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Foreword

Dalits comprise more than one-fourth of the Indian population. Despite their large numbers and the constitutional safeguards, the dalit community continues to suffer from social and economic oppression. It is seen that in cases where the dependency relations of dalits on non-dalits are more pronounced and have economic implications, atrocities on dalits have been greater. Factors like growing inequity both in terms of control and access to economic and social opportunities, domination of non-Dalits in decision making process and growing atrocities against Dalits still continue to characterize the dalit community.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provided an opportunity for involving Dalits in mainstream political, social and economic decision-making process. Article 243 D of the Constitution provides for reservation of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in every Panchayat in proportion to their population in that area. Towards this end, 21 per cent seats were reserved for dalit community in Panchayats. Out of this 21 per cent, one third seats were further reserved for women belonging to the dalit community.

The legislative mandate has opened the doors of political arena to the dalit community. However, the underlying factor in the negation of dalit leadership continues to be the rigid caste system which in turn reveals the challenging and daunting task involved for dalits to exercise their leadership. The practice of untouchability still exists in various forms. For women belonging to the dalit community, it is a dual oppression. Mishri Devi, the Sarpanch of Thikri village in Dausa district, Rajasthan was stopped from exercising her right to hoist the national flag during Independence Day celebrations. The upper caste members went to the extent of stripping her and, sweets which she had brought for the event, were thrown in the drain, as she was considered to belong to an untouchable caste.

Yet, a change is visible. A beginning is made. Cases are not uncommon where the dalit leaders have struggled and achieved to exercise their rights, uniting their community in the process, enlisting the community’s support and working for the development of their community. The greatest implication of the reservation is that power is now contested and shared and the community is increasingly being felt as a force to reckon with. This booklet provides a glimpse of both the oppression faced by the dalit community as well as the successful efforts of dalit leaders. The data has been collected in the course of PRIA and its partners interventions in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Rajesh Tandon
President
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DALIT LEADERS IN PANCHA YATS
1. Manaklaav Gram Panchayat

In the Manaklaav Gram Panchayat in Rajasthan, the major Dalit communities are Meghwaal, Bheel, Jaat, Maali, Bishnoi and Jatiya. As in other parts of India, here too agriculture is the primary occupation. One striking feature of this Gram Panchayat is that as a result of the land resettlement of 1956, most of the Dalit households own cultivable land. The households which do not own land either run small businesses like shops etc. or work in stone quarries in nearby areas. These Dalits do not depend significantly on the upper castes.

During the Gram Panchayat elections, the seat for the Sarpanch was reserved for a Scheduled Caste (SC) woman. Sushila Devi was in the process of filing her nomination, when some members of the upper caste communities conspired to get her form cancelled on technical grounds, so that their candidate could win unopposed. No one was aware of this until Sushila Devi’s brother-in-law who runs a social development organization, found out. With his prompt action Sushila Devi was able to contest the elections and subsequently went on to win.

Sushila Devi contested the elections on the advice of her husband and in-laws. After spending nearly 3 lakhs of rupees, she was able to gain the support of all the major communities in Manaklaav. However, in the initial months of being elected Sarpanch, she hesitated to attend or conduct the Panchayat meetings nor did she get involved in Panchayat related activities like construction etc. Her husband and in-laws were the major decision makers in the Panchayat. Slowly she has, however, gained confidence and now not only does she attend Panchayat meetings but also gives her opinion in Panchayat related matters.

Interpretation: Although Sushila Devi’s husband and other male members of the family play a dominant role in the decision making process, she herself is now actively involved in Panchayat activities too. However, in spite of the support she has from her family in particular and the community in general, she does not travel outside her Panchayat for block level meetings or other official work. Her husband and in-laws handle these responsibilities. This is mainly due to fear within the family that she might not be accepted by society should she cross social limits.
Having received training organized by UNNATI, Sushila Devi feels that trainings are necessary for building confidence and gaining knowledge on PRIs.

Ward members have all appreciated the efforts of Sushila Devi. Both she and her in-laws have proved that they are not influenced by nor are they acting for the interests of the higher communities. In the past two years, drains, kharanja, five anganwaadis, Rajiv Gandhi Pathshala and a Sabha Bhawan have been constructed. Handpumps have also been installed in some places in the Dalit Basti.

This case shows a close interrelation between the economic independence of the Dalits and the functioning of their representatives in the Panchayats. It is also seen that not all Dalits or women are proxy candidates; some of them are capable of functioning independently. There are definitely changes coming about and with proper training women candidates will be able to come up as efficient leaders.

2. Gram Panchayat: Indroka

75% of the households in the Indroka Gram Panchayat are Rajput. In terms of numbers, 300 of the 400 households are Thakur. Of the Scheduled Caste community, the Meghwals are predominant.

Although the Dalit community is not dependent to any great extent on the upper castes for their livelihood the domination, by sheer numbers, of the Thakurs has stifled Dalit voices. There have also been cases of violence and atrocities against the Dalits. As a result, many Dalit families have migrated elsewhere and those who have chosen to remain, prefer not to speak against the all-powerful Thakurs.

In the past, no one from among the Scheduled Caste community became a Sarpanch of the Panchayat. This situation changed when that seat was declared reserved for a Scheduled Caste woman. Rama Devi, along with 11 ward members, was elected uncontested. No elections were held. For this they received an award of Rupees two lakhs from the State Government. *(This reward was spent as per the instructions of the former Sarpanch, who belongs to the Rajput community).*

Rama Devi’s daughter-in-law, who has primary education, was not considered a suitable candidate for election. How could she allow her *bahu* to sit among the village elders and in front of strangers? was Rama Devi’s reaction. This opinion was shared by her son, the entire community and the Panchayat at large who had nominated Rama Devi for this position.

