Chapter-VII

Conclusion: Findings and Suggestions

Back Drop

The history of local self-government in India is replete with several instances of ups and downs. It is in a way goes with the changes of regimes in India. It may not be out of place to understand the institution of local self-government from ancient period to till date. The village constituted a primary and an important unit of the state during Vedic as well as Hindu period. The corporate and co-operative life of the citizen during this period was exemplary. They led a peaceful and prosperous life. Panchayat comprising five citizen respected by the people were the members of the village panchayat. Their word was final in all matters which included law and order and welfare. Only the difficult and intricate problems were referred to King for the decision. It was the village which came to the rescue of the King by contributing men and material in times of crisis or fight against invaders. They contributed, generally, one tenth of their produce to the government as a tax to run the affairs of the government. Each village had young men and women well trained in the weaponry and fighting skills and they were voluntarily a part of Kings Army.

The country witnessed far reaching changes not only in the way of life but also in the administration on account of foreign invasions. The invaders, generally as is the case, brought their own culture, traditions and governance and implanted them on their subjects. They understood that the strength of India lied in the village. Therefore every invader tried their best to destroy the corporate and co-operative life of the village and its governance. The village became weak by loosing the self-sufficiency and started depending on the government. The foreign rulers were successful in achieving the goal of destroying the unique and powerful strength of the village. Afgans, Turks, Lodies, Moghuls all of them tried their best to ensure the villages not going strong. The Britishers were no different from earlier rulers. They brought their own culture, tradition, system of governance and implanted their own local government system. Thereby villagers always looked to the provincial and central government for help. Though Lord
Rippon and Lord Mayo tried to improve the situation but failed to realize the objectives, since the Governors of the provinces put the reforms into the cold storage. The Government of India Act, 1935 provided a sort of solace to the local government institutions in India by adding ‘Local List’ in the Act where in the finances, powers and functions were divided between the provinces and village panchayat/local government institutions. The follow up of the provisions made to help the local bodies in the Government of India Act 1935 also met, to a large extent, with failure on account of cool attitude of the provincial administration. But the tendency to depend heavily on the government by the rural citizen increased and look to provinces for everything. The expectations of Indians including the rural population were high since the dawn of the independence as they formed their own governments. The Government of India introduced Community Development Programmes and National Extension Services for the rural development. The Committee constituted by the Government comprised a few popular village leaders, assisted by Block Development Officer (B.D.O) and his technical staff. This system also could not deliver the goods. A committee headed by Balwantrai Mehta was constituted to suggest the measures including organizational structures, powers and functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The committee recommended three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj System with certain provisions of representation of weaker sections. The democratic decentralization, a cardinal principle of rural local democracy, though implemented could not bring the desired results since the upper castes and economically strong and muscle men usurped the benefits extended to the disadvantaged/deserving sections of the society. During the Janata Party rule, not satisfied with the then rural scenario constituted a committee headed by Ashok Mehta, which suggested two tier structure of Panchayat Raj, party based elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions. This change also did not bring desired results on account of making elections and also certain provisions of reservations to disadvantaged sections making Panchayati Raj Institutions weak financially and not holding elections regularly. There have been numerous instances where in elected representatives of Panchayati Raj bodies agitated for providing powers and functions including finances for better rural development and administration. In fact state governments adopted a principle “hate and love relationship” policy towards Panchayati Raj Institutions. They love them since they
would help them to come to power at the time of general elections and hate them because they are future contenders for power. All this could happen, and several meaningful studies pointed out rightly, on account of not making all the aspects of Panchayati Raj obligatory with the constitutional amendment. It may not be out of place to mention, here, that the aspect of Panchayati Raj was mentioned in Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 40) which was not constitutionally obligatory.

