

Political Participation and Empowerment of Dalit Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions: A Study in Telangana

**A Thesis Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Award of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

POLITICAL SCIENCE

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December-2018**

Conclusion and Findings

The passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 was a step towards ensuring a provision for empowerment of hitherto socially, culturally and politically excluded groups called Dalits. Political structure of village communities in India witnessed changes which altered the relationship between traditionally higher middle Dalit and caste groups. For the first time in the history of Indian society, political mobilization among dalits is perceptibly increasing. Further, an increasing awareness of rights and privileges has led to their upward social mobility. Another important implication of the passage of the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act led has been the decentralization of power and decision making downwards. Most important implication of this is the reservation was granted to the lower castes in order to democratize and secularize the functioning of the panchayats and ensure that they do not remain under the control of influential rural elites in the countryside. The introduction of the reservation policy in PRIs the meaning, nature and scope of participation of weaker sections has widened. As far as local governance is concerned, the members of panchayats were accountable to their own community. The attitude of the elected representatives of Dalits has changed considerably within the panchayats and among the villagers. Prior to the reorganization of PRIs, this has never been happened. It is very difficult to conceive the idea of the presence of Dalits in panchayats.

The study reveals that the selected women received some extent partial cooperation from women members as compared with male members and Panchayat staff members. Majority of the respondents reported that they are attending the meeting of the Panchayat Raj Institutions regularly. It is an indication that Dalit women representatives are utilizing the opportunity provided meaningfully. It was also observed that since Dalit women are illiterate, lack of leadership qualities and remain mostly at home, their husbands take over their functions. Majority of them felt that

reservations for Dalit women have ensured that many of them are able to participate and elected to the Panchayats.

Majority of the elected representatives agree that their status has been enhanced by virtue of their being elected to the Panchayats. However, in terms of effective participation in the Panchayat affairs much more is to be desired. It clearly indicates that the provision of reservations can only empower women to a certain extent but for the elected representatives to play an active role in decision making there are other factors that need to be addressed.

The present study found that Dalit Women elected representatives were not able to articulate group specific interests and exercise their own judgment in decision making. As observed in the field, Dalits quite often do not take part in the deliberations and as a result they do not contribute much to major decisions that determine grass root level governance and development. In some cases Dalits have also been able to make their presence felt. This is a shift that is yet to take place in the study area. The participation of Dalits in social decision making is a far reaching phenomenon, because the leadership of Dalits is not yet been accepted by the villagers. Panchayats have also not yet become democratic institutions nor are they arenas of contestation and debate, in true spirits of the constitutional amendments.

Precisely, in our study area, education, economic independence, political consciousness, political background of the family emerge as determining factors that enable dalits in their attempt to move upward in politics. Education can provide them the self-confidence, knowledge and awareness of the functioning of the Panchayats and the ability to take part in decision making. Economic independence will certainly make them effectively stay in decision making as the constraints are reduced. The

reservation alone cannot provide empowerment unless Dalits also have the wealth on source of political sustenance.

In background of the foregoing details it is felt that the realization of democratic decentralization lies in providing Dalit Women the equal access to education, employment, health care and other basic services. In order to make them more empowered, the capacity building and training have to be intensified. Family as well as the community must support and create conducive environment for the enhancement of their participation in decision making. It is felt that Dalit Women need to participate actively in politics. It is imperative for the government and civil society to provide them necessary inputs for their exposure in public life and enable them to take initiatives among themselves to prove worthy of the positions they hold in gramapanchayats.

With the emergence of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, today a large number of women including Dalit women have come to occupy a leadership position in the Panchayats. These institutions were thought to be main agency for involving women in decision making at the grassroots level and acting as a training ground for democracy and political education do not seem to have achieved much at ground level. They are also not aware of basic programs, their duties and role in Panchayat institutions.

Most of the times these women's voice in the meeting is not given due weight. These women need a supporting and enabling environment, which encourages them instead of creating obstacles, is imperative. Getting out of their home and exposed to a new role coupled with new awareness heralds a new beginning to emancipation. However, there is need to be done to ensure that every girl child goes to the school and adequate facilities are provided in the school. Overall, in the end we can conclude that the participation of Dalit women in Panchayat raj institutions as compare to earlier days.

Despite this significant progress, these women are still facing a number of problems which affect their active participation in Panchayat Raj institutions.

The major findings of the study

- The panchayat elections have thrown up an interesting pattern of leadership which reveals that most of the elected Dalit Women are between 31 to 40 years of age. As they belong to the middle-aged group, these women have chosen politics after attending to the family responsibilities of bearing, rearing, raising and caring children. Most of them are married and live in nuclear families.
- A focus on their life, status and political participation may be a new area of revelation.
- Most of the respondents are illiterate. This has considerably affected their participation as other variables like political awareness, political mobility and political socialization are influenced by literacy. They are educationally backward.
- Lack of education has become a major inhibiting factor in their effective participation for discharging their duties as members of gram panchayats. Due to lack of literacy, they are unable to understand the basics of the working of the Panchayats. This limits their participation.
- Most of the Dalit Women representatives are landless agricultural labors, seasonal labors while, some of them are engaged in hereditary occupations such as menial village cleaning services, drum beating, and making leather equipment. This has reduced them to the culture of dependency.
- Most of Dalit Women representatives have less family income ranging from Rs.3000- to 50,000 per annual. Among them, majority of the respondent's family's income is ranging between Rs.3000. As many as below 30,000 (44 percent) respondents are found in the low-level income families in the region.

