

Socio - Political Empowerment of Dalits through Panchayati Raj *Experience from India*

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Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) 1992 provided constitutional sanctity to the Panchayats as the third sphere of self-governance in India. It enlarged the space for people's representation and their agency in matters of governance and moved decisions making closer to them. The Act particularly sought to correct the prolonged marginalisation of poor, marginalised and under-represented people such as Women, Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). This Act along with the ensuing State Acts on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) provided for mandatory provisions of (a) reservation of seats and (b) the obligatory Gram Sabha meetings. These provisions have given SCs in villages opportunity to participate in the political decision making. Because of affirmative actions of this Act, SCs are occupying leadership positions in local bodies.

However, their leadership has yet to achieve significantly the social acceptance, as envisaged in the spirit of the Constitution. Caste based identities and practices still continue to exclude them from exercising their leadership roles. Socio-economic vulnerabilities limit their capacities to articulate and to act upon their claims and concerns. In a nutshell, the gap between the formal recognition of right to participate and its actualisation still remains large even after 23 years of constitutional mandate. There is a need to understand how far reservation has provided effective representation to larger SC community. Has the politics of presence promoted inclusion of interests of SCs in policy making? Are new panchayats re-ordering the power relations in the society, especially in rural areas?

This article reviews the status of SCs in Constitutional Panchayats by analysing the issues of

their inclusion, representation and participation in governance.

Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) 1992 provided constitutional sanctity to the Panchayats as the third sphere of self-governance in India. It enlarged the sphere of people's representation and their agencies in matters of governance and moved decisions making closer to them. The Act particularly sought to correct the prolonged marginalisation of poor, a marginalised and under-represented people such as women, scheduled castes (SCs), and scheduled tribes (STs). This Act along with the ensuing State Acts on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) provided for mandatory provisions of (a) reservation of seats and (b) the obligatory Gram Sabha meetings have given SCs in villages an opportunity to participate in the political decision making. Because of affirmative actions of this Act, SCs are occupying leadership positions in local bodies.

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new panchayats re-ordering the power relations in the society, especially in rural areas?

Social exclusions of SCs (Institutions and Practices)

Social exclusion relates to the experiences of certain groups of being segregated from participation in the social, economic and political life of the mainstream society. It involves systematic or pervasive discrimination ranging from economic forms of injustices at one end to socio-cultural forms at the other. Economic injustices deal with exploitation of labour, marginalisation from means of livelihood and deprivation from adequate standard of living. At the cultural end, injustices stem from social patterns of representation. These are manifested in the ways in which dominant social groups devalue or disparage certain categories of people. Often economic disadvantages are bound up with cultural-valuational disadvantages. In the Indian context, caste system embodies economic as well as socio-cultural devaluations, which define lowest caste (SCs) as a despised category (Kabeer:200: 86). The caste system divided the society in endogamous hereditary group (*Jati*) ranked by ritual status. Beyond the fourfold classification of society in fixed hierarchical varna categories of *Brahmin*, *Kshatriyas*, *vaishyas* and *sudra*, was the fifth category of '*anti-sudras*', untouchable or outcaste. *Jati* identity was assigned at birth and according to birth. Each *Jati* was also assigned its own *Varna*. The untouchables too were organised in *jati*. They had low caste status, as they have been historically associated with ritually impure occupations such as killing, handling of animal cadavers or night soil. Social distance was maintained by the restrictions of contact and commensality with members of other castes. Caste based housing inside a village created caste based inequalities. Administrative parlance employs the term 'scheduled castes' for this disadvantaged section of population. It refers to official list of caste schedules attached to legislations. These lists are drawn up in order to establish entitlements to benefits of legal protection, access to welfare schemes especially for scheduled castes, of reserved seats in higher education, and in legislature (both Parliament and State Assemblies) and institutions of local self-governance, of reserved jobs in government employment and special financial assistance for enterprise. This term is also used in the constitution and in various laws. Apart from the institutionalised social exclusion, the SCs also faced powerlessness and marginalisation in multiple fronts. SCs comprise about one-sixth of the entire population, yet their share of country's resources is disproportionately lower. They have been denied the

right to access resources to maintain their livelihood, to education and adequate health care, and the right to participate in social, political and economic institutions.

