

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS ON SCHEDULED CASTE EMPOWERMENT: EVIDENCE FROM RURAL PUNJAB, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to analyse the contribution made by the reservation to the improvement in the socio-political status of the scheduled castes in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The univariate analyses are conducted using the primary field data was collected during the year 2015-16 from twelve villages spread over three districts of Punjab. The result shows an improvement in the representation of the scheduled castes as well as women in the PRIs on account of the reservation of seats for them. However, significant inter- and intra-caste differences were observed in the participation of PRIs working. Although the representation of women in PRIs has improved, their participation, however, remained questionable. It is found that the male members of the family predominantly decide on female participation in meetings and other functions of PRIs. The scheduled caste women, in particular, are suffering from dual discrimination in rural Punjab.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes; Panchayati Raj Institutions; Dual Discrimination; Affirmative Actions; Rural Punjab.

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system, as a decentralised form of government in which each village would be responsible for its affairs. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) laid the foundation for the Local Governments both in rural and urban India. The rural Local Government is also known as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Governments are called *Nagarpalikas*. The PRIs are a three-tier system with elected bodies at the Village, Taluk, and District levels known as *Gram Panchayat*, *Mandal or Taluks Panchayat*, and *Zilla Panchayat* respectively. The powers and functions of the PRIs vary from state to state. A Gram Panchayat (GP) is a village-level administrative body, with a *Sarpanch* as its elected head and some other members designated as *Panch*. The number of Panchs varies by the voters in the Village. All the members of the GP are elected for five years by the members of valid voters in the village. The Government of India (GoI) fixed a quota for females and scheduled castes (SCs), and scheduled tribes (STs) in the PRIs. During the field survey, 33 percent of seats of PRIs were reserved for women in Punjab whereas the caste/ community-based seats were determined in proportion to the members of various castes in the Gram Sabha as per the stipulated guidelines of the Constitution of India.

The majority of the studies analysed the contribution and limitations of PRIs for

improving the condition of women (Mohanty 1996; Jayal 2006; Dahlerup 2007; Chathukulam and John 2016; Mlambo and Kapingura 2019), however, few attempts were made to analyse the contribution of PRIs to the improvement of socio-political conditions of the marginalised groups- scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The class and gender divide in villages along with asymmetric information regarding the functioning of the panchayat, and the dominance of Sarpanches and other influential people in the decision-making process lead to low participation of gram sabha in panchayat (Singh 2002). The caste hierarchies persisted due to the continuation of socio-economic inequalities in India. The caste hierarchies are being reinforced by the nexus of caste and electoral politics (Sharma 2016).

Jeffrey (2001) illustrated the continuing role of caste dominance in the reproduction of social inequality. Decentralisation of governance in Haryana suffers poor implementation as the caste hierarchy and patriarchy continue to operate (Pal 2004). Affirmative actions in the form of PRIs reservation for marginalised segments have not effectively improved their participation since their participation is dominated by the non-marginalised segments. Thus they are not able to articulate the interest of their group/communities in the village governing body (Patnaik 2005). Ray (2009) found that although self-government under Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas, PESA) Act, 1996 has achieved very limited progress in the scheduled areas of Orissa, however, it has succeeded in reserving seats for the STs in the Panchayati set-up.

Jaffrelot (2006) found that reservation has improved the political status as well as the socio-economic condition of the other backward castes (OBCs) to a much larger extent than the untouchables. Specifically, it has led to the political empowerment of the OBCs in northern India while the *Dalits* have formed their political party to protect their interests. The caste belonging of the local political leader plays an important role in the application for employment under the reservation policy. While the political reservation system determines the caste group of the village council president, the caste of the council president determines the applications for reserved jobs by the households belonging to the same caste. Only caste networks with political leadership increase the probability of getting the job under the policy. It implies that the effectiveness of affirmative action programmes is plagued by local politics and caste networks (Gille 2017).

Investigating the role of electoral quotas on group-based discrimination, Girard (2018) found that the likelihood of caste-based exclusion for members of the SCs was reduced by about one-fifth through ongoing SCs quotas. It was observed that the electoral quotas affect day-to-day discrimination only and do not last long. These results were found consistent with a temporary change in the behaviour of members of the dominant castes after a one-shot electoral quota. Also, these were found inconsistent with either a change in the aspirations of members of the lower castes or a change in the stereotypes held by members of the dominant caste groups.

