

## **Political Theory and Citizenship Discourses: Cast(e) in the Periphery: Understanding Representation of Dalit Women and Politics in India**

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### Summary

Indian society is deeply gendered in that women have fewer opportunities to participate in public life. The gender division of labour that exists lays a disproportionate burden on women to fulfil the tasks of social reproduction. The care and nurturance of children, the sick and the old, household maintenance and provision for basic needs form a major part of women's work burden, especially in the case of rural women. Women are not perceived as 'public' persons in the same way as men, nor are their associational activities seen as being for the common 'public' good. Women's community participation continues to be perceived as 'outside' the planning and development process. In order to change this, in 1993, the landmark 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution mandated formation of local government councils in which 33% of the seats were to be reserved for women. This led to a remarkable number of women (over a million) joining mainstream politics at the grass-roots level. This act of women coming out of their homes led to a social and political revolution that has captured the attention of the world at large. However, in India this has also led to the assertion of new political identities at the grass roots, especially for Dalit women. This paper attempts to understand the way caste and patriarchy interact and entwine to restrict and deny women mobility and the right to political participation. It aims to understand the processes of how women are posited as the bearer of caste honour and purity, and how their political participation and assertion of political identities are challenging centuries of deep-rooted prejudice.

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### **Introduction**

The idea of citizenship has been in the domain of intellectual discussions for many centuries now, primarily derived from Western liberal concepts of universal citizenship, as opposed to the earlier concepts, which were based on exclusivity on certain grounds (e.g. gender, property ownership, etc.). The present notion of citizenship has come to be focused on the 'universal citizen' – an individual with rights, who engages with governance institutions or the state in the public arena. This is exemplified by the following definition by T.H. Marshall, one of the most

influential theorists of citizenship: *'Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed'* (Marshall 1950). The Oxford Dictionary defines the term *'citizen'* as a legally recognized subject or national of a state or commonwealth, and *'citizenship'* as denoting the collective individuals of a group or *membership*. Other definitions of citizenship have primarily focused on the status of being a citizen – that is, on being a member of a particular political community or state. Citizenship in this sense brings with it certain rights and responsibilities that are defined in law.<sup>1</sup> In the above categories, citizenship is understood as a status which is bestowed equally on all people who gain access to *'membership'* of a particular nation. Thus, those who gain *'citizenship'* gain access to a set of rights guaranteed to every member of that particular nation. This creates the impression that the concept of citizenship is an abstract and neutral one without biases of sex, race, caste, etc. Such a definition also automatically entails an understanding that all citizens of a particular nation are therefore equal, with equal rights and duties. However, feminist criticisms of concepts of citizenship have argued that such an understanding inevitably marginalizes certain groups while overlooking the inequalities within a nation. According to feminist critics, ideas of universal citizenship which can be defined as *'equal rights for all members'* hide the reality of unequal power relationships and societal differences that exist between various sections of society based on gender, class, caste, etc. These inequalities lead in reality to some people being excluded from claiming full citizenship rights on the basis of their difference. Feminists have argued that there is a need to reframe definitions of citizenship based on the forms of exclusion and marginalization. Echoing such sentiments, feminist Gita Sen describes citizenship as operating in four spheres: the political level, the economic levels, the cultural level of norms and values, and the personal levels of families, homes and relationships.<sup>2</sup> She goes on to say that the absence of citizenship at one level puts the others at risk as well, so if a woman cannot realize her economic citizenship, for instance, then that will affect how she experiences citizenship in the political and personal realms as well. Feminist scholars also point out that gendered exclusion from citizenship is linked to the public/private divide that identifies men's role as being in the public world of politics and paid employment, and women's role in caring and child-rearing in the home.<sup>3</sup> Understood through a feminist context,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?286>.

<sup>2</sup> Sen, Gita, 'Feminist politics in a fundamentalist world', Mukhopadhyay Maitrayee (ed.), 'Governing for Equity: Gender, Citizenship and Governance' (2003), Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), The Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

citizenship is thus not a secure identity, but instead impacts and is impacted by expressions of power while being ‘objects of struggle to be defended, reinterpreted and extended’.<sup>4</sup>

What this paper aims at is to understand processes of citizenship, political participation and exclusion for Dalit<sup>5</sup> women through a feminist lens within the context of the 73rd constitutional amendment in India. The 73rd constitutional amendment of 1993<sup>6</sup> gave constitutional status to the local governance system (known as the ‘*panchayat*<sup>7</sup> system’) and reserved 33% of the seats there for women. Put very simply, the *panchayat* system in India is a form of rural decentralized governance in which the rural populaces elect their own political representatives. Although this system was practised in certain Indian states before 1993, the 73rd constitutional amendment made it mandatory practice across the entire country. Some of the basic features of the constitutional amendment provided for are shown below:

