

# Panchayati Raj and the Political Empowerment of Dalit Women (A Study of Backward Caste Sarpanches in Anantapur Dist.)

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Indian women had been the most deprived section of society segregated, exploited and assigned a secondary status of depravity, inferiority Vis a Vis their male counterparts. Dalit women suffered a double deprivation both as women and as women from disadvantaged section belonging to the lower rungs of social ladder.

In the words of Gandhiji "Women is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities, she has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he by sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have." (Mahatma Gandhi, 1918).

The word Dalit 'as opined Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Phule means a broken man' - the one who is exploited, segregated attributable to the so called untouchables. The word Dalit also befits women backward cast who predicament is no less better than the tuff the so called untouchables considering the dual deprivation to which they were subjected to has been women in general and women from disadvantaged sections in society. Deprived of access education, economic independence and social isolation they were virtually confine to their houses in a status of subjugation. In that sense of depravity and exploitation women from backward castes can certainly be called Dalit women.

The social depravity of Dalit Women was clearly reflected in terms of socio-economic and political indicators which shown them occupying the subservient position in the Indian Society. Along with the Scheduled castes and

Scheduled Tribes, the women were also included among the disadvantaged groups of people in India. The constitution of India contains equal rights for all the citizens irrespective of social and economic status, but these provisions couldn't become a reality over period of four decades.

The social depravity of Indian women is reflected in terms of sex ratio life literate [census of India 1991), nutrition (Butilily wale 1985, Sen and Sen Gupta 1983]in work force participation wage and earnings (Mukarjee 1996)and work time dispositions (Jain 1996), but also in terms of access to power (Mukarjee 1996) which control and guides development programs if a society's access to political opportunity and participation in political decision making process are important components of capacity building and also autonomy. The entry of women into the decision-making bodies, it was thought would necessitate restructuring of institutions and brings solutions to issues pertaining to women's rights.

India as a welfare state is committed to the welfare and development of its people in general and of vulnerable sections in particular. The government has special concern and commitment for the well being of the socially disadvantaged group's i.e. the scheduled caste (SCs), the scheduled tribes (S.Ts.) the other backward classes (BCs) and the minorities. The planning in the post-independent era focused on the social amelioration of the weaker sections through educational and economic upliftment of the weaker sections among which women also constituted as belonging to this disadvantaged section. The constitution of India envisaged ensuring equality of all the citizens through provision of protective discrimination and also political participation. The planned efforts to emancipate women educationally economically did not yield the desired results

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over the decades after independence. Beginning with 1980's began the effort of political empowerment as it was perceived to give women the needed fillip to an onward surge towards all round development and to a status of respectability and partnership in decision making.

To make a political empowerment of women a reality, the issues of reservation of 1/3 of the seats for women at the grass-root level organization was taken by women's organizations and social activists. The Government of India passed 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments, which paved way for women's political participation. It was expected that the Panchayat Raj institution would ensure political empowerment removing the social and economic discrimination against them.

Empowerment means the process by which power is gained, developed, sized, felicitated or given (Webster's Dictionary). Empowerment may be broadly defined as control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology (Battiwala 1995) Empowerment therefore is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalized and the disadvantaged sections in a given context. (Sharma, 1991)

Perceptions of being empowered across time culture and dominate a person's life. In India, a low caste woman currently feels empowered when she is given a fair hearing in a public meeting, which is comprised of men and woman from different social and economic groups.

Empowerment in the human services has emerged from efforts to develop more effective and responsive services of women and other disadvantaged groups. The aim of empowerment is to address the role powerlessness plays in creating and perpetuating personal social problems. It can be distinguished by its focus on developing critical awareness increasing feelings of collective and self efficiency and developing skill for personal, inter-personal or social change.

Empowerment in its simple form means the manifestation of the redistribution of power that

challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance [Chandra 1997]. It is both a process and the result of the process It seeks to change the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate it pave way for the women to gain access to and control of materials as well as information resources.

The concept of Women's empowerment appears to be the result a number of important critical discussion dialogues and debates generated by the women throughout the world and intellectual resources. Control over ideology, signifies the ability to generate, capacity to propagate, capacity sustain and institutionalize specific sets of beliefs, principles, values, attitudes, action and behaviours - 'virtually' determining how people perceives, think and functioning a given Socio-economic and politically environment. (Apte, 1995)

The term "Backward Classes" describes the totality of groups entitled of preferential treatment on the basis of their backwardness, Viz., the S.C. s and S.T. s as well as BC, but those accorded special treatment because of temporary or situational disadvantage Gender discrimination is a universal phenomenon. Both inside and outside the households women are excluded from position of power. They are denied opportunities to participate in the decision making process. Even when the decisions are to affect their well-being, they are only passive observers. The primary challenge facing women to-day therefore is no increase their participation so they get hold of the situation and become actively involved in the process of decision making (Chandra 1997).