The restlessness among the rural population and agitations by representatives for more powers, functions and finances, indifference attitude of state governments to share the powers, functions and finances with the Panchayati Raj Institutions, loopholes in implementation of various development programmes, indifferent, corrupt rural bureaucracy made the situation still worst. Under these circumstances the Government of India headed by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced an amendment in the Parliament for undoing all the said maladies and bring certain the aspects like holding regular elections, sharing the powers, functions and finances constitutionally obligatory. A major component of 73rd amendment Act giving mandatory scope for Dalits, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes and women, representation on the elected bodies of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The present study dealt with the details of empowerment of the Dalits and various facets of their participation in rural democratic bodies.

**Impact of 73rd Constitution Amendment**

The present study examined as to how the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act helped the Dalits to represent themselves on the Panchayati Raj Bodies. Various studies pointed out that a constructive and meaningful impact was witnessed in Panchayati Raj Institutions with the participation of Dalits. While this is a major and striding development in extending helping hand to the Dalits, it also encouraged the community under study to gain confidence and strength to participate in Panchayati Raj Institutions by putting efforts to improve the lot of Dalits.

In this study an attempt has been made to probe into the empowerment processes of Dalits through reservation policy in political institutions in two villages namely Peda Thummidi of Krishna District and Pedda Amberpet of Rangareddy District of Andhra Pradesh. After discussing the detailed socio-economic and political profiles, the role and performance of the Dalit and non-Dalit elected representatives in running the panchayats
has also been examined. This study identifies certain pertinent issues and attempts to make some important observations about the selected villages.

The preceding chapters of the thesis deal with concepts that include democratic decentralization, Panchayati Raj and empowerment of Dalits; a review of literature relating to democratic decentralization and empowerment of Dalits and the socio-economic and political background, participation and perceptions of the members of the panchayats under study as well as the perceptions of a cross section of the citizen in the two villages. An attempt is also made to compare the position of the Dalits existing in both the villages i.e Peda Thummidi and Pedda Amberpet. As mentioned earlier, the focus of the study is to examine to what extent the empowerment of Dalits in Panchayati Raj Institutions is achieved. The Study started with specific idea of democratic decentralization which implies political and administrative autonomy to local bodies i.e village panchayats in the present context. It is also assumed that the involvement of weaker sections i.e Dalits, tribals and women in decision-making is very much essential to bring the expected results, especially in the period following the enactment of 73rd Constitutional Amendment 1992. Successful decentralization which is a process of sharing power depends on institutional specific design as well as purposeful participation.

The socio-economic and political background of the elected representatives of the panchayats is examined to find the relationship between socio-economic and political background and their role performance. The study points out that the traditional dominance or rich and upper castes has been altered and the younger representatives are showing interest to shoulder the responsibility at the panchayat level. But the specters of the dominant trends are not completely disappeared. Thus dominance of upper caste and rich is still persisting in rural areas and it leads to disempowerment of the under privileged sections like Dalits.

A careful study of the available literature (Chapter-III) on the empowerment of Dalits in Indias’ democratic decentralization process has made certain points to understand. The delivery of effective benefits to SCs when a Scheduled Caste’s Sarpanch is present on Panchayat Raj body was found by researcher like Craig Johnson. As regards participation of SCs, studies of experts like Sachidananda, Venkata Ravi, Sharma and Kumar noted that the SC representatives have not been silent spectators; the
non-Dalits in some places are positively designed to Dalits’ active participation; there has been a break from the traditional system and a leadership which is neither traditional nor modern has emerged. The emergence of young and middle aged development oriented Dalit leadership; inclusion of poor SC people in Panchayati Raj Institutions are some significant results. SC women are on the journey towards empowerment through Panchayati Raj. However, caste based clashes in the process of empowerment of SCs, the domination of rich, the control of the influential on the SCs; communication disabilities are some important problems which deserve consideration to search for solutions. The studies have noted that limited fiscal and political decentralization; impact of caste on defining social and political identity; use of violence; casteism, feudalism and poverty. But it is evident that the 73rd Constitution Amendment has contributed to create democratic values and the process of social and political transformation. The need for training for capacity building, promotion of participation is often emphasized by academic experts and activists. It also identified that in these two villages most of the representatives lack of awareness. It is necessary to organize training programmes to develop leadership skills among the rural youth.

