



# International Journal of Political Science and Public Administration

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

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## Beyond Quotas: Unpacking the Impact of Caste Reservations Based on Supreme Court Verdicts on Social Mobility and Caste Reservations and Inclusive Growth in India

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### Article Info

Volume 5, Issue 1, June 2025

Received : 16 February 2025

Accepted : 29 May 2025

Published: 25 June 2025

doi: [10.51483/IJPSPA.5.1.2025.56-63](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJPSPA.5.1.2025.56-63)

### Abstract

India's caste reservation system is a form of affirmative action designed to mitigate historical injustices and social exclusion faced by marginalized communities, particularly Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Rooted in constitutional provisions promoting equality and social justice, the system reserves seats in educational institutions, government employment, and legislatures to ensure greater representation and opportunities for disadvantaged groups. While the reservation system has significantly contributed to reducing socio-economic disparities, it remains a subject of debate regarding its effectiveness, fairness, and potential for reverse discrimination. Judicial interventions have played a crucial role in refining the policy by introducing sub-classifications and economic reservations, ensuring a more equitable distribution of benefits. This paper examines the historical context, constitutional framework, socio-economic impact, and judicial interpretations of caste-based reservations in India. It also explores potential reforms to enhance inclusivity and efficiency while maintaining the fundamental objective of social justice.

**Keywords:** Caste reservation, Social exclusion, Affirmative action, Equality, Judicial interventions

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### 1. Introduction

India is a multi-cultural, multi-social, multi-linguistic, multi-religious, and multiethnic federal state. It is a vast country which exhibited diversity in many terms. The Indian society thus presented a picture of divergent,

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different and often conflicting trends. Historically, many people of the country have suffered from social exclusion and accessibility of public space in terms of its to be a part of authority and public use. Spatial diversity and advocacy of religious principles contributed high level of social inequality. The jati system prevailed in India should be understood as a system of graded inequality, not a dichotomous hierarchy between upper castes and lower castes (Ashwini, 2008). The citizens were excluded from exercising their rights on the basis of their social identity in terms of caste, ethnicity, race and gender. Exclusion is therefore more a reflection of the very nature of social diversity. Social exclusion is said to occur when a group is excluded from rights or entitlement as a citizen, where rights include the social rights to a certain standard of living and to participation in society (Durga, 2012). The caste reservation system in India is a form of affirmative action designed to address these historical injustices and social inequalities faced by marginalized communities, particularly the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). The system reserves a certain percentage of seats in educational institutions, government jobs, and legislatures for these groups. The reservation system has significantly improved access to education and employment for historically marginalized communities. It has enabled a large number of individuals from SC, ST, and OBC backgrounds to pursue higher education and secure government jobs, which were previously inaccessible due to social discrimination and economic barriers. By providing opportunities to underrepresented communities, the reservation system has contributed to reducing social and economic disparities. It has played a crucial role in uplifting people from marginalized groups, helping them to achieve better socio-economic status. The system has empowered individuals from marginalized communities by increasing their representation in various sectors, including politics and public administration. This representation is vital for ensuring that the voices and concerns of these communities are heard and addressed in policy-making processes. Despite its positive impacts, the reservation system has also been a source of controversy and social tension. Some argue that it perpetuates caste-based identities and may lead to reverse discrimination, where individuals from non-reserved categories feel disadvantaged. Additionally, there are debates about the criteria for determining eligibility for reservations and whether they should be based on caste, economic status, or a combination of both. Critics often call for reforms to make the reservation system more inclusive and efficient. Suggestions include revisiting the criteria for reservations, expanding them to other marginalized groups, and ensuring that the benefits reach those who genuinely need them, rather than perpetuating advantages within already privileged sections of the reserved categories. The caste reservation system in India has had a profound social impact, contributing to the upliftment of marginalised communities while also generating debates about fairness and the best ways to achieve social justice.

