

Inclusive Governance: Ensuring Representation and Participation of Marginalized Communities

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Abstract

This paper investigates the challenges faced by marginalized communities in terms of representation in governance, with a specific focus on the political participation of elected Scheduled Caste (SC) Members of Parliament (MPs) in India. This paper examines this paradox through two critical lenses: (1) committee membership, which reflects the institutional positioning of SC MPs within Parliament and (2) career sustainability, particularly renomination patterns, which reveal the structural precariousness of SC MPs' political trajectories. This paper argues that while the reservation of parliamentary seats has ensured the descriptive presence of SC MPs, their systematic exclusion from influential committees, limited space in parliamentary discourse, and precarious renomination prospects reveal that substantive representation remains constrained, reflecting a deeper paradox of "presence without power" in India's democracy.

Keywords: Inclusive Governance, Representation, Political Participation, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

The promise of democratic representation in India lies not only on the principle of universal adult suffrage but is largely dependent upon the institutional mechanisms designed to ensure that historically marginalized communities have a voice in governance (Austin, 1999; Hassan, 2011)¹. One of the most significant of such mechanisms is the reservation of parliamentary seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs), which is a constitutional safeguard rooted in Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's insistence on "political safeguards" for Dalits². This provision has guaranteed the descriptive presence of SC members in the Lok Sabha since the first general elections of 1952³. However, despite of more than seven decades since independence, critical questions remain: does descriptive representation translate into substantive empowerment, or are SC parliamentarians structurally constrained from advancing the interests of marginalized communities? Scholars have established that SCs continue to face entrenched socio-economic and political exclusion

¹ Austin, G. (1999). *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*. Oxford University Press.; Hasan, Z. (2011). *Politics of Inclusion: Castes, Minorities, and Affirmative Action*. Oxford University Press.

² Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System*. Columbia University Press.

³ Galanter, M. (1984). *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*. University of California Press.

despite the formal expansion of democratic institutions⁴. While SC MPs are elected in substantial numbers, their ability to shape policy, influence decision-making, and advocate for Dalit and marginalized interests remains contested. Parliamentary politics, dominated by party high commands and shaped by entrenched caste hierarchies, often relegates SC MPs to symbolic participation rather than meaningful agenda-setting⁵. The paradox of “presence without power” thus persists, raising concerns about the depth of India’s democratic inclusiveness.

This paper examines this paradox through two critical lenses: (1) committee membership, which reflects the institutional positioning of SC MPs within Parliament and (2) career sustainability, particularly renomination patterns, which reveal the structural precariousness of SC MPs’ political trajectories. Each of these dimension highlights different aspects of the systemic hurdles faced by SC MPs, from being channeled into identity-based committees while excluded from influential financial and oversight bodies, to limited space in parliamentary discourse, to the instability of their political careers.

This paper argues that while the reservation of parliamentary seats has ensured the descriptive presence of SC MPs, their systematic exclusion from influential committees, limited space in parliamentary discourse, and precarious renomination prospects reveal that substantive representation remains constrained, reflecting a deeper paradox of “presence without power” in India’s democracy.

Conceptual Framework

The study of political representation has long grappled with the distinction between mere presence and effective influence. Hanna Pitkin’s⁶ (1967) classic typology remains foundational: she distinguishes between descriptive representation, in which elected officials resemble those they represent in terms of social characteristics, and substantive representation, in which representatives actively advocate for the interests of their constituents. In the Indian context, the reservation of parliamentary seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) guarantees descriptive representation by ensuring that Dalits are present in the legislature. Yet, whether this descriptive presence translates into substantive advocacy remains an open and urgent question.

Scholars⁷ of marginalized representation have argued that descriptive presence can matter symbolically, by signalling recognition and inclusion (Phillips, 1995). However, tokenistic inclusion often limits substantive impact. Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s⁸ (1977) theory of tokenism highlights how minority representatives are frequently confined to symbolic roles, lacking real power over decision-making processes. Applied to the Indian Parliament, this framework suggests that SC MPs may be structurally steered toward identity-based issues or committees while being excluded from influential domains such as finance, defence, or foreign affairs. Thus, the placement of SC MPs within parliamentary committees becomes a crucial site for evaluating the depth of their representation.

