Research Article

Caste, Politics, And Democracy: Understanding the Political Culture of Scheduled Castes in Telangana

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Abstract
The Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Telangana occupy a complex position at the intersection of caste, politics, and democracy. Historically subjected to discrimination and exclusion, these communities have, since the state's formation in 2014, experienced both new opportunities and persisting challenges in political participation. This article examines the political culture of Scheduled Castes in Telangana, focusing on their historical struggles, patterns of democratic engagement, and the impact of state policies such as Dalit Bandhu. Drawing on case studies from Warangal, Karimnagar, Khammam, and Hyderabad, it explores the ways in which caste identity, electoral behavior, and grassroots mobilization shape the democratic inclusion of SCs. The analysis highlights the internal divisions among SCs, particularly the Mala–Madiga conflict, and evaluates their influence on electoral strategies. The paper argues that while welfare-driven politics has increased visibility and mobilization, genuine empowerment requires structural change, inclusive representation, and deeper democratization.
Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Telangana, Political Culture, Democracy, Dalit Bandhu, Mala, Madiga, Caste Politics.

1. Introduction

The study of caste and politics in India has long preoccupied scholars seeking to understand the dynamics of democracy in a stratified society. Within this framework, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) remain central, as they represent communities historically subjected to untouchability, marginalization, and systematic exclusion. In Telangana, SCs constitute nearly 17% of the population, divided primarily between the Mala and Madiga communities, along with smaller groups. Their political culture—defined as the attitudes, beliefs, and patterns of participation in democratic life—reflects both the burden of caste oppression and the opportunities of democratic assertion.

Telangana's statehood in 2014 offered a unique context for the political mobilization of SCs. On one hand, the state government, led by the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS, formerly TRS), launched flagship welfare schemes such as Dalit Bandhu to strengthen SC empowerment. On the other hand, internal caste divisions, token representation, and continued socio-economic exclusion complicate the trajectory of empowerment. This article aims to unpack these complexities by examining the historical evolution of SC political culture in Telangana, their democratic participation, and the challenges they face in shaping an inclusive democratic order.

2. Conceptual Framework

The concept of political culture was first systematically elaborated by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) in their seminal work The Civic Culture. They defined political culture as "the specifically political orientations—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system." In essence, political culture refers to the values, beliefs, emotions, and patterns of behavior that people hold toward politics and governance. When applied to the Indian context, political culture acquires a distinct dimension because of the pervasive influence of caste, religion, and community identity in shaping political attitudes and behavior.

The dimensions of political culture are generally identified as: (a) awareness—the extent to which citizens understand political institutions and processes; (b) participation—the degree of engagement in political activities such as voting, campaigning, or protest; (c) attitudes—perceptions of political authority, legitimacy, and justice; and (d) beliefs—deep-seated ideas about democracy, equality, and rights. Among Scheduled Castes (SCs), these dimensions are often mediated by historical experiences of exclusion, socio-economic deprivation, and aspirations for social justice. For instance, their awareness of politics is closely tied to questions of reservation, land rights, and welfare schemes, while their participation often reflects both caste solidarity and strategic alignment with parties promising empowerment.

The relationship between caste identity and political behavior is particularly strong in the case of SCs. Caste not only influences voting patterns but also frames political consciousness, collective mobilization, and leadership. The Mala–Madiga divide in Telangana illustrates how intra-caste distinctions shape divergent political affiliations and demands, complicating a unified Dalit political culture.

Theoretically, the political culture of SCs can be situated at the intersection of caste politics—where identity serves as a mobilizing force—and democratic participation—where inclusion in electoral and institutional processes reflects a move toward equality. This duality captures both the challenges and transformative potential of SC engagement with democracy in Telangana

3. Historical Background of SC Politics in Telangana

The political culture of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Telangana cannot be understood without tracing its roots in historical struggles against caste oppression, agrarian exploitation, and social exclusion. The trajectory of SC politics in the region reflects a gradual shift from subordination to mobilization, shaped by both revolutionary struggles and constitutional democracy

4. SC Role in the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51)

One of the earliest political assertions of the oppressed classes in Telangana was their active participation in the Telangana Armed Struggle against the Nizam's feudal system. Scheduled Castes, particularly agricultural laborers and bonded workers, played a crucial role in resisting landlord oppression and demanding land redistribution. The Communist-led struggle mobilized SCs, who were at the forefront of organizing village committees, seizing land, and challenging social hierarchies. Although the movement was eventually suppressed, it planted the seeds of political consciousness among Dalits in Telangana, linking issues of caste oppression with broader struggles for land, dignity, and rights.

