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Descriptive Representation Without Substantive Empowerment: Caste, Party Influence, Money Power, and Patriarchy in SC Women-Reserved Panchayat Elections in Rural Telangana

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Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 mandated reservations for Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Gram Panchayat elections across India, with the intent of achieving both descriptive and substantive political empowerment for historically marginalised communities. This paper examines whether that intent has been realised in practice, drawing on primary data collected from 84 respondents in a rural village in Telangana through a structured questionnaire of 56 items. Using descriptive percentage analysis and cross-tabulations, the study investigates how caste dynamics and intra-SC sub-caste divisions, political party influence, money power and material inducements, and patriarchal norms interact to shape the SC women-reserved Sarpanch election. The findings reveal that 69% of respondents voted along caste lines, 85.7% confirmed active political party involvement in what is constitutionally a non-party election, 71.4% acknowledged that cash and material inducements were distributed, and 64.3% said elected SC women do not function independently after winning office. The paper argues that reservation has succeeded in ensuring descriptive representation - SC women are present in elected positions - but has not produced substantive empowerment, because the four structural forces of caste, party, money, and patriarchy remain largely intact. The study contributes micro-level empirical evidence from Telangana to the broader debate on the limits and possibilities of affirmative action in Indian local governance.

Keywords; SC Women Reservation, Panchayati Raj, Descriptive Representation, Substantive Empowerment, Caste Politics, Money Power, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Local self-governance in India rests on the constitutional promise that even the most marginalised communities will have a voice in decisions that directly affect their daily lives. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 was a landmark step toward that goal. By adding Part IX to the Constitution through Articles 243 to 243O, it gave Panchayati Raj Institutions formal constitutional status and mandated reservations for Scheduled Castes and women at every tier of the system. Article 243D required that seats be reserved for SC women in Gram Panchayats across all states. The policy logic was straightforward: if historical exclusion had prevented these communities from participating in governance, the state would intervene to guarantee their numerical presence in elected bodies.

Three decades after that amendment, the presence of SC women in Gram Panchayats across India is a visible reality. They hold Sarpanch positions in thousands of villages. Yet the question of whether their presence translates into genuine authority - the ability to make decisions, raise development issues, and govern independently - remains deeply contested. A large body of research, from Baviskar (2011) to Ban, Jha and Rao (2012), and from Jaffrelot (2003) to Sultana (2017), has documented the gap between formal reservation and substantive empowerment, identifying caste hierarchy, patriarchal family structures, party networks, and financial inequalities as the forces that persistently limit the real authority of elected SC women.

This paper contributes empirical evidence from a single village in rural Telangana to this debate. While much of the existing literature is national in scope or concentrated in northern and western Indian states, there is a relative shortage of close-grained, ground-level case studies from Telangana, a state with a distinctive caste structure, competitive two-party politics, and a history of strong OBC and BC political mobilisation. The study examines one SC women-reserved Sarpanch election held in 2025 and analyses, through primary survey data from 84 respondents, how caste dynamics, party influence, money power, and patriarchal norms shaped both the conduct of the election and the experience of the elected representative.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses the implications. Section 6 concludes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The political empowerment of Scheduled Caste women through Panchayati Raj reservation has attracted considerable scholarly attention since the 1990s. At the foundational level, Jaffrelot (2003) documented how reservation policies gradually increased Dalit political presence across India, while noting that their effectiveness was unevenly distributed, shaped by regional caste structures and intra-SC divisions. In states where sub-caste fragmentation is strong - such as the Mala-Madiga division in Telangana - Kumar and Jaffrelot (2021) demonstrate that electoral competition among SC groups often works against collective political bargaining, making SC candidates dependent on party support rather than community solidarity.

The role of political parties in ostensibly non-party Panchayat elections has been examined by Manor (2010), Palshikar (2016), and Heller, Harilal and Chaudhuri (2007). These scholars consistently find that parties function as the structural backbone of village elections - selecting candidates, funding campaigns, managing booth-level operations, and mobilising voters - even where party symbols are prohibited. The consequence for SC women candidates is particularly acute: they gain electoral viability through party support, but at the cost of post-election autonomy.

