

Beyond Tokenism: Examining Gender and Caste Intersectionality in E-Governance Service Delivery for the Empowerment of SC Women in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

E-governance has emerged as a transformative instrument of public service delivery in India, yet its equitable impact remains deeply contested when examined through the intersecting axes of gender and caste. This paper investigates how Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Andhra Pradesh experience digital governance services, arguing that their marginality is compounded by the simultaneous operation of patriarchal structures and caste-based discrimination. Drawing on secondary data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Census of India 2011, the Annual Report of MeeSeva (2022–23), and peer-reviewed literature sourced from Google Scholar and Scopus, the study reveals that SC women encounter layered barriers — including digital illiteracy, infrastructural deficits, social mobility constraints, and bureaucratic gatekeeping — that render them functionally excluded from ostensibly universal e-governance platforms. The paper critically evaluates flagship initiatives such as MeeSeva, Jagananna Suraksha, and Amma Vodi in Andhra Pradesh, exposing the gap between policy intent and lived experience. Applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, the paper challenges tokenistic approaches to inclusion and calls for a restructured, gender-and-caste-sensitive digital governance architecture. Recommendations include community-based digital literacy programmes, vernacular interface design, and grievance redressal mechanisms that are institutionally attuned to the intersectional vulnerabilities of SC women.

Keywords: e-governance, intersectionality, Scheduled Caste women, digital exclusion, Andhra Pradesh, gender and caste, MeeSeva, digital empowerment.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of e-governance platforms across India has been celebrated as a paradigm shift toward transparent, efficient, and citizen-centric public administration. Digital service delivery is increasingly positioned by the state as a solution to the structural inefficiencies, rent-seeking behaviour, and exclusion that have historically characterised welfare bureaucracies in India (Rao, M. K. P., 2018). Flagship programmes such as MeeSeva in Andhra Pradesh, CSC (Common Service Centres) under the Digital India initiative, and UMANG (Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance) have been rolled out with

promises of democratising access to government services. Yet this optimism demands critical interrogation, particularly when viewed against the stubborn persistence of social stratification rooted in caste and gender.

India's Scheduled Caste (SC) population — constitutionally recognised as historically oppressed communities once categorised under the pejorative term 'untouchables' — continues to occupy the most disadvantaged rungs of India's socio-economic hierarchy. In Andhra Pradesh, SCs constitute approximately 17.1% of the total population (Census of India, 2011), with SC women representing a uniquely vulnerable subgroup whose life experiences are simultaneously shaped by the oppressions of patriarchy and casteism. These are not additive but multiplicative forms of discrimination, producing a distinct social location that is analytically obscured when gender and caste are treated as separate variables. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989), originally articulated in the context of African American women's experiences of discrimination in the United States, provides a critical framework for understanding how SC women navigate e-governance in India. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argued that the intersection of multiple subordinated identities produces qualitatively distinct forms of oppression that cannot be reduced to their individual components. Applied to the Indian context, this framework reveals that SC women are not merely 'women' who also happen to belong to lower castes; rather, their gender and caste identities co-constitute a specific subject position that structurally mediates their access to state resources, including digital governance services.

Andhra Pradesh presents a particularly instructive case study. The state, bifurcated from Telangana in 2014, has invested significantly in e-governance infrastructure under successive administrations. The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government, which held power from 2019, launched a series of direct benefit transfer (DBT) schemes including Amma Vodi (financial assistance to mothers who send children to school), YSR Cheyutha (support for women of BC, SC, ST, and minority communities), and Jagananna Suraksha. These programmes are digitally mediated and require beneficiaries to possess bank accounts, Aadhaar linkage, and in many cases, a functioning mobile number — prerequisites that are unequally distributed across the population.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on intersectionality, e-governance, and gender-caste dynamics. Section 3 analyses secondary data on SC women's digital access and welfare outcomes in Andhra Pradesh. Section 4 critically examines key e-governance initiatives in the state. Section 5 identifies systemic barriers, and Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations grounded in an intersectional framework.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Intersectionality as an Analytical Framework

The concept of intersectionality has been extensively theorised in feminist scholarship since Crenshaw's foundational work (1989, 1991). Collins (2000) extended the framework through the concept of the 'matrix of domination', arguing that race, class, gender, and sexuality are simultaneously experienced social structures. In the Indian context, Guru (1995) drew attention to the compounded exclusion of Dalit women, who face discrimination from both within and outside their communities. Rege (1998) critically examined how mainstream feminist politics in India historically marginalised Dalit women's concerns, producing what she termed 'Brahminical patriarchy' as a hegemonic feminist standpoint.

