

Social Boycott: Caste, Informal Power, and the Reinvention of Village Governance in Rural Telangana Economy, India

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Abstract

This article examines social boycott as a contemporary form of caste power in rural Telangana society and economy, focusing on the role of Village Development Committees (VDCs) originating from the informal caste councils. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 respondents (8 women and 12 men; 8 from Scheduled Castes and 12 from Other Backward Classes) and autoethnographic reflections, the study reveals how social boycott operates through economic exclusion, control of commons, religious coercion, and gendered surveillance. The article argues that social boycott represents a form of informal sovereignty that thrives in the gap between constitutional law and everyday governance. By situating boycott within broader debates on decentralization, caste capture, and rural democracy, the study highlights the limitations of existing legal frameworks and the failure of state institutions to protect marginalized communities. The article concludes by proposing sociologically-grounded policy interventions aimed at criminalizing social boycott, regulating informal caste bodies, protecting livelihoods, and re-democratizing village governance.

Keywords

Social boycott, Caste-based governance, Informal sovereignty, Rural Telangana

AI Use Disclosure

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely for grammatical correction, language clarity, and stylistic refinement. The intellectual content, empirical data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions of this article are entirely the author's own.

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Introduction

Caste in India has survived not because it is static, but because it is adaptive. While the Constitution of India outlawed untouchability and promised equality before law, caste has continued to organize social life through informal institutions, moral sanctions, and everyday practices that rarely enter legal records. One such mechanism—social boycott—remains both pervasive and under-theorized in sociological literature. While untouchability was outlawed and equality before law enshrined, caste power has migrated into informal institutions and everyday practices that operate beneath the threshold of legality. One such practice—social boycott—has emerged as a central mechanism through which caste hierarchy is enforced in contemporary rural India.

Social boycott refers to the organized withdrawal of economic, social, and symbolic relations from individuals or groups who defy caste norms. It includes denial of work, refusal of trade, exclusion from religious and social life, prohibition from accessing commons, and reputational shaming. Unlike physical violence, boycott is slow, accumulative, and often invisible within legal and policy frameworks. Its power lies in its normalization as “community decision-making” or “village discipline,” even as it produces severe material and psychological harm.

This article examines social boycott as a mode of informal governance in rural Telangana. It argues that caste domination today is exercised less through overt ritual exclusion and more through extra-legal institutions that discipline labor, regulate markets, control commons, and punish dissent. Central to this process are Village Development Committees (VDCs), informal bodies that have evolved from traditional caste councils but now operate under the legitimizing language of development, welfare, and community consensus in the state.

VDCs, as informal bodies claim to represent collective village interests. VDCs are typically formed through caste councils, with a central committee that rotates annually. While they adopt the language of development, participation, and welfare, they function as extra-legal authorities that regulate markets, discipline labor, control commons, and influence electoral behavior.

Growing up in a village in Telangana, I experienced caste not as an abstract structure but as a daily regulation of space, dignity, and survival. Where one could live, work, sell goods, or access infrastructure was shaped by caste norms enforced without written rules. These lived experiences inform the autoethnographic dimension of this study and anchor its sociological analysis. Based on autoethnography and qualitative fieldwork across Karimnagar, Nizamabad, and Adilabad districts in the state of Telangana in India, the article documents how VDCs enforce social boycotts against Dalits, OBC artisanal castes, migrants, and women. These boycotts involve denial of services, prohibition of trade, religious coercion, fines, and reputational violence. Though constitutionally illegal, such practices persist due to dominant caste social

regulation, political patronage, administrative inaction, and the structural dependence of marginalized communities on village economies.

Following Ambedkar's insight that the village is "a sink of localism," this article argues that VDCs represent not participatory governance but the reinvention of caste sovereignty under decentralization and neoliberal development discourse. Social boycott, far from being a remnant of tradition, is a contemporary technology of power.

Review of Literature

Caste as Structure, Not Culture

Classical sociological accounts treated caste as a religious or cultural system (Dumont 1970). Ambedkar (1936), however, theorized caste as a system of graded inequality, maintained through endogamy, occupation, and social sanctions. Later scholars emphasized caste as a material structure shaping access to land, labor, education, and political power (Guru 2009; Deshpande 2011).

Despite economic change and democratization, caste continues to structure social relations in rural India (Jodhka 2015; Ingole 2019). Studies consistently show that Dalits and OBCs face systemic discrimination in housing, labor markets, education, and access to commons (Thorat & Newman 2010).

