

Dalit Women and Rural Power Structures, East Godavari District, AP

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Introduction:

The main aim of the project is to study the representation of dalit women in Panchayat Raj institutions and the impact of such representation on rural politics in the present changing political and social scenario in village India. The period of study is May 2005-May 2007.

Since independence, Indian State introduced number of policies and programmes to raise the living standards of women especially at rural level to strengthen the rural economy and polity. But the Status Committee report 1975 proved that Indian state has failed in its constitutional responsibility of not discriminating women on the grounds of gender. Plans for the development of agriculture, livestock, fisheries and other major sectors of the Indian economy contained no acknowledgement of the involvement of the millions of women in these sectors for a livelihood. The committee also found that women are being ill treated, exploited and abused right from birth onwards. It also found that there is a steady decline in the ratio of females to male in India over the decades. There is a decline in labour force participation of women particularly in agriculture with a rise in female unemployment up to 1971. However the development programmes initiated through different agencies often resulted in total failure in achieving the goals.

When the 73rd amendment was introduced in the year 1991 the participation of women and dalits was stated to be an effective means of promoting policies for economic and social development. With this Indian state began a process to create genuine democracy at the village level. The amendment represents an historic opportunity to transform the face of rural India. Special provisions were made to reserve the post of ward member or sarpanch of a panchayat. This was done to reinforce the mandate of the Constitution, which made special provisions for the weaker sections, especially the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and women. Moreover, it was a means to 'include the excluded.' From the point of view of the Constitution, any reservation or positive action or affirmative action is intended to provide space and scope for the historically discriminated communities to move away from discrimination and exclusion (Devaki –1992).

The process of decentralization to panchayat raj institutions has started opening exciting possibilities for women at the grass root level to participate in the political field and bring their voice into policy making and planning.

Politics, Reservations and Women's Representation: Issues Problems and Possibilities

Women's representation in the political bodies, while important on the grounds of social justice and legitimacy of the political system, does not easily translate into improved representation of women's various interests. While we cannot assume that more women in public offices would mean a better deal for women in general, there are important reasons for demanding greater representation of women in political life. First is the spontaneous one the greater the

number of women in public office, articulating interests, and seen to be wielding power, the more the gender hierarchy in public life could become disrupted. Without sufficiently visible, if not proportionate, presence in the political system "threshold representation" a group's ability to influence either policy-making, or indeed the political culture framing the representative system, is limited. Further, the fact that these women are largely elite women might mean that the impact that they have on public consciousness might be disproportionately larger than their numbers would suggest.

Second, and more important, we could explore the strategies that women employ to access the public sphere in the context of a patriarchal socio-political system. These women have been successful in subverting the boundaries of gender, and in operating in a very aggressive male-dominated sphere. Could other women learn from this example? The problem here is, of course, precisely that these women are an elite. The class from which most of these women come is perhaps the most important factor in their successful inclusion into the political system. We can, however, examine whether socio-political movements provide opportunities for women to use certain strategies that might be able to subvert the gender hierarchy in politics. Finally, we can explore the dynamics between institutional and grass-roots politics. As this study demonstrates, the "politicization of gender" in the Indian political system is due largely to the success of the different women's movements.

Political participation does not simply mean voting in the elections or campaigning but it also includes power in decision-making, identification of problems, planning, implementation and evaluation. It also includes attending public meetings, joining in a party organization, contributing money to a party, contesting elections etc. This is where the problem of empowerment caught the attention of many political thinkers and sociologists.

The political participation as a right of women was started in the year 1917, when Women's Indian Association delegated by Sarojini Naidu met Lord Morley, then secretary of state for Indian affairs and demanded equal voting rights for women along with men. It was the first attempt made by women for their political rights. As a result, in 1919 under the Montague Chelmsford reforms around ten lakh women obtained voting rights.

Though there is a significant number of women who are socially and politically active, it is true that 'those' women are not representative of Indian women as a 'whole' and not many women from the grass-roots level are coming up to the decision making bodies. Many women politicians are from the "elite" and the women who are elected to office are often relatives of prominent political leaders. Most of the women who participated in freedom movement and the women who contested in the elections (1975) were from elite sections. In the same year, out of 21 members of parliament six were SC and STs and they were also the elites in their respective communities. Pratibha Bharati, a noted dalit political leader is from an upper middle class family, her father being a high court judge, it became easy for her to enter public sphere with out much hindrance. If the family has accepted a woman's career in politics, she can negotiate with her family. This is more likely if the family is an elite political family with more than one member participating in politics. If the woman was already active in political life before she married, she can face tremendous pressures from her husband's family to conform to a traditional role that allows little scope for pursuing an active political career. A woman politician's options in this case are either to conform to the expectations of the family and retreat from public life, or to leave the family in pursuit of an

uncertain future in party politics. In the latter case, the lack of family support and the stigma of divorce are a clear disadvantage for a woman in politics. (In the case of Sadalakshmi, a wellknown dalit woman political leader in AP had a different experience altogether. She has neither political background or elite status nor family support. She is an example for self asserted woman.

In many cases, Class also intercede the influence of religion. With only one woman Muslim MP in the Rajya Sabha and one in the Lok Sabha, Muslim women are significantly under-represented. Dr. Najma Heptullah, who was also the Deputy Speaker of the Rajya Sabha, is from an elite class and educational background, and enjoys support for her work from both her natal and marital family. Margaret Alva, a Christian, and then Minister of State, and Founder Chair of the National Commission for Women of India, is from a similar background. In both cases the families were involved in the National Movement, were influenced by liberal ideology, and were highly educated.

Thus, the majority of women in the Indian Parliament are elite women. While their public role challenges some stereotypes, their class position often allows them far greater range of options than are available to poorer women.

73rd Amendment and the Dynamics of its Operation: A Genealogy of the Panchayats

The word "panchayat" is a traditional one, referring to the five elders in a village who mediated conflict and spoke on behalf of all the residents of a village in pre-modern times. In these traditional bodies, the lower castes—and women—had no representation. The question did not arise!

The word Panchayat has been retained for use after the 73rd amendment to the Constitution. The meaning is now a formal one referring to a body - not of five persons - elected according to law. Further the same word is used for the three tiers of local administration brought in by the 73rd amendment - the highest being the district or Zilla panchayat. The lowest is the gram panchayat that may consist of several traditional villages. All citizens of these villages constitute the gram sabha, which then becomes the basic unit of democracy. In between is a coordinating level - the taluka panchayat. The powers that these panchayats enjoy are enshrined in the laws enacted by each state, and, in India, there is considerable variation across states. Thus, this traditional word must now be understood in a thoroughly modern context. And this is quite recent. But this does not mean the traditional bodies had disappeared. What influence they wield at an informal level in the rural society, is another matter that merits careful study.

The Constitution provided, [in Part 4, The Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 40] for the setting up of village panchayats. But this is non-justiciable, and there was no pressure on any state to set up such a system. Many saw this article as a concession to Gandhi, rather than as a serious matter to be immediately implemented. The reason for this was the powerful voice of Dr Ambedkar. Drawing on his own experience of rural India as it then was, he argued that local elite and upper castes were so well entrenched that any local self

government only meant the continuing exploitation of the downtrodden masses of Indian society.

Thus, in addition to affirmative action enshrined in the Constitution, the distribution of powers was deliberately made to favour the Union as against the local, even state governments. The Union, being far away from the squalid battles of rural India, and being looked after by an educated and urban strata of society, would, it was felt, be more just - or at least more impartial - in its dealings with the downtrodden. Historical experience would tend, we suspect, to justify this early expectation. But is this still true after 50 years of gradual change? Has not the power of the upper castes in the rural areas declined? To what extent have things changed for the SC/STs--for the better?

The Union in those early days took up what was called the Community Development Programme. This was meant for all round social and economic development, and it was an important ministry headed for long by S.K. Dey. It was this programme that brought in such functionaries as the Village Level Worker and the Block Development Officer. After the 1960s this programme declined, as centrifugal forces led to the gradual dominance of the Union. Finally, the Ministry of Community Development ceased to exist. That philosophy became a thing of the past. But the bureaucracy it created remained.

Given the overall centralising trends in the Indian polity, the States too developed an authoritarian system of governance. States almost became subservient to the Union. Art 356 was used to keep a firm check on the behaviour of state governments. This ensured that strong hierarchical systems developed. All this was further strengthened during the Emergency. The states behaved in the same dominating way with lower tiers of governance - or, more correctly, administration. Strong line departments of the state governments took over development programmes. This is true, perhaps in varying degrees, of all the states. Indian democracy lost the grass roots link: it became a top down system. At the same time the bureaucracy grew in influence. Women were suddenly brought into this system as one dimension of this complex process—and it defines the context in which they have to function(Mahipal-1994).

