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## STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY : DALIT WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN PANCHYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

**E**mpowerment is the central issue that has been pervading the development debate after 1980s. Improving Dalit women status and empowering them would go a long way in accomplishing egalitarian gender relations in society. Women who are hitherto constrained by their structure for their self-expression constitute the target of most of the development programmes, which aim at bringing them into the mainstream of the development.

India ranked a lowly 101st of 136 countries, indicating huge disparity in access of women to economic, political, educational and healthcare opportunities and their participation in such services. Dalit women must be empowered and their literacy rate must be improved. The only sign of optimism lay in political empowerment of women. Despite Parliament dithering over passage of a women's reservation bill for equal representation in the legislature, India bagged a healthy ninth rank when it came to political empowerment of its women.

*Dalit women are mostly deprived, socially*

*excluded, less literate, absentee of property rights, and less empowerment socially and economically. They are ignorant about women entrepreneurship. They are poverty stricken having minimum access of maintaining standard of living. The total number of dalit women in India is 80.517 million or approximately 48% of the total dalit population, 16% of the total female population and 8% of the total Indian Population.*

*They make majority of unorganized labourer in urban settings and landless labourers in rural area. This paper deals with the strengthening the dalit women through democracy in PRIs in Telangana state. It also focus on the different challenges faced of the dalit women in PRIs.*

**KEYWORDS-** Dalit women, empowerment, democracy, political participation, challenges.

### INTRODUCTION :

India is a country of villages. Panchayati Raj system has influenced the village life extensively as one of the most important units of democratic decentralisation. Decentralisation of power is nothing but transfer of power from one tier of governance to another and, in same way, from one segment of population to another. Power moves from the dominant to the oppressed, men to women, caste Hindus to Dalits, upper castes to lower castes and bureaucrats to people's representatives. Power will not move on its own. It has to be made move. So a driving force is needed. The task is not so easy as may be envisaged, particularly in an extremely unequal society.(1) The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India have generated a discussion on the subject of Decentralization of Powers. Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act, Empowering People for Prosperity, brings out a significant change in the attitude, behaviour and performance of the rustic folk in India.



Dalit women face discrimination on a daily basis, as a dalit, as women and as a poor while they are in extremely vulnerable position. Systemic violence against dalit women can be seen as a mechanism to keep dalit in a subordinated position. It is built in to the total structure of the dominant society, which does not acknowledge the basic human rights of dalit in general and dalit women in particular.

EMPOWERMENT is a multi-dimensional concept and relates to the social attainment, the economical participation and political participation of people. Further, empowerment being an ongoing process, there is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. The 73rd Amendment to our constitution in 1993 was a major milestone in this direction. The amendment, besides making provision for reservation of seats for scheduled castes and tribes proportionate to their population in the panchayat area, also ensured reservation of not less than one third of these reserved seats for the women. The impact of reserving one third of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been fruitful, and has empowered women both politically and socially. At present, there are approximately 260,000 panchayat representatives in India, out of which around 75,000 are women making it the largest number of elected women in the world.

The Women's Reservation Bill 2010, approved by the Upper House of Parliament is another major step, basically aimed at giving more political space to the women and ensure their active participation in the development process. While reservation in panchayats or Parliament is important, the real challenge is to ensure that women are involved in the decision making process at home, and in the society. The challenge will be to develop their capacity so that they can perform their roles properly.

In India the constitution has provided with the fundamental rights and directive principles to every citizen without any discrimination in sex, caste and religion. Dalit women, in India's highly patriarchal and caste-based society, bear the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. Being positioned at the lowest social order of Indian society, Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribe women suffer from many forms of discrimination, including lack of education, economic disadvantages, social disempowerment, domestic violence, political invisibility, and sexual oppression.

Decision making processes in Panchayats need to be better defined, to diminish the possibility of elite capture, proxy participation and single point decision

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

1. To access the rights of the dalit women in Panchayat Raj institutions
2. How far women are participating in PRIs
3. To access the problems faced by dalit women at panchayat raj.

### **Impact of Panchayati Raj System on Rural Life.**

Effective planning at the grassroots level can only be envisaged if a large number of Gram Sabha members actively participate in the planning process. At present 50 per cent members (women) are virtually remaining outside the Gram Sabha meetings because they are not allowed to participate by their male family members and another big chunk mostly SC/ST and other weaker sections do not attend due to some compulsions. These members are less motivated to attend meetings because they do not expect any gain from such meetings but lose their oneday wage.

