PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION OF SCHEDULED CASTES AND SCHEDULED TRIBES AT THE GRAM PANCHAYAT LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The participation and representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) at the Gram Panchayat level constitute essential elements of democratic decentralisation, social justice and inclusive rural development in India. Historically, these communities have experienced social exclusion, economic disadvantages, caste-based discrimination and limited access to political institutions. The Constitution of India, particularly the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, introduced a significant institutional framework for strengthening local self-government and ensuring the political representation of disadvantaged sections of society. Article 243D provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Panchayati Raj Institutions, proportionate to their population in the respective Panchayat areas. However, the presence of elected representatives does not automatically ensure their effective participation in governance or independent decision-making.

This paper examines the constitutional and legal framework governing SC/ST representation at the Gram Panchayat level, the nature of their participation in local governance, the barriers affecting their political empowerment and the measures necessary to strengthen inclusive democratic institutions. It adopts a doctrinal and analytical research methodology based on constitutional provisions, legislation, government reports and secondary literature. The paper argues that meaningful representation requires more than electoral reservation; it requires social equality, administrative support, financial autonomy, political awareness and effective participation in the Gram Sabha. Strengthening the voice of SCs and STs in village-level decision-making is essential for achieving the constitutional objectives of equality, dignity and participatory democracy.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Gram Panchayat, Political Representation, Gram Sabha, Social Justice, Democratic Decentralisation, Political Empowerment.

Introduction

The Panchayati Raj system occupies an important position in India's democratic structure because it brings governance closer to rural communities. The Gram Panchayat, as the villagelevel institution of rural local self-government, performs significant functions relating to drinking water, sanitation, rural roads, public health, education, welfare programmes and local development. Its democratic legitimacy depends not merely on the conduct of elections but also on the meaningful participation of different social groups in the formulation and implementation of development priorities.

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have historically faced structural inequalities that have restricted their access to education, economic resources, public institutions and political power. Caste-based exclusion, social discrimination, geographical isolation and economic dependence have, in various contexts, affected their ability to influence village-level decisions. Consequently, the representation of these communities in Panchayati Raj Institutions is an important constitutional mechanism for correcting historical exclusion and promoting inclusive governance.

The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which introduced Part IX of the Constitution, gave constitutional recognition to Panchayati Raj Institutions. Article 243D provides for the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in Panchayats according to their population in the relevant Panchayat area. It also provides for reservation for women, including women belonging to SC and ST communities. These provisions seek to widen access to elected office and improve the representation of historically disadvantaged groups.

Nevertheless, representation and participation are distinct concepts. Representation concerns the presence of members of a community in an elected institution, whereas participation concerns their ability to express views, influence deliberations, contribute to development planning, scrutinise expenditure and exercise authority in practice. The central concern of this study is whether the constitutional guarantee of representation translates into effective participation and political empowerment at the Gram Panchayat level.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a doctrinal and analytical research methodology. The primary legal sources

include the Constitution of India, the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, and relevant constitutional and statutory provisions governing local self-government. Secondary sources include government reports, policy documents, research publications and academic literature relating to political representation, decentralisation and social justice.

The research analyses the legal framework alongside the practical concerns associated with the participation of SCs and STs in village-level institutions. It considers representation in elected bodies, involvement in Gram Sabha deliberations, participation in development planning and access to administrative processes.

The present paper does not claim to establish empirical findings from a field survey. Its conclusions are analytical and should be supplemented by interviews, questionnaires, Gram Sabha records and Panchayat level data where an empirical assessment is intended.

Constitutional and Legal Framework

The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992

The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, introduced Part IX of the Constitution of India, comprising Articles 243 to 243O. It established a constitutional framework for Panchayati Raj Institutions and strengthened the principle of democratic decentralisation. The amendment sought to provide continuity to rural local government, regular elections and representation for disadvantaged sections of society.

Article 243B provides for the constitution of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels, subject to the constitutional provisions and applicable exceptions. Article 243G enables State Legislatures to endow Panchayats with powers and authority necessary for functioning as institutions of self-government, including responsibilities concerning economic development and social justice.

These provisions create the institutional setting within which SCs and STs can participate in local governance. However, the actual distribution of functions, funds and functionaries depends substantially on the applicable State legislation and administrative arrangements.

