

# **POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF DEPRESSED CLASSES THROUGH PANCHAYATH RAJ INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF HAVERI DISTRICT**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter is introductory in nature and spells out the statement of the problem, objectives of the study, hypothesis framed and research methodology used in the study. This chapter serves as the foundation on the basis of which the other chapters of the study are developed. The depressed classes constitute as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Indian society. They are stigmatized people and, on this account, suffer from numerous disabilities which are regulated through religious beliefs and practices. Some of the common features among them are low economic status, segregation, lack of political power, low level of literacy and social mobility. All together reinforce the wretched condition of the depressed classes of the society. More than 85 percent population of weaker sections in India is engaged in primary sector, particularly agriculture. Their proportion as agricultural labourers is considerably higher than the general population.

**Keywords:** level of literacy and social mobility

## **Introduction**

The term 'participation' is a widely used concept and interpreted differently by different scholars. It has been used in terms of involvement, interaction, influence, self-help, empowerment and self reliance. 'Participation' is viewed either as a goal to achieve a milestone or set targets or it is seen as a means to achieve the goal. It is a performance oriented concept, and has to be understood in the context in which it is being used.

Available literature on participation indicates that with the growth of development studies the concept of participation has received scholarly attention. In India, the concept of 'popular participation' was promoted both by Government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the 1950s and 1960s. The need of people's involvement in development and community projects was highlighted by them as a pre-requisite for the success of micro level development programmes. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, multilateral agencies such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) also began to put emphasis on popular participation in development projects and programmes and thus the concept "of the people by the people and for the people" took a concrete shape. In recent years, a large numbers of studies have been initiated by different scholars on participation. This body of literature on 'participation' helps us to understand the concept of participation.

The term participation has generally been conceived as the involvement of the people in the affairs which affect them. It is accepted both as a value as well as a means to improve performance. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has defined participation from a broader perspective that, "*participation is a collective sustained activity for the purpose of achieving some common objectives, especially a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development*". United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) defines participation as active involvement in decision making at every stage starting with the identification of problems to the study of feasibility, planning, implementation and evaluation. United States Agency for International Development (USAID) defines participation as the active engagement of people in sharing ideas, committing time and resources, making decisions and taking action to bring about a desired development objective. Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) has considered participation as a voluntary contribution by people in any of the public programmes but the people are not expected to take part in either shaping the programme or criticizing its contents. According to United Nations Human Development Report, participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. People may in some

cases have complete and direct control over these processes in other cases the control may be partial or indirect.

Warr and Wall have conceptualized participation as involvement in the decision making process so as to influence the decisions. Pamela Singla holds the view that participation is an interaction among individual to achieve specific goals and outcomes. Vroom has considered participation as influence that an individual feels he has in decision-making process.

According to Pearse and Stiefel, participation should be defined as an organized effort to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in a given social situation, on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control.<sup>9</sup> According to Soysal, the term participation is used to cover all forms of actions by which people take part in the operation of administration. To Uphoff and Cohen, participation includes people's involvement in decision-making process, in implementing programmes, their sharing in the benefits of development programmes, and thus involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes. In the words of Oakley and Marsden, participation is an active process in which the person takes initiative and in doing so asserts oneself. Verba has defined participation as an active engagement of citizens with public institutions, an activity which falls into three well-defined modes, voting, election-campaigning and contacting or pressure either individually or through group activity, including non-violent protests.

To Sartori, participation means self-motion. It involves a factor of determination on the part of the participants.<sup>14</sup> Poonam Vats feels that participation can only be described when the person who participates is fully conscious of the responsibilities he assumes in doing so. Participation is not something that can be created artificially. It is a feeling on the part of the people, not just the mechanical act of being called in to take part in discussions.

The above definitions illustrate the fact that participation implies many things to many people. It is as argued by Rahman, is difficult to attain a concrete definition of the term 'participation'. It can be explored but cannot be contained in any formal definition.

Further we often notice that many prefixes such as active participation, passive participation, developed participation, real participation, and effective participation are used and added to the concept of participation. This implies that the term 'participation' does not convey much unless it is understood with respect to given objective, values and context.

In the context of Panchayati Raj Institutions, participation implies involvement of people in the process of decision-making, implementation and evaluation and the present work look at the topic of research from this perspective. Various authors have put forth different frameworks for analyzing the concept of participation. According to Cohen, the study of participation involves three dimensions namely: what kind of participation is under consideration, who is participating and how is participation occurring?

