

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Caste and Ethnicity after 1947

Paper 2 · Unit 14

Reservation, the Dalit and backward class movements, and the northeast: 20 marks in four years, asked on caste injustice and on Dalit leadership.

anantamias.com

The constitutional settlement

Asked in 2025 on initiatives to remove caste injustice after 1947. The constitutional provisions are the first half of that answer.

- **Article 17** abolished untouchability and made its practice punishable, and the **Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955**, strengthened as the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976, gave it statutory force.
- **Articles 15 and 16** prohibit discrimination and permit special provision for socially and educationally backward classes, which is the constitutional basis of reservation.
- **Article 46** in the Directive Principles requires the state to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, particularly Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- **Articles 330 and 332** reserve seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, originally for ten years and extended by successive amendments ever since.
- **Ambedkar's role** as chairman of the drafting committee is decisive, and his insistence on justiciable fundamental rights rather than mere directives shaped the whole instrument.
- **SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989** created specific offences and special courts, which was a response to the evident inadequacy of the earlier legislation.
- **Poona Pact of 1932** is the constitutional prehistory, since Ambedkar accepted reserved seats within joint electorates under Gandhi's fast unto death, and the arrangement adopted in 1950 follows that precedent rather than the Communal Award.
- **Limits** should be stated, since untouchability persists in practice, conviction rates under the atrocities Act are low, and the constitutional abolition altered the law faster than it altered society.

Reservation and its expansion

The principal instrument of state policy, and the site of the sharpest political conflict of the period.

- **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes** received reservation in legislatures, government employment and education from the outset, at roughly fifteen and seven and a half per cent respectively.
- **Kaka Kalelkar Commission** of 1953, the first Backward Classes Commission, produced a report the government declined to act on, largely because it could not agree on caste as the criterion.
- **Mandal Commission** of 1979 under B. P. Mandal reported in 1980, identified socially and educationally backward classes using eleven indicators, and recommended twenty seven per cent reservation for **Other Backward Classes**.
- **Implementation in 1990** by V. P. Singh triggered widespread agitation and self-immolations, and it transformed north Indian politics permanently.
- **Indra Sawhney judgment of 1992** upheld OBC reservation, introduced the **creamy layer** exclusion, capped total reservation at fifty per cent and disallowed reservation in promotions, which was later modified by amendment.

- **Later extensions** include reservation in central educational institutions from 2006 and the ten per cent economically weaker sections quota introduced by the 103rd amendment in 2019.
- **Debate** turns on whether caste or economic status should be the criterion, on the adequacy of the fifty per cent cap, and on whether reservation reaches the most disadvantaged within the reserved categories.
- **Sub-categorisation** demands within SC and OBC lists, and the Rohini Commission's work, reflect the recognition that benefits have concentrated among the more advanced groups in each category.

Dalit movements

Named explicitly in the syllabus. The movement has an intellectual tradition, a political history and a religious dimension, and all three are examinable.

- **Ambedkar** founded the Independent Labour Party in 1936, the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942 and the Republican Party of India posthumously realised in 1957.
- **Conversion to Buddhism** at Nagpur in October 1956, with several hundred thousand followers, was the culminating act, and it framed caste as a problem religion had created and religion could be used to escape.
- **Annihilation of Caste**, written as an undelivered 1936 address, is the movement's foundational text and argues that caste cannot be reformed without repudiating the scriptural authority that sustains it.
- **Dalit Panthers**, founded in Bombay in 1972 by Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale and J. V. Pawar, brought a militant idiom and produced a substantial Marathi Dalit literature.
- **Bahujan Samaj Party**, founded by **Kanshi Ram** in 1984 after building BAMCEF and DS-4, converted Dalit assertion into electoral power, and **Mayawati** became Uttar Pradesh chief minister four times.
- **Regional variation** is important, since Tamil Nadu's movement runs through the Self-Respect tradition, Maharashtra's through Ambedkar, and the northern movement developed later and more electorally.
- **Dalit literature** in Marathi, Hindi, Tamil and Kannada, including autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, is a distinct literary tradition with its own aesthetics.
- **Land** remains the deepest grievance, since Dalits are disproportionately landless agricultural labourers, and the failure of ceiling legislation described in the economic development unit is the direct cause.
- **Contemporary issues** include manual scavenging, atrocities, land access, and the debate over whether Dalit Christians and Muslims should receive Scheduled Caste status.