Cultural and Political Assertion

SCs assertion for distinct identity is not a recent phenomenon. Bhakti movement between the 10th and 16th centuries was at its core, a revolt against caste identities and untouchability. More recently the Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati and also Gandhiji sought to address the issue of untouchability. Gandhiji used the term 'Harijan' for untouchables, which literally meant '*Children of God*'. A popular used term for SC is *dalit*. This label was used as early in 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes', a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also used the term in his Marathi speeches. His concept of political justice for dalits was firmly rooted in the synthesis of social equality, involving freedom and liberty with economic equality. The term dalit received wide currency in the early 1970's. when 'Dalit Panther', a radical group, to assert their identity as part of their struggles for rights and dignity, used this term to include a broader social category of oppressed people (landless, poor peasant women, scheduled tribes, backward castes). However, as the scheduled tribes, backward castes, landless and poor peasant women do not share the same social heritage as the SCs, the term dalit in common jargon, therefore, refers only to scheduled castes. In more recent years, a new identity is emerging with the perspective that 'dalit is dignified'. To all SCs irrespective of traditional and parochial caste distinctions, 'dalitness' has become a symbol of their social identity (Bharati 2002: 4339).

Organised political assertion by SCs can also be linked to political awareness. They are seeking redistribution and recognition remedies to their deprived status vis-à-vis mainstream society. They are seeking redistribution of resources to ameliorate their economic and social marginalisation. Their assertion of dalit identity stands for protest and mobilisation against identity based disadvantages. Lack of recognition of their identity, rights and entitlements and lack of resources that would allow them to otherwise articulate their voice and demand rights and entitlements have created exclusionary identities. The democratic political system is perceived as an important institutional mechanism to assert their rights. SC voter turnout has increased. They exercise their franchise more vigorously and in large numbers (Kumar & Rai 2006). The caste based horizontal mobilisations, leading to the formation of

political parties along the caste lines such as the Bhartiya Kisan Dal (BKD), Bhartiya Lok Dal (BLD), more recently the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) representing the backward, other backward castes and dalits have allowed them to function as a collective social group in politics (Pai 2006).

The new caste and class equations between the traditionally dominant landowning backward, other backward castes and dalits are emerging. With economic development, and emergence of new forms of agricultural employment, land is no longer the source of power and prestige. Changes in the economic relationship are changing the contours of conflict between them. For instance, in Tamil Nadu the economic relationship between the Thevars (a backward caste) and the Pallars (SCs) has shifted notably. Pallars were earlier employed as agricultural labourers on the Thevars' land. Since nineties, the Pallars are enjoying upward economic mobility. With employment in the Gulf countries many of them have even acquired land. The feudal dependency on the Thevars, therefore, has been reduced. Reservation in education also freed them from land-based occupations. Their upward mobility has, however, created problems for them. Thevars, unable to accept their upward mobility, have resorted to acts of vandalism against them (Devakumar 2007). In western Uttar Pradesh changes in the traditional structures of rural dominance based upon land and social status are taking place due to education and diversification of occupational structure and government welfare development programmes such as Ambedkar Model Village programme for the lower castes. In recent years, rivalry between the upwardly mobile SC groups and the less ambitious Balmikis and Pasis among the SCs is increasing. Differential gains from economic development and access to political power have been responsible for this (Pai 2001). Nevertheless, only a small section of SCs benefited from such macro level developments. The large mass in villages continues to be in precarious state. Many state governments because of their top-down approach have failed to meet their basic needs such as education, basic social services, public distribution system and social security. The active participation of SCs and incorporation of their perspectives at all levels of decision making is essential to meet the goals of equality, justice and development. Decentralisation is the only mechanism through which public goods and services could be distributed effectively and efficiently. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 with an important agenda of devolution of powers to Panchayats sought to correct the prolonged marginalisation of SCs from political processes and decision making. It gave them the opportunity and

space to influence policies both as elected representatives and as Gram Sabha members.

