

Understanding Human-Political Agency Amongst Dalit Women Leaders in Panchayat Administration from Haryana: A Critical Social Work Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

The present research is based on the use of longitudinal and qualitative research in the study of socio-economic dynamics among women from Dalit community as leaders in Panchayati Raj institutions over a period of ten years, i.e. 2012-2022 in the state of Haryana. It outlines the factors that lead towards their changing roles in family, politics and network of social relationships. It identifies the transformation in the lives of dalit women by understanding their participation in local governance structures and the overall impact over a period of a decade through longitudinal data. During mixed methods data collection through semi-structured interviews, also by overcoming the challenges of attrition and sample loss in the process, the researchers maintained their commitment to understanding the change in the human agencies of their participants struggling through caste barriers and continuously working on making strong decisions for welfare of all communities. The significant factor of this study is to reflect about the underlying self-esteem, social stagnation in perception of the other communities towards these representatives and the power dynamics that affects their ability to function independently. In this context, the development of its convergence with Self-help groups and Mahila Sabha has also transformed the thought process about gender mainstreaming and women empowerment. Hence, the present research work highlights these social and economically dynamic yet time based

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transformations at micro- and macro-levels throughout local governance structures and creates a dialogue about inter-sectional understanding of local governance and the valued representativeness from the lives of its participants.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit Women, Governance, Longitudinal, Decade, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Local Governance, Agency

EVOLVING HUMAN-POLITICAL AGENCY: AN INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, in December, the Indian Constitution paved the way for the revival and evolution of the Panchayati Raj by establishing and accepting the roots of governance in the local self-jurisdiction of rural areas through the 73rd and 74th amendments. The Constitution mandated that the panchayats, elected through a democratic procedure at multiple levels in India, would have the power to participate in elections with caste-based reservations for women. The political leaders were expected to utilise their powers in fund allocation for the welfare of society at large, especially through participation based on ‘noted’ social status versus the ‘constitutional’ social status of marginalised sections. This ‘noted’ *khandaan* contrast was very much revealed during our conversation with the participants. It was shared by the participants that the goal ultimately was to give voice to the vulnerable sections, not as a choice, but by the constitutional assertion that they need to be represented. Hence, the reservation at Panchayati Raj Institutions became a means to uphold the constitutional significance for social equality and justice. However, there were many challenges that were very much visible during the whole research process. It was through the 73rd and 74th Amendments that women, specifically from the scheduled castes, got the right to representation, and for the first time in the history of India, these women got political justice for social equality. This section of women was very much grounded in the experiences of Caste in their everyday life. The biggest challenge was to prove their worth and dignity amidst their non *khaandani* status as opinionated by the social structures. As PRI members, they were viewed very differently from the women of ‘noted’ *Khaandan*, as shared by the participants. It was the 73rd and 74th Amendments that brought these women forward and empowered them by ensuring their political positions in the dark world of representation. These women became the torchbearers who were combating social inequalities deeply rooted in

the casteist society of Haryana politics. The amendments granted them access to the inexperienced and unfamiliar world of social, political, and democratic equality, which was till now inaccessible and undreamt.

The three most important and mutually inclusive factors that influenced the politics of Haryana were the family lineage, the occupational hierarchy, and the strength of a particular caste. However, in terms of caste in mass psychology, not much change was visible, but in terms of politics, there was definitely some change, though not a sea change yet. According to Bailey & Brake (1975), in radical social work, the voice of the vulnerable can become a catalyst in developing advocacy mediums for social welfare. As of now, this space is considered open and cheered for decision-making, especially for the unrepresented. But for this to happen, it was important that existing social structures must respect the dignity and worth of unrepresented sections. However, it was still awaited.

THE QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY AS PROCESS

This paper, through the use of mixed methods research, which is more longitudinal in nature, aims to understand the demographic factors that affect participation, the nature of perception towards leaders from the Dalit community, and their roles in decision-making within families and for society. This study is a critical evaluation of political representation as it focuses on the centrality of representativeness and its influential factors. It explores the influence on social structures when women from the margins own their voice, representativeness and further engage in decision-making at various levels of local social structures.

