

Electoral and non-electoral battles around Dalits in Panchayat Raj System: Field Notes from Alamuru Mandal in East Godavari District, A.P.

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Profile of the District

East Godavari district has four distinct geographical regions: One, an agency area where a large tribal population resides that largely has forest produce. Second, the Konaseema area that produces coconut, banana and paddy; it also has a coastal belt with fishing villages. Third is the *metta* area that produces fruits, oranges, jackfruit, along with millets such as jowar and ragi. Fourth, it has a low lying area that largely produces paddy in irrigated lands, and vegetables and flowers in the non-irrigated lands (the lanka area is irrigated not by canal water but by ground water). As a largely agriculture based economy, its industries also are based on agriculture such as rice mills, poultry farms, nurseries and brick kilns. East Godavari boasts of most technologically advanced rice mills and surpasses West Godavari and Nalgonda in this activity. It processes paddy not just of East Godavari but also cater to the neighboring districts.

Land is mostly concentrated in the hands of kmmas and kapus. Kmmas are the big landlords and also control much of assigned and endowment lands; kapus own lands in the average range of 5 – 10 acres. Dalits in the district have also obtained user rights to assigned lands at several places, though to a much smaller extent – half an acre to one acre per household. However, at many places even this land has been given on lease to kapus because they lack the investment. A large proportion of the dalits are landless labourers.

Field Labour Cooperative Societies, mostly of dalits, own small patches of land. They also have some *chettu pattas* on PWD lands. Assigned lands and endowment land is a constant source of tension, litigation and struggle between dalits and landlords in several villages in the constituency, with kmmas continuing their control over the land, kapus trying to obtain it by deceiving the dalits, and dalits trying to stake their claims.

Wages range between thirty and seventy rupees for women and between forty and hundred for men depending on the season. Seasonal migration to Guntur, West Godavari and Krishna districts is quite common.

This district boasts of a long history of social movements and also struggles by dalits. Brahma Samaj movement and later Adi Andhra movement were active in Konaseema region. Ambedkar's influence built on this, leading to electoral victories too. Bojja Appalaswamy, Eswari Bai and B.V.Ramanaiah won as MLAs from this region as Republican Party of India candidates. The current MP from Amalapuram is Harsha

Kumar who is a mala. MLA from Allavaram assembly constituency is Gollapalli Suryarao, a mala. The latter is the Minister for Small Scale Industries. He has also served as a minister in the earlier TDP government. It is generally believed that this region is the 'most developed' in terms of dalit assertion for rights, reform, education, entry into politics, bureaucracy etc..

In parts of the district, particularly the Alamuru constituency, there had been a strong presence of Communist Party of India. It led a struggle against the zamindar of Kapileswaram in which dalits participated in large numbers. CPI candidates won assembly seats in this region before the Emergency; it is only after this that the Congress made inroads with its 20-point programme among the the dalits. With the coming of TDP in the early eighties, madigas seem to have shifted their affiliation to this party.

In the seventies, there was a strong wave of Rationalist movement in this region that seemed to have touched the dalits. Under the influence of the CPI and rationalist movements, there were some contestations between mala-madiga and kamma-kapu in the Alamuru constituency itself around sexual politics. The dalits openly opposed such abuse of dalit women by upper castes. And groups of dalit men and upper caste men confronted each other physically. After these incidents, such 'abuse' has reportedly stopped. Another incident of those times that was mentioned to us was – how the dalits fought the kmmas when they beat up an SC boy in a toddy shop.

As a result of these confrontations, there is an impression that has gained ground that 'one should not touch the SCs. They create trouble'.

In East Godavari district, Christianity is more than 150 years old. The earliest missionaries –Lutheran and Canadian Baptist- came here and established churches in the early part of the nineteenth century. Most of the dalits in the district are Christians. Apart from the traditional denominations such as Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, RCM churches, there are innumerable Believers' Groups in the with a wide variety of names. In the Alamuru village alone, which is of course the mandal head quarters too with a population of nearly 10,000, there were about 18 churches of different denominations. Some of these churches also have exclusive upper caste membership.

The church has also established some of the oldest educational and medical institutions in the district. Each of the big and small towns such as Rajahmundry, Kakinada, Kadiyam, Eluru, Mandapeta has at least two schools established by one church or the other - RCM schools, Lutheran convents, etc. Some well known institutions among them are St. Theresa College in Eluru, Lutheran Hospital in Rajahmundry, and so on.

There is a strong dalit middle class in this district, that serves as the base for Mala Mahanadu, that has effectively used reservations in education and employment. Despite the strong base, Madiga Dandora has not had much impact. In terms of population, Malas seem to outnumber Madigas in a big way.

In electoral politics, there is a popular belief that the Godavari districts very often determine who comes to power and who doesn't since each of the districts vote for a party *en masse*. These districts together send about 5 Members of Parliament and 39 MLAs. So in terms of elections, for both TDP and Congress, these districts are significant. The voter profile of the MP constituency – Ramachandrapuram, under which Alamuru constituency lies is as follows: *kapus + toorpu kapus - 58,000; setti balija 18,000; devangulu 15,000; kammias 21,000; SCs 32,000 (Madigas – 9,000)*.

Capturing the political processes set in motion by the reservations for Dalits in Panchayat Raj structures

Reservations in Panchayats – Dalits and Women

The issue of the functioning of sarpanches has been situated on the axes of centralization Vs decentralisation of financial powers/ resources; and empowerment and non-empowerment of dalits, women and BCs. It has been widely noted that, historically, in Andhra Pradesh, the powers and duties of the sarpanchs, in short, the panchayats itself, have been drastically cut down, with a corresponding increase in the power of either the bureaucrats such as district and mandal level officials, or the parallel bodies such as education committees, water users' associations, etc. The list of issues that the village panchayat was looking after has drastically been reduced (Ravinder etc....)

Secondly, coming to the issue of reservation of seats for Dalits, BCs and women in the panchayats, it has been argued that the assumptions that they will be empowered through this process and that the functioning of the panchayats will change because of their entry are far fetched. These assumptions underestimate the structural impediments that the subordinated face in functioning in the panchayats (Seemanthini Niranjana- *'The Violence of Development'*).

What is interesting is that, going beyond the empowerment and governance debates, Niranjana's article tantalizingly suggests but leaves the question of relation between political processes outside the electoral political arena and the constitution of interests of the marginalized to be explored by others. If 'women's interests' are not without a referent, then how does one begin to think about the interests of the dalit women'?

Before we begin the discussion on the dalit woman, one needs to ask the question as to how have dalit woman and her subjectivity been theorized, because it is only through such a discourse that the parameters of assessing her functioning and ability are set. Mary John analyses 'Dalit woman as anthropological category (Mary John – Dalit woman in the Western Ethnography in Anupama Rao (ed.), 'Caste and Gender'). From another angle, Anupama Rao traces dalit woman as the 'subject of atrocity', available to the legal discourse, where the dalit woman figures as a victim, of caste hierarchy alone.

Third, dalit women themselves are mounting the critique that despite dalit women's enormous political involvement in several movements in the 60 years of the nation-state

as well as before, neither the movements nor the theory has given them their due. It is only in the 80s and 90s that the dalit women collectives have begun questioning this lopsided understanding of the dominant perspectives on dalit women and started the process of re-inserting themselves into the discourse on dalit women. Strongly contesting the 'woman' of the feminist discourse as unrepresentative of the dalit woman's realities, they are articulating their interests as aligned along those of their communities, in struggles with the upper castes in local areas, institutionalized casteism of the bureaucracy and the apathy of the state policies. (see Gopal Guru in A.Rao, op.cit.)

Located in these debates is the issue of reservations for dalit women in the panchayat system. It is important to see the political processes set in motion by this reservation for dalits and dalit women in the panchayat raj to even begin locating dalit women somewhere. And ask the question what happens to this issue if it is aligned at an angle – of the mobilization and movements of dalits? From the perspective of the dalits and dalit communities where do panchayat elections, sarpanch posts and dalit women sarpanchs figure?

What is involved in being a Sarpanch, in the first place?

Gram Panchayats, apart from their own sources of revenue, get their resources from two major sources. Their **own resources** range from collection of house tax in the village (entire amount goes to the village panchayat), auctioning the village tanks to the fishing societies (in East Godavari, a major source of revenue for the panchayats), cess on markets and marketing societies, revenue from village common lands, roads (major link roads that pass through the village), registration and transfer of private lands, etc. Apart from these, there are **automatic grants** that come to panchayats, i.e., *talasari* grant (grant made by the government based on population), grant that comes with the declaration of the best panchayat, grants from the Central Finance Commission and from the State Finance Commission. The last type of grants depend on the ability of the panchayat to lobby with the various **officials, funds and bodies** ranging from Mandal Parishad Development Officer, the District Collector, Zila Parishad grant, Mandal Parishad grant, and the MLA fund, MP funds, etc. This is usually available for infrastructural needs of the village: *big and small drains, bore wells, community hall, approach road, anganwadi building, construction of bunds to prevent the village from getting flooded*. It depends upon the ingenuity of the sarpanch to obtain these grants, and the will to put them to good use. The last is the major source of revenue for the entire bureaucracy and political leaders -from the MLA to the sarpanch and the village secretary. While it is usual for the MLA to get 10% of each sanctioned grant, the village sarpanch gets 10%. But many upper caste sarpanchs also get the contracts in the name of their friends and relatives and obtain better shares of the sanctioned grant.

