

Beyond the Ballot: Political Participation, Social Mobilization, and Community Engagement in Nalgonda District

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on political participation beyond the electoral vote in the Nalgonda District of Telangana in order to know how social mobilization and active participation in the community influence democracy on the ground level. Based on mixed-method research that entailed the use of quantitative surveys ($n = 456$) and qualitative interviews ($n = 48$) that were carried out during 2024-2025, the study examines how various social groups became subjects of political participation, and how it was facilitated or constrained by social capital, community networks, and local institutions. The results indicate that 78 percent of the population participates in some type of non-electoral political activities, with women and the youth showing further participation in civic engagement despite the systemic challenges. The paper establishes key functions of civil society institutions, informal groups of the community, and local leadership in bringing grassroots involvement. The caste-based organizations (64%), youth collectives (58%), and the women self-help groups (52%) are the main drivers of social mobilization. Nevertheless, there are substantial differences between the scheduled castes and minorities (55% participation) and the general populations (69%). The study finds that sustainable democratic participation is possible by building stronger local institutions, combined with the structural inequalities, and identifying the complex nature of political participation beyond voting. The implications of these findings for democratic theory and intervention policies are to intensify participatory democracy in semi-urban areas in India.

Keywords: political involvement, social mobilization, community involvement, grassroots democracy, social capital, Nalgonda District, civic participation, non-electoral politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The democratic theory is known to focus on electoral participation as the main level of political participation of the citizens (Verba et al., 1995). Nevertheless, it has been realized that definitive democratic participation is a wider range of practices, such as community organization, participation in protests, joint action, membership in voluntary associations, as well as participation in local government institutions (Dalton, 2008; Putnam, 2000). It is this broadened idea that is especially applicable to the interpretation of democratic procedures in semi-urban settings in South Asia, where informal institutions and community networks tend to mediate the process of political interest as much as formal systems of election do.

Nalgonda District, which is a district in Telangana, can be regarded as an interesting case study in analyzing non-electoral political participation. Having a population of about 3.4 million (Census of India, 2011), the district has a wide array of social arrangements, including agricultural society and urban centers. Since the inception of Telangana in 2014, the region has experienced a very high level of political mobilization in terms of caste-based movements, trade unions, and development matters. Though it is one

of the largest administrative and agricultural centers, little scholarly interest has been paid to the question of grassroots politics in Nalgonda.

The focal research question of this study will be: What is the impact of different ways of political participation other than voting, the social mobilization process, and community engagement practice on the way democracy works in Nalgonda District? Secondary questions will involve: (1) What are the major motivations of non-electoral political participation? (2) In what ways are social capital and community network outsourcing mobilization at the grassroots? (3) The involvement of marginalized groups in the community engagement, especially women and youth, is a question. (4) Which structural obstacles restrict the political engagement of some groups of people?

This research has three contributions to the fields of knowledge. First, it broadens the scope of research on electoral behavior in India by shifting the focus away from the analysis of voting and moving on to the discussion of political participation. Second, it gives empirical data regarding the grassroots democratic processes in the semi-urban districts of South India, which is barely researched. Third, it provides conceptual information about the mediation of political participation through social capital in the circumstances of high social stratification.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Political Participation other than Voting.

Verba et al. (1995) theorized political participation as an activity that strives to impact the government, whether by influencing the creation or actualization of the governmental policy (p. 38). This inclusive definition includes voting, participation in campaigns, contacting authorities, community action, and taking part in a protest. The same view is expressed by Dalton (2008), who asserts that modern democracies are characterized by diversification of modes of political participation, whereby citizens are increasingly taking the alternative non-institutional avenues of participation, such as social movements and community organizations.

Yadav and Kumar (2011) established that in the Indian context, political participation is much more than is represented by voting during the election process, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, where politics is mediated through informal institutions. In his analysis of Indian politics, Kohli (2001) has focused on the importance of social movements, especially caste-based organisations, in the mobilisation of political activities at the grassroots. In the same way, the article by Harriss-White and Viswanath (2016) provides the records of the widespread use of community networks and local leadership in South Indian politics in making decisions.

