

# CASTE, POWER AND THE PANCHAYATI RAJ

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled “**CASTE, POWER AND THE PANCHAYATI RAJ**” submitted by **PARVEEN GUPTA** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for award of the Degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**, has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other university and this is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before examiners for evaluation.

  
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## INTRODUCTION

The only alternative to a decentralized and genuinely democratic political system in a country like India is the gradual dissipation, erosion and disintegration of the State as well as the nation.

Rajni Kothari.

Such is the importance of Panchayati Raj in India, that it was seen as one of the major goals of India's freedom struggle as articulated by the father of nation, Mahatama Gandhi. He dreamt of an India which would be made up of "village republics". However, after independence, when the Indian State embarked on the path of nation building, this vision was found inconsistent with the idea of a modern nation. The village was considered a 'den of ignorance and darkness' and caste system prevalent in villages was condemned as oppressive and exploitative. Thus it was incumbent upon the state to end this exploitation and to ensure social justice and equality for all.

Two processes were thought to bring about the transformation from a 'feudal' India to a vibrant 'modern' India. First was the process of development, which by trickledown effect was to take care of the starving millions who generally belonged to the lower castes. Second was the process of democratization by the virtue of which each individual was to be granted rights and responsibilities. Universal adult franchise was to bring about a change in the mindset of rulers as well as the ruled. Each and every citizen could play a role in choosing the government. Both these processes were aimed at creating a casteless 'open' society. Panchayati Raj was supposed to wait till state acquired economic and political resources to implement it.

However soon it was realized that both caste and democracy have a dynamics of their own. The existing caste relations of superiority and inferiority were getting reflected

both in elections and also in the distribution of benefits of development. In the initial years, there was almost no participation of lower castes either in democratic governance or in developmental process. The ideal of village as a community with each villager enjoying equal rights was contradicted by the reality of caste relations. Thus Panchayati Raj was thought as a solution to overcome low participation. However, even in the Panchayati Raj structure, the dynamics of inter-caste linkages were not recognized and Dalits got a raw deal. Thus the situation did not improve significantly for Dalits. It took almost thirty-five years for reality to dawn upon the planners and policy makers to realize the fact that lower castes needed special treatment especially in a Panchayat setting. Consequently seventy-third amendment was passed. However, it still remains to be seen as to how the interests of Dalits are safeguarded under the new act. How does rural power structure with caste as one of its major organizing principle, intersects with it.

With this background it can be said that in order to understand this dynamics of caste in Panchayati Raj, especially in the last decade, a brief introduction on caste and its relation with politics is almost necessary.

### **CASTE: AN INTRODUCTION**

There have been various attempts to capture caste in a neat and precise definition. However owing to its complexity and multidimensionality such attempts have resulted in failure. Caste is not a simple structural unit of social stratification, but is a system of social organization in Indian society. Earlier scholars like Hocart, Senart, Risley, Hutton, Ghurye, using attributional approach tried to explain caste in terms of certain features like restricted choice of occupation, restriction on commensality and connubiality, and

hierarchy etc.<sup>1</sup> However they could not provide a sound theoretical model for the evolution and persistence of caste. Much of their work was based on religious and historical theories of caste.

According to religious theory, caste system has its origin in the primeval man who destroyed his body from which emerged four Varnas (as cited in *Purusukta* hymn). Thus from head emerged Brahmin, from arms the Kshatriya, from thighs the Vaishya and from feet the Shudra. This way the theory located caste in the Varna scheme which was pan-Indian in character.<sup>2</sup>

Historical theory also adopts the same Varna scheme and traces the origin of caste system to the Aryan conquest of India. Thus Varna (colour) was used to differentiate the Aryans (white skin) from Dasas (dark skin).<sup>3</sup> Aryans were organized among themselves in three groups. The first group was of the warriors and they were called Rajayanas. Later they changed it to Kshatriya. The second group was of priests and was called Brahmins. These two groups struggled politically for leadership among the Aryans. The third group was of farmers and craftsmen and was called Vaisia. Hence an elaborate four fold Varna system was established by the end of Vedic times. Various Smritis and Shastras further fortified this in later Vedic period. Thus Hindu scriptures ideologically sanctified what originated as a structural reality. Though religions like Buddhism and Jainism tried to provide an alternative to this oppressive system of caste exploitation, yet they could not advance much because of their ambitions to become a great religion. By the Mauryan period, the Varna scheme was accepted as the central theme, which governed all major

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<sup>1</sup> Sharma, K.L. *Reconceptualising: Caste, Class and Tribe*. Rawat Publications. Jaipur. 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Singh, Yogendra *Modernization of Indian Tradition*. Rawat Publications. Jaipur. 1996. p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Srinivas, M.N. 'Varna and Caste' in Dipankar Gupta (ed.) *Social Stratification*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1991.

aspects of life. Dipankar Gupta equates this phase to Asiatic mode of Production.<sup>4</sup> With the emergence of feudalism after the decline of Gupta Empire, the various occupational guilds gave way to occupational groups, which settled in different villages in small numbers. These occupational groups later crystallized into Jatis, which interacted with each other within the confines of *jajmani system*. Thus caste evolved into Jatis that represent the existential on-ground aspect of caste, which is localized; rather than a pan India Varna scheme, which is of theoretical relevance only (in present context).

Hence, according to attributional social theories, caste needs to be understood as a localized, endogamous hereditary group, which generally follows a certain occupation. Thus caste was primarily conceived in cultural terms where it exemplified the status summation in its best form<sup>5</sup>. These ideas were put into a neat precise model by Dumont who considers inequality based on the caste system to be a special type of inequality which was unique to Indian society.<sup>6</sup> 'Ideals and Values' are considered by Dumont as basic for knowing actual and observable behaviour of people. Hence the idea of the pure and the impure is basic to understanding of caste. This idea is the basis of hierarchy in Indian society. Dumont's main concern is with the understanding of traditional social organization of India from the viewpoint of ideas and values. Following Levi Strauss's structuralist model, Dumont constructs the binary opposite of pure and impure, an 'ideology' that governs the caste system.

However, Dumont's model invoked sharp criticism from various sociologists. It was faulted for stressing too much on hierarchy and ignoring difference. T. N. Madan

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<sup>4</sup> Gupta, Dipankar *Interrogating Caste: Underlying Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*. Penguin Books. New Delhi. 2000.p.200.

<sup>5</sup> Weber, Max *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London. 1948.

<sup>6</sup> Dumont, Louis *Homo Hierarchicus*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1998.



observed that Dumont's model is based on limited on limited ethnographic evidence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the factor of reciprocity was totally ignored and the structural factors of economy and polity were given only a passing reference. As pointed by Dipankar Gupta, economic and political factors do not occupy 'interstitial spaces' of hierarchy as suggested by Dumont but have a considerable influence in determining hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Moreover every caste member does not accept the hierarchy as sanctified in scriptures. Every caste has its own notion of hierarchy and competes with each other for status in this hierarchy. The social historical studies reveal that contrary to the scriptural view of caste as a closed and stable system in which the ranking on Varna scale coincided with that of caste or sub-caste status, there existed wide divergences in the status ranking of families within the same caste on the basis of sub-caste subdivision, occupational sub-specialization and accumulation of wealth. Moreover the position of caste in system of ranking was itself subject to changes due to external or internal forces operating in social system. There have always been attempts at caste mobility through acquisition of power, Sanskritization, censuses etc.

So an alternative to cultural theories of caste is structural theory which consider caste as a structural unit of stratification.<sup>9</sup> It is treated as an institutional system of interaction among hierarchically ranked groups for marriage, occupation, economic division of labour, enforcement of cultural norms and values by caste bodies and performance of ritual based on principles of purity and pollution. Structural theories use structural historical approach in order to study the origin, evolution and present

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<sup>7</sup> Madan, T.N. 'Dumont on the Nature of Caste in India' in Dipankar Gupta (ed.) *Social Stratification*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1991. pp.74-83.

<sup>8</sup> Gupta, Dipankar *Interrogating Caste: Underlying Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*. op.cit. p.64.

<sup>9</sup> Singh, Yogendra *Social Stratification and Social Change in India*. Manohar Publications. 1997.

organization of caste. Two broad directions can be discerned within this approach- Marxist and Non-Marxist.

Marxist theories of stratification are characterized by their dialectical and systemic notion of caste and are located in the mode of production. Kathleen Gough, Namboodripad, Ranadive are the proponents of Marxist school who analyse caste within the framework of the evolving modes of production of which caste structure is a product. Similarly Meillasoux locates the origin of the institution of caste such as *Jajmani* system and Varna in the class relations. Thus caste relations are treated as encapsulated class relations existentially as well as ideologically.<sup>10</sup>

Other sociologists like Klass use an eclectic theoretical approach and view surplus as the basis of emergence of stratification. He hypothesizes that caste in South-Asia has evolved historically from an egalitarian clan-based society. In course of time, due to natural differentials of ecological advantages of inventions of technology which create uneven opportunities for the generation of surpluses, hierarchical relationships among the totemic clans emerged.<sup>11</sup>

However, during the last two decades, cultural and ideological theories are supplementing these structural theories so as to account for the emergence of 'Dalit' identity and politics. Thus Phule's theory was rediscovered by Omvedt to explain the formation of Dalit, which accorded to this theory are a consequence of a Brahminic ideology and their class domination in a disguised form. Similarly Nicholas Dirks argue that castes are of mind and are an ideological construction which took place during the colonial period in India.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp.119-121.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.115.

Thus different models of caste based on competing ideologies have been constructed to account for the diversity and complexity of caste. However, all these models seem to agree on the point that ritual and economic aspect of caste is losing its relevance in modern day India. No longer the rituals of purity and pollution are followed in public life (though some exceptions are there). In present day India, it is the political aspect of caste which has given it a new lease of life. Hence a look at caste and politics is relevant to understand the persistence and proliferation of caste.

### **CASTE AND POLITICS:**

“Vote your caste here”- an illustration on the back cover of a book by M.N. Srinivas<sup>12</sup> in 1990’s clearly underlines the role that caste has played in Indian politics. Caste as a concept, as an institution and as a principle of stratification has always enamoured both Indian and foreign social scientists but in its modern “avatar” it is primarily its political form that has been a subject of research. Though scholars may differ over the relative importance that caste has in a “modern” democracy, yet no one can deny the fact that caste is very much a part of Indian political culture. This discussion on political significance of caste assumes much importance today with the rise of identity politics amongst Dalits and consequent “unfinished democratic revolution”<sup>13</sup> of so called lower castes.

However to appreciate the role that caste plays in Indian electoral politics, the effect that it has on democratic institutions and principles and to have a meaningful sociological understanding, one needs to analytically distinguish the various levels at which caste operates. Thus the macro level analysis for India as a whole, for a particular

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<sup>12</sup> Srinivas, M.N. (ed.) *Caste Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. Penguin Books. New Delhi. 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Pai, Sudha *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*. Sage Publications. New Delhi. 2002.

state or for a political party needs to be differentiated from the micro level village studies. The elections at a village or block level have dynamics of their own. Though it does not imply that the macro and micro are unrelated, yet to collude the two would be a too simplistic understanding of the reality. As M.S.A. Rao says that the term caste should be used with qualifications in a given empirical context, to designate respective territorial levels, structural orders and units of operation.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover it also needs to be understood that 'politics is not about elections alone'<sup>15</sup>. It is about participation of various castes in decision making, their mobilization, how do they operate and how caste relations are in turn getting affected by politics. The participation of Dalits need not be measured only in terms of their numbers in legislatures or panchayats but in terms of how much they can really affect the distribution of social and political power.

Methodologically one can follow a historical sociological approach so as to trace the trajectory of interrelation of caste and politics as it has been studied by various social scientists from time to time. The starting point could be taken as the writings of indologists, historians, colonial administrators and sociologists who suggested a broad Varna model to understand caste.

According to the Varna scheme there were two sources of power – secular with the king (kshatriya) and normative with the priest (Brahmin). However there was no complete disjunction between the secular role of king and its sacerdotal implications to

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<sup>14</sup> Frankel, F. and Rao, M.S.A. (ed.) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*. Oxford University Press (in two volumes). Delhi. 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Jodhka S.S. 'Changing Caste and Local Democracy: Assertion and identity among Dalits of Rural Punjab' (unpublished)

the maintenance of religious order was implied in his role.<sup>16</sup> It was the duty of the king to prevent *Varna Sankranam* i.e intermarriage between various Varnas. The cultural roles and duties of various Varnas were codified in *Dharamashastra* by Manu. This does not, however, imply that there was no rearrangement and redistribution of power. According to historian K.M.Pannikar,

Following Mahapadma Nanda and the Mauryas many of the royal families came from among the Shudras. Even today a large number of ruling families of India belong to the aboriginal castes<sup>17</sup>

Thus those who could gather economic and military resources laid claim to a higher status in caste hierarchy. There was also a process of patronization by ruling classes wherein certain groups gained higher status, like Kayasthas during Mughal rule. Similarly the use of census as a tool of claiming higher status during British rule has been analysed by M.N. Srinivas<sup>18</sup>.

Besides this process of "Sankritisation", i.e. claiming higher status by emulation there was also a simultaneous process of challenging caste hierarchy through anti -caste movements especially in the south. Thus anti Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu crystallized first around Justice party and then merged into *Dravidian* movement led by D.M.K. Similarly there was *Satyashodhak* movement in Maharashtra and *S.N.D.P.* movement in Kerala. These movements sought to organize 'depressed classes' for their rights and politically mobilized them to influence the colonial power. The Mahar movement led by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar impressed upon the British government to declare separate electorates for the depressed classes in 1932.

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<sup>16</sup> Singh, Yogendra *Modernization of Indian Tradition*. op.cit. p. 40

<sup>17</sup> Pannikar, K.M. as quoted in Singh, Yogendra op. cit. p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> Srinivas, M.N. *Social Change in Modern India*. Orient Longman. Delhi.1984. pp. 169-170.

These movements used caste idiom to organize the masses and thus gave a new meaning and new orientation to one's caste identity. As pointed by Washbrook, in Tamil Nadu the Dravidian movement was committed to destruction of caste system but used caste as a means of political mobilization and ultimately increased the political importance of caste.<sup>19</sup> Ghurye commented on this phenomena as early as in 1932 and observed that these mobilizations generated a new kind of collective sentiment which can truly be described as 'caste patriotism'.<sup>20</sup>

Even the modernization process which was set into motion by the British empire through various measures like introduction of modern education, modern technology, uniform legal system, industrialization, urbanization and representational politics could not weaken the hold of caste in terms of ascertaining identity and to derive a community feeling from it. On the contrary it provided the castes with an opportunity to horizontally extend their ties, which were earlier restricted by territorial limitations. As pointed out by Srinivas, the British rule freed the jinn from the bottle wherein caste consciousness got new mechanisms to express and strengthen itself. In his words:

The building of roads all over India, and the introduction of railways, postage, telegraph, cheap paper and printing – especially in regional languages- enabled castes to organize as they had never done before. A post card carried news of caste meetings, and the railways enabled members scattered in far flung villages to come together when necessary, while the availability of cheap news print facilitated the founding of caste journals, whose aim was to promote the interests of respective castes.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly the introduction of new civil and penal codes did not mark the end of caste panchayats; rather it led to a system of parallel panchayats. The new economic and political resources made available to lower castes by British rule, provided them with an

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<sup>19</sup> Washbrook, David A. 'Caste Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu, in Frankel and Rao op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Ghurye, G.S. *Caste and Race in India*. Keagan Paul London. 1932 p. 192

<sup>21</sup> Srinivas, M.N. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*. Asia Publishing House. Bombay. 1962. p. 16

opportunity to “Sanskritize” themselves thereby raising their own status rather than abolition of caste system<sup>22</sup>.

However this scepter of a caste ridden and caste divided society was resented by nationalistic elite who were leading the independence struggle. Though Gandhi believed in the efficacy of four *Varnas* to allocate social roles to individuals, yet he could not reconcile caste with issues like untouchability and exploitation. His absence from the Indian political scene post –independence, enabled liberal leaders like Nehru and Ambedkar to formulate a Constitution, which envisaged the establishment of an egalitarian order. Universal adult franchise provided for political and democratic equality to choose one’s representative. Articles 14-18 ensured that Nehruvian ideal of a caste free democratic polity and society could be realized. According to Nehru:

In context of society today, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive, and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can there be political democracy... between these two conceptions conflict is inherent and only one of them will survive.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly Ambedkars’ vision of annihilating caste was given legal clothing in the Constitution of India. Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy ensured that every citizen of India is treated equally, enjoys freedom and state shall strive to promote justice and social welfare for all. However this does not imply that the equality was absolute, it envisaged special provisions for the depressed classes. Thus reservation as a tool for socio-economic upliftment was adopted by the Constitution

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*. Delhi. Oxford University Press. 1946. p.257

makers. It is important to note that reservation was meant only for ten years initially and its aim was to eliminate the disparity between various caste groups. Thus it was concomitant with the Nehruvian ideology and vision of a socialist and egalitarian society. At that particular moment it was believed that industrialization would inevitably weaken caste solidarity. Similarly democracy and electoral politics were conceived as a general functionalist logic of modernity.<sup>24</sup>

All these discrete processes of modernity were expected to corrode traditional social structures and reinforce each other and most fundamental process of a modern society, which was presupposed by all: individuation.<sup>25</sup> This fitted well with the modernization and development theories popular at that time which took an evolutionary view of social change where tradition would yield to modernity.

However sociologists and social scientists were more sensitive to the resilience of tradition and their ability to structurally adapt themselves. They appreciated the fact that democracy is not only about fixed constitutional codes and principles; it also involves fluidity in everyday political processes. Thus Srinivas observed that the very manner in which the British transferred political power to Indians enabled caste to assume political functions. He further adds that provision of constitutional safeguards to backward sections of the population, especially Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has given a new lease of life to caste.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kaviraj, Sudipta 'Democracy and Social Inequality' in Frankel, Hasan, Bhargava, Arora (ed.) *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. Oxford University Press. Delhi 2000. p.102.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> Srinivas, M.N. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* op cit. p.15



He tried to analyse the interaction between caste and politics by putting forth the concept of 'dominant caste', which may be dominant locally or regionally.<sup>27</sup> Though he postulated this concept after observing power structure of a Mysore Village, Rampura, yet he utilized it to explain the phenomenon of political mobilization in India. Much of it will be discussed in the next section concerning rural power structure, however a brief explanation of its attributes concerning dominance needs to be mentioned. Srinivas defines

A caste may be said to be "dominant" when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields a preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in local caste hierarchy is not too low.<sup>28</sup>

Thus a dominant caste needs to be differentiated and distinguished from the traditional upper castes, which led the Indian National Movement. With the coming of electoral politics and democracy these dominant castes took advantage of their numbers and made concerted efforts to displace the upper castes, which traditionally enjoyed power.

Srinivas cites examples of rivalries of Kammas and Reddis in Andhra Pradesh, both of whom first united to drive out Brahmins from power and following that subdivided among themselves to reap the greater benefits of power.<sup>29</sup> Likewise he mentions the Okkaliga –Lingayat rivalry in Mysore, where too anti-Brahmanism acted as a catalyst for politicization of castes.<sup>30</sup> The Rajput- Bhumihar rivalry for power in Bihar and Scheduled caste movements of Shoshit Sangha in U.P. has also been noted by Srinivas to

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<sup>27</sup> Srinivas, M.N. 'Dominant Caste in Rampura' reprinted in *Dominant Caste and Other Essays*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Srinivas, M.N. 1955 'The Social system of Mysore Village' as mentioned in *Dominant Caste and Other Essays* op. cit. p.4

<sup>29</sup> Srinivas, M.N. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* op.cit. pp. 26-30

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

be connected with increased mobilization of castes for gaining secular objectives.<sup>31</sup> After observing two general elections he arrives at a conclusion that the power and activity of caste has increased in proportion as political power passed increasingly to the people from the rulers. The caste associations which earlier distanced themselves from day to day politics and mainly carried out educational, economic, health related, social and religious activities and worked as pressure group now started mobilizing themselves for political objective of competing in elections.<sup>32</sup>

Caste associations of traditionally deprived communities asserted along different leading political parties, to see that their party members were given party tickets to contest elections. The parties initially resisted pressure from these castes but soon realized that they would have to share power with lower caste party members owing to their numerical strength. Initially the upper caste elites prevented the new entrants on secular grounds like seniority, merit, party commitment etc. and labeled them as 'casteist' but as the competition intensified, all parties began to woo leading members who could mobilize caste votes.<sup>33</sup> As noted by Myron Weiner, though Congress wanted to avoid 'fissiparous' tendencies, yet the democratic system created an incentive for political mobilization along lines of caste, religion and language.<sup>34</sup> Thus a number of caste leaders joined different political parties and when their interests were not realized they launched new associations. An example could be cited of Bhartiya Kranti Dal under leadership of Charan Singh, who mobilized four castes to form a political alliance called AJGAR: Ahirs, Jats, Gujjars and Rajputs.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> Shah, Ghanshyam 'Introduction' in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.) *Caste and Democratic Politics*. Permanent Black. Delhi. 2002. pp.19-21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Weiner, Myron 'The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics' in Atul Kohli (ed.) *The Success of India's Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 2001. p. 198.