Contribution of Dalit Leaders and Movements in United Andhra Pradesh

During the post-independence period, when Telangana was merged with Andhra to form Andhra Pradesh (1956), Dalit leaders emerged to articulate demands for social justice. B.R. Ambedkar's vision profoundly influenced Dalit intellectuals and activists, who emphasized education, reservation policies, and political representation. Leaders like Katti Padma Rao, Bojja Tarakam, and others carried forward Ambedkarite ideology through writings, legal activism, and grassroots mobilization. However, despite constitutional safeguards, SCs in Andhra Pradesh

continued to face caste atrocities and socio-economic marginalization, compelling them to organize more assertively.

5. Dalit Movements in Telangana

From the late 1980s onwards, Telangana witnessed several Dalit-specific movements that redefined SC politics. The Madiga Dandora (literally "cry of the Madigas") movement gained momentum in the 1990s, demanding categorization of Scheduled Caste reservations to ensure equitable distribution of benefits between the numerically dominant Mala and the historically disadvantaged Madiga communities. This agitation brought caste sub-divisions within SCs into sharp political focus and reshaped state-level politics by compelling parties to address internal disparities.

The Mala–Madiga reservation conflict further sharpened caste identities, weakening the possibility of a unified Dalit front but simultaneously increasing political awareness and mobilization. Dalit intellectual forums and literary movements, such as Dalit poetry, cultural associations, and Ambedkarite organizations, also flourished in Telangana, creating a new wave of Dalit self-assertion. These forums not only critiqued caste oppression but also challenged the hegemonic narratives of mainstream politics.

6. Emergence of Ambedkarite Politics and Dalit Assertion in Telangana

The rise of Ambedkarite politics in Telangana marked a decisive turn in SC political culture. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), though limited in electoral success, provided a political platform for Dalit identity assertion in the 1990s and early 2000s. Student organizations such as the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) in universities like Hyderabad Central University became spaces of radical Dalit consciousness, often leading protests on issues of discrimination and exclusion.

The separate Telangana movement (2001–2014) also saw significant Dalit participation, with activists framing statehood as an opportunity for social justice and empowerment. Post-statehood, the Telangana government under the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS, formerly TRS) introduced welfare schemes like Dalit Bandhu to consolidate Dalit support. Yet, Dalit political assertion remains tied to the legacy of Ambedkarite struggles and grassroots mobilization that continue to influence Telangana's political culture.

The historical background of SC politics in Telangana demonstrates a long continuum—from revolutionary participation in armed struggle, through caste-specific mobilizations, to contemporary welfare-driven politics. This history provides the foundation for understanding present-day patterns of Scheduled Caste political culture in the state

7. Scheduled Castes in Democratic Participation

The creation of Telangana in 2014 provided a new political space for Scheduled Castes (SCs) to reassert themselves in the democratic process. Although historically marginalized, SCs have increasingly become a decisive electoral constituency, shaping outcomes in several districts. Their participation reflects a mix of constitutional safeguards, welfare-driven politics, and identity-based mobilization.

8. Patterns of SC Political Participation since State Formation (2014)

Since Telangana's statehood, SCs have actively engaged in democratic participation, particularly through voting, grassroots activism, and membership in political parties. Voter turnout among SC communities has consistently been high, often exceeding the state average. For example, in the 2018 Assembly elections, SC-majority constituencies in Warangal, Karimnagar, and Khammam reported significant participation rates, signaling both political awareness and expectations of state-led welfare. Importantly, SCs have become swing voters in Telangana politics, with their support shifting between major parties depending on perceived benefits and representation.

9. SC Representation in State Assembly, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and Municipalities

The Telangana Legislative Assembly has 19 constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes out of 119 seats. SC representatives, however, are often seen as dependent on the larger political parties rather than autonomous leaders of Dalit politics. While this ensures descriptive representation, critics argue that substantive representation—where leaders actively champion Dalit causes—remains limited.

At the grassroots level, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have ensured SC reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies. In Telangana's 2019 Panchayat elections, thousands of SC candidates were elected as sarpanches, ward members, and mandal-level representatives. These institutions provide a critical platform for SC participation in governance, although the influence of dominant castes, financial dependency, and bureaucratic hurdles often restrict their autonomy.

