



Dalit women participation as representatives in rural local self governance – An empirical study

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ABSTRACT

Panchayath Raj is not a new phenomenon in the country. Its illustration in history goes back to more than 1000 years. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. The present study was an effort to know the extent of participation of Dalit women elected representative in Panchayath and the problems faced by them. Purposive sampling technique was adopted consisting of 60 respondents from Bantwal Taluk. A pretested, semi structured questionnaire was administered and data were analysed by using percentages and proportions. The findings of the study revealed that Self Help Groups are the major inspiration and determinant factor for the membership in Panchayath Raj institutions. The respondents opined neither the reservation for women nor their actual presence in the Panchayath has become any more sensitive to the problems related to the village women. Most of the women were elected for the first time so they can yet to gain more political experience. A majority of the respondents revealed that financial assistance is a necessary ingredient for their self esteem, their independent functioning and their committed concern and approach to the needs and urges of the people of the area. Bringing women into power is not only a matter of equity, of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system political restructuring is the key to economic growth with justice. The training of women Panchayath members should be based on their own local experiences and elicit their involvement in preparing a framework that will enable them to analyse and understand their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

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Introduction

Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Direct political participation of Dalit women in local governance is a central human right in itself and enables the realization of a host of other human rights. Political voice and decision-making power concerning basic services, economic development and social justice are critical factors in challenging and transforming structural caste-class-gender discrimination, and enabling Dalit women to realize their fundamental rights. Political participation also demands accountability from state and non-state actors to guarantee and respect these women's equal political voice and development. This requires a transformation of power relationships both within institutions of governance and in the women's social environment.

Recent legal and policy reforms in India to ensure the representation of marginalized social groups in decentralized governance, including Dalits and specifically Dalit women, through constitutionally mandated reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions bring these issues to the fore. They demand analysis to determine, that the way Dalit women are enabled to claim their right to political participation in local governance, and the extent to which this participation is an effective tool for empowerment and realization of human rights for excluded social groups.

Indian Village and Local Self- Government Institutions

The Indian constitution adopted in 1950 envisaged a federal structure of a central government and state governments and union territories. India's founding father Mahatma Gandhi had conceived of India's independence with village as the base of the whole structure. He visualized that "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers in this structure composed of innumerable villages; there will be ever widening, never ascending circles." (Harijan, 1946). There was legislation for rural local bodies at the village, district and sub-district levels in colonial India. The new Constitution of independent India did not include rural local bodies as an essential part of the federal structure. However, Article 40 as a directive principle of state policy stated the state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government.

The decade of 1980s witnessed fresh effort for a comprehensive look at the whole question, including their composition and representation, functions, resources and constitutional guarantee for their existence and functions. In December 1992 a historic step was taken with the 73rd amendment to the Constitution to revitalise rural local government in the country, culminating the of an effort initiated in 1989 - when the 64th and 65th constitution amendment bills

were presented in the Parliament for constitutionally mandating local self government in rural as well as in urban areas.

Village councils or panchayats are not new in India. They existed in tradition and were also created later by statutes in different provinces/states as the subject is within their competence. They are seen as autonomous, local institutions of self-government responsible for development and also as agencies for government's development and welfare programme delivery. Women's entry in these institutions is also not new. What is new, however, is their universal, constitutionally mandated fully elected structure at three levels - village, district and an intermediate level - which may be a block/taluka/tahsil unit. There are provisions for elections by an independent state election commission in each state, reservation of membership and chairpersons' positions for weaker sections of scheduled tribes and castes (ST/SC), finance commissions to suggest devolution/ transfer of tax/non tax revenues, regular elections every five years and an indicative list of subjects in social sectors for devolution of responsibilities and functions to these institutions by each state.

Focus on Dalit women participation in politics

The position of women has always been a rather ambivalent one in our culture. A woman is a symbol of sacrifice and blossom of life. She prepares herself for life ahead and lives in a daze with an unexplained smile. One side, she was raised to the status of divinity and on the other side she was exploited in every aspect. There is invisibility and underestimation of women's economic contribution. Though they contribute nearly one third of India's GNP, it is undervalued and invisible. Yet she continues to be in a disadvantaged position. The problems of inequality of status and freedom, sexual harassment, Lack of economic independence, lack of health facility, lack of access to credit, training, decision making positions which prevent women to participate in formal and informal social organizations. A number of research findings indicate that women are the disadvantaged gender in both rural and urban areas of the country (Chen 1993: Agarwal 1994).

