

## **Social Justice and the Dalit Women in Democracy at Grassroots (with special reference to the Dalit women of Dholpur in Rajasthan)**

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### **I. Introduction:**

Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy that democracy is the Government of the people, for the people and by the people<sup>3</sup> can be evidently seen getting its real implementation in India. The term 'democracy' can be interpreted in several contexts, such as,

1. (Government, Politics & Diplomacy) government by the people or their elected representatives;
2. (Government, Politics & Diplomacy) a political or social unit governed ultimately by all its members;
3. (Sociology) the practice or spirit of social equality;
4. (Sociology) a social condition of classlessness and equality;
5. (Government, Politics & Diplomacy) the common people, esp as a political force<sup>4</sup>.

The Panchayati Raj in India has completed its fifty years successfully. However, it has left several questions to be answered by the scholars and thinkers. Obviously, the Panchayati Raj has not only opened several new vistas to the people but also won them a new identity. The boons of the Panchayati Raj to the women, and particularly to the Dalit women are conspicuously considerable. It will not be any exaggeration to deduce that the Panchayati Raj in India has changed the destiny of the Dalit women and brought them closer to the main stream of the development of the nation. A clear picture of the changed destiny of the Dalit women can be noticed in the fact that now there is no field of work where they are not seen proving themselves in various capacities. Now they are no longer dependent on the mercy of the members of the upper castes, or on the mercy of the dominating male members of their own castes for their existence. The Indian Dalit women are especially enthusiastic, as they are now seeing an incredible change in their destiny that always kept them too far away from the common modes of living adopted by the common women of the General Castes.

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3 The Gettysburg Address delivered by Lincoln at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863, during the American Civil War.

4 Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged 6<sup>th</sup> Edition 2003

Besides the other common gifts, the century has endowed them with the gifts of reservation and women empowerment.

The reservation policy and the process of women empowerment are two such weapons in their hands as enable them to improve their status and to prove their potential in the various fields and in various capacities. It is just because of these things that now the Dalit women in India have entered the politics of the nation and are working for its betterment in a way that the Indian Politics can see new horizon every hour. The history of Panchayati Raj reveals the changed destiny of the Dalit women. The recent-implementation of 50% reservation in Pachayati Raj is being taken an unexpected social and political change in India. Women with little political experience, getting benefit of the 50 percent reservation announced for them by the State Government last year, have taken on the male bastion in an impressive manner here. Women's groups have enthusiastically joined the election campaign while appealing to the voters to elect women candidates and see the difference.

## **II. Objectives of the Study:**

1. To study and interpret the meaning and definition of democracy
2. To study the meaning and concept of grassroots democracy
3. To analyse and interpret Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy in the present context
4. To study and explore the boons of the grassroots democracy
5. To find out the new dimensions brought about by the grassroots democracy
6. To study, explore and study the women's changing destiny as a result of the grassroots democracy
7. To study the participation of the Dalit women in the grassroots democracy
8. To study the success and failures of the Dalit women in the grassroots democracy
9. To know in detail the real experiences of the Dalit women in the grassroots democracy
10. To learn about the approach the fundamentalists on the Dalit women's joining the grassroots democracy
11. To learn about the husbands' co-operation and indifference to their wives' joining the grassroots democracy in Dholpur
12. To study the Dalit women's participation in the grassroots democracy in Dholpur district of Rajasthan
13. To observe and study the changed status of the Dalit women in Dholpur
14. To study the sense of consciousness and awareness among the Dalit women in Dholpur district
15. To find out the possibilities of upliftment of the Dalit women through the grassroots democracy

16. To make a comparative study of the Dalit women in grassroots democracy in past and in present
17. To observe and study the changes in the Dalit women caused by the grassroots democracy

