



Paradoxes of Panchayat functioning: Mapping Participation, Representation and Accountability in Fifth Schedule Areas

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to examine the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Fifth Schedule tribal areas, focusing on the interlinked dynamics of participation, representation, and accountability. While constitutional decentralization and provisions like the PESA Act were designed to empower Tribal communities and ensure self-governance, their implementation often falls short in practice. Using case studies, field insights, and institutional analysis, the paper interrogates how democratic processes unfold at the grassroots in tribal regions. It explores the contradictions between legal entitlements and lived realities highlighting issues like elite capture, proxy leadership, political party control, and administrative neglect. The study underscores how systemic barriers dilute the participatory potential of Gram Sabhas, marginalize tribal voices, and limit accountability mechanisms. The findings call for a reimagining of local governance in tribal areas that is rooted in autonomy, cultural relevance, and institutional integrity.*

Keywords: Accountability, Fifth Schedule, Panchayati Raj, Participation, Representation, Tribal Governance

This research study is particularly well-suited for publication in the *South Indian Journal of Social Sciences* due to its alignment with the journal's commitment to interdisciplinary and critical scholarship regarding governance, development, and democratic processes in India. The focus on participation, representation, and accountability within the framework of grassroots democracy spotlights elemental issues that lie at the heart of contemporary political discourse. By interrogating the nuances of political representation and examining the intricacies of institutional functioning and policy implementation, this study engages with pressing debates that demand rigorous analysis. Moreover, the research delves into the socio-political dynamics of Scheduled Areas, underscoring the significance of local governance in shaping broader social change. This exploration not only illuminates the unique challenges

faced by marginalized communities but also critiques existing power structures that inhibit genuine democratic engagement.

1.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Following India's independence, Article 40 of the Indian Constitution emerged as a pivotal component of the Directive Principles of State Policy, promoting the concept of democratic decentralisation. This article mandates that states establish village panchayats as the foundational units of local self-government (Srivastav et al., 2017). While the intent behind this provision is commendable, aiming to empower local communities and enhance grassroots participation in governance, its implementation has often raised several critical concerns.

The introduction of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, complementing the principles of Gandhi Ji's vision of "Gram Swaraj," represents a critical inflection point in the trajectory of social inclusion within India's local governance framework. These amendments instituted mandatory quotas that have fundamentally transformed representation patterns at the grassroots level, specifically mandating that a minimum of one-third of members in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) be women (Datta., 2003). This stipulation extends to leadership roles, ensuring that women's voices are not only present but influential in decision-making processes.

Moreover, the amendments addressed historical injustices by ensuring proportional representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes within PRI councils. This provision is of considerable significance, as it attempts to rectify deep-seated inequalities in political participation that have persisted for generations (Jha., 2021). By institutionalising these measures, the amendments confront the systemic barriers that have often excluded marginalised communities from the political arena.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the formal mechanisms of decentralisation, which ostensibly involve the transfer of authority from the state to local governance structures, often diverge markedly from their practical application. Various political economy factors such as gender, caste, and class continue to wield a significant impact on the operational dynamics of local governments. Many critics argue that, rather than fostering genuine democratic engagement, decentralisation processes have, in some instances, enabled local elites to appropriate resources for their own ends. This distortion of power not only contravenes the inclusive aims embedded within constitutional provisions but also perpetuates entrenched inequalities. Therefore, while the framework for decentralisation is established, its execution reveals a troubling reality: the potential for local governance to reinforce, rather than dismantle, existing hierarchies and exclusions (Srivastava et al., 2017).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to reflect upon the nature of representation, participation, and accountability of the elected representatives, specifically, to examine, whether the guaranteed representation of tribal communities in decentralized governance have led to increased their participation in the functioning of Panchayats.

1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. The gap between constitutional provisions and governance

The implementation of democratic decentralisation in India reveals a complex and varied landscape across its states, with some achieving commendable success while others encounter considerable challenges. Notably, Kerala emerges as a prominent case study, having significantly reformed the functions of local governments in line with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. This state's approach has been characterised by the formulation and execution of micro-plans that emphasise robust community participation. Such initiatives have led to striking transformations in local development dynamics, effectively empowering local communities and various actors within the political framework (Ramakantan, 2009).