Tandon has focused attention to the conditions of participation. According to him, political and structural arrangements, local organizations and traditions, and operational mechanisms which enable people to participate are essential pre-condition for effective participation. Poonam Vats has discussed three other conditions for effective participation. These include proper information, well organized communication network; and willingness to participate. Participation, thus we see has got many inter-related elements.

## **1.2 Role and Rationale of Popular Participation**

The term 'participation' has assumed such importance in present era because it is seen as closely related to the goal of development and social change. From the development perspective, Clayton has considered participation as both means and an end. According to him, as a means, participation is a process in which people and communities co-operate and collaborate in a development project and as an end, participation is seen as the empowerment of individuals and communities in terms of acquiring skills, knowledge and experience. Oakley has argued that participation can enhance the



efficiency of development by reducing time and saving resources. Participation allows people to influence the definition of programme objectives, and increases people's commitment and project effectiveness. Besides, participation leads to democratization, good governance, equality, equity and human rights. Participation increases self-reliance of participants by giving them opportunities to move from passive dependence to active interdependence. It intends to empower people to take more control over their lives.

Development is basically a normative term and carries varieties of meanings. It is human centered process and implies a positive change in the desirable direction. David Corten defined development as "a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of their life consistent with their own aspirations".<sup>24</sup> It was normally perceived that women play an equal role in development process throughout the world, but the fruits of development are distributed unequally among males and females.

Participation is a necessary ingredient of every political system. The term participation implies redistribution of power in a powerless society. The central issue of popular participation has to do with power exercised by some people against other people and by some classes against other classes. A society in which a substantial part of the population is denied any participation whatsoever, a sense of deprivation always comes into picture. So, to ensure participation we find both government and nongovernmental organizations have taken legal and institutional steps all over the world.

Participation in political process has been subject of abiding interest in political science since the days of Plato. Aristotle defined citizen as one who takes part in the administration of justice and holds office. The declaration of French Revolution of 1789 also says that all citizens have right to take part personally or by their representatives in the formulation of law. Marx argued that universal participation is a means and an end of the manifestation of human freedom.

The behavioural revolution which rejuvenated the academic discipline of political science in fifties and sixties of 19<sup>th</sup> century, concentrated on the study of political behaviour, voting behaviour and electoral process. In the context of voting behaviour, the term 'political participation' has acquired new and more dynamic connotation. In recent times, a good number of scholars have been initiated studies on the concept of political participation.

Politics is generally understood as an exercise of power. Political participation means involvement of people in the process of exercising power. According to Sushila Patni, participation in political process can be considered as the involvement of people in any form of organized activity that affects or seeks to affect the power relationship. According to Kaushik, participation in political sphere involves framing of policies and decisions and effective control over implementation of the same. Participation in a political process preserves equality and justice, reverse existing situation and brings out necessary social changes so as to promote a better social order. Herbert McClosky in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, refers political participation to those voluntary activities by which member of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. Norman D. Palmer defines political participation as the involvement of citizens in such political activities which directly or indirectly influence the behaviour and actions of decision-makers. Anthony M. Orum defines political participation as the variety of ways in which people try to influence the political process. Nie and Verba included in political participation, those legal activities by citizens which are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and the actions they take. Milbrath and Goel define political participation as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics.

In a democratic society, participation gives the ordinary citizen a means of voicing his opinion and a sense of belongingness to the system. "It gives the ordinary citizen a chance to show his willingness to carry out constructive public work and to demonstrate his good citizenship by other means than periodically exercising his right to vote". A democratic society in principle is a participant society in which power is shared and

authoritative decisions are made by the representatives of the citizens. The ordinary citizen can take part in the process of governing the country, irrespective of the sex, caste, class, religion or any other consideration. According to Palmer, citizen's active participation in political affairs in a democracy is crucial and necessary because it assures the legitimacy of the system and also strengthens the democratic values. According to McClosky, participation is necessary and of prime concern because it is the right of citizens through which 'consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled.' The *Concise Encyclopedia of Democracy* has mentioned that although political participation does not by itself make a democracy, the opportunity for the average citizen to participate in the political process is essential for any democracy and participation is often included in the definition of democracy. Gerian Parry and George Moyser have also argued that a regime in which common people do not participate in rule cannot be qualified as democratic.<sup>37</sup> James Bryce observes, "An essential ingredient of a democracy is that a considerable proportion should have the experience of active participation in the work of small self governing groups, whether in connection with local government, trade unions, co-operatives or other forms of activity". Thus, participation is of vital importance to democratic polity. This enables the government to set goals of the society in such a way as to maximize the allocation of benefits of the people as a whole. Therefore, political participation can be considered as a pre-requisite and minimal requirement for a successful democratic political system. It is not only for as ethical and moral reasons but for it has a functional and utilitarian reason as well.