The Government of, A.P. passed executive order in 1963 declaring 139 castes as backward and reserved for them 25 percent of the seats in educational institutions. This order was struck down by the High court of Andhra Pradesh on the ground that it was based solely on caste. The sub-committee adopted the following criteria for determining backwardness 1) Poverty 2) Low level of education 3) Low standard of living 4) Place of habitation 5) Inferiority of occupation and 5) Low status of caste.

Women's political participation in grass roots and community organisations, in non-government and people's organisations, in

feminist's organisations and in worker's movement and in other social and political movements for the transformation of society were witnessed. Women had been at the forefront of the environmental, peace, human rights, consumers and other movements. Women have mobilized in massive numbers to contribute to liberation movements and movements for democracy.

The real empowerment can take place only if women are turned from weaker sex and passive beneficiaries into a valuable human resource of unique strength, and to be integrated in our development efforts. Empowerment of women is strengthening of their innate vitality, which and be done through acquirement of knowledge, power and experience. Power is not power to dominate but power to reduce helplessness and effectiveness. No account of constitutional guarantee of equality will help promote women's in social transformation unless they become empowered persons. Realizing women's subjugation and subordination and affirmative discrimination against women in general has emerged in the need of their empowerment-both political and economic. Here empowerment refers to exercise of powers guaranteed by the constitution to woman in panchayaraj to get rid of different types of socio-economic disabilities.

The legislation in the amendment of the constitution (73<sup>rd</sup>) for detailing the provisions in respect of Panchayat raj and Municipality is definitely a hall mark for new and effective system of local self government. The late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had embarked upon empowerment of people to have greater say in their own affairs at the grass root levels UN addition to the nation and state levels. The concept of empowerment is again embossed in the society, which is a complex organism of multi-level and interrelated relationships and interactions.

One decade has gone by after the provision of political participation to women from disadvantage section to take of leadership as Sarpanches at grass-root level democratic institution of panchayat raj. The effort has been a step in the right direction. It has to be assessed to what an extent the real political empowerment of the Dalit women has become

a reality? To what extent the egalitarian society has emerged in the caste ridden rural fabric of India? Need to be brought forth through empirical studies so as to make suitable policy modifications to forth political empowerment and through it the emancipation of the backward section of the society.

### **Objectives**

This paper examines the political empowerment of backward caste women through participation in Panchayatraj and to know the impact that the political empowerment has wrought in the status of backward caste women in grass-root political institutions of Panchayatraj.

### **Method of Study**

Anantapur district is one the four district of backward region of Rayalaseema situated in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Total Panchayats in Anantapur District are 1005. Total women headed Panchayats 301. Other Caste women and SCs and STs Women put together head 217 Panchayats in the district. The universe for the present study was all the 84 Backward Caste Women who head village Panchayats of Anantapur District. Since the universe was small and manageable, all the respondents were covered in this census survey. The present study was carried out on all the 84 backward caste women Sarpanches occupying the Gram Panchayats in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The empowerment of women through political participation became a reality through passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the constitution paving way for the reservation for women in Panchayatraj to ensure their participation in the decision making process. The active participation of women in the decision making process is to begin with Gram Panchayat level. It was made that 33 percent of reservation for women at all tiers of Panchayat so as to get the elected women to safeguard the interests of the village and in particular of women and children adequate training and authority have to be given to them.

Backward castes women who form sizable portion of the population becoming Sarpanches

signalled the dawn of the era of women's political empowerment propelling women for all round development. The following are the major findings of the study.