Similarly, Karnataka's achievements in the realm of decentralisation can largely be ascribed to a robust governance framework characterised by a competitive party system, a free press, a professional civil service, and an enduring mechanism for public scrutiny of those in power. This combination has fostered a "public culture of accountability" that has proven crucial for effective local governance. However, it is imperative to recognise that these foundational elements of successful decentralisation were already established in Karnataka prior to the reforms (Nadeem, 2016)

Painstakingly, Madhya Pradesh exemplifies a state where the journey of democratic reform has transitioned through the stages of conceptualisation, mobilization, and institutionalisation. This progression is noteworthy, particularly as the state government has demonstrated a commendable willingness to engage with local communities in the formulation of village-level development plans (Mahor et al., 2012). Such an approach represents a significant evolution in the government's strategy towards development, indicating a shift from top-down decision-making to more participatory processes (Widmalm, 2016).

While, West Bengal's implementation of Panchayati Raj Institutions presents a compelling case of how decentralisation can ostensibly transform rural society and elevate the consciousness of marginalized communities. However, despite these apparent successes, the reality is more complex, revealing a landscape fraught with challenges. Notably, the dynamics between elected representatives and the bureaucratic apparatus remain a critical concern. This relationship has not matured into a seamless collaboration; rather, it is characterised by an ongoing "process of trial and error" (Patra, 2021). This suggests a persistent struggle

for adjustment, indicating that the initial enthusiasm for decentralisation has not yet translated into a fully functional and synergistic partnership between local leaders and administrative structures.

Despite the notable success stories, the implementation of decentralisation continues to face significant challenges across various states. In Kerala, a survey reflecting public perceptions uncovered discontent with "beneficiary selection along political or family lines." This sentiment indicates that many respondents perceive local leaders as being indistinguishable from the very centralised agencies they were meant to replace (Mody, 2004). This raises a critical question about the true nature of local governance—are these leaders genuinely representative of the community, or do they merely perpetuate existing power structures?

Often it has been noticed even after three decades of decentralisation, administrative capacity deficits represent a significant barrier for the effective implementation of democratic decentralisation in India. Scholars highlight four essential conditions for successful decentralisation: substantial political influence, adequate financial resources, sufficient administrative capacity, and dependable accountability mechanisms. However, many local institutions in India fall short on these critical prerequisites (Rao et al., 2017). In particular, the lack of administrative capabilities limits their ability to effectively execute development programmes. This shortcoming calls into question the efficacy of decentralisation, as without the necessary infrastructure and skills, local governance cannot fulfil its potential to drive meaningful change and empower communities. Therefore, it is imperative to address these capacity deficits if decentralisation is to achieve its intended goals.

2.2.

in Local Governance

Understanding Participation, Representation & Accountability

In the context of grassroots democracy, the fundamental principle of participation is placing people at the centre of governance by equipping them with the institutional mechanisms, authority, and opportunities to actively shape decisions that impact their lives. As Patnaik (2005) observes, political participation in a democracy extends beyond merely voting; it encompasses both the act of electing representatives and the meaningful involvement of those representatives in governance processes.

Notwithstanding the primary emphasis of democracy is on participation, nevertheless, it has limited the scope of participation to just casting votes, mere presence in panchayat functioning which is undermining the representatives' capabilities to constructively engage in deciding public policy. Democratic forms of governments have left it "up to the experts, the professionals, politicians, and managers to ensure that citizens' needs are well served" (Richardson, 1983: 2). In other words, democratic governance made a clear-cut distinction between the role of citizens and representatives, so far as participation in decision making is concerned. While the role of citizens was confined to that of electing representatives (participation in choosing candidates), the role of representatives involved articulation of interests of the people in the decisions made by them on behalf of the people (i.e. participation in actual decision making).

