CHAPTER IV

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Looking at the data pertaining to women representatives of GPs in the Coastal districts of Karnataka, it is clear that change also needs to come from within the women. The GP system has proved to be a poignant voice of social change, growth and development especially for the elected women representatives in the districts. Education, breaking strict patriarchal frameworks, economic mobility, development in areas of information management like the telephonic revolution, mass media, seem to have expedited the change for women.

4.1 Participation of Dalit Women

The data collected and analyzed in the previous chapter are used for discussion and to draw certain deductions, under various ‘heads’. Some general information about the respondents is presented here below.

Caste Composition

As the study pertained to ‘dalit women’, there were both SCs and STs representatives, the former in a slightly higher percentage, denoting the presence of more SC women representatives than STs in the area under study.

Age Distribution

The age of GP leaders is an important factor in understanding the social standing of the grassroot level leaders. It reflects the physical and psychological maturity of the leaders and also serves as an indicator of their experience and knowledge. Age can also play a vital role in the exercise of their powers and functions.
With regard to the age of the respondents, majority of the SC and ST were in the age group ranging 36-59 years. In the Indian context, this age range is a favourable age for women to get in to politics, as they will have completed all their ‘womanhood responsibilities’ such as upbringing of children, etc. The women will have gained a lot of common sense and have matured views on various issues.

Very young and aged women may suffer certain inadequacies such as failing health and enthusiasm amongst very old women and lack of required experience amongst young ones. The same trend was observed in another study conducted by Shubha—'Karnataka Panchayat Elections-1995: Process, Issues and Membership Profile’. It was observed that young and middle aged people are emerging in leadership positions at the grassroot level.

Traditionally, age was the privilege of the older people occupying important positions in the villages. In recent years there has been a tendency to elect younger representatives as revealed by some prominent studies made so far. A report on the Panchayat elections in Rajasthan, published by the Evaluation Organization, Government of Rajasthan, in the year 1961, records the following observations on the pattern of emerging leadership: (i) the tendency to elect younger sarpanches in the present elections particularly in the age group 25-35, is distinctly noticeable; and (ii) this is true of the elected younger Sarpanches also to the newly constituted Panchayats. In a subsequent study related to the elections of 1962, the same tendency was observed.

The Indian Institute of Public Opinion conducted an All India Rural Survey in 1964 which also included Rajasthan; reported that the elected representatives were in the age group of 26-40. Only one-fifth belonged to the older generation (50 years) whereas the 40-50 age group
constituted nearly 30 percent of the elected persons. Stephen and Rajashekaran identified that participation in Panchayat activities was much better among young and literate groups, particularly those in the 35-45 age group. Devaki Jain found that women who entered into GP were young women of 25-35 years of age.

**Family Type**

The data on family size and number of children of the Panchayat members are essential to assess whether the joint family system is still prevailing or not. The respondents were observed to be more from ‘nuclear families’ which shows the current trend in the villages amongst the dalits. However, another study shows a reverse trend. It was observed from Shubha’s ‘Karnataka Panchayat Elections-1995: Process, Issues and Membership Profile’ that even in modern times the ‘joint family’ is a salient feature of the rural social fabric in the State of Karnataka.

**Marital Status**

Majority of the respondents were married and the number of divorces very minimum, which speaks about the prevailing strong family system. The same was observed in Shubha's study ‘Karnataka Panchayat Elections-1995: Process, Issues and Membership Profile’. According to this study, most of the respondents were married.

**Education Status**

Education plays an important role in articulating opinions and moulding aspirations. It is true that education will also give boost to the SCs, STs, and weaker sections to qualify for leadership at the grassroot level. The level of education of the respondents in the Coastal districts
was satisfactory as compared to the other districts of the State (Human Development Report- 2005). The percentage of illiteracy is not much, though the SC/ST women are only semi-literate.

A study conducted by the Centre for Rural Studies, Manipal University observed that the SC, ST children in Udupi district is on par with the other social classes. However, the exposure to education will add to the total personality of these women and would have an impact on the level and intensity of their political participation. Rashmi Arun in her study of Madhya Pradesh Panchayats found that the women were housewives, first time entrants to politics, and most of them were illiterate or educated only up to the primary level. Govinda Gowda and others in their study of elected women Panchayat leaders of Karnataka found that education and annual household income had a significant and positive relationship with the developmental role performance.