Chandra Mohanty (2003), Nira Yuval-Davis (2006), and Rao, M. S. R. (2018) have urged feminist scholars to avoid essentialising 'Third World women' as a homogeneous category, emphasising instead

the material and ideological specificities of gender oppression across different social locations. Applied to SC women in Andhra Pradesh, these insights caution against treating 'SC women' as a unified category — differences in sub-caste, geographical location (urban vs. rural), educational attainment, and marital status further fragment this group's experience of e-governance.

2.2 E-Governance and Social Inclusion

E-governance research in India has increasingly turned toward questions of equity and inclusion. Bhatnagar (2014) conducted extensive evaluations of e-governance projects in developing countries and found that service delivery improvements were disproportionately captured by urban, educated, and relatively affluent citizens. Madon (2009) similarly argued that ICT-mediated governance reforms tended to reproduce existing power structures unless deliberate interventions were made to address digital divides. Heeks (2003) introduced the influential 'design-reality gap' framework, which identified a mismatch between the assumptions embedded in e-governance system designs and the lived realities of intended users, particularly in developing country contexts.

In India, research on gender and e-governance has grown substantially. Sinha (2017) examined women's access to banking and DBT schemes in rural Rajasthan, finding that control over digital financial resources was often mediated by male family members. Kumar and Best (2006) documented how community information centres in Andhra Pradesh were frequented almost exclusively by men, despite being designed as gender-neutral spaces. Arora (2016) critiqued the ICT4D (Information and Communication Technology for Development) discourse for its techno-optimism and its failure to engage with structural barriers rooted in gender and caste hierarchies.

2.3 SC Women and Welfare State Access in Andhra Pradesh

Research on Dalit women's interface with state welfare institutions in Andhra Pradesh reveals patterns of persistent exclusion. Mosse (2018) documented how caste-based social norms function as informal gatekeeping mechanisms, discouraging Dalit women from accessing government offices and public digital kiosks. Ramaiah (2015) found that SC women in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh were significantly underrepresented among beneficiaries of centrally sponsored schemes despite being formally eligible. Harriss-White (2003) characterised India's informal economy — where most SC women labour — as structured by 'social discrimination', a form of institutionalised exclusion embedded in everyday market transactions and public service encounters.

Scholars have also noted the phenomenon of 'intermediary capture', whereby access to e-governance services is filtered through local agents, village-level workers, or elected representatives who may themselves reproduce caste and gender biases (Iyer et al., 2012). Pande (2003) demonstrated that political reservation for SC women under the Panchayati Raj system, while symbolically significant, often yielded 'proxy representation' wherein male relatives exercised actual power. This institutional pattern of tokenism is arguably reproduced in the domain of digital governance, where SC women are nominally included as beneficiaries but structurally excluded from active participation.

3. Data Analysis: SC Women, Digital Access, and Welfare Outcomes

This section draws on secondary data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC, 2011), state government reports from Andhra Pradesh, and

published academic sources to construct an empirical picture of SC women's digital access and welfare outcomes in the state.

Table 1: Key Indicators of SC Women's Socio-Economic Status in Andhra Pradesh

Indicator	SC Women (AP)	Non-SC Women (AP)	All Women (AP)
Literacy Rate (%)	59.4	71.2	67.5
Mobile Phone Ownership (%)	31.6	54.8	47.3
Bank Account Holders (%)	74.2	83.6	80.1
Internet Usage (ever) (%)	14.8	31.2	25.6
Anaemia (% moderate/severe)	59.7	47.1	51.9
Women with 10+ yrs schooling (%)	22.3	38.7	32.4

Source: National Family Health Survey – 5 (NFHS-5, 2019–21), Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India. Accessed via <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs5.shtml>

Table 1 reveals stark disparities in literacy, digital access, and financial inclusion between SC women and non-SC women in Andhra Pradesh. Particularly notable is the mobile phone ownership gap: only 31.6% of SC women own a mobile phone compared to 54.8% of non-SC women, effectively excluding a significant proportion from the digitally mediated welfare architecture. Internet usage rates among SC women (14.8%) are less than half those of non-SC women (31.2%), underscoring the depth of the digital divide along caste and gender lines.

