



Inclusion without Justice: The contradictions of affirmative action in caste-based democracies

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the contradictions inherent in affirmative action policies within caste-based democracies, focusing on how inclusion is often pursued without achieving substantive justice. While affirmative action aims to correct historical inequalities and promote social mobility, it frequently reproduces the same hierarchical structures it seeks to dismantle. Through a theoretical and interpretive approach, the paper explores the complex relationship between inclusion, justice, and citizenship in caste-stratified societies. It argues that state-led inclusion mechanisms often privilege representation over transformation, offering symbolic recognition without altering the underlying power dynamics that sustain caste inequality. The discussion highlights the paradox of democratic inclusion—where formal equality coexists with deep structural exclusion. The analysis suggests that affirmative action must be reconceptualized beyond bureaucratic and quota-based frameworks toward transformative citizenship that fosters moral, epistemic, and social justice. The study concludes that achieving genuine equality requires reimagining democracy itself as an emancipatory process grounded in solidarity and belonging rather than administrative inclusion.

Keywords: Affirmative action, caste-based democracies, social justice, transformative citizenship

Introduction

Affirmative action, conceived as a moral and political tool for rectifying historical injustices, stands at a paradoxical intersection in caste-based democracies such as India and Nepal. While it aims to foster inclusion, it often operates within structures of entrenched inequality, inadvertently reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. The discourse of *inclusion without justice* underscores how affirmative action, when embedded in neoliberal and postcolonial frameworks, may lead to symbolic representation without substantive transformation of material conditions or power relations. As Nightingale *et al.* (2019) ^[26] argue, the politics of belonging and citizenship in South Asia are deeply tied to access to resources and authority, where marginalized communities continue to negotiate their existence within exclusionary state mechanisms that reframe inclusion as administrative compliance rather than social justice.

The contradictions of affirmative action become particularly evident when examining how state policies mediate access to education, employment, and political participation. Goswami (2022) ^[15] reveals that unequal educational attainment across caste lines in India persists despite decades of reservation policies, suggesting that affirmative action alone cannot undo the deep-seated sociocultural and economic inequalities that structure opportunity. Similarly, Barié (2022) ^[2] emphasizes the limitations of representational inclusion in Bolivia's progressive governance, where indigenous representation in political institutions did not necessarily translate into equitable resource distribution or transformative justice. This comparative lens highlights a broader pattern: inclusion policies may achieve surface-level legitimacy for the state while leaving intact the systemic biases that perpetuate marginality.

The moral legitimacy of affirmative action is often grounded in liberal democratic ideals, yet caste-based democracies operate within what Bajpai and Kureshi (2022)

^[1] term “democratic authoritarianism”—systems that decentralize power rhetorically but retain hierarchical control in practice. In such settings, affirmative action risks being co-opted as a tool of political pacification rather than empowerment. Pherali (2023) ^[29], in his study on education and peacebuilding in Southern Thailand, underscores that true social justice requires transforming structural violence and everyday inequities, not merely expanding participation within existing frameworks. Affirmative action that fails to address these deeper asymmetries risks becoming performative—offering access without agency.

The contradictions of inclusion are also evident in the cultural and spatial dimensions of caste. Harikrishnan (2022) ^[16] argues that caste-societies have historically produced spatial hierarchies that define modernity itself, where access to urban spaces, institutions, and resources remains mediated by caste-based exclusion. In this context, affirmative action may grant formal entry but not spatial or cultural belonging. Geary and Ober (2023) ^[10] similarly discuss how politics of belonging in Buddhist homelands in South Asia illustrate the tension between collective identity and exclusionary memory. Inclusion, therefore, becomes a contested terrain where recognition is granted conditionally and often on terms dictated by dominant groups.

