



DALIT LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW PANCHAYATS

In South Asia's caste system, a Dalit (or Scheduled Castes), formerly known as untouchable or *achuta*, is a person outside of the four Varnas, and considered below of all and polluting. Varna is functional hierarchy system proposed by the ancient Indian texts to organize society which later on to develop as the caste system in India. Dalits include people as leather-workers, scavengers, tanners, flayers, cobblers, agricultural labourers, municipal cleaners, gymnasts, drum beaters, folk musicians and street handicraft persons.

The granting of reservations to Dalits within the new panchayats (village council) established by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993 in India is one of the most significant changes introduced in recent decades. Apart from seats for Dalits in every panchayat based on their population, the post of Sarpanch (village head) together with one-third of the seats for Dalit women have been reserved. These provisions have the potential of throwing up a new leadership among Dalits who can play a seminal role in participation and decision-making in the new panchayats. Moreover, the amendment has given panchayats constitutional status making them the third tier within the federal structure. Other institutional anomalies which existed in the past have been removed: elections have to be held regularly, the powers and responsibilities of panchayats have been increased and clearly defined and state finance commissions established to provide adequate finances. Panchayats have emerged as an important level within the federal structure, play a more determining role in state politics and have the capacity to carry out development at the local level. Thus, reservation at the panchayat level is today a more important avenue of political participation for Dalits than within central and state legislatures. It has opened the doors of the political arena for emergent Dalit leaders to enter democratic politics and introduce change at the local level.

Traditionally, leadership in the village as confined to 'rural elites' who were, generally speaking, aged and moderately educated, belonging to the higher castes with links to state political leaders and the bureaucracy (Chakraborty and Bhattacharyya, 1993). A principal characteristic of this elite was landownership, which was not only the main source of subsistence at the village level but was also crucial in determining the rural stratification system and the power structure (Beteille, 1974). It created dependency of the landless lower caste workers on the higher landowning castes. The traditional caste hierarchy placed the Dalit at the bottom and also bred habits of deference of the lower caste to the higher caste, of the younger to the aged, unquestioning obedience of the landless agricultural workers to the landlord, and subservience of the poor to the wealthy. These features 'legitimized' the exercise of power by the powerful landowning and wealthy higher caste section of the village. The village authority structure worked in the form of rule, domination, influence, control, or even in its ugly form and naked manifestation of use of brute force or physical coercion by this group. Studies also point to factions within villages, which were often led by the upper castes and had followers from among the lower castes. Factional leaders, thus, controlled villages and politics within them (Chakraborty and Bhattacharyya, 1993). Newer forms of domination in which caste and class forces came together were noted in which power remained in the hands of the higher castes and oppression of the lower castes continued (Beteille, 1974; Srinivas, 1960).

In this setting, rapid social change produced in the rural areas brought a group of leaders who were able to easily handle both bureaucratic procedures and personal contacts to settle disputes, get things done and have influence over others. Their authority was sanctioned by the traditional caste structure as they belonged to the higher castes. The leader was able to do these things because of the respect he commanded or because of the power he wielded over



the villagers. What we find is the coexistence of two kinds of social systems each having its own characteristic mode of organization and norms. The first was organized in terms of caste, kinship and community relationships with a high value placed on personal loyalties and ties of personal dependence. While the second was the organizational nexus or the 'office' where relations are in principle governed by impersonal values and standards (ibid). In India, as villages were, and still remain, characterized by ties of caste and kinship, these two intersect and reinforce each other. Leaders were expected to help their caste brethren and to exercise power on their behalf.

These vertical relationships are undergoing change and it would be more difficult for upper caste leaders today to control the village authority structure and expect subservience from the lower castes. Exercise of power is no longer hereditary, given, automatic and unchallenged. With the introduction of democracy, universal adult franchise and democratic decentralization through the PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions), the base of power and its exercise have notably undergone change. New sources and forms of power have emerged, though at the same time the older sources and forms have not disappeared. Leadership is closely connected to and cannot be understood apart from these changes taking place in society. It can no longer be studied under the dominant-dependent paradigm. Scholars point to three stages - traditional, transitional and democratic. In the traditional stage it is quite natural that the political structure will be oligarchic and the dominant caste will rule and common villagers and lower castes will have practically no access to power positions. In the second stage, certain ambivalences appear and traditional ascriptive identities tend to get weakened in the face of achievements of education and wealth. But ruling autocratic forces still remain in control. This is a phase of both democratic and aristocratic politics. This is followed by the democratic stage where caste as a basic feature continues to be important, but loses its traditional legitimizing role and becomes one variable among many. Scholars have argued that in India this process is underway but is at different levels in different areas rendering the process very complex (Shiviah et al., 1978: 122-23).

