

CHHATTISGARH

Dalits, Panchayat Raj and Power Equations

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Creation of Panchayat Raj is perhaps the best transformation in democratic India to realize the participation of ordinary people in power sharing. Amendment of Article 73 of the Constitution was envisioned as the best among decentralization polity in democracy. Theoretically Panchayat Raj would mean the power distribution from a stringent centralized set-up to a decentralized one, gazed with radical change both at the level of delivery of goods and in the social composition.

After the new generation of Panchayats have started functioning several issues have come to the fore, which have a bearing on human rights. The important factor, which has contributed to the Dalit situation vis-a-vis the Panchayat system, is the nature of Indian society, which of course determines the nature of the state. The Indian society is known for its inequality, social hierarchy and the rich and poor divide. The social hierarchy is the result of the caste system, which is unique to India. Therefore caste and class are the two factors, which deserve attention in this context.

At another level it is essential to look into the question: who are the victims of the social system and nature of the state? They are women, the Dalits, Adivasis and the poor. How can the process of decentralization through strengthening the democratically elected local bodies tackle these issues along with defining rural development in compressed way? Whether the decentralization process and the decentralized institutions increase human rights violations or enhance the possibility for respecting and observing human rights?

In Chhattisgarh there has been a sharp increase in violent manifestations of casteism ever since the local government system began its functioning. When the Panchayat Raj institutions have been seen by the upper castes as the tool for the lower castes to assert their right as individuals living in a democratic polity the latter have become targets of caste based discrimination and violence. This rising unrest at the local level has become a common phenomenon.

Aghru Suryavanshi, a Dalit is not in his village Goud for the past one year. His major crime is that he had defeated his rival Ballu Singh Thakur on a general seat during the last Panchayat election, which drew wrath of the upper caste. Goud is a Panchayat in Janjgir district of Chhattisgarh. Dalits in this village have long-standing story of caste assault and aggression to tell.

In the Panchayat elections of January 2000, Mithailal Lahare was elected as the Sarpanch under the reservation quota. The dominant upper caste people, who disliked his stay in the office, dismissed him after a no-confidence motion.

This is yet another classical example of harassment and humiliation of Dalits in achieving their political rights under social compulsion. He stayed in the office for about 2 years after which the power automatically came back into the hands of the non-Dalits who could better manipulate the village politics.

Even after duly getting elected, the Dalits are not getting the power and status they deserve. "No confidence motion is the best way invented by the upper caste to take over from the Dalits", says Awadh Nawrang Sarpanch of Nangaridih Panchayat in Janjgir. Devkuwar Sarith, Sarpanch of Bada Darha Panchayat expressed her ambiguity saying, "untouchability practices are touching unpredictable magnitudes and there is an unvarying threat from the upper caste segment to bring in no-confidence and overthrow me. Women face it the worst. How will I work freely under this circumstance?"

In the last one-year there were 34 cases of no-confidence motions in Dalit Panchayats. Reservation being the modus by which Dalits could get into power sharing is seen as a means of disgrace by the upper caste segment thereby instigating a lobby to dismantle all reservations. What has happened in the last few decades is a gradual, sensible and rationale growth in the level of awareness among the Dalits. Questions relating to caste issue have been challenged that intimidates the very existence of the caste politics within the Panchayat Raj itself. In recent times these questions are more related to the aspects like delivery systems, mid-day meal, etc. Scores of such cases frequently occupy space in the media.

Violent attacks on Dalit bastis have been reported at many places in the state. In the background of these cases, in some way or other, is the power equation in the Panchayat. In 2004 there was an attack on Dalits in Gumka of Durg district by the upper caste segment. According to a report by Dalit Study Circle, the setting conditions of this began with the last Panchayat elections when the Dalits supported a candidate against the whims of the caste Hindus.

Similar incident happened in Goud in 2005, here there were several rounds of violence against the Dalits, beginning with the social boycott to refusal of worship rights of village goddess and finally converging into several rounds of violence. However the tension was set much before with the coming of a Dalit to power as Sarpanch.

In 2005 September a third incident of similar style was reported from Bhokludih village of Mahasamund district. Here the tension detonated with the mid-day meal scheme run by the non-Dalit Sarpanch. According to Tamaskar Tandon, member of Dalit Mukti Morcha (DMM), "these assaults are expressions to survive the challenge to the caste hierarchy".

With strong presence of caste disparity, utilizing the government machinery like the police has happened in a number of cases. The Pipariya Police on the instruction of the Sarpanch of Khairwar Panchayat in Kawardha district on 5th October 2004 detained one Bannu Satnami. Next day morning his body was found lying in front of the police station. During the year 2004-05 there were as many as 13 custodial deaths in Chhattisgarh, of which 11 were Dalits, a self-explanatory figure showing how police is deployed as a tool of caste atrocities.

In the village there is clear discrimination on the lines of caste. DMM activist Guddu Lahare says, "in the Panchayat there are two major means of discrimination. One is that the Dalits are kept away from the Panchayat proceedings, developmental work, schemes, etc. and another is that wherever Dalits are in power by virtue of reservation they are targeted and their posts are declared null and void after a certain period of time".

This is seen in good number in many Panchayats. For example the development work in the Panchayat in the Dalit bastis are not properly done. Nor are the Dalits involved in the planning and implementation process. Hence these settlements are still lying under bad condition.

Secondly the Dalits who are in positions like Sarpanch or Panch they are toppled within a short period by bringing in a no-confidence motion. This has barred many Dalits off exercising their rights in the Panchayat institutions. Those who had survived are only based on the principles set by the caste masters or by applying corrupt politics.

In Hasda village of Raipur the Panchayat has served the Dalits cultivating the land since 1965 with a notice of evacuation. Paul Ratre served with a similar notice says, "it is another form of discrimination synthesised with the Panchayat Raj, where the power at the grassroots is being manipulated by the caste Hindus to take away even the remaining resources and subjugate the Dalits." Dalits are socially boycotted; anyone who dares will have to pay the penalty of 10000/- rupees.

Landlessness and land alienation is a major issue of Dalit reality. In one village near Baramkela of Raigarh district nearly 200 families are landless and also their homestead land is going out of their hands since they had been notified by the Panchayat to leave the land. The land is said to be government land. However they had been living on this land for the past many generations.

Mid-day meal and discrimination against Dalit children in the schools are very high. DMM and other Dalit organizations have undertaken the fact-finding investigations in several villages. Similar investigation needs to be undertaken in different places too. Here again there is a social boycott imposed on Dalits.

In earlier days the boycott was mostly imposed by the caste Panchayats, but in recent times the Panchayat itself is undertaking it, under the guise of land encroachment. Scores of such cases from each district had come into the limelight through local media. Hirri village of Bilaspur, Salkhan in Raipur are the latest victims.

While analyzing these cases, such incidences happened only when Dalits began to assert their political rights through Panchayat institution. It is evident that the upper castes with their traditional control over the affairs of the village cannot tolerate the changes being brought about by the decentralized democratic institutions. In the backdrop of such incidences an array of question raises with reference to Panchayat Raj vis-a-vis Dalits. The initial

prediction of decentralization envisioned through Panchayat Raj hasn't become a reality. It also tells how Panchayat Raj is utilized as a tool of disempowerment of Dalits and consolidation of caste system.

How far new Panchayat Raj has helped the Dalits to come into the centre stage is absolutely questionable.

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