Yet, and this is the Indian paradox, several state governments conducted their own experiments with local self-government. This is the result of the shift in power from the traditional upper castes to the OBCs or intermediate castes. The changes that occurred over the last 50 years of planned development also resulted in pressures from below, to which political forces have had to respond. How this impacted on the SCs and STs that Ambedkar was concerned about is another question. Caste and class are not overlapping categories. Grabbing political power from the Brahmin and other upper castes does not mean that SC/STs will automatically be empowered—and the same applies to women as well. An interesting point missed out in all debates on reservations is that there are women in all castes, class and religions!

Women and Panchayat Raj

Prior to 73rd amendment various plans were made to include women in the Panchaya Raj system. Since independence, there were attempts to make villages self-sufficient. The planners of Panchayat Raj also thought if women are made effective participants in development they will have a statutory position in the task of development administration and the new women empowerment would give a new boost to village development..

In 1953, in the first elections of Panchayat Raj, very few women contested and got elected. The Balwant Rai Mehta committee (1957) had recommend that apart from the 20 members of the Panchayat Samithi, there should be 2 women- interested in working among women and children- as co-opted members. Provisions were made for women's representation. In many parts of India women were inducted into Panchayat Raj by co-option rather than election. This practice was questioned by many scholars as undemocratic as there was no systematic procedure for co-option. Some states had given up nomination or co-option and resorted to reservation as the only way of making sure that women were represented in Panchayat Raj (Chakravarti).

Later, it was felt that mere representation of women at the local level was also not enough to bring about the development of women and children. A more effective way would be to guarantee women's emergence as sarpanches of the village. Thus, during the eighties various workshops were conducted in the form of Panchayat Raj Sammelan for suggestions and means of strengthening the Panchayat Raj system. The National Perspective Plan for women in the year 1988 recommended that 30 percent of the 'executive head' positions from the village to the district level should be reserved for women.

A bill was prepared to bring about changes in the structure of Panchayat Raj Institutions in the year 1989 as the 64th constitutional amendment. The bill included provisions like direct elections, a fixed tenure, 30 percent reservations etc. This bill was introduced by the Rajiv Gandhi government but was defeated by a small margin in the Rajyasabha. The bill was re-introduced by the PV.Narasimha Rao government as the 72nd and 73rd amendment with changes in the provisions for elections and financial power, and was passed on 2nd December 1992. At the same time, the World Bank and other international development agencies began to support women's participation in rural development sector in the process of decentralization.

The 73rd amendment bill provides for direct election to all the seats of the Panchayats, at the village and zilla level. It provides a fixed tenure of 5 years for elections, to be held within a period of six months in the event of the super cession of any Panchayat. The bill also provides for a compulsory 3-tier system in all states except where the population does not exceed 20 lakh. Section 243D of the bill provides reservations for SCs and STs and women-

The following are the salient features of this section:

1) Not less than one third of the seats will be reserved for women (including SC and STs) and these may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies of a Panchayat. 2) In proportion to the total population of the area, seats for SCs and STs will be reserved. Not less than one third of the SC and ST seats may be reserved for women. According to the section 9 of the new Panchayat Raj Act, out of the total number of seats in a gram Panchayat, the

commissioner would determine the number of seats to be reserved based on the following principles:

A) SC and STs: The number of seats reserved should be in proportion to the total number of seats to be filled by direct election to the Gram Panchayats. The seats should be reserved based on the percentage of the population of the SCs or the STs as against the total population of the village. Such seats may be allotted by rotation to different wards in a Gram Panchayat.

Not less than 34% (Amendment Act 5 of 1995) of the total number of seats should be reserved for the Backward Classes. These seats should be allocated on a rotation basis to different wards in the Gram Panchayat

Not less than one third of the total number of seats should be reserved for women belonging SC, ST or BCs.

D) Not less than one third (including the seats reserved for women of SC, ST and BCs) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election shall be reserved for women. Such seats should be allotted on rotation basis for different wards in a Gram Panchayat

E) Women and members of the SC, ST or BCs can contest in the elections to the non-reserved seats in the Gram Panchayat.

The Question of Dalit Women

There are various socio cultural and economic reasons for the low representation of dalit women in politics. As we all know social discrimination and in-equality are universal phenomenon. Majority of dalit women are the victims of illiteracy, ignorance, unemployment and lack of information. The vast majority of them are living in rural villages in very poor conditions. Their work is low paid, insecure and hazardous with no security.

According to the Ministry of Labour, 85% of the Dalit women have the most formidable occupations and work as agricultural laborers, scavengers, sweepers, and disposers of human waste. Despite of the significant contribution of dalit women to the economic development of our country in the agricultural sector these women work for minimal wages under the upper caste landlords, since it is Proposed that by the National Commission for SC/ST that 85% of the Dalits are landless. When the Dalit women refuse to work for ridiculously low wages or fail to follow their harsh orders it results open violence, humiliation, beatings, rape, and jail. There are also a number of cases where the houses of Dalit women have been burnt down.

The majority of cases of violence against Dalit women are not registered. The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. Women are often also unaware of the laws and their ignorance is exploited by their opponents, by the police, and by the judiciary system (Shah, Thorat...- 2006). Despite of their sufferings Dalit women have been active throughout history, though often this has not been recorded. They were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit movements in thousands of Indian villages. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land

rights. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. However, they are unable to put an end to the structural discrimination and exclusion. Violence and impudency are keeping them in their place. Since the late 1980s, therefore, Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform – created, developed and controlled by themselves – through which they could forge their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problems as Dalits and as women. Conscious that the call for a separate platform could be interpreted as a divisive move by both Dalit men, women and non-Dalit women, the proponents of such a special forum emphasise that their initiative must not be mistaken for a separatist movement. Rather they assert that there is need for strong alliances between the Dalit movement, the women's movement and the Dalit women's movement if their common vision of social, economic and political equality and justice for all is to be realised. In order to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, such as legal action against caste based atrocities, political empowerment of Dalit women, economic empowerment building self-confidence and leadership the Indian State took many steps. In this process, the present study made an attempt to look at the impact of 73rd amendment, which made dalit women to enter grass root politics.

The Andhra Pradesh Context

In Andhra Pradesh other changes in the governance that have been introduced under the Telugu Desam government in the 1990s also need to be taken into consideration while locating the issues of Dalit women in Panchayat Raj institutions. First, parallel to the Panchayats, several other structures of managing and disbursing resources have been built. The widespread encouragement for the constitution of Self-Help Groups at the village level under the name of DWCRA facilitated compulsory gatherings of women in most villages. Women have been drawn into several of the parallel governing bodies at the village level either as part of Self-Help Groups or independently. Some of the development programs such as Velugu that aimed at reaching the benefits of the various development programs to the most vulnerable communities, among which Dalit communities' feature predominantly, had specific in-built programs for Dalits, including Dalit women.

Objectives

- To know how Dalit women negotiate with the institutionalized casteism that pervades several governmental and political structures in the political hierarchy.
- To find out how they understand their position; whether their entry into Panchayats has brought any changes in their position in the family, caste and the village (for instance, has the new political role of women helped them to overcome the taboos and patriarchal domination within their own homes?)
- To evaluate the empowerment of Dalit women, as empowerment is the goal of the constitutional amendment; the entry of women, in this case Dalit women into local governmental structures- how far have they empowered Dalit women? Does political empowerment precede or follow social and economic development of women?

- To analyze the caste power structure in the village as the 90s World Bank agenda of decentralized governance and liberalization policies brought many new agencies to the rural area.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative methods for the collection of data. The source materials for this report have been collected in the fieldwork done in four rounds of visits in one year (2005-06) and they comprise detailed interviews of Dalit women sarpanches, former upper caste sarpanches, Panchayat Raj Engineers, village secretaries and other village elders, as well as participant observation in the Grama sabha meetings. Initially, a pilot survey was conducted in the district to select the villages. At present there are 975 village Panchayats in East Godavari district; the Panchayats reserved for women (general) are 327. Out of 327, the villages reserved for ST women - 40, SC women – 59, and for BC women- 87.

Out of 59 village Panchayats reserved for SC women, five villages from the Plains and five villages from the Delta were selected randomly for the present study. Two villages in the agency area (Rampaa Chodavaram) were also visited. Here, I am presenting the selected narratives of the dalit women sarpanches. Each case study is unique in its nature.