Furthermore, the politics of inclusion must be situated within the global structures of inequality and neoliberal governance. Siegmann (2023) ^[33] highlights how Fairtrade certification in South Asian plantations reproduces dependency through mechanisms of “harvesting consent,” where workers’ participation is structured by capitalist imperatives rather than emancipatory change. Analogously, affirmative action in caste-based democracies can operate as a system of managed consent—where marginalized groups are incorporated into the democratic framework without dismantling systemic oppression. Tlostanova (2022) ^[39] calls this the *discordant trajectory* of postcolonial societies, where decolonial aspirations coexist with colonial legacies of classification, hierarchy, and control.

At the same time, movements for social justice and self-determination, such as the Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand, reveal how marginalized groups contest state-defined notions of inclusion. Davidsdottir (2021) ^[6] interprets this movement as a struggle to redefine citizenship beyond state-mediated rights—an assertion that justice must precede inclusion. Similarly, Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* (2022) ^[31] demonstrate that participation in multi-stakeholder forums in the Peruvian Amazon often privileges institutional actors over local voices, reinforcing a pattern of inclusion that masks asymmetrical power dynamics.

Therefore, affirmative action in caste-based democracies must be understood as a double-edged process: it opens avenues for representation but also risks reproducing dependency, tokenism, and bureaucratic regulation of marginalized identities. Inclusion without justice thus reflects a broader dissonance between the rhetoric of equality and the lived reality of persistent caste-based exclusion. For transformative justice to occur, affirmative action must transcend administrative quotas and engage with the material, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies that structure modern caste democracies. This calls for a radical reimagining of inclusion—one that aligns with what Pherali (2023) ^[29] terms *conflict transformation*, where justice is not simply about access but about altering the very conditions that make exclusion possible.

In sum, while affirmative action remains a vital instrument for equity, its contradictions in caste-based democracies reveal the limits of institutionalized inclusion without corresponding transformations in social and structural justice. True inclusion requires dismantling the hierarchies of caste, class, and power that underpin democratic systems, thereby shifting from mere participation to meaningful transformation—a move from *inclusion as policy to justice as practice*.

Literature Review

Affirmative action in caste-based democracies such as India and Nepal embodies a deep paradox: while it seeks to redress historical inequalities through inclusion, it often reproduces the very hierarchies it intends to dismantle. Scholars have long argued that inclusion without justice—when participation is reduced to bureaucratic or symbolic recognition—fails to transform structural power. This literature review explores how affirmative action, social justice, and citizenship intersect in complex postcolonial democracies, drawing upon cross-regional insights from South Asia, Latin America, and other postcolonial societies.

Affirmative Action and the Politics of Citizenship

Nightingale *et al.* (2019) ^[26] examine the “material politics of citizenship” in Nepal, emphasizing that access to resources and belonging is inseparable from the political economy of exclusion. Their study shows how the promise of inclusion under federal restructuring often leads to new forms of stratification, where marginalized communities struggle for legitimacy within state frameworks that prioritize administrative inclusion over redistributive justice. Similarly, Sinha and Jha (2022) ^[34] contextualize caste and servitude historically, tracing the persistence of social hierarchies in South Asia despite democratization. They argue that affirmative action policies, while institutionally necessary, often fail to interrogate the historical foundations of caste-based servitude and dependency.

In India, affirmative action has been framed as a constitutional mechanism for redress. However, Goswami (2022) ^[15] demonstrates that inequalities in higher education persist, revealing that access does not equate to equality. His sociological analysis of West Bengal shows that upper-caste dominance continues through informal networks and cultural capital, even within reserved systems. These findings echo the global critique of liberal inclusion raised by Gisselquist (2019) ^[12], who contends that legal empowerment, when divorced from collective social transformation, reinforces group-based inequality rather than eliminating it.