Violence, Atrocities, and the Limits of Legal Protections

Much of the literature on caste violence focuses on atrocities such as physical violence, massacres, sexual assault, and honor killings (Kannabiran & Kannabiran 1991; Berg 2020). While crucial, this focus risks treating caste oppression as episodic rather than structural.

Everyday forms of coercion such as economic strangulation, social isolation, and symbolic degradation often escape legal recognition. Social boycott occupies this grey zone: it is violent in effect but non-spectacular in form.

Social Boycott: Fragmented Engagements

Social boycott has received limited academic attention, often appearing in legal discussions or activist reports rather than mainstream sociology. Studies from Maharashtra document caste panchayats enforcing boycotts against Dalits who assert rights (Teltumbde 2018). The Maharashtra Prohibition of People from Social Boycott Act (2016) remains a rare legal recognition of the phenomenon. This article addresses these gaps by conceptualizing social boycott as everyday governance and VDCs as its institutional backbone. However, three gaps persist:

1. Social boycott is treated as exceptional, not routine
2. The institutional mechanisms enforcing it remain underexplored
3. Victims' lived experiences are marginal to theory-building

Caste, Community, and the Illusion of Harmony

Mainstream sociological narratives have often portrayed the Indian village as a site of moral community, shared norms, and participatory governance. Even critical accounts of caste have sometimes implicitly assumed that violence and exclusion emerge primarily during moments of rupture—electoral competition, economic transformation, or Dalit assertion. Such approaches obscure the quotidian, normalized mechanisms through which caste power is reproduced in everyday village life.

Ambedkar's (1936) critique directly challenges this romanticization. For him, the village was not a consensual social unit but a spatial and moral organization of graded inequality. Caste, in this sense, is not merely a system of belief but a mode of governance that regulates access to resources, labor, and dignity. Social boycott exemplifies this governing logic. It enforces compliance without visible coercion and produces obedience without formal authority.

Later sociologists such as Guru (2009) and Deshpande (2011) emphasize that humiliation and exclusion are not residual experiences but central to caste's durability. Social boycott operates precisely at this intersection of humiliation and material deprivation. It transforms community into a weapon, mobilizing social relations themselves as instruments of punishment.

What distinguishes social boycott from overt violence is its moral framing. Boycott is justified as protecting "village unity," "tradition," or "collective interest." This framing renders resistance illegitimate while normalizing exclusion as discipline. As a result, victims are not merely punished but morally delegitimized.

Informal Governance, Decentralization, and Caste Capture

The expansion of Panchayati Raj institutions was intended to democratize rural governance by decentralizing power. However, a growing body of scholarship shows that decentralization often facilitates elite and caste capture rather than redistribution (Pai 2013; Jodhka 2015). Informal institutions frequently coexist with formal ones, exercising greater authority through social control.

Gupta's (2012) concept of the "blurred state" is particularly relevant here. Authority in rural India is not monopolized by the state but dispersed across actors who invoke legality selectively. Village Development Committees operate within this blurred zone, drawing legitimacy from both tradition and proximity to elected representatives.

Chatterjee's (2004) notion of "political society" further illuminates how marginalized groups are governed not through rights but through negotiated compliance. Social boycott is one such mechanism of governance: it regulates populations through fear and dependency rather than law.

Law Without Reach

While untouchability is constitutionally prohibited and social boycott can fall under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, victims rarely pursue legal remedies. Dependency on village economies, fear of retaliation, and slow judicial processes discourage litigation (Berg 2020).

The Maharashtra Social Boycott Act (2016) remains an exception, highlighting the absence of nationwide recognition of boycott as a distinct offense.

Decentralization and Caste Capture

Panchayati Raj institutions were intended to democratize governance. Instead, decentralization has often facilitated caste capture, allowing dominant groups to exercise power informally while maintaining formal legality (Jodhka 2015; Pai 2013). VDCs thrive in this gap between law and practice.

Why Social Boycott Escapes the Law

Despite constitutional prohibitions against untouchability and discrimination, social boycott remains largely invisible within legal frameworks. This invisibility is not accidental. Boycott does not rely on written orders, identifiable perpetrators, or single incidents. It unfolds through dispersed acts—silence, refusal, withdrawal—that are difficult to litigate.

Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) note that caste violence often escapes punishment not because of legal absence but because of institutional reluctance. Police officers frequently frame boycott as “internal village matter,” reflecting their embeddedness within caste society. Berg (2020) documents how delayed investigations and acquittals further normalize impunity.

