

Participation and Agency of Scheduled Caste Women in Panchayat Governance: A Study from Rural Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the nature of political participation of SC women representatives in the institution of panchayat in rural Andhra Pradesh. Based on preliminary research with elected officials at three levels of government, the inquiry examines the gap between formal inclusion in politics via constitutional reservations and substantive participatory outcomes. Although reservation policies have effectively facilitated descriptive representation, converging roadblocks of caste oppression, patriarchal inhibitions, and class oppression constrain meaningful participation in the process of governance. It finds that high attendance at meetings is compatible with low levels of participation in debates, very low levels of participation in the setting of the agenda and limited input into the budget. The research utilizes intersectionality as a theoretical perspective to examine how caste and gender intersect to create a particular form of political exclusion. In an emerging preliminary analysis, the study finds power of education, family support system and access to women's collectives as enablers for higher degree of participation. The agency of SC women representatives- makes its mark through 'tenacity', strategic 'compromise' and 'selective engagement' and such outcomes are mostly in the realm of welfare and minor infrastructure activities. This research illuminates the politics of marginalized women participation in local democratic institutions at the micro-level and has potential implications for institutional reform as well as special interventions to address intersecting barriers in local governance.

Keywords: *Scheduled Caste women, panchayat governance, political participation, intersectionality, local democracy, Andhra Pradesh*

1. Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (the Act) of 1992 was a turning point in Indian local governance by creating a three-tier panchayati raj system in for rural areas and including provisions for reservations for the socially disadvantaged and women on a mandatory basis. Jayal (2006) Over three decades on, the panchayats are represented by a million women elected representatives in India and a substantial presence of Scheduled Caste communities (Jayal, 2006). This shift in demographics begs the question of whether numbers really matter in terms of political participation and substantive representation.

Democracy is a promise from which Dalit women are excluded in many ways. As Crenshaw (1991) highlighting the specific experiences of intersectionality, these individuals were living at the intersection of caste and gender, and suffered from unique oppressions, distinct from those upper-caste or SC men endured. Casteist thinking that marginalizes Dalits, patriarchal structures that barred women literally from the political arena, economic instability stemming from historical landlessness and educational barriers caused by ongoing exclusion from formal education.

The article deals with patterns and processes of participation of Scheduled Caste women in the panchayat system in rural Andhra Pradesh, a state with a large SC population (nearly 20%), and a strong tradition of Dalit political assertion. The study fills a crucial lacuna regarding how constitutional space for inclusion translates

into practice in local democratic processes for multiple marginalized groups. Although some research has focused on women's representation in the panchayats (Buch, 2000; Rai, 2011) as well as on SC political participation separately, there is less scholarship that has specifically taken an intersectional perspective on SC women representatives.

In this article we make a number of contributions based on preliminary analysis of three aspects: the pattern of participation in formal governance procedures, the conditions that facilitate or inhibit genuine participation, and the ways SC women respond to structural barriers. To the extent that the analysis contributes to debates – theoretical (descriptive compared to substantive representation (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 1999), and empirical about the possibilities and limitations of marginalized women's political agency in contemporary India – it is through its concerns with the complexity and messiness of reality rather than simplistic ideal type constructions..

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Intersectionality and Political Marginalization

Drawing on scholarship within critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist theory that is grounded in the simultaneous inquiry of race, gender, and other categories of analysis (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000), this study uses intersectionality as the theoretical lens to analyze how multiple systems of oppression work in a concurrent as opposed to an additive manner. In the case of SC women panchayat leaders, caste and gender do not simply “stack up” as separate hurdles but intersect to form unique configurations of political exclusion. They live what might be called a “double bind” — they are dismissed as Dalits, associated with incompetency, and as women, considered to be devoid of political intelligence.

SC women's experiences of politics are so different from those of upper-caste women, who face gender oppression without caste stigma, and SC men, who suffer caste discrimination but no gender-related obstacles to engaging in public life, that intersectionality draws stark lines of difference. This conceptualization does not essentialize either “women” or “Dalits” as taken-for-granted categories, but rather exposes the extent to which SC women's location straddles intersecting matrices of oppression.

2.2 Agency, Resources, and Achievements

The analysis is further informed by Kabeer's (1999) concept of empowerment as comprising resources (material and human resources as well as social relations that facilitate participation), agency (ability to make meaningful choices and bring about change), and achievements (instrumental outcomes and process related results such as self-confidence or women solidarity). This framework brings up crucial empirical queries: Does holding formal political offices “equip” SC women with resources that they did not have before? Does it increase their decision-making influence on matters of governance? Do they reap “desirable” results, for themselves and their followers?

