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Political Inclusion and Marginal Voices: A Study on the Participation of Scheduled Tribe Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions of Chhattisgarh

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Introduction

Political inclusion is a core indicator of a functioning democracy, especially in regions with socially and economically marginalized populations. In India, the Panchayati Raj system aims to strengthen grassroots governance and promote decentralized decision-making. Scheduled Tribe (ST) women represent one of the most disenfranchised groups due to intersecting barriers of gender, caste, ethnicity, and economic status. Although constitutional amendments mandate reserved representation for women and scheduled tribes in local governance bodies, actual participation, empowerment, and decision-making influence often remain limited. This study explores the level, nature, and challenges of political involvement of ST women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Chhattisgarh.

Theoretical Background

- **Feminist Political Theory:** Highlights structural barriers and patriarchal norms affecting women's political agency.
- **Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw):** Explains how multiple identities (tribal, gender, economic) intersect, deepening marginalization.
- **Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman):** Focuses on capacity building and socio-political transformation.
- **Decentralization Theory:** Supports local governance as a channel for inclusive participation.

Significance of the Study

- Addresses real vs. symbolic participation of ST women in PRIs.
- Relevant for state governance, rural development, and tribal empowerment policy.
- Provides recommendations to improve political leadership capacity among marginalized women.
- Helps NGOs, government agencies, and Panchayat training institutions develop effective support frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

Even with reserved seats, many ST women in Chhattisgarh experience passive representation, limited authority, and external influence (proxy representation). This study aims to understand: "To what extent do Scheduled Tribe women actively participate and influence decision-making in Panchayati Raj Institutions of Chhattisgarh?"

Operational Definitions

- **Political Inclusion:** Meaningful participation in decision-making processes within PRIs.
- **Scheduled Tribe Women:** Women belonging to constitutionally recognized ST communities.
- **Panchayati Raj Institutions:** Rural local self-government bodies including Gram Panchayat, Janpad Panchayat, and Zilla Parishad.

Variables

- **Independent Variable:** Participation mechanisms, socio-cultural support, political awareness.

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- **Dependent Variable:** Level of political inclusion, decision-making authority, leadership effectiveness.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent of participation of ST women in PRIs.
2. To analyze the barriers affecting their political inclusion.
3. To assess the influence of socio-cultural, educational, and economic factors.
4. To propose measures for improving effective participation.

Research Questions

1. What is the current status of ST women's participation in PRIs?
2. What socio-economic and cultural factors influence their political involvement?
3. Do they exercise real decision-making power or function as symbolic representatives?
4. What strategies can enhance their political inclusion?

Scope of the Study

- Focus on ST women elected representatives in rural Chhattisgarh.
- Includes Gram Panchayat, Janpad, and Zilla Panchayat levels.
- Study limited to currently serving representatives.

Delimitations

- Urban governing bodies excluded.
- Only elected women included; non-elected activists or community leaders excluded.
- No political party-based analysis.

Review of Literature

1. **Rao (2017):** Revealed structural gender inequality within local governance affecting decision-making autonomy.
2. **Kaur & Singh (2019):** Highlighted the significance of political training for women's leadership.
3. **Sahu (2020):** Found that ST women often face verbal and social restrictions from community elders.
4. **Pradhan (2021):** Observed proxy leadership where husbands or male relatives influence official work.
5. **Tirkey (2023):** Studied tribal governance in Chhattisgarh and noted improved outcomes with capacity-building programs.

Research Gap

While studies address women's participation and challenges in PRIs, limited research specifically examines ST women's active political autonomy in Chhattisgarh. This study bridges that gap.

Research Methodology

A. Research Design- Descriptive and analytical mixed-method approach.

B. Population- All elected ST women representatives in PRIs of Chhattisgarh.

C. Sample- 60 elected ST women from 3 districts (tribal-dominated).

D. Sampling Method- Purposive and stratified sampling.

E. Source of Data- **Primary:** Structured questionnaire, interviews, focus group discussions. **Secondary:** Government records, Panchayat training reports, census data.

Research Tool

- Questionnaire (Likert scale).
- Semi-structured interview schedule.

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- Leadership effectiveness assessment checklist.

Data Collection

- Field visits to Panchayat areas.
- Interviews conducted in local dialect with translation support.
- Permission obtained from local authorities.

Statistical Analysis

- Descriptive statistics (Mean, Percentage).
- Chi-square test (relationship between education and participation).
- Regression analysis (predictors of political inclusion).
- Qualitative content analysis.

Tabulation and Interpretation

- Participation index scores.
- Decision-making role frequency.
- Barriers categorized (social, economic, political).

Hypothesis Testing

H_0: Socio-cultural and economic factors do not significantly affect participation of ST women in PRIs.

H_1: Socio-cultural and economic factors significantly influence participation of ST women in PRIs.

Expected Findings

- Majority of ST women hold seats but limited real authority.
- Education and family support are key determinants of active participation.
- Proxy representation by male relatives prevalent.
- Training and exposure improve political confidence.

Conclusion:

ST women are politically represented but not always empowered. Their inclusion is evolving, but structural constraints limit independent decision-making.

Recommendations:

- Regular leadership and legal rights training.
- Village-level awareness campaigns to reduce proxy leadership.
- Mentorship by experienced women leaders.
- Financial and literacy support programs.
- Inclusion of tribal language-speaking trainers.

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