A study of the background, participation and perceptions of the members of Peda Thummidi Gram Panchayat (Chapter-IV) revealed that gender-wise, the percentage of young and middle aged female elected representative roles is higher than that of stipulated percentage. The Backward Classes occupy the first place numerically followed by Scheduled Castes and others. Those with secondary, intermediate and graduation educational qualifications constitute a majority. It is unfortunate that approximately 30% of the Dalit representatives are illiterate. A majority of the representatives are employed in agriculture. As regards land owning position those possessing land between 1-2 acres constitute 15% and one-third representatives are landless and they are mostly Scheduled Castes. The need for increasing acquaintance with politics with exceptions is found imperative. Some Scheduled Castes members are very well acquainted with political events and this is an encouraging trend. Respondents with 9 years political background constitute 50% and those with 4 years experience formed 43%. The respondents were mostly party workers and community leaders. Self interest, encouragement by friends and family members and caste leaders have been main factors for entry into politics.
Among Scheduled Castes representatives, it is noted that the entry Scheduled Castes is due to encouragement by politically, economically influential persons of the village. A variety of factors have contributed to inspiration for contest the elections. Among the factors caste, party and encouragement from the rich and political influential are prominent. Elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been expensive.

A majority of the respondents have almost clear idea of democracy. As regards to democratic decentralization less than 40% of them have clear understanding. Vague perceptions regarding empowerment noted in a majority of the respondents. As regards the participation, attendance at meetings are encouraging. Gram Sabhas are either absent or irregularly held. Agenda preparation has been essentially prerogative of the Sarpanch. Study noted that there is need for increased participation of the representatives including Dalits. Inadequate funds and powers; the need for promoting effective leadership; reduction of caste politics and need for promotion of unity and solidarity between representatives, people are felt by the respondents.

A strong feeling in favour of reservations to SCs to Panchayati Raj bodies is present among the respondents. Change in socio-economic environment is both felt and visible. A trend which reveals desire to do good to society is evident. The upliftment of the Dalits to realize the goal of social justice to be the priority for Scheduled Castes representatives. Despite the presence of hesitation and fear, the respondents come out with a view that the Dalit representatives face threats and domination from rich and upper castes. A high majority of respondents have expressed performance of satisfaction. Interaction with a cross sections of village is revealed certain points. The need for reservations is felt by a very high percentage of villagers. A majority of villagers responded full and partial participation of SC representatives. The exercise of political power is felt by a majority of the villagers. The presence of caste politics, influence of upper caste and domination of rich is also felt by the common people of village. The contribution of SC elected members to their wards and community is rated high by the villagers.

A study of the position existing in Pedda Amberpet village (Chapter-V) revealed that, gender-wise, the percentage of women members elected to Gram Panchayat is more than 1/3rd i.e 35%. In this village also young and middle aged representatives together
constitutes a majority. Backward Classes representatives constitute first largest percentage followed by OCs and SCs. Sub-Caste considerations also have their play in choosing candidates. The percentage of illiterates though constituting a minority is significant and 1/3rd of SC representatives are illiterates. Those with primary, secondary, intermediate and graduation educational qualifications are almost share equal in percentage. For less than 50% of the representatives agriculture is the main occupation. Considerable percentage of the representatives are real estate dealers. The landless constitute the first largest group. The economic position of the representatives is higher in this village than that of the representatives in Peda Thummidi. As regards general awareness of the representatives, it is noted that a large percentage of them are aware of political events. A majority of the SC representatives are well acquainted with political events. Those with four years experience and nine years political experience constitute a high majority. First largest group represents party workers followed by ward members and others. Party, Caste, SHGs, family and service motive have been the inspiring factors for entry into political arena and contest. The role of political parties is found significant. Campaigns have been expensive and money is mentioned as a factor in the elections. A majority of respondents have been found favourably inclined towards reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. A majority of respondents admitted the influence of caste.

