



Concept of political participation and empowerment of dalit women

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Abstract

In addition, women also face discrimination in term of religion and caste; the caste women are doubly disadvantaged, both within their family and in society. Specifically, the women representatives coming from Scheduled Castes rarely express their views in panchayat meetings and only, in certain cases, the middle caste women perform slightly better than the scheduled caste women in their panchayat meetings. As we can see the education level in India, women literacy is very low. The female literacy rate is much below than the national average in some of the northern states. The government of India came up with different programs and implemented for women development, but still, a lot is needed to be accomplished for their development.

Keywords: concept of political, women development, empowerment of dalit women

Introduction

The origins of political participation could be traced to ancient times. The City-states of ancient Rome and Greece functioned on the basis of the principle of direct democracy. The small size of these states and also of the population has facilitated the working of direct democracies. Political participation is a basic concept in political science and scholars define the concept in different ways. It may be defined as the actions of private citizens seeking to influence or support Government and politics. Milbrath and Goel uphold that this is a relatively broad definition since it also includes ceremonial and supports activities^[1].

However, there are two ways to understand broadness when defining the political concept participation: (1) in terms of the kinds of tools or actions that are included, (2) in terms of the target of the actions. Seen from the first perspective this definition is broad, but since the government is the sole target, it can also be viewed as a narrow definition. There are other definitions of the political concept participation which I will discuss below. In the discussion on political participation scholars often try to explain human behavior as it relates to the political system but they also recognize that the political system and the political culture have a significant impact on individual political behavior. Still, many scholars believe that at a basic level people follow the same behavioral laws irrespective of the culture they live in^[2]. Classical definition of political participation is the one that refers to: "those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and, directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy." From a socio-psychological standpoint, Warr and Wall define participation with the terms like 'involvement,' and 'influence'^[3].

A working definition put together by Oakley and Marsden lay down following features of participation: voluntary efforts, sensitization, response, and involvement in decision-making processes, program implementation, sharing benefits and evaluation, assessment of need, initiative, and control^[4]. Participation is a very important aspect of the social life. It relates to the involvement of people of diverse backgrounds pursuing a particular or common objective, though people may have different reasons to participate.

The motive of women to contest a local-body election could be to gain respect, status, popularity, satisfaction, or the opportunity to solve the issues affecting the village. There can also be monetary expectations, the scope for breaking away from traditional roles, or even the possibility to get away from the household work. These reasons could be categorized into three types: existence, relatedness, and growth as explained by Alderfer. The 'existence' needs could be categorized as psychological as well as material. 'Relatedness' could be connected to the interpersonal issues, such as esteem and belongingness. 'Growth' denotes one's personal development. The motives of political participation of Dalit Women go a step further because of the intersectional identity they possess. Along with the individual-centric motives listed above, motives shared by Dalit Women relate to their identity and social assertion, claiming human rights, capturing public sphere, political inclusion to advocate community interest, acquiring power, dealing with cultural oppression and intervening in social problems. This could be explained through the theory of political participation.

Empowerment theory

Empowerment entered the development lexicon some three decades ago and had been widely used since then. Power could be attained through several different sources. The dominant castes in India have legitimized their monopoly over power, and thus Dalit Women are rendered powerless. This powerlessness may not be observed by the dominant caste male members and at times also by Dalit Women, due to their socialization in patriarchal biases. Kabeer's argument suggests, earlier analyses of empowerment focused on Powerlessness, portraying Dalit Women powerless comes from this earlier work. She moves beyond and emphasizes there is no absolute absence of power as 'those who appear to have little power are still able to resist, subvert and transform the situation in their lives'^[5].

In this sense Dalit Women even though termed powerless in fact have potentials and possibilities to resist, to subvert and to even transform their lives. According to Kabeer the concept of empowerment should be understood through the

term 'power.' She writes that "one way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices". She further states "to be disempowered means to be denied choice", and empowerment would, therefore, mean, "the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability". Kabeer empowerment entails change. This process of change in my research is assessed through documenting the experiences of Dalit Women's political participation and impact of it on their development [6]. On these three dimensions. She stresses that agency in the context of empowerment does not only relate to making choices actively but also challenging the power relations in the process.

It is very important to study the empowerment process from the perspective of the transformative agency. In order to assess the empowerment of Dalit Women participating in grassroots politics, I need to look not only at their decision making ability but also how and of what levels of power are they able to challenge while making decisions. The factors that enable an individual to challenge power relations could be self-confidence, awareness of the self-image of women and it relates to them being educated. The societal structures play a crucial role in women's nurturing and keeping them ignorant, thereby naturalizing and routinizing the marginalization. Therefore, empowerment of these marginalized groups especially women through democratic means will lead not only to their individual empowerment but also the community.

Empowerment of dalit women

The achieving of equality of status for women was one of the specific objectives which is implicit in the preamble, fundamental rights and directive principle of the state policy of Constitution of India. The social change is a complex process which does not affect the different section of women in a uniform manner; therefore, the status of women cannot be defined easily. The political power in this country has for long been the monopoly of a few dominated upper caste men, which merely deprived the downtrodden the changes for betterment in which the condition of Dalit Women is insignificant. This clearly reflects the degree of inequalities of the society. The women leaders who enjoyed the power also have neglected downtrodden women and did not try to improve their social, economic and political status. But they must have played an important role in forming the social programmes, legislation for the welfare of women. It is regrettable and unfortunate for Dalit Women to be neglected in considering their share in the active politics and their potential in the national development process [7].

Recent developments in Indian legal and policy reforms to ensure the representation of women in decentralized governance through constitutionally mandated reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions bring these issues to fore. Women constitute a little less than fifty percent of India's population. They are an integral part of social structure not only for the perpetuation of the human race but also in socio-economic progress.

Conclusion

After the 73rd Amendment Act, Dalit Women participated in the process of decision-making, planning and implementation of Panchayat Raj. But the participation of Dalit Women in the local government bodies as elected representatives is limited, and Caste status appears to be a

major reason for this. Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Direct political participation of Dalit women in local governance is a central human right in itself and enables the realization of a host of other human rights.

Women's empowerment is one of the core objectives of the Panchayat in India. Women in India are awfully underrepresented in political institutions. The political power, access to decision making and authority are the critical prerequisites for women's equality in the process of nation-building.

It is a significant step in the political history of independent India. They demand analysis to determine, that the way Dalit women are enabled to claim their right to active political participation in local governance, and the extent to which this participation is an effective tool for empowerment and realization of human rights for excluded social groups. In particular, to make an impact at the policy planning and program administration level in each and every locality of our vast country.

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