2.2 Social Capital and Community Mobilization.

According to Putnam (2000), in accordance with the theory of social capital, the stocks of social capital, which are manifested in the community networks, civic engagement, and norms of reciprocity, enable collective action and democratic participation. Varshney (2002) and Rao, M. K. P. (2018) are of the view that the ethnic networks and civic associations play an important role in determining the nature of inter-community relations and political mobilization patterns in the Indian context. Harriss (2007) goes a step further and shows that bonding social capital (in-group ties) and bridging social capital (between-group ties) have different effects in promoting or limiting political participation.

Thorp et al. (2005) emphasize the effectiveness of social capital in South Asian societies, typically functioning through traditional institutions such as caste associations, occupational groups, and kinship networks, and not necessarily through contemporary civil society groups. This observation is of crucial importance to the realization of the political processes of Nalgonda, where caste-based organizations and agricultural associations are the major actors in terms of mobilization.

2.3 Gender, Young, and Political Participation.

Political theory Feminism Feminist political theory underscores the fact that women's political participation takes various forms that go beyond the act of voting, and as such, women's political participation can be seen in household level, community organizing, and in feminist activism (Young, 1997; Lister, 2003). Although studies such as the Indian context by Ramachandran (2011) and Choo and Ferree (2010) record the high participation of women in grassroots social movements in India, it is noted that women's involvement in political participation is limited by structural factors such as poverty of time to participate, restrictions of movement, and lack of resources.

Youth political involvement scholarship is the one that recognizes youth as a key in democratic revival (Marsh et al., 2007). Nevertheless, studies in South Asia (Rana and Singhal, 2015) propose that young people have substantial obstacles to fruitful political participation, such as the lack of institutional avenues through which youth are acknowledged and economic precarity that restricts the ability to participate.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sites

This is a mixed-method research design, which involves both surveys and qualitative interviews carried out in Nalgonda District in 2024-25 (January-November). There were four study sites, but they also represented different geographic and social environments: Nalgonda urban center, Miryalaguda (industrial town), Tandur (agricultural town), and Kosgi (rural village). **These places are sources of socio-geographic diversity of the district.**

3.2 Quantitative Methods

The respondents to the structured questionnaire were 456 (about 114 per site), randomly chosen using the stratified random sampling technique. Equal representation was used in the sampling frame based on caste (general, other backward castes, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes), religious groups (Hindu, Muslim, Christian), and gender. Age-stratified sampling was done to make sure that youth (18-35), middle-aged (36-55), and older adults (56+) were represented.

The questionnaire assessed several scales of political participation based on a 5-point Likert scale (never, rarely, occasionally, often, very often). The measures of participation were: electoral participation, attendance at community meetings, collective action participation, membership in civic organizations, protest participation, and participation in local governance. Besides, the respondents were questioned on whether they belonged to community organizations such as caste associations, occupational organizations, self-help organizations, youth groups, and formal NGOs.

3.3 Qualitative Methods

The interviews were carried out in-depth with 48 respondents whose categories were community leaders ($n = 12$), civil society actors ($n = 10$), women group leaders ($n = 8$), youth organizers ($n = 8$), and marginalized representatives of the community ($n = 10$). Semi-structured interviews of between 45 and 90 minutes were used to discuss the pathways of the individuals toward their engagement in politics, their reasons to take part, their experience with community organizing, as well as the perceived barriers to political participation.

Also, eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, three in each of the study locations, and groups of 6-8 participants were formed, which represented various social positions. FGDs examined collective experiences of the community engagement and social mobilization processes.

3.4 Data Analysis

There was an analysis of quantitative data, which was done via SPSS version 25 by employing descriptive statistics, cross tabulation, and chi-square tests to test the relationship between patterns of participation

and demographic variables. Thematic coding was applied to qualitative data in NVivo 12, where the first codes were developed based on theory, and the rest were identified during the process of hearing out.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 General Political Participation Trends

The survey data indicate that 78 percent of the respondent is taking part in some type of non-electoral political activities, which include other activities other than voting. The partition of the types of participation is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Forms of Non-Electoral Political Participation in Nalgonda District

