



Empowerment of dalit women in Tamil Nadu: with special reference to panchayat raj institutions

^{*1} A Senthilkumar, ² Dr. P Sakthivel

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamilnadu, India

³ Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

Direct political involvement of Dalit women in local governance (Panchayati Raj) is a central human right in itself and enables the realisation of a host of other human rights. Empowerment of women has been a subject of discussion in the contemporary world. Empowerment occurs when someone who did not have power earlier is given power- and this power makes the person who is empowered experience a sense of ownership and control over resources. Empowerment is facilitated by a combination of factors, including values, leadership actions, job structures and the rewards system. In Tamil Nadu, Dalits experience hostility from Thevar community in the Southern districts and from Vanniar community in the Northern areas. When the conflicts were strenuous, often Dalits deserted the villages. In Tamil Nadu, and other states where massacres and large-scale police attacks on Dalits in rural and municipal settings continue to take place, state administrations yet to act swiftly without bias to bring offending state and private actors to justice.

Keywords: penchant raj, dalit women, dalit movement, reservation, status

Introduction

India is a unique state of multi culture, caste, religion, custom and conventions based on the hierarchy system of India's age old culture. India's multicultural setup may facilitate the power holder and caste wise high rung people and it may not be suitable to lower class people. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution is a step forward to ensure and provide empowerment of women in general and Dalit women in particular, and it has given fillip to create political space for them by being the partners of the development process at grass root level. The representation of women in the institutions of local government has been facilitated through affirmative action, where one third of the seats have been reserved for women. This raises issues related to the representation of gender interests and the constraints on such representation.

Thus, women's empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate as a partner with human solemnity in the development process of the society through the political institutions. In India, although some prominent women are in the forefront of Indian politics like Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee and Mayawati, the participation of women in governance is very small and their presence in the political system is insignificant.

The plural connotations of Indian society has produced variations and differential participation in the local governance based on the age, sex, caste, class, gender and the patriarchy. It is also pertinent to note how these factors influence the participation of different social categories in the decision making processes. It is also quite interesting that the

socially and politically excluded collectivises respond to the changing conditions and take up the challenges to find their new identities. In this process of identification of 'images' independent of caste, gender and patriarchy have caused holocaust leading to tensions and conflicts. The conflict of interests from traditional-conservative values with that of democratic egalitarian values is a major thrust of enquiry.

The word 'Dalit', is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal', which means 'tom-asunder, broken, discriminated, disowned, subjugated, and a victim of apartheid'. But for the Dalit people, the real meaning of Dalit is "The struggle for Human Rights." Today in most of the Indian languages, the word 'Dalit' represents the oppressed and downtrodden. There are 300 million Dalit people in the world, 250 million in Asia and 150 million of those in India alone. More than 50per cent of the Dalits in India are in the states of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu has the fourth highest Dalit population in India, 10.7 per cent.

In this link the study of Dalit women, 'the bottom most oppressed', marginalized, susceptible to deprivations and subjected to multiple discriminations is quite essential as they belong always to the other world outside the domain of the protection of caste and protection from the male counter-parts within the family. This helplessness and lack of self-protection has rendered them subjugation and subordination. Dalit women, as feminists put it, needs a different perspective independent of other categories women because their problems are specific to them.

The structural interventions by the way of constitutionalisation of Panchayat Raj Institutions i.e., local governance, and one third reservation for women have certainly given new lease of

life to the women in general and Dalit women in particular to air their grievances as the forerunners of political forum at grass root level. It is also necessary to record the perception and outlook of the rural elites, mostly constituted by the dominant upper castes and recently emerged economically powerful intermediary castes towards the decentralization of power and the inclusion of social categories hitherto kept out of the power structure, viz., the women of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Social and cultural exclusion from the political system resulted in women and other disadvantaged sections of the population being alienated from the politics and governance. The reservation of seats in local governments has offered women new political space and opportunity to participate in politics and governance. Equality in opportunity, however, does not guarantee the effective participation of women. Non-participation of women in local governance is a consequence of many inter-related factors. Socio - cultural constraints manifested in the gender inequalities and differences among women, resulted in the construction of a non - political identity.