10. Electoral Participation of Mala and Madiga Communities

The Mala–Madiga divide continues to shape SC political participation in Telangana. The Malas, historically better positioned due to earlier access to education and employment, have largely aligned with the Congress Party, drawing from its legacy of implementing reservation policies. In contrast, the Madigas—numerically larger but socially and economically disadvantaged—have frequently mobilized around the demand for sub-categorization of SC reservations. Their political leanings have been more fragmented, with support distributed across the TRS (BRS), BSP, and in some cases, the BJP.

This divide not only influences voting behavior but also weakens the possibility of a unified Dalit political front. Political parties often exploit these internal differences by fielding candidates strategically from either community depending on the demographic composition of constituencies.

Role of SCs in Supporting Major Parties: TRS (BRS), Congress, BJP, BSP

SCs have emerged as a decisive support base for major political parties in Telangana. The Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), under K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR), consolidated Dalit support through targeted welfare schemes such as Dalit Bandhu (Rs. 10 lakh financial grant for Dalit families) and land distribution programs. The scheme has become both a political tool and a symbol of Dalit empowerment, particularly in rural Telangana.

The Congress Party continues to enjoy support among sections of the Mala community, especially in districts where historical loyalty and memories of Ambedkarite leaders remain strong. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), though relatively weaker in Telangana, has been attempting to attract Dalit voters by combining Hindutva with promises of development, often targeting Madiga voters dissatisfied with mainstream parties. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has maintained limited but symbolic presence, appealing to Ambedkarite sentiment though its electoral base remains marginal.

11. Reservation in Local Bodies and Impact on Grassroots Democracy

Reservations in Panchayati Raj and municipal bodies have significantly expanded SC participation in grassroots democracy. The 2019 Panchayat elections in Telangana witnessed an unprecedented number of SC women being elected as sarpanches due to gender and caste reservations. These developments have created new political spaces for Dalits, especially women, who historically had little access to power structures.

However, reservations alone do not guarantee empowerment. Many SC representatives face challenges such as lack of financial resources, bureaucratic resistance, and dominance of upper castes in local politics. Yet, the symbolic and practical importance of these positions

cannot be understated, as they foster political learning, leadership skills, and greater integration of SCs into democratic governance.

The democratic participation of Scheduled Castes in Telangana since 2014 reveals both progress and persistent challenges. While SCs have emerged as active voters, elected representatives, and beneficiaries of welfare-driven politics, their autonomy remains constrained by internal divisions, party dominance, and structural inequalities. Nevertheless, their role in supporting major parties and shaping electoral outcomes demonstrates their growing political significance in Telangana's democratic landscape.

12. Challenges in Political Culture of Scheduled Castes in Telangana

While the Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Telangana have made notable strides in political participation since the state's formation in 2014, their political culture continues to face several structural and social challenges. These challenges often undermine the depth of democratic empowerment and reveal the persistence of caste hierarchies in the political domain.

12.1. Internal Caste Divisions: Mala vs. Madiga

One of the most significant challenges to the political culture of SCs in Telangana is the internal division between the *Mala* and *Madiga* communities. The Malas, who historically had earlier access to education, missionary support, and employment opportunities, have benefitted disproportionately from reservation policies. In contrast, the Madigas, largely landless agricultural laborers, remain socio-economically disadvantaged. This disparity has fueled a long-standing demand for sub-categorization of SC reservations to ensure equitable distribution.

The Mala–Madiga divide has translated into political fragmentation, with each community aligning differently with political parties. Malas have often supported the Congress, while Madigas have been mobilized by the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) and shown varying degrees of support for the TRS (BRS) and BSP. This disunity weakens the prospect of a cohesive Dalit political front in Telangana and allows dominant parties to exploit caste cleavages for electoral gain.

12.2. Caste Discrimination within Political Parties and Token Representation

Despite the formal inclusion of SCs in political institutions, discrimination persists within mainstream political parties. Many SC leaders are offered "safe" reserved constituencies but seldom given significant roles in party leadership or policymaking. This results in token representation, where Dalit leaders hold positions in name but lack real influence over decisions.

For instance, although the BRS has positioned itself as a pro-Dalit party with initiatives like *Dalit Bandhu*, the number of SC leaders in senior ministerial or organizational roles remains disproportionately low. Similar patterns exist within Congress and BJP structures in Telangana. This limited access to decision-making reinforces hierarchical control by dominant castes and curtails the transformative potential of Dalit leadership.