Hassan (2005) has argued that pre-independent India and its public sphere were not socially equal. It was extremely dominated by economic and socially powerful caste structures and ideologies, including caste. In independent India, Ciotti (2009) argued that there was a significant absence of women in leadership roles in party politics. The internal structures of all parties didn't recruit women leaders from vulnerable castes. At ground level, there was more of "*Bhaichara*" (brotherhood) than the construction of women as leaders. At the grassroots level, it was never seen as a priority. However, women were seen as significant figures in rallies in many political parties in India. This denial of leadership roles was a significant factor that can be understood as a question of Dalit women representation as leaders at the grassroots level, specifically

in the Indian context. Even after being into leadership positions, was there any transformation noted in social relationships? It is evident in the multiple news reports about how dalit woman sarpanch were experiencing dehumanisation by existing social structures. Not going much far (as multiple events in history is evident of it), in a report 'Due to Caste' by NDTV and Firspost on 10th October (2020) it was reported that a Dalit woman panchayat President was made to sit on the floor (other panchayat and ward members on chairs) and was also barred from flag hoisting by the Cuddalore Panchayat in Tamil Nadu. Recently, in a video report by India Times on 18th July 2023, it was a dalit woman sarpanch and her family was publicly humiliated for denying forcible signatures on papers. Addressing the above question, conducted over a span of ten years, the first objective of this study was to understand the transformations in the social relationships, behaviours and perceptions of people around panch and sarpanch women. It aimed to reflect on the contestations that affect the power relationships of Dalit women and their vulnerability during their engagement with decision makers (Ramaiah, 1998).

Haryana, as a social region, is marked by various challenges and difficult social statistics, such as a challenging sex ratio, increased inclination towards female foeticide, a lack of supportive family environment for female education, patriarchal roots, male chauvinist social structures, and increased incidence of honour killings. All of this indicates the poor state of women rights in the social structures in this region. In the middle of all these challenges it was really a difficult process to collect the data for the present research as the question of honor was always the priority of the heads of the family. It was indeed a critical inquiry into their lives, their family structures, and their social positioning in the political milieu.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Hust (2004) advocated for the politics of 'presence' among women so that the representation is not only symbolic but really brings all the desired changes into action. Only females who have experienced caste in their daily lives can presumably understand better about what kind of issues they are facing and the policy initiatives that can resolve these issues in the non-egalitarian social structures. Reservation and its debate started during the Government of India Act in 1935, with the reservation for women in provincial legislatures. It further progressed to Gandhi's

initiative and support for Panchayati Raj with the idea of localisation and decentralisation of power in India. In independent India, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee influenced the panchayat system, and in order to support community development, in 1957, a three-tier system of rural self-government was introduced. In 1993, with the 73rd and 74th amendments in the Constitution, the real reservation for women from marginalised castes at all three tiers was introduced. It was not a symbolic initiative; rather, it was a firm belief that gradually, the reservation as an initiative to annihilate caste would be the reflection of a competent and cooperative modern India. In a study by Prasad and Haranath (2004), a critical debate between reservation and its existence is evident through the narratives from women in rural India. These narratives reflect how leadership, policy, and social change are very much correlative, but the patriarchal relationships make it very doubtful and restricted. Also on the similar note, the existence of proxy participation by their husbands was a critical area highlighted by the study of Singh (2008). However, in a study by Buch (2000), the early development of leadership traits among women in all three tiers in the newly evolved panchayats is reflected. It is very much understood that the level of literacy, educational qualifications, participation in family, local and social reforms, decision-making abilities, etc., had a very significant impact on the assertion of power by the female representatives, as their political performance was evaluated by Santha (1999). Quoted in Anandhi and Kapadia (2017, p. 1), the following excerpt from Alisamma Women's Collective reflects the spirit and the way ahead of the Dalit women leaders and their politics in a subaltern world that must be rethought and re-engaged:

We, Dalit women, therefore request you to recognise that it is not just male domination but casteist patriarchy that is at force in India. We ask you to rethink. We want you to acknowledge the political importance of the 'difference', i.e. the heterogeneity that exists among the Indian female community... Recognition of difference is fundamental to any democratic politics.

