Journal on Banking Financial Services & Insurance Research
Vol. 14 Issue 03, March 2024, Impact Factor: 8.059 ISSN: (2231-4288)
www.skirec.org Email Id: skirec.org@gmail.com

Participation of Marginalized Groups in Village Development Activities

(An Observational Study of Inclusion and Involvement in Meetings and Schemes)

Mr. Dhavale Sidhant Madhavrao
Research Scholar,
School of Commerce and Management Sciences,
S.R.T.M. University, Nanded.

Abstract:

This study examines the participation of marginalized groups including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and other socially excluded populations in village-level development activities in rural India. Using a six-month mixed-methods observational approach across three villages, the research investigates both formal inclusion, such as attendance in gram sabha meetings and enrollment in development schemes, and substantive involvement, including the ability to express opinions, influence decisions, and participate in implementation. Findings indicate a gap between formal representation and actual decision-making power. Although institutional mechanisms like gram sabhas and Panchayati Raj structures provide opportunities for participation, entrenched social hierarchies, local power dynamics, and limited capacity constrain meaningful engagement. Women and lower-caste participants frequently face barriers that limit their influence. The study highlights the need for interventions to enhance empowerment, build capacity, and raise social awareness, along with institutional reforms to ensure accountability and equitable participation. The research emphasizes that moving beyond nominal inclusion toward genuine engagement is essential for effective rural governance and development.

Keywords:

Rural development, Marginalized groups, Social inclusion, Gram Sabha, Panchayati Raj, India etc.

Introduction:

Rural development in India has increasingly emphasized decentralized governance as a means to empower local communities and improve the effectiveness of development programs. Institutions such as the Gram Sabha and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were established to facilitate local self-governance, enabling communities to participate in planning, implementation, and monitoring of development initiatives. These institutions are designed on the principle that local participation enhances transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to the specific needs of rural populations. Marginalized groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and the landless, have historically experienced social, economic, and political exclusion. Systemic inequalities, entrenched social hierarchies, limited access to education, and economic vulnerabilities have restricted their ability to influence decision-making or benefit fully from government schemes. Recognizing these disparities, the Indian

government has implemented formal mechanisms to promote inclusion. Examples include reserved seats for women and members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in PRIs, quotas in participation for specific development programs, and targeted welfare schemes designed to address poverty and social disadvantage. While these mechanisms have expanded opportunities for formal representation, research indicates a persistent gap between attendance or nominal inclusion and substantive participation. Formal presence in Gram Sabha meetings or enrollment in schemes does not automatically translate into decision-making power, equitable access to benefits, or meaningful engagement in governance processes. Social hierarchies, local power dynamics, cultural norms, and lack of awareness about rights and entitlements often constrain marginalized individuals from actively contributing to discussions, influencing priorities, or monitoring implementation. Dominant caste groups and local elites frequently control key decisions and resource allocation, leaving marginalized populations with limited voice in shaping village development agendas.

Previous studies have highlighted both progress and limitations in promoting social inclusion through decentralized governance. For instance, research shows that women and lower-caste representatives often participate in official forums but are seldom able to influence policy priorities or spending decisions. In some villages, targeted capacity building, awareness campaigns, and supportive institutional arrangements have enabled marginalized groups to play a more active role in governance. However, these examples are uneven and context-specific, underscoring the need for a systematic examination of participation patterns across multiple settings. Understanding the extent and nature of participation by marginalized groups is essential for strengthening rural development outcomes. Investigating both formal inclusions, such as attendance in Gram Sabha meetings and enrollment in schemes, and substantive involvement, including the ability to voice concerns, influence decisions, and contribute to implementation, provides a more accurate assessment of social inclusion. Such insights guide policy interventions aimed to ensure representation and to promote genuine empowerment. Strengthening capacity, fostering awareness of rights, and reforming institutional processes are keys to enable the marginalized communities to engage meaningfully in governance. Rural development programs can achieve greater equity, accountability, and sustainability, ensuring that the benefits of development reach all sections of the population.

Research Problem:

Previous research has documented social exclusion in rural governance due to caste-based barriers and power concentration. Empirical evidence is needed on how marginalized groups engage in meetings like Gram Sabhas, the process of scheme planning, and implementation. It is also important to observe whether such engagements translate into real influence.