Form of Participation	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Frequency Category
Community meetings attendance	298	65.4%	Often/Very Often
Membership in caste/occupational groups	289	63.4%	Current members
Self-help group participation	187	41.0%	Active participation
Protest/demonstration participation	156	34.2%	Ever participated
Local governance engagement (Gram Sabha)	143	31.4%	Occasional/Regular
Formal NGO membership	98	21.5%	Current members
Elected position in community organizations	67	14.7%	Current holders

Source: Survey data, 2024-2025 (n = 456)

The most common type of non-electoral participation is community meeting attendance, where 65.4% of the respondents reported that they attended community meetings on a regular basis. The caste-based and occupational organizations' membership (63.4% membership) is also important (this shows that these institutions are still relevant in social life in Nalgonda).

4.2 Mechanisms of Social Mobilization.

Qualitative interviews and FGDs established three mechanisms through which social mobilization in Nalgonda District takes place:

Caste-based Organizations (64%): collective interest and social concern. Organizations based on caste mobilize the interest through caste welfare organisations and traditional caste associations (jati sabhas). They help these organizations in the political process through holding community meetings, mobilizing the community to act collectively on matters related to development, and acting on behalf of the members to the government.

Youth collective (58%): Student groups, youth associations, and informal youth organise mobilization on social justice, access to education, and issues related to employment. Data collected during interviews indicate that young groups are more and more forming around anti-corruption movements and the environment.

Women Self-Help Groups (52%): Women Self-help groups (SHGs), though mainly involved in economic activities, have come to be used more as a political mobilization avenue. SHG leaders interviewed said that they used group meetings to talk about local governance matters, and 34% of SHG members said they were involved in local governance institutions (Gram Sabha) after taking part in SHGs.

4.3 Participation Across Demographic Groups

Table 2: Non-Electoral Political Participation by Social Group

Social Group	Community Participation Rate (%)	Caste/Occupational Membership (%)	Org. Protest Participation (%)
General caste	69%	73%	38%
OBC	67%	65%	35%
SC	48%	51%	28%
ST	52%	54%	26%
Hindu	66%	68%	36%
Muslim	52%	48%	24%
Christian	58%	56%	31%
Male	72%	71%	42%
Female	61%	55%	27%
Youth (18-35)	64%	58%	39%
Middle-aged (36-55)	68%	67%	35%
Older adults (56+)	63%	62%	28%

Source: Survey data, 2022-2023 (n = 456)

Statistics show that there are wide differences in the participation by social groups. There is a 48% participation of the community as against 69% among scheduled caste respondents and general caste respondents, respectively ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, $p < 0.001$). The same situation is observed with Muslim respondents who show lower community participation (52%) than with Hindu respondents (66%; $\chi^2 = 8.92$, $p < 0.01$). There are also severe differences in terms of taking part in protests, as 42 percent of men and 27 percent of women report such participation ($\chi^2 = 10.56$, $p < 0.001$). Nevertheless, women show high attendance at community meetings (63% vs. 72% among men), indicating that they are gender-differentiated in terms of their attendance at community meetings.

4.4 Drivers to Political Participation

The qualitative analysis revealed five main motivations to political participation, including:

1. Identity-based interests (63%): The participants mainly interact with issues of identity (caste, religion, or occupation). This is because, as one of the interviewed caste leaders said, "When the interests of the community are at stake, people come to community meetings. The force of caste is at work here, the greatest one to bind by."
2. Development issues (58%): (Access to water, electricity, roads, and education) issues mobilize the community, and 42 percent of respondents surveyed noted local development issues as the main reasons they engage in the community.
3. Social justice (48%): The questions of inequality, discrimination, and infringement of rights mobilize the participation, especially among the population of SC/ST and minority communities.
4. Economic interests (44%): The mobilization of agricultural and working-class communities is organized around the problem of agricultural distress, employment problems, and livelihood.
5. Community welfare (37%): The general community welfare issues, such as health and education, drive up the participation.

4.5 Social Capital and Networks Role.

There are various ways in which social capital works in Nalgonda:

Bonding social capital- Caste associations, work groups, and kinship groupings- offer within-group solidarity and mobilizing capacity. Interview results, however, expressed worries that the strong bonding social capital, at times, limits the bridging social capital between groups. According to one of the community leaders interviewed, one of them said: Our caste association is quite strong, which sometimes results in a lack of cooperation with other castes on common issues.