The Maharashtra Prohibition of Social Boycott Act (2016) stands out as a rare acknowledgment of boycott as a distinct offense. Its limited geographical scope, however, underscores the broader national failure to recognize boycott as structural violence.

Yet existing literature rarely treats boycott as a systematic technology of rule. This article argues that boycott is not merely a reaction to transgression but a proactive method of maintaining caste order under conditions of formal democracy.

Research Questions and Contribution

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How does social boycott operate as a mechanism of caste governance in rural Telangana?
2. What role do Village Development Committees play in enforcing caste discipline?

3. How do caste, gender, and migration status shape boycott?
4. Why do law and state institutions fail to dismantle these practices?

The article contributes to caste sociology by:

- Theorizing social boycott as informal governance
- Documenting VDCs as rebranded caste councils
- Centering autoethnography and victim narratives
- Bridging Ambedkarite critique with contemporary decentralization debates

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, combining autoethnography with field-based interviews. Autoethnography allows personal experience to function as sociological data, particularly valuable for studying normalized systems of domination like caste (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011).

As a researcher from an oppressed caste background who grew up in rural Telangana, my positionality shaped both access and interpretation. Respondents often spoke to me not as an outsider but as someone who “already knows.”

Sample and Field Sites

The study draws on in-depth interactions with 20 individuals subjected to social boycott:

- Women (8):
 - 4 Scheduled Caste
 - 4 Other Backward Caste
- Men (12):
 - 4 Scheduled Caste
 - 8 Other Backward Caste

Fieldwork was conducted across villages in Karimnagar, Nizamabad, and Adilabad districts. Participants included dalits, barbers, washermen, butchers, fisherfolk, agricultural laborers, petty traders, and migrants.

Ethics, Fear, and Silence

Fear structured the field. Many respondents refused recording or written consent.

One Scheduled Caste woman stated:

“You can write this, but if they know it came from me, I cannot live here.”

Silence itself emerged as data—revealing the power of social boycott to discipline speech.

Empirical Findings

The findings of this study are organized into two sub-categories. The first set of findings is derived from field visits conducted in selected villages across three districts, using convenience sampling and qualitative inquiry methods. The second sub-category of findings is based on my autoethnographic reflections, which draw on lived experiences to illuminate the everyday workings of caste-based exclusion and social boycott.

Field Visit-Based Findings

From Caste Councils to VDCs: This study found that the VDCs are formed through caste councils, with each caste group selecting representatives. These representatives constitute a VDC central committee, which typically changes every year through internal rotation. While presented as democratic, leadership remains firmly controlled by dominant castes due to land ownership, wealth, and numerical strength.

Women's participation is rare; Dalits and migrants are systematically underrepresented.

Parallel and Superior to the State

The study further revealed that the VDCs operate parallel to gram panchayats, often overriding elected representatives.

As an OBC male respondent noted:

"The sarpanch signs papers. The VDC decides prices, punishments, and votes."

VDCs regulate:

- Prices of meat, alcohol, and services
- Access to commons (lakes, grazing land, sand)
- Electoral behavior
- Religious and cultural contributions

They function as de facto sovereigns.

Price Fixing and Labor Discipline

Barbers and washermen who attempted to raise prices due to inflation were punished through collective refusal of services. A washerman (OBC, male) explained: *"Inflation is for everyone, but for us price should never change. That is their rule."* When resistance continued, VDCs instructed villagers not to avail services, effectively eliminating livelihoods.

Migrants, Outsiders, and Enhanced Vulnerability

Migrant butcher families were especially vulnerable. A butcher stated: *"First they say you are outsider. Then they say your caste is low. Both together make boycott easy."* Boycotts included denial of groceries, forced supply of meat at lower prices, and heavy fines.

Gendered Experiences of Social Boycott

Social boycott is not experienced uniformly; it is deeply gendered. Women bear disproportionate emotional, social, and material burdens, even when formal sanctions are imposed on households or male earners. Among the eight women respondents (four SC and four OBC), boycott manifested through intensified surveillance, humiliation, and restriction of mobility.

An OBC woman from a barber family described how boycott entered everyday life: *“They stopped coming to our house, but they also stopped talking to us at the water tap. Even other women became silent. Silence itself becomes punishment.”*

Women spoke of being excluded from informal support networks—borrowing food, sharing childcare, attending rituals—which are critical to survival in rural contexts. For widows and women-headed households, boycott translated into acute vulnerability.

Another OBC woman whose family resisted a VDC decision noted: *“Men fight and negotiate. For us, there is no negotiation. We just carry the shame.”*

This gendered dimension of boycott is largely absent in existing caste literature, which often centers public violence while neglecting domestic and affective terrains where caste power is reproduced (Rege 1998; Guru 2009).

