



Inclusive Democracy and Political Participation of Dalit Women in India: An Overview

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Abstract

Political participation and representation as a popular phenomenon is booming in present day politics of India and gained wide prominence and far reaching influence in every nook and corner of the country. It is now perceived as more instrumental for the progress and upliftment of a community as a whole. But the real problem lies in its inclusiveness and accommodative nature especially in the broader gender perspective. Women in general and Dalit women in particular are facing the problem of exclusion in the political processes of the nation. Though there is an outcry for the reservation and representation in the political apparatus of the country, the consequent policy actions remain mere rhetoric as there is no adequate women representation in our decision making structures. The under representation of Dalit women in particular can be looked upon through the prism of caste, gender and social prejudices. They are carrying the double burden of being women and lower class in the hierarchical structure of the society. The number of woman elected representatives from this socially and oppressed community in the national, state executive and legislative organs remain very low. Their representation in the main political parties' apex body and other key decision making structures has also remained low. Covert and overt untouchability practices still exist in the local and national level governance. Nominal presence of Dalit woman deprives them of any effective decision making power. High level of economic deprivation, low social status, poor educational status, lack of information, self-confidence and negotiating skills as compared to other caste hierarchy people preventing them from effective political participation. Empowerment should be taken place by bringing them in the key political positions by which the voice of the historically marginalized and oppressed voices will be represented. The reluctant approach of the privileged section in the policy making apparatus towards the inclusion of the Dalit women must be replaced by the inculcation of more inclusive policies and actions in order to make the democracy more inclusive.

Key words: Political Participation, Women, Dalit, Democracy, Inclusion.

Introduction

The term Dalit has monotonously been used in the lexicon of the marginalized and oppressed section in the hierarchical social order of Indian society. This hackneyed term has been in use to indicate the outcaste untouchables and oppressed sections emanated from the ferocious caste system. It implies all kinds of oppression. The protracted suppression and severe exploitation which has been existing in the society since time immemorial by the upper strata of the society made the life of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular in utter despondency. Caste system in India has a devastating effect on the social, cultural, economic, educational and political status of Dalit women in India. The persecution of Dalit women has been legitimized by the Hindu “holy” scriptures and they endured this savagery, not only through caste, but gender as well.

Amidst of exploitation, Dalit women bear a disproportionately larger chunk of burden. The division of labor in the households exposed them to exploitation and violence. Even though women in general face discrimination and marginalization in India, the depth of the plight of Dalit women is more in terms of both gender and caste. They face discrimination to amass a dignified life, equal social treatment, equal economic means, decision-making process, and to benefit from the governmental policies aimed at their well-being.

The lack of economic resources and education, poor health indicators, discriminatory social practices is relegated to the background of caste and gender prejudices existing in the society. The practice of untouchability and exclusion penetrated in the minds of people worsened the living conditions of Dalit women in every facet. It is there in the educational institutions, public offices, private firms so on. Caste order becomes instrumental in bolstering existing inequalities. Control over resources that fulfill fundamental human necessities is established unequally, in conformity with the coercive power of class and caste.

In the context of this rampant discrimination and exploitation against Dalit women, the endeavor for a better life cannot, perhaps, be detached from a wider political emancipatory agenda. The political empowerment is a sine qua non among Dalit women through which they can emancipate themselves from the oppression and inequality. The political participation of Dalit women, in governance at the local, regional and national level, is an embodiment of a major human right in itself and facilitates the cognizance of a host of other human rights. The effective political participation and decision making power is crucial factors in challenging and transforming structural and institutional caste and gender discrimination which enable the Dalit women to realize their fundamental rights. An effective political participation of Dalit women requires a transmogrification of power relationships both within institutions of governance and in the women’s social milieu.

Inclusive Democracy, Basic Tenets and Nexus with Political Participation

Inclusive Democracy can be defined as “a set of political practices aimed at minimizing the power of the elites and maximizing that of non-elites or ordinary citizens”. Civil and political liberties, development of democratic institutions, inclusion of marginalized section into the mainstream of political process have been considered as the yardstick of inclusive democracy. India is better positioned on the advancement of democratic institutions, civil and political liberties.

