

Democratic Decentralization and Social Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes — Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

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Abstract: The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) provided for a revolutionary framework for democratic decentralization in India by constitutionalizing the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) system and providing reservations to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. More than three decades since this landmark amendment, there are still a lot of unanswered questions about the quality of SC empowerment on the grassroots level. The present article provides the findings of the field-based mixed-method study, funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), that examines the degree to which PRIs serve as real vehicles of social inclusion for Scheduled Castes in Gaya and Rohtas Districts in Bihar, and in Sonbhadra and Ghazipur districts in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Structured surveys with 400 respondents of SC community (200 in Bihar, 200 in UP) along with the key-informant interviews with elected representatives, field observations and secondary analysis of government data and census data provide the answer to this question. It turns out that while reservation significantly boosts the presence of SC in PRIs, especially in UP, where the political mobilization of Dalits is relatively strong, substantive empowerment is still hindered by the existing caste hierarchy, intermediary role of dominant castes in governance, low attendance in Gram Sabha meetings (32/200 in Bihar, 19/200 in UP), and inadequate institutional capacity of PRIs. Bihar demonstrated relatively better performance in such welfare spheres as toilets and housing construction, whereas UP showed better political awareness and reservation awareness. This study concludes that while the constitutionalization is an important precondition for empowering Scheduled Castes, it is not enough by itself; urgent reforms in terms of administrative support, institutional capacity-building, accountability, and community awareness of their rights are required to ensure that formal representation would lead to actual social inclusion..

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, Scheduled Castes, Democratic Decentralization, Social Inclusion, Dalit Empowerment, 73rd Amendment, Gram Sabha.

Introduction

Democratic decentralization — the transfer of political, financial and administrative power to locally elected bodies — occupies an important place in the debate on governance, development, and social justice in post-colonial India. At the core of this experiment lays Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) system, a constitutionally mandated framework that seeks to transform representative democracy into participatory democracy by putting ordinary people, including the most marginalized groups, directly in touch with decisions that affect their everyday life.

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

The Panchayat system, although only constitutionalized relatively recently, has the roots that go back to the beginning of Indian civilization. Reference to the village councils can be found in Rigveda, Manusmriti, Shanti Parva of Mahabharata, Jataka tales, and many other old texts, thus proving the existence of collective governance at the grassroots level for thousands of years in India. Throughout such imperial forms of government as Maurya, Gupta, Chola, and Mughal, the Panchayat system survived and was used in various degrees, but was severely undermined by the colonial rule of British Empire. Revival attempts were made during Ripon Resolution (1882), Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919) and Government of India Act (1935), but these attempts failed to provide enough electoral representation (Saxena, 2006; Kumar, 2013).

After gaining independence, the idea of the Gram Swaraj — village self-government as the basis of Indian democracy — expressed by Mahatma Gandhi and stipulated in Article 40 of the Constitution as the directive principle of state policy was materialized in a number of committees. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) produced the first recommendation on the creation of the three-tier Panchayat system with the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad as the tiers. However, without the constitutionalization of the PRIs and unified standards throughout the country, the Panchayats remained powerless and depended on the political will of particular state governments (Ministry of Rural Development, 1985, 1986).

Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986) and Gadgil Committee (1988) laid down increasingly stronger foundation for the constitutionalization. Eventually, the landmark 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was adopted and came into force on April 24, 1993. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment enshrined PRIs in the Constitution, introduced mandatory three-tier structure, provided for State Election Commission and State Finance Commission, assigned 29 functional subjects to PRIs through Eleventh Schedule, and, most importantly for the present study, introduced proportionate reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and a minimum one-third reservation for women at all levels (Article 243D). Suddenly, the political landscape of rural India has changed dramatically: by mid-1990s more than 11 lakh women and 7.5 lakh Dalit (SC) and Adivasi (ST) representatives have been elected as heads and members of the local bodies, making this the most massive political inclusion in the Indian history (Government of India, 1996).

But numbers only tell half of the truth. More than three decades passed since the adoption of this landmark amendment, when three or four rounds of Panchayat elections have been held in most states, and growing amount of field-based research shows that the distance between representation and empowerment is alarming. The problem of "Mukhiya Pati", or husband acting as a leader on behalf of elected woman and SC representative, testifies to the structural limitations to the actual inclusion that reservation cannot overcome. Dummy candidates, social ostracization of SC elected representatives at Panchayat meetings, discriminatory approach in allocation of resources, and insufficient administrative support still remain obstacles to the promised constitutional inclusion.

