

Historical Deprivation to Panchayat Leader: Comprehending the Saga of Dalit Women in India

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Abstract

This paper aims to comprehend the journey of Dalit women from deprivation to being a Panchayat leader and also tries to analyse their role and experience in the PRIs. Their oppression on the grounds of caste and gender has affected their political participation significantly. Gradually the constitutional remedies and amendments started strengthening the participation of Dalit women in the Panchayat Raj Institution. One group strongly feels that the PRIs led by women has had a productive impact on the grassroots. On the other hand, one group also points out various problems which the women need to face in the internal processes of Panchayat.

There have been also several instances where Dalit women leaders have to establish their strong political identity through PRIs. They have redefined the ideals of women-hood and marching towards the reconstruction of community, society, and nation. Two major facets are responsible for this radical transformation. First is the impact of the thoughts of Dr.Ambedkar, whose political mobilization kept the prime motive of invoking women's agency in the struggle against caste. His philosophy of social democratic liberalism was surrounded around the core of emancipatory discourse, which always kept women conscious about their struggle, mission, and rights. Secondly the rise in Dalit women's socio-political movements which have been the mammoth source of inspiration and motivation for this significant change. The Dalit women, specifically in PRIs have equipped themselves with all the required skillsets and strategies in -recent times. Still, their consistent conflict with the socio-cultural challenges like the dominance of the upper caste and male dominance within the community is the biggest concern.

Keywords: dalit, women, panchayat raj institutions, patriarchy, sarpanch.

Introduction

Indian society has been divided on the grounds of gender, caste, class, and religion. Dalits were the major victim of caste structure but more than that, Dalit women have been always on the needle of oppression from society. Caste and gender have always been the influential factors for the inclusion or exclusion of the individual into mainstream society.

According to the 2011 census, the population of Dalit women constituted about 16.60 percent among the female population in India. They face discrimination on the grounds of caste, gender, religion, and untouchability. It resulted in the denial of their cultural, social, economic, and political rights. They became victims of social and religious practices and vulnerable to sexual violence. This discrimination faced by Dalit women reflected in differential achievements in human development indicators in this group. In all the indicators Dalit women score worse than non-Dalit women and Dalit men. (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015 :). This oppression is chronic which has affected the political aspirations and participation of Dalit women significantly. Gradually the constitutional remedies and

amendments started strengthening the place of women in social and public life.

The 73rd and 74th Indian Constitutional amendment, 1992 proved to be very pivotal for the inclusion of SC, ST, and women in local self-governance structures. It resulted in the increase in participation of Dalit women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. Their rise has reflected in the overall development of the respective Panchayats at many places. Today, the reserved category women are also contesting elections from the unreserved seats, which points out the meaningful change into the socio-political settings in India. This paper throws limelight on the historical context, constitutional provisions, and role and experiences of Dalit women in PRIs to comprehensively understand the plight of Dalit women Panchayat Leader in India.

Historical Context

While locating the existence of the Panchayat-like system in the Vedic Period, as a democratic local self-unit, there is a mention of Sabha and Samiti in the Rig Veda. Further, there was the introduction of Caste Panchayats and Village

Panchayats headed by the council of elders, which played a significant role in the village. (Nehru1964) These Panchayats used to follow a set pattern of knowledge and customs based on the monopoly of caste and patriarchy. There is not any context found of women leading or participating as a member of Panchayat in this era.

The exclusion of women and untouchables from society is embedded in the codes of Manu. In the post-Manu period, the knowledge was constructed very deliberately to solidify and glorify patriarchy and caste structure. Rege (2012) stated, "Manusmriti not only promoted the inequality between men and women but also cemented it. It considered women as just sexual objects and have no rights at all. Even the killing of the lower caste women was not a serious offense according to Manusmriti. The codes of Manu strictly prohibited the lower caste women to enter into the educational, political, social, and economic spheres". (Rege)

All the basic rights of the untouchables were not only forbidden by Manusmriti but also by Aapstambh Dharmasutra, Vishnu Smriti, Vashist Dharmasutra, Gautam Dharmasutra, Narad Smriti, and many more Hindu religious theologies. (BAWS Vol.-VII 1993). These constructions of knowledge left a long-lasting impact on society and laid the solid plinth for discrimination on the grounds of caste and gender. All these theologies denied the fundamental rights of the women and proved to be a major barrier to her socio-economic and political liberty.

Constitutional Provisions and PRIs

In a post-independent era, after a long discussion among the constitution-makers Panchayats finds a place in the Indian Constitution under Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy. Since it was under Directive Principles, there was an absence of a uniform Panchayat structure. In 1957, the BalwantRai Mehta Committee constituted by National Development Council suggested the three-tier PRIs, i.e. Gram Panchayat, PanchayatSamiti, and ZillaParishad. Until 1992, many minor developments took place with regards to the PRIs. 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, 1992 proved to be the masterstroke that introduced local self-governance in urban and rural India. The introduction of a three-tier system, reservation of seats for SC, ST, and women, offices of

chairpersons at all levels reserved for SC, ST, and women, etc. were some of the key features of this historic move.

