

**INCLUSION OF THE EXCLUDED GROUP AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: EXPERIENCES FROM VILLAGE PANCHAYATS OF MADHYA PRADESH (INDIA)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Social exclusion involves the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live on the basis of perceived group attributes like social origin, ethnicity and religious conviction. Social exclusion in India is not a new phenomenon. History bears witness to exclusion of social groups on the basis of caste, class, gender and religion. Most notable is the category of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. They were denied the access and control over economic and social opportunities as a result they were relegated to the categories of excluded groups.

It is true that the problems of the excluded classes were addressed by the state through the enactment of anti-discriminatory laws and policies to foster their social inclusion and empowerment. Despite these provisions, exclusion and discrimination of these excluded groups continued. So there was a need to address issues of 'inclusion' in a more direct manner.

It took nearly four and half decades for the Indian Parliament to pass the epoch-making Constitution Amendment Acts in 1992. The act had extensive effect on the power structure at the grassroots level which was in favour of the upper castes and locally dominant castes.

Panchayati raj in Madhya Pradesh has made a big headway in the working for the inclusion of these excluded groups. The leadership role played by the under privileged, poor and the marginalised people of the society at the grassroots level is indeed remarkable because two decades earlier these people were excluded from public life and political participation for them was a distant dream.

The main focus of this paper is to unfold the changes that have taken place in the rural power structure after 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. It will also explore how the involvement of this excluded group of the society at the grassroots politics has altered the development priority in favour of the needs and aspirations of vulnerable section of society and also how this group has been able to claim and acquire a legitimate share in the power structure.

**Introduction**

Social exclusion involves the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live on the basis of perceived group attributes like social origin, ethnicity and religious conviction. It is the

denial of equal opportunities imposed by certain groups of society upon others which leads to inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society (Chinna Rao, 2010).

If we look at the history of India, social exclusion is not a new phenomenon. History bears witness to exclusion of social groups on the bases of caste, class, gender and religion. Most notable is the category of Dalits (constitutionally categorised as ‘Scheduled Caste’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’) and women. They were denied the access and control over economic and social opportunities as a result they were relegated to the category of excluded groups.

At the time of Independence, the rural society was mostly feudal in nature. Dalits were socially excluded from the mainstream of society in every aspect i.e. cultural, social, political and economic. They became the victims of the rigid and immobile caste system. Dalits had no place in social and political decision-making. The ideas and orders were imposed on them by the dominant upper castes and this was the main hindrance in the nation building process after independence. Same was the condition of the women.

As this paper primarily looks at the role of Panchayats from the perspective of the excluded class it is essential to discuss the views of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar vis-a-vis the incorporation of PRIs in the Constitution.

Village swaraj was the alternative of Gandhi’s vision of an independent India. This was due to his fundamental opposition to parliamentary democracy which he saw as perpetuating domination and his belief in an economy of limited wants based on local production, resources, consumption and technologies (De Souza, 2002).

Nehru’s views on the Indian village were different to that of Gandhi. In reply to a letter from Gandhiji, Nehru wrote, “I do not understand why village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence. A village normally speaking is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent” (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009).

Dr. Ambedkar had similar view. He believed that the path of the future lay in a constitutional parliamentary democracy. For him, the village represented a regressive India, a source of oppression. The modern state hence had to build safeguards against such social oppression and the only way it could be affected was through the adoption of a parliamentary model of politics (De Souza, 2002).

A compromise was reached and village panchayats were given due importance in the Constitution of India (Article 40, Part-IV-Directive Principles of State Policy). The constitutional provision 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”. India’s quest for an inclusive governance system at the grassroots level thus receives a serious jolt. Efforts were made to set up Panchayats at village level through various legislations in all states and Union Territories in the early years of independence. What institutions were created at the district level and below after 1950

remained strong in form but weak in content. Social justice through social transformation and democratic process remained distant dream for decades.

It is true that the problems of the excluded classes were addressed by the state through the enactment of anti-discriminatory laws and policies to foster their social inclusion and empowerment. The Anti Untouchability Act of 1955, Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976 and the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989 were some of the legal steps taken by the Government for the welfare of these communities. In addition to legal protection, the state also used affirmative action of reservation policy to provide due share in education, employment and other services.