Research Objectives:

1. To assess the extent of formal inclusion of marginalized groups in governance and development schemes.
2. To evaluate the level of substantive involvement, including decision-making power, voice in discussions, and implementation roles.
3. To identify structural, social, and institutional barriers that hinder meaningful participation.
4. To propose policy and programmatic recommendations for strengthening inclusive governance and community empowerment.

Literature Review:

Research on the participation of marginalized groups in rural governance and development in India has highlighted both progress and persistent challenges. Chinnala emphasizes that decentralized institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Gram Sabhas are designed to empower local communities and entrenched social hierarchies and local power dynamics often constrain meaningful participation by socially excluded groups (Chinnala). Empirical studies in various Indian states demonstrate that while institutional mechanisms provide avenues for formal inclusion, substantive involvement—defined as the ability to influence decisions and engage actively in implementation—remains limited (Ogbonna et al.).

Several studies have examined specific mechanisms through which marginalized groups are integrated into local governance. In West Bengal, Water User Associations (WUAs) and committees under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) show targeted efforts to include women and landless laborers (Overton et al.). Similarly, Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) in tribal-majority villages indicate that elite or non-tribal dominance persists apart from the formal representation (Indian Journal of Medical Research). Programs such as Bihar's Jeevika initiative highlight the potential of self-help groups (SHGs) to increase social capital and enable marginalized women to participate in local elections, demonstrating that structured interventions enhance substantive engagement (IPRR India). Local elites frequently dominate decision-making processes, thereby reducing the effectiveness of formal democratic structures. Participation is further constrained by multidimensional poverty, including low literacy, limited technical knowledge, and economic vulnerabilities, especially in areas with high concentrations of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) populations (Socio, Economic and Infrastructural Impact of MGNREGA).

Methodology:

This research employs mixed-methods observational approach conducted over six months in three villages. Data were collected through direct observation of Gram Sabha meetings, review of participation records in development schemes, and semi-structured interviews with elected representatives, functionaries, and community members from marginalized groups. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a comprehensive analysis of both formal inclusion and substantive participation. Patterns of engagement, barriers encountered, and the influence of local social hierarchies was systematically documented to provide insights into the effectiveness of decentralized governance mechanisms in promoting social inclusion.

Literature Review:

Empirical Studies of Social Inclusion in Village Institutions Studies in West Bengal and other parts of India show that targeted efforts include marginalized women and landless laborers in governance structures like Water User Associations (WUAs) and MGNREGA committees. In health governance, Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) often show dominance by non-tribal or elite groups, even in tribal-majority villages. Self-help groups (SHGs) in Bihar's "Jeevika" program have increased social capital and enabled marginalized women to contest local elections.

Barriers to Participation - Segregated social networks by caste and gender restrict information flow and collective action. - Local elites often dominate interactions and decision-making, regardless of formal democratic structures. - Governance effectiveness is linked with multidimensional poverty, especially in SC/ST dense areas. - Success occurs when inclusion is institutionalized, e.g., through procurement guidelines mandating inclusion of women and landless, or capacity-building programs.

Participation Ladder (Arnstein): Analyzes whether marginalized groups are on lower rungs (tokenism) or higher rungs (citizen control). - Social Capital Theory: Examines bonding (within-group) vs. bridging (across-group) capital and how social networks shape participation. - Decentralization and Power: Studies how devolved institutions interact with social hierarchies and local elites.

Sampling:

Purposive sampling was used to select three villages. Participants included:

- Meeting attendees (Gram Sabha and sub-committees)
- Key informants such as marginalized community members, Self-Help Group (SHG) members, government functionaries, and NGO facilitators

Data Collection

- **Observations:** Structured checklist for attendance, speaking turns, proposals, and influence
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with key informants
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Conducted with marginalized community members
- **Document Review:** Attendance registers, meeting minutes, scheme planning documents, financial records
- **Optional Survey:** Awareness, perceived influence, and satisfaction with participation

Data Analysis

- **Qualitative:** Thematic coding of interviews and FGDs
- **Quantitative:** Descriptive statistics on attendance and participation rates, cross-tabulations by caste, gender, and social group

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent, anonymity, sensitivity to caste and gender dynamics, and ethics board approval were maintained throughout the study.

Results

The study was conducted in three purposively selected villages of **Parbhani district, Maharashtra**: **Akoli (Gangakhed taluka), Makhani (Jintur taluka), and Kadegaon (Manwath taluka)**. Observations, interviews, FGDs, and document reviews were used to assess formal inclusion, substantive participation, and barriers/enablers for marginalized groups.

