



Empowering Scheduled Castes through Community Halls in Telangana: Opportunities and Challenges

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The Context

The Constitution of India contains special provisions for protecting self-respect and promoting the socio-economic development of socially and economically deprived sections and realizing inclusive development. The Government of India and State Governments have launched several development programs for the empowerment of Scheduled Castes and other disadvantaged sections. Article 17 of the Constitution says that untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offense. Article 46 envisages the promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other weaker sections. There are other safeguards such as the Anti-Untouchability Act of 1955 and the SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 for the protection of the rights of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. One of the core interventions undertaken for the emancipation and empowerment of the Scheduled Castes has been the construction of Community Halls and Ambedkar Bhavans across the urban and rural areas of the country.

The concept of community halls for the marginalized communities is not a recent phenomenon nor is it unique to India. Community halls are public locations where the members of a particular community gather for group activities, social support, public information and other purposes. Historically, the Scheduled Castes are not allowed to access both public and private spaces. Community halls for the Scheduled Castes serve multiple purposes; they provide space for mobilizing the community; serve as platforms for discussing common issues and addressing them; foster solidarity among the SCs; the cumulative impact would contribute to the empowerment of the community.

The Government of India, during the Seventh Plan period (1985-1990), unveiled plans for the construction of Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls across the States and Union Territories. Construction of a community hall within the village is considered as one of the means for the SC

community to organize meetings to discuss the issues relating to their development. It would also enable them to take part in the decision making process on par with others.

The Scheduled Castes Development Department (SCDD) is implementing several programs to achieve equality and promote economic, educational and human development as well as ensuring social dignity among the Scheduled Castes. Among the key activities of the SCDD under the SCSDF (Scheduled Castes Special Development Fund) are the creation of infrastructural facilities, assignment of land, provision of housing and construction of Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls which would provide space for the articulation of issues and concerns for the development of Scheduled Castes.

This study defines the term “empowerment” as the availability and accessibility of exclusive space or community center to the Scheduled Castes to discuss the issues and concerns of their socio-economic development including dignity and security so as to participate in institutions and development processes at the grassroots level. The availability and accessibility of Ambedkar Bhavans (ABs) and Community Halls (CHs)¹ with adequate and quality space, resources and facilities would enable the marginalized communities such as the Scheduled Castes to make collective articulation of their interests and to participate in the decision-making process and thereby to empower the community.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the distribution and utilization of community halls and activities conducted and issues discussed by the community in the selected districts;
2. Investigate the facilities available in community halls and their accessibility to women; and
3. Study the level of empowerment of Scheduled Castes and their participation in grassroots level institutions.

¹ The district level and mandal level facilities are called Ambedkar Bhavans while the village level facilities are known as Community Halls (CHs). The focus of this policy brief, however, is on CHs.

Methodology

The issues and concerns relating to the availability and accessibility of Community Halls (CHs) by Scheduled Castes are examined in two phases: organizing a brainstorming session, and undertaking micro-level study taking inputs from the multi-stakeholder brainstorming session. Two districts were selected for the study: Warangal Urban and Nalgonda (SC population of these districts is higher than the state average). Four villages from each district were chosen totalling to eight villages in all for an in-depth study. The study used a mixed-method approach - quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire and qualitative information was gathered through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Secondary data was collected from the SCDD. The study adopted both historiographical and empirical methods involving primary and secondary data collection. Primary data was collected through an instrument and FGDs.

Table 1: List of selected locations under the study

Districts	% of SC population	Mandal	Village
Warangal Urban	18.14	Bheemadevarapally	Kothakonda
			Kothapally
		Inavole	Kondaparthi
			Inavole
Nalgonda	18.1	Narkatpally	Narkatpally
			Chervugattu
		Katangoor	Pamangandla
			Dugnevalli
Districts: 2	SC Population in the State: 15.5%	Mandals : 4	Villages: 8

Status of Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls in the State

Budget allocations for the construction and maintenance of Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls during 2014-15 to 2018-19 periods is Rs. 34160.4 lakh; but the actual expenditure during the same period is Rs. 1250.64 lakh, which accounts for 3.66% of total allocations. However, the allocations have increased progressively since 2014-15 from just Rs. 200 lakh to Rs. 18,000 lakh in 2018-19 with the latter representing the highest level of allocation. The main factor contributing to the low level of expenditure is the construction of Mandal level community halls which was started only two years ago in most of the Mandals.

