



THE SC-ST WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN PRIS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the ineffectiveness of reservation policy in Panchayats for the empowerment of women and highlight the issues and challenges therein. It tries to analyse the effectiveness of women's participation in the political process, largely to be judged based on their political awareness, their capability of decision making in a male-dominated society. Women remain largely excluded from the PRI and local governance structures. My article also explores the reasons for violence against SC-ST women representatives, Proxy politics, power-brokering and gender-based discrimination continue and many women sarpanch have had to face extreme violence for challenging existing power centres in their communities. Panchayat elections with gender quotas were instituted in 1992 with the passage of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, mandating 33.3 % of reservation for women and marginalised communities in PRIs across India. It provides for one-third of the total seats to be reserved for women. Because of the adoption of the policy of rotation, reserved seats differ in each election which implies that a seat that is a reserved seat this year may very well be general in the next term. The elected representatives continue to hold office for five years. Despite such positive results, women remain largely excluded from the PRI and local governance structures. Proxy politics, power-brokering and gender-based discrimination continue and many women sarpanch have had to face extreme violence for challenging existing power centres in their communities. However, my research work evaluates how Women are changing the nature of governance in India. Women's increased political participation has yielded positive results-development issues such as education, health, nutrition, increase in family income take centre in interventions by PRI. This reflects the larger gender divide in India, where awareness of women remains low among women, particularly those in rural areas.

Keywords: PRIs, SC ST women representatives, Political representation, Issues and Challenges, 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, Violence against SC ST women representatives.

Introduction

The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 proved to be catalytic, bringing more than 14.5 lakh women into leadership positions in India's local governance. Today, as many as 20 states - Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal-have increased reservations for women in their PRIs to 50 per cent. Many states such as Karnataka have more than 50 per cent of women representatives in PRIs, which indicates that women are now winning inwards that were not reserved for them. The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, provides for elective posts for women. It has been provided that not less than one-third reservation of the total number of posts of Members and Chairpersons at all three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions (i.e. Gram Panchayat, Intermediate Panchayat and District Panchayat) shall be reserved for women. The women reservation has been introduced keeping in mind the maximising participation of women in process of decision making in the Panchayati Raj System. Considering the involvement of domination on women in society, it is expected that the introduction of reservation policy on the Panchayati Raj system may be an important instrumental step to strengthen the participation of women in the political system. Reservations to elected seats are mandated by the Constitution in the following pattern i) One-third of the total numbers of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat are to be reserved for women. This is inclusive of the reservation provided for women belonging to the SC/STs (Article 243D (3)) ii) Within the reservation provided for persons belonging to the SC/STs as detailed above, not less than one-third of the total number of seats that are reserved for different categories in each Panchayat are to be reserved for women belonging to the SC/STs (Article 243 D (2)) iii) These seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies within a Panchayat (243D (1) and (3)).

Politics and governance, for ages, considered the prerogative of men, are now changing at the grassroots. India has been a frontrunner in some dimensions of women's political participation with several success stories of women's leadership-as prime minister, cabinet ministers, and chief ministers. It has been observed in rural India and particularly among the indigenous women that though they are elected, do not get the chances to participate in the decision-making process of Panchayat activities. Husbands, family members or other village headmen play an important role in the decision-making process of Panchayat activities. Despite such positive results, the SC and ST women remain largely excluded from the PRI and local governance structures. Proxy politics, power-brokering and gender-based discrimination continue and many women sarpanch have had to face extreme violence for challenging existing power centres in their communities. Many studies have revealed that reservations provided by the government had forced women to contest elections and that provision of reservation has not led them to participate in local bodies. Elected SC, ST women representatives are excluded by their gender, violence, domestic responsibilities, bureaucratic domination, poor financial status etc. The major issues and challenges which are being faced by the SC and ST women representatives in PRIs are as follows:

Enhanced Atrocities and violence against Dalit women representatives: Saravanakumar Rajeswari, president of the Therkuthittai reserved village panchayat of Bhuvanagiri Union in Cuddalore district, was humiliated when the vice president, who belongs to the Vanniyar community, a Most Backward Caste, forced her to sit on the floor at a meeting in the panchayat office on July 17. The issue came to light after a picture of her seated on the floor went viral on social media. All the others, including ward members, were seated on plastic chairs. The widespread criticism of the incident forced the government to institute an inquiry by the District Collector, Chandra Sekhar Sakhamuri. Rajeswari accused the vice president, Mohan Raj, and panchayat office secretary Sinduja of humiliating her since she was a Dalit. The Collector initiated necessary action. Rajeswari also alleged that the vice president used to hoist the national flag at all functions while she would stand on the sidelines. Earlier, on Independence Day, in Tiruvallur district, a woman Dalit president. Amurtham, 60, said that she was invited to hoist the flag at a government school in her own Athupakkam village. However, at the last moment the school authorities told her not to come and cited COVID as the reason. The flag hoisting ceremony was held at the school despite COVID but without the president. Amurtham claimed that she was not allowed to hoist the flag because she was a Dalit. She said she had been denied the right to hoist the flag on Republic Day too.