As the very first Dalit woman Sarpanch of Indroka, Rama Devi’s unanimous election gives the impression of a healthy political scenario at the village level. Indroka reflects a picture of an ideal Gram Panchayat which until recently was known for aggression and the chauvinistic attitude of the Rajput community. Now the Panchayat boasts of having a woman Sarpanch and an Up-Sarpanch, both from the Dalit community. Reality is however very different.

Rama Devi is 65 years old and illiterate. Not being aware of PRI Acts, the powers or functions of the Panchayat, the annual budget of the Panchayat or any other details, she found it very difficult to function as a Sarpanch. All her duties are performed by her son Jena Ram; right from conducting Panchayat meetings to completing official formalities at the block level. He is however, not able to take
independent decisions as powerful Thakurs of the Panchayat in association with the Gram Sewak (who is also a Thakur) try to influence Panchayat activities.

With the Gram Panchayat dominated by Thakurs, Rama Devi was not even allowed to sit in the same meeting room as the Thakurs. She had to sit outside. However with the intervention of the CSO (UNNATI) she now sits in the same hall. The efforts made by the CSO are appreciable and in time, with proper intervention, it is expected that the Dalit representatives will be able to understand and handle their roles and responsibilities efficiently.

3. Gram Panchayat: Nehri

The Dalits in this area have their own agricultural land and do not depend directly on the upper castes for their livelihood. It is however, their indirect dependence which at times obstructs their progress and keeps the Dalits from doing anything that goes against the upper castes. At present, the Dalits depend on the upper castes in mainly 3 ways:

- The Dalits need to cross upper caste land to reach their land which lies at the border.
- During the agricultural season, the upper castes provide tractors to Dalits.
- The Dalits borrow money from the upper castes for social functions like marriages, Mrityubhoj etc.

The Sarpanch of the Nehri Gram Panchayat, Barmer district Malaram Meghwal, is a member of the Meghwal community and a first timer in the Panchayat office. The Gram Panchayat is dominated by the Thakurs and the Gram Sewak is also a Thakur. Together they made it difficult for the Dalit Sarpanch to function independently. They insisted on taking all the decisions for the Gram Panchayat. The situation continued in this manner until the Sarpanch objected to the dishonest financial practices of the former Rajput Sarpanch and the Gram Sewak, during the construction of toilets in Tirasingdi village. When his verbal protests were ignored, he made a formal application to the Block Development Officer (BDO) of the Balotra Panchayat Samiti for action in this regard. The BDO, himself a Dalit of the Meghwal community, assured him of all support from his side. The upper caste lobby of the Gram Panchayat retaliated to this move of the Sarpanch and called a meeting. During this meeting, of the total 11 ward panchs, the 7 ward panchs of the general category decided to bring a no-confidence motion against the Sarpanch. The BDO however rejected the application on the grounds that no such motion could be called in the first 2 years of the formation of the Panchayat. The BDO further got the Gram Sewak transferred from the Nehri Gram Panchayat. A Gram Sewak of the Meghwal community has now been appointed. For the last one year things are moving smoothly. The Sarpanch, with the complete support of the Gram Sewak, is able to function properly.

This case highlights that caste association works not only at the Gram Panchayat level but also at the block and administrative levels. What if officials at different levels do not belong to the same community? This raises questions with regard to the proper functioning of our grass-root Dalit leaders.
4. Gram Panchayat: Khokhasar

The Rajputs, Jats and Dalits (Meghwal) constitute a major chunk of voters in the Khokhasar Gram Panchayat of Baitu Panchayat Samiti in district Barmer. The Jats however dominate the Khokasar Gram Panchayat because of their vast agricultural land holdings. A strange equation emerged out of this socio-economic pattern in the Panchayat elections of January 2000. For the first time the Dalits and Rajputs joined hands to break the monopoly of Jats in the Panchayat leadership. Unfortunately their combined strength of 750 votes was no match for the 1100 votes of the Jats.

Like other Gram Panchayats, the Dalits are divided into a number of sub castes. Untouchability is prevalent not only between the Dalits and the upper castes but also within the Dalit community, e.g. between the Meghwal and the Bheel. The Dalits themselves do not form a cohesive whole but are identified on the basis of their sub castes.

The dependency of the Dalits on the upper castes is minimal. The major occupation of the Dalits is agriculture and most of them own land. Those households which do not own land, migrate seasonally to Gujarat.

Shri Ramaraam Punar is a 40 year old sewing machine mechanic and has been staying in Balotra town for the last 22 years. He has an Interim (Higher Secondary) education. Ramaraam is not a stranger to political activities. He has been associated with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) for the last 6-7 years. Currently he is the BSP district president. Prior to the second term of the Panchayat elections, he contested for the Assembly elections. In 1994, his wife contested for the post of Sarpanch in the first PRI term. Though neither were successful then, Ramaraam's interest in politics and public service motivated him to contest for the post of Sarpanch, even though there was no reservation of the seat for an SC candidate.

Taking into account that he was challenging the powerful Jat community who had the majority of voters, money and muscle power, Ramaraam planned every step carefully. He personally contacted people from the Dalit and Rajput communities and met others at village level meetings. He enlisted the support of the SC and ST communities. In addition he also got some support from the Thakur community who preferred Ramaraam to any Jat candidate because he was educated, politically aware and therefore well informed. To be on the safe side, another Jat candidate was nominated so as to divide the Jat vote bank further. As a result, Ramaraam won the election with relative ease.

