

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The vital role played by caste and patriarchy in the emerging women leadership in the governance of local self-government of Pithoragarh and Almora district of Uttarakhand

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This paper discusses the bearing of the primordial institutions of caste and patriarchy on the emerging women's leadership in local self-government in Uttarakhand. The state of Uttarakhand was established in the year 2000 dated 9th November. The introducing of reservation for the women in local self-government for the first time in the country, has also led to make similar provisions in the Uttarakhand panchayati raj act, 2003 following the 73rd constitution amendment in relation to panchayati raj act, 1992 in the constitution of India. This has enabled larger participation of women of deprived sections of our society in local self-governance. However, the caste and patriarchy have larger implication in the emergence and performance of women leaders at the grass root level. This paper is based on the women leaders who hail from the lower stratum of the society who are more democratic and people centered, whereas those people from the upper caste are more conservative and family centered. The lower caste women leaders outnumber their male counterparts in the panchayats which provides explanations for the presence have more than one third women elected members in panchayats. The paper is based on the fieldwork carried out in the Almora and Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand during 2003-2008.

**Key words:** Primordial Institution, caste, patriarchy, emergence, leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

The independence of the country and the republican form of polity with universal adult franchise has initiated the process of political modernization and democratization in the country. However, the political modernization is confined only to the state and national level politics. When India emerged as a republican country, the rural society was mostly feudal in nature. Therefore, the first task the nation building process confronted was how to transform the rural feudal and conservative society into a democratic and modern society (Agrawal, 1999). This necessitated the implementation of democratic decentralization in the country. The novel idea of democratic decentralization is conceived in the form of Panchayati raj institutions in India. Panchayati raj institutions in India constitute three tiers panchayati raj system, panchayats are constituted at the district level, block level and village level. At district is called Zilla panchayat, of block it is called Kshetra samiti and village level is called village (Panchayat, 1999).

Provision about Panchayati raj: The constitution (73rd Amendment Act, 1992). This is known as the seventy-third constitution amendment bill, 1992. It was passed by the parliament of India in December 1992 and became operative in May 1993 (24th April 1993) on its satisfaction by fifty percent of the states (Lamal, 1999).

Structure of Panchayati raj system in the state of Uttarakhand: According to the 73rd amendment act, 1992 of the Indian constitution, Uttarakhand panchayat act, 2003 was passed. According to the constitutional amendments three-tier that is, gram panchayat, Kshetra panchayat and Zilla panchayats were accorded statutory status (Mishra, 1999: 10-13; Sharma, 1998).

Mukta (1998) observes that women from the lower socio-economic order have been emerging as effective leaders of panchayats. In fact, her study shows that women from the affluent sections of the society lack initiative and are dummy representatives who are controlled by their family members. This raises an

important issue wherein the socio-economic positions of women do not necessarily determine their political participation. Snehlata (1997) made an attempt to explain this phenomenon by relating it to the caste structure and norms of the backward castes in the society. She argues that the high caste women are restricted to domestic activities despite their poor economic condition (Singh, 1995).

The traditional caste panchayats, which were decision-making bodies of the village, denied access to women as they did in case of Dalits. The rural socio-political life of upper caste was male-dominated and women were more voiceless spectators. However, the democratic decentralization has brought revolutionary changes in the rights of women at the gross-root level governance. The constitutional mandate making one-third of the seats in the local self-government reserved for women has brought drastic changes in the male dominated decision-making traditional bodies. The rise of women's leadership in male-dominated politics at the gross root level is a significant development in post independent India (Rohit and Neelam, 2007).

It is well known all over India that Uttarakhand was a pioneer in launching panchayati raj institutions as true organs of gross root governance. A decade well before the historic 73rd amendment act was passed. The Uttarakhand state under the leadership of Narayan Dutt Tiwari brought legislation in 2003 that initiated radical changes in the local self-governance (Government of India, 2007).

## Objective

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To study of the socio-economic background of the respondents of the local self-government.
- To study caste and gender representation in the governance of local self-government.
- To study caste and political-traditional society of women leaders.