There are quite a few empirical studies on the effects of the political reservation system on the socio-political status of the scheduled castes in Punjab. There remain many unanswered questions such as who are the beneficiaries of reservation at PRIs? Whether or not all the caste groups among the SC have equally benefitted from the reservation at PRIs? Under the 33 percent reservation for women, whether or not women's

participation in PRIs has improved? What is the actual nature of their representation in PRIs? What difference does the entry of women into politics make? The present study attempts to answer some of these questions. Specifically, we attempt to analyse the contribution made by the reservation for the improvement in the socio-political status of the SCs and women in PRIs.

OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

The objective of this paper is to examine the role of reservation in PRIs for the improvement of scheduled castes' representation in local governance institutions i.e., Panchayat, hence their political participation and socio-political status in rural Punjab.

Further, we attempt to explore inter and intra-caste differences as well as gender-wise differences in panchayat and its working across the caste groups. To reach the objective, we proposed to test the following hypotheses:

H₁: The SCs have not gained the benefits of reservation of seats in the Gram Panchayat.

H₂: All the caste groups among the SCs are not equally benefitted from the reservation of seats in the Gram Panchayat.

H₃: The reservation of seats in the Gram Panchayat has not improved women's participation in village administration.

The paper is organized as follows: after the introduction and literature review in the first section of the paper, the second section presents the data and methodology. The results and discussion are presented in the third section of the paper followed by the conclusion in the fourth section.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Punjab, among all the states of India, always stands apart in terms of its development and socio-political and religious environment. About 32 percent of the total population of the State belongs to the SC community, and thus is home to the largest proportion of the SC population in the Country (GoP-DSJEM 2015). The analysis of the present study is based on primary information collected from a random sample of twelve villages, spread over three districts of Punjab, selected using a multistage random sampling technique. The microanalysis has been conducted based on both quantitative and qualitative data, collected during the year 2015-16, from 97 panchayat members, including 12 Sarpanch and 85 Panches who were working at the time of the visit, selected following the multistage random sampling procedure.

Both the structured questionnaire and open-ended questionnaire were used to collect the relevant information. In the first stage, all the districts of Punjab were divided into three strata, namely, the top one-third having the highest proportion of rural scheduled castes (SCs), the middle one-third having almost the average proportion of rural SCs in the State, and the rest one-third have a proportion of rural SCs lower than the State.

One district from each of these three sets of districts was randomly selected. Three districts were selected among these three sets of districts came out to be Jalandhar, Bathinda, and Rupnagar, representing the high, middle, and low proportions of the rural SCs population, respectively. The selected districts not only represent the distribution of rural SCs population in the state but also are equally representative of other socio-economic characteristics of rural Punjab. Based on the ranking of the districts in terms of agricultural development, Jalandhar represents the highly developed, Bathinda is the medium developed, and Rupnagar is the least developed district. Furthermore, spatially

also, the selected three districts are located in different regions of Punjab, hence representing the various cultural and geographical dimensions of the population in the state.

At the second stage of sampling, for each selected district, all the blocks were listed following the proportion of the rural SCs population. Two blocks- one with a high and one with a low proportion of rural SCs population, were chosen randomly from each district. Thus, six selected blocks for the study include- Talwandi Sabo and Mour from Bathinda district, Bhogpur and Adampur from Jalandhar district, and Morinda and Rupnagar from Rupnagar district. In the third stage of sampling, for each of the six selected blocks, all the villages were ranked as per the proportion of the SC population. Two villages were selected randomly from each selected block- one having a higher proportion of the SCs population and another with a low proportion of the SCs population. Finally, at the fourth stage of the sampling, from the selected villages, 97 panchayat members, including 12 Sarpanch and 85 Panches who were working at the time of the visit, were surveyed.

Information was collected from the selected villages for the analysis of the contribution made by the reservation in PRIs to strengthening the socio-political position of the SCs in society. The differences across the caste groups- SC and non- SC- in rural Punjab was analysed using univariate methods. The significance of caste-based differences were tested using Z statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into two sub-sections: 1. Inter-caste and intra-caste representation in the gram panchayat; and 2. Caste-wise participation in the working of the GP, and is presented as follows:

1. Inter-Caste and Intra-Caste Representation in the Gram Panchayat (GP)

The information related to inter-caste participation in the GP is presented in Table 1. The credit goes to the reservation of seats for the SCs in the GP there does not exist any significant difference in the number of Sarpanch and Panch belonging to the SCs and non-SC groups in the study area. It implies that the SCs have almost equivalent representation in the village administrative body that is the Village Panchayat or Gram Panchayat (GP) as do the non-SC. To better understand the situation of the SCs, information was collected regarding the previous terms as Sarpanch and Panch from the present village panchayat members. Approximately, 87 percent of each of the SCs and the non-SC reported that they were never part of the GP earlier and that this is their first term. On the other hand, approximately 82 percent of each of the SCs and the non-SC have accepted that for the previous one term, they were part of the village panchayat as Panch. The almost identical proportion of the SCs has enjoyed a similar number of terms as Sarpanch and Panch of the GP as do the non-SC.