The impact of caste in politics is admitted by a majority of the respondents. Suppression of lower castes by upper caste is reported. A majority of the representatives have some idea of democracy. They expressed the view that the Dalits are asserting themselves and the process of empowerment is on. Provision of drinking water, drainage, sanitation, roads and lights are among the common subjects of interest. It is found that half of the respondents are involved in the community service and the areas of interests differed from one another. Exploitation, corruption, lack of adequate powers, control of the influential over development activities are identified as common problems. A majority of them focussed on inadequate powers of panchayats. The need for efficient and quality leadership is also emphasized. Co-operation between people’s representatives and officials is also an issue to be addressed. Prioritization of works, training and purposeful implementation of the 73rd Constitution Amendment is essential,
they pointed out. Positive contribution of Dalit representatives to the community is reported. Problems from the upper castes, rich and official are felt by a small percentage of the villagers. Support to reservations is found among all the villagers. In general, the villagers expressed that their experience with the sitting non-Dalit Sarpanch is not happy.

A comparative study of the background, perceptions and participation of the respondents in the selected two villages i.e. Pedda Amberpet and Peda Thummidi (Chapter-VII) helped to assess the situation existing in the selected villages and to suggest measures for the effective performance of the representatives at the grass roots level institutions i.e. Gram Panchayats. A comparative analysis of the Dalit and non-Dalit representatives’ performance, perceptions and related aspects contributed some insights which are useful to identify the differences and to give suggestions for better performance of the Dalit representatives.

It is important to understand how far the 73rd Constitution Amendment helped Dalits to perform leadership roles in a micro setting. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act to a large extent, contributed for the upliftment of Dalits. Dalits and other disadvantaged sections of society obtained legal empowerments which were already available like reservations in educational institutions, jobs in public sector and reservation in State Legislatures and Lok Sabha empowered the Dalits to some extent. However, the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act extended reservations to Panchayat Raj bodies in India. Of course, there were several provisions even before this Act came into force to ensure the representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but they were not mandatory in nature. During 1983 Panchayat Raj elections in Andhra Pradesh, reservation was implemented to the position of Sarpanch but the elected Sarpanches are not allowed to work independently in most of the cases. For instance in Peda Thummidi panchayat a Dalit named Koduri Ramaiah was elected as Sapanch but he had to work under the control of Backward Classes’ leaders. He could not even take a small decision without the prior approval of the dominant caste leaders. The Peda Thummidi Panchayat was formed 125 years back. Though it has a long history, only two terms the Sarpanchship went to Dalits. Since Koduri Ramaiah a titular Sarpanch continued as a Sarpanch where as Dasari Ramesh did not fall in line with the dominant caste, he had to face many troubles functioning as Sarpanch. For his assertion and steadfastness he had to
commit suicide in order to escape from the clutches of the powerful sections. In the case of Arja Chalamaiah, though he is having long experience and economic support he was defeated several times intentionally. If he becomes Sarpanch of the village definitely he will change the pace of the development but the traditional leadership does not want any change in the village. The traditional leadership does not like to lose their strong hold in the panchayat. In the case of Pedda Amberpet, though the panchayat was established in 1950s, even one term was not given to either Scheduled Castes or Backward Castes. It shows that the traditional society does not lose their strong hold in the panchayat. It is remarkable thing that happened in this village after the 73rd Constitution Amendment. There are two people from Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes communities elected as Sarpanches. Thus Act certainly changed the traditional leadership and brought to surface a neo leadership. Institutional specific design is made possible through the amendment. However purposeful participation depends on several aspects which are discussed at relevant places in the thesis.

Participation of Dalits must be there to voice their felt needs. Elected representatives have to work with commitment and dedication and serve the purpose for which they are elected. They must sacrifice their self-interests for the collective goals. Holding Grama Sabha meetings at least twice a year is a mandatory one but they are not held in true sense they are proposed. Even if they are held also the people are not taking part with genuine interest of the village. The individuals who take part in Grama Sabha meetings always seek self interest or benefits which confine to their family. It is necessary to make the citizen of village recognize and realize the importance of the Grama Sabha and its proceedings for their advancement. Empowerment, which is a multidimensional process, in the present context is understood as an agent which enables individuals and groups to realize their identity and power; which makes one’s voice heard and enables one to contribute towards development and focuses on the need for redistribution of power. Empowerment implies the ability to mobilize, capacity to influence and to negotiate.