- Most of the Dalit Women representatives have been elected for the first time. Two factors are responsible for this. First the rotation of reservation of seat. Here once a women is elected from reserved constituency, she will not be in a position to contest second time as it becomes general or reserved to some other category. Hence, Dalit members, including women, can serve just one term. It is unlikely the same Dalit can contest, and win.
- Ordinarily getting elected to the gram panchayat is not enough. It is the effectiveness of the participation of Dalit Women that matters and for this they require initiatives. Awareness about PRI's is a pre-requisite for their effective participation. The study reveals that even after five years of term in their office, they are not aware about their functions and responsibilities.
- Even they would not know much about their role in gram panchayats. It is interesting to note that very few are aware of their powers and functions.
- The role of local elites in the functioning of panchayats is a factor which may curtail the political space that has been provided to the dalits through reservation. In other words, Dalits are not as effective as rural elites in decision making process since they suffer economic backwardness, social inferiority and Political ignorance. The study reveals that Dalit Women are actually stooges in the hands of their husbands and political masters'.
- Most of the Dalit Women representatives expressed their views that the opportunities may be provided to build the capacity and capability of the elected representatives so that they can play a very meaningful vole in panchayat function. In fact panchayat is a primary political institution that helps learn political tricks and political training to sustain the political career. As far as the training of the elected representatives is concerned, the way in which training and workshops conducted to teach basics of the working of the Panchayats is inadequate.

- There is a need to enhance their communication skills, sensitization of gender, change of their attitudes and knowledge of the functions and responsibilities of PRIs. Since most of the Dalit Women representatives are illiterate they need hands on training and exposure to the functioning of gram panchayats through participatory method.
- The Dalit Women representatives are first time entrants in to Panchayat. They contested the elections with the support of their family as the seat was reserved for Dalit women category.
- Out of the total 150 respondents, as many as 132 (88 Per cent) have maintained that they are the first person to contest election from their respective families. Most of them have contested elections due to the support and influence of their husband. Women were supported because the male members could not contest election as the constituency was reserved for women. Ordinarily men dominate the women in the decision making process which women also accept it as a normal practice and they never feel that it is curtailment of their political power leading to powerlessness.
- It is also quite evident from this study that the women representatives are totally dependent on their husbands. The men are proxy representative of Dalit Women in Grama panchayat affairs. It has also been observed that not only husbands represent them but also their sons or in -laws in the meetings of the panchayat. During the field work it was noticed that there were several attempts by the relatives of respondents to give the answer to many of our academic queries. Often it was insisted by relatives that the interview be conducted in the presence of them.
- During elections it has been observed that people in the village usually know and remember name of the husband of the contestant and not the name of the contestant.

- Most of the elected Dalit Women representatives have reported that family members generally support them in their role playing as elected representatives. At the same time, a number of societal barriers come in the way of their functioning as the male members out play their role, without giving opportunity to the women, and also without informing them as to what he intends to do on her behalf in the Grama panchayat.
- It is also quite interesting to note that the distribution of power indicated that the women did not have any role to play in decision making. She is forced to comply with the decisions taken. The practice of the husband or any other male member of the family being involved in the panchayat affairs was tolerated and supported in the system. The gender norms and values not only discouraged their participation but also located women outside the realm of politics.
- Most of the respondents of the present study have indicated that they did not have any political inclinations yet they did participate in some activities through which they could exhibit their political activities. Majority of the respondents (70 per cent) have indicated in negative. It means majority of the respondents have not involved in public activities prior to their entry into PRIs as members of gram panchayats. This implies that their entry into the GP is by sheer compulsion created out of situation of an opportunity due to reservation which the relatives of these respondents capitalized. It is reiterated here that most of the Dalit Women elected representatives contested elections mainly because of reservation.
- Most of Dalit Women representative's hail from those families where there are no members earlier elected to PRIs. It means they do not belong; to the family political background. Majority of the respondents are only first time entrants into politics, implying lack political background.
- Most of Dalit Women elected representatives have indicated that the reservation in politics is a precondition of their entry into politics. Further, they have also made it clear that Dalit Women would not, have entered public life,

or otherwise politics, without reservations. Reservation is, as they observed, necessary for providing access to politics for the socially excluded group's like Dalit Women.