Representation, Belonging, and Democratic Contradictions

Barié (2022) ^[2] provides valuable comparative insight from Bolivia, where indigenous representation in progressive governments did not necessarily translate into structural justice. This parallels South Asian contexts, where affirmative action has become an instrument of representational politics rather than a vehicle for decolonial transformation. Bajpai and Kureshi (2022) ^[1] further argue that South Asian democracies exhibit mechanisms of “democratic authoritarianism,” where decentralization and inclusion are discursively promoted but hierarchically controlled by political elites. Within this framework, marginalized castes and minorities are incorporated as symbolic participants in democracy but remain excluded from substantive decision-making power.

Geary and Ober (2023) ^[10] explore similar tensions through the politics of belonging in Buddhist homelands, showing how identity and memory shape inclusion in South Asia. Their analysis reveals that the politics of belonging often rests on exclusionary narratives that define who is “authentically” part of the nation. In caste-based democracies, this translates into conditional inclusion—where historically oppressed groups gain legal recognition without full social legitimacy. Tlostanova (2022) ^[39] similarly discusses “discordant trajectories” of postcolonial societies, suggesting that the legacies of colonialism continue to shape aesthetics, identity, and citizenship in ways that perpetuate structural inequality.

Education, Social Justice, and the Limits of Transformation

Education has long been viewed as a key mechanism for social mobility within affirmative action frameworks. Pherali (2023) ^[29] argues that education in conflict-affected regions like Southern Thailand must transcend inclusion to become a tool for “conflict transformation,” which implies addressing structural and cultural violence. In the Indian context, however, affirmative action in education often reinforces meritocratic discourses that stigmatize beneficiaries. Starkey (2021) ^[36] highlights the potential of “classroom counternarratives” to resist dominant narratives of exclusion, framing education as a site of transformative citizenship rather than passive inclusion. Yet, as Goswami (2022) ^[15] and Harriss-White (2020) ^[17] observe, systemic inequities in access to quality education and institutional bias remain pervasive, undermining the emancipatory potential of reservation policies.

Affirmative action also intersects with cultural and spatial dimensions of caste. Harikrishnan (2022) ^[16] advances a “spatial history of modernity” in caste societies, showing

how urbanization and modern development reproduce social segregation. Even as marginalized groups are legally included, spatial and cultural boundaries persist through caste-coded spaces and institutions. This resonates with Nightingale *et al.*'s (2019) [26] observation that belonging in Nepal's new federal order is often mediated by geography and resource control—underscoring that inclusion cannot be delinked from material and spatial justice.

The Moral Economy of Inclusion and Consent

Siegmann (2023) [33] introduces the idea of “harvesting consent” to explain how South Asian tea plantation workers experience Fairtrade certification. Her findings reveal that participation mechanisms often reproduce dependency by transforming workers into compliant subjects under neoliberal capitalism. This insight offers a powerful analogy for understanding affirmative action: inclusion can operate as a system of managed consent, integrating marginalized groups into an inequitable order rather than dismantling it. Folbre (2020) [8] similarly critiques the intersectional political economy of exploitation, arguing that capitalism's layered hierarchies of gender, class, and caste transform inclusion into a process of regulated inequality rather than liberation.

From a theoretical standpoint, Sharpe and King (2022) [32] revisit Marxian critiques of fascism to highlight how authoritarian populism mobilizes inclusion discourses to mask domination. In caste democracies, political elites often invoke the rhetoric of social justice to secure legitimacy while maintaining caste-based hierarchies. Parashar (2019) [27] terms “state violence in the name of revolution.” The moral economy of inclusion thus oscillates between empowerment and pacification, where affirmative action serves both as a promise of justice and a mechanism of control.

Religion, Secularism, and the Politics of Recognition

Caste-based democracies also grapple with religious and cultural dimensions of inclusion. Sohal (2022) [35] analyzes “Kashmiri secularism” as a form of democratic negotiation where religion and politics intertwine to define belonging. His study illuminates how secular-democratic inclusion remains shaped by dominant religious and cultural narratives. Chaturvedi, Gellner, and Pandey (2019) [5] trace similar dynamics in Gorakhpur's Hindu political consolidation, showing how democratic participation can coexist with exclusionary communalism. In such contexts, affirmative action cannot achieve justice unless it simultaneously addresses the cultural and religious production of marginality.