Money power in Indian elections has been analysed by Vaishnav (2017) and Banerjee et al. (2011). Both establish that economically vulnerable voters are disproportionately susceptible to material inducements, and that financially

constrained candidates - including SC women face a structural disadvantage in elections where spending capacity determines visibility and voter reach. In rural Telangana, Kumar and Rao (2021) confirm that cash and alcohol distribution has become a standard feature of Panchayat election campaigns.

Patriarchy and proxy leadership in SC-reserved seats have been documented by Baviskar (2011), Ban, Jha and Rao (2012), and Sultana (2017). These studies find that elected SC women frequently depend on male family members or party intermediaries to attend Panchayat meetings, speak in Gram Sabha, and make governance decisions in their name. Beaman et al. (2012) note that while repeated exposure to women leaders can gradually shift community attitudes, the institutional and social conditions required for genuine independence are rarely present in the first generation of reservations. Besley, Pande and Rao (2006) further show that even when SC representatives are elected, lack of administrative cooperation and limited access to bureaucratic resources restrict their governance effectiveness.

Against this background, the present study addresses a specific gap in the literature: the absence of micro-level case studies from rural Telangana that examine all four structural forces - caste, party, money, and patriarchy together, from the perspective of voters and community members, in a single reserved election event.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative-qualitative case study design to investigate the dynamics of an SC women-reserved Sarpanch election held in a rural village in Telangana, in 2025. The village was selected because it is a typical agrarian village with a mixed caste composition, a functional Gram Panchayat administration, and a history of competitive local elections in which caste identity, party intervention, and money power have all been observable. The identity of the village is anonymised to protect respondent confidentiality and to ensure the findings are read as representative of broader patterns in rural Telangana rather than as a report on a single named community.

A structured questionnaire of 56 items was administered to 84 respondents, including voters, youth, political workers, and community members directly and indirectly involved in the election process. The sample was drawn through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across gender, caste, education, and income categories. Primary data collection included field observations during

nomination, campaigning, polling, and counting, supplemented by unstructured conversations with candidates, party workers, and voters. Secondary data was drawn from government publications on Panchayat elections, election commission reports, and academic literature.

Data analysis employed frequency distribution and percentage analysis for all 56 survey items. Five cross-tabulations were constructed to examine the associations between selected demographic variables - gender, education, income, caste, and age and key attitudinal and behavioural indicators. Given the small sample size and the qualitative orientation of the study, inferential statistical tests were not applied; descriptive percentage analysis is used throughout, with cross-tabulations serving to reveal patterns across social subgroups rather than to test hypotheses statistically.

The sample profile is as follows. Among the 84 respondents, 58.3% are male and 41.7% female. Caste composition reflects the village social structure: 60.7% BC, 27.4% SC, 4.8% OC, and 7.1% others. In terms of age, 64.3% are between 18 and 35. Educationally, 26.2% are illiterate, 29.8% have intermediate-level education, and 26.2% are graduates or above. Occupationally, 59.5% are agriculturalists, and 86.9% of respondents earn less than ₹20,000 per month, placing the overwhelming majority in the low-income bracket.

FINDINGS

Caste Dynamics and Sub-Caste Divisions

Caste emerged as a central determinant of voting behaviour in the study. When asked whether the caste of a candidate influenced their voting decision, 69% of respondents said yes. Among SC respondents specifically, 82.6% acknowledged caste as an influence, the highest proportion across all caste groups - followed by 64.7% among BC respondents and 50% among OC respondents. This cross-tabulation confirms that caste voting is most intense precisely among the communities for whom reserved seats were designed to deliver empowerment.

Sub-caste divisions between Mala and Madiga communities within the SC category were acknowledged by 58.3% of respondents as a factor that affected the election outcome. This finding corroborates the observations of Kumar and Jaffrelot (2021) on how internal SC fragmentation undermines collective political power. Rather than presenting a unified electorate demanding accountable leadership from the SC woman Sarpanch, the two sub-communities mobilised separately, which allowed party

intermediaries to exploit the division. Candidate selection in the reserved seat was thus shaped not by the Sarpanch qualities or programme, but by sub-caste numerical calculation.

The persistence of caste voting is further reflected in the gap between stated preferences and actual behaviour. While 52.4% of respondents said they prefer the better-qualified candidate in principle, 47.6% either preferred the less-qualified or said it depended on the situation. In rural Telangana village elections, "depends on the situation" typically means "depends on caste loyalty." The fact that caste overrides education as a candidate selection criterion.