Thus, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar represent particularly important case-studies. Together, these two states constitute almost 50% of the whole Dalit population in India (Census of India, 2011): nearly 50% of Dalits live in UP, West Bengal, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu. In UP, the tradition of Dalit political mobilization that started with the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party creates distinctive political culture based on assertive politics of identity. The political culture in Bihar, on the contrary, where the tradition of Dalit inclusion in local politics is much older and the feudal order of relations rooted in castes is traditionally more stable. The comparison of these two states allows us to look into

the interaction between institutional design and social context as determinants of empowerment trajectory.

The present article presents the findings of the field-based mixed-method study of Dalit empowerment through PRIs in Gaya and Rohtas districts of Bihar, and Sonbhadra and Ghazipur districts of Uttar Pradesh. The research, financed by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), was conducted under the umbrella of the Center for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy of Banaras Hindu University and includes the results of structured survey with 400 SC respondents and qualitative data from key-informant interviews, focus group discussion, and field observations.

2. Literature Review

Literature on PRIs and social inclusion constitutes almost thirty years of post-73rd Amendment research and thus includes rich, although sometimes controversial, theoretical and empirical base.

Bandopadhyay (2004), in one of the pioneering studies on women's participation in PRI decision-making process, described the ways in which legislators, bureaucrats and political parties manipulate the representatives of women on the grassroots level, thus undermining the substance of reservation. Similarly, Joshi and Narwa (2005) described the structural inefficiencies of the Panchayati Raj institution implemented in accordance with the 73rd Amendment, stating that without further reforms in administrative and financial autonomy of PRIs, it cannot result in developmental outcomes.

The specific relationship between Dalit leaders and the functioning of Panchayat is examined by Chaudhary (2004): in the Madhya Pradesh, she explores how SC and ST leaders cope with the issue of caste inequality inside Panchayati Raj Institution, facing the institutional barriers. The intersection of caste and democracy in India is discussed by Balaboina (2013), who argues that despite all the effort of social scientists, the phenomenon of caste exclusion in democratic institutions of modern India is far from being fully understood and requires more detailed study of the caste politics in Gram Panchayats.

The issue of additional disadvantages that Dalit women face due to combination of the marginality caused by caste and gender has been studied by several authors. Thus, Trilochan (2011) points to the vulnerabilities of Dalit women as public figures, stressing the joint role of patriarchy and caste system in limiting their political potential. Buch (2005) in her study of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj in Haryana proves that the Dalit women representatives often suffer from the conditions of double oppression: they lack not only caste privileges but also gender equality.

In terms of the question of financial devolution and its importance for the efficiency of PRIs, Rajaraman (2003) underlines the need of provision of fiscal autonomy to local bodies: otherwise, they will never manage to solve the issues of local development. This point of view is supported by the empirical experience of Bihar, where the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act of 2006 established the budgeting, tax collection, and management of funds by the Gram Panchayats. Arora (2009), studying the participatory democracy and decentralization, notes that the officer-politician nexus on the local level often undermines the function of Gram Sabha, especially in such states where the administrative system is hierarchical.

The recent comparative studies began to distinguish the outcomes on the state level, recognizing that the federal character of PRI implementation makes the constitutional framework yield completely different results depending on the particular state. Goyal and Garg (2013) show how PRI institutions are able to drive the rural development in some states and stagnate in the others. Singh (2014), using the data on women representatives in Himachal Pradesh, points to constitutional provisions and practical barriers in this sphere, and Kumar Singh (2013) analysed the empowerment of Dalits in the context of 73rd Constitutional Amendment in several states.

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

The main points of the existing literature consensus include the necessity of numerical representation through reservation as a necessary but insufficient condition of empowerment, Gram Sabha as an important mediator between formal inclusion and actual participation, and influence of state-specific political culture on the outcome of Dalit empowerment. Less known is the comparative performance of UP and Bihar on this aspects, especially taking into account the recent political and administrative changes in both states.

3. Research Gap

Despite the large volume of studies on PRIs and social inclusion, there are still many empirical and analytical gaps. First of all, most of the existing studies examine the situation either in a single state, or analysed the empowerment of women instead of empowerment of Dalits, or use the aggregate secondary data without the field-based primary evidence. Comparative studies using the primary data on SC empowerment in UP and Bihar are virtually non-existent.