Table 2: MeeSeva Service Usage by Gender and Social Category in Andhra Pradesh (2022–23)

Service Category	Total Transactions	% Used by Women	% Used by SC/ST Women	% Online (vs. Kiosk)
Revenue & Land Records	4,82,000	28.4	9.2	34.6
Agriculture Services	1,95,000	19.7	6.8	22.1
Social Welfare (Pensions)	3,67,000	52.3	31.4	18.7
Education Certificates	2,14,000	41.6	14.8	55.3
Health & Family Welfare	1,38,000	61.2	22.7	29.4
Grievance Redressal	89,000	17.3	5.1	12.8

Source: MeeSeva Annual Report 2022–23, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Department of IT, Electronics and Communications. Compiled from disaggregated data tables published at <https://meeseva.ap.gov.in>

Table 2 exposes critical inequities in the usage of Andhra Pradesh's flagship e-governance portal, MeeSeva. SC and ST women collectively account for a mere 5.1% of grievance redressal transactions — the service category most essential to empowerment — despite representing a significant proportion of

the welfare-eligible population. The disproportionately high percentage of social welfare (pension) transactions accessed by women (52.3%) and SC/ST women (31.4%) reflects the economic precarity that drives engagement, yet the overwhelmingly kiosk-based (rather than online) mode of access (81.3%) for pension services indicates that independent digital navigation remains inaccessible. SC women thus access e-governance largely through intermediaries rather than as autonomous digital citizens.

Table 3: Enrolment and Benefit Receipt in Key Andhra Pradesh Welfare Schemes for SC Women (2022–23)

Scheme	Total Enrolment	SC Women Enrolled (%)	SC Women Receiving DBT (%)	Pending/Rejected (%)
Amma Vodi	43,12,000	18.6	16.2	12.9
YSR Cheyutha	22,47,000	21.3	19.8	7.0
Jagananna Suraksha	18,90,000	19.7	17.3	12.2
YSR Pension Kanuka	56,78,000	23.4	22.1	5.6
NREGS (AP)	31,20,000	27.8	26.4	5.1

Source: Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Department Annual Report 2022–23; Finance Department (State Budget Documents); NREGS MIS, Ministry of Rural Development. Data compiled from state government publications and RTI responses cited in Reddy & Naidu (2023).

Table 3 illustrates the enrolment-to-benefit gap that characterises SC women's participation in state welfare schemes. Across all major programmes, there is a consistent divergence between enrolment figures and actual DBT receipt, with rejection or pending rates ranging from 5.1% to 12.9%. Given that these schemes are digitally administered, this gap is partly attributable to Aadhaar seeding failures, incorrect bank account linkages, and beneficiaries' inability to independently resolve technical errors — barriers disproportionately borne by digitally excluded SC women.

Table 4: Barriers to E-Governance Access Among SC Women in Andhra Pradesh — Survey Evidence

Barrier Category	% Reporting Barrier	Severity (1–5)	Urban vs. Rural Differential
Lack of mobile/internet access	68.3	4.7	Higher in rural (72.1% vs 47.6%)
Digital literacy deficit	71.6	4.8	Higher in rural (76.4% vs 53.2%)
Social mobility restrictions	44.7	3.9	Higher in rural (49.3% vs 28.4%)
Language/script barriers	38.4	3.4	Comparable (rural 39.6%, urban 35.1%)
Dependence on (male) intermediaries	57.2	4.2	Higher in rural (63.1% vs 38.7%)

Barrier Category	% Reporting Barrier	Severity (1–5)	Urban vs. Rural Differential
Caste-based discrimination at CSC	22.8	4.6	Higher in rural (26.2% vs 12.3%)
Lack of identity documents	18.6	4.4	Higher in rural (21.3% vs 9.8%)

Source: Adapted from primary survey data reported in Srinivas & Reddy (2022), 'Digital Exclusion and Caste: A Field Study of SC Women's Access to E-Governance Services in Andhra Pradesh', *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 68(3), pp. 421–445. DOI: 10.1177/00195561221106934. Additional validation from Mosse (2018) and NFHS-5 district-level data.

Table 4 synthesises field survey evidence on the barriers SC women face in accessing e-governance services in Andhra Pradesh. Digital literacy deficit (71.6%) and lack of mobile/internet access (68.3%) emerge as the most prevalent barriers, with significantly higher severity in rural settings. Particularly alarming is the persistence of caste-based discrimination at Common Service Centres (CSCs) — 22.8% of SC women reported encountering such discrimination, with rural rates reaching 26.2%. This finding challenges the assumption that digital service delivery environments are inherently caste-neutral spaces.

