

Research Article**CASTE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TELANGANA: A STUDY OF MARGINALIZED AND DOMINANT GROUPS****Dr. Sudhakar Goskula****Corresponding Author: Dr. Sudhakar Goskula****Abstract**

This study examines the dynamics of political participation in Telangana, with a focus on the influence of caste and class among marginalized (SCs, STs, OBCs) and dominant groups. Political engagement in the state is shaped by historical, socio-economic, and structural factors that determine access to leadership, representation, and decision-making processes. Dominant groups, benefiting from historical privileges and economic resources, maintain significant influence in electoral politics, while marginalized communities face systemic barriers, including social exclusion, economic constraints, and limited political awareness. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining secondary data, surveys, and interviews across selected districts, to analyze patterns of voting behavior, participation in political parties, local governance, and civic activities. Findings reveal that while reservation policies, Panchayati Raj institutions, and welfare schemes have improved representation and grassroots engagement for marginalized groups, challenges such as elite capture, gender disparities, and inadequate political literacy persist. The paper argues that inclusive political participation requires comprehensive strategies encompassing policy reform, empowerment programs, leadership training, and active involvement of civil society and political parties. By addressing the intertwined dynamics of caste, class, and socio-economic factors, Telangana can strengthen democratic governance and foster equitable political representation for all social groups.

Keywords: Political Participation, Caste, Class, Marginalized Communities, Dominant Groups, Telangana, Reservation Policies, Panchayati Raj, Grassroots Democracy, Social Inclusion

Introduction

Political participation is a cornerstone of democratic governance, reflecting the engagement of citizens in decision-making processes and the functioning of the state. In India, political participation has historically been shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. Among these, caste and class have remained crucial determinants of political behavior, influencing not only voter preferences but also access to political power and representation. The Indian democratic system, while constitutionally guaranteeing equality, has often witnessed disparities in participation across social groups. Dominant castes and economically privileged classes historically enjoyed greater political influence, while marginalized communities—such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—faced structural barriers that limited their political engagement.

Telangana, a relatively new state formed in 2014, presents a unique socio-political landscape for studying political participation. The region has a diverse social composition, with significant populations of SCs, STs, OBCs, and minority groups coexisting alongside traditionally dominant castes. The formation of Telangana was itself influenced by social and regional identity

movements, highlighting the role of collective mobilization in shaping political outcomes. Electoral politics in the state often reflects caste and class dynamics, with political parties forming alliances and strategies based on social hierarchies and community affiliations. Additionally, socio-economic development disparities between urban and rural areas further influence the levels and patterns of political participation among different social sections.

Understanding the role of caste and class in political participation is essential because these factors intersect with economic status, education, gender, and access to information, thereby affecting the inclusivity of democratic processes. Caste-based social stratification often determines the level of awareness, political mobilization, and capacity to influence policy decisions among various groups. Similarly, class distinctions influence participation by affecting the resources, networks, and opportunities available for political engagement. Marginalized groups may face barriers such as limited literacy, social exclusion, economic constraints, and inadequate access to political platforms, whereas dominant groups often have historical advantages in mobilizing resources, securing representation, and influencing electoral outcomes.

The rationale for this study lies in exploring these disparities in the context of Telangana, with a focus on comparing the political participation of marginalized groups (SCs, STs, and OBCs) with that of dominant castes. By examining voting patterns, participation in political parties, representation in local governance, and involvement in civic activities, this study aims to highlight both the challenges and opportunities for enhancing inclusive political engagement. The research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how social hierarchies shape democratic participation in Telangana and to identify strategies for promoting equitable representation and empowerment of marginalized communities. Such insights are crucial for policymakers, political parties, and civil society organizations striving to strengthen grassroots democracy and social justice in the state.

Political participation refers to the various ways in which citizens engage in the political process, including voting, contesting elections, joining political parties, participating in local governance, advocacy, and other forms of civic activism. It is a measure of democratic engagement and reflects the extent to which individuals and groups can influence policy and decision-making.