Although the scenario of inter-caste participation in the GP presents an improvement in the political representation of the SCs, however, it would be interesting to study the intra-caste status of the SCs' representation in the GP. The collected relevant information is presented in Table 2. It is visible that the number of the MBCB caste group is relatively very low as compared to the RCR and Addharmi castes among the SCs. It is noteworthy that in the sampled villages, presently none of the MBCB caste group members occupied the post of Sarpanch at the time of the survey, and out of all the six SCs community Sarpanchs, four belong to the RCR caste group, and the remaining two came from the Addharmi caste. When asked about the previous terms as Sarpanch, approximately 95 percent of the MBCB caste group Panch accepted that they have never contested for the Sarpanch's post,

and only one member has reported that he had been elected for two terms as Sarpanch of the Village Panchayat.

In contrast with this, all the Panch from the RCR caste group and Addharmi caste accepted that they have not contested for the post of Sarpanch while 75 percent and 50 percent of the presently Sarpanch from the RCR and Addharmi castes revealed that they have already been running into their second term of the post under consideration. The remaining 50 percent of the Addharmi caste Sarpanch reported the third term whereas 25 percent of the RCR caste group Sarpanch has accepted that they are working for more than three terms at the position of Sarpanch in the GP. However, these differences fade away when the previous terms of Panch are compared across the caste groups.

In brief, it would be correct to conclude that among SCs, the MBCB caste group has not gained a similar political status as enjoyed by the RCR and Addharmi. On the other hand, RCR and Addharmi castes enjoyed political status approximately at par with the other caste groups in the rural society of Punjab. The findings rejected the proposed hypothesis (H_1) that the SCs have not gained the benefits of reservation of seats in the GP. Although the SCs have gained the benefits of reservation of seats in the GP, nevertheless the socio-political status of all the caste groups among them has not improved equally.

Table 1: Inter-caste group comparison of representation in the gram panchayat: 2015-16 (percentage)

Position and terms in village Panchayat		Caste group		Z value
		SC	Non-SC	
Sarpanch		6 (11.8)	6 (13.0)	-0.179
Panch		45 (88.2)	40 (87.0)	--
Previous terms as Sarpanch	0	44 (86.3)	40 (87.0)	-0.101
	1	4 (7.8)	5 (10.8)	-0.507
	2	2 (3.9)	0 --	1.439
	3 & more	1 (2.0)	1 (2.2)	-0.069
Previous terms as Panch	0	5 (9.8)	6 (13.0)	-0.494
	1	42 (82.4)	38 (82.6)	-0.026
	2	3 (5.9)	2 (4.3)	0.359
	3 & more	1 (2.0)	0 --	1.020

Note: 1. The caste group SC includes the Majhbi/Balmiki/Bhangi/Chuhra, Ravidasiye/Ramdasiye/Chammar, and Addharmi. 2. The caste group Non-SC includes BC/OBC and General. 3. Z is the computed value of the test statistics for the difference of proportion between the SC and non-SC.

Source: Field Survey.

2. Caste-wise Participation in Working of the GP

It is fairly evident that the reservation has provided an opportunity for the SCs to participate in the Village's Local Governance. But whether or not they succeeded to use these opportunities

appropriately remained questionable. That is, merely being a part of local governance does not make any difference if one is not free to express his/her views independently. Therefore, it would be

Table 2: Intra-caste group comparison of representation in the gram panchayat:

2015-16 (percentage)