⁴ Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Pai, S. (2002). *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*. Sage Publications.

⁶ Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*.

⁷ Phillips, A. (1995). *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁸ Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

This study also draws on the Ambedkarite vision of representation. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar⁹ argued forcefully that political safeguards were essential for Dalits, who had historically been excluded from both social and political power. His insistence on separate electorates during the Poona Pact negotiations, later converted into reserved seats, reflected his conviction that descriptive presence alone was insufficient without mechanisms to ensure genuine influence. In contemporary terms, this raises the question of whether the institutional design of Indian democracy merely guarantees the visibility of Dalits in Parliament or provides them with the substantive capacity to alter policy and governance outcomes.

The framework for this study rests on three dimensions of representation. First is institutional positioning, assessed through committee memberships. Parliamentary committees are the engine rooms of policy influence and oversight, and the marginalization of SC MPs from influential committees indicates structural exclusion from agenda-setting roles. The second focuses on parliamentary participation, and the third, career sustainability, which is examined through renomination patterns. If SC MPs face disproportionately high rates of denial of renomination, their tenure becomes precarious, limiting their independence and capacity for substantive advocacy. Altogether, these three dimensions provide a holistic lens for assessing the quality of representation. This conceptual framing raises the issues of SC MPs without the broader discourse of social justice and inclusive governance. The study, by weaving the debates of Pitkin, Kanter, Phillips and Ambedkar, raises a key issue: Representation is not about simply entering the parliament but if those entering are empowered to make any substantive changes once inside. The central paradox of India's democratic experiment with reservations, then, lies in the possibility that SC MPs are descriptively present but yet they are structurally constrained, which raises profound questions about the substantive inclusiveness of parliamentary democracy.

Methodology and Sources of Data

This paper relies on secondary sources to investigate the nature of representation exercised by Scheduled Caste (SC) Members of Parliament. Since the questions at hand concern institutional placement, patterns of legislative engagement, and the durability of political careers, the study draws exclusively on publicly available datasets and official records that track parliamentary functioning across the 15th, 16th and 17th Lok Sabhas. The standing committees are where detailed scrutiny of policy occurs, and access to them is often more consequential than floor speeches. Information on committee composition has been taken from the reports of the Lok Sabha Secretariat. By comparing the proportion of SC MPs on the Social Justice and Empowerment Committee with their presence in committees such as Finance or Public Accounts, the study evaluates whether SC MPs are institutionally positioned to influence policy beyond identity-linked concerns.

The second dimension addresses career sustainability through an examination of re-nomination patterns. Candidate lists published by the Election Commission of India form the primary source. These are compared across electoral cycles to see how many SC MPs secure party tickets for re-election. Reports by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) provide supplementary detail on candidate selection. This evidence allows us to situate parliamentary performance within the wider dynamics of party control and electoral vulnerability. Taken together, these two strands provide a coherent basis for analysing how far SC MPs move beyond descriptive presence to achieve substantive influence.

⁹ Ambedkar, B. R. (1946). *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Bombay: Thacker & Co.

Data Analysis

Patterns of SC/ST Representation in Parliamentary Committees

Table 1. SC/ST presence on key committees (15th–17th Lok Sabhas)

Committee	Lok Sabha	SC/ST %	Representation gap vs 25.4% (pp)
Social Justice & Empowerment (DRSC)	15th (2009–14)	67.7	+42.3
Social Justice & Empowerment (DRSC)	16th (2014–19)	50.5	+25.1
Social Justice & Empowerment (DRSC)	17th (2019–24)	59.5	+34.1
Finance (DRSC)	15th–17th	9.5	–15.9
Public Accounts Committee (Financial)	17th	6.67	–18.7
Defence (DRSC)	17th	21.4	–4.0
External Affairs (DRSC)	17th	28.5	+3.1
Joint Committee on the Welfare of SCs & STs	15th	98.0	+72.6
Joint Committee on the Welfare of SCs & STs	16th	100.0	+74.6
Joint Committee on the Welfare of SCs & STs	17th	95.0	+69.6

Source: Author’s construction using Government of India data.