The network of authority/powers that have a bearing on the functioning of the sarpanch is three fold, that can lead to innumerable configurations. There is the **bureaucracy** (District Collector, CEO of Zila Parishad, Mandal Revenue Officer, Mandal Parishad Development Officer and the Village Secretary); there are **elected representatives** (MP,

MLA, Zila Parishad Chairperson, Members of the Zila Parishad, Mandal Parishad President, Mandal Parishad Territorial Committee members, Sarpanch, Upa-sarpanchs and ward members). And, finally there are **party political structures** (political parties and their cadre everywhere; contractors who are both beneficiaries and patrons of the parties; local landlords, etc.). And they depend on a number of political configurations at the level of assembly constituency itself – because much of it depends on the party configurations themselves. If the sarpanch belongs to the TDP while the MLA belongs to the Congress, the process of obtaining funds gets so much more difficult.

Every panchayat has two accounts for both of which sarpanch is a common signatory. For one account, she/he is the sole signatory and for the other, she and the upa-sarpanch are the cosignatories. Cheque power is like a hanging sword for many BCs, SC and women sarpanchs because they have to figure out when exactly the cheque has to be signed for etc., because many a time, advance is drawn ahead by the contractor, and work not done, implicating these people on corruption charges. Usually upper caste ward members manufacture corruption charges against a dalit or BC sarpanch to make a case for stripping them of the cheque power.

Almost all the grants depend on the power, will and the ingenuity of this political leader of the village that is the sarpanch, to obtain and be used for the village. The sarpanch, therefore, is hardly a position that can be fully utilized by a simple *occupation of the post*. “A sarpanch has to run, persuade, and not sit in the village all the time.”¹ There are many upper caste sarpanchs who are known to be unintelligent’ and ‘lazy’ who do not know how to get things for themselves and the village, despite having the required money and connections, despite the possibilities of making more money for themselves and increasing their standing in the village by laying a road or two. In a sense, *there are ‘dummies’ and ‘proxies’ amongst upper castes too*.

A successful sarpanch also needs, many a time, the trust of the communities in his/her judgment – that they will be fair at least in the allotment of old age pensions, housing schemes, construction of the roads etc. In this scenario, for the upper caste sarpanchs, there are either no stakes or it is simply to extend the powers that he/she already has. It is almost impossible for the upper caste sarpanchs to wield this power in a fair manner. But for any of the reserved candidates, there are several expectations from the members of the community, family and from themselves, along with enormous resistance from the upper castes determined to not let them even function. The post is seen by dalits as a rare opportunity to enter the books of Gram Panchayat’s history- list of sarpanchs on the wall of the panchayat board. The community name has to be held high in the village. The name in the list of panchayat board members is significant, precisely for this reason.

¹ From interview with Kataari Nagamma, dalit ex-sarpanch of the village Badugu Vari Lanka, Alamuru Mandal.

Dalits and Political Processes – Panchayat elections

Panchayat elections are a heavily contested affair, with a lot of money being spent by kapu and kamma men in both congress and the TDP on either themselves or other BC and SC candidates that they put up. For the political parties, it is the time of rewarding long-standing party workers, consolidating local vote bank and or building for the next major election. For the local rich or dominant community, it is the time of reaffirming their prestige, showing off to their peers, reasserting their power vis-à-vis dalits and the BCs in the village.

The identification of the villages for reservation itself sets off the process. Usually, the rotation system works in an order – OC, BC and SC with OC women, BC women and SC women interspersed in between. But it is not always predictable whether it will be allotted to women or men. **In this system, in each village, the opportunity for an SC woman to contest comes approximately once in thirty years.**

As such, it seems to become an issue of heavy strategizing and thinking for dalit families and communities to put up their candidate and make him or her win. Usually, either the political party or the rich men in the village support each candidate. It applies to both dalits and BCs, men and women. While at one level, where SC communities are politicized as a community, there is eagerness to make their candidates win; at other places, where SCs have nurtured political ambition by being active in party activities, even women's posts come handy; and at places where neither of these two contexts exist, picking up of the dalit women candidates by the dominant caste in the village is not uncommon. However, everywhere the win of the candidate depends on the electoral players and their ingenuity.

At various points in the last thirty years, villages here have seen mobilization of dalits against lynching of young dalit men, rapes of dalit women, burnings, share in assigned land, endowment land, location of public toilets, breaking of Ambedkar statues, quality of anganwadi schools, upper caste exploitation of dalit women, sites for house construction, asking for flood relief and many other issues that have not come to limelight. There are many instances of dalit ward members and some instances of dalit sarpanchs being beaten up and sometimes killed. In villages that have mobilized on these issues, either due to the presence of active Field Labour Cooperative Societies, influence of the communist party, or an NGO like Samata or sheer gritty dalit men and women, there are more chances of dalit votes being consolidated during the election time and being used strategically. Usually, such a process seems to coincide with places where dalits have some kind of access to land.

Women, more than men, seem to come through the route of party politics, if not directly, by the involvement of their families in such politics. Quite a few SCs have become part of the mainstream parties, TDP and Congress and have been serving them loyally. Here, it is important to understand the relationship between the party and the party cadre at the village level. If we take an assembly constituency as the unit for studying the political

processes, we can see that each party cultivates a group of people in a village to work for the party. Usually these are power brokers who act as a bridge between the party bosses and the villages/ voters. These are (usually men) very articulate people who get small little things done for people and when necessary approach the higher levels in the party to get favours. While some are full time power brokers, some have small time occupations such as LIC agents. The MLA by granting a favour here and a favour there keeps them under his umbrella. The ultimate reward these local party activists is to get the party ticket in the panchayat or mandal parishad elections.

Winning of a particular candidate itself depends on a number of factors – such as the extent of support among upper castes (in many villages the number of kapu votes exceeds that of SCs and many times, SCs and BCs put together); the extent of conflict between the upper castes and the SCs (wherein upper castes decide to put up a Relli candidate instead of mala or madiga and vote for her or him); sympathy for the candidate (he had served the party a lot but not got much in return) etc.

Profile of the Alamuru Constituency²

Alamuru assembly constituency was earlier called Alamuru taluk, and has an identity from the colonial times. Alamuru is a village, mandal and a constituency. It serves as mandal headquarters. The village has MRO office, court, police station, Mandal Parishad Office. Its two previous MLAs belonged to TDP and earlier to that Congress, and earliest to CPI. The current MLA is Dr. Krishna Chowdhary, whose father was in CPI. He belongs to the congress party. MLA is a practicing doctor, whose hospital is popularly known by his father's name – Tatabbayi hospital. He has a reputation of being kind to the poor among his constituency.

The constituency itself is said to be dominated by the TDP and the MLA is an exception – he is supposed to have won on a combination of anti-incumbency and sympathy because he had lost the earlier election. Constituency is divided into three mandals – Mandapeta, Alamuru and Kapileswaram. At the mandal level, it is dominated by the TDP members – two mandals of Mandapeta, Alamuru are dominated by TDP and Kapileswaram leans towards Congress. It is dominated by kammass who control land as well as industry. Numerically, kapus are the majority. After them, BCs – *setti balija, chakali, mangali, goundla*- are stronger. Then come the SCs, among whom malas are numerically stronger. Malas and madigas have often acted in unison against the upper castes and the division among them vis-à-vis the upper castes is not visible.

In Alamuru mandal, there are 18 panchayats – among which:

3 are reserved for SCs (2 general + 1 woman);

² Given the fact that we were dealing with the issue of dalit women sarpanchs, which means electoral politics, reservations, village politics, caste relations and so on, we thought in the first round of field work we would take an assembly constituency as a unit for study. Alamuru constituency is a well known constituency in East Godavari district, plus Samatha our local contact NGO works with Panchayat Raj Institutions in just one constituency.

9 for BCs (6 general + 3 women) and
6 OCs (2 for women).

The three constituencies reserved for SCs are:

Madike (Bangaru Adinarayana - relli)
Nawabpet (Varasala Annavaram - maala) and
Alamuru (Talla Saroja David - maala)

Alamuru Mandal Parishad is headed by Dandangi Ramarao, who is also a dalit.

In **Mandapeta mandal**, there are 12 gram panchayats – among which:

2 are reserved for SCs (1 general + 1 woman);
5 are for BC (1 woman) and
5 are for OCs (1 woman).

SC panchayats are Mernipadu and Kesavaram. Both are won by women. They are Netala Karunapriya (mala) and Bangaru Chilakamma (relli).

In Kapileswaram mandal, there are 19 gram panchayats, of which:

4 are reserved for SCs and one among them for SC women. The four gram panchayats are Nidesenametta, Naagula Cheruvu, Padamati Khandrika and Kedarlanka. The sarpanchs are Sira Nagamani (madiga); Chirakoti Nageswara Rao (mala); Kondeti Nageswara Rao (mala);

Alamuru mandal alone has 200 rice mills and nearly 150 brick kilns.

