People's participation and Panchayat Raj system : A study in Andhra Pradesh

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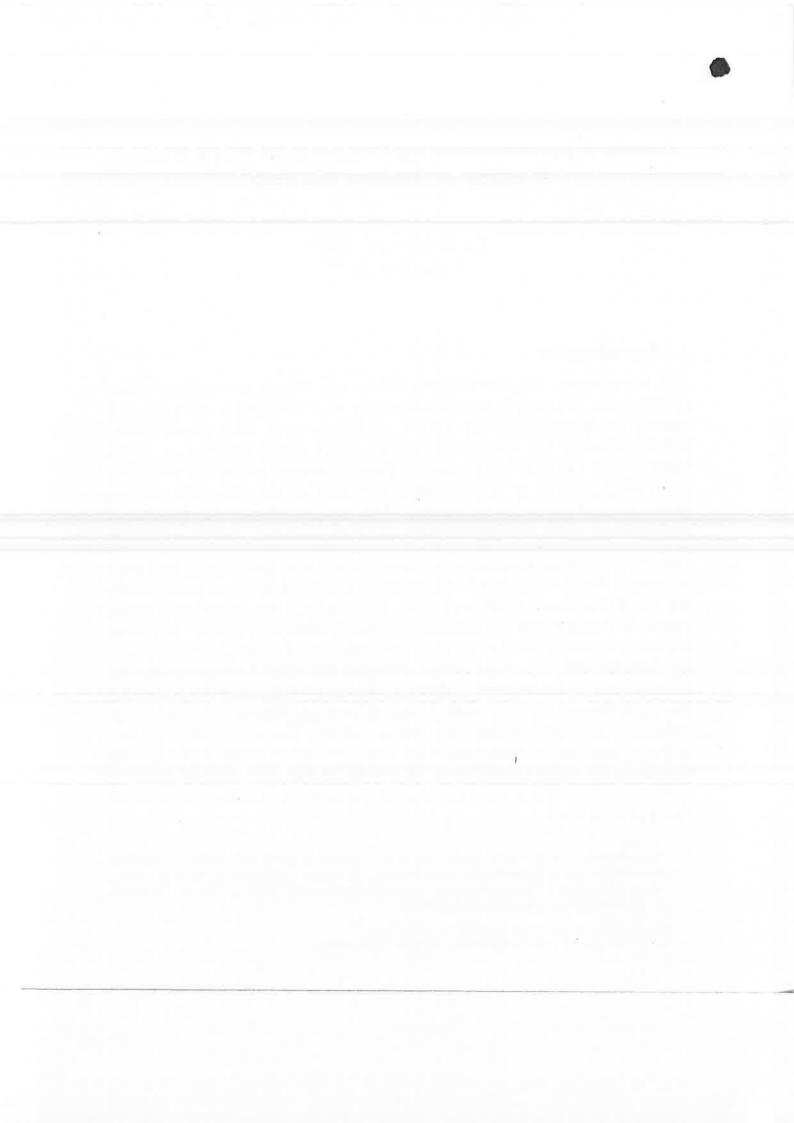Dr. R. Venkata Ravi**
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1. Introduction

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are meant for decentralized development planning and implementation; their functions involve decision making on development activities at grass-root level. The constitutional status has made the PRIs as much institutions of self-governance as the State or the Central Governments. This dimension has made the PRIs, more of custodian of social justice and also to empower the socially disadvantaged groups in the society. The new Panchayati Raj system has provision for caste and gender reservation of seats and positions in PRIs.

The growing interest in decentralised planning and administration is attributable not only to the disillusionment with results of centralised development planning, but the development thrust built upon the emphasis the growth-with-equity policies in the developing countries. The decentralised development planning, being process undertaken at the grass-root level, is well-suited planning process for development. So, it is not just changing the level of administration for development by the process of decentralisation but it is meant for enhancing the capabilities at the local levels to ensure local participation in the decision making for the development with "Social Justice". The social justice implies, in this context, equal opportunities for all section to participate in the process of making development decisions. It is believed that decentralised decision-making can enhance to identify and solve the local problem and also fulfil the needs of local level.

Thus, a decentralised development planning and management emphasis more on local development with the participation by people in the solving the local problems and attending the local needs. This has logically necessitates grass-root level organizational structure to plan and manage the development activities which are mostly becomes people-directed, people's need-oriented and implemented by people. The implication is that of democratic decentralisation for the management of development process.

2. Objectives

This paper is based on the following objectives:

1. To discuss the profile of Scheduled Caste (SC) leaders who have participated in Panchayats and Decision Making Process.

2. To identify the extent of Scheduled Caste (SC) participation, particularly Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Panchayats and in the Decision Making Process.

