JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL LAUREATES ACADEMY
www.rlaindia.org

DALIT WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION IN GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE: AN ASSESSMENT OF POWER, LEADERSHIP, AND SOCIAL BARRIERS IN ODISHA

Thokchom Sanjiba Singh
Research Scholar, Sikkim Alpine University, Namchi, Sikkim

Dr. Md. Altamash Imam
Research Supervisor, Sikkim Alpine University, Namchi, Sikkim

ABSTRACT

The representation of Dalit women in grassroots governance is essential for promoting social justice, inclusive development, and democratic accountability in Odisha. Although constitutional reservations have expanded access to elected positions in Panchayati Raj institutions, the relationship between representation and effective political participation remains complex. Dalit women may encounter intersecting barriers arising from caste hierarchies, patriarchal practices, economic disadvantage, limited institutional knowledge, and unequal access to political networks. This paper examines the representation, participation, leadership experiences, and social barriers affecting Dalit women in grassroots governance in Odisha. Adopting a qualitative and descriptive analytical approach, it draws on published research, institutional literature, and scholarship on caste, gender, and decentralisation. The analysis distinguishes numerical representation from substantive participation and explores how institutional practices and community relationships shape political agency. It argues that meaningful inclusion requires independent decision-making authority, responsive administration, leadership development, protection from discrimination, and stronger public accountability. The paper concludes that inclusive grassroots governance depends on transforming representation into effective and autonomous political participation.

E-mail: editor.jrla24@gmail.com

Keywords: Dalit women, political representation, grassroots governance, Odisha, leadership, caste and gender, political participation, social barriers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Grassroots governance is a significant component of democratic development because it provides citizens with opportunities to participate in decisions concerning local resources, public services, and community welfare. In rural India, Panchayati Raj institutions connect elected representatives with residents and create formal channels for discussing development priorities. However, access to these institutions has historically been influenced by inequalities associated with caste, gender, economic status, and education. Dalit women occupy a particularly important position in debates about inclusive governance because they experience social exclusion associated with both caste and gender. Their participation therefore raises questions about whether democratic institutions merely provide representation or also redistribute political authority to communities historically excluded from decision-making.

The constitutional framework introduced through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment established a foundation for the representation of women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Panchayati Raj institutions. These provisions created opportunities for Dalit women to contest elections and assume responsibilities within local government. Odisha's Panchayati Raj system provides a relevant setting for examining the consequences of these reforms because rural governance operates within diverse social, economic, and cultural environments. Nevertheless, reservation alone cannot guarantee that elected representatives will have equal influence over public decisions. The effectiveness of representation depends on whether elected women can express their views, obtain administrative information, influence development priorities, and discharge their responsibilities without interference.

Political representation can be understood through two related dimensions. Descriptive representation concerns the presence of individuals from particular social groups within elected institutions, whereas substantive representation concerns the extent to which their participation influences decisions and addresses the interests of the communities they represent. A Dalit woman may be formally elected but have limited influence if other actors control discussions, restrict her access to records, or make decisions on her behalf.

Conversely, a representative who develops administrative knowledge, builds community support, and participates actively in planning may use elected office to challenge existing inequalities. Research on women's local governance in Odisha has examined the relationship between electoral inclusion, political participation, and the transformation of women's roles in public life.

This paper assesses Dalit women's representation and participation in grassroots governance in Odisha, focusing on political power, leadership development, and social barriers. It adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach based on secondary literature and published institutional sources. The paper does not present original survey results or claim that the experiences of all Dalit women representatives are identical. Instead, it identifies major issues requiring attention in the study of local democratic institutions. Its central argument is that representation becomes meaningful when elected Dalit women possess the autonomy, knowledge, resources, and institutional support necessary to influence decisions and remain accountable to their constituents.

II. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND THE NATURE OF GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP

Political representation is a fundamental principle of democratic governance because elected institutions should reflect the diversity of the population and provide channels through which different groups can articulate their concerns. In rural local government, representation enables residents to participate indirectly through elected members and directly through appropriate public forums. For Dalit women, access to elected positions can challenge traditional patterns in which political authority is concentrated among men or socially dominant communities. Their presence may make the concerns of marginalised households more visible and encourage broader discussion of inequalities in public services, employment, education, sanitation, housing, and social protection.

However, representation must be examined beyond the number of seats occupied by women. Descriptive representation is important because it opens institutions to previously excluded groups, but substantive representation depends on actual participation in policy discussion and decision-making. An elected representative may attend meetings without having sufficient opportunity to speak or influence decisions. She may also face difficulties obtaining official documents, understanding expenditure proposals, or communicating

directly with administrative authorities. Such conditions can reduce the practical value of political inclusion. A comprehensive assessment should therefore consider the representative's role in deliberation, the independence of her decisions, her influence on development priorities, and the extent to which her proposals receive institutional attention.

Leadership at the grassroots level involves more than holding a formal position. It requires the ability to identify community needs, communicate with residents, negotiate competing interests, coordinate with officials, and monitor the implementation of decisions. Dalit women representatives may need to perform these functions while negotiating social expectations that question their public authority. Some may encounter resistance from individuals who believe that political decisions should be controlled by male relatives or influential community members. Others may develop leadership through practical experience, collective action, and engagement with public institutions. Leadership should therefore be understood as a developing capacity shaped by personal agency and the opportunities provided by the political environment.

The relationship between elected representatives and their constituents is another important dimension of grassroots leadership. Effective representatives must understand the needs of different households, communicate the status of public programmes, and explain the reasons behind local decisions. Dalit women may be particularly well placed to recognise certain difficulties experienced by disadvantaged residents because of their social and community connections. However, shared identity does not automatically ensure effective representation. Representatives also need access to information, administrative cooperation, and the ability to balance competing community priorities fairly. Their effectiveness should be assessed through their actions and accountability rather than assumptions based solely on gender or caste identity.

Political parties, local networks, community organisations, and administrative institutions can influence the development of leadership. Access to these networks may provide representatives with information, mentorship, campaign experience, and opportunities to communicate their concerns to higher authorities. Conversely, exclusion from political networks can restrict their ability to obtain support or negotiate institutional problems. Training programmes and peer networks can help reduce these disadvantages by enabling elected women to share experiences and develop practical skills. Nevertheless, leadership

development should strengthen independent judgment rather than encourage representatives to depend permanently on influential intermediaries.

The assessment of political representation in Odisha must consequently consider both institutional inclusion and the quality of participation. The existence of reserved positions demonstrates an important commitment to representative governance, but it does not by itself establish that Dalit women possess equal authority within Panchayats. Research should investigate who speaks during meetings, whose proposals are accepted, how decisions are implemented, and whether representatives can fulfil their responsibilities independently. Such an approach makes it possible to distinguish symbolic inclusion from substantive political participation and provides a stronger basis for evaluating the democratic significance of Dalit women's leadership.

III. CASTE, GENDER, AND SOCIAL BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The political experiences of Dalit women are shaped by the interaction of caste and gender inequalities. Caste hierarchies can influence social relationships, community authority, access to public resources, and the recognition granted to elected representatives. Gender norms may further restrict women's mobility, public speaking, and participation in political activities. When these inequalities operate together, Dalit women can face barriers that differ from those experienced by men from their communities or women from socially advantaged groups. An intersectional approach is therefore necessary to understand their participation in grassroots governance. It examines how overlapping social structures influence political opportunities without assuming that every representative experiences discrimination in the same way.

Social attitudes may affect the legitimacy of Dalit women's leadership. In some settings, residents or influential local actors may question a woman's ability to perform official duties because of her gender or caste background. Such attitudes can discourage her from speaking openly, contesting unfair practices, or raising concerns involving powerful individuals. Social exclusion may also occur through informal networks that shape decisions before formal meetings take place. When elected representatives are excluded from these discussions, they may have limited opportunities to influence outcomes even if they formally attend Panchayat meetings. Strengthening transparent procedures and ensuring fair participation are therefore important for reducing the influence of informal hierarchies.