**Present Functioning:** Ramaraam now prioritizes the needs of the SC and ST communities who were key to his victory. He has provided a water tank in the Bheel Basti and in the various schemes of JGSY and IAY, he gives preference to SC and ST families. He has the support of 5 ward panches from the SC and ST communities as well as from some Thakurs. His association with the BSP also provides leverage with officials at the block and district levels. He managed to transfer an OBC Gram Sewak who was working according to the wishes of the upper caste. His own community respects him and people listen to his suggestions.
He does sometimes feel pressured by his Rajput allies who demand more development activities in their villages. Somehow he manages the situation and is able to strike a balance in development work in his Gram Panchayat. Till date he has completed more than Rs 24 lakh worth of physical work in his Panchayat.

He has complete decision making powers, however he does feel that it is difficult to change the mentality of people overnight. Even now the actions of the upper caste leaders get more attention and recognition than those of the Dalit Sarpanch. The Dalit community trusts the upper caste community leaders to resolve personal or social issues. Even though Ramaraam’s efforts to interest the Gram Sabha members at meetings have not been successful, he has not given up working towards this end. To facilitate Panchayat functioning and due to non-cooperation by the Gram Sewak and the Patwari, he managed to appoint Dalits to take over those positions.

Ramaraam feels that his political connections have not only helped him to gain wider public acceptance as a Sarpanch, they also helped him in his efforts for getting development work done in his Panchayat. This, he strongly feels, is an advantage any other Dalit Sarpanch without political connections would not enjoy.

His main challenge, lies in the variations within the Dalit community which give the upper castes an advantage. They try to divide the Dalits by asking “Tumhare Sarpanch ne tumhare liye kya kiya” (What has your Sarpanch done for you?). To help overcome this, Ramaraam has tried to unite the Dalit community and mobilize them to attend the Gram Sabha. He tries to help the illiterate people to understand the various aspects of PRIs and at every meeting he passes a resolution for abolishing the various social evils prevalent in Dalit society.

The other challenge he faces is the domination of the Jat community. The Jats once tried to kill him but were unsuccessful. He was sufficiently aware to be able to file a case under the SC/ST Atrocity Act. They now threaten him with the provision of no-confidence. He is however confident that they will not be successful here either because for the Jat community to get the support of 9 ward panches will not be possible. He intends to contest in the next elections even though he is not very confident that he will win.

5. Gram Panchayat: Shekhasar

The Shekhasar Gram Panchayat is located in the interior. Though about 50% of the population belongs to the Meghwal community, the Thakurs dominate all social and economic levels of the Panchayat. Traditionally, leadership in the Panchayat has been closely linked to control over economic assets and social structure. Since social and economic power belongs to the Thakurs, it follows that political power should also be in their hands. For the last 40 years the situation has been so. The Thakurs, who controlled all aspects of village life, were also the decision makers in all individual or social conflicts.
In the first PRI term (1994-1999), the Shekhasar Gram Panchayat seat was reserved for a woman belonging to Scheduled Caste. Kiran Meghwal, a 28 year old woman decided to contest the election. (Akka Danna, a village in the Shekhasar GP, was her husband’s native village.) Kiran, a graduate from Delhi, was staying in Ganganagar with her school teacher husband. All through the campaign, Kiran remained in the background and her husband and other males in the family did all that was necessary. The Thakurs also supported her with the expectation, that having been brought up in Delhi and currently living with her husband in Ganganagar, Kiran would not want to stay in Akka Danna, thereby leaving the Thakurs with control over village politics.

During her first year in office, Kiran Meghwal was not very active in Panchayat matters. The first task she undertook was the construction of a Sabha Bhawan in a Thakur locality because the Thakurs had supported her during the elections. After construction, the remaining building materials were stored in a Thakur’s house. When construction of another Sabha Bhawan began in the Dalit Basti, Kiran’s husband went to the Thakur’s house to collect the materials stored there. The Thakur refused to return anything, beat him up and took him to the Police Station in Baap. Late that night when Kiran was informed of the incident, she went immediately to the police station. On the advice of the station in-charge, she filed a case under the SC/ST Atrocity Act. This incident was the catalyst which made Kiran take up the fight against domination by the higher castes. She decided to remain in the village and her husband too managed to get a transfer to the Jodhpur district.

Following this incident, the Rajputs kept their peace for about 6 months. Then they started obstructing Kiran’s work in one way or other. She even faced a no-confidence motion by the Thakurs (Up-Sarpanch) but overcame it by enlisting the support of an influential person from a nearby village. She slowly gained confidence and her husband stopped accompanying her to Panchayat meetings. She learned to speak without hesitation in front of the Thakurs and village elders. She began talking with officials at all levels. She asked for security for herself when she returned late at night, which was provided.

During her term as Sarpanch, she tried to create awareness among the Dalits. She asked them not to work without wages on the lands of the upper castes nor to involve the Thakurs in solving personal disputes. She worked hard to unite the SC and ST communities in her favor and in return for their support, she gave priority to their needs. She paid special attention to the education of the girl child in her Panchayat.

**The Present:** In the current term (2000-2005) of the PRI, the Shekhasar Gram Panchayat fell under the general category. People asked Kiran to contest for the elections again but she refused. According to her, she only wanted people to know the difference between Kiran Meghwal and any other Sarpanch. Not only her community but all across the Panchayat Samiti, people recognized her struggle and the efforts put in by her and many still regard her as the Sarpanch.

She is now a member of the Panchayat Samiti and got the highest number of votes in the block. She enjoys support from all the communities and the scope of her work has become wider than before. She has formed three SHGs called Indira Mahila Chetna Sangh and believes that these SHGs will help women, particularly Dalit women, in establishing and empowering themselves in Panchayats.
Now her aim is to contest the Zila Parishad elections and later the Assembly elections. She is young, educated and energetic and she gives credit to her supportive husband and her educational background for her achievements.

