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DALIT WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT: A CASE-STUDY OF A VILLAGE OF UTTAR PRADESH

Abstract

The Dalit movement and politics have always crusaded for 'Equality' in all aspects of their life – social, economic, and political. The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, 1992 provides reservation of seats in Panchayats for the marginalized groups to remove the essentialist social inequality and change the prevailing oppressive power structure. The amendment also reserved one-third of the total seats for women.

With reference to the Dalit women's position in these panchayats, scholars have discussed about its efficacy as an instrument of change. They confer the dominance of the upper caste men as determining reason for their relegated situation.

The present study explores the position of the Dalit women representatives in the panchayats, which is dominated by the Dalits themselves. It examines as to what does the Ambedkar's dream of 'equality' means for them, when they encounter or face challenges from their 'own' men in the public sphere who pursue the 'equality'.

The findings suggest that a complex pattern of age-old barriers obstructs the process of their effective integration into the political life. It is concluded that mere reserving the quotas for women would not lead to their empowerment; rather sincere initiatives should be taken to make them independent decision-makers of their life.

Keywords: *Equality, 73rd Amendment Act, Dalit women, Panchayat, Intersectional approach*

Introduction

The Dalit Movement and politics have always crusaded for 'Equality' in all aspects of their life – social, economic, and political. Various protagonists have demanded the eradication of discriminatory practices that lead to social exclusion¹ and inequality², especially the practice of untouchability. The exclusionary practices have not only segregated the Dalits but have also marginalized them systematically in the realm of social life by debarring them

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from participating in the educational, economic, and political processes and institutions.

During the pre-independence era, various attempts were made by the Dalits to overcome the stigma of untouchability and to improve their life situations. In the process, many of them followed the path of *sanskritisation*³; others became the followers of the Bhakti movement⁴. Many of their leaders like Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar emphasized more radical approaches to bring changes in the system.

After independence, the Indian Constitution (Article 15) reiterated the notion of the 'equality of all', which per se meant overcoming and removing all kinds of discriminations and bringing everybody on the same platform. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the author of Indian Constitution, for achieving 'Equality' insisted upon the need of political means and participation in various political institutions. He believed that political equality would entail equality in all the other spheres of life, and ultimately to social equality. Therefore, he instructed his followers to 'educate, organize and agitate'.

The Dalits' endeavour to carve out a niche in political arena started materializing with the adoption of the 73rd amendment of the Constitution in 1992. Under 243-D clause (1) (b), the amendment provided for the reservation of seats for the SCs and STs in accordance with the proportion of their population in a Panchayat. It also opened a new chapter for the Dalit women under clause (2) by providing for the reservation of seats not less than one-third of the total number allotted to the Scheduled Castes at the grassroots level. In this way, the Act promised to bring all the marginalized sections of the society to the fore and give them due space in the politics at the grassroots.

Various studies have been carried out since the implementation of the 73rd Amendment at the State as well as the National level. Most of them evaluate its achievements and comment on the hindrances encountered in the path of its being a success, particularly in the context of the participation of the marginalized groups— either the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes. Later, gender-oriented studies were also conducted, which examined the success of the Amendment. Amongst them, some scholars regarded it as an opening up of new horizon and hope (Buch 2010; Kodoth and Mishra 2011; Ahmad et. al 2008), whereas others raised serious questions on its efficacy (Omvedt 2005; Guru 1995; Patnaik 2005; Ciotti 2010; Hazarika 2008; Mangu bhai et al. 2009).

In the context of the Dalit women, it is contended that 'the lives of Dalit women have never figured in their own right, visible at most in the numerous statistics that document women's work' (John 2008: 443). Recently, though some feminist studies have attempted to underscore the Dalit women's voices into their discourse. Nonetheless, most of the studies have often either focused on the position of the Dalit women in the panchayats dominated by

the upper caste, particularly men or have ignored them altogether as a non-entity. These studies exposed the poor level of participation of these women because of the lopsided distribution of power ingrained in the power structure of a traditional society like India.

