Gendered Perspective of Dalit Women in Gram Panchayat

[1]Sujata Malik., [2]Moushumi Pattnaik

[1]Ph.D Scholar, Department of Political Science, Rama Devi Women's University, Bhubaneswar, India

[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shailabala Women's Autonomous College, Cuttack, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

The constitutional mandate of reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly increased the political participation of Dalit women at the grassroots level in India. However, their numerical presence does not necessarily translate into substantive empowerment. This study examines the gendered perspectives of Dalit women representatives in Gram panchayats. Focusing on their lived experiences, roles, challenges, and agency within local governance structures. Using a gender and intersectionality framework, the research explores how caste and gender jointly shape Dalit women's political participation and decision-making processes. This paper adopts a gender-sensitive framework to analyse how patriarchal norms, caste-hierarchies, and socio-economic marginalisation limit Dalit women's effective participation. The experience of Dalit women in local governance is characterized by a constant struggle against a system designed to keep them on the periphery of decision-making, where they must navigate both patriarchy within their community and upper-caste domination in the political sphere. Dalit women face a unique compounded oppression being Women, Dalits and Generally poor. Although, Dalit women are elected as placeholders for their husbands or dominant caste members with roughly 85% of elected positions being effectively controlled by others. In meetings they are often not taken seriously with their issues rarely discussed approved or implemented particularly when challenging existing power structures. Elected Dalit women frequently experience verbal, physical, and caste-based violence including threats, harassment, and even assassination attempts when asserting their authority. While, the 73rd Amendment provided a reservation 33.3% but it has not automatically translated into empowerment due to deeply entrenched patriarchal and caste-based norms that marginalize them. Despite these some Dalit women are overcoming barriers through previous social activism or support although they remain a minority.

Keyword: Reservation, Gender, Dalit women, Panchayat Raj Institution, Gram Panchayat

INTRODUCTION

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act-1992 marked a significant milestone in India's democratic decentralization by institutionalizing the Panchayati Raj system and mandating reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Women. After that Dalit women entered Gram Panchayats in unprecedented numbers occupying positions as Ward Members, Sarpanchs and Naib-Sarpanchs (Ministry of Panchayat Raj, 2004). However, their numerical representation does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or empowerment. Dalit women experience multiple and overlapping forms of marginalization due to caste-based discrimination, gender subordination, and economic deprivation. Within Gram Panchayats their political roles are shaped by these intersecting identities. A gendered perspective is therefore essential to understand not only their formal inclusion but also their lived realities, constraints, and contributions to grassroots democracy (Thirupathi, 2021). From a gender perspective the participation of Dalit women in Gram Panchayats must be understood through the intersection of caste and patriarchy. Dalit women face discrimination not only because of their gender but also because of their caste identity. Their social position is shaped by historical oppression, untouchability practices, economic dependency, lack of education, and limited access to resources. Even when elected as Panchayat representatives Dalit women often struggle to exercise authority

independently due to dominance of upper-caste members, male political leaders, and sometimes even family members (Kisku, 2019).

Several studies highlight that Dalit women representatives are frequently treated as symbolic leaders rather than active decision-makers. In many cases their husbands or male relatives act as proxies (commonly referred to as "sarpanch pati" culture), which reducing women's leadership to nominal status (Singha, 2019). Additionally, caste-based violence, social boycott, verbal abuse, and exclusion from Panchayat meetings continue to restrict their participation. Despite these barriers, Dalit women's entry into Panchayats has also created spaces for resistance, confidence-building, and collective awareness. Many Dalit women leaders have begun challenging discriminatory practices and raising issues related to welfare, education, health, sanitation, and rights (Thirupathi, 2021).

This paper seeks to analyse the gendered dimensions of Dalit women's participation in Gram Panchayats and highlighting both challenges and possibilities for empowerment.

Objectives-

1. To study the impact of gender and caste intersectionality on the political representation of Dalit women in Gram Panchayats.