2. The Interviews

Alamuru gram panchayat

Talla Saroja, current Sarpanch, SC (woman) reserved post.

Talla David, husband of Sarpanch

Alamuru has a population of 10,000, of which 7,000 are voters. Numerically dominated by kapus – 2,800, followed by BCs - setti balija, followed by SCs (Madigas and males-1500 & 230). Earlier, the panchayat was headed by the OCs, the kammis. Before that, it was reserved for BCs. It was expected that it would be reserved for the SCs. Alamuru is situated 30 km from Rajahmundry, off the national highway 5, well connected in all directions to Mandapeta, Ravulapalem, Kapileswaram etc.

Alamuru is a special major panchayat, ranking along other big panchayats such as Kadiyam, Dhavaleswaram, Anaparti, Yeleswaram, Gokavaram etc. The panchayat's annual income is Rs.49 lakhs. It has three big tanks (of 15, 12 and 6 acres each) that yield an income of 5 to 6 lakhs. There are several brick kilns and some rice mills as well as a market yard. House tax itself is a major source of income.

It has 16 wards. Currently, 9 wards are held by TDP; 6 by congress and one is independent. The upa-sarpanch is a kapu, while the sarpanch is a dalit woman named Talla Saroja David. Earlier she was a ward member.

Despite his loyalty to the congress party, Talla David reported that his wife was not given the ticket. He decided to file nomination papers anyway as an independent candidate. The post was contested by six in total – Eetakota Papa (madiga woman whose husband worked as an engineer); Cheekaramalli Suvarnabai (mala and official congress candidate, whose husband is an ex-serviceman and the family owns a piece of agricultural land); Talla Saroja David (independent but rebel congress candidate, mala) Her husband David has been a party cadre of congress for a long time. He was a political mediator and has a colorful reputation among the community. A known lover of alcohol, he maintains a group of SC youth. Saroja herself is a housewife; Yarla Susheela (mala, official TDP candidate), Saale Venkatalakshmi (mala, TDP rebel candidate) and Lanka Nani (mala, independent, moves around with Congress people and lives with a madiga man).

The election itself was quite an interesting affair. David expected a congress ticket but was denied, so he filed nomination papers. Eetakota Papa was promised a ticket by the TDP but was not given. Suvarnabai, the official candidate of the Congress is supposed to have spent quite a lot of money. Lanka Nani, we were told, does not enjoy a good reputation. She is supposed to have begged for a Congress ticket but when denied, is supposed to have filed the nomination anyway. The nominal nomination fee of Rs.60 is supposed to have eased the process of nominations.

Before the elections, an attempt was made to make the election 'unanimous'. A meeting was called for by Samata Voluntary Service Society between the TDP and the Congress. The formula was that TDP would be given 6 ward seats and congress 6. When the TDP bargained for 9, the attempt collapsed. David rejected this formula and went ahead with his own plans.

In the last days towards the election, TDP withdrew all its effort seeing the trend. The contest was between Suvarnabai and Saroja David. It is said in the village that Saroja David won on account of the sympathy for the family which had only daughters and had not made any money in the last many years despite being in the Congress. In a sense, it was thought that if David was given the opportunity to get the daughters married through the gram panchayat, it would be good.

Talla Saroja, after the election, remains in the background and David acts as the de facto sarpanch. David has a reputation of being 'headstrong' in the village but also of acting independently of any other pressures. We heard that his dominance was not going uncontested – the TDP ward members are actively contesting his dominance; sometimes even obstructing his entry into the panchayat office.

But not being in the know of things, we were told, he was also supposed to have landed in bigger financial problems – constructing a drain on his own expense (Rs.70,000) the contract of which was originally given to a kapu man who delayed it – but the contract itself in the danger of being cancelled by the PWD. We could not speak to Talla Saroja as she did not agree to being interviewed.

Talla David When contacted, Talla David turned out to be a seasoned political activist, working with the congress party for the past 30 years, after a brief stint with CPI in the mid 1960s. He listed the names of contestants in Assembly elections in East and West Godavari from 1970 to 2006, in the course of conversation. Similarly, he has the mental map of the demographic distribution of malas and madigas at his fingertips, almost in entire Coastal Andhra. He has served one of the local senior congress leaders who fell out of favour with current CM ceasing his fortune too. He has an MA in Political Science but does not have a regular job. He has never contested elections but had ambitions of doing so at some point. When the opportunity came for SC women, he naturally thought of putting up his wife, who had earlier served as a ward member in the panchayat.

After winning the elections, he said he also managed to win over the majority of ward members to his side. Do intense discussions happen in the panchayat meetings and what does his wife do during these times, we asked. Yes, they happen all the time but she is a calm person and stays mum throughout. She does not speak much, if at all, unlike him. He says that despite his intentions to do good for the village and the community people continue to misunderstand him. He has got a major drain cleared due to which one does not see a single mosquito in the village now. He has got a water tank built with a capacity of 1,20,000 liters. He also got into a contract with Nandi Foundation that will set up a

filter water plant worth 22 lakhs (17 lakhs of theirs and 4 lakhs of the panchayat which will provide clean water cheaply. Under the Upadhi pathakam, already 14,000 job cards have been distributed.

Saalè Dosamma (one of the 6 sarpanch contestants in Alumuru panchayat)

Dosamma was most reluctant to talk in the absence of her husband. A native of Choppella village, she finished her intermediate from Ravulapalem and came to Alamuru after marriage. Her husband, Sale Satyanarayana, an LIC agent, has been working in the TDP for a long time. Though TDP promised them a seat initially, in the end, it gave a ticket to someone else. Her husband, upset with the party, decided to remain in the contest. Did she have any inclination to contest? No, but since her husband was in pain, she decided to go according to his wishes. How did she do the canvassing? Though scared during the early days, she reported that her appeal went like this: “if you give me votes I will show what I can do”. Did she not tell her husband that it would be a costly affair and one should not go ahead? He is not the type to listen, she says. Once he has decided about something, he will go ahead.

Yalla Susheela (one of the 6 contestants in the Alumuru panchayat)

In contrast to Dosamma, Susheela was most willing to talk. She is 7th passed and has two children, aged 13 and 8, both of whom she has put up in Alamuru hostel itself for fear of their education getting spoilt. She and her husband have been most interested in politics for a long time. Her husband, a graduate from the same village, is a full time TDP worker and a small contractor who takes up work from big contractors to construct buildings and roads. He is a community leader too, mediating during disputes and conflicts in the locality, including love marriages. He also writes petitions to approach higher officials whenever the need arises; and takes people to the police or the collector for further action. He has also been involved in obtaining land pattas or house pattas for the SCs.

Susheela’s father was a lock lushker – a govt. employee. None of the children could get the job because they had not cleared the 10th class. After marriage, she has been involved in helping the people in the mala peta regarding old age pensions, water pipes, street lights, drains etc. She has never been shy of demanding from officials what is needed for the peta. In addition, she also lobbies with the husband to get things for the people. She was the president of the DWACRA group in the harijanawada for five years but says that the groups shut down because some of the poorer members could not repay and their comments hurt her.

She expected a TDP ticket and was happy when the ticket was given to her. Feels that people forget what they promise during elections. She canvassed without any problem during elections and would have loved the task of helping people out, getting things done for the village and talking to various officials. The TDP candidate who lost the election to the current MLA, Jogiswara Rao, financed her election. She and her husband also spent a lot of money; incurred debt on the house; but could not win the election. Her observation

is that while people get things done through her husband and her, they are not willing to vote for her. Even the parties, those people who have worked hard do not get seats, only those who cheat get the seat. During the election campaign for the election, people told her that everyone promises many things but does not do. Susheela told them that as a woman she knows how to solve the problems of women and will do so even by visiting them at home – whether it is the drains, pipes, toilets etc. When asked whether before the elections, there were attempts to make it unanimous, she reverently talks of the venerable kamma leaders whose attempts did not succeed. She is quite confident that at least in the next elections, she would be given a seat.

She thinks that this kind of reservation/opportunity comes rarely for harijans; usually these posts are occupied by kmmas and kapus – big people. But harijans (we) are not able to use this reservation properly.

It is important, she feels that elected SC representatives do their work well, because, finally, it is the good name that will remain in their stead.

How come the husband encourages her so much? Theirs was a love marriage. He listens to her advice. And never stops her from doing anything, encourages her to go wherever she is needed. Similarly, she also understands that his work in the party may not yield immediate results but would do so in future. She thinks that if she takes a different point of view, it will lead to marital conflict. She understands him and he understands her.

About the relations with upper castes - she confidently says that across the party barriers people come to help when there is a problem. Within the TDP too, the kmmas or the kapus would come to the rescue of the dalits even when there is a conflict between the upper castes and the dalits. She believes that they never leave the SCs in the lurch. She claims that they look after Susheela and her family like a sister; she and her husband always dine in their houses, along with them, without any feeling of untouchability. People visit her house without any party feeling or the caste feeling.