Table 1 reveals a striking structural imbalance in the distribution of SC/ST MPs across parliamentary committees between the 15th and 17th Lok Sabhas. The SC/ST members have been consistently concentrated in identity-linked committees such as the Social Justice & Empowerment Committee and the Joint Committee on the Welfare of SCs & STs, where their presence ranges between 50–100 percent, which is far above their overall population benchmark of 25.4 percent. However, in contrast, their representation in agenda-setting and high-leverage oversight committees such as Finance and the Public Accounts Committee is comparatively low, at 9.5 percent and 6.67 percent respectively. This pattern clearly indicates a dual process of inclusion along with exclusion, resulting in over-representation in symbolic spaces, but under-representation in the arenas where fiscal and policy direction are substantively shaped.

This dual inclusion-exclusion produces a symbolic empowerment without any real or substantive power-sharing. The high representation in welfare-linked committees ensures visibility and projects inclusivity, giving SC/ST MPs a platform to voice community-specific concerns. However, this clustering also functions as a form of containment which reinforces the idea that SC/ST parliamentarians are best suited to speak only on “their” issues, while being sidelined from the core governance domains of finance, audit, and budgetary scrutiny, aspects of governance which tend to determine the wider trajectory of state policy. All Parliamentary committees are not equal in their influence, and this hierarchy is significant to this study. Committees like Finance and the Public Accounts are the prestigious sites of oversight which are empowered to scrutinize government expenditure and shape macroeconomic agendas. However, while

welfare and social justice committees are important, they tend to operate at the margins of this hierarchy. The over-representation of SC/ST MPs in the committees like ‘social welfare’ therefore risks in creating an illusion of inclusion, while reproducing hierarchies of power in practice. The External Affairs Committee in the 17th Lok Sabha is one of the few exceptions, with SC/ST representation at 28.5 percent. The persistence of this across three Lok Sabha, which comprise different governments, indicates that distribution of SC MPs in these committees is not just a party choice but this indicates a practice in parliament. The leaderships continue to view SC/ST MPs as the best fit in welfare committees on the basis of caste identity. By so, they end up reproducing social hierarchies in an institution that is meant to establish political equality. What emerges is a layered stratification: SC/ST MPs are highly visible in welfare-oriented spaces but remain largely absent from the central arenas of governance. This reveals a troubling paradox. The Constitution promised not just descriptive representation for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, but also meaningful equality in the conduct of legislative life. Yet parliamentary practice has often worked in the opposite direction. By steering SC/ST MPs toward identity-linked domains and away from the most powerful committees, the system has produced a form of segregated representation. The result is a visibility that is more formal than substantive — representation that signals inclusion, while at the same time limiting genuine influence.

Table 2. Committees meeting/exceeding proportional SC/ST presence (17th Lok Sabha)

Committees (17th LS)	Meets/Exceeds 25.4%?
External Affairs (DRSC)	Yes
Social Justice & Empowerment (DRSC)	Yes
Chemicals & Fertilisers (DRSC)	Yes
Coal & Steel (DRSC)	Yes
Labour (DRSC)	Yes
Water Resources (DRSC)	Yes
Law & Justice (DRSC)	Yes
Tourism (DRSC)	Yes

Source: Author’s construction using Government of India data.

The data from the 17th Lok Sabha, depicted via Table 2, shows that only a limited set of committees meet or exceed the benchmark of proportional SC/ST presence (25.4%). These include Social Justice & Empowerment, External Affairs, and a cluster of sectoral committees such as Chemicals & Fertilisers, Coal & Steel, Labour, Water Resources, Law & Justice, and Tourism. On the surface, this appears to indicate a spread of representation across a range of domains beyond identity-linked spaces. However, closer examination reveals that the proportionality map is both thin and unevenly distributed.

