

Social Inclusion and Exclusion in India’s Panchayati Raj Institutions: Insights from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

India’s Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), formalized by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, aim to promote inclusive governance in rural areas. This paper examines social inclusion and exclusion in PRIs in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, focusing on participation and access to benefits. Using data from a 1999 World Bank study, it analyses how gender, caste, education, and wealth influence engagement in Gram Panchayats. Findings reveal significant exclusion of women, Scheduled Tribes (STs), and landless individuals despite high voter turnout and reservations. Policy recommendations emphasize education, information access, and accountability to enhance inclusion.

Résumé

Les institutions de Panchayati Raj (PRI) en Inde, formalisées par le 73^e amendement constitutionnel de 1992, visent à promouvoir une gouvernance inclusive dans les zones rurales. Cet article examine l’inclusion et l’exclusion sociales au sein des PRI au Rajasthan et au Madhya Pradesh, en se concentrant sur la participation et l’accès aux avantages. À partir des données d’une étude menée par la Banque mondiale en 1999, il analyse comment le genre, la caste, l’éducation et la richesse influencent l’engagement dans les Gram Panchayats. Les résultats révèlent une exclusion significative des femmes, des tribus répertoriées (ST) et des personnes sans terre, malgré un taux de participation élevé et des dispositions de réservation. Les recommandations politiques mettent l’accent sur l’éducation, l’accès à l’information et la responsabilisation afin de renforcer l’inclusion.

Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment established PRIs to decentralize governance and empower marginalized groups through participatory democracy (Alsop et al., 2000; Bardhan, 2002). Gram Panchayats (GPs), the village-level tier, are tasked with development and administrative functions, with reservations for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and STs to ensure inclusion (Menon, 2007; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Yet, social exclusion persists, driven by entrenched inequalities (Behar & Kumar, 2002). This paper investigates inclusion in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, asking: How do social attributes shape PRI participation and benefit access, and what interventions can reduce exclusion?

Methodology

The analysis draws on a 1999 World Bank study across six districts in Rajasthan (Ajmer, Bhilwara, Dungarpur) and Madhya Pradesh (Neemuch, Mandsaur, Ujjain) (Alsop et al., 2000). The study combined a survey of 2,013 villagers and 315 PRI representatives with anthropological research in eight Gram Panchayats. Villages were selected for diversity in size, accessibility, and caste composition. Participation was measured via voting, campaigning, and Gram Sabha attendance, with a 100-point Index of Political Activity as the dependent variable. Regression and factor analyses

identified participation correlates, supplemented by qualitative insights on exclusion (Alsop et al., 2000; Kumar, 2001).

Participation in Village-Level Governance

Voter turnout in Panchayat elections was high (95%), with no significant variation by gender, caste, or landholding (Alsop et al., 2000; Mitra, 2001). However, participation was driven by social pressures—candidate requests (37%), fear of conflict (19%), and concerns about losing benefits (18%)—rather than civic engagement (Alsop et al., 2000; Rao & Sanyal, 2010). Only 29% campaigned, and 35% contacted representatives, indicating limited influence (Alsop et al., 2000).

Gram Sabha attendance was low, with 65% of villagers not attending any meetings and only 7% attending regularly, undermining accountability (Alsop et al., 2000; Besley et al., 2005). Villagers cited lack of influence, with one stating, “the sarpanch does as he pleases” (Alsop et al., 2000, p. 11). Regression analysis showed men were 42% more likely to be “high participators” (11%) than women, who scored 24 points lower on the participation index (Alsop et al., 2000; Datta, 1998). Education increased participation by 46% for those with 10+ years of schooling, and each information source added 5 points (Alsop et al., 2000; Krishna, 2002). STs, especially women, scored 6 points lower, reflecting marginalization (Alsop et al., 2000; Pal, 2004).

Among representatives, women participated 15 points less than men, with 75% of female ward panches rarely attending meetings due to social norms (Alsop et al., 2000; Jayal, 2006). Education and information boosted participation, while landless representatives were less active, likely due to elite dependence (Alsop et al., 2000; Buch, 2012).

Access to Services and Benefits

Access to benefits like Indira Awas Yojana housing and subsidized loans was skewed. All 20 female-headed households and 88% of migrating households were excluded, lacking information or networks (Alsop et al., 2000; Heller et al., 2007). Benefits often depended on ties to the sarpanch, with 33% citing labor or patronage relationships (Alsop et al., 2000; Johnson, 2003). Vulnerable groups—female-headed, migrating, and landless households—faced structural barriers, reinforcing exclusion (Alsop et al., 2000; Corbridge et al., 2005).

Impact of Reservation Policies

Reservations for SCs, STs, and women have increased representation but not participation (Alsop et al., 2000; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Women’s “low participator” rates were slightly higher in reserved villages (47% vs. 53%), but high participator rates remained at 11% (Alsop et al., 2000; Bhavnani, 2009). ST participation showed no change, suggesting reservations alone cannot disrupt exclusion within five years (Alsop et al., 2000; Pande, 2003). Satisfaction with sarpanch performance was tied to information access, not reservations (Alsop et al., 2000; Kudva, 2003).

Discussion

Exclusion in PRIs reflects social inequalities. Gender disparities stem from patriarchal norms and low education (Alsop et al., 2000; Beaman et al., 2010). ST marginalization may result from geographic isolation, while landless households lack agency due to elite dependence (Alsop et al., 2000; Manor, 2010). Reservations have limited impact, as female sarpanches often delegate to male relatives, and elite capture persists (Menon, 2007; Ban & Rao, 2008). Low Gram Sabha attendance and weak accountability mechanisms further entrench exclusion (Alsop et al., 2000; Fischer, 2016).

Recommendations

1. **Education and Information:** Expand primary education and PRI literacy campaigns via radio and bulletins (Alsop et al., 2000; Kumar, 2001).
2. **Accountability:** Monitor Gram Sabha attendance and strengthen vigilance committees (Alsop et al., 2000; Besley et al., 2005).
3. **Support for Reserved Representatives:** Provide training and mentorship for women and STs (Alsop et al., 2000; Jayal, 2006).
4. **Targeted Benefits:** Formalize benefit allocation to include vulnerable groups (Alsop et al., 2000; Heller et al., 2007).

Conclusion

PRIs in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh achieve high electoral participation but struggle with inclusion. Women, STs, and landless individuals face exclusion due to social norms and elite capture. Reservations alone are insufficient without education, information, and accountability. Targeted interventions can make PRIs more inclusive, fulfilling their democratic mandate.

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