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Political Awareness among Dalit Women and their Participation in Rural Local Bodies in Punjab: Special Reference to Bathinda

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Abstract

Dalits, also known as "untouchables", are often deprived of equal and meaningful political participation due to their weak economic, political and social position and moreover discriminated attitude of society towards them. Dalit women are the most marginalized group of the society as they suffer from multiple discrimination as a Dalit, as women, as a poor. Indian government has enacted some constitutional safeguards and affirmative action's to promote equal opportunities for Dalit women in politics. There are seats reserved for women of scheduled castes at various levels of government. Many women from Dalit caste has come into politics through reservation. But they have not got equal status in the society because they have faced so many problems. There are so many obstacles regarding their active participation in politics. This study reveals the political awareness among Dalit women because it effects their participation in political process. The paper also focuses on the various hindering factors in women's active participation in politics.

Key Words: Political Awareness, Political Participation, Dalits, Dalit Women Political Participation.

Introduction

Political awareness and political participation are the important terms in democracy. Without awareness and participation of people no democratic system can become successful. Political awareness is a key concept because political awareness shapes the political opinion and political participation of people in the political processes of the system. Political awareness refers to the knowledge and information of persons about their political system. Political awareness is an exchange of information between the individual and various sources of political message communicated in the public space.

According to Zaller political awareness means "the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered"(Zaller 1992,p,21).

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Thus, Political awareness, defined as knowledge of individual about political events, parties, campaigns, elections and salient political issues. Political parties and pressure groups are the best means in order to make individuals politically aware and alert.

Political Participation

Political participation is also important factor for individual development. To participate in decision making process ultimately means of individual's empowerment. In every political system it is important that all the people should participate in governmental affairs.

David Easton, "When the set of people living in exacting area get some group decisions, then the participation of people in that decision making is called as political participation.(Joshi, 2008 p, 327)

According to Almond and Powell, "The participation of the members of the social order in the decision-making process of the political system is called political participation." (Ghangarekar, 1990 p, 64)

Political participation means participate in voting, taking a part in discussions about the affairs of government, contesting elections and taking part in election campaigning etc. political participation ultimately means empowerment of people. When they participate in all the matters of state they become empowered automatically. Political participation is related with political awareness because the participation of people in decision making process is depended on the level of their awareness regarding politics.

Dalits

The etymology of word Dalit is traced to the root 'dal' in Sanskrit; it means 'broken', 'split', 'crushed' and cracked. Dalits are designated with different nomenclatures such as Harijans, Dalits, Untouchables, Depressed Class, Weaker Section, and Schedule Castes. According to Punjabi encyclopedia "The Mahan Kosh" defines "Dalit as one who belong the lowest caste and has been trampled down by or broken under the feet of the upper caste". The people of these castes belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy.(Mukherjee, Sabharwal) They have been discriminated and dominated by higher castes for long period of time. Dalit community has been marginalized and deprived of their rights and determined by class, gender, race, skin colour and ethnicity. As caste determines one's status in India so Dalits remain as one of the most exploited communities in the India. In nineteenth century, Mahatma Jotirao Phule used term to describe the out-caste 'untouchables' people, who were oppressed and exploited by the people of another castes. (Geetanjali) Ambedkar used the

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term 'Bahiskrit Bharat' to define dalithood as a kind of condition which characterizes the suppression, exploitation and marginalization of Dalits by the economic, political , social and cultural domination of the people of upper caste Brahminical order. (Mukherjee, Sabharwal) The people of these communities are considered as weaker in all sections of the society, there is need to empower them in all the spheres of life. Dalit participation in social, economic and political field is essential for their development.

Dalit Women Participation

Dalit women are most depressed people in the society. They are discriminated thrice in the society: Firstly, they are women, secondly, they are Dalits and thirdly, they are poor. Dalit women are living in most miserable conditions in the society. They are discriminated not only by upper caste people but they are also discriminated by the male member of their own community. Men are dominant in Dalit community.

Dalit women have been discriminated for ages. In Vedic period caste system was not very strong and women position during that time was very strong in the society. They got all rights but women of lower caste had got less opportunities of education as compared to the women of upper caste. The women of upper caste were married at late age and the women of lower caste were married at early age. From that time till date they have been discriminated and exploited. After independence government of India has passed many laws in the favour of Dalit women so that they can get equal status in the society. 73rd constitutional amendment contains guidelines for the State to put in three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions. According to this amendment the seats are reserve for SCs and STs Categories in these institutions. The basic motive reserving seats for women is to increase their participation as voter, as member of political parties, elected as candidates in these institutions and women elected member of Panchayati Raj Institutions taking part in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation. (Narayan)Through reservation many women have come into politics.