Patriarchal practices can also influence women's control over political decisions. Household responsibilities, expectations concerning care work, and dependence on male family members may affect the time and resources available for official duties. In some cases, a woman elected to a reserved position may be pressured to follow the instructions of a husband or another influential individual. This possibility raises concerns about whether political authority is being exercised by the elected representative or informally transferred to someone else. However, it is equally important to recognise that Dalit women may actively negotiate family relationships, develop political confidence, and establish independent leadership. Research must examine both the constraints they encounter and the strategies they use to overcome them.

Economic insecurity can make participation more difficult. Representatives who depend on agricultural labour, informal employment, or irregular household income may face substantial costs when attending meetings, travelling to administrative offices, or participating in training. The time required for political responsibilities can also conflict with paid work and domestic duties. Limited financial resources may reduce access to communication technology, transportation, and political networks. These disadvantages can weaken the practical ability to carry out official responsibilities, even where the representative has strong leadership skills. Timely reimbursement of official expenses, accessible training, and stronger livelihood opportunities can help reduce the financial barriers associated with participation.

Educational and administrative barriers can further restrict political effectiveness. Local governance requires familiarity with government schemes, development plans, official records, budgets, public expenditure, and complaint procedures. Representatives with limited access to formal education or digital resources may face difficulties navigating these processes. Such difficulties should be addressed through practical training and administrative assistance rather than interpreted as evidence of an inability to lead. Clear documentation, local-language information, mentoring, and accessible technical support can help elected women understand their responsibilities and participate more confidently. Officials also have a role in ensuring that representatives receive the information necessary to fulfil their duties.

Finally, barriers to participation may be reinforced by inadequate accountability and limited protection against intimidation. When complaints involving discrimination, obstruction, or harassment are not addressed effectively, elected representatives may become reluctant to challenge established practices. Delays in implementing decisions or inadequate responses

from administrative authorities can also undermine their confidence and credibility among constituents. These problems require accessible grievance mechanisms, transparent decision-making, appropriate legal protection, and consistent administrative supervision. A critical assessment should identify not only individual experiences of exclusion but also the institutional practices that allow unequal treatment to persist. Addressing these interconnected barriers is necessary for building a grassroots governance system in which Dalit women can participate as independent and respected political actors.

IV. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, INSTITUTIONAL REFORM, AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Strengthening Dalit women's leadership requires systematic capacity-building that reflects the practical demands of Panchayat governance. Training should cover official responsibilities, meeting procedures, development planning, public finance, welfare schemes, record maintenance, and coordination with administrative authorities. It should also develop communication, negotiation, conflict-resolution, and public-speaking skills. These programmes are most useful when they include practical exercises, local examples, and opportunities to discuss actual administrative problems. Training should not be treated as a one-time activity provided immediately after an election. Continued learning and mentoring are necessary because representatives encounter new responsibilities and changing policy requirements throughout their terms.

Institutional reform is equally important because individual leadership cannot overcome every structural barrier. Panchayat meetings should follow transparent procedures that allow representatives to participate meaningfully and ensure that decisions are properly recorded. Elected members should receive relevant documents in advance and have reasonable opportunities to ask questions, propose activities, and seek clarification. Information about development funds, beneficiary selection, and public expenditure should be accessible in accordance with applicable rules. These measures can reduce the scope for informal control and help representatives monitor whether decisions reflect the needs of the community. Transparent procedures also strengthen public confidence in local institutions.

The participation of Dalit women in Gram Sabha meetings and other public forums deserves particular attention. These forums can provide opportunities to communicate community needs, question decisions, and monitor development activities. However, meaningful

participation requires more than holding meetings; residents must be able to speak without intimidation, understand the information presented, and receive responses to their concerns. Local authorities can improve participation by announcing meetings in advance, using accessible language, explaining relevant proposals, and documenting the issues raised. Women's groups and community organisations can help residents understand their rights and encourage broader participation, while public officials remain responsible for following established procedures.