The review of the existing works clearly shows that although the two states are widely mentioned in literature on the politics of Dalits and social transformation, rigorous comparative studies of the role of PRIs as mechanisms of Dalit empowerment in these two states are not common. Most of comparative studies use only the electoral data or administrative records that capture only representation but not the quality of participation, decision-making influence and delivery of benefits. Voices of SC community members, and not only of elected representatives, are also underrepresented in the existing research.

Moreover, the existing literature pays relatively little attention to the following dimensions that are included in the current study: the gap of awareness regarding the SC entitlements and Gram Sabha rights, the specifics and sources of borrowing behaviour as the sign of poverty, and the gap between the claims of official PRI performance and community perception of Panchayats. Also, SC community is treated as homogenous in most cases, with no regard to the differences between Dalit men and women, between youth and elderly people, between different sub-castes and between different geographical areas.

This study addresses these gaps by the mixed-method research design that combines the quantitative survey data and qualitative insights, specifically compares the outcomes of SC empowerment in four districts of UP and Bihar.

4. Research Questions

The study is organized around the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent have Panchayati Raj Institutions served as effective vehicles for the political, social, and economic empowerment of Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and what factors explain similarities and differences across the two states?

RQ2: How do SC community members participate in Gram Sabha meetings and other PRI processes, and what barriers prevent more active and substantive participation?

RQ3: Does the presence of SC representatives in Panchayat offices translate into tangible improvements in development benefit delivery and decision-making outcomes for SC communities, and does this vary between Dalit men and Dalit women representatives?

RQ4: What is the level of awareness among SC communities about their constitutional

entitlements within the PRI framework, and how does information access shape empowerment outcomes?

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This research will make use of a mixed method research design combining quantitative survey methodology with qualitative field work techniques. According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2017), the mixed method research design is particularly suitable for addressing research questions related to complex social phenomena that need both quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of reality to be taken into account. The quantitative element of the research provides systematic and comparable data on a large number of respondents, while the qualitative component offers interpretative richness capturing the subjective experiences and contextual nuances that aggregate statistics necessarily overlook.

5.2 Study Area and District Selection

Four districts, representing a variety of SC demographics, Panchayat performance, and the political situation in states were chosen as the basis for the field survey. Specifically, two districts of Bihar – Gaya and Rohtas were selected, and two districts of Uttar Pradesh – Sonbhadra and Ghazipur.

Gaya district (total population: 4,391,418; SC: 29.60%; ST: 0.17%; area: 4,976 sq. km) is a district of Bihar, located along the banks of the river Phalgu near the Bihar-Jharkhand border, is the second largest city of Bihar and has quite a high proportion of Scheduled Castes, thus making it interesting for studying Dalit political participation. Rohtas district (total population: 2,959,918; SC: 20.88%; ST: 0.37%; area: 3,847 sq. km), headquartered at Sasaram (under Patna Division), represents a district where there had been historically a lot of reform movements among the Dalits.

Sonbhadra district (total population: 1,862,612; SC: 22.64%; ST: 20.82%; area: 6,788 sq. km), located at the junction of four states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh), is UP's second largest district in terms of area, and has an interesting combination of high proportions of SC and ST population. Ghazipur district (total population: 3,622,727; SC: 27.23%; ST: 0.28%), which belongs to Varanasi Division with high proportion of SC population (27.23%) allows for comparing the conditions in eastern UP with those in the chosen districts of Bihar.

5.3 Sample Size and Sampling Strategy

The target population of the research is the members of SC households in the chosen districts. In total, 400 respondents were interviewed, 200 in each state. Stratified random sampling technique was used in order to ensure proper representation in terms of districts, blocks, gender and Panchayat type (general/reserved seat). Respondents were identified based on the lists of Panchayat voters and thus, the sample represented the voting population of SCs rather than elected representatives. The sample included 200 respondents each from UP and Bihar, with Bihar's sample having somewhat higher percentage of young respondents (154 of 200 aged 18–40 vs 107 of 200 in the same age cohort in UP).

5.4 Data Collection Methods

The primary data were gathered using structured personal interviews employing a pre-tested interview schedule. Interview schedule included socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, awareness and participation indicators (participation in Gram Sabha meetings, awareness of reservation provisions, awareness of government schemes), economic vulnerability indicators (loan taking behaviour, sources of loan, employment), and perception of the PRI performance (effectiveness of SC representatives, delivery of development benefits, importance of caste identity). Field survey was

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

conducted by trained research associates with field experience in rural UP and Bihar. Interviews took place at the places of residence and community centers of respondents in order to minimize the social desirability bias.