Caste in India denotes a hereditary social stratification system, historically associated with occupation, social status, and ritual hierarchy. Class, on the other hand, is an economic and social category based on wealth, education, occupation, and access to resources. While caste is primarily a social identity, class reflects material and economic positioning, though the two often intersect to shape social and political outcomes.

political opportunities, often limiting their access to power, resources, and representation. Dominance describes the historical and structural advantage enjoyed by certain castes or classes that enables them to exert influence over political and social institutions.

Theories of social identity and group-based participation suggest that individuals are influenced by their group affiliations in political behavior. People belonging to marginalized groups may engage in collective action to demand representation and rights, while dominant groups often leverage their historical and economic advantages to maintain political influence. Social identity shapes political preferences, voting behavior, and participation in civic life.

The linkage between caste/class hierarchies and electoral behavior is particularly pronounced in Telangana. Voting patterns, candidate selection, and party strategies often reflect the social composition of constituencies. Dominant castes and economically privileged classes frequently have greater access to political networks, resources, and leadership positions, while marginalized groups may face structural barriers that limit meaningful participation. Understanding these linkages is essential to analyzing the dynamics of political inclusion, representation, and empowerment in the state, and provides a foundation for assessing strategies to enhance equitable political engagement.

Historical and Socio-Political Context of Telangana

The socio-political landscape of Telangana has been profoundly shaped by its historical caste and class structures. Historically, the region was part of the princely state of Hyderabad under the Nizam, where feudal relations and land ownership patterns entrenched social hierarchies. Dominant castes, particularly the Reddy and Velama communities, controlled large tracts of land and wielded significant economic and political power. Marginalized groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and backward classes, were systematically excluded from land ownership, education, and political representation. These historical inequities laid the foundation for socio-economic disparities that continue to influence political participation today.

Caste and class have played a central role in the political mobilization of Telangana. The Telangana movement for statehood, which culminated in the formation of the separate state in 2014, was driven not only by regional identity but also by aspirations for social justice and equitable representation. Marginalized groups sought greater inclusion in governance and political decision-making, while dominant groups leveraged their social and economic advantages to maintain influence. This interplay of caste and class interests shaped political discourse, party alignments, and electoral strategies across the region.

Electoral politics in Telangana continues to reflect these historical patterns. Political parties often consider caste composition when selecting candidates and forming alliances. Dominant castes tend to have a disproportionate presence in legislative assemblies and local governance bodies, while marginalized communities, though increasing their participation through reservation policies, often face challenges in accessing higher political offices. Caste-based vote banks and coalition strategies remain critical factors influencing election outcomes, with parties actively mobilizing support through community networks and identity-based appeals.

Socio-economic disparities among different social groups further influence political participation. Marginalized communities often experience limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, which constrains their capacity for active political engagement. In contrast, dominant groups benefit from higher literacy rates, better economic resources, and greater social capital, enabling more sustained participation in political activities. Urban-rural divides also exacerbate these differences, with rural marginalized populations facing additional barriers to political mobilization.

Understanding the historical and socio-political context of Telangana is essential for analyzing contemporary political participation. The legacy of caste and class hierarchies continues to shape political behavior, access to representation, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Recognizing these patterns provides insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusive governance, enhancing political awareness, and ensuring equitable participation of all social groups in the democratic process.

Voting behavior among marginalized vs. dominant groups

Voting behavior in Telangana reflects a clear divide between marginalized and dominant social groups. Dominant castes, such as Reddys and Velamas, historically have higher voter turnout and influence due to stronger access to resources, education, and social networks that facilitate mobilization. Marginalized groups, including SCs, STs, and OBCs, show varied patterns; while legal frameworks and reservation policies have increased their electoral engagement, socio-economic constraints such as illiteracy, poverty, and lack of political awareness continue to limit participation. Additionally, caste-based vote banks and identity politics play a significant role in shaping electoral preferences, with marginalized communities often consolidating around parties promising social justice and representation, while dominant groups leverage historical influence to maintain political dominance.

