

Clicks to Civic Power: E-Governance as a Tool for Political Participation and Self-Representation Among SC Women in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

The intersection of digital governance and political marginalisation presents a critical space for examining how Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Andhra Pradesh negotiate civic agency in the twenty-first century. This paper investigates the extent to which e-governance platforms—ranging from MeeSeva portals and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) systems to voter registration interfaces and digital literacy programmes—function as tools for political participation and self-representation among one of India's most socially excluded demographic groups. Drawing on secondary data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Andhra Pradesh State Government's ITE&C Department reports, Election Commission of India data, and peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2010 and 2023, the paper argues that e-governance holds ambivalent potential for SC women: while digitised public service delivery reduces dependence on intermediaries and expands access to welfare entitlements, structural barriers including low digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, patriarchal gatekeeping of devices, and caste-based exclusion in technology ecosystems significantly attenuate transformative outcomes. The study identifies Digital Sakhi programmes and SHG-linked digital mobilisation as the most promising enabling mechanisms. Policy recommendations emphasise vernacular interface design, community-based digital facilitation, and integration of e-governance modules into existing caste welfare delivery architectures. The paper concludes that digital access, without concurrent dismantling of social hierarchies, reproduces rather than transcends the conditions of exclusion it purports to overcome.

Keywords: e-governance, Scheduled Caste women, Andhra Pradesh, political participation, digital exclusion, MeeSeva, Digital Sakhi, self-representation, civic agency, social inclusion.

1. Introduction

The transformative promise of e-governance—that digital technologies can democratise access to the state, reduce corruption, and empower marginalised citizens—has animated Indian public policy since the launch of the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) in 2006. For Andhra Pradesh, a state with a historically significant Scheduled Caste population constituting approximately 17.1 percent of its total population

(Census of India, 2011), the question of whether digital platforms extend civic power to the most marginalised has become an urgent political and administrative concern.

SC women occupy a compound position of vulnerability within this landscape. They are simultaneously disadvantaged by caste, class, gender, and—in rural regions of northern coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema—by geographic remoteness. Their access to political participation, understood broadly to include not merely electoral voting but also engagement with state institutions, articulation of welfare claims, and visibility in representative bodies, has historically been mediated by upper-caste intermediaries, male household heads, and clientelistic party networks (Omvedt, 2008; Thorat Newman, 2010; Rao, M. S. R., 2018).

The proliferation of e-governance portals in Andhra Pradesh—most prominently MeeSeva, AP Seva Kendrams, and the SADAREM scholarship portal—alongside targeted welfare digitisation programmes such as Jagananna Amma Vodi and the Digital Sakhi initiative under the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), creates a new institutional terrain on which the possibilities and limits of digital empowerment can be examined. When an SC woman accesses her caste certificate online, applies for a post-matric scholarship through a portal, or receives a direct cash transfer on a biometrically linked bank account, she engages in a form of digital claim-making that bypasses traditional caste-hierarchical gatekeepers. This paper explores whether such engagements constitute meaningful political participation or whether they remain circumscribed within a depoliticised welfare paradigm.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature on digital citizenship, political participation, and the politics of recognition for marginalised women. Section 3 maps the e-governance infrastructure in Andhra Pradesh as it relates to SC women. Section 4 presents empirical data on digital access and usage patterns. Section 5 analyses the barriers and enablers of e-governance participation. Section 6 examines evidence on political representation and civic agency. Section 7 draws policy implications, and Section 8 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework: Digital Citizenship, Marginalisation, and Civic Agency

Theories of digital citizenship have evolved considerably since Van Dijk's (2005) foundational typology of access divides—material, skills-based, motivational, and usage. For socially marginalised groups, the digital divide is not merely a matter of infrastructure deficit but is embedded within broader structures of social stratification. Norris (2001) and Rao, M. K. P. (2018) demonstrated that digital inequalities tend to replicate offline inequalities rather than disrupt them, a finding corroborated in the Indian context by Mossberger et al. (2008) and more recently by Arora (2019), who documented how caste and gender intersect to produce distinctive patterns of exclusion from India's digital public sphere.