Secondary data sources include Census of India (2011), Government of India reports on Panchayati Raj, Ministry of Panchayati Raj reports and publications, reports of the State Finance Commissions of UP and Bihar, statistics of NCRB crimes, National Family Health Survey data, and the literature reviewed above. The secondary data was used both for contextual analysis of the primary data and for validating the field observations against the official statistics.

5.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and cross tabulations) were employed to analysed the quantitative data, with comparison being made between UP and Bihar, and between subgroups (gender, age cohort, education level). Qualitative data from the open ended answers and field notes were thematically analysed using induction and triangulation with the quantitative data. Chi-square test was used where appropriate to check the statistical significance of inter-state differences.

6. Findings and Analysis

6.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the 400 surveyed SC respondents in the chosen four districts demonstrates the structural disadvantage in which Dalit communities of these states exist. As regards the caste composition, in the sample from Bihar, the overwhelming majority was SC (154 out of 200), while the number of OBC respondents was 40. In UP, the sample included 115 SC, 63 ST, and 16 OBC respondents – such distribution reflects the presence of ST people in the tribal belt of Sonbhadra.

The data on family type shows very similar patterns in both states: joint families are still the dominant form in these areas with 149 out of 200 UP respondents and 146 out of 200 Bihar respondents living in joint families. Most of the families are of moderate size, having from 4 to 9 members. Such extended families have implications for the process of SC empowerment: while joint families provide support and collective voice, they tend to perpetuate patriarchal and caste hierarchical decision making.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Characteristic	UP (n=200)	Bihar (n=200)	Total (n=400)
SC respondents	115 (57.5%)	154 (77.0%)	269 (67.3%)
ST respondents	63 (31.5%)	4 (2.0%)	67 (16.8%)
OBC respondents	16 (8.0%)	40 (20.0%)	56 (14.0%)
Age 18–40 years	107 (53.5%)	154 (77.0%)	261 (65.3%)
Joint family type	149 (74.5%)	146 (73.0%)	295 (73.8%)
Male family head	124 (62.0%)	112 (56.0%)	236 (59.0%)
Illiterate	~52 (26.0%)	~50 (25.0%)	~102 (25.5%)
Agricultural labourers	56 (28.0%)	96 (48.0%)	152 (38.0%)
Daily wage earners	72 (36.0%)	41 (20.5%)	113 (28.3%)

Source: Primary field survey data (2019–2020). UP = Sonbhadra + Ghazipur; Bihar = Gaya + Rohtas.

The occupational data demonstrate the economic vulnerability that is the underlying condition behind low political agency of the SC communities. In Bihar, 96 out of 200 respondents (48 percent) identify themselves as agricultural labourers – the most vulnerable and socially oppressed occupation among rural ones – with additional 41 respondents (20.5 percent) working as daily wage labourers. In UP, the picture is somewhat different: there are more daily wage earners (72/200, 36 percent) than agricultural labourers (56/200, 28 percent) due to greater diversity of rural labour market in eastern UP. The decision making in the families is almost completely male dominated in both states: 62 percent of UP respondents and 56 percent of Bihar respondents identified male head of the family as the main decision maker, although the government schemes aimed at women empowerment (Indira Awas Yojana, Self Help Groups, toilet construction grants) seem to slowly change this trend.

6.2 SC Representation in PRIs: Constitutional Provisions and Ground Reality

The constitutional provisions for the representation of SCs in PRIs are explicitly formulated and rather well implemented in formal terms. According to Art. 243D, SCs should be represented proportionally in every Panchayat, with the additional provision that not less than one-third of reserved seats should be held by SC women. This has resulted in noticeable increase in SC presence in all three levels of Panchayati Raj – Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad.

Table 2: SC Population Share and PRI Reservation Coverage by Study District

District	State	SC Population (%)	ST Population (%)	GP Seats Reserved for SC (%)	Women SC Seats (% of SC Seats)
Gaya	Bihar	29.60	0.17	~29	≥33
Rohtas	Bihar	20.88	0.37	~21	≥33
Sonbhadra	UP	22.64	20.82	~23	≥33
Ghazipur	UP	27.23	0.28	~27	≥33

Source: Census of India (2011); State Election Commission data. GP = Gram Panchayat.