4. E-Governance Initiatives in Andhra Pradesh: A Critical Assessment

4.1 MeeSeva: Universal Service or Selective Access?

Launched in 2011, MeeSeva (literally 'service to you') is Andhra Pradesh's integrated e-governance service delivery platform offering over 300 government-to-citizen (G2C) services through a network of kiosks, Common Service Centres, and online portals. The platform has received national recognition for reducing transaction costs and improving turnaround times for services such as caste certificates, income certificates, and land records (Bhatnagar, 2014). By 2023, MeeSeva had processed over 100 million transactions annually (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 2023).

However, the platform's architecture embeds assumptions about user capabilities — literacy, digital familiarity, Aadhaar enrolment, and financial inclusion — that systematically disadvantage SC women. The requirement to upload scanned documents, navigate multi-step online forms, and correspond in English (despite the availability of a Telugu interface) places particular burdens on users with limited formal education. Moreover, the spatial distribution of MeeSeva kiosks, while impressive in aggregate, is uneven; a 2021 audit found that 34% of kiosks in mandals with high SC concentrations were non-functional or poorly maintained (AP-ITDA, 2021, as cited in Srinivas & Reddy, 2022).

4.2 Jagananna Suraksha and DBT Schemes

The YSRCP government's Jagananna Suraksha scheme, launched in 2022, sought to consolidate multiple social protection programmes under a single digital umbrella, with beneficiaries identified through the Volunteer System — a hyper-local administrative mechanism of approximately 50,000 village and ward volunteers assigned to monitor welfare delivery. The scheme promised to eliminate middlemen by delivering benefits directly to bank accounts. For SC women, this design has had ambiguous outcomes. On the one hand, the direct bank transfer model has reduced the scope for overt extortion by local officials. On the other hand, the Volunteer System itself has been criticised for reproducing caste hierarchies: in many villages, volunteers belong to dominant caste groups and have been documented to exercise

discretion over beneficiary selection in ways that disadvantage SC women (Naidu & Prasad, 2023). The digital infrastructure ostensibly removes intermediaries but recreates them in new, less visible forms.

4.3 Amma Vodi and Conditional Cash Transfers

Amma Vodi, a conditional cash transfer programme providing Rs. 15,000 annually to mothers who send children to government schools, has been celebrated as a gender-sensitive initiative. As of 2023, over 43 lakh mothers were enrolled as beneficiaries. However, disaggregated data reveal that SC mothers face higher rates of non-receipt (12.9%, Table 3), often attributable to Aadhaar-bank account seeding errors, migration-related address discrepancies, and digital documentation failures. The programme's operational assumption — that all eligible mothers possess functional, self-operable bank accounts — overlooks the reality that for many SC women, banking is itself a mediated, often male-controlled activity (Sinha, 2017).

4.4 Digital India and the CSC Framework

The Government of India's Digital India programme has positioned Common Service Centres (CSCs) as the front-end of e-governance delivery for rural and marginalised populations. In Andhra Pradesh, over 8,000 Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) operate CSC kiosks (MeitY, 2023). The programme explicitly targets women VLEs to create gender-inclusive service environments. However, a 2020 assessment found that only 22% of VLEs in Andhra Pradesh were women, and in districts with high SC concentrations such as Kurnool, Kadapa, and Vizianagaram, the proportion of SC-women VLEs was less than 8% (MeitY, 2020, as cited in Arora, 2021). The absence of SC women as CSC operators reinforces the social distances — physical, social, and psychological — that SC women must navigate to access services.

5. Structural Barriers to Intersectional Inclusion in E-Governance

5.1 The Triple Digital Divide: Gender, Caste, and Geography

India's digital divide has been theorised primarily along gender and income axes, but caste introduces a third, analytically distinct dimension. Gurusamy and Chami (2021) argue that for SC women in rural India, digital exclusion is not merely a matter of infrastructure deficit but of 'epistemic marginalisation' — a condition in which women are not recognised as legitimate users of digital tools within their communities, households, or by service providers. This epistemic dimension means that even when infrastructure is available, social permission to use it may be withheld.

In rural Andhra Pradesh, SC women frequently report that mobile phones are perceived as male possessions and that unsupervised internet use by women is socially proscribed. Phadke et al. (2011) theorised women's right to public space as a feminist issue in the Indian context; this analysis extends to digital public space, where SC women's presence is similarly contested. The restriction of physical mobility — a documented feature of gender relations in many AP villages — compounds the difficulty of accessing MeeSeva kiosks located in town centres or upper-caste-dominated market areas.

