Economic Liberalization and Changing Political Culture of Scheduled Castes-A Study

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Introduction:

The concept of political culture occupies a central position in political science, serving as a bridge between the formal structures of governance and the lived experiences of citizens. Political culture may be understood as the patterned orientations of individuals toward political objects, institutions, and processes, encompassing values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that provide meaning and stability to political life. It is not only about how citizens view their government but also about how they interact with it, internalize political norms, and shape governance through participation or resistance. In democratic societies, political culture plays a particularly vital role as it influences whether formal rights are translated into meaningful participation and empowerment. A supportive political culture fosters democratic consolidation, while a fragmented or exclusionary culture may reinforce inequalities and inhibit participation

In India, the discourse on political culture cannot be separated from its complex socio-cultural and historical fabric. The caste system has historically determined the contours of social interaction, access to resources, and political participation, making it one of the most significant determinants of political culture3. For Scheduled Castes (SCs), positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, political culture has been shaped by centuries of exclusion and marginalization as well as by movements of resistance, assertion, and constitutional reforms.

Despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability under Article 17 and the introduction of affirmative action through reservations in education, employment, and legislatures, SCs continue to face systemic inequalities that affect their political participation. Political culture among SCs, therefore, emerges as a dynamic negotiation between inherited structures of discrimination and newly acquired spaces of rights and representation

Historical Background of Scheduled Castes in Telangana:

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Telangana have a long history marked by social exclusion, economic deprivation, and political marginalization. Historically, these communities were subjected to untouchability and were confined to menial occupations, facing systemic discrimination in various aspects of life, including access to education, employment, and social services. The Adi-Hindu movement, initiated by Bhagya Reddy Varma in the early 20th century, played a pivotal role in challenging the entrenched caste hierarchies in the region. Varma's efforts focused on promoting social reform and advocating for the rights of the Depressed Classes in Nizam's Hyderabad, which is now part of Telangana.

In the post-independence era, the Indian government recognized the need to uplift these marginalized communities. The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, provided legal safeguards for SCs, including reservations in education and employment, aimed at promoting their socio-economic development. According to the 2011 Census, the Scheduled Caste population in Telangana was recorded at 54.08 lakh, accounting for 15.45% of the state's total population. The Madiga community emerged as the largest among the SCs, forming approximately 48.29% of the total SC population in the state2. In recent years, Telangana has taken significant steps to address the evolving needs of SC communities. In April 2025, the state became the first in India to implement the sub- categorization of SCs under the Telangana Scheduled Castes (Rationalisation of Reservations) Act, 2025. This legislation divides the 59 recognized SC communities into three groups to ensure a more equitable distribution

of the 15% reservation in government jobs and education. These historical developments reflect the ongoing efforts to empower SC communities in Telangana, addressing both historical injustices and contemporary challenges.

Historically, the SC movement in the region began with the Adi-Hindu movement (1911) led by Bhagya Reddy Varma, which focused on self-respect and education. Post-independence, and especially after the formation of Telangana in 2014, this has shifted toward substantive empowerment. Today, the study of their political awareness involves analyzing how they navigate the state's welfare landscape (like the Dalit Bandhu scheme) and internal caste dynamics (the Mala-Madiga sub-categorization). Thus, an inquiry into SC political culture in Telangana requires attention to both the universal theories of political culture and the region's particular historical and socio- political trajectories. By situating Telangana's SC communities within broader debates on caste, democracy, and political participation, the study aims to capture how exclusion, resistance, and institutional reforms interact in shaping the lived political experiences of marginalized groups.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-economic and demographic profile of Scheduled Castes in Telangana and its influence on their political attitudes and behaviour.

2. To assess the level of political awareness, knowledge, and literacy among Scheduled Caste individuals in different districts of Telangana.

3. To analyze patterns of political participation—including voting behaviour, membership in political parties, and involvement in political movements—among SC communities.

4. To provide recommendations for policy and practice aimed at strengthening the democratic participation and political empowerment of Scheduled Castes in Telangana.