Ruth Manorama (2008: 451) alleges, 'In all the voluminous social science research in India, women from lower class/caste are rarely to be found as the subjects of study, speaking in their own voices, coping with their own lives and difficulties...How do lower caste women actually perceive their position in society? How much do they accept it? How do they engage, if they do, in action to change their situation?'

Conceding to the above argument, the present study further argues that most of the studies have failed to examine the situation of these women in the panchayats ruled by their own counterparts – the Dalit men – as well. Rarely, have the Dalit women's position been examined or evaluated in comparison to the Dalit men in settings outside their private domain – as contenders. The present study is an attempt to explore this 'gap of knowledge' through a case -study of a village of western Uttar Pradesh.

Theoretical Background

The Dalit women constitute half of the 201 million Dalit population, and 16.6 per cent of the total Indian female population (Census 2011). Scholars argue that the Dalit women in the contemporary Indian society face discrimination, simultaneously, on three accounts: they are poor, they are Dalits, and they are women. It results from the three institutional systems: Class, Caste and Gender. The effects of these three institutions gets multiplied when they work together, and thus, lead to further deterioration of the condition of the Dalit women than when they work separately.

Kimberle Crenshaw contends that 'All equality is not created equal...what's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these [social Inequalities], and the experience is not just the sum of its parts.' (UN Women 2020).

The position of the Dalit women in Indian society is also the outcome of various forms of inequalities resulting from their different social identities, particularly, caste, class and gender. The dynamics and complex interplay of these three social identities in the context of the Dalit women exacerbates their marginalization in comparison to identities taken separately – Dalit men, low class, and non-Dalit women. Annie Namala (2008: 459) states, 'While Dalit women share many of the same disabilities arising out of their class position with the poor in general, their caste along with Dalit men and their gender with all other women, the extent, intensity and depth vary. The cumulative effects of caste, class and gender are qualitatively different from the impact of each of these independent factors.'

It is asserted that although the traditional taboos under the caste system and constraints under the class system are same for the Dalit men as well as women. The Dalit women deal with them more often, because she faces discrimination, under the patriarchal system, by the men of their own communities as well. Sadana and Sonalkar (2015) pegs their position as retaliated within family relations on account of the oppression faced by their men from other caste members, while Varma (2010), in his study on dalit women in Rajasthan, holds the dominance by the other 'upper' Scheduled Caste men responsible for it.

Stephen (2009) delineates, 'The fact is that Dalit women have been victims of patriarchy as much as other women, and still suffer huge impediments to a peaceful existence, let alone the full enjoyment of their human rights. Under the circumstances, it is rare to see a Dalit woman in a position of leadership, whether in the home, at work or in social or political institutions. It is therefore inconceivable to the mainstream that a Dalit woman should have power or decision-making authority and be free to exercise it. Hence, even if she manages to attain such a position, it is most vulnerable position – Dalit women sarpanches in Panchayats often face humiliation, threats and physical violence, because the community is unable to accept a Dalit woman as a leader.'

Scholars have insisted that the 'reservation of seats in political institutions ... no more... perceived as a concession but as an instrument of political empowerment and for achieving social justice' (Buch 2010:8). These concerns of social justice and political empowerment can be achieved only through the active involvement of every member in the politics of the state. However, they argue that mere 'Numerical representation itself does not ensure empowerment of weaker sections (such as women, particularly, the Dalit women) unless and until it is transformed into effective participation' (Patnaik 2005: 4753).

The present study attempts to understand the position of the Dalit women representatives in the rural power structure, particularly, when it is dominated by the Dalits themselves. It investigates the interplay of caste, class and gender identities in a village panchayat through case-study. It analyses that whether these quotas for Dalit women in the political offices lead to some qualitative change as well along with the quantitative increase in women's representation, especially, when the Dalits dominates it. It also inquires into the dynamics of power distribution between the Dalit men and women in the political arena at the grassroots through intersectional feminism approach.

