

Role And Impact Of Elected Dalit Women In Local Governance: A Case Study Of Kolar District

Dr. Umesh K

Associate Professor Department of Social Work and Sociology Government First Grade College,
NR Pura, Chikkamgaluru Dist.

Introduction:

An important political development in India over the last few decades has been the Dalit struggle for identity and rights. The term "Dalit" was occasionally used by Ambedkar, but it was first introduced by Jotiba Phule in the nineteenth century to describe the oppression faced by the 'untouchable' castes of Hindu society in India (Phule, 1873). The principle of purity and pollution was central to the relations between the upper and lower castes in India, and ritually impure occupations were historically associated with the Dalits (Ambedkar, 1936). The term "Dalit" became popular in the 1960s among Marathi writers and neo-Buddhists (Nagaraj, 1994). According to Victor Premasagar, the term expresses the weakness, poverty, and humiliation faced by Dalits at the hands of the upper castes in Indian society (Premasagar, 2000). Although the term does not have a reference in historical texts, it is said to be derived from Sanskrit, meaning "suppressed" or "crushed" (Sharma, 2010). "However, if the principle of exploitation is applied, all the socially, politically, and economically oppressed sections of Indian society are Dalits" (Sharma, 2010, p. 23).

Dalit identity not only expresses who Dalits are but also conveys their aspirations, struggles for change, and revolution (Guru, 2009). Like most social groups, Dalits are not homogeneous, as pointed out by Mukul Sharma (2010). According to the Arjun Sen Gupta Committee Report, Dalits constitute 81 percent of India's vulnerable population (Gupta, 2006). The term "Scheduled Castes" is used in administrative parlance in India to denote the erstwhile 'untouchable' castes (Constitution of India, 1950). In fact, the term "Dalit" was declared unconstitutional by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes in 2008 (NCSC, 2008).

The proposal for taking governance and administration to the grassroots level, providing transparency, and ensuring the right to information concerning state affairs has become a global concern (Sen, 2008). The fundamental knowledge behind democratic decentralization is to broaden the area of democracy by granting both democracy and autonomy to the lower levels of government (Bhargava, 2005). This approach seeks to empower local government institutions through various measures, developing them into "the tiny fountainheads of democracy" or a "multi-form democracy" (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). The concept of participation has acquired varied meanings over time; at one end of the spectrum, it could mean just nominal membership in

a group, and at the other end, it could imply having an effective voice in the decision-making process (Rai, 2014).

Panchayati Raj System

In recent years, several initiatives have been undertaken to ensure the active participation of Dalit women in governance, aiming to make the development process more inclusive and demand-driven. A significant effort in this direction was the implementation of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India. These amendments mandated the establishment of a three-tier Panchayat system in every state, comprising Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels. However, states with populations not exceeding 2 million could opt for a two-tier system, excluding the intermediate level (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 1992).

The Panchayats enjoy a five-year term, and if dissolved earlier, fresh elections must be conducted within six months from the date of dissolution (Government of India, 1993). The Gram Sabha, or village assembly, consists of all persons registered on the electoral rolls within the Panchayat area. The amendments also introduced reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in all Panchayats, proportionate to their population in the Panchayat area. Notably, one-third of these reserved seats are set aside for women belonging to these groups (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 1992).

Furthermore, the amendments mandate that not less than one-third of the total seats in every Panchayat be reserved for women, including seats reserved for SC/ST women (Constitution of India, Article 243D). The offices of Chairpersons in Panchayats at all levels are also reserved for SC/STs and women as determined by the State legislature. It is specified that not less than one-third of the Chairperson positions must be reserved for women (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 1992).

The State Finance Commission, appointed by the Governor, reviews the financial position of the Panchayats. This commission is responsible for making recommendations on the principles governing the distribution of taxes, duties, tolls, and fees between the State Government and the Panchayats (Constitution of India, Article 243I).

Dalit women and Local Governance

Dalit Women and Local Governance

Dalit women represent one of the most marginalized segments of society. Despite constituting half of the total population, women often struggle to achieve an equal share in active politics. Their socio-economic status is closely tied to their participation in political processes. Notably, over one million Dalit women have entered Panchayats, reflecting a significant shift in local governance (Sinha & Roy, 2020).

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, enacted in 1993, was a landmark in promoting the political participation of Dalits and women at the local government level. This amendment mandated that one-third of the seats reserved for Dalits in local governance must be filled by Dalit women, thus ensuring their representation (Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993). In Karnataka, the Panchayati Raj system was implemented in the same year, further supplemented by the

Karnataka Panchayats (Reservation of Seats and Rotation of Reserved Seats) Rules, 1995. These rules ensure that the reservation of seats aligns with the prescribed ratios by listing wards and Panchayats in descending order based on the percentage of women and Scheduled Caste office holders (Government of Karnataka, 1995).

Currently, 18,797 Dalit women have been elected to Local Panchayats, marking a significant presence in local governance and highlighting the impact of these constitutional reforms (Government of Karnataka, 2023).

Rationale of the Study

There are no studies have been taken up from the earlier epochs, it has been experienced that, caste has played an contributory role in participation of Dalit politics and rapid issues related to the more downgraded. In Indian society were a highly graded in the social order, Dalit belonging to the lower castes have smaller access to public fore, which is compounded by their caste. This exclusion makes it difficult for these to represent and articulate the voices of their constituencies and their demands are often overlooked or subsumed by the dominant sections of the society. The mobilization of Dalit in large numbers weakened the bondage of tradition and encouraged them to develop a perspective on the wider socio-political problems. Reservation in the local governance helped the Dalit women to take active part in the local governance, but attempts have not made by any individuals/organizations to understand the level of participation and contributions made by the elected Dalit women members in local governance, hence the present study. In this regard the present studies were look at the contribution in local governance by the elected Dalit women in Kolar district.