Despite these provisions for equal participation and empowerment, exclusion and discrimination of these excluded groups continued; so there was a need to address issues of “inclusion” in a more direct manner. It took nearly four decades for the Indian Parliament to pass the epoch-making Constitution Amendment Acts on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1992. To broaden this inclusion, the Parliament provided reservation for these disadvantaged sections in the local bodies through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Act. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, is a significant step in the political history of independent India. The Act, which provides the much required constitutional recognition to the long standing need of developing power of people at the grassroots level, promises not only decentralising administration and local self-government, but also participation of those groups of persons hitherto considered as weaker sections, namely, SCs, STs and women. Article 243 (D) makes provision for reservation of SCs, STs, in every Panchayat in proportion to the population of that area. Such seats will be filled by direct election and shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats so reserved shall be reserved for women belonging to SC/ST. Besides, not less than one-third of the total number of seats (including the seats reserved for SC/ST women) to be filled by direct election shall also be reserved for women and allotted by rotation. The office of the chairpersons in Panchayats at the village level or any other level shall be reserved for the SC/ST categories and women in such manner as the legislature of the state by law may provide (Bohra, 1997).

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of Dalits in the rural society. It was a turning point in the history of local governance with far reaching consequences for Indian federalism, decentralisation, grassroots democracy and people’s participation in planning for development, gender equality and social justice. It has thrown open political opportunities in the Panchayats as well as overall transformation of these disadvantaged sections.

Thus, after years of discussion and debates finally on 24<sup>th</sup> April and 1<sup>st</sup> June 1993 the panchayats and municipalities got the constitutional status and were defined as ‘institutions of self government’. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act could not be perceived as a response to pressure from the grassroots but an increasing recognition that the existing structure of the government needed to be transformed. It was a political drive of the centre to see the PRIs as a solution to the Governmental crisis that India was experiencing (World Bank: 2000).

The purpose behind the devaluation of power to the village panchayats, through 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, was to mobilise people towards the socio-economic development and to involve them in all the activities of the communities. Its objectives include reduction in the size of work of the higher level government and leaving the responsibility to the people to decide their destiny as per the new dispensation (Sisodia: 2011).

If we look at the history of working of Panchayati Raj in India since 1993, we find that it has made a big headway since then. The leadership role played by the under privileged, poor and the marginalised people of the society at the grassroots level is indeed remarkable in the history of the politics of India because two decade earlier these people were excluded from public life and political participation for them was a distant dream. The involvement of this excluded group of the society in grassroots politics has generated immense interest among the scholars to explore how these people would be able to tackle the local problems, chalk out their plan for development and implement the government schemes.

### **Madhya Pradesh: Background of Panchayat Raj**

The power structure in Gram Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh prior to 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act was in favour of the upper castes and locally dominant castes in the society. The emergence of such type of power structure not only defeated the basic implications of democratic decentralisation but also the aim of rural development with social justice. In this context, reservation provided scope for women and for the members of SC/ ST communities to have participation in Panchayats. Before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act came into operation there was no effective participation of the weaker sections. In earlier state Acts there was no reservation of seats for SCs and STs.

Madhya Pradesh government deserves the credit for its sincere efforts and commitment for democratic decentralisation. The government has been extremely receptive to ground realities about the inadequacies of the Panchayat system and has continuously striven to devise strategies for making Panchayats effective institutions of local self-governance. The then Chief Minister Digvijay Singh had introduced a number of reforms and amendments in Panchayati Raj to strengthen the grassroots institutions.

After the Constitutional Amendment, Madhya Pradesh was the first State to organise elections to the Panchayats. As of now the Panchayats in Madhya Pradesh is succeeding the forth term resulting in considerable change in the governance system at the grassroots. If we look at the performance of the reforms carried out in the last two decades it conveys an impressive story of deepening democracy.

### **Methodology: Context**

This paper is based on the study of the process and pattern at grassroots level in Ujjain district of Madhya Pradesh. A representative sampling framework of 10 Gram Panchayats

from the district were chosen for the in-depth study. The selection of the Gram Panchayats was purposive keeping in mind the representation of various categories of leadership and location of panchayat. Panchayat Representatives, Former Panchayat Representatives and Gram Sabha Member/Villagers were the units of observation. From each selected Gram Panchayat - 6 Panchayat Representatives (1- Sarpanch, 1- Up-sarpanch and 4- Panch), 6 Former Panchayat Representatives and 6 Gram Sabha Members (Male and Female) were taken for an in-depth interview. Thus from 10 selected Gram Panchayats of the district, 60 Panchayat Representatives, 60 Former Panchayat Representatives and 60 Gram Sabha Members/Villagers were chosen.

