



Dalit Women and Politics: A Study on the Political Participation of dalit women in Rural Andhra Pradesh

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Received 15 August, 2022; Revised 28 August, 2022; Accepted 31 August, 2022 © The author(s) 2022. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction:

Unlike in many other parts of the world, the political participation of women is not a new phenomenon in India. In the early 19th c. itself Indian women had begun to appear on the national scene in public and political activity. The political participation as a right of women was started in the year 1917, when Women's Indian Association delegated by Sarojini Naidu met Morley and demanded equal voting rights for women along with men. It was the first attempt made by women for their political rights. As a result, in 1919 under the Montague Chemsford reforms around ten lakh women obtained voting rights. Very soon, women were not only being accepted in public activity but were organizing themselves to fight for their rights in different ways and means. As the educated middle class woman played a remarkable role during the freedom struggle similarly women belong to the backward communities played an important role in the movement led by Dr. Ambedkar against caste discrimination. In this context, the present paper Dalit Women and Rural Politics in Andhra Pradesh will discuss the historicity of women in politics in general and dalit women's participation in rural political structure in particular and how dalit women negotiated with the institutionalized casteism that pervades several governmental and political structures as Sarpanches in Village Panchayat system.

Dalits and Politics:

Andhra Pradesh experienced significant movements against caste discrimination under Adi Andhra Movement since 1906. The basic thrust of the movement was to critique the ideology of Brahmanical Hinduism and counter the socio cultural hegemony of the Upper Castes. (Chinna Rao-2003). The anti caste movements and the constitutional benefits brought several changes in the lives of dalits in terms of modern education, dignified employment and exposure to the new world particularly in coastal Andhra Pradesh. However, it is needless to say that most of these changes benefited men in the community than women. Dalit women in Andhra Pradesh are still not only struggling to get minimum education and employment but also facing several forms of violence within and outside the community.

From the beginning of its formation as a separate state in 1956, Caste played an important role in the electoral politics of Andhra Pradesh. Shudra Castes such as Reddy's and Kammas became politically dominant as they hold maximum land holdings and the occupants of all major business like real estate, transport, Industries and even education.

While there is some overlap between caste and class, it is far from complete. Some of the backward caste people were not poor in an economic sense For ex. Kapus in coastal Andhra. More accurately, these are the affluent groups among Sudras. The villages are dominated by either Kapus or Rajulu (supposingly a kshatriya community). However, the process of urbanization and industrialization made many upper castes to migrate to the near by urban centers. As a result, who are left in the rural India are OBCs and SCs. Attempts by SCs and BCs to grab the power over the village often lead to violence among these two castes.

The role of state policies in the process of nation building and political development of India occupy greater significance during the closing years of the 20th C. with the adoption of the 73rd amendment to the constitution. Indian state begin a process with the potential to create genuine democracy at the village level.. It represents an historic opportunity to transform the face of rural India. Special provisions were made to reserve the post of ward member or sarpanch of a panchayat. This was done to reinforce the mandate of the Constitution, which made special provisions for the weaker sections, especially the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and women. Moreover, it was a means to 'include the excluded.' From the point of view of

the Constitution, any reservation or positive action or affirmative action is intended to provide space and scope for the historically discriminated communities to move away from discrimination and exclusion.

The participation of women and dalits was stated to be an effective means of promoting policies for economic and social development. It will be difficult for a state, which is highly centralized and bureaucratized to take the collective needs and aspirations of the people. The framers of constitution envisaged a decentralized democratic system of governance and direct participation of the people in decision-making down to the grass root level. Thus, the process of decentralization to panchayat raj institutions has started opening exciting possibilities for women at the grass root level to participate in the political field and bring their voice into policy making and planning.

Power Politics Reservations and Women's Representation: Issues Problems and Possibilities

Women's representation in the political bodies, while important on the grounds of social justice and legitimacy of the political system, does not easily translate into improved representation of women's various interests. While we cannot assume that more women in public offices would mean a better deal for women in general, there are important reasons for demanding greater representation of women in political life. First is the intuitive one the greater the number of women in public office, articulating interests, and seen to be wielding power, the more the gender hierarchy in public life could become disrupted. Without sufficiently visible, if not proportionate, presence in the political system "threshold representation" a group's ability to influence either policy-making, or indeed the political culture framing the representative system, is limited. Further, the fact that these women are largely elite women might mean that the impact that they have on public consciousness might be disproportionately larger than their numbers would suggest.