The Indian Institute of Social Science in a study of PR in Haryana found that the majority of the women leaders, including younger women, were illiterate when elected to office. Two years after assuming office they demanded literary skills.

**Occupational Pattern**

The occupational pattern of the respondents very clearly showed that the majority of the SC, STs were agricultural wage earners. This throws light on their ‘poor economic conditions’ which is a characteristic feature of this stratum of society. They are economically backward. This economic backwardness leads to other setbacks in their overall ‘Empowerment’.

It was clear that some were dependent on agriculture and few were housewives. This proves that agriculture and related activities are the
source of income for rural communities. As industrial units are less in Coastal Karnataka, there are not many labourers in the industrial sector. The income status of the respondents clearly shows that many are still very poor and not in a position to lead a decent life. Those who had agricultural lands owed very small, economically, unviable units. It was clear from the study that early marriage was very prevalent both amongst SC and STs. This is not a good indicator. However, child marriages were not observed in the Coastal districts.

Types of Houses

It was observed from the study that a majority of the respondents owned ‘tiled houses’. The reason for this could be that under various Central and State Government Schemes, houses are being constructed with a huge subsidy input and hence, a majority of the respondents stay in good houses.

Electricity Facility at their Dwellings

It is heartening to note that a majority of the dalits houses have electricity, may be through the welfare schemes of the government.

Toilet Facility at their Dwellings

It was observed that a large number of the houses had toilets with a small percentage of people still resorting to ‘open air defecation’. It is mandatory for the GPs to cover all houses, especially of SCs and STs with toilets. The above figures are a result of such schemes. All the three districts have done well under the centrally sponsored ‘Total Sanitation Scheme’ where efforts have been directed to cover maximum number of
houses. Apart from the above, the awareness level of SC, ST members could be one more reason for the above favourable situation.

**Decision-Making at Home**

It was interesting to observe that in a majority of the respondent houses the decisions on various family issues were being taken jointly. This is indeed a good development and is an indicator of women getting empowered.

**Dalit Women Hand Over their Earnings to Men at Home**

Management of earnings is another important aspect of working women in India. Women normally hand over their earning to the family head or her husband. This is true for rural as well as urban parts of the country. However, we see a joint management in the interviewed members of the families. With regard to the management of earning, it was learnt that in a majority of the cases the funds were being managed jointly which points to the economic empowerment of women.

**Migration Details**

It was learnt from the study that a major percentage of the respondents have not migrated to other places, but have been staying in the same area/village. However, the two main reasons for migrating to the village from where they have been elected to GP are marriage and employment.

**Awareness Level towards the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act**

The 73rd Constitution Amendment is a milestone in the history of ‘Decentralized Local Government’ with a lot of importance being given
to women, especially dalits. In light of the 73rd Constitution Amendment, the states have adopted the PR system according to their convenience. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provided an opportunity for involving the dalits in mainstream political, social, and economic decision-making process. Article 243 D of the Constitution provides for reservation of SCs and STs in every Panchayat in proportion to their population in that area.

Unfortunately, a major chunk of the respondents did not know much about the Amendment as well as the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, despite the fact that as members of GPs, they are trained in all these aspects. Their level of education and awareness may be responsible for such a situation. A study conducted in the Bellary district of Karnataka (2001) by the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) has observed that about 43 percent of SCs, STs, and women leaders knew the 73rd Constitutional Act and its implication.

**Awareness of Reservation Policy**

It is interesting to note here that a comfortable percentage SCs (not STs) knew about the reservation of seats as per the 73rd Amendment. The ST respondents were not that much aware as the SCs. The system of reservation of seats in the PRIs was introduced to mobilize the hitherto politically unorganized members, particularly women.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has created a space for women for their political participation and decision-making at the grassroot level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 says that it provides reservations for women in PRIs in two ways; for the office of the members and for that of the chairperson. As per clause (2) and (3) of Article 243 D, not less than one-third of the seats meant for direct
election of members at each tier of the Panchayats is to be reserved for women. Article 243 D of the Constitution provides for reservation of SCs and STs in every Panchayat in proportion to their population in that area. The 73\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment Act mainly aims at decentralizing power besides removing the gender imbalances and bias in the institutions of local self-government.