#### The *panchayat* system in India

- A three-tier *panchayat* system shall be constituted in every state, comprising *panchayats* at the village, intermediate and district levels. However, states with populations not exceeding 20 lakh could dispense with the intermediate level, and have a two-tier system.
- Elections to the *panchayats* at every level shall be filled by direct election from territorial constituencies in the *panchayat* area.
- The *Panchayats* will enjoy a five-year term; if dissolved earlier, fresh elections will be completed within six months of the date of dissolution.
- The Gram Sabha (village assembly) will consist of all persons registered on the electoral rolls. While the composition of the Gram Sabha is uniform, its powers and functions may vary, as provided for by the state legislature.
- In the directly elected seats of members in all *panchayats*, there will be reservation of seats for Scheduled Caste-Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) in proportion to their total population in a *panchayat* area, and one-third of these seats will be reserved for women belonging to these groups.
- Of the seats to be filled by direct election in every *panchayat*, there will be not less than one-third reservation of seats in *panchayats* for women, including the seats reserved for SC-ST women. Such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *panchayat*.

Interestingly, the idea of women’s political representation was largely the result of the recommendations carried in ‘Towards Equality’, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India made in 1975, as well as the ‘National Perspective Plan 1988-2000’, which had proposed women’s quotas in local bodies; there was no

<sup>4</sup> Meer, Shamim et al., Gender and Citizenship Overview Report, BRIDGE Development – Gender, IDS, Sussex.

<sup>5</sup> The Untouchables under the Hindu caste system.

<sup>6</sup> At present, the Indian parliament is in the process of increasing the reservations to 50%.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Panchayat’ literally means assembly (*yat*) of five (*panch*) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Traditionally, these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and villages.

significant mass mobilization of women to press this demand. Also these amendment bills were passed unanimously in parliament without any discussion or debate. In sharp contrast, a similar proposal to reserve seats for women in the Indian parliament has been pending for years now.<sup>8</sup>

This paper attempts to look at the political citizenship of a group of Dalit women within the twin axes of caste and patriarchy. It documents their experiences of citizenship and political participation after 14 years of implementation of the amendment in one of the poorest and most deprived villages in India. The paper certainly does not claim to be authoritative or apply to the whole of India since encapsulating the experiences of a million women cogently is beyond its scope. What is being attempted here, though, is to link the 'micro-experiences' of Dalit women in local governance with 'macro-debates' on reserving seats for women by capturing how Dalit women in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (which is governed by a female Dalit minister) have experienced decentralization and then seeing if there are any lessons to be drawn from their experiences.

The paper is structured in the following manner: the first section talks about the 73rd amendment followed by experiences gathered by the author during a field visit and interactions with Dalit women. The author has tried to determine if and how Dalit women are able to influence the local governance agenda, either as voters or as elected representatives, and their understanding of participation and citizenship at grass-roots level. The last section deals with the key findings of the field visit and the conclusions that can be drawn from these.

In order to make the paper reflective of reality in the field, the author undertook a visit to Orai in Jalaun district in Uttar Pradesh (henceforth 'UP'). The methods used were the following: focus-group discussions, group interviews and individual interviews. A total of twenty elected women were interviewed, ten of whom were *panchayat pradhans*.<sup>9</sup> A total of five focus-group discussions and three group interviews were held with a total of 45 community women. The names of the women have been changed in the document.

The key questions that this paper has tried to address are the following: What kind of impact has the 73rd amendment had on Dalit women's political involvement? What are the micro/macro factors that influence a Dalit woman's political participation? Do the twin axes of caste and patriarchy impact women's electoral experience in a different way than a Dalit man's? What are the citizenship experiences that a Dalit woman undergoes and the difficulties she experiences in claiming her citizenship rights?

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<sup>8</sup> 'Indian Experience of Women's Quota in Local Government: Implications for future strategies', by Nanivadekar, Medha, Expert Group Meeting on Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership, 24 to 27 October 2005. UNRISD.

<sup>9</sup> *Pradhan* literally means 'head'. *Panchayat pradhan* means 'head of the *panchayat*'.

### **Some remarks on the Indian context**

In India, women are given equal civil and political rights, including universal adult franchise under the Indian constitution. Right from its inception, the principle of affirmative action has been instituted in the Constitution of India in articles 15 (1), (3) and (4), which prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion, sex, caste and place of birth and also provides for the state making special provisions for women, children and the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India that were made in 1993 provided for 33% of the seats to be reserved for women in local self-government institutions in rural and urban areas respectively. This created a landmark situation which enabled more than a million women to enter the political field for the first time.