Article 243D: Reservation of Seats

Article 243D is the principal constitutional provision governing the reservation of seats for

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Panchayats.

Under Article 243D(1), seats are reserved for SCs and STs in every Panchayat. The number of seats reserved for each category is, as nearly as possible, proportionate to the population of that category in the Panchayat area relative to the total population of that area. Such seats may be allotted to different constituencies by rotation.

Article 243D(2) provides that not less than one-third of the seats reserved under clause (1) must be reserved for women belonging to SCs or STs, as applicable. Article 243D(3) separately requires reservation for women of not less than one-third of the total directly elected seats in every Panchayat, including the seats reserved for SC/ST women.

Article 243D(4) provides for reservation of the offices of Chairpersons in Panchayats for SCs,

STs and women in the manner prescribed by State law, subject to the constitutional requirements.

These provisions recognise that equal political opportunity may require affirmative measures to address historical exclusion. They create opportunities for members of SC and ST communities to occupy elected positions and participate in the exercise of public authority. However, the effectiveness of reservation must also be assessed by examining whether elected representatives can exercise their powers independently and participate meaningfully in governance.

Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993

In Karnataka, the principal legislation governing Panchayati Raj Institutions is the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993. The Act provides the statutory framework for village-level self-government, the constitution of Gram Panchayats, reservation of seats and the functioning of Gram Sabhas and other Panchayat institutions.

Section 5 deals with the constitution of Gram Panchayats and reservation of seats, including seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Act also provides a framework for Gram Sabha participation, local development planning and the performance of Panchayat functions.

The statutory framework is significant because constitutional guarantees require

implementation through State laws, rules, administrative procedures and local institutions. The Karnataka legislation recognises the importance of participation by socially disadvantaged communities and provides for institutional arrangements intended to facilitate local self-government.

The effectiveness of these provisions depends on proper implementation, timely elections, transparent reservation and rotation procedures, access to information, accountable administration and the ability of elected members to participate in the exercise of Panchayat powers.

Gram Sabha as an Instrument of Participatory Democracy

The Gram Sabha is an important forum for direct participation in village governance. It provides an opportunity for eligible voters in the village to deliberate on local development needs, public services, welfare programmes and accountability in the functioning of the Gram Panchayat.

For SC and ST residents, the Gram Sabha can serve as a platform to raise concerns relating to drinking water, roads, sanitation, housing, education, public distribution, social welfare benefits and discrimination in access to public resources.

Effective participation requires more than formal attendance. Community members must have an opportunity to speak, receive relevant information, question public decisions and obtain responses to their grievances. Where meetings are poorly publicised, held at inconvenient times or dominated by influential individuals, the practical value of the Gram Sabha may be reduced.

Accordingly, accessible meetings, advance notice, transparent records and systematic follow-up of resolutions are important for strengthening the participation of SCs and STs.

Nature and Importance of SC/ST Participation at the Gram Panchayat Level

Electoral Representation

Reservation of seats creates a formal avenue for SC and ST members to enter elected local institutions. Such representation can improve the visibility of historically marginalised communities and create opportunities to raise their concerns within the decision-making

process.

Elected representatives can bring local problems to the attention of the Panchayat, participate in committee work, contribute to development priorities and monitor the delivery of public services. Their presence may also encourage other members of the community to engage with local institutions.

However, the number of representatives alone cannot establish the degree of empowerment achieved. Their influence must also be assessed through their participation in meetings, involvement in planning, access to records and capacity to shape decisions.

Participation in Development Planning

Gram Panchayats are involved in identifying local needs and implementing development programmes. SC and ST representatives can contribute to the identification of infrastructure gaps, welfare priorities and service-delivery problems affecting their communities.

For example, they may raise issues concerning access to drinking water, roads connecting marginalised habitations, housing assistance, sanitation facilities, school infrastructure and the implementation of social welfare schemes.

Inclusive planning requires that development priorities be determined through transparent and participatory procedures rather than through the exclusive influence of dominant local groups. The views of SC and ST residents should be considered when development plans are prepared and beneficiaries are identified in accordance with applicable eligibility criteria.

Participation in Decision-Making

Participation in decision-making is a central indicator of substantive political empowerment. Elected members must have a reasonable opportunity to discuss proposals, examine expenditure, question administrative action and contribute to resolutions.

