



## Dalit among Dalits: Political Participation of Dalit Women in India

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### ***Abstract:***

*The most deprived section of the society is the dalit women. They are the innocent, Poor, illiterate and easy targets for sexual harassment. The women face not just caste violence inflicted on them by the dominant castes, but also state violence. This caste discrimination is inherited by birth. Dalit women are facing multiple oppressions violating their economic, political, social and cultural rights. Besides reservations alone cannot carry forward this democratic process; the provisions for education and employment by the state, will help raise capabilities and awareness among Dalits, together with political mobilization through civil society and political parties. Indian society with thousands of years of its oppressive, anti-human and status quoits history could be changed through democracy, practiced through vibrant self-governing institutions at the village level. However, it is not a quantum jump but a painfully slow process.*

***Keywords:*** Dr. B.R. Ambedkar , Dalits , Manusmriti , sexual harassment

### **Introduction**

According to the Hindu caste hierarchy, there are four castes namely the Brahmins (priestly caste), the Kshatriya (warriors), the Vaishyas (traders and the Shudras ( menial task workers). Below this four tier caste ladder is another rung, who are called the untouchables ( Panchamas). Among the untouchables, the status of women is further eroded and closely linked to the concept of purity. Dalit women are thrice discriminated, treated as untouchables and as outcastes, due to *their caste*, face gender discrimination *being women* and finally economic impoverishment due to *unequal wage disparity*, with low or underpaid labour. This is what the rigid, fundamentalist Hindu promotes through continuation of caste system, imposing the Brahminical values to maintain the

caste system.' The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including the *Manusmriti*, *Atharva Vedas*, *Vishnu smriti*, and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmins (upper priestly hindu caste), led to a society in which equality between men and women was far from existent. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian constitution, also makes it very clear in his article titled "The rise and fall of Hindu woman" that the root cause of suffering for women in India are these so called Hindu religious. Books like the *Manusmriti* divide people into a stratified caste system and promote inequality between men and women. According to the *Manusmriti*, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth (n.pag). It not only justifies the treatment of dalit women as a sex object and promotes child marriage, but also



justifies a number of violent atrocities on women as can be seen in the following verses (*Manusmitri*): Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskaras are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth. (*Manusmitri* IX.18) A Brahman, Kshatriya, or Vaishya Man can sexually exploit any shudra woman. (*Manusmitri* IX.25) Even the killing of a dalit woman is explicitly justified as a minor offence for the Brahmins: equal to the killing of an animal (*Manusmitri*). If the killing of an untouchable was justified as a minor offence, you can imagine the treatment they received throughout their lives.

In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unbelievable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the *Manusmitri* and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which Dalit women could be uplifted. The horrendous Laws in the *Manusmitri* were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favourable only to the Upper castes, which form the majority of India. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women. The Laws of the *Manusmitri* have a devastating effect on the level of education reached by Dalit women.

The most deprived section of the society is the dalit women. They are the innocent, Poor, illiterate and easy targets for sexual harassment. The women face not just caste violence inflicted on them by the dominant castes, but also state

violence. This caste discrimination is inherited by birth. Dalit women are facing multiple oppressions violating their economic, political, social and cultural rights.

### Dalit Women Scenario

While providing reservation to Dalits, the 73rd Amendment has made it mandatory that one-third of the seats reserved for them be filled by Dalit women. The conformity legislations in the states have also reiterated this provision. But the impact of reservation has been differential in states. Where the social status of women has traditionally been better and levels of literacy, status in society and participation in the workforce are higher, women have been able to take advantage of this measure. Women Power in village meant giving priority to issues like drinking water supply, installation of hand pumps, construction of toilets, village wells and roads, appointment of teachers, closing of liquor shops, etc.<sup>[1]</sup> In such states, reservations have helped strengthen the position of Dalit women. In other parts of the country, where women's position in the family and society and participation in public affairs has traditionally been low, the reservation measure has not caused much change. The impact of this measure has been much slower.

It is imperative to point out one important thing that reservation alone cannot change the status of women and enable their participation in local bodies. The position of women and the perception that they have little knowledge about, and are incapable of taking part in public affairs, even of independent voting remains strong. In most of the cases the Dalit women Sarpanchs are mere namesake



representatives.<sup>[2]</sup> In some states, there has been little or no acceptance of reservation for the lower castes by the upper castes in the village. This has resulted in atrocities against Panchayat members including women. In these states power structure in villages remains oppressive. Dalit women who stood for election were beaten, raped and ill-treated and their land grabbed by members of the higher castes who were not prepared to relinquish power to the lower castes. An easier method to retain power is to put up proxy candidates but keep the control in the hands of the dominant castes, always men.