One of the standard assumptions behind the landmark amendment was that if women entered politics in large numbers, they would change the whole texture of present-day politics since they were expected to bring different values, preferences and perspectives into the political arena. It was expected that they would ensure women's issues were given a high priority on the agenda of political parties and that their presence in decision-making positions would lead to the elimination of discrimination against women (Nanivadekar 2005).

This also threw up its own set of challenges, however. How could rural women, lacking in formal education and with no public exposure or political experience, equip themselves for this new role? What implications would it have for Dalit women in places where caste hierarchy still rules? What role does the state play in ensuring that they are able to meet their challenges? Most of these questions still remain unanswered, despite the fact that India's attempts at enhancing women's political representation at *panchayat* level have received worldwide attention and are considered a model initiative.

UP is the most populous state in India, accounting for 16.4 per cent of the country's population. The total population of the state as per the 2001 census<sup>10</sup> was 16.61 crores, or 166 million. The female literacy rate is only 41% and life expectancy is 49.6 years for women. UP also has one of the largest populations of Dalits in India, comprising 22% of the population. It is a state which is known for its strong caste-based hierarchies and repression of Dalits by higher castes. It is also one of the most poverty-stricken states in India. The sex ratio of the state is 898/1,000 as opposed to the national average of 933/1,000.

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<sup>10</sup> The Indian government conducts a nation-wide census once every decade, the last one in 2001. Population data source is from the Indian census data.

### The status of Dalit women in India

In India, according to the Census Report of 1991, Dalit women constitute 49.96% of the 200-million-strong Dalit population in India and 16.3% of the total female population of India. They number 80.5 million people, i.e. 8 out of every 100 citizens in the country, and 8% of the total Indian population. The literacy rate for Dalit women is only 23.6%. Vulnerably positioned at the bottom of the caste, class and gender hierarchies, Dalit women are victims of deprivation, exploitation and violence. Not only do they face endemic violence and discrimination (due to both caste and patriarchy), but the vast majority of crimes against them go unreported, unregistered and unpunished (the conviction rate is less than 1%). Moreover, they face violence and exploitation not only from the dominant castes, but also at home within their own families and communities. Dalit women have a drop-out rate of 54% at primary-school level, which rises significantly as they move up to secondary school. The poverty rate among Dalit women is 36.2% as compared with 21.6% among non-Dalit women. 94% of Dalit women are engaged in the unorganized, self-employed sector (farm/wage workers, domestic helpers, etc.), marked by overwork, low wages, non-payment of equal wages and the absence of social security or maternity benefits.<sup>11</sup>

Dalits have been asserting their identities through nationwide movements for almost 100 years now. In recent years, Uttar Pradesh (UP) has seen the rise of Dalit political power through the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and its leaders Kanshi Ram and Mayawati,<sup>12</sup> with the latter becoming the first female Dalit chief minister in 1995. In the same year as an almost simultaneous process, Dalit women were initiated into grass-roots-level politics through the first *panchayat* elections held in UP.

This has not been an easy experience for the Dalit women who have ventured out. They have faced innumerable problems ranging from proxy presence to non-cooperation by male *panchayat* members. This has also happened to Dalit women voters whose claims to active citizenship have been hampered by caste and patriarchy.

The villages visited for the purpose of this paper are located in Jalaun district – one of the 100 poorest districts according to the Planning Commission of India.<sup>13</sup> About 50 per cent of the area of Jalaun is affected by drought. It has faced this catastrophic

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on the status of Dalit women in India, visit the website of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights at <http://www.ncdhr.org.in/>

<sup>12</sup> Mayawati (born on 15 January 1956) is an Indian politician. She is the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. It is the fourth time she has held this office, following three short tenures between 1995 and 2003. Her supporters refer to her as '*Behenji*', or sister. At the age of 39, the unmarried Mayawati was the youngest politician to become chief minister in Uttar Pradesh. She is the first Dalit woman chief minister of any Indian state.

<sup>13</sup> See [http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/peoreport/peoevalu/peo\\_NCAER.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/peoreport/peoevalu/peo_NCAER.pdf) (accessed 31 August 2010).

dryness for half a decade now. As a consequence, its agricultural production has fallen drastically, leading to the crisis of livelihood security. Rising livelihood insecurity has increased distress migration. The level of migration had reached 50% to 60% a year on average. The sex ratio is very low in this region at 749 women per 1,000 men as opposed to India (933/1,000) and even UP (898/1,000).

Poverty, a feudal social structure and caste-based oppression define the environment from which the elected women representatives (or 'EWRs') from the Dalit have come. Their experiences also call for the need to re-frame citizenship concepts from the double axes of caste and gender, the key argument being that although decentralization undoubtedly harbours the possibility of empowering citizens, it is not a cure-all that benefits women and men equally. This is an argument that has been glossed over in most assessments conducted on women in *panchayats*, which tend to highlight isolated cases of 'empowerment' without drawing much attention to the challenges still hindering access to power for Dalit women.

