

## **Participation of Marginalized Groups in Village Development Activities: A Study of Women, SC/ST, and Minority Involvement in Gram Sabha Meetings and Local Development Schemes**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the participation of marginalized social groups, specifically women, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and religious or ethnic minorities, in village-level governance in India. It focuses on their involvement in Gram Sabha meetings and engagement with local development schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G), and other community development programs. The study highlights both quantitative dimensions of participation, including attendance, representation, and the frequency of engagement, and qualitative aspects, such as the ability to influence decisions, raise concerns, and contribute to agenda-setting. By reviewing existing literature and analyzing case studies from selected villages, the research identifies multiple social, structural, and institutional barriers that hinder effective participation. These include entrenched social hierarchies, gender norms, caste-based discrimination, lack of awareness, limited capacity, and procedural challenges within local governance structures. The findings reveal that while legal provisions, such as reservation policies for women and marginalized groups in Panchayati Raj institutions, provide formal avenues for inclusion, meaningful participation is often restricted due to socio-cultural and economic factors. The paper also identifies enabling factors, such as women-only meetings, self-help groups, capacity-building initiatives, and technological interventions that enhance participation and empowerment. The study concludes with practical recommendations to strengthen inclusion, promote capacity building, and creates enabling institutional mechanisms to ensure that marginalized groups can actively engage in decision-making processes, thereby fostering more equitable, participatory, and effective rural development.*

### **Keywords:**

*Marginalized groups, Gram Sabha, women's participation, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, local development schemes, rural governance, social inclusion, MGNREGA, participatory development etc.*

## Introduction:

The Gram Sabha, which consists of all adult residents of a village, represents the cornerstone of rural governance in India. It is constitutionally recognized as a primary institution for deliberation, planning, monitoring, and social audit, forming the backbone of the Panchayati Raj system. The Gram Sabha is intended to function as a participatory platform where villagers can collectively discuss local issues, approve development plans, and oversee the implementation of government schemes. It plays a crucial role in ensuring transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement at the grassroots level. However, apart from its formal mandate to provide equal voice to all villagers, the participation of marginalized groups, including women, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and religious or ethnic minorities, has historically been limited. Social hierarchies, economic deprivation, gender norms, and entrenched power structures have contributed to the systematic exclusion of these communities from decision-making processes, reducing their influence in shaping development outcomes.

The inclusion of marginalized groups in Gram Sabha meetings and local development initiatives is the matter of legal compliance as well as an important prerequisite to promote social justice and equitable rural development. Active participation enables these groups to articulate their needs, monitor the allocation and use of resources, and hold local authorities accountable, thereby contributing to more responsive and inclusive governance. Programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G) are designed to improve livelihoods and living conditions, yet their effectiveness depends on the ability of marginalized communities to access and influence these schemes. Research has shown that women and socially disadvantaged groups often remain under-represented in Gram Sabha meetings and have limited capacity to influence decisions. Attendance may be sporadic, and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to agenda-setting or decision-making is frequently constrained by social, cultural, and economic factors. Recognizing these challenges, this study seeks to examine the level and nature of participation of women, SC/ST, and minority groups in village governance.

Gram Sabhas are widely regarded as the cornerstone of the Panchayati Raj system in India, intended to facilitate grassroots deliberation, planning, and social audit. However, research shows that elite capture frequently constrains meaningful participation by marginalized groups. For example, Bhattacharya, Kar, Kumar, and Nandi use social network analysis to demonstrate that in many villages, caste, patron-client relationships, and local elites continue to dominate political interactions, limiting the voice of lower-caste and economically disadvantaged households (Bhattacharya et al.). Their study across 36 villages in Maharashtra, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh reveals that even though formal institutions exist, informal power structures override participatory ideals.