Feminist Dalit scholars argue that caste patriarchy operates through women’s bodies and reputations (Rege 1998; Paik 2014). Social boycott weaponizes this logic, using shame as a disciplinary tool.

Religious Coercion and Temple Politics

The study affirmed that religious institutions play a crucial role in legitimizing social boycott. VDCs frequently invoke “village unity” and “religious duty” to extract compulsory financial contributions for temple construction or festivals. Refusal is framed as betrayal of the village rather than dissent.

In one village, three caste groups—Scheduled Castes, fisherfolk, and artisan OBCs—refused to contribute to a temple. The response was swift: “We were boycotted and eventually forced to pay the contributions through pressure of the committee and the humiliation we faced” (SC male respondent)

The VDC instructed shopkeepers not to sell essentials to these families. The boycott continued until the groups paid the demanded amount. This demonstrates how religion becomes a moral alibi for economic coercion, transforming faith into an instrument of caste discipline.

Scholars have noted the politicization of religion in rural governance (Jaffrelot 2003; Srinivasulu 2002), but its role in enforcing everyday caste sanctions through boycott remains insufficiently examined.

Control of Commons: Land, Water, and Markets

The study further found that the VDCs exert control over village commons—grazing lands, fishing ponds, sand, forest produce, and shops built on public land. Access to these resources is conditional on caste compliance. A fisherwoman (OBC) explained: *“Water belongs to everyone, but permission belongs to them.”*

Commons become sites of conditional citizenship, where access is mediated by loyalty to caste authority rather than legal entitlement. This aligns with Ambedkar’s critique that villages operate as moral economies where rights are subordinated to hierarchy.

Escalation, Fear, and Forced Compliance

The field narratives reveal that social boycott follows a predictable trajectory. Initial dissent—often over prices, labor conditions, or religious contributions—is met with warnings. If resistance continues, boycott escalates to denial of services and market exclusion. Eventually, victims face a choice between compliance and displacement.

An OBC male respondent described this progression: *“First they tell you nicely. Then nobody comes. Then nobody sells. Finally, you understand there is no village left for you.”*

Fear is central to boycott’s effectiveness. Even those not directly targeted comply with VDC decisions to avoid becoming future targets. Thus, boycott governs not only its victims but the entire village.

Social Boycott as Informal Sovereignty

Taken together, these findings suggest that social boycott constitutes a form of informal sovereignty. VDCs exercise authority over life chances without legal mandate, yet their decisions shape survival itself. This sovereignty is tolerated—and often enabled—by the state.

Boycott thus represents a form of everyday authoritarianism embedded within democratic structures. It reveals how caste adapts to democracy by governing through society rather than against it.

Village Development Committees as Informal Caste States

The study echoed that the VDCs present themselves as voluntary, development-oriented bodies. In practice, they operate as parallel governments. They regulate prices of meat, laundry, alcohol, control village commons, collect funds for temples, and influence elections.

A respondent from an OBC washerman community noted, *“They say it is for development, but development is only for those who obey.”*

The annual rotation of leadership does not dismantle hierarchy; it merely redistributes authority among dominant caste men. Women are almost entirely absent from decision-making. SC representation is symbolic, lacking veto power. VDCs derive legitimacy from custom and fear rather than law. Their decisions are enforced through social boycott, fines, and threats. As one SC barber explained, *“They didn’t beat us. They told everyone not to come to us. Hunger does the rest.”*

Social Boycott as Everyday Governance

Boycott manifests through denial of customers, refusal of credit, exclusion from rituals, and control of labor. In one village, washermen were replaced by migrants to punish resistance.

Women experience boycott differently. Boycott thus exploits gendered labor and mobility constraints. An SC woman recounted, *“When they stopped selling us groceries, I had to walk to another village every day. They knew it would break us.”*

The State, Law, and Political Economy of Non-Enforcement

Police as Spectators: Police intervention in social boycott cases is rare and largely symbolic. Officers often call VDC members for “counseling” but avoid registering cases. As one respondent stated: *“Police come, talk, go. Committee stays.”* Fear of electoral backlash prevents enforcement. VDCs mobilize caste votes, making them indispensable to political actors.