Political Participation of SCs in PRIs

Participation represents an expression of human agency. In an electoral system, people engage in political activities to influence decision making processes and policies to bring in the desired socio-political change. Since the last decade of 1990s, the meaning, nature and scope of public participation have shifted considerably. Earlier political participation meant voting, contesting in elections or supporting candidates. Now, the focus is on the agenda of good governance implying increased influence of the people including poor and marginalised people such as SCs over wider decision making processes; and also increased responsiveness of governments to their voices. A close look at the post 73rd Amendment phase of PRIs in states vis-à-vis SCs participation in it brings to light the fact that the ideal of strong, truly representatives and responsive PRI is still a distant dream. What, then, has been the experience of SCs as Gram Sabha constituents and as elected representatives of local bodies after three decades of such provisions being in place?

SC Elected Representatives: Socio-Economic Conditionality

According to studies on Dalit Leadership in Panchayats conducted by PRIA and its affiliates (Kumar & Rai 2006), education, economic interdependence, political consciousness enabled SC elected representatives to act their agency. For instance, because literacy rates were high in Himachal Pradesh (HP) and SCs have taken up horticulture and improved their economic condition, the SCs as elected representatives have shown confidence in exercising their agency. They have worked for their community in providing basic facilities. The economic interdependence gave them the confidence to initiate a process of reordering of relationship within the Panchayats. Majority of SC elected representatives in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, on the contrary, were illiterate. Widespread illiteracy made them dependent on government functionaries and higher caste representatives in the same elected body. SC elected representatives in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh were cultivators or landless agricultural labourers. Daily pressures of livelihoods as well often prevented them to undertake additional governance related responsibilities. Continued economic hardships and absence of secure livelihoods pushed them to make compromises with their roles as elected leaders of local bodies.

Participation in Decision Making

As Gram Sabha constituents, participation of SCs has been nominal by proxy. It is because of two reasons: one, existing social realities and power equations; and the other high level of ignorance among SCs. Since most of them are not aware of their role in the formation of village plan, they remain silent in the meetings. The simplistic appeals for increased political participation of SCs in Gram Sabha generally overlook some ground realities such as the timings of Gram Sabha meetings, problems of quorum and procedures adopted for finalising development plans and projects, the quality of deliberations and manipulation of discussions by dominant groups, helplessness of poor wage workers to lose a day's wage, illiteracy and lack of awareness of the new system of governance. The progressive provisions of the 73rd Amendment Acts cannot be realised unless social prompting and social support is provided to marginalised sections. Unfortunately, except for some civil society initiatives, no institutional support mechanism exists to encourage and support the effective participation of dalits in the Gram Sabha meetings. Wherever civil society organisations have undertaken Gram Sabha mobilisation campaigns, the participation levels of dalits increased both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

The studies on SC leadership have revealed that the SCs as elected representatives were not able to articulate group specific interests or exercise their own judgements in decision making. They did not take part in deliberations or contribute to major decisions. A number of SC representatives were stoically dependent on elites of the village and remained answerable to these elites. Both SC male and female elected representatives, being uneducated and inexperienced, were often not allowed to carry out their mandate. Their efficacy was always under scrutiny; their views were not considered significant and they were not included in the meetings. The upper or dominant castes and male elected representatives, on the contrary, opined that improved economic situation, education and literacy, training and personality development and honorarium for sarpanch could strengthen their role in PRIs. The insensitivity, indifference, vested interests, abusive language and non-cooperation of other elected representatives; functionaries and officials constrained the ability of many to perform better. Due to these factors, they deliberately did not attend the meetings. These constraints have led to their being less informed on the issues related to governance (Kumar & Rai 2006), perhaps the single most disempowering factor for such elected representatives is the continued practice of

untouchability even during the meetings of Gram Panchayat AND Gram Sabha. Separate glass for water and tea, and separate mat for sitting apart are powerful symbols of such exclusion and humiliation, even if the elected SC Sarpanch is expected to chair and lead these fora. As voters, however, their turnout has always been very impressive in Panchayat elections.¹

