

Deconstructing Merit in a Merit, Efficiency, and Intelligence Economy

Srijani Roy

Humanities and Social Sciences Department, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0525>

Received: 18 September 2025; Accepted: 24 September 2025; Published: 04 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to complicate the category of ‘merit’ within the contemporary Indian context, particularly in relation to the affirmative action policies and the introduction of the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota. While merit is often framed as a neutral and an objective measure of individual effort, this paper argues how it is deeply embedded within the histories of caste, class, and intergenerational accumulation of capital. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu’s forms of capital, Deshpande’s notion of castelessness, and Darity Jr.’s theory of proprietary claims, it traces how privilege is often naturalized as ‘ability’ and reproduced as ‘merit’ within the existing educational and employment systems. By situating the ‘merit vs. quota’ debate within the broader neoliberal transformations and amidst the global challenges to affirmative action, this paper demonstrates how meritocracy serves as a powerful ideology that legitimizes inequality while appearing egalitarian. In conclusion, the analysis calls for a rethinking of merit as a socially constructed and relational category, rather than a fixed individual trait, and argues for affirmative action policies that move beyond simplistic binaries of ‘merit’ and ‘reservation’. It is only by critically interrogating the making of merit can we reframe social justice debates in ways that address enduring inequalities and create more inclusive futures.

Keywords: Meritocracy; Caste; Affirmative Action; Knowledge Economy; Social Reproduction; EWS Reservation

INTRODUCTION

“Wo Kota se nai, Quota se h” – a remark by a BTech student during my Teaching Assistance class! While the entire wordplay of homophones seemed striking, it also motivated me to delve deeper into how do people perceive merit, as earned ability or as an inherited privilege?

Zooming out, this question of merit has become a point of contention across the world. In June 2023, the United States of America, through a Supreme Court Judgment, had ruled against race-based affirmative action in college admission. This was argued to create an engaged global workforce that is grounded in ‘meritocracy’, thereby calling for a shift from ‘DEI’ (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) to ‘MEI’ (Merit, Excellence, and Intelligence) (Guynn, 2025).

Closer home the issue of reservation in higher education, government employment, and even political representation has had its own share of debate, discussion, as well as violence often reducing it to the binary of ‘merit’ vs ‘quota’.

By situating the ‘merit vs quota’ debate within the broader questions of caste, class, and intergenerational capital, this paper aims to probe into the question of how is ‘merit’ socially constructed in the context of affirmative action in India - is it perceived as an outcome of individual effort and ability, or as a reflection of historically accumulated group-based privilege?

Certain theoretical frameworks that would be relied on include Satish Deshpande’s (2014) conception of ‘castelessness’ among the upper caste individuals wherein he argues the individuals over the course of time have converted their caste capital into class capital; Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of ‘social reproduction’

which emphasises that education is not only an equalizer, but a way through which existing social hierarchies get reproduced and William Darity Jr.'s (2017) theory of 'proprietary claim' that highlights how dominant groups in trying to maintain their relative position claim exclusive access to certain forms of capital or resources.

The Ideological Foundation Of Merit

Before one attempts to deconstruct the idea of merit, it is essential to see how the principle of merit emerged. In the 18th and 19th century Europe with the collapse of feudalism, merit came to be seen as alternative to the existing practices of inheritance by birth and restriction of positions based on group affinity. Thus, the idea of a meritocratic regime was based on its claim to efficiency and equality, where the best person for the work was chosen from an open field (Madan, 2007).

In India, Ambedkar's seminal work *The Annihilation of Caste* notes, "*The capacity to appreciate merit in a man apart from his caste does not exist in a Hindu*". Thus, caste-based hereditary education and employment had come to be seen as antithetic to the idea of modern India and there was a call to restructure the society and economy on the idea of merit and meritocracy (Ambedkar, 1936).

Deshpande notes how one of the central tensions in making the Constitution was to on one hand, abolish or delegitimize caste and the associated privileges and disadvantages, while on the other hand, to redress the disabilities of caste through provisions of affirmative action for the historically marginalized groups (Deshpande, 2013). Hence, one can note how merit here, emerges as resting on an egalitarian principle that creates an equal opportunity for all.