This phenomenon of horizontal consolidation by middle level castes saw its fruition in 1967 when Congress party was ousted from power by regional parties, which more or less represented the interests of 'backward castes' and projected Congress as an urban, upper class, elitist party. To explain this phenomenon and to account for the caste-politics nexus in India, Rudolph and Rudolph proposed a three-phase model of political mobilization, each suggestive of different phases of political development: vertical, horizontal and differential.<sup>35</sup> Vertical mobilization is defined by them as marshalling of political support by traditional notables in local societies that are organized and integrated by rank, mutual dependence and legitimacy of traditional authority. The political mobilization by Reddis in Andhra is an example of successful vertical mobilization. It remains a viable strategy for dominant classes and castes until dependents, tenants, and clients become sufficiently politicized to be mobilized by ideological appeals to class or community interests and sentiments.<sup>36</sup> Horizontal mobilization involves the marshalling of popular political support by class or community leaders and their specialized organizations. Ignoring the leaders and members of natural associations, they make direct ideological appeals to classes or communities. Horizontal mobilization of solidarities among class or community equals introduces a new pattern of cleavage by challenging the vertical solidarities and structures of traditional societies.<sup>37</sup> They cite the example of Shanars the toddy tappers who mobilized themselves horizontally, raised their political and economic status and acquired the honorific title 'Nadars'. This phase is illustrative of how the cultural and structural transformation of a traditional institution contributes to

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<sup>35</sup> Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Rudolph, Sussane Hoeber *The Modernity of Tradition*. Chicago University Press. Chicago. 1967. p.24.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

political modernization and democracy, including political participation and representation.<sup>38</sup>

Third phase in their model is called differential mobilization, which involves the marshalling of direct and indirect political support by political parties (and other integrative structures) from viable, but internally differentiated, communities through parallel appeals to ideology, sentiment and interest.<sup>39</sup> Thus it essentially involves a process of fission, fusion and decompression of caste associations and blocks which suggests how the role of caste in politics depend on external factors- its historical, social, and political environment- and on internal factors- the caste's readiness and capacity for common consciousness, mobilization and organization.

On the impact of caste on Indian politics they suggest that caste association, in this context, is no longer a natural association in which caste was and is. It is beginning to take features of voluntary association where membership in caste associations is not purely ascriptive; birth in caste is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for membership.<sup>40</sup> Regarding the future of this interaction they presume that there would be a change in caste based associations leading to a transformation in their communal character by growing full fledged secular integrative associations through fusion. Thus regional differences in caste profiles would yield to more homogeneous patterns, partly in consequence of politics.<sup>41</sup>

Following Rudolphs, Rajni Kothari, an eminent political scientist stressed on the important role that caste still plays in Indian politics. He argues that instead of asking: Is

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

caste disappearing? We should ask – what form is caste taking under the impact of modern politics and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society.<sup>42</sup> As politics is a competitive enterprise where the main aim of political actors is to acquire power, it is very much natural that they would use the caste structure to mobilize support. ‘Thus alleged ‘casteism in politics’ is no more than and no less than *politicization* of caste’.<sup>43</sup> He criticizes Rudolphs for having a western bias towards Indian social structure because of their assumption that caste-politics interaction has led to a ‘democratic interaction of caste’. According to Kothari this view ‘tends to rarefy the caste as *the* political force in India’ thus ignoring the complexities of Indian society.<sup>44</sup> With the advent of democratic politics in India, politics and society began moving nearer and a new structure started coming into being. In order to understand this change, Kothari proposed a three-stage model.

In the first stage the traditionally powerful elite caste politicize itself by responding to the opportunities offered for western education. Kothari calls these castes ‘entrenched castes’. In Maharashtra and Tamilnadu, they were Brahmins and in Bihar, Kayasthas. With some political success on part of entrenched caste, the members of other high castes in that area would respond with resentment because of their relative deprivation. These ‘ascendant castes’ would then organize themselves and challenge the ‘entrenched caste’. As they belong to the middle level peasant castes, they respond slowly to process of westernization, which explains their late politicization. Thus in the first stage a bilateral structure of caste politics emerge with polarization of two castes or

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<sup>42</sup> Kothari, Rajni. (ed.) *Caste in Indian Politics*. Orient Longman. New Delhi. 1986 (1st published 1970) p.4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. pp. 4-5. Italics in original.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.6 italics in original.

sub- castes.<sup>45</sup> Examples could be cited of Rajputs (entrenched) and Jats (ascendant) in Rajasthan, Brahmins (entrenched) and Marathas (ascendant) in Maharashtra.

In second stage factionalism and fragmentation takes place within the competing castes leading to formation of multi- caste and multi- faction alliance, thus supplementing inter caste competition by intra- caste competition. In this stage the power structure of caste became more complex and sophisticated where other bases of support like economic patronage, patron- client loyalties, bond groups etc are invoked.<sup>46</sup> The dominant castes either used the existing vertical ties that existed between them and other castes or used new bases as mentioned above. Hence there was a regional differentiation in strategies and dynamics of mobilization. However one thing that remained constant was that all of this was restricted to leading two or three castes- well to do educated ones. The lower castes were still found to be in dependent relationship with entrenched and dominant castes.<sup>47</sup>

In stage three the caste identity tends to be weakened with the development in education, urbanization, and the development of an orientation towards individual achievement and modern status symbols. In words of Kothari, “the structure of particularistic loyalties” has been “overlaid by a more sophisticated system of social and political participation with cross cutting allegiances. Institutional differentiation and specialization has progressed, so that economic, political, educational institutions are distinctly different”.<sup>48</sup> Hence caste federations now start admitting members and leaders

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p.15.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. pp. 20-23.

from other castes, other than those with which it started, stretches out to new regions and becomes a distinctly political group.

Both Rudolphs and Kothari thus foresee a future wherein caste would lose its original character and would not play a major role in future Indian politics. This was objected by G.S.Ghurye who raised the scepter of a future where there would be few caste blocks or coalitions and Indian society would be stuck at stage two.<sup>49</sup> Such caste blocks according to Dumont would be highly dangerous and exclusive wherein they “would be essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as collective *individual* as a substance”.<sup>50</sup>

Though sociologists in 70s differed in the future projections regarding role of caste, yet they all agreed that first two decades belonged to backward castes mobilization through caste associations. As summarized by Ghanshyam Shah there were three consequences of interaction between caste association and political parties. Firstly, poor and marginalized caste members, who were hitherto untouched by political processes, began to participate in electoral politics. Second, caste members got split among various political parties, weakening the hold of caste. Third, numerically large castes got representation in decision-making bodies, and strength of traditional dominant castes was weakened.<sup>51</sup> The socialist parties also played a role in making caste an issue against the hegemonic Congress party.

However one major conceptual flaw of these models was that all of them gave a very marginal space to discourse on the question of Dalit politics and Dalit identity. It is

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<sup>49</sup> Ghurye, G.S. *India Recreates Democracy*. Popular Prakashan. Delhi. 1978.

<sup>50</sup> Dumont, Louis *Homo Hierarchicus*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1998. p.222.

<sup>51</sup> Shah, Ghanshyam (ed.) *Caste and Democratic Politics* op. cit. p. 23.

only in 1980's, when the 'elite' amongst the Dalits raised the question of exploitation, discrimination and deprivation, which existed, even three decades after the adoption of constitution. Inspired largely by Dr. Ambedkar's writing and philosophy, Dalit entered into public discourse in the writings of Marathi literary writers in 1960's and was popularized by Dalit Panther movement in 1970's. However this discourse could never find a place in the writings on caste and politics because there was an absence of middle class intelligentsia, which could define and give a meaning to their identity. Moreover there were differences among Dalit leaders on the question of who constitutes a Dalit. In a narrow sense it referred to Scheduled Castes only, whereas in wider connotation it includes all the oppressed and exploited sections of society.

According to Gopal Guru, the Dalit category is 'historically arrived at, sociologically presented and discursively constituted'.<sup>52</sup> The new identity has evolved through political processes, cutting across religious, regional, linguistic and caste boundaries. Dalits attacked the caste system, considering its ideology Brahmanical fraud for deluding and robbing the common people.<sup>53</sup> Ghanshyam Shah has identified various factors which led to the emergence of this self-asserting Dalit identity. Firstly, 'there is an overall acceptance of equality as a desirable norm, thanks to permeation of liberal and radical Philosophical discourse, capitalist and technological development, including communicational advances and changes in society.'<sup>54</sup> Secondly capitalist development has weakened traditional functioning of caste system. This is further aided by protective discrimination through reservations in Government jobs and admission to educational

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<sup>52</sup> Guru, Gopal. 'The Language of Dalit-Bahujan Discourse' in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.) *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Sage Publications. New Delhi. 2001.

<sup>53</sup> Sardesai as quoted in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.) *Dalit Identity and Politics*. p.23

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 39.



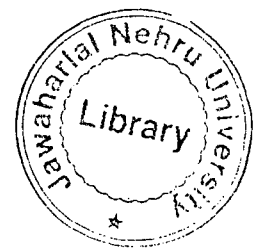
institutions, which has led to upward mobility and consequently 'relative deprivation'. All of these coupled with competitive politics within the parliamentary framework (with seats reserved for SC) have led to political consciousness among Dalits on an unprecedented scale.<sup>55</sup>

It is in this context that Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has emerged as a major force in Uttar Pradesh politics in 1980s and 1990s. Sudha Pai has traced the emergence of BSP in U.P. and treats it as a period of revolt in Dalit movement. She ascribes its rise to the growing understanding among Dalits in 1980's that all the welfare schemes under *Garibi Hatao* were meant for their cooption; and that they were victims of Vote-bank politics.<sup>56</sup>

Thus there was a horizontal consolidation of Dalit votes under leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, marking a new phase in Indian political history with BSP progressively capturing the number of Dalit votes polled. One distinctive feature of BSP was that though it emerged out of a social action group called Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4), yet it was not a religious or reform movement; rather it was a political organization whose aim is to capture power and use it to improve the conditions of SC community. Unlike Republican Party of India, BSP leaders were not satisfied with the share in political power; rather they were militant in outlook and identified themselves as Dalits and not Harijans. In early 1990's BSP tried to widen its social base by mobilizing BCs, OBCs, SCs, STs and religious minorities on the common platform of 'Bahujan'. This attempt was both ideological and pragmatic, as the SCs constitute only 20 percent of population. This effort culminated in the formation of a SP-BSP coalition government in UP in 1993. However this coalition government could not last long as

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. pp. 40-41.

<sup>56</sup> Pai, Sudha. *Dalit Assertion and Unfinished Democratic Revolution*. op. cit.



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there were increasing conflict between Yadavs (BCs) and Dalits, where in BCs found it difficult to share power with radical Dalits. Soon BSP realized the limits to exclusive caste based political mobilization and thus formed alliance with upper caste parties like BJP and Congress in order to attain power in late 1990s. Even when it came to power, Mayawati resorted to symbolic politics like installation of Ambedkar statues and changing the name of places. It really lacked any broad agenda; a vision of transformation or development; and lacked any substantive details of what it had to offer. This led to alienation amongst its Dalit supporters, leading to splitting of votes, as a result of which BSP lost in 1998 and 2000 elections. Interestingly, however its vote share increased every time. This led to a political rethinking by leadership of BSP, which is now reverting to its old strategy of horizontally consolidating Dalit votes. It has emerged as a powerful pressure group at central as well as state level, where it could effectively bargain for its share in power while continuously expanding its base in other states.

All these events, understood as 'democratic upsurge' make scholars like Sudipta Kaviraj to conclude that "electoral politics altered the structural properties of caste in one fundamental respect: it created 'democracy' of castes in place of a 'hierarchy'".<sup>57</sup> For political parties it's their numbers and their spatial concentration that matters and not their ritual rank. Thus, in Indian case, instead of a 'liberal, individualistic, stripped down equality' there exists 'equality between caste groups'.<sup>58</sup>

However, if we look back at the corpus of literature regarding caste and politics, certain salient points draw our attention. Firstly, all the analysis is at a general level. All of them seem to suggest a pan Indian theoretical model that could explain the role that

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<sup>57</sup> Kaviraj, Sudipta. 'Democracy and Social Inequality' op. cit. p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 109.

caste has played and would play in future Indian politics. However as pointed out by Jodhka, “notwithstanding its pan Indian character, caste relations had divergent structures and regional specificities”.<sup>59</sup> Thus to put a single model would be de-historicizing the experience of castes. What we need is an inter-subjective understanding of caste relations, which could situate the interaction of caste and politics in a particular context. The economic, political, demographic, religious and ideological correlates of this interaction could be ignored at one’s own peril. As pointed out by Hasan, there are certain very definite limits to caste mobilization “because of a perpetual struggle over the distribution of various benefits to caste and classes”.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover such simplistic notions like the future belongs to an integrative society where in caste factions based on differential mobilization would automatically undermine the importance of caste, need to be explored critically. According to this argument, if all parties match caste-to-caste candidates, then the electoral advantage of a particular caste would be lost due to division of votes. However, what it neglects is that why do parties, psephologists and media people still talk about caste in elections? Thus, either political actors or social scientists are wrong about the calculations of electoral arithmetic. Hence, a more empirical research needs to be carried out to ascertain the reality on ground and its emerging character. This does not mean, however that caste alone is determining factor in politics; it implies that a neat, precise and phased model would be undermining the diversity and complexity of Indian landscape. As observed by Vivek Kumar, all three

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<sup>59</sup> Jodhka S.S. ‘Caste and Democracy: Assertion and Identity among Dalits of Rural Punjab’ op. cit. p.5.

<sup>60</sup> Hasan, Zoya. ‘Power and Mobilization: Patterns of Resilience and Change in U.P Politics’ in Frankel and Rao (ed.) op. cit. p. 187.

phases viz. vertical, horizontal and differential mobilizations are operating in Indian society at various levels.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly a conclusion like- democracy has led to 'equality between castes' is based primarily on the experience of dominant middle castes and neglects the later developments like emergence of Dalit identity. It also seems to be shaped by the caste politics around Mandal Commission report implementation, where the desirability and criteria for reservation for OBCs constituted the primary axis of debate. Jodhka after studying the assertion of Dalit identity in rural Punjab concludes that "apart from asking questions like 'what happens to democracy when caste communities act like vote banks', one should also examine the question, whose or which caste group's participation in politics is being talked about?"<sup>62</sup> It would not be fair to treat caste consciousness of Brahmins and Dalits in same way. Caste consciousness of Brahmins aim to maintain status quo and prevent dispersion of power whereas in case of Dalits, it challenges the Brahminical ideology and seeks social transformation towards an egalitarian order. Even after fifty-five years of independence they do not participate as equals. It is in this context that present research is located.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH:**

The primary objective of this study is to explore and review the existing literature on the subjects of Caste and Panchayati Raj. Given that caste and Panchayati Raj interaction has not been studied in detail till now, the study hopes to identify the manner in which the two interact and transform each other. In order to undertake such an

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<sup>61</sup> Kumar, Vivek *Dalit Leadership in India*. Delhi. Kalpaz Publications. New Delhi. 2002. pp. 221-224.

<sup>62</sup> Jodhka S.S 'Caste and Democracy: Assertion and Identity among Dalits of Rural Punjab' op. cit. p.5.

exercise, I have tried to review the existing literature of the subject and related topics with specific objectives of finding answers to following questions:

1. How has the subject of rural power structure been looked at and conceptualized by sociologists and social anthropologists? What connections do existing writings establish between caste and power?
2. How have the questions of Caste and Social Structure of village analyzed and understood in the official discourses on Panchayati Raj? What are the specific provisions for ensuring participations of lower castes?
3. What is the status of weaker sections especially Dalits in post Seventy-Third Amendment era? Is there a significant change from past and what needs to be done?

#### **CHAPTER SCHEME:**

The study is divided into five parts comprising Introduction, Conclusion and Three chapters.

The chapter on 'Rural Power Structure' aims to review the literature that is available on the nature and structure of power in a village setting. The objective is to arrive at a theoretical framework to understand the dynamics of power relations in a village so as to prepare the background for the study of caste and Panchayati Raj interaction. It is an attempt to understand the caste-politics interaction in a more realistic fashion because it is in the micro setting of village, that people interact on the basis of caste lines on an every day basis. The starting point is taken to be the 'Dominant Caste'

model of M.N. Srinivas<sup>63</sup>, which is put to critical test. The debate centering on elite vs. plural mode of power distribution in a village setting is reviewed so as to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of power structure in a village. Moreover in a country like India, question of class is very much linked to the question of caste, especially so in the agrarian settings. Hence an attempt is also made to understand and map the Agrarian Class Structure. Starting from pre-colonial times to the present day, the chapter tries to provide a brief introduction to the various debates that involve agrarian class structure. Post independence transformations like Land Reforms and Green Revolution are extensively analyzed because they had tremendous impact on national, state as well as village level politics. The chapter points to the shortcomings of Caste and Class model respectively, and suggests adopting a new approach that could account for both correspondence and conflict between the two models.

The chapter on 'Evolution of Panchayati Raj' has an objective to review and analyze the policies that State had and has towards the participation of lower castes (especially Dalits) in decentralized structures like Panchayats. Thus it revisits the important reports and amendments concerning Panchayati Raj with an explicit aim to temporally map the evolution and development of policy framework towards Dalits in Panchayati Raj. Important benchmarks like Balvant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1957), Asoka Mehta Committee Report (1978), and Seventy-Third Amendment (1993) are thus thoroughly analyzed so as to locate Panchayati Raj in the national politics in general and lower castes in particular. The chapter provides a comparative analysis of various phases of Panchayati Raj (with special reference to Dalits) and tries to map the evolution with

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<sup>63</sup> Srinivas, M.N. 'Dominant Caste in Rampura' op. cit.

the changes taking place in social structure. The chapter provides a background to understand the events in the last decade.

The chapter titled 'Post Seventy-Third Amendment Scenario' aims to analyze the working of Panchayati Raj structures since 1993. The issues of Dalit participation, their knowledge, their training, and 'opportunity space' provided to them by Panchayati Raj etc. are discussed in detail. The chapter brings out the lacunae in studies relating caste to Panchayati Raj, especially after seventy-third amendment. The discourse on womens' participation has occupied such a primary position that the issue of Dalit participation has almost fell in oblivion. Still an attempt is made to indirectly arrive at inferences concerning their participation and their assertion of new found 'identity' by looking at various empirical studies across the length and breadth of India. The phenomena of rise in violence against Dalits in post seventy third amendment era is taken as indicator of how Panchayati Raj is helping the Dalits to assert more, leading to such reprisals. The chapter remains inconclusive because of paucity of material and demands that factor of "learning phase" of Dalits should be taken before arriving at any straight forward conclusions.

The final chapter, rather than concluding prepares the groundwork for more detailed and empirical studies and brings out the importance of studying Caste dynamics in Panchayati Raj in a globalized context. Thus the broad objective of this research is to review the existing literature so as to clarify and improve theoretical models and to raise new questions which can stimulate further research.

## CHAPTER - I

### RURAL POWER STRUCTURE

In the last chapter it was pointed out that despite an increasing assertiveness by Dalits and the rise of identity politics in India, the “lower castes” do not participate as equals in the decision making processes and power sharing arrangements. This unequal participation of different castes is most manifest at rural level wherein traditional caste idiom still holds its sanctity (however limited), and people interact with each other on caste lines in everyday life. The caste anonymity enjoyed by urban population due to migration, education, wealth etc is more or less absent in village level politics. In past few years there has been assertion of Dalit identity even at local level leading to increased conflict in villages as pointed by some scholars.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, to understand the interaction of caste and politics it is necessary to understand the Rural Power Structure. Only by understanding the complex interrelationships that various castes or sub-castes have with each other, following facts can be appreciated:

1. Who exercises power?
2. What are the bases of this power?
3. How is power exercised?
4. On whom is power exercised?
5. Whether ‘democratisation’ or ‘dispersal’ is taking place?

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<sup>1</sup> See Jodhka ‘Changing Caste and Local Democracy: Assertion and identity among Dalits of Rural Punjab’ op. cit. and Pai, Sudha. *Dalit Assertion and Unfinished Democratic Revolution* op. cit.



This assumes a great methodological value because traditional discourse on caste and politics is mainly derived from village studies carried out by social anthropologists in 1950s and 1960s. These studies were an attempt by sociologists and anthropologists to complement the 'Book- View' of Indologists and Orientalists by a 'Field view', which is arrived after detailed empirical investigations carried over a period of time.<sup>2</sup> Thus, notion of "Village Republics" as popularized by Metcalfe in his famous quote was put to critical test by anthropologists in their respective studies.

The village communities are little Republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution; Hindu, Pathan, Mughal, Maratta, Sikh, English are masters in turn; but the village communities remain the same.