Main functions of Panchayat in Eleventh Schedule

The new Eleventh Schedule, added to the Constitution by Article 243-G, lists 29 sectors or functions which may be transferred by state governments to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. These are:

1. Agriculture, including agricultural extension
2. Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation
3. Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development
4. Animal husbandry, dairy and poultry
5. Fisheries
6. Social forestry and farm forestry
7. Minor forest produce
8. Small scale industries, including food processing industries
9. Khadi (homespun cloth), village and cottage industries
10. Rural housing
11. Drinking water
12. Fuel and fodder
13. Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication
14. Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity
15. Non-conventional energy sources
16. Poverty alleviation programmes
17. Education including primary and secondary schools
18. Technical training and vocational education
19. Adult and non-formal education
20. Libraries
21. Cultural activities
22. Markets and fairs
23. Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries
24. Family welfare
25. Women and child development
26. Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded
27. Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the

scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes

28. Public distribution system

29. Maintenance of community assets

Women in Panchayat

In Tamil Nadu, proper provisions were introduced in the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act in 1994. The relevant sections in the TN Panchayat Act are 11, 20, 32 and 57 respectively. These were also supplemented by the Tamil Nadu Panchayats (Reservation of Seats and Rotation of Reserved Seat) Rules, 1995. The rules provided for the reservation of seats by adopting a list of wards and Panchayats arranged in the descending order of the percentage of SC's, ST's and Women and applying the cut off at a point where the number of reserve seats and offices is equal to the prescribed ratio. The periodicity of the rotation is also fixed under the rules.

In Tamil Nadu, it was observed that half of the electorate comprised women and that male canvassers could hardly enter homes to seek the support of women voters. It was also noticed that some women candidates were dummy running for their husbands. Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyer noted that- "India is, to the best of my knowledge, the first country in the world to adopt a grassroots approach to the upliftment and empowerment of women. Where others have reserved seats for women MPs and MLAs and trusted on a trickle-down effect to bring women into political sphere, we in India have begun at the lowest tier of governance and are working our way upwards.

A huge reservoir of women politicians is thus being created and will soon be in a position to challenge male dominance in the general constituencies, up to and including the Lok Sabha level. After all, the ultimate aim is not to get a female presence in a third of our Panchayats/nagarpalikas, but women's participation in at least half our polity as a Whole.

Dalit Women Empowerment by Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu

Dalits are the exploited and most backward communities in Tamil Nadu for centuries and centuries. Women of these Dalit communities mostly illiterate and unskilled and live a life of most social backwardness, poverty and misery. This affects the holistic development of their children and also hinders the socio-economic improvement of the society and the nation. Hence to address the development issues related to these Dalit women especially in rural areas the representation of women in the village administration has brought about a tactical shift in the functioning of grassroots democracy. The changing situation in power structures has created opportunities for the Indian woman general and particular Dalit women to take active part in Panchayat raj. Now, women are not restricted to home and hearth, but are entering into various fields and proving their capabilities. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that grants 33% reservation for women in the Panchayat raj have encouraged women to participate in their village development and plan for the future of their villages. More significantly, priorities at the village development level have changed health, child education, sanitation, socio-economic development for the better. Women's entry into panchayats, both as members as well as heads after the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional

Amendment Act (1992) has pushed them into the process of decision-making and policy implementation considerably. It has been observed that the integration of women into the political process has an important bearing on the working of the democratic institution. By 1994, 3,30,000 women had entered politics as a result of panchayats and many more have been elected in the last two years; the percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically, that is, from 4–5% to 25–40% after 1992. By 1999, as many as 7, 68, 582 women had been elected to gram panchayats, and 38,582 women to panchayat samitis.

