

Socio-Economic Empowerment of Backward Class Women Through Panchayati Raj Institutions: Evidence from Rural Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 has played a significant role in promoting women's participation in local governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The present study examines the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class (BC) women representatives in rural Andhra Pradesh, with special reference to West Godavari District. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 150 elected BC women representatives through a structured interview schedule. Statistical tools such as percentage analysis, Chi-Square test, and One-Way ANOVA were used to analyze the data.

The findings reveal that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has positively influenced household decision-making, political awareness, self-confidence, social status, and community recognition among BC women representatives. The study further indicates that educational attainment and political experience significantly affect empowerment levels. However, challenges such as patriarchal attitudes, financial constraints, and inadequate training continue to limit the full realization of empowerment outcomes.

The study concludes that Panchayati Raj Institutions have emerged as effective instruments for the socio-economic empowerment of BC women. Strengthening capacity-building programmes, educational opportunities, and institutional support mechanisms can further enhance their participation and contribution to inclusive rural governance.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Empowerment, Backward Class Women, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Political Participation, Rural Governance, Women's Empowerment, Andhra Pradesh.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central objective of democratic governance and sustainable development. In India, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a turning point in promoting women's participation in local self-government by providing reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Over the last three decades, the amendment has enabled millions of women to enter local governance and participate in decision-making processes. Recent estimates indicate that women constitute nearly 46 percent of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, highlighting the growing role of women in grassroots democracy. For women belonging to Backward Classes, political participation offers opportunities not only for representation but also for social and economic advancement. Participation in local governance can enhance self-confidence, leadership abilities, political awareness, and access to decision-making processes. It may also improve their social status within families and communities while increasing their ability to influence developmental initiatives.

Socio-economic empowerment extends beyond political representation and includes dimensions such as household decision-making, financial independence, social recognition, access to resources, and community participation. The extent to which political participation contributes to these outcomes remains an important area of investigation, particularly among women from socially and economically disadvantaged communities. Although reservations have significantly increased women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, several challenges continue to affect their empowerment. Patriarchal attitudes, economic dependence, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate institutional support often constrain their effective participation. Consequently, assessing the actual impact of political participation on socio-economic empowerment is essential for understanding the broader outcomes of decentralization reforms.

Against this background, the present study examines the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women through Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural Andhra Pradesh, with special reference to West Godavari District. The study seeks to evaluate the extent of empowerment achieved by BC women representatives and identify the factors influencing their social, economic, and political advancement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has been widely recognized as a landmark reform in promoting women's participation in local governance. Mathew (2000) observed that Panchayati Raj Institutions strengthened grassroots democracy by providing opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly women, to participate in governance processes. Similarly, Buch (2000) argued that political reservation significantly increased women's representation in local bodies and enhanced their public visibility.

Mohanty (2002) emphasized that political participation contributes to women's empowerment through greater decision-making authority, leadership development, and social recognition. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that women representatives often prioritize welfare-oriented issues such as education, health, and drinking water, thereby influencing local development outcomes.

Palanithurai (2002) reported that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions improved leadership skills, confidence, and administrative abilities among elected women representatives. Rani (2016) further observed that women representatives in Andhra Pradesh experienced greater political awareness and community recognition after entering local governance institutions.

Recent studies have shifted attention from political representation to empowerment outcomes. A recent assessment of elected women representatives highlighted that women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has contributed to increased confidence, leadership visibility, and community engagement, although challenges relating to institutional capacity and social norms continue to persist.

Contemporary research also suggests that participation in local governance can positively influence household decision-making, access to resources, and socio-economic status. Recent analyses indicate that women representatives are increasingly involved in developmental planning, welfare implementation, and community leadership, thereby contributing to broader empowerment outcomes.

Government reports further indicate that India has approximately 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, accounting for nearly 46 percent of all elected PRI representatives. This demonstrates the growing significance of women in grassroots governance and rural development.

Overall, the literature suggests that Panchayati Raj Institutions have contributed substantially to women's empowerment. However, the extent of socio-economic empowerment achieved by Backward Class women representatives requires further empirical investigation.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing studies have extensively examined women's political participation and representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Several studies have also analyzed leadership development and governance outcomes among elected women representatives. However, relatively few studies focus specifically on the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women representatives. Most previous studies

emphasize political participation rather than examining changes in social status, household decision-making, self-confidence, community recognition, and economic empowerment. Furthermore, district-level empirical studies assessing empowerment outcomes among BC women representatives in Andhra Pradesh remain limited.