2. To understand the decision-making power of Dalit women within Gram panchayats from a gendered perspective.

3. To find out the challenges and problems of Dalit women in Gram Panchayat.

Research Questions-

1. How do patriarchy and caste hierarchy intersect to influence Dalit women's roles in Gram Panchayat leadership?

2. What extent do reservation policies enable meaningful political participation of Dalit women at the village level?

3. How do gender relations and caste structure influence the decision-making power of Dalit women within Gram Panchayat?

4. What are the challenges and problems faced by Dalit women in Gram Panchayat?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nagaraju T. (2022) highlights while Dalit women perform their political job, they must deal with various challenges and issues. They deal with simultaneous oppression from two directions, their condition in Panchayati Raj Institutions is more fragile and worst. First from the male members of their family and the upper caste, and second because of their inferior standing within caste system.

Thirupathi (2021) emphasizes shifting from nominal representation to substantive political empowerment for Dalit women to achieve the true objectives of local self-governance.

Singh (2019) highlights that Dalit marginalization is not only poverty-related but a historically produced caste-based exclusion that continues in modern India.

Human Rights Watch (2017) documents cases where Dalit women leaders were targeted to discourage political assertion.

Sabharwal and Sonalkar (2015) in this paper attempt to develop an understanding of the problems of Dalit women and present an analysis of the complex gender, class and caste intersectionality of the challenges they face in politics.

Paik (2014) highlights how caste patriarchy restricts Dalit women's mobility and voice even after entering formal political institutions.

Palanithurai (2005) analyses the socio-economic position, governance roles and effectiveness of women and Dalit leaders in Panchayats. He critically evaluates the intersection of formal political empowerment with real-world performance and constraints faced by women and Dalit presidents in India's panchayat system.

Rao (2005) links political participation of Dalit women to increased vulnerability to verbal abuse, threats, and sexual harassment.

Baviskar (2003) notes that proxy representation is more prevalent among Dalit women because of their weaker social position in villages.

Chakravarti (2003) argues that caste cannot be understood without gender and gender oppression in India cannot be understood without caste.

Pawar (2003) mainly focuses on the life experiences of a Dalit woman and how her identity is shaped by caste, gender, poverty, and social discrimination.

Kishwar (2000) documents cases where elected Dalit women sarpanches were reduced to symbolic figures due to male dominance.

Rege (1998) emphasizes that Dalit women's political experiences cannot be understood through gender alone, as caste-based oppression deeply conditions their public participation.

METHOD

The paper has adopted the framework of gender and intersectionality to understand how caste and gender interact to shape participation and power within local governance institutions. It seeks to analyse how Dalit women representatives experience participation, leadership, and decision making within the Gram Panchayat system and how patriarchical norms and caste hierarchies influence their political roles of Dalit women.

The study uses qualitative secondary data collected through systematic review of published literature such as books, peer-reviewed journals, government documents, policy reports, NGO publications, and census/election data. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, Panchayati Raj Acts, Ministry of Panchayati Raj reports, Election Commission statistics, and official Panchayat-related policy documents. Secondary sources include feminist and Dalit feminist theory, academic studies on Panchayati Raj institutions, and intersectionality-based analyses of caste and gender in governance.

Conceptual Framework: Gender, Caste, And Intersectionality

Gender is not merely a biological distinction but a social construct that defines roles, responsibilities, and power relations between men and women. In the Indian context, gender is deeply intertwined with caste. Dalit women occupy a distinct social location where patriarchy and caste oppression reinforce each other (Chakravarti, 2003). The concept of intersectionality introduced by feminist scholars, helps in understanding how multiple identities such as caste, gender and class interact to produce unique experiences of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Dalit feminist perspectives argue that mainstream feminist discourse often overlooks caste, while Dalit movements sometimes marginalize women's issues. Applying an intersectional and gendered lens to Gram Panchayats allows for a more nuanced understanding of Dalit women's political participation.

1. Intersectionality Theory by Kimberle Crenshaw

Intersectionality theory first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is a framework used understand how various forms of discrimination and social identities discrimination (such as caste, class, gender, race, sexuality, and disability) intersect and overlap (Jones, 2022). It emphasizes that people are not defined by a single social category but by multiple interconnected aspects of their identity that can result in unique experiences of privilege or oppression.