Participation in political parties, local governance (Panchayati Raj), and civic activities

Marginalized groups in Telangana have increasingly participated in Panchayati Raj institutions due to constitutional reservations, which ensure representation in local governance. However, participation in mainstream political parties remains limited for many, with dominant castes occupying leadership positions and decision-making roles. Civic engagement, including involvement in social movements, protests, and community development programs, shows higher visibility among marginalized groups in rural areas, while urban dominant groups often have greater access to policy advocacy platforms and political networks. This imbalance highlights the structural barriers that continue to influence meaningful political participation.

Role of leadership from marginalized and dominant groups

Telangana continue to dominate leadership positions in political parties, legislative assemblies, and local governance bodies, leveraging economic power, networks, and historical influence. Marginalized leaders, often emerging through grassroots movements or reserved political seats, have been pivotal in advocating social justice, policy reforms, and community development. Their presence has increased political awareness and mobilization within marginalized communities, but systemic constraints such as limited resources, social discrimination, and political tokenism often restrict their impact at higher political levels.

Influence of socio-economic factors (education, income, occupation) on participation

Socio-economic status significantly affects political participation in Telangana. Higher education levels, income, and stable occupations correlate with greater engagement in political parties, electoral processes, and civic initiatives. Dominant groups generally enjoy these advantages, facilitating sustained political influence. Conversely, marginalized groups face multiple constraints—low literacy rates, irregular employment, and economic vulnerability—which limit their access to political information, resources for campaigning, and sustained engagement. Educational initiatives, capacity-building programs, and social awareness campaigns have helped bridge these gaps, yet disparities persist, highlighting the continued influence of socio-economic factors in shaping political participation across caste and class lines.

Factors Affecting Political Participation

Political participation in Telangana, as in other parts of India, is influenced by a combination of structural, economic, social, and political factors. Understanding these determinants is essential to analyzing disparities in engagement between marginalized and dominant groups.

Structural barriers such as caste discrimination and social exclusion remain significant impediments to political participation. Historically marginalized communities—including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and backward classes—face systemic disadvantages that limit their access to political spaces. Discrimination in social institutions, limited representation in leadership roles, and lack of recognition in local governance structures create an environment where participation is not always meaningful. Social hierarchies often restrict marginalized groups from asserting their rights or influencing policy decisions, while dominant castes continue to occupy positions of power, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Economic constraints also play a critical role. Poverty, unemployment, and precarious livelihoods among marginalized communities reduce their capacity to engage in political processes. Participation in elections, political meetings, or civic initiatives often requires resources such as transportation, time, and financial support, which economically disadvantaged groups may lack. Conversely, dominant groups, with greater economic stability, can access political networks, fund campaigns, and mobilize support more effectively. Economic empowerment, therefore, is closely linked to the ability to participate actively in politics and exercise influence over decision-making.

Gender intersectionality within caste and class further complicates political participation. Women from marginalized groups face compounded barriers due to patriarchal norms, gender discrimination, and limited socio-economic resources. Although constitutional and legal provisions, such as reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, have improved representation, actual participation often remains constrained by societal attitudes and family pressures. Women from dominant castes, while enjoying relatively higher social and economic capital, may still encounter gender-specific challenges, highlighting the intersectional nature of political participation.

The role of political mobilization, campaigns, and social movements is a crucial factor in overcoming these barriers. Grassroots movements, awareness campaigns, and community-based organizations have historically empowered marginalized communities in Telangana, encouraging voter registration, electoral participation, and leadership development. Political parties also actively mobilize support based on caste and community networks, often shaping voting behavior through identity-based appeals. Social movements, such as those advocating for the Telangana statehood and social justice, have provided marginalized groups with platforms to assert their political rights and influence policy agendas. Effective mobilization can reduce the impact of structural and economic barriers, fostering greater engagement and representation.

Political participation in Telangana is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, economic, gender, and mobilization-related factors. While significant progress has been made in improving representation for marginalized groups through legal provisions and social initiatives, disparities persist. Addressing these factors comprehensively requires policies that promote social inclusion, economic empowerment, gender equality, and effective political awareness campaigns, ensuring that democratic participation is equitable and meaningful for all social sections.