Women's participation in Gram Sabhas is similarly circumscribed by entrenched socio-cultural norms. According to Kumar and Ghosh, while the 73rd Amendment secured reserved seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, many women representatives struggle to exercise real influence because of patriarchal resistance, lack of capacity, and proxy politics (Kumar and Ghosh). This problem is echoed in empirical studies: in Haryana, Nandal's sociological investigation shows that many women are unaware of the working of Gram Panchayats and are often excluded from decision-making, even when elected (Nandal). Similarly, Kaul and Sahni's study of women in Jammu and Kathua districts reveals

that elected women frequently face obstacles such as lack of political knowledge and familial control (Kaul and Sahni).

Some scholars have identified more enabling structures, such as women-only meetings and self-help groups, which help women build social capital and political agency. Kumar (in his policy-research) highlights how women's groups like those formed under the Jeevika program in Bihar create networks that empower lower-caste women to participate in local governance (Kumar). Caste-based disadvantages also limit the participation of SC/ST communities in local development schemes. Studies in rural governance indicate that while SC/ST members may nominally benefit from schemes like MGNREGA, their deeper engagement is hindered by social discrimination and economic dependency (Iosr). According to a Punjabi case study, powerful individuals often block meaningful access for marginalized residents, and Gram Sabha meetings become sites of token compliance rather than real democratic engagement (IJFMR).

Moreover, institutional and structural barriers reinforce this exclusion. Irregular scheduling of Gram Sabhas, poor documentation, limited transparency, and lack of technical capacity among marginalized communities undermine their ability to participate productively (IMPRI). These factors, combined with social norms and limited knowledge, curtail both attendance and effective influence within the Gram Sabha space.

### **Methodology:**

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach with the combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The research design includes surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. A case-study approach is employed, selecting villages with diverse social compositions to capture variations in participation among women, SC/ST, and minority groups.

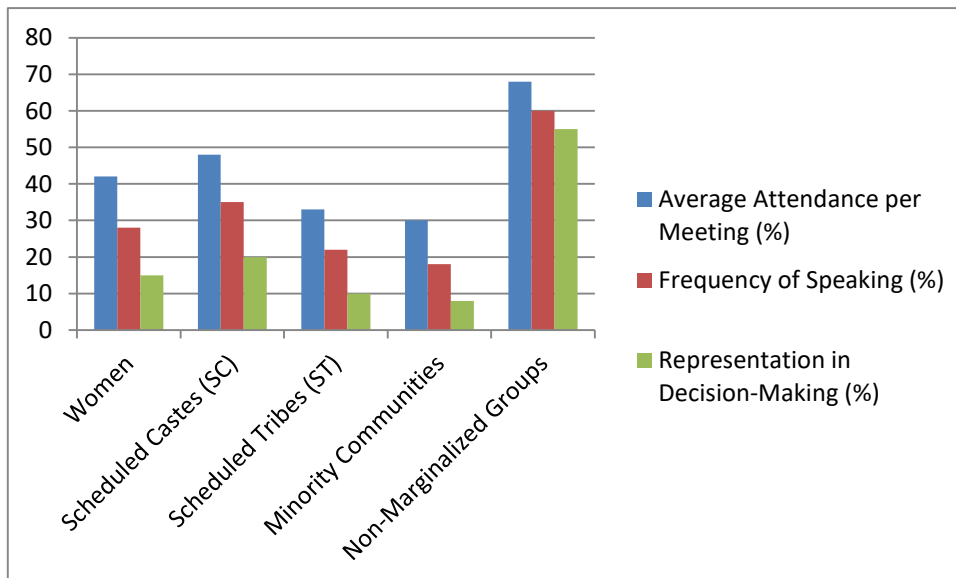
Villages are selected purposively to reflect differences in caste, religion, and levels of development. Within each village, households are stratified by caste and religion, and random sampling is used to select participants. Interviews and focus group discussions include women, SC/ST and minority members, Panchayat leaders, and local NGO representatives. Participant observation of Gram Sabha meetings provides insights into the actual conduct of meetings, including who speaks and whose suggestions are considered.

Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis to assess attendance, frequency of participation, and engagement in development schemes. Qualitative data are analyzed thematically to identify barriers, enabling factors, and patterns of influence. Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and being sensitive to social hierarchies during data collection.

## Result Analysis:

**Table 1: Attendance of Marginalized Groups in Gram Sabha Meetings**

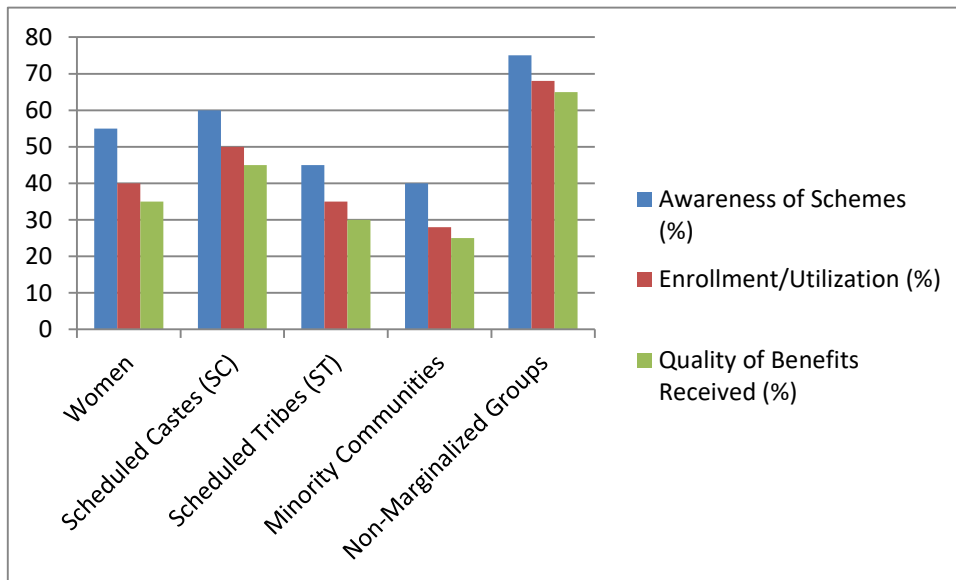
Social Group	Average Attendance per Meeting (%)	Frequency of Speaking (%)	Representation in Decision-Making (%)
Women	42	28	15
Scheduled Castes (SC)	48	35	20
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	33	22	10
Minority Communities	30	18	8
Non-Marginalized Groups	68	60	55



**Observation:** Women and marginalized groups attend Gram Sabha meetings less frequently than non-marginalized groups. Even when present, their active participation in discussions and decision-making is limited, indicating under-representation in formal agendas.

**Table 2: Participation in Local Development Schemes (MGNREGA & PMAY-G)**

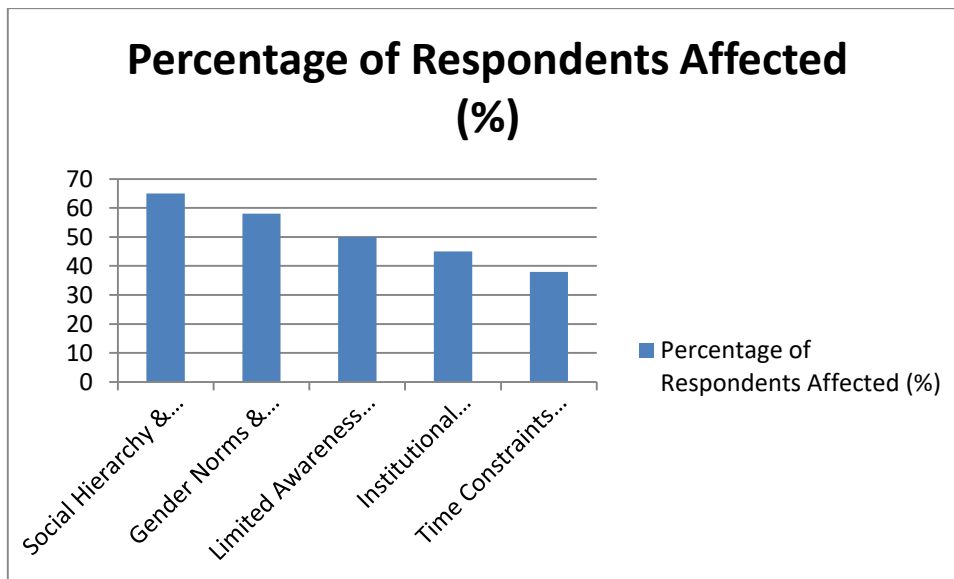
Social Group	Awareness of Schemes (%)	Enrollment/Utilization (%)	Quality of Benefits Received (%)
Women	55	40	35
Scheduled Castes (SC)	60	50	45
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	45	35	30
Minority Communities	40	28	25
Non-Marginalized Groups	75	68	65