Autoethnographic Reflective Findings: Living Under Caste Rule and Social Boycotts

In this section, I draw on autoethnographic reflections to demonstrate how Village Development Committees (VDCs) do not merely govern disputes or development projects but actively reproduce caste domination through control over infrastructure, livelihoods, mobility, and everyday social life. These reflections are not anecdotal digressions; they are analytically central. Autoethnography, as recognized in qualitative social science, enables access to the lived textures of power that remain invisible in official records and policy documents (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011; Chang 2008). Through my own family’s experiences, I show how caste operates as a governing logic, with VDCs functioning as its institutional anchor.

The Caste of Sewage: Purity, Pollution, and Infrastructural Power

It is unusual for a Dalit family to live in the physical center of a village in rural Telangana. My family’s location itself disrupted the spatial logic of caste. As migrants from Maharashtra—where our caste is officially classified as Scheduled Caste—our caste identity was ambiguous in Telangana, where the same caste is listed under Other Backward Classes. This ambiguity initially offered partial protection. Yet it did not dismantle caste; it merely delayed its enforcement.

For nearly three decades, my family was denied access to the village's public sewage system. This denial was not accidental, nor merely interpersonal. It was collectively enforced through dominant caste consensus, mediated by village authorities and later normalized through the informal authority of the VDC. A dominant caste household blocked the sewage line on the grounds that our waste should not pass through their property. Their own sewage flowed freely through lower-caste households, revealing the selective deployment of purity and pollution.

What is critical here is not only the act of exclusion, but how it was sustained. Appeals to the local government failed repeatedly. The village leadership—closely aligned with dominant caste interests and later absorbed into the VDC structure—refused to intervene. The VDC's silence functioned as consent. Through inaction, it legitimized caste-based infrastructural violence.

For almost thirty years, my family was forced into manual scavenging within our own home. This was not a remnant of the past; it was a contemporary outcome of caste governance. Only after a change in dominant caste power relations—triggered by property sale and shifting electoral dynamics—was a new sewage line laid, carefully routed to avoid disturbing dominant caste property. Even then, the solution avoided confronting caste authority directly. The VDC did not dismantle exclusion; it managed it spatially.

This case demonstrates that VDCs govern not only people but pipes, pathways, and possibilities. Infrastructure becomes a site where caste is materially enforced under the guise of administrative convenience.

The Caste of Animal Husbandry: Regulating Livelihoods and Sensory Hierarchies

My family's occupation as butchers placed us at the intersection of caste, economy, and stigma. We raised goats and sheep at home, a practice integral to our livelihood. Dominant caste households objected, citing smell and hygiene. Yet the same households kept buffaloes within their compounds—animals that produced equal, if not greater, sensory disruption.

The objection was never about smell. It was about who was permitted to produce it. The eventual removal of our livestock from the village core was not negotiated as an individual dispute. It was enforced through collective pressure, normalized by village leaders, and later embedded within the regulatory authority of the VDC. Animal husbandry thus became a governed activity, with caste determining which livelihoods were spatially acceptable.

Through such regulation, VDCs transform economic activities into moral hierarchies. Livelihoods associated with marginalized castes are treated as pollutants that must be displaced, while dominant caste practices are rendered invisible or natural.

The Caste of Gulf Migration: Governance through Absence

Migration to Gulf countries emerged as a survival strategy for many lower-caste households in the village. Lack of land, economic security, and social dignity pushed men to leave their families behind and work under precarious conditions abroad. Dominant castes, with land ownership and local power, largely remained in the village.

What is often framed as individual economic choice must instead be read as structural compulsion. VDCs, by regulating local livelihoods and enforcing social boycotts, indirectly produce migration. The governance of caste thus extends beyond village boundaries, shaping transnational labor flows.

The consequences were borne disproportionately by women, children, and elders left behind. Family separation produced long-term emotional, educational, and health impacts—costs never acknowledged in narratives of “development.” The VDC did not merely fail to protect these families; its governance practices actively pushed them out.

The Caste of Cattle Herds: Segregating Commons

The segregation of buffalo herds reveals how village commons are governed through caste. Two herds existed: one exclusively for dominant castes, the other for SC and OBC communities. Dominant castes owned the majority of cattle and controlled the more resource-rich grazing routes.

Membership in a herd was not voluntary. Crossing these boundaries invited fines, social sanctions, and, in some cases, boycott. The VDC oversaw access to commons, converting shared resources into caste-regulated spaces. This practice transformed constitutional entitlements into conditional privileges.

The Caste of Wine Shops: Everyday Segregation and Moral Policing

Even leisure and consumption were segregated. Separate wine shops existed for dominant castes and for SC/OBC communities. Violating this segregation was treated as moral transgression, punishable through fines or social boycott.