Dalit women representatives face several no-confidence motions against by the upper caste people: If it is not ostracism imposed by political parties it could be caste-based oppression that women have had to bear. Muktiben Patel, a backward caste woman who became sarpanch of Nitaya village of Hoshangabad district, had to face several no-confidence motions against her by the thakurs (a higher caste) of the village but continues her work like repairing school buildings and getting a pukka road for her village. Kesarbai, a chamar (a scheduled caste) sarpanch of the Sona Savri gram panchayat also of Hoshangabad district, had to suffer threats from men belonging to higher castes who even sent hooligans to attack her house. Professor Abdul Aziz of the Institute of Socioeconomic Change, Bangalore, feels that priorities have changed at the gram panchayat level to issues like water, anganwadis (creches) and public conveniences. While it is too early to jump to any sweeping conclusion as the panchayats are yet to complete their first full term, there are enough reasons for optimism like this countrywide survey of women-run panchayats show.

Social issues/problems: gender discrimination and poor situation of women, Disagreements and conflict among members of the community, Family members of the previous Panchayat representatives were getting involved in the matters of running the Panchayat, high prevalence of female feticide (which is a problem all over Kangra as well), Lack of community hall, which could be used by members of the community for social events including marriages. Moreover, the fact that women's effective participation in the PRI institutions leaves much to be desired and also recognising that women representatives are mostly either subservient to the militantly dominant male class or at best dummy surrogates planted to serve the vested interests of their masters, to conclude that women's reservation in the PRI (and the subsequent enhanced political participation of women) has not made a mark in terms of improving the grim scenario faced by women in general and poor and low caste women in particular, would be an exercise in fallacy. Even after 68 years of Independence, the

women are not free to participate in public meeting. The male member of the family thinks the female should have stayed inside the four walls of the house.

Denial of the SC, ST women representatives Participation in the decision-making

process: The enactment of women reservation in the Panchayati Raj institution helps to a gradual increase of women representation in the lower level of politics. In the same way, it fails to achieve women participation in the decision making process. The proper representation of women does not mean proper participation. No woman representation is found in the sample area. All the 30 women representatives agree that they do not go to participate in the public meeting where male members remain present. The most interesting finding is that Mrs Kishori Barik the sitting Sarapanch of Kaharmunda Panchayat never comes to Panchayat office in her four years of tenure. All the Panchayat activities are undertaken by her husband including the husband of all ward members. The signatures of the candidates for the proceeding of the meeting are done in their houses by the office bearers or the male members of the concerned family. She also does not know the different development programme running in her Panchayat. According to the inhabitants of village Kharmunda, they never see her after the election as she belongs to the neighbouring village Dadangapali. In a personal interview, she expresses her inability to discuss with male members. Sometimes she thinks to do so but her husband does not allow the public meeting. Mrs. Tapisa Bagarty former Samiti member was attending all Panchayat meeting; she alleged that her suggestion was ignored knowingly by the Panchayat Secretary and Naib Sarpanch. The 73rd amendment act emphasizes the participation of women in the decision-making process of gram Sabha and palli Sabha meeting. The study reveals that the women are not invited to Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha and the entire women ward member reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings rather their husbands are invited to the meeting.

No proper intimation regarding meetings of the Gram Sabha: it was observed that the majority of the women reported that they were not informed or invited to meetings of the Gram Sabha and were hesitant to attend meetings either due to the presence of village elders or because attending meetings would cause them to lose their day's wages or neglect household duties, Despite the 50% reservation for women in all three tiers of PRIs in states like Himachal Pradesh, empowering women to play their roles in PRIs actively, productively, independently, collectively and sustainably, is a big challenge due to prevalent gender inequality and gender-based discrimination in outreach and service delivery mechanism. Most of them are illiterates or low literates. So they hesitate in conducting Panchayat activities. They also fear to speak with the highly educated officials like B.D.O. Again the strong caste feeling prevails in the sample area. As a result, particularly in the SCs women do not like to expose to a public place.

The Patriarchal Forms of Socio-Cultural Practices Become a Constraint for Dalit

Women Representatives: to participate in the meetings. The society does not allow the women to participate in public meeting and discussion in the presence of an elderly male member of the village. The presence of women in Palli Sabha meeting in the village and Gram Sabha in the Panchayat office among the male members of different villages is not quite an acceptable behaviour and considered as disrespect to the male member of the meeting and family as well. Thus, hardly a woman dares to participate in the meetings.