Geographical and Demographical Description of the Study Area

State of Andhra Pradesh has an SC population of nearly 106 lakh (1991 census), which forms nearly 16% of the total population. Among the 23 Districts, East Godavari has the highest SC population (7.79%) followed by West Godavari (5.94%). The total population of East Godavari is 4,901,420. The total SC population is 8,81,650. Among the SC population the major sub-castes are Mala and Madiga, and Malas are more in number than Madigas. East Godavari District is situated in Krishna Godavari Agro Climatic Zone, It is one of the agriculturally potential districts in Andhra Pradesh, contributing about 10% of the total food production of the State.

Per Provisional population figures of 2001 Census, the total no of Mandals are 59. However as per G.O.Ms.No.31, Revenue (Registration & Mandals) Department, Dated 05-06-2002 a new Rural Mandal Routhulapudi (44 villages) with head quarters at Routhulapudi was formed by transferring certain villages from Sankhavaram (12 villages), Kotananduru (31 villages) and Tuni (1 village) Mandals, there by making total number of Mandals to be 60.

East Godavari Dalit movement started much before Ambedkar,' s struggle against caste discrimination under Adi Andhra movement. During 1906-39 dalit leaders rebelled against existing caste system. The basic thrust of the movement was to critique the ideology of brahmanical Hinduism and counter the socio cultural hegemony of the uppercastes.(Chinna Rao-2003). The term Adi Andhra was coined in post 1917 when the dalits all over the south, influenced by the non Aryan theories of the Dravidian movement were identifying themselves as Adi Dravidians, Adi Andhras and Adi Karnatakas (original sons of the soil. The first district level Adi Andhra conference was held in 1921 at Amalapuram by Vundru Tatayya. According to ChinnaRao (2003) some dalits from this district went to Rangoon to collect money for the conference. Kusuma Dharmanna, Pamu Ramamurthy, Eli Vadapalli are

some of the eminent dalit leaders of that time made a significant contribution to the movement. Golla Chandrayya arranged 200 acres of land for cultivation for dalits, he also established credit societies in dalit wadas. Vundru Tatayya, Bojja Appalasamy, and many others established schools for dalit children. Vadapalli established Industrial training school for dalits (Chinna Rao-2003). Thus East Godavari district stands for its remarkable contribution for the dalit movement.

The working of Panchayat Raj and the participation of Dalit women have to be understood at the local level and local context. Hence, a field study was conducted to find out about the experiences of women and their functioning in Panchayat Raj.

For the field study, a few villages in East Godavari district were selected. The selection has been made based on the geographical divisions of the district, which is divided into 3 zones- Agency/hill tracts (Rampachodavaram division), Plains/uplands (Kakinada, Peddapuram and Rajahmundry divisions) and Delta (Amalapuram division). The general elevation of the district varies from a few meters near the sea to about 300 meters in the hills.

The delta portion constituting the whole of Konaseema and portions of Kakinada, Ramachandrapuram and Rajahmundry erstwhile Taluks, presents a vast expanse of rice-fields surrounded by plantain, betel, coconut gardens and innumerable palmyras. There is mostly alluvial soil in the Godavari delta and sandy clay soil at the tail-end portions of Godavari river, red loamy soil in the upland and hill tracts of the district.

The erstwhile mandals of Tuni, Pithapuram, Peddapuram and portions of Kakinada, Ramachandrapuram and Rajahmundry constitute the upland areas.

The present study has been conducted in the selected villages of East Godavari district of coastal Andhra. During the first visit six villages were covered. They are – Samanasa (Amalapuram mandal), A.Vemavaram (Amalapuram mandal), Aminabad (Kothapalli mandal), Ponnada (Kothapalli mandal), Karapa (Samalkot mandal), Venkatayapalem (Ramachandrapuram mandal), Unduru (Ramachandrapuram mandal), Pandillapalli (Peddapuram mandal), Rampa (Rampachodavaram).

The Profiles of Dalit Women Sarpanches

NAGALAKSHMI, Mala, 32yrs, Sarpanch, Samanasa, Amalapuram (Congress Party)

This is one of the interesting case studies I found during my fieldwork. The case of Nagalakshmi is interesting because, unlike usual illustration of illiterate and ignorant dalit women sarpanches who are exploited by the upper caste landlords or a proxy representative of her husband this particular case study gives rather a different picture of a dalit woman sarpanch in one of the Scheduled Caste dominated villages in Amalapuram.

The questionnaire was mainly based on the objectives of my study such as How Nagalakshmi is negotiating with the institutionalized casteism? What kind of support is she getting from her family? Is there any change in her position in the family? In the context of empowerment

how was her life changed before and after politics? Is she doing any thing specific to the welfare of dalits/dalit women? How does she look at the changes that were brought to the village in the name of 'governance' in the place of government?

nasa is a village near Amalapuram. The population of the village is 6,500. The majority of the population belongs to Mala and Madiga castes. There are 1500 Kapus and very few Brahmins. Other communities include Rajulu, Erukulu etc. Due to urbanization most of the Brahmins left the village to nearby towns. There were 82 DWCRA groups. At present only fifteen are running successfully.

I went to Amalapuram on 3rd December 2005 to meet the dalit women sarpanches in the mandal. It was a personal contact, my uncle (who was the then director of the area hospital) that I used here to get help in contacting people. He made phone calls to the village panchayats reserved for dalit women to find out who were accessible at that time. While making phone calls suddenly he remembered that the ex minister Veer Raghavulu's relative was also working as a sarpanch of the nearby village called Samanasa. He made a phone call to the sarpanch and informed her that a researcher came from Hyderabad wanted to meet the sarpanches of that region. Since I went through this contact, I gained easy access to Nagalakshmi. The sarpanch immediately agreed and asked us to come to her home. I went to the village Samanasa, along with my uncle.

The Role of the Family and the Question of Proxy for Women in Politics

It is to be noted that after reaching the village when we enquired about the house of the village sarpanch at a tea stall, people who were sitting at the tea stall pointed at a concrete building and told us that is the house of the sarpanch Shyam. I was about to say we don't want Shyam's house we want to go to the sarpanch Nagalakshmi's house but my uncle stopped me from saying that and proceeded towards the house of Shyam.

On the way my uncle told me that no women sarpanch is known by her name in any village. When we reached the house of the sarpanch the first thing I noticed is the nameplate on which it was written as 'Nagalakshmi Shyam, Sarpanch, and Samanasa.'

When Nagalakshmi came out we introduced our selves. When she saw my uncle she was quite excited and told him that "I know you sir. I have come to your hospital." My uncle introduced me to her and told her about my project. Nagalakshmi asked me what is the purpose of the project. I explained the purpose of my study and the importance of recording women's experience in local politics that is a new arena for women in the villages. She nodded her head convincingly and told me: "Ask me any question. I am ready to answer. But, my husband is not at home. If he was there it would be even more useful to you." But I told her "I don't want to meet your husband. I came all the way from Hyderabad to meet exclusively women sarpanches like you."

She also spoke about political parties and their programmes: "My family supports the Congress party but I like the programmes of Telugu Desam like Janmabhoomi. I used to

participate in Janmabhoomi program very actively. It was like a festival for me. I used to feel very happy when I distribute pensions to the old people and ration cards to the needy. Whenever I get a chance to help the needy, I feel satisfied as a sarpanch. At present there is no activity in the village. Congress government is not interested in solving people's problems."

Hereditary is not a new thing in politics. From national politics to local politics the tradition continues with out much objections even from the public. From national politics to local politics this tradition is very commonly practiced. In many cases public too supported such candidates out of sympathy or affection towards the family. After, Mrs Indira Gandhi's death, sympathy votes showered on Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister of India with out any political experience. In the same way, even in Andhra Madhava Reddy,s wife bacame MLA when her husband died in the Naxalites attack. Vangaveeti's wife Ratnakumari became MLA of south Vijayawada, after her husband's death. Even GMC Balayogi's wife vijayalakshmi became MP after her husband's death in a plane crash.

In the case of reserved constituencies the same tradition is practiced many political leaders including dalit leaders. Here in Nagalakshmi's case also her father-in-law being an ex-sarpanch it became easy for her to contest and win in the elections.

Even after she became the sarpanch she has to show her respects towards her father-in-law like any other common woman in the society. Family support doesn't mean whatever she does the family will support her or encourage her to take bold decisions, just because she is in power. The family supports her in protecting her political power but not in decision-making. As a woman she has to play the conventional role of an obedient daughter in law. This shows the extent of struggle involved in women entering politics,if an educated woman like Nagalakshmi is facing this, what would be the situation for other women? However, Nagalakshmi seems to be herself whenever it is possible.