Thus, raising the question that if merit is a way of letting go of previous systems of hierarchy and creating a neutral field for all, how does it play out in a neoliberal, knowledge-based economy? Do the older systems fade away or do they manifest in newer ways? A question that we attempt to deal with here.

Merit In The Knowledge Economy

It was firmly believed that with modernization, traditional practices of hierarchy in India would fade away. However, studies have exhibited a more ambiguous picture (Mosse, 2018).

In a study of HR managers in Delhi-NCR, Jodhka and Newman (2007) found unanimous support for hiring 'strictly on merit' and not based on inherited privileges. This is in tandem with their constant use of words like "professionalism, credentialism, standardization" in neoliberal India. Yet when probed further, merit was associated with having educated parents, urban upbringing, and 'good' family background, all proxies for class and caste privilege - but termed as a preference for a "cosmopolitan meritorious individual".

This idea of the "cosmopolitan meritorious individual" comes alive strongly in Ajantha Subramaniam's (2019) study of the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras wherein she notes how for the longest of time given its 'status of national eminence' and in the name of merit, IITs did not comply to the rules of affirmative action. It was only in 1973 and later in 2006, that reservation policy for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes was implemented respectively. Her ethnographic study shows the association of IIT with the knowledge economy and how individuals adopted a casteless marker and became 'the intellectual barred of caste' which follows Satish Deshpande's (2013) argument of 'castelessness' as a subjectivity that is produced among the upper castes of India who have converted their caste capital into modern capital or class capital.

However, Subramaniam (2019) complicates the idea that the caste capital simply transforms into modern capital. In her work, she observes an oscillation between the denial and assertion of caste - particularly among Tamil Brahmins, who frame their historical association with knowledge as both tradition and merit. While this appears to contrast with Deshpande's (2013) notion of upper-caste castelessness, it can be read alongside William Darity Jr.'s (2017) theory of 'proprietary claim' whereby dominant groups maintain their relative status by asserting identity and privilege when it is threatened. In this sense, caste capital is both disavowed and mobilized, reinforcing merit as a class and caste construct.

These examples show that merit in the knowledge economy is not detached from the social location of individuals which carries with it the long history of social inequality, despite its positioning of neutrality. This brings us to the question of what really goes into the making of merit?

The Making Of Merit

As per the Indian Constitution, higher education unlike primary education is not seen as a right and thereby, requires a funnel effect to sort the “right” students and hence, merit-based discrimination is considered to be the most legitimate and desirable (Deshpande, 2006). The role of scholastic examinations like JEE, NEET, UPSC then is to identify who will produce the best return on social investment – the ‘rank’ not only becomes the sole marker for the two mutually exclusive groups of “merit” vs “without merit” but as the ‘biographical number’ (Ruddock, 2021) governing their lifelong identity.

But what lies behind the success in competitive exams? Marc Galanter (1984) notes 3 broad resources required to succeed in competitive exams – Economic resources (access to education, training, and even the time to study and freedom from work); Social and Cultural Resources (networks, guidance, confidence) and lastly, one’s hardwork and intrinsic ability (Deshpande, 2006). Thus, merit which is seen as the product of the last category is in reality intrinsically weaved into the first two.

At this juncture, Bourdieu’s seminal work on ‘Forms of Capital’ (1986) helps us to unpack the connections between the various capitals. Bourdieu, like Francis Stewart (2009), argues that all forms of capital, economic, social, and cultural, are interconnected, with economic capital as their foundation. His work on the French society depicted how economic capital although most easily transferable (through inheritance) could be challenged and herein, the reliance on subtle forms of cultural capital like education became a way of legitimizing privilege by making inherited advantages appear as personal merit. Thus, elites increasingly use the education system to ensure the reproduction of their status in a way that appears fair but continues to reinforce social hierarchies.

Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) argues how social capital has a multiplier effect. It becomes an aggregate of resources that arises from a membership in a group - the group provides each member with a collective backing. This intersects with Darity Jr.’s (2017) notion of ‘proprietary claims,’ wherein dominant groups feel entitled to have exclusive access to education, decision-making, or social mobility, helping them preserve their relative advantage under the guise of merit, often resisting policies that might redistribute access.