Padamati Khandrika

Kondeti Nageswara Rao, current Sarpanch

The village has a total population of 6,000 people, of which 3,200 are voters. Majority are kapus (1,800); SC (400) and BCs (450). Rest are chowdharys. This was earlier reserved for the BCs and now has come to the SCs. Total number of wards is 12, of which 6 belong to BCs, 3 belong to OCs and 3 for SCs. It is a kapu dominated village with a few weavers. There are a few Madiga families too. Nobody in the village owns more than 10 acres of land. But SCs do not own practically any land. He is exceptional because he owns 4 acres of land.

This panchayat is next to the Angara panchayat and Nageswara Rao (45), the current sarpanch was born in that village and moved to this village after marriage. He was

unanimously elected. He has had a long stint in politics, party affiliation being the congress. He owns four acres of land, has a own house. Is a father of seven daughters, all of whom he is educating. Two are graduates, one is going to do B.Ed.; the second one is a graduate and a taekwondo champion and a weightlifter too. Two other daughters are studying in gurukul schools. When the election notification came, before it became clear that he was eligible despite the number of children he has, he made his daughter file the nomination for the Sarpanch post.

He says he loves his caste (*kulamante prema undi*) and has long since decided that he would work for his community. He has long been managing the caste relations in the village on a 'harmonious platform' – working for the issues of BCs, STs and SCs. In the village itself, he had headed the SC, ST, BC association president (that has nine caste sanghams) for the past 12 years. And has a reputation of being a *peddamanishi* in the entire village. He had negotiated several conflicts between the upper castes and the rest in the village. Whenever a conflict arose, he would be called upon to settle the issues. He cites an instance from his youth when an SC youth was beaten up by a kamma youth where on behalf of the society they mobilized SCs, STs and BCs under one banner. The SCs had asked the BCs one pertinent question - if you want us to come for your issues, you need to come for our issues. Around 10,000 people from several villages gathered. Those who came to confront the SCs had to withdraw. That was when he was elected the president of the Sangham.

Before he moved to this village, in Angara, under the aegis of the SC, BC Sangham, they got 10 acres of lanka land allotted to SCs, during the 20 point programme implemented during emergency: 2 acres of endowment land for the BCs and 1 acre for the Madigas, with the help of a Chowdhary Sarpanch, Subbareddy. Every year the land is auctioned for lease; and the collected rice was distributed to the SCs during the days of drought. Income from one acre of coconut plantation has been used to pay taxes; income from one acre is used towards various expenses to be incurred to go to the various offices including the collector etc.

But a lot of endowment land, 60 acres of Govindaswami temple and 20 acres of Nookalamma temple remains in the hands of the kmmas. Most of the land has been under the control of the kmmas who, in the past, had become rich by subletting the land to BCs and SCs for high rents and became rich in the process – by giving 3 to 6 bags of paddy to the government, but taking 30 bags from the tenant farmer. Now, the government too has increased the rents for the endowment land, reducing the margins. Every year, it is the kapus and the kmmas who get the lease rights, almost without open bidding.

In this village, Padamati Khandrika, their own SC, BC society has managed to get lease rights for 8 acres of endowment land last year. The SC Sangham got the lease rights for three years, which it gives to others on annual lease. The money thus earned is profit for the society. How did they clinch this deal?

For years, they have been trying to get lease rights for endowment land during the time of annual bidding. Every year, he says, the kapus and kammass see to it that the SCs do not get rights to even one cent of endowment land. Year before last, Wilson of SC corporation stood behind them giving important support and suggestions: that the SCs should bid as high as others do and not lag behind. He also suggested to them that if it comes to that, the SC society should buy up 10 acres of land, to be distributed among the landless SCs in the village. The SCS also readied the money on his suggestion, but that year they could not do it.

Next year, Nageswara Rao and others strategized to participate in the bidding. There was a long delay, much resistance to this proposal but the SCs persisted, saying that even at the market rate, they will take it, pledging their own land. They even got ready to pledge their land. This year, the SCs were prepared, with money, demanding that they be given rights to 10 acres out of the 60 acres of endowment land under the Gopaldaswami temple lands, under the gram panchayat of Angara. They said that the SCs can ask for the rights at half the price, according to the order given by the collector. The kapus tried another tactic, asking the SCs to cultivate 2 cents of land each. SCs agreed to that but insisted that the formal use rights be given to them; and they will not agree to any informal arrangements wherein the SCs will be made into the tenants of tenants.

The land has been leased at the rate of 30 bags of rice. Now, the land has been leased not to the SCs but others, because, Nageswara Rao says that SCs are not developed enough to cultivate that land. If the others cultivate, the Society will get some profit, which will be of use to everyone.

Nageswara Rao is the secretary of the mandal sarpanchs association and may go onto become the office bearer of the constituency level platform in future. He is quite active in training programmes and talks of encouraging dalit women sarpanchs such as Sara Nagamani of neighboring village to speak up for the dalits in their villages. This village, selected for the inauguration of the Indiramma Adarsha Grama Pathakam, is rushing towards finishing all the houses allotted for the SCs, BCs and STs. And instead of giving it to an outside contractor, he saw to it that it is completed under his guidance, with local specifications taken care of. Indiramma Gruha Kalpa of EGO district has been inaugurated by CM Rajasekhara Reddy. Apart from Rs.33,000 that the govt. gives to the beneficiary, in this village, they are using DWCRA funds towards this; and the rest they are filling in through the EGS scheme.

He petitioned the MRO that the contract should not be given to any outside contractor. He has plans to develop the local village tank area into a park, laying the road, development of house plots etc. and is already lobbying for this work with the ZP chairperson for Rs.20 lakhs. They have asked the collector to sanction Rs.5 lakhs towards the panchayat building.

He is proud of the fact that he has access to the officials – collector, MRO, Zila Parishad chairpersons etc. That he can, with a little prior preparation, ask for funds for the village

and is able to get them for the village. At the same time, he recognizes that it is not possible for everybody to be like him. He says that only those people with a certain stature in the society, ability to articulate issues, those with certain recognition of working with people can do these negotiations.

He is having a rather smooth run in the panchayat and is able to manage well, because of his previous reputation. Usually, some contestation takes place when new schemes come and when a particular fund is to be allocated among different castes. For example, old age pensions. He claims that he usually sees to it that just distribution of funds occurs in the panchayat among all the castes, including OCs. Among the 200 houses allotted under the Indiramma scheme, he saw to it that 100 are allotted to SCs; 10 for the BCs, and the rest for the other castes.

Madike

Bangaram Adinarayana, current Sarpanch, Relli caste

Madike is a roadside village that lies on the NH -5, on the road from Rajahmundry to Ravulapalem. It is a major panchayat with a total population of 10,000, with nearly 5,300 votes. Of these, SCs constitute 860 votes (expected to rise to 2,000 by the time of next election); BCs 1800 votes and the rest belong to kapu, kamma, rajus and brahmins. Setti balijas and chakalis constitute the BCs. There are around 12 relli votes, in five relli families. It also has a few hamlets that are scattered at a distance from the village.

There are no malas in the village, it is a totally madiga population – of nearly fifteen hundred. Nearly 220 families own ½ an acre of assigned land in one of the lankas. They also obtained loans for bore wells etc. And all of them also cultivate their land. Another thirty members are given ‘chettu pattas’ (pattas for trees) on grassland next to PWD canal land nearly 7 years ago, under the aegis of Field Labour Cooperative Society of the village – 60 trees for each dalit. They have started bearing fruit now. Since the trees stand on the banks of the kapu fields and since they have lost the grassland, kapus resented the allotment and killed some trees. It became a source of tension between kapus and SCs. This Society is active even now with office bearers. The society also has rights over 11 acres of assigned land which they put up for open auction every year. Recently, when an illegal transfer of a part of this land (2 acres and 50 cents) occurred, during which a kapu who obtained it through deceit sold it to another one, the Society got into action and got the rights back, under the recent Congress govt. stricture that all illegal transfer of assigned lands is invalid and should be reverted to the SCs.

Currently the Society is trying to stake claim to the endowment lands (22 acres) that are under the control of the Sivalayam trust which is dominated by the kapus. The society is asking for that land to construct the newly sanctioned 78 houses under the Indiramma Illu Pathakam for the SCs. They suspect it may not work out.

There is an Ambedkar Society that is registered for youth. There is dalit youth with a PhD who is working as a teacher; at least five graduates, some of whom are working as teachers etc.; some more SSC passed. And now, most children go to school. Several are employed in the government offices as fourth class employees in Kakinada, Ravulapalem and other places.

The rest of the people go to work in Rajahmundry and other nearby nurseries for daily wages. Many have become masons, some tailors etc. Women, by and large, do not go out to work, except in nurseries that provide for travel and pay a decent wage.

Nobody goes to work on kapu or kamma lands from this community. Therefore, economically or socially the community does not depend on Kapus or other upper castes. Additionally, all of them are practicing Christians with only a few going to the Hindu temples. Their power comes from this non-dependence, apart from the voting rights.

The miniscule population of the Rallis that lives separately from the village, depends on fishing and fruit selling for survival. It is only in the last six to seven years that they have started permanent residence here. There was regular seasonal migration to Visakhapatnam earlier. Madigas do not consider them to be part of the village population and there are no relations between these communities as yet.