3. To identify the determinants of Scheduled Caste (SC) members' participation in Decision Making Process.

4. To suggest strategies for enhancing Scheduled Caste (SC) member's participation in Decision Making Process.

3. Source of Data

The study is based on a sample survey in the Nellore district, which has more of SC population in the Andhra Pradesh. The study is based on the response from the eleven SC leaders of Zilla Parishad (ZP), thirty-nine SC leaders from 12 sample Mandals Parishads (MPPs) and thirty-one SC leaders from 12 sample Gram Panchayats (GPs). Totally 79 elected SC leaders' participation in the Panchayats have been studied. Apart from this, discussions have also been held with elected leaders and officials of PRIs in the Nellore district. A structured interview schedule used to collect the data from the SC leaders, after duly testing in the field. The study indicates only the pattern / trends with reference to the different forms of participation in Panchayats.

4. Major Findings

Based on the discussion in the previous chapters, the findings and conclusions are enlisted and presented in conformity with the objectives of the study. Based on the findings of the study workable strategies are also suggested for improving the participation of the SC leaders in the Panchayats.

4 (1). Socio Economic and Political Status of SC Leaders

Majority of the SC leaders are married and are from Hindu religion background. Majority of the SC (men) leaders are in the age group of above 41 years; and most of the SC women leaders are in the age group of below 41 years. When level of Panchayat increase, the proportion of women leaders declined. Hence, it is concluded that more of women participation in lower level of Panchayats than higher level. In the Gram Panchayats level, majority SC leaders are found illiterates in the higher level of Panchayats SC leaders are more educated. Mostly SC leaders have come from nuclear families. Most of the SC leaders are from agricultural background; however, SC people who are in the business also got into Panchayats. The agriculture and fishing labourers have also found in the lower level of Panchayats, mostly in Gram Panchayats. The majority SC leaders in the Mandal and Gram Panchayat levels are with an annually family income of below Rs. 20,000. Most of the SC leaders of Zilla Panchayat are with an annual family income of above Rs. 50,000. The SC people without land and marginal farmers have become Panchayat leaders.

It was found that, most of the SC leaders have affiliation to the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), specifically women leaders at Mandal and Gram Panchayat level. The TDP and Congress are the two major parties found at grass root level. Most of the elected SC leaders are with more years of political experience; first time elected SC leaders are found less. Leaders with more political experience have come to Panchayat Raj Institutions. Mostly, the more experienced SC leaders only occupied the position of President / Chairperson / Sarpanches.

4 (2). Forms and levels of Participation

The SC leaders participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions can be in the form of attendance to the meetings, frequently of interaction (discussion)

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in the meetings and degree of participation in the decision making process. The findings of the study on these aspects are given below:

Attendance and Gender : Less frequency of attendance; by the SC women leaders (Gram Panchayat Members) to Gram Panchayats; Zilla Panchayats in the Mandal Panchayat meetings and SC men have attended more frequently than women. Poor attendance by the women leaders of Gram Panchayat. It is understood that; many SC women leaders are not aware the provisions of the APPR Act 1994; communication disability, caste hierarchy, male domination one reasons for their poor attendance in the meetings.

Attendance and Position in Panchayat : The SC leaders who are Member or Head in the Gram Panchayat, Mandal Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat have been regular to the meetings of their respective Panchayats. But, the representative of the higher level of the panchayats have not attended the meetings of the lower level of Panchayats. It is also observed that attending the Panchayats meetings by the SC leaders who are close to the political leadership. Hence, it is understood that attendance to the meetings treated as more for exhibition of political power rather than playing their role in the Panchayats.

Frequency of Interaction : In the lower level of Panchayats, SC, leaders, particularly women have not discussed or interacted in the Panchayats meetings. It is understood that upper caste and senior leaders, particularly men have not allowed the women to take part in the discussion. Even after securing a place in the Panchayats system SC people were not able to speak in the meetings due to the prevailing social structure. The SC leader's position in the Panchayat status in the Party, political experience and influence of these factors on the level of interaction or discussion revealed no clear pattern. Because, the level of participation in the discussion is very much decided by the political parties and its senior leaders.   Hence, it is concluded that authorised SC leaders by the parties to speak in the Panchayat meetings have active interaction in the meetings.

4 (3). Priorities on Development Activities

The SC leaders have given much priority to the provision of loan and credit for agriculture and animal husbandry related activities. Creating and maintaining facilities like roads, drinking water and streetlights given higher priority by the SC leaders. In the sector of health and

family welfare, SC leaders have given much priority to the visit of health workers; maternity and child care facilities and family planning programmes. The SC leaders are much concern for the pre-schooling facilities for children and school building. Organizing women into groups, providing relief and assistance to widows, old age and pregnant women are given much priority by the SC leaders. The SC leaders expressed high priority for development of social forestry for income generating, fodder and fuel, popularizing the non-conventional energy sources and energy survey methods. The SC leaders have expressed high priority for basic facilities and credit supply for fishing activities and priorities for organizing cooperatives "among" fishing community. It is understood that SC leaders have much priority for development activities, which involve financial aspects and leads to benefits for the community.

