

Political Empowerment of Scheduled Caste Leaders in Local Bodies

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Abstract

The rural leadership was given a constitutional and legal recognition in the framework of Panchayati Raj. It has carved out a share of political power for the weaker section. This received further momentum and consolidation through 73rdAmendment Act in 1992,which accorded a Constitutional status to Panchayati Raj, elaborating the composition Constitution and duration powers and responsibilities elections and auditing of the panchyats at the village, intermediate and district level.(Asha Koushik,1998) The most significant part of 73 amendment deals with reservation for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population at each level and not less than one third of membership and office of chairperson to women. Legislations were followed by elections to the 2.25 lakhs of Grampanchyats in the country, which saw emergence of new breed of leaders, who included weaker sections and women, endowed with zeal and enthusiasm

Andhra Pradesh has introduced reservations to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population and direct election to the post of the Sarpanch even before the 73rd Amendment. Direct election to the post of Sarpanch was first held in 1981 and subsequently in the years 1988, 1995 and 2001. Out of 21914 Grampanchayaths, 1332 are major Panchayats. In the 2001 elections, 3226 Grampanchayatis elected their leader unanimously and more than 18000 Grampanchayats went to polls with about 3.82 crores of voters.

Key Words: Empowerment, Community development programmes, Panchayati Raj, Sarpanch, Grampanchayaths, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes,Population.

Introduction:

To conceive someone from Scheduled Caste, as a leader is strange predicament for the traditional and caste ridden rural set up. Nevertheless, empowerment of the Scheduled Castes has come' to stay- He is a leader of different breed. Can he take people along with him? Can he be a successful leader? The following is a discussion on the standing of the Scheduled Caste leaders in rural Andhra Pradesh.

India is a land of villages with more than 70% of its population inhabiting more than 5 lakh villages. As such most of its socio economic and political problems and planning pertain to rural society.

After India attained independence it was realized that if the fruits of the independence are to reach the common man, the development and reconstruction of the villages was the urgent need. Equally important was

the active participation of the villagers in the development process and emphasizing the need for grass root democracy Gandhiji rightly observed that "India could not be truly independent unless there is Gramswaraj and unless the Panchayat Raj is established in the villages"

The pioneering developmental inputs such as Community development programmes, land reforms and adult franchise have ushered a new era of transformation that has changed the traditional rural structure dramatically. The Panchayati Raj system has emerged sequel to the Balwanth Rai Mehta committee recommendations and was considered a political and administrative innovation of far-reaching importance. (Narayana, 1998) The Panchayati Raj has minimized the influence of all pervading caste system in the rural political scenario. Earlier and for a long time Brahmins held power in Indian society because of the importance attached to ritual status and knowledge. Later the economically dominant and land owning castes wrested power from Brahmins. (Khan, 1980) The lower castes and weaker sections seldom received any share in the power. It all changed as the community development and Panchayati Raj institution have given a new thrust to the development of different kind of local leadership. The age-old leadership of the villages based on ascription and caste has given way to secular leadership based on election.

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A decade after 73rd Amendment, it should be in fitness of things to assess the impact of reservation to Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj and to examine the empowerment of the marginalized section of the society. The ensuing discussion is on the socio-economic and political profiles of the Scheduled Caste Sarpanches who are respondents of the study. The 225 respondents are drawn from all the three natural regions of Andhra Pradesh, namely Rayalaseema, Telangana and Coastal Andhra., from each of this region one district namely Anantapur, Mahaboobnagar and East Godavari were selected and from each of this district 75 Scheduled Caste Sarpanches were selected for a detailed Study.

Table – 1 : Sex Particulars

Sex	Number	%
Male	176	78.22
Female	49	21.78
Total	225	100

The sex distribution of the respondents' reveals that 176 (78.22%) are male and the remaining 49 (21.78%) are female. A woman occupying elected political position in village, more so from the Scheduled Castes is a rarity. However, this is made possible only because of the women reservations. The women respondents have accepted this as a fact. All the woman respondents were elected from women reserved seats only.