**Awareness Level towards the No-Confidence Motion**

A majority of the SC women (STs to a lesser extent) knew about the ‘no confidence motion’.

**Awareness Level with regard to the Gram Panchayat Meetings**

According to the 73\textsuperscript{nd} Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993, there are three types of meetings in the GP namely general, special, and emergency. The general meeting is conducted once in a month and special meetings are conducted when the GP faces severe problems. But emergency meetings can also be conducted when the GP faces serious threat internally as well as externally. Maximum number of respondents were aware of the ‘GP meetings’ and type of ‘meetings’, with the SCs again leading in the awareness percentage.

**Knowledge about the Social Justice Committee**

Social Justice Committee is one of the three most important Standing Committees of any GP, which apart from managing various issues connected with social justice should also look in to dalit issues. The Committee has a dalit woman as a member.

It was observed from the study that majority of the respondents (SCs and STs) knew about this Committee and a sizeable number of
respondents were members on this Committee. This position of SC, ST members shows that they are aware of an important Constitutional provision, may be indirectly through these Committees. Being ‘aware’ of their rights is the beginning of ‘empowerment’. However, it is observed that dalit issues discussed in meetings during their (SC, ST respondents) presidency were less. May be, such a change would occur over a period of time as age old practices would take time to change. However, there is a gradual, positive change amongst dalits and others.

**Awareness Level with regard to Reservation for Dalits in Various Government Sponsored Programmes**

The awareness level of respondents with regard to various government sponsored programmes was not very encouraging, except for the ‘housing scheme’.

**Number of Terms as Members**

It was observed that the majority of SC, ST respondents were serving the GP for the first time; around 10 percent were serving for the second term.

**Source of Motivation to Contest Gram Panchayat Elections**

Contestants for the GP election have different motivators within their community and political parties influencing them to contest in the GP election. The study made an effort on this aspect too. The major influence on the members was from various political parties.

Participation in political party activities is important because it leads to political socialization and education. However, the GP elections were held on non-party basis. A sizeable group of respondents (both SC,
ST) were motivated by political parties to contest the elections, which goes to prove that the political participation of dalits is just a façade. However, there were a good number of dalits who jumped into the fray because of personal interest. It was learnt that there were other factors that have also influenced the dalit women to get in to the political arena.

It may be mentioned here that at the GP level, in the State of Karnataka, ‘party less politics’ members are not supposed to fight the elections on party lines. However, the reverse is true at the field level. Political parties interfere to a great extent; they influence candidates to contest elections and try to build up the party from the village level.

Owing to special reservation for women SC, ST candidates, parties take more interest in influencing dalit women. The same is evident from the field study.

According to the study conducted by NIRD in Bellary district of Karnataka State (2001), friendship, kinship and other support from the village people helped about 33 percent of the leaders to get into GPs. The other reason mentioned by 15 percent has been reservation. But for reservation, these sections would not have been able to politically overthrow the dominant caste or the rural elite. There is a general tussle for power among the rural elite themselves. Reservations have come in handy to put an end to the power tussle. Only 4 percent of the leaders have been helped by the political parties. However, many leaders have admitted that reservation is a powerful weapon for the political empowerment of SCs, STs, and women.

Snehalatha Panda in the study of Village Panchayat in Orissa found that most of the women entered into Village Panchayat due to pressure from village community and family and showed great maturity in outlook, increased political consciousness, and interest in their responsibility.
Position in the Gram Panchayat

Of the respondents, a very small fraction had served as Presidents and Vice-Presidents. This was possible owing to the reservation policy; otherwise, dalits would not have occupied these positions of authority and power.

Sources of Training

It was learnt from the study that a major section of the respondents had received training from different sources, a majority from the Abdul Nazir Sab State Institute, Mysore.

The Government of Karnataka has been regularly organizing trainings for the local body members to capacitate the skill of these members. Various well experienced institutions like ANSSIRID, NGOs, and Resource Persons are identified by the government for capacity building measures enabling smooth administration of local governments. Every member of a local government participates at least in one training within his tenure of membership. Keeping this in mind, an effort was made to identify the number of members participating in such trainings.