These rules were never written. They were enforced through shared understanding, VDC-backed sanctions, and fear of reputational loss. Over time, segregation became habitual. Children learned early where they could go, whom they could interact with, and how far they could aspire.

Socialization into Caste Rule

Taken together, these experiences show that caste is not learned once; it is rehearsed daily. Every child is socialized into a system where dignity, mobility, and belonging are caste-coded. Economic mobility—through migration, education, or business—does not dissolve this hierarchy. Social valuation remains caste-bound.

VDCs play a decisive role in this process. By coordinating exclusion across infrastructure, livelihoods, commons, and social life, they ensure that caste domination is systemic rather than episodic. What appears as tradition is, in fact, governance. What appears as community is, in fact, rule.

Violating these boundaries invited fines and boycott. These practices demonstrate how caste is reproduced through mundane repetition rather than spectacular violence.

Discussion

Social Boycott as Informal Sovereignty

This study conceptualizes social boycott as informal sovereignty—a mode of rule exercised without legal authority but sustained through social consensus, fear, and economic dependency. VDCs function as caste states within the state, enforcing norms, collecting penalties, and regulating livelihoods. The empirical evidence from rural Telangana demonstrates that caste has not merely survived constitutional democracy; it has reorganized itself institutionally. Village Development Committees (VDCs) represent this reorganization. Emerging from traditional caste councils, VDCs function as caste states within the state, governing everyday life through mechanisms that are extra-legal but socially binding.

Unlike classical caste councils, VDCs operate with modern legitimacy—invoking development, welfare, and participation. This makes them harder to contest and easier to normalize. Social boycott thus represents a shift from ritual exclusion to governance through deprivation.

From Ritual Exclusion to Governance through Deprivation

Classical accounts of caste emphasized ritual purity, pollution, and spatial segregation (Ambedkar 1936; Dumont 1970). While these logics persist, the findings of this study suggest a significant transformation in how caste power is exercised. Social boycott marks a shift from ritual exclusion to governance through deprivation. Instead of merely denying touch, temple entry, or physical proximity, dominant caste institutions now regulate livelihoods, markets, infrastructure, and access to commons.

The cases of barbers, washermen, and butchers reveal how price control becomes a disciplinary tool. Resistance to unfair economic arrangements—such as attempts to raise prices in response to inflation—is reframed by VDCs as moral deviance and disobedience to “village decisions.” The resulting boycott is not symbolic; it is materially devastating. By denying customers, groceries, water access, and credit, VDCs weaponize everyday survival itself. Hunger, debt, and humiliation become instruments of caste governance.

This aligns with Thorat and Newman's (2010) analysis of discrimination in markets but extends it by showing how market exclusion is actively organized and enforced through informal institutions, rather than emerging solely from prejudice or employer bias.

Village Development Committees as Caste-Based Parallel States

The discussion of VDCs in this study reveals them not as community organizations, but as parallel governing authorities. Their structure—representation based on caste population, male dominance, annual rotation of leadership—creates the appearance of democracy while reproducing caste hierarchy. Rotation does not dismantle power; it circulates authority within dominant caste networks that already control land, capital, and political connections.

VDCs decide prices, control village commons, collect compulsory religious contributions, influence electoral outcomes, and settle disputes. In doing so, they perform the core functions of a state: regulation, extraction, punishment, and adjudication. Yet they do so without constitutional accountability. Their power is not written into law, but into social relations.

This phenomenon resonates with Gupta's (2012) notion of the "blurred state," where governance is dispersed across informal actors who selectively invoke legality. It also reflects Chatterjee's (2004) argument that large sections of the population are governed not as rights-bearing citizens, but as subjects within "political society," where compliance is negotiated rather than guaranteed.

However, this study pushes the argument further by showing that VDCs do not merely fill gaps left by the state; they actively undermine constitutional governance by enforcing caste discipline in ways that the state often tolerates or enables.

Social Boycott, Fear, and the Production of Compliance

One of the most striking findings of this research is the predictable escalation of social boycott. Dissent is first met with warnings, then with economic exclusion, and finally with the threat of complete social annihilation. This gradual escalation produces fear not only among the targeted families but across the village. Others comply not because they agree with VDC decisions, but because they fear becoming the next targets.

In this sense, social boycott governs the entire village, not just its victims. It creates what Foucault might call a disciplinary environment, where surveillance and punishment are diffused through society rather than centralized. The absence of overt violence makes boycott appear non-violent, even as it inflicts sustained harm.