These studies based on extensive fieldwork challenged the "isolated communities" model as expressed in the works of colonial officers, Indologists and Orientalists. These studies provided evidence that villages rather than being "republic" were very much integrated into the broader polity, economy and culture of the region. However, while describing inter-caste relations, these studies uncritically accepted categories from colonial formulation where organic interdependence rather than conflict occupied the centre stage. This was also aided by the fact that Village studies were located in the wider context of modernization and development studies.<sup>3</sup> Thus they were treated as single units, which could be modernized or developed on western lines. Hence, caste relations were more or less conceived in a functionalist manner wherein organic interdependence of castes through *Jajmani* system was stressed. Following works of

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<sup>2</sup> Jodhka S.S 'From "Book View" to "Field View": Social Anthropological Constructions of the Indian Village, in *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 26(3). 1998.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 313-317.

Wiser<sup>4</sup>, scholars like Srinivas and Dube stressed on the unity of village wherein reciprocal interdependence united the village community. Reciprocity was understood in terms of exchange of services at more or less equal terms, wherein there was no element of exploitation. Though differences in terms of caste and class were recognized, yet inter-caste solidarity complemented intra-caste solidarity, thus presenting a picture of unified village community.<sup>5</sup> The question of how power is distributed and exercised was also dealt in a descriptive rather than analytical manner.

### **DOMINANT CASTE MODEL:**

This model put forth by Srinivas has been the most popular and contested notion of rural power structure in India. This model is an attempt to understand the dynamics of power in a village setting which goes on to show that how in most of cases power is concentrated in and exercised by members of dominant caste. Srinivas introduced the concept of 'dominant caste' in 1955 and identified various attributes that contributed to its dominance. He defined dominant caste in following terms:

A caste may be said to be "dominant" when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in local caste hierarchy is not too low.<sup>6</sup>

To this he adds modern education and modern occupation contributing to dominance and also mentions "the twin sanctions of physical force and boycott" as facilitating exercise of dominance. He claims that concept of dominant caste is of crucial importance in understanding social and political life in Rural India, because it is

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<sup>4</sup> Wiser William. *Behind Mud Walls*. University of California Press. California. 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Srinivas, M.N. *Dominant Caste and other Essays*. op. cit. p.43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

omnipresent. It constitutes the pivot around which the social, political and economic life of a village revolves. Owing to wealth it possesses, it acts like a patron for most of the service castes in the village. A patron's following can be made to yield him political benefits, being from a dominant caste ensure him maximum followers; and thus act as vote bank for politicians.<sup>7</sup> As it is "numerically strong, its members have the assurance that the other castes in the village will not be able to subject them to any insult or exploitation".<sup>8</sup> Considerations of power do prevail and that is why dominant caste enjoys enormous influence in solving village disputes. They also perform the kingly function of ensuring that each caste performed its duties and did not assign to itself the rights and privileges, which belonged to the higher castes.<sup>9</sup> With their numerical strength and wealth, they have more chances to *Sanskritize* themselves and proclaim their desired caste status, so be it Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaishya model. Even after independence and inauguration of Panchayati Raj, it is the dominant castes which due to its sheer numbers, horizontal consolidation and social influence, enjoy maximum representation.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is the dominant caste, which is central to village level politics and how power is distributed at the local level.

This view is however contested by scholars like Dube, Dumont and Oommen. Dube argues that, "numerical strength while it is an element of dominance does not necessarily make a caste dominant".<sup>11</sup> He poses some serious objections to the concept of dominant caste: "It will be meaningful to speak of a 'dominant caste' only when power is diffused in the group and is exercised in the whole group or at least a sizeable part of it.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Dube, S.C. 'Caste Dominance and Factionalism', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, NS, II. 1968. p.59

When there are pronounced inequalities of wealth, prestige and power between different individuals in a so called dominant caste and where the dominant individuals exploit the weaker elements in their own caste as well as the non-dominant castes it will perhaps be inappropriate to think of it as a dominant caste”<sup>12</sup> until and unless there exists intra-caste unity, it is useful to talk in terms of “dominant individuals, dominant faction and complex alignment”.<sup>13</sup>

Arguing on similar lines, Oommen states that given the segmentary and factional character of caste, it is highly probable that instead of a united dominant caste, there exist hostile factions leading to power dispersion.<sup>14</sup> Moreover all the power holders of a village need not necessarily be from dominant caste. Oommen cites new developments in independent India namely democratic decentralization, organizational innovations, market economy, spread of literacy, adult franchise that are rapidly transforming Indian society and consequently the rural power structure.<sup>15</sup> He also raises a methodological question that out of so many factors mentioned by Srinivas, which factors in what combination would constitute dominance.<sup>16</sup> One also has to identify the context in which dominance operates and whether resources available to dominant caste actually translate into exercise of power. In order to do so, the dominant caste needs to be “highly articulate and politicized”.<sup>17</sup>

Thus in place of an ‘elitist’ dominant caste model, Oommen and Dube seem to suggest a pluralist model wherein instead of a singular caste, there exist various castes

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> Oommen, T.K. *Social Structure and Politics: Studies in Independent India*. Delhi. Hindustan Publishing Corporation. Delhi. 1984. pp. 75-76

<sup>15</sup> Ibid pp. 75-77.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

and factions, sharing power. Both of these models though criticize Srinivas; implicitly accept the proposition that villages can be treated as “communities”. Thus instead of concentration there exists dispersion of power, thus conveniently neglecting the sites of conflict.

Dumont, however, raises certain fundamental questions when he criticizes the concept of dominant caste. He, along with Pocock, contests the relevance of treating village as “communities” because the caste system itself resulted in there being a hierarchy in rural society.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, according to Dumont, rather than numerical preponderance, it is the possession of land that constitutes the sole source of dominance.<sup>19</sup> According to him, the landowning caste is able to control other residents in the village through the institution of client ship, which gives the latter dependent rights in land, or to a share in the produce of a specific piece of land.

Srinivas, however, replies to his critics in a detailed manner wherein he tries to rescue the concept of dominant caste and its continuing importance, even after four decades of independence.<sup>20</sup> On the question of dominant individuals and dominant factions rather than a unified dominant caste, he contends that all of them owe their dominance to the fact that they belong to the dominant caste. Moreover “unity of a caste, particularly that of a dominant caste, is not something static and constant, but dynamic and contextual. It emerges especially in relation of opposition to other castes”.<sup>21</sup> Srinivas argues that his intention is to explain how caste is being used as a base for acquiring power, and not to explain the manner in which it is exercised by dominant caste. As

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<sup>18</sup> Dumont, Louis and Pocock, David. ‘Village Studies’ in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. I. 1957. pp. 23-41.

<sup>19</sup> Dumont, Louis *Homo Hierarchicus*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Srinivas, M.N. *Dominant Caste and other Essays* op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

regarding landownership, its character is undergoing change, where contrary to Dumont's hypothesis, instead of land owning castes, dominance is shifting now to those castes which are populous but which do not own a significant portion of locally available land. Finally, he concludes that, "*All in all, post independent India is, certainly at the regional if not at the state level, the India of dominant castes*".<sup>22</sup>

It is this grand proclamation, which provides a point of departure for us because it tends to neglect and demean the assertion that lower castes have made from time to time. It also tends to neglect the effect of land reforms, and the 'nexus' that caste and class have with each other. As pointed out by William Rowe who studied power structure of Senapur village, "in the past a small group of economically and politically all powerful Kshatriya landlords quietly directed the society. Now with the social tie of landlord and tenant severed, a numerous and economically able caste community such as Noniya (a lower caste) feels somewhat free to pursue its own ends independently".<sup>23</sup>

This pattern of inter-caste tension is also corroborated by studies of McKim Marriot in *Kishangarhi* and Yogendra Singh in *Chanukhera*. Anand Chakravarti carried out a detailed empirical study of a Rajasthan village called 'Devisar' in 1964-65 and commented on the changing patterns of power relations in post independent India.<sup>24</sup> He discerns a very sharp difference in social life after the *jagirdari* abolition and introduction of Panchayati Raj introduced in 1950's. In Devisar, the Rajput dominance had given way to more competitive political relations within the village. He cites various examples comparing the situation before and after the introduction of the above said measures. He

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.8 (italics in original).

<sup>23</sup> As cited in Singh, Yogendra. *Modernization of Indian Tradition*. op. cit. p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Chakravarti, Anand. *Contradiction and Change- Emerging patterns of Authority in a Rajasthan Village*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1975.

goes on to show that how the traditionally deprived castes were now asserting themselves rather than uncritically accepting their ignominy and non-participation in community matters. Chakravarti does not seem to regard the actual loss of land by the Rajputs of devisar as the primary condition for the destruction of their dominant status. Instead questions of ideological and general political environment outside the village and leadership structure of village are emphasized.

In most of 1970's and 1980's, there was a neglect of study of this kind of change owing to a neglect of village studies as such. It was accepted that a village as a microcosmic reality fails to represent the historic and far reaching changes that were taking place in the wake of land reforms and green revolution, etc. Moreover the primary space was occupied by development studies and their critiques, which somehow uncritically accepted the fact that a democratic transformation is ongoing in Indian village where power is primarily concentrated in state institutions, to which all castes have equal access. Thus Mendelsohn, after studying a Rajasthan Village 'Behror' concludes, "*land and authority have been de-linked and this amounts to a historic, if non revolutionary, transformation*".<sup>25</sup> He further claims that dominant caste is disappearing or becoming less significant due to decline of traditional sources of power and the void has been filled in by the state. He criticizes the works of M.N. Srinivas and Anand Chakravarti for their failure to capture the historical process where in at the time of independence itself, the dominant caste was losing its hold over the village level politics. Thus according to Mendelsohn, Srinivas was putting forth the concept of

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<sup>25</sup> Mendelsohn, Oliver. 'The Transformation of Authority in Rural India' in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.) *Caste and Democratic Politics* op. cit. p. 169 (italics in original).

dominant caste “*at that historical moment when it was disappearing or at least becoming less significant*”.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, he criticizes Anand Chakravarti on the ground that his work seems to suggest that decline in power of locally dominant Rajputs was sudden and was precipitated by the introduction of institutional measures as mentioned above. According to Mendelsohn, there were instances of assertion and resistance by lower castes even before the introduction of these measures. Though these instances are mentioned in the works of Chakravarti, they have not been fully analysed. However he also seems to suggest that presently the situation has undergone a big change wherein state has tried to ensure equality through measures like land reforms and poverty alleviation.

However this unproblematic power dispersion model wherein state ensuring justice and equality for all, has been challenged by scholars like Jodhka. While studying the inter-caste relations in Punjab Jodhka observes that there has been an assertion of Dalit identity in rural Punjab, which has been made possible by their increased economic independence, contractual agrarian relations and increased politicization. Though the role of state and police has not been non-partisan, but a concerted effort by Dalits has forced the police to insist upon traditionally dominant Jats to share power with Dalits.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Jodhka’s work suggests that idioms like caste hold their sway at local level but can be challenged through assertion of identity politics. This brings us to an important methodological question; wherein relying solely on caste idiom to understand Dalit assertion and dispersal of power would be futile unless it is related to their economic position and well-being. In rural India, agriculture is the primary occupation hence it is

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid p.170 (Italics in original).

<sup>27</sup> Jodhka S.S. ‘Caste and Democracy: Assertion and Identity among Dalits of Rural Punjab’ op. cit.



imperative that power dispersal and exercise is very much dependent on the land and class relations it entails. Hence a brief look at how power is distributed among various classes would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of rural politics. As pointed out by Andre Beteille, in a country like India question of class is very much linked to the question of caste, especially so in the agrarian settings.<sup>28</sup>

Closely related to this are the questions of Land Reform and Green Revolution, which mark the two most important institutional measures, attempted by Indian state to engineer a more egalitarian, democratic and prosperous agrarian structure. The manner in which these measures affected various classes differentially has been a subject of much academic research and thus need to be taken into consideration so as to understand the present context.

#### **AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE MODEL:**

In a village setting the class structure is mainly based upon and derived from the agrarian system, land being the primary commodity and agriculture being the primary occupation. This holds special methodological relevance for a society like India, which is predominantly rural and wherein concepts like rural industrialization and diversification of agriculture have failed to reduce the dependence of people on land. Hence the differential relations, which people of various strata in rural society have with the land provide the basis for economic differentiation and subsequent formation of classes. This agrarian system, differentiated and stratified into various classes, acts as a model to understand the social structure of a village and concomitantly the rural power structure. As pointed out by Burton Stein, "My use of the term 'agrarian system is a concept which

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<sup>28</sup> Beteille A. *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. 1974.

permits me to treat the relationship between people, groups of people and the land as a systemic unity as a whole.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly Daniel Thorner states, “The Agrarian structure is, after all, not an external framework within which various classes function, but rather it is sum total of ways in which each group operates in relation to other groups.”<sup>30</sup> Thus an understanding of who occupies the uppermost echelons of agrarian class structure would determine who exercises power in rural India. This corresponds well with the Marxian methodology where the economic infrastructure provides the base on which the superstructure of legal and power relations emerges. However to apply Marxian conception of classes uncritically would lead to a neglect of historicity and traditional structure of Indian society. Thus an understanding of class relations must be punctuated by understanding of caste, kinship and community relations.

Adopting a historical approach would enable us to capture the structural continuities and breaks in the evolution and transformation of Indian agrarian structure. Colonial history and ethnography tried to project a picture of India where due to absence of private ownership of land, there were no classes and thus no conflicts and tensions.

This construction is best exemplified in the ‘village community’ statement of Metcalfe cited above. This construction emphasized the fact that these communities were harmonious, relatively isolated and, above all, unchanging and that the land was owned by the village community collectively. Since, there had been no private rights over land, the British believed that there would have been no significant economic differentiation in the Indian village.

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<sup>29</sup> Stein Burton, ‘Integration of the Agrarian System of South India’ as quoted in Sharma K.L. *Rural Society in India*, Rawat Publications. Jaipur. 1997. p.71.

<sup>30</sup> Thorner, Daniel. *The Agrarian Prospect in India*, University Press. Delhi. 1956.p.2.

However, historical research by Indian scholars has shown that this was a superficial understanding of the Indian village and this view was deliberately propagated to isolate village communities. It was agreed that, there was no sale and purchase of land in most parts of the Indian countryside. However, everyone did not enjoy equal rights of cultivation or produce from land. They were governed by the customs and the grants made by the king. According to Irfan Habib, during the Mughal period of Indian history,

Economic differentiation had progressed considerably among the peasantry. There were large cultivators, using hired labour, and raising crops for the market, and there were small peasants, who could barely produce food grains for their own subsistence. Beyond this differentiation among the peasantry, there was still sharper division between the caste peasantry and the 'menial' population.<sup>31</sup>

The village was linked to the central authority through the revenue bureaucracy of which Zamindars formed the backbone. Mughal authorities differentiated among the classes of landowners while fixing the revenue demands. The larger landholders, such as zamindars or headmen or a favoured community were required to pay less per unit.<sup>32</sup> As pointed out by S. Nurul Hassan, there were three classes of Zamindars namely: (a) the autonomous chieftains (b) the intermediary Zamindars and (c) the primary Zamindars.<sup>33</sup>

Though the revenue was fixed and there was not much exploitation, agrarian relations were not free from conflicts and tensions. Whenever the revenue demands became unbearable, the typical response of the peasantry was to flee *en masse* to other territories where conditions were more conducive to land cultivation. There were also instances of the peasantry revolting against the local rulers. Most of these revolts,

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<sup>31</sup> Irfan Habib 'Agrarian Relations and Land Revenue: North India' in T, Raychaudhury and Habib, Irfan (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol.1. Orient Longman. Delhi. 1982. p.248.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. pp.239-240.

<sup>33</sup> As cited in Sharma, K.L. *Rural Society in India* op.cit. pp.71-72.

however, were unorganized, inspired by some religious ideology or a millenarian dream and lacked any substantial emphasis on addressing revenue issues or investment in agriculture. Thus it were the Zamindars who held the key to power in villages and constituted the 'power elite' in rural India. However, their exercise of power was constrained by the fact that all the land "theoretically" belonged to the king and thus they can be dispossessed of their Zamindari rights any time. There was a correspondence between caste and class positions in medieval times where the landlord generally belonged to a superior caste and landless to the downtrodden one. K.L.Sharma rightly argues, "even when one refers to the Marxist view about agrarian hierarchy in terms of five classes namely, landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and the rural proletariat, one finds that caste hierarchy inheres such a view of class hierarchy".<sup>34</sup>

#### **AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE DURING COLONIAL RULE**

In order to provide for a steady inflow of revenue and for ease of governance, colonial rulers introduced various settlement and property acts. Lord Cornwallis first introduced the Permanent Settlement Act in Bengal in 1793. Under this the hitherto intermediary Zamindars, now became legal owners of land for which they had right to collect revenues. This had a tremendous impact on the rural power structure because earlier agents now became masters themselves and thus the overarching central authority was lost. This act also had other politico-strategic implications, for in the landlord, the British rulers saw a possible support base in local society.<sup>35</sup> Thus a new class emerged in Indian rural setting namely the class of new Zamindars, who were not the traditional

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.73.

<sup>35</sup> Desai, A.R. *Social Background to Indian Nationalism*. Popular Prakashan. Bombay. 1976. p.39.

revenue collectors, rather they were a class which had purchased the Zamindari rights in auction. This new class paid a fixed amount to colonial state and in order to maximize their return resorted to rack-renting. This also led to sub-infeudation intensified the trend towards 'parasitic landlordism'.<sup>36</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century the entire area under Permanent Settlement was in a state of crisis.

In order to overcome the deficiencies of the Permanent Settlement, the colonial regime tried a new arrangement in the regions of Madras, Bombay and Berar. This came to be known as the Ryotwari Settlement. Under this, the actual landholders (*ryots*) were given formal proprietary rights. The ryot in theory was a tenant of the state, responsible for paying revenue directly to the state treasury and could not be evicted as long as he paid his revenue. A slightly different land settlement known as Mahalwari or Malguzari, was introduced in the United Provinces, Punjab and the Central Provinces. Under this, the village was identified as the unit of assessment, and the village paid the revenue collectively. A villager of 'good social standing' was generally given the responsibility of collecting the revenue from individual cultivators and paying the assessment on behalf of the village. As such the Mahalwari system was not very different from the Ryotwari system, effective ownership of the cultivated land was vested in the cultivator in both systems.

Despite different modes of collecting revenue, "all the three systems generated more or less a similar agrarian class structure in the village."<sup>37</sup> The Zamindari System had the zamindars, tenants, and agricultural labourers as the main agrarian classes. The Ryotwari had ryot-landlords and ryot-peasants.

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<sup>36</sup> Moore, B. Jr. 1966 *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Penguin. Middlesex. p.346.

<sup>37</sup> Singh Yogendra *Social Stratification and Change in India*. Manohar Publications. New Delhi.2002. p. 63.

These new land revenue systems had a cataclysmic impact on the rural power structure. First of all it led to the destruction of patron-client relationship between the tax collector and the tenant. The new class of Zamindars or lambardars did not have any interest in the welfare of peasantry and the peasant was subjected to exploitation and misery. They were forced to get increasingly involved with the market, even when they did not have the capacity to produce surplus. Though the new settlements changed the formal structures of authority, the colonial policies also reinforced and revitalized older, 'quasi-feudal' structures. As pointed out by Robert. E. Frykenberg even the older Zamindars continued to hold their rights over land. "Most of Rajputs whose Zamindari rights were sold continued to live as they lived before in their villages and taluks, dominating lower caste cultivators and offering sustained and at times effective opposition to auction purchasers."<sup>38</sup>

Other measures like commercialization of agriculture led to processes like commodification of land, and movement from food crops to commercial crops. One obvious consequence of this shift in cropping patterns and a growing involvement of the peasantry in the market was a significant increase in the vulnerability of the local populations to famines. Thus peasantry comprising tenants, small cultivators and agricultural labourers were reduced to helpless non-participants in the distribution of surplus. The old and new Zamindars from the upper castes exercised power at the behest of colonial rulers in order to perpetuate this exploitation and subordination.

Nationalist movement tried to change this skewed distribution of produce and power and espoused the cause of powerless peasantry. Thus a radical agrarian ideology

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<sup>38</sup> Frykenberg, Robert 'Structural Change In Rural Society 1596-1885' in Frykenberg ed. *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*. London. 1969. p. 409.

was accepted and the nationalist leadership led *kisan movements* in various parts of the country. Following Independence, therefore, land reforms were introduced in most states and a beginning was made for transformation in agrarian class structure.

### **AGRARIAN CHANGES AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

Indian independence marked a new phase in the history of Indian agriculture. Guided by socialist ideology and the political pressure of peasantry (which had participated in large numbers in nationalist movement), Indian state attempted to create a more egalitarian and prosperous rural society. 'Development' emerged as a strategy of economic change and an ideology of the new regime. The new political class now belonged to the nationalists who had always fought for the cause of peasants. Thus it was expected that a radical shift in land relations, class structure and power structure would take place. However, the political change at national level or regional level could not percolate to micro setting of village. The local interests that had emerged over a long period of time continued to be powerful in the Indian countryside even after independence. Thus there was a structural continuity where in upper classes and upper castes continued to exercise their dominance. As pointed by Thorner the older structures of exploitation, of debt dependencies, the local values that related social prestige negatively to physical labour, and the absence of any surplus with the actual cultivator for investment on land, very well continued in post independent India.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thorner, Daniel. op.cit. p.12.

