

Caste and Patriarchy in Panchayats

The caste system and patriarchy still exercise a stranglehold on Haryana's panchayat institutions making a mockery of decentralised governance. The women elected representatives need adequate support systems as well as education to make them effective leaders.

MAHI PAL

On November 4, 1948 in the Constituent Assembly, B R Ambedkar said: "What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism". More than half a century has passed since he expressed these views in the context of extending panchayati raj to Indian villages. A decade has now elapsed since the panchayats were elevated from being mere units of self-government to being institutions of self-government by being included in part IX of the Indian Constitution and, importantly, adequate space too has been provided in these bodies for dalits including dalit women. During the last decade, panchayati raj system (PRS) has moved from the periphery to the centre-stage of academic research and policy studies. It is, therefore, interesting to know: Is there any difference in the situation from what Ambedkar had said more than five decades ago about the Indian villages? Whether social change that has been brought about in rural setting through various developmental and welfare-oriented programmes transformed the social system to any meaningful extent in the villages? As to what extent have the panchayats contributed to the process of change in the social system in Haryana and elsewhere in India? What are the problems being faced by dalit women sarpanches in performing their roles and duties? What sort of support mechanism, if any, is required to enable them to play their role more effectively? It was in this background that the Haryana Institute of Rural Development (HIRD) in collaboration with the National Commission for Women (NCW), organised a one-day state level workshop for women sarpanches and panchayat members belonging to the dalit community for understanding the problems being faced by them

in carrying out their public/officials duties and for eliciting suggestions from them as to what sort of support system is required for their effective functioning. As many as 188 dalit elected representatives (ERs) of PRIs from all 19 districts of Haryana participated in the workshop. Of them, 76 per cent were sarpanches, 13 per cent were panches and the rest were chairpersons and members of the panchayat samiti. The highest participation of ERs was from Panipat district (16 women) and the lowest was from Rewari district (two women). The workshop was chaired and inaugurated by Baby Rani Maurya, member, National Commission for Women (NCW).

In order to make the discussion systematic and to enable each and every participant to express her views, achievements, problems and suggestions five major issues were identified as being more relevant in the context of dalit women ERs. These were: conduct of business of panchayats and powers; management of common property resources; schemes for the welfare and development of dalits; identification of the problems/hurdles in their way; and strategy for the capacity building of these women. One issue was given to each group. From the discussions with these women, following broad conclusions emerged:

(i) *Illiteracy and lack of awareness about powers and functions and developmental schemes:* As far as the conduct of business and their powers are concerned, these sarpanches have been holding the meetings of the gram sabha and gram panchayat regularly. The focus of these meetings has mostly been construction of houses, roads, ponds, etc, and almost nil on the social issues such as problems of adverse sex ratio, anaemia among women and children, sanitation, welfare schemes, etc. They were not much aware about their powers and functions in general, and the major functions, and powers pertaining to the 16

departments which were devolved to panchayats in 1995 and in 2001 by the state government, in particular. They were also not much aware about the provisions contained in the Haryana Panchayat Act for constituting production, social justice, amenities sub-committees and local committees of panches for effective handling functions of gram panchayats. On the whole, it was found that illiteracy and lack of awareness about their powers and functions, the consequent dependence on the gram 'sachiv' and the lack of holistic approach to development were the main limitations of women ERs of the panchayat.

As far as awareness about the schemes of rural development and welfare is concerned, they were aware about the 'Anaaj' Scheme (i.e., SGRY) and the Housing Scheme (i.e., IAY) only. They were not aware about the SGSY, the TSC and the watershed (Haryali) Schemes. They were also not aware about various schemes specifically meant for the welfare, education and economic development of the dalits.