Second, and more important, we could explore the strategies that women employ to access the public sphere in the context of a patriarchal socio-political system. These women have been successful in subverting the boundaries of gender, and in operating in a very aggressive male-dominated sphere. Could other women learn from this example? The problem here is, of course, precisely that these women are an elite. The class from which most of these women come is perhaps the most important factor in their successful inclusion into the political system. We can, however, examine whether socio-political movements provide opportunities for women to use certain strategies that might be able to subvert the gender hierarchy in politics. Finally, we can explore the dynamics between institutional and grass-roots politics. As this study demonstrates, the "politicization of gender" in the Indian political system is due largely to the success of the different women's movements.

Political participation does not simply mean voting in the elections or campaigning but it also includes power in decision-making, identification of problems, planning, implementation and evaluation. It also includes attending public meetings, joining in a party organization, contributing money to a party, contesting elections etc. This is where the problem of empowerment caught the attention of many political thinkers and sociologists..

Though there is a significant number of women who are socially and politically active, it is true that 'those' women are not representative of Indian women as a 'whole' and not many women from the grass-roots level are coming up to the decision making bodies.

Many women politicians are from the "elite" and the women who are elected to office are often relatives of prominent political leaders. Most of the women who participated in freedom movement and the women who contested in the elections (1975) were from elite sections. In the same year, out of 21 members of parliament six were SC and STs and they were also the elites in their respective communities. Pratibha Bharati, a noted dalit political leader is from an upper middle class family, her father being a high court judge, it became easy for her to enter public sphere with out much hindrance. If the family has accepted a woman's career in politics, she can negotiate with her family. This is more likely if the family is an elite political family with more than one member participating in politics. If the woman was already active in political life before she married, she can face tremendous pressures from her husband's family to conform to a traditional role that allows little scope for pursuing an active political career. A woman politician's options in this case are either to conform to the expectations of the family and retreat from public life, or to leave the family in pursuit of an uncertain future in party politics. In the latter case, the lack of family support and the stigma of divorce are a clear disadvantage for a woman in politics. (In the case of Sadalakshmi, a well knowndalit woman political leader in AP had a different experience altogether. She has neither political background or elite status nor family support. But still she moulded her career by her own and sustained as a strong political leader in AP.

According to Susheela Kaushik, (1993) there are two broad factors for the womens involvement in politics or lack of it. The first relates to the social structure, religion and culture of the country as the basis to explain women's involvement in politics. The second factor relates to the political institutions like the nature of party system, process of political succession, which support or oppose the recruitment of women to political offices. In fact, it is the socio political environment and its support or lack of support to women's political activity, determines the participation and involvement of women in politics.

There are various socio cultural and economic reasons for the low representation of women in politics. As we all know social discrimination and inequality are universal phenomenon. In Indian context, the caste society, which is highly hierarchical prevented women to come out from their domestic sphere. Majority of Indian women are the victims of illiteracy, unemployment and lack of information. The vast majority of them are living in rural villages in very poor conditions. Their work is low paid, insecure and hazardous with no security.

According to the Status Committee report 1975, Indian state has failed in its constitutional responsibility of not discriminating women on the grounds of gender. Plans for the development of agriculture, livestock, fisheries and other major sectors of the Indian economy contained no acknowledgement of the involvement of the millions of women in these sectors for a livelihood. The committee also found that women are being ill treated, exploited and abused right from birth onwards. It also found that there is a steady decline in the ratio of females to male in India over the decades. There is a decline in labour force participation of women particularly in agriculture with a rise in female unemployment up to 1971. A number of policies and programmes have been introduced to raise the living standards of women especially to strengthen the rural economy and polity. However the development programmes initiated through different agencies often results in total failure in achieving the goals.

Women and Panchayat Raj: Prior to 73rd amendment various plans were made to include women in the Panchayat Raj system. Since independence, there were attempts to make villages self-sufficient. The planners of Panchayat Raj also thought if women are made effective participants in development they will have a statutory position in the task of development administration and the new women empowerment would give a new boost to village development..

In 1953, in the first elections of Panchayat Raj, very few women contested and got elected. The Balwant Rai Mehta committee (1957) had recommend that apart from the 20 members of the Panchayat Samithi, there should be 2 women- interested in working among women and children- as co-opted members. Provisions were made for women's representation. In many parts of India women were inducted into Panchayat Raj by co-option rather than election. This practice was questioned by many scholars as undemocratic as there was no systematic procedure for co-option. Some states had given up nomination or co-option and resorted to reservation as the only way of making sure that women were represented in Panchayat Raj.