6. Reservation in PRLs...Power Off Limit

The Deriya Gram Panchayat of the Balesar Panchayat Samiti in Jodhpur district is like any other Gram Panchayat of Rajasthan. But what makes it different from the rest is the fact that it is one of the few Gram Panchayats headed by a Dalit Sarpanch for last two consecutive terms. In Deriya, the Rajput community is predominant and has held the reins of power for years. But during the Panchayat elections in 1994 (under the new three-tier system) Deriya got the opportunity to have its first ever woman Sarpanch, that too from the Dalit community.

Sayari Devi belongs to the Nomadic Sapera (Kalbeliya) community of Rajasthan. She made a living in Jodhpur, by begging from door to door. A day before the last date for filing nominations for the post of Sarpanch, the Rajputs of Deriya traced her and filed her nomination. This was done in an effort to check the unopposed candidature of the Dalit representative of Deriya and to control the power strings through a dummy Sarpanch. Ironically, things happened the way the dominant caste groups wanted. Sayari Devi became the Sarpanch. However, she was not allowed to participate in the functioning of the Panchayat. She used to sit outside the Gram Panchayat Bhawan during Panchayat meetings. She hardly remembers any developmental work / activity undertaken during her term, except for the allotment of a home under Indira Awas Yojna to herself, for which she even had to bribe the Gram Sevak. She has no intention of contesting the election again.

The second term of Panchayat elections in Rajasthan took place in 2000, but this time the Deriya Gram Panchayat was not reserved for any category. This time too the Dalit community was determined to have a Dalit Sarpanch. It was a prestige issue for the community, considering the events that took place five years ago. Four community meetings were conducted and no one was willing to stand against two of the most influential persons of the village. Finally in the fifth meeting Sheela Ram Gadela agreed to file his nomination. The backing of the Dalit community and his enthusiasm to become the Sarpanch motivated him during the campaign. He won with a margin of 100 odd votes.

Despite the fact that the Balesar Panchayat Samiti has its first ever Dalit Sarpanch elected from a general seat, the overall situation is almost unchanged. The power of decision making still rests in the hands of the dominant caste groups in the village, just as it was during the last term. Sheela Ram admits that no one listens to his opinion at Panchayat meetings and there exist a number of groups in the village that resist his decisions. He was not even allowed to hoist the national flag on Independence Day in the government school of the Panchayat.
7. Confident Yet Cautious

The Pachpadra Gram Panchayat of the Balotra Panchayat Samiti, district Barmer has 21 wards and is one of the biggest Gram Panchayats in Rajasthan. Pyari Devi, the Sarpanch, is proud of the fact that there were four other Scheduled Caste women contesting the elections opposite her for this SC reserved seat and she won by a margin of just one vote. She is of the opinion that it is a difficult task for a woman to run the affairs of such a big Gram Panchayat. She has to handle the varied demands of her ward panches as well as that of the dominant Kharwal community of the Gram Panchayat. (The Kharwal community controls the lucrative salt trade, which is a major source of employment for the Panchayat. Due to this, nobody questions their leadership or interference in matters of the Gram Panchayat.)

Pyari Devi used to attend Panchayat meetings with her husband, who works as government health worker in a nearby Gram Panchayat. Whenever she attended the meetings alone, the ward panch of the dominant communities did not allow her to speak. This situation carried on for one year. In the mean time however, she developed an understanding of the functioning of Panchayats. This gave her enough confidence and motivation to take the lead and control over the affairs of her Gram Panchayat. Now she does not allow any outsider, other than the ward panches, to attend Panchayat meetings. She no longer feels threatened by the Kharwals or other communities of the Panchayat. She does however feel that her illiteracy sometimes restricts her from being completely self reliant in fulfilling the responsibilities of a Sarpanch.

8. The Voice of the Unheard

Ghewaram Meghwal, the Up-Sarpanch of Patodi Gram Panchayat of Balotra Panchayat Samiti in Barmer, has been active in Panchayat level politics for the last 20 years. In the last term (1994-1999) he was elected Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat from the seat reserved for a Scheduled Caste candidate. But his first brush with Panchayat elections was in 1988, when he lost the unreserved post of Sarpanch, Patodi.

In the current term Ghewaram contested from an SC reserved seat. His willingness to give voice to his fellow Dalit ward panches and his concern for safeguarding the interests of the Dalit community at large with his experience as a former Sarpanch, motivated him to contest the Panchayat elections. Besides, the current Sarpanch, Devraj Singh, a Thakur, always sought his advice in all Panchayat related matters. This was a privilege the other 5 Dalit ward panches did not enjoy.

9. A Campaign to Regain Self Respect

On October 14, 2001, the Annual Day function of the primary school of Aadel Gram Panchayat in Sindhari Panchayat Samiti of district Barmer was under way. The MLA of Sindhari was the chief guest. Sarpanch Bheraram Meghwal, his ward panches, former Sarpanch Magaram Jat and representatives from the Panchayat Samiti & the Education Department were also present.
The organizers called Sarpanch Bheraram to welcome the MLA traditionally by fastening a “safa” (turban) on his head. This was to be a landmark event in the history of Aadel Gram Panchayat as no Dalit has ever been given this honor before. But as Bheraram approached the dais, Magaram Jat (former Sarpanch), objected to Bheraram’s doing the ritual and confronted him. Neither the Chief Guest nor the people’s representatives nor the government officials said anything in support of the Dalit Sarpanch. Finally, with the intervention of Rau Ram Jat, a local leader, the humiliated Dalit Sarpanch was able to complete the ritual.