Backward castes in electoral politics

Named in the syllabus and the largest political transformation of independent India after 1990.

- **Lohia's** socialist politics argued for backward caste representation from the 1950s, and his formula reserving sixty per cent of party positions for the disadvantaged anticipated Mandal by decades.
- **Charan Singh** built a rural backward caste politics in northern India, and the **Kisan** and middle peasant constituency he assembled became the base of later backward caste parties.

- **Congress system** decline after 1967 opened space for these forces, since the Congress had accommodated backward castes as clients rather than as leaders.
- **Southern precedence** matters, since Tamil Nadu and Karnataka had backward caste reservation and non-Brahmin politics decades before the north, through the Justice Party, the Self-Respect Movement and the Miller Committee of 1918.
- **Post-Mandal parties**, including the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Janata Dal formations, made backward caste leadership normal in the largest states.
- **Rudolph and Rudolph's** and **Christophe Jaffrelot's** work on the silent revolution is the standard scholarly framing, and Jaffrelot's title captures the argument that this was a democratic transformation without a revolution.
- **Women within these categories** face compounded disadvantage, and the debate over sub-quotas within the women's reservation legislation reflects the argument that caste and gender exclusions intersect rather than operate separately.
- **Assessment** to offer: electoral democracy did what land reform did not, transferring political power to numerically large subordinated groups without redistributing economic assets.

Tribes and ethnicity

The syllabus pairs caste with ethnicity, so the tribal and northeastern dimension belongs here.

- **Fifth Schedule** governs scheduled areas in central India with Tribes Advisory Councils, and the **Sixth Schedule** provides autonomous district councils in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.
- **Nehru's panchsheel for tribals**, set out in his foreword to Verrier Elwin's book, argued for development along tribal lines rather than assimilation or isolation.
- **Displacement** by dams, mines and industry fell disproportionately on tribal populations, and the resulting movements, including the Narmada Bachao Andolan, are a continuing thread.
- **Forest Rights Act of 2006** recognised individual and community rights over forest land, addressing a grievance created by the colonial forest acts and continued after independence.
- **Statehood movements** produced Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in 2000, both justified on tribal and developmental grounds rather than linguistic ones.
- **Northeast** presents the sharpest ethnic questions, with the Naga movement from the 1950s, the Mizo insurgency and the 1986 accord, and the Assam movement over migration leading to the 1985 accord.
- **PESA of 1996** extended panchayati raj to scheduled areas with gram sabha powers over land acquisition and minor forest produce, and its weak implementation is a standing complaint.
- **Left-wing extremism** in the central Indian tribal belt draws on exactly these grievances of land, forest and displacement, which connects the ethnic question to contemporary security policy.

Last-mile revision

- Article 17 and the 1955 Act; Articles 15, 16, 46, 330, 332; SC/ST Atrocities Act 1989.
- Kalelkar 1953 shelved; Mandal reports 1980, implemented 1990; Indra Sawhney 1992 with creamy layer and the fifty per cent cap; EWS quota 2019.
- Ambedkar: ILP 1936, SCF 1942, Annihilation of Caste 1936, conversion at Nagpur October 1956; Dalit Panthers 1972; Kanshi Ram founds BSP 1984.

- Lohia and Charan Singh; southern precedence through the Justice Party and Miller Committee 1918; Jaffrelot's silent revolution.
- Fifth and Sixth Schedules; Elwin and Nehru's tribal panchsheel; Forest Rights Act 2006; Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh 2000; Assam Accord 1985 and Mizo Accord 1986.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating reservation as beginning with Mandal. SC and ST reservation dates from the Constitution and southern states had backward class reservation from the colonial period.
- Saying Indra Sawhney struck down OBC reservation. It upheld it, added the creamy layer and capped the total at fifty per cent.
- Presenting Ambedkar's conversion as a personal religious choice. It was a political act framing caste as a problem created by religion.
- Omitting the southern precedence, which makes the north's post-1990 transformation look unique when it was in fact belated.
- Separating caste from ethnicity when the syllabus pairs them, and leaving out the Fifth and Sixth Schedules and the northeast.

Mains Practice

Discuss the major initiatives taken by the Government of India for the removal of caste injustice and inequality after 1947.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

How did the factionalised Dalit leadership in Hyderabad undergo a period of intense re-organization between 1948 and 1953?

10 marks · 150 words · 2023