

## **UNDERSTANDING THE PARTICIPATION OF DALIT WOMEN ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN PANCHAYATS : A STUDY OF GHAZIPUR AND MAU DISTRICTS OF UTTAR PRADESH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Drawing upon a micro-study of two districts, Ghazipur and Mau in Uttar Pradesh, this paper tries to explore the extent of dalit women elected representatives' (DWER) participation in decision making process at grassroots level. It also argues that participation of DWERs in Panchayati Raj Institutions is in worst position in terms of their power structure which controls and guides the development programmes of a society. This paper focuses on the understanding of different hindering factors in women's full participation in political process. The study also reveals very pertinent observations regarding the limited and restricted political space given to DWERs in Panchayati Raj Institutions.*

### **Introduction**

*"Dalit<sup>1</sup> candidates, especially women, are frequently forcibly prevented from standing for election or, if elected, forced to resign from village councils or other elected bodies or not to exercise their mandate, [and] that many Dalits are not included in electoral rolls or otherwise denied the right to vote..."*

CERD/C/IND/CO/19, 5 May 2007<sup>2</sup>

The above mentioned statement explains that in Indian society the Dalits, especially women, have been socio-economically deprived of their basic rights. Their position has been ascribed and legitimised by social and religious sanctions. In the Indian social structure, Dalit women are the most socially excluded and marginalised and commonly refer to themselves as "the Dalits among the Dalits". They comprise 48 per cent of the Dalit population in India or 16.3

per cent of India's total population (Government of India, National Census of India, 2001, Final Population Total, 2004). They continue to experience discrimination and exploitation in private and public sphere. Considering the long history of suppression of Dalits and particularly women from Dalit community, there were numerous initiatives undertaken by Civil Society Organisations (CSO), governments and academia and they agreed that history could be changed through democracy, practised through vibrant self-governing institution at village level. Therefore, Dalit women's participation in strong political institutions at the grassroot level is extremely imperative.

In this regard, Indian Parliament passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment in 1992 reserving seats for women, SCs and STs in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The main provisions of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment involve the participation of

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women as voter, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women elected member of PRIs taking part in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation (Narayan, Usha.1996).The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Indian Constitution contains guidelines for the State to put in place three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions, which generated a lot of hope about empowering the weaker sections. For the first time it provided the statutory reservation of elected posts in local bodies for women, besides the scheduled castes (Dalits) and the scheduled tribes. It was a turning point in the history of local governance with far reaching consequences for Indian federalism, decentralisation, grassroots democracy and people's participation in planning for development, gender equality and social justice.

Before the amendment, the Indian democratic structure through elected representatives was restricted to the two houses of Parliament, state assemblies and assemblies of union territories. This constitutional change represents an important milestone in the history of democracy in India. It mandates regular elections at local level, with special provision to protect the rights of women and of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The democratic processes at the village level in many cases have not given the strength and power to the participants of that process, particularly, the dalit community. The local bodies' elections are a nightmarish experience for the Dalits. It should be noted that empowering Dalits and marginalised groups through ensuring their participation in the decentralised mechanism was one of the stated objectives of the central act. However, the ground reality reflects some negative trends too. It is commonly observed through media reports and CSOs studies that people from dominant groups resorted to various measures to dilute or sabotage the attempts

to empower marginalised groups especially Dalits.

Women in general and Dalit women in particular face multiple hurdles and find it difficult to participate in the political process that has hitherto been in a male bastion. They are not adequately represented in our legislative body which is a serious lacuna in initiating good governance. This under-representation is not simply a democratic deficit but also an experiential deficit. The legislative process required taking into account all the relevant experiences of the diverse social categories in a society (Oommen, 2003:132). The reasons for this are gender-specific. Women have less mobility than men. They have domestic responsibilities, which puts limits on the time they can spend in such processes. They are subject to the authority of the men in the family. This vision of the family in Indian traditional society often prevents the women from taking part in public fora (Adhikari *et al.*, 2004, Bondi and Davidson, 2004). It is important to underline that women's marginalisation is not one-dimensional i.e. caused only by gender. It is, instead, an outcome of the intersection of the subordination conferred by caste, class and ethnicity, as well as gender (Agrawal 1997; Agrawal and Gibson 2001). This is apparently visible in Indian villages, which are highly stratified by caste, class, ethnicity and gender. In Indian rural contexts, therefore, women are likely to be disadvantaged additionally because of their caste and class locations. The higher stratification of society, the more layers upon women, and hence the more difficult it is for them to be involved in participatory processes. The means by which women are excluded may echo and reinforce hegemonic gender norms, as well as replicate patterns of gendered exclusion that have wider resonance (Larson and Ribot, 2004). Recognising the limitations of caste and gender, Government of India has passed laws