This was not the end of Bheraram’s ordeal that day. The former Sarpanch created a furor when he saw Bheraram’s name on the foundation stone of the new school building. In the presence of all the dignitaries, he dismantled the stone bearing the name of the Dalit Sarpanch. As a result, the inauguration of the school building did not take place.

None of the persons present during the function made any complaint and neither was any action taken by the police against Magaram. Even the aggrieved Bheraram did not raise his voice in protest against this attack on his basic rights. It was only when a local pressure group “Dalit Hak Sangharsh Samiti” intervened and encouraged Bheraram to take action, that the matter got people’s attention. A rally was organized in support of Bheraram at the district headquarters and a memorandum was given to the police authorities, the District Collector, the Human Rights Commission and the National SC/ST Commission appealing for appropriate action to be taken against the culprit. After a long “dharna”, the movement ended when the authorities re-erected the foundation stone in its original place and Magaram promised not to do such a thing in future and agreed to bear all the expenses incurred during the movement.

10. Barriers from Within

In ward 17 of Joliyali Gram Panchayat in Mandor block, district Jodhpur, a routine change of “met” or supervisor for the ongoing famine relief work was due. From the start, representatives of the dominant Purohit community were selected as supervisors. This time the Gram Sevak of the Panchayat, Shankar Singh, proposed that the supervisor be selected from the Dalit community. He proposed Kelki Devi, the ward panch. This suggestion angered the Purohits and they rejected his proposal. Though the Dalits constitute more than 70% of the total population of Joliyali, no one openly supported Kelki Devi. The Gram Sevak then repeated his proposal to the Purohits but they rejected it again on the grounds that the women in their community did not work outside. That evening a group of young Dalit boys met the Gram Sevak asking him to repeat his proposal the next day. However, none of the boys from that group were present the next day; instead the Dalit community leaders from the Gram Panchayat insisted that they did not have any problem with a Purohit becoming the supervisor. The last straw was Kelki Devi herself, turning down the proposal of becoming the first Dalit woman supervisor in the Gram Panchayat. Finally, a member of Purohit community was selected as the supervisor.
1. A Dalit Woman Sarpanch’s Struggle for Legitimacy

Savitaben, a visionary thinker and hard worker, is the Sarpanch of Saddha Gram Panchayat of Himmatnagar district and Taluka. She was elected in 1995 by a huge margin. After being elected, without wasting any time, she took up lots of development activities, thereby giving the villagers a new quality of life. Using the funds at the disposal of the Panchayat, she constructed a 1200 ft. road, a 700 ft. water pipeline, a water tank, a community hall, installed an electric motor etc. Beside these public facilities, she helped handicapped persons and other needy families to draw funds from various government schemes.

All these development activities made her very popular among the villagers. But the members of the Panchayat became jealous of her popularity. Their main grouse against Savitaben was “How could a mere woman, that too a Dalit, take entire credit for rejuvenating the village?” In the Panchayat there were both upper caste as well as Dalit members. However, Savitaben refused to cow down and be a puppet in anyone’s hands. She went ahead with the developmental activities for the village. This alienated her further from the Panchayat members, especially those from the upper castes who alleged that she has misused the money allocated for hand-pumps. Her fault merely lay in the fact that she could not install two hand-pumps with a budget of Rs 29,000, which was barely enough to cover the labor cost of installing one hand pump. Although she knew that she was being wrongly accused, she asked the contractor to give a declaration on stamped paper, detailing the work for which he had been paid. The contractor agreed to furnish the necessary details. She had, in the meantime, already returned the balance amount to the Taluka Panchayat. This proof of Savitaben’s innocence only reinforced the faith the villagers had in her all along.

However the Panchayat members continued their relentless efforts to humiliate and mentally torture Savitaben. They now alleged that since she belonged to a Scheduled Caste, she was using the Atrocity Act to harass people. The local police station confirmed that Savitaben had never used this Act as a pretext to harass anyone.

The Panchayat members now targeted her character, trying to create a rift in the family. Despite being unable to furnish any solid proof against her, the allegations continued against her character,
honesty and her accounting methods. Finally, the members of the Panchayat managed to arrange a 
majority vote and passed a no-confidence motion against her. Though the whole village was on her
side, the Panchayat members used their majority to oust Savitaben from office.

Savitaben was not one to accept defeat and sit at home. Educated up to the seventh standard, she
decided to fight against the injustice that had been meted out to her. She decided to contest the
Sarpanch election again, despite receiving threats from the Panchayat members. The same Savitaben
who had been removed from her post by a no-confidence motion was re-elected by a thumping
majority, thus proving her immense popularity. But this was not the end of her ordeal. After six months,
once again, the Panchayat members suspended her on grounds of incompetence.

2. Somabhai Chamar Faces Expulsion from His Own Village

Somabhai Ravabhai Chamar was elected as the Sarpanch of Kankrol Panchayat, HimmatnagarTaluka
of Sabarkantha District in 1995. As the Sarpanch, he undertook a series of development works for his
Panchayat.

The upper caste people however, never accepted him as their Sarpanch. In the Panchayat, Talati,
who was from a higher caste, continuously harassed Somabhai. Most of the time, Talati deliberately
withheld important information from him. Ultimately, Somabhai raised this issue with the higher
authorities and succeeded in getting transfer orders passed for Talati. But Talati got those orders
cancelled by using his influence and also by greasing the palms of higher authorities. After this incident,
Talati started inciting other upper caste representatives of the Panchayat against Somabhai and
ultimately succeeded in getting him suspended.

After the suspension of Somabhai, the Panchayat members called a meeting and passed a resolution
against Somabhai, expelling him from the village on the allegation of trying to poison the water tank of
the village. When these developments came to the notice of the DDO, Sabarkantha, he immediately
got the resolution cancelled on the grounds of human rights violation. But for the intervention of the
DDO, Somabhai would have been thrown out of his own village for trying to be an effective leader.
Now Somabhai has filed a case against the motion of no-confidence, in the High Court. Whether the
Dalit Sarpanch gets justice here is yet to be seen.