## THE LAND REFORMS:

Land reforms was the first major strategy adopted by the Indian state to provide 'land to the tiller' and to put an end to the practices like 'absentee landlordism', 'rack-renting', etc. Initially the question of land reforms was debated on technical grounds i.e. whether it would increase or decrease agricultural productivity or whether it would contribute to modernization of agriculture or not.

However, the process of agrarian reforms is "inherently a political question"<sup>40</sup> and not a purely technical or economic one. The Indian State was responding to the unrest in rural India owing to skewed land distribution. Thus a whole bundle of reforms were undertaken wherein the state governments were directed to (a) abolish intermediary tenures (b) regulate rent and tenancy rights (c) confer ownership rights on tenants (d) impose ceilings on holdings (e) distribute the surplus land among the rural poor and (f) facilitate consolidation of holdings.

The state governments over a short period of time passed a large number of legislations in order to provide a legal framework to land reforms. The number of these legislations was so large that, according to Thorner, they could be 'the largest body of agrarian legislations to have been passed in so brief a span of years in any country whose history has been recorded'.<sup>41</sup> Theoretically land reforms constituted a big leap forward in a society like India where few upper-caste landlords owned majority of land.

However, in practice land reforms remained an unfulfilled promise. There remained a wide gap between the land-reform ideology projected during the freedom struggle and thereafter and the actual measures introduced for land reform. According to

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<sup>40</sup> Ghose, A.K. ed. 1984 *Agrarian Reforms in Contemporary Developing Countries*. Select Books. New Delhi. p.6.

<sup>41</sup> Thorner, Daniel. op. cit. p.14.



Yogendra Singh' "This lag could be partly explained by the class character of Indian political administrative elite, who are resistant to the needed radical reforms".<sup>42</sup> The upper class Zamindars used their clout in politics and bureaucracy to subvert the process of land reforms. "The implementation of the enacted laws had been half hearted, halting and unsatisfactory in large parts of the country".<sup>43</sup> Joshi described it as "sectoral or sectional reforms".<sup>44</sup> Most of the legislations had intentionally provided loopholes with the help of which the dominant landowners could tamper with land records by redistributing land on paper among relatives, evict their tenants, and use other means to escape the legislations. Land reforms were successful only in those regions of the country where the peasantry was politically mobilized.

Its limited success was in the realm of providing land to the superior tenants who generally belonged to middle level castes. This helped in weakening the hold of absentee landlords over the rural society and facilitated a shift of centre of power from feudal landlords to 'market-oriented independent cultivator'. In the abovementioned study of Devisar, Anand Chakravarti argues that 'though the abolition of *jagirs*' (intermediary rights) was far from satisfactory, it made considerable difference to the overall land ownership patterns and to the local and the regional power structures. The Rajputs, the erstwhile landlords, possessed much lesser land after the land reforms than they did before. Most of the village land had moved into the hands of those who could be called small and medium landowners. In qualitative terms, most of the land began to be self-

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<sup>42</sup> Singh Yogendra *Social Stratification and Change in India*. op.cit. p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Appu, P.S. 'Tenancy Reform in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol X. Nos. 33-35, Special Number, 1975, pp.1339-62.

<sup>44</sup> Joshi, P.C. *Land Reforms in India: Trends and Perspectives*. Allied Publishers. New Delhi. 1976. p.56

cultivated and incidence of tenancy declined considerably.”<sup>45</sup> It has been estimated that as a result of Zamindari abolition laws, roughly 20 million tenants became landowners. Tenancy fell from 60 to 25 percent and the percentage of owner-cultivators increased from 40 to 75 percent. Despite charges of large-scale evasion and tenant eviction, the state acquired about 14 million acres for distribution in addition to large amounts of privately held grazing, forest and wasteland.<sup>46</sup>

In caste terms the principal losers in northern India were Rajputs and to a lesser extent Bania, Kayastha and Muslim landlords. The main beneficiaries were the erstwhile tenants among Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, Koeris, that is, those belonging to upper strata of Shudra castes.

After cornering the benefits of first wave of agrarian legislation, these groups tried to block all subsequent attempts at reform designed to benefit the marginal farmers and the landless that usually belonged to the castes and groups further down the hierarchy. Under the leadership of Chaudhary Charan Singh, they opposed collectivization of agriculture and lowering of land ceilings. Chaudhary Charan Singh held that self sufficient peasant proprietors be allowed to retain holdings of 30 acres to provide ‘efficiency in agricultural production’.<sup>47</sup> According to Rudolphs middle caste constituted ‘bullock capitalists’ who controlled majority portion of land –34 percent controlled 51 percent land. In contrast the landless were 27 percent but held no land at all, the small holders were 33 percent and controlled 10 percent land whereas six percent

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<sup>45</sup> Chakravarti, Anand op.cit. pp.97-98.

<sup>46</sup> Rudolph, L.I. and S.H.Rudolph. *In Pursuit of Lakshmi : The Political Economy of Indian State*. Orient Longman.Bombay.1987. p.315.

<sup>47</sup> Hasan, Zoya. ‘Power and Mobilization: Patterns of Resilience and Change in Uttar Pradesh Politics’ in Francine Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds.) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*. Vol.1. Oxford University Press.Delhi.p.182.

large landowners held 39 percent land.<sup>48</sup> From the above data it is clear that only in rare cases that the landless labourers living in the countryside, most of whom belonged to the ex-“untouchable” caste, received land.

Thus it can be said that land reforms altered the rural power structure through transfer of power from upper caste landlords to middle caste owner cultivators. However, it did not lead to any change in the status and power of the lower castes who were still at the bottom of power and class hierarchy.

### **THE GREEN REVOLUTION:**

Green Revolution was one of the major steps taken by the state to solve the burgeoning food problem of India and to engineer a sustained growth in Indian agriculture. It conceptualized agrarian change in purely technological terms and was based on the ‘trickle down’ theory of economic growth. It carried the conviction that ‘agriculture was being peacefully transformed through the quiet working of science and technology, reaping the economic gains of modernization while avoiding the social costs of mass upheaval and disorder usually associated with rapid change’.<sup>49</sup> The technological and infrastructural inputs were provided by the United States and the primary emphasis was on increasing the food grain production. The mechanism for which was introduction of higher yielding variety (HYV) seeds of wheat and rice. However, the green revolution was not just the use of HYV seed . It also entailed requirement of fertility enhancing inputs, i.e., chemical fertilizers, controlled irrigation conditions and plant protecting chemicals (the pesticides). These were to be made available through provision of cheap institutional credit, price incentives and marketing facilities. The technology was

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<sup>48</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph. op.cit. p.52.

<sup>49</sup> Frankel, F.R. *India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs*. Oxford University Press. Bombay.1971.p.V

supposed to be 'scale neutral' that is it could be used with as much benefit by the small, as by the big landowners.

However, when it came to actual implementation people with small holdings could not avail the advantage of green revolution. The small landholders simply could not afford the cost of package it entailed. Even the state did not come forward to help small farmers. Joan Mencher during her fieldwork in South India observed that the concerned agriculture officers were far from being neutral. "What they thought was needed to further the green revolution was to forget about small farmers...because they could not really contribute to increased production. To these officials, progressive farmers are those who have viable farms and who are fairly well-off".<sup>50</sup>

However, participating in the green revolution did not mean the same thing to the smaller farmers as it did to the bigger farmers. While the bigger farmers had enough surplus of their own to invest on the new capital intensive farming, for the smaller landowners it meant additional dependence on borrowing, generally from informal sources. Jodhka's study of three villages in a green revolution district of Haryana showed that the average outstanding debt of small farmers "from informal sources was the highest even in absolute terms when compared with other categories of farmers".<sup>51</sup> Thus the new technology was not scale neutral as it was conceptualized, rather it was very much dependent on investment of resources. The new technology altered the agrarian structure in a fundamental manner because it made everyone get involved with the market compulsively. Rather than keeping the food grains for their own consumption,

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<sup>50</sup> Mencher, J.P. *Agriculture and Social Structure in Tamil Nadu: Past Origins, Present Transformations and Future Prospects*. Allied Publishers. New Delhi. 1978. pp. 239-240.

<sup>51</sup> Jodhka, S.S. 'Who Borrows? Who Lends?: Changing Structure of Informal Credit in Rural Haryana'. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 30(39). 1995. p. A124.

small farmers had to sell their produce immediately after harvesting when prices were relatively low, so as to clear off their debts that they had taken at the beginning of agricultural season to buy inputs. The same food grains are bought later in the year for consumption when the prices were higher. "Thus though the small farmers did take to the new technology, their resources being limited, it brought in new dependencies for them as well".<sup>52</sup> This process of agrarian capitalism in the villages is thus associated with the decay in the fortunes of poor peasantry and agricultural labourers, thus accentuating class conflicts and tensions in various parts of the country.

The new entrepreneurial farmers recognized the importance of collective mobilization so as to extract a better deal for themselves. Buoyed by their numerical preponderance and the gains of land reforms and green revolution, they embarked on a new process of social mobilization that contrasted village life with city life. Interestingly, these 'new' farmers' movements emerged almost simultaneously in virtually all the green revolution regions and were primarily directed against the Congress party. "Their discontent arose out of frustration both with the government policies on prices and procurement and with the fact that control over agricultural patronage in the districts was maintained by the Congress supporters among the local landed elites, who naturally favoured themselves."<sup>53</sup> Though initiated in the late seventies, these movements gained momentum during the decade of the eighties. Using the language of neo-populism and invoking traditional social networks and identities of the landowning dominant castes, they argued that the village was neglected at the expense of city and the Congress was at best representing urban interests. Thus the change in power structure introduced by the

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<sup>52</sup> Op. cit. p. A128.

<sup>53</sup> Brass, Paul. 'Politicization of Peasantry' in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.) *Politics in India*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 2000. p. 212.

land reforms was being consolidated by the green revolution. The power was now getting increasingly concentrated in middle classes and middle castes, which were undergoing 'embougeoisement', whereas the other sections of agrarian structure i.e. agricultural labourers and ex-landlords were experiencing 'proletarianization'.<sup>54</sup>

The changes produced by the green revolution also generated an interesting debate among Marxist scholars on the question of defining the prevailing 'mode of production' in Indian agriculture. Though the debate raised a large number of questions, the most contentious was 'whether capitalism had become dominant in Indian agriculture or was it still characterized by the semi-feudal mode of production'? This debate has been beautifully summarized by Alice Thorner, in a series of three articles on the mode of production in agriculture.<sup>55</sup> Majority of scholars like Utsa Patnaik and Daniel Thorner argued that the capitalist tendency was initiated very much during the colonial rule, and that after independence the process of accumulation had gathered greater momentum.<sup>56</sup> So it is definitively a shift towards capitalist agriculture.

However another set of scholars led by Amit Bhaduri argued that the process of agricultural production in India was still dominated by landlords cum moneylenders. Basing themselves on the empirical studies of agricultural systems prevalent in eastern India, they asserted that Indian agriculture could still be characterized by a semi-feudal mode of production. Owing to debt mechanism, exploitation was very much rampant in the countryside leading to forced commercialization of labour and as a result a stagnant agrarian structure.

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<sup>54</sup> Sharma, K.L. *The Changing Rural Stratification System*, Orient Longman. Bombay. 1974.

<sup>55</sup> Thorner, Alice 'Semi-Feudalism or Capitalism? Contemporary Debate on Classes and Modes of Production in India' *Economic and Political Weekly*. Special Article. December 1982.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Article 1.

However, towards the end of the debate there seems to have emerged a consensus that though it may have its local specificities and considerable regional variations, the capitalist mode of production indeed was on its way to dominate the agrarian economy of India and most certainly that of the regions that had experienced the green revolution.

This debate also found its echo on the issue of how green revolution has affected the agrarian labour. This assumes a great importance for the present study because generally the agricultural labourers belong to the traditionally deprived castes. Thus the formation and crystallization of Dalit identity cannot be divorced from the asymmetric land relations that are found in the countryside.

Scholars like Bardhan argued that while cash wages of the agricultural labourers had gone up after the introduction of the new technology, their purchasing power had in fact come down due to an overall increase in the prices.<sup>57</sup> This analysis was supported by Dhangare who argued that though the green revolution has brought in prosperity, it has aggravated inequalities too.<sup>58</sup> The green revolution made many of the traditional occupations redundant and the 'jajmani relations' disintegrated rapidly.

Breman pointed out that a process of 'depatronization' was being experienced in the farmer-labourer relationship in the villages of South Gujarat.<sup>59</sup> Bhalla and Kathleen Gough also observed this trend towards formalization and contractualization of relations between landlords and agricultural labourers. The voluntaristic nature of attached labour has been analysed in a positive light by Rudra who argued that the attached labour in

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<sup>57</sup> Bardhan, P. 'Green Revolution and Agricultural Labour' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 5(2931). 1970. pp. 1239-46.

<sup>58</sup> Dhangare 'The Green Revolution and Social Inequalities in Rural India'. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 20(2). 1988. pp.2-13.

<sup>59</sup> Breman, Jan *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat India*. University of California Press. Berkley. 1974.

post-green revolution agrarian setting was more like permanent employment in the organized sector.<sup>60</sup>

This was contested by Brass who observed that mechanism of debt and attachment was still used to discipline labourers. He asserted that the indebted labourers of Haryana countryside were in fact 'bonded slaves'.<sup>61</sup> Jodhka adopts a middle ground in this debate wherein he argues that

Attached labour in the post-green revolution agriculture should be seen more as a system of labour mortgage where the labourers, despite an acute dislike for the relationship, were compelled to accept attachment for an interest-free credit. However, their loss of freedom being temporary in nature, they could not be characterized as bonded slaves because they could come out of this relationship later.<sup>62</sup>

Thus we can see that an analysis of caste is futile until and unless its linkages with class relations are properly understood and mapped out. However, this inter-linkage must be discerned from the traditional Marxist position, which see caste only as an outward extension of class relations. The concept of 'Caste-Class nexus' as proposed by K.L. Sharma would be extremely useful where the two converge and diverge simultaneously.<sup>63</sup>

It is in this context of assertion of Dalit identity, its linkage with the land relations and the role of state to ensure equality that the present study needs to be located. The seventy third amendment has reserved seats for Dalits at various levels of Panchayati Raj, in proportion to their population. Thus it has ensured that they are adequately represented at the self-government level and hence can participate in the decision-making process. However the question that needs to be explored is that whether representation actually

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<sup>60</sup> Rudra, A. 'Class Relations in Indian Agriculture' in U.Patnaik (ed.) *Agrarian Relations & Accumulation: The 'Mode of Production Debate in India'*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1990. pp. 251-67.

<sup>61</sup> Brass, T. 'Class Struggle and Deproletarianization of Agricultural Labour in Haryana (India)'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Vol. 18(1). 1990. pp. 36-67.

<sup>62</sup> Jodhka, S.S. 1994 'Agrarian Changes and Attached Labour: Emerging Patterns in Haryana Agriculture'. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 29(39). 1994. pp. A102-6.

<sup>63</sup> Sharma, K.L. *Reconceptualising Caste Class and Tribe*. Rawat Publications. Jaipur. 2001.



translates into participation? Even if they do participate, do they take decisions as equals? Do they represent the interests of their own community or act as stooges of 'dominant castes'? Has Panchayati Raj provided them with an opportunity to come out of their psychological subordination and thus resist and assert themselves.

## CHAPTER - II

### EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

(With Special Reference to Weaker Sections)

The chapter on Rural Power Structure provides us with an insight into caste dynamics in village India and how it is transforming and in the process itself getting transformed with political and social evolution. Such an understanding is very much necessary to have a view that is closer to reality. However, it would not be wrong to say that these dynamics exhibit and manifest themselves within the ambit of structure, a set of rules that are provided by the legal arrangement that govern these institutions. Hence, an evolutionary study of these legal arrangements as documented in various reports and constitutional acts is necessary to appreciate the changes, the advances and the failures that have accrued ever since these ideas were put forward.

To understand the process of emancipation and empowerment of weaker sections like Dalits through these democratic structures, it is necessary to understand how problems specific to them were analyzed and what kind of responses were planned to overcome those. This analysis cannot be divorced from the question of 'How Panchayati Raj has been visualized as a whole?' because only then it could be ascertained whether these institutions can really bring about a significant change towards a more egalitarian order. This would require an understanding of the basic character and objectives of Panchayati Raj, how it is located in the nationalist discourse. Whether it is a step towards deepening democracy by making it more participatory or whether it is just another institutional innovation to bring about socio-economic development. Though the two

cannot be looked in isolation, yet the primacy between the two would have a bearing on the actual working of these institutions.

The ideas like Decentralization, Local Government, Panchayati Raj, etc have been advanced for almost a century now. The actors have changed, the context has changed (from colonial state to independent India) yet the formal questions with regard to needs, benefits, and objectives of such an exercise remain the same.

The idea of local self-government can be traced back to Sabhas and Samitis in ancient India, but in its modern avatar its genesis lies in the Lord Ripon's resolution of 1882. As per this resolution local self-government was needed to address the concerns of 'administrative efficiency', 'political education' and 'human development'. However Ripon was alone in his efforts because the colonial government was not in favour of any devolution of powers.

Even various committees appointed to address the issue like Royal Commission on Decentralization and other constitutional reform measures like Montagu Chelmsford reforms, Government of India resolution etc could not bring about any effective decentralization. On the contrary they all favoured a highly centralized, hierarchical administrative system where the administrator was the focal point of governance.

Finally, it were the efforts of Gandhi which placed the debate on democratic decentralization at centre stage because the idea of local self-government was a vital strategic element in his movement for national independence. For him a network of such rural organizations functioning in villages without any connection with the government will be the true foundation of any civic revolt. Panchayats were to act as platforms of

mass politics against the British rule and at the same time were to serve as instruments of an alternate paradigm of social and economic development. In his own words

My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants.... The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications...the Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary, and executive combined to be operative for its year in office. Any village can become such republic without much interference.<sup>1</sup>

Such villages would be interlinked in a set of 'ever widening, never ascending circles' rather than in a hierarchically organized pyramid. However, in the debates of Constituent Assembly his ideas were opposed on the grounds of being impractical and incompatible with the Westminster style of democracy which had a bias towards centralization. The father of Indian Constitution Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was opposed to Gandhian idea of village republic because in it he saw the ruination of India. He compared it to the ideas of communalism and provincialism, and decried it as regressive. Finally, in the absence of Gandhi, the modernists had their way. However a concession was made to Gandhians by including Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Directive Principles of State Policy. Art 40 of Indian constitution states:

The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self-government'.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, within the Constitution itself, the idea of Panchayats becoming building blocks for a new Indian polity was given up.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Desouza, Peter Ronald 'Decentralization and Local Government The Second Wind of Democracy in India' in Hasan et al ed. *India's Living Constitution Ideas Practices and Controversies* Permanent Black. Delhi. 2002. pp. 370-404.

<sup>2</sup> Basu, D.D. *Introduction to the Constitution of India*. Prentice Hall of India Limited. New Delhi. 2004.

In the post independence period, the problems of rural India were sought to be addressed by the grand project of Community Development. It was described as a method 'to initiate process of transformation of social and economic life of the villages'.<sup>3</sup> The main idea behind Community Development was to process the development of area through people's own democratic and cooperative organizations; the government was to help only with technical advice, supplies and credit. Simultaneously it was to bring about a democratic revolution by making an individual realize his own position in the vast democracy of India by acting as the builder of his own village centre.

This was to be supplemented by National Extension Service (NES) which was an agency for extending to the villagers the scientific and technical knowledge in certain fields like agriculture, animal husbandry and rural industry. Its main function was to make the people understand what change or innovation will benefit them, why it will benefit them and how it can be introduced.

However, in the initial years only this honeymoon with Community Development got over. It was soon realized that that there was neither community nor much development in the Community Development Programme.<sup>4</sup> The government appointed a committee called 'Team For The Study of Community Projects And National Extension Service' popularly known as Balvant Rai Mehta committee report, who headed the team. The team was to assess the extent to which the movement had succeeded in utilizing local initiatives and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving economic and social conditions in rural areas. The team analyzed the working of CD and NES projects in detail and submitted a set of recommendations in 1957, in order to make

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<sup>3</sup> Planning Commission. *First Five Year Plan*. 1952. p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> Dube, S.C. *India's Villages*. Routledge. Kegan Paul. London. 1956.

rural development more effective and efficient. Thus the terms of reference of the committee demanded a review of existing levels of participation in community projects and suggest measures to improve the same.

#### **BALVANT RAI MEHTA STUDY TEAM REPORT:**

The report put forward the concept of democratic decentralization in order to solicit real participation of villagers in the Community Development Projects. It revived the idea of Panchayati Raj and held that community development would only be deep and enduring when the community was involved in the planning, decision and implementation processes. Thus it recommended the creation of a democratic, statutory, elective and comprehensive body which could take charge of all aspects of development work in rural areas.<sup>5</sup>

The government should divest itself completely of certain duties and responsibilities and devolve them to a body which will have the entire charge of all development work within its jurisdiction, reserving to itself only the functions of guidance, supervision and higher planning (Para 2.8).