### 1.3 Means and Methods of Political Participation

In a democratic society there are various means and methods through which people can participate in political process. Verba and Nie have mentioned four means of political participation which include voting, campaigning activity, co-operative activity and citizen initiated contacts.<sup>40</sup> Milbrath and Goel add protest and communication to these modes mentioned by Verba and Nie, which relate individuals to polity.<sup>41</sup> Schonfeld has mentioned ten types of activities which are often cited in the literature of political participation. These include (a) holding public or party office, (b) belonging to a party or other political organization, (c) working in an election, (d) attending political meetings or rallies, (e) making financial contribution to a party or a candidate, (f) contacting a public official, (g)

publicly expressing a political opinion to convince others, (h) partaking in political discussions, (i) voting and (j) expressing oneself to political stimuli.

Voting is considered as the simplest political activity which does not require much information and motivation as do most other political activities. Since vote determines who holds elective office, it exerts a pressure upon the leaders and is called as the blunt instrument of control over the government. Campaign activities require much initiative and have more collective effect upon decision making process than voting. Membership in political party or voluntary organization is the co-operative mode of political participation. This mode of participation requires much initiative on the part of citizens. Contesting election is considered as the highest and most serious form of political participation than the other modes of political participation. Protest activities, such as marches, rallies, strikes and other such direct actions- which are called as unconventional method of political participation, generally considered as unhealthy for democracy. But slowly and gradually this type of participation is gaining ground in many developing countries of the world.

#### **1.4 Women's Participation in Political Process**

The above factors have a great impact on participation of women in political process. Generally participation of women in political process implies the degree of equality and freedoms enjoyed by women in shaping and sharing of powers and value that is given by society to the roles which their male counterparts enjoy. Political participation of women does not mean only women's participation in electoral and administrative processes. But also, it includes the whole range of voluntary activities which has a bearing on the political process including voting, supporting political groups, communicating with legislators, disseminating political views and opinions among the electorate and other related activities.

Until the dawn of Industrial revolution, women had a secondary status in society throughout the world. They were not granted to take part in social, political and economic activities and remained confined to the four walls of their family lives. Industrial Revolution spearheaded movements for democracy, equality and social justice,<sup>53</sup> paving the way for women to take part in industrial productivity and economic activities and thus bringing a change in their roles in society. In the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when



the idea of 'equality of the sexes' took shape in Western Europe and North America, the position of women in political arena started taking a new turn. During this period, Suffrage Movement and demand for political rights of women brought a new era for women's participation in public space.

New Zealand became the first country to enfranchise women in 1893. Subsequently, Finland became the first European country to enfranchise women in 1906. Australia and Canada provided the voting right to their women counterpart in 1908. After a continuous struggle for equal political rights, women achieved voting right in 1920 in USA and 1928 in UK. In Germany, women were enfranchised by the Weimer constitution of 1919. Slowly and gradually, women got universal suffrage in almost all the countries of Asia, Africa, Europe, America, and Latin America. However, in most of the Middle-East countries women are yet to gain equal suffrage.

With the voting rights granted to women in most countries of the world, women's struggle for more political space in decision making arena started getting recognition. With the advent of feminism in USA in 1960s the concept of participation of women in political process (not only in voting but also in other political activities) took a new direction. In later decades, importance of the concept of participation of women in political process has significantly increased among political thinkers and researchers. In recent times, a large number of institutions and research centres have been established to broaden the scope of analysis of women's participation in political process.

#### Conclusion:

Various International Organizations, Government Organizations and Non Governmental Organizations took initiatives to promote women's status in society. For example, in 1946, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSCW) was set up as a permanent body of the Economic and Social Council. In 1952, the General Assembly of United nations adopted the Convention on the Political Right of Women which stated that "Women shall be entitled to hold public office established by national law on equal terms with men without any discrimination". In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the

General Assembly of United Nations. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitute discrimination against women and sets up an agenda to end such discrimination. The CEDAW also highlighted the participation of women in politics.

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