Herein, Jeffery et. al’s ethnographic study of Jat and Dalit boys of Uttar Pradesh can be a case in point. Through their study they found how economic and social capital associated with the upper caste Jats helped them in accessing information and networks to ensure their boys get private jobs in urban centres. Young Jat men, especially the ones not from rich households engaged in ‘fall back jobs’ like private teaching, contractual services etc or at times were complacent with being unemployed but were not seen taking up jobs in manual wage labour in contrast to the Dalits who because of their lack of social and economic capital had lesser chance to move away for work and had to take up manual wage labour as there were less alternatives present for them. This analysis further complicates the idea of what can and what cannot be considered as “merit” (Jeffery, 2008).

Hence, one can argue how ‘merit’ itself is masked and marked with a long-standing history of accumulation, conversion, and power not just of an individual but of categorical groups as well. This gets reflected in Ambedkar’s critique of the caste system where the structural system already reserved opportunities for certain groups, while structurally excluding the other (Ambedkar, 1936). Thus, our complication of the term merit itself challenges its static nature and drawing from Mosse calls for a more *dynamic and relational* approach towards it (Mosse, 2018).

Reframing Merit Through Ews Reservations

The introduction of the 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in 2019 with the 103rd Constitutional Amendment marked a turning point in India’s affirmative action discourse. While caste-based reservation was implemented to address historical discrimination and stigmatisation, the introduction of the

EWS reservation was to address the inequality of access and opportunity that torments the poorer sections even among the social elite castes (Wankhede, 2023).

However, the EWS quota had faced its own set of legal challenges, the Janhit Abhiyan vs. Union of India (2020) case had argued against the EWS reservation on two grounds – first, that it breached the 50% ceiling of quota and second, that it discriminated against the marginalized groups, especially the ones who face social and economic backwardness. Despite having faced questions of its legal validity the Supreme Court in a 3:2 bench decision suggested that the reservation for the poor section of the population does not harm the basic structure of the Constitution (Sharma, 2024).

In line with the Supreme Court's judgement, even the popular discourse around the EWS reservation for the upper-caste individuals is seen as a "reverse" to the "reverse discrimination". This counterweight can be seen in tandem with Darity Jr.'s (2017) argument of 'proprietary claim' by the dominant group to reclaim what they believe to be their right.

Ostensibly, while the EWS reservation may seem to be a step in the right direction towards creating a more equal society; a closer look reveals how conveniently it overlooks the social and cultural capital inherited by upper-caste groups. This reinforces what Mosse (2018) refers to as 'opportunity hoarding', where caste advantage is sustained through access to elite networks, institutions, and norms masked as neutral mechanisms of the market.

This then brings us to the question that Wankhede (2023) raises: is reservation now a poverty-alleviation programme? The shift to economic capital as a source of affirmative action, also fails to acknowledge the embeddedness of the social and cultural capital that operates through informal networks, institutional privileges and cultural knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986); thereby, not taking into account the empirical evidences that have shown greater intergenerational occupational mobility among forward castes as compared to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or Other Backward Classes and the precarity of simultaneous sticky floor and higher chance of downward mobility that dominates the lives of the historically marginalized groups (Vegard Iversen, 2017).

Furthermore, as Yadav and Dhawan (2022) note, the judgement of EWS reservation in a way sidelines the entire discussion on merit, which as argued throughout the paper becomes a basis for challenging affirmative action time and again. Thereby, highlighting the phrase they use "*merit matters only when we discuss 'their' children, not when we discuss 'our' children*" (Dhawan, 2022).

Hence, viewing economic hardship among upper-caste groups as a sole reason for reservation reasserts merit as an individual trait briefly disrupted by poverty but not shaped by structural privileges. Thereby highlighting how the category of "merit" itself gets moulded often at the whims and returns for the dominant groups.

Rethinking Merit In Today's World

Today, both globally and in India, affirmative action faces renewed pushback; framed as a threat to "merit" and "efficiency". The crackdown of affirmative action in colleges of United States has been justified by arguing how diversity agenda in itself is a way of promoting racial preference and giving way to skill gap which diminishes "objective academic ranking" or "merit" (Donald, 2018).