The intersectional feminism, as explained by Kimberle Crenshaw⁵, is 'a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.' (UN Women 2020). To understand the experiences of the Dalit women representatives and the strategies they follow

to face the challenges at the household, community, and political level, and to what extent they are able to meet them. In a way, it attempts to examine that what does Ambedkar's slogan mean for the Dalit women, when they encounter or face challenges from their 'own' men in the public sphere who, paradoxically, stake claim to the 'equality-of-opportunity' in the socio-economic and political space of the society. In other words, where do they stand in the Dalit movement, which is ostensibly based on the ideology of 'equality of all'?

The present study is an outcome of certain facts observed during a field study in 2010 and re-visit in 2016 to a village situated in the western Uttar Pradesh, which is numerically dominated by the Dalits. During the visits, these phenomena attracted the attention, and led by curiosity to further explore the details and identify the 'blind' spots. To understand the phenomena holistically, case-study method was considered as the most appropriate. A case-study involves a careful and complete understanding of any social unit or event in its natural real-life context. Further, it is a method of study of depth rather than breadth. It provides the researcher an opportunity to choose from a range of tools. To understand the underlying complexities of the interactions between caste, class and gender, it has been examined by intersectional lens. Further, apart from observation, in-depth interviews with all the Dalit women representatives elected to the village panchayat either as Chairperson or a Member or had contested, particularly after the implementation of the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, since 1995 panchayat elections till the field visit in 2016, were carried out to unravel the 'realities' in their own situations.

Veerpura – The Study Village

The Veerpura village⁶ is situated in the block of Alampur Jafarabad, tehsil of Aonla in the district of Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh⁷. It is located at a distance of 2 kms. from the tehsil and 44 kms from the district. According to Census 2011, the total population of the village is 1905, which is comprised of 1039 males and 866 females with sex ratio at 833. The total number of households are 369. However, the total number of SC population is 1385 with 753 males and 632 females, which is 72.20% of the total population. The total literacy rate is 65.53% with male literacy at 75.80% and female literacy at 53.49%. The total area of the village is 189.428 hectares, and the agricultural area is 171.24 hectares.

The village is composed of two hamlets – Veerpura and Veerpura-Gautia. These hamlets are separated from each other by a distance of half of a kilometer. The hamlet Veerpura is inhabited by an upper caste – the Thakurs, while the other- Veerpura Gautia- is housed by the Jatavs⁸, a Scheduled Caste, only. The hamlets have a history of clashes between them. Even though they have a legacy of troubled relationship, the significant feature of this village is that the Jatavs have an upper hand over their upper caste adversaries. The

Jatavs have been in a better position and are ruling the local power structure of the village for a long time.

During the period of study in 2010, the village panchayat of Veerpura was found to be consisted of one Pradhan and eleven other members (Table 1)⁹. As evident, nine members belong to Veerpura Gautia, including the Pradhan, all of whom were Jatav, while the rest, of the three, were Members from Veerpura, who were Thakur by caste. This clearly indicates the numerical dominance of the Jatavs in the village panchayat.

The analysis of the village panchayat¹⁰ gender-wise distribution shows no gender inequality, rather a clear numerical predominance of the women representatives is noticed. Among the members, six are female and five are male. Of the six female members, four belong to Veerpura Gautia and two are from Veerpura. Hence, at the outset, it may be interpreted that there is no apparent discrimination across the lines of caste and gender; rather a clear dominance of the Jatavs and female gender prevails.