### **Gendered access to the *panchayat*: the public/private divide**

Dalits capturing political power have led to new forms of state/society relations being re-imagined in Uttar Pradesh in which Dalits as citizens have staked the right to participate in state governance. This provides an interesting context in which to examine whether these re-imaginings have changed grass-roots power and gender equations in favour of Dalit EWRs. The findings in that direction are documented below.

#### *Gendered division of labour*

The first finding indicates the presence of a deep-rooted sexual division of labour within the private and public realms which occupies a central role in gender discourse in rural India. The narratives of the Dalit EWRs being interviewed clearly highlight this dichotomy. A key problem seems to be the persistent understanding (among both women and men) that the public world of politics and decision-making is a male one, whereas the private world of domestic life, the household and social reproduction is female. One of the strongest manifestations of this is the phenomenon of '*pradhan pati*'<sup>14</sup> – the practice of former *panchayat* members nominating their wives or daughters-in-law if they are unable to stand for election themselves due to the seat falling under the women's reservation quota. Many instances of this concept (which enjoys social sanction) in which the husband/father-in-law/son is accepted by the entire community as the de facto *pradhan*, were found in the course of doing research for this paper. This has emerged as a very useful method for men – and sometimes for influential local families – to keep control of

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<sup>14</sup> Husband of the *pradhan*, i.e. the head of the *panchayat*.

the particular *panchayat* in their hands. This is also used as a tool for men to fulfil their political ambitions, which would otherwise get thwarted due to the posts being reserved for women.

Saroja Devi's situation exemplifies this quite clearly. A Dalit woman, she has been the *panchayat pradhan* on two successive occasions and yet the nameplate at the entrance to her house names her husband as the *pradhan*. A decade earlier, when the seat was unreserved, her husband was elected *pradhan*, and now he still continues to occupy the position, albeit unofficially. Saroja Devi speaks openly about the fact that she is unable to devote any time at all to *panchayat* activities, saying: 'I have to care for 11 children and a blind and old mother-in-law. When is there any time for me to attend to *panchayat* duties?' Not being freed from her domestic responsibilities, her schoolteacher husband carries out her 'political' and therefore external responsibilities instead. This is not only accepted by her, but is also justified since she puts her primary role as a care-giver ahead of her role as that of a people's representative and a citizen. Many other EWRs echo similar sentiments, citing child-care and household responsibilities as the primary reason why the main responsibilities of governance are routinely handed over to husbands.

#### *Who decides?*

The second finding points to a situation where taking part in *panchayat* elections or not doing so is seldom an individual decision for Dalit women. All the women interviewed mentioned that the decision to stand for election was not their own; it was either a community or a family decision in which the male elders of the community approached the husbands of the women, who, in turn, talked to their wives about it. The women also confirmed that they were initially reluctant to step into the public world after remaining within the four walls of their homes all their lives. However, they agreed, given the insistence of their husbands and/or other male family members. Apart from the desire to exercise control, such family measures were also taken after considering the financial gains that the family could make during the woman's stint in the *panchayat*.

#### *Who is given information?*

Often, women's access is controlled by limiting it to information. In certain extreme situations, the women did not even know that they had been elected to a particular post since the entire process, from filling in nomination forms and campaigning to finally assuming office, was externally controlled by the men, the women hardly having any role to play in the matter. Khushi Devi, an elected member of the Village Development Council (or VDCs as they are more popularly known) only came to know about her membership when a local NGO invited her to a workshop with other elected women members; they had found her name on the list. This was despite the fact that the last elections had been held almost four years earlier. Her husband had done all the necessary paperwork and campaign work on her behalf and continued to attend meetings.

*Who steps out of the home?*

The third finding points to a situation where there are male citizens at both ends of the continuum, as office-bearers and as citizens, and where the women are made invisible and irrelevant. Whenever a woman becomes the *pradhan* and she wants to use her power and resources for village development, the village men use her husband to negotiate or make demands and put forward requests for government schemes, etc. Given the existence of the '*purdah*'<sup>15</sup> system, it is unacceptable to the village men to negotiate with a woman in a public place, as a result of which many males seek out the husbands of the *pradhans* instead. In certain instances, since the *pradhani's* husband attends all the meetings, the other women members find it inappropriate to attend meetings themselves and are, in turn, represented by their husbands.