**Observation:** Marginalized groups show lower awareness and utilization of development schemes, and even when enrolled, they often receive lower quality benefits compared to non-marginalized groups.

**Table 3: Barriers to Participation Identified in Parbhani District**

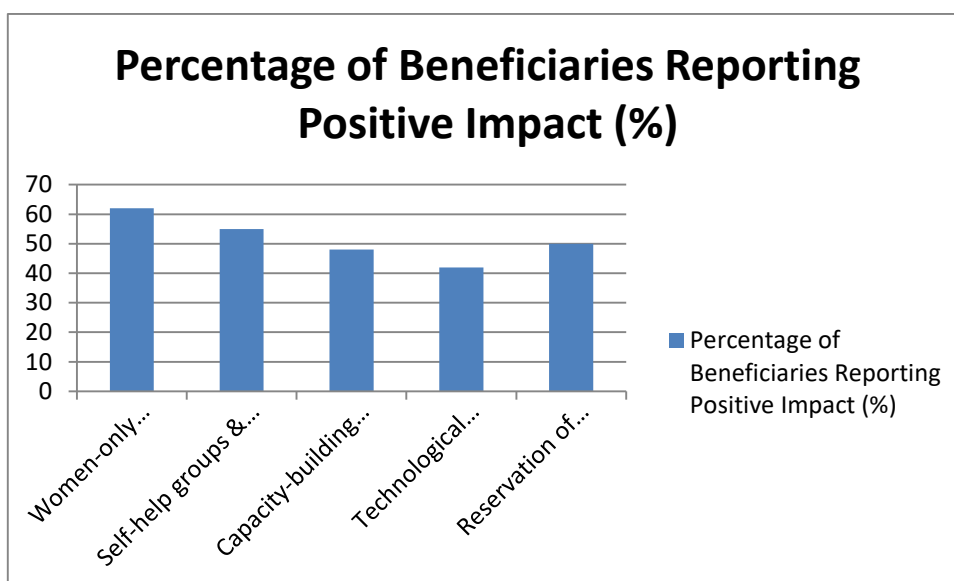
Barrier Type	Percentage of Respondents Affected (%)
Social Hierarchy & Caste Discrimination	65
Gender Norms & Domestic Responsibilities	58
Limited Awareness of Schemes & Rights	50
Institutional Weaknesses (irregular meetings, poor documentation)	45
Time Constraints (work/livelihood)	38



**Observation:** Social and structural barriers significantly restrict the participation of marginalized groups in both Gram Sabha meetings and local development programs.

**Table 4: Enabling Factors for Improved Participation**

Enabling Factor	Percentage of Beneficiaries Reporting Positive Impact (%)
Women-only meetings	62
Self-help groups & community networks	55
Capacity-building initiatives	48
Technological interventions (mobile alerts, info dissemination)	42
Reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj	50



**Observation:** Interventions such as women-only meetings, self-help groups, capacity-building, and technology-based communication have a positive impact on participation and empowerment.