These are the women leaders engaging with caste and politics in their everyday lives, working and struggling constantly with Panchayat officials and government systems at all three tiers in search of their role and soul, striving to achieve political equality for all but by emphasising on the recognition, respect, and space of assertion for the 'difference'. However, these realities have been neglected by the political structures in the region under study. It was in 2015 that the Haryana government (later on by the Supreme Court) introduced new regulations in the election system

of Haryana Panchayat that specified distinct educational qualifications, criminal background, loan repayment status (financial credibility), and the presence of a functional toilet structure at residence for candidates fighting in Panchayat elections. This needs to be understood critically because even the socioeconomic profile of Haryana Dalits and their families reveals that the economic condition is not of having all these basic facilities. As such, it becomes critical to question the assumption of the above factors as credentials for candidature, raising concerns regarding the representation of vulnerable sections who were already at the margins. According to the census of India (2011), the literacy rate amongst dalit women is the lowest as compared to average literacy rate of 75.6% in all regions of Haryana except Mewat. Moreover, the percentage share of Dalit women cultivators (10.5%) out of the total population is the lowest in comparison to women in total (70.2%). It reveals the significant difference in socio-economic profile of Dalit women in comparison to non-Dalit women in Haryana.

For the present research, the data was collected from 60 Dalit women Panchayat members from various regions of the state of Haryana. We conducted two rounds of interviews. The first was in 2012, and then, after a span of 10 years, the data was recollected from the same regions with distinct sets of representatives. The aim was to understand the changes in terms of their political agency and social positioning. The data collection methods involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation as a method, along with their family and key community members. The objective of the interviews was to understand the ways in which women from vulnerable communities were perceived and understood by their own family members as well as by their community as a whole. It was also an attempt to understand the transformation in their skills as a leader and as an administrator within democratic politics. For this, a qualitative methodology was employed, and the research was conducted with cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations. From a social work perspective and Dalit feminist standpoint that seeks to theorise and build knowledge structures for liberating women of 'difference' from social exclusion and regressive relationships. Hence, consent was sought from the representatives, and significant attention was given to their self-perception, individual subjectivity, and political-human agency, which was considered of utmost importance during the whole research process. Secondary data, including significant government reports and information bulletins issued by the Haryana government, obtained from the portal of the Haryana State Election Commission, and Census of India, along with reports from the Labour Commission, were analysed. An integrated and

holistic approach towards social work research is deemed essential as the only way to uncover and reproduce alternative knowledge for excluded women, ultimately challenging and dismantling the conventional model of caste (Kumar, 2021).

In 2012, with new changes in the rules of local governance in Haryana under the Panchayati Raj Act, our research analyses indicate that most of the women from the Scheduled Castes (SC) came forward primarily due to nominations by their family members, specifically the male members of their families and the Panchayat. At this time, a significant number of women from Haryanvi society identified themselves with *Ghunghat*, joint family structures, and were under patriarchal dominance and caste hierarchy. Most of them shared that they were engaged as workers in field farms and remotely located factories, contributing strenuously to support their families. More than 93% of them were landless. The financial crisis was a reality that most of them shared. From the age group of mid-30s to 40s, they constituted approximately 46 seats as Panch, with 29 serving as Sarpanch at the Panchayat Samiti level and 15 as Zila Parishad members. Six of them served as Sarpanch and contributed to the administration process of their Panchayats. The most significant revelation was the transformation in social relationships within the family. Now, it was the sons who wanted their mothers to strengthen their political positioning and worked alongside them rather than 'on their behalf'. This was a very crucial transformation in contrast to 2012, where we found dependency on the *Pradhanpati* (as proxy) who was making administrative decisions on behalf of most Panchayat members. About education, most of the Panchayat members shared that due to the lack of adequate infrastructure in their Judal villages, female education was the most affected. In private schools, most Dalit women representatives faced limited acceptance in terms of education, work, and functional responsibilities as administrators. Low educational achievement and limited economic resources, coupled with a lack of social acceptance and networking, made it more challenging for Dalit families in these regions to prioritise and fulfil the educational needs of the upcoming generation. Most of the women we interviewed were first-generation learners as well as first-generation political leaders from their families. In congruence with the findings of Singh (1997) and Bhasan (1977), the present study revealed that most women leaders, as Panchayat members, still strictly adhere to patriarchal structures and gender roles. Ninety-eight percent of women respondents were married, 2% were widowed, but none of them were unmarried. Marriage is still within the caste, if neglected that there was an unsaid rule of boycott