Six months before the elections, in a small tiff with the dalit youth, a kapu bajji seller overturned a boiling hot oil pan onto them. While one was severely injured, others sustained minor injuries. The entire community marched to the police station and registered a complaint. SVOS helped them in turning it into a SC/ST atrocities case. Even now, the case is going on in the face of several attempts by the Kapus to come to a compromise. Madigas have not relented yet.

In this background of severe contestation and resentment of the kapus, the elections came as an opportunity for the kapus to get back at the SCs. It was clear that if the madigas selected one candidate unanimously, he would win the contest. So, they selected a relli man, Bangaram Adinarayana, who was willing to contest, and put him for a contest. Several madiga men had (seven in all) also filed their nominations by then.

As usual, one month before the elections there was a village meeting called for by the OCs to discuss the modalities of seat distribution, at Sivalayam where all communities met. The madiga community firmly opposed anybody outside the community, especially Adinarayana as their candidate. The Madigas chose the local MRPS leader, the young Muniprasad as the mediator to choose their candidate. He selected Lazar as the candidate at a meeting before the Sivalayam meeting in the madiga peta wherein the rest of the candidates gave a signed statement saying that they will withdraw. When the Madigas stated this at the Sivalayam meeting, wherein they also asked the TDP and the Congress to withdraw their candidates, the upper castes did not agree to withdraw Adinarayana.

Then the kapus went back, regrouped and passed a whip that all the BCs should vote in unison, along with kapus for Adinarayana. They convinced the BCs saying that – how can a madiga man sit on the chair, and mediate our quarrels. Their stand was, *chachinodaina undachchu gani, maadigodu undakudadu* (a dead man is better than a madiga man) Adinarayana was hidden away till a day before the election till which time the madiga candidates were willing to withdraw, if the other castes came for compromise. When it became clear Adinarayana was not withdrawing, they all decided to contest. Even then it was a tough contest because the madiga candidates had some support among other castes. On the day of the election, a young madiga boy died, wherein fifty people could not go to the polling booth. Adinarayana won by 70 votes. The strong conviction of the madigas is that the BCs and kapus saw to it that the one opportunity that the madigas got to enter the rolls of the panchayat was deliberately taken away. And there is no getting around that fact. Despite the fact that the dalits worked for 60 years for all the other parties to get them elected, the upper castes snatched away the single opportunity that the dalits got to get elected to the panchayat – “the upper castes do not want our name to be mentioned in the list of presidents of the panchayat after independence”.

This strategy of foregrounding Rellis, in the face of consolidation of Malas or Madigas was first adopted in Kadiyam, where too, madigas do not bow before the upper castes. It is said that in Kadiyam too, a Relli sweeper was chosen from the office, given Rs.200 and asked to file the nomination.

However, post-election the situation is quite tense in the panchayat itself. The three SC ward members (one for 360 voters) yield quite a bit of influence in the panchayat and have not let the BC and kapu members get away with many things that are inimical to the madiga community interests. Adinarayana is caught in this trap, whereby he is persuaded to sign on certain schemes of which the major share goes to non-dalits. If he protests, he is abused and sometimes beaten. The madiga community is currently involved in strategizing to turn him to their side so that he would be out of that trap.

Currently, a contest is happening between the kapus and the SCs about the house construction and the road construction. When the funds were sanctioned for the road construction, road was laid in the entire village, excluding the dalit peta. Similarly, in the construction of the houses, the dalits do not want external contractors; they want to handle the money and the material issues on their own, directly with the office of the MRO.

39 year old Adinarayana looks tormented when he speaks about his being the sarpanch. As an eligible man, he has felt that he had the right to contest and win. His wife had prodded him one evening and he felt the urge to contest. The kapu youth also encouraged him. Since there was a threat to his life before the elections from the SCs, he hid for a week in Kapileswaram and came back just before the elections. He never stepped out of his house and went for canvassing, did not even step into the madiga peta.

And he won with a majority of 125. He had thought that after becoming a sarpanch, life will be smoother. But, it has become quite tense due to the conflict between the kapus and the SCs. SCs are very strong in the panchayat and it is their word that goes. His wife interjects saying that before the election, he used to go fishing and she would sell them. Now, he says that it would not be proper for a Sarpanch to go fishing. And he also does not do much else. His son intervenes to say that the kapu nursery owners now hesitate to employ him as a daily wage labourer.

Adinarayana looks despondent saying that he thought he would earn some commission in the contract. The kapu man who got him elected got him sign on a contract document for a cement road in the village assuring him 10%. Then he got the cheque signed saying that he will give the money later. When Adinarayana protested, the kapu man threatened to kill him. Has he managed to do anything? Yes, Adinarayana got sanctioned almost 10 houses and built for all the Relli families in the village, for the first time. Though his house is not complete due to lack of money, others are near completion. More importantly, he got the village water tank built, right behind his house, giving a small part of his own land. The tank stands proudly. He thought he should do something to keep his name in the village and he did it. He has also managed to get a loan for his wife to set up a shamiana house from the SC corporation of Kakinada.

Again his wife intervenes to say that on 15th August when Adinarayana went to the school to hoist the national flag, none of the panchayat members went with him. Feeling bad, she sent her own children to accompany their father.

Mernipaadu

Netala Karunapriya, 22 years old, current Sarpanch.

Mernipaadu is an interior village, on the border of the Mandapeta mandal. Being not very accessible to the law and order officials, kodi pandelu (cockerel fights) and pekaata (card playing) flourish in the village. Recently, it was awarded with Nirmal Grama Puraskaram that is given to villages for successful implementation of the sanitation programmes, Karuna Priya's aunt proudly informed us.

The village has a total population of 800, with 520 or so votes. The SCs have only one ward, with only 70 votes in all. They reside in two parallel streets and some of them will move to the newly built houses once they are finished, under the Indiramma Adarsha Grama Padhakam. The houses are being constructed on a piece of assigned land. None of the SC families owns a cent of land. Despite several attempts, not a single cent of assigned land, except the newly given house pattas, has been allotted to the SCs. All are agricultural labourers working on the lands of kmmas, to some extent kapus. For nearly 20 years, they have been trying hard to stake their claim on the assigned land which till now has not borne fruit. BCs are the numerically dominant castes, while kmmas own most resources. The panchayat was previously reserved for the BCs. The ex-sarpanch's

brother in law, Chikena Veerraju is the upa-sarpanch of the current panchayat and practically runs the entire show. He belongs to setti balija community.

The community chose Karunapriya as their candidate because she is an intermediate (fail) and felt that she would understand the technicalities. Her aunt, a pastor, though wanted to contest, could not because she is a known Christian. Karuna is a 22 year old woman, married to a 7th pass man, who is widely believed to be less intelligent than her. She is raised by her grandmother, after her father passed away, and her mother was married to another man. Grandmother married her off nearly seven years ago, because she feared that after her death, nobody would look after Karuna. Karuna, till days ago, lived with her in-laws, with her children. One year ago, they moved out of the in-laws house, because of some problems.

Karuna, when chosen as a candidate, was quite reluctant to contest but did so due to the support of the community, in turn backed up by the upa-sarpanch, who seemed to have convinced everybody else in the village that she would be the right candidate. Karuna and her aunt claim that he spent the money towards her election – to the tune of Rs.30,000. She won over the TDP candidate with a majority of almost 120 votes, unheard of in the history of that small panchayat. Thereafter, her husband or her aunt accompanies her to the panchayat office; when she does not go, upa-sarpanch gets the files to her house where she signs them. He also takes her to the other offices such as MRO or MDO offices. She also says that she does get to speak there and everybody is cooperative. When something good is proposed for the village, no one objects. She cites the issue of individual toilets that have been built in the BC and SC localities.

Karuna is still well-guarded and others feel the need to protect her in the public glare, so that she may not blurt out too much. Her aunt, the upa-sarpanch's son, her husband, and a BC ward member all came rushing to the interview cite, within a few minutes of us reaching there. She smiles a lot, looks for reassurance from her aunt, looks to the son of the upa-sarpanch for confidence but when she talks, speaks clearly. She looks convinced of what she is doing right now – in the interests of the community and does not look too perturbed by the 'cooperation' of the BC upa-sarpanch. In fact, she sounded a little happy that she is doing this much; whereas about her family situation, she sounded quite disappointed – an uneducated husband, uncooperative in-laws etc. The trip to Delhi, when she received the Puraskaram is held in high regard by her and her close relatives. She sounds grateful that the upa-sarpanch took her all the way to Delhi for the trip bearing every expense. Her husband looked decidedly uncomfortable in the company of this public.

Currently, she is running the Nirantara Vidya Kendram that runs for half a year. She plans to work as an anganwadi teacher after she completes her tenure. She has not seen any money that comes by way of the commissions during the work undertaken in the village. She claims, quite believably, that all the work was done by the upa-sarpanch with his own money and the bills are still pending clearance.

An SC male ward member distinguishes the current situation from the earlier one when OCs were in power and now. Now, ordinary SCs from the village also can go to the Bank, MRO office or MDO office where they will be recognized and given a chair. An SC woman becoming a sarpanch has eased the access to at least some government offices. Earlier, when the non-dalits were in power, it was always a matter of going to the panchayat office, begging one or two people for a favour and waiting for things to work out. Now, at least there is some recognition than earlier.