that make it mandatory for local governments to include women and Dalits and ensure their empowerment through meaningful political participation. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is the capacity to implement) in people for use in their own lives, their own communities and in their own society, by acting on issues that they describe as important. Above all, empowerment is a result of participation in decision-making (Saxena N.C., 2000). Then, women's empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition at par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity (Palanthurai, 2001). Nevertheless, overall development of a nation requires maximum utilisation of human resources without any discrimination. So the participation of Dalit women in political process is a major step towards inclusive politics.

After the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, it was assumed that strengthening of panchayats will emerge as a vibrant local government institution and elections of women representatives were anticipated as an agent of social change. Women enjoy reservation for not less than one-third seats for members and presidents of all three tiers of local governments for the Panchayats and municipalities. Uttar Pradesh was the first State to introduce Panchayat legislation (Uttar Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1947). But at the same time it is also true that Uttar Pradesh is India's second largest State as well as it is one of the most backward states in the Indian Union. This backwardness or the 'inertia' that has characterised this State is to a large extent because its society remains steeped in social and gender inequality (Drez and Gazdar, 1996: 33). The cause behind the inertia is the apathy of the State, but an equally important factor is

the failure of civil society to challenge oppressive patterns of caste, class and gender (ibid, 1996:61).

As a State, UP played a prominent role in every sphere of electoral politics from local governance to Indian Parliament. The State has always been an important actor for Dalit movement too. In this study, we are focusing on local self-governance pertaining to DWERS (*Dalit Mahila Pradhans*) to enquire their potential. Hence, the focus of the study is to examine the participation of Dalit Women Elected Representatives in PRIs in Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

### Conceptual Framework of Analysis

"Panchayat" literally means assembly (*yat*) of five (*panch*) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community, who mediated conflict and spoke on behalf of all the residents of a village in pre-modern times. In this traditional body, the lower castes—and women—had no representation. The term 'Panchayati Raj' is relatively new, having originated during the British administration. 'Raj' literally means governance or government. The word Panchayat has been retained for use after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution. The meaning is now a formal one referring to a body - not of five persons - elected according to law. Further, the same word is used for the three tiers of local administration brought in by the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment - the highest being the district or Zilla Panchayat. The lowest is the Gram Panchayat that may consist of several traditional villages. All citizens of these villages constitute the Gram Sabha, which then becomes the basic unit of democracy. These bodies, which are legally local government, have a pyramidal structure. At the base is the Gram Sabha—the entire body of citizens in a village or "Gram." This is the general body that elects the local government and charges it with specific responsibilities. This body is

expected to meet at specific times and approve major decisions taken by the elected body. Above this basic unit of democracy is the Gram Panchayat or GP, the first level elected body, covering a population of around five thousand people. This may include more than one village. It is not uncommon to find several villages coming under one GP. This has implications for women's participation, as women have limited mobility.

In this backdrop, the study would seek to formulate the following objectives:

1. To identify the causes and obstacles that infringe the participation of Dalit women ERs in the Panchayati Raj Institutions,
2. To assess Dalit Women Pradhan's decision making powers in planning and budgeting of panchayat activities,
3. To examine the degree of interaction and communication of Dalit women ERs with government officials in order to facilitate the proper functioning of panchayat system.