Position and terms in village Panchayat		Caste					ZMB-RC	ZMB-AD	ZMB-B-BC	ZMB-GN	ZRC-AD	ZRC-BC	ZRC-GN	ZAD-BC	ZAD-GN
		MBCB	RCR	Addharmi	BC/OBC	Gen.									
Currently Sarpanch		0 --	4 (23.5)	2 (14.2)	0 --	6 (14.6)	-2.285**	- 1.522	--	-2.648*	0.670	2.285**	0.763	1.522	- 0.037
Currently Panch		20 (100.0)	13 (76.5)	12 (85.8)	5 (100.0)	35 (85.4)	2.285**	1.522	--	2.648*	-0.670	- 2.285**	- 0.763	-1.522	0.037
Previous terms as Sarpanch	0	19 (95.1)	13 (76.5)	12 (85.8)	5 (100.0)	35 (85.4)	1.637	0.885	- 1.015	1.324	-0.670	- 2.285**	- 0.763	-1.522	0.037
	1	0 --	3 (17.6)	1 (7.1)	0 --	5 (12.2)	- 1.906**	- 1.034	--	- 2.387*	0.912	1.906***	0.512	1.034	- 0.596
	2	1 (4.9)	0 --	1 (7.1)	0 --	0 --	1.015	- 0.262	1.015	1.015	-1.034	--	--	1.034	1.034
	3 & more	0 --	1 (5.9)	0 --	0 --	1 (2.4)	-1.032	--	--	-1.004	1.032	1.032	0.565	--	- 1.004
Previous terms as Panch	0	0 --	3 (17.6)	2 (14.2)	0 --	6 (14.6)	- 1.906**	- 1.528	--	-2.648*	0.251	1.906***	0.279	1.528	- 0.037
	1	18 (90.0)	12 (70.6)	12 (85.8)	4 (80.0)	34 (83.0)	1.501	0.374	0.523	0.786	-1.043	-0.447	- 0.991	0.282	0.254
	2	2 (10.0)	1 (5.9)	0 --	1 (20.0)	1 (2.4)	0.465	1.491	- 0.523	1.067	1.032	-0.751	0.565	-1.118	- 1.004
	3 & more	0 --	1 (5.9)	0 --	0 --	0 --	-1.032	--	--	--	1.032	1.032	1.032	--	--

Note: 1. MBCB includes Majhbi Sikh, Balmiki, Chuhra, and Bhangi, and RCR includes Ramdasiya Sikh, Chamar, and Ravidasiya. 2. BC/OBC includes castes such as Nai, Thori, Ramghariya, Jhur, Ghumiyar, etc. 3. General includes castes other than the previous groups, mainly the Jat Sikh and Brahmin families that were surveyed under the present Study. 4. Z_{MB-RC} , Z_{MB-AD} , Z_{MB-BC} , and Z_{MB-GN} are computed Z for the difference of proportion between MBCB and RCR, Addharmi, BC/OBC & General castes respectively. 5. Z_{RC-AD} , Z_{RC-BC} , and Z_{RC-GN} are computed Z for the difference of proportion between RCR and Addharmi, BC/OBC & General castes respectively. 6. Z_{AD-BC} and Z_{AD-GN} are the calculated values of test statistics for the difference of proportion between Addharmi and BC/OBC & General castes respectively. 7. *, **, and *** indicate value significant statistically at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance respectively.

Source: Field Survey.

interesting to analyse the caste-wise member's participation in the working of the GP. The information about the Scheduled Castes' participation in working of the Gram Panchayat in rural Punjab was collected from the Panchayat members during the field survey and the

results are presented in Table 3. 76.5 percent and 47.8 percent of the SCs and the non-SC respectively reported that the Government officials visit at the Sarpanch's residence. An almost similar percentage of members have accepted that the Village Panchayat meetings are held at the Sarpanch's residence only. Approximately 10 percent of the SCs members accepted that the Common Dharmshala, as well as Sarpanch's residence, are used to conduct meetings with all the visiting Government officials to the Village. The corresponding percentage for the non-SC is 19.6 percent and 26.1 percent respectively. For the Panchayat meetings, approximately one-fourth of the non-SC revealed that the Common Dharmshala, as well as Sarpanch's residence, is used whereas only 15.7 percent of the SCs agreed to the same.