What did the previous regimes do? Not much, first under the 20 point formula in emergency, houses were given; now again SCs are getting land; till now, it has been, 'we won't grow, we won't let you grow'. But, now we have started growing. After Karuna got elected, her aunt says that the village got houses, roads, toilets, drinking water pipeline, taps and a water tank. The village got Nirmal Grama Puraskar after the election, from the President of India, Abdul Kalam. Still there is a lot of work pending – road for the SC street, which is half way through.

Enthusiastically, Karuna narrates the experience of getting the award – to facilitate Nirmala Grama Puraskar, there was a door to door campaign to stop use of public spaces for shitting, including public toilets and to construct a private toilet for every household. All the existing public toilets have also been demolished and new private ones constructed for every household. Since that is the criterion of getting selected for the Puraskar, it was done. Even the *rythulu* (peasants), who are used to going around here and there, have stopped doing it.

What is the revenue of the panchayat? – Rs.40,000. There is a village tank and some coconut trees. The last president of the panchayat left a debit of Rs.1,20,000. Now the 'president' (vice-president) has managed to cover up the loss to some extent. The last president was a BC. Under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, currently the tasks of desilting the canals, laying roads, getting drains cleaned is getting done.

Karuna Priya also becomes vocal talking about the contribution of the vice-president. She assumed the voice of the panchayat saying that 'we' did it. The vice president spent Rs.1,00,000 for the work towards the Nirmal Grama Puraskar; so he spent it because he was assured that he would be reimbursed. Still it is pending. Even to receive the award, he footed the bill for travel and boarding; while her fare was reimbursed, his was not.

Do they interfere in the panchayat activities or do they leave both these people to do what they want? Chowdharys have supported both the SC Sarpanch and the BC upa-sarpanch and fully cooperate with the village development activities. Till now, they have been very helpful. Of course both inform the chowdharys before embarking on any thing and the latter give advice as to what would be the best course of action. Who is the village secretary and how does he cooperate? Shyamasunder, a Brahmin. He is ok. But he is part-time. Since the executive officers have become village secretaries from 2002 and given revenue responsibilities, along with many other responsibilities. Now, this post, though under the supervision of the Sarpanch, is no longer paid by the Panchayat, but by

the Mandal Parishad. That has made this person totally unaccountable. This panchayat does not have a permanent village secretary. As of now, 8000 gram panchayats do not have permanent, full-time village secretaries. The current village secretary travels from Mandapeta.

How come, since Chowdharys belong to TDP, how are they supporting these two, who belong to the Congress? Earlier they belonged to TDP, now they have shifted their loyalty to Congress. Pastoramma says that because things did not get done during the TDP regime, now they have shifted to Congress.

We asked a BC ward member who walked in how many votes her ward had. She said she did not know, much to the amusement of everyone. Then Karuna Priya replied that each ward has 67 votes. There are two BC women ward members. The last Sarpanch is another the male BC ward member. The TDP wanted to retain him in the panchayat so that they can make him the vice president.

Karuna adds to say that before the election, TDP asked for a bargain – that Karuna Priya will be unanimous but they will want the vice president. They also wanted five ward members for themselves. But the Congress people did not agree, wanting ward members to be divided equally. Then the contest happened. Congress won five ward members; TDP five. Sarpanch post had three contestants.

Did she think she would win? She says she thought so. She spent Rs.30,000 in all. Does she get any money as a commission in the contracts for roads etc.? No, she says she has not got a single paisa till now.

Does she find the PRI training useful? She giggles and says that the training programme tells the women to come out and do things; that women do not come out. She says that with everyone's cooperation she has been able to do things.

Nawabpet

Varasala Annavaram, Sarpanch, 2006 elections.

A village in Alamuru constituency, it lies somewhere between Padamati Khandrika and Alamuru. It is panchayat with a total of 3,000 kapu population, 150 mala families, 5 madiga families, 300 setti balija families and four or five dudekula families. The five kamma families own land ranging between 30-40 acres. A few weaver families are also present. All in all, it is a kapu dominated village with nearly 1200 votes. The upa-sarpanch is a kapu. Annavaram contested on behalf of Congress. There were other contestants too but since he is the candidate favored by kapus, he seems to have won.

While many kapus own lands, quite a few are daily wage labourers, a few owning land ranging from 10 to 20 acres. SCs do not own any land, but the Society owns 2 acres. Mostly they are daily wage labourers, but nobody works as a paaleru now. Mostly SCs

work as masons, workers in the brick kilns, and also as a part of the group that takes a task during the peak season of agricultural labour such as harvesting etc. During this season, the wages also rise to Rs.200 to Rs.300 per day. There are DWACRA schemes and MATS schemes operating in the village for women.

The caste relations have changed from his childhood days. During his previous generation, food carriers of SCs, BCs and OCs were carried in separate baskets by separate people from home to the field. But now, all carriers are being taken by the same person. While OCs still retain the feelings of superiority and nurture feelings of grievance when SCs come to power, it is lower among the BCs. The latter also work in the fields along with the SCs.

Annaram is a sharecropper of land, given by a kamma family. He is not literate and his wife, who studied till 7th, helps him in reading the necessary papers, he says. He has two daughters aged 7 and 3.

Annaram was not comfortable speaking about his sarpanch giri. About his own election, he talked confidently, saying that he contested on his own – thinking that, since the government gave an option for the SCs, why should he not contest. After the election, he finds panchayat being run by kapus and their fellow travelers. Asked how he would sign on a particular document, he said that his wife reads it for him. Does he feel that the sarpanch has any decision-making power? He said that a sarpanch does not have sole decision-making power. He has to go by consensus, after consulting everyone. How have the kapus taken his being the sarpanch? Naturally, he says, they have pain, which they cannot show, but it is there. “They (kapus) have accepted us because the government gave a provision, otherwise, will they ever allow us to come into power?” Do the SCs feel more confident with him in power? “Naturally, they feel reassured that their man is in power.” How do the kapus react if he pushes for anything for SCs? “They feel pained. Under the Indiramma Adarsha Gramam scheme, I am pushing for 7 houses for SCs among the 16 accepted ones. They are not accepting.” Who constructs these houses and do dalits ever take up any contracts? No dalits, including himself can take up any contract for development work because one needs an initial investment of Rs.40,000 to 50,000.” After Congress resurrected the cheque power, it is good, because it has come out of the hands of the village secretaries.

Badugu Vari lanka

Kataari Nagamma, Sarpanch (2001-2006)

Kataari Nagamma's name was reverberating in several contexts as the epitome of courage. She is known as the ideal dalit woman sarpanch who acted independently without fear, fought with the upper castes and who did a lot for the village. She is the person with whom many other dalit woman sarpanchs get compared, often unfavorably. So, her image preceded our meeting her in person.

Kataari Nagamma was the sarpanch of Baduguvvari palem from 2001 to 2006. Badugu Vani palem is a village off the NH -5, on the way from Rajahmundry to Ravulapalem, but lies at a 3km distance from the highway. The total population of the village is 4,000 with a total of 2,000 votes – 1050 kapus, 600 SCs, 150 BCs (goundla) and the rest belong to chakali, setti balija etc. There are twelve wards in the village,

Half the SC families have land pattas in their name worth 5 kunchas, which was given to them during the Indira Gandhi era. kapus also have land not exceeding 2 to 5 acres. goundlas also have small pieces of land. A part of the patta land given to the SCs was submerged under the new bridge constructed over the Godavari. SCs work both on their land and kapu lands too. They raise vegetables mostly; and to an extent flowers like chamanthi and lilies.

The SC lands that were given to the villagers have recently been re-allotted to Madigas of Madike village, by the MRO, leading a bitter conflict between the two villages. A case is currently in the court and CPI ML New Democracy is fighting on behalf of the Madike Madigas whereas the rest of the dalit leaders are asking the MRO to correct his mistaken allotment. It appears that there was a small extent of resale, non-cultivation etc. The MRO named the Malas as landlords and reallocated the land to the Madigas of Madike. Nagamma fought with the MRO arguing that a person with one or two acres of land does not become a landlord. She cited a GO whereby an SC with five acres of land also can be given govt. assigned land.

Moreover, SCs of Choppella, Chemudulanka, Potlanka, Ubalanka and Narsipudi had been allotted lands in Badugu Vari lanka during the Indira Gandhi time which has now become contentious. After the allotted lands for SCs have been submerged under the new bridge, this issue has given rise to resentment among the SCs of Badugu Vari lanka.

For several years now, whenever Godavari rose, the village has been getting flooded. Before Nagamma arrived on the scene, Godavari easily flooded the village lands, leading to the submergence of at least 700 acres out of 1000, every year.

The first sarpanch of the village was a mala man, who was a migrant labourer to the village. He was picked up by the kapus who felt that the local malas would not listen to them. They used the man so thoroughly and without any benefit to him that after the sarpanchgiri, that man and his family have left the village and live as watchmen in a nearby garden. Before Nagamma a Kaapu man was elected the sarpanch, one Dharmaraju and he was divested of cheque powers due to misappropriation of funds by the MRO and the Collector.