Table-2 : Age Particulars

AGE	Number	%
< 30	56	24.89
31 – 40	81	36.00
41 – 50	61	27.11
51 – 60	20	8.89
60 >	7	3.11
Total	225	100

The age distribution of the respondents reveals that as many as 137 (60.88%) respondents are below 40 years of age. A meager number of 27 (12%) of the respondents are above the age 50 years. A majority of the respondents are. Politically speaking, still young and as such; it is not the case of 'aged, experienced and matured' leadership among the Scheduled Castes. Many of the Sarpanches have taken plunge into the politics for the first time.

Table-3 : Sub Caste Particulars

Sub Caste	Number	%
Madiga	183	81.33
Mala	37	16.44
Adi Andhra	5	2.22
Total	225	100

There are fifty-nine sub castes among the Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh but the Mala and Madiga are numerically dominant among them. As the sub caste particulars reveal. 183 (81.33%) respondents are from Madiga sub caste and 37 (16.44%) respondents belong to Mala sub caste. Politics is not the domain all the sub castes, and there are 'dominant subcastes' among the Scheduled Castes. The data reveal that almost all the respondents are married.

Table – 4: Educational particulars

Particulars	Number	%
Illiterates	141	62.67
Primary	37	16.44
Upper Primary	25	11.11
High School	19	8.44
College	3	1.33
Total	225	100

The educational particular of the respondents are rather disappointing and do reflect the educational backwardness of the Scheduled Castes. The Sarpanch is the first citizen of the village, an elected representative, and is supposed to lead and manage the affairs of the village. Disappointing, as the case is, 141 (62.66%) respondent, are illiterates. Lack of education, as the illiterate respondents have admitted, is affecting their reputation and functioning as Sarpanch. The paradox of the situation is that despite their illiteracy except twenty-seven of the illiterate respondents all of them have learned to sign. Less than two percent of the respondents alone could complete college education.

Table-5: Occupational Particulars

Occupation	Number	%
Agl. Labour	107	47.56
Cultivation	42	18.67
Business	15	6.67
Unskilled labour	13	5.78
Petty Shop	12	5.33
1+2	6	2.67
Tailor	3	1.33
Cobbler	3	1.33
Housewives	24	10.67
Total	225	100

Forced to follow hereditary caste occupations, the Scheduled Castes were associated with the so-called defiling occupations such as scavenging, leatherwork, drum beating, carcass recovery and flaying, grave digging etc. Some others have been in the clean occupations such as agriculture labour. The distribution of the respondents by occupation very clearly shows that the respondents, who are the leaders, have moved out of defiling caste occupations. As many as 41 fathers of the respondents were in the defiling occupations of leatherwork (32) and scavenging (9). None of the respondents are in the occupation of scavenging and only 3 (1.33%) of them are cobblers. However, 120 (53.33) respondents still continue to be in agricultural and other

occupations of manual labour, the 'non-polluting' occupations. 79 (35.11%) respondents are in respectable occupations such as agriculture, business and shop keeping.

Table – 6: Income Particulars (per annum)

Income (in Rs.)	Number	%
< 10,000	8	3.56
10000 – 20000	98	43.56
20000 – 30000	83	36.89
30000 – 40000	27	12.00
40000 – 50000	2	0.89
50000 >	7	3.11
Total	225	100

The low-income levels of the respondents reflect the inferior occupations they are engaged in nearly half the respondents are earning less than Rs. 20000 per month and only 7 (3.11%) respondents are earning more than Rs. 50000/- per month. certainly the respondents are not 'economically affluent' leaders.

All the respondents have won from the reserved seats only. 176 (78.22%) male respondents have won from Scheduled Castes (general) reserved seats and the remaining 49 (21.78%) have won from Scheduled Castes (women) reserved seats. 182 (80.88%) respondents have won the election in their native place. Almost all of them reside in the village where they won election except for only 3 (1.33%) respondents who live in the nearby towns.