Panchayati Raj institutions in effective implementation of Bharat Nirman Programme at grassroot level, we strongly feel that the proposed objectives of the programme could be achieved in the stipulated time if Panchayats be made as institutions of self government i.e. they should enjoy functional, financial and administrative autonomy at their level and the plan formulation of these components should emerge from the Gram Sabhas for onward consideration in the Gram Panchayat.

Panchayati Raj System as a means of democratic decentralization has a deep impact on the rural life of India. The impact of this system based on various studies in the rural areas are given below:

1. There is an increase of women's participation in leadership.
2. There is a decrease in the exploitation of villagers by the landlords, money-lenders and upper castes;
3. Role of political parties has increased in the village leadership;

4. In the early days of Panchayati Raj, lower castes, especially Harijans, experienced evaluation in their status and self-respect.
5. Power structure in villages is acquiring a new phase. Now the power structure in villages is not confined to older persons only.
6. Leadership in villages is now with the people who come from the middle class or those who have no traditional family background in the power structure.
7. Man studies reveal that a definite change is taking place in the criteria for leadership.
8. Spread of education in villages is mainly taking place due to Panchayati Raj;
9. Panchayati Raj has lessened the importance of Caste Panchayats;
10. Villagers receive health and medical facilities;
11. Necessary arrangements have been made for housing for poor people;
12. Increase in groups in, confrontation and individualism;
13. Sense of responsibility has increased among the villagers;

### People's Participation through Grama Sabha: the Direct Democratic Device

Participation cannot be imposed on the people from above; it should be voluntary and based on will to participate. Here by participation we mean direct involvement of people and not indirect involvement through their representatives. This is because of the existing socio-economic and political structure of the society in most of the developing countries. The so called representatives of the people are most likely to represent the rich, rather than the interest of the poor majority. However, in such a large country like ours, direct participation of the people is possible only at local level and as such our focus of discussion is limited to direct participation at local level. This is also in consonance with the assumptions that an equitable sharing of the benefits of development by poor is possible only when there is equitable participation by them in the process of development.

However, under the existing social system, equitable participation of the poor in the process of development can be regarded as a gradual process. The process can be accelerated only when the poor become conscious on their rights and privileges and build up strength to achieve justice for themselves in the sharing of benefits of development

### WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS :

The women need to be 'empowered' in the realm of political decision making so as to facilitate their 'real' empowerment. About one million women entered Panchayats after 73rd constitutional Amendment Act. It is a known fact that 40 percent of the elected women represented the marginalized sections and about 70 percent women representatives were illiterate and most of them had no previous political experience. Therefore, it was but natural that there as a widespread apprehension that women will be manipulated by men. However, in spite of several instances of such manipulation and capitulation by women, the presence of such a large number of women in Panchayats has indeed had a deep impact on gender equity. The occupation of the marginalized women of elected seats and chairperson's posts in grassroots democratic governments is a huge social and political revolution, the significance of which would take at least a generation to fully unfold.

There are a huge number of Panchayats working in different circumstances, the extent of empowerment of women vary from region to region and Panchayats work under different legal frameworks – as States have the discretion to define the scope and ambit of Panchayati Raj – every spectrum of political behaviour, ranging from abject subordination of women to remarkable instances of social and political assertiveness can be seen in the functioning of Panchayats. Therefore, examples are merely anecdotes – true only in respect of the instance quoted - and have very little value in terms of deriving conclusions about Panchayati Raj. However, there is no taking away from the fact that there have been huge benefits, which have not been fully understood or studied, to empowerment and development through Panchayati Raj.

The constitution prescribes only a minimum level of reservation of one third for women in Panchayats but the States have the leeway to mandate more than that level. Bihar took the bold step of reserving 50 percent of the Panchayat seats for women. Currently, elected women representatives are in place in 54 percent of seats in Bihar's panchayats. Bihar's example was followed by Sikkim, which increased their reservations for women to



40% and held their elections under the new arrangement in January 2008. Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand have passed laws increasing the reservations for women in Panchayats to 50% . These changes will apply to the next elections to Panchayats in these States.

