicting attitudes towards AA. The binary logistic regression analysis provides us with the direction and significance of the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable, that is, support or opposition to AA policy. The multicollinearity assumptions were tested, and none of the independent variables had a variation inflation factor greater than five. Furthermore, the bivariate correlation between all the variables in the regression model is also low (see Supplementary File, Table A), indicating a low multicollinearity between the variables.

The logistic regression model was statistically significant (X^2(30, N = 2401) = 259.003, p = .001). The model explained 13.7% (Nagelkerke R2) of the variance in opposition or support to AA and correctly classified 63.6% of cases. Table 2 indicates the results of the logistic regression modelling, with regression coefficients (B) at a 5% level of significance, Wald statistics (to test the significance level of the statistics), and the exponentials of the coefficients (Exp(B)), that is the odds ratio.

Among all variables that reflect the group's self-interest, caste background emerges as the strongest and most significant determinant of attitudes towards AA in the binary logistic regression model (Table 2). The results show that *ceteris paribus* students from privileged backgrounds (UC category) were close to two times significantly more likely to oppose AA than those from the SC background.

Concerning gender, while the chi-square results showed that gender was not significant, the effect of gender as a determinant of group self-interest is significant when included with other explanatory variables in the logistic regression. When controlling for other explanatory variables, women were significantly less likely than men to express opposition to AA. Scholars suggest that groups that experience discrimination are more likely to support AA, with studies showing that women generally have more favourable AA attitudes than men (Park, 2009; Sax & Arredondo, 1999). Women's support for such policies is believed to stem from a sense of self-interest, as it justifies advocating for measures that combat gender-based discrimination.

It is noteworthy to mention that female students in the study sample were less likely than male students to have high scores or attend selective HEIs following test-based admissions (see Supplementary File, Table A). This suggests that men may perceive AA as a risk to their self-interest because they believe it goes against merit-based selection, with the feeling that they stand to lose the most from the AA policy. Regarding SES background, students from low-SES families, especially first-generation learners were less likely to oppose the reservation policy than those from high-SES families.

Based on Hypothesis 2c, regarding the impact of inter-group interactions on students' attitudes towards AA, friendship with diverse peers in college emerged to be the significant variable affecting attitudes. It was found

Table 2. Variables in the logistic regression model.