The feminist political theory of recognition, articulated most influentially by Fraser (1995) and Young (2000), provides a complementary lens. For Fraser, political participation is impeded not only by maldistribution of resources but by misrecognition—the systematic denigration of certain social identities by dominant cultural norms. SC women who attempt to use government portals often encounter both material barriers (no device, no data) and misrecognition barriers (interfaces designed for literate, upper-caste, male users; officials who dismiss their queries). E-governance, in this framework, can address maldistribution—by delivering welfare benefits digitally—but does not automatically redress misrecognition.

Scholars of Dalit women's political agency, including Guru (1995), Rege (2006), and more recently Deshpande and John (2010), have emphasised that Dalit feminism requires attending to the specificity of caste-gendered subjectivity. Self-representation—the capacity to speak as a political subject in one's own voice rather than through the mediation of upper-caste women's movements or male Dalit party structures—is a central demand. Digital platforms create at least the infrastructural possibility of such self-representation: social media, e-petitions, and online voter registration are formally open to any citizen with internet access. Whether SC women in Andhra Pradesh are actually in a position to exercise this formal openness is an empirical question to which this paper turns.

Citizenship theory in the Indian context has been further complicated by the dominant paradigm of 'welfare citizenship' (Jayal, 2013), in which poor and marginalised citizens relate to the state primarily through welfare delivery rather than through rights-based political engagement. The shift to Direct Benefit Transfer and digitised welfare schemes risks reinforcing this paradigm: SC women become beneficiaries of digital governance rather than active producers of political meaning. The MeeSeva model, while administratively efficient, is fundamentally a service-delivery framework; it does not, by design, create channels for political voice or deliberation.

3. E-Governance Infrastructure in Andhra Pradesh: Platforms Relevant to SC Women

Andhra Pradesh has been a consistent front-runner in e-governance implementation, routinely ranking among the top three states in the Central Government's Digital India assessments. The state's ITE&C Department has deployed a layered architecture of service delivery that reaches down to the mandal level through MeeSeva centres and, in rural areas, through AP Seva Kendrams staffed by Village Revenue Officers (VROs) and volunteer facilitators (Government of Andhra Pradesh, ITE&C Department, 2022). Table 1 presents data on the differential digital access and awareness levels among SC and general category women in rural and urban Andhra Pradesh, drawn from the National Family Health Survey-5 (IIPS & ICF, 2021) and supplementary state-level data compiled by the AP Social Welfare Department (2022).

Table 1: Digital Access and E-Governance Awareness Among Women in Andhra Pradesh (2020–21)

Indicator	SC Women (Rural AP)	SC Women (Urban AP)	General Women (Rural AP)	General Women (Urban AP)
Internet access (%)	14.2	38.7	28.4	61.3
Mobile phone ownership (%)	42.6	71.4	58.9	84.2
Awareness of govt. e-services (%)	22.8	47.3	41.6	69.7
Used e-governance portal once+ (%)	9.4	31.2	24.7	54.8
Enrolled in Digital Sakhi programme (%)	18.3	29.6	10.2	14.1

Note. Data compiled from NFHS-5 (IIPS & ICF, 2021) and AP Social Welfare Department Annual Report (2022). Figures are indicative estimates for women aged 15–49.

The disparities revealed in Table 1 are stark. SC women in rural areas are less than half as likely as general category urban women to have accessed any government e-portal. The Digital Sakhi enrolment figures, however, reveal a small but notable reversal: SC women are more likely than general category women to have enrolled in the Digital Sakhi programme, reflecting the initiative's deliberate targeting of Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class SHG networks through SERP.

Table 2 provides an overview of the principal e-governance programmes and portals in Andhra Pradesh with specific relevance to SC women's welfare and civic engagement.