12.3. Violence, Social Exclusion, and Barriers to Leadership Roles

Caste-based violence and social exclusion remain obstacles to the political assertion of SCs in Telangana. Incidents of atrocities against Dalits—ranging from land disputes to resistance against inter-caste marriages—directly affect their willingness to participate actively in politics. Dalit sarpanches and elected representatives often face intimidation, resistance from dominant castes, or bureaucratic non-cooperation that undermines their authority.

Furthermore, Dalit leaders who attempt to build independent organizations often face systemic marginalization. Student organizations like the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) have highlighted cases of institutional discrimination in universities, reflecting how exclusion persists even in educational and political spaces. Such barriers discourage Dalits from occupying leadership roles and reinforce a dependent political culture rather than an autonomous one.

12.4. Limitations of Welfare Politics: Dependency vs. Empowerment Debate

The Telangana government's flagship *Dalit Bandhu* scheme, which provides a one-time grant of Rs. 10 lakh to Dalit households, has received both praise and criticism. While the scheme symbolizes recognition of Dalit empowerment, critics argue that welfare politics fosters dependency rather than sustainable empowerment. Without systemic reforms in education, land redistribution, employment, and social justice, one-time cash transfers may not lead to long-term transformation.

Moreover, welfare schemes are often politicized, being selectively distributed or tied to electoral considerations. This undermines the perception of SCs as autonomous political actors and reinforces their identity as beneficiaries rather than equal citizens. The dependency vs. empowerment debate thus remains central to the political culture of SCs in Telangana.

The challenges facing the political culture of SCs in Telangana reveal a paradox: while democracy has opened avenues for participation and representation, structural inequalities, caste divisions, and tokenism limit substantive empowerment. Internal Mala–Madiga divisions fragment Dalit unity; discrimination within parties restricts leadership opportunities; violence and exclusion deter grassroots assertion; and welfare-driven politics risks entrenching dependency. Overcoming these challenges requires not only stronger policy frameworks but also a shift in the political culture of mainstream parties to genuinely embrace Dalit empowerment

13. Democracy, Social Justice, and Future Pathways

The political culture of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Telangana highlights the dynamic relationship between democracy and social justice. While constitutional safeguards and welfare schemes have expanded avenues of participation, genuine empowerment requires deeper reforms in representation, education, and leadership development. Looking ahead, several pathways can strengthen SC political culture in Telangana and provide lessons for Indian democracy as a whole.

13.1. Need for Strengthening SC Leadership within Mainstream Parties

Although SCs hold reserved seats in the Telangana Legislative Assembly and Panchayati Raj institutions, their influence within mainstream parties remains constrained. Most SC legislators function as loyalists of party leadership, without significant autonomy to shape policy or articulate community concerns. Strengthening SC leadership means ensuring not only numerical representation but also meaningful participation in decision-making roles such as ministerial portfolios, party organization posts, and parliamentary committees.

Mainstream parties—BRS, Congress, BJP—must move beyond tokenism and cultivate second-generation Dalit leadership. Leadership training programs, mentorship, and deliberate inclusion of SC leaders in critical portfolios such as finance, education, and home affairs can enhance their substantive role in governance. A stronger SC leadership presence would also foster accountability in implementing welfare policies like *Dalit Bandhu*.

13.2. Empowering SC Women in Telangana's Political Culture

SC women face multiple layers of marginalization: caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and socio-economic deprivation. Yet, they are also at the forefront of grassroots democratic participation. Reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has brought thousands of SC women into political office, but their leadership often remains symbolic due to patriarchal control and lack of institutional support.

Empowering SC women requires capacity-building initiatives, leadership training workshops, and financial support for independent political activity. Civil society organizations can play a vital role in mentoring SC women leaders, while political parties must actively promote their inclusion beyond local governance to state-level politics. Greater visibility of SC women leaders would challenge both caste and gender hierarchies, enriching Telangana's democratic fabric.

13.3. Role of Education, NGOs, and Civil Society in Raising Political Awareness

Education has historically been the most transformative tool for Dalit empowerment. Expanding access to quality education, especially higher education, is essential for nurturing critical consciousness and preparing SC youth for leadership roles. The emergence of Dalit student organizations in Telangana universities demonstrates the potential of education in shaping radical political awareness.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Ambedkarite forums, and Dalit cultural movements also contribute significantly by mobilizing communities, conducting awareness campaigns, and advocating for rights. Civil society initiatives such as legal literacy programs, voter education, and campaigns against caste violence strengthen democratic participation. In Telangana, movements like the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) show how grassroots activism can pressure governments to address long-standing inequalities.