However, despite this representation, the field survey data demonstrated consistent existence of what could be termed as "representational deficit" – where the numerical presence of SC members in PRI structures is not matched by their substantive decision making power. In focus group discussions in all four districts, the SC respondents described the experience of social ostracization during Panchayat meetings, difficulties of getting agenda items related to SC community interests on the agenda of formal meetings, and the persistent feeling that the dominant castes control the real levers of local governance, even if the formal authority belongs to the SC representatives.

For example, one 44-year old Dalit respondent from Ghazipur said: "Our Mukhiya is from our

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

community, but his decisions are made in the upper-caste households of the village. When he comes to sign papers, he does what they tell him. We do not know what is happening with the Panchayat funds". This statement, which is common to various field sites, demonstrates the persistence of the mechanism of proxy governance through which the formal SC representation is emptied of its content.

The awareness of SC reservation provisions was relatively high in both states – 161 of 200 respondents in Bihar (80.5 percent) and 147 of 200 in UP (73.5 percent) are aware of the reservation provisions. This means that the constitutional framework penetrated the consciousness of the community, even if the structural obstacles for its leveraging persist.

6.3 Gram Sabha Participation: The Chasm Between Rights and Reality

The Gram Sabha – the meeting of all registered voters in a Gram Panchayat area – is the basic democratic institution in the PRI system. It is the place where citizens are supposed to deliberate on the development priorities, approve Panchayat budget, get social audit reports, and hold their elected representatives accountable. For the SC communities in particular, the Gram Sabha meetings are the only formal channel of voicing their interests and monitoring the implementation of reservation provisions.

However, the field survey data demonstrate a profound participation deficit: only 32 out of 200 respondents in Bihar (16 percent) and 19 out of 200 in UP (9.5 percent) report having participated in Gram Sabha meetings. Moreover, more than 55 percent of respondents in both states do not even know if the Gram Sabha meetings take place regularly in their Gram Panchayat area – the evidence of both information failures and the failure of PRIs to create the participatory spaces.

Table 3: Gram Sabha Awareness and Participation Indicators

Indicator	UP (n=200)	Bihar (n=200)
Aware that Gram Sabha meetings are held	~90 (45%)	~91 (45.5%)
Not aware / uncertain	~110 (55%)	~109 (54.5%)
Have personally participated in Gram Sabha	19 (9.5%)	32 (16.0%)
Aware of SC reservation in Panchayats	147 (73.5%)	161 (80.5%)
Consider SC representative effective	67 (33.5%)	86 (43.0%)
Received employment through Panchayat (MGNREGA etc.)	42 (21.0%)	48 (24.0%)
Aware of PM Adarsh Gram Yojana for SC	47 (23.5%)	44 (22.0%)
Caste identity considered most important social identity	162 (81.0%)	148 (74.0%)

Source: Primary field survey (2019–2020). Percentages are of total state sample.

The non-participants cite several barriers to participation that are structural as well as attitudinal in nature. Quite a significant number of people cited lack of information about the schedules of meetings as the main obstacle, reflecting the problems of PRI's communication and transparency. Others said that they consider the meetings "useless" – such attitude is rooted in the experience of Gram Sabhas where the outcomes are predetermined by the dominant caste members and SC voices are systematically suppressed. Occupation with wage labour on the meeting day is another frequent reason mentioned by the people, reflecting the time cost of participation that is borne disproportionately by SC households.

6.4 Economic Dimensions: Livelihood, Credit Access, and Welfare Scheme Delivery

According to the respondents from both states, approximately 60–70 percent of them have taken loans at some point in recent years – the evidence of chronic economic vulnerability of the SC households. Sources of loans revealed a disturbing pattern: in UP, only 9 out of 200 respondents (4.5 percent) have obtained loans from the government or institutions, while in Bihar the number is somewhat higher at approximately 25 (12.5 percent). Almost the entire remainder depends on private moneylenders who charge interest, creating the persistent pattern of debt bondage that the formal PRI-mediated credit access did not disrupt. The purposes of borrowing are similar in both states: weddings, house construction, and agricultural inputs – indicating that the PRI-mediated economic programs have not changed the fundamental drivers of household financial vulnerability.