Further, women had been able to occupy the post of village Pradhan twice¹¹ since the implementation of 73rd Amendment, but only when the post was reserved for them. In this context, the present paper attempts to explore how far this numerical dominance of the Dalit women representatives translates into their 'actual' domination in the panchayat. Further, it attempts to unravel the dynamics of the power structure within the public as well as the private domains through examining the existing patterns of power relations between Dalit men and Dalit women representatives. For the purpose mentioned, the Dalit women representatives who were elected or had contested after the implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act, and available at the time of visit, were interviewed extensively.

Profile of the Dalit Women Representatives

The present study emphasizes the educational level, type of family and the ownership of land of the Dalit women as crucial prerequisites for the inculcation of leadership skills and qualities for performing the duties of representative effectively.

Education

Education is one of the most important prerequisites for capacity building, and leadership quality and skills. Table 3 gives a comparison of the educational level of the Dalit women representatives' as well as their husband's. Except three women representatives who have studied up to class 5, none of them have had any formal schooling/education, whereas majority of these women's husband had been educated. This indicates that most of these women belonged to a family that appreciates the value of having a good education and knowledge of political proceedings. They had a support of an educated and

upwardly mobile husband.

However, all these women reported that they were not asked for their consent and have been made to contest the election only after the seat was reserved for a woman; because their husbands became ineligible to contest. Further, most of them belong to a family where their male counterparts have political aspirations and/or are already involved in politics or are oriented towards it.

A major drawback with these women is that they do not know how to read and write. Consequently, they were unable to read the various documents related to panchayat on their own and had to rely upon their male counterparts to find out about the contents (if they ever cared to do so!).

Family Type

Family type is another significant factor that is included. It helps to understand how much amount of the leisure time¹² does a woman has at her disposal. It is argued that for developing leadership qualities one should have some extra-time apart from the time spent on the routine-work. Shah (2005) notes that the women leaders are, usually, the dominating figures in their own homes. They have few domestic responsibilities to cater at home and may either have very few children or none. In the present study, it can be seen from table 4, majority of these women live in a joint form of family. A joint family in the Indian society is characterized by the subordinated position of women in the family. Their prime duties are confined to the household chores and rearing and caring. They are never sought for any advice on the matters concerning the family; thus, they do not hold any authoritative position in the family. This, however, does not mean that the women living in nuclear-type families are better placed. Certainly, they are asked for their opinions from time-to-time over the issues related to the household, which are considered less important or too generic in nature. They are mostly excluded and considered as incapable of taking major family-decisions. This non-participation in the decision-making process in the major issues of the family and the secondary position in their family imbue these women with lack of confidence in their capabilities and lower their self-esteem, which surreptitiously affects their urge to take decisions on their own. This psyche imperceptibly results into the non-participation of these women in the panchayat as well. The problem is that these women, also, do not feel deprived of their right and do not consider it as their duty to participate and voice their opinions; rather it is condemned as too disrespectful behaviour towards their male members. So, they accept the situation as given and find themselves unable to challenge it. Robert Whyte and Pauline Whyte (1982) and Safa (1984) posits that Asian women tend to relate herself more with the issues of her oppressed socio-economic group than with oppressed women group as a member (Shah 2005).

Land

Lastly, land is the third factor that has been included. Bina Agarwal makes a crucial observation that the gap between the genders 'in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment. In primarily rural economies such as those of South Asia the most important property in question is arable land' (Agarwal 2008:175). Land signifies the social status of a family in a village. It is considered as providing the reliable source of financial independence in the form of asset to the people of rural areas. It determines the social position a person holds as an authority within the family as well as outside it. Mira Savara and Sujata Gothoskar (1984) in a study on the struggles of landless women notes that the leadership comes from those women who were holding small parcels of land because they are relatively economically stable and independent of the local rich peasants.

As evident from Table 4, out of twenty-seven, seventeen are landholders who comprise 62.96 percent of the total Dalit women representatives. Out of these seventeen women representatives, only seven have large landholdings. These lands are owned by their families and none of the women representatives possess or own any land independently in their name. Although most of them work in their own fields and supports the family, but all of them are economically dependent. Those who are landless though work in others' fields, but they are also economically dependent, and their living condition is also dismal. One of the major reasons for the women representative's secondary position is that the landed property is owned and managed only by the men in their family, making them dependent.