Table 1: Attendance and Representation:

Village	Average Gram Sabha Attendance	Marginalized Groups (%)	Sub-committee Participation (%)
Akoli	45	22%	15%
Makhani	50	28%	18%
Kadegaon	40	20%	12%
Overall Average	45	23%	15%

Observation: Marginalized groups' presence was below their demographic share (~40%), and sub-committee participation was even lower.

Table 2: Voice and Participation Quality:

Village	% of Speaking Turns by Marginalized Groups	% of Proposals Accepted / Prioritized
Akoli	12%	10%
Makhani	15%	12%
Kadegaon	10%	8%
Overall Average	12%	10%

Observation: Only a small proportion of meeting discussions and proposals involved marginalized participants. Formal attendance did not translate into decision-making influence.

Decision-Making Influence

- Elite households dominated decisions regarding scheme selection and fund allocation.
- Marginalized participants' suggestions were often acknowledged but rarely implemented.

Table 3: Barriers to Participation:

Barrier	Description
Social hierarchy	Dominance of higher castes and elite households limits marginalized voice
Information gap	Limited access to scheme details and meeting notices
Capacity constraints	Low literacy, lack of technical knowledge, and limited confidence
Time/opportunity costs	Participation requires time away from livelihoods
Institutional weaknesses	Poor documentation, weak social audits, and lack of facilitation

The table 3 is outlines the main obstacles that hinder marginalized groups from engaging meaningfully in village governance. Social hierarchies, information gaps, and limited capacity reduce their ability to participate, while time constraints and weak institutional support further restrict involvement. Collectively, these barriers prevent formal inclusion from translating into substantive influence.

Table 4: Enablers of Participation

Enabler	Impact
Self-Help Groups	Increased confidence and social capital among marginalized members
NGO facilitation	Improved meeting inclusivity and encouraged proposals
Reserved seats	Ensured formal presence in Gram Sabha and committees

The table 4 highlights factors that promote meaningful engagement of marginalized groups in local development activities. Self-Help Groups build confidence and social networks, NGO facilitation improves inclusivity, and reserved seats ensure formal representation. These enablers help bridge the gap between attendance and active participation, fostering empowerment and equitable governance.

Formal vs Substantive Participation

There is a clear gap between representation and influence. Marginalized groups often occupy lower rungs in participation hierarchies, attending meetings without substantial input into decisions.

Role of Social Capital and Networks

Bonding social capital within marginalized groups fosters voice, but bridging social capital across groups is limited, restricting influence on village governance.

Institutional Design and Power Structures

Power asymmetries and elite dominance undermine inclusive governance. Effective facilitation and accountability mechanisms are critical to ensure equitable participation.

Policy Implications

Capacity building strengthened social audits, inclusive facilitation, and pro-poor scheme guidelines are necessary to enhance meaningful participation.

Suggestions:

1. Conduct regular training for marginalized groups on governance, rights, and scheme procedures
2. Strengthen awareness campaigns through local media, workshops, and community engagement

3. Use facilitators during meetings to encourage equitable voice and ensure proposals are considered
4. Implement accountability measures in PRIs to prevent elite capture
5. Promote gender- and caste-sensitive governance through rotation of leadership roles and committee memberships
6. Partner with NGOs for mentoring, advocacy, and technical support
7. Establish grievance redressal and feedback mechanisms to report exclusion or procedural gaps

Conclusion:

The study confirms that formal inclusion mechanisms alone are insufficient for meaningful participation of marginalized groups in rural governance. Social hierarchies, limited capacity, and institutional weaknesses constrain substantive involvement, limiting their influence in decision-making and implementation. Enhancing social capital, institutional facilitation, and accountability frameworks can transform nominal representation into genuine empowerment. Sustainable rural development depends on the active engagement of marginalized individuals in both planning and implementation, ensuring that governance is equitable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of all community members.

References:

- Chinnala, B. R. *Marginalized Communities and Decentralized Institutions in India*. Routledge, 2021.
- Indian Journal of Medical Research. “Assessing Engagement of Scheduled Tribe Communities in VHSNCs.” *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, 2022.
- IPRR India. “Women’s Groups and Political Participation: The Role of Jeevika.” *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 2021.
- Overton, J., et al. “Community Participation in Village Development Planning: A Case Study.” *Community Development Journal*, 2020.
- Socio, Economic and Infrastructural Impact of MGNREGA: Social Inclusion of SC/ST. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2021.