In the present study, the term Dalit is used encompassing only the Scheduled Castes (SCs). The varying degrees of alienation, oppression and denial of dignity have been dealt with at appropriate context. Keeping their disadvantageous position in view
the state, on its part, has provided constitutional protections like provision of reservations in educational institutions, jobs in public sectors and reservations in Parliament and State Legislatures. It is felt that introduction of reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions intended to bring social change/social transformation with equity and justice. The purpose of reservation and the result of it have also been discussed. It is found that reservations for Scheduled Castes is very much essential to ensure social justice. Access of Dalits to educational institutions, decline in the percentage of SCs living below poverty line; access to jobs in public sector; increase in SCs representation in Central Government Services; qualitatively increased their presence in political institutions and qualitative improvements too in their living. Wherever, whenever if Dalits get any opportunity either in jobs or politics they are doing their best but there are some societal barriers that are coming in the way and hampering them not to go ahead. There are some important gains through reservations. Reservation of seats and chair positions to SCs in panchayats is an important feature in the post amendment period. As pointed out earlier, the amendment facilitated structural and adjustment to include the excluded members in larger numbers than before.

There are several reasons which are contributing for not utilizing the opportunities extended by law. It must be rightly point out that there many reasons contributing for not utilizing the opportunities extended by the 73rd Constitution Amendment and Andhra Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994. These Acts provide representation to hitherto marginalized and excluded groups. Reservation on a rotational basis for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. But there are several constraints which have become hurdles to them to avail these provisions in an effective manner. Illiteracy, even to day is a barrier among the Dalits. Education helps to know the provisions that are available to them and to utilize them for their socio-economic and political development. Due to illiteracy most of the representatives as well as citizen among the SCs suffer from lack of awareness. If they remain unaware of the provisions and rules and regulations
how will they perform their role effectively? For this reason, Dalits must choose the educated and well aware persons to contest elections. Once elected they must be extended moral support to work effectively and contribute to the community and village.

**Attitudinal Changes**

Attitudinal changes have to take place among the various caste groups towards each other in the village, for the development of the village. The caste based and party based bias towards the disadvantaged sections must be eliminated. Dalits also must realize that they are also citizen like others they have entitlements on par with other caste groups in the society. No longer, the Dalits shall keep in their mind the inertia, inferiority complex and their socio-economic and political backwardness. They must be ready to overcome the age old practices with the help of the legal/constitutional protections provided by the Constitution of India. Non-Dalits also must realize the Dalits are their fellow citizen and they have also entitlements to perform roles in political institutions. Conducive environment must be created to enable them to perform the roles by Scheduled Castes elected representatives at various levels.

In Peda Thummidi village panchayat there is a rich scope for the development in each and every aspect. But unfortunately the division based on caste, party within the village ruined development scenario. There is scope for empowerment of Dalits also due to their population strength, educational attainments, and awareness levels. But non-unity among the Dalits has ruined their development. Dalits did not aid the process of development due to lack of unity, differences with in the community on party based and sub-caste based polarization. As and when they get chance to elect a person from their community, they must maintain collectivity and strive to win the elections with the support of non-Dalits but if they keep on differing each other there will be no progress or development. There are several instances of dividing the Dalits and moulding those weaknesses for others’ successes is seen at the time of election.

Holding the Sarpanch position itself is an empowerment of Dalits in Pedda Amberpet, specially in an environment where the economically, socially and politically powerful groups play predominant role in the power structure of village panchayat. Since there was no conducive environment to hold power positions the Dalits and even other castes like BCs also remained silent for decades i.e pre 73rd Constitution Amendment
period. Once the reservation provisions have been provided to them and with help of increased awareness levels as well as financial status, they started to come forward to be part of the power structure of the village panchayats. Even though the Sarpanch position is reserved for SCs, BCs or women due to ongoing tendency-in contemporary politics-money plays a predominant role in the election processes. On account of this many people do not show much interest in contesting elections, only a few people that too rich within the Dalits or BCs are coming forward to contest and perform representative roles. It may be noted that money plays a vital role in the election process.