### **III. Hypothesis:**

1. Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy is a model definition
2. The grassroots democracy is the finest evidence of democracy
3. The grassroots democracy provides the poor and illiterate an opportunity to lead the people and represent the people of their community
4. The grassroots democracy opens several unexpected and miraculous vistas to the women of all the religions and castes and creeds in India
5. The grassroots democracy's special boons are reserved to the Dalit women who were often prevented from joining the main stream of development of the nation
6. The concept of the grassroots democracy has brought new hopes, aspirations, uriosities, convictions and determinations to the Dalit women in the Dholpur district of Rajasthan
7. The Dalit women in the grassroots democracy in the Dholpur district are still very far away from the real spirit of democracy
8. The Dalit women in the grassroots democracy in the Dholpur district find themselves divided between their family liabilities and their public life
9. Their illiteracy forces them to depend themselves on their husbands and on the other male family members for important decisions, finance management and free movement in the society
10. Their illiteracy forces them to keep their husbands and other family members at the public meetings and even at the offices .The concept of grassroots democracy has started changing the destiny of the rural women in the Dholpur district
11. The Dalit women in the Dholpur district show an incredible enthusiasm and interest at the time of the Panchayat Elections
12. The concept of the grassroots democracy has brought about a tremendous change in the mentality of the fundamentalists of the society in the Dholpur district of Rajasthan
13. The participation of the Dalit women in the grassroots democracy in the Dholpur district in the previous years has proved that they are ahead every hour in the field of politics
14. The contesting of the Panchayat elections lately by the Dalit women in the Dholpur district witnesses that they are eager to prove their potential in this field as well
15. The Dalit women in the grassroots democracy in the Dholpur district

have several of their problems

16. Their exploitation has not been checked yet.
17. The path of the grassroots democracy for the Dalit women is full of impediments, and that these impediments are created by the society at large.

#### **IV. Methodology:**

The study was made in the month of January and February, 2010 with a view to preparing a research paper and exploring the relevance of the grassroots democracy in the modern age. The Investigator confined the study to the Dholpur District in Rajasthan. In order to make it scientific, he based it chiefly on the primary data. However, the secondary data were also used wherever it was necessary. For the purpose 100 units of information were randomly selected and most of whom were women working as political leaders or as the newly elected panchs, sarpanchs, members of gram panchayats, zila parishad, and others. Owing to the shortage of time interview technique was adopted, and the questions that could get the factual information were asked. The investigator also made the observation of the actual working conditions of the Dalit women of the Dholpur district in order to peep into their world of grassroots democracy. Of the 100 units selected for the purpose 98 were of the opinion that the grassroots democracy provides a platform to the Dalit women of the Dholpur district to use their potential in the field of politics; 91 said that politics is now the most favourite career-oriented field to most of the women, and particularly, to the Dalit women; 86 said that today it is the dream of every Dalit woman to contest elections of the Panchayat and to enjoy the status of panch or sarpanch, and thus, to lead a life which knows no exploitation in the name of caste; all the 100 units said that the Panchayati Raj has brought about a revolutionary change in the destiny of the Dalit women in the district; 18 of them were of the view that the advantages of the Panchayati Raj in Dholpur district are being availed in totality only by very few of the Dalit women; 37 of them were of the view that the concept of grassroots democracy can meet full implementation only when the Dalit women educate themselves enough to be self-conscious and to be well-familiar with their rights; 73 of them were bold enough to inform that most of the Dalit women work with the help of their husbands, sons or brothers, and not independently; 96 of them shared their view that it is the male members of the family of the Dalit panchs or sarpanchs who see the financial management and who allow the women of the families just in order to be politically dominant in the village.

#### **V. Concept of Grassroots Democracy:**

Grassroots democracy is a tendency towards designing political processes where as much decision-making authority as practical is shifted to the organization's lowest geographic level of organization. An 1876 book about the Black Hills says that "gold is found almost everywhere, in the bars, in the gravel