Nagamma was born and brought up in the village. Eldest of the seven siblings she was married to a man with three children whose wife had a heart ailment. Apart from these three inherited children, Nagamma herself had 11 children, five girls and six boys. As livelihood became difficult at the in-laws' village, Rale, she moved with her entire family

to the mothers' village during the early years of marriage. Now, her own family, natal and marital, contribute 50 votes in each election. She says that her husband is shy and does not like to mingle with many people.

Nagamma looks after her widowed sister without children; her own widowed daughter with two children. Looked after the husband's first wife till she died two years ago. And got her three sons married; gave one of them a house in Rale.

Nagamma attained fame during the mid 1980s during floods when a SC youth was beaten up by an SI during flood relief distribution. Nagamma, a new mother, handed over her child to a relative, went to the SI, caught him by the collar and threatened him, "How can you beat a boy in these conditions, where all of our houses are flooded, we don't have food and are living in a shelter? Do you have to beat a boy for asking for food?"

When Nagamma decided to contest, she was already known as someone who did not mince words and who was fearless. As such, the elders of the community, even though given a chance of selecting a single candidate, decided against her candidature. As a result there were five more contestants, along with her, in the race. Nor did any party give her a ticket, neither the congress for which she worked in several elections, nor the TDP, for which she worked in a single election. Kapus were definitely against her because there was no way she would listen to them. So, according to her, "they selected women who would not stand up without their instruction". The upa-sarpanch of the previous panchayat expressed support for her but she decided to not bank on it.

However, she did borrow money to the tune of Rs.40,000 and spent it on the election canvassing – distributing blouse pieces for women in the village, along with a steel bowl. On the day of the counting, she did not have an agent and saw votes polled for her being taken out on the charge that they crossed a line – as invalid. There were 240 invalid votes that were taken out. Thereafter she fainted, out of sheer fatigue and hopelessness. But, despite this, she won with 40 votes majority.

The troubles started soon after her election. First the village secretary, a kapu, broke the chair. She grew enraged, took him by the collar and threatened him with dire consequences if he did not get out of the village in two days. Other accounts of this incident say that she threatened him with a charge of rape under the SC, ST atrocities act, if he does not behave himself. The secretary ran away and a Brahmin village secretary was appointed for the village, who behaved well.

Next came the inevitable corruption charge, that she siphoned off Rs.10,000 for which she could not show corresponding work –in the Food for Work programme. Even though she knew about the discrepancy, she thought those who ate off will reimburse the treasury. She was persuaded to sign the cheque for Rs.10,000 by the upa-sarpanch and then he siphoned off the money. Nagamma says that the entire plan was to get her cheque power cancelled and given off to the vice sarpanch. So, she waited for eight months and just before the enquiry committee of DLPO and DPO from Kakinada came to the village

she paid Rs.10,000 to the treasury. The MDO told her to make sure that she will not release money/or sign a cheque till the work is completed, never. From then onwards, Nagamma says that she made sure that treasury cheque book for which she is the sole signatory was always kept with her, throughout the five years, never parted with it. The other cheque book, for which the sarpanch and the upa-sarpanch are the joint signatories, she tried to keep it in the panchayat office. There were attempts to transfer the cheque book to the village secretary, but she thwarted those attempts. She warned the village secretary and the clerk to keep the accounts clean, without any hotchpotch. Even when there was an attempt to keep a joint signature cheque book in some other place, she thwarted those attempts.

After these attempts, some SC men caught her in the dark and beat her, when she was returning after she settled a dispute, at around 8.00 PM. But she did not relent.

Next came the big financial transaction of spending Rs.7,00,000 that was already sanctioned but was lying with the MRO for lack of initiative of the previous sarpanch. Even after two years of her getting elected, the money was not released. She got a letter from the MLA, went to the Collector with the letter, met him four times till the grant was released. She got the funds released and constructed a new school building and a cement road. Here again, she was cheated by the kapu contractor, who siphoned off the commission that usually goes to the sarpanch. This was the second lesson for her, she says, after which she never let down her caution in these matters.

During the floods, quite unlike the earlier times, she made sure that, along with people who lived in huts, even those who lived in pucca houses got some relief. She argued with the collectors, “These people are not living in rich bungalows. Their pucca houses have developed creaks”. So, for the first time, a pucca house got Rs.700 whereas a hut liver got Rs.1500. But, Dharmaraju the ex-sarpanch complained against her. When the inquiry committee (MROs of Anaparthi and Mandapeta) came, she asked them whether they would believe the word of a man whose cheque power was removed because of corruption against her and asked them to check with every house whether the money was paid. The inquiry commission could not come up with anything against her. After that, another grant of flood relief was sanctioned for the village, Rs.1500 for the pucca house and Rs.2500 for the hut dwellers. She made sure that even those who beat her got their share. A total of Rs.4,00,000 was released towards flood relief this time.

When a newspaper report was written about her corruption, she filed a SC, ST atrocities Act case against those who appeared in the report – the SI, the CI of the Alamuru mandal they came and fell on her feet and apologized. Only then did she remove the case.

Her next big victory came with the sanction of Rs.2 Crores for the construction of the bund between the Godavari river canal and her village. She maneuvered for it by getting the photographs of the flooded lanka lands to the newspapers and petitioning the then MLA, MRO and the Collector. When the engineer came from Hyderabad to do the investigations, she requested him to enhance the bund strength.

She saw to it that the road to the village *vaada revu* was laid and is well lit because from the village all women go to take a dip every month on a particular day. During the rainy season, she saw to it that all the drains in the village were cleared so that they won't get clogged. She also saw to it that new bigger pipes for bore wells were laid whereby at any time of the year, people could get water. By the time her term got over, the panchayat had a surplus of Rs.3 lakhs.

She says that after her tenure got over, the next sarpanch is a BC man, put up by the kapus. This panchayat is not able to move because the BC man has not managed to muster up enough courage even to call for a panchayat meeting. The village drains are back to clogged state; level of cleanliness has declined and nothing gets done. This election, she put up her own brother as a ward member in the Kaapu ward, canvassed for him saying that if they trusted her, they should vote for her brother. They did and he won as a ward member. Then she tried to make the brother the upa-sarpanch but kapus thwarted her attempts. Now the sarpanch is pleading with her to be on his side to get things done. People have advised him that if he wants to get things done, he should ensure that Nagamma is by his side.

After her tenure there were two conflicts in which she had to mediate. One involved the incident wherein a goundla RMP doctor and his wife were beaten up by a gang of kapu youth threatening them to leave the village. She intervened and assured the goundla youth that they need not leave the village. She made them complain to the police. Next the kapu youth came to the mala peta to beat up the SC youth. Nagamma saw to it that the SC/ST atrocities act was filed against them. Now she says all those youth are running around the station and the courts.

The other incident is where a goundla woman was beaten up by a young kapu boy and the panchayat decided that it was not his fault. Nagamma took the woman's side in the panchayat meeting and advised her not to hide her injury incurred during the beating. But the entire kapu community stood behind the boy. Nagamma asked the woman to file a police case, but the police SI persuaded her not to do so. The woman moved to her sister's house with an infected wound, and committed suicide later, unable to bear the humiliation and the physical pain.

What does she do after the sarpanch giri? People come to her for mediating conflicts. Sometimes, SVOS people invite her for workshops. A Sarpanch, according to her, has to run around (*tiragali*), be courageous and do the work. Though she was not liked by her community, now she says, they recall the good work she did. It is for that kind of name that she worked. A good name, always will put one in good stead.

She showed us the clogged drains, unclean roads in the village saying that when she was the Sarpanch, she always saw to it that before the rainy season all the drains are cleared and the roads were always clean.

Is she a believer? She is and she goes to Pentecost church. She narrated the way God guided her throughout this election process. Just after she filed her nomination papers, she dreamt that she was playing caroms where she struck four coins. Next day, carrom board was given to her as the election symbol. Again, on the day before election, she dreamt that she had four guavas in her hand whereas other four women who contested against her had nothing. She won with 40 votes.

Namma proudly showed us the school building that she constructed, the house sites that she got for various relatives of hers. She also said that she got use rights for five acres of submerged land that has now become available for cultivation.

Chemudu Lanka

(OC Sarpanch, Upasarpanch post shared between BCs and SCs in 2006 elections, half term each)

The village Chemudu Lanka attained fame in the Alamuru constituency because the SCs in the village (263 votes) strategised effectively to obtain sharing of upa-sarpanch post with BCs. They have done this by persuading a rebel TDP candidate to contest, and along with BCs voting *en bloc*, and at the same time splitting the Kaapu votes in the middle.

Chemudu Lanka gram panchayat has a population of 4,011. It was bifurcated from the neighboring Choppella panchayat in 1995. It has a total of 2800 votes: 2000 Kaapu votes, 41 Relli votes, 423 BC votes, and 263 SC votes (all Mala, Madiga only one family). First sarpanch was OC, then BC and now, again, OC. Though it is the turn of the SCs in the rotation system, it has not been done. Local speculation is that it was 'managed'.

The SC community, though small in size, seems to be very vocal and assertive for reasons that we shall discuss below. It has been able to mobilize MPDO and the District Collector to get certain basic amenities for their colony, such as roads, toilets, etc.

About 100 SC families have five *kunchas*³ of land in the neighbouring Badugu Vari Lanka but 90% have leased it out to the Kapus. So, most of the families in the village depend on the kapus for work.