Where representatives lack access to information or are unable to understand budgets, official records and scheme guidelines, their formal presence may not result in effective influence. Training in Panchayat procedures, financial administration and relevant legislation can help strengthen their capacity to discharge their responsibilities.

Meaningful participation also requires respect for the authority of elected members. Administrative officials and other representatives should facilitate lawful decision-making rather than exclude or marginalise elected members on the basis of caste or social status.

Social Justice and Accountability

SC and ST Representatives can contribute to the promotion of social justice by bringing instances of discrimination, exclusion and unequal access to public services to the attention of the Panchayat and competent authorities.

Their participation may support the identification of gaps in the implementation of welfare schemes and improve communication between public institutions and disadvantaged communities. It can also strengthen accountability by ensuring that the needs of different habitations and social groups receive consideration.

Nevertheless, Panchayats must operate within the Constitution and applicable law. Elected representatives alone cannot eliminate structural inequality; effective enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, administrative accountability and community participation remain necessary.

Representation of SC/ST Women

Women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes may experience overlapping forms of disadvantage arising from caste, gender and economic inequality. Their representation is therefore particularly important for inclusive rural governance.

SC/ST women representatives may bring attention to issues such as maternal and child health, nutrition, sanitation, school attendance, access to welfare schemes and the safety of women and girls. Their participation can also challenge the exclusion of women from public decisionmaking.

At the same time, they may encounter barriers involving household responsibilities, restricted mobility, limited access to education, social discrimination and pressure from influential persons. Capacity-building programmes should therefore address both gender inequality and caste-based exclusion.

Major Challenges Affecting Effective Participation

Caste Based Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Caste-based discrimination can affect the confidence, mobility and public participation of SC representatives and residents. In some local contexts, traditional social hierarchies may influence who speaks during meetings, whose proposals receive attention and who exercises informal authority.

Such practices undermine the constitutional principles of equality, dignity and equal political participation. Effective institutional safeguards and enforcement of applicable laws are necessary to prevent discriminatory treatment.

Economic Dependence and Limited Resources

Economic insecurity may restrict participation in public affairs. Representatives who depend on daily wages, agricultural labour or irregular employment may find it difficult to attend meetings, travel to government offices or participate in training programmes without financial hardship.

Lack of independent resources can also make representatives vulnerable to pressure from influential persons. Timely payment of lawful allowances, accessible training and adequate institutional support can reduce some of these difficulties.

Limited Legal and Administrative Awareness

The responsibilities of a Gram Panchayat member may involve statutory procedures, public finance, development schemes, official correspondence and administrative coordination. Insufficient knowledge of these matters can reduce the ability of elected representatives to participate effectively.

Regular orientation programmes, practical training in local languages and access to simplified manuals can improve understanding of legal powers, meeting procedures, budgets and accountability mechanisms.

Proxy Representation and External Influence

A potential problem in local governance is the exercise of informal control by persons who do not hold the elected office. An elected representative may face pressure from family members, political intermediaries or socially dominant individuals.

Where a representative is prevented from exercising independent judgment, the democratic purpose of reservation is weakened. However, proxy representation should not be presumed merely because a representative receives advice or assistance. It must be assessed through evidence concerning actual decision-making, control over official functions and participation in meetings.

Administrative and Financial Constraints

Even active representatives may find it difficult to implement local priorities where the Panchayat lacks adequate funds, staff, technical assistance or delegated authority. Dependence on higher administrative levels may limit the timely execution of development decisions.

Effective decentralisation requires appropriate devolution of functions, funds and functionaries, subject to applicable law. Representatives must also have access to financial information and procedures for monitoring expenditure.

Weak Participation in Gram Sabha Meetings

Participation may be reduced by inadequate public notice, inconvenient meeting times, livelihood obligations, limited awareness and insufficient follow-up of community demands. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's 2026 National Study Report on low Gram Sabha participation identifies factors including occupational constraints, inadequate communication, weak grievance responsiveness, limited transparency and insufficient follow-up. These findings concern Gram Sabha participation generally and should not be interpreted as specific measurements of SC/ST participation alone.

Measures to improve meeting accessibility, transparency and responsiveness are therefore important for inclusive local governance.

Major Findings and Discussion

The constitutional and legal analysis supports the following observations:

1. **Reservation is an essential mechanism for representation.** Article 243D provides a constitutional foundation for the inclusion of SCs and STs in elected Panchayati Raj Institutions.