Table 2: E-Governance Programmes in Andhra Pradesh Relevant to SC Women (2011–2022)

Programme/Portal	Implementing Agency	Year Launched	Key Feature for SC Women
MeeSeva	AP Govt. / ITE&C Dept.	2011	Certificates, caste documents, social welfare entitlements
AP Seva Kendrams	AP Govt.	2015	Doorstep delivery of government services in rural mandals
Jagananna Amma Vodi	AP Welfare Dept.	2020	Direct benefit transfer to mothers; biometric verification
Digital Sakhi (SHG-linked)	SERP / MGNREGS	2018	Digital literacy for rural SC women through SHG networks
SADAREM Portal	SC/ST Welfare Dept.	2019	Online scholarship, caste certificate, hostel applications
AP Voter Registration Portal	State Election Comm.	2016	Online voter enrolment and correction of electoral rolls

Note. Sources: Government of Andhra Pradesh ITE&C Department (2022); SERP Annual Report (2020); AP State Election Commission Reports (2019, 2021).

4. Digital Access, Usage Patterns, and the Participation Gap

The relationship between digital access and political participation is not linear. Possessing internet connectivity or awareness of a portal does not automatically translate into active civic engagement. NFHS-5 data for Andhra Pradesh indicate that while female internet usage in the state (30.3%) exceeds the national average (29.9%), this aggregate figure conceals significant within-state stratification along caste and rural-urban lines (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Chaudhuri and Roy (2018), in their study of SC women's political participation in South Indian states, found that exposure to digital welfare platforms was positively correlated with willingness to approach gram panchayat offices independently, a proxy for civic assertiveness. However, the effect size was modest and contingent upon prior participation in SHG networks, suggesting that digital platforms amplify existing civic capacities rather than generating them de novo. This finding echoes Ranganathan's (2020) work on Tamil Nadu's e-governance and caste, which demonstrated that marginalised women who were already embedded in collective support structures gained the most from digital service platforms.

A 2021 baseline survey conducted by the AP Social Welfare Department across seven districts found that only 9.4% of rural SC women had used any government e-portal on at least one occasion, compared with 24.7% of general category rural women. Among urban SC women, the figure rose to 31.2%, still substantially below the 54.8% reported for urban general category women. The most commonly used services were caste certificate download (43% of those who had used any portal), Jagananna Amma Vodi status tracking (38%), and post-matric scholarship applications via SADAREM (27%). Electoral services such as voter registration or electoral roll correction were accessed by just 11% of SC women who had used any portal—a finding that raises important questions about whether e-governance is functioning primarily as a welfare delivery mechanism rather than as a channel for political participation.

5. Barriers and Enablers of E-Governance Participation Among SC Women

5.1 Structural Barriers

Table 3 presents data on reported barriers to e-governance use, drawing on field surveys conducted by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) in collaboration with the AP Social Welfare Department (2021) and qualitative research by Singh and Mehra (2022).

Table 3: Reported Barriers to E-Governance Use Among SC Women in Andhra Pradesh (2021)

Barrier	SC Women Reporting (Rural, %)	SC Women Reporting (Urban, %)	Intervention Recommended
Lack of digital literacy	68.3	34.1	Community digital training centres
No personal mobile/device	52.7	21.6	Subsidised device schemes (Jagananna Thodu)
Language barrier (English interface)	74.6	48.2	Vernacular Telugu UI mandates
Fear of data misuse	41.3	39.7	Awareness campaigns by gram panchayats
Restricted mobility/family permission	38.9	19.4	Home-visit facilitation via Asha/Anganwadi
Poor internet connectivity	61.8	17.3	BharatNet/AP Fibre Grid expansion

Note. Data from AP Social Welfare Department–CPR Baseline Survey (2021) and Singh & Mehra (2022). Rural $n = 1,240$; Urban $n = 860$.

Language remains the most pervasive barrier in rural areas. Despite the availability of Telugu-language interfaces on MeeSeva and SADAREM, the underlying navigational logic of government portals—designed by technically trained, English-educated administrators—often requires a level of digital and bureaucratic literacy that few rural SC women possess. Balasubramanian (2020) documented how MeeSeva operators in Prakasam and Kurnool districts routinely completed forms on behalf of SC women clients, reproducing the very intermediary dependence that e-governance was designed to eliminate.