3. Dalit and Illiterate, But a Success

Thirty-five-year-old Fusaram, a barely literate man belonging to a Scheduled Caste, is the Sarpanch
of Bithuja Panchayat of Balotra Panchayat Samiti. However, he has never let the low status of his
community or his illiteracy become a drawback in the development process.

The geographic condition of this area is an important factor for the success of the Bithuja Panchayat.
Due to the Luni River, there is a continuous supply of fresh water despite being in the Thar Desert. The
groundwater department, with the local people, have dug 100 tube wells, and according to the Public
Health Engineering Department (PHED) about 29 are in working condition. This area supplies water
to 59 villages as well as Balotra town, benefiting a population of 1,10,000. This resource was always there but without the efforts made by Sarpanch Fusaram, it would have remained untapped. The impact of Fusaram’s initiative of tapping fresh water can be seen in the different sectors of village economy viz., agriculture, animal husbandry and the cottage industry.

Apart from the primary benefits of water tapping, Fusaram has undertaken various strengthening initiatives, such as forming a Panchayat level committee to explore and manage the marketing of milk produced in the area.

He also tried to deliver the benefit of governmental programs/schemes to the people of his village. Fusaram also took care that the most deprived sections received the benefit of employment in various construction sites under government programs.

Although Fusaram and his Panchayat have been striving for the development of the area, this Panchayat has been declared as a Dark Zone. As a result no additional tube wells can be dug. At the same time, water supply to other places is still continuing without any remuneration. Thus, the area is facing the two-fold danger of future water shortage and economic hardship due to the absence of remuneration.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act gives Panchayats the right to impose taxes and fees on its properties for generating income. However, Fusaram’s case demonstrates how administrative interference restricts the Panchayats. If only the facilities and laws enacted were implemented in their true sense, this Panchayat would have been able to ensure its income and tackle the problems of being declared a Dark Zone area.
1. Dalit Leadership–Undaunted and Resourceful

Mrs. Radha Devi, the President of Pangode Gram Panchayat in the district of Thiruvananthapuram, is a woman who has fought many a battle in her political life. She hails from a Scheduled Caste community and an economically backward family, consisting of her husband and two children.

Political activism is not an alien concept to Radha Devi. Both she and her husband were active members of the Karshaka Thozhilali Union for many years. This experience, coupled with her party's decision, prompted her to stand for the Panchayat elections in 1995. This proved to the beginning of her relentless struggle. Radha Devi had decided to contest the election from a particular ward of the Panchayat, where she had actively worked as a member of the Karshaka Thozhilali Union and had earned acceptance. Trouble started brewing when another woman of the same party wanted to contest from the same ward. This woman, from a non-Dalit community, succeeded in winning over the party leadership, which asked Radha Devi to shift to another ward. She was not willing to change and presented the matter to the party forum. In spite of her repeated pleas, the party leadership refused to budge. She felt she was being sidelined because she belonged to the Scheduled Caste community.

Deeply hurt, Radha Devi resigned from the party, stood as an independent candidate and won the election, defeating her rival by a large margin of votes. In the meantime, the party expelled both her and her husband from the Karshaka Thozhilali Union. The Panchayat Council was equally divided between rival political groups. In such a situation, the vote of the independent member becomes critical. Radha Devi contested for the post of President. The tally of votes was equal. But luck favored Radha Devi. One of the votes was invalid and she was declared President elect. When she became the President, the party to which she formerly belonged, tried to win her back to their fold, but she did not concede. Instead she forged an alliance with the opposition party.

Shortly after, her enemies arranged to table a no-confidence motion against her. To her surprise, she found that a woman member of her alliance party had also signed the no-confidence motion. She immediately contacted the concerned person and tried to sort things out. She discovered that this
woman had been nursing a grudge against her for ignoring some of her suggestions regarding the implementation of a particular plan. Another problem was that when the woman member’s husband tried to interfere in the matter, Radha Devi made it clear that it was none of his business. Taking this to heart, she gave vent to her anger by signing the no-confidence motion. The alliance party however, took a positive stand. They summoned the concerned woman member and warned her that her membership to the party would be cancelled if she favored the motion without the party’s consent.

Meanwhile, the ruling party won over to their side some of the members of minor alliance groups, thus securing a majority in the Council. Radha Devi had a series of discussions with the major parties and on the day prior to voting on the motion, issued a press release, stating that she was going back to her original party. That was the end of the no-confidence motion. Radha Devi said that many still nursed feeling of hostility, but because of her position as the President, everyone was compelled to co-operate with her.
1. The Fight Goes On

Mohan Behera was suffering from multiple disabilities when he was chosen to be the ward member of Kanjipani village in Kuanra Gram Panchayat of Banspal block, Keonjhar. Not being as educated as his contemporaries in the Panchayat and hailing from a backward caste, he has not been able to overcome his inhibitions to confidently work in the public domain. However, these limitations have not deterred him from attempting to fulfil the promise of democratic socio-economic development to his people. This enormous task seems unlikely because of the increasing hostile Panchayat Mukhiya.

The Gram Panchayat is mainly populated by “juangas,” a near extinct breed of tribals, infamous and who remain drunk all day. They stay alienated from the mainstream, are ignorant and have no interest in Panchayat affairs. People don’t come to the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha without the incentives of bhoj and drink etc. The Sarpanch and the secretary take advantage of this situation and misuse the democratic institution for their own benefit.