Reservation for Dalits, particularly for women, is accepted in form but seldom in substance. Any change in the status quo is resisted, sometimes violently.<sup>[3]</sup> This points to the limitations as well as the possibilities of state intervention without the necessary social support systems. Similar experiences have been reported from Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Bihar<sup>[4]</sup> that Dalit women have also faced many problems in performing their duties due to illiteracy, lack of information and dependency on the male members of their families. An important obstacle is no-confidence motions against Dalit women Sarapanchs by the dominant sections who are unable to accept that power is in the hands of the poor and disadvantaged women.<sup>[5]</sup>

Elitists' perception is that due to reservation of seats many *dalit* women were elected to local bodies. They have been given the opportunity to share power with other Hindu caste man and women. But in spite of their representation it has been found that the elected *dalit* women representatives are treated 'as puppet' in the Panchayati Raj

Institutions. Most of them remain silent spectators to the proceedings of the Panchayat meetings and rarely *dalit* women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Broadly these factors may be categorized as (i) internal Factor, and (ii) External Factor.

The **internal factors** which affecting the process of women empowerment and participation are identified as: lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, skill, leadership quality, low level of education, lack of exposure etc. The **external factors** which affect the process of participation and empowerment of women are: influence of family, caste, social outlook, patriarch etc. On one occasion one elected male representative remarked "what do the women folk now? Their job is to cook and serve; governance is not their job, it is our exclusive privilege." Patriarchal influences and traditional norms of our society hinder the path of women empowerment in the local government. More specifically, most of SC/ST and women representatives were facing the problem of non-cooperation from the official and upper castes/ dominant sections of their Grama Panchayats. These problems have not only been obstructing developmental works but also not enabling elected representatives to participate in the Panchayats.

They hardly voice their own opinion regarding developmental administration. Simply sitting and listening to proceedings of the meeting have been their form of participation. Active participation in the form of involving in the decision making process was found to be rare in case of *dalit* women representatives. Furthermore, due to male dominance elected *dalit* women members are functioning more or



less as dummies—the husbands of women Sarpanchas are actively participating in the Panchayat matters instead of allowing their wives to take part in the decision making process. Financial matters are not tackled by the women representatives and for this they depend upon their husbands or sons or any other male relatives. Practically it has been found that two heads are functioning at Gram Panchayat levels—the head (de-jure)—the elected women Sarpanch and he had (de-facto)—the real Sarpanch. Most of the elected women Sarpanchs are regarded as a mere ‘Rubber Stamp’ and all the functions of the Panchayat are being performed by their husbands or local elites. Although, reservations have helped strengthening the position of Dalit women in PRIs, but reservation alone cannot change the status of women and enable their participation in local bodies. Dalit women who stood for election were beaten, raped and ill-treated and their land grabbed by members of the higher castes who were not prepared to relinquish power to the lower castes. An easier method to retain power is to put up proxy candidates but keep the control in the hands of the dominant castes, always men. Any change in the status quo is resisted, sometimes violently. Reservations alone cannot carry forward this democratic process; the provisions for education and employment by the state, will help raise capabilities and awareness among Dalits, together with political mobilization through civil society and political parties. Indian society with thousands of years of its oppressive, anti-human and status quo history could be changed through democracy, practised through vibrant self-governing institutions at the village level. However, it is not a quantum jump but a painfully slow process.

### **Social Inclusion of Dalits and PRIs**

One of the distinct changes that have come out as a result of democratic decentralization is the emergence of Dalit leadership in the Panchayats. The traditional caste Panchayats which were decision-making bodies of the villages denied access to the Dalits. The rural socio-political life was upper caste dominated and Dalits were mere voiceless spectators. It is believed that the long-standing tradition of democratic demonstration and radical provisions of reservation for Dalits have drastically changed the socio-political scenario in rural India. However, the problem is that, it is observed that most of the members of the Panchayats from reserved constituencies are illiterates and inexperienced and are controlled either by their relations or vested interests, so the very purpose of reservation is defeated. In the Panchayats there are two major means of discrimination. One is that the Dalits are kept away from the panchayat proceedings, development work, schemes, etc., and another is that wherever Dalits are in power by virtue of reservation they are targeted and their posts are declared null and void after a certain period of time.