All the respondents own houses. About half the respondents inherited their houses and the remaining of them built houses on their own, some taking government assistance. 119 (52.88%) respondents live in thatched houses and 70 (31.12%) respondents live in terraced houses 12 (5.33%) respondents do not have electricity facility in their houses. Cycle or moped, radio, tape recorder and small black and white television, meager jewelry an: the general material possessions in the households of all the respondents.

Table – 7 : Extent of land (N=81)

Land owned	Number	%
< 2 Acres	42	51.85
2 – 4 Acres	24	29.63
4 – 6 Acres	13	16.05
> 6 Acres	2	2.47
Total	225	100

The distribution of the respondents by procession of landed property indicates that 81 (36%) of them own land and nearly one third of them acquired land on their own and an equal number of them got land distributed by the government. However, of the land-owning respondents (81), a majority, 42(51.85%)

respondents own less than two acres of land and only 15 (18.51%) respondents have more than 5 acres of land. More than 64% of the respondents have said they are saving money and at the same time the savings are meager. Of the respondents who save, almost 88% are saving less than Rs.300 per month. Private Chits is the popular mode of savings among the respondents. 72% of the respondents have borrowed loans and about 58% of the respondents have borrowed from private moneylenders and the remaining have borrowed from the banks. More than half of the borrowers has borrowed more than Rs. 10000 but less than Rs. 15000/-.

It is common knowledge that the Panchayati elections on caste grounds and the traditional dominant castes secure power the changed setup. The caste group using the numerical strength assumes the characteristics of the pressure group. (ZcnabBanu, 1998). The Madiga and Mala sub castes among the Scheduled Castes have their own caste organizations namely the 'Madiga Dandora' and 'Mala Mahanadu'. Of the total respondents 117 (52%) have said that are members of caste organization. Of this 117, the caste organizations members' 93 (79.48%) are associated with Madiga Dandora and the remaining 24 (20.51%) associated with Mala Mahanadu. All most all the respondents have said that their caste associations do play a major role in deciding the chances of election during the polls.

Table-8 : Reason for entry into Politics

Land owned	Number	%
Political party	96	42.66
Reservation	46	20.44
Friends	26	11.55
Faction leaders	18	8.00
Higher castes	16	7.11
Family	10	4.44
Own Caste Elders	5	2.22
Dominant caste	4	1.77
Village head	4	1.77
Total	225	100

The respondents have answered to the question as to how and why they have entered into the politics. As many as 96 (42.66%) respondents have said they went into politics because of the political party, in which they are members in case of 46 (20.44%) respondents it was the chance of reservations, and in another 26 (11.55%) cases it was friends who initiated them into the politics. 18 (8%) respondents have entered into the politics because of faction leaders, and all of them are from Ananatapur district only.

The directive on Panchayati Raj election clearly states that the election should not be fought on political party basis. The data clearly shows that almost half of the respondents (49.62%) are members of the political parties. The political parties woo grass root leaders to go into their fold and openly claim that in a particular district their party has so many numbers of Sarpanches. It is equally not unusual for a Sarpanch to

join a particular political party, after winning election independently. Of the 112 Sarpanches who have claimed party affiliation 83(74.10%) belong to the ruling Telugu Desam Party and the remaining 29 (25,90%) belong to Congress Party. Of all the respondents who have claimed party affiliation, 86 (76.78%) have been party members for more than five years.

Table-9 : Position held earlier (N=58)

Earlier position	Number	%
Sarpanch	14	24.14
UPA Sarpanch	16	27.59
Ward member	28	48.27
Total	58	100

58(25.77%) respondents have held some or the other position, before winning election as Sarpanch but majority 167 (74.33%) respondents are the first timers and got elected without any previous position. Of this 58 experienced respondents 14 (24.13%) were Sarpanches. 16 (27.59%) were UPA Sarpanches and the remaining 28 (48.28%) were Panchayati members in the past.