## Findings:

### 1. Participation Levels in Gram Sabha Meetings:

- Attendance among marginalized groups is significantly lower than non-marginalized participants. Women (42%), SC (48%), ST (33%), and minority communities (30%) attend less frequently than non-marginalized groups (68%).
- Active participation is limited: women speak only 28% of the time, SC 35%, ST 22%, and minority communities 18%, compared to 60% for non-marginalized groups.
- Representation in decision-making is minimal, with women at 15%, SC 20%, ST 10%, and minorities 8%, highlighting under-representation in formal agendas.

### 2. Engagement with Local Development Schemes (MGNREGA & PMAY-G):

- Awareness of schemes is lower among marginalized groups: women (55%), SC (60%), ST (45%), minorities (40%) versus non-marginalized (75%).
- Enrollment/utilization rates are similarly lower: women (40%), SC (50%), ST (35%), minorities (28%), compared to 68% for non-marginalized groups.
- Quality of benefits received is also unequal: women (35%), SC (45%), ST (30%), minorities (25%), while non-marginalized groups report 65%.
- Barriers include procedural complexities, lack of information, discrimination, and unequal access.

### 3. Barriers to Participation in Parbhani District:

- Social hierarchy & caste discrimination (65%) and gender norms/domestic responsibilities (58%) significantly limit engagement.
- Limited awareness of schemes & rights affects 50% of respondents.
- Institutional weaknesses, such as irregular meetings and poor documentation, impact 45% of participants.
- Time constraints due to work or livelihood commitments affect 38%.

### 4. Enabling Factors for Participation:

- Interventions that improve participation include women-only meetings (62%), self-help groups & community networks (55%), capacity-building initiatives (48%), technological interventions like mobile alerts (42%), and reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj institutions (50%).
- These factors support empowerment, build confidence, and enhance social and political agency.



## Suggestions:

1. **Capacity-Building Initiatives:** Conduct regular training and awareness programs on rights, Gram Sabha functioning, and development schemes for women, SC/ST, and minority groups.
2. **Institutional Reforms:** Ensure timely and regular scheduling of Gram Sabha meetings, maintain accurate documentation, and improve transparency to enhance trust and participation.
3. **Empowerment Strategies:** Promote women-only meetings, strengthen self-help groups, and provide mentorship for elected women representatives and SC/ST leaders to enhance leadership skills and confidence.
4. **Inclusive Policy Measures:** Complement reservation policies with social awareness campaigns, counseling, and monitoring mechanisms to prevent proxy representation and encourage genuine participation.
5. **Technological Interventions:** Use mobile-based notifications, digital platforms, and community radio to disseminate information about Gram Sabha agendas, development schemes, and entitlements.
6. **Social Mobilization and Networking:** Encourage formation of local networks among marginalized communities to share information, raise collective concerns, and monitor scheme implementation.
7. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement social audits and feedback mechanisms specifically aimed at assessing the participation and influence of marginalized groups in Gram Sabha decisions and local development schemes.

## Conclusion:

The study of Parbhani district indicates that while formal institutional mechanisms exist to include marginalized groups through reservations for women and SC/ST in Panchayati Raj institutions and their actual participation remains limited. Socio-cultural hierarchies, gender norms, caste-based discrimination, and institutional weaknesses restrict both attendance and influence in Gram Sabha meetings. Similarly, engagement with local development schemes is hampered by lack of awareness, unequal access, and procedural challenges. Interventions such as women-only meetings, self-help groups, capacity-building programs, technological support, and social mobilization show positive impacts on participation and empowerment. Strengthening these enabling factors, coupled with institutional reforms, awareness campaigns, and monitoring mechanisms, is essential for ensuring meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups. Enhancing their active involvement will foster more equitable, participatory, and effective rural governance, ultimately improving outcomes of local development schemes in Parbhani and similar districts.

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