

Reserved Representation, Persistent Domination: Elite Capture and Caste Power in Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act was adopted in 1992 to democratize rural administration in India by institutionalizing the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and ensuring political representation for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs). Even though the impacts of these reforms on redistributing substantive power are controversial, they have greatly widened the scope of descriptive representation of historically marginalized groups. The paper examines the law of contradiction between reserved representation and caste domination in the Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh. The paper is based on the theoretical framework of elite capture and on how the elites of the dominant caste group negotiate changes within the institution, thereby reforming control informally without surrendering their power. This paper examines the persistence of caste-based domination in the Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh despite political reservation. While reservations have expanded the presence of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in local governance, their impact on decision-making remains uneven. Based on qualitative fieldwork conducted across five Gram Panchayats over four months, including 32 semi-structured interviews and direct observation, the study analyzes how dominant caste groups retain influence through informal mechanisms such as agenda-setting, bureaucratic mediation, and economic dependence. The findings indicate that although reservations have transformed the formal structure of representation, underlying power relations continue to operate through informal channels. The paper highlights the limits of institutional reform and emphasizes the need to engage with everyday practices of power in decentralized governance. Since the research shifts the analysis to the effects of representation on practices of everyday power, it adds to the argument on decentralization, caste, and the threshold of institutional reforms in addressing structural inequality in rural India.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions; Political Reservation; Elite Capture; Caste Power; Decentralisation; Madhya Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were institutionalized under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and marginalized groups were introduced to create a democratic local government. The reform aimed to make decisions more accountable to historically marginalized groups and to upset established hierarchies of power through compulsory elections, the decentralization of functions and finances, and political reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women (Sukumar et al., 2019).

The principle of caste-based reservation was based on one major democratic assumption that political representation might be an instrument of empowerment. The reform was supposed to help weaken the dominant castes' monopoly and promote a more equal distribution of resources and opportunities by ensuring that marginalized groups could be represented in formal positions of power. Decentralization, here, was intended to improve participation and accountability, as governance would be closer to people (Crook & Manor, 1998; Ribot, 2002).

Nevertheless, the results are not even after over thirty years of its application. Although reservations have increased the number of SC/ST representatives, their influence on actual decision-making is weaker than desired. According to existing studies, although descriptive representation has improved, substantive empowerment remains limited (Besley et al., 2004; Kumar, 2006). Formal inclusion in most rural settings is accompanied by informal domination by dominant caste groups.

The paper is addressing this contradiction by examining how caste domination persists despite institutional reform. It posits that decentralization does not displace power but rather transforms it, enabling hegemonic actors to adjust to new institutional environments. Instead of explaining this persistence solely in terms of social backwardness, the analysis draws on the concept of elite capture, which emphasizes how local elites maintain power by operating within institutional structures (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2014; Vaid, 2014).

Concurrently, the procedure is not homogeneous. Cases of effective agency by SC/ST representatives, enhanced by education, political networks, and collective mobilization, show that outcomes are contingent and situation-specific (Fazal, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How has caste-based reservation altered the formal structure of power in the Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh?
2. Through what informal mechanisms do dominant caste elites retain or reconfigure power after the introduction of reservations?
3. Under what conditions do SC/ST representatives exercise substantive agency in Panchayat governance?
4. How do everyday practices of governance mediate the relationship between formal authority and social domination?

The paper is structured as follows. In the second part, the conceptual and theoretical model is outlined based on the literature on decentralization, elite capture, and caste power. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology and the field's situation. Subsequent sections analyze the formal implications of the reservation process and discuss the actual processes of elite capture and the spaces of agency and resistance. The last section concludes by discussing what the findings suggest regarding one of the questions in decentralized governance and the constraints of institutional reform in tackling the established social inequality.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed study is based on the conceptual framework, which holds that decentralization has never been a neutral change in the administrative system but a reconstruction of power relations at the local level. The framework does not view institutional inclusion as the only way for a society to be socially altered, but rather as the nature of interactions between formal political reforms and deeply constructed social hierarchies, especially in its ability to moderate the effects of government, particularly those that concern caste.

Decentralization and Political Reservation

India began the process of decentralization, formalized in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, anticipating that it would increase democracy by decentralizing power, resources, and accountability to locally elected governments. Decentralization has normative objectives, namely greater participation, increased accountability, responsiveness to local needs, and the empowerment of formerly marginalized groups. This was to be done through the most noticeable way of political representation of SCs and STs in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Sukumar et al., 2019).