The position of Dalits in Punjab is quite different from the other parts of India. In the many villages of Punjab where SCs population is exceeds up to 50 %. There are total 37 caste communities are registered as SCs in Punjab. Women are from Dalit category most depressed class. But the position of Dalit women is not equal all over the Punjab. In Doab region, Dalits are more powerful than the other parts of Punjab. So the position of Dalit women is also stronger in this area than other districts of Punjab. (Puri) Bathinda is well known district of Punjab. There are a quarter million of Dalit families living in this district. All the political parties during Lok Sabha elections have started wooing Dalits with the same set of unfulfilled

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promises, Bathinda constituency has reserved for SC category. Many people from these categories have come into politics through reservation. Number of Dalit women has come into politics through reservation in various local bodies. To analyse their participation in local bodies' institutions in rural area this study is conducted in Bathinda district of Punjab. The sample of 50 women has been taken who are elected members of Panchayats in different villages.

Objectives of Study

- To analyse the social, economic condition of Dalit women
- To analyse the awareness level Dalit women in rural area
- To analyse political participation of Dalit women

Research Methodology

Many women have come into politics after reservation in local bodies. 73rd constitutional amendment has become a milestone for women empowerment in politics at the grass root level of governance. There are 33% of seats reserved for the women in rural local bodies out of which 1/3 of seats are reserved for the women of SC and ST category.

Through this amendment many women from Dalit category are also come into politics. To analysed their participation in local bodies institutions in rural area this study is conducted in Bathinda district of Punjab. The sample of 50 women has been taken who are elected members of Panchayats in different villages. Qualitative and Quantitative both methods are used to collected and interpreted data.

Socio – Economic Profile of Respondents

The Socio Econonic profile of women affects their political participation. Socio economic profile shows that 16 % of women are belongs to the age group of (18-35), 52 % of women belongs to the age group of (36 to 45), 24 % belongs to age group (46 to 60) and only 8 % belongs to age group (above 60). From above data it is analyzed that most of women are come to the politics from the age of 36 to 45 years. Marital Status of respondents shows that 94 % of women members are married and 6 % of women are unmarried. Educational profile of women shows that 42 % of women are illiterate, 38 % women are educated up to metric, 14% are got education up to graduation and 6 % of women are post graduate. This data shows that most of the women belongs to Dalit community are still uneducated or get a education up to metric and in higher education their position is not satisfactory. 70% of women are belongs to the joint families and 30% are from nuclear families. This shows that women have got more opportunities in joint families. Occupational profile of Dalit women shows that 40% of

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women are working as a laborer, 32% of are working in their house, 12% of are working in agriculture sector, 16 % of women are working in another sectors such as jobs, doing their own business and religious profile shows that all the women are faith in Sikhism.

The social-economic profile of the Dalit women shows that most of women are uneducated and unemployed. Only reservation of seats in PRIs has provided them to the opportunities to participate in political affairs. When the seats are reserved for the Dalit women there is not any option for the people of upper caste, in spite of support to the Dalit women.

Political Awareness and Participation

Political participation is one of the important aspects of empowerment. After reservation the political participation of Dalit women have been increased in PRIs. To analyze how their role will played as a panchayat member has also analyzed for efficient result.

Awareness Level among the Respondents

The Participation of people in various activities is depends upon their level of awareness if they are fully aware about the programmes and function they can play very active role in these development plans. In political field, people can play their active role if they are aware about their political system. To analysed the political awareness among Dalit women many questions are prepared and the answers are fulfill from the respondents through personal interview.

Knowledge about their M.L.A, C.M and P.M.

The data collected through empirical study shows that 100 % of women have a correct knowledge about the name of their Prime Minister, 94 % of women are give correct answer about the name of Chief Minister of Punjab and 6 % are not aware about the C.M. and 94 % of women respondents are fully knowledge about their M.L.A's and 6 % are aware about their M.L.A's. this shows that women are more knowledge about Prime Minister of India than their own state government ministry.

