

The Insidious Power of Patriarchy

Janakamma, stood up in a hall packed with Panchayat Presidents, PDOs and Secretaries and said: *"I am illiterate, but for the past 20 years I have worked as a member and President for the Periapattna Gram Panchayat, Mysuru. I got one crore sanctioned to build children's hostels. During the elections I went house to house and told my constituents about my work and they elected me... What a good candidate needs is not education, but 'common sense' and the ability to understand the needs of people and respond appropriately"*.

This was her reply to vehement arguments for 'education' as a criterion to stand for Panchayat elections during the Mysuru Regional Consultation held by the Ramesh Kumar Committee in 2014.

Janakamma's recognition by her constituency proves that schooling is not a requirement to do the right thing, understand and relate to people's concerns, or find viable solutions to their problems. Janakamma feels injustice more sharply than a college graduate and as she lives the lives of so many other marginalised women in her Panchayat she passionately fights their battles as her own. I have met thousands of women like Janakamma all over Karnataka who confirm that education does not make one either a more able administrator nor is it an insulation against corruption.

Criteria such as 'education' have been used time and again to exclude the poor and the marginalised, especially women, from the electoral politics and from representing themselves. This also lays bare the arrogant assumption that the 'educated' and the 'well to do' are able to more than adequately understand and address the concerns of the less fortunate and the skewed logic that flows from this therefore, is that men can represent women.

Attempts to deprive women from participating in mainstream decision making is not new and has been tried in many ways and in many States, the most recent example being Rajasthan, where the order has been challenged and will most likely be struck down as it violates the provisions of the Representation of People's Act and our fundamental right to equality and equal opportunities.

If we are to accept Montek Singh Ahluwalia's lowered poverty line of Rupees 27 a day in rural areas and 32 in urban, the poor account for not less than 30% of our population of which 50% are women! In recognition of this M Y Ghorpade introduced 33% reservation for women in Karnataka as early as 1993. Following the amendment to Article 243 (D) of the Constitution in 2009 by the UPA Government, raising the reservation for women in all three tiers of Panchayats from 33% to 50%, the Karnataka Act was amended to fall in line. However, it was not done in time to be implemented for the Panchayat Raj Elections in 2010.

Members, all male, of the Ramesh Kumar Committee representing these minority communities made strong arguments in favour of alternating the reservation of such seats between men and women as where there is a single reserved seat for the SC/SC and BC the preference is given to women resulting in some seats permanently represented by women. Underprivileged communities feel that they are already disadvantaged by years of discrimination that even men find it difficult to advocate for their concerns, so when a women is their representative, she being even more intimidated by the dominant power structures, is even less able to participate effectively, their community therefore doomed to have no representation by default. More importantly, the men from that constituency feel that they are being deprived of their right to participate in local government. They were also in favour of ceiling the reservation of women at 50%.

When the amendment for 50% reservation was introduced in the Panchayat Raj Act of 1993, the number 33 was replaced with 50 in the existing clause that read 'not less than 33%' meaning that it could be more. However the Karnataka Municipal Corporation Act states 'one half of the seats' thus implying a ceiling. Despite the fact that there is only 33% reservation for women in Karnataka, women now constitute around 43.6% of the 95,307 elected panchayat representatives in Karnataka – an increase of 0.6% over the previous body [2005-2010] and already nudging the 50% mark. So with 'not less than' 50% reservation for women, the percentage is likely to go up to 75% or even more.

The Committee took serious note of this issue and the rotation of seats alternately between men and women was agreed to without disturbing the existing system of reservations. However, this was not considered satisfactory and the demand for a ceiling on women's reservations persisted, which in reality is to ensure a reservation for men! After enormous pressure, the Committee gave in and included an amendment to this effect.

It is interesting to note that our RDPR Minister evinced great interest in this particular amendment and spent a good part of our two hour meeting with him trying to understand it better, ignoring all the other progressive amendments we had made.

Though women participated equally in the movement for independence be it in Gandhi's non-violent 'Quit India Movement' or Subash Chandra Bose's armed resistance, post independence there was been a steady decline and men have increasingly dominated the political scene since. The lack of women's participation has reached a point where a Women's Reservation's Bill [of 33%] became necessary and was introduced in parliament in 2010 but the UPA government couldn't pass the Bill due to the opposition from allies and it is still pending.

The percentage of women in Parliament in the 16th Lok Sabha is only 11.2% of the 543 seats a slow climb up from the 4.4% in the first Lok Sabha and so reservation is an urgent need to ensure the inclusion of more women. But an amendment for 50 % reservation only for local governments was passed.

Women have to cross three major thresholds to enter public life. First, the threshold of home and family with the inherent economic and socio-cultural barriers; the second is the means to access knowledge and information related to governance; and thirdly, being able to transact the new age of information technology and the concept of e-governance. Women in the Legislature and Parliament have already crossed many of these barriers, but for the rural woman the struggle is enormous.

Yet studies have shown that women led Panchayats are no worse than those led by men and in many cases, perform much better, but the scepticism that reservation is only a 'general power of attorney' given by men, still persists. It is clear that reservation alone is not enough and the Ramesh Kumar Committee appreciated these challenges and endeavoured to mitigate them by supporting and enabling women to overcome these hurdles while ensuring that men were sensitised to create an enabling environment for women's active and informed participation.

Some of the recommendations included a single member constituency so all representatives, especially women had a definite constituency to identify with and for them to be accountable to; a ceiling on election expenditure paid by the State to enable women and the marginalised to participate without having to raise large sums of money; the provision of an Private Secretary to eliminate the 'dominant male' that now calls the shots and in situ capacity building that included the women's family, especially the spouse to garner their support.

Infrastructure such as separate toilets for women in all Panchayat Offices and the provision of a crèche and a cubicle for nursing mothers was seen as essential. It was also suggested that a code of conduct be developed to ensure that 'men' behaved with respect and courtesy in all their dealing so women felt comfortable.

As a member of this Committee I was not in favour of the ceiling. Women have been subjugated to patriarchal machinations for centuries in a male domain. So tipping the balance in favour of women could do no harm. However, ultimately, we have to mature to a stage where we do away with reservations of all kinds and candidates are chosen based on their ability to truly represent their constituents and are honestly and transparently accountable to them, and who knows – maybe women will be better at this and will then dominate the scene! But that can happen only when we rid ourselves of the feudal blood that flows through our veins and replace patriarchy with equality and social justice.

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