

Vol 3 Issue 10 Nov 2013

ISSN No : 2230-7850

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

Indian Streams Research Journal

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

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TRIBAL WOMEN AND DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER: AN APPRAISAL



Mamata Sahoo

Tulasi Women's College, Kendrapara, Odisha

Abstract:-The Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendments Act) has the noble intention of bringing power to the women in general and tribal women in particular. These amendments provide for decentralization of power or decentralized administration through local self-governing bodies at the district (Zila Parishad), block (Panchayat Samiti), village (Gram Panchayat) and Municipality/ NAC levels. These amendments further provide a platform for direct and active participation of women in various levels of development and nation-building process. One important objective of these amendments is to empower women and tribal women in particular, to have a greater access, say and role not only in the affairs at the grass –root level. It aims at reducing political and bureaucratic interference in various development programmes in rural and tribal areas. In other words, local bodies encourage active participation of tribal women in the formulation and implementation of different development activities and thereby bringing a meaningful socio-economic change particularly in rural and tribal areas.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Decentralization, decentralized, political.

INTRODUCTION

This sheds the sense of alienation and deprivation among the women in general and tribal women in particular from the system of governance. Thus the fruits of development percolate downwards to the women with their active involvement and participation. It creates a system of self-governance which ultimately supersedes the existing bureaucratic system and through which several developmental works are undertaken. But social reality is completely different from the prescribed norms and provisions. The present paper seeks to understand the factors responsible of ineffective participation of women in general and tribal women in particular in the process of democratic decentralization through local bodies in the state of Odisha. Our endeavor is primarily based on experience and observations made during last two years (from 2010 to 2012) in tribal dominated districts called Mayurbhanja covering Zilla Parishad, five Panchayat Samities (Block) and ten Gram Panchayats (GPs).

Certain specific provisions have been incorporated in the constitution of India through the 73rd and 74th amendment Act with a view to extend and enhance representation to the women in general and tribal in particular in various self-governing local bodies. The following are the provision: 243 D (3) provides that not less than one –third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in Panchayat. 243 D(4) provides that the offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at the villages or at any level shall be reserved for the STs, SCs and women in

such manner as the legislature of a state may provide by law. Provided further that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to various Panchayats at each level. Thus, all the states in India coming within the purview of these amendments of the constitution have made statutory provisions with regard to the reservation of women in the local bodies. These amendments which regulate the local bodies are now urging women to assert themselves, but in a rather ineffective manner. Very recently, The Orissa Zilla Parishad Bill (Amendment), 2001 were passed in the Orissa Assembly on dt 003-08-2001. These amendments seek provision for 27 percent reservation for Backward classes (OBCs) for the posts of the President Zilla Parishads, Chairmen of the Panchayat Samities and Sarpanches of GPs. Significantly, a proposal for the reorganization of blocks is under the consideration of the Government of Orissa. A high level committee headed by the chief Minister, Law Minister, finance Minister and the Panchayat Raj Ministries looking into this matter Orissa Government is also taking steps to complete the process of reorganization of Panchayats. But the High court of Orissa has issued an interim stay on the process in response to a petition which says that reorganization of Panchayats should be done basing on the 2001 census. So, the state government has written to the Census Commissioner for final notification of the census report as early as possible. All the same, this may be considered to be a good beginning and welcome step in giving due representation to women in general and tribal women in particular in various local bodies. The above analysis however, does not strengthen the feeling that

reservation and power to women are altogether new ideas incorporated in the constitution through amendments. Subsequent discussion will reveal the attempts made in the past to give due power and representation to women of our country.

Self- governing local bodies like village Panchayat has been in existence in India since time immemorial. It finds place in the Manusmriti and in the Artashatra of Kautilya in 400 BC. Historical as well as sociological researches have also attested the fact that almost every village in pre British India had a self-governing body of its own which used to function as a little republic. Economically slowly and systematically destroyed this body over the years through the introduction of Ryotwari system and centralization of executive and judicial power in order to strengthen the British Raj and enhance the revenue collection. Those attempts which were initiated to strengthen the local bodies by Ripon Resolution, 1882, Royal commission on Decentralisation, 1907, government of India Act, 1919 and 1935 were, in fact, made for the entrenchment and maintenance of the British Raj and revenue collection only. Interestingly, there was no reference of panchayat when the Draft constitution was included at a later stage. As per the constitution of India and the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government (Art. 40). As regards equality of opportunity in all spheres to women, the Preamble to the constitution social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, Equality of Status and of opportunity and to provide among them all; Fraternity, assuring the dignity of individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. Further, according to art, 15 of the constitution, the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth or any of them. Under Art.14, women are guaranteed equality before law and Art. 16 (1) and (2) provide for equality of opportunity in matter relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state. What we want to point out here is that the constitution of India not only treats women equal to men but also paves the way for their full cooperation and active participation in all spheres of national development.

