

Panchayati Raj and Dalits in India: A Post 73rd Amendment Scenario

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Abstract

This paper is a scholastic enquiry on the politics of the marginalised, with special reference to Panchayati Raj institutions in the milieu of the Post 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in India. It is a product of my theoretical reading and field based observations in the process of pursuing PhD in Political science the area of Dalit participation in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Introduction

Providing constitutional status to the local bodies through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (73rdCAA hence forth) was a milestone in Indian politics. This write up focuses on reservations (protective discrimination) for the marginalised (Dalits) elected to positions in Panchayati Raj institutions across India. This observation becomes relevant as the 73rdCAA envisages evolving these institutions as agencies for planning and implementation of activities for 'economic development and social justice'. The 73rdCAA, though hailed as a landmark act with empowerment content, is fraught with difficulties.

According to George Mathew the 73rdCAA brought two major changes in the Indian political System.⁵⁰ First, democratic decentralisation was further extended in the country with the creation of 250,000 Gram Panchayati, 6,000 Panchayati Samithies and 500 Zilla Parishads. Every 5 years, 3 million public representatives are elected, and – as required in the act – these include around 1 million women (33%), 660,000 Scheduled Caste members (14.3%) and Scheduled Tribe (8%) members whom became representatives in the local Government strata. Second, changes occurred due to the creation of numerous Local Bodies (local governments), and the Indian federal system was transformed into a multi-federal system as a result of 73rdCAA. (Mathew, 2000) The Act created

⁵⁰ George Mathew discussed the impact of constitutional amendment from the perspective of reservations (affirmative action) of elected positions of Panchayats, and from the statutory provisions. For more elaborate discussion see George Mathew 2000, p.10

11th&12th schedules which listed subjects to be devolved to Local Bodies, creating a sense of ‘constitutionalised devolution’ (Reddy, 2000).

In fact the numbers do not reflect the political reality on the ground (Sudarshan, 2011). The participation of marginalised groups is a mere statutory formality and in essence, in various ways, the marginalisation is compounded. This disjunction between the numbers and the essence can be understood by analyzing the Indian socio-political process and perspective.

Romanticism and reality of ‘Little Republics’

The concept of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was heavily influenced by the ideal of Indian village as ‘little republic’.⁵¹ This romantic description of village was propagated by colonial administrators, such as Charles Metcalf, Henry Main, and also by the stalwart of Indian freedom struggle, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi)⁵² (Jodhka, 2012). This view transformed in to ‘Gram Swarajya’⁵³ (Gandhi, 1942) and was vividly discussed, influencing the constituent assembly. But this romanticism was negated by Ambedkar, Marx⁵⁴, and Mc Kim Marriot. They emphasised the unequal stratification of Indian social order as exclusionary and anti-democratic. The echo of those debates can be heard in the rumbling of the 73rdCAA and the contrasting ground reality.

73rdCAA and Dalits

Constitutionally Dalits⁵⁵ have become equal voters and secured some seats but their influence on polity is insignificant. Similar exclusion is also reflected in local government bodies. Many attempts have been made to promote inclusion from the 1957 Balwantrai Mehta committee promote inclusion⁵⁶ (1959) to the 1002 73rdCAA, but with little impact on the living conditions of Dalits.

The discriminatory caste system ill-treated and marginalised millions of Dalits. That was the reason why Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, speaking in 1995, was critical of the PRI System which he thought would inevitably strengthen the hold of dominant castes directly or indirectly in rural areas (Ambedkar 2005). Many struggles and movements were waged on social and political fronts against this inequity and discrimination in various parts of India from the mid-1960s to the late-1980s. These movements

⁵¹ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar viewed ancient ‘village republics’ as inequality and undemocratic. In the Constituent Assembly debates on 4th November 1948 his remarkable statement is that “what is village, a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism”.

⁵² To understand the ‘romantic,’ modernist’ and ‘social exclusion’ perceptions of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar respectively see Surinder.S.Jodhka2012

⁵³ The idea of *Gram Swaraj* was proposed by M.K Gandhi in and was popularized as frame work by many proponents of him during India’s national movement. According to him, Gram Swaraj is self-reliant and a complete republic based on individual freedom.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, New-York Daily tribune, June 25, 1853; see also <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.html>

⁵⁵ Ex – untouchables in pre Independent India. Indian Constitution recognizes them as Scheduled Castes.

⁵⁶ The study team was headed by Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed by the Government of India in January 1957 to examine the working of the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service and to suggest measures for their better working. Recommendations of this committee were instrumental in starting the Panchayati Raj institutions across all states in India in late 1950s.

were largely responsible occasional and half-hearted response from the State. Debate and action in the area of decentralised democracy and the enactment of the 73rdCAA is an example for such an attitude.

When the Adivasis⁵⁷ and Dalits from various backward regions demanded, through the Naxalite movement, radical redistributive reforms (land/forest rights) in 1967, the Union government initiated several centrally directed rural development programmers, and State Governments made changes in the PRIs to accommodate some of the demands and wean the groups away from radical demands. The 73rdCAA is further seen as diverting the attention of Dalits from capturing state power, as they were becoming involved in mass movements, to rise against atrocities and caste segregation. Furthermore, the 1992 Act was also seen as an attempt at national level to destabilise the domination of regional parties. Thus social movements and political exigencies influenced the amendment. The shaping of PRIs followed the pattern below.

1. In the initial phase, upper castes and dominant communities were accommodated in the power structure through PRIs and the marginalised communities were kept at bay.
2. From the mid-1960s to 1980s politicisation of downtrodden communities became visible. Attempts to accommodate, co-opt the margins were started.
3. In the post-1980 phase, social movements representing marginalised⁵⁸ communities had influenced politics at the state and sub-state levels, which led to rethinking about decentralisation at Union government level.

In each phase Dalits were scantily accommodated and systematically marginalised. Dalit women elected representatives are worst off. Dalits face the ire of socially dominant groups but also of government functionaries. Because of this apathy, they did not evince much interest in the PR institutions. Sometimes, when Dalits try to exercise their power they are facing violent reactions from the upper castes. Despite the technical reservation of electoral seats provided by the 73rdCAA, they are still disempowered.

Failure to secure proper shares or partnerships in the popular power means that none are happy (Arden 1963). Hence as long as genuine partnership is not ensured in the local political system, there cannot be any freedom and equality for Dalits and the marginalised.

⁵⁷ Adivasis are a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups, who leaving in forest and hilly areas in Indian Constitution recognizes them as Scheduled Tribes (ST).

⁵⁸ Marginalized in this context refers to Scheduled Castes (S.C), Scheduled Tribes (S.T), Backward Classes (B.Cs) Women and Religious Minorities.

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