There was marginal women representation in local governance before the passing of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. The seats prescribed by the state laws were filled very often through nominations. The nominees undoubtedly used to be women belonging to higher caste and class. But after the provision for reservation of seats for women, more than five million women candidates contested elections for nearly one million reserved seats for women in the local bodies. The reservation of seats for women, SC, and STs concerns also office bearers with the members(GOI). As a result, nearly one million women being members of the local government bodies, they also occupy the positions of Sarpanch and Sabhapati in Gram Panchayats, PanchayatSamiti, and ZillaParishad respectively.

The constitutional provisions assure the women, specifically of the Scheduled Castes with all the socio-economic and political securities. Due to this in the modern reforms, the participation of the Dalit women in the political spaces is pleasing. But in many cases, they are attacked by the indirect forms of discrimination at socio-political spaces.

Role and Experiences of Dalit Women in PRIs

There are different sets of perspectives that produce their different analytical contemplations regarding the role and function of women as a Panchayat leaders. One group strongly feels that the PRIs lead by women has had a productive impact on the grassroots. This perspective questions the myths that use to consider women inefficient to perform better in local governance. On the other hand, one group also points out various problems which the women need to face in the internal processes of Panchayat. They observed that there is a lack of awareness and confidence in them and the officials take advantage of that in various ways. Another major group also states how gender and caste play a very important role in the functioning of PRIs.

The dominance of the upper caste is still very much prevalent in the rural areas that directly and indirectly control the local politics. In addition, the growing influence of proxy politics questions the role of elected Dalit women

representatives. Around 85 percent of the women state that they were pushed into the Panchayat politics by their either husbands or another family member under the spell of the dominant caste member. The provision of political reservation for women has helped them to acquire political spaces but the increase in caste violence at the places where the Dalit women are the head of the Panchayat is a matter of big concern. (Gaikwad2016). Such incidents need to be taken into consideration because it categorically highlights a different kind of frequent struggles of the Dalit women Panchayat leaders against the dominant caste in the village.

Identical situations are there in PRIs of the states of Gujrat and Tamil Nadu. Studies revealed that, once the Dalit women got elected, they are controlled by the dominant caste males. They also control all the resources and other working amenities. The women were either proxies or face serious obstructions while working. In some cases, it is the husband's decision for his wife to contest the election which denotes that political participation is governed by Patriarchy. (Malik and Shrivastava 2011). Their political participation has to suffer from multiple forms of discrimination. There is a huge disparity among Dalit and non-Dalit women and also within the community between men and women with regards to educational and socioeconomic status. It affects the growth and self-esteem of the Dalit women representative in the PRIs. On the other hand, despite strong constitutional provisions of political representations for the women, they are utilized as proxies and are kept far from the decision-making process.

In another case, the Alwadi Panchayat was dominated by the Maratha community and headed by Satabaia Dalit women Sarpanch. She was succeeded to build a community hall for the Mahar community by facing severe resistance from the dominating community. She also stood strong in support of the fellow peon of the same officer who was deliberately overloaded by the work from the Maratha community members. (Baviskar2008). Such different studies demonstrate the dauntless nature of the Dalit women leaders who have defied all the odds imposed by dominant caste members. Another study conducted in Meerut and Azamgarh also displays the upper caste dominance in decision making. The dominant castes like

Jats and Thakurs somehow manage to organize power to dominate the Panchayat proceedings. (Pai2001).

The study which was conducted in the Sehore and Baitul district PRIs revealed that lack of basic amenities is a significant problem on the grass-root level, thus being coming from the marginalized and below poverty line group, they lack to manage the social capital for the Panchayat affairs in a comprehensive manner. (Chaudhary2004). The study concludes the fact that issues are not about the inefficiency of women leaders but it is about the stronghold of gender-biased mindsets among the people which affects the development of the Panchayat.

Conclusion

With the multiple realities of the Dalit women Panchayat leaders in India, it is evident enough that caste and gender are key factors in determining people's inclusion and exclusion into Panchayat activities. Despite robust constitutional provisions and safeguards the caste-based hegemonic spirit and patriarchy are so deeply rooted that it is badly damaging the social ethos. There have been also several instances where Dalit women leaders have to establish their strong political identity through PRIs. They have redefined the ideals of women-hood and marching towards the reconstruction of community, society, and nation. Two major facets are responsible for this radical transformation. First is the impact of the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar, whose political mobilization kept the prime motive of invoking women's agency in the struggle against caste. His philosophy of social democratic liberalism was surrounded around the core of emancipatory discourse, which always kept women conscious about their struggle, mission, and rights. Secondly, the rise in Dalit women's socio-political movements has been the mammoth source of inspiration and motivation for this significant change. The Dalit women, specifically in PRIs have equipped themselves with all the required skillsets and strategies in recent times.

The increasing importance of Dalit women in public life is having consistent conflict with the socio-cultural challenges like the dominance of upper caste and male dominance within the community. Pardesi and Kamble (2007) observe that "Dalit women are not merely discriminated by the higher caste people, but also

discriminated within their communities. There is a strong domination of men in Dalit community". (Pardesi and Kamble 2007) This phenomenon is taking a dig at the socio-political liberty of women, which needs to be addressed with utmost priority. Women need to come hard against the cultural forms of knowledge which have been strengthening the caste hegemony and patriarchy, and the religious theologies which are the abode by all these elements. Secondly, they need to amplify their voices against proxy politics and restructure the spirit of liberation.

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