The Dalit Women at Work: The Efficacy of the Reservation

Scholars, like Mrinal Gore (Katakayam 2006), strongly believe that the reservation has been singularly responsible for bringing more women into politics especially at the local self-government level. However, the aim of this policy, as Nirmala Buch (2010:19) believes, '...is not only of increasing women's numbers in panchayats but also their effectiveness and impact. Their effectiveness is indicated by the extent to which they are able to influence institutional rules, norms, and practices and, consequently, shape the policy agenda and decisions about the use and allocation of resources'.

To ascertain the effectiveness and the impact of the policy on the Dalit women at the grassroots level, the participation level and efficacy of these Dalit women representatives as an officeholder has been explored in the study. Pratuysna Patnaik in her study has evaluated the participation of representatives 'around the way they act in regular panchayat meetings; participation in regard to setting the agenda, which incorporates identifying issues and problems of the constituencies; raising them in panchayat meetings

and participating in discussions, and finally their involvement in the decision-making process, such as taking decisions in planning, budgeting, location of developmental projects, and selection of beneficiaries in the panchayats'(Patnaik 2005 : 4756).

Similarly, in the present study the participation level of the Dalit women representatives were assessed upon **three major parameters** – calling or attending the panchayat meetings, articulating the agenda and in decision making.

Attendance

Attendance of elected representatives in regular gram panchayat meetings was found to be extremely low. Majority of them did not attend the meetings regularly. Some representatives on probing further divulged that often they are not even informed about meetings' schedule. Although it was more than two-and-a-half-of-a-year of their election for the current panchayat when the interviews were conducted, the members stated that neither have they gone to attend any panchayat meetings since then nor did they enquire about it¹³. They maintained that they would go only when they are called upon by the Pradhan. Interestingly, majority of the women representatives did not bother that being an elected member, it is their duty to attend the meetings and participate in its proceedings.

One of the elected representative's husbands said, '*Abhi tak to koi meeting nahi hui hai, aur agar hogi bhi toh ye wahan ja ke kya karenge? Usme toh hum jayenge, agar pradhanji humein bulayenge toh*' (Till now no meeting has taken place, and if it does ever, then what would she do there? I shall go to attend it and, that too, when the Pradhan would call upon any such meeting ever).

It was also noticed that in most of the cases panchayat meetings were nothing more than just a formality to be finished and kept for records. The following case clearly illustrates the lack of importance of the attendance in the meetings of the Panchayat. During the field study, the author came to know about an elected Dalit woman representative, who had been re-elected for the second term as a member in continuity. Being amazed at her win, the author showed interest in meeting and interview her, but was informed by others that because the woman representative is a migrant labourer, she has already left for Punjab. When it was further inquired about how does, then, she participates in the proceedings of the Panchayat. It was told that she has 'never' gone for any such proceedings; and, further, her absence does not affect the proceedings of panchayat, because the number of members required for fulfilling the quorum¹⁴ always becomes available.

Participation in articulating the agenda

This involves identifying issues of the locality, raising specific problems

and issues in the meetings, and discussing them. These are some of the important activities in the functioning of the panchayats. However, none of the women representatives has ever done so. In fact, they were not even aware of any such duty as a member. However, when the issues that were currently under discussion at the panchayat were asked about to the few elected women representatives, they were oblivious. One of them remarked, '*kuan se muddey?... humara thodhe hi kaam hai! aur waise bhi yeh hi jatein hain hum nahi... hum nahin jaante kuchch bhi*' (what issues? It is not our work! And, moreover, it is always my husband who goes to there and have the knowledge about it... I do not know anything about it.)