Though her father-in-law regularly visits the office instead of Nagalashmi other instances show that Nagalakshmi is not a puppet in her father in-law's hands. Her participation in Janmabhoomi programmes and her ideas about political parties and functioning of different governments and also her knowledge about ways to generate income for the Panchayat shows that she is not simply listening to her father-in-law but she has her own mind. Being within her limits and being cautious about her position in the family as a daughter-in-law of a big family, she was seen to be managing both family and the office pretty well.

I asked her to tell me how she became the sarpanch of the village. Nagalakshmi said: "Though I was a native of this village I was brought up in Trivandrum, Kerala. My father used to work in the shipyard there. I completed my high school in Trivandrum. I wanted to go for higher studies. But when I got a marriage proposal from our relatives of this village, my father compelled me to accept the proposal since my husband's family is a well-known political family in this area. After the marriage with Shyam, son of the ex-sarpanch and the present member of Mandal Praja Parishat of the village, I came to this village.

In the beginning, I found it very difficult to adjust in the village. I used to read weeklies and other magazines a lot in Trivandrum. Here, even to get a weekly; we have to go to Amlapuram. We don't get any thing here. In the second year of my marriage, I gave birth to a baby girl. Later, I did my B.A through correspondence course and completed my graduation. When I was doing my graduation, the Election notification for village Panchayats for the year 2001 came up. This time, my husband wanted to contest. But then our family came to know that our village was reserved for dalit women. Everybody in the family suggested my name since "I am more educated and also I am not a shy person like other women in the family." Since I also wanted to do something useful to the society, I immediately agreed. Two more candidates also contested in the elections. But being the daughter-in-law of the ex-sarpanch and also being more educated than the other two candidates villagers elected me as the sarpanch."

Education, Dalit Identity and "Respect"

When I noticed her stress on education, I asked her opinion on the then recent government order of making 10th class compulsory for village sarpanches, She said: "Education is very important, because educated people get more respect than uneducated persons. Even Brahmins respect me since I am educated. In Kerala, all are educated. Here also I see to it that all girls go to school. If I come to know about any drop outs I personally go to their parents and convince them to send their children to the school."

Nagalakshmi's educational status has a special meaning altogether. Only a dalit sarpanch has to speak about 'respect' like that. No upper caste person has to speak like this. For a dalit person education is very important. A common belief is that education brings civilization to the people. In the case of dalits who are uncivilized and untouchables by birth, will become civilized only through education and only through education dalits will reach higher position in the society. As a Dalit and as an educated woman she is aware of the fact that education is very important for dalits.

Being a Leader of Everyone, Yet Working for Dalits: The Challenges of a Dalit Sarpanch

Regarding the other activities she did as a sarpanch she said that when she came to power there was no income in the village Panchyats. With the help of her husband, she said she made plans to generate income for the Panchayat by planting coconuts trees at the side-lands of graveyards and the village lake and auctioning the village fishpond annually. In the annual auction of the fish ponds the panchayat got Rs.3000 in the year 2005. She said she also constructed the concrete road in the village. Earlier, there were no water pumps in the Scheduled Caste colony. During her tenure, two water pumps were installed in the Scheduled Caste colony. At present, she said she was constructing *pucca* houses for Scheduled Castes under the Indira Awas Yojana.

She spoke about her routine as a sarpanch. She said that she regularly goes to the office. She sits in the office till 5'0 clock every day. Every body respects me in the office not only because I am the sarpanch but also because I am the daughter-in-law of the ex-sarpanch. She said that the village secretary was very cooperative. She mentioned that usually her father-in-law accompanies her whenever there is a meeting. She said: "If I don't understand

any thing related to administrative matters, I take his help, because he is experienced as an ex-sarpanch. Where as, I am new to the village and have no idea about the needs of the villagers.”

However, as a dalit woman sarpanch Nagalakshmi could not do much about the welfare of her own dalit women. She is not in touch with any self help group. Her middleclass status in the village might be the reason for her to stay away from her own community. Moreover, she feels that she is a leader for the whole village and she did not wanted to confine herself to her own community or women. But at the same time, she didn't forget to say that she gave water connection to SC wadas and constructed *puccs* houses for SCs. Since the village is mostly dominated by SCs though there was no upper caste domination on the sarpanch but being a dalit sarpanch I feel, she is answerable to her own community.

Manikyam, Mala, 36yrs,Sarpanch, A.Vemavaram

to Vemavaram on 14th December,2005, to meet Bujji Mallavarapu, the sarpanch of the village. Vemavaram is situated in 15 kilometers from Amalapuram. There are two thousand households in the village. Agriculture is the main occupation. This is one of the few villages in Amalapuram mandal where a reasonable number of Madiga families living.

ched the village in the morning and as usual I started enquiring about Bujji the sarpanch. But some one at the Soda shop told me that the sarpanch of the village is not Bujji. Due to some legal reasons a woman called Manikyam.. I went to Manikyam's house to find out the details. Both Manikyam and her husband came out of the house and asked me do they get any benefit if they give their interview to me. I explained them saying Iam a researcher and I came here to study the working of dalit women sarpanches. They looked convincing and agreed to talk about them. As I was curious about the legal issue my first question to them was what happened to the earlier sarpanch and how Manikyam became sarpanch? Manikyam's husband replied to this question in the following way-

kyam has done her Bcom, LLB. Her father is a counselor in Kothapet. Naturally, she is also interested in politics. In 2001 panchayat elections our village was reserved for dalit woman. Manikyam expressed her wish to contest in the elections both me and her father felt happy about her decision.Iam an active member of Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangam. With the support of Yuvajan Sangam and her father's contacts in the local area supported us. Three women including one Madiga woman contested against Manikyam. Both of us used to go for door-to-door campaign in the village. Our slogan was 'Indiramma gramam Adrsa Gramam'. In the elections madiga candidate Bujji Mallavarapu won the elections. Manikyam got second majority votes. After the elections we came to know that Bujji does not have required age to contest in the elections.We failed a case against her in the court.The court case went on for three years. Finally, in August 2004, the courts asked the then district collector to conduct by elections as Bujji couldnot produce any evidence to prove her age. But the district collector was not willing to conduct elections because the term was going to get over within two years. However, he asked Manikyam, who got the next majority votes to continue as sarpanch for the rest of the period. Vemavaram is one of the few villages in East Godavari where there is a reasonable Madiga population. After the elections there was a tension in the village between Malas and Madigas.Madigas felt they were cheated. Madigas blamed Malas

for not allowing a Madiga woman to become Sarpanch. Otherwise, both Malas and Madigas live cordially in the village.

Similar questionnaire which I used for Nagalakshmi, used here also. Even Manikyam came from a political family. Her father being a councillor of Kothapet municipality, she was brought up in a political atmosphere. I asked Manikyam what made her to choose politics as her career. Because she has done Bcom, LLB. If she try, she will get definitely get a good government job. Manikyam told me that 'for me politics is also a job. The Government cannot provide permanent jobs to all. This present sarpanchship is like a seasonal employment not only to me but for many young and educated people like me. I feel there is an urgent need to youngsters like me should take politics seriously'.

Co-operation or Dependency?

Manikyam is an example of the present middleclass educated dalit woman who is confident enough to chose her own career. At the same time, she doesn't hesitate to take help from her husband in administrative matters. When I asked her what do you think about proxy representation. In response she said that, 'My husband is my great support. He is active in caste politics. If I don't know something I don't hesitate to ask him. I don't consider it as dependency but rather it is a co-operation. According to Manikyam, proxies are those who sit at home and send their husband or father to the office. Educated women like me take help from men when it is needed which is very common in any field.. Village politics are very complicated. My husband is active in caste politics. We are balancing between caste politics and mainstream politics. Though, Manikyam claims her dependency on her husband is co-operation. Patriarchical elements are very clear in Manikyam' relation. Togh she is educated and she can handle the office by her own, her husband accompanies her to the office daily in the name of co-operation. Even though women are more educated and in a higher position than her husband being a woman she has to obey her husband. Otherwise she will not be respected neither in the family nor in the society. Though patriarchal aspect is very much visible in her relation with her husband, Manikyam tried to be sophisticated. Like Nagalkshmi, Manikyam also has definite ideas about education She says that I support the new government policy of making tenth class as the minimum educational qualification. Because, according to me Education gives knowledge about the administration and management. It changes our attitude towards others. Education is important for political leaders too. Especially, village sarpanches who have exclusive right on cheque signing power. Among all the political representatives only sarpanches have the 'cheque power'- not even MPs and MLAs have the power to sign cheques. So it is very important to elect educated persons as sarpanches. Manikyam's ideas about education correlate with Nagalkshmi. Interestingly, every respondent was talking about the importance of education in dalits lives whatever field they chose.