Government sanctioned 437 Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls during 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19 with an allocation of Rs. 17330.5 lakh. This works out to Rs. 39.65 lakh per AB/CH; out of 437 ABs and CHs, 334 ABs and CHs (76%) were sanctioned during 2017-18 alone. It is also noticed that there is a variation in the allocation of budget across districts. The bulk of the Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls were

sanctioned to Nalgonda, Suryapet and Yadadri Bhuvanagiri districts. And the remaining small fraction of the centers was allotted to Jogulamba Gadwal, Jayashankar Bhupalpally, Jangaon, and Warangal Rural districts.

There are considerable variations between the number of applications for Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls and the number of approvals. In Warangal Urban district out of 102 applications, 25 Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls were sanctioned; while in Nalgonda District out of 95 applications, 89 Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls were sanctioned.

Regarding the construction of Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls as well, the status throws up a mixed picture. In Warangal Urban district out of 25 ABs and CHs, five have been completed. In Nalgonda district out of 89 ABs and CHs, nine buildings/halls have been completed and the remaining are in different phases of construction such as design, land acquisition, budget release and the like.

Availability of Space: In Kottapally, Kottakonda, Kondaparthi and Dugnevalli villages the land allocated for the construction of community halls was inadequate and even the community is not satisfied with the availability of space. By contrast, the users from villages of Inavole, Pamangandla, Chervugattu and Narkatpally are happy with the space available at their respective community halls which are relatively newly-constructed (see table 2).

Utilization: The existing community centers have been mostly constructed in the localities of SC communities, i.e. Mala and Madiga colonies. However, their accessibility to women reveals a mixed pattern as illustrated in table 2. ABs and CHs are used for organizing both official and private events and activities. The official functions include meetings to commemorate Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and meetings conducted in connection with government programs and visits of government officials; private functions/activities include celebration of festivals (such as Vinayaka Chaviti) and organizing private chit funds. The local community also organized meetings to discuss common issues relating to the SC community and colony and the village.

Maintenance: Ambedkar Bhavans at the district level are maintained by the Scheduled Castes Development Department. Junior Assistant/Assistant Social Welfare Officer is in-charge of the Bhavans. Community halls, in all the villages, are being managed by the community or Ambedkar Youth Organizations. The field survey found that in Kothapally, Kondaparthi, Inavole, Narkatpally and Pamangandla villages, the community halls are cleaned by the community members themselves; while in the other villages, the maintenance is not satisfactory.

Participation of Scheduled Castes in Grassroots Level Institutions

Participation is influenced by many factors. Meaningful civic

participation in politics and governance contributes to a democratic culture in rural India. In fact, democracy succeeds only when the majority of people particularly the marginalized communities have access to resources and institutions and participate actively in the governance and development processes. It can be hypothesized here that accessibility to community halls and participation in their activities would motivate and enable them to take an active part in grassroots level institutions. The study, however, reveals that the participation of SC elected representatives in the PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions) leaves a lot to be desired. The major contributing factors are poor socio-economic background, inadequate powers and budget, bureaucratic apathy towards the conduct of meetings and communicating information to the members and the community in general, predetermined norms to implement the central and State-sponsored schemes, patriarchy and excessive interference of higher-level political executives in the functioning of PRIs.

The impact of utilizing newly-constructed community halls on the Scheduled Castes women is particularly visible. They regularly meet at the community halls to discuss community and family concerns and priorities. The study also found that they are actively involved in the decision making process at the community level. The women are now able to question the government officials in the Gram Sabhas and demand more facilities and schemes for their localities; their mobilisation through Self Help Groups also contributed to their increased participation.

day. SHGs promoted leadership, self-confidence and social mobility contributing towards the empowerment of poor women. But the community halls need to be more inclusive with respect to women since women are able to access community halls in only a couple of sample villages. SHGs prefer rented houses instead of community halls where the halls are too small to accommodate them and they also lack privacy in some locations. In some villages, the halls are inaccessible to women as they are located away from their neighbourhoods.