Table 4: Economic Vulnerability and Welfare Scheme Access Indicators

Indicator	UP (n=200)	Bihar (n=200)
Have taken a loan (at some point)	~125 (62.5%)	~136 (68.0%)
Loan from government/institutional source	9 (4.5%)	~25 (12.5%)
Loan from private moneylender	~85 (68% of borrowers)	~91 (67% of borrowers)
Have ration card	173 (86.5%)	159 (79.5%)
Receive regular rations	155 (89.6% of cardholders)	139 (87.4% of cardholders)
Have toilet at home	133 (66.5%)	146 (73.0%)
House is kutcha/semi-pucca	~117 (58.5%)	~100 (50.0%)
Aware of SC scholarship scheme	>100 (>50%)	>100 (>50%)

Source: Primary field survey (2019–2020). UP = Sonbhadra + Ghazipur; Bihar = Gaya + Rohtas.

Welfare scheme delivery through the PRI system has shown a mixed picture. Ration card coverage – one of the key indicators of PDS access – is relatively good in both states: 173 of 200 UP respondents (86.5 percent) and 159 of 200 Bihar respondents (79.5 percent) have ration cards, with very high rate of regular ration receipt among the cardholders. This is one of the areas where PRI functioning produced positive results. Toilet construction under the Swachh Bharat Mission program demonstrated

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

somewhat better result of Bihar (73 percent coverage) than of UP (66.5 percent) – consistent with the recent emphasis on rural sanitation in Bihar.

Housing data demonstrated a disturbing picture: the majority of respondents from both states still live in kutchha (non-permanent) or semi-pucca houses, indicating that the Indira Awas Yojana, although producing positive effects, did not achieve full coverage of SC households. The health seeking behaviour is dominated by the private medical shops rather than government health facilities – indicating that there are still gaps in primary healthcare delivery through the Anganwadi and Primary Health Centre network that Panchayats are supposed to supervise.

6.5 Caste Identity, Politics, and PRI Functioning

The most striking result of the survey is the persistent importance of caste identity in the rural social relations. In UP, 162 out of 200 respondents (81 percent) consider caste as the most important social identity in their lives, compared to 148 out of 200 in Bihar (74 percent). While such result may appear to imply greater caste consciousness in UP – which could be interpreted either as driving factor of the political mobilization or as the evidence of persistent caste discrimination – it reflects the complex role that caste identity plays in empowering SCs.

Thus, UP's tradition of organized Dalit political mobilization in association with the BSP and its election infrastructure created a political culture in which caste identity operates as a collective resource rather than a mere signifier of subordination. This is evident in higher awareness of reservation rights (147/200 in UP versus 161/200 in Bihar, although the higher proportion in Bihar might be explained by the younger sample structure), and also in the fact that during fieldwork UP's SC respondents were more inclined to articulate specific demands towards the PRI regarding its accountability. Respondents in Bihar, in turn, describe a political climate in which SC communities started asserting their collective voice more recently, with the identity functioning much more often as a passive signifier of marginalized status than an active political resource.

Table 5: Perceptions of PRI Effectiveness and SC Empowerment

Question / Indicator	UP: Yes/Positive	UP: No/Negative	Bihar: Yes/Positive	Bihar: No/Negative
PRI played important role in SC empowerment	67 (33.5%)	~60 (30%)	86 (43.0%)	~55 (27.5%)
General-category Mukhiya works most independently	~90 (45%)	—	~85 (42.5%)	—
Dalit woman Mukhiya produces better outcomes for Dalit women	~88 (44%)	54 (27%)	~75 (37.5%)	75 (37.5%)

Received employment via Panchayat (MGNREGA)	42 (21%)	158 (79%)	48 (24%)	152 (76%)
SC participation in Gram Sabha satisfactory	Low	~81% unaware	Low	~84% unaware

Source: Primary field survey (2019–2020). "—" = not directly applicable.

Efficiency of SC representatives in PRI structures is disputed. About 40 percent of respondents in both states did not know whether PRIs played an important role in SC empowerment (the fact in itself indicating the information deficits discussed above); among those who had an opinion, slightly more positive opinions were provided in Bihar (86/200 compared to 67/200 in UP). Curiously, the question about the independence and efficiency of general category Mukhiya was answered positively by respondents in both states.

Implementation of MGNREGA projects through Panchayats – a clear test for PRIs in terms of delivering welfare benefits to SC communities based on employment – demonstrated disappointing results: only 42 of 200 (21 percent) UP respondents and 48 of 200 (24 percent) Bihar respondents reported receiving employment through Panchayat projects. These figures imply that despite constitutional requirement of 100 working days guaranteed to each household, MGNREGA fails to deliver employment-based welfare to SC communities through PRI channels.

