

Social Justice and SC Women's Empowerment: PRIs in Uttar Pradesh

SANGITA YADAV

Research Scholar

CSSEIP/SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

This paper will question the idea of social justice and women empowerment especially in the context of SC women. This paper includes three major aspects. The first part deals with the concept of Panchayati Raj Institutions in general and Uttar Pradesh in particular. The second part of the paper deals with the idea of social justice and decentralization of power in the context of both icons Ambedkar and Gandhi respectively. The third part of the paper deals with SC women's participation in Panchayati Raj of Uttar Pradesh.

Key Words : Social Justice, Empowerment, Women, Reservation, PRIs

INTRODUCTION

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that provides one-third reservation to women in the *Panchayati Raj* system, has supported them to engage in the process of decision making and make discussion in a public sphere.¹ But still, their presence at the society and family level are not very noteworthy; they are fighting with unjust tyrannical forces and restricted by the typical biased attitude of the society which is controlled by patriarchy.

Uttar Pradesh *Panchayat Raj* Act was passed in 1947.² It was the first state to introduce *panchayat* legislation in the state. After India's independence, the act has been repeatedly amended. In accordance with the provision of the 73rd constitutional amendment Act, the Uttar Pradesh *Panchayat* Act, 1994, was passed.³ This step was taken as a significant milestone in Indian history. With this step, one-third reservation has been given to women at every level of the *panchayat* system.

Uttar Pradesh is a large state which has a huge population. The total population of the state is 199,812,341 as per census, 2011. There are 79.73 per cent Hindu population and 19.26 per cent are Muslims.⁴ Scheduled

Castes constitute nearly 22 per cent of the total population of the state. Among them approximately, half of the population belongs to SC womenfolk.⁵ They are the most neglected, discriminated and marginalized section of the Indian society. They play a very crucial role at household level as a wife, mother and equally participate in economic activities with their male counterparts but, still, they are excluded when it comes to political participation or decision making. They have been kept far from the political sphere for centuries even after the independence of the country.

History of Panchayat System:

Panchayat system is an age-old institution which played a very crucial role in public life from ancient time. In ancient time, there were four forms of village councils namely *Samiti*, *Sabha*, *Gana*, and *Vidhata*. Women were acknowledged to be present at two councils only; *Sabha* and *Vidhata*, and in two others they were not allowed. Chanakya's *Arthashastra* also mentioned that villages were the basic units of administration at that time.⁶

During Buddha's period, too *panchayat* system was very important. The traditional *panchayat* system and

effective attendance of common folk in the decision making practice by voting, discussion and dialogue were continued. Kinship system became hereditary during the period. But most decisions of day to day life of people and with regard to administration were taken through village assemblies. But, in the medieval period, the *panchayat* system withered away under the military authoritarianism of the Mughal Empire. In the British era, it was covered by the administration. Nonetheless, the British administrators were attentive about the relevance and importance of local level politics. Therefore, Charles Metcalfe, the then interim governor-general of colonial India, in his renowned minute of 1860, wrote; “India’s village communities are a little republic, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations”.⁷ But, very soon during the British rule itself, the *panchayat* system started to lose its sovereignty from the villages.

After independence, the Government showed efforts to endorse the formation of village *panchayats* to build them potent entities of regional politics. Article 40 of the Indian Constitution stated: “The state shall take steps to organize village *panchayats* and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”.⁸

SC Women in India:

India, popularly known as the country of diversity has its own pros and cons. On one side it is the home of people from diverse religions and ethnicity but at the same time, the society is divided in a very exploitative system of caste and gender discrimination. The status of women is not equal in the society and the people from the most oppressed community *i.e.*, Schedule Castes are treated badly. The women from the SC community are the most exploited group in the society who face both caste and gender-based discrimination and hence SC women are oppressed among the oppressed. They are victims of multiple exploitations- religious, social, economic and cultural as well. SC women experience patriarchal domination of a more severe form than that of non-SC women. Even after seven decades of Independence and Constitutional provisions women from SC community cannot dress up like other Hindu women nor could they wear jewellery of their choice. They were exploited sexually by upper caste men and as domestic hands by the upper caste women. This way, they are doubly exploited by the men and women of the upper caste. Dr.

Ambedkar also mentioned it very clearly in his article titled “The rise and fall of Hindu woman” that the root cause of poor status of women in India is the Hindu religious texts. Works, like the Manusmriti, divide individuals into a graded caste framework. According to Manusmriti, women are not given the right to education, independence, or wealth.⁹ Owing to poverty, the SC women have to engage in menial works to earn a livelihood from a very early age. Due to the caste framework, they are denied access to education, public places like market, temple and well, etc. and forced to live on the fringes of the village. Being SC women, they have always been in fear of abuse and violence and this fear erodes their self-confidence and dignity. Ambedkar had always argued for those lower down in the caste hierarchy, which has always been a source of humiliation, violence, and deprivation.¹⁰ As argued by Jodhka, the Indian villages have always been unequal, materially, socially and politically and it continues to be so even today. Though Gandhi never recognized untouchability in the society and even when he did, he attributed it to a kind of moral corruption, which, for him, was a symptom of colonial enslavement.¹¹

Social Justice:

Social justice is a very broad term and cannot be defined in a single sense. Social justice has a multidimensional significance. Social justice, in reality, is the core of the wide thought of justice. It is predominantly concerned about the development of a just and reasonable society, parallel circulation of commodities and assets to all sections of the society, equal opportunities to all, etc. Social justice ensures the proportionate treatment to all individuals without any kind of social discrimination based on religion, caste, class, gender, color, and race. Plato suggests justice a ‘deserved treatment’ particularly awarding all citizens their due. John Rawls defines justice as fairness. For David Miller, it is the sharing nature of equity.¹²

Empowerment of SC Women through Reservations in PRI:

Women Empowerment involves various factors which include: opportunities to exercise their economic and political rights at the household and community level. The principle objective of empowerment is to challenge man-centric idea of society, exchange the structures and establishments that encourage gender discrimination and

social imbalance, empower poor people and women to access and control both material and instructive assets.¹³ As defined in Jakarta Declaration, "Empowerment of women is not only an equity consideration; it is also a necessary pre-condition for sustainable social and economic development, the involvement of women in the political arena and in the decision-making process".¹⁴

Empowering the women belonging to the most oppressed community of Indian society is the biggest challenge. *Gram Panchayat* which is the smallest unit of governance in Indian democracy was thought to be the most important unit to SC women empowerment for exercising their political rights. Hence, the *Panchayati raj* system provided the platform for SC women. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution and provision of inclusion under Article 243 can be seen as one of the milestones of State initiative in providing a political opportunity to women belonging to rural areas. It had shown a change in the approach towards women's motivation. Earlier, women were by and large seen as an object of development only. Nonetheless, the amendment has given women the right to exercise their decision making power at the community level. Due to the reservation of seats in PRI, the participation of women in general and SC women in particular in local politics has increased considerably.¹⁵ However, there are examples which show that its achievement and progress is limited ingenuine political participation. In 1995, a workshop of elected women *panchayat* individuals from many States made a humiliating disclosure that most women were overwhelmed by their male family members. The decisions taken by the women representatives were the decisions of their male family members. Elected women representatives hardly exercise their powers in decision-making process due to the dominance of their male counterparts.

In Uttar Pradesh, it is very challenging for SC women to work as PRI representatives at every level of *Gram Sabha*. Sudha Pai's work of three villages of Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh proposes that the provision of reservation has been unsuccessful to create the expected outcome.¹⁶ The investigation uncovers that women *pradhans* are just for the 'name'. The women from the area have also confessed that they had contested for the *panchayat* election not by their own choice but rather because of family pressures and the choice of their community people. This prompted the ascent of the idea of '*panchayat pati*'.

The same has been observed during the fieldwork in Bishunpur *Gram Panchayat*, Balrampur District, Uttar Pradesh. The present *pradhan* is a female and her name is X but when the researcher tends to know the name of the *grampradhan*, people from the community said, the *pradhan* is Y who is a male. Y is her nephew and working as a clerk in ITI College near the village. The lady *pradhan* X lives with her husband in Balrampur city, her husband is a government employee in a hospital. When the researcher had been to her house for the interview, the *gram pradhan* X and her nephew were present. The irony here is that the post of the *gram pradhan* is in a name i.e. held by the lady X whereas all important decisions are taken care of by the male member, Y. The lady does not know anything about the ongoing works; she comes only to put her signature¹⁷ in papers.

There is another case regarding belonging to the SC category, who is the *Gram Pradhan* of *Pachhiyana Chhetra Panchayat*, Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh. She is an illiterate housewife. In the last *panchayat* elections of 2015, she stood for the post of *gram pradhan* election and got elected, because the seat was reserved for the SC woman. She is the wife of one who already had been the *pradhan* in the *panchayat* elections of 2005. Her husband is completely influenced by the previous *pradhan* who is from Verma caste and had also been *pradhan* for two times. The area is OBC dominant and *Kurmi* (Verma) community is in majority. Therefore, *Kurmis* of the area have always been in the dominant position in local politics. They play the role of kingmakers when the seats were reserved for SC male or female and used to influence in all the decision making powers.¹⁸

The above examples show that caste discrimination and patriarchy in the society is to such an extent that even provision for reservation proves insufficient for women (SC and Non-SC) empowerment and social justice. These inabilities were exacerbated by the way that many of the lady *pradhans* owed their named position to their male members or other influential people. In order to fulfill the reserved seats, political specialists need to convey different procedures to persuade the women and one of the most embraced systems is to influence the women through their relatives. Subsequently, women politicians are 'leaders through' their spouses or some other male members of the family. In this way, they might be named latent spectators who are not able to strike their entrance to actual *panchayat* leadership

and decision execution. This phenomenon is considerably clearer in the case of women having a place with SC identity.

Despite all the above limitations, the *Panchayati Raj* system has significant contribution in strengthening the *gram sabha* and local politics. Through the implementation of PRIs people got a positive voice in local level politics. Hence, the village *panchayat* framework had taken the democratic spirit to the local level politics by raising the level of the credibility of women from all groups.

Conclusion:

The objective of women empowerment especially, SC women through reservation in PRI is not a disappointment. But a change is needed and a start to accomplish the higher objective to achieve the goals. And in order to achieve the highest goal of making the society free from the discrimination based on castes and gender issues, the provision of women reservation has to take a milestone initiative in the long run to get social justice.

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