Role of traditional (dalit & non-dalit) Panchayats

The traditional caste panchayats still continue to influence the process of local governance as they have social sanction. It often acts either in tandem with the elected Panchayats or in some cases ignoring them totally in order to enforce its traditional codes. Examples of traditional caste panchayats putting up barriers for effective functioning of local self-governance institutions are numerous. For instance, a striking feature in Panchayat elections everywhere has been the struggle to usurp power at the grassroots level by disparate social groupings using caste to polarise people. Money and liquor flow freely. Traditional power structures, with the support from Panchayat secretaries and other government officials, often manipulate the constitutional mandate and rule by proxy. The dominant caste leaders in villages, in order to control PRIs, tend to control remotely the dalit elected representatives who are dependent on them due to various compulsions. The elected dalit candidates both men and women work according to the whims and fancies of those who 'sponsor' them. In the event of defiance of self-assertion by a dalit sarpanch, the panchayat is virtually made defunct by unique methods. Elected representatives belonging to upper caste would tactically stay away from the officially convened meetings, which then cannot take place for want of required quorum. Instance of public humiliation and even physical intimidation of dalit sarpanches, including women, have often been reported in the media. The inability of SC elected representatives to participate confidently in the Panchayats stems from their sense of insecurity in the village. The absence of organised structure within their own community intensifies their insecurity. SC communities in the village also have power dynamics among themselves. For instance, Dhanak and Chammar, or Dhanak and Bawariya castes would not intermingle. The effect of such

¹ PRIA's observation of the outcome of recent election in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh shows that SCs actively participated. In all these states, they cast their votes in large numbers. This time candidates from weaker sections contested from general (unreserved) seats. In Rajasthan, for instance, SC and ST (Scheduled Tribes) candidates contested from general seats (Pant: 2006).

fragmentation can be seen in public meetings where a dalit elected representative, in the absence of people's base, faces difficulties in raising voice for the community issues.

Institutional Impediments in Institutionalising Participation

Rotation of seats, no confidence motion and two child norm are some of the major institutional barriers to their effective participation. Instances of bringing no confidence motion against SC leaders were common. In Chhattisgarh over the last year, there have been 34 no-confidence motions in Dalit headed Panchayats. According to a Dalit Mukti Morcha activist, 'The panchayat has two major means of discrimination. One is to keep dalits away from Panchayat proceedings and development work; the other is to target Dalits whenever they are in power and to declare their posts null and void after a period of time'. This has barred many Dalits from exercising their rights in the Panchayat institutions. Those who survive are usually those who work according to the dictates of caste masters or applying corrupt politics (George 2008). Women representatives are particularly very vulnerable to such practice and tactics. The two child norm for Panchayat members is likely to discourage women in general and SC women in particular from being candidates. The likelihood of puppet candidates in place of real candidates would increase, reducing further the agency of SC women.

Grassroots reality of Dalit Participation in the Panchayats

A critical mass of dalit leadership has emerged. The number of elected representatives at all levels of Panchayats shows that representation at least in terms of numbers has increased. The provision of proportionate reservation at all tiers of Panchayats has now brought in nearly 6 lakh elected representatives of SCs. They not only have membership in proportion to their population in the

panchayat area, they also occupy the post of head as chairpersons in the Panchayats. The Constitution has reposed faith in SCs to be able to participate in public sphere effectively. As elected representatives they can directly participate in public decision making. As Gram Sabha constituents they can articulate their concerns, take part in the planning of development programmes and allocation of resources, as well as seek accountability from the PRI. The question is - are they actually exercising their agency?

Loosening caste based deprivation, articulation of demand

Decentralisation and the new roles of Panchayats 'from below' have provided a new climate for marginalised voice articulation. We have instances of SCs collectively contesting in a diversity of settings over the rights to access and entitlements to resources and essential services. They have been employing a range of strategies to engage with the Panchayats on a wide variety of issues. There is often an evolution in strategy as contours change over time. Transition from resistance to dialogue and solution finding indicates an on-going process of reflection amongst SCs about which strategies work, when, why and for whom. The SC collectives have engaged with line departments for accessing services. They have participated in campaigns to educate the dalit community on free and fair electoral processes. They have supported the credible citizen leaders to contest in Panchayat elections for inclusion of dalits concerns in public decision making. SC collectives such as Panchayat Vikas Samiti, Mahila Vikas Samiti and Kshetriya Vikas Samiti in Ahmedabad and Sabarkantha districts in Gujarat have sought to address inequalities at the village level within the governance framework. Panchayat Vikas Samiti (PVS) for instance, works as an interface between the Panchayat and the Gram Sabha. It discusses and addresses village issues for equitable and socially just development.