One of the important ways in which the concept of *purdah* plays out further are the binding societal norms that define a woman's identity through control over her mobility. This is especially the case in situations where the women *pradhans* are required to attend meetings at the block, sub-division or district levels which are situated some distance away and where they lack safe transport facilities that also run to schedule. Since the women are not expected to travel outside their home area, they are often substituted by male relatives, in particular by husbands and adult sons. This is a practice accepted by the administration, and actual presence by the women is seldom insisted upon except for legal matters such as signing of cheques and documents. This is in keeping with the definition of a 'good woman' who maintains a low profile and does not take an active role as far as the public arena is concerned. It is also linked to the purity/impurity factor: the caste honour rests on women, and unrestricted mobility may sully their purity. This is significant since women are seen as being 'gateways' in the caste system and the crucial pivot on whose purity/sanctity axis the caste hierarchy is constructed.

*Who has access to information?*

The fourth finding points in the general direction of the tactics employed by male *panchayat* heads to restrict the access granted to female *panchayat* members. This denial of access takes various forms, which include not informing the women of meetings, verbally abusing them and physically driving them away from *panchayat* offices if ever they protest. In addition to that, the threat of punishment for overstepping familial boundaries is also used to silence the women, who are reprimanded by their husbands for making such demands on the *panchayat*.

Silencing a woman by appropriating her speech is another method employed, in this case by family members. Radha Devi, the Dalit woman *pradhan* from Umri *Gram Panchayat* (or 'GP'), is a case in point. During our interview, she was not allowed to

<sup>15</sup> Literally meaning a veil or the cloth used to cover the face of the women, this system segregates women and men in both social and private spheres. Married women are supposed to observe *purdah* in front of men other than their husbands.

speak – her brother-in-law spoke on her behalf instead. While she maintained her silence, he insisted that her husband was there to ‘help’ her discharge her activities as the *pradhani* since she was busy taking care of her four children and her extended family. Since most women are either completely illiterate or semi-literate, families also use their illiteracy as another excuse for controlling their access to meetings and financial decisions. All the women spoken to unanimously felt that their lack of literacy skills was the biggest obstacle that they faced.

In fact, this reflects a national trend. In a study on *panchayats* in the Indian states of West Bengal and Rajasthan, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that women *pradhans* in reserved GPs were less likely to be literate, they were less educated and less politically knowledgeable, and they were younger and poorer than women *pradhans* in unreserved GPs. Women *pradhans* coming into the system through quotas are more likely to be socially and economically disadvantaged, and the researchers hypothesized that they were more likely to be controlled by dominant local elements.

#### *Whose wife are you?*

One more overall trend that emerges is the fact that all the women that have contested elections have done so in the guise of ‘*bahus*’, or daughters-in-law of the family, which, in turn, has been translated as the ‘*bahu*’ of the village/community/clan in particular. This is not only true for UP, but also for India and, indeed, South Asian politics in general, where the identity of a daughter-in-law takes precedence over other identities while claiming representation during elections. Marriage is still seen as an absolute must for Indian women. In rural areas, especially, an unmarried woman is regarded as an aberration and an exception that has not fulfilled the biological destiny of marriage and motherhood. Therefore while voting at *panchayat* level, the fact that the woman is married into a local family ensures that she is someone who can be trusted upon to fulfil her societal obligations.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Differences amongst us?*

A sixth point that needs to be mentioned here concerns the observed power differences between Dalit *pradhanis* and Dalit women *panchayat* members due to the different political positions that they occupy. The members clearly articulate the fact that there are no benefits to be had from simply ‘becoming a member’, betraying apprehensions about the widespread corruption present in India. It is interesting to note here that it is not automatically assumed that *pradhanis* would be ‘cleaner’ than their male counterparts since it was also assumed that the husbands and male members of the family would continue to take key decisions regarding *panchayat* finances.

<sup>16</sup> However, UP’s chief minister Mayawati is an exception to this role as her primary political identity is not that of a *bahu*, but that of *behenji*, or ‘sister’.

Despite the challenges documented above, there has been no acknowledgement from the state of the particular problems faced by the EWRs and these have therefore not been addressed by support mechanisms like arranging safe transport or organizing meetings at a time and location which is convenient for the women. Besides some very preliminary induction meetings meant for the *pradhans*, over the years the EWRs received very little capacity-building support to help them overcome the challenges they faced. Thus, some critical gaps have emerged which have hampered the women's ability to discharge their responsibilities fruitfully. This has only ended up promoting traditional attitudes that frame women as being unable to fruitfully participate in public life.