Table 3: The scheduled castes' participation in working of the gram panchayat in rural Punjab: 2015-16 (percentage)

Activities			Caste group		Z value
			SC	Non-SC	
Place of meetings with the Government officials	Not a fixed place		0 --	0 --	--
	Panchayat Ghar		0 --	0 --	--
	Dharamshala	MBCB community	0 --	0 --	--
		RCRA community	0 --	0 --	--
		Common	5 (9.8)	9 (19.6)	-1.364
	Sarpanch's residence		39 (76.5)	22 (47.8)	3.034*
	Panchayat Ghar & Sarpanch's residence		2 (3.9)	3 (6.5)	-0.573
	Common Dharamshala & Sarpanch's residence		5 (9.8)	12 (26.1)	-2.117**
The place for the Panchayat meetings	Not a fixed place		0 --	0 --	--
	Panchayat Ghar		0 --	0 --	--
	Dharamshala	MBCB community	0 --	0 --	--
		RCRA community	0 --	0 --	--
		Common	3 (5.9)	10 (21.7)	-2.285**
	Sarpanch's residence		38 (74.5)	21 (45.7)	3.016*
	Panchayat Ghar & Sarpanch's residence		2 (3.9)	3 (6.5)	-0.573
	Common Dharamshala & Sarpanch's residence		8 (15.7)	12 (26.1)	-1.262
How the place is selected?	Sarpanch Only		1 (2.0)	0 --	1.020
	Sarpanch along with his/her allied members		13 (25.5)	4 (8.7)	2.275**

	Unanimously	37 (72.5)	42 (91.3)	-2.504**
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Note: 1. The caste group SC includes the Majhbi/Balmiki/Bhangi/Chuhra, Ravidasiye/Ramdasiye/Chammar, and Addharimi. 2. The caste group Non-SC includes BC/OBC and General. 3. Z is the computed value of the test statistics for the difference of proportion between the SC and non-SC. 4. *, and ** indicate value significant statistically at 1%, and 5% levels of significance respectively.

Source: Field Survey.

The differences between the SCs and the non-SC become clear in the context of using the Common Dharamshala for Panchayat meetings. Approximately 6 percent of the SCs reported the use of Common Dharmshala only while 21.7 percent of the non-SC claimed that the Panchayat meetings are held at the Village's Common Dharamshala. All these differences raise the question that how the place is selected for meetings. 91.3 percent of the non-SC reported that the place for the meeting is selected unanimously whereas only 72.5 percent of the SCs accepted the same. In contrast with this, 25.5 percent of the SCs revealed that the place for various meetings is decided only by the Sarpanch along with his/her allied members. It is supported by 8.7 percent of the non-SC too.

To ascertain the socio-political status of the SCs, information about their participation in GP decision-making was collected and presented in Table 4. It was reported by 32.6 percent of the non-SC that they attend all the meetings of the Panchayat whereas only 15.7 percent of the SCs accepted the same. On the other hand, approximately 8 percent of the SCs revealed that they rarely attend the GP's meetings and the same percentage of them accepted that they never participate in the meetings. None of the non-SC has acknowledged non-participation in the Panchayat meetings; only 4.3 percent of them agreed to their rare attendance at the meetings.

When asked for the reasons for not attending the Meetings frequently, one-fourth of the SCs and 47 percent of the non-SC replied that their husband attends meetings. 36.8 percent of the non-SC and 20.8 percent of the SCs reported that they attend meetings sometimes and in case of their absence, they discuss and resolve the issues telephonically. Approximately, 17 percent of the SCs revealed that they do not attend the Panchayat meetings as meetings are not called at all, whereas another 12.5 percent have reported that they are not participating in the Panchayat meetings as nobody cares about their opinion on any issue. In contrast with this, none of the non-SC has reported the same reasons for not attending the meetings frequently. Approximately, 21 percent of the SCs and 5.3 percent of the non-SC reported that they failed to attend meetings frequently as they are not always informed about the meetings.

All the members who reported their participation in the Panchayat meetings were asked that have they had ever spoken in the GP meeting. While approximately 96 percent of the non-SC accepted that they speak in the meetings, only 74.5 percent of the SCs reported the same. It signifies that about one-fourth of the SCs do not take an active part in the GP meeting discussions. Further, to unfold the exact position of the SCs' participation in the Panchayat, information regarding the reasons for not speaking in the meetings was collected. A majority (50 percent each) of the SCs and the non-SC reported that the meetings are called just to convey the decision taken by Sarpanch and his/her allied members. Approximately, 42

percent of the SCs revealed that they do not speak in the meetings as nobody considers their opinion seriously and the remaining eight percent said that they are not attending meetings, rather on their behalf, their husbands attend meetings.

The results lend support in favour of the proposed hypotheses (H_2 , and H_3) that neither all the caste groups among the SCs nor the women equally benefitted from the reservation of seats in the GP. All this suggests fairly that although the SCs and women became part of the Local Administrative bodies, their participation in working and decision-making of these bodies has remained approximately similar to the earlier situation.