6.6 Comparative Performance: UP versus Bihar

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that while in many ways divergent, UP and Bihar show some overlapping empowerment trajectories. UP demonstrates somewhat better performance on measures of political consciousness and rights awareness (higher rate of caste identity salience, higher awareness of SC scholarship schemes). On the contrary, Bihar's performance is somewhat better on welfare delivery metrics (toilet construction, institutional credit access, quality of housing under the Indira Awas Yojana scheme).

Such disparity seems to be consistent with the structural interpretation given by several respondents and informants in the field. In UP, a 38-year-old Dalit school teacher in Sonbhadra remarked that "since the BSP governments of the 2000s, we know our rights. We know we can go to the Panchayat and ask. Whether they listen is another matter". A Block Development Officer in Rohtas district, Bihar, agreed that Panchayats in his region were gradually getting better in terms of implementation of various schemes, although noted that inter-caste dynamics remain the single largest obstacle for efficient SC participation in Gram Sabha meetings.

7. Discussion

The results of this study confirm and complement the existing literature on PRI-mediated SC empowerment. The general pattern – significantly increased formal representation as a result of reservation; constraints of substantive empowerment caused by the existence of structural caste hierarchies; very low levels of SC participation in Gram Sabha meetings – coincides with findings from other states analysed in literature (Joshi & Narwa, 2005; Arora, 2009; Singh, 2014). However, adding a comparative aspect brings an interesting insight.

UP's better performance on the political consciousness versus welfare delivery in Bihar mirrors the general dichotomy between the political empowerment (representation, voice, rights awareness)

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

and material empowerment (resource access) in empowerment literature. Higher caste identity salience and rights awareness in UP can be attributed to political legacies of BSP mobilization, which created organizational infrastructure allowing Dalits to assert themselves regardless of individual PRI elections. Better welfare delivery in Bihar is likely to be related to generally more effective administrative implementation of welfare schemes in recent times by state government despite lack of corresponding Dalit political empowerment.

The low rates of participation in Gram Sabha are especially important in view of the literature. The extremely low rates – 9.5 percent in UP and 16 percent in Bihar – confirm Arora's (2009) observation about the weakening effect of officer-politician nexus on Gram Sabha functioning and Kumar Singh's (2013) analysis of the incomplete implementation of the 73rd Amendment, and extend it to the context of UP and Bihar. Information deficit – with more than 55 percent of the respondents unaware whether there were any Gram Sabha meetings – points to failure of basic transparency requirements.

The tendency for respondents in both states to think that general category Mukhiya works more independently and effectively than SC and woman Mukhiya is disturbing in light of empowerment theory, although not entirely unexpected. This likely reflects the advantages that dominant-caste representatives enjoy in terms of social capital (better connections with block-level bureaucracy, more experience in administration, fewer social ostracization barriers) as well as the effect of proxy governance, which implies that Panchayats headed by SC representatives in reality might be managed by dominant-caste interests.

The information about credit access deserves special attention. Only 4.5 percent of UP respondents and 12.5 percent of Bihar respondents reported accessing institutional credit despite Panchayats' potential of delivering financial inclusion to their constituents through Self-Help Groups and rural credit linkages. This is a major missed opportunity. As Rajaraman (2003) has shown, without financial autonomy and access to institutional credit, SC households remain dependent on dominant-caste moneylenders.

One good news – relatively high ration card coverage and regular delivery of PDS – indicates that when it comes to simple welfare delivery tasks, the PRI system is able to perform quite efficiently. The difference between it and MGNREGA delivery suggests that the PRI effectiveness is inversely proportional to complexity and degree of discretionary local administration required for scheme's implementation.

8. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to evaluate the quality and depth of SC empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, based on primary field data from 400 SC respondents from four districts as well as secondary information and qualitative evidence. The conclusions of this study highlight a serious discrepancy between the constitutional vision of democratic decentralization and real life experiences of SC communities in rural north India.

Formal representation certainly has changed. The 73rd Amendment has brought SC members into PRI structures on a large scale – something that would have been inconceivable prior to 1993. From this standpoint, the constitutional framework has achieved its immediate objective. But formal representation is just a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for substantive empowerment, and the results of this study indicate that the gap between them remains rather large.