Monitoring village level functionaries

Access to basic services is important to ensure a minimum decent standard of living. Monitoring of the basic services has been a key intervention of Panchayat Vikas Samiti (PVS). They were monitoring the basic services and bringing about some change in the situation. But they failed on many accounts because the government functionaries were not supportive. Government provides and appoints a village level government functionaries such as ANMs, anganwadi worker and supervisor, teacher, gram sevak, malaria worker. Successful delivery of any services such as health, education, PDS, drinking water to villages depends on how the government functionaries in village function.

A PVS in one of its meetings in Nesda Village discussed that people were not aware of the work of village government functionaries who provided them services. They did not know about the time of their visits to the village. It was very difficult to approach them in case of need. The style of functioning of village government

functionaries did not make them accountable to the village or panchayat. The matter was raised at Kshetriya Vikas Samiti (KVS) at Dholka Taluka level. They organised a one day consultation with the village level functionaries as a step in this direction. They met Taluka Development Officer (TDO) and explained the purpose of consultation. They requested the TDO to issue a letter to all the government functionaries to remain present in the consultation and provide requisite information. TDO issued the letter to government functionaries. The consultation aimed at facilitating a dialogue between villagers and government functionaries about their roles and responsibilities. Samiti members decided to put up a board at the entrance of the village where the functionaries would sign and mention the time of their entry in and departure from the village. Initially, PVS members had targeted Talati (Panchayat Secretary) to make him accountable to the community. Talaty refused by saying that he was not the only government functionary who visited the village. Other functionaries also needed to register their visits. Hence, it was decided that all government functionaries such as village health worker, anganwadi workers, malaria workers, etc whose service was important to villagers would register their visits in the board. After the consultation, board was put up in the village. A chalk is kept in a shop located just apposite the board. When the functionaries enter the village, they take the chalk from the shop sign their name and time. The consultation initiative has led to tangible improvement in the basic services of the villages. A number of practical issues have been resolved. People get information about days and time of visits of ANM, Talati and other officials. They have also devised ways to ensure that their services reach out to maximum number of people in village. Teachers have become regular. ANM comes regularly and visits all the people. Talati comes regularly and cooperates. Ration at PDS shop is sold in stipulated time. The success of this monitoring of village level government functionaries has set an example in the Dholka Taluka. Other panchayats are also thinking of putting up such board.

Backlash of Socio-administrative structures

Higher caste groups have systematically used massive and widespread violence against SCs, in particular atrocities against SC women, to perpetuate

domination. Many violent incidents are reported from across the country when SCs tried to exercise their legitimate and rightful claim to representation, participation or leadership. Such cases from across the country reveal that such incidences happened particularly when dalits asserted their political rights.

- Villagers in Phoolijhar, about 90 km from Raipur, beat their Dalit Sarpanch, Bholaram, to death on Friday, reportedly infuriated by his offensive behaviour. After battering him to death, the mob set his body ablaze. '(Kaiser 2008)'
- Savita ben, elected sarpanch of Saddha Gram Panchayat in Himmatnagar Taluka of Sabarkantha district, Gujarat, in 1995 took up development activities such as constructing roads, water pipelines, tanks and community halls. She also helped handicapped people and other needy families to get access to benefits from various government schemes. All this made her popular among villagers but other panchayat members, especially those from the upper castes, accused her of misusing her powers and started to humiliate her. These panchayat members managed to oust her from office through a no-confidence vote. On contesting elections again, despite threats from panchayat members, Savita ben was re-elected by a thumping majority. But this was not the end of her ordeal. After six months, panchayat members once again suspended her on the grounds of incompetence (PRIA 2003).
- The successful conduct of elections to panchayats reserved for SCs in four villages in Tamil Nadu in October 2006 broke the decade long defiance of strong and substantial section of the people. The victory celebrations and the grand public honour that the State Government in Chennai gave the SC presidents from Pappapatti, Keerippatti and Nattarmangalam in Madurai district and Kottakachiyendar in Virudunagar district a few weeks later generated hope that this was the first step on the strenuous path to empowering the underprivileged in other