13.4. Policies for Inclusive Governance and Real Representation

For SCs in Telangana to achieve substantive empowerment, inclusive governance must move beyond welfare populism. Policies should focus on land redistribution, employment generation, access to healthcare, and equitable distribution of reservation benefits among Mala, Madiga, and other sub-castes.

Institutional reforms are also necessary. For example, ensuring that SC representatives chair significant legislative committees, strengthening accountability mechanisms for SC-focused schemes, and promoting proportional representation within party organizations would deepen real representation. The long-pending demand for sub-categorization of SC reservations in Telangana highlights the urgency of designing policies that address intra-caste disparities while preserving collective solidarity.

13.5. Towards an Egalitarian Democracy: Lessons from Telangana for Broader India

Telangana's experience offers important lessons for India's democratic project. The *Dalit Bandhu* scheme, despite its limitations, reflects a bold attempt to rethink welfare as a tool for empowerment. Similarly, the active participation of SCs in local governance illustrates how grassroots democracy can open new political spaces for marginalized groups.

At the same time, Telangana also demonstrates the risks of internal divisions, welfare dependency, and limited leadership autonomy. For India as a whole, the challenge is to reconcile caste identity politics with the universal values of equality and social justice. An egalitarian democracy requires dismantling structural barriers, nurturing inclusive leadership, and transforming political culture from mere representation to genuine empowerment.

The future of SC political culture in Telangana lies in bridging the gap between representation and empowerment. Strengthening leadership within mainstream parties, empowering SC women, expanding educational opportunities, and promoting inclusive governance are critical steps. Telangana's journey shows that while welfare and reservations open doors, the deeper challenge is cultural transformation within politics itself. Only by addressing these issues can democracy become a true instrument of social justice, both in Telangana and in India at large

14. Conclusion:

The political culture of Scheduled Castes in Telangana reflects the complex interplay between caste and democracy in contemporary India. From historical marginalization to gradual assertion, SCs in Telangana have traversed a long journey shaped by both structural inequalities and opportunities provided by democratic institutions. Their active participation in the Telangana Armed Struggle, subsequent Dalit movements in united Andhra Pradesh, and contemporary electoral politics underscore a trajectory of resistance, mobilization, and negotiation with mainstream power structures. The formation of Telangana in 2014 created new avenues for Scheduled Castes to engage with governance. Local self-government

institutions, state assembly representation, and welfare-oriented programs have enabled broader SC participation in the political process. At the same time, the persistence of internal divisions—particularly the Mala–Madiga conflict—continues to limit collective solidarity. Despite these challenges, there is a noticeable transition from marginalization to assertion. SCs are no longer passive recipients of welfare policies; instead, they increasingly demand dignity, recognition, and structural inclusion.

Telangana's policy experiments, especially the *Dalit Bandhu* scheme, mark a significant innovation in state-led social justice initiatives. By providing direct financial support to Dalit households, the program attempts to move beyond symbolic representation and welfare dependency toward economic empowerment. Similarly, the enhanced role of SCs in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies has deepened democratic practice at the grassroots level. These developments position Telangana as a laboratory for democratic inclusion, offering lessons for India's larger democratic discourse. At a national level, Telangana's experience highlights both opportunities and dilemmas. While targeted policies can accelerate empowerment, they must be accompanied by structural reforms in education, land distribution, and political representation to ensure sustainability. Moreover, true democratization requires dismantling entrenched caste hierarchies within parties and governance systems, thereby enabling SC leaders to emerge as independent voices in policy-making.

Future research on SC political culture in Telangana can fruitfully explore three areas: the evolving role of Dalit women in politics, the impact of welfare schemes like *Dalit Bandhu* on long-term empowerment, and the ways in which intra-caste dynamics (Mala vs. Madiga) shape broader political strategies. Such inquiries will deepen our understanding of how caste and democracy intersect, not only in Telangana but across India. Ultimately, the case of Telangana underscores that democracy and social justice are inseparable. Strengthening SC political culture is not merely about representation but about transforming Indian democracy into a truly egalitarian system where the marginalized participate as equal stakeholders in shaping the future.

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