Political Party Influence

The constitutional non-party character of Panchayat elections was found to be a formal fiction rather than a social reality. An overwhelming 85.7% of respondents confirmed that political parties actively participated in the election. Among the most active electoral actors, local leaders (48.8%) and party workers (31%) together account for nearly 80% of perceived ground-level activity. This confirms that the election was organised through party machinery, not through independent community mobilisation.

Party influence on individual voter behaviour was equally pronounced. When asked whether party affiliation influenced their voting decision, 42.9% said always and 44.0% said sometimes - a cumulative 86.9% who acknowledged party as at least a partial determinant of their vote. Past performance, by contrast, was cited as a strong influence by only 25% of respondents. The displacement of performance-based accountability by party loyalty represents the most direct evidence that partisan networks have colonised village democracy in this context.

Party influence also extended beyond elections into governance. The finding that 26.2% of respondents identified party leaders (rather than the elected Sarpanch) as the most influential actors in Gram Sabha meetings, and that 73.8% said political connections determined access to government welfare benefits, confirms that party networks shape resource distribution after the election as well.

Money Power and Economic Vulnerability

Money power was confirmed as a decisive electoral factor. A total of 71.4% of respondents acknowledged that cash, gifts, or alcohol were distributed during the election.

More significantly, 65.5% said these inducements influenced their own vote - a self-reported figure that likely understates the actual impact given social desirability bias. Financial strength of the candidate was rated the most decisive factor in determining election outcomes by 33.3% of respondents, ranking above party influence (23.8%), development agenda (19.0%), and education (15.5%).

The income cross-tabulation confirms the economic mechanism through which money power operates. Among respondents earning below ₹10,000 per month - who constitute 45.2% of the sample - 57.9% agreed that economically weaker voters are more susceptible to inducements. Since 86.9% of all respondents fall in the below ₹20,000 income bracket, the village population as a whole is concentrated in the most vulnerable economic range. For SC women candidates, who typically lack independent financial resources and must rely on party or family funding for campaigns, the financial demands of electoral competition create a dependency that compromises their post-election autonomy.

Patriarchy and Women Autonomy

The study found strong evidence that patriarchal norms persist within SC-reserved seats. When asked whether SC women representatives function independently after election, 38.1% said no and 29.8% said only partially, leaving just 32.1% who believed elected women exercise full independence. The gender cross-tabulation on this question reveals that the perception of dependence is shared across both male (36.7% saying "no") and female (40.0% saying "no") respondents, indicating that this is not a gendered perception bias but a reflection of observed behaviour.

The data on public confidence reinforces this finding. Among respondents, 39.3% said SC women representatives lack confidence in public meetings, while only 32.1% described them as confident. Proxy leadership dynamics were observed directly: respondents confirmed that male family members attend Panchayat meetings on behalf of elected women, raise issues in their name, and make governance decisions in their place. Additionally, 26.2% of respondents said people cannot express themselves freely in Gram Sabha meetings at all, and 54.8% said freedom of expression is only conditional - a finding that disproportionately constrains the space available to SC women representatives who face compounded social pressure from both caste and gender norms.

Financial dependence reinforces patriarchal control. The finding that 35.7% of respondents believe SC women candidates face financial difficulties during elections, combined with the absence of substantial party support (confirmed by 57.1% of respondents), means that SC women must typically rely on male family members for campaign funding. This financial dependency at the point of candidacy reproduces patriarchal authority in the governance space after election.

Community Perceptions of SC Reservation Impact

Community perceptions of the reservation policy itself were mixed to pessimistic. Only 38.1% of respondents said that SC reservation has fully improved political representation, with 41.7% saying it has only partially done so and 20.2% saying it has not improved representation at all. On caste discrimination specifically, only 36.9% said reservation has reduced it, while 63.3% said it has had little or no effect. Welfare scheme delivery - perhaps the most concrete test of whether the elected Sarpanch has real power - was seen as biased by 74.4% of respondents, with only 25% believing schemes are implemented fairly.