This framework's assumption is based on democratic theory, which holds that political representation is an instrument of empowerment. With the reservations, the traditional monopolies of power were expected to be watered down, and redistribution of resources and voice was anticipated, since the decision-making space was offered to marginalized groups. This assumption, however, should be further considered, particularly in stratified societies where political power is embedded in wider social and economic practices.

The other important difference in this regard is the one between descriptive representation and substantive empowerment. The descriptive representation is the quantitative existence of marginalized groups in political institutions. Conversely, substantive empowerment is the ability of such groups to exercise real influence over decisions, resource distribution, and outcomes. Though reservations have continued to be effective in increasing descriptive representation in PRIs, substantive empowerment is far more conditional and skewed. It is this detachment between representation and power that is the main analytical foundation of this study. This difference between the descriptive representation and substantive empowerment is a key aspect of the analysis of the results of political representation (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips & Asenbaum, 2023).

Elite Capture in Local Governance

To demonstrate this, the paper uses the concept of elite capture, particularly in reports on decentralization and local government. Elite capture models: The classical models of elite capture, including those by Bardhan and Mookherjee, hold that decentralization can contribute to local inequalities when socio-economic elites possess an unfair advantage in information, resources, and access to institutions. Rather than democratizing the governance process, decentralization may shift power from higher bureaucracies to local elites.

Elite capture does not imply open opposition to institutional reform. Rather, it focuses on the adaptability of elites. According to the elite, they are less likely to abandon their strategies when formal rules change, but they redefine their approach. Such a mode of adjustment may take the form of proxy leadership, unofficial supervision of elected leadership, the bureaucracy of points of control, or manipulation of welfare dispensation systems in the context of Panchayat reservations. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) posit that this suggests decentralization may breed inequality when local elites have greater access to information, resources, and bureaucratic networks. These customs allow the elites to operate within the reservation's formal regime while undermining its redistributive objective.

It is important to note that elite capture is not a static circumstance, but a dynamic process. It is an informal negotiation between institutional norms and the unending social power. It takes an analytical position that shifts the focus to whether decentralization is effective and how power is used, contested, and remade in decentralized settings. Rather than resisting change, the elites tend to adapt to and fit into new institutional designs (Manor, 2004b). This focus is why the study fails to view caste domination as a social issue that has faded; instead, it examines it as a political process.

Caste as a Structure of Power

Even though elite capture is a useful concept for explaining inequality in a decentralized governance system, caste-specialized analysis is especially instrumental in the Indian context. Caste is not only a form of identity, but a holistic system of power that defines entry into land, labor, social honor, and institutional power. Thus, caste in rural India is a power structure founded on land ownership, labor relations, kin relations, and social honor (Beteille, 1965; Jodhka, 2012). Rural Indian politics is closely connected to land, labor relations, kinship, and the application of social penalties.

With this, caste power is an informal process that exists alongside formal power and sometimes even overshadows it. The informal power may take the form of agenda-setting, serving as an

intermediary with bureaucratic organizations, controlling the information flow, mobilizing coercion, and complying. The office position should suggest the ability to control such resources (not necessarily officially, i.e., by being in the office). Informal power tends to override formal institutional leadership, particularly in local governance contexts (Gupta, 1995).

This framework can be useful for the governance of rural regions because it explains why caste pecking orders persist even after official integration. The panchayat reservations do not make any real difference in the material and relational grounds in which caste domination is established, but only change the symbolic and procedural aspects of power. It implies that the scope of authority exercised by representatives of the reserve categories is limited only when these informal structures are disrupted (Fazal, 2017).

Conceptual Model

It is by bringing these strands together that the study takes the following conceptual sequence: *Political Reservation* → *Elite Adaptation* → *Reconfiguring Power* → *Strained Agency*

This model points out that reservation triggers a form of accommodation rather than the replacement of power, leading to the emergence of novel forms of domination compatible with formal inclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FIELD CONTEXT

Research Design

The research design was a qualitative multi-site case study in which the researcher investigated the functioning of caste power in Panchayats after political reservations were implemented. It is especially appropriate for studying informal systems of power that are difficult to quantify. Qualitative case studies are particularly well-suited for exploring informal power relations that cannot be measured quantitatively (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2017). Instead of assessing the results, the study aims to examine the processes, interactions, and practices by which people exercise authority in daily governance.

This study adopts a qualitative multi-site case study approach to examine informal power relations in decentralized governance.