Dalit woman Sarpanch

When I became sarpanch at the eleventh hour, I am trying to meet the targets of the year such as construction of toilets. With the help of my husband I conduct a literacy campaign in the village during evenings. My aim is to make all the villagers literate and make the village 'Sampoorna Akshara Gramam'. During my tenure, toilets were constructed successfully. I impose fine on the people who are not using the toilets.

Manikyam became the sarpanch after almost three years of elections. But still in a short period the way she tried to do service to the women community especially is very interesting. One of the major problems in the villages lack of toilets, which is effecting the health of women. The State government's campaign against using open places is causing ill health and sanctioning separate funds for the construction of toilets the local leaders are not paying any attention. Unlike previous male local leaders as an educated woman Manikyam is concerned about the health of rural women. She took personal interest in not only constructing the toilets but also to see that they are being used. Not only toilets she is also concerned about dalit men who are spoiling their health by taking liquor. Along with her husband she started a campaign against the liquor drinking. Her service to her community proves that she is concerned about the well being of her community.

Kasulamma, Besta, 46yrs, Sarpanch, Aminabad

This case study is a typical example of the 'proxy' representation of the woman sarpanches in Village Panchayats. I selected this case to understand the so-called 'proxy' representation.

Aminabad is a seashore village in Kothapalli mandal. This village is highly populated by fishermen. This time, I went alone to meet the sarpanch. I reached Aminabad at 11'O clock in the morning. When I went to the panchayat office I found a big lock to the main door. The attender of the office came running from somewhere to ask me who am I and why did I enter into the precincts of the office. I told him that I came to meet the village sarpanch. He took me to a nearby (Chavidi) house and introduced me to a middle aged woman who was sitting in the Verandah chatting with group of women. When I explained her about the purpose of visit she immediately told me that I don't know anything. I will call my husband he is the former sarpanch of the village in fact he looks after all the administrative matters. But I told her that I would speak to him later. At first I would like to chat with her for some time. With a great difficulty she agreed and sat with me in the Verandah and introduced the other women who were around as her daughters and daughter in-laws. The prevailing situation was giving me very inconvenient vibes. I could not ask any of the questions that can be connected to any of my objectives. Infact, I changed my format of interviewing myself. As she was interested in talking about her family I encouraged her to talk about herself that is about her family. In the process I tried to extract whatever I needed from her. When I asked her to tell about herself she started saying that ours is a Besta family. Our family is in fishing export business. We have three daughters and two sons. Our daughters got married and sons are looking after the business.

Before my sarpanchship my husband was the sarpanch of the village. In 2001 elections the village was reserved for BC woman. Since 15 years my husband was in local politics. So he didn't want the sarpanchship to go out of his own hands due to women reservation. He asked me to stand in elections. I agreed to stand to save our family honour. I did not even participated in the election campaign. I won the election with a great majority. Our villagers respect me as the wife of ex sarpanch that is why they elected me. Usually I don't go to the office. Whenever there is a important meeting or the collector or MRO visits the village I will go to the office.

When the district collector came to our village to participate in Janmabhoomi programme. As usual my husband attended the meeting instead of me. In the meeting the collector sent the office attendar to me

to attend the meeting. That was the first time I attended a public meeting. I had a strange feeling. I couldn't sit there for a long time. I am an illiterate. What will I do even if I go to the office? Any way, my husband is there to look after the village as well as the office. I don't like to go out of my house. In fact, I don't get time to step out of my house. Ours is a big family. My married daughters are staying nearby. They visit us frequently. Though my daughter-in-laws help me in kitchen I have to manage many other things at home. In this busy household work where will I get time to go to the office? If there is any urgent file to be signed my husband brings the file to home and get my signature. Then I asked her did you ever asked him what is that file about. She immediately replied that my husband has twenty years experience in politics. Until now there was not even a single complaint about his work. Why should I question him now? More over the sarpanchship is for only five years. I have to live with my husband for lifelong. If I start questioning my husband just because 'I am the sarpanch', doesn't he develop grudge on me. If we look at Kasulamma as an ordinary housewife, she is very active, talkative and clever enough to manage a big family. She was happy to talk about her family, children and especially about her husband for hours together. For forty-six years she was tuned as a good housewife. She has built her own world in her house. She is not like Nagalakshmi or Manikyam who are proud of their education and who have political ambitions. She is proud to be the wife of a politician. She is proud for her position in the family as a mother in law and as a grand mother for seven children. Suddenly, when her husband asked her to stand in elections she agreed as a good housewife. Both Nagalakshmi and Kasulamma came from political families but still due to their cultural backgrounds atleast Nagalakshmi is making attempts to deal with her father in law with out hurting him. She is allowing him to go to the office daily at the same time she is participating in the programmes like Janmabhoomi. Where as, Kasulamma could not even imagine questioning her husband. Kasulamma is very much aware of the fact that her husband is very powerful man in the village. She is depended on him by all means. When she said this sarpanchship is for only five years how can I question. Some how I felt that if that sarpanchship is permanent she would have definitely questioned her husband's domination on her. At the same time we can not take her statement as anti men. Even in the anti arrack movement the women agitators of the movement were not 'anti-men'. Their struggle was against government and local liquor contractors. The women to the other places did not extend the movement, which suggests that the priorities of women are more local and immediate and we have to understand their politics with different tools. Even during the Onion agitation, Sharad Joshi used to force women to talk about the problems of women as women in the meetings. But those women used to constantly speak about the rising prices of basic cooking provisions because that was their immediate problem. Women do not tackle the gender relations directly.. The existing socio cultural scenario forces women to be proxy. In our society, the primary role of women is still considered as wives, mothers child rearers whatever may be their level of education and professional career.

In the meantime her husband came in and enquired about my purpose of the study. When I asked him about the working of the village panchayats he said that the village Aminabad is a seashore village. The village is prone to natural calamities. So there is always a risk involved in working here. The main occupation of the village is fishing. When Tsunami occurred, the village was partially affected but the village Panchayat got lots of funds from not only the government

but also from various other agencies. So they distributed the money to buy motorboats, food and clothes to everyone in the village and also celebrated the annual Jatara of the village.

in the same day after noon I took a round in the village to talk to some of the fishermen who were repairing their boats sitting in front of their houses. Their women were drying the fish in the other side of the houses. I asked them 'How did they feel when Tsunami occurred'. They replied saying that initially they were not frightened when they saw gigantic waves in the sea. Because, such waves are common during full moon and dark moon days. When they came to know through media that so many people died in many places only then they realized that it was not a common occurrence. I asked them about the distribution of the funds after Tsunami. They said that they don't know how many funds village elders got from different agencies. But every household got one thousand rupees, one sari and one lungi from the village panchayat office. Some private agencies (NGOs) like Adarsa, Jyoti and other NGOs distributed fishing nets to some hundred men in the village. Very few people got money to buy motorboats. Then I asked them to tell about the role of the sarpanch in distributing the funds. They responded saying 'he' became crorepati. His sons are engaged in fishing export business. When they said 'he' I tried to correct them saying the sarpanch of your village is a woman why are you saying 'he'. They laughed at me and said that we never consider her as a sarpanch because she never acted as a sarpanch. This is the case of many woman sarpanches in the state. The name of the woman sarpanch is also not known to the villagers. The husband or father or son becomes unelected sarpanches in their women's place.