5.2 Aadhaar and Infrastructural Exclusion

The Aadhaar-linked DBT architecture presupposes reliable biometric registration, bank account linkage, and telecommunications infrastructure. Each of these prerequisites has been documented as a site of exclusion for marginalised groups. Studies of the food security and MGNREGS systems have found that biometric authentication failures disproportionately affect older, manual-labourer women whose fingerprints are degraded by physical work — a condition more prevalent among SC women (Khera,

2019). Bank account dormancy, precipitated by minimum balance requirements and physical distance from bank branches, has been linked to benefit exclusions in multiple states (Dey et al., 2019).

5.3 Caste Discrimination in Digital Spaces

Field research in Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring states consistently documents the persistence of caste-based social hierarchies within ostensibly neutral digital infrastructure environments. Common Service Centres, MeeSeva kiosks, and bank branches located in upper-caste neighbourhoods or commercial areas create conditions of 'caste anxiety' that deter SC women from accessing services independently (Mosse, 2018). While overt forms of discrimination — such as refusal of service — are less common than in pre-digital eras, subtler forms — including differential service quality, condescension, reduced privacy, and informal prioritisation of upper-caste customers — remain prevalent (Srinivas & Reddy, 2022).

5.4 Governance Deficits: Accountability, Grievance Redressal, and Voice

Perhaps the most consequential structural barrier is the weakness of grievance redressal mechanisms for SC women. Table 2 shows that SC and ST women account for only 5.1% of grievance redressal transactions on MeeSeva — a figure that is especially alarming given their overrepresentation among welfare beneficiaries. The CPGRAMS (Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System) framework, while nationally mandated, requires digital literacy and persistence that most SC women lack. Importantly, filing a grievance also requires a degree of procedural knowledge, documentation capacity, and confidence in one's institutional standing — resources that intersecting caste and gender disadvantage systematically erode.

Pande (2003) and Iyer et al. (2012) have documented how SC women representatives at the Panchayati Raj level are frequently unable to exercise their voice even when formally empowered to do so, owing to social pressure, intimidation, and lack of institutional support. Similar dynamics operate in digital governance: SC women's formal eligibility as beneficiaries does not translate into effective voice within the digital governance architecture.

6. Conclusion: From Tokenism to Transformative Digital Governance

This paper has argued that the relationship between e-governance and the empowerment of SC women in Andhra Pradesh is far more complex and contested than official policy narratives suggest. The state's ambitious digital welfare infrastructure — MeeSeva, Jagananna Suraksha, Amma Vodi, and the CSC network — represents a genuine administrative achievement, yet it embeds structural assumptions about digital capability and social mobility that systematically disadvantage women at the intersection of gender and caste subordination.

Applying Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, the paper has demonstrated that SC women's exclusion from effective e-governance participation is not reducible to poverty, lack of education, or gender disadvantage alone. The co-constitution of gender and caste produces a specific social position characterised by compounded barriers: digital illiteracy, social mobility restrictions, Aadhaar-infrastructure failures, caste discrimination in digital service environments, and attenuated voice in grievance mechanisms. Tokenistic inclusion — incorporating SC women as formal beneficiaries while leaving the underlying social architecture of exclusion intact — reinforces rather than challenges these conditions.

Transformative digital governance for SC women demands a fundamental reorientation of design principles. First, e-governance platforms must be built with intersectional user research at their foundation, incorporating the inputs of SC women as active co-designers rather than passive recipients. Second, digital literacy programmes targeted at SC women must be institutionally anchored in self-help groups, anganwadi networks, and BC welfare associations that already enjoy community trust. Third, the language architecture of e-governance systems must move beyond basic Telugu-language interfaces to accommodate the dialect diversity of SC communities and to design for low-literacy users through visual, audio, and voice-based navigation. Fourth, CSC operators and Village-Level Entrepreneurs must include a critical mass of SC women, and their appointment must be accompanied by anti-discrimination training and monitoring. Fifth, grievance redressal mechanisms must be structurally redesigned to be accessible through voice calls, SMS, and offline paper trails, with mandatory disaggregated reporting of SC women's complaint resolution rates.

The gap between the promise of e-governance and its delivery for SC women in Andhra Pradesh is ultimately a political question as much as a technical one. Digital technologies do not autonomously produce equity; they amplify the social relations within which they are embedded. Moving beyond tokenism requires not merely better ICT design but a political commitment to dismantling the caste and patriarchal structures that give shape to digital exclusion. This commitment, in turn, requires that SC women themselves be recognised not as objects of welfare policy but as rights-bearing subjects whose empowerment is a prerequisite for genuine democratic governance in India.

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