The Constitution of India in its Preamble made a resolve "to secure all of its citizens, EQUALITY of status and opportunity...." Accordingly, it confers on all citizens a fundamental right to be free of discrimination by the State on grounds of race, religion and caste. In specific contexts government is further forbidden to discriminate on grounds of place of birth, residence, descent, class, language and sex. Additional provisions outlaw untouchability and protect the citizen from certain kinds of discrimination on the part of private persons and institutions (Galanter, 1961). It is envisaged that Government will not only refrain from discriminating but will actively undertake to remove existing discriminatory practices in the private sphere. Article 46 of constitution give the government a directive that reads The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Thus, the Constitution has provided reservation in institutions and in public employment to three categories of people; Persons who are socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes. (C. Basavaraju, 2009) Backward classes means: (1) as a generic term including the SC and SC and others as well; and (2) only those backward groups not included in the first two categories.

According to Ghose (1969), a society's strength depends on the empowerment of its weakest sections. Therefore, safeguarding and promoting the interests of these groups is essential for social stability and progress. Recognizing this need, the Indian Constitution mandates the state to protect such groups through affirmative action. In line with this directive, Article 46 emphasizes the promotion of the educational and economic interests of weaker sections. Additionally, Article 15, which generally prohibits discrimination by the state, is supplemented by Article 15(4), which allows the state to make special provisions for the advancement of

socially and educationally backward classes, as well as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Similarly, Article 16, which guarantees equality in public employment, is qualified by Article 16(4), enabling the reservation of appointments or posts for backward classes that, in the state's opinion, are inadequately represented in public services. This form of protective discrimination is aimed at creating an egalitarian society based on constitutional principles rather than graded inequality.

Political representation is also crucial in this framework. Article 330 reserves seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha, while Article 331 ensures representation for the Anglo-Indian community. At the state level, Article 332 provides for the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in legislative assemblies. Additionally, Article 335 states that while considering appointments to public services, the claims of SCs and STs should be taken into account, provided that efficiency in administration is maintained. However, this article also allows for relaxation in qualifying marks or evaluation standards for reservations in promotions to various public services.

The Constitution further establishes institutional mechanisms to uphold these provisions. Article 338 creates the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, Article 338A establishes the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, and Article 338B sets up the National Commission for Backward Classes. Moreover, Article 339 grants the Union control over the administration of Scheduled Areas and the welfare of Scheduled Tribes. Furthermore, Article 340 empowers the President to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes, assess their difficulties, and recommend measures for their improvement. The commission is also tasked with suggesting grants that the Union or states should provide for their welfare and specifying conditions for such grants. After completing its investigation, the commission must submit a report to the President, who will then present it to both Houses of Parliament along with a memorandum explaining the actions taken on its recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review

Caste, class, and social mobility in India are extensive and diverse, offering various perspectives on the historical and contemporary dynamics of the caste system and its intersections with other social stratifications. (Abraham, 2011) provide a critical analysis of the impact of caste on India's meritocratic ideals and economic opportunities. Abraham's work discusses the complexities of caste and class interaction in the context of modern India's competitive economy, while Deshpande explores how economic discrimination manifests through caste, affecting access to resources and opportunities. These works highlight the persistent nature of caste-based inequalities despite India's economic liberalisation and development.

Historical perspectives are crucial in understanding the formation and perpetuation of caste structures. Ambedkar (2014), Dirks (2001) offer significant insights into the historical roots and ideological underpinnings of the caste system. Ambedkar's seminal work advocates for the complete dismantling of the caste system, emphasising its inherently oppressive nature. Dirks, on the other hand, traces the colonial construction and reinforcement of caste identities, arguing that British colonial policies significantly shaped the modern understanding and institutionalisation of caste. Beteille (2007) complements these discussions by examining caste, class, and power dynamics in a specific regional context, providing a nuanced understanding of local variations and their implications for social stratification.

