



CAPSTONE PROJECT



Exploring Political Empowerment and Governance of Scheduled Caste Representatives in Maharashtra Panchayats

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**Exploring Political Empowerment and Governance of Scheduled
Caste Representatives in Maharashtra Panchayats**

**Submitted to Kautilya School of Public Policy in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree of
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SELF-DECLARATION

This is to certify that the thesis titled “Exploring Political Empowerment and Governance of Scheduled Caste Representatives in Maharashtra Panchayats” is my original work and has not previously formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship or Fellowship to this or any other University.

Kamble Sudhir Shyamsundar

April 4th, 2026

CERTIFICATE OF THE SUPERVISOR

This is to certify that the thesis titled "Exploring Political Empowerment and Governance of Scheduled Caste Representatives in Maharashtra Panchayats" is original work undertaken by Kamble Sudhir Shyamsundar under my supervision and guidance as part of his Master's degree in this Institute. The thesis may be sent for evaluation.

Supervisor's Signature


Dr Amrendra Pandey

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April 4th, 2026

Kautilya School of Public Policy

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Executive Summary

This project examines the lived experiences of Scheduled Caste elected representatives in rural Maharashtra, focusing on their roles within the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The study has been directed towards overcoming an important gap. Although political reservation has enhanced the formal presence of the Scheduled Castes in village governance, it has not necessarily led to effective decision-making and political empowerment.

The study is conducted in rural areas of Latur and Nanded districts. It is based on the qualitative interviews with the Scheduled Caste Sarpanch and the Gram Panchayat members (both men and women). A qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted to understand elected representatives' experiences in governance. The interviews were focused on their involvement in politics, understandings of political empowerment, decision-making processes, barriers in governance, caste and gender relations, and their views on policy change. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The findings indicate that the reservation is an important factor for their entry into the office; however, entry is often far from autonomous. In many cases, candidature and electoral success depended on family members, local elites, or heads of panels (pramukhs). Participants remembered, again and again, a discrepancy between office and real authority. Many of them envisioned political empowerment as a combination of visibility, dignity, voice, and the right to say "no", but most of them only realized some of these dimensions.

One of the major findings of the project is that informal institutions still play a powerful role in local governance. Decisions were often made outside the Panchayats' meetings, e.g., in elite households or through local political networks. Women representatives, in particular, were often controlled by proxies such as husbands, sons, or other powerful men. The study also concluded

that caste discrimination, patriarchal control, bureaucratic dependence, unequal access to information, and corruption were very significant factors contributing to the limitation of substantive participation.

At the same time, the study does not paint a totally negative picture. A few representatives were able to improve access to water, roads, housing, and sanitation, and local services. However, such gains were often selective, and projects associated with dignity as a community, with land, or with symbolic assertion were often strongly resisted.

The project concludes that political reservation has resulted in formal access to the Panchayat office; however, substantive empowerment is patchy and negotiated. To improve the real political empowerment of Scheduled Castes representatives, the report recommends sustained capacity development for Scheduled Castes, greater transparency in the administrative domain, security for proxy governance, more support for women representatives and first-time representatives, and greater accountability in the distribution and implementation of funds.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

In this study, I examine the lived experiences of Scheduled Caste (SC) elected representatives in rural Maharashtra, focusing on their role in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This subject is important because Panchayats are generally considered the most immediate tier of democratic governance in rural India. They are supposed to act not only as administrative units but also as forums where marginalized communities participate in public decision-making, voice their needs, and influence the local population's development priorities. The democratic relevance of the Panchayats was further reinforced by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which gave constitutional status to the PRIs and also enforced the reservation for SC, ST, and women in local Government (Tandon, 2008; Haokip & Umarani, 2018; Harinath, 2024; Rajendra Prasad & Durugamma, 2026). In principle, this reform set out to address the history of marginalized groups' exclusion from positions of authority and to deepen democracy by broadening access to local governance.

For Scheduled Castes in particular, reservation is not only an electoral device but also an institutional measure to make constitutional equality a reality in the day-to-day life of democracy, despite its legitimacy often being contested by dominant castes (Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010). The reservation for SC representatives, including the posts of Sarpanch and ward members, was intended to provide an opportunity for communities that had been deprived for centuries of the right to exercise authority within the social and political structure of villages. In this sense, political reservation was expected not only to increase representation but also to contribute to dignity, recognition, and substantive participation in the process of governance. The idea was that a greater

political presence in historically marginalized communities could influence decisions concerning welfare schemes, village-level infrastructure, service schemes, local justice, and so on.

However, the available literature also shows that the relationship between representation and empowerment is not straightforward. Several scholars highlight that the formal entry of Scheduled Castes into Panchayats does not necessarily lead to the effective exercise of authority (Patnaik, 2005; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011; Haokip & Umarani, 2018; Harinath, 2024). The election for SC representatives can be linked to the persistence of caste hierarchy, elite influence, bureaucratic opacity, and unequal access to the decision-making process. This implies that the success of a political reservation cannot necessarily be measured by the fact that some SC representatives are elected. It also needs to be evaluated in terms of the actual conditions under which SC representatives function, and the extent to which they are, in fact, autonomous and perceived as legitimate decision-makers in village society.

This is a cause for concern, especially in the state of Maharashtra. The state has a great history of anti-caste struggle, Ambedkarite thought, and Democratic mobilization. At the same time, village society in Maharashtra is still under the influence of caste priests, disparity in landholding, informal political patronage, and unequal access to public resources. George's (2024) ethnographic work in western India is particularly useful for establishing the fact of competition in village politics, which is deeply rooted in caste-based relations of power operating at the very local level. In such a setting, the availability of an SC sarpanch or a Panchayat member could signify a symbolic opening up, even as the representatives struggle in their daily lives to exercise their authority. The tension between official constitutional inclusion and real exercise of authority offers the background for my study more generally.

1.2 Problem statement

“Despite constitutional provisions under the 73rd Amendment, SC representatives in Maharashtra panchayats experience limited political empowerment and governance due to entrenched caste-based barriers.”

1.3 Research questions

1. What social, institutional, and structural barriers shape SC representatives' ability to participate in governance and influence decision-making?
2. How does political inclusion through Panchayati Raj Institutions create pathways to economic inclusion for SC communities?
3. What Policy interventions are required to overcome the social, institutional, and structural barriers to SC's political empowerment in Maharashtra?

1.4 Significance of the study

I consider this study to be important on both academic and policy grounds. Academically, it contributes to the literature on democratic decentralization, caste, and political representation, focusing on SC elected representatives through studies of their everyday experiences in rural Maharashtra. Existing scholarship has already demonstrated that descriptive representation does not necessarily translate into substantive representation (Patnaik, 2005; Tandon, 2008; Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010), yet there is a need for grounded qualitative work that captures how such tensions are negotiated in daily governance. This study adds to that conversation by integrating the issues of caste, legitimacy, informal power, bureaucracy, and development into a single empirical problem.

The study is also important because it fills a gap concerning a particular region. While some important studies have examined the participation of Dalits in Panchayats across various states, including Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011; Tandon, 2008; Harinath, 2024; Rajendra Prasad & Durugamma, 2026; Ahirwar, 2022). There is relatively limited qualitative work done focused on the lived governance experiences of SC Sarpanches and the members of Panchayats in Maharashtra (George, 2024; Bansode & Swaminathan, 2021). Given the specific political and social context in Maharashtra, such work is especially needed.