In 2001 elections, Narasimha Murthy, a young and unusually self-assured and dynamic mala by about 28 years old, formerly working in Samata, a local NGO, decided to contest as MPTC post from the village, in the OC⁴ category. He contested against a kapu man with 25 acres of land, and was sure that he would not be able to win. But, he strategized with the community to make sure that the SC votes counted in the elections. So, they aligned with the Congress candidate (kapu) and voted for him en bloc. This was the move

³ A kuncha is equivalent to half an acre?

⁴ Open Competition (non reserved post)

to defeat the TDP candidate in the fray. Being a candidate himself, he voted for the Congress. The TDP won and the Congress lost. But this incident demonstrated in the village that the SCs had *arrived*.

Public Toilet Agitation: In 2003, the SCs started agitating against the village public toilet that stood alongside the road to the SC colony. 90% of kapus and 10% SCs used it, but during the rainy season, all the dirt came into the SC colony causing havoc and disease. After petitioning the village panchayat and getting no response, a group of 10 SC youth under the leadership of Murthy demolished the public toilet with crowbars. Then, the kapus came in a group to attack the SC colony. The SCs resisted equally. Seeing the resistance, Kapus went back and got Murthy arrested. Within half an hour of his being taken to the police station, two tractor loads of SC men and women went to the police station, threatened the SI and the CI and got him released. The case was not registered, finally because of public pressure. After Murthy's release, in retaliation, the SCs filed 18 cases on kapus with charges ranging from rape, attack, attempt to murder, and of course some under SC ST Atrocities Act. The kapus relented and came for a compromise. Both decided to withdraw their complaints and came to an agreement that nobody will use the toilet and within six months the toilet will be completely removed. The public toilet was re-built by the kapus. The SCs petitioned the Collector for a grant to build individual toilets in the SC colony. Seventy two individual toilets were sanctioned by the collector, the drawings were done by the mandal engineer, and the job of construction was entrusted to a contractor of their choice, an acceptable Reddy. The Collector sanctioned only Rs.2500 per toilet, and since this money was not enough Murthy and his friends approached the general manager of ONGC and got another grant of Rs.500 per toilet.

An important fact that needs mention here is the role played by the local MPDO Usha Kiran in all these agitations. She being an SC herself was extremely supportive of the SC community of Chemudu Lanka.⁵ Secondly, a point that Murthy stressed repeatedly was that as an SC community and being educated he and his friends always could go directly to any body at any level: MP, MLA, MPDO, MRO, District Collector, and so on).

The Ambedkar Statue Issue: Then came the incident of beheading the Ambedkar statue in the village on eve of Christmas in 2005. Kapus cleverly got it done by some of the SC men from the colony. The hell broke loose. The entire SC community (of course steered by Murthy and his friends) went on 6 days of indefinite hunger strike; 11 days of relay hunger strike, and rasta roko on NH 5⁶ for an hour everyday. They put up tents along the highway to prominently display the agitation. Prominent state and district SC leaders descended on the scene; food was organized for the entire community all these days with contributions from SC employees of Rajahmundry, because SCs refused to go to work in the kapu lands. The Joint Collector and the District Collector came down for negotiations and promised Rs.25,000 towards the establishment of a new statue. But the SCs asked for more. Finally, with the one lakh rupees sanctioned by the Collector, a grand 'golden'

⁵ In other interviews we realised that she is known in the entire district for being extremely supportive to the SC communities, be it in issues of confrontation or infrastructure matters.

⁶ The village is perched along the NH 5.

statue of Ambedkar was erected prominently along the highway and at the entrance of the village, which several dignitaries inaugurated.

The SCs also demanded compensatory wages for ten days. The Collector sanctioned 30 kgs of rice for each family.

Murthy says that after this agitation, there were attempts to eliminate him altogether, which of course never succeeded.

In early 2006, the SCs came up with a new demand for housing sites because about 17 families did not have houses of their own. After prolonged agitation, the government allotted house sites far away from the village. The SCs refused to accept these sites and wanted the government to acquire private lands right adjacent to the SC colony and convert them into house sites. The government relented and purchased 10 acres of land at the rate of Rs.97,000 per acre. The land is now under litigation. MPP was reserved for SC. For Murthy's bad luck this year Chemudu lanka MPTC post was reserved for BC. He would have contested if it had been any other reservation, Murthy had a very good chance of becoming Mandal President.

Against this backdrop of internecine battles, came the 2006 Panchayat elections which were actually very eagerly looked forward to by the SC community because in the rotation system, this time round it was the chance of SCs. The enthusiasm was however short-lived because for some inexplicable reasons the post was declared as Open Competition (OC). Predictably speculation is that it was 'managed'.

After the election notification, Dondepati Somutata, a rich landlord known to be a *koteeswarudu*, and who had already contested in two earlier panchayat elections and lost, organised a meeting of all castes and expressed his wish to get elected unanimously. Some 300 people from all castes in the village attended this meeting. He offered a donation of three lakh rupees to many caste leaders sitting there and as an understanding was about to be worked out. Murthy raised the issue of upa sarpanch, asking if they can get the post of upa sarpanch if they agreed to Somutata's proposition. He asked why the OCs should always be elected as upa-sarpanchs. The kapu leaders sniggered at him and dismissed him by saying that people with 200 and odd votes should better know their place in the village. The meeting dispersed cheering Somutata for his wisdom and benevolence.

That night while the rest of the village slept, back in the SC colony, Murthy and his friends burnt midnight oil and came up with a new plan. Next day, they mobilized all the nine BC *kula sanghams* and convinced them that they all should vote en bloc instead of getting dispersed. That way they would get ward seats too. However, it was not easy. For the next few days, it was a big task to keep people from SC colony not to go to the other side. At the last minute a new strategy occurred to Murthy and others, if the entire effort should not go waste.

The idea was to bring a new kapu candidate into the picture, the brother of Nagireddy Venkataratnam, who had the secret ambition of becoming the sarpanch himself. The SCs went as a group to his house, raised slogans in his praise, and entreated him to file his nominations. Before he could think of consulting his family members, he was brought to the church in the SC colony, prayers were offered for him, and he was persuaded to sign on a stamp paper promising upa-sarpanch post for the BCs and SCs. This man later sold four acres of land, started his campaign in earnest for which Murthy and others worked. Murthy had a good rapport with the poorer sections of the *kapus* who were dominant in the village, especially women. Somutata's efforts at compromise did not work. During the election campaign, both the rival candidates drowned the village with liquor and other gifts, which is very common in the area.

Somutata eventually lost by 444 votes, which is no mean achievement for Murthy and his friends. Nine out of twelve ward seats went to candidates supported by Murthy camp: two out five in OC; five out of six in BC and one SC).

Now, the upa-sarpanch post is shared between BCs and SCs – half term the post will be held by a BC ward member, and the other half by an SC ward member.

Concluding Notes

Alamuru mandal presents the inside story of the battles around sarpanch elections where Dalits are politicised and see the electoral battles as part of the larger struggle for Dalit emancipation and empowerment. With a long history of battles for self-respect, land and social reform, the East Godavari Dalits could be seen leveraging their strength to elect or select a candidate of their choice. Elections to the Dalit sarpanch posts, that rarely come the way in individual villages due to roaster system, are fully integrated into the party system despite the open disavowal. Many candidates, male and female, have earlier histories of either being associated with a political party, being a political mediator or a community organizer. Getting elected itself depends on many factors, a prominent one being the support of the non-Dalits in the village. While all the elected Dalit sarpanches saw knew the historical significance of their election and were keen to do something for the village, their ability to do so depended on their previous political experience and leadership qualities, apart from the relative strengths of the local Dalit and non-Dalit politicization and mobilization.

Electoral arena has drawn in an extremely interesting set of local women leaders, even those with 'questionable' reputation demonstrating the ability of the political to disrupt the caste-patriarchal frameworks. The ability of the elected Dalit women to perform their duties and get things done, however, depended on the supportive networks, apart from inherent leadership qualities. While most elected women acquired leadership qualities by the end of their term, there were few avenues that created pathways to absorb them into conventional political parties. As the possibility of re election or re entry into panchayat raj also was absent such women leaders got re absorbed into the domestic arena.

Annexure 1

People interviewed during this visit

Alamuru Village

1. Samuel (Sam), Samata Voluntary Society
2. Yesu Dasu, Samata Voluntary Society
3. Talla David (Sarpanch's husband)
4. Yalla Susheela (TDP candidate for sarpanch post)
5. Saale Dosamma (Rebel TDP candidate for sarpanch post)

Badugu Vari Lanka Village

6. Kataari Nagamma (ex-sarpanch)

Madike Village

7. Bangaram Adinarayana (Sarpanch)
8. Jeeva Ratnam (Contestant for Sarpanch)

Padamati Khandriga Village

9. Kondeti Nageswara Rao (Sarpanch)

Chemudu Lanka Village

10. Narasimha Murthy (Community leader)

Mernipadu Village

11. Netala Karunapriya (Sarpanch)
12. Pastoramma, Sarpanch's aunt
13. Bunga Abraham (Ward member)

Navabpet Village

14. Varasala Annavaram (Sarpanch)