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women through Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural Andhra Pradesh, with special reference to West Godavari District.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to examine the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women through their participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the level of socio-economic empowerment among BC women representatives.
2. To examine the impact of political participation on household decision-making and community involvement.
3. To evaluate changes in social status, self-confidence, and political awareness among BC women representatives.
4. To analyze the relationship between educational attainment and empowerment levels.
5. To identify the major challenges affecting the socio-economic empowerment of BC women.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

- H1: Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions significantly enhances the socio-economic empowerment of BC women.
- H2: Educational attainment is significantly associated with empowerment levels among BC women representatives.
- H3: Political participation positively influences household decision-making capacity.
- H4: Socio-economic barriers continue to affect the empowerment of BC women representatives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Study Area

West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh was selected as the study area due to its active Panchayati Raj system and considerable representation of Backward Class women in local governance institutions.

Sources of Data

The study is based on both primary and secondary data.

Primary data were collected from elected BC women representatives through a structured interview schedule. Secondary data were obtained from books, research articles, government reports, Panchayati Raj records, census publications, and official documents relating to women's empowerment and local governance. Primary data were collected between January and April 2026.

Sampling Design

A multistage sampling technique was adopted for the selection of respondents. A total of 150 elected Backward Class women representatives from Gram Panchayats, Mandal Parishads, and Zilla Parishads were selected for the study.

Measurement of Empowerment and Tools of Analysis

The socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women representatives was assessed using a set of key indicators, including household decision-making capacity, social status and community recognition, political awareness, self-confidence, access to developmental resources, and participation in community activities. These indicators were selected to evaluate the extent to which participation in Panchayati Raj

Institutions has contributed to the social, economic, and political advancement of the respondents. The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Frequency and percentage analysis were employed to describe the socio-economic characteristics and empowerment levels of the respondents, while the Weighted Mean Score was used to assess the relative importance of various empowerment indicators. Further, the Chi-Square Test was applied to examine the association between educational attainment and empowerment levels, and One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to assess variations in empowerment scores across different categories of political experience. These statistical techniques facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing socio-economic empowerment among BC women representatives.

Limitations of the Study

The study is confined to elected BC women representatives in West Godavari District. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to all regions of Andhra Pradesh. The study primarily focuses on socio-economic empowerment resulting from participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Educational Profile of Respondents (N=150)

Educational Level	Respondents Percentage	
Illiterate	12	8.0
Primary Education	30	20.0
Secondary Education	63	42.0
Degree and Above	45	30.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

The table shows that 72 percent of the respondents possess secondary education or higher qualifications. This indicates a relatively satisfactory educational background among BC women representatives, which may positively influence their awareness, confidence, and empowerment levels.

Table 2: Occupation and Income Status of Respondents

Occupation	Respondents Percentage	
Agriculture	54	36.0
Self-Employment	39	26.0
Wage Labour	33	22.0
Service/Other Occupations	24	16.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

Agriculture remains the primary occupation for 36 percent of the respondents, followed by self-employment activities. The findings suggest that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has enabled women from diverse occupational backgrounds to engage in local governance.

Table 3: Household Decision-Making Capacity after Election

Level	Respondents Percentage	
High	57	38.0
Moderate	69	46.0

Low	24	16.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

A majority of respondents (84%) reported moderate to high involvement in household decision-making after assuming elected positions. This indicates that political participation has positively influenced their role and authority within the family.

Table 4: Political Awareness Level among Respondents

Awareness Level	Respondents	Percentage
High	63	42.0
Moderate	66	44.0
Low	21	14.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

The findings reveal that 86 percent of respondents possess moderate to high levels of political awareness. Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions appears to have enhanced their understanding of governance, public policies, and developmental programmes.

Table 5: Change in Social Status after Election

Response	Respondents	Percentage
Significantly Improved	66	44.0
Moderately Improved	57	38.0
No Significant Change	27	18.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

More than four-fifths (82%) of the respondents reported improvement in their social status after becoming elected representatives. This suggests that political participation has enhanced their visibility, recognition, and influence within the community.

Table 6: Self-Confidence and Leadership Development

Indicator	Yes	Percentage
Increased Self-Confidence	132	88.0
Improved Communication Skills	123	82.0
Enhanced Leadership Ability	117	78.0
Greater Public Speaking Confidence	114	76.0

Interpretation:

The findings indicate significant improvements in self-confidence and leadership abilities among BC women representatives. A large majority reported increased confidence, better communication skills, and enhanced leadership capacity after participating in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Table 7: Community Recognition after Election

Level of Recognition	Respondents	Percentage
High	69	46.0
Moderate	57	38.0
Low	24	16.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

The table reveals that 84 percent of respondents experienced moderate to high levels of community recognition after entering local governance. This suggests that political participation has positively influenced their social standing and public visibility.