Galanter (1984) provides an in-depth analysis of India's legal framework surrounding affirmative action and reservations, discussing the complexities and debates over these policies. Jaffrelot (2003), Kothari (2005) further delve into the political mobilization of lower castes and the role of caste in Indian politics. Jaffrelot examines the rise of political movements representing lower caste interests, while Kothari provides a broader analysis of caste's role in shaping political behavior and outcomes. These works underscore the significant role that caste plays in India's political landscape, influencing policy decisions and electoral dynamics.

Jeffrey *et al.* (2008), Borooah *et al.* (2015), investigate the implications of education on social mobility, particularly focusing on how caste and gender intersect to shape educational and employment outcomes. Borooah and his co-authors provide empirical data on caste-based exclusion and discrimination in various socio-economic spheres, highlighting the systemic barriers faced by marginalized communities. Heller (2000), Sen (2006) offer comparative and philosophical perspectives, respectively, discussing the broader implications of these socio-economic dynamics for democracy and identity in India.

Narayan and Kumar (2010), Teltumbde (2018) explore how literature, culture, and intellectual thought have shaped and responded to the realities of caste. Narayan and Kumar focus on Dalit literature and its role in imagining a post-caste society, while Teltumbde critically engages with Ambedkar's ideas, examining their relevance and radical potential in contemporary times. These contributions highlight the cultural dimensions of caste and their role in both reinforcing and challenging existing social hierarchies.

Surinder (2015) explores the transformation of caste hierarchies in modern India. Jodhka argues that while traditional caste structures have shown some flexibility, they continue to persist in new forms, often adapting to the changing socio-economic landscape. The work underscores the resilience of caste as a social institution, highlighting how it continues to influence various aspects of life, including access to education, employment, and social capital. Jodhka's analysis provides a foundational understanding of the enduring nature of caste in Indian society, despite the country's economic liberalisation and modernization.

Thomas (2004) offers a valuable comparative analysis of affirmative action policies in India and the United States. Weisskopf explores the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped these policies in both countries, examining their effectiveness in promoting social equity. He highlights the similarities and differences in the implementation and outcomes of affirmative action, emphasizing the unique challenges faced by each country. Weisskopf's work provides critical insights into the broader discourse on affirmative action, contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of policy in addressing historical injustices and promoting social mobility.

Ghanshyam (2001) focuses on the political mobilization of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India. Shah examines how caste-based identity politics have evolved, influencing political behavior and policy outcomes. He argues that the political mobilization of SCs has been instrumental in challenging traditional power structures and advocating for social justice. However, Shah also highlights the complexities and contradictions within caste-based movements, noting that they can sometimes reinforce existing hierarchies rather than dismantle them. This work is crucial for understanding the intersection of caste and politics in India and the role of caste-based movements in shaping the country's democratic landscape.

Vani *et al.* (2015) provide a comprehensive overview of caste-based discrimination and exclusion. The contributors examine the socio-economic challenges faced by marginalised communities, offering insights into the systemic barriers that hinder their progress. The book highlights the multifaceted nature of caste discrimination, which manifests in various forms, including social ostracism, economic marginalisation, and limited access to resources and opportunities. The authors advocate for a multi-dimensional approach to addressing caste-based inequalities, emphasising the need for policies that go beyond reservations to include broader social and economic reforms.

Manoranjan (2004) explores the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, discussing how these overlapping identities contribute to the marginalisation of women in India. Mohanty argues that women from lower castes face unique challenges that are often overlooked in mainstream feminist discourse. He emphasises the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to understand the complexities of discrimination and to develop effective strategies for empowerment. This work provides a critical lens for examining the role of caste and gender in perpetuating social inequalities and highlights the need for inclusive policies that address the specific needs of marginalised women.

Ghanshyam (2004) provides a comprehensive overview of the role of caste in Indian democratic politics. The contributors discuss how caste identities shape political participation and representation, influencing electoral outcomes and policy decisions. They examine how caste politics has evolved, noting both the positive and negative aspects of its influence on Indian democracy. While caste-based political mobilisation has empowered marginalised groups and provided them with a platform to voice their concerns, it has also contributed to the fragmentation of the political landscape and the perpetuation of identity politics.