It is argued that the private domain of women's life eventually affects closely to the quality of their performance in the Panchayat as well as other public spheres. It is based on an observation during the fieldwork that none of the interviews could be conducted in isolation; it was done only in the presence or under the watch of some male relative, who in most of the cases was either their husband or their son. In most of the cases, it was either husband or the other male relative, who answered all the questions that were put before the women representatives. Further, during the interview, many times the women representative who was being interviewed left the place, and got herself involved with household chores; and their male counterpart answered the questions instead.

Participation in decision-making

Participation of the Dalit women representatives in the decision-making process was limited only to putting thumb-impression on the recommendation of and approval by the husband or some other relative. They themselves reasoned that they are less aware about these activities, and these works pertain to men. Some of them reported that when the other male members and their husbands are done with the discussions, they are just asked to put their thumb-impression. Table 2 shows that they have no formal schooling, which makes them unable to know what the contents of the documents are.

Cases of two women representatives – a Jatav, and a Thakur – both of whom had occupied the post of Pradhan, deserves special mention over here. Both belonged to prosperous and landowner families of the area. Both had contested only because the seat of Pradhan had been reserved for women. During both the women Pradhan's tenure, their male relatives used to handle all the matters related to the Panchayat, and these woman Pradhan were mere a rubber-stamp.

The cases cited above from the field areas clearly indicates the inferior and subordinate status of the Dalit women in both the spheres – public as well as private, in comparison to the Dalit men. This is so, because they are, generally, uneducated, unskilled, dependent, and property-less individuals. Due

to their precarious life situations, they are overly dependent on their male counterparts. This dependence on others has, certainly, undermined their faith in themselves, and their own potential and capabilities; thereby making them into a timid, under-confident and non-participatory one. It is argued that the private sphere of these women, imperceptibly, impinges upon their efficiency and the level of participation in the public sphere.

Dalit Women and Panchayats: A Hiatus

I am conscious of the fact that if women are conscientised, the untouchable community will progress. I believe that women should organize, and this will play a major role in bringing an end to social evils...the progress of the Dalit community should be measured in term of the progress made by its womenfolk.

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar speech to the **Dalit Mahila Federation in 1942.**

Under the 73rd Amendment Act, originally meant to empower all the underprivileged groups together equally, unintended consequences have followed, which are challenging and deteriorating the ideological basis of the policy of reservation. Contrary to Ambedkar's vision, it is argued that a hiatus has developed between the agent of change – the Dalit women, and the instrument of change – the panchayats, thereby obstructing the process of empowerment of them.

A case of a Dalit women representative from the field beckons for a reality check. This Dalit women representative was 60 years old. She was partially deaf; could hardly hear anything. Therefore, when questions were asked, her son replied instead. This son was married, and 10th fail and did not have any source of income. The author had already seen him at the house of the Pradhan, where he was gossiping with the others. He said that it was *bhaiyaji* (a term he used to refer to the current Pradhan), who have directed his father to make her mother to contest in the election, since there was no other option available to him. When she contested, she won and got elected. The old woman was totally unaware of the responsibilities and duties of a member of Panchayat. In fact, in the backdrop of her partial hearing problem and illiteracy, one can decipher the role and contribution she could make as a member of panchayat. In this case, the magnitude of influence of *Bhaiyaji* (of Jatav caste group) over the family cannot be overlooked.

This incident shows that even among the Dalits, intentionally, women, who are incapable, dependent, apprehensive to challenge the male dominance and disinterested in political activities, are facilitated and coerced to contest for these positions; only to fill the seat which has been reserved for them. And, not to raise any issue against gender invisibility. It reflects upon the patriarchal structure of the caste. It also indicates the position of the Dalit women in the

rural power structure, and the legalistic approach of the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act. In this way, the male dominance is not challenged; rather it is further perpetuated and reinforced. The other cases, like mentioned above, also corroborates the argument.