From a policy perspective, the study is relevant because it directly addresses how political reservation functions in practice. If reservation is to be an effective instrument of empowerment, policymakers must understand why elected representatives remain constrained after coming to office. These constraints, however, are not limited to caste discrimination but also include poor institutional support, unequal access to information, corruption, proxy decision-making, and gendered dependency (Tandon, 2008; Patnaik, 2005; Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011; Harinath, 2024). By highlighting these barriers, the study can contribute to the discussion on strengthening accountability, transparency, and democratic inclusion at the village level.

1.5 Scope of the study

The present study is limited to Scheduled Caste elected representatives in rural Maharashtra, specifically in the districts of Latur and Nanded. It is based on ten qualitative interviews with SC Sarpanches and members of Gram Panchayats, including men and women. The study is not an attempt to create statistical generalizations about SC representatives in the state as

a whole. Instead, it has an interpretive and analytic task: the attempt to understand the experience of political reservation in the ordinary course of governance, as well as the processes shaping formal inclusion amid shifts in local social and institutional realities.

The scope of the study is, therefore, limited but analytically meaningful. It focuses on entry into office, the lived meaning of political empowerment, decision-making processes, caste and gender relations, institutional barriers, and development outcomes. By centering these themes, I want to explore not only the promise of a democratic reservation but also the conditions that continue to limit its realization in practice in village governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political reservation and democratic inclusion

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution was a significant institutional change in the Indian democratic system by conferring constitutional protection on Panchayati Raj Institutions and requiring local bodies to have reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women (Tandon, 2008). Similar formulations emphasizing the 73rd Amendment as enlarging SCs' formal space in local governance appear in state-level work on Karnataka (Rajendra Prasad & Durugamma, 2026). In theory, the reform was meant to address the historical exclusion of marginalized communities from decision-making and democratize village-level governance (Tandon, 2008). State-specific studies, such as those on the Tekari block in Bihar, similarly treat the 73rd Amendment as an attempt to devolve power and democratize rural governance for Dalits (Kumar & Prakash, 2025). Political reservation was therefore aimed at creating an opportunity of numerical representation not only to increase the numbers of underrepresented social groups, but also to give historically oppressed groups a voice in governance and priorities in the area (Tandon, 2008).

Nonetheless, the literature always demonstrates that formal representation does not necessarily result in democratic inclusion in any substantive meaning (Patnaik, 2005; Tandon, 2008; Haokip & Umarani, 2018). In her work on Panchayats in Orissa, Patnaik (2005) suggests that the measure of numerical representation should be based on participation, responsiveness, and accountability, rather than on the occupancy of reserved seats. It is work that shows that institutional presence is not a sufficient measure of power when elected representatives fail to influence decisions and represent the interests of their constituents (Patnaik, 2005; Malik &

Shrivastava, 2011). This is the difference between entering office and exercising power in practice, and it is the major theme of the literature on reservations and local democracy (Patnaik, 2005; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011; Haokip & Umarani, 2018).

With this understanding, it is more likely to view political reservation as an enabling factor rather than an assured realization of the outcome (Haokip & Umarani, 2018). It opens access to the office, although the translation of the office into power is subject to discussion of broader social and institutional contexts (Patnaik, 2005). This argument is reflected in the work on Dalit political participation, which is based on a review and claims that the enlargement of the formal space of political participation with reservations did not eliminate many of the arrangements of caste power (Haokip & Umarani, 2018; Tandon, 2008).

2.2 Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj Institutions

The literature on Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj Institutions shows a clear consensus that reservation has transformed the social structure of local bodies (Tandon, 2008; Haokip & Umarani, 2018; Rajendra Prasad & Durugamma, 2026). However, there is a split over whether it has resulted in any substantive change in political power. For Karnataka, Rajendra Prasad and Durugamma (2026) review SC participation and note that despite quotas in both seats and offices, wide socio-economic disparities and landlessness keep SC representatives in a structurally weak political position in many panchayats. One recurring conclusion is that SC representatives have access to offices that were traditionally inaccessible to them (Tandon, 2008; Haokip & Umarani, 2018). However, their power is usually limited by social dependence, low institutional support, and informal control by dominant village actors (Patnaik, 2005; Haokip & Umarani, 2018). Empirical work from the Tekari block in Bihar similarly finds that reservations for Dalit

representatives have not been properly implemented, with real authority constrained by financial dependence, bureaucratic control, feudal attitudes, and local bias against Dalit presidents (Kumar & Prakash, 2025).

Malik and Shrivastava (2011) provide valuable background for this argument through their investigation of Dalit women elected to office in Uttar Pradesh. They are interested in their participation in the decision-making process at the grassroots level and demonstrate that such a formal election of people representing the Dalits does not result in their effective input into the functioning of the state. The authors demonstrate that social location, reliance, and a lack of autonomy can influence how these representatives function in their post-election lives. This is particularly applicable to their work, which demonstrates that participation should not be judged by election outcomes but by people's actual engagement in deliberation, planning, and decision-making (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011).

Harinath (2024), in his study on rural Telangana, establishes that the participation of SCs in Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha processes remains limited due to weak institutional support, that access to local decision-making processes remains unbalanced, and that village society is characterized by discrimination. According to this literature, the mere presence of SC representatives in the local institutions they serve is not sufficient; rather, the ability to act as effective political actors in these institutions is required (Patnaik, 2005; Harinath, 2024).

Meanwhile, the conclusions across the literature are not entirely consistent. Ethnography of a village Panchayat in western India by George (2024) provides a more nuanced perspective, in that the village's politics cannot be reduced to a fixed formula of domination. Her work indicates that local politics might be concerned with actual rivalry, shifts in power, and the unequal growth

of the political potential of subordinated groups. This is particularly relevant to the present study, as it preconditions the possibility of perceiving SC representatives not merely as limited office-holders, but as actors who negotiated the conditions of rural Maharashtra's mutability (George, 2024). Quantitative work on Haryana shows something similar for SC women: their share among PRI members and a composite empowerment score both increased substantially between 2010 and 2016, even though seat capture does not automatically guarantee equal influence in decision-making (Mangat, Ahmed, & Gill, 2025).

2.3 Caste, informal power, and local governance

One of the most fundamental themes of the literature is that caste operates not merely on a formal basis of exclusion but also through informal authority in day-to-day governance (Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010; Haokip & Umarani, 2018). A similar trend can also be seen in Marathwada (Scheduled Caste-dominated areas of Maharashtra): statistically, the larger the proportion of Scheduled Castes in a village, the worse the access to schools, health facilities, and banking systems, irrespective of the village's total size (Bansode & Swaminathan, 2021). Importantly, Inbanathan & Sivanna (2010) focus on legitimacy: it is not merely a question of whether Scheduled Castes are represented in Panchayats, but of whether other high-caste groups give them social legitimacy. They are based on the concept of the dominant caste to demonstrate that constitutional provisions can lead to a situation in which SC representatives have formal power. However, local society can still deprive them of full rights to be decision-makers (Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010).