However, some extent the desire to participate in the the meeting is expressed by former Samiti member of Kharmunda Panchayat. It gives an insight into the interest of women to be involved in the developmental process. But multi-level boundaries of family, village and society suppress and prevent them to participate in the process. Despite such hurdles, she was interested to participate but the rotation basis of seat reservation prevents her. In reality, the rotation basis of seat reservation for women plays a significant role in providing more opportunity to the women to a large extent; but in the case of an interested woman candidate for the same seat prevent to participate in the Panchayat Raj Institution. The mandatory policy of women reservation cannot empower them. Huddles in Participating Decision Making Process.

The predominance of Bureaucracy Marginalizes the SC, ST Women Representatives

Powers: The lukewarm attitude of the bureaucracy has not yet allowed the SC, ST women representatives to function as real democratic institutions with people's participation. The bureaucracy did not shed its elitist approach to become rural oriented between the misgoverning officials, non-governing and non-officials public interest became a causality. The bureaucracy is hostile to a rural Panchayat leadership. Supremacy of bureaucracy over PRIs is fading the spirit of grassroots democracy. As rightly observed by the Maru Sing committee that a major reason for the failure in the working of these institutions were the excessive and undue interference of the bureaucracy. however, the Pathetic conditions prevailing in the Panchayat System and the conflicts which were surfacing between the Sarpanch and the Secretary concerning their status and powers. It was observed that nobody is listening to Sarpanches and heeding their orders because Secretary is a permanent employee whereas Sarpanch is a politician having no powers. In practice, the secretaries are more loyal to higher officials than Sarpanch but they are not even available to people. The village secretariat not only marginalizes the Sarpanch powers in the village administrative setup but also undermines the representative character of the panchayats, village Secretary System reinforces upper Caste hold over the rural administration and creates space for their control over the resources. As several studies have shown that no social status of Sarpanches and Mandal Parishad Presidents in the reserved post. Indeed, most panchayats are still at the mercy of local bureaucrat's nod there are innumerable tales of officials who demand a hefty commission to release government funds. Formidable though the politician-bureaucrat-contractor nexus is, is hardly the most vicious. For the most murderous battles have been fought in the name of caste.

Denial of Political Participation and Empowerment: Rural women are politically marginalised, but rural Dalit women are given even less of a voice in the decision-making process. In India, there is a quota system in place for Dalit's to have seats in the local panchayat (town assembly), but the role Dalit women play is consistently subordinated to their male counterparts. Dalit women who attempt to utilise their power in the panchayat are met with male and dominant caste backlash, pressure and sometimes violence. Many times Dalit women are told they are not even allowed to sit on a chair but must take their place on the floor. In the majority of instances, a Dalit woman has no ability.

Pressure tactics dominant caste Hindus to deny any meaningful participation of Dalit

women representatives in panchayats: Direct intimidation and other kinds of pressure tactics are always used by the dominant caste Hindus to deny any meaningful participation of Dalit's in panchayats. Let us see some recent examples. Last year, a Dalit panchayat president in Pappati village, Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, had to resign shortly after being sworn in because of immense upper-caste hostility. In an even worse case, the husband of an honest and bold panchayat president of village Kamrej in Bhavnagar District in Gujarat, the first Dalit woman to hold such a post committed suicide because he could not persuade his wife to resign from her post. The Dalit woman panchayat president had refused to follow the dictates of caste Hindus of the village. Consequently, she was not allowed to enter the panchayat office and her family was subjected to constant harassment. Savitaben The third case is that of Savitaben, elected sarpanch of Saddha Gram panchayat in Himmatnagar taluka of Sabarkantha district, Gujarat, in 1995. Savitaben took up development activities such as constructing roads, water pipelines, tanks and community halls. She also helped handicapped people and other needy families to get access to benefits from various government schemes. All this made her popular among villagers but other *panchayat* members, especially those from the upper castes, accused her of misusing her powers and started to humiliate her.

Conclusion

It was observed that though reservation for the socially oppressed SC, and ST Women have been ensured in the local bodies, the task of overcoming the social stigma and discrimination is still haunting them. Implementation of reservation alone has proven to be insufficient and the government needs to ensure the rights of the Dalit community representatives are exercised in a true sense. To ensure their political participation in PRIs Government must take necessary steps towards enhancing the SC, ST women's empowerment and representation at the grassroots level institutions. It was found that government need to make special efforts to facilitate their on boarding, ensure the regular flow of information and facilitation.

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