Intersectionality theory suggests that individuals lives and experiences are shaped by a matrix of social categories that interact in ways that cannot be separated. For instance, a Dalit woman might face different challenges from a general woman or a man due to the intersections of caste and gender. This concept goes beyond examining individuals through the lens of single-axis thinking such as just focusing on gender or caste alone. Instead, it urges an understanding of how these identities combine to create specific experiences of marginalisation or advantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

Thus, this theory of intersectionality in the context of Gram Panchayats the foundational units of local self-governance in India analyses how multiple overlapping social identities compound to create unique experiences of discrimination or empowerment for rural individuals (Mohanty, 2005). For example: Upper caste women face patriarchy, but not untouchability, Dalit men face caste oppression, but still have male privilege and Dalit women face both simultaneously. Thus, intersectionality helps you to define how multiple identities influence their leadership and participation (Jones 2022).

2. Theory of Patriarchy and Caste Patriarchy by Walby and Uma Chakravarti)

Sylvia Walby and Uma Chakravarti offer distinct yet foundational theories on patriarchy, focusing on its structural complexity and its intersection with other systems of power like capitalism and caste.

Sylvia Walby: Six Structures of Patriarchy- In the book of "Theorizing Patriarchy (1990)", Walby defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, women oppress, and exploit women (Sanauddin, 2025). Her ideas portray six interdependent structures of domination:

- Paid Work: Discrimination in the labour market, such as the gender pay gap and occupational segregation, which pushes women into lower-status, lower-paid roles.

- Household Production: The exploitation of women's unpaid domestic labour and childcare, which benefits men.

- The State: Government institutions and laws that historically and systematically work in the interest of men example, lack of equal opportunity enforcement or restricted access to services.

- Male Violence: A systematic pattern of behaviour used to control women through physical and sexual threat.

- Sexuality: Control over female sexuality through double standards and "compulsory heterosexuality".

- Cultural Institutions: Representation of women in media, religion and education that reinforces patriarchal norms.

- Male Violence: A systematic pattern of behaviour used to control women through physical and sexual threat.

Walby also tracks a historical shift from private patriarchy (exclusion of women from public life and direct control by a husband at home) to public patriarchy (segregation within public institutions like the workplace and state) (Sanauddin, 2025).

Uma Chakravarti: Brahmanical/Caste Patriarchy- Uma Chakravarti's work, particularly in "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India (1993)", explores how patriarchy and the caste system are inseparable. Their reproductive roles are essential for maintaining "caste purity" (Menon, 2024). For example:

- Sexual Control for Caste Purity: To ensure that a caste group remains "pure," women's sexuality must be strictly controlled through marriage and motherhood. This prevents *miscegenation* (mixing of castes).

- Ideology of the Chaste Wife: Compliance is maintained through the ideology of Pativrata (the devoted wife) and Stridharma (duty of women), which encourages women to participate in their own subordination to gain social respect (Chakravarti, 1993).

- Intersection of Oppression: Chakravarti highlights that while upper-caste women face intense surveillance to protect lineage, lower-caste and Dalit women are often victims of sexual violence used as a tool of caste-based humiliation and power.

- Patrilineal Succession: Subordinating women ensures that property and status are passed down through legitimate male heirs preserving the existing social order.

Thus, Walby theory explains how patriarchy operates differently for Dalit women due to caste hierarchy. Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical Patriarchy highlights how caste-based control over women's roles, mobility, and sexuality maintains caste dominance. In Panchayat system, caste patriarchy influences:

- Restriction on Dalit women's public voice

- Control over decision-making

- Dominance of upper-caste men in political institutions

- Denial of respect and authority to Dalit women representatives

3. Social Exclusion Theory by Hilary Silver and Amartya Sen

Dalit women's exclusion in Gram Panchayat is not only institutional but also socio-cultural and economic. Using Hilary Silver's social exclusion framework, exclusion is understood as monopoly of power by dominant castes, reinforced through caste norms and patriarchal practices (Silver, 1994). Amartya Sen's capability approach further shows that political reservation does not automatically create empowerment, because Dalit women may lack capabilities such as education, social mobility, decision-making freedom, and access to resources (Denis, 2009). Thus, their participation often remains symbolic rather than substantive.