This point can be used to examine the other idea that the literature records numerous examples of indirect control and not direct exclusion. Local governments might seem democratic

on paper, but in reality, they may still be controlled by networks of landholding claims, politically influential families, or unelected players, who often influence decisions before they are even submitted to formal Government offices (Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010; George, 2024; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011). Malik and Shrivastava (2011) demonstrate the intersection of this logic with patriarchy in the example of representatives of the Dalit women. Similar remarks are made by Harinath (2024), who identifies local structures that undermine the real presence of SC representatives in the presence of formal institutions.

George (2024), however, rejects any strictly deterministic explanation of the informal power complex. Her research on western India reveals that caste politics in the village is both relational and historically changing, operating not only through the hierarchy of rituals but also through migration, welfare and development funds, and competition in local politics. This is helpful because it implies that informal power cannot be merely a remnant of tradition; it is constantly being redefined in modern-day democracies (George, 2024). Nevertheless, her work demonstrates that the power to control village politics cannot be understood without taking into account the informal spheres in which power is discussed, negotiated, and exercised (George, 2024).

2.4 Political empowerment and substantive representation

This literature centers on the distinction between descriptive and substantive representations. Descriptive representation means that office holders are representative of marginalized groups, and, in this case, substantive representation would be whether representatives can influence decisions and act on behalf of their communities (Patnaik, 2005). Particularly in Panchayats with a Scheduled Caste population, this difference is crucial, as the effectiveness of

the reservation measure cannot be assessed solely by the number of SC representatives elected (Patnaik, 2005; Haokip & Umarani, 2018). It should also be considered whether such representatives can contribute effectively to the governance (Patnaik, 2005).

According to the literature, substantive empowerment has several dimensions - it involves speaking in meetings, setting the agenda, accessing information, having the authority to allocate funds, communicating with officials without intermediaries or brokers, and behaving in a socially legitimate manner in the village (Patnaik, 2005; Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010; Harinath, 2024). Haokip and Umarani (2018) suggest that reservations have provided an institutional form of inclusion for Dalits. However, the exercise of power is constrained in cases of social exclusion, economic dependency, and poor enabling conditions. The same argument is made by Tandon (2008), who states that it is impossible to implement the idea of empowerment without social and institutional support. This is consistent with qualitative findings from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and other states, where Dalit representatives, especially women, often remain dependent on dominant caste elites and officials despite occupying reserved positions (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011; Haokip & Umarani, 2018; Ahirwar, 2022; Kumar & Prakash, 2025).

According to Harinath (2024), partaking can also be cosmetic because its representatives lack the institutional support needed to transform presence into power. However, the local democratic engagement can foster slow learning in politics and the development of new skills, even in unequal circumstances (George, 2024). Taken together, the literature suggests that the concept of political empowerment cannot be viewed as a binary. It can be better described as an overlapping process of symbolic inclusion, voice, authority, and dignity that can not necessarily grow concurrently (George, 2024; Harinath, 2024; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011).

2.5 Representation and development outcomes

Another smaller but substantive body of literature examines whether developmental benefits for marginalized communities are generated by political representation (Ahirwar, 2022; Patnaik, 2005; George, 2024). This question is essential since the normative promise of reservation is not only that SC representatives are supposed to be in office, but also that their presence could lead to greater responsiveness, improved access to schemes, and greater interest in neglected settlements (Patnaik, 2005; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2003). The case of two village Panchayats in Madhya Pradesh by Ahirwar (2022) is also useful here, as it relates social exclusion to political empowerment and examines whether Dalit-led governance can enhance representation in decision-making and improve local outcomes. As the study implies, caste remains a significant obstacle, but in some circumstances, political inclusion can enhance responsiveness. Similarly, Mangat, Ahmed, and Gill (2025) show that increased representation of SC women in Haryana's PRIs between 2010 and 2016 is associated with higher composite empowerment scores at the district level, suggesting some improvement in their capacity to shape local development, even if the study calls for further research on actual decision-making power.

Patnaik (2005) also contributes to this debate indirectly by demonstrating that the relevance of representation depends on how effectively elected representatives address their constituents' demands. In the case of non-responsive, numeric representation, the developmental potential of decentralization is low (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2003). George (2024) adds another twist by demonstrating that the battles over development funds are themselves central to caste politics in the village. Development, however, is not an impartial consequence of decentralization; it is a component of the political struggles over access to resources, visibility, and power (George, 2024; Patnaik, 2005).

2.6 Gaps in the literature

Despite the solid foundation provided by the current literature, there are certain gaps. First, qualitative research specifically about Maharashtra and directly centered on the lived experiences of members of Scheduled Caste Sarpanches and Gram Panchayats is a limited topic. While there is quantitative work on caste and development in Marathwada, showing that villages with higher SC shares are structurally disadvantaged in access to basic amenities (Bansode & Swaminathan, 2021), such studies focus on outcomes rather than on how SC representatives themselves navigate local governance. However, it is more focused on political competition within a single village than on the specific narratives of power, dependency, and rule by SC representatives themselves (George, 2024).

Second, a significant part of the literature focuses more on identifying barriers than on the actual local decision-making process. The literature indicates that caste hierarchy, proxy control, and dominant local actors are important. However, few publications examine how agendas are formulated prior to meetings, how officials converse, how files are transferred, and how elected representatives navigate these processes on a day-to-day basis. The conceptual foundation is provided by Inbanathan and Sivanna (2010), who foreground legitimacy and dominant-caste acceptance of SC office-holders, and by Malik and Shrivastava (2011), who demonstrate how Dalit women's participation is constrained even after election.

Third, few studies examine the relationship between political inclusion and development outcomes. Some research suggests that access and responsiveness may increase with representation. However, it lacks depth on when this occurs, why it is not uniform, and why this form of development projects or community-assertion projects can face greater opposition than

others. Lastly, it is necessary to have a work that brings together caste, gender, informal institutions, and bureaucratic processes within a single analytical framework. Existing state-specific studies—for instance, on SC participation in Karnataka (Rajendra Prasad & Durugamma, 2026), SC women’s empowerment in Haryana PRIs (Mangat, Ahmed, & Gill, 2025), and Dalit participation in Bihar’s PRIs (Kumar & Prakash, 2025)—highlight important patterns but are located in other regions. There remains a gap in similarly detailed, Maharashtra-focused accounts of how SC representatives experience everyday governance and bureaucracy. The current research attempts to fill these gaps by focusing on Scheduled Caste elected representatives in rural Maharashtra and investigating not only their entry into office but also their lived experience of power, dependence, and local Government.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

My research design in this study was qualitative, aiming to understand the lived experiences of elected representatives from the Scheduled Castes in rural local Government. I did not seek to quantify participation based on numbers; rather, I investigated the representatives' perceptions of political empowerment, decision-making, and the limitations they encounter in practice. Because my research questions focus on social, institutional, and structural experiences, a qualitative approach was the best. It enabled me to explore the dynamics of power in daily village politics, how elected officials perceive their mandate, and how official political inclusion does not necessarily match real power.