4 (4). Involvement in Development Decisions

It was found that among those who expressed priorities for the beneficiaries oriented development activities, only small proportion have also involved in decision making on such activities. On the community oriented development activities, about half of the leaders who have expressed priorities have also involved in decision making in activities meant for community benefits. The SC leaders are involved in the decision related to activities for enhancing the infrastructure facilities like – roads, drinking water, health and educational facilities. It was observed that more of SC men are involved than women leaders in the development decision making in Panchayats. The educated leaders than the illiterates have involved in making development decisions particularly on the community oriented development activities. It was found that TDP leaders had much involvement on all development activities than other party leaders. It is concluded that both Heads and Members of the Panchayats have involved in community oriented development activities. However, Members involvement is more in the vital areas like – drinking water and health related facilities. It is concluded that SC leaders have involved in the decision making related to the agriculture and rural development. It shows that SC leaders in Panchayat Raj Institutions are very concern about the activities in the rural economy, as most of them are basically come from rural and agriculture background.

4 (5). Source of Encouragement and Help

Political party is the major source of encouragement for SC women (than men) to participate in Panchayat meetings and discussions. However, it is observed that women leaders are depending on their family members and officials for discussion in the Panchayats. The SC women are remotely controlled and manipulated by the party, family and officials in the affairs of the Panchayats. So, SC women's participation is dictated or directed in the democratic process. Most of the SC leaders, irrespective of their political experience depend on the parties to discuss in the Panchayats. It is observed that more experienced shown their loyalty to the party and less experienced got directions from the party to speak in the Panchayats. The SC leaders who are heading the Panchayats are found to be more depending on political party, officials and family than Members of Panchayat to discuss in the meetings. It indicates the dependence of the SC leaders due to socio-political system, which operates against the democratic decentralization. It is also observed that irrespective of their educational status, SC leaders depend on their party and also officials. It is due to their level of knowledge about the Panchayat Raj system and elected leaders role.

4 (6). Support from Political Parties

It was found that SC women leaders and their participation in the discussion given low significance. The political parties have given much of "Instructions" than "Suggestions" to the SC leaders particularly to men. The political parties have operated through the SC men who are more experienced and heading the Panchayats. In the higher level of Panchayats, the Members are given importance, whereas in the lower level, the Heads Gram Panchayats are given instructions by the parties.

4 (7). Hurdles for Participation

The SC men faced problems of domination from upper caste, senior local leaders; whereas women have hurdles like communication disability, senior local leaders, male leaders and official's domination. In the lower level of Panchayats, SC leaders are unaware of the new Panchayat Raj system and provisions. The SC leaders with less political experience and being first-timers have faced the problem of unaware of the new Panchayat Raj system and implications. It was found that the lower age group SC leaders are facing more problems than elders.

5. Participation in Decision Making Process

5 (1). Degree of Participation

The SC men's participation found to be more than SC women in all steps of the decision making process. The SC women's participation is more in Choice phase than other two phases of the Decision process. Based on the SC women's non and low degree of participation in the deciding phase, it understood that SC women in PRIs have to be participate only "by directions" and "domination by SC men" in the decision process. Based on the non or low degree participation by illiterate SC leaders, it is concluded that level of education has significant role to increase degree of participation. This is because of their lack of awareness on new Panchayat Raj system and role implications. The SC leader's status in the party has no influence on the participation in decision-making process. Higher the status need not result in more participation in decision-making process. Based on the analysis, it is concluded that both Members and Heads of the Panchayat Raj Institutions have chance to vote on any resolution to decide on development issues. So, participation in decision-making is more of political process than the management function in decentralized governance.

It is concluded that training intervention have influenced the participation by SC leaders, as notable difference is observed between trained and untrained leader's level of participation in Decision Making. It is understood that more frequently interacting and discussing in the meetings results in the higher degree of participation in the Decision Making Process.

5 (2). Factors determining Participation

The SC leader's participation is determined by the educational status, age, gender, political experience, position in the Panchayat, status in the party, training, land owned and income level. It is found that the SC leader's level of interaction in the Panchayat is determined by the gender, attendance, education, age and training. The factors determining the SC leaders participation in the Decision Making process are education, frequency of interaction, land owned, income, training, gender and attendance.