### 3. Methodology

The study involved an in-depth analysis of relevant case laws and judgements. The legal principles established in these cases were critically examined to understand the evolution of the judicial stance on the reservation system. The study included an analysis of constitutional provisions, particularly Articles 14, 15, 16(4), and from 330 to 341, to interpret the legality of subject. The arguments centered on whether these provisions

allowed for differential treatment within a constitutionally recognized category. The research considered the historical context of caste discrimination and the rationale behind the original reservation system. It also examined the evolution of affirmative action policies in India and how they have adapted to changing socio-economic realities. The study critically analysed judicial precedents and their implications for reservation policy.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Economic Reservation Against Affirmative Action

The opposition to caste-based reservations by higher caste groups in India stems from several reasons, often rooted in concerns about fairness, meritocracy, and socio-economic competition. Many individuals from higher caste groups feel that the reservation system unfairly disadvantages them by allocating opportunities based on caste rather than merit. They argue that deserving candidates from higher caste backgrounds may be overlooked for educational and job opportunities due to the quotas reserved for SC, ST, and OBC categories.

The reservation system in India has been a subject of intense debate, with critics arguing that it undermines meritocracy by allowing candidates with lower qualifications to be selected over more qualified individuals solely based on caste. This concern is particularly significant in competitive fields such as education and government employment, where reservations may result in the selection of candidates who do not meet the same standards as those from non-reserved categories. Additionally, some higher-caste groups argue that the system fails to consider economic disparities within caste categories. They contend that economically disadvantaged individuals from higher castes do not receive the same level of support and opportunities as those from reserved categories, despite facing similar socio-economic hardships.

Another major criticism is that the reservation system reinforces caste identities and social divisions rather than fostering a caste-neutral society. Furthermore, individuals who benefit from reservations often experience stigmatization or assumptions about their abilities being attributed to their caste rather than their actual qualifications.

In response to persistent demands from higher-caste groups, the Indian Parliament amended the Constitution in 2019 to introduce reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) within the general category. Critics argue that this move contradicts the original vision of the Constitution's framers, who designed affirmative action policies to uplift underrepresented and historically marginalized communities. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 2019 introduced a 10% reservation for EWS in government jobs and educational institutions without affecting existing reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the non-creamy layer of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This amendment added Clause 6 to Article 15 and Clause 6 to Article 16 of the Indian Constitution, enabling reservations for economically weaker individuals who do not belong to SC, ST, or OBC categories.

Academicians and Activists argue that the EWS quota primarily serves the interests of historically privileged caste groups, undermining the fundamental constitutional safeguards for the most marginalized communities. According to the criteria for EWS reservation, eligible individuals must belong to privileged caste groups with an annual family income of less than Rs. 800,000 or own less than two hectares (five acres) of agricultural land.

The constitutionality of amendments is determined by the judiciary, the third organ of the government, through a process known as judicial review. If a law contradicts constitutional values, the judiciary has the authority to declare it void. The issue of EWS reservations was challenged in the Supreme Court in the case of *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India*, which sought to determine whether the 103<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment of 2019 adhered to constitutional principles. In a 3-2 verdict, the Supreme Court upheld the amendment, ruling that the Constitution permits reservations based solely on economic criteria. However, the judges differed in their opinions on who should be eligible for EWS reservations and the proportion of seats that may be reserved ([Supreme Court Observer, 2022](#)).

Similarly, the 104<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, passed by the Indian Parliament in 2020, ended the reservation of seats for the Anglo-Indian community in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies while extending the reservation for SCs and STs for another ten years. Despite the Anglo-Indian community's already

marginal representation in Parliament, this amendment met partially the long-standing demands of the majority upper class without significant opposition.