parts of the state. However, a series of incidents from different districts have belied this hopes and dampened the October 2006 spirit. Hardly a month after the elections, P Jaggaijan, a poor agricultural worker who belonged to the Arunthathiyar sub-sect of Dalits and was the president of Nakkalamuthanpatti village Panchayat in Tirunelveli district, was done to death for the simple reason that he refused to oblige his own deputy, the 'upper-caste' vice president, by being the president "only on paper". Instead he made bold to expose the irregularities of the earlier regime led by the deputy's wife. A murder case is pending before the Special District Sessions Court constituted under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act). In the same district, the president of Maruthankinaru village panchayat, M Servaran, was

found dead near his house on 9 February 2007. From the beginning of his term he confronted the hostility of the 'upper-caste' vice president and her husband, who had sought to appropriate all powers and make him a dummy president. He was not even allowed to occupy the president's chair, the local people reportedly told a fact-finding team of human right activists. By April end, the police were still investigating. At least 10 other SC panchayat presidents in Tirunelveli district have complained that their lives are under threat from caste-Hindu opponents, who are allegedly resisting their exercise of power. Even in Madurai district, a number of newly elected SC presidents have complained that they have been prevented from functioning independently by either their deputies or the majority caste-Hindu elements, including former presidents. This is the position in many other districts as well (Vishwanathan 2007).

It is clearly evident from the above case studies that the upper castes could not tolerate the changes being brought about by the decentralised PRIs. The initial prediction of Decentralisation envisioned through panchayat Raj has not become a reality. Panchayati Raj is, in fact, utilised as a tool of disempowerment of dalits and consolidation of powers of dominant castes. How can a SC Sarpanch gain confidence to conduct business as constitutionally elected leader of the village?

Conclusions

The foregoing analysis suggests several conclusions.

- A substantial number of scheduled caste (dalit) persons have been elected to the panchayats. Nearly half a million such elected panchayat representatives, at the three tiers, get elected in every round of panchayat elections. Nearly 40% of these are women scheduled caste persons. Over the four rounds of elections to the panchayats since 1994, this number adds up to nearly one and a half million elected representatives from such excluded communities countrywide. This indeed is a very impressive achievement by any account.
- However, it is also true that caste discrimination and atrocities on scheduled caste households continue unabated in different regions of Indian society. Despite various constitutional provisions and legislative measures, subjugation of dalits in economic and socio-cultural practices, continues, and in some cases, has even further intensified. Thus elected panchayat representatives from scheduled caste communities face enormous discrimination and harassments in performing their public roles effectively. The experiences of women elected representatives from scheduled caste households are even worse; physical and several sexual harassment and violence against such women panchayat leaders is widespread. Provisions of no-confidence motion are very deviously used to further dominate elected panchayat representatives from scheduled caste households.
- While continued discrimination in society has a very complex reality, what is really worrisome is that government officials also treat such elected panchayat representatives with disdain, neglect and

apathy. Thus upper caste domination and harassment of scheduled caste elected panchayat representatives get support from lower level government functionaries on the ground. Such attitudes and practices further limit the effectiveness of elected Panchayat representatives from scheduled caste households.

Suggestions

Given the above realities, what are possible strategies to further empower the Panchayat representatives from scheduled caste households? Several things can be done systematically.

- The provisions of no-confidence rules in each State Legislation should be so amended that no such abuse against Scheduled caste Panchayat leaders could be made in the first two and a half years of their tenure. Such provisions can make the connivance of higher caste leaders against scheduled caste leaders somewhat restricted.
 - No efforts have been made to sensitise and train government officials, especially at the district and block levels, to the constitutional requirements of their obligations to work for elected representatives from scheduled caste households. Training institutes of government should be asked to regularly include such subject matter in all pre-service and in-service training programmes for government officials. Both incentives and penalties may be further identified to ensure that officials operate in the spirit of this constitutional mandate.
 - The institution of SC Commission at the central and state levels has not been activated to bring synergy to the efforts towards empowerment of scheduled caste Panchayat leaders. Such SC Commissions could be requested to investigate cases of harassment of the elected panchayat leaders belonging to scheduled caste households. This may also create an organic channel of solidarity actions against societal discrimination and that carried out against the elected panchayat representatives. Ministry of Panchayati Raj can initiate a dialogue in this regard as well.
- In essence, the affirmative actions to empower the scheduled caste (dalit) leadership through the Panchayats is merely a starting point; further actions by governments and civil society actors is essential to realise this potential more fully than has been

possible so far. It is towards this end that further interventions are urgently called for.

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