I adopted an exploratory approach because the research sought to develop grounded knowledge of a relatively under-researched problem in the context of Maharashtra. Instead of testing a specific hypothesis, I focused on identifying recurring patterns, meanings, and themes that emerged across participants' interviews.

3.2 Study area

This research was carried out in the rural areas of Maharashtra, and specifically the villages of Latur and Nanded districts. I chose this larger geographical area because it provided a social and political background relevant to researching the involvement of Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj Institutions, and because these two districts have a high proportion of SCs: Latur has 19.6% SC population, and Nanded has 19.05% SC population (Census, 2011).

Latur has 785 Gram Panchayats, and Nanded has 1,307 (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, 2026). Based on the 2011 Census SC population proportions of 19.6% in Latur and 19.1% in Nanded, approximately 154 Sarpanch posts in Latur and 250 in Nanded are estimated to be reserved for Scheduled Castes. Of these, roughly 77 in Latur and 125 in Nanded are further reserved for SC women, in line with Maharashtra's 50% women's reservation in PRIs (Government of Maharashtra, 2013). The area captures many of the broader characteristics of rural Maharashtra, such as social stratification, reliance on agriculture and informal labour, and the relevance of local elite networks to village politics.

This area was also practical for my research since I was somehow familiar with it and could access respondents using local contacts. Since this paper is qualitative, using interviews as the research method and having the trust required to conduct the interviews and access, this geographical familiarity allowed me to find participants and facilitate more detailed conversations.

3.3 Participants and sampling

The study is grounded on the ten semi-structured interviews with elected representatives of the Scheduled Caste. Both the Sarpanch and the Gram Panchayat include men and women. I have made this variation to make the sample varied in position, gender, and political participation.

I have used a purposive, network-based grouping method based on personal contacts and referrals. First, I recruited some respondents through acquaintances, and second, I met other respondents through local contacts. This proved effective because electoral access, especially in the rural areas, is occasionally linked with trust and informality. I have selected the participants because they belong to the Scheduled Castes community and have served as elected members in village governance.

3.4 Data collection

I collected the data by semi-structured interviews. This method allowed me to formulate a series of broad guiding questions and to provide room for the participant to talk about their experiences in their own words. The interviews focused on their political entry, their vision of political empowerment, their role in the decision-making process, the hindrances to governing, their caste-gender relationship, and their thinking on policy change.

The conversations were conducted mostly in a conversational style, which helped the participants talk more freely about sensitive matters such as caste discrimination, local elite domination, and bureaucratic coercion. The interviews were to be conducted in languages understood by the interviewees, with a mix of Marathi and Hindi, and subsequently translated into English for analysis and writing. In cases where participants had locally meaningful expressions, I attempted to ensure that I translated them to preserve the intended meaning. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

3.5 Thematic analysis

I analysed the interviews using thematic analysis. I have read every transcript and identified recurring ideas, patterns, and expressions that align with my research questions. My initial coding involved noting recurring problems such as entry based on reservations, proxy governance, caste discrimination, the absence of decision-making authority, reliance on the bureaucracy, and development-related problems.

At the second step, I collected similar codes into general themes. The process enabled me to find key patterns in the interviews. The last themes were: reservation as a point of entry; political

empowerment meanings; informal institutions and proxy governance; caste and gendered legitimacy; institutional and structural barriers; and development gains and constraints. Because my research is qualitative and interpretive, thematic analysis was most useful, as it enabled me to shift from personal stories to general patterns of analysis while maintaining the context of participants' experiences.

3.6 Ethical considerations

I was keen on ethics throughout the research. I have stated the purpose of the study before all interviews, informed participants that they were not required to take part, and asked them to provide written consent. I also told them that they were not obligated to answer any question or halt the interview when they felt like it.

I would not include participants' real names in the final report to ensure the information remained confidential. Rather, I anonymised them using P1, P2, P3, etc. I also did not include some identifying details that could disclose their identity or village. As not all of the questions were unrelated to caste discrimination, politically related pressure, and local power relations, anonymity was particularly vital.

Table 3: Participant demographics

Participant's Demographics					
Participant ID	Gender	Position	District	Education	Entry into Office
P1	Male	Sarpanch	Nanded	Post Graduate	Self-motivated but panel-supported
P2	Female	Sarpanch	Latur	7th pass	Elite supported / nominal entry
P3	Male	Sarpanch	Latur	Graduate	Community-supported / self-motivated
P4	Male	Sarpanch	Nanded	8th pass	Community-backed but elite-supported
P5	Female	Former Sarpanch	Nanded	10th pass	Family-supported
P6	Female	Sarpanch	Latur	7th pass	Family-supported / son-mediated
P7	Male	GP Member	Latur	10th pass	Elite-supported
P8	Female	GP Member	Latur	Low education	Husband- and elite-supported
P9	Male	Sarpanch	Nanded	Low education	Elite supported / nominal entry
P10	Male	Sarpanch	Nanded	Low education	Elite supported / nominal entry

4. Findings

The chapter presents the results of ten semi-structured interviews with Scheduled Castes elected representatives from rural Maharashtra. To ensure participant anonymity, the participants are identified by P1 to P10. The results indicate that, in these ten cases, politically reserved institutions have achieved relatively little beyond enabling the formal entry of Scheduled Caste representatives into Panchayat institutions, and this entry has not been accompanied by concurrent conversion into autonomous and substantive power. In the interviews, participants repeatedly described the same gap between being in the office and having power. They attribute this to the pervasive presence of village elites, informal decision-making arenas, a caste-based social hierarchy, dependence on the bureaucracy and on their constituents, and control over gender. Simultaneously, the interviews demonstrate that the elected representatives are not completely deprived of agency. They could, in certain instances, increase access to water, houses, roads, and other local amenities. The results are gathered into six themes.

Table 4: Themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis

Main theme	Sub-themes
Reservation as an entry point, but not always as an autonomous entry	Reservation-based entry; Ambedkarite motivation; Family-mediated candidature; Elite-backed selection
Meanings of political empowerment in lived experience	Voice and dignity; Symbolic recognition; Limited authority; Layered empowerment
Informal institutions and proxy governance	Dual decision tracks; Elite control; Family proxy rule; Meeting ratification
Caste, gender, and the legitimacy of authority	Caste-based disrespect; Ritual exclusion persists; Patriarchal silencing; Contested legitimacy
Institutional and structural barriers	Information asymmetry; Bureaucratic dependence; Technical paperwork barriers; Corruption networks
Development outcomes: gains and limits	Basic service gains; Uneven development access; Blocked community projects; Selective benefits

4.1 Reservation as an entry point, but not always as an autonomous entry

All ten interviews indicated that reservation was the fundamental precondition for entering the local office. The vast majority of participants were unlikely to hold a post such as Sarpanch or Gram Panchayat member without some reservation. Some of the interviewees made specific associations of this introduction with Babasaheb Ambedkar and the constitutional pledge of representation. P5 said that “A seat was reserved for a woman from the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. We discussed that we should take advantage of this seat and utilize the reservation that Babasaheb (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar) provided for us.” On the same note, P6 noted that her son had informed her that “this is an opportunity given by Babasaheb and we must not let it go.”

