

# Dalit women scale caste wall

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EVEN AS grassroots democracy has given India over a million elected women representatives, it has empowered Dalit and Adivasi women leaders to challenge caste barriers.

"Remarkably, the actual occupancy of seats by women belonging to these categories (Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) substantially exceeds the percentage of reservation. For instance, in Karnataka, 46 per cent and 65 per cent respectively of SCs and STs elected to panchayats are women. Can there be a more telling evidence of womens' empowerment through panchayati raj, particularly of the poor and the downtrodden?" states Minister of Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar, in his last review of the State of Panchayats (2006-07).

This is remarkable because only one-third of reservations in the SC/ST categories are mandatorily reserved for women, implying that Dalit and Adivasi women are also winning from seats not reserved for them.

Mumbai-based Maharashtra Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (MMRA), an association of elected women representatives formed in 2000, reflects an interesting social trend. Seventy per cent of its 2,000 members are Dalit.

"Dalit elected women representatives are more politically

conscious and active than the Maratha women. They are better at organising themselves. They are more struggle-oriented because they feel they have nothing to lose," said project director Bhim Raskar.

A shining example of the success of this social experiment is Maya Devi Sorte, the state leader of the MMRA, who has contested three elections including the Zilla Parishad election. Sorte also participated in the United Nations conference, in New York, on the role of women in the panchayati raj institutions, in 2006. On how being an elected representative has impacted her life, she said, "It has given me self-respect and self-confidence. Education of girls has now become a priority, our standard of living has improved and we are also becoming economically empowered," said Sorte, chairman of sub-committees on ration, police vigilance and education. She was elected from Wadwal Nagnath in Latur district, in Maharashtra, in 2006.

"Women Dalit and Adivasi leaders are making the best use of constitutional opportunities. There are Dalit elected women representatives in states where the caste dynamics is very strong," said Maalan Narayan, national media advisor to Hunger Project, an international organisation that has trained 65,000 women panchayat leaders in India. But the challenges are immense. "Women Dalit leaders have to battle caste discrimination every day. Influential villagers are not happy and want to unseat women leaders. But the Dalit elected women representatives are receiving support from local NGOs," said Bimal Kant of Hunger Project's Bihar state office.



SANJEEV VERMA/HT

UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi interacts with a delegate from Karnataka at the National Convention of Chairpersons of District and Intermediate Panchayats in New Delhi on Thursday.