

Panchayat Raj Institutions and Role of Women

Dr. Nenavath Balu Naik
Department of Political Science
Osmania University

Abstract:

The active participation of Dalit women in mainstream political activities is an essential factor with significant consequences for the general governance of any nation. The active participation of Dalit women in local administration is not only a fundamental entitlement but also acts as a catalyst for the realisation of several other human entitlements. The presence of Dalit women in positions of political authority and influence, particularly in domains like essential services, economic progress, and social equity, serves as a crucial catalyst in confronting and deconstructing systemic bias rooted in caste, class, and gender. This article looks into active women's role in Panchayat Raj Institutions and significant changes brought out by empowering women in politics.

Keywords: Dalit women, political activities, caste and gender differences, Panchayat Raj activities, etc.

Introduction

Empowering Dalit women in politics is a process that brings about significant changes by not only ensuring their rights but also by restructuring power dynamics in governmental institutions and the wider social structure. Dalit women play a crucial role in dismantling long-standing inequities by actively engaging in political processes. Participating in this activity provides them with a means to express their needs and concerns, promoting a society that is more inclusive and fair.

Political engagement requires accountability measures to guarantee that the perspectives of Dalit women are not just acknowledged but also honoured. This entails establishing frameworks that ensure equitable political representation and access to development opportunities for Dalit women. These measures are crucial for safeguarding and advancing their rights.

Ultimately, it is crucial to overhaul power dynamics within governance institutions and the wider societal context to establish an environment conducive to the political and social

empowerment of Dalit women. This transition is not only imperative for ensuring justice but also serves as a fundamental requirement for achieving sustainable and inclusive development, wherein the rights and dignity of every individual are respected, irrespective of their caste or gender.

The legal and policy reforms in India have played a crucial role in tackling long-standing inequalities and guaranteeing the inclusion of marginalised social groups, specifically Dalits and Dalit women, in decentralised governance. This has been achieved through the implementation of constitutionally mandated reservations in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). These measures represent a notable advancement in promoting diversity and empowering communities that have previously experienced marginalisation. The examination of these reforms examines their influence on the capacity of Dalit women to assert their entitlement to political engagement and evaluates the efficacy of this engagement as a means of empowerment and the fulfilment of human rights for marginalised social groups.

The constitutional modifications, particularly the 73rd Amendment, have established the basis for reservations in PRIs, guaranteeing the inclusion of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women in the representation. The laws specifically targeting Dalits, notably Dalit women, highlight the dedication to tackling social disparities at the local level.

Dalit women have been granted a formal and constitutionally protected position in local governing structures through reservation legislation, which allows them to engage in decision-making procedures. Dalit women have been afforded the chance to exert influence on policies about fundamental services, economic advancement, and societal fairness within their communities, thanks to the provision of designated seats.

The active participation of Dalit women in PRIs functions as a potent instrument for their empowerment, enabling them to confront and reshape systemic disparities rooted in caste, class, and gender. Political engagement enables Dalit women to express their concerns, explain their needs, and actively contribute to the development agenda, thereby generating a sense of empowerment and communal leadership.

Political involvement is crucial for marginalised socioeconomic groups to achieve their human rights, as it immediately affects the decision-making process on matters that have a

direct impact on their life. Dalit women can utilise reservations to actively support and guarantee the execution of policies that advance social equity, financial prosperity, and the safeguarding of fundamental rights within their communities.

A Backdrop in Panchayat Raj Institutions

In the 19th century, under British Rule in India, the idea of local self-government was established. It was first implemented in towns and later expanded to include villages. Nevertheless, its presentation was characterised by a unique methodology. In 1869, the British formalised these local entities into quasi-official committees, making them vulnerable and mostly ineffectual. This decision exemplified a hierarchical and dictatorial method of governing that restricted the independence and influence of local self-governing systems.

Notwithstanding these initial obstacles, there were endeavours to rejuvenate and democratise local administration during the British colonial era. Lord Ripon, while serving as Viceroy of India, played a crucial role in establishing the groundwork for contemporary local governance. In 1882, Lord Ripon introduced a resolution to reorganise and grant authority to local governing bodies.

The resolution passed by Lord Ripon in 1882 was a pivotal milestone in establishing a more efficient and inclusive system of local governance. The text highlighted the necessity for increased representation and participation of residents in decision-making procedures. The objective of this resolution was to enhance the responsiveness of local governments to the needs and aspirations of the people at the community level.

In response to Lord Ripon's idea, a series of laws were passed in the following years to enhance the democratic nature and reinforce the local institutions. These legal reforms aimed to establish a more democratic structure for local self-government, enabling greater involvement of Indian individuals in local governance.