## METHODOLOGY

The members of Panchayati raj institutions at all three levels (gram panchayat, keshtra panchayat, zilla panchayat) in the Almora and Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand constitute the population under the study. The data under the study was collected in the year 2003-2008. The members of zilla panchayat, keshtra panchayats and gram panchayats who were elected on the basis of panchayat elections held in the state in 2003 are considered as the population of the present study. This paper is based on the primary data collected from members of local self-government. All these members were randomly selected. The total number of 350 members of PRIs (Panchayat raj Institutions) from different levels was selected which are as follows: 251 from gram panchayats, 67 from the keshtra panchayats and 32 from the zilla panchayats are under the study. Out of 350 respondents under study, 145 constituted female respondents.

This paper basically focuses on the study of these 145 women

respondents who are panchayats members of Almora and Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. Data for the study was collected through interview by using an interview schedule. Therefore simple percentage method is used in analyzing the socio-economic background, caste and gender representation and caste and political-traditional society of the respondents in the governance of the local self-government.

## The analysis and interpretation of data

It is observed that the caste background of the women is an important factor in their emergence as panchayats leaders, unlike in case of male leaders. The dominant caste has not facilitated the emergence of women leaders in their communities. It is not worthy that most of the panchayats women leaders are from the lower social order. The fact that in some states the number of women in local self-government has exceeded the one-third provision can be explained very convincingly with reference to the caste system and its bearing upon the rise of women's leadership (Prabhu, 2006). It is observed that the upper castes because of their stronger thrust on patriarchy are reluctant to let their women folk to enter the village politics. This has been observed from the analyses and interpretation of the data under study is that the prevailing rigid caste system and cultural values and social norms surrounding the system of patriarchy have stronger implications in the good governance at the gross root level.

## Socio-economic background respondent of gram panchayat, keshtra panchayat and Zilla panchayat

(i) Table 1 shows that out of 251 respondent of gram panchayat 85(33.86%) respondent are of the age group of (25-35) years, 95(37.84%) are of age group of (36-45) years, 56(22.32%) are of the age group of (46-55) years and 15(5.89%) are of the age group of (56 and above) years. Thus from the above analysis of data, it has been concluded that majority of gram panchayat respondents lies between the age group of (36-45) years.

(ii) Table 1 shows that out of 251 respondents of 130 belong to general category, 68 belong to OBC category and 53 to SC/ST category. The highest number (51% that is, 130) seats are occupied by general category, (27% that is, 68) seats are occupied by OBC category and (23% that is, 53) seats are occupied by SC/ST category.

Thus by caste wise categorization of the members it has been observed from table 1 that maximum number of seats have been occupied by the members of general category which constitute 50% of the reservation.

(iii) Out of 251 respondent of gram panchayat 71(28.28%) are illiterate, 105(41.84%) are educated up to primary level, 40(15.94%) are metric/higher school pass, 20(7.96%) are intermediate and 15(5.98%) are graduates (Table 1).

## RESULT

The following inference has been reached from the analysis of Table 1 that majority of respondents of gram panchayat are either illiterate or educated up to primary level (that is, 70.12%).

Table 1 shows that out of 251 respondent of gram panchayat 104(41.44%) are agriculturist, 61(24.30%) are housewives and 86(34.26%) are labors.

From Table 1 it has been concluded that maximum number of respondents of gram panchayat are

**Table 1.** Socio-economic background of respondents of gram panchayat, kethra panchayat and zilla panchayat.

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Note: figures in parenthesis shows percentages to the total.

agriculturist.

## DISCUSSION

By the combined analysis of socio-economic background of gram panchayat, kethra panchayat and Zilla panchayat, it has been concluded that maximum number of respondents of these panchayats come from general category, who are of the age group (25-35) years, are illiterate and are agriculturist.

Table 2 shows that out of 205 male respondent 103(64.77%) are of general caste, 65(57.52%) are respondents of other back ward caste and 37(47.43%) respondents belong to SC/ST caste. That out of 145 female respondents 56(32.23%) are of general caste, 48(42.48%) respondents are of OBC caste and 41(52.57%) females respondents are of SC/ST.

This study has found that a large number of women respondents are being elected from the SC/ST cadre. This has been earmarked for the women in this modern era. The lower caste (SC/ST) is electing more women to represent

them in the panchayat where as the upper caste (Gen.) are just adhering of the legal provision of one-third. It can be argued that contradictory to the earlier picture when ever the dominant upper caste (Gen.) used dummy lower caste (SC/ST) women to contest election from the seat reserved for general women, the lower caste women have rested more seats from their male counterparts than from the upper caste women.