Participation in Decision-Making Process

It was interesting to note that a substantial percentage of SCs and STs (slightly less) were observed taking part in decision-making on various issues at the GP level. This is indeed a new trend. Participation in ‘decision-making’ is a character of ‘empowerment’ and indicates the degree of dalit empowerment. Sachidanada Satpathy in the case study of three GPs in Orissa classified 57% women members as passive supporters who are unable to participate in the actual decision-making. The rest (43%) participated in decision-making, and reacted to the discontinuance of their views.
Independent Decision Taken as President/Member

It was recorded that a small percentage of respondents under SC, ST category could take independent decisions as Presidents/Members. It has to be understood here that owing to historical and sociological reasons, dalits, especially dalit women have been kept out of institutional level participation for centuries. It is only after 1993 that they were given political space. For obvious reasons, they need some more time to join to the mainstream and start participating as others.

Assistance Provided by Others in Taking Decisions

It was observed that, a large percentage of respondents depended on others while taking decisions. A small percentage could take decisions independently. Maybe over a period of time, with increased education and awareness, this position may change.

Participation through Speaking at the Gram Panchayat Meetings

Speaking at a GP meeting is by itself an indicator of ‘Dalit Empowerment’. During the olden days, dalits, especially dalit women were not allowed to speak in public. It is clear from the study that a major chunk of respondents were speaking on various issues in the GP meetings. This is indeed a very good sign of ‘dalit women’s’ political emancipation.

Percentage of Members who could get Solutions for their Queries

It was interesting to note that a large number of respondents could get their problems solved. This shows that they have been good at
following–up the issues of their wards or GP’s. This is an ‘output’ of their political participation.

**Percentage of Members who Got Invitations for Programmes**

A large percentage SC, ST women respondents observed that they are getting invitations to participate in various programmes and activities. This indirectly indicates the ‘social acceptance of dalits’ by the society. This would naturally boost the morale of dalits, especially ‘dalit women’.

**Getting Help from Others**

Quite a considerable proportion of members succeeded in getting help from others which is a positive trend.

**Issues on Which Dalit Women Members Protested**

Only a small group of respondents could protest against certain major issues, whereas a large percentage of respondents were not able to.

**Getting Exploited as Dalit Women**

As mentioned earlier, dalits who have been oppressed by others over centuries cannot protest for obvious reasons. It could be possible over a period of time. A large majority of respondents opined that they are not being exploited by others. This is a positive indicator of both—‘Empowerment of Dalit Women’ and creation of required awareness amongst members of other communities.

**Opinion towards Positive Development of Panchayat Raj Institutions**

With a background of their experiences in the GPs, majority of respondents opined that positive developments are observed in GPs.
Members who felt that they are Treated Well as a Result of their Membership

Quite a substantial number of SC, ST respondents felt that their identity in various areas (public contact, mobility, knowledge, respect, decisions, etc) has improved after becoming GP members. In general, these aspects send a very positive signal towards their recognition in society and the consequent level of empowerment.

Confidence among Dalit Women Members—Before and After Becoming Members

It was also learnt from the study that the confidence level of most respondents improved substantially. A study conducted by Stephen and Rajasekharan on GP women members of eight districts of Karnataka observed that a moderate degree of transformation was noted among 40.7% of the respondents and there was an increased level of self-confidence in 97%. Being GP members, had a positive impact on their capacity and abilities. Their participation in public activities has also increased, as did their ability to command respect from the public. Devaki Jain found that women’s experience in Panchayat Raj has transformed many of them. This transformation included empowerment, self-confidence, and political awareness.

Capacity to Discuss with the Government Officials

Good relationship between leaders and officials is a pre-requisite for successful development of works and also for better implementation of such works. It was also clear from the study that the capacity of respondents to discuss with the government officials has improved to a great extent after active participation in politics.
Majority of the respondents could shed their fear and inertia and have become active members of GPs. According to a study conducted by NIRD in 2001 in Bellary district of Karnataka, the SCs, STs, and women leaders are reluctant to meet the officials at the grassroot level. About 37 percent of the leasers never had any interaction with officials. 9 percent of the leaders said that their relation is good, and they get their work done. Only 6 percent of the leaders mentioned that the officials are not co-operative.

**Discriminated by their Gender**

Majority respondents felt that there is no gender discrimination at the ward level.

**Awareness of the Department of Women and Child Development**

The government department which is very closely connected with the issues of women and children is the Department of Women and Child Development. A substantial percentage of SC, ST women respondents knew about the department which is a good sign of increasing awareness of dalits.