There is a perceptible link between political participation and inclusive democracy. A democracy cannot be inclusive without the incorporation of a complete and effective participation of all the sections of the country in its political mechanism. The central premise of Democracy is political equality and political participation. Political participation is an integral part of a democratic set up which determines the nature, success and effectiveness of democracy. Democracy becomes inclusive when it

Facilitates a complete involvement of every sections of the society. Political participation of people is considered to be the most basic principle of a democracy which has been emphasized in the notion of Participatory democracy. The concept of Participatory Democracy insists on increasing citizens' participation within the existing democratic system and denies the Elitist theory and Representative Democracy, as these gives little opportunity to its citizens for any significant participation in the decision-making process. Political participation denotes the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives.

In other words, when citizens themselves play an active role in the process of formulation and implementation of public policies and decisions, their activity is called political participation. Abraham Lincoln's acknowledgement is a reflection of the importance of popular participation when he defined democracy as 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'. People and their participation constitute an indispensable part of a democratic institution. When a country tries to practice democracy, it needs to be observed just how successfully they realize this ideal. In particular, we must consider whether there exists, equal opportunity for every citizen to involve in the political process. A democracy cannot be considered inclusive, unless and until it represent and assure the participation of every groups cut across caste, class, race and gender.

Political Participation: A Theoretical Perspective

Political participation is much wide and a more complex term, expressing itself in various kinds of overt and covert political activities. It is not limited to the selection of decision makers only but to affect their political behavior and hence societal decisions at large. Generally political participation is the involvement of individuals and groups in the political process of a political system at various levels. In Milbrath's study (1965), political participation was being interpreted quite broadly from spectator's activities including exposing oneself to political stimuli, voting and political discussion to campaign activities and to gladiatorial activities such as soliciting political funds, being a candidate for office, and actually holding public or party office.

Norman D. Palmer defined political participation as 'the involvement of citizens in such political activities which directly or indirectly influence the behaviors and actions of decision makers'. Myron Weiner defines political participation in a broader context. It reads as follows:

"I shall use the concept of political participation to refer to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods intended to influence the choice of public politics, the administration of public affairs, or the choice of political leaders at any level of government, local or national". Crook and Manor define political participation as "citizens' active engagement with public institutions including voting, campaigning, and pressuring either individually or through a group".

Political participation means not only contesting elections and decision making, it includes the gamut of voluntary activities with a bearing on the political process, including voting, support of political groups, communication with legislature, difference of political views and opinions among the electorates and other related activities. Political participation can be considered to include involvement in any form of organized activity that affects or seeks to affect, power relationship.

Participation, therefore, includes tendencies to influence attitudes and behavior of those who have power of decision making. This covers a wide range of activities of political participation from representation to decision making to movements, protest and support, meetings on issues of vital situational and systematic import. The idea of democracy would flourish only when genuine and effective political participation is materialized.

Attention to the problem of participation of women in general and Dalit women in particular has become crucial in the light of the present situation where an increasing awareness is needed to do away with inequality, to provide equal opportunity, irrespective of gender, in the sharing of resources, and in the rule making process.

Political Participation of Women in India: An Overall Assessment

In general, women have a lower rate of participation than men in India, which is a result of the interplay of several factors. Those factors include physiological constraints (women lack the psycho-social features connected with Political leadership), cultural constraints (politics is man's work), role constraints (women have been socialized into the lifetime role of wife or mother), and male conspiracy (men seek to preserve their power positions by imposing restraints barring women from access to positions of influence). Another factor which influences women's political participation in general, is the structural restraints imposed by political campaign. In order to win the election, women candidates are required to use resources that will affect the result most often in their favor.

The 1950 Indian Constitution guarantees Universal Adult Suffrage to all its Citizens. But the constitutional and legal measures, however, brought little changes in the attitudes so far. Statistics reveal that India lags behind many countries, including Pakistan and Nepal, in respect to women's participation in politics. The Inter- Parliamentary Union (IPU) data says that, with only 10.8 percent of women representation in the Lok Sabha and 10.3 percent in the Rajya Sabha, India ranks 98 in the world. India, the world's largest democracy, has now only 59 women representatives out of 545 members in Lok Sabha, while there are 25 female MPs in the 242-member Rajya Sabha. While India shares its position with Benin and Jordan, it is ranked 47 places below Pakistan and 80 places behind Nepal. The number of women holding key positions in the Indian national politics is very less. India has provided its first women president after several decades since its independence.