The new panchayats are now a decade old and in almost all states two elections have been held since the passage of the Act. In terms of sheer numbers, the large number of elected representatives represent a substantial change in the composition of panchayats. The passing of the 73rd amendment has coincided with a number of changes that have taken place both within the Dalit community and in the Indian society and polity. The 1980s witnessed an acceleration of the long-term processes of democratization and regionalization experienced by the Indian society and polity in the Republican period. A number of scholars have pointed out that the power of the rural elite has been questioned though not broken. Writing in the early 1990s Mendelsohn pointed out that with economic development, education and emergence of new forms of non-agricultural employment, land is no longer the only source of power and prestige in rural India (Mendelsohn, 1993: 804-42). In a similar vein, a more recent study of western UP shows that the traditional structures of rural dominance based upon land and social status are undergoing change due to education, diversification of the occupational structure, and government welfare/ development programmes leading to new caste/class equations emerging in the countryside between the traditionally dominant landowning castes and the Dalits (Pai, 2002). A second challenge to the rural elite has come from the rise of political consciousness among the lower castes leading to an upsurge from below questioning the traditional caste hierarchy. This has taken the shape of socio-political mobilization, construction of identity, rise in the number of Dalits voting and emergence of parties led by Dalits and associations.



These shifts have been matched by corresponding changes within the Dalit community. Literacy rates among the Dalits rose faster during the 1980s. They had increased by only a little over 4 per cent between 1971 and 1981 but between 1981 and 1991 the increase was 8 per cent - a little over 7 per cent among men and 5 per cent among women. Despite the fact that literacy rates and the educational attainments of Dalits are still abysmally low in parts of the country, this is the area in which some change has occurred since the 1970s. School enrolment rates also rose during this decade. There were also reports of improvement in the economic conditions of Dalits in some parts of the country providing them with the potential to revolt against ill-treatment by the higher castes. For example, in UP, studies point to improvements in the socio-economic conditions of Dalits from the late 1970s.' In eastern UP, the Green Revolution leading to increase in investment in agriculture and urbanization, increased employment opportunities on farms, brick kilns, construction activities, and rickshaw pulling in cities, removing the absolute dependence on landowners and patron-client relations (Shankar, 1993). In the Western plains, where the condition of Dalits was already better off, a significant shift has been a movement away from land to other sources of livelihood. Due to spread of education, a small urban professional and entrepreneurial elite has arisen which has made use of job quotas to shift to non-agricultural employment (ibid).

Voting percentages among Dalits have also risen and faster than in the general population. In many areas Dalits have voted for the first time since independence. The spread of the power of the vote has been a very important means of raising confidence to revolt against 'upper caste' domination. In the 1996 elections, the percentage of Dalit voter turnout at the national level was 87.3 per cent, the corresponding figure for the upper castes being 85.6 per cent. In the 1998 elections the Dalit voter turnout rose to 93 per cent and the national average to 91.9 per cent. These figures assume significance when we realize that Dalit voter turnout in 1971 was 78.7 per cent (Pushpendra, 1999: 2611). In short, by the 1990s many scholars pointed to the rise of a new republican, educated, upwardly mobile generation among the Dalits with higher levels of consciousness of identity and who were not prepared to put up with domination and oppression.³ However, these changes have taken place only in a few parts of the country, the pace of change has been slow and poverty remains. Second, only a small section among the Dalits in each region has benefited from these developments, while the large mass of the Dalits due to their disadvantaged position could not benefit from them. Moreover, such social and political changes may not make themselves felt immediately at the panchayat level. It is more difficult for Dalit leaders to assert themselves and introduce change at the *village* than at the national or state or even the district level. This is because it is at the village level that the greatest oppression is experienced by Dalits and the village panchayats are the most vulnerable.

Another significant aspect is that the need for inclusion of Dalits is even greater today. The constitutionalization of the panchayats has meant establishment of three tiers of federalism and greater powers and responsibilities - financial and developmental - in the hands of these institutions. With the introduction of economic reforms at the state level in the mid-nineties, there has been an increasing recognition among scholars and policy makers that poor-oriented programmes employment, basic social services, PDS, social security - are best implemented in a decentralized manner by PRIs with community participation and subject to local accountability (Guhan, 1995: 248). This view gained ground due to the failure of many state governments, especially those in the backward states of the northern belt, to meet the basic needs of their citizens, particularly the disadvantaged sections. In order to introduce these changes, greater devolution of powers to PRIs, removal of corruption and inefficiency, and higher levels of accountability and participation were needed. The passage of the 73rd



Constitutional Amendment in 1993 had already made devolution of power to panchayats part of the agenda of all state governments. Thus, economic reforms and reform of the functioning of panchayats came to be seen as complementary." In this scenario, the participation of Dalits in the functioning of PRIs has become important to ensure that they are included in vital decisions affecting development in the rural areas.

PRIA has a long history of empowering the leadership of socially excluded sections especially SC, ST women and men. Studies on Leadership of SC and ST commissioned in 2002-2003 are one of them. Work on strengthening leadership of marginalized communities specifically with SC and ST empowers the Sc and ST communities to engage and monitor the delivery of services by the local governments. It also ensures that the funds which are available in government are translated to meet the need of the SC and ST.

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