Nonetheless, the decision to take office was not always independent. The reserved seat created an opportunity, but the actual choice of candidate was shaped by family members, panel pramukhs, or village elites. P2 described how she entered politics, “since the Sarpanch position was reserved for a Scheduled Caste woman this time, Panel pramukh insisted that I contest the election, assuring me and my husband that he would take responsibility for getting me elected. P8 told another version of the same: “Panel pramukh called my husband and said, ‘This time we shall stand Vandana in the election!’” She added, “He didn’t even ask me; he just brought the form and said, ‘Vandana, you have to get elected’.” This evidence demonstrates that the system of reserved entry was often mediated by strong men, who already controlled the local political connections.

Entry remained tied to patronage structures, even when participants had a specific personal motivation. P1 said that he had wanted youth representation and village change, but also recognised the dependency that the local panel system had created: “We joined that panel, and the panel helped us win. They (Panel pramukhs) told us: ‘Yes, you are the Sarpanch, but you must do

what we say.” P4 similarly said that the seat was reserved for SC and “people came to my house and told me to contest, saying they would support me,” but admitted that “there was no way I could have become Sarpanch on my own.” P7 too described being encouraged by “the prominent politicians in the village” who said someone from his family should contest because the ward was reserved.

From these interviews, it is evident that reservation did contribute to political entry, although access to office was usually preconditioned by reliance. Political actors were not necessarily self-selected among the candidates. They were often elected, sponsored, or forced to the fore under the village power systems already in existence. It means that the problem of autonomy does not become a post-election issue, but rather one that starts at the moment of candidature.

4.2 Meanings of political empowerment in lived experience

The participants did not take political empowerment as an abstract academic concept, but through the daily experience of visibility, dignity, voice, and the power to make decisions. To others, the original connotation of the word empowerment was simply the idea that a member of their society could hold a position previously inaccessible to them. P10 said, “If we talk about political empowerment, it means wanting to become a voice. From our oppressed community, a leadership emerged and got elected.” The same description of empowerment was described by P4, who explained it as “creating leadership from the lower strata of society and making that community strong.”

Simultaneously, the participants strongly contrasted symbolism with substantive power. This distinction was best formulated by P3, who said: “Political empowerment means not just

getting elected, but having real capacity to decide and implement without being controlled.” He also clarified that “empowerment has levels. First level is symbolic... Second level is voice... Third level is authority... And fourth level is dignity.” This multifaceted understanding is useful, because it illustrates what many other interviews also suggest: office may bring recognition, but it does not necessarily bring control.

Some only experienced the symbolic aspect of empowerment. P6 said, “I feel it when I see that my signature can actually get a road built or help someone get a house. That is strength.” However, during the same interview, she admitted that she had not attended any other meetings, as she was not educated and unfamiliar with technical terminology. P2 was even more direct about the gap between the office and the authority: “I don’t see any political empowerment in my experience because I don’t take any decisions.” P7 also held it straightforward, saying that “I never felt empowered.” P8 connected empowerment with independent decision-making and categorically rejected the idea: “If a woman can make her own decisions, it might call empowerment. But in my case, there is nothing like that.”

One of the repeated themes of the interviews is that the election brought visibility and new forms of public recognition. P4 said, “since I became Sarpanch, people now call me ‘see Sarpanch saheb is here, call the Sarpanch for this work,’” and that this is what altered him to have another identity. P6 also noted that at this point, “when I visit the government offices now, the officers give me a chair respectfully.” However, all these experiences of symbolic respect were accompanied by the ongoing dependence and insecurity. The data therefore suggest that political empowerment was usually partial: participants received office, recognition, and sometimes voice. However, they were not always able to have full control over their powers.

4.3 Informal institutions and proxy governance.

One of the most powerful trends across the interviews is the extent to which formal structures of the Panchayat often coexist with parallel patterns of informal decision-making. Officially, decisions are supposed to be made through Gram Sabha meetings, Panchayats deliberations, registers, resolutions, and committee procedures. In practice, however, it was common for respondents to say that actual decisions were made elsewhere.

P3 captured this most clearly: "Decision-making has two tracks - one official, one unofficial." He explained that while formal meetings exist, "some of these discussions are taking place in Tea stalls, some in the house of the influential persons." P10 described a similar process: "Meetings take place in the Panchayat, but meetings also take place at the landlord's house." He also added, "Decisions are also made by four people sitting at the square in the temple." P4's interview provides one of the finest descriptions of this pattern: "Before our official meetings, another meeting takes place at the 'Wada' (the Panel pramukh's mansion). It is there, in the Panel Pramukh's house, where things are decided first."

For several women participants, informal governance took the form of proxy control by family or patrons. P2 stated, "I am merely present there in name only, and after the Gram Sabha, I sign the register and return home." P6 described her own role in similar terms: "My role in the office is to be there and sign the papers, but the planning and decision happen with my son." P8 was more explicit than that: "Decisions are made in Saheb's (panel pramukh) meetings... Our role is only to stamp Saheb's decisions." These accounts show that formal representation of women may allow for the exercise of actual power through husbands, sons, or local elite.

This theme also reveals how formal institutions can become arenas for ratification rather than decision-making. Agendas tend to be formed beforehand, and the meetings loom as justifications for decisions already taken elsewhere. Such informal institutions do not replace the Panchayat; instead, they operate behind and through it, shaping how formal decisions are made. The result is that the constitutional office is there, but power is mediated through invisible or unofficial power centres.

4.4 Caste, gender, and the legitimacy of authority

The interviews reveal that being elected does not make a Scheduled Caste representative socially legitimate in others' eyes. Many participants, however, described the caste-based disrespect that persisted even after they assumed office. P1 said, "Because of being considered 'untouchable,' our words do not get much weight." He also reported on the everyday humiliations, "When eating together, sometimes you have to sit a little far away." On the same vein, P7 said, "Even today, with all this technology, we aren't allowed to enter the temple right outside my house." P8 remembered, "Caste is still observed in the village. When we go to Panel Pramukh's house, we still have to sit aside."

Some respondents described explicit verbal reminders that they had conditional or subordinate authority. P3 said that when he questioned a decision, "someone said in front of others, 'You people got chair because of reservation, don't act too much.'" P7 too: "They tell us, 'You are here just for the sake of the name, so stay that way.'" These statements are important, as they reveal that the struggle is now not only for office but also for recognition as a legitimate authority.

For the women representatives, caste discrimination was multiplied by the talons of patriarchy. P6 said, "People from the upper castes don't like to see a Mahar woman in power." She

has also said that officials tend to skip her, "They try to avoid me and call my son directly on his phone because they think a woman won't understand." P8 stated about the fear and silence caused by both caste and gender: In Gram Sabha meetings, "We women members just sit in a corner", and she was scared of speaking in meetings because "my husband will scold me at home." P2 said likewise that she often faces routine insubordination from the upper castes and that if she were to respond, "[I]f I say something in retaliation, they immediately pick a fight and threaten to beat us."

There was some variation. P5 had said that "The villagers gave me due respect and never practiced any caste discrimination." This is an important exception, as it implies that social experiences are not identical in all villages. Even so, the broader pattern in the data is clear: Constitutional legitimacy does not necessarily translate into social legitimacy. Caste hierarchy and patriarchal control still shape who is treated as a 'real' authority.