called 'Hooka Paani Band', and the use of social media platforms is still prohibited by most of the families. It was not even allowed to use social media platforms for video messages regarding public opinion for contesting the elections or political positions by women. Our respondents shared that this restriction was similar for women from upper castes as well. Asking for votes on video or digital platforms was considered to be funny and a dishonour for the family. In an earlier interview phase during 2012 we found that most of the Dalit women representatives restricted using door to door campaigning. During PRI (Panchayati Raj Institutions) elections, most of them asked for votes through rallies, citing reasons for being safe in terms of their own as well as their community's honour. Around 32% of them shared that they engaged in political campaigning with the help of their family and relatives through group meetings in *chaupals* (informal gatherings). They mentioned that they never had any formal group meetings with the whole village but the remaining 68% of respondents said they were selected unanimously in *chaupal* meetings at the village level. Instead of them, their sons or husbands participated, as there was no sitting arrangement for women, but the men used to sit on the floor. When asked about why they were made to sit on floor on meetings, one of them, hiding beneath her *pallu* said: '*Didi, mhaara aadmi kyukar baithe barobar badaan ke saath, nahi, yun koni hove!*'

Translated: Sister, how can my man sit equally along with the highs, No, it doesn't happen!

Further, when asked about administration and its process, they revealed that there was always a feeling of being unsafe and not fully fair. They also highlighted the inadequate support from the Election Office in case any violent episode takes place. When asked about their participation and time devoted to the workplace, two-thirds of them expressed that they devoted around six hours daily to the work of Panchayati office. Most of the burden of their work included bank-related assignments and paperwork, attestations for the financial tasks for *mahila samiti* and self-help groups in the village. It was a convergence of roles and responsibilities, as through these works, they were able to meet almost all the women in the village. Around 32% mentioned that they dedicated around 3 hours for the work of local functions and related concerns. However, most of the time, their family members, especially sons or husbands, used to do the work which was to be done outside the village, as it included travelling and communication with the outside world. While they used to handle and take care of their work inside the Panchayat office and regularly attended its meetings. The primary focus of their work was on road construction,

its maintenance, drinking water, electrification, well maintenance, health and sanitation, and the implementation of village welfare schemes like the Public Distribution System and obtaining solar chulhas. Regarding influencing factors in the decision-making process during PRI meetings, respondents indicated that 22% felt that dominant castes or landlords of the village consistently influenced the meetings, while around 52% believed that other male members of the village played a significant role. In Zila Parishad, 40% of the women shared that literate male members often dominated the decision-making process in PRI. In 2022, there was an increase in the number of elected female representatives from Scheduled Castes. This increase was attributed, in part, to male members whose educational background did not meet the new rules nominating their mothers and wives as candidates. Out of the total PRI representatives, approximately 12% held the position of Sarpanch in Haryana, with the majority being from Other Backward Classes (OBC) or other categories. However, the percentage of SC female Sarpanchs increased to 13%, compared to the 2012 statistics. It was in 2022 that we still found that most of the women are still either working in factories or are labouring in the fields of the feudal lords in their village. They were nominated by their family members, and at the same time, they were still having *ghunghat* and worked under the support of their son and husband. There was not much difference found in terms of age group, except that now the women who were 25 to 35 years old were also representatives in Panchayati Raj. They constituted around 98 seats at *Sarpanch* and *Panch* levels. However, as Zilla Parishad members, we found only three members from a similar age group. The socio-economic background of these women was still not very satisfactory. However, now they revealed that they participated in elections only due to two dominant reasons: either their husbands wanted them to participate or to enhance their community support. However, they were still not allowed to sit at the same chair with other dominant male members of the Panchayat. Also, during the process of data collection, we used participatory collective oral narration as a technique to develop active involvement of family members to share about their perceptions and transformative journey as a part of the life of female panchayat members. This was very significant in the case of Kamla Devi (name changed), who as a sarpanch worked in Chahelka communities of Mewat District. She worked in the field of education at different levels. Her work is concerned with education of children in the community but the issue of the education of girls is especially dear to her heart. Her family members shared that she has made community members aware about various Government