It is remarkable to note that on August 27, 2003, the then President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam administered the oath of office to 400 women *sarpanches* from Chattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal. These women took a pledge to follow the Seven-Point Programme prepared by President Kalam for improving life in rural area:

- Children will be valued as our great asset.
- Development of society, education and rights of boys and girls must be given equal importance.
- We will not waste our hard earned money on gambling and alcohol.
- We will keep our family small for better health and prosperity.
- We will make our children understand the importance of education, because education imparts knowledge and knowledge makes children successful.
- We will unite to protect the forests and check pollution.
- Every person will plant at least five trees and saplings.

Reservation Policy for Dalits in Panchayat Raj Institutions

The reservation policy has allotted in the proportion of total populations of the SCs and STs in the percent of 15% and 7%. The reservation policy has given social mobility in the many ways of Dalits and other marginalized people in the field of education, occupation and income. Many of the scheduled caste persons have got jobs in the proportions of the reservation category of government sector as well as in public and private sectors. Now, they are enjoying certain amount of power, but the benefits of the reservation policy have not benefited these people as they face still discrimination. Some cases to certain family background who are slaved under the dominant group of peoples in particular communities. The most of the scheduled castes in villages are very poor, landless, uneducated, verbally abused by other group of people, ill - treated and will says that helpless people in village but now at least they got some political power to develop their community and villages at the same times their mind set still their bottom of high caste people even they come to as a position of village panchayat. The former dominant group of members still occupies their seats and they are not allowed to sit in their positions of the chair.

They have rights to ask all things if will ask something or anything to become a caste violence to be happen and illegally space the many problems on that time. Some of the villages have cooperate together to working for village development activities to each other of scheduled caste and other caste peoples to give supportive actions, helping tendencies, friendships making, some of them accepting inter caste

marriages in some villages in India. The reservation of Dalits in Panchayati Raj have been empowering in the field of education, economic, social and political ways.

The Status of Dalit Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment had the most-deep impact on the socio-economic and political empowerment of Dalit and women. On account of 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions one million women throughout the country are occupying considerable socio-political space. While many of these women are inexperienced, a process of social mobilization has already begun. However, there are a number of factors which limit women's abilities to participate fully in the political process. These include societal attitudes towards women and certain institutional barriers. Nevertheless, Panchayati Raj joint with literacy campaign and access to micro-credit is creating synergies that have the potential to transform Indian society and bring about greater gender equality. The process of social mobilization has made women think of reinventing gender roles in private and public spaces. Due to their increased visibility, the gender based distinction between private and public space is becoming blurred.

Dalit Women are able to act with dependence and freedom to win Panchayat elections. On the one hand, 85% are pushed by their husbands or the dominant castes, they become proxy politics. This method is aimed at creating a legitimate political space for primarily dominant caste men and Dalit men to exploit Dalit Women, and at getting the control through them. Dominant caste and Dalit men help them to be elected and then take the control, menacing and threatening them. Moreover since these women have a livelihood dependency and a lack of sufficient financial resources for the election expenses, they accept the situation.

On the other hand, 12, 5% are discouraged from filing nominations (allegations, property destructions) and 14, 5% are forced or pushed to withdraw their nominations. Finally, during the election process, Dalit women regularly face illegal practices: threatening, harassing or preventing the candidates or other Dalit from voting or entering the election booths.

Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu

Irattaimalai R. Srinivasan (1859-1945) organized the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1881. The Depressed Classes Mission Society of Madras was established in 1909. It took up the task of educating the oppressed classes. Violence and human rights violations towards Dalits are indescribable in Tamil Nadu. In result to the struggles of Dalits in the state some of the organizations like People's Watch, Dalit Media Network, Dalit Liberation Education Trust and International Dr. Ambedkar Centenary Movement have emerged in. The concrete activities of these organizations, for instance, Federation for Dalit Action and Liberation (FeDAL) at Vadipatti, near Madurai had launched out action to retrieve 'panchami lands' from unlawful occupiers.