Youth Priorities: The youth play a leading part in the utilisation and maintenance of CHs (see below). In fact the community vision and priorities are articulated by the youth. The SC youth reported that they need higher educational institutions at Mandal or Revenue Division levels; financial support/ investment for taking self-employment; employment opportunities for boys and girls in public and private sector at an early age. More importantly, the youth are not willing to take up their traditional occupation of agriculture. However, the fundamental constraints include their low level of employability and lack of skills such as soft skills, professional skills, communication skills, team-work, critical thinking, and information technology.

The mobilisation of the youth owes a great deal to the community halls. It is the youth who play a leading role in organising a variety of events at community halls such as Ambedkar Jayanthi, Christmas, Vinayaka Chaviti and even blood donation camps. The community halls serve as a common

Table 2: Status of Community Halls

Details	District: Warangal Urban				District: Nalgonda			
	1*	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Year of construction	1993	1992	2001	1996	1998	2018	2018	1998
More than one community hall in the village	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Regular maintenance of the CA by community	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Availability of toilets	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Compound wall	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Availability of chairs & other items	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Adequacy of space	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Availability of newspapers & books	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Conduct of weekly community panchayats	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Access to SHG members	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Conduct of chit meetings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

*The numbers represent the community halls of the following villages respectively: 1- Kottakonda; 2- Kottapally; 3 – Kondaparthi; 4- Inavole; 5- Narkatpally; 6- Chervugattu; 7- Pamangandla; 8 - Dugnevalli

Participation of Women and SHGs: The SHGs (Self Help Groups) of study locations, in general, are functioning effectively with most members utilizing the financial assistance for a variety of purposes including the purchase of land and households assets, repayment of old debts and saving money for the rainy

platform for the young women as well who use the space to celebrate festivals and other community events. The youth also take active part in various campaigns and awareness building drives initiated by the government from time to time relating to pulse polio, literacy, voting, and corruption. The regular

community activities organised at community halls have created social capital among the SC community which in turn has enabled them to articulate their concerns and priorities at local forums and official meetings.

The status of community halls presented in table 2 throws up a mixed picture. It reveals that the oldest of the sample CHs was constructed almost three decades ago in 1992. More than a half of the villages have more than one CH. It can be seen from the table that maintenance of the halls leaves a lot to be desired. A good proportion of the halls are bereft of adequate space and essential facilities such as toilets, compound walls and furniture. Weekly community meetings and chit meetings are held at regular intervals at the community halls but half of the halls are not accessible to women's Self Help Groups. However, the general pattern is that relatively new halls are more accessible to women since they are located within or close to the SC localities and are often more spacious with better facilities than the older ones. In these villages women are visibly more proactive with higher levels of participation in local institutions.

Key Policy Messages

- Construction of Ambedkar Bhavans and Community Halls needs to be considered as a long term investment in the well-being of Scheduled Castes.
- Allocation of ABs and CHs across different administrative units needs to be done objectively on the basis of certain criteria; for instance on the basis of the percentage of SC population across the districts, Mandals, and villages. Presently the distribution of community centers is skewed.
- Allocation of adequate land for the community centers to make provisions for facilities such as meeting halls, libraries, and space for indoor games.
- The unit cost of community halls needs to be increased; the increases can be on the following lines: at village level Rs 15 lakh from Rs 7.5 lakh; at Mandal level Rs 50 lakh from Rs 25 lakh; at Division level Rs one crore from Rs 50 lakh; and at District level Rs three crore from Rs one crore.
- Architectural designs of ABs and CHs need to inspire the younger generation. Uniformity needs to be maintained in designing community halls from village to district level.
- The processes of allocation and release of budget and monitoring of the progress of construction need to be made online through a portal in order to ensure transparency and accountability.

- Maintenance of the community halls should be under Gram Panchayats at the village level, Mandal Parishad Development Officer at the Mandal level and the Scheduled Castes Development Department at Revenue Division and District levels.
- However, the maintenance of community halls at the village level needs to be carried out in collaboration with the community so as to foster ownership among the community.
- The suggested online MIS on the community centers can also be used to monitor the maintenance of the halls at the state level.



Community Hall in Chervugattu village in Nalgonda District



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