2.3 Descriptive and Substantive Representation

The line between descriptive representation (the numerical presence of group members in institutions) and substantive representation (the representation of group interests in policy and practice) offers policy-analysis clarity for the consideration of outcomes of participation (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995). The system of reservations in India has succeeded in providing

descriptive representation to SC women in panchayats. The question remains as to whether this numerical presence leads to substantive representation real power in decision making on priorities and distribution of resources and that is an empirical matter to be explored in the day to day experience of governance.

2.4 Research Questions

This initial research paper deals with three interning questions:

1. What are the patterns of SC women's involvement in the processes of panchayat governance such as meeting attendance, speaking in deliberations, agenda-setting and budget participation?

2. What are the enabling and constraining conditions of 'deeper' (beyond presence as such) forms of participation?

3. How do representatives of SC women strategise to challenge the barriers and to exercise agency in institutionalised forms of governance?

3. Research Context and Methodology

3.1 Research Setting

Andhra Pradesh (post-2014 bifurcation) the case for this study. It has a considerable SC population and long tradition of Dalit political mobilization through Ambedkarite as well as left political formations. The study concentrates on villages, where the hold of caste identity is strong, and panchayats are the main mediator between citizens and democratic governance.

The site selection for the study represents a range of geographic and socio-political settings (Delta, semi-upland and upland), and a spectrum of agricultural commercialisation, caste composition, and panchayat institutional performance. This diversity enables an analysis of the ways in which local context influences the participation experiences of SC women.

3.2 Methodological Approach

The research is a mixed method study with qualitative and quantitative data. The study engages with SC women at three levels of governance- gram panchayats, mandal praja parishads and zilla praja parishads to capture cross-level variation of institution.

Quantitative component: Baseline demographics, SES background, political history, and participation are assessed using structured questionnaires. Survey routines consist of both closed ended questions that can be analyzed statistically and open-ended questions that provide information-rich answers.

Qualitative portion: Ground-level interviews with multi-generational family farms and ranches living realities, paths to political participation, challenges and strategies in governance, and self- evaluations of effectiveness. Conducted in Telugu, the interviews allow the representatives to define in their own terms the meanings they attach to political participation and the politics of gender.

Observational element: Panchayat meetings are systematically observed to record participation patterns that are not always accessible though self-reported data, such as patterns of interaction, the order of speakers, decision-making dynamics, and mannerisms of covert inclusion or exclusion.

The fieldwork was carried out over six months, enabling the building of rapport with the participants, observation at various seasonal and political phases as well as the inductive process of data collection and analysis. This prolonged interaction with the field was crucial as it enabled me to go beyond what could easily be revealed for instance about experiences of discrimination or about the organisational politics.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to established ethical standards of informed consent, confidentiality by pseudonymisation and reflexive consideration of power relations between the researcher and the participants. It recognises the challenges of cross-caste, cross-gender research relations and strives to be respectful of the participants as knowers of their own lives.

4. Preliminary Findings

4.1 The Presence-Voice Gap

Preliminary findings show a considerable gap between seat and voice in the processes of governance. Although virtually all SC women representatives are regular attendees at panchayat meetings, their participation in

debates is much more restricted.

The attendance is much higher, showing that presence has been normalized in the middle of logistical and social obstacles. But as with so much of the qualitative data, what observational data tell us is that attendance, which often means passive watching, not active participating. In these sessions, the SC women representatives in panchayats rarely spoke, and only when they were asked or incidentally spoke in response to queries on their specific constituencies.

There is little correspondence between who attends and who speaks. A large number of the deputies say they speak infrequently during meetings, many of them stating they only speak “from time to time”, or “rarely” despite their regular attendance. This divide between presence and voice captures the distinction between formal inclusion within the institutional spaces and meaningful engagement in their deliberative processes.

But SC women are brief, hesitant and their interventions are typically limited when they speak. “They usually answer questions, give statements on issues categorized as “women’s issues” (water, sanitation) or communicate constituency demands, but do not elaborate too much.” Rarely do these figures engage in the confident agenda-shaping, sustained debating, or tactical jockeying that marks the participation of the upper-caste male legislators.