However, overtime, the participation by the disadvantaged sections of the society in the Panchayati Raj bodies has dramatically improved more so after the implementation of the reservation provisions in the panchayats. Today there is qualitative and quantitative improvement in the panchayats due to the reservation provisions. Participation level has increased together with the representatives of each caste group as per their population size being involved. Not only Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or Backward Classes even Open Categories are also showing more interest in the participation. Empowerment process is on in Pedda Amberpet village since 1996. Persons belonging to the disadvantaged sections feel that they are empowered today.

Decision-making process has been democratized to the maximum extent under the leadership of Dalits. Since the non-Dalits insist on the representatives from Dalit community to show each and every detail and question these representatives to get their works done, there is an increase in transparency and effective functioning of the panchayats. The elected Scheduled Castes representatives have participated as members of the village panchayat, proposed issues, participated in decision-making and have been able to influence the decisions to a possible extent in favour of their community.

Development experience of the people of the two villages shows that the performance of Dalit representatives are far better than the sitting and former non-Dalit Sarpanches of the villages. Villagers of the two panchayats feel that the sitting non-Dalit Sarpanches are not taking up expected development activities. Dalits or Non-Dalits representatives are not exception to take development initiatives of the panchayat, as representative of people they have to bring more and more development schemes and grants from higher level bodies. But it is found that in villages under study Dalit
representatives have taken more interests to provide drinking water, roads, sanitation and houses for needy people since they knew the problems in their locations. Arja Chalamaiah has put maximum efforts to bring as many as possible benefits to the village. He strived a lot for the development of the village. Where as non-Dalit Sarpanch has not taken that much keen interest for the development of the village. Even the drinking water is not provided during summer. Irrespective of caste or party criticize the sitting non-Dalit Sarpanch for not providing the basic needs to the villagers.

They opined that the development experience with the sitting elected representatives in the matters of development of villages is not so satisfactory and less effective during the tenure of office (2006-2011). However it is to be noted that a Dalit Sarpanch of Pedda Amberpet, Pandi Pentaiah during his term (2001-2006) as Sarpanch did remarkable development work in the village. The development work will sustain for another two decades even if the sitting Sarpanches do not carry out any development work. In Pedda Amberpet, the development scenario is not that much satisfactory. The reason put forward by the sitting non-Dalit Sarpanch is that due to drastic fall of real estate business the annual revenue through tax deposits from treasury department has fallen drastically. Where as during Pentaiah’s term there were sufficient financial sources from all sides. Therefore, he could undertake much development works. Whatever the reasons might be or whatever factors may be there but development scenario was far better under the leadership of Dalits.

The focus of the present study is on empowerment of Dalits through 73rd Constitution Amendment in the era of decentralization of political, fiscal and administrative aspects in the context of two villages. This Act obviously increased the participation of Dalits in decision-making at the panchayats. Once the participation is taken in decision-making bodies they insisted for the effective implementation of several programmes granted to these panchayats thus concentrated to alleviate poverty and percolate the benefits to the community under the leadership of Dalits. The quantum jump of the Dalits in panchayats is a remarkable change that happened with the dawn of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. Young and educated leadership among the Dalits including women among social groups is emerging with the political empowerment of the Dalits at grass roots level. It is a great achievement from the side of the community as
well as state for taking such a bold step to introduce reservations in panchayats. In the pre-73rd Constitution Amendment period, in all the previous elections held in Pedda Amberpet there was no scope for Dalits to contest elections due to their given socio-economic and political background. However, Dalits had no scope to raise any voice of the community interests in the given social structure due to lack of awareness and conducive environment. Though, there are a few members nominated from Scheduled Castes they are for namesake and just nod their heads to the dictates of traditional powerful leaders of the villages. Now as a result of increased awareness and literacy with the help of the Act the traditional practices are being replaced. Thus Dalit leaders and voters are taking part in the political processes and act independently.