Material and Methods

The present study was carried out in Kolar district of Karnataka State. The purpose of the study was to assess the socio-demographic profile of Elected Dalit Women and to understand the level of participation, and contribution made by the elected Dalit women in local governance. The data has been collected from 120 elected Dalit women in local governance. Researcher selected samples by adopting purposive sampling technique, with the assist of interview schedule, and descriptive research design has been adopted to conduct this study. Data analysis was done with the help of SPSS 17.0.

Results and Discussion

1. Demographic Profile

The socio-demographic profile of the elected Dalit women reveals a significant presence of middle-aged individuals, with 48% (40 out of 83) of the elected members falling within the 35-45 age group. This demographic trend aligns with findings from previous studies, which suggest that middle-aged women are more likely to engage in political activities due to greater family stability and social capital (Kudva, 2003). The study also found that 81.6% (98 out of 120) of the

respondents were married, while 8.3% (10 out of 120) were widows. These figures are consistent with Mohanty's (2005) observations that marital status influences women's participation in local governance, often providing both social legitimacy and challenges.

Regarding education, 26.6% (32 out of 120) of the elected Dalit women were illiterate, reflecting broader national trends where education remains a barrier to political participation among marginalized groups (Deshpande, 2011). The lack of educational qualifications, as not mandated by the Indian Constitution, allows for a more diverse pool of candidates but also highlights the need for further educational initiatives to empower these women politically (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Additionally, 65% (78 out of 120) of respondents were from nuclear families, which mirrors trends noted by Bhargava (2009) that nuclear family structures can both support and hinder political participation depending on socio-economic conditions.

A significant portion of the respondents, 48% (40 out of 83), were engaged in agricultural labor with a monthly household income below 11,000 INR. This indicates that economic vulnerability remains a critical factor influencing the participation of Dalit women in politics, as supported by Narayana and Rao's (2007) findings that economic empowerment is crucial for effective political engagement.

2. Political Background

The political affiliations of the elected Dalit women members in Chamarajanagar District reflect a strong alignment with established political parties. A majority, 65% (78 out of 120), of the elected members were associated with the Karnataka Congress Party, while 18.3% were aligned with Janata Dal (Secular), and 10% with the Bharatiya Janata Party. These affiliations indicate that Dalit women, like their male counterparts, often rely on party support to gain entry into politics, as discussed by Jha (2004). The remaining 6.6% who contested independently highlights a growing, albeit small, trend of Dalit women seeking political space outside traditional party structures, resonating with findings from Pal (2011) that emphasize the importance of independent political agency among marginalized groups.

3. Contribution of Elected Dalit Women in Panchayat Work

The study revealed varying levels of participation among elected Dalit women in Panchayat activities. Approximately 36.6% (44 out of 120) of the women were very actively or moderately involved in Panchayat work. This is in line with findings by Agarwal (2010), who noted that women's participation in local governance is often active when there is a supportive community environment and a clear understanding of governance processes. However, 28.3% of Dalit women showed poor participation, which could be attributed to moderate educational levels. This is consistent with the research by Sharma (2007), which indicated that lower educational levels often limit the effectiveness of women's participation in governance.

Among those actively participating, 26.3% (32 out of 120) prioritized economic development activities for Dalits, while 21.6% (26 out of 120) focused on rural link road improvements. These priorities reflect the immediate needs of their constituencies and align with Desai and Thakur's (2015) findings that marginalized women often prioritize developmental issues that directly impact their communities.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Panchayati Raj Act and the 73rd Amendment has enabled over a million Dalit women to participate in local governance, marking a significant step towards their political empowerment. This study's findings underscore the challenges and successes of Dalit women in local governance, echoing earlier research by Jayal (2006) and Rai (2012) on the transformative potential of reservations for marginalized women. Despite the progress, there remains a need for more targeted interventions to enhance the political participation and capacity of Dalit women, especially in areas like education and economic empowerment, as supported by the work of Sen (2014).

References

1. Agarwal, B. (2010). *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*. Oxford University Press.
2. Bhargava, B. S. (2009). *Politics of small parties in India*. Shipra Publications.
3. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*, 72(5), 1409-1443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x>
4. Desai, M., & Thakur, M. (2015). *Women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions in India: A review of policy initiatives and challenges*. Rawat Publications.
5. Deshpande, A. (2011). *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
6. Jayal, N. G. (2006). *Representing India: Ethnic Diversity and the Governance of Public Institutions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
7. Jha, P. S. (2004). *Caste and politics in Bihar*. Penguin Books.
8. Kudva, N. (2003). Engineering elections: The experiences of women in Panchayati Raj in Karnataka, India. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16(3), 445-463. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022392520186>
9. Mohanty, M. (2005). *Caste, Class and Gender: The Historical Roots of Reservation Policy in India*. Sage Publications.
10. Narayana, M. R., & Rao, H. (2007). *Empowerment of Women through Political Participation in Karnataka*. Himalaya Publishing House.
11. Pal, M. (2011). *Politics of Caste and Ethnicity in Bihar*. South Asia Books.
12. Rai, S. M. (2012). *The Gender Politics of Development: Essays in Hope and Despair*. Zubaan.
13. Sen, A. (2014). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

14. Sharma, K. (2007). *Women in Grassroots Democracy: A Study of Women Sarpanches in Haryana*. Kalpaz Publications