	B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Social background: SC (ref.)			20.510	3	.000*	
ST	.180	.263	.470	1	.493	1.198
OBC	.392	.150	6.821	1	.009*	1.479
Upper castes	.674	.155	18.889	1	.000*	1.962
Gender (*male = ref.*; female = 1)	−.200	.094	4.505	1	.034*	.818
Religion: Hindu (ref.)			2.646	2	.266	
Muslims	.040	.135	.088	1	.766	1.041
Other religious minorities	−.274	.174	2.481	1	.115	.760
Father's education: Undergraduate & above *(ref.)*			6.282	3	.099	
Higher secondary school graduate	−.235	.141	2.777	1	.096	.791
Less than higher secondary school	−.112	.115	.956	1	.328	.894
No education	−.518	.240	4.680	1	.031*	.596
Family income level: High (ref.)			3.057	2	.217	
Middle	−.181	.147	1.520	1	.218	.835
Low	−.271	.156	3.009	1	.083	.762
High school scores: Third division (less than 50%) (ref.)			2.108	3	.550	
Second division (50–60%)	.265	.197	1.811	1	.178	1.304
First division (60% and above)	.205	.171	1.435	1	.231	1.228
Distinction (75% and above)	.247	.192	1.654	1	.198	1.280
Selectivity in admission (no selection test = *ref.*; selection test = 1)	.055	.136	.163	1	.686	1.057
Location of permanent residence (rural = *ref.*; urban = 1)	.033	.100	.111	1	.739	1.034
Type of high school: Government (ref.)			1.864	2	.394	
Private-aided	−.053	.099	.285	1	.593	.949
Private-unaided	.148	.143	1.067	1	.302	1.159
Social group of best friend SC (ref.)			9.689	4	.046*	
ST	.188	.267	.497	1	.481	1.207
OBC	.289	.142	4.123	1	.042*	1.335
Upper castes	.330	.143	5.314	1	.021*	1.390
Don't know	.526	.173	9.191	1	.002*	1.692
Teachers encourage to work together (*never = ref.*; always = 1)	.073	.093	.619	1	.432	1.076
Level of study (*undergraduate = ref.*; postgraduate = 1)	−.062	.104	.356	1	.551	.940
Subjects in high school: Social sciences (ref.)			6.397	3	.094	
Sciences	.304	.133	5.242	1	.022*	1.355
Commerce	.295	.161	3.340	1	.068	1.343
Other	.062	.248	.062	1	.803	1.064
Subjects in college: Social sciences (ref.)			18.603	3	.000*	
Science	.517	.125	17.145	1	.000*	1.677
Commerce	.319	.177	3.235	1	.072	1.376
Computer science/engineering	.126	.418	.090	1	.764	1.134
Due to reservation, HEIs have to admit less talented students (*disagree = ref.*; agree = 1)	.599	.091	43.061	1	.000*	1.820
Caste discrimination is not a problem in India (*disagree = ref.*; agree = 1)	.544	.090	36.249	1	.000*	1.723
Belief in caste superiority (*disagree = ref.*; agree = 1)	.288	.091	9.989	1	.002*	1.334
Social diversity leads to tension in the society (*disagree = ref*; agree = 1)	.245	.089	7.585	1	.006*	1.277
Constant	**−1.836**	**.304**	**36.437**	**1**	**.000**	**.159**

Notes: *ref.* stands for reference category; * significance at 5% level of significance.

that students who had friends from the UC were 1.4 times more likely to oppose AA policies compared to those who socialised with students from disadvantaged groups.

Academic discipline also significantly affects the likelihood of students' opposition to AA. All other factors being equal, students who studied sciences in their high school were 1.3 times more likely to oppose AA in college admissions than those who studied social sciences. Similarly, those who chose to study commerce subjects in college were 1.6 times more likely to oppose AA than those studying subjects in social sciences. In this study, since the correlation results show that students' field of study in college is more likely to be the same as in high school (see Supplementary File, Table A), this implies that their attitudes were formed even before entering college and were further reinforced through their selected field of study in college. Regardless of whether pre-existing attitudes influence the selection of an academic field or if attitudes are influenced by it, the results indicate that social sciences play a positive role in shaping favourable attitudes towards AA.

Among the measures of caste-based prejudice, opposition to AA based on meritocracy was found to strongly influence students' attitudes towards AA. Students who believed that the reservation policy would lower academic standards were 1.8 times more likely to oppose AA than those who did not hold this belief. Those who doubted the existence of caste-based discrimination in society were 1.7 times more likely to oppose reservation policy than those who were aware of it. Belief in caste superiority was another significant factor influencing students' attitudes towards AA. Students who believed in social hierarchies were 1.3 times more likely to oppose AA than those who did not. Additionally, students with a negative attitude towards social diversity were nearly 1.3 times more likely to oppose AA than those who recognised the value of social diversity in society. Thus, it is clear from the logistic analysis that opposition to AA is more likely to come from students from privileged backgrounds (UC category), in particular male students studying commerce or science disciplines, and who harbour caste-based prejudices.