According to Mohan, the rule of the Sarpanch prevails in the Panchayat. Both the Sarpanch and the secretary have colluded to siphon off funds that come into the Panchayat. Mohan gives the example of the public distribution system. Everyone knows that the secretary is selling sugar meant for public distribution, yet no one dares to voice a protest.

Developmental work also suffers equally. A typical problem here is that though the Village Level Worker (VLW) should be selected from among the villagers given their weak financial position and skills, the Sarpanch normally sub-contracts it to a professional contractor. As a result, the work itself is the first casualty. The place and coverage of different developmental work is also at the discretion of the Sarpanch.

Mohan concludes that given all these problems he feels compelled to talk about the Panchayati Raj System in the Gram Panchayat.
1. Tribal Leadership

Rajan Kol is the new Pradhan of Sarhat Gram Panchayat in the Manikpur block of Banda district. He belongs to the community of Kol tribals which have traditionally been entirely subservient to the big landowners. Many of them worked as bonded labor, living just for the comfort of their “masters”. However, awareness has been gradually building up among the Kols and they are challenging some of the more glaring injustices of the existing socio-economic system.

Rajan Kol is one of the leading activists of Patha Kol Adhikar Manch, a forum for asserting the rights of Kol tribals. When he was elected as the village Pradhan in the last Panchayat elections, this process of awareness got a big boost. Members of the Kol community saw to their surprise, that even big landowners had to come to a member of the Gram Panchayat to get their work done.

However, bitter experiences awaited Rajan Kol. He was keen to implement development schemes in the village, but found that the concerned officials expected him to pay commissions and cuts before any money could become available. This meant that less money would be available for development work and also that he would not be able to maintain proper accounts, as bribes obviously cannot be shown in the accounts. Rajan decided to resist this. Several efforts were made to corrupt him. Threats were tried. Development funds were also held back. But when all this did not work, the officials finally relented and Rajan’s village started getting its share of the development funds.

With the help of the villagers, Rajan has been able to implement a model afforestation scheme where nearly 2,500 trees of mixed species have survived, despite adverse conditions. In addition, work on the construction of culverts and village paths has been implemented properly.

2. Krishna Devi

The Kauraari Gram Panchayat in Firozabad district is a reserved constituency for Scheduled Caste women. The Kori, Jaatav, Dhobi and Khatik are the major Scheduled Caste groups. Even though the SCs form about 50% of the population, the Brahmins and Thakurs are the dominating caste groups in terms of land holding sizes. There is skewed distribution of land within the Gram Panchayat. Among
the SCs, the largest land holding size is 20 bighas, while among the upper castes the smallest land holding size is 50 bighas.

Before 1993, prior to the enactment of the Uttar Pradesh PRI Act, the Pradhan was from the Brahmin community. This seat was declared reserved for SCs in the first PRI term. To continue their dominance and safeguard their interests, in the first term, the Brahmins of Kauraari village supported one Dalit candidate who subsequently worked for their interests.

The situation changed during the second PRI term, when the constituency was declared reserved for SC women. This time the upper castes of Nala Parihaar Village asked Krishna Devi (Koiri Caste) to contest the elections. With the support of her husband, family, the SC community and upper caste land owning males, Krishna Devi won. This was the first time someone from the Nala Parihaar village got elected for the post of Pradhan.

During the election, the Brahmins and Thakurs supported Krishna Devi with the expectation that their dominance would continue. They not only campaigned for her but tried to create rifts among the different SC caste groups, so that more voters could lean towards Krishna Devi. Finally she did win by 71 votes. However, after almost two years, the expectations of the land owning castes have not been fulfilled.

Although Krishna Devi does not take any decisions independently, with the help of her husband Shiv Kumar, she has managed to use Rs 60-62 thousand on some construction work and for providing drinking water in the Dalit Muhalla (Basti).

The Gram Sabha members of the Kuaraari Panchayat are of the view that Krishna Devi is a proxy candidate as most of the functions are performed by her husband. However they do admit, that the interests of the Dalits have not been overlooked and that she is not serving the upper castes.

One important aspect is, that despite working for the Dalit community, neither Krishna Devi nor her husband Shiv Kumar are aware of the PRI Act, the powers and functions of the Panchayat etc. As a result they are dependent on the BDO for providing any information. There are also some Gram Panchayat members who belong to or are supported by the higher castes. They are hostile to Shiv Kumar and delay the passing of resolutions for 5 - 6 months. As a result major problems like lack of school facilities, non functioning ration shops, updating the BPL list, construction of roads and houses have not been addressed till date.

a. View of Gram Sabha Members

In the Kauraari Panchayat, focused group discussions were organized with the Gram Sabha members. They were of the opinion that although power has been shifted from the high castes to the Dalits, the higher castes still try to take advantage by creating rifts among the Dalits. Dalit society itself is divided into various sub castes and taking advantage of this, the upper castes are able to dominate politics, society and the economy of the village.
DALIT LEADERS IN PANCHAYATS

The new Pradhan, Krishna Devi is not acting as a means of serving upper caste interests. But there are three more years to go. Since Krishna Devi has not been able to pass any resolution and has not provided any facilities to Kauraari village, it is difficult to say how far she will not be influenced by the upper castes' interests.

The people also feel the need of coherent community groups (like SHGs) which will help in strengthening bonds within the Dalit community. This will help in uniting the Dalit community by bringing their interests together and will enable them to select a leader of their own choice.

b. Distance Between Villages: a Constraint

In this case there is another major constraint. The distance between the two villages of Panchayat Kauraari and Nala Parihaar is about 5 km and there are barriers like a canal and the Delhi-Lucknow railway track. Also the Dalit communities do not have common interests as there are variations not only in terms of sub castes but also land sizes. Since the Panchayat is not physically a cohesive unit, the interests of the village becomes greater than the interests of the community. The Dalit Pradhan belongs to Nala Parihaar, while most of the Gram Panchayat members belong to Kauraari village. The upper castes take this as a tool for dividing the Dalit community by saying that your “Pradhan works only for his village”.