Women's representation in both national and state level politics remains low, despite the outcry over the ineffective reservation policies of the government. Women's representation in the decision making structures is inadequate. Their presence in the state executive and legislative organs too remained small. The numbers of women chief ministers are very less in number. As an effort to correct the underrepresentation of females in the national and state legislatures, a more accessible platform has been given to women in the local rural and urban self-government system. Direct election at this elementary level has been considered as an easy access to women to build experience in policy articulation and to enhance their participation in the regular village offices. States hold one or two seats specifically for women at each of the three levels. Although women are elected to these seats, they rarely attend, and when they do, their participation in discussions is minimal. Despite the reservation policies at various levels, politics continues to be a male bastion.

The Conundrum of Political Representation of Dalit Women

Dalit women comprise a separate category among dalits and among women. There is an increased momentum of Dalit politics at both regional and national levels, due to the emergence of identity politics. However the same momentum has not been reflected in the case of Dalit women. The leadership inside various Dalit movements has not involved significant number of Dalit women. Notwithstanding, by the early 1980s, Dalit women were politicizing themselves as dalits and as women. Several autonomous Dalit women's forums and networks have emerged as robust autonomous voices seeking empowerment. This phenomenon can be viewed as a corollary

of the inability of the state to safeguard Dalit women. The Dalit women's position "outside" both the mainstream Indian women's movement and patriarchal Dalit movements echoes the position of "double jeopardy". Dalit women exercise, the elementary tool of political participation, the right to vote, in large number, although participation as candidates and key position holders is low. Dalit women are not adequately represented in position of power in proportion to their presence in the overall population. Dalit women are underrepresented in both state and national legislatures. The Indian parliament, the apex law making body in the country, consists of less number of Dalit women which has been a phenomenon over several years.

At the state level, legislatures are dominated by man and the degree of male domination considerably varies from state to state. Four states account for nearly half of the country's Dalit population. Uttar Pradesh stands first with 20.5% of the total scheduled caste (SC) population, followed by West Bengal with 10.7%. Bihar with 8.2% and Tamil Nadu with 7.2% come third and fourth. The participation of Dalit women is apparently low in the above said states as well, despite of their huge population. The raising identity consciousness and politicized generation catalyzed the emergence of some regional parties based on caste lines in some of the states. The decay of the Congress system in the 1980s and its ability to attract Dalit votes, together with increasing lower caste mobilization, provide space for the parties like BSP.

Political participation of Dalit women is not adequate at the local level too. Caste hierarchy and patriarchy still exist in decentralized governance system in India. In the context of extending Panchayats raj to the villages in India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar observed: "What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrowmindedness and communalism". The Panchayats have been upgraded from being mere units of self-government to being institutions of self-government by incorporating part IX into the constitution of India. The provisions of representation have also been provided to dalits including women. Though the Panchayats Raj institutions have been in existence for a long time, they have not able to achieve the stature and grandeur of doable, reactive and receptive people's bodies due to numerous reasons mainly meager representation of marginalized sections like dalits and Dalit women. One cannot see any change in the scenario from what Ambedkar had said decades ago about Indian villages. The situation has become even much worse.

The social prejudices emanated from the prevailing caste system of rural society in India formed a major obstruction for the political participation of Dalit women. The unwillingness of the dominant class to share powers and functions with Dalit community in a common platform was dismantled by the introduction of new constitutional provisions of self-governance system both at the rural and urban areas. However, for the majority of Dalit women, the Panchayats election marks a strong caste and patriarchal control over them and the enjoyment of their rights. The dominant castes often sought to directly engineer elections by consensus, thereby making the reservation policy redundant. The primary instrument for this is benami or proxy politics. The use of proxy candidature gives legitimized political opportunity for firstly dominant caste and secondly Dalit men to exploit Dalit women. They reinforce their own interests and the suppression of Dalit women. Indeed, this proxy politics denied Dalit women's right to independent and empowered participation in local governance. Once elected, dominant caste male control over Panchayat resources and the deeply embedded discriminatory practices rule the experience of Dalit Women Panchayat representatives. The Dalit women face strong opposition and obstructions while attempting to work for the benefit of their community. The Observation of the CERD Committee on the Indian Government's Report in 2007 says that: "Dalit candidates, especially women, are frequently forcibly prevented from standing for election or, if

elected, forced to resign from village councils or other elected bodies or not to exercise their mandate”.

Inclusive Democracy and Political Participation of Dalit Women: Rhetoric

India is considered to be the largest democracy in the world. Although India is being touted as the biggest democracy, political inequalities are rampant among its population, especially among Dalit women, which is manifested in their low level of representation in various strata of political realm. The exclusion of Dalit women in the decision making structures and government's insouciance to Dalit women needs make the democracy impotent as equal political participation and representation is quintessential for an inclusive democracy.