(ii) *Encroachment of common land:* Access to common property resources (CPRs) is very important for the marginalised groups for meeting their various basic needs and raising their living standards. But the fact is that the CPRs, particularly common land, are not being properly managed. Most of the sarpanches said that some portion of the common land has been encroached by dominant section of the villages. They pointed out that they had been trying their best to remove encroachments and had succeeded in some cases but by and large, they have been still struggling for removing the encroachment. In this context, one sarpanch from Mahendragarh district said that the district administration was not taking action against the encroachers in her village and a 'phirni' (circular road) of the village could not be completed because people of the dominant caste encroached upon a piece of land falling in its way. When asked why she did not approach the deputy commissioner, she replied: "I met the deputy commissioner along with panchayat members on many occasions, but he did not take any action to remove the encroachment". A similar story was also narrated by a sarpanch from Rohtak district. The broad conclusions emerging from interaction in this group were: encroachment on the land outside and in Abadi Deh was prevalent; women representatives were not aware about the nature and extent of CPRs and their management and legal provisions to deal with various categories of common land; there was lack of proper planning of CPRs; elected women

representatives have made some efforts to develop and, to conserve CPRs; and in most of the cases, dalit ERs failed to remove the encroachment due to unfriendly attitude of the higher castes and the bureaucracy. (iii) *Poverty and resource-lessness*: This also emerged as one of the more important impediments in the way of these women. Without adequate regular income for the families to which these women belonged, their participation in the panchayats' work was greatly hampered. They have to spend money on the official work from their already meagre resources. One sarpanch from Kaithal district had this to say on this issue: "All sarpanches have to spend a lot of money on going to different offices and on hospitality of visiting officials. There should be suitable honorarium for meeting these expenses. Otherwise, either they will be spending from own pocket or will meet these expenses by wrongful means."

(iv) *Social inequality and casteism*: It came out from the discussion that the dalit women representatives of panchayats had to face opposition from members of the panchayats and village people belonging to higher castes, particularly men, who hampered their various activities. A sarpanch from Panchkula district candidly said that gram sachiv and the vice-chairman of the panchayat samiti were obstructing the process of development initiated by her GP and alleged: "They are demanding money out of the grants received for the development works, but I have refused to do so. These persons even forced the panches not to attend the meetings of the GP." Another sarpanch from Jhajjar district alleged that she could not hold even a single meeting of the GP during the past four years as a few influential persons of the dominant castes had 'purchased' a majority of the panches. "Former BDPO had openly helped them to hold separate meetings and they even forced me to sign in the proceedings book without telling the proceedings of the meetings", she complained. "My husband died due to this problem and one day I shall also die", she exclaimed. However, a few women also said that they were not facing any problems in this regard.

In her observations and remarks Baby Rani Maurya, member, NCW told participants that as a remedy for this malady they should meet the deputy commissioner of the concerned district. And if still the problem persists, matter should be referred to the NCW for necessary action. She specifically praised those women who said that although they faced problems, yet they did not lose heart and were always ready for the struggle. She advised them not to sign papers without reading or by knowing

the matter written on the paper. She told them: "you should sign with open eyes". She advised them to form self-help groups (SHGs) in the villages. These groups would not only help them to better their economic condition but also help them in the functioning of the panchayats. She also shared her experiences as mayor of Agra municipal corporation. She cited her own example that although she also belongs to SC community, due to determination, perseverance and dedication to her work, she could reach here present status. In her remarks Surat Singh, director, HIRD dwelt on the importance of knowledge of the basics of PRIs for effective empowerment of the women ERs.

Support Systems Required

Keeping in view the problems/hurdles faced by the dalit women ERs of the panchayats, a five-pronged support system strategy for the capacity building of these women panchayat leaders and for making their participation in decentralised governance, planning and development more effective and truly meaningful emerged from the proceedings of this workshop. *Special arrangement for informal education*: Almost all women ERs considered illiteracy as the major impediments in the way of their functioning as panchayat leaders. This calls for special arrangements for their education. Indeed, focus of the adult education may be centred around these women panchayat leaders. It may be made compulsory for those dalit women ERs who were not literate to become

literate within six months of their election so as to enable them to become independent and effective in their functioning.