Women, in many societies, are often restricted to the roles inside the house, those of wife and mother. While major changes have occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades, norms that restrict women to the home are still powerful in defining the activities that are deemed appropriate for women and they exclude political life, which by its very nature takes place in a public forum. Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women. In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower castes have lesser access to public fore, which is compounded by their gender. This exclusion makes it difficult for these women to represent and articulate the voices of their constituencies and their demands are often overlooked or subsumed by the dominant sections of the society. Women's empowerment is one of the objectives of the third generation Panchayath in India. Women in India are awfully underrepresented in political institutions. The political power, access to decision making and authority are the critical prerequisites for women's equality in the process of nation building. The 73rd amendment has mandated representation of at least one-third women through election instead, of the earlier token one or two women nominated by government or co-opted by the predominantly influential, powerful male membership/leadership of these panchayats. It is a significant step in political history of independent India. It offers at once a

challenge and an opportunity for women generally and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women in particular to make an impact at the policy planning and programme administration level in each and every locality of our vast country.

Aim and Objectives:

The present paper aims to study the extent of participation of Dalit women elected representative in Panchayath. The objectives of the study are to know the Socio- demographic profile of the respondents, Political profile of the respondents, to analyze the constraints faced by the respondents because of the vulnerability.

Method of the Study:

A descriptive study was conducted among 60 Dalit women elected representatives from Bantwal Talluk during February to April 2009. Purposive sampling technique was adopted consisting of 60 respondents from Bantwal Talluk. The study was based on both primary and secondary data. A pretested semi structured questionnaire was administered and data was analysed by using percentages and proportions. The secondary data was obtained from various published and unpublished records such as books, journals, magazines, newspapers and websites.

Major Findings:

Socio-demographic Status of the Respondents:

It is evident that, the majority (78 percent) of the respondents belong to the age group varying 31 years to 50 years. It may be stated here that age factor is off course a significant factor. A matured age reflects quite sound and reasonable views in conformity with the needs and necessities warranted by the circumstances. Almost 76 percent are literates, as it was observed Self help group is one of the effective strategy because of which many representatives became literates. The data clearly shows that nearly 68 percent of respondents were involved in different occupations such as agriculture, coolie and Beedi rolling. It can be understood since they were felt the need for participation they started to take representation in politics. Majority of 82 percent respondents were married. More than half (56 percent) of the respondents were belonging to Scheduled Caste and rest (44 percent) were Scheduled Tribes. Income also plays one of the determinants for representation in politics. The respondents in the study were having very low income. It is interesting to know that no women elected representative was paid any honorarium for her work. It thereby shows that these respondents were working on self fewer bases for an overall general welfare and development of the people and that of the women interests in particular.

Political Profile of the respondents

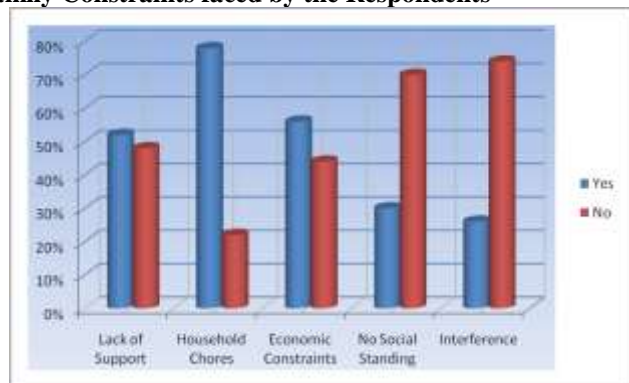
Majority (82 percent) of the respondents were not aware about the seventy-Third Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1992 which provides reservation of one-third seats to women in general and to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe in particular. In the study population majority of 78 percent were elected for the first time as Panchayath representatives, so they have yet to gain more political experience. The findings of the study revealed that Self Help Groups are the major inspiration and determinant factor for the membership in Panchayath Raj institutions. It is observed that all the respondents contested elections from reserved seats. Majority (82 percent) of the respondents were supported by one or the other political party. The support from any party however does not always imply that the person is an active member of the party. It has been observed that primary membership and affiliation to political party

become more active and articulate. It may be added here that some respondents seek membership of political party after their successful context in the elections. However, in some cases sometimes the respondents enjoyed backing and support of a political party as well. All the respondents had links with one or the other political party as such members were persuaded and astonished by their political mentors who were already in politics. Majority (70percent) of the respondents wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the concerned village. Nearly 30 percent respondents mentioned that they had pressure from the family especially from their husbands and father-in-law's, whereas 16 percent of the respondents entered Panchayath to hold power and to prove their identity, and the same number mentioned political parties pressurized the respondents. Around 6 percent respondents expressed since there was no other women member available they were forced to contest elections.

Participation in Panchayath Activities

Bringing women into power is not only a matter of equity, of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system political restructuring is the key to economic growth with justice. Much has been said about women elected representatives in panchayath. Very few (24 percent) respondents visit Panchayath office daily, because of topographical consideration and domestic constraints. Majority of 76 percent of the respondents reported that they attended the meetings regularly. Around 66 percent of the respondents viewed that they are active members in the Panchayath. But more than half (54 percent) 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 Panchayath meetings. They actively participated in the discussion and debates regarding future plan of action. They were free to determine areas required more of development and financial assistance required for the betterment of the people. At the same time, there are many women representatives who have taken bold initiatives and become successful. The rest felt that gender disparity was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their viewpoints, as male member's view points were preferred in male headed penchant, other reason being that they felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members. The study revealed that around 32 percent of the respondents have visited their ward area to look into the problems faced by the ward members. It can be understood from the above data that the reservation of women alone will not help them to make decisions unless she becomes assertive.