It is widely known that the concept of 'representation' has taken shape within the context of power relations among the representative and the represented. In the context of modern liberal democracy, representation can be understood as a relationship between two people, where the representative plays the key role in a democratic setup, holding an authority to perform the various actions on behalf of the represented. Helena Catt (1999) has distinguished two types of representation, i.e. delegation and trustee. The role of delegates is to act on behalf of represented. Trustee primarily refers the role of representatives as to make 'good' and 'wise' decision for everyone. The central argument of Catt's representative democracy is the idea of people's power, where people choose the representatives, and those representatives are expected to be accountable for the decision that they make for the constituents. Therefore, the concept of representation seems to be as an advocacy on behalf of the underrepresented, in which representation bring into play, a principal-agent relationship.

The interpretation of accountability in practical and theoretical contexts has a different connotation, meaning, and implications. Therefore, 'accountability has a range of connotations, but in general, the term can be understood as 'giving an account' or 'being answerable' to someone, who is directly or indirectly involved and affected by those decisions. Often the term 'accountability' expresses the idea of 'responsiveness' of the authorities to their stakeholders to disseminate the information (Cornwall et. al., 2000).

3. METHODOLOGY

To examine the specified objective, two Gram Panchayats based on purposive sampling were selected from Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. These Panchayats were Yeoli and Shioni, and both Panchayats have a decisive tribal presence. The qualitative methodology has been used to explore the undercurrents of tribal self-governance in the 5th Scheduled Areas of Maharashtra. As the qualitative method becomes more relevant while attempts to synthesize the critical problems with regard to the participation aspect in the governance process. Both primary and secondary sources of data were tapped to elicit relevant data for the study.

study Panchayats

Consequent upon the above discussion, attempt has been made to explore insights from the field on how grassroots democracy functions in the Fifth Schedule panchayats of Maharashtra. The practical experience of participation and representation largely focuses on three closely connected aspects:

I.How meaningfully the elected representatives participate in the day-to-day functioning of the Panchayats,

II.The extent of responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the people they represent,

III.The degree of accountable they are for the decisions they make.

The attendance of elected representatives at Gram Sabha, Ward Sabha, and Panchayat meetings serves as a crucial indicator of their engagement in local governance, yet this attendance reveals significant disparities in participatory practices. Field insights indicate that two distinct types of meetings occur within Panchayats: 'restricted meetings' and 'public meetings.' The former confines participation to elected representatives and government officials, focusing primarily on internal discussions and administrative affairs, thereby restricting broader community involvement, whereas, public meeting referred to as the Gram Sabha meetings, involving all section of the people including the representatives.

It was observed that many representatives come to the meeting with certain issues pertinent to their constituency/wards. However, when they voice their concern in the sitting agenda, often these representatives find their voices are unheard due to myriads of factors. One of the important intricacies in altercation in decision-making is found that the Sarpanch along with the handpicked representatives manipulates the voice of other representatives by suppressing their legitimate voices. The Sarpanch deliberately sidelined the voices of the representatives, because of their 'ideological affiliation with certain political parties'. By prioritizing loyalty over democratic engagement, the Sarpanch and their chosen cohort effectively mute the essential discourse that should inform collective decision-making.

Upon interaction with the elected representative, it was observed that 'political affiliation, association with a particular community or group plays a vital role in shaping the participation in decision-making. The meaningful participation of a representative in decision-making is often disproportionately determined by his/her 'affiliation' to a specific political party. The elected representative's 'association' with a particular set of people such as the Sarpanch, village elite and officials usually rewarded in the decision-making process.

To support the argument, the study examined the participation of elected representatives in the functioning of panchayats through three broad categories: active participation, passive participation, and co-opted participation. These categories were assessed using specific indicators to capture the nature and extent of involvement. Based on field observations and responses, the study identified three distinct patterns of participation among elected representatives, which are described in detail below. This classification helps to understand not only the level of engagement but also the underlying dynamics that shape the role of representatives in grassroots governance.

4.1.