4.5 Institutional and structural barriers

The interviews show that the barriers faced by the SC representatives are not just social. They are also institutional and structural. One of the recurring problems was unequal access to information. P1 said, "Some officers inform the panel head before informing the Sarpanch," and added, "The panel head has more information than the Sarpanch." P9 similarly noted that "Information flow is a big issue." because officials often inform influential local actors first and then communicate with him formally as a second step. This sort of information asymmetry weakens elected representatives by making them reliant on others for information on files, sanctions, estimates, and meetings.

Another common obstacle was technical paperwork and bureaucratic language. Lower-educated participants reported difficulty repeatedly comprehending documents. "Due to a lack of

knowledge regarding documents, these things happen," P4 said. P6 explained, "When I sit in meetings, and they say big words when talking about the budgets and laws, I feel lost." P8 likewise recorded that papers were passed around for signatures, but "What is written in it, how much money came, where it was spent—this is never explained to us in detail." In several of the interviews, signing documents came to signify powerlessness rather than authority.

Corruption and contractor control were also mentioned. P1 said, "Suppose 100 rupees comes as a fund for some work, then 40% goes into corruption." P4 gave even more detailed description: "There are fixed 'percentages'—a percentage for the Sarpanch, the Panel Pramukh, the BDO, the Junior Engineer, the EO, the CO." If the SC representatives raise voice against the corruption, their voices are suppressed, P3 said "[W]hen I complain about corruption or wrong work, panel pramukh says 'this is how the system runs,' meaning you should adjust." These statements can be interpreted as indicating that local governance is structured by a political economy in which elected representatives are bound to navigate bureaucratic opacity, rent-sharing, and elite influence over works and contracts.

4.6 Development outcomes: gains and limits

Despite these constraints, neither interview paints a uniformly negative picture. Several participants spoke of areas where they were able to make concrete gains in development. P1 said, "We have done many works under NREGA and arranged labour work for people... Under the 15th Finance, we made a library... Many houses have been made... We arranged garbage management in the village." P5 reported during her term of office that "We made water arrangements in the village. We brought water from 3 kilometers away, installed streetlights, renovated the school, and built the Anganwadi." P6 similarly said, "We solved the water problem... We also fixed the muddy

roads in our locality and worked on the Anganwadi. I made sure that the poor families from our community got the Gharkul houses." P9 also described how he implemented part of it by creating a water tanker rotation schedule to ensure fair distribution.

These examples indicate that representation can be beneficial in the normal day-to-day management of provisions for basic services: water, roads, sanitation, housing, and local accessibility. In some cases, the presence of an SC representative also made office-holders more approachable. P4 said, "[T]he biggest change is that common people can reach me without any barriers."

At the same time, the interviews show clear limits. More assertive projects, those linked to community identity, land, or redistribution tendencies, tended to be more strongly resisted. P1 said, "We wanted to build a Buddhist Vihar for our community, which couldn't because it was stopped by local elites." P4 reported that "That SC/ST fund is diverted to a General ward... On paper, it shows the work was done in the SC/ST ward, but the actual work happens elsewhere." P5 wanted to construct a Gram Panchayat building, but she couldn't and said, "I wanted to build a Gram Panchayat building, but getting the space was difficult. The funding came through three times but had to be sent back." P6 explained that a similar project failed because "The powerful people in the village wouldn't give up any space in the main square." P7 listed several failed goals: "There were many failed goals of mine: I wanted the Gharkul (housing) scheme... a library... a community hall. None of it happened, just because the panel pramukh opposed it." P8 wanted poor women in her area to benefit from the housing schemes; however, "Panel pramukh put the names of his close people first," P8 said.

The pattern is here significant. Basic welfare and routine services were more attainable than projects that would improve SC collective dignity and visibility or SC control over village space. Representation did matter, but its developmental effects were selective. This is the larger implication of the chapter: political reservation achieves institutional presence, but that presence is continually renegotiated within unequal social and political arrangements.

5. Discussion

This study began with the question of whether political reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions translates into meaningful political empowerment for Scheduled Castes representatives. The findings suggest that reservation has unquestionably increased formal access to office, but substantive empowerment remains uneven, mediated, and fragile. Throughout the ten interviews, elected representatives discussed a constant tension between being in office and applying authority. This chapter interprets those findings in relation to the literature and the study's research questions.

5.1 From representation to substantive empowerment

The findings provide strong endorsement of the distinction in the literature between descriptive representation and substantive empowerment. Reservations helped participants gain entry to local institutions, become visible as public figures, and, in some cases, speak as representatives of their communities. However, as several respondents made clear, being elected did not necessarily mean having the power to decide independently. This is consistent with previous scholarship, which suggests that the very presence of representatives from Scheduled Castes in Panchayats does not necessarily indicate changes in long-standing structures of power in villages (Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010; Haokip & Umarani, 2018; Harinath, 2024).

At the same time, the findings also add some nuance to this debate. Passive or symbolic representation is not seen in the interview material. Participants such as P1 and P3 show that some elected SC representatives do try to use formal procedures, negotiation, and personal initiative in exercising leadership. This aligns with George's argument that village politics cannot be reduced

to elite capture, as the exclusive competition of reserved entry may also produce new forms of political learning, competition, and capacity over time (George, 2024). The present study, therefore, suggests that empowerment should come to mean graduated rather than absolute: reservation may be the source of visibility and some voice, but substantive empowerment is critically dependent on education, autonomy, institutional support, and the capacity to resist external control.

5.2 Informal power and the limits of local democracy

One of the most evident results of this research is that the functioning of formal Panchayat institutions often aligns with that of powerful informal structures. Participants repeatedly described decisions being made at the Wada, the house of a Panel Pramukh, in elite meetings or through family networks, before they entered the formal Gram Panchayat process. In this sense, local democracy does not exist but is strained by informal authority.

This finding is consistent with the literature on dominant caste power, informal control, and proxy governance. Inbanathan & Sivanna (2010) suggest that rather than the question of whether SCs are elected, the question that emerges is whether the authority of SCs is socially accepted as legitimate. Similarly, Malik & Shrivastava (2011) demonstrate that reserved representatives, especially women, may hold office officially, while husbands or male intermediaries make decisions. The interviews in this study both validate these patterns. Women respondents, in particular, were likely to identify themselves as signatories rather than decision-makers, although male respondents also asserted their dependency on panel heads, landlords, and politically connected elites.

These findings imply that the limits of local democracy lie not only in formal institutional weakness but also in the existence of parallel power centres. The Gram Sabha, Panchayat meeting, and committee structures may be in place on paper, but deliberation is often predetermined by actors who may not hold constitutional post.

5.3 Social and institutional barriers in combination

A major contribution of this study is its depiction of the combined effects of social and institutional barriers. Participants have not experienced caste discrimination in isolation from governance structures; caste, gender, bureaucracy, and economic dependence are reinforcing each other. Respondents specified humiliation by such elements as tone, practice of seating, temple exclusion, and acts of everyday disrespect. At the same time, they were also facing information asymmetry, being dependent on Gram Sevaks, inability to understand documents, delays at bureaucratic levels, and corruption in the allotment and implementation of works.