### **Being a woman and a Dalit: experiencing caste**

Although caste continues to define the experiences of women and men in the region, with BSP coming to power in recent years, there has been an observed lessening of caste-based atrocities. This is mainly due to intensive political mobilization by the Dalits. However, since no process has been established yet to safeguard the interests of marginalized communities once they reach positions of political power, the inevitable backlash has followed. This is particularly pronounced in cases of verbal and physical violence against Dalit EWRs by dominant caste men, including post-election violence. These repressions are routine and aim at suppressing the EWRs by stopping them from taking charge of their respective *panchayats*. Such instances often take the form of gun violence aimed at the family of the women, including targeting their children and husbands. Indirect forms of violence are also adopted. These tactics, which are clever and, indeed, often ingenious, include charges of financial misappropriation made against the women. Although the charges are not proved in most cases, continuous harassment is expressed as one of the key reasons as to why the Dalit EWRs (and their husbands) do not wish to stand for re-election.

#### *Caste as a source of violence*

Sita Devi, a Dalit woman *panchayat pradhan*, recounted how she was hounded out of her house for three months after she won the local village election. She was forced to depend on hired personal security and had to flee her home. Her husband, who was unable to attend to his job as a clerk in the government health centre due to the disturbances, was threatened with suspension or transfer in an attempt at intimidation which she says was motivated by the upper castes of the village. When she finally started work on building village roads, raw materials were siphoned off during the night. Complaints were filed against her at the District Magistrate's office<sup>17</sup> alleging corruption.

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<sup>17</sup> The highest administrative officer in a district.

In other cases, Dalit EWRs who tried to initiate work in villages under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)<sup>18</sup> faced similar obstacles where, sensing that the development projects being carried out under the NREGA would primarily benefit the Dalits, the upper-caste communities filed complaints against them. In fact, the harassment seemed part of a pattern that Dalit EWRs have had to go through ever since they have occupied positions of power following the 1993 amendments. The police have refused cooperation and no cases have been lodged even when the instigators have been named by the women. Such cases are not isolated examples from UP; Indian media reports<sup>19</sup> are full of stories in which Dalit EWRs have been driven away from their villages and have been made homeless through upper-caste violence aimed at intimidating them. The police and the district administration have been wilfully indifferent in all of these cases. The Dalit EWRs have also faced obstacles in calling for village assemblies and holding regular *panchayat* meetings.

Caste hierarchies thus loom large in the consciousness of Dalit EWRs, all of whom have experienced varying degrees of caste-based violence and exploitation in their lifetime. Such experiences have been critical in forming the consciousness and choices of EWRs and have seriously affected their ability to perform in the role of elected representatives on many occasions.

Indira Gandhi,<sup>20</sup> who became India's first woman prime minister in 1966, was once described as the 'only man in her Cabinet', indicating that she had certain positive and assertive masculine qualities which set her apart from her feminine, non-assertive male colleagues. This comment also sums up prevailing attitudes towards women in politics, who are seen as being in possession of certain masculine qualities required for public life, which also means not all women are equipped for such roles.

### Claiming their rights as citizens

As discussed before, feminist critics have termed concepts of 'universal citizenship' premised on Western liberal concepts as exclusionist by nature since they do not take differences into account that are based on crucial variables like caste, class,

<sup>18</sup> This act, which was passed in parliament in 2005, guarantees every rural family in India 100 days of employment through unskilled manual labour in every financial year. This is implemented through the *panchayats*.

<sup>19</sup> Some examples of cases that have been reported are mentioned here: <http://forums.sulekha.com/forums/coffeehouse/hinduism-today-two-Dalit-women-sarpanches-forced-out-of-villages-972463.htm>; [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main41.asp?filename=Ws070209Dalit\\_woman.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main41.asp?filename=Ws070209Dalit_woman.asp); <http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2009-February/017900.html>; <http://www.ahrchk.net/ua/mainfile.php/2006/2128/>.

<sup>20</sup> Indira Gandhi, the daughter of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (19 November 1917 – 31 October 1984) was the Prime Minister of India for three consecutive terms from 1966 to 1977 and for a fourth term from 1980 until her assassination in 1984, a total of fifteen years. She was India's first, and to date only, female prime minister.

gender and ethnicity. In the case of Dalit women, such gendered patterns of exclusion have also intermingled with the axis of social division based on caste and class. This is particularly manifested in the way in which Dalit women are unable to exercise their rights, particularly with respect to their identities as voters and participants as citizens in local governance processes. As Gabriele Dietrich<sup>21</sup> (1992) points out while discussing the inter-relationships between caste and patriarchy, caste should be looked at as a marriage circle and endogamy which is related to patriarchal controls over women. Not only can her husband (and the community) affect a Dalit woman's decisions in politics, but he can also control her political position as a whole, as in the case of Dalit women voters.