Later, it was felt that mere representation of women at the local level was also not enough to bring about the development of women and children. A more effective way would be to guarantee women's emergence as sarpanches of the village. Thus, during the eighties various workshops were conducted in the form of Panchayat Raj Sammelan for suggestions and means of strengthening the Panchayat Raj system. The National Perspective Plan for women in the year 1988 recommended that 30 percent of the 'executive head' positions from the village to the district level should be reserved for women.

A bill was prepared to bring about changes in the structure of Panchayat Raj Institutions in the year 1989 as the 64th constitutional amendment. The bill included provisions like direct elections, a fixed tenure, 30 percent reservations etc. This bill was introduced by the Rajiv Gandhi government but was defeated by a small margin in the Rajyasabha. The bill was re-introduced by the P.V. Narasimha Rao government as the 72nd and 73rd amendment with changes in the provisions for elections and financial power, and was passed on 2nd December 1992. At the same time, the World Bank and other international development agencies began to support women's participation in rural development sector in the process of decentralization.

The 73rd amendment bill provides for direct election to all the seats of the Panchayats, at the village and zilla level. It provides a fixed tenure of 5 years for elections, to be held within a period of six months in the event of the super session of any Panchayat. The bill also provides for a compulsory 3-tier system in all states except where the population does not exceed 20 lakh. Section 243D of the bill provides reservations for SCs and STs and women-

The general notions about rural dalit women are that they are illiterate, ignorant, with lack of administrative skills, and not aware of politics and conclude that because of all these shortcomings most of the women representatives have remained as proxy. But the above cited movements shows that given a chance rural women will prove themselves. Usually, the women in politics are caught between two expectations – one is to prove better than men and other is to make a difference as women politicians. The women in politics are also expected to be less corrupt, more disciplined, more punctual etc. Moreover the code of conduct always controls them. In our society, the primary role of women is still considered as wives, mothers child rearers whatever may be their level of education and professional career. The existing socio cultural scenario forces women to be proxy.

A major step needed to facilitate women's participation both in formal and informal political processes is a provision of strong support system. In all kinds of public participation as well as in seeking opportunities for self-development, the primary responsibilities of women for looking after home and children always come in the way. Unless arrangements are made for child care and other domestic responsibilities, sustained participation of women in the public sphere is not possible without the integration of men in the domestic sphere.

On the one hand, parallel bodies are useful in bringing awareness among women. Women Self-Help Groups such as DWCRA, thrift and credit societies and other committees brought women into the process of village development. These groups have contributed significantly in enhancing the economic and awareness status of women in villages. The group meetings helped them in articulating their problems. During Gramasabhas most of the women come forward and articulate their needs with respect to, say, old age pensions or loans for income generating purposes. In addition, women also constitute other SHGs such as education committees and mothers committees. On the other hand, because of the parallel bodies the powers of the Panchayat have been cut down-one of the respondents feels that she was doing better as a DWCRA member than as a sarpanch. only the persons with money and of the upper castes could be elected to the positions of importance. There was no space for women and Dalits in traditional Panchayat system. Today, because of the 73rd amendment, persons from oppressed sections also got a chance to participate in the elected bodies. In many places of Andhra village Panchayats have been run by Dalit families for almost a decade now. Through this, the status of the family of the Dalit sarpanch is changed, but there is hardly any change in the position of other Dalits in the village. The reservation system that allowed Dalits into politics after fifty years of independence brought significant changes in the social conditions of the village. The contract system is an example how the caste system is working in the village.

The positive discrimination of PRI has initiated a momentum of change. Women's entry into local government in such large numbers, often more than the required 33.3 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics, and have no time to go to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes.

The constitutional amendments to improve the life standards of women in rural India are not just enough. There should be a movement to bring about an attitudinal change in our society, bureaucracy. There should be an awareness campaign for women in general and dalit women in particular to build the capacity and capability of the elected representatives so that they will be able to play a meaning full role in Panchayats. There is need to train them to give basic knowledge on the working of the Panchayats in the state. If empowerment of dalits and women is the goal of the State (as mentioned in 73rd amendment) the state should take all necessary steps to empower them. Giving political empowerment is meaning less without giving powers to exercise and funds to utilize..

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