A widely held belief is that the reservation system has led to a cycle where certain families or communities benefit across generations, while other economically disadvantaged individuals, regardless of caste, are left out. This has fuelled calls for a review and restructuring of the system to ensure that it benefits those who genuinely need it. In highly competitive sectors such as higher education and government jobs, reservations have also intensified competition for the remaining unreserved seats. This has caused frustration among higher-caste individuals, who feel that their opportunities are disproportionately limited.

While these concerns are frequently raised by opponents of caste-based reservations, it is essential to recognize that the system was originally implemented to address historical and ongoing social injustices faced by marginalized communities. The debate surrounding reservations remains complex and sensitive, reflecting India's diverse social and economic landscape.

#### **4.2. Supreme Court's Decisions and Rationale of Affirmative Action**

Judicial interventions in the caste-based reservation system in India have played a critical role in shaping its implementation and evolution. These interventions have included landmark judgments, guidelines, and reviews by the Supreme Court and various High Courts. While these interventions aim to ensure justice, fairness, and adherence to constitutional principles, they also come with a range of pros and cons. The judiciary ensures that the reservation system aligns with constitutional values such as equality, non-discrimination, and social justice.

In *Champakam Dorairajan v. State of Madras*, the government of Madras had reserved seats in state medical and engineering colleges for different communities in specific proportions based on religion, race, and caste. This policy was challenged as unconstitutional. The government defended its order by citing Article 46 of the Constitution, which allows the state to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), to achieve social justice. However, the Supreme Court struck down the order, ruling that it violated the right to equality guaranteed under Article 15(1). The Court further observed that Directive Principles of State Policy cannot override Fundamental Rights. Consequently, Parliament amended Article 15 by introducing Clause (4) to address this issue (Basavaraju, 2009). Since the Constitution does not specify a limit for reservations, the Supreme Court, in *Balaji v. State of Madras*, declared unconstitutional a government order that reserved 68% of seats in engineering, medical, and other technical colleges. The Court held that such a high percentage was excessive, unreasonable, and detrimental to merit-based candidates. To ensure a fair balance, the Court established a 50% ceiling for reservations in educational institutions and public employment (Basavaraju, 2009).

However, in *State of Kerala v. N. M. Thomas*, the Supreme Court adopted a more favorable stance towards SC and ST members. The case involved a government order that exempted SC/ST employees in the registration department from passing a departmental test for promotion to higher posts for two years. This exemption was challenged, but the Court upheld the classification, ruling that extending the period for SC/ST employees to pass the exam was a reasonable measure aimed at ensuring equal opportunities in public employment.

In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992), the Supreme Court reaffirmed the 50% ceiling on reservations, emphasizing that this limit should not be exceeded at any point, as originally established in the *Balaji* case. The Court ruled that if the reservation quota surpasses 50% due to the carry-forward rule, it would be deemed unconstitutional and in violation of Article 16(4) of the Constitution. The judgment reinforced the need to strike a balance between affirmative action and meritocracy. Furthermore, the Court delineated the scope and limits of reservations, setting criteria for identifying backward classes and introducing the concept of the "creamy layer" in Other Backward Classes (OBC) reservations. This principle ensures that the more affluent and advanced members of OBCs are excluded from receiving reservation benefits.

In *Ashok Kumar Thakur v. Union of India & Others*, the Supreme Court reviewed the validity of the Constitution (Ninety-third Amendment) Act, 2005, and the Central Educational Institution Act, 2005. These laws provided reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and OBCs in both private, unaided educational institutions and central educational institutions. The Court upheld both legislations, affirming their constitutionality as measures aimed at ensuring social justice for disadvantaged communities.