Table 3 shows that out of 145 respondent of local self-government 7(4.82%) have personal desire, 99(68.28%) have family background, 23(15.86%) have caste/community insistence and 15(10.34%) have party insistence as their motivators.

It is observed that most of the women leaders belong to upper castes (Gen.) and other backward classes have reported the insistence of their families as the motivating factor for contesting panchayat elections. In case of women leaders from the scheduled castes and schedule tribes, the insistence of the community is reported as the main reason for contesting the panchayat elections. The implication of this is that it is found that in the fact the women leaders from the upper

castes (Gen.) are more oriented towards their family background and feel that the leadership position in the panchayat is their family due. This resulted in their position in the masses.

Table 4 shows that out of total 145 women leaders 56 belong to general caste in which 48(85.72%) have effect of their political tradition of their families and 8(14.28%) are those women leaders who do not have any effect of their political tradition of families, 20(41.66%) are women leaders of OBC caste having effect of their political tradition of families and 28(58.34%) are those women leaders who do not have any effect of their political tradition of families and traditional society, 7(17.08%) are women leaders of SC/ST having effect of their political tradition of families 34(82.92%) are those women leaders who do not have any effect of their political tradition of families.

Thus by analyzing Table 4 it has been concluded that the majority of the lower caste (SC/ST) women leaders hails from families with no political background, whereas the upper caste women (Gen.) are mainly from families which have strong political standing in the village

**Table 2.** The percentage of caste-wise category and gender representation in local self-government of Uttarakhand.

Caste	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Gen.	103(64.77)	56(32.23)	159(100.00)
OBCs	65(57.52)	48(42.48)	113(100.00)
SC/ST	37(47.43)	41(52.57)	78(100.00)
Total	205(58.57)	145(41.48)	350(100.00)

Note: figures in parenthesis shows percentages to the total.

**Table 3.** Percentage of caste wise emergence of women leader in contesting elections.

Caste	Factors responsible for motivating women in contesting elections				
	Personal desire	Family background	Caste/community insistence	Party insistence	Total
Gen.	2(3.57)	49(87.50)		5(8.93)	56(100.00)
OBC	1(2.08)	40(83.32)	3(6.26)	4(8.34)	48(100.00)
Sc/st	4(9.76)	10(24.39)	20(48.78)	7(17.08)	41(100.00)
Total	7(4.82)	99(68.28)	23(15.86)	15(10.34)	145(100.00)

Note: figures in parenthesis shows percentages to the total.

**Table 4.** Percentage of effect of political traditions on the women leaders belonging to different castes.

Caste	Effect of political traditions of families on women leaders		
	Yes	No	Total
Gen.	48(85.72)	8(14.28)	56(100.00)
OBCs	20(41.66)	28(58.34)	48(100.00)
SC/ST	7(17.08)	34(82.92)	41(100.00)
Total	75(51.72)	70(48.28)	145(100.00)

Note: figures in parenthesis shows percentages to the total.

panchayats. Since the families having political tradition are also the elite groups in the village, it can be argued that the upper caste women's leadership is in the hand of elite political traditional families. This certainly has implications on the working on panchayats. In fact it is found that the upper caste women leaders (Gen.) lack interest in the development of the panchayats.

## Conclusion

The democratic and efficient functioning of women leaders in panchayats is a crucial issue that needs careful academic attention. The important observation of the study is that the prevailing rigid caste system and cultural values and social norms surrounding the system of patriarchy have stronger implications in the good governance at the gross root level. This also pin points that one should bear in mind that literacy and training to

women panchayat members is not sufficient to enable them to work in a democratic fashion and spirit. This requires thorough and radical changes in our socio-cultural system. The emerging women's leadership from the lower castes is found relatively more democratic and people-centered precisely because of the lesser degree of patriarchy among them and the more liberating and radical ideologies of their castes.

Further, the developmental and livelihood issues of lower castes transcend the issues of patriarchy. This has enabled the lower caste women to rise to the level of panchayat leaders. The women panchayat leaders from the upper castes are found to be more passive and less democratic precisely because the dominant upper caste men are against their more assertive role as panchayat leaders. The issues of livelihood and development have been unable to evoke much effective participation from the women from landed communities. This explains the phenomenon of the rise of more vocal and assertive

leadership among lower castes in the panchayat raj institutions.

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