Secondly, the Dalits who are in positions like Sarpanch or Panch are toppled within a short period by bringing in a no-confidence motion. This has barred many Dalits from exercising their rights in the Panchayat institutions. Those who had survived have complied with the norms set by the caste masters or have applied corrupt politics. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was viewed as a powerful instrument of social inclusion in the country and one expected that the hitherto excluded communities



would get justice after its due implementation.

### **Political participation of Dalit women in India**

Political participation is generally recognized as a representative instrument towards achieving positive policy outcomes for each group. In 2009, only 10.3% of the seats in both houses of parliament were held by women and only 10% were in ministerial positions placing India in 100<sup>th</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> positions globally, respectively, on these indicators.<sup>[6]</sup> Democracy, by definition, must account for all its constituents; with women making up roughly half the country's population, it seems absurd that they do not comprise anywhere near a similar composition in the national parliament in India. It is now fairly well established that women in power are more likely to take up and prioritize women's interest and needs.<sup>[7]</sup>

A recent global survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that women parliamentarians as a whole tend to emphasize issues such as childcare, equal pay, parental leave and pensions. They highlight reproductive rights, physical safety and gender-based violence, human development, the alleviation of poverty and the delivery of services <sup>[8]</sup> and that an increased representation of women in governance would lead not only to inclusion of women's issues on the political agenda, but once 'critical mass' <sup>[9]</sup> of women politicians has been reached, it would lead to a genuine representative democracy. Consequently, women's rights advocates in India have been raising the demand for more seats for women in governance structures. The need for affirmative action in the form of reservation for women in Indian politics

was first highlighted in 1975 when the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74) noted increasing marginalization of women in the country's economy, political class and society. Since then women's groups have been demanding a reservation of seats in the Parliament for women. The Women's Reservation Bill was born out of such activism. The Bill has a long history of debate and deliberation in the parliament and was finally cleared in the upper house in 2010 and it's now awaiting clearance in the Lok Sabha.<sup>[10]</sup> While Women's Reservation Bill is a commendable step forward for the Indian polity, it must be noted that not all women in India are born equal. There are wide disparities in human development indicators across social groups. For this legislation to make sense for Dalit women, it needs to recognise these differences for the women who are trapped in the additional burdens imposed by caste and poverty. The section below talks about the issue of political participation of SC women in two ways. There is some official data which gives the representation of SC women vis-à-vis non-SC women and vis-à-vis SC men in the parliament. We will study the unequal representation of SC women in parliament. Secondly, there are few studies which examine the nature of participation and the effectiveness of Dalit women in panchayats and other bodies. Based on the limited evidence, we will study how effective is the role of SC women in the political governance. We also look at issues related to participation in the political institutions with the help of primary studies.

### **Status of Dalit women in political participation as Member of Parliament**



Based on the statistics of the national census 2001, India is home to more than 80 million Dalit women. Indian data on the trends in participation at the national level of governance show that participation of women in general and Dalit women in particular remains dismally low in India. Data on Lok Sabha from 1971-2004 reveals the dominance of SC men in the politics as compared to SC women. The 14th Lok Sabha had a total of 75 MP's from SC social group, of which 65 were men and 10 were women. When compared to 1971, more women parliamentarians have entered politics since 1971. There is slight improvement in the percentage share of the women parliamentarians from SC background although they continue to be underrepresented. They are underrepresented when compared to SC men and non-SC/ST women.

The 1971 Lok Sabha had total of 26 women MPs, of which 5 belonged to SC group, 1 belonged to ST group and remaining 20 belonged to Non SC/ST groups. The data on Lok Sabha from 1971-2004 reveals the dominance of Non SC/ST women groups in the politics as compared to the women from the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribe background. The data indicates that the highest number of females from non SC/ST groups belonged to the 1984 Lok Sabha i.e. Congress dominated regime.