and sand of the beds, even in the ‘grass roots,’” that is, the soil just below the surface. If used in politics, the phrase means that really competent politicians and leaders may be found not only among the elites and the royal, but among the poor as well. At present, the phrase ‘grassroots democracy’ is used to mean the poor’s participation in politics at the grassroots level, that is, at the Panchayati Raj. As we all know, India’s democratic structure has three levels of governance - national or federal, state or regional governance and the grassroots level called the Panchayati Raj and Nagar Palika systems. The Panchayati Raj system covers the village, the tehsil and the district, and the Nagar Palika system serves towns and cities. If democracy means people’s participation in running their affairs, then it is nowhere more direct, clear and significant than at the local level where the contact between the people and their representatives, between the rulers and the ruled are the best guarantee for its success. It is believed that democracy at the grassroots is the best form of democracy, as even the members of the deprived in the different castes and religions get opportunities to represent the community they belong and are able to prove their potential in the various capacities in the local government bodies. If a real democracy at grassroots in the world is to be seen, it is only in India. No doubt, the other countries like America boast of having this form of democracy, but it is none but in India where it has met its real implementation. Ever since democracy has been controversial. The thinkers like Lord Bryce and S. Radhakrishnan were never satisfied with its actual working. Lord Bryce expressed doubts about the feasibility of a real democracy except in small countries like Switzerland and Scandinavia. To S. Radhakrishnan, it was no better than a lottery of ballot-box. His dissatisfaction for democracy in India can be conspicuously noticed in his treatise *Kalki or the Future of Civilization* in which he takes the reader long back at the point of time when democracy in India was at an embryo stage. He is sorry to say, “We welcomed democracy as a release from autocratic rule, but we are not satisfied with its working today. We are coming to realize that that government is a technical art and only those skilled in it can be the rulers. Democracy in its actual working rarely permits a country to be governed by its ablest men”<sup>5</sup>. The present political scene in India when most of the political leaders are illiterate, semi-literate or with a criminal background reveals the validity of this statement. However, the prevailing forms of governance at the local levels has done much to the women of India, and has made them familiar with their political skills that can help them to be successful as political leaders. The grassroots democracy has both imparted a new improved status to them and helped them prove that they can also lead if opportunities are provided and if they are supported by their family.

## **VI. Grassroots Democracy and the Women:**

However, the concept of the democracy at grassroots has opened several

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5 S. Radhakrishnan: *Future of Civilization*.

new and entirely unexpected vistas to those Indian women who wanted to use their potential of leading in the governance of the society, but who were too enslaved by the long-age traditions of the families and society at large to do so. As a result, for a long time they confined themselves to the walls of their houses managing the various home affairs. The concept of democracy at grassroots has almost changed the concept of a housewife. Now a successful housewife is one who is capable of working in the private or public sector alongwith being wholeheartedly devoted to the family affairs. The truth about democracy at grassroots is that it has brought about a tremendous and incredible change in the destiny of the Indian women.

The Indian women have always been capable of doing worthy things, but constitutionally speaking, the year 1993 when the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in the Constitution guaranteed them 33% reservation in village councils. Indeed, it was a great opportunity for them to make their participation in local elections. 50% reservation in the Panchayati Raj is something that was not expected even by the women themselves. Obviously, it is going to bring about a great change in the entire Indian social system as well as a change in the status and role of the women. The reservation policy for women in India has laid the foundation of a new and entirely different era when every woman is conscious of herself, when she is ready to accept every challenge, when she is mentally prepared to prove herself and when she is ready to avail herself of every opportunity that the concept of grassroots democracy provides her. The concept has changed the approach of the fundamentalists who were not ready to allow the women of their families to join politics lest she should become more worthy of her husband. Now the situation is absolutely changed. The reasons are many, but unemployment of the male members of the family and the consciousness of the women are the notable reasons that have made even the fundamentalists of the society welcome warmly the democracy at grassroots in particular. According to Mr. Bhanwar Lal Soni, the E.O., Nagar Palika, Dholpur : The Panchayati Raj in India, and particularly in Rajasthan stands for renaissance of women, as it has brought the ray of hope to every woman, and especially to the Dalit woman of India who can be seen working in the various capacities at the different levels of grassroots democracy<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, the newly elected Dalit women Panchs, Sarpanchs, Sub-Sarpanchs and members of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad admitted at the time of their first meeting at the campus of the Panchayat Samiti that the grassroots democracy has changed their destiny positively by providing an opportunity to work for the public, and thus to be financially self-dependent. Most of them consider the grassroots democracy a boon of the modern age that had never been imagined before by them and their families. They were full of enthusiasm on their elections, and eager to work in a new capacity absolutely unrealised

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6 Interview of E.O. Mr. Bhanwar Lal Soni , Nagar Palika, Dholpur, on March, 2, 2010 at the Nagar Palika.

before.