4. Ambedkarite Perspective of Caste as Structure of Power

According to Ambedkar caste is not merely a social hierarchy or a religious custom; it is a comprehensive system of power designed to control economic resources, political representation, and social dignity. His analysis shifts the focus from 'caste as culture' to 'caste as a structure of domination' (Khullar, 2023). Ambedkar argued that the caste system is a unique hierarchical structure where everyone accepts their subordination to those above them while dominating those below them. He famously described Hindu society as a multi-storied tower with no staircase or door; everyone is forced to die in the story or they are born into.

- Descending Contempt and Ascending Reverence**:** This mechanism prevents the oppressed from forming a united front as each caste is preoccupied with maintaining its superiority over the one below it (Prabaharan, 2024).

- Enclosed Classes: Castes are "enclosed classes" rather than flexible social groups. The "upper" castes hold power by isolating themselves and restricting access to knowledge, land, and arms (Khullar, 2023).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's theory views caste as a system of social, political, and economic inequality. It is not just social discrimination, but a structure that controls power.

- Dalit women leaders may face resistance from dominant castes.

- Panchayat politics often reflects caste dominance.

- Even after reservation, caste power influences who controls resources.

Gram Panchayat And Women's Reservation

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) institutionalised Panchayati Raj in India and mandated reservations to ensure political inclusion in the form of reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) in proportion to their population. The nature of reservation for women is minimum 33%, later enhanced to 50% in many states within all categories including SCs. This led to the emergence of Dalit women as elected representatives at the Gram Panchayat level particularly as sarpanches, ward members, and panchayat presidents. Gram Panchayat is the lowest tier of the Panchayati Raj system and plays a crucial role in rural governance, development planning, and welfare implementation. The reservation of one-third of seats for women, along with proportional reservation for SCs, has facilitated the entry of Dalit women into local governance (Ministry of Panchayat Raj, 2004).

Dalit women's participation in Gram Panchayats occurs through contesting and holding elected positions like Ward Members and Sarpanch/Pradhan participation in Gram Sabha meetings, involvement in decision-making on local development, welfare schemes, and social justice issues acting as intermediaries between the state and marginalized communities (Baviskar and Mathew, 2009). Dalit women representative participation was aimed at empowering these women leading to positive outcomes like a) increased political awareness and self-confidence b) enhanced public visibility and leadership skills c) raising issues related to caste discrimination, gender violence, access to welfare schemes, health, and education d) challenging caste and patriarchal hierarchies. For many Dalit women entry into Panchayats represents their first engagement with public power. However, participation often remains procedural rather than substantive.

Gendered Challenges Faced By Dalit Women In Gram Panchayats

1. **Patriarchy and Male Dominance**

Patriarchal norms restrict Dalit women's mobility, speech, and decision-making power. In many cases, husbands or male relatives act as de facto representatives often referred to as "proxy leadership", undermining women's autonomy (Kiswar, 2000). Even when they attend meetings Dalit women's issues are rarely discussed or approved. Only about one-third of elected Dalit women presidents are able to discharge their duties independently. And male dominant-caste members often seize control over panchayat funds and development projects, and forcing Dalit women to act as "rubber stamps" for resolutions and payments. (Thirupathi, 2021).

2. **Caste-Based Discrimination**

Dalit women sarpanches and members frequently encounter caste discrimination from dominant caste Panchayat members, officials, and villagers. They may be denied respect excluded from informal decision-making spaces, or face obstruction in implementing development works (Guru, 1995). At the bottom of the social ladder all girls and women from the Dalit caste who are born into a life of exploitation, entrapment and potential abuse all areas of life (Peebles, 2015).

3. **Double Burden of Work**

Dalit women representatives shoulder a dual responsibility: domestic labour and public duties. The absence of family and institutional support limits their ability to fully engage in Panchayat activities (Silver, 1994). For, example rural Dalit women are primarily responsible for time-consuming household chores, child-rearing,

caring for the elderly, and fetching water or firewood, often without help. Even due to economic necessity Dalit women are often active in manual low-paid or unpaid agricultural labour. Thus, the combination of intense domestic work and manual labour leads to extreme "time poverty" leaving them with almost no time to engage in meaningful political activity or decision-making (Rai, 2016).

4. Social Exclusion and Everyday Humiliation

Dalit women sarpanches and ward members face exclusion from informal decision-making spaces, denial of seating, access to common facilities, or respectful address, Caste-based insults and gendered humiliation during meetings (Singh, 2019). Social exclusions are precisely followed in Indian traditional society. Their membership and status are determined by birth, caste, gender, class etc, which were help in maintaining the system (Peebles, 2015).