- Most of the Dalit Women representatives attend gram panchayat meetings regularly. As many as 82 Percent of them attend meetings at least once in a month. Though women members are eager to attend meetings the men in their family, particularly husbands, attempt to represent the women in local governance in a proxy manner. This is so because women are, in the opinion of their husbands, incapable of taking decisions. This has resulted in the political subjugation of Dalit Women by their husbands. Often husband involves in decision making on behalf of his wife.
- Majority of the Dalit Women respondents have perceived that panchayats are not functioning properly. The meetings held and the action plans for developmental projects approved is all done without giving scope to women members for discussion on priorities of local development. The official formalities are all completed to show that the meetings are held as per norms. Gram sabhas are mandatory but in practice they don't meet regularly. But there is a tendency that the records are created for having conducted grama sabhas and approval for the list of beneficiaries of various development schemes and programs are announced. Ordinary gram panchayat meetings held without taking any proper decisions. Often they end up in factional situations due to petty disputes.
- Further, the role of panchayat in local area development is not satisfactory as the members always indulge in petty politics leading to factions. These factions end up in parochial approach to the development of local area. Many a times, the development works have been taken up to satisfy powerful faction even though the work is not carried out on priority for benefitting the entire village. Hence need based developmental works suffer due to factions within the panchayat establishment.

- Political reservation provided to Dalit women have ensured their election to the panchayats is strongly perceived notion among respondents. Majority of them feel that their status has been enhanced by virtue of their being elected to the grama panchayats. Mere representation by virtue of reservation does not automatically confer authority on them.
- Dalit women, after getting elected, need to have their own initiatives followed for their effective participation in decision making process. That means, reservation alone will not help for their political empowerment. Reservation is a basic step towards their empowerment, but it is only a means not the end in itself.
- The issue of proxy representation in panchayat institutions is a common feature. The women elected to the PRI's have experienced that they are represented by their male counterparts, either husband in-laws or father or brother in case of the unmarried, in a proxy manner in the panchayat affairs.
- The women, however, educated they are, have left with no option but to comply with the practice. Never have they dared to question it. Sometimes they admit that they don't like this tendency of proxy representation. But unable to express this explicitly. Therefore, they fear expressing their displeasure about being represented in proxy manner in the panchayat affairs as it might lead to family dispute.
- Dalit women representatives are always at disadvantage as they are illiterate, lack leadership qualities, and remain submissive to their husbands. These factors have helped husbands take over the powers and functions of elected women.
- The proxy representation is a major challenge in the realization of democratic decentralization of power, and the empowerment of women in Indian society.
- It is noteworthy that the leadership of a Dalit is always confined to his community. The village community generally does not accept the leadership of

Dalits, however effective they are in their leadership qualities and ability to lead the community or mobilization capacity. Their leadership has no social relevance. They may not find a place in the village power hierarchy that decides the social issues. This is also true in case of Dalit Women. The villagers never take Dalit Women very seriously because they lack articulation, knowledge and skills.

- Moreover, the capacity to understand the provisions and powers of Panchayat raj Institutions required to discharge their duties and powers in LSGs are quite limited. Further, villagers generally do not expect much from Dalit Women for the reasons better known to them.
- Despite all these problems, challenges and shortcomings Dalit Women representatives in PRI's have made their presence felt by involving in decision making process as effectively as any other group. The impact may vary from area to area. It is needless to say that they have made remarkable presence in the PRIs system.

The following are the suggestions, provided here under, which could be viewed being useful for taking up certain exercises keeping the Dalit Women empowerment as a goal, object, process and a determined orientation. They are as follows.

- The Dalit Women need to be oriented for their better educational and economic attainments which will in turn ensure their participation in all areas of activities including political decision making.
- The Dalit Women elected to local bodies used to be provided with a through orientation and be given adequate political capacity building programs frequently in order to ensure their effective participation in decision making in PRIs.
- Political socialization has to be intensified for Dalit Women as they have to play their role as voters, movers of political activities and elected

representatives. The political motivation and value orientation is necessary for them to participate in the electoral processes and developmental activities at grass root level.

- It is also suggested that the male members are to be sensitized about the procedures and provisions of the representation of women in the constitutional bodies like PRIs and make them aware of the need for restraints in proxy representation. This needs value orientation among them.
- The shift from the status of a housewife to a public person as members of grama panchayat raises certain issues coping with the attitudinal and behavioral changes. Dalit Women need to be properly educated so as to orient these changes towards public service as long as they are in the field and also towards their meaningful participation in the decision making process. There is a need of providing value orientation, political motivation and political socialization that should occur in the context of family and community.
- The women must be provided with the congenial atmosphere and environment to voice their issues that concern the community they represent without hesitation and hinge at the grama panchayat meetings for which a mechanism need to be evolved.
- Dalit women may be taken as the reference group which speaks for the marginalized groups whose experiences are drawn from multi-dimensional exploitative systems emanating from caste, gender and patriarchy. The voice of Dalit Women is the voice of the marginalized among the marginal groups. Hence there is a need of forming groups among the marginalized for interactions on political matters.
- The government and non-government organizations and civil societies working for the gender equality must focus on the issues of gender biases embedded in iniquitous and discriminatory practices in local governance.

- Both male and female members must be oriented towards achieving gender equity which is necessary for the empowerment of women in Indian society.
- Other stake holders of political power at grass roots must give ample space for Dalit Women to operate power and make their presence felt by the larger society. Hence, there is greater need to enhance their knowledge, skills, awareness, education and change of their attitude.