First, while committees like External Affairs and Law & Justice represent noteworthy inclusions, the majority of “big-ticket” or high-leverage committees remain inaccessible. Two of the three financial committees—Public Accounts and Public Undertakings—fall short of proportionality, while the Finance Committee itself records a significantly low figure (≈9.5%). This confirms a pattern already visible in earlier data: budgetary and fiscal oversight remains largely closed to SC/ST members, even when sectoral committees open up space for proportional inclusion.

Second, the committees where proportionality is achieved are predominantly sectoral and technocratic in

nature (e.g., Chemicals & Fertilisers, Coal & Steel, Water Resources). These bodies deal with important but relatively bounded policy domains, often focused on infrastructure, natural resources, or technical regulation. In terms of parliamentary hierarchy, they carry less weight compared to financial, defence, or home affairs committees. This suggests a form of segmented inclusion, where SC/ST MPs achieve proportional presence primarily in committees with narrower or specialised mandates.

Third, the persistence of over-representation on the Social Justice & Empowerment Committee reinforces the structural channeling of SC/ST MPs into identity-linked spaces. Its presence alongside sectoral committees that meet proportionality creates the appearance of inclusivity, but this inclusivity is not evenly spread across the parliamentary landscape. The conspicuous absence of proportionality in fiscal committees highlights a distributive asymmetry: SC/ST MPs may deliberate on welfare, law, and resource sectors, but they remain under-empowered in shaping the financial architecture that governs resource allocation itself.

Taken together, Table 2 reveals a paradoxical outcome. While proportionality is achieved in a handful of committees, the clustering in sectoral domains and the continued exclusion from financial oversight reproduce a hierarchy of influence. SC/ST MPs are included, but in ways that limit their ability to shape the commanding heights of parliamentary scrutiny. In effect, representation is dispersed but strategically bounded, reinforcing symbolic presence without redistributing substantive legislative power.

Table 3. Leadership representation (chairs and ministers)

Indicator	Count/Ratio	Share (%)
DRSC + financial committee chairpersons, 2009–2020	21 of 240	7.3
Union Council of Ministers (NDA-II)	6 of 54	11

Source: Author’s construction using Government of India data.

The evidence on leadership positions, as depicted in Table 3, reveals another dimension of systemic under-representation for SC/ST legislators. Committee chairs occupy crucial roles in parliamentary functioning: they set agendas, steer deliberations, and cast deciding votes in the event of ties. In this sense, chairs exercise disproportionate influence relative to ordinary members, shaping the policy salience and outputs of committees. Yet between 2009 and 2020, SC/ST MPs held only 21 of 240 chairpersonships across DRSCs and financial committees—just 7.3 percent—far below their proportional presence of 25.4 percent in the Lok Sabha.

A similar pattern extends to the executive branch. In the Union Council of Ministers during NDA II, SC/ST representation stood at 6 of 54 ministers (11 percent). While slightly higher than the chairperson share, this still falls well below demographic proportionality. Given that ministerial positions are the pinnacle of agenda-setting authority in the parliamentary system, the data underscores the limited scope of SC/ST participation in decision-making hierarchies.

This combined with the earlier committee membership figures (Table 1), this suggests that the issue is not simply one of access to seats but of access to power. SC/ST legislators are frequently channelled into membership on welfare-linked or sectoral committees, but they remain largely excluded from the leadership roles that would allow them to direct agendas or exercise decisive influence. This points to a layered exclusion: inclusion at the level of presence, exclusion at the level of authority.