### Methodology

The present study was conducted in Gazipur and Mau districts of Uttar Pradesh. In this regard an intensive field work was completed in the winter of 2009-10. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for data collection and interpretation. In order to have proper grounding in the area of the study and familiarise with the concepts, theories and findings of earlier studies, literature review is required. Hence, the study referred and reviewed various earlier studies, reports, and government publications available on this topic. Besides review of literature, the present study is an amalgamation of participatory research adopted by the study team. The study team

used participatory approach and method for data collection.

The sampling has been made in such a way that it must capture the maximum possible diversity. In U.P there are 71 districts out of which 1.42 per cent districts are selected purposively i.e. two districts. Respondents of this study are the 130 *Dalit Mahila Gram Pradhans* who are elected as village heads in August-September 2005. Out of 16 blocks in Ghazipur districts half of the blocks are selected because the number of blocks are more in the district. These are Manihari, Sadat, Mardah, Ghazipur, Sadar, Kasimabad, Barachawar, and Bhanwarkol. However, in Mau district all 9 blocks are selected purposively, namely, Pardanha, Kopaganj, Tanpura, Ghosi, Badraon, Doharighat, Fatehpur Mandav, Muhammadabad Gohana, Ranipur. Interview schedule and focused group discussions were used to extract the required information. The interview schedule comprised three sections :- (1) personal and socio-economic profile of the respondents, (2) factors affecting DWERs from performing their roles and their complete political participation, and (3) violation of rights to political participation.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Respondents' Socio-Economic Profile

The socio-economic profile shows that 100 per cent DWERs (*Dalit Mahila Pradhans*) are married, 68.5, per cent *Pradhans* live in joint family. The principal occupation of 58.5 per cent Dalit women village *Pradhans* is agriculture. Most of the village *Pradhans* are economically dependent on their husbands. In some of the villages the families of elected representatives are economically dependent on the people of higher caste of that village. Due to this dependency the higher caste people nominate Dalit women to contest the election because of the reservation of the seat

for SC women. They work as a proxy *Pradhan*. Because of this economic dependency, the higher-caste people interfere in the work of *Pradhans* and try to regulate the *Pradhan* by their own will and way. At times the upper caste people pressurised them to work in a certain way. But when the DWERs did not obey them, the higher caste people used to create troubles for them. They also try to make conspiracy to exile DWERs from the post of *Pradhan*.

Mostly DWERs engage in active politics after their election. Before that, DWERs played their role as a house-wife and indulged in agriculture sector. Most of the DWERs are not managing panchayats on their own and are largely directed by their husband or any other male member of the family to manage the affairs of panchayat.

Dalit women are really benefited by the reservation policy and by virtue of it they could become the panchayat leaders. When the *Gram Pradhan's* seat is reserved for Dalit women then the upper caste people have no option but to support Dalit women candidates in panchayat election. Certainly, these factors are helping in the empowerment of women in their family and also in their locality. Hence, PRIs are providing Dalit women an identity in an orthodox male dominated socio-political set-up.

### **Political Participation**

One of the important aspects of panchayat is political participation. Political participation can be judged objectively by taking the participation and performance of DWERs in the panchayat process. So, an in-depth analysis of the proceedings of panchayat meetings was done to identify and understand the real role played by each DWER in the decision making process of the panchayat such as the nature of attendance in the meeting, types of opinion they expressed in the

meeting including their preferences and note of dissent if any. In this backdrop, here our focus is to discuss various aspects of political participation viz. decision making powers—in planning and budgeting of panchayat activities, participation in panchayat meetings and committees, interaction with Government officials and higher panchayat tiers, violation of rights to political participation—discrimination and obstructions— and no-confidence motion.

*Decision Making Powers in Planning and Budgeting of Panchayat Activities* : For any elected member decision making powers are the first and foremost indicator of political participation. An effective decision making involves right kind of knowledge pertaining to the programmes and policies, their execution and the power of decision makers, the confidence and zeal of the elected members. Mostly, it depends on the capability of the elected representatives to utilise the limited resources for development. The study discloses the fact that, in the decision pertaining to the panchayat activities and programmes, 3.85 per cent women themselves take decision, 30.00 per cent women take decision with the help of their husband, 15.38 per cent DWERs face the problem in making decision in the Gram Sabha and 31.54 per cent do not face any difficulties. This shows that less than 50 per cent DWERs are interested in decision making process in the meetings. But they are facing difficulties therefore, it should be encouraged to take the decisions in the Gram Sabha, which will certainly create a democratic ambience in the village society. The study reveals that when the decisions are not taken in the panchayat meetings, then obviously the question arises as to who takes the decisions pertaining to panchayat issues. In this connection 13.08 per cent decisions are taken by their husbands, 11.54 per cent by panchayat employees/officials, 4.62 per cent by dominant upper caste people of the village and 5.38 per cent by their

son. However, in case of 15.38 per cent cases the decisions are taken by the members of the village panchayat.