### **VII. Changed Destiny of the Dalit Women:**

Kruti Dholakiya observes in her article 'Reservation Policy For Backward Classes in India': "India began as a closed socialistic nation. After 1991, it has turned towards capitalism and has opened its doors to globalization. With the higher levels of education, higher levels of income, higher levels of growth, the economy is likely to stabilize very fast. With higher pecuniary incentives, people are likely to forget the basic caste differences"<sup>7</sup>. The concept of grassroots democracy has especially blessed the Dalit woman by bringing her close to education, employment and self-consciousness which can be noticed in her awareness of fundamental rights, legal provisions, laws and statutes, and legal amendments.

Today every field is open to her for her participation and if she is determined to build up her career in politics, she can easily join it. The most significant thing is that there is no need of education for her. Even if she is illiterate, she can contest elections and represent the people of her ward, village or district quite successfully. In fact, once the myth of a Dalit woman's being empowered and her enjoying a dignified and honourable status now seems to have turned into reality. Though she may be seen working in various capacities in all the public and private departments, she is mainly being more successful in the grassroots democracy. Today the Dalits make up 16.2% of the total population of India. Close to half of them live under the poverty line, and even more than 62% are illiterate. In Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal, they constitute 7.1% of the country's population. According to the census of 2001, the total population of women in India is 49,65,14,346 of which 8,05,46,940 are the women of Scheduled Castes and 4,16,85,411 are the women of Scheduled Tribes. Every fourth Indian is a Dalit. The present position seems to be better with reference to the rate of literacy among them. The literacy rate is 31.48% for boys and 10.93% for girls. Dalit women belonging to the creamy layer of the society are better with good education and socially and economically, they are well off like the women of other castes. No doubt, much is being done to empower the Dalit women and to empower them politically, still much is left to be done, as there are still several of them living under miserable conditions and leading horribly undignified life. 33% reservation under the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment proved itself a boon to the Dalit women because it enabled them in particular to join the world of politics at all the three levels of governance, and particularly at the local level, and make an active participation in making and implementing the Government policies.

"India is a multi-party parliamentary democracy that implies that there is a proportional representation of all minorities. This means that for any political

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7 Kruti Dholakiya : Reservation Policy For Backward Classes in India.

changes to occur there has to be a 66% majority agreement in the legislation. From this point of view too, the Dalit women have become very important. In all the local bodies of Government there are essentially some female Dalit representatives”<sup>8</sup>. Their active participation has proved that they are not inferior to other women of other classes in any respect. They are intelligent enough to understand the things; they are sensible enough to take any proper action for the welfare of others; they are daring enough to face and overcome any critical situation. In fact, on an average, it is the aspiration and dream to be a panch, sarpanch or zila pramukh, and thus, to lead a life free from the social shackles. Today she is not the same as the Dalit woman in the past. She is representing the various political parties in India . In the field of politics, and particularly, in the field of the grassroots democracy, if the real empowerment of women is to be noted, it is chiefly of the Dalit women.

The modern age with little caring for caste differences witnesses the same , as the Dalits have started being free from all those social and economic shackles that in the past were the impediments in their path of doing something worthy and useful for the country. However, the present democracy at grassroots is forcing the thinkers to brood seriously over the issue and decide for themselves if it is successful or a failure. It is true that like the controversial issues its critics too can be classified into two groups. Anyway, I strongly believe that the success of the grassroots democracy in the context of the Dalit women is still rather far from being a complete reality, as still they are in the grip of men and fail to take decisions independently.

