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The panchayats are very old institutions of India. But the participation of women in the PRIs in such a huge number is certainly an epoch making phenomenon. After forty-five years of independence, the Government of India felt the need to involve women in the institutions of local self-government in rural areas. To include the vast sections of women and particularly women of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the affairs of decision-making and implementation of development programmes at the local level is really commendable.

During the survey it was observed that most of the dalit women representatives of Kalahandi are newcomers. Had the government not provided for reservation, the patriarchal and caste-ridden village milieu would not have provided them the opportunity to represent the PRIs. Now that it has been mandatory to include women members, there is likely to be a change in the perception of the rural people about the role and position of women in the rural society and political institutions. The representation of dalit women in the panchayats will also bring about a radical change in the co-relationship of various classes in the villages. The other factors were also due to the persuasion of family members i.e. husbands or kin-group, influence from the village people and their personal interests. Actually their personal interest was created by the above factors.

It was also observed that out of the total dalit women representatives interviewed, all the dalit women representatives were already married and majority of them were in the age group of 35-50 years. This was due to the patriarchal nature of the village society and pervasive male dominance in the rural
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political structures. The entry of the married women into PRIs was due to the following reasons like early marriage is common in rural areas, unmarried girls were not allowed by their parents to hold such posts, the village committees have strong reservation in selecting unmarried girls for contesting political offices, and for the fear that unmarried girls would stake their marriage if they involve in public activity before marriage.

It was also observed that among the total dalit women panchayat representatives interviewed only three women had prior political experience (they were elected in the panchayat election of 1997) and all others were first time entrant to PRIs. And not a single respondent was from any political background. Most of the representatives were found to be school or high school literates (5-10 standard). Due to their lack of education, they do not understand the policies and programmes of the government. Lack of infrastructural facilities like electricity, road, etc. are also the stumbling blocks in the way of their information regarding various development policies and programmes of the government. However, the most heartening thing was that even if they are not that educated and lack all the required skills, after being elected as the people's representatives they were feeling independent and self-confident. Earlier they used to get jitters going before village elders or government officials to discuss the problems of their villages, but now they have started talking freely to them.

The monthly income of majority of respondents was Rs.1001-3000. All the dalit women representatives were house wives and declared themselves as home makers which includes child rearing, field working (taking food for their family members working in the field, weeding grass from the paddy crops, cutting crops,
etc.), fetching water from the pond and well, wash clothes of the family, cook food for the entire family, looking after the old members of the family; activities that put limits on the time they can spend in political affairs. Most of the representatives are poor. They had little land property or no land at all. Most of them are living in houses made of clay and few were living in pukka houses, which they had been provided by government’s IAY. Even after being elected as the people’s representatives, most of the representatives maintained that it had made them independent but it had not changed anything in their socio-economic status. According to them, “They are where they were earlier.” So, the socio-economic condition of dalit women representatives is a matter of concern as it is linked with their role perception. If they are economically poor, they might not think about the development of the Panchayat. Our policy makers, who have in mind putting reservation to develop both women and panchayat through various measures, must bear in mind that mere representation is not enough; they need to be strengthened both socially and economically.

So far as the cooperation of male/female representatives of other castes in discharging their duties is concerned, they still face caste and gender based discrimination. They rarely get the administrative support to do something for the development of their locality even if they wish to.

The most interesting finding came out during the conversation with the villagers was that in comparison to the general castes women representatives, the SC/ST women representatives are better performers. The reason they cited was that the women representatives of higher castes do not mix with people freely and very rarely come out of their homes to look into people’s problems. Their families
are highly patriarchal and therefore, women are not allowed to participate in public affairs. Whereas the SC/ST women representatives do not shy away to come out of their homes and mix with people freely and try to hear the problems and also to solve them.

During the survey, it was also observed that all the dalit women representatives maintained that there should be 50 percent reservations in the PRIs. Because the time is changing and women can also do what men can.

So far as the concept of proxy is concerned it is easy to point out numerous examples of women who have worked entirely according to what they were told by their husbands or other male members of their families. In some cases elected women remained at home while their husbands attended the panchayat meetings and carried out official transactions on their behalf. Some of the elected women representatives were approached by men only when their signatures were needed. This is true to some extent, but this is not the whole picture. It is very much easy to argue that reservation for women has failed. However, in our male dominated society it is not that easy for women to come out of their homes and make a nick in the outer world straight way. In order to realize the greater potential created by these reservations, we should look at several other examples in which women have made remarkable achievements for the development of their villages or locality. The yearning of several women to assert their independence and make a significant contribution to the welfare of the people is visible in many examples. In many cases they have been helped by their family members, husbands and have been encouraged to realize their potential of initiating meaningful social change.
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From such examples it is quite clear that when conducive atmosphere exist for women to play a leading and active role in the decision making of the village, the entire village community benefits. This increased participation of women is often associated with better utilization of financial resources, increased harmony among the villagers and prioritization of some important but neglected aspects of development such as girls' education and sanitation. Corruption has been one of the main problems of PRIs. Interviews in several villages confirm that when women representatives function in an independent way, possibilities for corruption are lesser. Even if a Sarapanch is honest, there is the other threat that government officials refuse to release money and do not cooperate in other ways unless a certain commission is paid to them.

Thus it is in the interests of not just women but the entire village community to encourage the further empowerment of women in village affairs. The 33% reservation for women in PRIs is an important part of this empowerment of women. To strengthen it further, the following suggestions must be taken into consideration.

Suggestions:

• The programme of free universal education upto the age of 14 should be vigorously implemented. As the literacy rate of female is very poor in Kalahandi, girls should be encouraged to go to school.

• Government should take steps to improve the socio-economic conditions of dalits and particularly the women.

• Women representatives in PRIs must be trained in the art of decision making so that they are not influenced by external factors.
• Political education should be imparted to them which should include not merely their powers, rights and functions but also on the concept and relevance of PR, the nature of Indian democracy and constitution, Information on the policies and schemes, current political developments and trends, or on legislations, policies and programmes for women and other weaker sections, etc.
• Particular attention must be paid to develop their interpersonal communication skills.
• There should be inter-district level or intra-district level meetings of the panchayat representatives at least twice a year to share their experiences being in the institution of panchayats. This would provide impetus to the new entrants to develop their decision-making capacity.
• Voluntary organizations, Women Organizations, Universities and Research Institutions and professionals should also play a crucial role in helping and training elected women representatives.
• As observed during the field survey, the dalit women representatives confessed that some way or other they always felt being treated as dalits. Therefore, stern action should be taken against persons who create such feelings.
• Besides this administrative back up at the micro level, at the very place of functioning the political leaders should encourage women to participate effectively and create sufficient scope for discharging their responsibilities. If the political will and administrative support is converged on the women members, the goal of women intervention will be achieved.
However, the lesson of PRI is clear: if the wisdom of grassroots organizations, especially the courage and clarity of women, is to become policy, it will not be through the art of intellectual persuasion but by the arrangements made within a political system for their voice to have power. The process has just begun. As Albert Camus had said, “All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning”. So we must have patience to reap the fruits of women’s involvement in the decision-making process. Bringing women into power is thus not only a matter of equality, but of correcting an unjust and unrepresentative system. And to give an opportunity to the dalit women who have been oppressed and suppressed throughout ages, in the decision-making process of panchayati raj is to make them feel inclusive and that they too have the capacity to make the future of the society and country a better one.