*Development Activities Looked After by DWERs*: From the above analysis it is clear that mostly decisions are not taken in the village panchayat meetings and somehow it is decided by the family members or by the people from dominant caste or both. To make it more explicit, categorically it is being asked to the DWERs, 'Do you look after development activities yourself?' The findings are given in Table which reveals that 53.85 per cent do not check the development activities themselves and 45.38 per cent check themselves. This shows that in more than 53 per cent cases the DWERs do not look after the development activities and the proxy is made by others. This dependency syndrome is due to the nexus of caste and patriarchy of typical Indian characteristics. Therefore, it is important to know, why DWERs do not look after the work themselves. The cause of not personally looking after the village development activities is attributed to three important factors viz. being women, being low caste and being not much educated, 24.62 per cent being women, 15.39 per cent because of their low educational level and 5.38 per cent because of belonging to lower caste. This result shows that it is the gender which is a barrier for women to look after the development activities besides poor educational background. Now the question arises, if DWERs do not visit then who looks after the developmental activities in their absence.

**Development Activities Looked After by DWERs Themselves**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	59	45.38
No	70	53.85
Sometimes	1	0.77
Total	130	100

*Decision Makers in the Planning of Financial Matters*: The decisive steps in planning the financial matters are a very important aspect of decision making. In this connection 31.53 per cent said that it is decided in the village panchayat meetings, 23.84 per cent take the decision jointly by the *pradhans* and their husbands, 19.23 per cent *pradhans* themselves, and 12.30 per cent by their husbands only. This is a good trend that 31.53 per cent cases of decisions are taken in the meetings but the remaining 69.47 per cent shows the gray area of panchayat where husband of *pradhan* and other people take the decision in the name of womenfolk. It may predict that in due course of time this trend might change because Indian society is in the phase of transition. Slowly, things will be changed and this is the beginning. The womenfolk are now slowly coming out of their household activities and taking up the leadership, though the number is very less, certainly this is the beginning of change.

**Decision Makers in the Planning of Financial Matters**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Myself	25	19.23
Myself and husband	31	23.84
Husband only	16	12.30
Myself and other male members of family	5	3.84
Other male member of family	6	4.61
In village panchayat meetings	41	31.53
Dominant people of the village	3	2.30
By panchayat secretary	3	2.30
Total	130	100

### **Participation in Panchayat Meetings and Committees**

Apart from decision making, the other important aspect of political participation is attending the meetings, talking to the higher authorities of the system and sharing the problems and ideas for better governance at local level. It is required here to analyse whether the DWERs take part in the meetings and participate in the other activities or not; which will justify their political participation and also justify the objectives of social justice through reservation to Dalit women in local bodies.

*Participation of DWERs in Meetings :* The study shows the participation of DWERs in village level meetings. 64.62 per cent women elected representatives attend every meeting, whereas 21.54 per cent do not attend the meetings. So, it's evident that their participation in the decision making process is negligible.

*Respect as Representative in Panchayat :* In this context 40.77 per cent DWERs say that they are respected by others, however 42.30 per cent say they are not respected. This result reflexes caste as a form of discrimination and cause of disrespect is still very much pertinent in the country. It also unravels the fact that, due to legislations people don't have any alternative except somehow accepting it superficially. As a result, caste as form of discrimination is part and parcel of life in society.

*Reasons for not Participating in Panchayat Meetings :* The study reveals that 10 and 6.15 per cent DWERs are not participating in the meeting because of their gender and caste, respectively whereas 6.92 per cent are not attending because usually their husbands participate in the meeting. This shows they are victims of triple burden i.e. gender, caste and patriarchy.