5. Violence, Threats, and Intimidation

Dalit women leaders are particularly vulnerable to verbal abuse and threats by dominant caste groups, Sexual harassment and character assassination, Economic retaliation such as social boycott or denial of wages under schemes like MGNREGA and other Government Policies (Singh, 2019). This discourages independent political action and Dalit panchayat leaders have been brutally attacked with reports detailing killings of or assaults on elected leaders who attempt to challenge corruption or assert their rights (Kisku, 2019).

6. Lack of Administrative Knowledge and Capacity Building

Most Dalit women representatives face limited access to education and political training, or awareness of Panchayati Raj procedures and financial power, Inadequate institutional support from bureaucracy. This dependence strengthens elite capture (Mohanty, 2005). A high percentage of elected Dalit women are either illiterate or have minimal education making it difficult for them to manage administrative tasks, read government guidelines and financial records (Rao, 2005).

7. Limited Access to Resources and Development Funds

Dalit women leaders struggle to influence budget allocation and development priorities, Implement welfare schemes for Dalit communities (Singh and Verma, 2019). They often struggle to get direct unhindered access to Panchayat funds and are dependent on bureaucratic male-dominated systems to release money for projects. Now PRIs functions have adopted digital technology, for example e-Gram Swaraj, Government e-Marketplace (GeM) (Ministry of Panchayat Raj, 2023). Low digital literacy and lack of access to smartphones and weak internet connectivity in rural areas hinder women from managing development funds in PRIs (Saha, 2025).

Gendered Experiences Of Participation And Leadership

Despite persistent caste and gender-based challenges, Dalits have experienced positive outcomes through participatory engagement in socio-institutional settings. Many Dalit women have used Gram Panchayat platforms to address issues such as access to drinking water and sanitation, implementation of welfare schemes, education and health services, prevention of caste discrimination in public spaces. Case studies from Odisha and Rajasthan show that Dalit women elected to Gram Panchayats gradually exercised leadership in welfare delivery and school enrolment after initial exclusion (Pai, 2001). In Andhra Pradesh, Dalit women's participation in self-help groups under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission enhanced financial autonomy and collective agency (Kabeer, 2011). A gendered perspective reveals that Dalit women often prioritize community welfare and inclusive development. Their leadership style tends to be collaborative and grounded in everyday experiences of marginalization.

Empowerment and Agency of Dalit Women

Participation in Gram Panchayats has contributed to varying degrees of empowerment among Dalit women (Paik, 2014):

- Political empowerment: Increased confidence, public speaking skills, and awareness of rights

- Social empowerment: Greater visibility and respect within the community

- Personal empowerment: Enhanced self-esteem and decision-making capacity

However, empowerment remains uneven and contingent upon factors such as education, support networks, training, and social context.

Suggestions

Capacity-building programs, leadership training, and legal awareness initiatives by the state and civil society organizations play a crucial role in strengthening Dalit women's participation. Gender-sensitive governance requires:

- Regular training on Panchayat functions.

- Protection against caste and gender-based violence.

- Institutional mechanisms to ensure accountability and inclusion.

- Electoral reforms should provide for state funding for Dalit women contesting for elections local bodies and PRIs.

- Greater attention needs to be placed on how central and state policies can promote local governments to monitor the meaningful participation of Dalit women in the Elections.

- Increased resources need to be placed in the political skill-building of women within the Gram Panchayat.

CONCLUSION

A gendered perspective on Dalit women in Gram Panchayats highlights the complex interplay of caste, gender, and power in local governance. While constitutional provisions have opened political spaces for Dalit women, structural inequalities continue to limit their substantive participation. Nevertheless, Dalit women are not merely passive beneficiaries; they are active agents negotiating, resisting, and reshaping local power structures. For Gram Panchayats to become truly democratic and inclusive, it is essential to move beyond numerical representation towards genuine empowerment. Addressing patriarchy, caste discrimination, and institutional barriers through an intersectional and gender-sensitive approach can strengthen Dalit women's leadership and contribute to social justice at the grassroots level.

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