Study & Fieldwork Area

Study/Fieldwork was conducted across five Gram Panchayats in Madhya Pradesh over a period of some months. The sites were selected to reflect variation in caste composition and administrative functioning. The study is based on 32 semi-structured interviews with elected representatives, officials, and villagers, as well as direct observation of Gram Sabha meetings. Repeated field interactions enabled the identification of informal practices that are not visible in formal documentation.

The panchayats were purposively selected regarding three factors;

- **Caste stratification** of the village,
- **Reservation position** of Panchayat leadership, and
- **Administrative dispersion** in the performance of governance and institutional capacity.

Such a choice allows comparison of results across various forms of caste power and their consequences for reservation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Observation of Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings

- Analysis of official records such as beneficiary lists and resolutions

Repeated interactions and observations during fieldwork helped identify patterns that were not immediately visible in formal settings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding, focusing on patterns of elite capture, bureaucratic mediation, and conditions that enable or constrain agency.

Limitations

The study is based on qualitative evidence and is context-specific. However, triangulation of sources enhances the reliability of the findings.

FORMAL POWER AFTER RESERVATION: WHAT CHANGED?

The development of caste-based reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions has actually changed the official architecture of rural governance. The 73rd amendment to the Constitution has enabled SC and ST members to hold posts of authority they could not hold previously, such as Sarpanch and Ward Member posts. They have the powers and responsibilities of any other elected office, such as chairing Panchayat meetings, signing resolutions, supervising development projects, and acting on behalf of the Panchayat to higher administrative structures. The formal obstacles to entering local politics have been shattered.

The presence of SC/STs in leadership posts has not only been high, but also in normal standing committees and Gram Sabha forums. This transformation has broadened the participatory social space and reshaped the symbolic topography of village politics. The Panchayati Raj system officially gives equal legal authority to the reserved representatives to the non-reserved representatives (The Constitution [Seventy-third Amendment] Act, 1992; Jain, 2005; SJ, 2021). Reservations have also brought marginalized communities into the public eye in official political arenas. Representatives of SC/ST communities occupy a central position in meetings, maintain contacts with officials at the block level, and serve as the state's and the village's official interlocutors. The symbolic meaning of this type of visibility is substantial: it implies recognition by the Constitution, breaks the former norms of exclusion, and introduces new requirements for political participation. It is even against societal norms to be in office, according to the majority of representatives.

However, in addition to these benefits of formal power and publicity, they have also drawn reservations that, in turn, have generated new administrative responsibilities. Elected officials are supposed to be in the complex bureaucracy, run online portals, organize various development initiatives, and fulfill reporting requirements. This growth in administrative workload in institutional support or capacity-building has not been matched with a corresponding increase. The symbolic flow of rural politics changes when marginalized representatives come into view, though there is no need for them to redistribute control (Rao & Sanyal, 2010). Access to information, administrative processes, and local legitimacy remains uneven. As a result, a gap persists between formal authority and operational power.

This section identifies the major contradiction in the paper's analysis. The reservation has enabled the descriptive representation to be extended, enhanced visibility, and redistributed formal responsibilities. However, these changes are accompanied by unequal influence and power. The next section examines how this contradiction is established and sustained through the processes of elite capture and power reconfiguration.

MECHANISMS OF ELITE CAPTURE AND POWER RECONFIGURATION

Changing the formal division of political roles does not eliminate the status quo of power. Instead, the elites within the high caste respond to institutional reform by preparing strategies

to influence informally. This section examines 5 key ways in which caste elites reshape power in Panchayats, thereby sustaining domination through changes in representation.

Agenda Control and Decision-Making

Agenda-setting control is a crucial power tool of the Panchayat government. Although the elected representatives are the formal chairs of Gram Sabha meetings and Panchayat sessions, the decision on what matters to be raised and what not is often made elsewhere. In most instances, the agenda is informally created before meetings through consultations between key stakeholders and Panchayat secretaries or influential intermediaries. Agenda-setting is a rather influential but delicate process in which elites influence how governments should behave (Lukes, 2005; Manor, 2004a).

These power imbalances are also expressed through meeting dynamics. The members of the dominant caste are likely to discuss issues early and often, and to put problems into perspective, which limits the scope of conversation. Representatives from reserved categories can officially chair meetings, but in most cases, their roles are limited to facilitating the process rather than leading it. There is a use of interruptions, strategic silences, and appeals to consensus to exclude dissenting voices without confronting them.