*Meetings Conducted by Others :* The study shows that 15.38 per cent meetings are being conducted by the husband of DWERs, 7.69 per cent by panchayat secretary and 3.85 per cent by the son or father-in-law. Hence, the study shows that the role of DWERs is sandwiched between male dominance, public criticism and their lower caste position in the society; which restrict a very open kind of participation in the political process. Further, they are not much aware about the system and its functional characteristics because of their socio-economic background. Moreover, they are also first generation representatives without having proper orientation and training.

### **Interaction With Government Officials and Higher Panchayat Tiers**

The other important indicator of political participation is proper communication and interaction with other higher government officials, who facilitate the proper functioning of panchayat system. In this backdrop we examine the level of interaction and communication of DWERs with other panchayat officials.

*Interaction and Communication with Officials :* The study reveals the fact that 54.62 per cent DWERs interact and communicate with the higher officials, whereas 28.46 per cent never interact, while 16.15 per cent interact at times. Moreover, it reflects that DWERs avoid talking to the higher officials. Taking the nature of rural society and the sociological factors into consideration, it can be very easily apprehended that mostly the male members interact with the officials. There is extreme communication gap between DWERs and bureaucracy, the reasons of which will be further substantiated in subsequent analysis. The study elicits that 55.38 per cent DWERs don't hesitate to communicate with the higher officials whereas 15.38 per cent hesitate to communicate. 33.85 per cent, 11.54

and 18 per cent DWERs accepted that gender, poor education and lower caste identity, respectively are the main reasons for not communicating with higher officials.

*Others Who Communicate* : When the DWERs were asked 'who communicate with the higher officials on behalf of them'; more than half of them answered that their husbands used to communicate with higher officials. Some of them told about their sons/father-in-law representing them. This fact indicates the domination of male in a traditional social structure. A study conducted by Bidyut Mohanty (2002) also asserts the same result. It is alleged that since many of the women are first timers and are illiterate, they depend upon their menfolk for conducting the panchayat activities first; the husbands for DWERs will shield them from the panchayat secretary, B.D.O if they try to harass the women. In fact, some of the state governments have passed a rule that their male relatives could accompany the women elected representative to the panchayat. This is because in some cases, the secretary of the panchayat tried to implicate the inexperienced DWERs in the scams by asking them to sign on blank cheques etc. Some of the DWERs were punished because of those fraudulent acts. An interesting finding came out from the above field experience. Even if DWERs depend on relatives, the power relation between husband and wife has already changed due to the reservation for women, the woman's husband gets a chance to come to the public sphere because of the wife and particularly no longer monolithic structure is seen in family relation.

### Conclusion

The conclusion derived on the basis of the empirical study is that political participation of elected dalit women in panchayat suffers from tripartite discrimination based on caste, gender and patriarchy. The other factors acting

as a barrier are their poor socio-economic background and lack of education and information pertaining to the system. So, it would be concluded that the provision of reserved seats in PRI's has merely inducted Dalit women in the political process and raised their status without showing any desirable signs of their active participation in decision making. It is indeed disheartening to note that Dalit women have won their seats not because of any political consciousness but because of the vested interest of either their husbands or dominant castes of the village. They work as dummy surrogate representatives. Thus for all practical purposes their condition is similar to a puppet working at the command of its master who may be male member of their family or member of the dominant caste. The study shows that significant number of DWERs attended meetings but few members have full freedom of speech and expression in the panchayat meetings. The major reason behind this is patriarchal set-up and thereby non-cooperation. Hence, only providing reservation to Dalits for their participation in democracy is not enough. Capacity building and training, positive, cooperative and proactive attitude of the government officials and family members are required. A lady panchayat secretary should be appointed where elected representative is a woman. To some extent this will make the womenfolk a bit confident; the fear of sexuality and hesitation will be minimised. As a result, it may have a positive impact for the political participation of Dalit women.

### Notes

1. The term 'Dalit' has been used throughout the study interchangeably with the legal term 'Scheduled Caste'.
2. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination/C/IND/CO/19, 5 May 2007.



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