Hence, the main guiding force behind the creation of PRIs was to handle the development work in a more efficient manner. The third plan document suggested that the real test of Panchayati Raj “must be its practical effectiveness as agricultural extension agency”. Local participation was seen as an effective instrument for the effective implementation of national policies.

In order to give the idea of Panchayati Raj a concrete shape the team proposed a three tier structure of PRIs at district, block and village level namely the Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti, and Gram Panchayat respectively. The Panchayat Samiti was to act as

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<sup>5</sup> Report of the *Team For The Study of Community Projects And National Extension Service*. Vol.1. Committee on Plan Projects. New Delhi. November 1957. p. 6.

the locus of all development activities because it corresponded to a block which was already equipped as the unit of development. The team recommended that

Panchayat Samiti should be constituted by indirect elections from the village Panchayats. The Panchayats within the block area can be grouped together in convenient units...we consider that such elected representatives should be about 20 in number in each Panchayat Samiti.

As regards weaker sections and disadvantaged groups it goes on to say that within the 20 odd Panchayat Samiti members, 2 members shall be women who will be 'interested in working among women and children'.<sup>6</sup> Thus it strictly tries to bind the 'agency' of women and treat them as necessary conjuncts rather than ones who could actively pursue their career in local level politics.

Apart from this, the areas where the population of scheduled castes exceeds 5% of the total population of the Panchayat Samiti area, one member belonging to the SC group shall be co-opted and the same for the Scheduled Tribes.<sup>7</sup> The way these members are sought to be represented just show the way that how the report uncritically accepts the low representation and participation of Dalits and makes no serious effort to address their problems. Moreover it accepts only a nominal representation, one member in twenty and that too when population exceeds 5%. Such low representation is 'tokenism' in the sense that given the history of subordination and oppression, disadvantaged groups would not be able to express their views and there would be no meaningful participation in deliberations.

Moreover it is to be noticed that Scheduled Caste population of one Panchayat Samiti area is counted and not the village as a unit. Hence, how to account for representation? He or she would belong to which village or area? These are some of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

questions which remain unanswered. Thus even if there is some proportion of SC population at village level but not at Panchayat Samiti level, they would go unrepresented at the most important level (i.e. Panchayat Samiti). Another important fact is that their representation as heads of the Panchayat Samiti is not mentioned at all. The same situation holds true for women members. Now given the predominance of Pradhan or Sarpanch (who generally belong to traditionally upper castes), in taking decisions, it is very much expected that their representation was just a façade of representative democracy. The provision for co-option exists only if there is no representation at all.<sup>8</sup>

Among the multifarious activities that are given to the Panchayat Samitis, one of the important tasks entrusted is that of welfare of backward classes. Thus, here once again we see a notional recognition of the deprivations of certain groups. However, these welfare measures are not clearly spelt out. Again, it seems that tokenism is at play and no real or concrete measures are being spelt out for the real 'empowerment' or 'emancipation'.

At the Panchayat level the report talks representation of women, SC and ST in a similar fashion as that of Panchayat Samiti. But the report very categorically mentions that " we do not consider that members of any other special group need any special representation either by election or co option".<sup>9</sup>

Even for the groups of women, SC and ST, the approach is not of providing seats for contestation and election, but rather it is on nominating them. Hence, this does ensure their presence in the bodies, but how do they exercise their rights, duties and obligations

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 15.



in this scenario? What is the level to which they can fruitfully contribute to the entire process of their development and the development of the community they belong to?

The entire focus is on ensuring their presence in these bodies, as they are present in the community also. But the entire issue of their being 'active agents' and 'representatives' of the community is totally missing. The ways in which they can articulate their desires and participate in social change is absent altogether.

The report further accepts that one of the banes in village level administration is 'separatism' arising out of caste distinctions. These processes are highly detrimental to the welfare of the entire village as a whole. It is also mentioned that most of the elections should be held on a unanimous basis but then this consent should not be forced.<sup>10</sup> This kind of agreement can only create harsher conflicts in the future. Most of these issues arise as caste factions and groups fight with each other for power in the public domain. The report while admitting that such feuds may increase, still preferred method of elections to that of preferable to nomination.

Turning its attention to people's participation in community works, it acknowledges that there is unequal participation from the village community even in public works done in the villages. While the rich and prosperous generally abstain from works requiring physical labour, they may contribute in cash. The weaker sections might have to participate but even that may not be purely voluntary.<sup>11</sup> The committee seems to suggest that by democratic decentralization this skewed participation pattern would be corrected and would not call for a disproportionately large sacrifice from the weaker sections of the community.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

The committee in its second volume of the report analyzed the position of Panchayats as they existed in 1956 and accepts right at the outset that though Panchayats have been formed in almost all States, only 10% of them are working effectively, roughly one half are average and about 40% are unsatisfactory.<sup>12</sup> They have spelt out a felt need for creating more sustainable and participatory structures of Panchayats. The study also mentions that in the first elections to the Panchayats, there was a tendency of electing the old and conservative types in the age group of 45-60. However, with the passage of time and with successive elections, the profile of members is now between 25-40.

The report also admits that often the Panchayat is the stronghold of the upper castes and influential members of the villages. Even though there are provisions for reservation for the weaker sections, they are not in a position to negotiate with any kind of authority like Panchayats. Many a times they are indebted to the Sarpanch who is often a man of substance. In the sense, the Panchayat cannot be said to command the loyalty of all sections of the community especially the poor tenants, the landless, the artisans and the backward classes; in practice, the weaker sections have as yet little voice in the affairs of the Panchayats.<sup>13</sup> One can clearly establish that in the Indian social context, the economically weak are by and large the lowest of caste groups. There is a strong positive correlation between the two.

While ascertaining the impact of Community Development Projects on weaker sections particularly Harijans, the team found that they could not avail much benefit of the agricultural loans, grants, employment opportunities etc. and did not participate much in social education activities. A point worth noting is the finding in the report that the

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<sup>12</sup> Report of the *Team For The Study of Community Projects And National Extension Service*. Vol. 2. Committee on Plan Projects. New Delhi. November, 1957. p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

attitude of Non-Harijans towards the participation of Harijans in community activities was not satisfactory. 40% of the upper caste respondents remained non-committal on the issue which shows that untouchability was still prevalent in 1956.<sup>14</sup> Their presence in the cooperatives was also minimal.

Thus we can see that though Balvant Rai Mehta committee report acknowledged the working of caste dynamics in Community Development and Panchayats, yet it did not take any sufficient corrective measures to correct the imbalance. While it recognized the dominance of upper castes and non-participation of lower castes in community activities, it just provides a token representation to Dalits and that also through co-option. It repeats the mistake of Community Development Project by assuming community as a monolith where all sections participate equally. However in practice, participation is not about elections alone, it extends further in day-to-day working and decision-making. Partially, this neglect of participation of lower castes can be attributed to the fact that the whole concept of Panchayati Raj is located within the paradigm of development. Thus primary concern was development rather than deepening, extending and expanding democracy.

Despite its shortcomings the report was visionary because it set into process a motion which had the potential of transforming the power structure of India. Thus PRIs were established with much fan fare in almost all the states. However, its period of ascendancy (1959-64) did not last for long, soon it entered the phase of stagnation (1965-69), which was followed by the phase of decline (1969-77). During this period when Panchayati Raj was established and then lost its significance, there was a little commitment to the ideological underpinnings of decentralization. The idea of village government and democracy became peripheral to the concerns for making development

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

more effective. Owing to their perception as instruments of plan implementation, politics was seen as inimical to their effectiveness. Unanimity in elections was construed as an indicator of village consensus and initially State governments offered prizes to those Panchayats which elected its leadership unanimously.<sup>15</sup>

However elections unleashed the process of politicization wherein vote banks were created with power brokers manipulating them. The group traditionally in power began to realize that deprived sections could constitute important vote banks. The deprived groups also became aware of the importance of their vote. However little revolution occurred in terms of distribution of power. As pointed out by various studies, the elections in no way lessened the linkage of traditional factors of caste and property with power and leadership.<sup>16</sup> The expectations that it would lead to a consensual mode of operation were belied and the Panchayats provided the means and legitimacy to the dominant groups to remain in power.

They soon became objects of neglect and as a result they were continuously starved of financial resources. There was too much of bureaucratic interference and there was total apathy in the political system to conduct their elections regularly. This provided an opportunity to traditional upper caste leaders to expand their political influence to gain benefits for themselves and their caste members<sup>17</sup>. As a result Panchayati Raj more or less reinforced the traditional power structure of rural India.

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<sup>15</sup> Mathur, Kuldeep 'Challenges of Decentralization: The Politics of Panchayati Raj' in Sebesti, L. and Raj, S. (ed.) *People's Power and Panchayati Raj: Theory and Practice*. Indian Social Institute New Delhi. 1998. p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Mathur, M.V. et al *Panchayati Raj, Planning and Democracy*. Asia Publishing House. Bombay. 1969. Also see Siriskar, V.M. *The Rural Elite in a Developing Society*. Orient Longman. Delhi. 1971,

<sup>17</sup> op. cit. Mathur, Kuldeep. p. 6.

## **ASOKA MEHTA COMMITTEE REPORT:**

This decline was arrested by victory of Janata Party in 1977, which guided by Jai Prakash Narayan's ideals appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Asoka Mehta to review the situation regarding democratic decentralization in the States and Union territories and to identify shortcomings and effects. The ideological reasons for the appointment of such committee were also supplemented by the changes that had taken place in the rural class structure. The Green Revolution was a decade old, and the rich and middle class peasants (belonging to upper and middle castes) were interested in having 'the wherewithal of development at their doorstep'.<sup>18</sup> In line with their newly acquired economic power and state funded programmes they wanted to occupy the positions which could be relevant to them. The village councils were the easiest for them to conquer.

The committee was entrusted with the task to make PRIs a success. It was to examine in particular mobilization of resources, system of elections, relationship with administration etc. One of the important points that need attention is that it had a specific term of reference for the weaker sections which read as follows:

"1 (b) Planning and implementation of schemes for rural development in an objective and optimal manner, and in looking after the interests of the weaker sections of the society".<sup>19</sup>

The committee reviewed the working of Panchayati Raj for two decades since its inauguration (1959-77) and submitted its report in 1978. This committee popularly known as Asoka Mehta Committee observed that PRIs have been bypassed under the

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<sup>18</sup> Leiten, G.K. and Srivastava, R. *Unequal Partners: Power Relations, Devolution and Development in Uttar Pradesh*. Sage Publications. New Delhi. p.23.

<sup>19</sup> Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions. 1978. Introductory iv.

garb of development programmes and bureaucracy has a major role to play in dissociating PRIs from development. Worst of all there was a lack of clarity in regard to the concept of Panchayati Raj itself and the objectives for which it should stand. The report comments that “some would treat it as just as an administrative agency; others an extension of democracy at the grass roots level; and still others as charter of rural local government”.<sup>20</sup> Such an intriguing picture led to a crisis of expectations all along the line.

One of the most important reason for disappointment with PRIs as identified by the committee was their domination by economically or socially privileged sections of the society that had facilitated the emergence of oligarchic forces yielding no benefits to weaker sections.<sup>21</sup>

However, some members argued that dominance of oligarchy was a malaise that affected Indian politics at all levels, so why single out Panchayati Raj for criticism. They argued that in the long run the democratization process would destabilize the traditional leadership and there is no shortcut to this process. However, they also agreed that unless this happens, measures should be taken to protect the interests of the weaker sections of the society. This recognition was a major leap forward from Balvant Rai Mehta committee report which paid only a lip service to the interests of weaker sections.

The committee did not condemn Panchayati Raj as a total failure, rather it acknowledged its role in the process of ‘democratic seed-drilling in the Indian soil’.<sup>22</sup> It had made people more aware of their rights and generated a modern and pro-change leadership. Hence, rather than its abolition the committee favoured its reconstruction,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

reinforcement and revitalization so as to make them an integral part of the democratic process of India.

In its chapter titled 'Dynamics of Development' it identifies that social content of growth gains substance as a country gathers economic momentum and as deprived become aware of their rights. Hence, Panchayati Raj must be an embodiment of an effort towards egalitarian order.<sup>23</sup> This order can be achieved by higher economic growth which must always be followed by distribution so as to ensure social justice. Such an understanding arises from the basic assumption that the economic stagnation of villages is responsible for perpetuation of exploitative relationships of caste and land holding. The dormancy of village economy introduces a zero-sum game attitude towards distribution of economic inputs and outputs, thus 'poisoning the quality of their social life'.<sup>24</sup>

Democratic processes can aid in establishment of an egalitarian order by providing poor a forum for the assertion of their strength. The report acknowledges that poor suffer from many handicaps, but their numerical strength is their asset. Democratic institutions, with periodic elections provide them with an opportunity 'to upturn the social soil'. Their numerical strength bestows them with political power which can lead to social and economic betterment. Besides this socio-economic argument, the report also puts forward political argument for creation of PRIs. As per this argument grassroot institutions are required because they deepen the democratic consciousness. A vibrant faith in democracy necessitates greater opportunities for direct involvement of the people in the management of local affairs.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

Thus Panchayati Raj is considered both an end and a means. As an end, it is an inevitable extension of democracy to the grass roots, which in turn makes it the base of democratic pyramid in the country. The extension would help in establishment of two-way linkages from bottom upwards, from panchayats to state to national level and vice-versa. As a means it would achieve a more equitable growth and ensure distribution of benefits to a wider populace. However, it needs to be noticed from the above discussion that creation of more egalitarian society through the instrument of Panchayati Raj is located in the paradigm of development rather than an end in itself which has to be achieved irrespective of development.

To achieve this the committee proposed that instead of block, the district (Zila Parishad) should be the primary tier of decentralization because of its historical significance. Moreover the administrative and technical skills and capabilities required for planning, supervising and co-ordinating developmental programmes are available at the district level only. This tier should be supplemented by Mandal-Panchayat which would be larger in size than the village Panchayats because village Panchayats have become unviable for development owing to their limited resources. Moreover the committee noticed that villages have ceased to exist as socio-economic units and a cluster approach would be more appropriate for their effective development. Thus a reorganization of Panchayati Raj structures was proposed by the committee so as to bring them in consonance with the needs of changing times.

Regarding its composition the committee recommended that both at Zila Parishad and Mandal-Panchayat level, there should be directly elected members. It for the first



time proposed that seats should be reserved for SC/ST in proportion to their population.<sup>26</sup> This was revolutionary in comparison to the previous structures which provided only a token representation to the weaker sections. It must be noted, however, that committee did not provide reservation at the level of chairpersons at various levels of Panchayat. Thus it stopped a little half way because as observed earlier also it is the chairperson who generally runs the various Panchayats and commands maximum prestige and influence.

Yet a positive change was that at the Zila Parishad level, the committee preferred elective mode to ex-officio mode, which formed a major component of Balvant Rai Mehta committee report. The Asoka Mehta committee argued that ex-officio mode worked against the interests of weaker sections. It noticed that in rural areas, ownership of land is a major source of socio-economic and political power. Generally the Sarpanchs and headmen are drawn from the dominant sections of the society. When only sarpanchs become ex-officio members of the district, the numerical preponderance of persons belonging to dominant sections facilitates the election of president drawn from the regionally relevant dominant group.<sup>27</sup> Thus in order to look after the interests of weaker sections, the mode of direct elections is better suited in which political parties should participate effectively at all levels.

The participation of political parties would lead to programme based contests and lead to greater political accountability. The objectives of betterment of weaker sections that these parties espouse at national level would also get reflected in their manifestos at

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

the local level, thus providing an opportunity to weaker sections for their issue based participation.<sup>28</sup>

The committee felt that regular elections, no partisan super session and real devolution of functional authority and resources would bring about a marked change in the political landscape of India. In its report ii devoted a full chapter (Chapter V) to the weaker sections and their problems, and how Panchayati Raj sought to address them. In this chapter it acknowledges that the problems of lower castes need to be addressed by a multi-dimensional approach which requires simultaneous tackling at social, economic and political level. The PRIs would provide them with an effective and widest possible participation in democratic processes and would provide them with a venue for an effective participation in deliberations on programmes suited to them and also in their implementation. The committee does acknowledge the fact that even within the Panchayati Raj Institutions, there have been structural gaps. Although the SCs and STs form a major part of the population in the rural areas, the present set up has not benefited this section of society. To quote from the report, "The inability as well as the structural inadequacies of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to benefit the weaker sections of society has made us very anxious to provide structural as well as programmatic remedies to ensure that they derive, in adequate measures, the benefits of the planned development of the country."<sup>29</sup> Thus the committee proposed reservation of seats for them.

The committee rejected the separate electoral college and list system in favour of reservation of seats for SC/STs because it argued that to 'provide a fair deal to Scheduled

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.187.

Castes/Scheduled Tribes, their representation in various tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions should be based on the size of their population in their respective areas'.<sup>30</sup>

Besides reservation the committee also proposed to set up **Social Justice Committees** at each of the three tiers of Panchayati Raj where the Chairman may be only from these groups. These committees would enjoy special status and power and would be entrusted with the task of welfare of weaker sections only. An illustrative list of functions to be assigned to these committees is as follows:

- Matters of common or individual projects designed for the weaker sections.
- Planning and implementation of schemes including all matter relating to house sites, village sites etc.
- Investigation into and disposal of cases of injustice and discrimination being done to weaker sections.
- All other situations and merits arising in each case.<sup>31</sup>

There is also mention of '**Social Audit**' of schemes meant for the welfare of the SCs and the STs so as to ensure that funds meant especially for them are not utilised for general schemes. The criteria of such a social audit are not to be financial disbursements but the extents of benefits reaching the targeted groups. The Report also talks about the constitution of a committee of MLAs/MLCs belonging to Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes to look into the effective running of schemes for this population.<sup>32</sup>

The Report recognizes that there are important issues of occupational diversity, which are at the core of resolving the in egalitarian set up of the country's rural social

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

fabric. PRIs should thus be involved in the opening of these kinds of avenues so that it helps the weaker groups.

The Report looks at PRIs both as a means and as an end to ensure the fuller realization of the potential of the weaker sections. It even envisages a synergetic relationship between the PRIs and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Promotion Finance/Development Corporations. At the grass roots, the Panchayati Raj Institutions can provide these bodies with relevant and need based information for pursuing any kind of work or activity.<sup>33</sup>

There is emphatic insistence on the fact that many of the Common Property Resources have been encroached upon by the powerful and dominant groups of villages. Government should take ample measures to ensure that these lands/forests/grazing land/water bodies are restored to their original condition, that is, in the hand of the community itself. This step can ensure very effectively that these resources are accessed by all and sundry without any fear or favour. Moreover increased flow of credit to weaker sections, allotment of waste lands etc would ensure that the development process does not bypass them.

Thus it can be observed that Asoka Mehta committee report tried to give the weaker sections their due in the power structure, which has long been denied to them. Though it is agreed that it could not break away from the developmental paradigm, yet it marked a positive change in terms of representation in proportion to their population, participation of political parties and special measures for weaker sections, etc. The report in an optimistic expectation also drafted a bill (43<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill) in order to give effect to their recommendations.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 88.

However, with the collapse of Janata government at the centre led to a sidelining of the Mehta Committee report. Still some of the non-Congress-ruled states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal did implement it, though partially. The Karnataka model incorporated almost all recommendations whereas West Bengal model was not that radical. The successes and failures of the working of PRIs in these states are very well documented in various books and articles.<sup>34</sup> However, the objective of an all India transformation in the power structure, which this report sought to achieve could not fructify because of selective implementation and that too in few states.

Meanwhile the Congress government appointed various committees like G.V.K. Rao committee in 1985 and L.M.Singhvi committee in 1986, which set the stage for the introduction and passage of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment bill in 1993.

#### **G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985):**

This Committee was formed in 1985 to look into the ways and means to revitalize the PRIs. It recommended that the Panchayat Samiti and the Gram /Mandal Panchayat should have a sub-committee, consisting mainly of women members, for considering and implementing programmes and schemes for welfare of women and children, including adult education. The two important suggestions that this committee provided were:

- a). That the 'district' should be the basic unit of planning; and
- b). That there should be a system of regular elections for the Panchayats.

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<sup>34</sup> Pl . see. Mathew, George (ed.) *Panchayati Raj in Karnataka Today*. Concept Publications. New Delhi. 1986. Also Kohli, Atul *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. pp. 88-91.

### **L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986):**

This Committee, formed for Revitalization of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for Democracy and Development, argued for devolving of more economic powers and resources to the PRIs in order to render them financially autonomous and self-reliant. The Committee perceived the PRIs as one that needs playing a pivotal role in the democratic success of the nation. It viewed the PRIs as the basic unit of self-government and the base for the democratic and republican operations of the nation. The Committee was strongly of the view that considerable training, research and public education inputs should be provided to strengthen the PRIs and the performance capabilities of those who are called upon to function as voters, elected representatives, administrative officials, and voluntary workers in relation to PRIs. It recommended further that national and state level local self-government institutes, and centres for training at the district level should be formed and empowered to train and evaluate particularly in relation to PRIs and Urban Local Bodies.

The Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pension, Government of India, held half a dozen conferences, of District Magistrates and Collectors, between December 1987 and July 1988 at several locations, on the broad theme of "Responsive Administration". The various suggestions of the first five conferences were put together as a report which argued for people's participation, status of elected bodies at the local level, the latter's powers, responsibilities and financial resources. The Report also delved into the issue of the PRIs raising their own resources for at least a part of their expenditure, so as to have a sense of participation and responsibility.

It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that none of the conferences or the Report of these personnel had recognized women as a special component either for purposes of reservation or financial allocation. No specific issue of development was viewed as one that could involve women in their majority or as being covered under women's issues. Obviously the sensitivity to women as constituting equal proportion of the population or as a majority among the poor and weaker sections of the rural areas is totally absent at the administrative level.

All these developments need to be contextualized in the changes that were taking place at the political landscape of India during 1980's. Under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi the centralized state had begun a roll back on the economic front. The emerging discourse of globalization favoured a rapid rollback of the Indian State from a position of virtual omnipresence and omnipotence to one where it should conduct itself as a facilitator in the process of development only. This rollback was seen as phenomena that would necessarily allow then its logical corollary of the devolution of powers to the units of local self-government at the rural (*Panchayats*) and urban (*Nagar Palika*) levels. It is at this grassroot level that the elected representatives shall execute upon the nature and type of development that suits local aspirations.

Moreover as evident in the District Collector's conference held by Rajiv Gandhi, central government was apprehensive and suspicious of the role played by state government in the process of development. Thus centre viewed Panchayati Raj as an instrument which could keep the power of state governments under check, by devolving

majority of powers to Panchayats. The enactment of the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (CAA) must be seen in this light.

### **SEVENTY THIRD AMENDMENT:**

The Bill was drafted in a manner to address the problems encountered by the PRIs in previous years like

- a) Non-constitutional status of PRIs.
- b) Lack of empowerment of disadvantaged groups.
- c) No free, fair and regular elections.
- d) No fixed terms.
- e) No real devolution of powers and functions.
- f) Problem of finances for Panchayats.

The amendment sought to provide an answer to the above problems by incorporating following main features:

- 1) A uniform three-tier PRI structure across the country at the village block and district levels (much like Balvant Rai Mehta committee recommendations).
- 2) The centrality of Gram Sabha as a deliberative and decision making body, for decentralized governance. All the adult members of the village community would constitute Gram Sabha, which has to meet regularly and would act as watchdog of Panchayats.
- 3) Direct elections to all seats for all members at all levels. In addition to it the Sarpanch of village Panchayat may be appointed as member of



Block level Panchayat. Similarly chairperson of block level Panchayat may act as a member of Zila Parishad (district level).

- 4) MPs, MLAs, MLCs may also be members of Panchayats at the intermediate and district levels.
- 5) In all the Panchayats at all levels, seats are to be reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their population, and one third of total seats to be reserved for women. One-third of SC and ST seats will also be reserved for women.
- 6) Offices of the chairperson at all levels will be reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their population in state. One-third of the office of Chairpersons at Panchayats at all levels also to be reserved for women.
- 7) There are 29 items which can be devolved by state governments and on which Panchayats can exercise their jurisdiction.
- 8) There is a uniform five-year term for PRIs and in case of dissolution, elections to be held compulsorily within six months. The reconstituted Panchayat will work for the remaining term.
- 9) An independent State Election Commission (SEC) is to be constituted for conduct of their elections.
- 10) Setting up of State Finance Corporation (SFC) so as to provide resources for Panchayats.
- 11) Constitution of District Planning Committees to draw out plans for the whole district which can then be incorporated in plans at state and national level. Such a committee would have primacy of elected

members so that planning exercise is carried out based on the felt needs of people rather than in centrally located Planning Commission.

- 12) The state legislature may choose to provide for reservation of seats for backward sections.<sup>35</sup>

The Seventy-Third amendment is thus historical in the sense that it provides constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions, thus ending the uncertainty which always loomed on the fate of these institutions. Moreover unlike Asoka Mehta committee report, this amendment is to be necessarily followed by conformity legislations of various States and Union Territories throughout the country. Hence it would provide a nation wide uniformity that had been missing earlier. The constitution of SEC and SFC would address the problems of irregular elections and the shortage of resources.

The path-breaking provision is, however the one that provides reservation for women and dalits at all levels. Article 243 D states:

- (1) The seats shall be reserved for a) Scheduled Castes b) Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat and the number of seats so reserved shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in that Panchayats the population of Scheduled Castes in that Panchayat area or Scheduled tribes in that Panchayat area bears to the total population of that area and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in Panchayat (It must be noted that the provision for rotation does not provide the time period after which it would be given effect.)
- (2) Not less than one third of total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to SCs, or as the case may be, the STs.
- (3) Not less than one third...of the total number of seats...shall be reserved for women.

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<sup>35</sup> Basu, D.D. op.cit.

Similarly the clause 4 provides for reservations at the level of Chairperson also.<sup>36</sup>

This innovative provision has the potential to undermine the rural power structure because it provides a voice and public face to those sections in the village that till now had only a minor visibility and participation in the public affairs. It is hoped that it would create leaders out of these sections, who would then carry on the movement of social transformation so as to achieve a more egalitarian socio-economic order. It is expected that the new PRI Act would radically transform the way in which politics is carried out at village level because now on there would be more equitable distribution of power. Such redistribution of power would have bearing on national level politics also because it would bring about change in the source of power which would now flow from bottom upwards.

However such a vision seems to be an overstatement because the very creation of Panchayati Raj structure is and never was a result of any grass root movements or democratic upsurge. Paradoxically the third tier of government has been added by a centralized intervention in the form of constitutional amendment. Thus a progressive state is trying to deepen and expand democracy through the institution of Panchayati Raj. In this process it is attempting to challenge the traditional structures of power which at rural level are determined by caste and class criteria. It remains to be seen whether the state would be successful in its endeavour or as it has happened in the past, the rural power structure would be able to subvert and manipulate democracy in the interests of rich and powerful. The next chapter would discuss such changes (if any) in post seventy-third amendment era.

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<sup>36</sup> Bakshi, P.M. *The Constitution of India*. Universal Law Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi. 1998. p. 182.

An important point that needs to be stressed is that even now the primary discourse on Panchayati Raj is mainly developmental. As pointed out by Sivaramakrishnan the amendment was primarily driven by the concerns of political community and political elite for improving governance especially in rural India.<sup>37</sup> Panchayati Raj Institutions would effectively deliver the goods of development because the centralized state has failed because of its insensitivity, casualness, lack of accountability, inadequate processing of information during programme formulation and failure to ensure timely flow of funds, etc. Panchayati Raj would overcome these difficulties through the instrument of decentralized planning which would ensure effective harnessing of local resources as well as would provide effective utilization of resources granted by national and state governments. The decentralized democracy is expected to break the hold of rural elites over institutional resources so that weaker sections can also benefit from various social welfare schemes of government. It would also provide a more sustainable use of resources, an increase in accountability at local level, reduction in cost of delivery etc.

Thus the discourse on democracy, federalism, law, equity, and justice are only supportive discourses.<sup>38</sup> Now the question that arises is whether democratic processes in long run would displace development as primary goal of Panchayati Raj or not. As of now only one state's legislation regard Panchayati Raj as institution of Local-self government. Rest all are still guided by their use as instruments of effective delivery mechanism. It holds special relevance for lower castes who need to see themselves as

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<sup>37</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, K.C. *Power to the People? The Politics and Progress of Decentralization*. Konark. New Delhi. 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Desouza, Peter Ronald *The Struggle for Local Government: Indian Democracy's New Phase*, a paper presented at an international workshop entitled "Local Democracy in Nepal and South Asia. Nov.2004. p.5.

active agents in the process of political participation rather than passive recipients of benefits offered to them by state. Panchayati Raj must generate a positive self-esteem and motivation in the weaker sections so that they feel politically empowered.

It is in this context, it also needs to be mentioned that the system of reservation for SCs/STs needs further fine-tuning. It needs to take into consideration that if enforced in an undifferentiated way, it would help only an elite section among these groups. However, these questions along with the question of rotation of reserved constituencies after every election can be addressed later when Panchayati Raj becomes much more established. At this point of time it just needs to be analyzed whether it is actually churning the democratic soil in the rural side.

### CHAPTER - III

#### POST SEVENTY-THIRD AMENDMENT SCENARIO

As noted in the previous chapter, the seventy-third amendment constitutes a benchmark in the political history of India because it makes decentralization a constitutional reality rather than a loosely woven structure envisaged in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Art. 40). It constitutes a radical departure from previous Panchayati Raj institutions because it provides a real representation to disadvantaged communities namely women, Dalits and Adivasis. About one million women and nearly 700,000 Dalits and Adivasis are elected to represent the interests of rural India. In adding so many people to the political map of India, the constitution has not only increased the representative density of Indian politics but has also given it a qualitative shift.

Thus, a lot of hope and optimism has been generated by these reforms. It is expected that this “the second wind of democracy in India”<sup>1</sup> would really empower the hitherto powerless by providing power to take decisions controlling their lives. The ‘opportunity space’<sup>2</sup> generated through intervention of state would enable them to break the barriers of dominance and exploitation and they would assert themselves as equal partners. However, to consider mere enactment of legislation as a panacea to all problems would be a gross misunderstanding. Based on previous experiences certain questions need to be addressed like

- a) What has been achieved because of these reforms?
- b) Is only representation through reservation good enough?

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<sup>1</sup> Desouza, Peter Ronald ‘Decentralization and Local Government The Second Wind of Democracy in India’ in Hasan et al ed. *India's Living Constitution Ideas Practices and Controversies* Permanent Black. Delhi. 2002. pp. 370-404.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 393.

- c) Whether it automatically translates to empowerment and participation in decision-making?
- d) How to capture and empirically interpret the complex process of empowerment?
- e) Do we have sufficient evidence to understand this process and to arrive at conclusions?
- f) How to factor in the 'learning phase' of the disadvantaged groups?

Thus a whole lot of questions need to be answered in order to really understand this complex process. Though there is a plethora of work on Panchayati Raj institutions, most of it is administration oriented where in their success and failure is measured in terms of how well the elections are conducted, whether sufficient legal and fiscal powers have been devolved to them, whether they are encouraged or scuttled by the state government, what is their relation with sister institutions, how is bureaucracy reacting to their emergence and whether they are acting as engines of growth and development. No doubt these questions are important, but like Indian planners and politicians these studies fail to understand that these institutions are primarily meant to deepen democracy and empower people rather than to act as agents of growth and development. Panchayati Raj has an intrinsic value, because it inverts the traditional power structure upside down. As envisaged by Gandhi and Jaiprakash Narayan, in direct democracy power flows from bottom to top, wherein those at bottom exercise maximum control over their lives. It can be followed from this that the disadvantaged would benefit maximum from this experiment because a control over resources would enable them to assert themselves and challenge the traditional inequalities. Thus for a fuller and comprehensive understanding

of Panchayati Raj, it has to be studied in its dynamic and working context wherein the real power relations come into play.

In the decade following the Seventy-third amendment, some attempt was made in the right direction when a large number of studies were carried out to understand, measure and interpret the process of women empowerment. A brief review is as follows:

#### **A Brief Review of literature on Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj:**

There has been a mixed bag of indications regarding women's participation in PRIs ranging from extreme rejection of the model to a cautious optimism. However, they need to be studied in a proper temporal perspective so as to allow for the learning period of women Panchs and Sarpanchs as they enter these decision-making bodies. Initial studies pointed that women's representation was for namesake only. The work related to PRIs used to be done by the male kin of the women Sarpanchs. The female pradhans in U.P could be dismissed as a pradhan because it is their husband, sons and even powerful neighbours who rule by proxy.<sup>3</sup> Women contested only at those places where men could not contest because of reservation.<sup>4</sup> Nirja Jayal has also shown in areas of western Uttar Pradesh women act like "rubber stamps" for their husbands.

Similarly a study by MARG in Haryana shows that women representatives have been handicapped by their illiteracy and powerlessness within patriarchal family

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<sup>3</sup> Mishra, S.N. Kumar, Lokesh, Pal Chaitali *New Panchayati Raj In Action*. Mittal Publications. New Delhi. 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Leiten G.K. 'Panchayats in Western Uttar Pradesh "Namesake" Members' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. XXXI NO. 39. 1996. pp 2700-2705.



structures. Even the government officials look to the men folk of elected women to attend meetings.<sup>5</sup>

As argued by Ashok Jha, despite reservation for women, effective participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions have failed due to misuse and manipulation by local power brokers. Ignorance of women about their rights and procedures and about their potential and responsibilities has kept them far behind men in the local bodies. It is very much doubtful that mere increase in number of reserved seats for women in local bodies is likely to increase participation of women. Unless structural changes are brought about and a sincere effort is made to educate women and the power structures existing in rural areas are neutralised, nothing much can be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

However, they seem to be extreme cases, which do not seem to take into consideration the psychological independence and attitudinal change that women have experienced because of their representation through their reservation. Participation here must not be seen only in terms of their decision-making capabilities but also in terms of awareness about their rights, their effort to put their views across and to strive for their acceptance. It also has to look into the interface of women members with the government officials, which provide a venue to them for stepping out of their houses and interacting without somebody always there with them usually. Moreover it also brings in a new dimension to the local self-government. As pointed out by a study in Himachal Pradesh,

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<sup>5</sup> MARG *They call me Member Saab-A study of Panchayats in Karnal District*. Haryana. 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Jha, Ashok Kumar (ed.) *Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions*. Anmol. New Delhi. 2004.

conducted by Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), women are more transparent, accountable and committed to the development process.<sup>7</sup>

Taking into consideration the points mentioned above, findings of a study by Snehlata Panda in Ganjam District of Orissa can be appreciated which states that women are attending a majority of meetings, showing leadership traits and capability to arrive at decisions.<sup>8</sup> Similarly a study of Tamil Nadu shows that a great percentage participated, voted and debated in meetings.<sup>9</sup> These results also gain support from a study conducted by CWDS in states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, which shows that women are increasingly becoming aware of their rights, responsibilities and functions<sup>10</sup>. In Haryana, a recent study by A.K. Sinha et al. shows that women's level of participation ranges from low to medium. While calculating this participation they used the indices of eleven functions like social (which includes resisting dowry, education of girl child etc.), political, economic, educational, etc.<sup>11</sup>

In the decade of 1990's various books and reports were published on the issue of women and Panchayati Raj, some terming it success, some as partial success and some as complete failure. As pointed out by Desouza, "most of the reports and studies on decentralized democracy are excessively evangelical or overly skeptical."<sup>12</sup> It is always a discussion between those who marvel at its achievements and those who deride its claims

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<sup>7</sup> Mohapatra, Ajaya Kumar, *State of panchayats in Himachal Pradesh*..... as posted on [reportingpeople.org/issues\\_panchstory6.htm](http://reportingpeople.org/issues_panchstory6.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Panda, Snehlata 'Emerging pattern of leadership among Rural Women in Orissa' in *The Indian Journal of Public Administration* Vol. XLII. Oct-Dec 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Athreya, V.B. and Rajeshevari, K.S. *Women's participation in Panchayati Raj: A case study from Tamil Nadu* M.S. Swaminathan Foundation. 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Buch, Nirmala *From Oppression to Assertion: A study of Panchayats and Women in MP, Rajasthan and UP*. CWDS New Delhi (mimeo). 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Sinha, A.K. et al 'Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj :Haryana' in *Eastern Anthropologist* Jan-Mar. 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Desouza, Peter Ronald *The Struggle for Local Government : Indian Democracy's New Phase*, a paper presented at an international workshop entitled "Local Democracy in Nepal and South Asia. Nov.2004

since these judgments depend upon the political position that you take. However, they tend to ignore that every action and initiative has elements of both gain and drawbacks, empowerment as well as exploitation, change and continuity. This paradox has been mentioned by various political scientists like Weiner, Manor and is a reality of a socially and economically inegalitarian society aiming to transform itself into an egalitarian one through democratic processes.

#### **PANCHAYATI RAJ AND DALITS:**

However, a major lacunae in all these studies is the gross neglect of the empowerment aspect of Dalits. As argued by S.N. Chaudhary the Dalits and Adivasis never get prominence in research because even at macro level politics their presence was almost notional and they were never perceived as significant political actors.<sup>13</sup> There are only few studies across the length and breadth of India, which deal with this aspect. However, some indirect indicators can be used to interpret as to how rural power structure is getting transformed due to Panchayati Raj. One such indicator can be violence against Dalits. How to interpret this violence requires methodological caution. As can be gleaned from the news articles published in *Panchayati Raj Update*<sup>14</sup>, violence against Dalits has increased ever since the passing of two amendments. This can be explained as a result of an increasing assertion of Dalits and the resistance on the part of dominant castes to cling their traditional privileges. Some scholars would interpret this as a relatively worse off situation for Dalits, but scholars who have systematically studied violence on Dalits in Jhajjar and Talhan treat it as a struggle by Dalits to shake off

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<sup>13</sup> Chaudhary, S.N. *Dalit and Tribal Leadership in Panchayats*. Concept Publishing Company. New Delhi. 2004. p 13, This argument has also been dealt in the Introduction of this dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> A journal published by Institute of Social Sciences.

centuries of oppression and humiliation.<sup>15</sup> Though they have not taken factor of Panchayats into account, but the fact that Dalits have acquired a new 'opportunity space' owing to these institutions cannot be discounted while explaining this new Dalit assertion. This is also supported by a study carried out by CSDS which shows that the reservation of Sarpanch post in a Panchayat produces both a back lash by the rural dominant castes, who try to undermine the authority of Sarpanch, and resistance by Dalit castes who try to improve their lot through positions acquired.<sup>16</sup>

This dynamic of Dalit assertion does not confine itself to state sponsored Panchayats only but also brings into picture the traditional 'caste panchayats'. These Panchayats enjoy 'traditional authority'<sup>17</sup> of their own and enjoy considerable hold over the members of particular caste group. In both Jhajjar and Talhan, it was the caste Panchayats of the traditionally dominant *Jat* caste that condoned and legitimized the violence on Dalits. It is interesting to note that while Dalits are turning towards the institutional innovations of state, the traditionally dominant castes are reviving and strengthening their old arrangements in order to perpetuate their hegemony. This parallels the situation, which is documented in studies relating to women and Panchayati Raj experiment. As reported by Prem Chowdhry for Haryana, the traditional Panchayats sanction violence against women, order their forcible eviction from village and make the family of the women obey their orders even in personal matters.<sup>18</sup> The power of imposing

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<sup>15</sup> Jodhka, S.S. and Dhar, Murli 'Cow, Caste and Communal Politics: Dalit Killings in Jhajjar' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. 18-24 Jan. 2003. pp. 174-176.

<sup>16</sup> A Study on *Dalits, Discrimination And the Struggle for Equal Citizenship*. CSDS. July 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Scheme adopted from Max Weber .

<sup>18</sup> Chowdhry, Prem 'Caste Panchayats and Policing of Marriage in Haryana: Enforcing Kinship and Territorial Exogamy' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Jan-Aug.2004.

community sanctions goes on to prove that it would take long before these parallel structures give way to modern institutions completely.

Coming back to Dalits, it's the local cultural and social context which is governing the role played by Dalits in Panchayats. As stated in the chapter on rural power structure the caste factor is intrinsically enmeshed with the class factor; the Dalit consciousness does not arise in vacuum. It is only when they achieve some upward mobility that they feel that they must also get equal share in the resources provided by state. This fact is amply demonstrated in study conducted by Sudha Pai in the state of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>19</sup> Pai studied the role of social capital and Panchayat activities in the empowerment of Dalits in two districts of Uttar Pradesh. Both the districts, Meerut in western U.P. and Azamgarh in eastern U.P. are geographically very distant from each other and also differ in their socio economic contexts. Three villages each district were selected for their Dalit majority population and their selection as Ambedkar villages by U.P. government.

In the Meerut villages, Pai finds that there is a transition from control by dominant caste peasants to a more democratic system which provides a greater participation to lower castes. However, despite the changes in social composition due to reservation, decision making is largely in hands of *Jats and Rajputs* who control the Panchayats with the help of a small but influential group of *Jatavas*. Still there is some breakthrough because earlier the *Jatavas* acted as pawns of dominant castes, now they have an independent position due to reservation. Though the candidates are chosen by

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<sup>19</sup> Pai, Sudha 'Social Capital, Panchayats and Grass Roots Democracy Politics of Dalit Assertion in Uttar Pradesh' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Feb. 24,2001. pp. 645-654.

Jats, they have a better bargaining position and can better utilize the resources made available by the Government like Ambedkar Village Program (AVP).