The concept of the *panchayat*, a village-level local governance system, derives its strength from the idea of self-rule, i.e. that as universal citizens, the villagers – both women and men – will be able to arrive at decisions which will be beneficial for the progress of their constituencies. A critical perspective missing in the operationalizing of the *panchayat* system in India is an acknowledgement of the variables which exclude certain groups from the process. For instance, every *panchayat* is supposed to have public meetings at least twice a year to facilitate the community planning process, which are to be attended by every voter in the village. The village meetings are supposed to function as a place where important decisions regarding the village development are discussed and taken, including which development projects get prioritized. Therefore the community meetings, or *Gram Sabhas/Gram Sansad* meetings as they are known, are important events for citizens wishing to get involved and make the planning a participatory process.

#### *Whose meetings? Whose development?*

However, Dalit women's testimonies indicate that women's access to such public events is severely restricted due to existing socio-cultural norms. The women note that such public meetings are out of bounds for them, partly because in mixed villages, i.e. dwellings with a majority upper-caste population, it is difficult for Dalits to attend meetings in the presence of upper castes. It is even more restrictive for Dalit women to attend such gatherings without upper-caste presence. The women reiterated that they were not informed about any such meetings taking place (as their participation is not expected), and even if they were, the overwhelming proportion of village men there would render their presence useless since they were not expected to express their opinions in mixed gatherings. Therefore, by their very nature, village council meetings tend to exclude half the adult population by not involving the women. Women have accepted such exclusion just as they have accepted other forms of exclusion in their lives. The lack of established and compulsory gender quorums in such meetings, village planning processes and similar institutions has ensured that they remain outside the ambit of participation.

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<sup>21</sup> In her article 'Dalit Movements and Women's Movements'.

Empirical studies by Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) show that the village council meetings are dominated by men from non-Dalit and non-tribal groups elsewhere in India, too, and thus do not create a decentralized and participatory environment for inclusive local governance. Jayal (2006) shows that even if women attend meetings, they may not be able to express their opinions in large and mixed gatherings and translate them into plans reflecting women's concerns. Raabe, Sekher and Birner (2009) conclude that if women attend but do not actively participate in village meetings, then local governance and service-delivery outcomes are more likely to reflect the interests and needs of men. This is particularly important for the allocation of untied funds for which GPs have discretionary spending powers.

#### *Who votes? Who decides?*

The second point that emerges is about women being able to make an informed choice as voters. Who to vote for in elections in India and especially in UP is a strategic decision where issues of caste, community and religion play crucial roles. As the women in the villages note, who to vote for is also a family decision and a decision which is often taken jointly in community meetings attended by male elders of the village. There are also family conferences organized on these matters where the family as a unit decides to vote for certain candidates who are seen as strategically well-placed in addressing the community's concerns. This is an accepted practice and individual interests are subsumed by family and communal interests. Therefore a woman candidate promising to work for women's welfare may not get enough votes to see her candidature through. This creates an additional burden on women struggling to stand for election on their own since they lack support from all sources: their family, the community as well as the state.

#### *Who steps out of the home?*

The third finding takes us back in the direction of the public/private divide, viz. to the idea of male/female places. Access to *panchayat* offices and members of the *panchayat* for the purpose of expressing a demand or petitioning them is exclusively gendered not only for Dalit EWRs, but for the female Dalit electorate as a whole. Dalit women rarely go to the *panchayat* to voice demands. If the *pradhan* is of a higher caste, then that in itself creates barriers. But even in cases where the *pradhan* is a Dalit woman, it does not necessarily increase women's access. Any kind of negotiation to be conducted with the *panchayat* is to be done through the males of the family, so there are males at both ends of the spectrum: male villagers negotiating with the husband of the *pradhan*. The *panchayat* as a place for raising demands and securing justice for women does not exist in reality.

### **Putting gender on the development agenda**

In continuation of the above debates on citizenship and women's exclusion, this has also been a topic of debate and discussion as to whose interests elected women represent. It is often assumed that once elected, women would uphold and promote

the causes of other women. Medha Nanivadekar<sup>22</sup> raises questions pertinent in this regard: What is the purpose of quotas? Is it only a numerical presence of women? Can the women elected to reserved seats act as an agency for change or would they end up internalizing prevalent rules of politics? Can we legitimately expect women from reserved seats to owe their primary loyalty to the cause of women? Do women alone represent women? Should women primarily represent women?

Dalit EWRs being interviewed saw themselves primarily in terms of representatives for all their constituents, and not only for women. When asked about what they perceived as women's issues in their constituencies, they did not demarcate any matters as exclusively female ones. All of them said that the critical issues in their areas concerned infrastructure such as roads, electricity and water, particularly the latter, which was a very sensitive issue that often led to confrontation between the castes. Since the area is also drought-prone, access to water is particularly critical. Besides that, creation of basic infrastructure in an impoverished area was an area of concern. These matters seem to dominate public consciousness, and development by the *panchayat* is measured by progress on these indicators.