**Awareness of the Dalit Organizations**

A respectable percentage of respondents knew about the dalit organizations. It is notable that at least women are aware of these organizations which are fighting for their causes. From the various points discussed above, it is very clear that the position of dalit women is changing through their political participation in the Coastal districts of Karnataka. In certain sphere such as being very vocal, very independent, take independent decisions, etc. they may not be doing very well. This is
obvious as they are just coming out of their shell and would need more time to go along with others. In any case, the progress achieved by the dalits, especially women in Coastal districts after the implementation of the 73rd Constitution Amendment is remarkable. There are certain added advantages for the dalit women of the Coastal districts such as education, level of awareness, exposure to media, impact of communications and infrastructure, facilities for better health and education, etc.

All these factors must have added to the progress achieved by the elected dalit women representatives in the GPs of Udupi, Dakshina Kannada, and Uttara Kannada districts.

4.2 Dimensions of Dalit Women Qualitative Participation

Prior to the reservation bill, statistics regarding women’s participation in PRIs were significantly lower (between four and five percent). It was very low in the case of dalit women. Today, 33.33 percent of candidates participating in the PRIs are women. In general, participation at local level can be viewed from two angles—quality and quantity. As far as the qualitative aspect is concerned, there are three levels of quality of participation: passive participation, active participation, and decision-making participation. The same logical explanation can also be applied in the case of dalit women candidates who have participated as members in the GPs of Coastal Karnataka. A constitutional provision is only a necessary step which should be followed by effective measures for women’s upliftment in the rural areas. To make ‘Women’s Empowerment’ in society and politics a reality, an enormous amount of work remains to be done, given their present socio-economic conditions.

Despite reservation for women, effective participation in PRIs has failed due to misuse and manipulation by the local power-brokers in few
states of our country. Ignorance of dalit women about their rights, procedures, potential, and responsibilities have kept them lagging behind men in the local bodies. Considering the field realities of Coastal Karnataka, it is doubtful that a mere increase in the number of reserved seats for women and particularly dalit, in local bodies is likely to increase the participation of women. Unless structural changes are brought about, and sincere efforts made in the direction of educating dalit women nothing much can be achieved. Dalit women representatives often run into barriers especially of family and society and are hindered from participating effectively. They feel inhibited to speak especially in large male dominated assemblies. Those who muster up enough courage to speak receive very little respect or attention. It has been observed that dalit women are invited not only to make up the quorum but also to discuss the issues of general public systematically. Further, the officials pay heed to the needs of both, upper class and dalit women. The rights of women, thus, get systematically validated by the local bureaucracy.

In spite of positive developments, which have been seen in the Coastal areas, the family, community, and the state (represented by the officials) have together created a situation wherein elected dalit women representatives are facing many operational constraints while enacting their roles and discharging their functions in the GPs. Dalit women representatives have some individual weaknesses:

- Illiteracy and low education levels of the majority of the dalit women elected to the GPs,
- Overburdened with family responsibilities,
- Introversion due to the lack of communication skills,
- Poor socio-economic background with which the dalit women have come into the system and poor capacity building, and
The control of the Patriarchical system. There are some other limitations regarding dalit women’s qualitative participation in GPs. They face problems at every stage of their participation -

- Male family members and also leaders from the caste, group or community come in the way of the affairs of the Panchayats.
- Indifferent attitude and behaviour of officials working in the system.
- Misguidance by local bureaucracy.
- Apprehension of no-confidence motion by other elected members of the system.
- Mounting pressure from the political party which has vested interests in the gender reservation for positions in the PR system.
- Women in general and dalit women in particular were branded as ‘incompetent’ in the eyes of villagers and were forced to quit by passing the no-confidence motion.
- Undue interference by the husband of dalit women representatives, who treat them as mere dummies.

As a result, it is clear that mere reservation is not enough because a dalit women representative lacks qualitative participation due to both internal and external factors. ‘Dalit Women’s Empowerment’ is not something which can be handed over to women. This is a process which involves sincerity, earnestness, and capacity and capability on the part of men and more particularly, of women. It is a challenging task in an Indian village as even today a woman cannot take any independent decision. She feels subordinate to her husband and sometimes even to her son.