This combined pattern is important, as some of the literature tends to emphasise either caste exclusion or institutional weakness. The interviews suggest that the two are practically inseparable. Harinath (2024) similarly highlights how covert discrimination, limited devolution, and opaque administrative practices together undermine SC representatives' participation. Malik & Shrivastava (2011) demonstrate the intersection of caste and patriarchy as factors that circumscribe women representatives, and Haokip & Umarani (2018) the overall gap between the constitutional rights and enabling institutional conditions. The present findings confirm these arguments and provide evidence that institutional dependency itself can serve as a mechanism for reproducing caste hierarchy.

5.4 Political inclusion and uneven developmental inclusion

The second research question was to know whether political inclusion through PRIs establishes pathways to economic/developmental inclusion for SC communities. The results imply an ambiguous answer. In several cases, elected representatives improved access to water, roads, sanitation, housing, NREGA work, and village accessibility. This shows that political inclusion can lead to developmental benefits, particularly for day-to-day service delivery. In this light, the study supports the more cautious optimism expressed by Ahirwar (2022), who suggests that Dalit communities in certain Panchayats have improved outcomes.

However, the interviews also demonstrate these gains as uneven and limited. Projects related to community assertion, symbolic presence, land or collectivity dignity, such as a Buddhist Vihar, community hall, study space, or works in the area of SC, faced greater resistance. This leads to the belief that with representation, there may be improvement in the delivery of ordinary service, but not in the deeper distributions of space, visibility, and local power. George (2024) also shows that development and caste politics are deeply entangled in village life; in the present study, access to development is clearly shown to be politically negotiated.

Overall, the discussion suggests that political reservation has opened the institutional door, but substantive empowerment is constrained by informal authority, contested legitimacy, and uneven control over resources. The next chapter develops this interpretation to determine policy recommendations for strengthening the real political empowerment of Scheduled Caste representatives.

5.5 Expert Perspectives

To further this analysis, two experts in this domain have been consulted in conducting this study. According to the first expert, who works closely on Panchayati Raj Institutions and local governance in India, the core problem is an autonomy deficit at the point of entry. On his part, a reservation assigns a seat but does not transform the person in it into an independent political actor. He further added that bureaucratic dependence is the load-bearing barrier, as it transforms social disrespect into a failure of governance, since files, funds, and information flow through intermediaries with no one to report to. He also added that powerful players tend to leave space for basic services, as doing so enables them to appear as good benefactors; hence the reason why water and road projects continued in this case, and not the community-assertive ones.

The second was an intellectual expert and a Dalit scholar, more straightforward in his criticism. In his argument, he contended that the reservation was not intended to transfer power but rather to transfer presence, and that the two are very different. Regarding why a community hall, is subject to so much opposition, he remarked that powerful sentinels block them because such projects are not just about buildings but declarations of dignity and civilizational counterclaims. Starting their professional paths in different directions, these two scholars nevertheless arrive at the same conclusion this study reaches: being in office and actually having power are not the same thing, and closing this gap requires much more than just giving people a reserved seat.

6. Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that political reservation has provided the Scheduled Castes with access to local office. However, meaningful empowerment has been constrained by a lack of institutional strength, control by ruling elites, caste hierarchy, and gendered dependence. The recommendations below are based on those findings and are intended to strengthen the effective functioning of the political reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

6.1 Capacity-building and continuous training

Training for elected representatives needs to be made more practical, continuous, and compulsory, particularly for first-time Sarpanch and ward members from SC categories. One-time orientation sessions are not sufficient. The State Panchayati Raj Department, through the State Institute of Rural Development and district/Zilla Parishad training cells, should provide modular induction and quarterly refresher trainings on Panchayat functions, reading budgets, implementing schemes, Gram Sabha procedures, utilisation of funds, and complaint mechanisms. It should also be held in a simple local language, rather than technical administrative language. This is especially important, since several representatives in this study said they struggled to understand files, legal process, and Government communication. Training should not, therefore, be designed as a formality but as a long-term support mechanism that helps build confidence and decision-making capacity over the course of the term.

6.2 Greater administrative transparency and information access

A major barrier identified was unequal access to information, a theme throughout the interviews. In several cases, for example, officials provided information either to local elites or to

heads of panels or other politically influential intermediaries rather than to the elected representative. To solve this, all notifications, agendas, estimates, sanctions, and releases of funds should be notified directly and simultaneously to the Sarpanch, the members of the Panchayats, and the relevant committees. This can be done through both digital means, such as eGramSwaraj, SMS, or WhatsApp groups that include all GP members, and physical means, such as mandatory display on notice boards at the Gram Panchayat office and in SC localities. Gram Sabha agendas and sanctioned works should also be publicly displayed in the village, so that information does not trickle into a few hands. Transparent information flow is essential, as control over information often translates into control over governance itself.

6.3 Safeguards against proxy governance

The study reveals that proxy governance remains a profound concern, especially for women representatives, for whom decisions are usually made by husbands, sons, or local elite. Institutional safeguards are thus needed. Panchayat proceedings should include a note on the persons present, who speak, and who sign the official decisions. Repeated interference by informal or unofficial individuals in formal governance should be regarded as a violation of the rule of law, and systematically recorded and addressed through administrative instructions and supportive interventions. Training and administrative instructions should leave no doubt that it is not possible to exercise elected office through a husband, relative, or patron. At the same time, care should be taken to ensure that safeguards are put in place without embarrassing women representatives or driving them further away from governance. The goal, after all, should not merely be to detect improper behavior; rather, it should be to bolster their autonomy.

6.4 Stronger support for women and first-time SC representatives

Women and SC representatives standing for election for the first time need a special kind of support beyond the routine support given for elections. Dedicated mentoring systems at the block or district level could help newly elected representatives understand procedures, access officials, or otherwise resist pressure from dominant actors in the village. Peer support forums among SC representatives, particularly women, could also provide opportunities to share approaches and build confidence. Since some participants described being silenced during meetings or passed over by an official, support structures should include legal awareness, public speaking advice, and grievance channels for reporting issues such as intimidation, discrimination, or exclusion. Strengthening the autonomy of women and first-time representatives is therefore key if reservation is to go beyond symbolic inclusion.

6.5 Improving accountability in fund allocation and implementation

To enhance accountability for works, regular public and social audits at the village level should, where applicable, be conducted using available social audit mechanisms. Ward-wise fund allocation and sanctioned works, the name of the contractor, and work implementation status should be displayed at the Gram Panchayat office and at prominent locations in SC wards, and these should be reviewed in the Gram Sabha meetings. At least one SC elected representative should be included in any village-level audit/monitoring committee. Technical approvals and expenditure records should be made simple to read and understand. For example, key figures and decisions can be presented to elected representatives in local languages during meetings using summary sheets and simple visuals. Strengthening accountability for the use of funds is important

because uneven control over development resources directly undermines democratic participation and the broader promise of political empowerment.

7. Conclusion

The results of this study depict the lived experiences of elected representatives from the Scheduled Castes in rural Maharashtra. I explored the disjunction between formal political inclusion and the reality of political empowerment. Based on ten qualitative interviews, it can be seen that political reservation has, no doubt, provided opportunities for SC representatives to enter the Panchayati Raj Institutions, often for the first time. However, this entry has not translated automatically into independent authority or equal participation in governance. A common theme in the interviews was a persistent difference between holding an office and actual power.