The respondents have given different perceptions as to who are their political patrons. A majority of 102 (45.33%) respondents consider that their caste is the chief patron for them, followed by 74 (32.88%) of the respondents considering the political party to which they belongs the patron for them. Asked to give the reasons for their success in the election a majority of the respondents 91 (41 %) have attributed the support of the higher castes. 54 (24%) respondents have said they could win because of reservations. Asked to give the most significant factor for winning election, 52.44% have said that the support of the high castes is crucial, while party support was said to be the most significant for 12.78% of respondents. Interestingly a tiny fraction of 11.28% alone could recognize all-important reservations as the significant factor, which indicates their continued political subordination to the higher castes.

Table-10 : Level of satisfaction being the leader of the Village

Level of satisfaction	Number	%
Very much	7	3.11
Some what	8	3.56
Little	57	25.33
No idea	5	2.22
Not at all	148	65.78
Total	225	100

The respondents were asked to respond to the question that did they feel enthusiastic at being elected as the leader of the village. A majority of the respondents (72.18%) have opined in negative. This could be indicative of the lack of political confidence and articulation. Similar responses were also expressed to the question of whether they are satisfied and enjoy being in office, 65.78% of the Sarpanches have given a

negative response. 60.15% of the respondents feel the role of Sarpanch is insignificant. The overall inference one could get from the above is the continuance of political powerlessness and lack of self-confidence or in other words a sense of alienation. In this connection all the respondents have expressed a strong opinion that the village politics are dominated by higher castes even today, in many cases the Scheduled Caste Sarpanch is a leader de jure while the higher caste leader is leader de facto.

The respondents were asked to list out what are the works they have taken up for the development of the village. They have taken up works like construction of CC roads, drainage, bus shelter, over bridge, houses for the weaker sections and school building. Solving water problem has been major achievement for some of the respondents. Providing basic amenities to the SC colonies has been priority to some other respondents. While a majority of the respondents could achieve some or the other above things, 42 (18.80%) respondents have said they could not achieve anything in the above terms. The respondents prioritized the same works listed above as their major pending works and wish to improve their record. Asked to explain whether they get support from higher castes in discharging their duties as Sarpanch only 7 (3.01%) respondents have answered positively and a majority 118 (52.63%) in negative. 100 (44.36%) respondents said the support from the higher castes is issue based.

The respondents were asked to give their opinion on whether they have freedom to take decisions in discharging their duties. Only 12 (5.33%) respondents have said they have complete freedom to take independent decisions. All the respondents have said being a Scheduled Caste leader they get influenced by the dominant castes in the village belonging to the lower caste (87.97%), illiteracy (9.02%) has been quoted as the main reasons for their ineffective way of functioning. Even today only 15 (6.77%) respondents could enter into the houses of the higher dominant castes, and 7(3.01%) respondents could enter into temples of the village. Not entering into the houses of higher castes and temple has been self construed discrimination in majority cases, as the respondents have admitted.

Speaking about the future plans only 29 (12.78%) respondents have expressed their willingness to contest next election as Sarpanch and 54.89% have not decided yet. 32.33% of the respondents do not wish to contest again. Asked to give their response to the question whether they anticipate a chance to get elected again. 39 (17.29%) respondents were hopeful of winning again, 37 (16.54%) respondents were not optimistic and 149 (66.17%) respondents have no idea about the outcome, if they contest again.

Conclusion:

Reservations to the Scheduled Castes were proposed in the Panchayati Raj to pave way for their political empowerment. However, at the village level, the reservations have served the purpose only in terms of quantity but not quality. The Scheduled Castes leaders are by and large educationally and economically backward. Given their socio-economic, educational and political backwardness, at the very outset, one cannot expect effective leadership from Scheduled Castes leaders. The Scheduled Castes leaders, as the study indicates are not assertive, confident, enthusiastic and without any perception of their position and power. According to them, the higher castes continue to hold sway in the village and dominate them. The higher

castes act 'hand in glove' and in many of the instances the Scheduled Caste leader is only a 'sponsored leader'.

The political empowerment of the Scheduled Castes has led to the emergence of first generation of leaders This would certainly inspire more of the Scheduled Castes to take a plunge into the political process. The first generation leaders may be unassuming, different and dependent, but with continued patronage, participation and a passage of time it is hoped that effective leadership may emerge among the Schedule Caste.

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