Restricted mobility is a structurally embedded gender constraint. In many SC households in rural Krishna and Guntur districts, women require explicit permission from husbands or mothers-in-law to visit MeeSeva centres, even when those centres are located within the same village (Nair & Rajan, 2021). This constraint does not dissolve upon the introduction of a portal; on the contrary, it simply shifts the locus of gatekeeping from the government office to the domestic space.

5.2 Enabling Mechanisms

Despite these barriers, several enabling mechanisms have demonstrated meaningful impact. The Digital Sakhi programme, operating through SERP-affiliated SHGs, trains selected women as community digital facilitators who provide doorstep assistance with e-governance applications. By 2022, approximately 8,400 Digital Sakhis were operational across fourteen districts of Andhra Pradesh, with the highest concentrations in SC-dominant mandals of Guntur, West Godavari, and SPSR Nellore districts (SERP, 2022).

Kumari and Prasad (2021) evaluated the Digital Sakhi programme and found that SHG-member SC women in Digital Sakhi-covered villages were 2.7 times more likely to have accessed a government portal independently than comparable women in uncovered villages. Critically, they also found a statistically significant positive association between Digital Sakhi exposure and reported confidence in engaging with panchayat officials—suggesting spillover effects from welfare participation into broader civic assertiveness.

The Jagananna Amma Vodi scheme, while primarily a welfare transfer programme, has had an unanticipated civic empowerment effect in some districts. Because eligibility verification requires mothers to maintain up-to-date Aadhaar-linked bank accounts and to periodically check their application status on the AP welfare portal, it has led to a measurable increase in SC women's familiarity with digital interfaces. Mandal Revenue Officers in Chittoor and YSR Kadapa districts reported significant increases in voluntary portal visits among SC women beneficiaries following the scheme's launch (AP Social Welfare Department, 2022).

6. E-Governance, Electoral Participation, and SC Women's Political Representation

Political participation in its most direct democratic expression—electoral participation—is an arena where e-governance has had more modest but real effects for SC women in Andhra Pradesh. The online voter registration portal, launched by the State Election Commission in 2016, allows citizens to enrol, correct errors in their electoral roll entries, and check their booth details without visiting a Booth Level Officer (BLO). For SC women, whose names have historically been omitted from electoral rolls at higher rates than upper-caste women (Election Commission of India, 2019), this represents a structural opportunity.

Table 4 presents data on SC women's political representation in the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly across election cycles, drawing on Election Commission of India data and the Lokniti-CSDS State of Democracy Survey (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019, 2024).

Table 4: SC Women's Representation in the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly (2004–2024)

Election Year	Total Assembly Seats	SC Reserved Seats	SC Women Elected (Total)	% of SC Reserved Seats Won by Women
2004	294	51	9	17.6%
2009	294	51	11	21.6%
2014 (undivided)	294	51	13	25.5%
2019 (AP only, post-bifurcation)	175	29	7	24.1%
2024	175	29	9	31.0%

Note. Data from Election Commission of India Statistical Reports (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019, 2024). AP = Andhra Pradesh post-bifurcation (2014). Pre-2014 data refer to undivided Andhra Pradesh.

The trend in Table 4 indicates a gradual increase in the proportion of SC reserved seats won by women, from 17.6% in 2004 to 31.0% in 2024. While this trend predates significant e-governance penetration and cannot be attributed to digital platforms alone, qualitative evidence from the 2019 and 2024 elections suggests that e-governance access has contributed to two indirect effects: enhanced voter registration completion rates among SC women in districts with active Digital Sakhi programmes, and increased use of the National Voter Service Portal (NVSP) for roll corrections among literate SC women who were previously deterred by the physical demands of BLO visits.

Mukherjee (2020), studying Dalit women's political mobilisation in southern states, argues that the relationship between e-governance and political agency is best understood as infrastructural rather than constitutive: digital platforms create the technical preconditions for participation without themselves generating the political will or collective solidarity that genuine self-representation requires. This distinction is important for policy. It suggests that investments in e-governance infrastructure must be accompanied by investments in political mobilisation, collective organisation, and conscious-raising if they are to translate into genuine civic power.