Although these initiatives represented a favourable change towards democratisation, it is crucial to recognise that the overall course of local administration under British control was intricate. The original inclination of the colonial administration to consolidate authority and regulate local institutions had enduring consequences, and subsequent reforms were not devoid of constraints. The pursuit of authentic local self-governance progressed and eventually

established the foundation for the decentralised governance systems that were subsequently enhanced following India's independence in 1947.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, established in 1959, played a pivotal role in assessing and proposing reforms for local administration and rural advancement in India. The committee noted a significant absence of public engagement in the current frameworks and suggested a series of institutional measures to tackle this problem. An important result of their suggestions was the implementation of a three-tier framework to structure and oversee rural development initiatives, to improve the meaningful and efficient involvement of the local community.

The three-tier structure comprised Panchayats at various levels, encompassing the village, block, and district levels. The objective of this approach was to distribute decision-making processes and enable local communities to actively engage in their development. The village-level Panchayat, as the fundamental unit, was conceived as a crucial entity for local governance and development.

In addition, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee acknowledged the significance of tackling gender inequities and advocating for women's involvement in local governance. The committee's report strongly advocated for the creation of legally mandated women's Panchayats at the rural level. The objective of this plan was to provide a specific area where women may actively participate in decision-making procedures, acknowledging their crucial contribution to rural communities.

The committee's proposals encompassed transitional measures aimed at dismantling deeply ingrained conventional views common in rural communities. This indicated a deliberate endeavour to confront and modify prevailing societal standards and hierarchies that could impede the efficient operation of the projected Panchayati Raj system and the involvement of women in government.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee's views and recommendations played a crucial role in the development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India. The subsequent execution of these suggestions resulted in the creation of a decentralised system of governance that sought to promote local progress, community involvement, and inclusiveness, with particular provisions for the representation of women at the grassroots level.

The Ashok Mehta Committee, formed in 1977 under the Janata Government, played a pivotal role in rejuvenating the Panchayati Raj system in India. One of its primary suggestions was the implementation of a dual-level system. The Zilla Parishad, situated at the highest point, functions at the district level and is responsible for coordinating and supervising the Panchayats within its authority. The Mandal Panchayat, which functioned as a conglomerate of villages, constituted the second layer. This layer was responsible for municipal administration and development planning, thereby bringing governance closer to the grassroots level. The recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee sought to achieve a harmonious combination of decentralisation and administrative effectiveness, exerting a significant influence on subsequent policy choices and moulding the course of the Panchayati Raj system in India.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee and the Ashok Mehta Committee made important contributions to the development of local governance in India. However, they were criticised for not prioritising women's participation. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommended the inclusion of two female members in the composition of Panchayats, one from the general category and one from the SC/ST category, through the process of co-option. Nevertheless, the limitation arose from the appointment or selection of women members, rather than their democratic election. In the scenario of co-option, a mere two women were chosen alongside their male counterparts in groups consisting of 15 to 19 members.

The practice of co-opting or nominating women members has created issues regarding the democratic legitimacy of women's representation. The situation presented potential disadvantages, particularly for Dalit women. The election of Dalit women could result in their being frequently seen as subordinates to members of the dominant caste, leading to economic dependency that may impede their ability to assert themselves politically. The absence of a straightforward, democratic election system for women's representation restricted the extent to which women, especially those from marginalised communities, could truly empower themselves and actively engage in the process.

Although the committees initially established the foundation for Panchayati Raj systems, successive reforms and committees acknowledged the necessity for more robust legislation to augment women's involvement in local governance. Over the years, there has been a growing demand for greater inclusivity and democracy in local governance. One way

this has been achieved is by implementing reserved seats for women in elections, which helps to create a more representative and empowered governance system.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was a crucial milestone in the later phase of reestablishing decentralised government in India. Implemented on April 24, 1992, this amendment sought to establish a comprehensive structure for the participation of women, Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in key political, social, and economic decision-making processes at the local level.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act incorporated a crucial element, which mandated the implementation of a 33% quota for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This reservation marked a significant milestone in efforts to tackle historical gender inequalities and guarantee the active involvement of women in municipal governance. The amendment acknowledged the essential role that women play in community development and aimed to grant them a more prominent and empowered position in decision-making.

Furthermore, the amendment brought Article 243D into the Constitution, which specifically deals with the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) at all levels and tiers of Panchayats. The reservation was intended to be commensurate with the population in each separate region. This provision sought to augment the representation of marginalised communities, guaranteeing their active participation in local governing organisations.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act brought about a significant change in the distribution of political power in India by introducing reservations for women, SCs, and STs, thus emphasising the importance of decentralisation. The objective was to establish Panchayati Raj structures that are more inclusive and representational, recognising the significance of varied perspectives in crafting local development policies and programmes. The amendment established the groundwork for a grassroots government structure that is more inclusive and fair.

Within panchayats nationwide, Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) make up 42.3% of the total, while SCs account for 13.7% and STs make up 14.6% of all ERs. Additionally, nearly one-third of the EWRs are from marginalised communities, specifically the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The tangible consequences of this

groundbreaking constitutional provision will become apparent only when these Economically Weaker Sections (EWRs) Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) Empowerment Reservations (ERs) are properly empowered and informed about their rights and responsibilities.