Although India has been able to invigorate individual rights and civil liberties along with electoral participation as an outcome of its inclusionary policies, the under representation of the lower classes, in important political, policy and bureaucratic processes, continue to persist. The lower classes, especially Dalit women, have been excluded and marginalized by the elite which took complete control of the political and bureaucratic machinery as seen in Northern part of India. Not only just North, the entire country is plagued with a disproportionately lower representation of the different minorities including the dalits in political leaderships and administrative services. The Dalit women representation is incomplete unless and until they hold the actual policy making power in high echelons.

The 2011 census recorded nearly 20.14 crore people belonging to various scheduled castes in the country. The number was 16.66 crore in 2001 census. The Dalit population showed an increasing growth, whereas India's population grew 17.7% during the same period. Though there is an increase in the population of dalits in the country, many states, with a considerable number of dalits, do not have any adequate presentation in the political arena of the country. Dalit empowerment is very poor in many states. The Dalits and the Dalit women are not represented in the governmental structures in proportion to their respective population. The inadequacy of Dalit women's participation and representation in the national, regional, and local level institutions and decision making structures proves that the claim of India's inclusive democracy a mere rhetoric.

Desideratum of Change and Inclusiveness

The political participation and representation of Dalit women is quite mediocre. There should be a shift from mere political participation to effective and robust participation. For this major transformation, the major stumbling blocks in their way to effective political representation need to be identified. The illiteracy and lack of awareness about powers and functions and developmental schemes retarded the efficacy of political participation of Dalit women. Poverty and lack of resources are also the major issue areas. These all emerged as detrimental impediments in making their participation effective. Until and unless these issues are resolved, there would be no improvement in their way. A support mechanism is needed to enable them to play their role more effectively. Strategies for the capacity building should be formulated for them. Since Dalit women lack adequate regular income, their participation in the local level has really been hampered. They are compelled to spend money on the official work from their meager income.

Therefore, to enhance their participation and overcome this problem, there should be a proper honorarium to meet these disbursements. A special arrangement should be formulated for their education since illiteracy has been the major obstruction in the way of their functioning as strong political leaders. There should be a special and compulsory training arrangement for the Dalit

women who were not literate to become literate before their election so as to enable them to become independent and effective in their functioning. For the elected women representatives, there must be an intensive training and separate capacity building exercises immediately after their elections to sensitize them on various aspects of governance and power sharing. Their focus should be on the relevance and various dimensions of centralized and decentralized governance, constitutional and other safeguards, implementation of various welfare programmes, interface with officials and higher caste representatives in the political realm. Such exercises and training programmes need to be repeated and upgraded at regular intervals. Frequent exposure visits and get together can also be arranged as a part of the capacity building mechanism. The literature generated by various institutions like National Commission for Women and other agencies may be used as a basic input for their activities.

There is an immediate need of sensitization and reorientation of social and representative system. The Dalit women representatives often face covert and overt opposition from members belonging to higher caste. There is need for changing the outlook of the higher castes and concerned officials towards the Dalit women elected representatives through the channel of sensitization so that these people encourage and help them in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

Conclusion

To enhance the effective participation, the Dalit women who excelled in their work may be awarded by organizing special functions. This may help to double the self confidence among them especially in the local level Panchayat administration. For the de facto political empowerment of Dalit women, the pro-active involvement and participation of non-governmental organizations, community based organizations, various research training institutions and civil society organizations, particularly women oriented ones, are essential and should, therefore, be encouraged.

Most importantly, the initiative and intervention of the governments and constitutional bodies, like National Commission for Scheduled castes, National Commission for Women, should be in place to include the excluded groups in the society and thereby make the democracy more inclusive. There should be an explicit focus on the political empowerment of Dalit women in national developmental plans. Adequate funded education and development plans should be mandated for Dalit women in local government. There should be a strict implementation and monitoring of government sanctions against proxy candidature as well as caste and gender discrimination. Mandatory trainings have to be provided to government officials on such issues of proxies and discrimination. There should also be some sanctions against those who allow both practices to operate. There should be a proper monitoring mechanism for the election of Dalit women as well as their participation in local governments and special capacity building trainings have to be taken place. Government should take prompt action on complaints from them and establish support offices with adequate facilities. At the international level, UN bodies should request states for information on the political participation of Dalit women separately in all relevant reports. The above measures are needed to be implemented properly and more effectively in order to make political participation of Dalit women equal and meaningful.

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