schemes like Mid-day Meal, RTI, Aganwadi, PDS and Ladli schemes through **the of** an NGO. With the support of her community and NGO, she was able to retrieve the defunct school system, repair the school building, equipped the roof with water harvesting unit, and made mid day meal and aganwadi functional. Through the NGO, she also imparted life skill education to adolescent girls; is involved in educating farmers' on better agricultural practices. Along with this, she has made the health sub-centres well equipped and functional. She has made community women aware of hygiene, maternal and child health, safe delivery and nutrition. The village, is her maternal place, has been one of the worst performers in the country on most socio-economic indices with large family size, low average income, entrenched gender bias, low literacy rate among women and abysmal reproductive and child health. She has been closely working with Muslim population in the villages whose girls never stepped out of their houses. No doubt that this particular landscape provides a challenge to any person and more so to a woman who herself represents the most discriminated groups in this area. Going around the villages with other women and NGO representatives, interacting with men, women, teachers, principals, government officials, village pradhans, politicians and children is an everyday challenge for Kamla Devi, but she has developed the coping skills to struggle ahead. Her family members, especially brother narrated with tears in her eyes how when she left her in-laws' house, she was ill equipped for any job and did not know what to do. She was an ordinary woman without confidence in her ability to do anything. She was very shy and hesitant to speak to strangers. But as there was no choice, she started developing interest in the work of a grass root level organisation that made her sarpanch. She still remembered the days when she would walk around villages and would start crying at slightest remark or criticism as if she was at fault. People commented on her character since she had to speak to all categories of people in the villages. But her determination to excel carried her. She can now speak with anyone with ease and handle any situation, even if it is uncomfortable to her. She has very clear goals for the collective community as well as for her personal life and has a strong will to accomplish them. Now her son is in the twelfth standard and aims to do IIT, for which she is coaching him.

As illustrated above, in general, in these ten years, villages witnessed the rise in female education, especially in the context of the community, due to reserved seats and the rule of minimum eligibility of being educated till the 5th class. These women were mostly aware of education and its importance and were working hard to ensure their children received school

education. Most of them shared that due to visible caste concerns, their children were denied accessibility for inclusive and quality education. These women representatives had a high level of self-esteem but still believed in fulfilling their gender roles and responsibilities for the family first, even in 2022. We didn't find any unmarried women or transgender individuals contesting the election for *panch, sarpanch, and zila parishad*. It was found that only 2% of women shared that their work was being done by their husband or other male members of the family because of her lack of ability to make decisions. That is why their attendance was also very low in PRI meetings. 30% of the women representatives in Sarpanch positions stated that they were very much efficient in taking their own decisions and even negotiating with the other members. The significant set of skills that they felt have developed were - communication with the others. Still, the rest of them expressed that their voice was never listened to by the dominant members of PRI.

CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

From the above research, it can be concluded that two conceptualisations can be derived from the demographic profile as well as the participation experience of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj institutions. It was also found that the 'difference' is now obviously understood by the representatives from Scheduled Castes in terms of leadership as well as history. There is a distinct but gradually progressive transformation. They are perceived by their own communities as *pradhans*, meaning the women with a bar in politics. However, this journey is still challenging and needs social and political support to be truly transformative in nature. The findings of this research reflects that there is a need to work on strengthening and building capacities of these women leaders for developing and strengthening their voice in gender-related issues, as well as understanding the complexity of gender roles that are followed strictly. This can be considered a future investment in annihilation of caste, and hence intervention strategies need to be developed with a flexible and holistic approach toward the betterment of women leaders in PRIs. From the perspective of the study, directions include specific attention needed on the development of skills and capacity building from the approach of inclusiveness and integrated community development. This must work towards the annihilation of caste for the betterment of the vulnerable sections of society. In this context, it is essential to implement much better policies that can help develop awareness

against caste and gender systems among the community. A national support system for these women representatives is needed to share their roles, responsibilities, expressions, and voices from mainstream society. For this purpose, it is suggested that the state government must develop and implement policies that also incorporate exchange programmes for women leaders, specifically so they can meet, network, advocate for their rights, and share their experiences with women from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Upholding the constitutional values and integrity, at policy, this research paper suggests that there must be a mechanism at the village level to prohibit and restrain any kinds of violence against dalit women leaders in panchayat administration. The government machinery must ensure that there is an accessible judicial system specially designed in a functional and speedy manner so that social justice as an ideal can be ensured in each village. Further, due to poor socio-economic status, the organisations which are working at the grassroots for the empowerment of dalit women shall be given special funds for their skill development and livelihood generation. Through this way, a bridge for the exchange of ideas and experiences can be created to transform social processes that were full of discrimination and stigma. Furthermore, there is a need to conduct extensively sensitive research work in this area to examine the gap, progress, and become a strength for justice at the national level. This would contribute to providing social justice for all in the reality of contemporary times.

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