In contrast in Azamgarh villages, the middle castes still controlled the Panchayats. There was almost a total absence of participation by large majority of the villagers in the decision-making or implementation of the programmes. The Dalits have the formal authority but have failed to acquire control over Panchayats. The benefits of the programmes have not been utilized by Dalits. There is also an absence of social jealousy and conflict between various Dalit castes owing to non-utilization of facilities offered by state. Sudha Pai ascribes the differential experience of two districts to the factor of social capital. "In Meerut district, closer ties and stronger bonds of social capital have emerged among the *Jatavas* that has enabled them to challenge the dominance of *Jats* and *Rajputs*, gain control over Panchayats and more benefits from the AVP, though this has created open conflict with MBCs and other subcastes of Dalits. In Azamgarh district the Dalits remain economically weak, with divisions even among the *Chamars* and unable to collectively challenge the power of *Kurmis* and *Yadavs* and play a more effective role in Panchayats".<sup>20</sup>

The above mentioned study somewhat echoes the conclusions drawn by Pundir who studied four areas in western and eastern U.P.<sup>21</sup> These four areas were marked on the basis of numerical proportion of Dalits and degree of their political organization. In those areas where Dalits were numerically superior, economically independent and politically aware, they had considerable influence in decision-making. Not only did they participate in decision-making, they could influence decisions in their favour also. Thus a greater

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid p.652.

<sup>21</sup> Pundir, J.K. 'Development of Scheduled Castes: A Study of their Political and Decisive Participation at Local Level in Rural Areas' in AJSDJ, Vol.III. 1995. pp. 49-64.

degree of political mobilization leads to a relatively better say in decision-making. Wherever the social capital or bonding between the various members of community is low, it leads to exploitation and oppression.

A major factor in the formation of social capital and degree of political organization is the initiative taken by various political parties. Thus Pai's study admits the positive role played by Bahujan Samaj Party in bringing awareness amongst Dalits about their rights through grass root enrollment and also by furthering and promoting initiatives like Ambedkar Village Program. In those areas where the hold of such parties is not significant and where the traditional parties exist, the Panchayats work in similar manner as they used to do before the introduction of seventy-third amendment. As argued by Leiten after studying Panchayats of Uttar Pradesh "Although the discursive ground is shifting, the bottom line is that rich peasants do not tolerate a democratic and enlightened departure".<sup>22</sup> Though they themselves are at the helm of a fairly radical peasant's movement through 1980's, they have attempted to block the dispersal of power through decentralization and democratization. He conducted a study of seven Panchayats around the Sisauli block of Muzzafarnagar district. This area is dominated by the politics of Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) which is mainly a party concerning the interests of middle caste peasants like *Jats* and *Gujjars*. Owing to its strong presence in the region, it has helped in perpetuating the hegemonic and feudal outlook of *Jats*. In terms of caste composition of Panchayat members, there has been a significant change wherein low caste agricultural labourers have become the biggest group (44 percent) who together with small peasants (15 percent), numerically dominate the Panchayats.

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<sup>22</sup> Leiten G.K. 'Panchayats in Western Uttar Pradesh: Namesake Members' in *Power Politics and Rural Development*. Sage Publications. 2002. p.55.

However, when it comes to Pradhans, rich peasants continue to dominate, ruling directly or by proxy. In the course of day-to-day actual working, these Panchayats are a one-man show where Pradhan decides everything. There are no regular meetings, the members are unaware of their rights. Most of them stay out of proceedings the decisions are taken unilaterally by Pradhan. Any disagreement with Pradhan leads to ostracization. Even when Pradhans are females or/and Dalits, they act as puppets of rich peasants. 'The Pradhan forced it on me' is the constant refrain of Panchs and they merely exist as namesake members.<sup>23</sup> The dominance of Pradhan has been allowed to grow to such an extent that he is the only hinge on which depends the deployment of state resources and initiatives. Since politics and activism are the domain of dominant personalities in the *Jat Biradri*, no autonomously initiated movements can take place. Hence the hopes of empowerment have been belied in the area owing to absence of any grass-root movement and due to lack of political mobilization by any political party.

The rural power structure has emerged as the greatest constraint to such empowerment. The source of this rural power structure is ideological suppression as well as the pattern of land holdings which give the landlords not just power over the material lives of those working on their land but also access to the power of the state. This is well documented in other study by Leiten and Srivastava of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>24</sup> To quote them at length would be extremely useful,

'Panchayati Raj, it appears from our case studies, despite honourable exceptions, is the Raj of the big people. In the public domain, poor villagers continue to be expected to comply. Some changes have taken place, though, and the factionalism of dominant

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.63.

<sup>24</sup> Leiten, G.K. and Srivastava, R. *Unequal Partners: Power Relations, Devolution and Development in Uttar Pradesh*. Sage Publications. New Delhi. pp. 176-205.



castes in at least two cases has been confronted by empowerment from below. These cases demonstrate that Panchayats may fail to function even in villages where the lower castes have succeeded in securing the control over Panchayats. The dominant elite retains sufficient intra village and supra village power which allows it to obstruct the development efforts, particularly if they are initiated by and targeted at the poor villagers. Access to power, infrastructural facilities and state institutions continue to be dominated through the established land owning families.’

There are a number of ways and strategies by which effective participation is blocked by the traditionally dominant castes. An informative list can be culled out from the study conducted by CSDS on the struggle for Dalit equality.<sup>25</sup> Though this study does not address itself primarily to Panchayati Raj System, yet it points to certain discriminations that Dalit Sarpanchs have to face in their day to day functioning. Some of these ways of dominant castes can be enumerated as under:

- a) They do not allow Dalit Sarpanch to sit on the Sarpanch chair. This symbolic struggle is one of the most important that a Dalit has to fight.
- b) They keep the telephone on the table of the Secretary i.e. deprive the Dalit Sarpanch of the accoutrements of power.
- c) They ignore the decisions of the Sarpanch but follow the decisions of the deputy Sarpanch who, in reserved Panchayats will be from the dominant castes. The deputy Sarpanch is the alternative locus of authority and the real locus of power.
- d) They boycott Gram Sabhas called by Sarpanch but attend those called by the deputy Sarpanch.

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<sup>25</sup> Op. cit. *Dalits, Discrimination And the Struggle for Equal Citizenship.*

- e) They manipulate the minutes of Gram Sabha meeting taking advantage of the illiteracy of Dalit Sarpanch.
- f) They deny the Sarpanch the status of office, of being first citizen of the village, on occasions such as hoisting of the national flag, award of prizes and performing ceremonies etc. which earlier dominant castes used to perform.
- g) They disallow the Sarpanch from entering upper caste houses.
- h) They address and refer the Sarpanch by caste name.
- i) They prevent Dalits from exercising their franchise.
- j) They threaten Dalits from contesting elections for the post of Sarpanch and insist that the post be kept vacant as long as it is reserved.
- k) They ensure that the line department officials of the government place obstacles in the path of development works undertaken by Dalit Sarpanch so that Sarpanch gets the reputation of incapacity and of doing very little for the village eroding thereby the legitimacy of the reservation policy and correspondingly strengthening the legitimacy of the 'old order'. Dominant castes as Sarpanchs can get things done. This is very much illustrated in the study of Leiten and Srivastava cited above.
- l) They embroil the Dalit Sarpanch in expenditure illegalities, real or imagined.

Moreover the act of direct violence against Dalits is still a potent force to make them tow the line of dominant groups. The caste violence in Tamil Nadu and caste massacres in Bihar must be recognized as an important aspect of the upper-caste response to the new language of the rights of Dalits as well as to increasing political empowerment through Panchayati Raj. A story from Panchayati Raj update is illustrative of this

For the past two months the southern districts of Tamil Nadu have been rocked by caste related clashes...it is a sorry state of affairs that even the political and state power stood besides the oppressive castes...On this day just because Dalits stood for elections to the village panchayat, the high caste people of the village brutally murdered six persons, including the President and Vice- President of Panchayat, in broad day light. They severed the head of the president and threw it inside a well.... The post of Panchayat president in this village was reserved for Dalits during the recent Panchayat elections. The high caste people, unable to face this encroachment on what they had traditionally considered their domain, protested against it and threatened the Dalits with reprisal if they contested for the post. They burnt even their houses.<sup>26</sup>

The murders were a result of Dalit contesting elections. Peter DeSouza has quoted P. Sainath to explain the process and stages that a Dalit has to go through before a court can even hear the case. These are

- 1) Pressure from the caste panchayat.
- 2) Entry fee to enter the police station.
- 3) Resisting a brokered compromise.
- 4) Paying money for filing an FIR.
- 5) Delay in recording the statement of the witnesses.
- 6) Coercion in the village.
- 7) 'Feeding' of the judges.<sup>27</sup>

This phenomenon of ruling by proxy and to punish them when they do not agree gets further magnified when the Panchayat members are both Dalit and women. Nayak studied the nature and extent of violence against the Panchayat representative of Dalit community. Citing the case of stripping of Draupadi Bai, a Dalit Sarpanch of Rajgarh district M.P. before the B.D.O. on November 19,1995 the author contends that days of

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<sup>26</sup>Larbeer, Mohan 'Atrocities in Melavalavu Panchayat' in *Panchayati Raj update*. July,1997, No.43.p.6.

<sup>27</sup> Sainath, P. various articles in *The Hindu*.

real empowerment are really very distant. Draupadi contested the election for a seat which was reserved for women Dalits and won it in 1994. Her winning the election was resented by M. Aggarwal, an upper caste male who wanted the rival candidate to win. He belonged to a rich family and wanted to exercise indirect control over the Panchayat fund. So he began to search opportunity to humiliate Draupadi. He got a contract to build a school building and taking advantage of this he made allegations of misuse of funds against Draupadi. No confidence motion was brought against her and in that meeting she was badly abused and humiliated. At 2 a.m. she tried to escape from the meeting but Aggarwal and others pulled her Sari and she felled.<sup>28</sup>

Thus Dalit women Panchs and Sarpanchs have to face a large number of problems because of their double disadvantage. Mahipal tried to map these problems faced by Dalit women and enumerated following observations<sup>29</sup>:

- a) Majority of respondents are not informed about the schemes and proposed meetings at the block level. Even if they are informed, they are not allowed by male family members to attend it. They are mainly directed to cast votes.
- b) They are economically dependent on their husbands.
- c) Majority of them are illiterate and have not received much training.
- d) Their husbands are denied *patta* of land they are cultivating since long.

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<sup>28</sup> Nayak, R.C. and George Matthew 'Panchyat at Work: What it means for the Oppressed?' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. July 6, 1996. p.20.

<sup>29</sup> Mahipal 'Women in Panchayat: Experiences of a Training Camp' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Jan. 24, 1998. pp. 150-152.

- e) No-confidence motions against women elected representatives are much more in number.
- f) Even bureaucracy turns a blind eye towards these non-confidence motions.

Hence a number of factors hinder their participation, their decision making and their ability to assert themselves. Though they are formally present because of their reservation, their participation is really very low. Similar kinds of findings are stated in a study by Buch, Jain and Chaudhary of women representatives in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>30</sup> Lack of awareness, training and their poor economic background provide for their continued domination by upper caste males. When it comes to Dalit women representatives the strategies of dominant castes become more effective because of the overarching patriarchal structure, wherein women accept their subordinate positions. As put forward by Mahipal even after more than a decade after the passage of the Panchayat act, Dalit women are the most disadvantaged due to their lower level of literacy, their lack of awareness about government programs, their exclusion in deciding about the Common Property Resources etc.<sup>31</sup>

The above-cited studies create an impression that nothing much has changed in the last decade. Dalits are still marginalized in terms of their participation and decision-making. They still remain excluded even when the democracy has deepened itself to a grass root level. Their formal position of authority does not translate into actual authority because of the various constraints mentioned in various studies. These studies seem to

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<sup>30</sup> Buch, N. Jain, U. and Chaudhary, S.N. *Women in Panchayati Raj in Madhya Pradesh* (Mimeo) Mahila Chetna Manch. Bhopal. 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Mahipal 'Caste and Patriarchy in Panchayats' in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Aug. 7-13,2004. pp. 3581-3583.

arrive at a conclusion that as long as the rural power structure is not transformed radically through reorganization of land relations, nothing much could be achieved. The high caste politics and bureaucracy would use them as proxies in order to perpetuate their hegemony and power. Thus introduction of Panchayati Raj has not achieved much in terms of empowerment of marginalized.

However, to arrive at such conclusions would be quite hasty and premature, given the discrimination that lower castes have suffered for centuries. To presume that one piece of legislation would change the power structure radically, is to expect too much. As can be learnt from the experience drawn from the national level politics, it took almost forty years (after the introduction of reservation in Constitution) for a critical mass to emerge which could articulate the political aspirations of Dalits. Thus to ignore the 'learning phase' would be a great injustice to the new era of Panchayati Raj. Moreover as noted in the introductory chapter, even at the national level the Dalit politics is confined to a few pockets and few political parties. Hence as long as these parties fail to enroll and mobilize the grass root cadres, nothing much could be achieved. The Macro-micro linkages need to be strengthened so that not only upper and middle castes but also Dalits can take advantage of the power their counterparts enjoy at national and regional level.

As is evident from the studies of Sudha Pai, the lower castes could assert themselves much more effectively when the Bahujan Samaj Party was at the helm of affairs. The knowledge that somebody is there who is 'one of their own, generates in them a confidence to approach public functionaries to seek redress to their problems. At a seminar held on Uttar Pradesh politics in Jawaharlal Nehru University, various scholars

argued that the reign of BSP has led to the empowerment of Dalits.<sup>32</sup> Owing to active intervention of Chief Minister herself, the bureaucracy got actively involved in resolving the disputes between Dalits and higher castes. Though her reign did not continue for long and her politics was vilified as opportunistic politics, yet it unleashed an energy and set into motion a process where Dalits felt for the first time that they were active partners in the politics rather than subordinate passive ones.

Thus if the political parties try to deepen democracy and take it to grass root levels, much more can be achieved. In the present set up the problem is that state level leaders have a vested interest in emaciating the Panchayati Raj, because they see in Panchs and Sarpanchs, future politicians who can replace them. Hence, until and unless, any party follows internal democracy, it cannot lay the foundations of mass 'participatory democracy'. This fact is amply demonstrated by the working of Gram Panchayats in West Bengal. There Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI (M)) has generated a great deal of political awareness among the disadvantaged sections. This is also aided by the fact that the land reforms program has been most successful in West Bengal as compared to any other state in India. As a result the phenomena of caste oppression and exclusion from decision making is not that rampant in West Bengal. After studying the working of Panchayats in Barddhaman, district of West Bengal, Leiten came to the conclusion that the new act has led to more visibility of poor SC/ST in the public arena.<sup>33</sup> Prior to this amendment, the rural politics in the Barddhaman district was dominated by rich peasants and landlords. It is not that the transition is complete and there is a radical change in distribution of power, yet some advancement has been made. In their dealing with

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<sup>32</sup> Seminar on Uttar Pradesh Politics in 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Leiten G.K. 'Caste Gender and Class in Panchayats: The Case of Barddhaman, West Bengal' in *Power Politics and Rural Development*. Sage Publications. 2002. p. 43.

administration the poor people have acquired respect and self-respect. The reference to 'human dignity' is often heard especially among the SC/ST members. They throng the Panchayat building and the Block Development Office, which in earlier days was out of bounds for them. To quote a remark from a Santhal in Leiten's study would be highly useful in mapping the change.

When we were young, we were restricted to our *para* (hamlet) and the *bhadralok* were our intermediaries with anything outside the village. The field on which we worked was theirs, the *pradhan* was theirs and the *chowkidar* (watch-man) was theirs. We would dare not to venture out to the babu's office or to send our children to school. But this has changed. Now the *morols* do not even dare to shout at us. Even the lowest section of society knows where the member lives and where the Panchayat is located and when we go there we are received and given proper attention.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, there is a shift which is perceptibly slow, but qualitatively distinct. It is a shift which continues to operate, and is therefore much basis to conclude that CPI (M) is actively and consciously furthering the process.

The nature of relationship between the upper caste leadership and the emerging Dalit leadership in the Panchayat is witnessing a change. In spite of prolonged backwardness and economic dependence, it is hoped that the poor Dalits may replace the rich leadership of upper castes provided they are united, assertive and dedicated. Datta has given an example of how when the disadvantaged recognize their rights and raise their voice, transform the existing power relations.<sup>35</sup> The protagonist in this study is Maiah Wankhede, an upper caste, urban based, educated woman who married a Dalit activist. When she heard that the Panchayat was reserved for women candidates, she decided to contest the election. In spite of all fair and unfair means used by the opponent

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Datta, Bisakha 'The amount of work the ladies did, the men will not do and who will make the Chapatis: A study of all women Panchayats in Maharashtra' Calcutta. Stree. 1997.



(who belonged to rich upper caste), she won the election because she and her panel focused on issues that concerned the common man like problem of water, toilet and fuel, etc.

Thus it can be gathered from the above study that the participation of disadvantaged groups brings about an overall change in the nature of village politics. As these groups do not have to perpetuate their hegemony and do not aim to retain power at any cost, it is expected that they would try to establish their political base by working on issues which concern all. It is only when they establish their credentials, they can hope to win even after the reservation ends for that particular constituency. Neither do they enjoy the traditional authority of the dominant castes, nor do they have money power (generally Dalits belong to landless agricultural labour class or small peasants) so as to influence voters. It is agreed that they are winning seats because of reservation but this reservation is temporary because Article 243 D provides for rotation of constituencies. It clearly states that reserved seats both for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes as well as women, shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in Panchayat.<sup>36</sup>

Thus representation for disadvantaged sections inheres a promise to bring about a positive change in the quality of politics. This will make Indian democracy truly representative, as the elected members belong to all cross sections of population. This would trigger a process of inculcating leadership qualities among the Dalits who hitherto have contended themselves in being followers. It is alleged time and again that they are

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<sup>36</sup> This provision has also generated much debate because it is argued by various scholars that if it is to mean that rotation would take place every five years, then it would be difficult for them to get elected again without reservation. Because of their lack of prior experience and their inability to manipulate the system, they are most likely to lose.

See more on this in Meenakshisundaram, S.S 'The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment: A Case for further Amendment' in *Journal of Rural Development*, vol.61(4). 1997.

used as proxies by the traditionally rich upper castes, but even in that position they are accorded a minimal respect by the influential. The final authority to sign papers lie with the Dalits in reserved constituencies, thus, providing for automatic bargaining and negotiation wherein the upper castes cannot take them for granted. They may be signing on dotted lines, but at least they are learning about the procedures of the government work and are internalizing the positional authority that inheres in the post of Panch or Sarpanch.

This 'political education' in long run would bring about a change in their self - perception and they would assert for their rights and privileges. The experience of reservation in jobs, education and at national and regional level politics provide ample evidence of the fact that how over the years, Dalits have imbibed the mainstream values and skills which has furthered their aspiration to achieve equality. It has given them a voice to articulate their relative deprivation and exploitation that stems from the realization that even when they acquire material wealth, they are looked down upon (for their ascriptive identity). This 'status inconsistency'<sup>37</sup> of elected Dalit Panchs and Sarpanchs (they being at the bottom of wealth and status scale and occupying positions of power) would no doubt generate in them an awareness to collectively mobilize themselves to assert for their rights.

It has been pointed out in a study concerning participation of Dalits that the reservation has given the disadvantaged sections a social recognition in villages, which they have been denied for centuries.<sup>38</sup> Given the fact that as the constituency gets smaller,

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<sup>37</sup> Concept put forward by Gerhard Lenski to explain that how an individual can be differentially located on the tripartite axis of wealth, status and power.

<sup>38</sup> Prasad, Devi and Haranath, S. 'Participation of Women and Dalits in Gram Panchayat' in *Journal of Rural Development*. NIRD Hyderabad. Vol. 23(3). 2004. pp. 297-318.

the worth of every single vote increases proportionately, the Dalit vote has emerged as a force to reckon with in Gram Panchayat elections. Recognition of the fact that every village in India has some Dalit population, local level politicians are forced to focus specially on the needs of lower castes. Thus panchayats can act as 'platforms' around which the Dalits could gather and conduct their political activities, educating and mobilizing their own people. This political experience would not go waste as in long run it would definitely bring about a change in the rural power structure. The process may be slow and evolutionary but it would lead to a revolutionary change. No doubt that the traditionally dominant castes have tried to retain hold over the Panchayats by supplanting the system of reservation, but at the same time it cannot be denied that they have acceded to the fact that Dalits cannot be taken for granted. This sentiment is aptly presented by Jodhka in his article about the Dalit assertion in Punjab.<sup>39</sup> When Jodhka asked a Dalit of Talhan village about the prospects of Dalits exercising their rights, the latter replied that what can be done in a council in which majority is of Jats. However, he also added that Jats cannot have their way all the times. "Their domination and Sardari will not go unquestioned".

Hence it can be said that rather than off hand dismissing Panchayati Raj, and arriving at conclusions that it should be discontinued and dismantled would be too hasty. Although it is agreed that it has not lived up to the expectations it had generated, yet to pronounce it as completely unsuccessful would be a gross misunderstanding of the reality. The solution lies not in restricting democracy, but to deepen it and make it more participatory.

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<sup>39</sup> Jodhka, S.S. 'Sikhism and Caste Question: Dalits and their Politics in Contemporary Punjab' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Vol.38. Jan-Aug 2004. pp. 165-192.