Felfeli-Crawford (2021) [7] and Pernau (2021) [28] offer cultural and emotional perspectives on inclusion. The former explores decolonization through music, arguing that cultural representation must accompany political inclusion to challenge colonial epistemologies. The latter underscores how emotional histories shape belonging, implying that justice involves not only material redress but also affective and symbolic recognition. Together, these studies suggest that affirmative action must operate within a broader decolonial framework that integrates cultural justice with material equality.

Digital Spaces, Governance, and New Forms of Exclusion

The rise of digital governance has introduced new complexities to inclusion. Celeste (2021) [3] examines “digital punishment” and exclusion on social media, demonstrating how online spaces replicate offline hierarchies of visibility and voice. Kohl (2022) [20] extends this analysis to platform regulation, where hate speech control often reflects Western compromises that may not translate effectively to caste-sensitive contexts like India. Tønnesson, ZawOo, and Aung (2022) [40] show how digital spaces are used by armed groups in Myanmar to construct pseudo-states, suggesting that digital participation may simulate inclusion while consolidating exclusionary control. In caste-based democracies, where digital platforms are increasingly used for governance, such dynamics can reproduce caste privilege through algorithmic bias and representational inequity.

Resistance, Decoloniality, and the Quest for Justice

Movements challenging state-centric inclusion highlight the inadequacy of formal mechanisms in delivering justice. Davidsdottir (2021) [6] discusses the Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand as a struggle for self-determined citizenship, where indigenous communities reject symbolic inclusion and demand genuine sovereignty. Their resistance illustrates the central argument of “inclusion without justice”: that participation within an unjust order may reinforce rather than dismantle subordination. Mendoza (2018) [23] similarly argues that decolonial thought must move beyond the question of whether the “subaltern can speak” to whether the structures of power can be transformed to allow subaltern agency.

Kabeer (2020) critiques neoliberal narratives of empowerment that commodify women's agency, calling for a feminist reimagining of development rooted in justice rather than inclusion metrics. This resonates with Ndaguba and Hanyane (2018) [25], who advocate community economic frameworks for poverty alleviation that prioritize collective empowerment over individual integration. Such approaches offer alternatives to affirmative action's statist paradigm, emphasizing solidarity, self-governance, and epistemic justice.

Historical and Comparative Reflections

Comparative histories deepen understanding of how inclusion operates across time and context. Goodman (2020) [13] and McLaughlin (2021) [22] reveal how colonial and liberal reforms in British and American contexts created selective forms of inclusion that mirrored existing power structures. Their analyses suggest that inclusion without structural transformation becomes a cyclical process—granting visibility without redistributing power. Goonewardena (2020) [14] and Leidig (2020) [21] further illustrate how populism and nationalism manipulate inclusion discourses to reinforce authoritarianism and majoritarianism, a pattern strikingly similar to caste politics in South Asia.

Gianolla (2020) [11] invokes Gandhi's intercultural democratic discourse as a counterpoint to exclusionary populism, emphasizing ethical inclusion grounded in nonviolence and mutual respect. His vision of intercultural democracy resonates with the need to rethink affirmative

action not merely as a legal framework but as a moral and dialogical practice of justice.