Intensive training for women elected representatives: Separate capacity building exercise for elected dalit women ERs through intensive training may be undertaken immediately after their elections to sensitise them on aspects and relevance provisions/procedures of decentralised governance, planning and development, constitutional and other safeguards, implementation of various rural development and poverty alleviation programmes, interface with officials and higher castes representatives, social development and access to and management of the CPRs in a decentralised mode. Such exercises should be repeated at gradually upgraded levels and at regular intervals. Exposure visits and frequent get together may also be arranged a part of the capacity building exercise. In developing the reading materials for them, literature generated by the NCW and other agencies may be used extensively as a basic input.

Economic betterment: As was gathered from the discussion, almost all sarpanches have to spend some money on visiting different offices and towards meeting hospitality expenses of visiting officials and others in connection with panchayat work. Moreover, they have to forgo their wages for attending to panchayat affairs. Hence, the opportunity cost of attending to the activities of the panchayats is quite high in respect of their livelihoods. In view of this, there is a clear and felt need for providing a suitable honorarium to the dalit women

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ERs of the PRIs for conducting panchayat affairs and attending meetings, etc. Otherwise, their income-earning employment, their interest in panchayat work and their ability to perform duties, etc., will be adversely affected. In addition, preference may be given to dalit women ERs for becoming the members of SHGs being formed under different rural development programmes implemented by the governments. These would go a long way not only in their economic betterment but also in their political empowerment and social emancipation.

Sensitisation and re-orientation of social and administrative system: There is need for changing the outlook of the higher castes and concerned officials towards the dalit elected representatives of the panchayats through sensitisation so that these people encourage and help them in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

Promotion of good practices: In order to promote good practices for proper implementation of the PRIs, dalit women sarpanches who excelled in their work may be awarded by organising special functions at district and higher levels. This will not only bring self-confidence among these women but also have a demonstration effect on the society at large.

It may also be added here that for effective implementation of the support system for the de facto political empowerment of dalit women ERs as suggested above, besides the initiatives and intervention of the governments and constitutional bodies such as the NCW and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, pro-active involvement and participation of civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and research and training institutions, particularly women-oriented ones, are imperative and must, therefore, be encouraged.

To sum up the outcome of the workshop, caste prejudices emerged as a major stumbling block in the way of the functioning of dalit women representatives of panchayats. This, in fact, is a result of the unwillingness the dominated castes hold for having themselves become ineligible to share the powers and control they have long been used to in the PRIs, due to the new constitutional provisions for the dalits. Due to the prevailing stranglehold of the caste structure in rural society in India, neither the respect for the office of ERs nor the simple social values of giving equal regard to fellow human-beings, impel fellow villagers and the fellow elected representatives to treat dalit women ERs as equal during the course of their functioning

under the PRS. This has resulted into paradoxical situation, where on the one hand the Panchayati Raj Act provides de jure powers to the office of the sarpanches and on the other, de facto, they remain bereft of these powers. The decentralised bureaucracy, which is expected to work under the guidance and supervision of the ERs of the panchayats, is either generally away from the scene or succumbs to the pressure of the village politics and power game.

But all has not been lost and as they say, every cloud has a silver lining. The deliberations during the workshop did indeed reveal that PRS has been instrumental to a significant extent in igniting the process of releasing the depressed, oppressed and suppressed energy of the dalit women who have got the opportunity to come forward as ERs. It was found that wherever the dalit

ERs were oppressed and obstructed by the dominant castes, they came out openly to resist, and to struggle against the oppressors. Importantly, it was also found that whenever the women panchayat leaders were literate, they were more assertive than the others. A promising and positive conclusion gathered from this workshop was that dalit women ERs especially the educated ones among them, had become quite visible, assertive and vocal whenever the circumstances allowed. It may be treated as a beginning of the end of the invisibility of dalit women sarpanches in local governance. This process of their becoming visible, assertive and empowered can be hastened by enlarging the scope of their functions and building their capabilities to function effectively through appropriate training and exposure opportunities. **EPW**