### **ROLE OF PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS**

The gender representation in the local self government or the PRIs has been more than satisfactory. Though only one-third of seats were reserved for women by the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment, the actual representation is much more at all levels. The percentages of women at district, tehsil and village levels of Panchayat are 41, 43 and 40 respectively. Though there is a belief that these women leaders are only proxies for men, yet these women gradually become independent. In fact they have begun to contest from unreserved seats also. It has led to empowerment of not only those women who are in the Panchayats but also in the rural areas of India. However much more needs to be done to empower women in local self governments so that they can play a more proactive role in decision making and by their very presence encourage more and more women to come forth and demand their rights. For this capacity building is required through knowledge and education and training in diverse areas pertaining to women- such as laws and rights, programs for women etc.

### **RESERVATION FOR WOMEN IN PANCHAYATS**

Government proposes to amend Article 243D of the Constitution to raise the level of reservation for women including Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women in Panchayats from the present one-third to at least half of the seats and offices of Chairpersons in Panchayats. Accordingly the Ministry of Panchayati Raj will introduce a Constitution Amendment Bill in this session for this purpose.

Reservation has played a significant role as four-fifths of all the representatives got elected from reserved seats. The role of reservation was also evident from the fact that it emerged as an important motivator (43%) for contesting the first election as guidance of an academic advisory committee, provides many new insights into Social and Political empowerment of women in the new Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This is the largest-ever survey on any aspect of Panchayat functioning, covering Gram Panchayats in 23 states, with a total sample size of over 20,000, including Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), Elected Male Representatives (EMRs), ex-EWRs, official functionaries and members of the community. Nearly three-fourths of the EWRs in the sample belonged to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and OBC categories, and were evenly divided above and below the poverty line. (See Table I&II) Reservation has played a significant role as four-fifths of all the representatives got elected from reserved seats.

The role of reservation was also evident from the fact that it emerged as an important motivator (43 %) for contesting the first election as much as its withdrawal was an important reason for not contesting the election among former women representatives (39%). The majority of the elected representatives had contested only one election (87%) and hence the proportion of first timers in politics was also high (86%). Around 14% were re-elected more than once at the gram Panchayat level.

Further analysis showed that the majority of ex-women representatives could not get re-elected because the seat from where they were elected was de-reserved in the next round. While no gender discrimination in the Panchayat is reported by 60% of elected women representatives, acceptability in Panchayat meetings and enabling them to raise issues freely was mentioned by 94 percent. A supportive professional environment evidently motivates elected women representatives to perform better, as 60-64% reported an increase in their interaction with line departments and parallel bodies. Even the participation of common women citizens in various activities such as attending Gram Sabha meeting, etc. has reportedly increased (68-78%).

Now majority of women representatives are no more proxy of their male relative patrons. 58% of women representatives are now taking their own decisions to contest elections. This is a big achievement. 15 % of women sarpanch are able to win elections second time. Women belonging to younger age groups of 21-35 years have shown better performance compared to the women belonging to the age group of 35 years and above. Women members of active committees at village level were found to be more successful at Panchayat level. Again quoting the Report, Dalits were also benefited by the whole process.

Reservation has inspired and prompted them to contest elections. There can be no greater evidence for the fact that not only has Panchayati Raj attracted women to politics in large numbers, but also that this wish to contest for elections seems to be most keenly felt among the women belonging to the SCs and STs. by the fact that 88 per cent of them were elected on reserved seats.

### **STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY:**

In Indian society, the Dalits woman is not treated as a human being. Both economically and socially, these women are marginalized. They are helpless beings and their life is cheap and unimportant in this caste society. They are the victims of caste, class and sex. For the majority of women in India, the greatest problem is that of survival. Poverty, dowry murders, widow burning, female infanticide have assumed new dimensions with modernization and technological advancement. The rural Dalit women face more atrocities from the upper caste men and women. In this society they have no safety and security.

Any time the upper caste men can use them the way they like. Untouchability is forgotten here, if an upper caste man wants, he can to rape a poor, pale, weak, unhealthy, dark, voiceless Dalit woman. There is no end in India for the sexual violence against Dalit women.



### **Factors that facilitate entry and participation of women in the Panchayats**

Presently there is no actual participation of the rural poor in any kind of decision-making at the village, block, and district levels. The government planning is defective as the normal procedure is that the guidelines for resources utilization, budget allocation to different sectors and regions and the programmes and projects for area development are prepared by central government. However, direct participation of the poor in decision making is possible only at the village level. Even at the village level, discussion regarding community development projects such as drinking water, social construction etc, are confined in the hands of small caucus of so called village elites. The following are the factors that are focused by women in Panchayats:

#### **1. Women's reservation**

The reservation for women is the most important factor that motivates and facilitates women to come forward into political life through Panchayat Raj Institutions serving in their own village.