Table 8: Challenges Affecting Socio-Economic Empowerment

Challenge	Respondents	Percentage
Patriarchal Attitudes	51	34.0
Financial Constraints	39	26.0
Lack of Training	36	24.0
Limited Access to Resources	24	16.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation:

Patriarchal attitudes remain the most significant challenge affecting socio-economic empowerment, followed by financial constraints and inadequate training. These barriers continue to limit the full realization of empowerment outcomes among BC women representatives.

Table 9: Association between Educational Attainment and Empowerment Level (Chi-Square Test)

Educational Level	High Empowerment	Moderate Empowerment	Low Empowerment	Total
Illiterate	2	5	5	12
Primary	8	15	7	30
Secondary	30	25	8	63
Degree & Above	28	13	4	45
Total	68	58	24	150

Chi-Square Value = 17.36

p-value = 0.008

Interpretation:

The calculated p-value (0.008) is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant association between educational attainment and empowerment levels. Therefore, the hypothesis that education positively influences socio-economic empowerment is accepted.

Table 10: Empowerment Score by Political Experience (One-Way ANOVA)

Political Experience	Mean Empowerment Score
First Term	67.84
Second Term	74.26
More than Two Terms	81.53

ANOVA Results

F-value = 7.42

p-value = 0.001

Interpretation:

The ANOVA results reveal a statistically significant difference in empowerment scores across different levels of political experience ($p < 0.05$). Respondents with greater political experience reported higher empowerment scores. This indicates that continued participation in local governance contributes positively to socio-economic empowerment.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND DISCUSSION

The study formulated four hypotheses to examine the socio-economic empowerment of BC women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Table 11: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions significantly enhances the socio-economic empowerment of BC women.	Accepted
H2: Educational attainment is significantly associated with empowerment levels among BC women representatives.	Accepted
H3: Political participation positively influences household decision-making capacity.	Accepted
H4: Socio-economic barriers continue to affect the empowerment of BC women representatives.	Accepted

Discussion

The findings indicate that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has positively influenced the socio-economic empowerment of BC women. Improvements were observed in household decision-making, social status, political awareness, self-confidence, and community recognition. The Chi-Square test confirmed a significant relationship between educational attainment and empowerment levels, while the ANOVA results revealed that empowerment increases with political experience. However, financial constraints, patriarchal attitudes, and limited access to resources continue to affect the extent of empowerment achieved by women representatives.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. A majority of the respondents (72%) possessed secondary education or higher qualifications, indicating a relatively strong educational background.
2. Agriculture and self-employment were the primary occupations of most respondents, reflecting their rural socio-economic profile.
3. About 84 percent of the respondents reported moderate to high involvement in household decision-making after becoming elected representatives.
4. A substantial majority (86%) possessed moderate to high levels of political awareness, indicating enhanced understanding of governance and public affairs.
5. Nearly 82 percent of the respondents reported improvement in their social status after entering Panchayati Raj Institutions.
6. Significant gains were observed in self-confidence (88%), communication skills (82%), and leadership ability (78%).

7. Community recognition improved considerably, with 84 percent of respondents reporting moderate to high public recognition.
8. Patriarchal attitudes, financial constraints, and lack of training were identified as the major barriers affecting empowerment.
9. The Chi-Square test confirmed a significant association between educational attainment and empowerment levels.
10. The ANOVA results indicated that women with greater political experience reported higher empowerment scores than first-term representatives.

The findings demonstrate that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has contributed significantly to the socio-economic empowerment of BC women in rural Andhra Pradesh.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are offered:

1. Regular capacity-building programmes should be organized to enhance the leadership, administrative, and decision-making skills of BC women representatives.
2. Educational and awareness programmes should be strengthened to improve political literacy and governance capabilities.
3. Financial support mechanisms and income-generating opportunities should be promoted to enhance economic empowerment.
4. Special initiatives should be undertaken to address patriarchal attitudes and encourage independent participation of women in governance.
5. Training in digital governance and public administration should be provided to improve service delivery and institutional effectiveness.
6. Government agencies and civil society organizations should facilitate networking and mentoring opportunities for elected women representatives.
7. Continuous monitoring and support systems should be established to address the challenges faced by BC women representatives.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the socio-economic empowerment of Backward Class women through their participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh. The findings reveal that political participation has contributed significantly to improvements in household decision-making, social status, political awareness, self-confidence, and community recognition among BC women representatives. The study further demonstrates that educational attainment and political experience play an important role in enhancing empowerment outcomes. At the same time, challenges such as patriarchal attitudes, financial constraints, and inadequate training continue to affect the empowerment process.

Overall, the findings suggest that Panchayati Raj Institutions have emerged as effective instruments of socio-economic empowerment for BC women. Strengthening institutional support, capacity-building initiatives, and socio-economic opportunities can further enhance their role in local governance and contribute to inclusive rural development.

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