Strategies of silence often remain unspoken. Instead, they rely on social cues, appeals to experience, or administrative complexity. By placing the caste elites in the position of knowledgeable intermediaries, it is possible to shadow the capabilities of SC/ST representatives to contest decisions, while still maintaining the illusion of participatory deliberation.

Examples:

- In one Panchayat, agendas were informally decided before Gram Sabha meetings, limiting deliberation.
- In one Panchayat, the Sarpanch (SC) noted that agenda items were informally finalized by influential villagers prior to the Gram Sabha, limiting the scope of discussion during official proceedings.

Bureaucratic Mediation

The other major elite-capture procedure is bureaucratic mediation. Panchayat governance is increasingly reliant on digital platforms and documents, as well as on procedural norms. These processes are not distributed equally in terms of control, and such caste elites tend to balance between the elected representatives and the state machine. This can be achieved by dominating bureaucratic interfaces, which is not a violation of the rule (Corbridge et al., 2005).

The block officials and secretaries of the panchayats are at the center of this process. This is even though they are formally answerable to elected institutions; they usually support socially hegemonic players with greater administrative experience and social power. Representatives of reserved groups might become dependent on such intermediaries for assistance with resolution requests, data uploads, or financial operations.

The result of such interdependence is discriminatory delays and grants. Any files concerning actions promoted by SC/ST representatives may be stalled on procedural grounds, while those advancing the interests of the elite will be given priority. The practices are not related to the literal violation of the rules but rather depend on the bureaucracy's discretion, which exhibits subtle yet effective domination.

Examples:

- A representative relied on intermediaries for documentation, who influenced decisions.

- A Ward Member (ST) relied on a local contractor to prepare documents and manage digital submissions. This intermediary influenced which development projects were prioritized.

Economic Dependence and Land Relations

In the countryside, the economic relations, especially land ownership and labor dependency, are one of the main constituents of the power of the caste. Caste elites normally control farmland, employment networks, and credit sources. The consequences of these economic imbalances for politics include the restriction of the autonomy of representatives of closed classes. Thus, land and labor relations continue to be structured as the political compliance in rural India (Beteille, 1965; Jodhka, 2012; Vaid, 2014).

Representatives of SC/ST communities, who frequently lack independent economic means, might succumb to pressures beyond the bounds of formal politics. The fact that they rely on the high castes to make a living, to get accommodation, or to access common facilities is a weakness that can be used to rectify the political behavior. The Panchayat decisions are thus enclosed within the larger range of economic relations of dependence.

It is important to note that these pressures are rarely revealed through overt political coercion. They instead seem like a reminder of the obligation, a threat of losing support, or even an indirect threat of social consequences. This is because there is no sharp distinction between economic survival and political compliance, through which domination can be reproduced without an open challenge.

Examples:

- A Sarpanch avoided conflict due to economic dependence on dominant caste employers.
- An SC Sarpanch avoided challenging decisions on beneficiary selection due to dependence on dominant caste employers for agricultural work.

Beneficiary Selection and Resource Capture

The other key point of elite capture is the control of welfare schemes and development resources. Panchayats equally contribute to the beneficiaries of schemes related to housing, employment, and social security. There are official standards, but their interpretation and implementation are left to local taste.

The caste elites, who usually dominate decision-making, tend to consult beneficiaries informally and prioritize their networks and friends. Representatives of the reservation categories can formally sign lists; however, their influence does not play a significant role in their establishment. Decentralization of welfare delivery, rather than dismantling patronage networks, has been found to create and perpetuate them (Jain, 2005). The patronage systems thus continue to play a major role in resource distribution, thereby exacerbating existing disparities.

This is the process by which elites maintain their legitimacy by posing as agents of state resources, even though they do not occupy any formal positions. Their interference with access to welfare reinforces loyalty and dependence, thereby enhancing their power.

Examples:

- Beneficiary lists were adjusted after informal consultations.
- Beneficiary lists for housing schemes were modified after informal consultations with influential actors, despite formal eligibility criteria.

Coercion, Threat, and Social Sanctions

Finally, mechanisms of domination that involve various types of informal coercion and social sanctions also exist. All these are minor forms of intimidation, up to the more overt exclusion.

The representatives of the SC/ST communities that are attempting to act independently may experience social isolation, humiliation in society, or the inability to legitimize themselves.

Informal sanctions, considered potent instruments of caste power, include social boycotts and reputational attacks (Jeffrey et al., 2008). These sanctions are not very caste-based. Rather, they are absolved of charges of incompetence, procedural violations, or personal violations. With this kind of framing, the coercion will be achieved under the guise of accountability, under the guise that it is not strong.