The number of SC and ST women parliamentarians accounted to 5 and 2 in number constituting 10.87 and 4.35 per cent of the total membership. The highest numbers of SC women were in the 12th Lok Sabha which consisted of 12 SC women members and only two women MPs from ST background and 30 women MPs from non-SC/ST background. The data indicates that in terms of the

membership of the women parliamentarians, the 1977 Janata government had had least number of women parliamentarians with only one SC female, one female from the Scheduled tribe background and 18 females from non-SC/ST background. After 1984 Lok Sabha that had the highest number of the women parliamentarians, i.e., 46 in number; the percentage share of the women parliamentarians declined. Yet after this decline there has been considerable increase in the Indian National Congress of women parliamentarians since 1991. More women parliamentarians have entered politics since 1991. There is a slight improvement in the percentage share of the women parliamentarians from SC background; although they continue to be underrepresented.

It is clear from the table given below that from 1952 to 2009 election to Odisha Legislative Assembly only 92 women were elected to Odisha assembly. Among them 31 women were from dalit section. Although the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population of Odisha constitute 36 per cent of the total population since the formation of Odisha in 1936 to 2009 only 10 Scheduled Caste women and 21 Scheduled Tribe women were elected to Odisha legislative Assembly. The percent of Scheduled Caste women representation is only 10.86% and the percentage of Scheduled Tribe women representation is 22.82%.

#### **Status of Dalit women as Panchayat leaders**

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has created space for women in political participation and decision-making at the grass roots level by providing that 1/3 rd of the seats are reserved in all over the country. Dalit



women have also been separately granted 33 per cent reservation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Though there have been a lot of studies published to look into the status and the role played by women in PRIs after the 73rd amendment. However, these studies are general in nature looking at the functioning of women representatives as a whole and not focusing on the Dalit women.

There are a limited number of studies on the status and the role of Dalit women leaders. The study of Haryana (2005) points out that a majority of Dalit

women were between thirty and fifty years of age and most of them were illiterate, staying in the joint families that forced them to perform multiple roles after being elected. Though they had to play the role of leaders but lack of education was a major hindrance that did not enable them to understand even the basics of PRIs. The majority of SC women were not aware of their roles and responsibilities as the Members and those who were aware did not assert their rights as representatives due to societal imposed inhibitions and disabilities

Table-1 Caste wise representation of women to Odisha Assembly

YEAR	Brahmin	Kshyatriya	Karan	Khandayat	SCs	STs	Others	Total
1952		3						03
1957		5						05
1961		3		1				04
1967		4		1				05
1971	01							01
1974	01	2		1				04
1977	01	4	1			1		07
1980	01					04		05
1985	01	1			1	5		08
1990	02			5	1	1		09
1995	06	2				2		10
2000	02	3	1	1	3	3	1	14
2004	01	2	2		2	4		11
2009		2			3	1		06
TOTAL	16	31	04	09	10	21	01	92

Another important handicap has been the proxy representation of the women by their male counterparts in the family. Though in majority of the cases, proxy representation is done by the husband but it is also the sons and the fathers-in-law who become defacto representatives. There are also some recorded instances of SC women elected representatives in the panchayat

institutions being prevented from carrying out their duties owing to caste discrimination. At times they are not allowed to sit on a chair to preside over a meeting; there have been instances of SC women *sarpanches* not being allowed to conduct flag hoisting on Independence

Day and Republic Day; often it is the male, non-SC deputy *sarpanch* who conducts all the business of the



panchayat when the sarpanch is SC woman.

### **Effectiveness in political participation at the local level of governance**

In the end we look at the discrimination faced by Dalit women in the course of performing their roles in various bodies particularly village panchayat (village council). Although there are many incidents reported in newspapers focusing on the discrimination on Dalit Women in PRIs, the studies which deal with the constraints faced by Dalit women in performing their roles as representatives in the local governance are very few. Panel 3 captures the sphere, nature forms and consequences of gender and caste-based discrimination faced by dalit women leaders in the course of performing their role in the village panchayat. Limited empirical evidence from primary studies suggests that Dalit women face constraints which are related to patriarchy and to their caste background. On the issue of patriarchy, the study on Haryana by Dhaka and Singh (2005), points out difficulties faced by Dalit women in performing their roles in the form of proxy representation of the women by their male counterparts in the family. Though in majority of the cases proxy representation is done by the husband but it is also the sons and the fathers-in-law who become defacto representatives. The study points out that at times women are compelled to contest elections so as to serve the interests of the idle or unemployed male members of the family.