Taking cues from the above, it is contended that the Dalit politics and movement, which have been so far persuading the notion of 'equality', have neglected the pervasiveness of gender inequality among the Dalits. Scholars have cited several reasons for the relegated position of women in the Indian society. Patriarchy is one of the most important reasons cited by them. Apart from other factors that the Dalit women may share with their men, under this system, they are further marginalized through the systematic neglect by the Dalit men as well. The Dalit women are, Manorama (2008: 450) rightly points out, 'overwhelmingly ... less educated and in low paid jobs. Social mobility for a man in the intermediary lower caste may mean withdrawing women from outside work participation'.

In the context of the Dalit women, generally intellectuals speak about the exploitative nature of relations between the upper castes and them. As Leela Dube (2008: 472) opines, 'The control of resources and ritual status – together integrally informed by and constitutive of relations of power – reinforce each other and underlie the sexual exploitation of lower caste women by upper caste men'. However, the gender inequality within the Dalit community is persistently ignored except a few studies (Irudayam, Mangubhai and Lee 2006, Srivastava 2013, Varma 2010, Sujatha 2014, Rege 2006).

Traditions and symbols are relentlessly used to maintain and reinforce the status quo in the power relations between the genders. 'Women's subordination is part of a cultural system' emphasizes Buch (2010:22). Low level of education, lack of social mobility, burden of household chores, lack of independent financial resources is all considered as the crucial factors contributing to the continuity of the male-dominance among the Dalits.

Additionally, these traditions and cultural symbols also limit the areas of activity and articulation of the Dalit women. In times of conflict between the private and public domains, women always give preference to the previous one, and ignore or compromise with the latter. Shah (2005:174) argues, 'Culture and traditions are conceptualized in a way to reinforce the women's position subservient to the male. Community rights based on traditional religious codes are emphasized over citizen's rights. Women are organized and mobilized to defend and perpetuate traditional institutions with patriarchal authoritarian structures and value systems.'

In this way, patriarchy as a system is kept intact, which lulls the process of achieving 'equality' within the Dalit family and outside it, ultimately leading to the strengthening of the 'sexist political culture' (Kodoth and Mishra 2011). This, even though the inclusion of women into politics through reservations

was meant for the inclusion of them into the decision-making bodies as decision-makers and to empower them.

Why this is so, Ciotti (2010: 189) reasons rightly, ‘... political participation is an all-male phenomenon. As has happened in other instances, the first to engage with “change” are men, and this has been the case with Dalit political mobilization as well. Where Dalit politics has empowered educated young men, women’s participation in local governance institutions has been nominal, just as state and national politics have primarily been known through the male lens’.

Similarly, when the ‘change’ was introduced into the rural power structure through the 73rd Amendment Act, men became the primary beneficiaries since they were more exposed to the outside world, while the Dalit women were, mostly, left untouched. A major drawback with these reservation policies is, that they were introduced without mobilization and training of the Dalit women that could have helped their proper integration into the political life. Because, as Patnaik underscores,

‘The idea of representatives acting to further the interests of their constituents in a responsive manner becomes questionable in a context where the majority of them did not cherish any political aspirations or ambitions and were elected because of the influence or persuasion of others’ (Patnaik 2005: 4754).

It is insisted that apart from other life improving initiatives, such as, education, health facilities, nutrition etc., initiatives should be taken by the government organizations as well as the non-government organizations to mobilize and train these representatives and prepare them for their job. Since, democracy is not just about entitling the people to vote; rather it is about empowering people in a real sense of the term— through making them understand of their power and the control they can have over the on-goings in their surroundings.