The effectiveness of the mechanisms lies in their working together as a whole. Each one of them, by itself, may appear insignificant or indistinct; when united, they create the mood in which the cost of dissent would be more than the rewards. Domination, hence, will not persist through force but through the fear of consequences.

Examples:

- A woman representative faced exclusion after questioning decisions.
- A woman Sarpanch (ST) who questioned financial decisions faced social exclusion and public criticism, discouraging further intervention.

5A Summary of Mechanisms of Elite Capture

Mechanism	Operation	Example
Agenda Control	Informal decision-making	Pre-finalized agendas
Bureaucratic Mediation	Control over procedures	Contractor influence
Economic Dependence	Livelihood pressure	Avoidance of conflict
Resource Allocation	Informal networks	Adjusted beneficiary lists
Social Sanctions	Social pressure	Exclusion

Section Takeaway

Bringing these forces together suggests that elite capture in Panchayats is not a traditional phenomenon but an adaptation. Reservation subverts formal hierarchies, but the majority of caste elites exercise authority not through formal structures but through informal ones, which in most cases include both institutional and informal mechanisms. In the following section, we will see in what circumstances this pattern is violated and when the representatives of the reserved categories have meaningful agency.

SPACES OF AGENCY AND CONDITIONAL EMPOWERMENT

Even though the elite capture processes apply to most of Panchayat governance, analytically, it would be inappropriate to assume that there is no change beyond the incidence of symbols in caste-based reservations. We see instances of meaningful, if small, agency by SC/ST representatives throughout the Panchayats. Intermediation between the reserved representatives occurs conditionally through education, collective organization, and external institutional support (Deininger et al., 2014; Mansuir & Rao, 2012). Such instances are not typical outcomes of reservations; rather, they are contingent on specific social, political, and institutional conditions.

One factor that helps attain agency is educational attainment. Representatives of SC/ST who possess more formal education are more likely to be better skilled in their administrative work, in negotiations with authorities, and in opposing attempts at bureaucratic intervention. Education reduces dependence on the middle and enhances trust in formal relations, broadening the scope of practical power. However, education does not oppose caste power; it is just a precondition, not a determinant.

It is also necessary that the political parties have their support. This is better placed in the hands of representatives who have the active backing of political parties, particularly those where

organizations are located at the block or district level. Party affiliation can provide some extra power, legal and administrative services, and unofficial coercion. Such assistance is often distorted, partisan, and likely to attract electoral bargains, and therefore not as reliable as a permanent source of empowerment.

Collective platforms, including self-help groups (SHGs), community-based organizations, and caste associations, also constitute spaces of agency. Personal vulnerability decreases when SC/ST representatives are incorporated into operational groups. Being together enables mobilization, information exchange, and publicity that can overcome the methods of isolation practiced by dominant-caste elites. These groups, however, are unequal and, in most cases, strained by resource constraints and internal hierarchies.

External institutional support, including non-governmental organizations, legal assistance systems, and interventions by higher administrative bodies, can also be used to broaden the agency's scope. In other cases, the entry of foreign players brings checks and balances, local information and decision-making, and challenges monopolies. However, the necessity of external support underscores the frailty of local empowerment, as such interventions are usually temporary and conditional rather than part of regular governance practice.

Although these are enabling conditions, agency is distorted, weak, and controversial. When minor caste groups make self-assertion attempts, elite caste groups may respond with countermeasures such as bureaucratic obstruction, social isolation, or reputational attacks. Therefore, the agency is more situational than structural, occurring at specific moments and not modifying governance patterns. This drawback implies that empowerment through a reservation concept is not linear but a bargaining process predetermined by changing power relations.

Mini Case Narratives

Case 1: Education and Autonomy-

An educated SC Sarpanch managed administrative processes independently, reducing reliance on intermediaries and increasing decision-making influence.

Case 2: Collective Support

A woman Sarpanch (ST) drew support from local self-help groups, enabling her to assert decisions in Gram Sabha meetings.

Case 3: Political Backing

A Ward Member (SC) with party connections directly approached officials and successfully challenged delays in welfare implementation.

Case 4: Fragility of Agency

Another representative withdrew from active participation after facing sustained social pressure, highlighting the limits of empowerment.