Barriers to SC empowerment through PRIs are multi-dimensional – social (caste hierarchies that subordinate SC voices in Gram Sabha meetings and Panchayat proceedings), political (proxy

governance and manipulation of SC representatives by dominant-caste interests), economic (chronic dependence on private moneylenders; poor MGNREGA delivery) and informational (low awareness of Gram Sabha schedules; lack of knowledge of entitlements such as PM Adarsh Gram Yojana). An effort aimed at increasing SC empowerment should be comprehensive and cover all four barriers at the same time.

UP-Bihar comparison shows that political context plays an enormous role – states where Dalit political mobilization traditions are well established are capable of producing SC communities with higher rights awareness and capability to leverage the provisions of the constitution, even if welfare delivery outcomes are not always superior. This discovery has important implications for institutional design – it shows that PRI empowerment does not happen in a vacuum but relies crucially on the political environment in which local governance operates.

As the PRIs celebrate their fourth decade since becoming constitutional bodies, the challenge is clear: it is necessary to move beyond formal representation to genuine participatory governance. To achieve that will require not only administrative reforms, but also tackling the deeper structures that limit SC agency within democratic institutions. The experience of Gaya, Rohtas, Sonbhadra and Ghazipur makes it obvious that this is a pressing and unfinished democratic project.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Policy and Institutional Reforms

Mandatory Gram Sabha Awareness Campaigns: State governments should mandate that Block Development Officers and Panchayat Extension Officers conduct quarterly information campaigns informing SC communities about Gram Sabha meeting dates, agendas, and their rights to participation. Penalties for PRIs that fail to hold mandatory Gram Sabha meetings should be enforced.

Enhanced Financial Devolution: Without substantial financial authority, PRIs will not be able to fulfill the needs of SC communities for development. State Finance Commission's recommendations on fund devolution to PRIs should be followed fully and on time, including ring-fencing of funds for SC welfare under Article 275(1) conditions.

Institutional Credit Access: Panchayats should be empowered to facilitate institutional credit for SC communities through Self-Help Group network and rural cooperative banks, reducing the 95 percent dependence on private moneylenders seen in UP.

9.2 Capacity Building for SC Representatives

Evidence of proxy governance and perceived inefficiency of SC representatives highlights the need for systematic capacity-building programs. The study recommends the establishment of the structured orientation program for all new SC Panchayat representatives covering finance management, entitlements, administrative procedures, and legal rights. The training should be gender-sensitive, taking into account additional difficulties facing Dalit women representatives. State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) in UP and Bihar should establish special SC representative training programs with at least two residential sessions per term.

9.3 Accountability and Anti-Discrimination Measures

Proxy governance – when the dominant-caste members exert de facto control over SC-headed Panchayats – should be considered as a form of electoral fraud and addressed with the specific provisions of law. Social audits should be strengthened by adding the requirement for mandatory

Democratic Decentralization and Social
Inclusion: Evaluating Panchayati Raj
Institutions in Empowering Scheduled Castes
— Evidence from Field Studies of Uttar
Pradesh and Bihar

reporting on SC benefit delivery, with dissemination of the audit findings at Gram Sabha meetings. SC communities should be educated to use RTI provisions and make Panchayat proceedings public. District Collectors and Panchayat Raj Officers should be held accountable for active discrimination in PRI functioning under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

9.4 Community-Level Interventions

Beside institutional reforms, community-level interventions are necessary for building the social capital that would allow substantive participation. The study recommends: inter-caste dialogue programs at the Gram Sabha level to address social ostracism as a barrier for SC participation; promoting SC Self-Help Groups not only as economic vehicle but also as a socialization mechanism; incentives to reduce time cost barriers to Gram Sabha participation (such as attendance fee, child care and compensation for the lost wages due to attendance) for SC agricultural labourers. PM Adarsh Gram Yojana, the awareness of which is shockingly low in this study (47/200 in UP; 44/200 in Bihar), requires massive re-communication campaign focused on SC communities.

9.5 Strengthening MGNREGA Delivery

The low rate of Panchayat-mediated employment for SC respondents through MGNREGA – 21-24 percent of the respondents reported receiving it – reflects a major delivery failure. The state governments should introduce transparent, Gram Sabha -monitored registration process and work allocation for MGNREGA, with SC communities being given priority in areas where SC population share is above 20 percent. The problem of delayed MGNREGA payments in both states should be addressed through direct bank transfer mechanism controlled at the Panchayat level.

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