Information was collected from the members, who attend the meeting of the GP, regarding the role played by them in decision-making. The majority (83 percent and 100 percent) of the SCs and the non-SC respectively, reported that they made suggestions about important issues such as the issues related to the use of grants, MGNREGA activities, water, sanitation, and other village development issues, organization of socio-economic awareness programmes, health check-up camps, etc. While 50 percent of the non-SC informed that they make suggestions about all the issues discussed in the Panchayat meetings, only 38.5 percent of the SCs accepted the same. Approximately 26 percent each of the SCs and the non-SC accepted that they made suggestions related to the water, sanitation, and other village development issues, etc. 62.5 percent of the 8 respondents from the SCs caste group reported that they have never made any suggestions in the Panchayat meetings, informed that the meetings are held just to convey the decisions taken by Sarpanch and his/her allied members. The remaining 37.5 percent reported that suggestions are not sought in the meetings. The decisions are pre-decided. When asked about the final decision-making, approximately 98 percent of the non-SC and 76.5 percent of the SCs reported that the decisions are taken unanimously. In contrast with this, 23.5 percent of the SCs revealed that the final decisions are taken by the Sarpanch and his/her allied members only. All this is fairly indicative of the pathetic condition of the SCs members of the GP.

Table 4: The Scheduled Castes' participation in working and decision making of the Gram Panchayat in rural Punjab: 2015-16 (percentage)

Activities	Caste group		Z value
	SC	Non-SC	
How often attending meetings			
All meetings	8 (15.7)	15 (32.6)	-1.968**
Frequently	19 (37.3)	12 (26.1)	1.195
Sometimes	16 (31.4)	17 (37.0)	-0.581
Rarely	4 (7.8)	2 (4.3)	0.729
Not at all	4 (7.8)	0 --	2.077**
Reasons for not attending meetings frequently			
Meetings are not called at all	4 (16.7)	0 --	2.194**

Not always informed about the meeting		5 (20.8)	1 (5.3)	1.590
Busy with other work		1 (4.2)	1 (5.3)	-0.167
Not attending meetings as nobody cares about my opinion		3 (12.5)	0 --	1.852*
Meetings are not held during a convenient time		0 --	0 --	--
Busy with household work		0 --	1 (5.3)	-1.031
Husband attend meetings		6 (25.0)	9 (47.4)	-1.548
Discuss & resolve telephonically		5 (20.8)	7 (36.8)	-1.158
Have you ever spoken to a meeting?	Yes	35 (74.5)	44 (95.7)	-3.017*
	No	12 (25.5)	2 (4.3)	--
Reason for not speaking in the meeting				
Nobody cares about my opinion		5 (41.7)	0 --	--
No healthy discussion is held		0 --	0 --	--
Meetings are held just to convey the decision taken by Sarpanch and his/her allies		6 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	--
Husband attend meetings		1 (8.3)	0 --	--
Discuss & resolve telephonically		0 --	1 (50.0)	--
Have you ever made any suggestions about an important issue?	Yes	39 (83.0)	46 (100.0)	-3.103*
	No	8 (17.0)	0 --	--
If not, who else makes suggestions?				
Suggestions are not sought		3 (37.5)	0 --	--
Meetings are held just to convey the decision taken by Sarpanch and his/her allied		5 (62.5)	0 --	--
Decisions are taken by the influential members of the village community and executed by the Panchayat		0 --	0 --	--
If yes, what was the issue?				
Use of grant		5 (12.8)	4 (8.7)	0.605
Related to MGNREGA activities		3 (7.7)	2 (4.3)	0.652
Related to water, sanitation & other village development issues		10 (25.6)	12 (26.1)	-0.052
To organize socio-economic awareness programmes		3 (7.7)	1 (2.2)	1.149
Health check-up camp		3 (7.7)	4 (8.7)	-0.168

All issues	15 (38.5)	23 (50.0)	-1.072
Who takes the final decision?			
Sarpanch only	0 --	0 --	--
Sarpanch members along with his/her allied	12 (23.5)	1 (2.2)	3.371*
Unanimously	39 (76.5)	45 (97.8)	-3.371*

Note: Same as Table 3.

Source: Field Survey.