Trust in the electoral process was also qualified: only 41.7% fully trust the Panchayat election system, while 46.4% have partial trust and 11.9% have none. Challenges most commonly identified by respondents as limiting SC women leadership were caste pressure (36.9%), money power (26.2%), and patriarchal norms (21.4%). When asked what reforms are most needed, 47.6% cited voter awareness and 31.0% called for stronger law enforcement. These community-articulated priorities directly correspond to the four structural forces identified in the study.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support the central theoretical distinction between descriptive and substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967; Beaman et al., 2012). In the village studied, descriptive representation is technically achieved: a Scheduled Caste woman holds the Sarpanch position. But the four forces documented in this paper - caste hierarchy, party penetration, money power, and patriarchal norms - operate together to prevent that formal presence from becoming substantive authority.

Each force reinforces the others. Caste fragmentation between Mala and Madiga sub-communities makes it impossible for SC voters to present a unified political demand, opening the door for party intermediaries to manage the reserved seat election on their terms. Party

dependency, once established during the election, continues into governance through informal control over Gram Sabha proceedings and welfare distribution. Money power both amplifies caste mobilisation (resources are used to target specific sub-caste communities) and creates financial dependency for SC women candidates, converting campaign debt into post-election obligation. Patriarchal norms, finally, determine how the elected woman exercises the position she wins: with limited public confidence, constrained mobility, and proxy decision-making by male family members.

The study findings resonate with Baviskar (2011) argument that female participation in local government is far from sufficient for empowering women, and with Besley, Pande and Rao (2006) observation that the governance effectiveness of SC representatives is constrained by limited administrative cooperation and inadequate access to bureaucratic resources. They also corroborate Manor (2010) finding that decentralisation has not dislodged elite control in rural governance, and Palshikar (2016) argument that party dependency is particularly acute in areas where institutional structures are underdeveloped.

What distinguishes this study from much of the existing literature is its simultaneous examination of all four forces within a single case. The literature has tended to examine caste, party, money, and patriarchy as separate themes. The micro-level data from this study shows that they are not independent variables but a mutually reinforcing structural system. Addressing any one force in isolation - for instance, by strengthening party support for SC women candidates while leaving caste fragmentation and patriarchal norms unaddressed - is unlikely to produce substantive empowerment.

The practical implications are clear. Reservation policy needs to be complemented by voter awareness programmes that explain the purpose and accountability requirements of SC reservation, by strict enforcement of Model Code of Conduct provisions on cash and material inducements, by leadership training and institutional support specifically for SC women representatives, and by administrative reforms that ensure equal cooperation from Panchayat officials regardless of the social identity of the elected Sarpanch.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine whether SC reservation in Panchayat elections in rural Telangana has translated formal electoral representation into genuine political empowerment. The evidence from 84 respondents in one village election in 2025 is unambiguous on the descriptive

side: reservation successfully placed a Scheduled Caste woman in the Sarpanch position. It is equally unambiguous on the substantive side: the conditions under which she was elected and the constraints she faces in governance prevent her from exercising real authority.

Caste identity - particularly the Mala-Madiga sub-caste division shaped 69% of voters choices and fragmented the SC electorate in ways that served party interests rather than community ones. Party networks dominated the election despite its constitutionally non-partisan character, with 85.7% of respondents confirming active party involvement and party affiliation influencing the votes of nearly 87% of respondents. Money and material inducements were distributed in 71.4% of cases and influenced 65.5% of respondents votes, with economic vulnerability-concentrated in the 87% of respondents earning below ₹20,000 - creating conditions in which short-term inducements reliably override policy-based voting. Patriarchal norms limited the elected Sarpanch independence both during campaigning, through financial dependency, and after election, through proxy leadership by male family members.

The study has limitations. It is based on a single village with a sample of 84 respondents, and the findings should not be generalised to all of Telangana without caution. The absence of longitudinal data means the study captures a snapshot of one election rather than a trajectory of change. Future research could compare these findings across multiple villages in the same district, track the experiences of elected SC women across multiple terms, and use in-depth interviews with the elected women themselves to capture perspectives not available through community surveys.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes a ground-level empirical account of how four interacting structural forces combine to hollow out the empowering intent of SC women reservation in rural South India. Its main contribution is not to argue that reservation has failed, but to identify with precision what structural conditions must change for it to succeed.

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