The reluctance of victims to approach the police or courts further reinforces this informal sovereignty. As documented in this study, police interventions—when they occur at all—are symbolic. Officers "advise" VDC members but avoid registering

cases. Political representatives, dependent on dominant caste vote banks, remain silent. This institutional failure confirms Kannabiran and Kannabiran's (1991) and Berg's (2020) observations that caste violence persists not because law is absent, but because enforcement is structurally compromised.

Gendered Dimensions of Informal Sovereignty

The findings also demonstrate that social boycott is deeply gendered. While men are often the visible targets of economic sanctions, women bear a disproportionate share of the consequences. Exclusion from informal support networks—borrowing food, accessing water, participating in rituals—intensifies women's unpaid labor and emotional burden. Silence, shame, and social isolation become everyday realities.

Dalit and OBC women's testimonies reveal that boycott operates through reputational violence as much as economic deprivation. Feminist Dalit scholars have long argued that caste patriarchy disciplines women's bodies, mobility, and respectability (Rege 1998; Paik 2014). This study adds that social boycott extends this discipline into the domain of governance, using women's vulnerability as leverage against entire households.

Autoethnography and Caste as Infrastructure

The autoethnographic reflections in this study deepen the discussion by showing that caste operates not only through norms and institutions, but through infrastructure itself. The denial of sewage access for decades, justified through notions of purity and pollution, illustrates how caste is built into pipes, pathways, and spatial layouts. Similarly, the regulation of animal husbandry, segregation of cattle herds, and separate wine shops reveal how caste is reproduced through mundane, repetitive practices.

These experiences affirm Ambedkar's critique of the village as a site where graded inequality is naturalized through everyday life. Caste does not need spectacular violence to sustain itself; it survives through slow, normalized deprivation.

Social Boycott as Contemporary Caste Rule

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that social boycott is not a residual or exceptional phenomenon, but a central mechanism of contemporary caste rule. It allows caste power to adapt to democracy by governing through society rather than against it. VDCs embody this adaptation: they speak the language of development, welfare, and participation while practicing exclusion, extraction, and coercion.

Social boycott thus represents a modern form of caste sovereignty—informal, deniable, and effective. It exposes the limits of constitutional guarantees when everyday governance remains captured by caste institutions.

Policy Implications and Sociological Interventions

The persistence of social boycott in rural India exposes the limits of constitutionalism, decentralization, and rights-based governance when confronted with entrenched caste power. Addressing social boycott requires moving beyond symbolic legal prohibition toward a multi-scalar strategy that recognizes boycott as a form of collective punishment, informal governance, and structural violence. The following interventions are proposed not as technocratic fixes, but as sociologically informed responses to caste-mediated domination.

Explicit Criminalization of Social Boycott Across India

Despite constitutional guarantees against untouchability, social boycott remains legally under-recognized as a distinct and punishable offense. Existing legal frameworks—such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act—address discrete acts of violence or humiliation but fail to capture the collective, prolonged, and economically coercive nature of social boycott.

The Maharashtra Prohibition of Social Boycott Act (2016) represents a critical precedent by recognizing boycott as a specific crime involving denial of social, economic, and religious rights. However, the absence of a nationwide legal framework has resulted in uneven protection and weak enforcement. A central legislation explicitly criminalizing social boycott would provide conceptual clarity and legal legitimacy to victims' claims.

From a sociological perspective, criminalization serves not only as deterrence but also as symbolic delegitimation of caste authority. It disrupts the moral economy that normalizes boycott as “custom” or “community discipline,” reframing it instead as an unlawful exercise of power.

Legal Recognition of Informal Caste Bodies as Coercive Entities

Village Development Committees (VDCs), caste councils, and informal village committees operate in a legal grey zone. While formally unrecognized, they exercise quasi-judicial and executive powers, including levying fines, enforcing boycotts, regulating livelihoods, and controlling access to commons.

Legal systems often treat these bodies as benign cultural formations rather than coercive institutions. This misrecognition allows them to operate with impunity. There is an urgent need to legally define such bodies as potentially coercive collectivities, whose actions can attract criminal liability when they violate constitutional rights.

Sociologically, this intervention challenges the romanticized notion of “community self-governance” and exposes how decentralization can be captured by dominant caste interests. Recognizing informal caste bodies as coercive actors enables the state to intervene without framing such intervention as “interference in tradition.”

Livelihood Protection and Relocation Support for Boycott Victims

One of the most devastating effects of social boycott is economic strangulation. Denial of work, refusal of trade, and exclusion from local markets force victims into debt, distress migration, or coerced compliance. Legal remedies alone are insufficient when survival itself is at stake.