Table1.1: Educational Qualification of Respondents;

Education		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Graduate	83	30.7	30.7	30.7
	Illiterate	31	11.5	11.5	42.2
	Postgraduate	59	21.9	21.9	64.1
	Primary	30	11.1	11.1	75.2
	Secondary	67	24.8	24.8	100.0
	Total	270	100.0	100.0	

The educational background of the respondents is shown in Table 1.1. Among the 270 individuals surveyed, the largest segment were graduates (30.7%), followed by those with secondary education (24.8%). Postgraduates made up 21.9% of the sample, indicating a significant portion with higher education. Respondents with primary education accounted for 11.1%, while illiterate individuals made up 11.5% of the total. This spread reflects a varied educational profile, contributing to a broad spectrum of perspectives in the study.
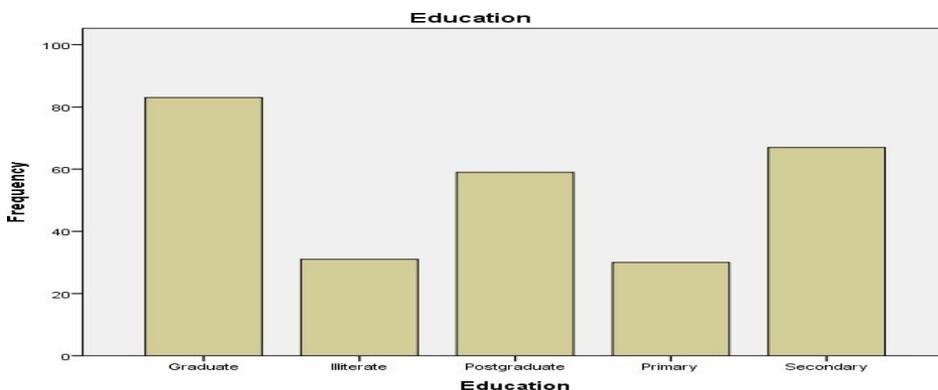
Educational Qualification of Respondents

Table 1.2: Occupational Profile of Respondents

Table1.2 : Occupational Distribution of Respondents					
Occupation		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agriculture	42	15.6	15.6	15.6
	Business	47	17.4	17.4	33.0
	Daily wage	47	17.4	17.4	50.4
	Govt job	48	17.8	17.8	68.1
	Private job	39	14.4	14.4	82.6
	Unemployed	47	17.4	17.4	100.0
	Total	270	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.2 presents the occupational distribution of the respondents. The responses reflect a fairly even spread across multiple occupations. The largest groups were those engaged in government jobs (17.8%), daily wage labor (17.4%), business(17.4%), and the unemployed (17.4%), each representing a significant portion of the sample. This is followed by respondents in agriculture (15.6%) and private sector jobs (14.4%). This occupational diversity provides valuable insight into the varied socioeconomic backgrounds of the surveyed population.

Limitations of the study

1. Due to resource and time constraints, the study is confined to selected districts of Telangana rather than the entire state. While care is taken to ensure representativeness, the findings may not capture all micro-regional variations within Telangana.

2. The sample, though carefully stratified and randomly selected, cannot entirely encompass the vast heterogeneity of the SC population. Smaller sub-castes and

Findings

• The SC communities in Telangana have faced long-standing social exclusion and economic deprivation, rooted in caste-based discrimination and untouchability. However, reform movements like the Adi-Hindu movement spearheaded by Bhagya Reddy Varma played a foundational role in contesting caste hierarchies and advocating for the rights of Depressed Classes during the early 20th century.

• Telangana's SC population, constituting over 15% of the state's total population, is diverse, with the Madiga community being the largest sub-caste group. This demographic heterogeneity necessitates nuanced approaches to address intra- community disparities and ensure equitable

representation.

• Electoral data and local governance records show a gradual increase in SC voter turnout and representation, particularly following the implementation of reservation policies. While SC participation in elections has improved, rural turnout still lags slightly behind urban averages. Reserved constituencies have enhanced SC representation in local bodies, though the dominance of certain sub-castes remains an issue.