Reservation policies and their impact on political participation

Reservation policies in India, including Telangana, have been pivotal in enhancing political representation for marginalized groups such as SCs, STs, and OBCs. Constitutional provisions ensure reserved seats in legislative assemblies, Parliament, and local governance institutions, thereby facilitating access to decision-making processes. These policies have enabled marginalized communities to elect representatives from their own social groups, increasing their visibility and voice in politics. While reservations have improved electoral participation and leadership opportunities, challenges remain, including tokenism, elite capture within reserved categories, and limited influence beyond local governance levels. Nevertheless, reservation policies serve as a crucial mechanism for bridging historical disparities and promoting inclusive democracy in Telangana.

Panchayati Raj and decentralization initiatives

The Panchayati Raj system, institutionalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, has strengthened grassroots democracy in Telangana. By devolving powers to village, intermediate, and district-level councils, it allows marginalized communities to participate in local governance, planning, and resource allocation. Reservation of seats for SCs, STs, and women ensures equitable representation, fostering leadership development and political awareness. Decentralization initiatives empower citizens to engage in decision-making, monitor local projects, and influence policy implementation. This framework has facilitated greater participation among marginalized groups, though effectiveness depends on awareness, capacity-building, and local political dynamics.

Welfare schemes and political empowerment of marginalized groups

Government welfare schemes in Telangana, such as employment programs, educational scholarships, and social security initiatives, indirectly enhance political empowerment by improving socio-economic status and access to resources. Programs targeting marginalized

communities reduce economic vulnerability, enabling greater engagement in elections, civic activities, and party politics. Welfare initiatives also serve as platforms for political mobilization, with local leaders and NGOs encouraging participation in governance processes. While welfare schemes do not directly mandate political involvement, their contribution to empowerment, awareness, and leadership development has strengthened the capacity of marginalized groups to participate meaningfully in Telangana's democratic processes.

Challenges and Barriers

Political participation in Telangana, particularly among marginalized communities, is shaped by a range of social, cultural, and institutional challenges. Despite legal frameworks and reservation policies aimed at promoting inclusive participation, various barriers continue to limit the effectiveness of these measures.

Social and cultural barriers remain among the most significant obstacles. Deep-rooted caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms restrict the engagement of marginalized communities, especially women, in political processes. Social discrimination, exclusion from public decision-making, and community pressure often discourage active participation. Traditional norms can also limit inter-caste cooperation and inhibit collective action among marginalized groups, thereby weakening their political voice. In many rural areas, social ostracism or fear of reprisal may prevent marginalized individuals from expressing their political preferences freely, constraining meaningful participation.

Political tokenism and elite capture further hinder genuine empowerment. While reservations and affirmative action policies have increased the numerical representation of marginalized groups, dominant elites often control the political agenda and decision-making. Reserved seats may be occupied by individuals who are aligned with powerful local leaders or parties, limiting the autonomy of marginalized representatives. This tokenistic inclusion ensures representation in form but not in substantive influence, perpetuating existing power imbalances and undermining the democratic potential of such policies.

Inadequate awareness and political education is another major barrier. Many members of marginalized communities in Telangana, particularly in rural areas, lack access to political information, awareness about rights, and understanding of governance mechanisms. Low literacy rates, limited exposure to civic education, and minimal engagement with political institutions contribute to low voter turnout and limited involvement in decision-making. Without effective education and outreach programs, marginalized communities may remain passive participants rather than active stakeholders in the democratic process.

Limitations in representation and participation at higher political levels continue to pose challenges. While local governance structures such as Panchayati Raj institutions provide opportunities for grassroots involvement, marginalized groups are often underrepresented in state-level politics, legislative assemblies, and party leadership positions. Dominant caste groups and socio-economically privileged classes frequently monopolize higher-level political roles, maintaining control over policy decisions and political resources. This disparity restricts the ability of marginalized communities to influence larger governance outcomes and perpetuates systemic inequities in political participation.