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5 (3). Participation in Training

More of SC men than women have attended the training on new Panchayat Raj system. Majority of the new comers and elders not been trained. The most of the illiterates and low educated SC leaders not attended the training. The politically less experienced SC leaders not trained. Those who are from political families have not attended the training. The SC leaders have suggested that Panchayat leaders need to be trained on the aspects of augmenting the resources, revenues, people's participation, communication skill and provisions of the new Panchayat Raj system. More particularly, the elected leaders have to be given training on the implication of the gender and caste reservation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

6. Strategies for Enhancing Participation

The Panchayati Raj Institutions are self-government at grass-root level. The constitutional status for panchayats aims at democratic decentralization. The constitutional amendment is most significant for the gender and caste reservation in the PRIs; it is to provide opportunity for the people who are socially and economically marginalized to participate in the management of decentralized development process. The participation of scheduled caste elected leaders in the PRIs can be attending the meetings, interacting in the meetings, involving in the development decision-making. To enhance the schedule caste elected leaders' participation in the Panchayat only making law for providing reservations of seats is not sufficient, but which involves more of empowerment process. The Panchayats are designed for establishing social justice by equal opportunity for participation by gender and various caste groups. Hence, based on the present study for enhancing schedule caste leaders participation in the Panchayats following suggestions are presented.

- The elected leaders under caste and gender reservation have to be trained adequately on the provisions of Panchayati Raj Act, functioning of Panchayats, role of the elected leaders in the Panchayats.

- The elected SC leaders have to be periodically (at least once in six months) sensitized on the various development programmes in the state and Panchayats role in managing the development activities.

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- The provision of the Panchayati Raj Act and elected leaders role and duties have to be given as manual in the local language for the better understanding of the low educated leaders.

- Modern communication methods like video graphs and audio graphs have to extensively use for educating the elected leaders, specifically illiterate and low educated to make them to understand their role and responsibilities in PRIs.

- The first times elected SC leaders have to be given chance to witness the proceedings of PRIs within state; and also may be taken to other states to understand the functioning of the PRIs. This will enable to understand the PR system in other states.

- The allowance for attending the PRI meetings should be made more attractive and the monetary benefit may be more than there per day earnings of the labour.

- Each of the members has to be allotted a subject to initiate the discussions in the meetings. This will make all the leaders to interact with others in the meetings.

- All the directly elected SC members have to be given chance and adequate time to present their views equal to other members to speak on the subjects in the Panchayat.

- The minor details of the every functions related to the subjects allotted to PRIs have to be listed. Moreover, the role and responsibilities of the panchayats and its members in this context have to be spelled out in the form of manual in Telugu language. In nutshell, Members have to specify about their duties in relation to development decision-making in the PRIs.

- With the newly elected leaders, model panchayats meetings have to be conducted for the Members to give better understanding of the systems and procedures. These model meetings shall be conducted after the first training programme. However, as part of the training programme also model meetings have to be organized. This will give them chance for understanding the PP systems and procedures.

- The new Panchayati Raj System and functions allotted, responsibilities, role of the Members, officials of the panchayats have to be part of

the any educational programme, particularly part of the literacy programme.

- The need for the caste and gender reservation in the Panchayats, the role of Panchayats in decentralized development process has to be educated at the level of primary and secondary school. This will give much familiarity to all section of people in the society.

- The senior political leaders – MLAs and MPs with open mind have to educate their party leaders in the PRIs on their role, responsibilities in the Panchayats. This will make Panchayat leaders to feel comfortable with their role in the Panchayats and also senior political leaders who are also participating in the PRIs.

- The decision making process should spelled out simply. The steps have to be made clear to the elected leaders. This will make leaders to understand the steps and also participate in the process.

- The Andhra Pradesh government may have to have an exclusive Janma Bhoomi programmes on the Panchayats, before the next Panchayat election to create awareness of the PR systems.

7. Issues for further Research

- The relationship between the elected leaders and officials, particularly in the context of leaders elected under reservation.

- Comparative study of the SC leaders participation in different states which has similar structure like – Andhra Pradesh.

- The impact of training on the level of participation by the elected leaders in PRIs.

- Assuming the further training needs among SC, ST and Women.

- Elected leaders participation in the Standing / Functional Committees in the PRIs.

- Making case studies on successful leadership emerged among weaker sections in Panchayat Raj administration.

Based on the study it is indicative that specifications and related training on role and functions are very much required for the Panchayats leaders.

In the process of democratic decentralisation the elected leaders have to be given proper training for better participation. Moreover, the caste and gender reservation in the PRIs is meant for empowering the socially and economically disadvantaged groups to participate in the decentralized development administration. Hence, it requires large-scale cultural and attitudinal change, which will make the advantaged groups to feel that others also have equal right as citizen to participate in the Panchayats and also in the development activities. It is also necessary that confidence have to be built that Panchayats can solve the people's problems.

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