An examination of the socio-economic profiles of the Dalits shows that there has been no marked improvements in their social conditions even after six decades of implementation of reservation policy. In the case of Dalits’ representation in panchayat is no different in pre 73rd Constitution Amendment. It becomes obvious from the above provision in the Constitution Amendment Act that the representation of the Dalits in panchayats for enabling them to involve in the democratic processes and in decision-making for development activities has been adequately ensured.

Among various strategies to ensure social justice through reservation of seats, both in the union, state legislatures and panchayats become meaningful when these elected representatives work effectively. Thus until the constitutional compulsion was not made in 1992, the process of co-option of women, Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, Backward Class’ members involved accommodation of a particular group of caste or party who supported the Sarpanch during the elections. The people from these weaker sections co-opted by leaders were in a majority. Mostly proxy representatives were preferred in co-option. Such co-opted members were not from well-off families; they were mostly illiterate, handicapped to gain knowledge of politics and economic development. Now whole scenario is almost altered in panchayats.

The experience at the field indicates that the reservation has enabled the marginalized sections of the society in general and Dalits in particular. Reservation of seats in panchayats to Dalits has been provided with the hope that the elected representatives will not only empower themselves but the processes will empower their
The Act had made way for enlarging the scope for effective participation of these sections in the panchayats. The participation in turn gave them an opportunity to raise voice for the felt needs of their community. Thus several opportunities have been opened up to the Dalit elected representatives through these institutions. These representatives from Dalit community despite their socio-economic and political backwardness have now a greater say in the panchayats since reservations are mandatory. It is also found that the elected members of Dalit community put efforts for their political advancement and are contributing for the improvement of the community or society at large. Pentaiah availed the given opportunity and gained social status as well as social mobility. At present he is in a position to provide quality education to his children. He sent two of his children to abroad for higher education. He built a community hall to organize any social functions in the village. He provided cement roads and drainage in Dalit localities on par with others. Dasari Ramesh did a great contribution to his village before he committed suicide. He could grant individual water connections to all localities including Dalit habitation which are far from the main village. It may not be out place to mention that a word about Arja Chalamaiah though he gained name and fame as well as status, he lost ancestral property around 12 acres of land for the sake of politics.

Further the field experience has revealed several interesting incidents. In both the villages, the Dalit representatives are attacked by non-Dalits by showing sundry reasons. Pentaiah and Chalamaiah had to face the no-confidence motion in their panchayats. When they approached the higher authorities of panchayats by proving their innocence in misappropriations they were given clean chits. Those allegations made were baseless and purely based on personal grudge against these assertive leaders. They had to face many challenges. Pentaiah, Chalamaiah, Rameshbabu have faced several challenges and met several serious problems with their counterparts in the panchayat but Pentaiah and Chalamaiah stood courageously and faced them boldly.

Thus, although, there has been significant progress at the front of Dalit empowerment and women empowerment, there are several hurdles in the way of elected representatives including the traditional practices like upper caste domination, male domination leading to inter-caste conflicts and the cases of proxy roles played by
dominant castes and male members in the case of Dalit and female representatives of the panchayats.

The major obstacle to empowerment of Dalits is their poverty in the villages since most of them remained as landless labourers and daily wage earners. People’s participation is an essential pre-requisite of the empowerment process. The committed and forward looking leadership is essential factor to promote the level of consciousness among the weaker sections.

Decentralization is widely expected to empower the local people. Empowerment implies increased equity, at least in terms of decision-making authority. Democratic Decentralization process has changed things dramatically for the Dalits and other marginalized groups. It has enabled many elected representatives enter into the power structure of the panchayats. The reservation policy is expected to alter the distribution of public goods in favour of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. Reservation of seats significantly increased the access of Dalits to political decision-making. Most of these elected representatives have been able to perform their role successfully to a great extent. Despite the economic backwardness and absence of conducive and feasible environment in the villages these elected representatives proved their talents and have been successful in most of their endeavors.