Residential Background of Respondents:

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Table 1.3 *: Residential Distribution of Respondents*				
Valid	Rural	102	37.8	37.8	37.8
	Semi-Urban	90	33.3	33.3	71.1
	Urban	78	28.9	28.9	100.0
	Total	270	100.0	100.0	

The distribution of respondents by place of residence is detailed in Table 1.3. majority of respondents (37.8%) reside in rural areas, followed by semi-urban areas at 33.3%, and urban areas at 28.9%.

This spread shows that the survey effectively captured perspectives across different settlement types, with a slightly higher representation from rural regions, which is consistent with the demographic distribution of SC populations in many districts.

Residential Distribution of Respondents
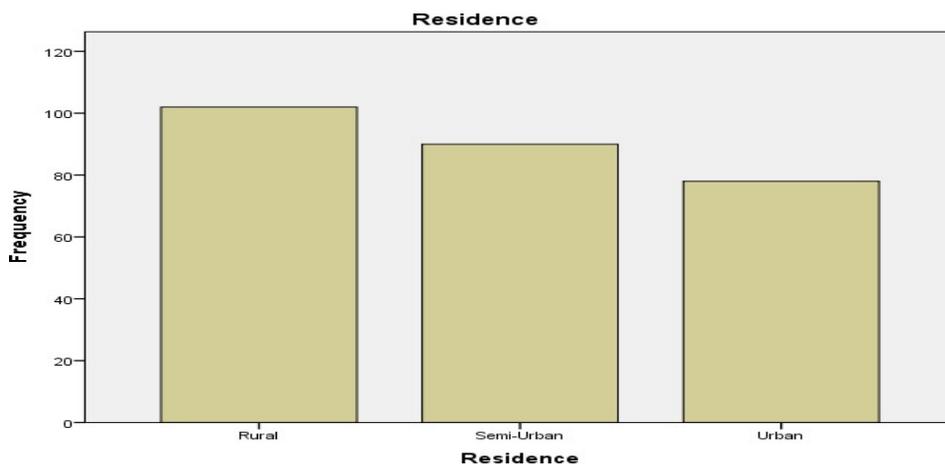
Monthly Income of Respondents:

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Table 1.4: Monthly Income Distribution of Respondents				
Valid	₹10,001–₹20,000	77	28.5	28.5	28.5
	₹20,001–₹40,000	74	27.4	27.4	55.9
	₹40,001+	60	22.2	22.2	78.1

Below ₹10,000	59	21.9	21.9	100.0
Total	270	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.4: illustrates the monthly income distribution among the respondents. The highest proportion (28.5%) reported earning between ₹10,001 and ₹20,000, followedclosely by those earning ₹20,001 to ₹40,000 (27.4%). Respondents earning above ₹40,000 comprised 22.2% of the sample, while 21.9% reported earnings below ₹10,000 per month. This distribution indicates a broad range of income levels among the respondents, reflecting varying degrees of economic stability within the SC community.

Monthly Income Distribution of Respondents
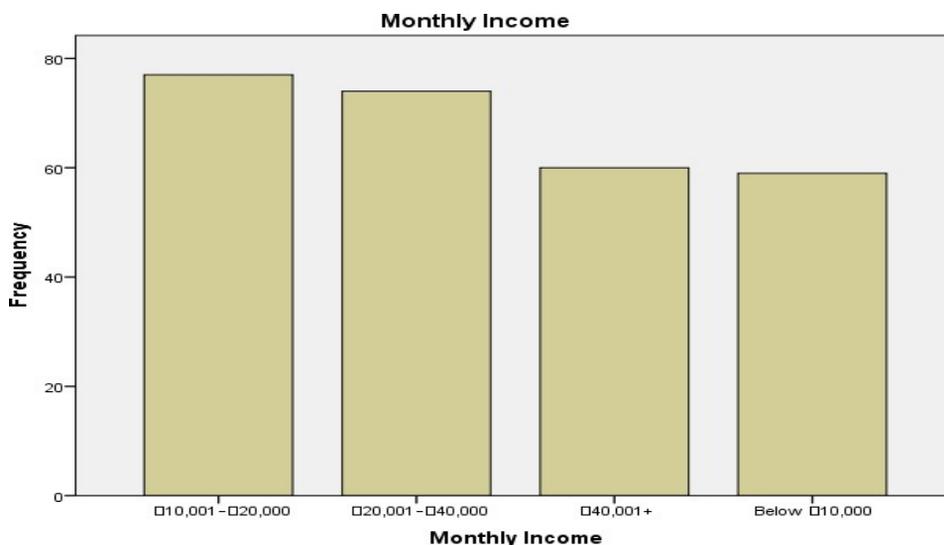
Attitudes on Political Representation and Empowerment:

1.5. Attitudes on Political Representation and Empowerment					
Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
a) Political leaders represent all SC sub-castes equally.	27 (10%)	54 (20%)	68 (25%)	81 (30%)	40 (15%)	270
b) Internal divisions among SCs hinder political empowerment.	81 (30%)	95 (35%)	54 (20%)	27 (10%)	13 (5%)	270
c) Caste plays a major role in allocation of political tickets and positions.	95 (35%)	81 (30%)	40 (15%)	32 (12%)	22 (8%)	270
d) SC youth are motivated to take political leadership roles.	32 (12%)	54 (20%)	81 (30%)	68 (25%)	35 (13%)	270

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e) Political empowerment is necessary for socio-economic development.	130 (48%)	95 (35%)	27 (10%)	10 (4%)	8 (3%)	270

Respondents were asked to express their attitudes toward political representation and empowerment within their community. The data presented in Table 1.5 reveal nuanced perspectives on key issues affecting political participation among Scheduled Castes (SC).

Only 30% of respondents agree or strongly agree that political leaders represent all SC sub-castes equally, while a larger proportion (45%) disagrees or strongly disagrees, reflecting perceptions of unequal representation among sub-groups.

A significant majority (65%) acknowledge that internal divisions within the SC community hinder political empowerment, suggesting that intra-community fragmentation remains a critical barrier.

Similarly, 65% of respondents perceive caste as a decisive factor in the allocation of political tickets and positions, highlighting persistent caste-based influences within political processes.

Regarding youth engagement, only 32% feel that SC youth are motivated to take on political leadership roles, while 38% disagree or strongly disagree, indicating a need for initiatives to encourage political participation among younger generations.

Importantly, an overwhelming 83% of respondents affirm that political empowerment is essential for socio-economic development, underscoring the community's recognition of the link between political agency and broader advancement.

These findings underscore the complexity of political empowerment for SC communities, shaped by issues of representation, internal cohesion, caste dynamics, and youth involvement.

Conclusion:

The political culture of SCs in Telangana is a complex synthesis of historical marginalization and modern constitutional assertion. Data reveals a highly literate and educationally diverse community, with over 50% of respondents holding graduate or postgraduate degrees. This educational advancement fuels a strong consensus (83%) that political empowerment is the primary engine for socio-economic development. However, economic stability remains varied, with significant segments still reliant on daily wage labor or facing unemployment. Geographically, the study successfully bridges the rural-urban divide, reflecting the lived experiences of the 15.45% SC state population. A critical finding is the perceived inadequacy of representation, as 45% of respondents feel sub-castes are not treated equally by leaders. The significant majority (65%) identifying internal divisions as a barrier highlights the urgency of the 2025 sub-categorization reforms. Furthermore, the persistent influence of caste in ticket allocation (65%) suggests that formal democracy still battles informal hierarchies. Low youth motivation for leadership (32%) indicates a generational gap in political enthusiasm that requires targeted institutional intervention. While historical movements like the Adi-Hindu reform laid the groundwork for self-respect, the current phase is defined by welfare navigation. Schemes like Dalit Bandhu and legislative acts represent state efforts to translate formal rights into substantive economic empowerment. Ultimately, the political culture is transitioning from a "culture of resistance" toward a more "participatory civic culture." Yet, intra-community fragmentation and systemic exclusion in political parties continue to inhibit the full realization of democratic goals. Strengthening SC political agency in Telangana will require addressing these internal disparities while fostering inclusive leadership. The study concludes that true empowerment lies in moving beyond mere voting to achieving equitable sub-caste representation an youth engagement.

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