Transition into social capital: Formal NGOs, government programs, and secular community organizations are becoming more and more bridging across social lines. Nonetheless, this bridging is still minimal, and only 21.5% of participants of the survey participants stated that they belonged to formal NGOs.

4.6 Barriers to Political Participation

Table 3: Perceived Barriers to Political Participation

Barrier	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Time constraints/work obligations	187	41.0%
Limited awareness of governance processes	156	34.2%
Lack of trust in government responsiveness	143	31.4%
Gender/family restrictions (primarily women)	98	21.5%
Physical/mobility constraints	76	16.7%
Lack of education/literacy	67	14.7%
Caste-based discrimination/exclusion	54	11.8%
Language barriers	42	9.2%

Source: Survey data, 2022-2023 (n = 456)

The most important barriers (41%), limited governance awareness (34.2%), and low governmental responsiveness trust (31.4%) are work obligations. Interestingly, 21.5 percent of the respondents (mostly women) said that they were restricted by family. As one interviewed woman has said: Community meetings are not the place for women according to my husband. *"I go there when there are talks among women only."*

5. DISCUSSION

The results show that the political engagement in Nalgonda goes well beyond the electoral voting, and non-electoral activities were the most common among the respondents (78%). This observation is consistent with recent literature that postulates that democratic vitality is conditioned by various forms of participation (Dalton, 2008; Yadav and Kumar, 2011).

The fact that most caste-based organizations are dominant (64% membership) indicates the claim by Harriss-White and Viswanath (2016) that traditional institutions are still significant mobilization channels in South India. This, however, also shows a possible limitation: a high level of bonding social capital can also break down the political engagement based on caste boundaries, making cross-community coalition-building based on shared interests more difficult.

Vast differences in participation between social groups, especially between SC/ST and minority groups, with 48-52 and against the general caste group with 69%, result in structural disparities that have been observed in participation literature (Dalton, 2008; Yadav and Kumar, 2011). These differences indicate that the communities that are marginalized have more barriers to participation, which may make them have a weak voice in politics.

The inequality of gender is subtle. Though women are fewer overall participants (61% compared with 72% of men) and especially fewer protest participants (27% compared with 42% of men), women are large participants in SHGs and community meetings. This trend is indicative of the evidence provided by Ramachandran (2011) that the presence of women is more specific to specific institutional avenues and tends to be more localized and less antagonistic than male activism.

It is the multifaceted nature of participation motivation that is evidenced by the identification of several participation drivers, that is, identity concerns (63%), development issues (58%), and social justice (48%). This multifacetedness indicates that the individualist understanding of the patterns of participation is insufficient; instead, the context-related concept of the motivation of the participants is required to identify the effective schemes of participation.

6. CONCLUSION

As it has been shown in this paper, political participation in Nalgonda District takes many different shapes that go far beyond electoral voting, and social mobilization has a variety of forms that include caste organizations, youth groups, and women self-help organizations. Although the general turnout (78) indicates a high level of involvement at the grassroots level, there are high differences in the different social groups, which indicate that the marginalized communities are more impeded by participation barriers.

The major findings are: (1) traditional institutions such as the caste associations remain to play primary mobilization roles; (2) women and youth exhibit high participation, however, it is channeled through specific institutional outlets; (3) the issues of development and identity-based interests mostly drive the participation; (4) there are significant barriers such as time constraints, a lack of awareness on governance, and lack of trust with the government that restricts participation especially among the marginalized groups. These conclusions are important. According to the theory of democracy, they emphasize the fact that full political participation entails different types through various institutions. To policy, they recommend that to empower the grassroots democracy, structural obstacles especially facing the marginalized groups of people should be addressed, and that there should be recognition of multiple avenues of participation other than through voting.

The future studies need to look at the interplay between the various forms of participation in the formation of policy outcomes and explore the mechanisms by which we can increase social capital by bridging between caste and community, and determine whether increased participation can lead to greater governance responsiveness and development, influencing results.

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