Reservation serves as an important entry point; for example, the study found that candidature and decision-making were often mediated by a family member, a local elite member, a panel pramukh, or other politically influential actors. It also found that participants understood political empowerment in layered terms - as visibility, voice, dignity, and authority, but many participants experienced the symbolic elements in this process. Informal institutions such as the Wada, the panel pramukh's house, and elite meetings were often controlled by particular families. These spaces frequently determined the course of decisions before they entered the formal Panchayat process. In addition, the emergence of caste discrimination, patriarchal control, bureaucratic dependence, information asymmetry, and corruption were major barriers to participation in a substantive way. At the same time, the study found that SC representatives did retain some agency. Some were able to achieve improvements in water supply, housing, roads, sanitation, and local accessibility, although such developmental achievements were patchy and often limited.

It is concluded that political reservation brings formal access to office, but not necessarily substantive empowerment. The very presence of SC representatives in Panchayats carries important political connotations, but the exercise of authority is subject to negotiation within unequal power structures in villages. Caste hierarchy, informal elite influence, proxy governance, and a lack of institutional support continue to shape how elected representatives operate once they become incumbents. In this sense, the democratic promise of reservation is far from fully achieved. The study shows that reserved office and real power are not the same.

This study's contribution to the literature is found in three areas. First, it presents a grounded qualitative analysis of SC representation in rural Maharashtra, a setting where lived-experience research of this kind is scarce. Second, it unites caste, gender, informal institutions, bureaucracy, and development in a single analytical frame. Third, it adds to the much wider discussion of democratic decentralization, yet demonstrates that tests of reservation's effectiveness in strengthening the political position of Scheduled Caste representatives must be measured not only by electoral inclusion but also by the everyday experience of governance.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations of this study that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. To begin with, the research relies on a small qualitative sample; thus, the results should not be applied to all Scheduled Caste elected representatives in Maharashtra. Second, the research is geographically confined to a few rural settings, predominantly in Latur and Nanded, and the findings may not be relevant to other districts and political contexts. Third, the review is based on self-reported interview data, which can be viewed through the prism of personal interpretation and may be influenced by selective memory or reluctance to disclose politically and socially sensitive topics, including caste discrimination, corruption, or even local elite domination.

Fourth, as the interviews were conducted in a mixture of Marathi and Hindi, which were then translated into English, some language peculiarities and subtleties may have been missed in translation. Lastly, although both men and women are represented in the study, members of Sarpanches and Gram Panchayat are also included, the sample size is insufficient to enable more in-depth subgroup comparisons. Irrespective of this, the paper presents useful qualitative information about the discrepancy between formal representation and substantive empowerment in rural local governance.

Future studies can build on this study by expanding the sample to include more districts and comparing the experiences of SC representatives across different regions of Maharashtra. Comparative work between sarpanches and ward members, or between men and women representatives, could also lead to a better understanding of differences in the operation of power within the local institutions. Further work may also focus on the long-term link between political representation and development outcomes for SC communities.

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Annexure

Annexure - 1

Interview guide

1) Journey into the role and meaning of “empowerment.”

Main question: Can you tell me the story of how you became an elected representative, and what this role has meant for you personally and politically?

Prompts:

- What motivated you to contest for the Sarpanch/Member position?
- Before elections vs after elections, what changed in your life?
- When you hear “political empowerment,” what does it mean to you?
- Moments you felt respected and powerful? Moments you felt powerless?

2) Decision-making and participation inside the Panchayat

Main question: Walk me through how decisions are actually made in your Panchayat, where do you fit in that process?

Prompts:

- In Gram Sabha/Panchayat meetings, who speaks most? Who decides the agenda?
- Do you get information in advance (notices, budgets, schemes, documents)?
- Have you ever disagreed with a decision? What happened?
- Are your suggestions recorded and acted on, or ignored?

3) Barriers and enablers to exercising authority

Main question: What helps you do your work effectively, and what makes it difficult?

Prompts:

- Social barriers: discrimination, disrespect, threats, isolation, "you are only for name."
- Institutional barriers: paperwork, signatures, access to staff, rules, and meeting timing
- Structural barriers: fund control, contractors, party pressure, local elites/brokers
- Enablers: supportive officials, allies, training, networks, civil society support
- "If one thing changed, your work would become easier—what would it be?"

4) Power relations and everyday negotiations

Main question: In practice, how do caste and local power relations shape your daily work as a representative?

Prompts:

- Are there individuals/groups who hold "real power" even without formal posts?
- Any examples where dominant leaders influenced/overruled you?
- How do you handle conflict, pressure, or social boycott?
- Do you form alliances (within Panchayat, party, community groups)? How?

5) Governance outcomes, economic inclusion, and impact

Main question: What have you been able to deliver a change through this role—and what outcomes were blocked?

Prompts:

- Example of something you wanted to do but couldn't—why not?
- Do you receive the same priority as other representatives when proposing development works?
- Were you able to create or improve inclusive economic opportunities (credit access, jobs, and schemes) for SC households in your village?
- Did access to credit, SHG loans, or bank linkages improve? How?

Closing questions

- If a new SC representative joined tomorrow, what advice would you give them?
- What would an "ideal empowering Panchayat" look like in your village?
- If you could suggest one policy reform to the Government to strengthen SC political empowerment, what would it be and why?

Annexure - 2

Consent Form for Participation in Research Interview

Researcher: Sudhir Kamble

Title: Exploring Political Empowerment and Governance of Scheduled Caste Representatives in Maharashtra Panchayats

My name is **Sudhir Kamble**, and I am a student researcher conducting a capstone research project as part of my academic programme. You can contact me at skamble26@kspp.edu.in or +91 93071 00424. This research is being carried out under the supervision of my academic institution.

This study aims to understand the experiences of Scheduled Caste (SC) elected representatives in Maharashtra's Panchayati Raj Institutions, with a focus on political empowerment, participation in governance, and decision-making processes. The study seeks to contribute to academic and policy discussions on inclusive and participatory local governance.

You have been invited to participate in this study since you are an elected Scheduled Caste representative in a Panchayat. Your thoughts and experiences are valuable for understanding how the political reservation operates in practice at the grassroots level.

I will ask you questions about your perceptions and experiences regarding governance, decision-making, power relations, and social dynamics in the Panchayat. The interview will take about 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission; otherwise, I will take written notes. The data will be stored securely by the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to the transcripts and recordings. Your responses will be used for academic purposes, such as the capstone report and potential academic or policy-related publications. In the final report, I will change your name and any other identifying information to protect your identity.

Some questions may relate to sensitive issues such as caste or power relations and may cause discomfort. You may choose not to answer any question. There are no direct benefits to you, but

your participation may help improve understanding of social justice and inclusion in local governance.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop the interview at any time without giving a reason.

Consent Statement

Please select one option below:

- The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained to me, and I **agree** to participate in this study.
- The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained to me, and I **do not agree** to participate in this study.

I agree/do not agree (circle one) to the interview being audio-recorded.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____