2. **Representation and empowerment are not identical.** The presence of elected members does not, by itself, establish independent decision-making or substantive influence over development priorities.

3. **The Gram Sabha is important for direct participation.** Its effectiveness depends on accessibility, transparency, meaningful deliberation and the response given to community demands.

4. **Social and economic conditions influence participation.** Caste-based exclusion, livelihood constraints, inadequate resources and limited administrative awareness may affect the practical exercise of political rights.

5. **SC/ST women may face intersecting barriers.** Their participation requires attention to both caste-related exclusion and gender inequality.

6. **Administrative capacity and devolution matter.** Training, access to information, adequate resources and clear institutional responsibilities are necessary to convert formal representation into effective local governance.

These are analytical findings derived from the legal framework and the issues discussed in the literature and government materials. They should not be treated as statistically measured conclusions about every Gram Panchayat or every SC/ST representative.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Strengthening Legal and Political Awareness

Regular awareness programmes should explain the constitutional rights of SCs and STs, the functions of Gram Panchayats, the role of the Gram Sabha and the legal remedies available in

cases of discrimination. Such programmes should be organized in accessible local languages and at times convenient for rural residents.

Capacity-Building for Elected Representatives

Training should cover Panchayat legislation, meeting procedures, preparation of development plans, public finance, budget scrutiny, government schemes, record maintenance and grievance redressal. Training should be practical, continuous and responsive to the specific needs of firsttime representatives.

Ensuring Effective Gram Sabha Participation

Gram Sabha meetings should be publicised sufficiently in advance. Meeting times and venues should take account of the needs of marginalised habitations and persons dependent on daily wages. Agendas, attendance records, resolutions and action-taken reports should be made accessible to the public.

Preventing Discrimination and Proxy Control

Competent authorities should respond promptly to substantiated complaints involving caste discrimination, intimidation or obstruction of elected representatives. Clear procedures should ensure that elected members can perform their lawful duties independently and that complaints receive fair consideration.

Improving Access to Information

Panchayats should make relevant development plans, budgets, beneficiary-selection criteria, expenditure statements and meeting records accessible in accordance with applicable transparency and disclosure requirements. Digital information should be supplemented by physical notice boards and assistance for residents who lack internet access.

Strengthening Financial and Administrative Support

Panchayats should receive appropriate resources and technical assistance to implement approved local priorities. Elected representatives should be trained to monitor expenditure and demand accountability. State and district authorities should ensure that the distribution of responsibilities is accompanied by adequate institutional support.

Promoting Participation of SC/ST Women

Targeted training, mentoring, peer-learning programmes and accessible meeting arrangements can support SC/ST women representatives. Institutional measures should enable them to speak freely, participate in committees and exercise their responsibilities without intimidation or unlawful interference.

Monitoring Substantive Participation

Evaluation should consider not only the number of SC/ST representatives elected but also their attendance, participation in discussions, contribution to resolutions, involvement in development planning and access to administrative information. Appropriate monitoring must respect privacy, avoid discriminatory assumptions and rely on verifiable evidence.

Conclusion

The participation and representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes at the Gram Panchayat level are fundamental to the realisation of democratic decentralisation and social justice in India. The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, and Article 243D of the Constitution have established an important framework for improving the political representation of historically disadvantaged communities. The Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, provides the corresponding State-level institutional framework for local self-government.

However, meaningful political empowerment cannot be measured solely by the number of reserved seats occupied. It must also be assessed through the ability of elected representatives to participate in deliberations, influence development priorities, scrutinize public expenditure and exercise their statutory responsibilities independently. The participation of SC and ST residents in Gram Sabha meetings is equally important because inclusive governance requires direct community engagement in addition to elected representation.

Caste-based discrimination, economic dependence, inadequate legal awareness, administrative constraints and weak participatory practices may limit the effectiveness of constitutional guarantees. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action by State authorities, Panchayat institutions, civil society organisations and local communities.

Ultimately, the success of reservation and decentralisation depends on transforming formal political representation into substantive participation, accountability and social inclusion. A Gram Panchayat can fulfill its constitutional purpose only when SCs and STs have a meaningful opportunity to influence decisions affecting their lives and when their dignity, equality and participation are protected in practice.

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