Active and Meaningful Participation

The elected representatives falling under this category typically enjoy an elite socio-political background, characterized by party affiliation, economically strong, and prior experience in politics. Political sponsorship often serves as their key advantage in navigating and influencing Panchayat affairs. Due to their social capital and political connections, these representatives are generally more assertive and play an active role in the decision-making processes of the Panchayat. Their nature of participation are as follows:

- Proactively participates and engages in panchayat issues and administrative functions of Panchayat
- Influence significantly over decision-making processes and shaping administrative decisions
- Influence the outcomes by manipulates the voices of others
- Mobilise and influence other representatives for consensus building to align with them
- Closely works and associates with Sarpanch

Their nature engagement in critical issues, such as planning, budgeting, project site selection, awarding of contracts, implementation of development initiatives, and the selection of beneficiaries for welfare schemes. Notably, a majority of representatives in this group are particularly active in awarding contracts and selecting beneficiaries. A significant observation is that these representatives, in collaboration with Panchayat officials, exert considerable influence over financial decisions, including the allocation, distribution, and categorization of Panchayat funds. Their consistent engagement in financial matters underscores their dominant role in shaping the developmental priorities and governance practices at the grassroots level.

This category is predominantly composed of elected women representatives (EWRs), whose participation in Panchayat affairs is largely symbolic. Despite their formal inclusion in local governance, their involvement in decision-making remains limited. Although they are present at Panchayat meetings, their views are often reduced to mere physical attendance without active contribution.

Several structural and socio-cultural factors contribute to the marginalization of women representatives in the decision-making process. First, a significant number of EWRs lack adequate knowledge and understanding of Panchayat functioning, which limits their capacity to engage effectively. Secondly, many women representatives report that their attempts to contribute are systematically undermined or ignored by more dominant actors—typically those from the first category—leading to a sense of exclusion and demotivation.

Despite these challenges, a few women representatives have attempted to assert themselves through informal or de facto forms of representation, finding alternative ways to make their voices heard. Nevertheless, for the majority, the lack of meaningful participation and the persistent barriers they face result in minimal engagement with Panchayat activities, reinforcing their peripheral role in grassroots governance.

This category comprises neutral, independent, and first-time elected representatives' individuals who do not have prior political affiliations or associations with any political party. Their entry into Panchayat politics is often the result of persuasion by community members or influential actors.

Due to their lack of prior experience and limited familiarity with the functioning of Panchayat institutions, their participation in governance tends to be passive and largely shaped by others. Their role in decision-making is often characterized by deference and a tendency to conform to dominant voices within the Panchayat, particularly those from the more assertive and politically connected first category. As a result, their scope for independent articulation of issues is constrained, and they often rely on more experienced representatives to represent their views, leading to a form of co-opted participation.

In the context of Panchayati Raj Institutions, accountability refers to the obligation of elected representatives and the Panchayat as a collective body to report, explain, and justify their actions and decisions to the constituents they serve. It involves the dissemination of information regarding the activities, initiatives, and outcomes undertaken for the development and welfare of the respective wards or the Panchayat as a whole. Elected officials are expected to be answerable for their performance, ensuring that their conduct aligns with the interests and expectations of the public.

However, field observations suggest that transparency and accountability, particularly in financial matters, are among the least prioritized aspects of Panchayat functioning. A notable trend is the reluctance of Panchayat representatives and functionaries to disclose detailed information about financial resources, expenditures, and fund allocations. This lack of openness undermines the principles of democratic governance and weakens the trust between the electorate and their representatives. The absence of institutional mechanisms to enforce accountability further exacerbates this issue, allowing for opaque practices that hinder genuine public oversight.

6. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The empirical findings from the study Panchayats in the Fifth Schedule Areas reveal a significant gap between formal participation and substantive engagement. While many representatives attend Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings, their role is often limited to passive observance, offering little input into deliberations or decision-making processes. This passive engagement tends to reinforce the dominance of politically influential groups, who often steer the agenda to serve narrow, self-interested goals.

The study further highlights that the institutional capacity of Panchayats to accommodate diverse perspectives is severely constrained by several structural and socio-political factors. These include the pervasive influence of political parties, bureaucratic dominance, manipulation by local elites. Such dynamics undermine the democratic ethos of Panchayati Raj institutions and limit the potential of grassroots governance to be truly representative and participatory. Therefore, strengthening institutional mechanisms for inclusion, accountability, and equitable participation remains critical for realizing the transformative potential of local self-governance in Scheduled Areas.

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