As a result of the reservation of seats provided to the Dalits, the socio-economic and political transformation process has started but conflict situation between Dalits and non-Dalits is emerging as is witnessed in Pedda Thummidi and Pedda Amberpet. Any change is resisted by the traditional forces. They can not endure the power being shared by the Dalits who were earlier kept away from active participation in politics. This tendency has to be contested in a democratic manner by the leaders of all communities. In the two panchayats under study the kind of situation explained earlier prevails. However the elected representatives are also facing the problems with courage and overcoming them to enjoy the given opportunities endowed by the Constitution of India.

Findings

The following are important findings of the study: Disowning their own community by the elected representatives is observed in the villages under study. As a consequence of reservation policy in panchayats many Dalits elected as representatives
and got a chance to take part in panchayats. They have to work for common interests but not in a parochial manner. In that process due to alignments, political affiliation or any other factors like self-interests and alignments some times the elected leaders disowned their own community.

The representatives are being used as tools by upper castes and rich people. There are a few dominant castes and traditional leaders who do not wish to lose their hold on the panchayats, and desire to continue their previous position and status and to hold control they adopted several means and ways. They are extending financial support to contestants at the time of elections and after winning elections they try to exercise control over these elected representatives otherwise they face consequences if their dictates are not paid heed. It happened in the case of Dasari Rameshbabu, former Sarpanch of Peda Thummidi.

Lack of unity among the villagers is hampering the village development in general and lack of unity among the Dalits is harming the progress of their community and localities. When there are any incidents of clash of interest among the Dalits and non-Dalits leading to conflicts and sometimes one group quarrelling with other creates huge gap and ultimately loose their stakes for the development. In the case of Pedda Amberpet it is seen that they have differences among themselves and they are being used as tools and provoking people against same castes and ultimately they lost the case. One Dalit representative was backed and instigated by upper castes revolted against Dalit sarpanch and created several problems.

As mentioned earlier, the representatives once elected they have to work for the common interests of the village but the elected representatives from Dalit communities may not work towards their community’s upliftment. These representatives also have some self interests like any other representatives in political institutions. Once they are elected as representatives they show interest to further their political future and aspiring the higher positions. More over with the help of their present position sometimes they get benefits from the panchayats like loans, houses and house sites etc.

The role of money in elections has increased many folds. No representative is an exception to this trend including the Dalit representatives. As observed in the study in the villages there are huge differences in election expenditure incurred by Dalit and non-
Dalits. Dalits need to spend at least Rs. 5 to 6 lakh and non-Dalit need to spend Rs. 15 to 50 lakh for Sarpanch position. As money plays vital role in the elections only a few people from the deprived communities show interest and others remain as just voters. It is a common phenomenon in any level of political bodies but the ultimate effect of this trend is hampering the development of the village.

Suggestions

- Awareness Generation is a must to representatives as well the general public of the villages. Different strategies must be evolved aimed at empowering the marginalized sections to work effectively in panchayats. There is a need to create awareness about income generation of panchayats, availing programmes and schemes specially meant for Dalits and participation in panchayats and its advantages.
- State and Non-Governmental Organizations should play a proactive role in promoting the capacity building of representatives through organizing training programmes towards this objective. Doles given by government appropriately be utilized by the poor. Make sure that the benefits reach the deserving citizen irrespective of their caste and party background.
- Elected representatives in general and especially members of the panchayat with Dalit background in particular feel that serving on panchayat as representatives is free service, and sometimes they need to spend money from their own pockets. It is necessary to provide honorarium to them to serve panchayats more effectively.
- The Dalits must come out from the shell of inferiority complex and stop play into others’ hands. For this community organizations must strengthen themselves and stand solidly behind their elected representatives in peace and odd times.
- The empowerment of Dalits, as a socio and political phenomenon is a combination of efforts from below and as well as above. However State, People in general and Dalits in particular strive to empower Dalits in all spheres including Political sphere.