Findings of a study conducted by NIRD (National Institute of Rural Development) study of some of the states would be illustrative of the potential of Panchayats and how they could be made more conducive to the development of Dalit identity.<sup>40</sup> These findings are summed up as under:

- 1) In all the states the Scheduled Castes have benefited in terms of representation by the reservations provided to them in the elective posts. In some states, the other backward classes also have benefited greatly through the reservation provided to them.
- 2) In most states, separate Standing Committees have been set up to deal with subjects relating directly to the welfare of marginalized sections. However, the subjects and functions transferred to the PRIs themselves as also the staff being very few, these measures have made very little additional impact on the lives of marginalized people.
- 3) Non- constitution of District Planning Committees in most states has denied a voice to the marginalized sections in the planning for their economic development and social justice.
- 4) Non integration of DRDAs with the PRIs, where today the marginalized have political representation, denies them participation in economic decision making and implementation of weaker section development programmes since most programs and resources of the DRDAs including institutional finances mobilized by them are aimed at the eradication of poverty of the marginalized sections of the society.

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<sup>40</sup> As published in Panchayati Raj Report 2001.

- 5) In certain areas failure to address the past injustices and imbalances has rendered the social justice provisions of the amendment meaningless.
- 6) The potential of Gram Sabha as a forum of equality and transparency has not been fully utilized in the social and economic contexts of the marginalized, excepting in Kerala and West Bengal and one or two other states.
- 7) There has been no uniform effort to forge linkages between substantive development subjects that would bring economic and social empowerment to the marginalized, such as land reforms, agriculture and allied activities, village industries, education, employment and providing a say to the representatives of Dalit and marginalized communities in integrated management and welfare programs.

One of the starkest finding of this study was the prevalence of practice of 'Untouchability' even towards the elected Dalit representatives. When it comes to the amenities and services required in areas inhabited by Dalits such as drinking water, electricity, roads, drains, old age pensions, widow pensions, loans and similar other needs, they got no priority or much lower priority.

Thus if the intended goals of Panchayati Raj namely participation and empowerment of weaker sections is to be achieved then a lot of ground work needs to be done. The failures should not demoralize the Dalits and must not dampen the spirit of policy makers. What is required is a concerted effort to overcome the barriers and constraints.

First and foremost the institution of Gram Sabha should work in the manner it was conceived in the seventy-third amendment. The rationale for creation of it was to have a deliberative space so as to take democracy downwards and to have a more participatory 'direct democracy' within the realm of representative democracy. Such a village council with no boundaries of caste, class and gender was supposed to bring about integration and involve every single adult in the decision-making process. By acting as watch-dog of the Panchayat, it would regulate the affairs for the benefit of all. Moreover it would not only set rules but would also affect what kind of values are established in the society. The value of equality and social justice are natural concomitants of such an open to all body.

However, as pointed out by various studies, the institution of Gram Sabha is intentionally bypassed and subverted by the dominant sections of the village. They change the 'rules of the game' so as to serve their own interests by extending their power. As clearly enunciated in the study conducted by Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organizations (NCRSO) "in vast majority of these Gram Sabha meetings, the minimum required quorum as prescribed by each state was rarely fulfilled. However, in nearly one-third of cases under study, record of the Gram Sabha meetings were completed even when the meetings were either not held or there was no quorum".<sup>41</sup>

Various strategies are employed by dominant sections like not calling meetings at all, calling meetings without prior notice, not framing appropriate rules for conduct of meetings, preparing no agenda, keeping no record of meetings, etc. so as to govern

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<sup>41</sup> PRIA and NCRSO 'Local Self Governance: Myth or Reality of Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha' paper quoted by Peter DeSouza.

Panchayats according to their own whims and fancies. Taking advantage of the low attendance the dominant sections claim to speak for whole of the village and pass off their self- interest as public interest. Even Dalits find it convenient not to attend Gram Sabha, lest they invite the ire of the dominant castes. Moreover some of them find it easier to get things done through their traditional spokesperson rather than to participate in Gram Sabha which requires time, energy and skills. This political apathy does not augur well for all the villagers in general and Dalits in particular. Every effort should be made by the government to guarantee that Gram Sabha functions regularly and effectively. Dalit representatives may not be able to raise their voice alone, but presence of their brethren in the Sabha might lead to their resistance and assertion. Moreover a good attendance is at the heart of a decentralized democracy because it ensures transparency, accountability, responsibility, participation, political self-realization and good governance. "In the absence of good attendance, the rural oligarchy will continue to rule and do so now by invoking the authority of the Gram Sabha, providing a democratic veneer for oligarchic rule."<sup>42</sup>

Thus Dalits need to be made aware of their rights and the advantages of participation in Gram Sabha. Their fear needs to be taken care of by an effective law and order system so that no violent incidents take place<sup>43</sup>. Moreover Dalit representatives need to be imparted skills and education so that they can effectively participate and are not governed by others just because of pure ignorance. Capacity building efforts should also include imparting of education of Constitutional rights relating to freedom of speech and association, which are relevant to the marginalized people's right to peacefully

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<sup>42</sup> Desouza, Peter Ronald *The Struggle for Local Government : Indian Democracy's New Phase*. op. cit. p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew George 'Gram Sabha and Social Audit' in *Kurukshetra*. October 1999. p.29.

organize themselves and demand and access their social, economic and political rights. The training should also include the education of dominant castes so as to challenge the traditional beliefs and mindset due to which they consider ruling others as a prerogative. Social integration should be the key in emancipation of the marginalized sections of society. For this the support of all sections particularly the non-marginalized is essential. Until and unless non-marginalized sections accept the rightful position of the Dalits, there would always be backlash. Every backlash puts the clock back by several years. Hence all sections of society must participate in this effort to build trust and harmony.

It seems romantic that education would bring about a change in the exploitative system that has existed for centuries. Still a start can be made in the right direction. It does not mean, however, that their rights need to be trampled till then. It needs to be realized that the mores and norms can be changed effectively only when their structural base i.e. land relations is altered significantly. Thus there is need for land reforms including tenurial rights and access to technology and credit so as to make small holdings and assets viable. This needs to be contextualized in the modern era of privatization, globalization and liberalization which is seen to be working against the poor and the marginalized sections. The Panchayati Raj experiment can act as a bulwark against the loosening grip of state over its sovereignty as far as economic affairs are concerned. The marginalized sections in particular and the rural India in general have been neglected in the era of globalization. The imbalance thus generated can be corrected only if people have more control over their lives, rather than one centralized government deciding everything.



It would be premature to come to conclusions right away and to give up the efforts in making Panchayati Raj a success. This would be playing in the hands of the traditional elite and giving in to their blackmail. Dalit assertion of politically organized nature is a recent phenomenon in the rural side, for which Panchayati Raj can definitely act as catalyst. It would definitely generate a Dalit middle class of Panchayati Raj representatives, who would constitute a critical mass for further emancipation and movement. They may not be a potent force till now, but it might not be too far when they refuse to be taken for granted or to be used as proxies. Even in studies which paint a grim picture of Panchayati Raj experiment, it is admitted that something has been achieved at least in terms of formal representation and authority.

All the sections of society especially academicians, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and social activists must see to it that the forces unleashed by panchayati Raj and Dalit assertion are utilized properly so as to ensure social justice for the sections who always had a 'ringside' view of power. A genuine democracy must value each citizen equally and Panchayati Raj being the most direct and most participatory form of democracy has the potential to achieve this and radically transform the rural side. Only an enabling environment is required. The government needs to implement the act more seriously by devolving more power and financial resources to PRIs.

Hopefully the caste, class and ethnic polarities would give way to the only polarity that has come to the force in the recent years that is between the people and the elite, and between the spirit of change and that of stagnancy and domination. An assessment by Rajni Kothari made in early 90's hold valid even today.

A crucial challenge faces Indian democracy today. It is necessary that issue is not left merely in hands of government and parties, prisoners of entrenched interests and narrow time-spans. It is an issue on which non-party activists, intellectuals, opinion makers and the concerned citizenry as a whole should keep the pressure on.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Kothari Rajni 'Perspective on Decentralization' in *Vikalp*. Vol IV No.2, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra. Bombay. 1995. p.27.

## CONCLUSION

The seventy-third amendment is celebrated as an important benchmark in the political and social history of India. Politically it envisages constituting a new India which would be more democratic, more dynamic and which would have a more egalitarian power structure. Through the instrument of 'direct democracy', Panchayati Raj would turn the traditional 'hierarchical power structure' upside down and would bring democracy closest to people, thus flattening the power structure by making it more broad-based. Socially, it envisions the 'inclusion' of hitherto excluded groups (like Dalits, Tribes and Women) by providing for their participation in decision-making processes.

It constitutes a radical departure from previous two phases of Panchayati Raj institutions, constituted after Balvant Rai Mehta and Ashok Mehta Committee reports respectively. The point of departure is the 'real' representation it provides to the disadvantaged communities and categories namely women, Dalits and Adivasis. About one million women and nearly 700,000 Dalits and Adivasis are elected to represent the interests of rural India.

However as noted in the chapter on post seventy-third amendment scenario, there is still a long way to go before these excluded groups could integrate meaningfully with the Panchayati Raj institutions. Even after fifty years of independence and various constitutional mandates, Dalits and Women work as proxies for their masters (dominant caste males). Though they are present in Panchayats because of 'opportunity structure' provided by Constitution, they do not participate as 'equals'. They are still regarded as outsiders as far as power sharing is concerned.

However, at the same time there is also evidence of these groups recognizing their rights and asserting their newfound identity. In modern day India, caste may have lost its old structural form that governed all social institutions and determined modes of interaction but it is still very much relevant in the present day 'identity politics'. It constitutes one of the most important bases on which lower castes are organizing themselves and asserting their presence in modern day politics. How Panchayati Raj would contribute in enhancing or arresting this assertion remains to be explored. Detailed empirical studies need to be carried out in order to understand the unfolding of this dynamics wherein caste and Panchayati Raj interact with each other. Whether Panchayati Raj would be able to transform the present inegalitarian structure in favour of Dalits (majority of whom belong to lower class also); or whether the Rural Power Structure would stifle all the present initiatives, remain to be seen and studied. Such a detailed empirical study needs to be appreciative of the rural power structure in its fullest form where the three axes of caste, class and gender constitute a nexus (as explained in chapter two).

Such studies must also raise the methodological questions of how to differentiate macro from micro while still retaining their organic linkages. How participation needs to be measured and understood needs a more precise and clear definition. Moreover how the modern day Panchayati Raj institutions interact with the traditional structures of power like caste-panchayats need to be fully mapped out.

The present day knowledge regarding the interaction of caste and Panchayati Raj is only informative and sketchy which inhibits drawing of straightforward conclusions. This research has pointed towards the various lacunae (methodological and otherwise)

that exist in the present corpus of literature. Especially in the last decade, much of the literature on Panchayati Raj has more or less focused on women's participation. The village and its concomitant caste structure seem to have fallen in disfavour of sociologists.

This is not to say that issues concerning women are not important. No doubt the seventy third amendment is historical in providing for one-third reservation for women, which need to be studied in detail. But at the same time it needs to be understood that caste still constitutes an important dimension that governs participation in democratic structures like Panchayati Raj. The same amendment is also important for Dalits because it provides them representation in proportion to their population. Moreover, even the discourse on women's participation cannot be divorced from the discourse on caste because Dalit women do not participate on similar terms as upper caste women. Thus an inter-subjective approach is needed in understanding of caste relations, which could situate the interaction of caste and politics in a particular context of Panchayati Raj. The economic, political, demographic, religious and ideological correlates of this interaction cannot be ignored.

Moreover, as pointed in the chapter on the evolution of Panchayati Raj, how caste structure would interact with the political structure of Panchayati Raj would itself be determined by how democratic decentralization is perceived by politicians, planners, researchers and general populace. Over the years three discourses centering on Panchayati Raj (having implications for participation of disadvantaged groups) have emerged namely: developmental discourse, governance discourse and democratic discourse.

It is the first one, the 'developmental discourse', which has always occupied the centre stage ever since the evolution of Panchayati Raj. The aim and objective of Balvant Rai Mehta Committee was not to determine ways and means so as to establish 'Gram Swaraj', but to provide for structures through which participation of community can be ensured in Community Development Projects. Thus Panchayati Raj was conceived as instrument through which people could participate more actively and more directly in the development programmes. Therefore it is no surprise that much of the report's focus was on activities like agriculture, irrigation etc. The whole approach was technical in nature and social concerns like involvement of disadvantaged groups had only a passing reference. Though Asoka Mehta Committee tried to address the problems of participation, it also conceived participation in a developmental framework. It was more or less an attempt of regional dominant castes to extend their political influence down to village, by capturing the important positions responsible for developmental activities. Though, it had a social context, its scope was restricted to only few non-Congress governed states. The seventy third amendment has tried to break the mould, by providing for reservations. Still it locates Panchayati Raj in developmental paradigm. The precursors of this amendment like Singhvi committee, Rao committee, and District Collector's conference very well point out that how Panchayati Raj was to usher in a better development by devolution of more powers and functions to PRIs. This is evident from the fact that most of the states (except Punjab and Bihar) in their respective Acts don't say that the objective is to establish institutions of local 'self-government'. Most of the State governments see the Act as a tool to establish panchayats as their agencies and nothing more than that.

The second discourse is intimately connected with the first one because Good Governance entails better administration of rural areas. Thus Panchayats ensure that the local leaders and elite who have a better knowledge of resources and social traditions of a village would be in a better position to administer them rather than far away located central state. The primacy accorded to local level planning in Asoka Mehta committee report, which finally culminated in District Level Planning in Article 243ZD of Constitution (introduced by Seventy-third amendment) goes on to show that how better utilization of resources constitutes the central plank of governance. This aspect would end the isolation of Indian village and help it to get integrated with the mainstream of Indian nation. Given the size of Indian Union, it makes much more sense to decentralize administration so as to provide for better governance. Thus, Panchayati Raj can bring about a holistic development through better utilization of resources and through better targeting of credit flow and other central initiatives etc. A villager by acting as builder of his own village through the institution of Panchayati Raj, would identify itself better with nation-state.

The third discourse concerning Panchayati Raj is its objective of extending, expanding and deepening democracy by taking it to grass root level. Through the direct participation of villagers in 'Gram Sabha', decision making process would be made more broad based and would instill a sense of ownership among the villagers. Periodic elections would unleash the potential of village wherein representatives would come up with agendas and objectives that could address concerns of all sections of population. This discourse is primarily responsible for ensuring the inclusion of excluded groups as stated above. Firstly, by providing reservation to weaker sections, it would make them a

party to the power structure, however skewed it may be. Their presence in Panchayats would provide weaker sections a platform to learn about the structure and processes of democratic politics and thus to conscientize them about their rights. This would go a long way in bringing about political revolution where Dalits and other disadvantaged groups would be able to assert themselves. Moreover even if there are non-reserved candidates, they can exclude the participation and votes of the Dalits only at their own peril.

However in independent India, the discourse on democracy has always been secondary and incidental to the discourses on development and governance. This primacy of developmental agenda, coupled with lower bargaining positions of Dalits provides an explanation for the neglect of Dalits over so many years. Even after Seventy third amendment this anomaly has not been corrected fully. Until and unless, the local self-government through fair and free elections becomes the primary goal of Panchayati Raj, no big breakthrough can be made. Until and unless every citizen of India realizes his or her individual as well as community rights and responsibilities in a democracy, Dalits would not emerge as a potent force. The State level politicians along with bureaucrats would continue to stifle the growth of PRIs unless citizens take it upon themselves to protect the democratic spirit.

The adverse affect of according primacy to development and governance at the cost of democracy is that political actors as well as general population would consider Panchayats as only one of the many tools available to carry out a holistic development. As a result, these democratic structures would be conveniently sidelined if other mechanism suits the political class and bureaucracy. Here a reference to farmers' suicide in Andhra Pradesh would be suitable. As pointed by P. Sainath, the Naidu government's



*Janmabhoomi* model of development gutted the panchayats and curbed local democracy. Hence, the panchayats have proved totally ineffective during the agrarian crisis.<sup>1</sup> *JanamBhoomi* was seen as a whole new "model of development", which aimed, among many other things, "to involve people in the implementation of development programmes." However in practice, the program run by bureaucrats established a parallel set up of its own, which led to a sharp centralization of power. New committees came up at the village level that were not elected by the people as a whole but only by small groups with vested interests, who could be managed from above.

Thus developmental paradigm led to subordination and utter neglect of Panchayati Raj structures. Participation in the scheme remained at a mere theoretical level, thus exacerbating the inequalities that existed in the social structure. Thus, Panchayats need to be seen as a platform which provides a space for lower caste-class people to exercise whatever restricted power they enjoy. Moreover, Panchayati Raj during the process of democratisation would contribute to capacity building of local people. It would throw up better leaders who would have more to contribute to national level politics because of their grass root experience. This holds much relevance for Dalit candidates who have little prior experience of participation in positions of authority and decision-making.

Another important factor that needs to be explored and analyzed is the effect that the process of Globalization has on the participation of disadvantaged groups in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The process of democratic decentralization and globalization occupy the same temporal space in Indian history. This cannot be dismissed simply as a

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<sup>1</sup> Sainath P. *Little panchayat, percentage raj* as posted on [www.Indiatogether.org](http://www.Indiatogether.org)

mere coincidence. The enactment of Panchayati Raj just followed the years when Indian nation state made its first serious attempt in 1991 to integrate its economy with the global one. They together symbolize the post-socialist era's collective revulsion for the state.

It needs to be remembered that both the World Bank as well as OECD countries consider 'participatory development' as the preconditions of 'Good Governance'. Thus they prescribe roll back of state leaving more space for participatory structures. This new strategy which is explicitly pro-globalization' and pro-liberalization' has had a twin-fold impact on the discourse on governance and development.

Firstly, the new discourse favours a rapid rollback of the Indian State, thus, theoretically leading to a natural devolution of powers to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. If indeed it is so, then the important question to ask, surely, is, what is the relationship between the larger process of globalization, and the aspirations towards democracy and decentralization? Are these compatible, or inherently conflicting tendencies?

It needs to be pointed out that what happens in principle may not happen in practice. As a principle, a movement away from state should facilitate emergence of local participatory structures but in reality it is not that straight forward. The local economy, however, particularly in a marketised context, is essentially a part and parcel of the larger economy and intimately connected to policies that define the macro economy.

At the macro-economic level i.e. at central and state level, the process of policy-making is predominantly a technocratic, and therefore an elite-centred, rather than a participatory, exercise. The policy making was technocratic even before globalization, but ideological concepts like socialism gave it a participatory character. Now, post-liberalisation, the language of policy making has become more technocratic making it

incomprehensible to the ordinary rural folk. Moreover, the present set up of decentralization does not guide us as of what could be the connecting bridges between the increasingly technocratic character of public policy-making, on the one hand, and the ostensible commitment to using people's knowledge and participation at local levels. When reduced to a question of choice between these two ends of the knowledge spectrum, the state's preference is obviously for a technocratic orientation to policy-making rather than to people's knowledge. Thus technocracy wins over participation, defeating the very purpose of Panchayati Raj. This impact is much more adverse on disadvantaged groups, because they are the ones who are getting first time opportunity to participate through these decentralized structures. Hence the process of globalization in its present form is inhibiting the learning process and participation of disadvantaged groups like Dalits.

When the entire Panchayati Raj Institution have no role to play in taking macro-economic decisions which effect the lives of rural populace, then to expect political revolution from it would be unrealistic. If the macro framework detracts from the logic of local empowerment, the local institutional context is no more facilitating for the poor. Today there is an ideological vacuum, as a state-led and redistributive developmental model no longer provides a legitimizing discourse and the market does not offer an alternative ideological platform. Democratic decentralization offers a readymade legitimizing formula, subtly replacing the commitment to economic redistribution with a misleading rhetoric of political empowerment. But where existing structures of inequality are left intact and become compounded with the disadvantages of marketisation, political empowerment is a useful slogan, not a realistic or genuine goal.

Similarly the role played by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) must be put to test. Avowedly, they help in enhancing participation and give it a new qualitative shift, but how much of it is translated on ground remains to be explored. It needs to be remembered that most of these agencies are funded by international organizations like World Bank, USAID etc. Hence the political agenda of these must be taken into account while evaluating their contribution. Moreover these agencies and organizations also have their biases like bias towards urban, tarmac, bias for places where there are projects, bias towards people who are relatively better off and are user of their services, and bias of being bound by funding agencies' specifications. It is much like that weaker sections like Dalits are ignored by these organizations because they do not belong to the vocal section of the rural populace.

Hence the whole context of Panchayati Raj needs to be analyzed in a holistic manner so as to find out the conceptual flaws and practical difficulties so as to make it a reality. Panchayati Raj institutions are inserted within the existing political and economic system, rather than as a challenge to the latter. Typically village strongmen (frequently representing a higher caste and superior economic power) and/or local bureaucrats, have wielded power within the village. The logic of Panchayati Raj is based to some extent on the principle of cooperation and collaboration between these agents on the one hand and the poor and the marginalised on the other. Yet, the simple question, why should the local strongman and the bureaucrat collaborate with the lower classes in a programme which potentially spells the end of their power and vested interests, has not been addressed, or even acknowledged? The hope is that somehow using the strength of their numbers, the poor can use the institution for their own benefit. And yet, the history of democracy has

long established that numbers per se do not mean power, numerical strength translates into power only via organization and movement, and never otherwise.

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