#### **2. Motivation and support from family :**

Most of the elected women representatives stated that they are motivated from their family members, community and their other people to come into politics.

#### **3. Political interest:**

Women who are having the interest to serve the society and politics are entering into politics through PRIs.

#### **4. Decision making process:**

Decision-making is an important parameter indicating the degree of participation. Thus an attempt was also made to understand whether women members have any access to the decision-making process, and if yes, how they participate in this process and if their opinions or demands have any voice in the meetings.

## 5. Gender Disparities :

To overcome the problem of gender disparities the women are coming forward to enter into the panchayati raj institutions and elected so that they can solve the problems especially faced by the women in their families and working places.

### DALIT WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

Women's increased political participation has yielded positive results. First, issues central to development, including health, nutrition, family income and education, take center stage as women participate in the PRI, village development boards and other governance structures. Secondly, women have shown that they have critical information about community resources, are adept at managing funds, result in more inclusive governance and learn quickly about how to lead effective community-centered development.

Despite such positive results, women remain largely excluded from the PRI and other local governance structures. Proxy politics, power brokering and gender discrimination continue, and many women sarpanches have had to face extreme violence for challenging existing societal power centres. In other cases, women are only within the PRI in name, but in reality, it is male family members who hold the power. In spite of the affirmative action in panchayati raj in favor of marginalized communities, exclusion of caste, poverty, tribal status, gender and caste sharply demarcate those who have political power from those who do not. Elected Women representatives in the Panchayat Raj Institutions are facing problems in the terms of decision making and implementation of the programmes at the gram panchayat level. When the role of the women is taken the Dalit women representatives are facing more problems when compared to other upper class women.

### Major problems faced by Dalit Women Representatives in PRIs

#### 1. Freedom of Speech and Expression

Majority of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings. They were not found meek or mute, they usually raised their point and view in the Panchayat meetings. They were not free to put forth their view points.

#### 2. Gender disparity

Gender disparities was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their view points as male members view points were preferred in male headed Panchayats. Other reason being that they (WERs) felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members.

#### 3. Motivation by other members

Problems faced by WERs from their colleagues out of the total respondents, they face problems from other panches due to their self-motive; Panchayat members were exclusively guided by their personal interest.

#### 4. Non-Cooperation

The women representatives are facing the problem of non-cooperation from the upper community authorities towards the dalit women. The women representative thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported and even if they presented befitting and relevant arguments.

#### 5. Freedom in decision making

The major problem faced by the dalit women representatives in the Panchayat Raj institutions is that they are not able to take the decision as per the orders of the government. Domination by the upper caste in decision making.

### SUGGESTIONS :

- Women should be imparted with her rights i.e. right to speech
- Electoral reforms should provide for state funding for women contesting for elections to Parliament, state assemblies, urban local bodies and PRIs
- Greater attention needs to be placed on how central and state policies can promote local governments to monitor the meaningful participation of Dalit women on the PRI
- Increased resources need to be placed in the political skill-building of women within the PRI.
- Greater efforts should be made towards the inclusion of poor and other excluded women on state planning



boards and commissions.

- Allocate funding for time- series evaluation of the impact of women on the PRI and what policy and other contextual factors promote and enable women's political participation

### **CONCLUSION :**

Empowerment of the dalit women is much more essential in present day context. To stop the against them, it is very much essential that they must empower towards sustainable development in achieving their rights. By fulfilling its national and international obligations to protect Dalit women from violence, complemented by adequate focus on improving the socio-economic conditions of Dalit women, the Indian State could contribute to enlarging the choices and agency of Dalit women. Increased Dalit women's agency, in turn, would contribute to social change not only for their families and their communities, but also for the wider Indian society. The goal of women's empowerment will not be accomplished by reservations alone, and there are a number of obstacles identified by the respondents. It can be noted that there are more restraining than facilitating factors for the entry and participation of women in political arena, and it is equally interesting to find out that the restraining factors are so many and so diverse. Steps are being taken to overcome these hindrances, but it is a very time-consuming process

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