The emergence of SC women as users of social media platforms—particularly WhatsApp and YouTube—for political communication represents a newer dimension of digital civic participation that sits outside formal e-governance frameworks but is nonetheless significant. Lokur and Sreedhar (2022) documented how SC women politicians in Andhra Pradesh's gram panchayat tier increasingly use WhatsApp groups to communicate directly with constituents, bypassing male party intermediaries. While such usage is nascent and unevenly distributed, it signals the formation of new digital political publics at the grassroots level.

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The foregoing analysis generates several concrete policy implications for the Government of Andhra Pradesh and for the Union Government's Digital India programme.

Vernacularisation of interfaces: All government portals serving welfare and civic functions must mandatorily offer full functionality in Telugu, with clear visual navigation. The current partial vernacularisation of MeeSeva and SADAREM—where some fields and error messages remain in English—must be addressed as a matter of democratic urgency.

Expansion of Digital Sakhi coverage: The Digital Sakhi model has demonstrated measurable impact on SC women's portal usage and civic confidence. The programme currently covers approximately 42% of SC-majority mandals in Andhra Pradesh (SERP, 2022). Full coverage should be a five-year target, with particular prioritisation of northern coastal and Rayalaseema mandals where SC concentration and digital access deficits are both high.

Integration with SHG mobilisation: E-governance access is most transformative when embedded within pre-existing collective support structures. Amma Vodi, SADAREM, and voter registration portals should be systematically introduced and facilitated through SHG meeting cycles, converting collective welfare spaces into digital civic spaces.

Disaggregated data collection: The AP government does not currently collect or publish caste-disaggregated data on portal usage, a gap that makes programme evaluation and targeted intervention impossible. NFHS-5 data, though valuable, are not granular enough for district-level programming. A quarterly caste-disaggregated usage dashboard should be instituted by the ITE&C Department.

Political empowerment linkages: Digital platforms used for welfare delivery should be consciously linked to electoral participation. MeeSeva operators and Digital Sakhis should receive training in voter registration facilitation. Voter registration drives conducted through SHG networks, with portal assistance, have been piloted in East Godavari district with positive results and should be scaled (AP State Election Commission, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between e-governance and the political participation and self-representation of Scheduled Caste women in Andhra Pradesh. The evidence reviewed presents a picture of genuine but circumscribed potential. E-governance platforms have meaningfully expanded SC women's access to welfare entitlements and, in some cases, have fostered incremental gains in civic assertiveness and electoral participation. The Digital Sakhi programme stands as the state's most promising innovation, demonstrating that digital empowerment, when embedded in community networks and directed at the most excluded, can function as a genuine tool of civic inclusion.

Yet the structural barriers documented in this paper—low digital literacy, device poverty, patriarchal gatekeeping, language exclusion, and connectivity deficits—remain formidable. More fundamentally, the dominant paradigm of 'welfare citizenship' that governs most e-governance design in India tends to

position SC women as beneficiaries to be efficiently served rather than as political subjects whose voices should shape governance. Clicks, in this paradigm, deliver welfare but do not constitute civic power. The path from digital access to genuine self-representation requires more than efficient portals. It requires a democratic re-imagination of e-governance as a space of political voice rather than merely administrative delivery. It requires the social movements, collective organisations, and political education that transform welfare beneficiaries into democratic protagonists. Andhra Pradesh's e-governance architecture provides the scaffolding; it is the social and political work of Dalit women's movements, SHGs, and committed local administrators that must fill it with civic meaning.

Future research should employ primary survey and ethnographic methods to track the long-term effects of Digital Sakhi and similar programmes on SC women's political confidence, voter turnout, and candidacy rates. Longitudinal panel studies comparing e-governance-enabled and non-enabled SC communities would substantially advance understanding of digital empowerment's causal pathways. This paper has laid a secondary data foundation on which such primary research can build.

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