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Telangana's SC subclassification risks reinforcing old inequities

A refined system factoring in generational disadvantage, schooling, and employment history will ensure true representation for most marginalised SCs.

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Former Minister Motkupalli Narsimhulu pours milk on a statue of B.R. Ambedkar to celebrate the Supreme Court's judgment in favour of subclassifying SCs and ST for the purpose of reservation, at Tank Bund in Hyderabad on August 2, 2024. | Photo Credit: G. RAMAKRISHNA

Following the **Supreme Court's** validation last year of subclassifications within the SC and ST categories, the Telangana government, led by Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, appointed a single-member judicial commission in November 2024. Headed by the retired Justice Shameem Akhtar, it was tasked with assessing intragroup disparities among various castes within the SC category and proposing a rational redistribution of reservation benefits.

As part of its mandate, the Justice Akhtar Commission reviewed earlier studies, including the findings of the 1997 **Ramachandra Raju Commission** and the 2007 Usha Mehra Commission. Both reports found that Malas and Adi-Andhras had disproportionately benefited from SC reservations. To address this imbalance, both commissions recommended subclassifying SCs into four groups on the basis of population size and redistributing reservation benefits accordingly.

Between December 2024 and January 2025, the commission conducted extensive field visits to Dalit habitations across multiple districts of Telangana. In addition to receiving nearly 1,100 petitions from both supporters and opponents of subclassification, the commission gathered wide-ranging data on SC demographics, literacy levels, financial assistance, employment, education, **government job** appointments, and political representation. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, information was sourced from government departments, grant-in-aid institutions, and public sector undertakings.

A new three-tier system

The commission proposed a new three-tier system, wherein all 59 SCs in the State are divided into three groups. This grouping is based on each caste's social, economic, and educational status, with each group allocated a certain percentage of the SC quota in proportion to its population size.

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Group I consists of 15 castes identified as the most marginalised, representing 3.3 per cent of the SC population. This group is allocated 1 per cent of reservation from the SC quota.

Group II consists of 18 castes that have moderately benefited from reservation. This group constitutes 62.7 per cent of the SC population and is recommended for 9 per cent of the SC reservation.

Group III consists of 26 castes that have largely reaped the benefits of reservation policies. This group is allotted 5 per cent of the SC quota as it accounts for 34 per cent of the SC population. On February 4, 2025, announcing this subclassification formula to a supportive Assembly, **Revanth Reddy** passionately hailed it as a “permanent solution” to the decades-long demand for equitable redistribution of reservations within the SC community.



Chief Minister Revanth Reddy being greeted by his party members after the Supreme Court's judgment, in Hyderabad on August 1, 2024. | Photo Credit: Mohammed Aleemuddin/ANI

The formula offers a more balanced distribution compared with earlier attempts, such as the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes (Rationalisation of Reservations) Act, 2000. Justice Akhtar, for devising the method, and Revanth Reddy, for his enthusiasm and commitment to its implementation, deserve recognition and appreciation.

However, two critical questions remain: Does this subclassification truly achieve justice for the most marginalised within the SC category, or does it merely restructure existing disparities within a new framework? Can it genuinely serve as a permanent solution, as claimed by the Chief Minister?

Old concerns resurface

Opponents of **subclassification** argue that dominant groups within each new category may continue to monopolise benefits. This concern was raised in the late 1990s by the Mala-Mahanadu, which opposed the Madiga Dandora's demand for the subclassification of SC reservation to curb the dominance of Malas and Adi-Andhras. Critics also point to Supreme Court Justice Bela Trivedi's dissenting opinion in the case involving the question of whether States have the right to sub-classify SCs, that subclassification could deprive certain sections of SCs of their rightful share. While the existing system allows dominant SC groups to appropriate benefits, the proposed subclassification by the Justice

Akhtar Commission does not guarantee that the weakest castes within each new category will be prioritised. In effect, it simply reshuffles the existing privileges.

For instance, among the 15 castes in Group I, Jangam, Dakkal, and Matangi are better placed than Pambala and Samban, which remain almost invisible to mainstream society. Similarly, in Group II, Arundhatiya and Madigas are significantly more organised and socio-economically better positioned than Dandasi and Yatala. A similar pattern emerges in Group III, where Adi-Andhra and Malas enjoy greater social, economic, educational, and political advantages than other castes in their category. As a result, even after sub-classification, the relatively stronger castes within each group may continue to dominate reservation benefits, further marginalising the weakest among them.

The way forward

“Justice to the weakest first” is a fundamental principle of our Constitution. Judges who favoured the sub-classification of SC reservations have framed their arguments around this essential value. However, merely dividing quotas by categorising SCs into three groups is insufficient to ensure fairness. A more refined approach—what I call a “merit-based equity model”—should be adopted, incorporating three key criteria: generational access, schooling background, and employment history. This model assigns greater weightage to those facing the most severe disadvantages, ensuring that reservation benefits reach those who need them most.

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Generation: First-generation candidates accessing education should receive full weightage (for example, 10/10 points), while second-generation candidates should receive a lower score (for example, 5/10 points).

Schooling: Candidates who completed their schooling in government institutions should receive full weightage (10 points), while those who studied in private institutions should receive a lower score (5 points).

Employment: First-generation candidates applying for government jobs should receive full weightage (10 points). If a parent is already in government service, the candidate's score should be reduced accordingly.

While the proposed model seeks to prioritise the most marginalised, it does not inherently address gender justice—a crucial factor given the deep-rooted gender disparities in marginalised communities. In many SC families, the education of sons is prioritised over that of the daughters owing to economic constraints. To correct this imbalance, a sub-quota for women within each subgroup must be established. For instance, in Group I, the allocated 1 per cent of reservation should be split equally between men (0.5 per cent) and women (0.5 per cent). Similarly, in Group II, which has 9 per cent reservation, the quota should be split equally: 4.5 per cent for men and 4.5 per cent for women. These refinements to Justice Akhtar's method would ensure both gender justice and equitable distribution.

The **Telangana government's** initiative is a significant step, but true justice requires nuanced implementation. As B.R. Ambedkar argued, reservation should account for structural disadvantages. Future policies must address urban-rural disparities, transgender representation, and intersecting inequalities to ensure that the most marginalised groups access the benefits equitably. The suggested justice-oriented approach should not be confined to Telangana. It should serve as a model for all States and Union Territories implementing SC and ST subclassifications. Otherwise, the Revanth Reddy government's subclassification measure—rather than being the “permanent solution” it claims to be—could set the stage for continued struggles for justice among the marginalised.

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Ayesha Minhaz

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