### **VIII. Participation of the Dalit Women of Dholpur in the Grassroots Democracy:**

#### **Facts & Figures About Dholpur**

Area:	3,034 sq. kilometers
Area under forests:	27059 Hectares
Latitude:	77014'-78016' E
Longitude:	260-26057' N
Temperature:	Max.- 49 0C, Min.- 1 0C
Annual Rainfall:	67 cms.
Population:	9, 83,258 (2001 census)
Male:	5, 38,203
Female:	4, 45,155
Population Density:	324 per sq. km
Sex Ratio:	827 females per 1000 males
Literacy Rate:	60.10%
No. of Sub-Division:	4

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8 Dr. Rajvir Singh Dhaka : Behind the Veil: Dalit's Women in Panchayati Raj.

No. of Tehsils:	5
Panchayat Samitis:	4
No. of Villages:	809

Carved out of Bharatpur district Dholpur is surrounded by Agra district in the north-east, Morena district of Madhya Pradesh in the south, Sawai Madhopur district in the west and Bharatpur district of Rajasthan in the north. Dholpur is famous for its excellent sandstone. This red sandstone was used for building not just the local structures but also those of Delhi like the Red Fort. Some of the worth visiting places in and around the district are: Laswari, Shergarh Fort, The Khanpur Mahal, The Shiva Temple, Machchhkund, Ramsagar Sanctuary, Talab-E-Shahi and Van Vihar Wild Life Sanctuary etc. FINDINGS Of the 100 units selected for the purpose 98 were of the opinion that the grassroots democracy provides a platform to the Dalit women of the Dholpur district to use their potential in the field of politics; 91 said that politics is now the most favourite career-oriented field to most of the women, and particularly, to the Dalit women; 86 said that today it is the dream of every Dalit woman to contest elections of the Panchayat and to enjoy the status of panch or sarpanch, and thus, to lead a life which knows no exploitation in the name of caste; all the 100 units said that the Panchayati Raj has brought about a revolutionary change in the destiny of the Dalit women in the district; 18 of them were of the view that the advantages of the Panchayati Raj in Dholpur district are being availed in totality only by very few of the Dalit women; 37 of them were of the view that the concept of grassroots democracy can meet full implementation only when the Dalit women educate themselves enough to be self-conscious and to be well-familiar with their rights; 73 of them were bold enough to inform that most of the Dalit women work with the help of their husbands, sons or brothers, and not independently; 96 of them shared their view that it is the male members of the family of the Dalit panchs or sarpanchs who see the financial management and who allow the women of the families just in order to be politically dominant in the village. Despite the fact that the Dalit women's performance at the grassroots democracy in Rajasthan is quite admirable, they are still lagging behind and still struggling to get such opportunities as may help them work independently in a situation when they no more find themselves helpless at the mercy of the male-folk. Their illiteracy, ignorance, indifference to the happenings around them, their inability to make decisions and their dependence on the male members of their family are the obstacles in their path. India can boast of its grassroots democracy when the Dalit women are treated with honour at the panchayat samitis and zila parishads. On the basis of the conclusions of grassroots democracy relating to the participation of the Dalit women in the Dholpur district, it can be deduced that it will still take them several years to work entirely by themselves. However, their emergence at the grassroots democracy is enough to predict that they have very bright prospects at the grassroots democracy. In the Panchayat elections of Rajasthan held in the month of January, 2010, as a result of the allowing the

women 50% reservation, an incredible craze for contesting elections was noticed among the women of all the castes and religions, and particularly among the Dalit women. Despite the fact that many of them failed in their efforts to win the elections, the picture of the winning Dalit women in the district is quite admirable. In the Dholpur Zila Parishad, 3 women of Scheduled Castes and one woman of Scheduled Tribes are participating actively as its members. In all the four Panchayat Samitis, namely, Baseri, Bari, Dholpur and Rajakhera the number of the SC & ST women is 13 and 4 respectively. In Rajakhera Panchayat Samiti there are 2 SC women sarpanchs while the number of SC women panchs is 46; in Baseri Panchayat Samiti, there are 5 SC women sarpanch while the number of the SC women panchs is 35; in Dholpur Panchayat Samiti, the number of the SC women sarpanch is 3 while there are 34 SC women panchs and in Bari Panchayat Samiti, the number of the newly elected SC women sarpanch 3 whereas there are 40 SC women panchs. Similarly, at the Dholpur Nagar Palika, 2 Dalit women, at the Rajakhera Nagar Palika 2 Dalit women and at the Bari Nagar Palika 3 Dalit women are rendering their valuable services to the people by representing the community which they belong to.