Family Constraints faced by the Respondents



The diagram depicts the constraints faced by the respondents in discharging their responsibility. Out of sixty respondents majority of them faced constraints from the family

and colleagues. Around 30 percent of the respondents believed that the family had no progressive to a social standing in the community because the family were still taboo ridden and victims of ignorance and guided by old traditions. A majority of 78 percent of the respondents stated that family members do not help them in household chores so household chores act as constraint in their work. Whenever women take up Panchayath works and role seriously, some oversight in family responsibilities will only be inevitable simply because they will not be able to devote the same amount of time and energy compared to when they were not Panchayath members. Nearly 25 percent respondents faced constraints like family interference in their work; still another 52 percent respondent's faced lack of support by family that is family did not support them economically. On the whole it may be concluded that the respondents were between the fire and the frying pan. Neither the government gave them any dole or incentive to inspire their importance and position in the family, nor was the respondents themselves on their own of any assistance to the family in performance of its daily chores of the life. A majority of the respondents revealed that financial assistance is a necessary ingredient for their self esteem, their independent functioning and their committed concern and approach to the needs and urges of the people of the area.

Recommendation:

On the basis of study following suggestions are made:

❖ It is evident that men's attitude towards women's entry into politics has begun to change from that of total rejection to limited encouragement and in some cases even to active encouragement. This trend needs to be strengthened through orientation courses and training programmes for officials and elected representatives, both men and women.

❖ Besides there is a need to train the women leaders at regular intervals to enable them to manage the responsibilities assigned to them in the Panchayath at all the levels. Since the hard up women members found it difficult to forgo their wages for attending training programmes, these must be organized at their doorstep and some of the articulate Panchayath leaders should be involved as the trainers.

❖ Another important effort required for real empowerment of Dalit women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and rearing children needs to be transformed into a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.

❖ It is not enough that women are motivated, but the whole household and the community, especially men need to be made aware and be convinced and hence they too support the women in their effort for an integral development.

❖ Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and also active in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected one's should be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to the urban areas and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.

❖ The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. The Mahila Mandals in the village can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize them for this purpose. Some successful women's organizations can also act as

catalytic agents for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities. The Government should provide finances and infrastructure to some of the deserving and successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives.

❖ Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision-making. It has been noticed that there are certain very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of Panchayath, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honoring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get replicated.

❖ The media both print as well as electronic can play an important role in creating awareness in the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

❖ All the members may not have the same caliber and expertise, the group developers should identify the inefficient members of the group and impart proper training to them in order to make them competent.

❖ The training of Dalit women Panchayath members should be based on their own local experiences and elicit their involvement in preparing a framework that will enable them to analyse and understand their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

Conclusion:

Local self governance is not a new phenomenon in the country. Its illustration in history goes back to more than 1000 years. Panchayath Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and

women. Dalit women face discrimination, exclusion and violence as a result of both their caste and gender. Dalit Women's participation in the panchayath is necessary so that they can think about Dalit women's issues. In as much as Dalit women's participation is required, they also need to be given support and guidance. Then only can they become capable representatives. The government, NGOs and donor community need to understand and address this situation right from the start. Crucial aspects to the development of Dalit women's potential is training and other empowerment activities that lead to Dalit women being financially independent. The more confidence and self-worth that Dalit women can gather, the more they will be empowered to engage with political processes and be involved in collective action.

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Aspects	Response	Respondents (n=60)	Percent
Aware of 73 rd amendment before election	Yes	11	18%
	No	49	82%
Term	First time	47	78%
	Second Time	13	22%
Support from Political party	Yes	49	82%
	No	11	18%
Member of Political party before the context	Yes	13	22%
	No	47	78%
Reason for contest (Multiple answers)	Hold power	10	16%
	Help people in society	42	70%
	Pressure from family members	18	30%
	Pressure from party	13	16%
	Non-availability of representative	4	6%

Indicators	Responses	Respondents (N=60)	Percent
Visit to Panchayath Office	Daily	14	24%
	Once in a Week	18	30%
	Once in a month	28	46%
Attendance at meetings	Regularly	46	76%
	Sometimes	14	24%
	Not at all	-	-
Type of participation in meetings	Active	40	66
	Passive	20	34
Freedom to express views	Yes	32	54%
	No	12	20%
	To some extent	16	26%
Frequency of Visit to ward area	Daily	8	14%
	Once in a week	11	18%
	Once in a month	36	60%
	Not at all	6	8%