State responses must therefore include livelihood protection mechanisms, such as:

- Emergency income support
- Access to alternative markets and cooperatives
- Employment under public works programs without village-level mediation

In cases of prolonged or violent boycott, relocation and rehabilitation must be treated as a legitimate form of relief rather than as defeat or displacement. Sociologically, relocation acknowledges that caste violence is spatially embedded and that remaining within hostile social environments can reproduce harm.

Such interventions also challenge the dominant narrative that rural rootedness is inherently desirable, recognizing instead that mobility can be a form of resistance.

Police Accountability and Institutional Reform

The failure of law enforcement is a central factor enabling social boycott. Police reluctance to register complaints—often justified as maintaining “village harmony”—reveals the alignment of state institutions with dominant caste interests.

To address this, accountability mechanisms must include:

- Mandatory FIR registration in boycott-related complaints
- Disciplinary action for non-compliance
- Independent monitoring of caste-related cases
- Sensitization training grounded in caste sociology, not merely legal procedure

From a sociological lens, police neutrality is a myth in caste societies. Institutional reform must therefore confront the caste composition, socialization, and local embeddedness of law enforcement agencies themselves.

Gender-Sensitive Interventions Recognizing Women’s Disproportionate Burden

Women experience social boycott in uniquely gendered ways—through intensified surveillance, reputational damage, exclusion from support networks, and increased unpaid labor. Yet policy responses often treat households as homogeneous units, masking intra-household inequalities. Gender-sensitive interventions must:

- Recognize women as primary victims, not secondary dependents
- Provide direct access to relief, legal aid, and counseling
- Address stigma and isolation through collective support mechanisms

From a feminist sociological perspective, social boycott functions as a form of disciplinary patriarchy, where caste control is exercised through women's bodies, mobility, and honor. Any serious intervention must therefore integrate caste and gender analysis rather than treating them as separate axes.

Re-Democratization of Village Governance Beyond Caste Representation

Finally, addressing social boycott requires rethinking the structure of village governance itself. Panchayati Raj institutions, while constitutionally mandated, often coexist with or are overshadowed by informal caste bodies. Mere caste-based representation within formal institutions does not dismantle caste power; it often reproduces it.

Re-democratization must involve:

- Transparent decision-making processes
- External oversight of village-level institutions
- Limiting the authority of informal bodies over public resources
- Strengthening rights-based citizenship over community-based belonging

Sociologically, this intervention challenges the assumption that democracy naturally flows from local participation. In caste-stratified societies, democracy must be actively produced, protected, and institutionalized against capture by dominant groups.

Conclusion

This study has argued that social boycott is not a remnant of a pre-modern past but a contemporary and adaptive technology of caste power. Far from being an occasional aberration, boycott functions as a routine mode of governance in many rural contexts, operating through informal institutions that derive legitimacy from tradition, community consensus, and moral authority. Village Development Committees and caste councils do not merely coexist with formal democratic institutions; they actively reshape and often override. The findings demonstrate that social boycott is a form of collective punishment that disciplines dissent, regulates access to livelihoods, and enforces caste hierarchies without overt violence. Its effectiveness lies in its invisibility within legal and policy frameworks. Because boycott is enacted through everyday practices—silence, exclusion, denial of services—it escapes easy classification as violence as it produces material & psychological harm. By foregrounding gendered and intersectional experiences, this article shows that women bear a disproportionate burden of boycott, experiencing intensified surveillance, social isolation, and emotional labor. These harms remain largely unacknowledged in both academic literature and policy discourse, which tend to focus on public acts of caste violence rather than slow, accumulative forms of exclusion.

The autoethnographic reflections included in this study further reveal how caste operates through infrastructure, space, and sensory regimes—sewage lines, animal ownership, migration pathways, and everyday interactions. Such accounts challenge dominant sociological approaches that treat caste primarily as ideology or identity, instead revealing it as a lived system embedded in material arrangements and governance practices. Ultimately, this article contends that democracy cannot be meaningfully realized in spaces where citizenship is mediated by caste compliance. Addressing social boycott therefore requires more than legal reform; it demands a reimagining of rural governance, community, and belonging. As Ambedkar cautioned, the village cannot be romanticized as a site of harmony when it continues to function as a unit of graded inequality. Social boycott persists not because the law is absent, but because caste power has learned to govern through informal means. Recognizing, documenting, and confronting this reality is an urgent task for sociology, policy, and democratic practice alike.

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