**IX. Number of Sc and St Women at Various Levels of Grassroots Democracy in the Dholpur District<sup>9</sup>:**

LEVELS OF GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY	SC		ST		Total	
	Gents	Ladies	Gents	Ladies	Gents	Ladies
Zila Parishad	2	3	0	1	2	4
Panchayat Samiti	6	13	2	4	8	17
Gram Panchayat	191	168	40	58	231	226
Total	199	184	42	63	241	247

**X. Obstacles before the Dalit Women at Grassroots Democracy:**

Obviously, the Dalit woman has entered the world of politics and is working quite successfully at all the three levels of government, but several of her problems that create impediments in her active participation too cannot be overlooked. Her history says that at the beginning, she had to face much problem because nobody was ready to see her in power. She worked only with the support of her male family members who could speak for her or raise the issues for her. I remember that about fourteen years ago, I was invited to address the women sarpanchs of the Dholpur district of Rajasthan. I was shocked to see the scene at the panchayat samiti Dholpur, as there were only the husbands, brothers or the other male members of their families. It made me realize that the women sarpanchs were there only in theory, not in practice. Similarly, at one of the

<sup>9</sup> Election record available at the office of the District Collector, Dholpur.

conferences presided over by Ramvati, the zila parishad president I observed that it was not the President of zila parishad but her husband who spoke and addressed the audience on behalf of her. Some of the major problems which are commonly faced by the Dalit women political leaders are illiteracy, lack of knowledge, unawareness of the laws, blind faith in their male family members and their acting upon their advice, their indifference to the people whom they represent, their working in their self-interest, their physical, mental and economic exploitation at the hands of the man-folk etc.

However, now as the reports say, changes have started occurring. If not in all the cases, at least, in 15% cases, the Dalit women have started taking part in the various government bodies quite independently. Not only this, they are now ready to face every consequence whatever it is or may be. Many of them are seen not only addressing the public quite confidently but also taking their decisions independently without the help and support of the male members. This trend is an evident fact of the would-be revolution among the Dalit women that may occur any hour in future.

#### **XI. Suggestions:**

- The Dalit women who are desirous of making politics their career, should be encouraged for education in order to make a better and more effective participation in grassroots democracy.
- After their election as panchs, sarpanchs, Panchayat Samiti member or Zila Parishad Pramukh, all the women including the Dalit ones should be trained for a sufficient period of time, and during the training period they should be taught about their rights and powers as well as about their duties so that they can find it easier to work under new capacities.
- Orientation and refresher programmes for the women in grassroots democracy should be designed and structured in a way that they can learn from time to time how to handle a particular situation. These programmes will especially be beneficial to the Dalit women, as they often have to depend on others for such things.
- In order to make the women at the grassroots democracy aware of the financial matters, they should be given special training so that they can have a clear idea about the various funds sanctioned by the Government to be spent for the implementation of the various schemes. Financial matters often create problems for all the women including the Dalit ones, and obviously, such a training can protect them from those who misuse them for their own interests.
- The male members of the elected women should be banned at the public meetings, and they should be allowed to accompany them only on some specific occasions, and The Government should specify the

occasions when they may be with them.

- There must be a planned and proper arrangement for the security of women, and particularly for the Dalit women who often fall victims to the physical, economic, social, religious and mental exploitation.
- The Police Administration must be alert enough to punish such people who attempt to infringe the rights of the Dalit women in politics, and who prevent them from exercising their duties properly. The women at all the different levels of grassroots democracy ought to be determined to work honestly in the interest of the public which they represent in order to make the grassroots democracy a crystal-clear success.