



By the book

- The Supreme Court has allowed Madhya Pradesh to implement a 14% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
- Madhya Pradesh had already provided reservations for women besides Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and its proposed quota for OBCs is 14%, to keep the aggregate within the 50% ceiling.

Backwardness and political reservation:

1. The Court has held that the criteria for reservation in job and education, which is social and educational backwardness, need not be applied for reservation in local bodies. Backwardness to be established for political reservation can be of a different nature, it had held.
2. OBCs collectively form more than half the population of India and many communities want to be included in the category. The politics of the country is largely litigated among this segment, and suggestions and demands are raised on a regular basis.
3. There is demand for removing the 50% ceiling on quotas, a caste-based census that the Center is opposing but clamors for which is growing, and reservation in the private sector.
4. While quotas have proven to be an effective instrument of empowerment and justice, competitive politics around them often leads to a paralysis of politics and governance.
5. Making the reservation regime fair, objective, and empirical is a major governance challenge, and the Court's attempts in that direction is welcome. Political parties and governments must act in tandem with the judiciary so that reservation programmes do not turn divisive but serve a development purpose.

Understanding India's ethanol blending policy

- The Union Cabinet approved amendments to the National Policy on Biofuels, 2018, to advance the date by which fuel companies have to increase the percentage of ethanol in petrol to 20%, from 2030 to 2025.

- The policy of introducing 20% ethanol is expected to take effect from April 1, 2023. The Center has also targeted a 5% blending of biodiesel with diesel by 2030.

Ethanol as fuel:

- However, it takes much more ethanol to power a vehicle's engine than petrol. It also leaves residual by-products that can corrode and damage the vehicle which is why, while vehicles can be run on ethanol, they need to be tuned accordingly so that they don't compromise on efficiency and usability.
- On the other hand, the gains are potentially significant as ethanol can be sourced from sugarcane, molasses, and maize, which given India's agricultural base, can substantially reduce India's dependence on petroleum.
- Car makers have said that with modifications in engines (hardware and tuning), the loss in efficiency due to blended fuel can be reduced. To compensate the consumers for a drop in efficiency from ethanol-blended fuels, tax incentives on E10 and E20 fuels may be considered.

6 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT ETHANOL AND FLEX FUEL

- Flex fuel vehicles can run on both petrol and ethanol
- India is aiming to achieve E10 by 2022 and E20 (which would involve a 20% ethanol blend) by 2025
- At present there are no flex-fuel-powered engines or vehicles with the exception of a limited-edition TVS Apache RTR motorcycle
- Ethanol is hygroscopic, and has a tendency to absorb moisture making it difficult to store in pure form. Its affinity to attract moisture can also lead to impurities settling at the base of the fuel tank and contaminating the engine
- At present E10 isn't available across the country, and will be made so by 2022
- According to the government, all vehicles manufactured since 2008 are E10 compatible (but not optimised). E100 ethanol will be sold at a lower price from ethanol pumps

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The international experience:

- Flex Fuel Engine technology (FFE), or vehicles that run entirely on ethanol, are popular in Brazil and comprise nearly 80% of the total number of new vehicles sold in 2019. The cost of flex-fuel vehicles (four-wheelers) could cost about ₹17,000 to ₹25,000 more than the current generation of vehicles.

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2. The prices of ethanol produced in India are higher compared to the U.S. and Brazil, because of the minimum support prices that the government provides.

The environmental costs of ethanol blending:

1. Because ethanol burns more completely than petrol, it avoids emissions such as carbon monoxide.
2. However, tests conducted in India have shown that there is no reduction in nitrous oxides, one of the major environmental pollutants.
3. For India, sugarcane is the cheapest source of ethanol. On average, a ton of sugarcane can produce 100 kg of sugar and 70 liters of ethanol but that would mean 1,600 to 2,000 liters of water to produce 1 kg of sugar, implying that a litre of ethanol from sugar requires about 2,860 litres of water.