4.2 Constraints on Substantive Participation

Multiple intersecting factors account for limited substantive participation:

Educational deprivation: A large part of the representation was uneducated. Educational shortfalls affect both specific knowledge about political procedures and the cultural capital and confidence that comes with going to school. Yet it is clear that education has its own influence on representation. When asked about technical language, bureaucratic jargon, and ways of speaking associated with formal schooling, they responded that as low-educated representatives they were intimidated by these things. “They are just using big words talking about government rules, I don’t understand. “I’m scared to talk in case they laugh at me or tell me that I don’t know anything.”

Discrimination based on caste: the overwhelming majority of members said they were discriminated against by upper caste panchayat members. This discrimination is expressed in the patronizing negation of contributions, in the interruption or in speaking over SC women when they try to speak, and in selective listening when proposals made by SC women are disregarded while similar proposals made by upper caste members are entertained. These incidents are told and re-told to show that SC women’s voices are not meaningful, thus silencing prospective participants.

Patriarchal sanctions: male panchayat members have dismissed women’s concerns as petty and that women were not capable of governance. This gendered rhetoric seeks to confine women to highly specialised “women’s issues”, and exclude them from areas considered to involve genuine power, such as budgetary prioritization, major infrastructural projects, strategic policy planning. For SC women in particular, upper-caste actors may simultaneously invoke both casteist and patriarchal logics to discredit them as participants in the.

Economic constraints: Most women SCs are faced with a dire economic situation and imperatives of survival that make the political responsibilities and survival imperatives sometimes incompatible. Unstable wage labor dependency also means that time for meetings or political work is time lost that cannot be made up, posing difficult trade-offs that women representatives not as economically secure as themselves do not face.

4.3 Limited Strategic Decision-Making Participation

Participation restrictions also become more stringent for core functions of governance (i.e., agenda-setting and budgetary decision-making). A large proportion of representatives claimed they never or rarely do bring items to the agenda. Likewise, few representatives contribute to the budget process.

There is much elitism in budget talk. Budgets are issued in technical formats using accounting classifications, government funding formulas, and bureaucratic jargon that can be impenetrable to representatives without

financial literacy training. In addition, budgets are in many cases submitted as already-decided by officials following directives from on high—to be ratified and not debated. Representatives argue that when they have sought to challenge budget priorities, they have been met with pronouncements that technical requirements or external mandates prevent them from doing so. This technocratic budgeting process freezes out those already marginalized and renders them impotent in determining where resources are allocated.

4.4 Variations and Enabling Factors

In line with these broad limitations on participation, SC women MPs are diverse. Active participationsome are very active, speaking frequently, tabling agenda items and participating substantively in governance processes.

Educational level is the strongest predictor of participaton. Frequent speech among educated MPs Representatives who have received secondary education or above are far more likely to speak frequently as compared with those who have received primary education or who are uneducated. Education not only equips people with specific knowledge, but it also gives them naanch the confidence, the cultural capital, and the sense of entitlement they need to participate as equals.

The ability to participate is greatly influenced by family support systems. Supportive family members, in particular husbands or in-laws who are supportive of political involvement), this is reflected in higher participation among those facing family opposition or barriers. Support is expressed in encouragement to keep going in the face of adversity, taking on the household duties that enable women to engage in politics, practical aid in attending meetings or filling out paperwork, and emotional encouragement. Family opposition, on the other hand, can take the form of restrictions on movement, humiliation that undermines confidence, interference with decision- making, and in some instances threats of violence and/or abandonment.

There is also a positive correlation between access to women’s collectives and better participation. Links to women’s federations that connect elected representatives across villages, or the provision of NGO training on governance, diminish feelings of isolation, and make such representatives feel more confident and better prepared. These linkages offer information on rights and procedures, practical advice for overcoming barriers, solidarity to resist isolation, and in some cases, legal representation when faced with discrimination.

A history of collective organization in SHGs, village organization or social movements is a predictor of more active participation. Such histories mean familiarity with collective processes and decision making; confidence derived from earlier public positions; social ties that can be activated; and often ideological commitments to resisting inequality.

4.5 Strategies and Agency

In the face of daunting obstacles, SC women representatives are not all passive, but utilize multiple tactics to challenge constraints on and limited agency within:They live life on their own terms Persistent Assertion Many women representatives continue to attend and speak, over time normalizing their presence and, in some cases, achieving grudging respect for their commitment.

Alliance-building: When the opportunity arises, representatives from various countries ally informally with other female representatives to offer mutual assistance, to coordinate action on shared matters, and to collectively address discrimination.

Pragmatic pursuit of male allies: Some representatives pragmatically engage with sympathetic male representatives or officials who they believe will support their priorities to provide counsel or advocate, understanding they must work within systems dominated by men to achieve ends.