### **Participation, Attitudes and Perceptions of Panchayati Raj Representatives**

After Independence several efforts have been made by the government to address the issues in the rural areas. Several schemes were implemented and massive investments were made but the result was not up to the expectations. The top-down model of development was adopted with the hope that it will involve the poor and marginalised in the process of development. Unfortunately, no such thing happened and a distorted and uneven development process emerged, resulting in further concentrated of the resources and authority in few hands. The fruits of development were neither shared, nor did the poor and marginalised have access to it. The marginalised sections, be they the poor, women or rural people, continued to be marginalised. As a result 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act was passed to involve more and more people in the process of development. One of the primary objectives of the post 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Panchayat system was the organisation of institutions of local self governance. An institution which would initiate political processes leading to leadership development, empowerment and participation in self- governance of hitherto marginalised sections of the society. Significantly, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment of the Constitution ensured the inclusion of marginalised sections.

Two decades of functioning of Panchayati Raj clearly reflects that it has made significant impact on the socio-political processes, leading to substantial social churning in the case of women as well as to the people of all the castes to ascertain the participation of weaker and marginalized section of the society in the decision making process. Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to investigate the dynamics of local governance as well as understand the attitudes and perceptions of the panchayat raj representatives who have a very close experience of its functioning.

**Table 1**  
**Class**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	General	10	16.7
2	SC	34	56.7
3	ST	00	00.0
4	OBC	16	26.7
	Total	60.0	100.0

The background information of respondents depicts that the overall scenario of leadership at the grassroots level. The respondents have been classified in the category of general, SC and ST to make the assessment of the shift in the power structure. Maximum 56.7 per cent of the respondents are from SC category, 26.7 per cent are from OBC whereas 16.7 percent are from general category. This shows that there is good number of representation of the marginalised section of the society.

**Table 2**  
**Main criteria of dominance in the village**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Criteria of dominance in the village</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Age	02	03.3
2	Religion	18	30.0
3	Education	03	05.0
4	Caste	10	16.7
5	Political Personality	36	60.0
6	Wealth	16	26.7
7	All	09	15.0

Table 2 shows the criteria of dominance in the villages. 60 per cent respondents are of the view that political personality is the main criteria of dominance. 30 per cent respondents express view about religion. 26.7 per cent regards wealth. 16.7 per cent feels the caste. 15 per cent respondents answer all. This analysis shows that maximum respondents regard political personality as the main criteria of dominance.

**Table 3**  
**Basis of voting in panchayat election**

<i>S. No.</i>	<b>Basis of voting in panchayat election</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Caste based	14	23.3
2	Party based	29	48.3
3	Personal Image	48	80.0

Number of factors influences the voting behavior of the people at the village level. Table 3 clarifies the basis of receiving votes. 80 per cent respondents received votes due to personal image. 48.3 per cent respondents earned vote on account of party support. 23.3 per cent respondents view that caste is the basis of receiving votes. It is evident from the above analysis that local elections are fought on personal image.

**Table 4**  
**Participation of weaker sections in gram panchayat meeting**

<i>S. No.</i>	<b>Weaker section</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Dalit	49	81.7
2	Womens	40	66.7
3	Other Backward class	56	93.3

After 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, due representation has been given to all the castes to participate in the panchayats affairs. It has been ascertained that particularly the weaker and the marginalised sections of the society are duly represented in the decision making process. The caste category wise representation of respondents as shown in table 4 reflects that maximum number 81.7 per cent are Dalits who participate in panchayat meetings. 66.7 per cent are women who participate in panchayat meetings and 93.3 per cent comes from OBC

who participate in panchayat meetings. This shows that there is considerable number of participation of weaker sections in gram panchayat meetings.

**Table 5**  
**Which group of peoples take decision in the Panchayat**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Caste/ Group</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	General	19	31.7
2	SC	02	03.3
3	ST	00	00
4	OBC	04	06.7
5	All	35	58.3
	Total	60	100.0

Table 5 provides the detail of the decision taken by a particular group in the village panchayat. 58.3 per cent of the respondents are of the view that the decisions are taken by all. 31.7 per cent respondents point out that decisions are taken by the general. 6.7 per cent express the view that decision are taken by OBC. Whereas 3.3 per cent says that the decisions are taken by the SC. The above analysis depicts that the in maximum cases the decisions are taken by all which is a very positive indication.