DISCUSSION: RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PRIS

The paper's findings challenge prevailing attitudes toward the structure of political reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In addition, the structural foundations of caste domination have not been transformed fundamentally, as the symbolic monopoly of power is being disrupted because the SC/ST communities are now able to take elective office. This is a critical aspect of understanding the limitations of institutional change, given the difference between symbolic disruption and structural continuity (Faheem, 2022). These dynamics were not always explicit in formal records but became clearer through sustained field engagement and repeated interactions with participants.

When the reservations switch who speaks on behalf of the village in formal forums and before the state, hierarchies change. Nevertheless, the power structure of caste, land domination, labor relations, bureaucracies, and social legitimacy has not changed much. Accordingly, power

extermination does not occur; rather, it is a reconfiguration along informal lines that does not eliminate formal inclusion. This is why elite capture does not lead to institutional reform; on the contrary, it often facilitates institutional reform.

These findings align with the idea of decentralization, which, as the theory suggests, does not always democratize power. Rather, it shifts power to other arenas where political inequalities can be discussed more effectively. The proximity of neighborhoods to the local society enhances accountability, but this premise is undermined by the fact that dense social hierarchies normally characterize local arenas. Decentralization in such circumstances increases the stakes of power games at the regional level without necessarily changing their structure (Faheem, 2022).

This discussion is based on the prevailing literature on elite capture, its relational elements, and its flexibility. The study shows how the elite are tactical in adjusting to institutional constraints and in implementing the new rules to stay in power, rather than treating elite capture as an implementation failure. At the same time, the implications make over-deterministic descriptions difficult, specifying the conditions under which agency can be attained, but only on a short-term basis and unevenly. These findings provide support for relational conceptualizations and an adaptive conceptualization of elite capture, rather than the aortic model of institutional failure (Bardhan, 2002; Manor, 2004b).

The implications of the policy, however, cannot be reduced to the requests for increased reservations and participation. They would rather quote the necessity of interventions that will mediate between the formal institutions and informal power. Capacity-building programs are supposed to be more than just training to address bureaucratic access and power biases. Due to the lack of administrative freedom in fiscal decentralization, there is a risk that dependency will outweigh empowerment. Decentralization does not destroy hierarchies of power but rejuvenates them within societies with social stratification (Ribot, 2002). Similarly, the tendency toward informal coercion can be reduced by improving grievance redressal and monitoring systems, provided they exist and can be accessed to meet victims' needs.

The idea of empowerment is not only achieved through representation, but also through a mix of representation and social, economic, and institutional changes. The findings indicate that decentralization does not eliminate hierarchy but reshapes it. Power persists through informal mechanisms that coexist with formal inclusion. These patterns became clearer through sustained field engagement, where everyday practices revealed the limits of institutional change. These findings suggest that institutional reform must be complemented by efforts to address the underlying social and economic inequalities that shape local governance.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines a central contradiction in India's decentralized governance: the coexistence of constitutionally mandated political reservation and persistent caste domination within Panchayats. Focusing on Madhya Pradesh, it asks whether reservations have altered local power relations and how dominant caste groups have responded.

First, political reservation has expanded the formal presence of SC and ST representatives in Panchayat leadership. This has increased their visibility, authority, and role as state representatives at the local level, disrupting the symbolic monopoly of dominant castes over political office.

However, this formal inclusion has not led to a substantive redistribution of power. Dominant caste groups continue to retain influence through adaptive strategies such as agenda-setting, bureaucratic mediation, economic dependence, welfare allocation, and informal social pressures. Caste domination, therefore, persists not merely as tradition but as an evolving political process.

The study also finds that the agency of SC/ST representatives is conditional. Greater autonomy emerges where education, political support, and collective mobilization intersect. However, such agency remains uneven and often fragile, frequently constrained by counter-mobilization from dominant groups.

The paper contributes by shifting the focus from institutional outcomes to everyday practices of power. By combining elite capture theory with caste as a structural force, it shows that decentralization reshapes rather than eliminates domination, challenging linear assumptions of democratic deepening.

The findings highlight the limits of reservation as a standalone reform. Without addressing structural inequalities in land, economy, and bureaucratic access, institutional inclusion remains constrained.

Future research should adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches to better understand how power adapts over time across contexts. Reservation, therefore, emerges as a necessary but insufficient condition for empowerment. (Jodhka, 2012; Phillips & Asenbaum, 2023).

Lastly, Panchayat reservation has failed, yet it has not made what it pledged: change. This is not pertinent because it will not address caste power. It, however, introduces the complexity of adjustment, assertion, and even contention over power in decentralized democratic institutions.

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