Conclusion

The Dalit politics and the movement have always been focused on achieving ‘Equality’ but only among ‘men’. Dalit women has not been given the priority they deserve. This is so, because in Indian society families have always been taken as a single unit. The disparity in the statuses and their sources within an Indian family has often been ignored while analysing. The implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act has certainly increased the participation of women in politics at the local level, though so far only numerically. This alone may not raise their status in the society or the family. Because a complex pattern of age-old barriers restrains them from participating actively in the public sphere, which mars the process of effective integration of them into the political life. Sincere efforts should be taken to make them

independent decision makers. Since, Henkel and Stirrat point out ‘the most important question is not “how much” are people empowered rather “for what” they are empowered’ becomes significant. As politics is a struggle not for authority alone, but for the power it entails to make changes. (Hazarika 2008).

Table 1: Composition of the village panchayat in 2010

S.No.	Hamlet	Male Representatives	Female Representatives	Total
1.	Veerpura (Thakur)	1	2	3
2.	Veerpura Gautia (Jatav)	5	4	9
	Total	6	6	12

Table 2: Educational level of the women representatives and their husband’s

Educational Level	Women Representatives	Representatives’ Husband
Formal Education	3(11.11)	23(85.18)
No Formal Education	24(88.89)	4(14.81)

*Figures between parenthesis is in per cent.

Table 3: Family type of the women representatives

Family Type	No. of Representatives
Joint	17(62.96)
Nuclear	10(37.03)

*Figures between parenthesis is in per cent.

Table 4: Landholding in the family of the women representatives

Landholding (in Bighas)	No. of Representatives
Landless	10(37.03)
Below 5	8(29.69)
5-10	5(18.51)
10-15	2(7.40)
15-20	0
Above 20	2(7.40)

*Figures between parenthesis is in per cent

Notes

- 1 Social exclusion is a process, whereby a group of people are consciously prevented from participating in the decision-making process.
- 2 Social inequality leads to unequal distribution of resources, legitimised by the society in the garb of acceptable rules/norms of hierarchy.
- 3 Sanskritisation is a process of upward mobilisation of a group of people of ‘low’ castes by imitating the habits and lifestyles of the higher castes.
- 4 For example, the Arya Samaj’s campaign for *Shudhdhikaran*. Under it, the low caste Hindus, who adopted other religions, were allowed to reconvert to Hinduism.
- 5 Intersectional feminism was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, an American Law

- Professor in 1989.
- 6 A 'village' is often an artificial census construct, made up of several hamlets at some distance from each other.
- 7 Uttar Pradesh has appropriately 52,000 Gram Panchayats at the village level covering 77,134 inhabited villages, 813 Kshettra Panchayats at the intermediate (Block) level and 70 Zila Panchayats at the district level. The 70 districts have been grouped into 17 divisions. Additionally, there is Gram Sabha, which is the basic unit in the Panchayati Raj mechanism (CHRI 2007)
- 8 'Jatav' is another term used for 'chamar', particularly in Western Uttar Pradesh. The term derives its origin from caste group name of 'Yadav'. It was Paras Ram and Chander Inder Mann, who succeeded in gaining the name for the officially called 'chamar' caste group (Ahuja 2020).
- 9 Number of *Panches* or members in a Gram Village Panchayat depends upon the population of the Gram Sabha (Section 12, U.P. Panchayati Raj Act, 1947). For population from 1000-2000, eleven *Panches* are elected to the Village Panchayat (CHRI 2007).
- 10 Under 243D Clause (2) not less than one-third of the total number of seats are reserved for women at the panchayats.
- 11 In the recent panchayat elections held in May 2021, other woman has been elected to the office of Pradhan.
- 12 Leisure time may be defined as the spare time one has at her /his own disposal, which may be used in some other activities than the routine-work or daily chores.
- 13 The law provides that a Gram Panchayat meeting must be held at least once a month. The notice of the meeting must be sent to each member through a chowkidar or a peon at least five days before the meeting and must also be published by affixing copies of the notice at conspicuous places within the jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat (CHRI 2007).
- 14 Quorum is the minimum number of members who must be present in a meeting/ deliberation to take decisions. Generally, at the village panchayat level, the presence of majority of the members forms the quorum.

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