Even within India, the implementation of the Mandal Commission Recommendation faced severe backlash with mass of students coming to the streets to protest. In neoliberal India there has been a growing consensus on caste becoming archaic and not affecting the lives of people now and thereby calling either for an end to reservations and paving way for merit or tweaking the norms of reservation in ways that benefit certain groups (often the dominant ones) as was seen in the case of EWS reservation.

However, this paper attempted to deconstruct this idea of merit as a neutral, value-free, objective individual trait and initiate a way to reimagine it as a socially and historically constructed category in itself. The emergence of the EWS reservation, the increasing focus on cosmopolitan individualism makes it more so necessary to understand the embeddedness of merit into the social relations.

To rethink merit, then will require us to conceive merit beyond a static score but to evaluate it through a dynamic and relational lens taking into account the historical marginalization (Ambedkar, 1936), the dearth of capital to begin with (Mohanty, 2001), the conversion of caste capital into neoliberal cultural and social capital (Newman, 2007) (Deshpande, 2013), and the constant threat of downward mobility that affects certain groups more than the others (Vegard Iversen, 2017).

Hence, drawing from David Mosse (2018) social policy in India would require to move beyond viewing historical marginalizations through archaic lens that can be solved by implementing certain special measures temporarily.

In conclusion, there is an urgent need to move beyond the binaries of reservation, “quota vs merit” to create policies that address market and non-market-based inequalities, remove barriers and design more holistic affirmative policies that address structural inequalities affecting the lived experiences of individuals.

REFERENCE

1. Ambedkar, B. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste*.
2. Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–58). Greenwood.
3. Craig Jeffery, P. J. (2005). Reproducing Difference? Schooling, Jobs, and Empowerment in Uttar Pradesh, India. *World Development* Vol. 33, No. 12, 2085–2101.
4. Craig Jeffery, P. J. (2008). Degrees without Freedom? Education, Masculinities, and Unemployment in North India. San Francisco: Stanford University Press.
5. Deshpande, S. (2006). Exclusive Inequalities: Merit, Caste and Discrimination in Higher Education Today. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2438-2444.
6. Deshpande, S. (2013). Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the 'General Category' . *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32-39.
7. Dhawan, Y. Y. (2022, November 09). EWS verdict shows merit matters only when it's 'their' children, not 'our' kids. Retrieved from The Print: <https://theprint.in/opinion/ews-verdict-shows-merit-matters-only-when-its-their-children-not-our-kids/1206345/>
8. Donald, H. M. (2018). *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine our Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
9. Guynn, J. (2025, March 20). DEI explained: What is DEI and why is it so divisive? What you need to know. Retrieved from USA Today: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2025/03/04/trump-dei-backlash-explained/81170427007/>
10. Madan, A. (2007). Sociologising Merit. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3044-3050.
11. Mohanty, B. (2001). Land Distribution among Scheduled Castes and Tribes. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
12. Mosse, D. (2018). Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage. *World Development*, 422-436.
13. Newman, S. S. (2007). In the Name of Globalisation: Meritocracy, Productivity and the Hidden Language of Caste. *Economic and Political Weekly* , 4125-4132.
14. Ruddock, A. (2021). *Special Treatment: Student Doctors at All India Institute of Medical Sciences*. California: Stanford University Press.
15. Sharma, D. S. (2024). Reservation Policies in Transition: The Supreme Court's Approach to the EWS Quota and 50% Cap. *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* .
16. Singh, S. M. (2012). How Close Does the Apple Fall to the Tree? Some Evidence from India on Intergenerational Occupational Mobility. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
17. Stewart, F. (2009). Horizontal Inequality: Two Types of Traps. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 315-340.
18. Subramaniam, A. (2019). *The Caste of Merit*. London: Harvard University Press.
19. Vegard Iversen, A. K. (2017). Rags to Riches? Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
20. Wankhede, H. S. (2023). Does EWS Reservation Redraft the Principles of Social Justice? *Economic & Political Weekly*.

21. William Darity Jr., D. H. (2017). Stratification Economics - A General Theory of Intergroup Inequality. In S. R. ANDREA FLYNN, The Hidden Rules of Race. USA: Cambridge University Press.