D. Ananthalakshmi, 45 yrs, Sarpanch, Karapa.

I came to know about this village in a local newspaper under the heading local contractor harassing a dalit woman sarpanch. Karapa is a village near Samalkot. The sarpanch of the village is Ananthalakshmi. She is forty-five years old. She is a widow. She has a son who is doing graduation in Kakinada. She was an agricultural laborer. I met her at her home. She narrated her story in the following way- I was a daily laborer before I became the sarpanch of the village. I used to work in the fields of Suryanarayana, Motubari of the village. One day Suryanarayana came to my house with some of our community men and asked me to stand in the coming panchayat elections as the village is reserved for SC woman. I was very surprised to hear this from him. I called my son, who is studying at Kakinada and told him about the proposal. My son agreed very happily and told me that there is nothing to worry. These days so many women are contesting in elections. But still I expressed my fears about my ignorance about administrative matters. Moreover, I am an illiterate. Then my son told me that the State government would give training to the elected people. In the training they will teach what to do in the office. How to behave etc. With that confidence I agreed to contest in elections. From the beginning Suryanarayana was with me. He himself mobilized some of my community people. They all formed into a group and made preparations for the campaign. I won the elections with his support. In the first two years Suryanarayana used to accompany her to the office. Without his advice she never used to do anything. In the year 2004, Village panchayat got funds for constructing roads in the village. Suryanarayana got the contract. He started the construction immediately. But after constructing two meters road he stopped his work saying he doesn't have money. The task was supposed to be finished before the annual gramasabha where they have to show all the accounts. Suryanarayana

demanded money from me saying if the road is not completed in time she will fall into a trouble. Then, our village secretary suggested me to sanction the full amount to the contractor so that he can finish his work. As there was no other way, I sanctioned the cheque and it was recorded in the file that the road has been constructed and the cheque is also issued to the contractor. But after taking money also the contractor did not complete his work. Whenever I asked him about the work he used to give something or the other excuse. Finally, in the gramasabha, which is an annual meeting of the village, the MDO found that the money granted for the construction of the road was spent but the road was not constructed. When the MDO asked explanation I couldn't say anything. I tried to say that it was not my fault, the contractor and village secretary together had cheated me. I am an illiterate and I did not know what was recorded in the files. But the MDO didn't listen to me; he complained to the police against me. The police took me to the police station. When my son came to know about all this he couldn't keep quiet. With the help of his friends he met the then Zilla Parishad chairman who is also a Dalit and explained him what had actually happened..

Chairman Janardhan enquired about the issue and found that both the contractor and the village secretary cheated me. He called the village secretary and the contractor to the police station and compelled them to accept the truth. Finally both of them agreed to repay the money. The village secretary was transferred. After this incident, my son is helping me by reading out the files prepared by the village secretary. The present secretary is a female secretary. But still I can't trust any one now.

In this case study I would like to make two points- One is the upper caste oppression on the poor dalit woman and the second is the assertion of dalit community itself against the oppression of upper castes. Since generations the upper castes are controlling the affairs of the village. They could not tolerate the changes that are being brought about by the decentralized democratic institutions. Therefore, from the beginning of the implementation of the panchayat system, tensions, violence and killings have taken place in order to resist the transformation. The elections to the local government bodies have been the first and foremost point of attack by the casteist groups (Mathew-2003). In inevitable cases they look for mild candidates who can be useful for them. In most of the cases the only role of a dalit women/men is to obey whatever the landlord says. We come across many instances of dalits exploitation in various ways. However, there are rare incidents of resistance by dalits we come to know about their contest. In Anantha lakshmi's case, the landlord did not expect that her son will complain to his caste leaders against him. The landlord took all the advantage of her ignorance and left her in crisis. When the caste leaders and police interfered he couldn't defend himself. The case study is an example of the rising consciousness of dalits. In my observation in the field the dalit women sarpanches who are from political families are in much safer zone. Though they are proxies to their family members. Yet It is difficult to say which is better.

Inta Malathi, 35yrs, sarpanch, Unduru, (Congress party)

at to Unduru in March 3rd to meet Malathi the sarpanch of the village Unduru. As usual I went to the office to find out the residence of the sarpanch, luckily I found the office opened. That was the first

time in my fieldwork Panchayat office was kept opened in working hours. I went inside and introduced myself to the person who was sitting there. In my conversation with him I came to know that he is the village secretary. He gave me the village profile. According to him, the total number of households in the village are 2000; 800 households belong to Malas and 800 belong to Settibalijas. There are only eight Madiga households and one Brahmin household. I enquired about the sarpanch. The village secretary told me that the present sarpanch is the wife of the ex sarpanch. She was elected because of the 'good name' of her husband. Though both wife and husband worked as sarpanches they did not earn anything. Both of them still go for the daily labor. They trust him a lot that is why, they leave all the administrative work to him. Then I went to Malathi's house. By that time I went there she was busy with cooking. I introduced myself and told her the purpose of my visit. Meanwhile her son came out and asked me whether I am doing any survey on the work of sarpanches to select the sarpanch candidates for next elections. I replied him saying in fact, I am doing a survey on the working of the women sarpanches but I am not here to select the best candidates for the coming elections. I also told them that I am not a government person. I am student and I will write a report to my college on the working of the women sarpanches in AP. They were not convinced by my words. They still thought that I am a government worker. I am just telling lies to them. They treated me like a government servant. After every two minutes they used to ask me will you recommend our name? what is the criteria to select the candidates. can you suggest us what should we do to get selected. As there was no option, just pretended that I came from government. And then started my interview. When I asked her why are you still going for daily labor. I heard that your husband was also an ex sarpanch of the village. Didn't he earn anything? She replied that Her husband is a very soft person. He doesn't even harm ants. Because of his good character the villagers chose him as the sarpanch. I was also elected as the sarpanch only because of him. When I asked her do you go to the office regularly, she replied saying, from the beginning we are living on daily labor. If I go and sit in the office I will lose my daily wage. The salary we are getting is very low. We are getting only fifteen hundred rupees per month. Some times my husband goes to the office to find out what is happening in the office. He brings the files to be signed to home. I don't mind going to the office. In fact, I like to sit in the office chair. I am also a member of DWCRA group. She went on saying about her experiences with DWCRA. According to her, there are 12 groups in DWCRA. The revolving fund for DWCRA was granted. They haven't decided what to do with the money. The group members also got LPG gas connections under the Deepam scheme. Though some of them sold the gas stoves in the black market, some members are using them. Once in every second week the DWCRA members meet and discuss problems: these discussions need not exclusively be on thrift and credit but could be about family issues, sometimes even national politics etc. DWCRA coordinator visits our group once in a month. She informs us about various programmes and schemes of the government. I asked her do you get any special treatment in the group as a sarpanch. She said that I don't get any special treatment as a sarpanch. All are equal in the group. Later, I met Malathi's husband, Satyanarayana who told me that his wife Malathi is a very active women. She has a quick grasping power. She conducts DWCRA group meetings. She calls all the members personally to attend the meeting. Not only as a DWCRA member but also as a daily labor she acts as a 'Muta Mestri, that is organizing a group of workers for the major works like road construction etc. In 2001 elections when the village was reserved for dalit woman. Our village elders immediately suggested Malathi's name. Kapus who are dominant

in the village helped us in the elections. It doesn't mean that they are interfering in the Panchayat matters. Our present village secretary is a Brahmin. He is very helpful to us. He doesn't allow others to interfere in administrative matters. We also trust him. Before taking any decisions we discuss with each other.

case study is an example of how Parallel bodies are useful in bringing awareness among women. Women Self-Help Groups such as DWCRA, thrift and credit societies and other committees brought women into the process of village development. These groups have contributed significantly in enhancing the economic and awareness status of women in villages. The group meetings helped them in articulating their problems. The group meetings not only help them in solving their economic problems but also help them to discuss about various social issues like child marriage, dowry, liquor etc. Here, the striking thing is Malathi is very actively participating in DWCRA concerned programmes but somehow I found a disinterest in her as a sarpanch. In one hand her husband and in other hand the village secretary are somehow not allowing her to take any interest in the Panchayat matters. In my opinion, one of the reasons for Malathi's disinterest is that In self help groups all the members belong to almost same socio economic backgrounds. So the members also feel a kind of equality among them selves. They can freely share their problems with each other. Where as in Panchayat system there a hierarchy and members belong to different socio economic conditions. There is no question of a Poor dalit woman sarpanch to feel her in a Panchayat office.

In the work shop on dalit women sarpanches at Anveshi, one of the participant felt that Telangana women are war like characters and Godavari women are passive and they try to imitate Uppercaste women such as Kapus who spend most of the time in stitching and knitting. Here, one important thing I would like to mention is that stitching and knitting is not Kapus' culture but it is Victorian culture. Dalit women who were converted to Christianity were given training in nursing, stitching, knitting etc to earn their own livelihood. Slowly uppercaste women too showed interest in these activities. To day, internationally acclaimed lace business of Narasapur region is shaped by both upper caste and dalit women. The productive skills among Godavari women could be one of the reasons to show interest in the activities of self-help groups than Panchayat programmes.