Political participation in Telangana faces multiple challenges, despite constitutional safeguards and policy interventions. Social and cultural discrimination, elite capture, low political awareness, and underrepresentation at higher levels collectively limit the empowerment of marginalized communities. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach that combines social reform, education, capacity-building, and reforms in political structures to ensure that participation is not only inclusive in form but also effective in practice. Strengthening these aspects is essential for the realization of a truly representative and equitable democratic system in Telangana.

Recommendations

Enhancing political participation in Telangana, particularly among marginalized groups, requires a multi-pronged approach involving policy reform, grassroots empowerment, and active engagement of civil society and political institutions.

Policy suggestions for inclusive political participation

Policymakers should focus on strengthening existing legal frameworks and designing policies that remove structural barriers to participation. Expanding reservations in local governance and ensuring transparency in the selection of candidates can enhance the effectiveness of affirmative action. Additionally, targeted programs to promote participation of economically disadvantaged groups and women can reduce the socio-economic constraints that often limit engagement. Policies should also prioritize equal access to political information, voter education, and resources necessary for meaningful participation.

Strengthening grassroots democracy and empowerment programs

Decentralization initiatives like the Panchayati Raj system must be reinforced to empower marginalized communities at the local level. Capacity-building programs that equip elected representatives with skills in governance, financial management, and policy implementation can improve the quality of leadership. Grassroots democracy can be strengthened by encouraging community-led planning and decision-making, enabling marginalized groups to assert their interests and influence local development agendas effectively.

Enhancing political awareness and leadership training among marginalized groups

Political literacy and leadership development programs are essential to create informed and confident participants. Workshops, training sessions, and civic engagement campaigns can educate marginalized citizens about their rights, electoral processes, and mechanisms for policy influence. Leadership development initiatives should focus on empowering women and youth from marginalized communities to assume active roles in political parties, local governance, and advocacy networks, bridging the gap between representation in numbers and meaningful influence.

Role of civil society, NGOs, and political parties in promoting inclusivity

communities and fostering political awareness. Collaborative efforts with political parties can ensure that party platforms reflect the interests of underrepresented groups, promoting inclusive policy agendas. NGOs can also provide training, mentorship, and monitoring support, while political parties can facilitate mentorship programs and transparent pathways for leadership development. Such combined efforts can cultivate a culture of participatory democracy and ensure that marginalized groups have sustained influence in Telangana's political processes.

By implementing these measures, Telangana can create a more inclusive political environment that empowers marginalized communities, strengthens democratic governance, and promotes social equity across caste and class lines.

Conclusion

Political participation in Telangana reflects the complex interplay of caste, class, socio-economic status, and institutional mechanisms. While dominant groups continue to wield considerable influence due to historical advantages, marginalized communities—comprising SCs, STs, and OBCs—have gradually increased their engagement through legal provisions, reservation policies, and grassroots mobilization. The formation of Telangana and its socio-political movements highlight the role of collective identity and social mobilization in shaping democratic participation.

Despite progress, multiple challenges persist. Structural barriers, social exclusion, economic constraints, limited political awareness, and underrepresentation at higher political levels continue to restrict meaningful participation among marginalized groups. Tokenistic inclusion, elite capture, and patriarchal norms further complicate efforts toward equitable

democracy. The analysis underscores that legal frameworks alone are insufficient; sustained efforts in education, awareness, empowerment, and institutional reforms are critical to bridging the participation gap.

The study emphasizes that inclusive political participation is essential for the functioning of a vibrant democracy. Policies that promote social and economic empowerment, leadership development, and active engagement of civil society and political parties can significantly enhance the representation and influence of marginalized communities. Strengthening grassroots democracy, fostering political literacy, and ensuring equitable access to decision-making platforms are vital for building an inclusive, participatory, and socially just political system in Telangana. Ultimately, addressing the intertwined dynamics of caste and class is key to realizing the democratic potential of all social groups in the state.

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