Dalit Women's Movement in Tamil Nadu

The place of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu is dismal. Dalit women movements have taken numerous efforts to uplift their situation. AIDWA initiated in organizing women in different

parts of India especially in Tamil Nadu. The following instances vividly describe their involvement in the struggles of Dalit women:

- At Surilipatty, Theni District Dalit women were molested by high caste men on Dec 16, 1997. AIDWA women condemned and agitated against this event.
- At Oddanchathram, Dindigul District Dalit women were asked to stand in a separate queue in Public Distribution System (PDS) shops. They were not allowed to stand along with their fellow women. Hence, AIDWA women organized meetings to highlight the problems of Dalit women in Dindigul. They also organized the same at Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Chidambaram.

In September 2000 Dalit women conference was well thought-out mobilizing nearly 10,000 Dalit women from all over the state by *Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal lyakkam* (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement). The meet discussed various issues such as untouchability, caste atrocities, and the impact of globalization on Dalit women and violence against women during caste clashes. The meet was inherited a separate identity for Dalit women and made them aware of their rights. But the various Dalit fora were not giving due importance to Dalit women and their problems.

In fighting against the rampant crisis of selling illicit liquor Dalit women have played a major role. Two Dalit Self-Help Group women were assassinated in the brutal attack. *Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal lyakkam* (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement) headed by Burnad Fatima along with other groups under took a fact-finding mission in the victims' village. *Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal lyakkam* (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement) organized a State level meet in Erode on eradication of untouchability in Nov 2001.

It demanded a watchdog committee to prevent untouchability crimes, priority for Dalits in education and job opportunities, an awareness campaign on human rights and distribution of 'panchami' land to Dalit women. In the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), Tamil Nadu Women's Forum occupies significant position by doing the entire documentation of cases of discrimination and violence against Dalit women.

Conclusion

In recent decade lower castes are enjoying political rights as well as developing their community and changing their social positions in positive way. Numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of democratic decentralization, quota system for women, disadvantaged sections and marginalized groups, social inclusion policy, the political empowerment, the impact of caste, gender and patriarchy on the process of constitutionalisation of Panchayat Raj Institutions. 'Dalit women, 'the bottom most oppressed', must change the future India will change. If they continue to be in chains of caste, gender and patriarchy, the country will be in bondage. For healthier future for India, Dalit women must strive to break the chains of bondage'.

The Government and Non-Government organization should take necessary action for Dalit and Dalit women to provide proper training facilities for administration work in Panchayat offices; they should be given proper awareness programs for community development, to give education facilities for all

Dalit and Non-Dalit representatives, to develop their skills, knowledge power and to explain the values of their powers and authority and so on to create and empower Dalit and Dalit women in a positive way of encouragement to politically take part and act upon in Panchayati Raj Instructions in India without any Problems faced as a Dalit.

"To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is a man's injustice to woman. If by strength it is meant moral power then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not more self-sacrificing, has she not great powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women."

Mahatma Gandhi

References

1. Lakshminarayan P. Empowerment of Women through Panchayati R-j Institutions", in Ani! Dutta Mishra (eli.), Gender Perspective: Participation, Empowerment and Development, New Delhi, Radha Publication. 1999, 78.
2. Palanithurai G. The Genre of Women Leaders in Local Bodies: Experience of Tamil Nadu, Indian Journal of Public Administration, 2001.
3. Snehalata Panda. Political Empowerment of Women: Case of Orissa PRIs, Indian Journal of Public Administration. 1999; 45(1):86.
4. Towards Equality. Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. 1974, 303.
5. PRIA, NCRSO. Study of Women Leadership, 1999.
6. Bandyopadhyay D, Mukherjee Amitava. New Issues in Panchayati Raj, Published by Task Force on Panchayati Raj, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation by Concept Publishing Company, 2004.
7. Tamilnadu Social Development Report, 2000.
8. Human Rights Foundation Consultation, 2000.
9. 73rd Amendment Act, Indian Constitutions
10. All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (Aidmam)
11. <https://scroll.in/article/831232/dalitwomenpanchayatleader-sintamilnadu>.