6. Jillella Padmavathi, 28yrs, Venkataya Palem, Ramchandrapuram (Congress)

to know about this village by my previous respondent Malathi and her husband. They told me to visit the place definitely, because of the historicity of the village. According to them in 1989 then MLA, Thota Trimurthulu tonsured the head of a Dalit boy forcibly and assaulted him for teasing a Kapu girl in a cinema theatre. The dalit boy's family was boycotted from the village. The issue came to the notice of the District Dalit leaders. They visited the village to found the facts. After finding the facts, they filed an atrocity case against the MLA and declared that boycotting a family from the village is barbaric. The leaders threatened all the villagers by saying if any one ill treats the victims family, they will be imprisoned.. Very soon the issue became an issue of Kapu vs Dalits. However, like any other issue based movement it went on for some time after that nobody bothered. But case is still in the court. I visited the village in April 2006; I went to the Panchayat office. It was a major Panchayat. So, the office building is also very big and well maintained unlike minor Panchayat offices. I met the village secretary and told her that I would like to meet the village sarpanch, and then

a fifty-year-old man came out and asked me about the purpose of my visit. I explained him about my project. Then he told me that I can speak to him because sarpanch is at home. When I looked at him confused, then the village secretary told me that he is none other than the husband of the village sarpanch. I told that man to take me to his house because I want to see the sarpanch. He told me that his house is quite far from this place. It will be difficult to reach there. Then I asked him how do you manage. He said that he has a cycle. The village secretary who was listening to our conversation gave her bicycle to me. I took that bicycle and told him that lets go. On the way he requested me not to ask any 'big' questions to his wife. Because 'she does nt know anything'. We reached their house in ten minutes. It was not at all big distance. He called his wife out and introduced me to her. Padmavathi is an young and beautiful women. When I told her that as part of recording the experiences of dalit women sarpanches I came to meet her. She told me very sadly that what experiences do we have. Only the educated rich women can go to the office and sit there. They can command their subordinates very well. But uneducated people like us can't do that. Even if we go to the office no body cares us. She also told me that her husband is an active member of local Dalit politics. Because of her husband, villagers don't treat her badly. But at the same time they don't give required respect also. She also said that the village society is very bad. If a I go to the office alone villagers will make comments on me. They look at me as characterless. They can even connect me illegally to the village secretary. Her fears about the village society are not untrue. Rural women are afraid of character assassination. In conventional societies it is not easy for women to come out publicly. Even if they come out immediate blame will fell on their character. The government invited women all of a sudden to enter politics with much preparation. Neither the candidates nor the people were ready for this sudden change when the 73rd amendment was passed. As Devaki jain pointed out it is truly a historic movement. But, it would be better if women candidates were trained well before taking up the office responsibilities. While talking to Padmavathi I found that she has many things to say but she was not able to say because her husband was sitting there.

When I was going back to the office, Padmavathi's husband told me that with his efforts the police picket that was in the village for almost fifteen years was sent back. At present both upper caste people and Dalits living in the village were cordially. The victim of the atrocity case was sanctioned a cycle-repairing shop in the village; even other Dalits in the village were given some special grants and loans, since it was a village where an atrocity had taken place.

Modernization in the villages:

When I went back to the office to return the bicycle, there I found an old ex sarpanch who was sitting under the tree with two three men around. When I came to know that he worked as a sarpanch to the same village I asked him to tell me about the changes that occurred from his period to the present day. Very happily he started saying that the village sarpanch was a very powerful person in the early days, i.e. in the 1970s and 80s. The whole village administration was under his control. Once the TDP came into power, drastic changes occurred at the local level. For every small thing committees were formed, for example, Jala Committee, Vidya Committee etc. Earlier, minor irrigation works were looked after by the Panchayat office; with the formation of the Jala Committee the charge of all the minor irrigation works was taken over by the committee. Within a short period it became a parallel institution in the village, because most of the problems of the villagers center around irrigation works.

er, whenever villagers had any problem they used to appeal to the sarpanch; now instead of meeting the sarpanch they are going to the chairman of a particular committee. During the Rajiv Gandhi period a new programme called the Nehru Rozgar Yojana was introduced. Under this program funds were released directly from the central government to the district collector and to the village Panchayats. Under this programme, without any delay and negotiations, Panchayats used to get funds. When Panchayats started getting funds without intermediaries (such as MPTCs and MLAs), they started working freely. After a few years this programme was stopped.

n Panchayats had to depend on Zilla Parishads and Mandal Parishads. Meanwhile Chandrababu Naidu introduced the Janmabhoomi programme, which was again dominated by Zilla Parishads. In this programme, Panchayats used to get orders from Zilla Parishads and Mandal Parishads and it was according to their agenda that programmes were to be conducted in villages.

ner important change was that according to the new Panchayat Raj Act (1993), the membership of the sarpanch at the Mandal level is cancelled. Now, a separate representative has to be elected from the village for the Mandal Praja Parishad. A sarpanch representing his own village at the Mandal level is different from a separate person's representation. Because as a sarpanch he knows the needs and problems of the village better and his voice is certainly different from that of an ordinary representative.

Yet another difference is that earlier the village Panchayat staff used to get salaries from their own Panchayat office. Now they are getting salaries from MDO (Mandal Development Office). Today Panchayats are controlled by both MDOs and MROs.

According to Gopinath Reddy, the sarpanches are unhappy with the Janambhoomi Program. The user committees systematically taken over the functions constitutionally entrusted to the Panchayats. It is also observed that, the performance of community based organizations was said to positive initially, but the net contribution of CBOs is not very significant (Gopinath-2003). The study Benjamin Powis on parallel bodies in Nalgonda shows that, local political leaders preferred for Water Users Association chairman than sarpanch as they felt it was a more important and powerful post. Natural resource committees in particular can have a far wider constituency than the Panchayats, although centering on a specific set of stakeholders.

The Telugu Desam government in Andhra, under the leadership of Chandrababu Naidu developed Self Help Assocations within the context of significant structural development of the party. It is claimed that TDP committees exist in all habitations in the state – from polling booth level committees at the sub-village level to the state level. In 2002 the party claimed to have over 12 lakh active members and, if the party positions were all filled, there would be nearly 8 lakh party committee position-holders at various levels. This implies that 63 per cent of active TDP cadre can get 'political employment' by holding positions in booth, village, mandal, district committees or on the various sub-committees. Committees of various forms have opened up space for the local party leaders to offer symbolic, if not financial incentives to party cadre. Key positions like water-user association chairman or village party president have offered opportunities to relocate important village leaders who cannot contest for sarpanch due to caste-based reservation in the panchayats. Well-connected leaders can utilise these positions to capture funds by utilising the influence of the local MLA. This can, in certain circumstances, facilitate the effective capture of gram panchayat's functions and powers (Manor –1998).

Niranjana Devi Y.,34 yrs, Valmiki,Rampachodavaram

I met Niranjana Devi, sarpanch of the village Rampa chodavaram. Rampachodavaram is situated 50kms away from Rajahmundry in an agency area. The actual village population belongs to Koyas, Konda Reddys, and Valmikis. I met Niranjana Devi in her office. After introducing myself, I asked her about her political experience as a newly elected sarpanch. She told me that I am not new to politics. My father was an active member of Valmiki Sangam. After my graduation, I also joined the association. I am interested in social work. I don't want to sit at home ideally. I always like to help people. I am in social service for twenty years. The nearby village people also come to me for help. I asked her what kind of help she does. She replied that from domestic problems to legal problems people approach me for advice. Because of that good will only I was elected as the sarpanch of this village though it was not reserved for woman. After hearing this, I told her that in my entire field trip, she is the first woman sarpanch who is politically experienced. She happily told me that, generally you plain people have notions about tribal women, as they are uncivilized people. But we are more assertive than plain women. It is true that we Valmikis are in better position than Koyas and Konda Reddys. Valmikis are in better position because, most of us got converted into Christianity and got educated. At present, socially and financially we are in better position. Hence, Koyas and Konda Reddys are demanding categorization among tribes. They also went to the extent of saying we Valmikis are no more tribals. Government should take out Valmikis from tribal list. She told me that the tribal area is in the grip of outsiders. Non tribals exploit the tribals. If we fight between us outsiders will take even more advantage. As a newly elected sarpanch she told me that being a major Panchayat she has many responsibilities to take up. I visit at least one village in a week and find out the problems in the village and try to solve them myself. One of the major problems agency people face is drinking water. Though government is granting various funds still many villages in the agency area are without drinking water. Niranjana is on a mission to construct water tanks in the village. She is also concerned about her fellow tribal women who live in collecting soap nuts and honey. Niranjana wants to get some funds to market the forest products and help the women to make self-financing. She told me that tribal women are self-assertive but more than their rights they fight for the wellbeing of their men folk. She always gets complaints from women against their husbands who are spoiling their lives by consuming liquor. I asked her do you take your husband with you. She replied that I don't take my husband with me. I am born and brought up here. I know all these places very well. In fact, he is from Maredumilli. He doesn't know these places.