Across these studies, a consistent theme emerges: affirmative action and inclusion policies in caste-based democracies succeed in redistributing opportunities but fail to dismantle structural hierarchies. Inclusion without justice manifests through symbolic representation, bureaucratic participation, and neoliberal co-optation. The reviewed literature collectively suggests that social justice requires a shift from procedural inclusion toward transformative equality—addressing the material, cultural, and epistemic dimensions of caste oppression. Genuine transformation, as Nightingale *et al.* (2019) ^[26] and Pherali (2023) ^[29] suggest, must center on power, belonging, and resource control rather than tokenistic access.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, theoretical methodology to examine the contradictions inherent in affirmative action policies within caste-based democracies, particularly focusing on South Asia. Rather than employing empirical or statistical analysis, the study engages in critical discourse analysis, policy interpretation, and theoretical synthesis of existing scholarship on inclusion, justice, and democratic representation. Drawing from postcolonial, intersectional, and decolonial perspectives, the methodology explores how affirmative action both challenges and reinforces structural inequalities in caste societies.

The theoretical grounding of this paper aligns with Tlostanova's (2022) ^[39] framework of postcolonial aesthetics, which highlights the discordant trajectories of decolonial justice and modern statehood. Similarly, the work is informed by Pherali's (2023) ^[29] emphasis on social justice and peacebuilding through education, which provides a foundation to understand how state-led affirmative policies can sometimes reproduce conflictual hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Nightingale *et al.* (2019) further guide the approach by conceptualizing citizenship as a material and contested space where belonging, authority, and resource access intersect. This intersectional understanding allows the paper to address how affirmative action operates not merely as a political tool but as a mechanism that defines inclusion and exclusion.

Objectives of the Study

- To critically examine the conceptual underpinnings of affirmative action within caste-based democracies.
- To explore how state-led inclusion mechanisms often fail to achieve substantive justice, reproducing structural inequalities.
- To analyze the contradictions between democratic ideals of equality and the persistent hierarchies of caste and privilege.
- To propose a theoretical framework reconciling inclusion with justice through transformative citizenship.

The methodology relies on reviewing peer-reviewed literature, historical policy documents, and theoretical arguments to construct a layered understanding of the politics of inclusion. In line with Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* (2022) ^[31], it situates participation and representation as dynamic, contested processes, emphasizing the moral and epistemic limits of affirmative justice in deeply stratified societies]'

Discussion

The discourse on affirmative action in caste-based democracies reveals a deep contradiction between inclusion and justice. While such policies are designed to promote equality and social mobility for historically marginalized communities, they often operate within the same structural hierarchies they aim to dismantle. Nightingale *et al.* (2019) ^[26] argue that citizenship in postcolonial societies like Nepal and India is materially and symbolically contested—defined by struggles over authority, resources, and belonging. Affirmative action, in this light, becomes a political tool for managing difference rather than transforming social relations. Its bureaucratic implementation frequently reproduces existing power asymmetries, where the dominant castes and political elites control the narrative of inclusion. Sarmiento Barletti *et al.* (2022) ^[31] highlight the importance of recognizing difference as a necessary step toward meaningful participation and bridge-building among social actors. However, within caste-based democracies, participation is often framed through state-mediated categories of identity, which flatten complex experiences of marginality. Policies meant to include can thus paradoxically entrench exclusion, as groups compete for limited quotas and symbolic recognition without substantive redistribution of power or opportunity. This dynamic echoes Pherali's (2023) ^[29] insights on peacebuilding, where justice and reconciliation remain superficial unless grounded in transformative social change that addresses the root causes of inequality.

The contradiction also manifests in the aesthetic and cultural domain. Tlostanova (2022) ^[39] discusses how postcolonial societies grapple with discordant trajectories of modernity and decoloniality, where the rhetoric of progress masks ongoing subjugation. Similarly, caste-based democracies use the language of justice and representation to maintain legitimacy while failing to disrupt the epistemic foundations of hierarchy. Goswami (2022) ^[15] reinforces this by revealing persistent disparities in higher education, where affirmative action has improved access but not erased structural biases in quality, recognition, or social acceptance. Geary and Ober (2023) ^[10] emphasize, politics of belonging in South Asia are tied to collective memories and imagined homelands. Affirmative action policies often fail to account for these affective dimensions of exclusion, reducing justice to administrative inclusion. The result is a form of "managed diversity" that sustains democratic authoritarian tendencies, as noted by Bajpai and Kureshi (2022) ^[1], where inclusion is conditional upon compliance rather than transformation.