Peer networks and mentoring can also contribute to leadership development. Experienced elected representatives can share knowledge about administrative procedures, resolving local disputes, accessing government programmes, and responding to resistance. Networks involving Dalit women representatives from different Panchayats may reduce isolation and provide a forum for discussing common problems. Civil society organisations, academic institutions, and relevant government departments can support these networks through training and information-sharing. Such collaboration should remain consistent with the authority of elected institutions and should not replace the representative's independent judgment. The objective is to strengthen her capacity to act effectively rather than create another form of dependence.

Protection against discrimination and political intimidation is essential for meaningful participation. Authorities should ensure that complaints involving caste-based exclusion, harassment, threats, or obstruction of official duties can be submitted through accessible procedures and receive appropriate attention. Representatives should understand the legal and administrative options available to them. Public officials must also be accountable for providing relevant information and responding to legitimate requests connected with Panchayat responsibilities. Community awareness programmes can reinforce the principle that elected women possess the same institutional legitimacy as other representatives. A governance system cannot be considered inclusive if marginalised representatives formally hold office but are unable to exercise their responsibilities safely.

Evaluation should measure the quality and outcomes of participation. Relevant indicators include the frequency and nature of participation in meetings, access to records, the number and substance of proposals introduced, influence over local priorities, responses from administrative officials, and the implementation of decisions. Qualitative interviews can explore whether representatives feel able to exercise independent judgment and how

constituents evaluate their performance. Comparisons across districts and Panchayats can identify differences in institutional support, social conditions, and leadership opportunities. Such research should include both successful experiences and continuing difficulties, avoiding the assumption that all representatives share the same experiences. Evidence-based evaluation can guide more effective policies and help ensure that reservation produces lasting improvements in democratic inclusion.

V. CONCLUSION

The representation and participation of Dalit women in grassroots governance are central to the democratic ideals of equality, inclusion, and social justice. In Odisha, Panchayati Raj institutions provide a formal setting in which women from historically marginalised communities can enter political office and participate in local decision-making. Reservation policies have expanded these opportunities, but formal inclusion is only the starting point of political empowerment. Effective participation requires that elected representatives possess the authority, knowledge, resources, and institutional support necessary to influence public decisions and remain accountable to their constituents.

The analysis highlights the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. The presence of Dalit women in elected institutions is important, but their political influence depends on their ability to participate in deliberations, access official information, propose development activities, and oversee implementation. Caste discrimination, patriarchal expectations, economic insecurity, educational barriers, and political interference may restrict these opportunities. However, these challenges should not obscure the agency of Dalit women, who may develop leadership through experience, collective action, training, and engagement with public institutions. Their experiences require careful investigation across different social and administrative contexts.

Improving participation requires both individual capacity-building and institutional reform. Practical leadership training, transparent meeting procedures, accessible administrative information, effective grievance mechanisms, financial support for official duties, and protection against discrimination can help elected women exercise their responsibilities. Stronger Gram Sabha participation and public accountability can also ensure that development priorities reflect the needs of marginalised residents. These measures should be supported by sustained efforts to challenge social attitudes that undermine women's authority

and by systematic evaluation of whether elected representatives can make decisions independently.

In conclusion, meaningful representation occurs when Dalit women are not merely present in grassroots institutions but are recognised as legitimate and effective political leaders. Their empowerment should be evaluated through autonomy, influence, accountability, and the practical outcomes of their participation rather than electoral numbers alone. Further empirical research in Odisha should document the experiences of Dalit women representatives, compare institutional practices, and assess the effectiveness of leadership-development initiatives. Such research can inform policies that make Panchayati Raj institutions more inclusive and responsive while strengthening the democratic participation of communities historically excluded from political power.

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