5. Concluding Remarks and Observations

This study fills a significant gap in the literature by systematically examining college students' attitudes toward the AA policy of reservation in HE admissions for SEGs in India. To our knowledge, this is the first study using a large-scale data set to study college students' AA attitudes in India. The study results revealed that, with various controls in regression analyses, the caste affiliation of students remains the most important predictor and is significantly associated with AA attitudes. The support or opposition to AA reflected the self–interest of caste groups. While students from SEGs expressed significantly greater support for the reservation policy, students from the UCs, specifically male students, strongly opposed the reservation policy. These results are unsurprising as the policy favours members from the reserved categories (SCs, STs, OBCs) over those from the non-reserved categories (UCs) in HE admissions, with the UC group feeling that they have the most to lose from the AA policy. While caste affiliation emerges as the best indicator of AA attitudes, there are strong underpinnings of caste-based prejudices influencing AA attitudes.

Results indicate that students who believe in caste superiority oppose AA policies. Although constitutional provisions have abolished the traditional practices of the caste system by ensuring equal treatment under the law, the results suggest the prevalence of modern casteism. In other words, those with a sense of superiority oppose AA as they may view these policies as a threat to their caste-related privileges. In addition, students' views that AA goes against the principle of meritocracy imply caste-based prejudice since they think they

are being unfairly disadvantaged because lower–caste students are admitted through the reservation policy. Previous research has also shown that students admitted through the quota system are perceived as less hardworking and competent by UC students (Deshpande, 2019).

This study shows that students with low openness to diversity oppose AA policy. Such attitudes and beliefs may explain unfavourable social conditions of inter-relations on HE campuses for students from the SEGs. Previous research has established that students from SEGs experience discrimination which takes the form of low in-class interactions with their teachers, strained social interactions with their peers, and unsupportive administration (EPW, 2007; Sabharwal, 2020).

Furthermore, this study has shown that those students who doubt the existence of caste-based discrimination in society tend to oppose AA policy. In contrast to the doubts expressed by the respondents, studies in India reveal high levels of discrimination in access to public health services, housing, and labour markets (Borooah et al., 2015; Thorat & Newman, 2010). Scholars have argued that because caste-based discrimination in access to opportunities exists, a class-based approach to AA may not address persisting inter-group inequalities (Thorat et al., 2016). The reason is that members from lower-income, socially privileged groups are more likely to benefit from AA than those from similar-income but stigmatised groups, as the latter is "socially excluded" due to their group identity (Borooah, 2017). Identity-based group preference in AA policy is thus a method of providing equality of treatment in accessing opportunities, ultimately resulting in greater equality of opportunities.

Despite the study's limitations, including the need for more precise measurements to express AA attitudes, or that it is unable to fully explain why women students support AA more than men, and that it was not explicitly designed to examine attitudes toward AA policy, this study is pathbreaking. It comprehensively analyses college students' views on the AA policy of reservation in HE admissions in India. The logistic estimates indicate that the overall model includes significant variables that explain the variation in attitudes toward AA. It is important to note that the results of this study may not be generalisable to all HEIs. Therefore, we encourage further research that includes public and private universities across different disciplines. Future research in India could examine responses to specific items to capture caste-based prejudices, views on approaches to AA policy (that is, quota vs. positive measures), and perception of fairness of AA policy to better understand and account for more variation. Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn.

In conclusion, the study's findings offer insights for HEIs to combat caste-based prejudices and biases towards the reservation policy, especially with diverse students on their campuses (Sabharwal, 2020). The study's findings suggest that faculty and administrators must provide a range of curricular interventions to address the misunderstandings or opposition to AA among privileged students. This is because these attitudes are often rooted in societal ideologies of caste and ignorance and may persist without such interventions. More academic courses must be offered to help students learn about the prevalence of discrimination based on caste and its role in the persistence of social inequalities. This will help promote a better understanding of inter-group inequalities in access to opportunity structures and the rationale of identity-based group preference in AA policies. Furthermore, a significant association between supportive attitudes toward AA and interaction with diverse peer groups implies the positive influence of intergroup contact on attitudes toward AA. To promote positive attitudes towards diversity, it is essential to foster

greater interaction among peers from diverse backgrounds based on a culture of respect. This is crucial in garnering widespread support for AA policy in India and creating HE campuses that are socially just and inclusive.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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