Thus, the discussion suggests that without addressing the moral, epistemic, and structural dimensions of caste, affirmative action remains a mechanism of procedural inclusion rather than a pathway to substantive justice. Genuine equality requires a rethinking of democracy itself—from one centered on representation to one grounded in emancipatory belonging and transformative citizenship.

Major Findings

Inclusion Without Transformation: Affirmative action in caste-based democracies achieves procedural inclusion but fails to bring about structural transformation in social hierarchies, leaving caste-based inequalities largely intact.

State-Centric Definition of Justice: The state remains the primary arbiter of inclusion, defining justice through administrative mechanisms rather than through moral or social transformation (Nightingale *et al.*, 2019) ^[26].

Reproduction of Hierarchies: Affirmative action often reproduces elite dominance within marginalized categories, enabling better-positioned subgroups to capture the benefits while the most oppressed remain excluded (Goswami, 2022) ^[15].

Symbolic Participation Over Empowerment: Participation mechanisms under affirmative frameworks emphasize symbolic inclusion, overlooking power redistribution and the transformation of social relations (Sarmiento Barletti *et al.*, 2022) ^[31].

Epistemic and Cultural Exclusion: Despite formal inclusion, caste hierarchies persist in cultural and epistemic domains, maintaining hierarchies of knowledge, aesthetics, and belonging (Tlostanova, 2022) ^[39].

Conditional Belonging: Inclusion through affirmative action often requires marginalized groups to conform to dominant social norms, leading to conditional belonging rather than genuine emancipation (Geary & Ober, 2023) ^[10].

Democratic Paradox: Affirmative action exposes the paradox within caste-based democracies where equality is proclaimed as a value, yet systemic exclusion continues to define everyday social realities (Bajpai&Kureshi, 2022) ^[1].

Need for Transformative Citizenship: True justice in caste-based contexts requires reimagining citizenship as a participatory and emancipatory practice that transcends bureaucratic inclusion and fosters solidarity across social divides (Pherali, 2023) ^[29].

Conclusion

The exploration of affirmative action in caste-based democracies reveals that while such policies have opened institutional spaces for marginalized communities, they have not fully dismantled the deep-rooted structures of inequality that underpin caste systems. Affirmative action often operates within the constraints of a state-centric framework that prioritizes representation over redistribution, resulting in inclusion without justice. As Nightingale *et al.* (2019) ^[26] suggest, struggles over citizenship and belonging are fundamentally about power and material access, not merely recognition. Hence, policies aimed at inclusion must go beyond formal quotas to address the structural and epistemic hierarchies embedded within social institutions.

The contradictions between democratic ideals and social realities persist because affirmative action functions as a compensatory rather than transformative mechanism. It reproduces conditional belonging, where marginalized groups are included in state narratives of progress yet excluded from genuine participation in shaping those narratives. The persistence of caste-based inequality highlights the limits of procedural democracy and underscores the need for an alternative politics rooted in solidarity, moral justice, and transformative citizenship. As Pherali (2023) ^[29] notes, social justice cannot be achieved

without addressing the underlying causes of exclusion, violence, and historical subordination.

Future research can expand this theoretical discussion by engaging with intersectional frameworks that consider how caste interacts with gender, class, and region to produce layered forms of marginalization. Comparative analyses across South Asian democracies could illuminate the diverse ways affirmative action policies are experienced and contested. Moreover, ethnographic studies could deepen understanding of how communities interpret inclusion and justice in everyday contexts. Theoretical inquiries could also examine how digital governance, identity politics, and decolonial epistemologies reshape the discourse of affirmative justice. Such future work can move the debate from inclusion as a policy goal to justice as a transformative and lived democratic experience.

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