**Table 6**  
**Role of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Women in Panchayat Programmes**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Role of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Women</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	No role	09	15.0
2	To some extent	27	45.0
3	Mostly	03	05.0
4	Not given importance	09	15.0
5	Not get involved	12	20.0
	Total	60	100.0

Table 6 depicts the role of SC, ST and women in panchayat programmes. Overwhelming majority, 45 per cent of the respondents argues that SC, ST, and women play role to some extent. 20 per cent respondents feel that these group do not get involved. 15 per cent respondents says that these groups play no role or are not given importance. Whereas only 5 per cent respondents agree to their involvement. It is clear from the above analysis that majority of the respondents feel that these groups play the role to some extent. This shows that the marginalised groups still do not have complete access in the development process.

**Table 7**  
**Empowerment of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Women through Panchayats**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Empowerment of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Women through Panchayats</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Yes	44	73.3
2	No	16	26.7
	Total	60	100.0

73rd Constitutional Amendment was passed with an objective to empower the most marginalised section of the society. Table 7 provides the details regarding the empowerment of SC, ST and women through panchayats. 73.3 per cent of the respondents are of the view that empowerment of the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Women have become

possible through panchayat raj. Whereas 26.7 per cent says no. This is indeed very encouraging sign.

**Table 8**  
**Women reservation in Panchayat is justified**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Womens reservation in Panchayat justified</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Yes	50	83.3
2	No	10	16.7
	Total	60	100.0

Table 8 highlights the opinion with regard to justification of women reservation in panchayat. 83.3 per cent of the respondents justify women reservation whereas only 16.7 per cent respondents do not justify reservation. This shows that maximum number of respondents is in favor of giving reservation to women.

**Table 9**  
**Participation of Women or their involvement in  
decision making in Gram Sabha/ Gram Panchayat**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Participation of Women or their involvement in decision making</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Yes	38	63.3
2	No	22	36.7
	Total	60	100.0

Table 9 shows the participation of women in gram sabha or gram panchayat. 63.3 per cent representative report that women participate in gram sabha or gram panchayat. Whereas 36.7 of the respondents say that there is no involvement of women in decision making which is indeed an issue of concern that sizable number of the respondents has endorsed the fact that there is no participation of women in panchayat which is again a poor sign.

**Table 10**  
**Change among the weaker/dalit section due to their representation in PRI**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1	Increase in awareness towards local politics	17	28.3
2	Increase in the presence in meetings and interference in panchayat meetings	08	13.3
3	Change in the life style	21	35.0
4	Awareness towards asking for information under RTI	07	11.7
5	No change	07	11.7
	Total	60	100.0

Table 10 throws light on the changes among the weaker/dalit section due to their representation in PRI. 35 per cent of the respondents are of the view that there is a change in life style. 28.3 per cent points out that representation in PRI has enhanced their awareness towards local politics. 13.3 per cent of the respondents feel that there is an increase in the presence in meeting. 11.7 per cent argues that there is a change in awareness towards seeking information under RTI whereas 11.7 per cent respondents find no change among the panchayat representatives. It is very clear from the above illustration that there is an increase in the attendance in meeting and participation in panchayat decisions and there is an increase in life style and awareness towards local politics.

## Conclusion

To conclude it can be inferred that because of PRI there has been change in the rural power structure in favour of the weaker sections. Panchayat Raj leadership pattern as well as the authority structure in rural Madhya Pradesh has registered a major shift. Gradually, people belonging to lower socio-economic background have joined the Panchayat Raj institutions. Irrespective of the charge that dominant sections of the society misutilised the reservation provisions, it cannot be denied that the PRIs have made it possible for the weaker sections to get into elective offices and get into the pace of further development.

The process of empowerment of the marginalised especially the women and the dalits through panchayati raj institutions have raised the hope that it would alter the development priority in favour of the peoples need and aspirations. In the next decade or so the SCs, STs and women are bound to make future progress in their social status, leadership role, economic

position, educational position and political awareness. This will enable them to claim and acquire a legitimate share in the power structure. Local government is only the beginning and for many as it is just a nursery of leadership where from an inclusion has started taking place.

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