Selective engagement: The representatives tend to concentrate their activities in areas in which they have meaningful work to do welfare disbursement and small constituency projects for the most part -- and tend to avoid fighting consuming wars over issues where they meet with an insurmountable wall of resistance.

Long-term capacity building:Multi-term representatives talk about deliberately working to enhance their governing knowledge, understanding of bureaucracy, and formal relationships as they go, as their success is in part a function of time and accrued capacity.

These strategies may be understood as agency-oriented initiatives within structural constraints neither an expansive possibility to transform contexts of living nor an utter annihilation without modes of acting.

4.6 Outcomes and Accomplishments

However, many SC women legislators achieve meaningful outcomes despite a host of obstacles.

Making welfare access easier: The most common success relates to officials helping citizens to circumvent red tape and access government programs collected under pensions, housing development, food staples. Livelihood: For members of a downtrodden community, who have had their access to territories curtailed by illiteracy, poverty or bias, it does help if they have legislators who can relate to them and fight for them.

Small infrastructure: Many legislators from SC colonies turn out to be pilots in developing constituency-based “mini-infrastructure” work including drainage, street lighting, potable water, road concreting. While small in magnitude, these upgrades are significant in the context of systematically under-served populations.

Encouraging even greater participation: The presence and activities of representatives seem also to promote a more general increase in women's participation at the local level, leading to more women participating in public meetings, approaching officials and showing an interest in future political participation.

Combating discrimination: A few leaders make SC a part of a partial victory in breaking down caste based barriers/SC households are allowed part access to common water points, overturning certain discriminatory school rules, acting in caste based violence cases etc.

Process wins: Instrumental changes aside, representatives develop self-confidence, learn to navigate governance, establish networks and over time gain respect rather than have all manner of suspicion aimed their way process achievements that should be recognized alongside tangible or substantive ones.

5. Discussion

These initial results help in the study of marginalized women's political participation in these ways:

The presence-voice gap observed here replicates and builds on previous studies of women's panchayat representation (Buch, 2000; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) to show how the presence of inclusion in the constitution does not necessarily in itself lead to substantive participation. While the observation data reveal certain specific dynamics, they also serve as empirical examples of the theoretical contrasts between descriptive and substantive representation.

Intersectional analysis is key to analyze the SC women's life worlds. Neither caste-based analysis nor feminist theoretical analysis which analyses patriarchy alone is sufficient to understand how patriarchal and caste based ideologies wield together to oppress SC women in panchayat polity. This intersectional framework shows us that there are qualitatively different experiences that are hidden in everyday claims to “women's representation”.

Within-group heterogeneity In the literature important critiques are raised against the idea that SC women can be ‘pigeon hole’ as a single category. Background variables, namely education, family situation, ties to organization, and local environment, give rise to notable differences in how people participate and in the results of participation. This divergence implies that although structural constraints may be potent, they do not possess an absolute determining nature—thus signaling towards potential avenues for interventions geared towards enhancing participation.

Agency and constraint are intricately intertwined. SC women are not passive subjects of discrimination nor are they completely autonomous agents who do not face structural barriers. They demonstrate significant agency in the form of strategic accommodation to constraints, in which they are paradoxically both successful and still subject to the same fundamental power structures. This observation aligns with Kabear's (1999) notion of empowerment as an expression of both resources and agency in doubly constrained situation.

The study contributes to both theory and practice. It makes theoretical contributions to the literature on intersectionality in political institutions as well as the micro-level processes through which marginalized groups engage formal democratic institutions. At the practical level, the findings highlight a gap between the systemic needs for institutional reforms that would strengthen the panchayati raj system in general and the specific requirements of SC women, who are doubly marginalized by caste-gender intersections.

6. Conclusion

This is a preliminary investigation. Three decades after constitutional amendments revolutionised local governance, SC women are now able to contest formal positions of political power. This is such a dramatic advancement in democracy that certainly would be worthy of applause. But far too many uncomfortable divides still exist across the spectrum of formal inclusion and substantive empowerment. In order to understand and address these disparities, intersectional dynamics of caste and gender must be considered, as well as an understanding of structural constraints and individual agency, and an acknowledgement of diversity among SC women elected representatives.

The road to an inclusive local democracy that treats all citizens as its political equals remains under construction. This study records the state of play, while signaling what will have to change—through both further institutional reform and interventions of a different order—to bridge those gaps between constitutional promise and lived reality. Politicizing SC women is both a victory to be heralded and a matter of unfinished democratic business to be relentlessly pursued through further research and advocacy.

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