The implications are significant. Representation without leadership risks reducing SC/ST MPs to passive participants, rather than active shapers, of parliamentary outcomes. It also entrenches a hierarchy within representation itself: while numerical presence can be showcased, substantive power remains concentrated elsewhere. In this way, leadership under-representation reinforces the broader pattern of differentiated inclusion, ensuring that the constitutional promise of political equality is only partially realised.

Table 4. Ticket denial among sitting SC/ST MPs

Party	Election year	SC/ST MPs denied tickets (%)
BJP	2019	53.7
BJP	2014	28
INC	2014	26

Source: Author's construction using Government of India data.

The evidence on ticket denial adds a further layer to the structural disadvantages faced by SC/ST legislators. While descriptive presence within Parliament and visible participation in committee work are apparent, the fragility of political careers significantly undercuts their ability to convert presence into sustained influence. The data shows that denial rates for sitting SC/ST MPs are exceptionally high: in 2019, more than half (53.7 percent) of the BJP's sitting SC/ST MPs were denied re-nomination, compared to already elevated rates of 28 percent in 2014. The Congress likewise recorded high rates in 2014, with 26 percent of sitting SC/ST MPs denied tickets.

Such volatility and disproportional denial undermine the stability of SC/ST parliamentary careers. High churn prevents the accumulation of seniority, which is often the basis for advancement into leadership positions such as committee chairpersonships or ministerial posts. It also weakens backbench bargaining power: MPs who are uncertain of renomination are less likely to push redistributive agendas or challenge party leadership on rights-based issues, since doing so could further jeopardize their career prospects. In effect, precarity disciplines dissent.

When read alongside the evidence of positional concentration (Table 1), leadership scarcity (Table 3), and bounded proportionality (Table 2), electoral precarity emerges as the third reinforcing strand of exclusion. SC/ST MPs may achieve presence in numbers, but their concentration in identity-linked committees, their marginality in leadership roles, and their high risk of being dropped by parties combine to produce a structural ceiling. This layered disadvantage ensures that their parliamentary role remains visible but vulnerable: they are included for representational legitimacy but denied the institutional security and authority that enable meaningful agenda-setting power.

Ultimately, the high denial rates demonstrate that SC/ST representation remains conditional and contingent, subject to party strategies rather than secured by principles of proportional inclusion or political equity. This condition of insecurity consolidates the broader pattern of differentiated inclusion: not only are SC/ST MPs steered into narrower domains, but their very tenure is rendered precarious, reinforcing dependence on party leadership and limiting the autonomy necessary to advance substantive social justice concerns.

Conclusion

This study shows a clear paradox in the way Scheduled Caste (SC) members are represented in Parliament. The Constitution has secured their presence through reserved seats, but that presence has not given them the same level of power as other MPs. SC MPs are most often placed in committees linked to welfare or

identity, while they are rarely included in financial or oversight committees that carry greater weight in shaping policy. Even when their share looks proportionate, it is usually in smaller or less influential committees. Leadership roles are rarer still. Very few SC MPs chair committees or hold senior ministerial positions, which limits their ability to set priorities or influence outcomes. This lack of authority is reinforced by unstable political careers, as many SC MPs face high rates of ticket denial. Without security of tenure, it is difficult for them to build seniority or challenge party leadership.

What emerges is a pattern of representation that is visible but restricted. SC MPs are seen in Parliament, but often in spaces that confirm symbolic inclusion rather than genuine power. Theories of representation help explain this—Pitkin’s distinction between presence and influence, or Kanter’s idea of tokenism—but the point comes through clearly even without them. Recognition matters, but recognition alone is not enough. Ambedkar’s insistence on safeguards for Dalits reminds us that political equality requires influence, not just visibility. The broader democratic implications are profound. When SC MPs are steered into limited roles and denied long-term security, their capacity to shape decisions that affect their communities is weakened. This keeps existing hierarchies intact rather than breaking them. Addressing the problem will mean going beyond the basic guarantee of reserved seats and changing how committees, leadership posts, and party tickets are distributed. Only then can representation become more than symbolic and move closer to the constitutional vision of justice and equality.

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