Table 5: The scheduled castes and transparency in working of the gram panchayat in rural Punjab: 2015-16 (percentage)

Activities		Caste group		Z value
		SC	Non-SC	
Shown Panchayat Account Books (PABs)	Yes	40 (78.4)	44 (95.7)	-2.665*
	No	11 (21.6)	2 (4.3)	--
If not, have you ever asked for PABs?	Yes	2 (18.2)	0 --	--
	No	9 (81.8)	2 (100.0)	--
If PABs were not shown, what was the reason?				
PABs are not maintained at all		8 (72.7)	1 (50.0)	--
PABs are not updated		3 (27.3)	1 (50.0)	--
Panchayat meeting proceedings recorded	Yes	38 (74.5)	44 (95.7)	-3.119*
	No	13 (25.5)	2 (4.3)	--
If yes, how the proceedings are recorded?				
On the spot		3 (7.9)	7 (15.9)	-1.137
The same day after the meeting		3 (7.9)	10 (22.7)	-1.926***
A day after the meeting		6 (15.8)	8 (18.2)	-0.289
Either on the same day or a day after the meeting		26 (68.4)	19 (43.2)	2.374**
In the next meeting of the Panchayat		0 --	0 --	--
When do members sign the proceedings?				
On the spot		3 (7.9)	3 (6.8)	0.190
The same day after the meeting		2 (5.3)	3 (6.8)	-0.285
A day after the meeting		6 (15.8)	10 (22.7)	-0.797
Either on the same day or a day after the meeting		23 (60.5)	26 (59.2)	0.120
In the next meeting of the Panchayat		0 --	0 --	--
As and when the proceedings are ready Sarpanch gets it signed at home		4 (10.5)	2 (4.5)	1.022

Note: 1. The caste group SC includes the Majhbi/Balmiki/Bhangi/Chuhra, Ravidasiye/Ramdasiye/Chammar, and Addharimi. 2. The caste group Non-SC includes BC/OBC and General. 3. Z is the computed value of the test statistics for the difference of proportion between the SC and non-SC. 4. *, **, and *** indicate value significant statistically at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance respectively.

Source: Field Survey.

The information regarding documentation of the Panchayat meetings and transparency was collected and the results are presented in Table 5. The Table reveals that 95.7 percent of the non-SC and 78.4 percent of the SCs accepted that the Panchayat Account Books (PABs) are shown to the Panchayat as well as Gram Sabha members. Out of the remaining 21.6 percent of the SCs, it has been reported by the 72.7 percent that the PABs are not maintained at all by the Panchayat. It shows the ignorance among the SCs members of the GP since it is mandatory for all the Panchayats to maintain the PABs. The remaining 27.3 percent revealed that PABs are not updated by the Panchayat. While 96 percent of the non-SC acknowledged recording the Panchayat meeting's proceedings, only three-fourths of the SCs reported the same. 68.4 percent and 43.2 percent of the SCs and non-SC respectively informed that the meeting proceedings are recorded either on the same day or a day after the meeting.

About 60 percent of the SCs, as well as the non-SC, reported that the proceedings are signed by the members either on the same day or a day after the meeting. 15.8 percent of the SCs reported that the meeting proceedings are signed a day after the meetings while 10.5 percent accepted that the Sarpanch gets proceedings signed from the members as and when these are ready. The corresponding percentages for the non-SC are 22.7 percent and 4.5 percent respectively. 7.9 percent and 6.8 percent each of the SCs and the non-SC reported that the proceedings are signed on the spot and/or the same day after the meeting. Although the majority has accepted that the PABs are maintained and meeting proceedings are recorded by the Village Panchayat, however, the minority view cannot be overlooked in this case.

CONCLUSION

No doubt, the Affirmative Action (AA) programme of the Centre and/or State Government has partially benefitted the SCs in rural Punjab. Reservation at the GP has improved political participation and promoted representation of the SCs in the GPs. Although the SCs have gained the benefits of reservation of seats in the GPs, nevertheless the socio-political status of all the caste groups among them has not improved equally. The intra-caste analysis revealed that the MBCB caste group has not gained a similar political status as enjoyed by the RCR and Addharimi castes. On the other hand, RCR and Addharimi castes enjoyed political status approximately at par with the non-SC group in the rural society of Punjab. However, the questions such as why the MBCB caste group failed to gain benefits from the reservation at PRIs in rural Punjab. How to ensure active women's participation in the local governance bodies in general and SC women, in particular? etc. are some questions that might be addressed in future studies.

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