The study of Tamil Nadu (Baghel 2009) pointed out that due to combination of Opponent Dalits and Dominant Castes or combination of Administration and Opponent Dalits,

they faced hardships while carrying out the developmental functions in the villages. On the other hand, Bhawani Ilango of Pudukkotti District and Jesu Mary of Ramanathapuram district developed a collective strength and carry out the functions as representatives; successfully and point out that for all their successes, their opponents were responsible as the criticism helps to perform better and administer the schemes perfectly.

The studies also point out that despite these discriminatory practices, Dalit women representatives made four kinds of efforts to empower SC women (1) these women were made aware of their rights and the schemes meant for their betterment, (2) they were motivated to participate in the Gram Panchayat meetings, (3) they were motivated to pursue gainful economic activities, and (4) they attempted to provide loans to SC women, (5) a decline in violence on SC women and men, most importantly, (6) the number of disputes between SC and other communities were on decline as they were using public utility services like ponds and grazing grounds together. Dalit women representatives felt the improvement in their status after getting elected. In summary, we can infer from the available literature that woman face constraints on effective participation in the panchayat. These constraints are: traditional and patriarchal prejudices against the women; economic dependence on husbands, sons or parents; illiteracy, lack of awareness of rights and duties. These are the constraints which maybe faced by SC women as well, although there are extremely limited numbers of studies focusing on the constraints faced by SC women in performing their responsibilities in panchayat institutions.



SC women as panchayat leaders additionally, may also face discriminatory treatment in performing their duties which impact their effectiveness due to their caste background. There are again very few studies detailing these issues which have been presented in the section. Further research is required to

understand the constraints faced by SC women leaders in performing their responsibilities, arising due to patriarchy and due their caste background.

**Table 2. Spheres of Discrimination**

Spheres of Discrimination	Identifier of Discrimination	Consequence of Discrimination
In decision making process (Panchayat Meetings)	Not allowing to participate in decision making process, upper-caste discouraging women to take part in panchayat meetings,	Not able to utilize funds for schemes on poverty reduction, lack of information from the three tier structure
In performing duties	Discriminatory behavior in the offices of Panchayat, indicating lack of skill in Dalit women in performing duties.	Not able to complete developmental functions in the villages.
Fund Allocation for their Panchayat's	Lack of allocation of funds and neglect from the officials,	Lack of funds to implement schemes meant for women and their community,

*Source: Information in this table is collated by the Author (Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal) from primary level studies on political participation mentioned in this section*

**Conclusion**

Women from discriminated groups suffer from multiple layers of deprivation – gender, poverty and social exclusion. Therefore the problem requires dual solution – first, the policies against gender discrimination and poverty for all women and second, complimentary policy measure against social exclusion and discrimination for women who belong to excluded groups. While we have developed policies against gender discrimination and to further the economic, educational and political empowerment of women, the remedies against social exclusion of scheduled caste women in multiple spheres, such as exchanges in various markets and in supply of services through

non-market agencies in education, health services, food security schemes and housing are severely lacking. This would indeed demand complimentary group specific gender policies, in addition to the general policy of women’s empowerment, to address the multiple layers of deprivation of women from excluded groups.

The 73rd Amendment has emerged as an effective instrument to unleash the tremendous energies for social transformation in the Indian society. Strong political institutions at the grass roots level are a necessary condition for carrying out the new possibilities of the post-73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment PRIs. The 73rd Amendment has aided the process of



inclusion by providing reservation to Dalits and other weaker sections. However, reservations alone cannot carry forward this democratic process; the provisions for education and employment by the state, will help raise capabilities and awareness among Dalits, together with political mobilisation through civil society and political parties. Indian society with thousands of years of its oppressive, anti-human and status quoits history could be changed through democracy, practised through vibrant self-governing institutions at the village level. However, it is not a quantum jump but a painfully slow process.

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8. Ibid
9. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), an important human rights document concerning women and female children, was approved at the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing, China attended by 150 countries and three-thousand NGO's. The BFFA considers a target of 30 per cent, as a sufficient "critical mass" of women deemed necessary to bring about real changes in parliament.
10. For detailed debates around the Bill, see Meena Dhanda edited, *Reservations for Women*, Women Unlimited 2008. )
11. For details of representation in proportion to population share formula argument, see S Thorat, 2008.
12. These positions have been well articulated in Ambedkar1947, Sukhadeo Thorat and Narender, 2008.