The living conditions of tribal poor are in a very bad situation. Most of the tribal women live on collecting soap nuts and other herbals. Most of their agricultural land is in the hands of plain people. The tribals are working as daily laborers in their own fields. Still, I found a number of self-help groups working in the village. The members of the self-help groups are conscious about land ownership rights to commercialized marketing of the herbal products. Most of the members are participants of both ITDA works and the programmes of self-help groups. Here, tribal women seem to be more assertive than tribal men. Some of the group members too felt they don't like their men standing with folded hands in front of the plain man. When I asked them 'don't you all wish your contractor by saying Nameste'. They promptly said 'no we don't care them. We do our work and come back home. We believe in hard work. We have nothing to do with them'.

Sayamma Mala, 56 yrs, Pandillapalli, Peddapuram (Congress):

Pandillapalli was a minor Panchayat with 2500 population. It was a Raju dominated village. The other major communities living in the village are Brahmins, Malas, Chakalis, Mangalis and only one Madiga family which is residing at the outskirts of the village. When the village Panchayat

was reserved for SC women in the Panchayat elections of 2001, Narsimha Raju, a contractor in the village told his assistant Babji to ask his mother to stand in the elections. Babji is a dalit. He is B.Com graduated. His family's main occupation is agriculture. But Babji was not interested in agriculture. Somehow he managed to get assistant job under the contractor Narsimha Raju. Very soon, he became a trustable person to Narsimha Raju. When Narsimha Raju suggested Babji's mother's name and offered his support to contest in the elections, Babji, thought it was a great opportunity and immediately went to his mother Sayamma and told her about the elections. But Sayamma refused to stand in the election. Meanwhile, Babji's brother who was separated from their family long back, decided to stand his wife in the elections. Subsequently, Narsimha Raju came up with an agreement according to which, if Sayamma stands in the elections and wins, all the major construction works will be taken by Narsimha Raju and all the minor works will be given to Babji. Babji forced his mother to contest in the elections against his sister-in-law and another candidate. With a lot of pressure from Babji and Raju, Sayamma agreed to contest in the elections. Sayamma won the election with a good majority.

of a dalit contractor

In the first year of her term a cement road was sanctioned to the village. Narsimha Raju allowed Babji to file tender to the contract. The structure of a contract system is built in such a way that for an ordinary Dalit the existing system is unapproachable, though there is a legal clause saying that Dalit contractors should be given preference. For instance, if a village Panchayat has decided to construct a road for 20 meters or 30 meter, it passes a resolution in a Panchayat meeting and then sends the file to the concerned engineer. The engineer prepares an estimate. The prepared estimation is again presented in a Panchayat meeting for the acceptance of all the Panchayat members. Then the file is sent to the Mandal supervisor, for a technical grant. The Mandal supervisor grants the proposal and sends the file back to the village Panchayat. The village Panchayat calls for public tenders. Every village Panchayat has some registered contractors, and only those contractors can file tenders. The contractor who gets the work should deposit some amount (depends on the estimated amount for the actual work) in the Panchayat office.

Initially, the MDO refused to give the contract to Babji, because, he belongs to a lower caste. Narsimha Raju recommended Babji's name for the contract. Only then, Babji got the contract. Slowly, when Narsimha Raju started interfering in the Panchayat matters, Babji was alerted and instead of his mother he used to attend the meetings in the office. He also started making contacts with higher officials. When the contract for construction work of the Pucca houses for dalits was sanctioned Narsimha Raju wanted to file tender for the work. Babji also wanted to get the contract. Angered by this Narsimha Raju abused Babji in the name of caste and called him goonda. There was a tough competition between Narsimha Raju and Babji. Finally, Babji got the contract. He completed more than half of the houses. Sayamma feels her son is doing this for his living. It is her responsibility to help him in whatever way is possible. Interestingly, Babji's brother who was separated from the family long back has rejoined the family and started helping his mother and brother. One way of looking at this case study is that the representation given to women has brought change in the caste hold on power. For example, in a given situation, women align themselves with their caste and family than any other institution. As a woman sarpanch she may not raise her voice against gender discrimination in the village but she can become a tool for the up-liftment of her own family status. Thus, while

the representation of women in these bodies is a welcome move, women belong to these sections are used by both their own caste men and also upper caste men.

Conclusion

preliminary visits to the selected area and the initial interviews with the Dalit women sarpanches in East Godavari district raised some important questions, such as the role of parallel bodies and Village Panchayats as well as sarpanches in the context of the decentralization of governance; the role of dominant castes in a constituency which is reserved for Dalits, and the power structure of the village which has been under Dalits' sarpanchship for almost a decade (as in the villages where the present woman sarpanch is a wife of a Dalit ex-sarpanch), and caste politics in general.

Historically, Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the hierarchy of castes. That means people born into a particular caste are also born into the occupation associated with their caste- they had no choice. Each caste also had a specific place in the hierarchy of social status. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity and generally maximum commensality occurs within the caste. Untouchability is an extreme and particularly vicious aspect of the caste system that prescribes stringent social sanctions against members of castes located at the bottom of the purity pollution scale. Strictly speaking the untouchable castes are outside the caste hierarchy- they were considered so impure that their mere touch severely pollutes members of all other castes bringing terrible punishments for the former and forcing the latter to perform elaborate purification rituals. However, various social movements against caste discrimination in the country over more than a century brought major changes in the then existing caste system. Today, untouchable castes that were once considered superstitious and submissive are now rebellious, antagonistic and fully conscious of their power and rights in a democratic country. Many who till then had little exposure to modern education and professions moved into them. This however, directly benefited the men of these castes. Women perhaps benefited indirectly. The anti-caste movement of the time did bring about change, and a shift in power equations.

It is evident that the upper castes that have been controlling the affairs of the village and the community and the rural economy cannot tolerate the changes that are being brought about by the decentralised democratic institutions. From the beginning of the implementation of the panchayat system, tensions, violence and killings have taken place in order to resist the transformation. There are also numerous cases of violence against dalits to prevent them from contesting elections or to influence them to favour other interest groups. If these efforts also fail and elections do take place, they look for candidates who can be coaxed to carry out the whims and fancies of the dominant castes. On the other hand if somebody out of favour of the dominant caste manages to get elected, they do not cooperate with the person concerned.

The recent Panchayat elections in AP (July – August 2006) witnessed violence in several places. The police opened fire as the violence disturbed the polling. A lot of confusion was created regarding the voters' list and reservations. According to the newspaper reports in many places reservation was not followed at all. Even district collectors and MROs joined hands with politicians. There were instances of Mandal Revenue Officers (MRO) enrolling ineligible persons in voters list. There are cases of

auctioning the seats especially in tribal areas. The reports also say that in some places, District collectors and MROs gave false caste certificates to the candidates.

In one hand sarpanches themselves felt that the powers and functions of village Panchayats are cutting down at the same time they also agree to the fact that the position of head of the village is still very attractive to many. The result was candidates spend large amounts of money in the elections. In East Godavari district itself, it was estimated that one crore was spent only on the final nomination day.

In this situation the participation of dalit women in elections is even more complicated. There are hardly any instances of dalit woman standing herself in elections. Either her family members or upper caste people in the village 'chose' her as a candidate. The upper caste people always select a poor and mild dalit woman whom they can influence easily as a candidate. After coming to the positions of power, elected dalit representatives are restricted in effective exercise of their leadership. Instances are not uncommon where the women dalit sarpanches sit on the floor during the course of the panchayat meetings while the male upper caste members sit on the chairs.

However, the exploitation faced by dalit women and men by upper caste land lords is almost similar, when it comes to the question of dalit women the dalit men seems to be no less exploitative. In both middle class and lower middle class dalit families, dalit men are as patriarchal as upper caste men. Even those dalit men who are active in caste politics and who are fighting against Brahmin supremacy (see Manikyam P:25) are not allowing their women to take responsibilities by their own. My observation from the field is that though some educated women try to balance between the patriarchal roles of wife, daughter in law etc, and the role of sarpanch of the village with out hurting the male members of the family, some women are accepting their husband's intervention in their office silently. It does not mean that they don't like enjoy power and position. As rightly said by one of the respondents in Mary John's study (2007) on women corporators, the reservations given to women especially backward castes will certainly help not only women but also it will help every one in the family. Her children, her relatives, her friends will know the worth of the power.

After 60 years of independence, many villages in India are in very bad position. Even basic facilities like electricity, roads drinking water are also not provided to many villages. There is stagnation in the progress of village community. In such situation, marginal sections got an opportunity to take up the village administration. The existing training system to train the newly elected representatives is not enough to train them. There should be a continuous mechanism to enhance the building capacity of the new representatives.

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