The case of *Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India* challenged the Economic Weaker Sections (EWS) quota, presenting three major contentions. First, the petitioners argued that reservations based solely on economic criteria were unconstitutional, as affirmative action under the Constitution was designed to address social and educational backwardness rather than economic status. Second, they contended that the EWS quota discriminated against economically weaker sections within SC, ST, and OBC communities by excluding them from its benefits. Third, they asserted that the 10% EWS quota violated the 50% ceiling on reservations established in *Indra Sawhney*. According to data presented in court, India had 31.7 crore people living below the poverty line, including 7.74 crore SCs, 4.24 crore STs, and 13.86 crore OBCs – collectively constituting 25.84 crore, or significant portions of these communities. In contrast, 5.8 crore people in the general category, primarily from upper castes, fell below the poverty line, constituting 18.2% of their total population. In a 3:2 split decision, the Supreme Court upheld the 103<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment and EWS reservations, ruling them constitutionally valid. While all five judges concurred, that reservations could be granted based solely on economic criteria, they differed on the scope and eligibility criteria for EWS reservations.

However, some constitutional experts have expressed concerns that the EWS judgment may serve as a precursor to the gradual erosion of constitutional protections for SC and ST communities. They argue that the EWS quota carries within it the potential to dismantle the entire reservation system (Namboodiri, 2022).

The Supreme Court's ruling in *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* marked a significant development in India's caste-based reservation framework. This decision permitted the sub-classification of SCs, allowing states to create sub-quotas within the overall SC reservation to ensure that the most disadvantaged within these communities receive adequate representation and benefits. This ruling overturned the 2004 judgment in *E.V. Chinnaiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, which had held that SCs formed a single, homogeneous group and could not be sub-classified.

The judiciary has played a crucial role in ensuring the fair implementation of reservations and that the intended beneficiaries receive the benefits. However, some critics argue that judicial interventions at times amount to judicial overreach, where the judiciary oversteps its authority and encroaches upon the functions of the legislature and executive. Such actions can create tensions between different branches of government and disrupt democratic processes. Judicial interpretations of reservations have sometimes been inconsistent, leading to confusion and uncertainty. For example, the criteria for defining backwardness and applying the creamy layer concept have varied across different rulings, resulting in inconsistent implementation across states and regions.

Additionally, judicial scrutiny and litigation often cause delays in the execution of reservation policies. Prolonged court cases regarding the validity of specific reservations can stall appointments and admissions, causing disruptions and uncertainty for affected individuals. The judiciary also faces the complex task of balancing competing social interests, and its rulings may sometimes be perceived as favoring one group over another, leading to dissatisfaction and protests.

While the judiciary has the authority to review the constitutionality of reservation policies, it may not always be equipped to address the broader socio-economic complexities associated with affirmative action. Judicial decisions tend to be based on legal principles rather than the evolving social realities on the ground. For instance, shifts in socio-economic conditions and the emergence of newly marginalized groups may not always be adequately addressed within the existing legal framework, leaving gaps in protection and support.

Overall, judicial interventions in India's reservation system have had profound implications for the nation's social and legal landscape. While the judiciary has played a key role in safeguarding constitutional values and ensuring the fair implementation of affirmative action policies, it has also faced criticism for instances of overreach, inconsistent rulings, and delays in policy execution. The debate over judicial interventions in reservations remains a complex issue, reflecting the broader challenge of balancing affirmative action with meritocracy and social justice.

## 5. Conclusion

The Supreme Court's rulings on affirmative action in various cases mark a significant shift in India's approach to caste-based reservations. By permitting sub-classification within the SC category and introducing economic reservations, the Court recognized the need for a more refined and equitable distribution of reservation benefits.

These decisions highlight the importance of empirical evidence and constitutional interpretation in shaping affirmative action policies. However, they also raise complex questions regarding the criteria for determining backwardness and the judiciary's role in addressing social inequalities. As states proceed with implementing sub-classification and economic reservations, they must ensure that the process remains transparent, evidence-based, and aligned with the principles of social justice and equality.

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**Cite this article as:** Firosekhan S.N., Abdul Malik A. and Shanimon S. (2025). Beyond Quotas: Unpacking the Impact of Caste Reservations Based on Supreme Court Verdicts on Social Mobility and Caste Reservations and Inclusive Growth in India. *International Journal of Political Science and Public Administration*, 5(1), 56-63. doi: 10.51483/IJPSPA.5.1.2025.56-63.