3. Bharat Singh

Bharat Singh(Parihaar Mau Gram Panchayat, Madanpura Block) has contested elections twice from an unreserved constituency. He is not a Panchayat representative, but his courage and enthusiasm sets an example for other Dalit representatives.

In the Parihaar Mau Gram Panchayat, the Scheduled Caste population is around 55%. Yet no SC has ever become a Panchayat representative. The SCs in the village are poor and most of them do not own any land. Bharat Singh has his own tailoring shop and in the interest of doing something for the Dalit community, he contested the elections. Prior to the elections of 2000, a lot of SC people had come forward in his support, as the other candidates were Yadavs and Thakurs. On polling day, upper caste men entered the polling room and forced the Dalits to vote in favor of the Thakur candidate. The Dalit community were also warned not to vote for Bharat Singh, if they wanted their “rozi roti” (livelihood). The administration too did not take any action as they enjoyed a good relationship with the Thakur community of the Panchayat. Thus the Thakur candidate won from this seat. When the election results were declared, many Savarna people gathered in front of Bharat Singh’s house and warned him not to contest any election in the future.

Despite all this, Bharat Singh has not lost courage and is ready to contest in the next election. He believes that awareness will come among the Dalits one day and they will then be able to elect a leader of their choice.
4. Satyawati

Smt. Satyawati, a 55 year old lady, has been holding the post of Up-Pradhan in the Pedraon Gram Panchayat, Madnapura block for the last two terms. An interesting fact is that she has contested from a constituency which is neither reserved for a Scheduled Caste, nor for women; yet she is the first elected woman representative from the SC community. More interestingly, she does not even know what kind of constituency it is. When asked who motivated her to contest for elections, she answered that it was the Pradhan. All the election expenses were borne by the Pradhan and in return for that she is extending unquestioning support.

Daulatpur and Pedraon are the two villages in this Gram Panchayat. The Pradhan is from Daulatpur and belongs to the Yadav community. He has constructed drains and Kharanja in his village while Pedraon suffers from water logging on the streets and no proper facilities for sewage disposal. Satyawati had requested the Pradhan to do something about these problems but he did not pay her any attention. Subsequently she stopped asking for any support because both the Pradhan and other high caste people said that she did not know how to speak ('Bolne nahi aata hai'). She does not attend meetings and does not dare question why the Pradhan is spending the Panchayat budget on constructing drains only in his village. She puts her thumb impression on every document. In this way she is fulfilling the needs of the village masters and land lords. She is not aware of any functions of Panchayats in general or her functions in particular. She repeats that she is holding the post only because the Pradhan wanted her to be Up-Pradhan.

The Gram Sabha members feel that Satyawati is Up-Pradhan just in name and she has not been able to solve the problems of her own community. No Gram Sabha meetings have taken place in two years and therefore, they have not been able to put forth their problems. They feel that illiteracy and lack of awareness among the Dalits is a major barrier and due to this, their own leaders do not perform up to their expectations.

5. Ramavati

Smt. Ramvati of Lakhnai Panchayat is an OBC member, who got elected from a Scheduled Caste women reserved constituency. The Pramukh, Ajay Yadav, asked her to contest the election and she defeated two other women candidates. Ajay Yadav gave her Rs 30,000 as election expenses and in return for that, she and her supporters voted for Ajay Yadav. She also got support from the Yadav community. Ram Prakash, another candidate for the post of Pramukh, offered Ramvati Rs 50,000. However, she was scared of the unsocial elements promoted by Ram Prakash and refused to support him.

After winning the election as a dummy candidate, she and her community are now paying the price. Lakhnai is backward and most of the Dalit community work as agricultural laborers on upper
caste land. The village does not have the minimum basic facilities of drinking water, proper roads or sewage disposal. Their representative is not raising these issues before the Pramukh or Pradhan. People too are scared of losing their livelihood and therefore, do not raise their voices. The Dalit community is forced to live in impoverished conditions, even after the enactment of constitutional provisions. When questioned about her role as the people’s representatives, Ramvati said that her husband goes to the Block Office and attends the meetings.

6. Munni Devi

Smt. Munni Devi of Lakhnai Panchayat belonging to a poor agricultural laborer’s family, got elected from a Scheduled Caste women reserved seat. The Thakurs and Brahmins helped in filing her nomination papers and took care of all election expenses. Munni Devi narrated one incident of how the SCs are the vote banks for the upper castes. One of the Yadav candidates filed a case under the Dalit Act specifically meant for Dalits against a Thakur, stating that Munni Devi was being ill treated by the Thakur. As a result, all the Dalit votes turned in favor of the Yadavs. Munni Devi could not protest because of fear of the Yadav community.

According to Munni Devi, employment and credit needs are two important factors which influence behavior among the Dalits. They are not able to speak against the upper castes because the upper castes fulfil these crucial needs. One major problem in the village is a shortage of food grains under the PDS. Another is that the Pradhan does not listen to her. She feels very helpless as the expectations of the people are not being addressed. She however, does not attend Gram Panchayat meetings and resolution papers are sent to her for signature. She signs on every paper without questioning and in this way every resolution/proposal gets approved.

Munni Devi is having a bitter experience in her first term in the Panchayat office. She is however, ready to contest for elections the next time, provided she gets support from her own community and the Dalits are united. She stresses that training and awareness building programs should be provided along with the formation of strong community groups (Sangathan).