Under these circumstances, what could possibly be women's concerns? Instances of violence against women are accepted as routine, hence it is possible that they are not automatically seen as violations that need to be addressed by the *panchayat*. Moreover, without exposure to awareness and stimulation that would view violence against women as an aberration, it is not something that the women would address automatically. So the underlying assumption that women would primarily represent and stand up for the rights of other women does not happen in a vacuum unless there are external sources present to initiate ideas that human rights are inalienable and hence may not be suppressed under any circumstances.

In India, the role of *panchayats* has traditionally been to focus on the infrastructural needs of the villages such as water, roads, electricity and job creation through government schemes. The *panchayat* as an instrument for upholding justice and protecting rights has never received much attention in the discourse on how it functions. Addressing women's issues and concerns like dowries, child marriage, gender-specific abortions,<sup>23</sup> caste-based atrocities, i.e. issues critical to women's rights and well-being, is not regarded as a critical area for engagement for the

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<sup>22</sup> Indian Experience of Women's Quota in Local Government: Implications for future strategies, by Nanivadekar, Medha, Expert Group Meeting on Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership. 24 to 27 October 2005. UNRISD.

<sup>23</sup> The district of Jalaun has a sex ratio that is much lower than the national figures. The figure was quoted earlier.

*panchayat*. This was reflected in the EWRs labouring to articulate ideas of citizenship. Full citizenship for women seemed alien as an idea with rights and entitlements, especially the concept of a woman being a human being with certain rights that she can claim at will.

### **Women's perceptions of identity and citizenship**

Living in a society where women's identities are formed through their marital relationships and motherhood, Dalit women's primary identities are shaped by their caste and marriage. Years of caste-based oppression and the subsequent increase in political awareness have ensured that a woman's identity as a Dalit has taken precedence over her identity as a female. For Dalit women, citizenship ideas are tied up with ending caste-based oppression and with the quest for equal honour and justice. One of the ways in which the caste equation can be redrawn and equality can be achieved is by capturing forms of political power. In the case of Dalit women, family, caste and class provide some of the most influential power relationships between men and women.

Even though the last decade has seen a reduction in some existing practices like untouchability, the women question whether the caste system itself will ever disappear. Such queries are still in abstract forms, however, and the women struggle to express them in concrete terms. Citizenship is also defined by them as a struggle for economic justice, of achieving parity between the rich and the poor. However, despite all the barriers, there is overwhelming support amongst them for women's quotas since they believe that somewhere down the line the increased numerical presence will translate into actual representation by women. In that respect, Mayawati stands out as an icon of inspiration to Dalit women in general, whether or not the women play any role in public life.

It emerged from the interviews that Dalit women's conceptions of citizenship are not bound around issues of gender-based exclusions. The theoretical understanding that women and men are equal citizens with equal rights is present somewhere in their consciousness, but once again the understanding is at a theoretical level, while the women struggle to operationalize it in their everyday lives. It is also linked more with the idea of duties that a woman citizen must perform rather than rights that she holds which she can then exercise to expand her freedom. Citizenship rights linked with 'freedom' or 'choice' have less meaning in such a context, especially for the poorest and most disenfranchised like the Dalits, without enabling conditions through which they can become reality.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, although this particular article is based on the experiences of a limited number of Dalit women, the attempt has been made to capture certain critical areas in Dalit EWR's political representation. The author wishes to throw up questions

challenging the widespread assumption that simply increasing the numerical representation of women in governance structures will lead to effective participation by women. There is no doubt about the premise that decentralization has the potential to empower excluded communities including Dalit women and men. However, through the experience documented here, it can be said that decentralization is not a universal remedy and does not automatically benefit women and men equally unless specific measures are introduced by the state to address women's unequal position and power imbalances in society, including those of caste hierarchies. This especially needs to be recognized especially now that India is in the process of increasing the quota for women from 33% to 50% in *panchayats*.

In situations where Dalit women representatives are facing harassment and obstructions in their work, the state must go beyond simply reserving seats to address the situation effectively. It must play a pro-active role in capacitating women so that they are able to articulate on their positions as Dalits and as women. There is a need to move past the commonly accepted citizenship definitions which de-link citizenship and political participation from debates on gender and exclusion. Citizenship debates therefore need to be reframed from a gender and caste analysis angle. It must be accepted and acknowledged by the state that citizenship concepts reframed from a gender and inclusion perspective can introduce rights and political participation as development goals. Promoting inclusive citizenship will also mean identification of caste as a barrier to women seeking a role in the public arena.

In a nutshell, the relationship between citizens and the state should not only mean the 'right to vote', but also the right to entitlements and agencies. So addressing the gender gap in governance would imply not only increasing the participation of women in governance structures, but also creating an enabling environment for both community women and EWRs to contribute to the governance processes effectively.

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