1. A majority of women 78.5 per cent of them are in the group age of 20-40 years. It is heartening to know that women in their prime adult age are entering politics, which indicates the enthusiasm and interest they exhibit to come forward to participate in the process of planning for development.
2. It is observable that 63.10 per cent of the respondents are illiterates. It was only 9.52 per cent are with education levels of high school and above.
3. The overall inference is that all the respondents have minimum of land holdings which is an indicator of their economic status in their rural areas. Based on the sample it is observed that owning a land certainly enhances a person's political stature particularly in the rural areas.
4. The income levels of the families of Backward Caste Sarpanches are in category lower middle and lower classes.
5. The basic social institutions viz .family and caste continue to be motivating factors for backward class women's entry into politics.
6. The respondents clearly indicated that 50 percent of the respondents had protecting the families interest as the main consideration forcing their entry, while in the case of 32.14 per cent, rivalry prevalent in the political set up as the reason for their entry into politics.
7. On the whole 76.19 per cent have accepted that they were forced into politics to some extent.
8. The process of emergence of backward class women leaders was found to be following the traditional channels of political emergence such as caste, family's standing in the village and of course the new dimension of reservation for gender which was found to be linked to the traditional channels of caste and family status, intertwined with rivalry and factions prevalent in rural areas.
9. In spite of several constraints, these women leaders with limited literacy and exposure to political deliberations in the rural areas, have certainly registered moderate success.
10. The reservations no doubt has helped largely the first generation leaders while the majority of them 78.57 per cent who are either second or third generation leaders, which means that the traditional channels of political emergence and dominance are still prevalent. Reservation or no reservations the rural political elites still rule the rural political institutions
11. The average empowerment score of all the backward caste women leaders indicate an average of 43.56 points which is indicative of certain empowerment among these women, which signals of a positive change in the right direction.
12. The empowerment scores reveal that the opinion on empowerment ascends as their age increases.
13. The highest average was obtained by younger generation of women. The lower scores of the higher age groups might be due to their pre-occupation with family burden and their experience of the local political scenarios for a long duration.
14. The highest scores of political attitude is noticed among 21.42 per cent of the respondents who are have primary education. Paradoxically respondents with education levels ranging from upper primary level degree have attitude scores which shows declining attitude scores.

In the light of the findings listed above regarding the socio-economic profile and on the emergence and the performance of backward caste women leaders of Panchayatiraj, it can concluded that the process of emergence of backward caste women leaders is the same as in the case of men. The channels of emergence of rural leadership through caste, family status are widely operational even in the case of emergence of backward caste women leaders. Most of the women are from families with second and third generation of political participation therefore they must have had

adequate political socialization. The empowerment of backward caste women is nothing significant except for women occupying positions of power. The self appraisal of women leaders reveals that the empowerment they experienced is to large extent moderate considering the fact that women are not totally equipped and free from the influence of the traditional institutions which continue to sway the rural political scenario. No doubt the political reservations have opened the doors of local self government for the women to enter positions of power to partake in the decision making process. The political empowerment has given the women a sense of confidence and opportunity for interest articulation which would not have been possible without their entry into local self government. Women in political offices A have certainly broken the ice. A beginning has been

made in the emancipation of backward class women through political empowerment. Given the constraints, the strides made by backward caste women through Panchayat Raj is certainly a step in the right direction. It is hoped that empowerment of women in general and backward caste women in particular in the true sense of term, in all its dimensions will be a reality in the coming decades.

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<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Age group in years</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1	20-30	19	22.62
2	30-40	47	55.95
3	40-50	16	19.05
4	50 and above	2	2.38
5	<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Table No. 1: Distribution of the respondents by Age**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Levels of Education</b>	<b>No of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Illiterates</b>	53	63.14
<b>2</b>	<b>Primary</b>	18	21.42
<b>3</b>	<b>Upper Primary</b>	5	5.92
<b>4</b>	<b>High School</b>	6	7.14
<b>5</b>	<b>College</b>	2	2.38
<b>6</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Table No. 2: Distribution of the Respondents by their level of Education.**

Sl. No.	Response	No of Respondents	Percentage
1	Factions	6	7.14
2	Rivalry	27	32.14
3	Protecting Family Interest	42	50.00
4	Any other specify	9	10.71
5	Total	84	100

Table No. 3

Distribution of the Respondents by Village Considerations that Forced the L.S.G.

Sl. No.	Age group in year	No of Respondents	Empowerment Scores
1	20-30	19 (22.62%)	45
2	30-40	47 (55.95%)	50
3	40-50	16 (19.05%)	50
4	50 and above	2 (2.38%)	55
5	Total	84 (100%)	

Table No. 4: Age and Empowerment Scores

Sl. No.	Levels of Education	No of Respondents	Average Attitude Scores
1	Illiterate	53 (63.10%)	59
2	Primary	18 (21.42%)	46
3	Upper Primary	5 (5.92%)	30
4	Secondary	6 (7.14%)	24
5	Inter	2 (2.38%)	18
6	Total	84 (100%)	

Table No. 4: Age and Empowerment Scores