Key Issues and Challenges:

The primary concerns and obstacles about women belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are as follows: These individuals experience socio-cultural marginalisation and prejudice, which consequently hinders their ability to fulfil their responsibilities.

1. ERs belonging to marginalised communities frequently experience low self-esteem and confidence.
2. Emergency responders (ERs) belonging to marginalised groups typically lack experience and may have no prior knowledge of political and administrative operations.
3. Women in emergency rooms are overwhelmed due to the triple load of tasks and obligations, including their position in household work, their involvement in the rural economy, and their responsibilities as public elected representatives.
4. Many EWRs are unable to travel to gain training experience.
5. Emergency responders from marginalised groups frequently have limited access to formal education, legal knowledge, and general awareness.
6. The phenomenon of proxy participation syndrome persists, in which these ERs are compelled to serve as mere placeholders, as a result of the influence exerted by the prevailing dominating actors.

These marginalised individuals are also subjected to various forms of oppression, including verbal, nonverbal, physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse. They continue to face exclusion, even in public forums such as panchayats. This exclusion is evident in instances where they are prevented from hoisting the National Flag, occupying the chairperson's seat, or being offered tea/water in different utensils. They are silenced when they try to express their opinions in Panchayat meetings, are not allowed to conduct the Gramme Sabha, and their suggestions are not recorded in meeting resolutions. Furthermore, there is an inequity in the allocation of funds to Panchayats led by these marginalised sections.

There is a deficiency in training campaigns that are specifically created and focused on marginalised groups of employees in the early stages of their employment. Additionally, there is a lack of ongoing assistance and guidance provided to these employees after the training period. Support services are insufficient for EWRs. While most states have implemented a 50% quota of seats for women in PRIs, the establishment of childcare centres and Grievance Redressal Committees for reporting incidents of sexual harassment (by Supreme Court recommendations) has been delayed.

Gramme Sabhas have been granted specific authority under the Panchayats Extension Scheduled Areas Act, 1996. This authority pertains to activities such as land acquisition, regulation of small bodies of water, granting licences and permits for the extraction of minor minerals, overseeing the utilisation of minor forest resources, and controlling the production and distribution of intoxicants and liquor. The Emergency Rooms (ERs) and Gramme Sabhas in this area hence must be empowered to carry out this responsibility.

Recommendations :

Devolving more resources, funding, and personnel to Panchayats is essential for strengthening grassroots governance. This decentralization empowers local bodies to efficiently address community needs and ensures more effective resource allocation. Simultaneously, implementing quotas for Dalits in local and district police forces is a crucial step towards inclusive representation, fostering diversity, and building trust in law enforcement. To bolster support for Dalits, establishing dedicated offices in each district becomes pivotal. These offices can serve as crucial hubs for providing targeted assistance and addressing specific concerns within the community. Moreover, granting Gram Sabha enhanced authority in overseeing Panchayat operations, budgeting decisions, and resource allocation fosters greater local participation and accountability.

National strategic plans with clear objectives are imperative for the holistic advancement of Dalit women. The allocation of dedicated funds for the implementation of these plans ensures focused efforts with measurable outcomes over specific timeframes. Land reforms, when rigorously enforced, can address historical inequalities and provide economic empowerment to marginalized communities.

A modest fund for election expenses and a standardized wage structure for Panchayat positions ensure a level playing field and fair compensation. Monitoring progress, auditing

accounts, and arranging monthly gatherings with village Panchayat presidents contribute to transparency and accountability. Additionally, training programs tailored for women, stringent regulations against proxy candidates, and periodic performance assessments every five years are integral for sustained development. To uplift Dalit women, training initiatives and network enhancement within the Panchayat framework are essential. Simultaneously, an extensive social education campaign across various media platforms raises awareness and fosters inclusivity in society. By adopting these comprehensive measures, India can progress towards a more equitable and participatory governance structure, particularly at the grassroots level.

The existing interpretations and implementation of reservations under Panchayat Raj suffer from notable deficiencies, which hinder the ability of Panchayats to effectively accomplish their primary goals of promoting fair development and social justice. Reforms are necessary, as it is important to acknowledge that the political involvement of Dalit Women cannot be considered separately. It is imperative to investigate innovative methods that promote cooperation among Dalit Women, non-Dalit Women, and Dalit men, utilising the achievements of Dalit Women's political leadership as a catalyst. The primary objective of these endeavours should be to establish a conducive atmosphere that fosters the engagement of these women in political activities, thereby leading to a fundamental shift in their ability to obtain and manage societal resources and advantages. Furthermore, it is crucial to advocate for the establishment of a culture that upholds human rights, which necessitates accountable governance and fair treatment for every individual.

Nevertheless, the low social position of Dalits remains unchanged. They are revered in their role as president, but their status as Dalit women is not given the same level of respect.

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