Interested in News

Type of News	Frequency	Percentage
Local News	32	64%
Regional News	4	8%
National Level News	11	22%
International News	3	6%
Total	50	100%

Sources: Through Personal Interview

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Interest in listening news shows individuals awareness in political field. 64 % of women are interested in local news which is related with their areas. 8 % of women respondents are interested in regional news, 22 % of women members are showed their interest in national level news and there are only 6 % of women who like to listen international level. It means that women who are in politics and they are more concern with events of their local areas.

Participation in decision making process

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	**15**	**30%**
Sometime	**23**	**46%**
Husband and other male members of family are participated	**24**	**24%**
Total	**50**	**100**

Sources: Through Personal Interview

In total number of 50 women respondents 30 % of women are participated in decision making process. They are aware about their duties and responsibilities. They are take part in all the developmental programmes. 20% of women respondents are that they are not taking part in these activities, meetings are attended by their husbands and family members. 24% of women answered that they are taking part in decision making process and sometime they have not attended the organized held by Gram Panchayats.

Redress the grievance of Method Adopted by the Women to people

Response	Frequency	Percentage
By themselves	**21**	**42%**
Directed to the people concern authority	**11**	**22**
assigning the problem to authority	**2**	**4%**
Husband and Male members of family solve the problems to people	**16**	**32%**
Total	**50**	**100**

Sources: Through Personal Interview

Women when elected as representatives of people are responsible for people. They have ability to solve their problems. It is found from the study that 42% of women are solving the problems of their people by their own self. 22 % women accepted that they direct the

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people to concern authority for redress their grievances. There are also 4 % of women who told that they are assigning the problem to authority by themselves. 32 % women asked that their husbands, father and other male members of their family are solved the problems of the people. Most of people reached to the male members of their family and told about their problems.

Measures suggested women for achieving equal status in society

Suggestion given by women member for achieving equal status in Society	Frequency	Percentage
Education	**32**	**64%**
Economic Independence	**11**	**22%**
Equal Share in Property	**2**	**4%**
Governmental Politics	**5**	**10%**
Total	**50**	**100**

Sources: Through Personal Interview

Women members also give some suggestion so that they can achieve equal position in the society. Education is a key of empowerment. 64 % of women are suggested that lack of education among the women of Dalit category is main reason of their backwardness. Due to lack of education they are not aware about their rights and they do not confidence to talk in the meetings. In this way their participation in decision making process is not sufficient. It is need to educate them so they actively involved in decision making process. The women of these categories explained that economic condition of women also affected their participation in political field. 22 % of women are demanded that if women are become economic independent they can perform better roles. 4 % of women are agreed that women should have equal share in the property. Because their economic condition in the society in not sound they depend upon the male members of their family for their needs. 10 % of women also suggested that government should make more policies and programmes for women development and empowerment.

Conclusion

The above study concluded that political participation of elected Dalit women suffers from thrice discrimination based on caste, gender and patriarchy. Other factors that are influence their awareness and political participation are their socio economic background. It is found that most of Women are uneducated and working as a laborer in various sectors.

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When the awareness level of women members analyzed it is seen that all the women have accurate knowledge about the name of their prime minister but few among them, who have not knowledge about name of their chief minister and MLAs. Women are also showing interest in politics through news most of women listen and having knowledge about the news of their areas. Some women members are also interest in national and international news. When the political participation of women are concluded it is found that 30 % of women are aware about the rights and duties and they are participate in decision making process. But still there are 20 % of women members who said that they are not taking part in decision making process. They come into politics only because of reservation all their duties and responsibly as members are done by the male members of their family. Many people are visited to their representatives for solving their problems. It is seen that out of total 50 women members most of women are solved the problems of their people by themselves. But still 32 % of women agreed that people approach to their husbands for redress their grievances. People donot considered women as a member of Panchayats they only contact to their husbands. So they come to visit them and share their problems with them.

Thus, analyzed above data it is found that the condition of Dalit women is not still in satisfactory position. Indian government has taken several towards women development. Many women from these communities are got higher education and they become economically sound. They have a full knowledge about their rights and duties. They also come into politics and participate in political activities. But it is also found that male dominant in political institutions of local bodies especially in rural areas. Due to these issues, Women active participation is not possible still today.

Women are suggested that women become empowered in politics only if they got education, economic independence women got all the economic rights and some women members also suggested that government should make more polices towards women development.

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