In view of the above analysis, it may be said that participation of women in grass-root democracy has been realized and recognized by our policy planners, thinkers and scholars. In the year 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta committee Report has commended the induction of two women members in panchayats in order to carry on the specific programs relating to welfare of women and children. This report has given birth to the first generation panchayats in some states. But this phase of panchayats has been marked by confrontation between the bureaucracy and panchayats. After 1977, political structure of the country has to undergo certain major changes. The Janata Government at the Centre has come out with plan to strengthen democratic bodies at the grass – root level in tribal and rural areas. So, a committee headed by Ashok Mehta has been appointed by the government for the purpose. This report has given birth to what is called the second generation panchayats in some

states of India namely, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and West Bengal. The report has also pointed out relevant and significant role played by women representatives in decision-making process during implementation of various welfare activities and also their involvement as an integral part of the total development of the local people and areas. As per the suggestions outlined in the report, the decision-making role of women should apply specially to welfare and development programmes relating to women and children. The expectation of this provision is to make women members aware of the problems faced by women in general and tribal women in particular who are largely engaged in agriculture and allied activities and also in mobility of women labour. The report has further recommended reservation of two seats for women in panchayats and their cooption in case they fail to come through direct elections. As a result of this, a number of states have provided reservation facility of women in panchayats. But the question arises: Is reservation sufficient?

Reservation is not an end in itself. It may not go long way in effective participation of women in general and tribal women in particular in grass-root democracy, as there are obstacles which hamper their active participation.. As far as reservation for women is concerned we have learnt in the past and in the latest amendments indicate that we could begin making amends. It has been observed that the role played by women in rural and urban bodies has been weak due to various reasons. Tribal women who take some interest are generally the relatives of personalities having some influential people of the local areas. The possibility of voting in the line of caste, sex, age, kinship, family and residential background in the rural and tribal areas cannot be ignored. Reportedly, panchayats elections in rural and tribal areas have reinforced the primordial ties which have apparently supplanted the politics of choice of honest and good people. This however does not fulfill the objective of democratic decentralization. Though elections of local bodies without party politics need to be encouraged, in reality they may not be delinked from each other. It is the moral responsibility of every individual to ensure that honest and morally upright nation-building, their relationships are likely to be affected first, and the chances are that they may tend to cut themselves off from people who were formerly happy to mix with.

People have to rise above their narrow grooves. Most of the tribal women practically do not participate in the discussion and meeting of the local bodies. They are members on official records only. This may be due to illiteracy and lack of awareness among tribal women. Interestingly, in some cases the male members (husband, father, brother and like) on behalf of the tribal women members are generally found taking part in the meetings, discussions and other matters. This reflects the persistence of gender bias in the rural and tribal societies. It means that women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and significant change in the equation of power is not yet observed in the tribal and rural areas. There is a need of the decentralization of power by keeping local bodies above such politics. Because of social and economic barriers some of these women members do not even attend the meetings and their signatures are obtained

later on from their houses. Allegedly, they are not consulted while taking decisions. This further substantiates the fact that tribal women still suffer from low self esteem because of age-old social subjugation and lack of political freedom. It is a felt need to make tribal women aware of their role in all spheres of Panchayat activities. IN the process of development and decision making women have to operate along with men. In view of this, appropriate training programs for all functionaries at the district or block or GP level ought to be organized regularly and systematically.

Lack of awareness among tribal women has led to the lack of orientation that they are provide with a golden opportunity to serve their communities and they have to derive the best advantage out of it for the welfare of their communities. Also some tribal members feel awkward to sit with others and participate in the discussion, though they have started understanding the subject matter under discussion. Because traditionally they have been considered as weak and inferior to men. They have to understand that they may extend the maximum assistance possible in the process of decision making. It is observed that some of them never sit for the whole time in the meeting and return to their homes. Generally, women share responsibilities of village administration, in addition to domestic responsibilities. They attend to people's problems and there are no fixed hours of work. On the other hand the society has not inculcated the culture of sharing of domestic works among male members of the society. Naturally, it disturbs the harmony of home and family life and ultimately the women prefer their homes. It is, therefore, essential to shed certain stereotyped prevailing attitudes about role and responsibilities of women in socio-economic development of a particular area. Sometimes, some of them are found attending the meeting and putting their signatures just to complete the official formalities and found remaining silent during the proceedings and deliberations. Because , they are very much vulnerable and susceptible to comments, criticism and remarks made by others in the meetings and discussions. Apparently upset over the atmosphere in a Gram Sabha once a tribal women member has said, "feeling could be running high and you could go over the top in making others know just how upset and angry you are".

The policy of reservation in local bodies has a positive role to play in promoting the accelerated uplift of historically disadvantaged groups including tribal people and women. Under the existing provisions in the 73 Amendment Act, 1992 about one-third women representatives are in the panchayats. There cannot be any dramatic movement in the system just by including any dramatic movement in the system just by including women members in the panchayats. Tribal women members are generally found subordinated to dominant caste members who are apparently in undisputed control. Disgusted with the situation, once a member says, "something you think has disappeared is about to strike back into view. It is really strange how the past keeps coming back to haunt you. It appears to be inevitable." In some cases, they find it difficult to mix with the general people/ members. A sense of inferiority and inadequacy interferes with the attainment of one's hopes and aspirations. A positive attitude in one's own

mind release inner power. They may be advised not to allow their age old emotional state to cloud their judgment improvement in this sphere may be delayed, but we should be hopeful that this phase of uncertainty will not last long. Sometimes, they are found reluctant to attend meeting and discussions on important financially matters due to lack of confidence. When the meeting comes to and end, they get the idea where the spending plans are headed. A woman must have faith abilities. Without having a certain amount of confidence in her abilities, she can neither be happy nor be successful. They have to appreciate the fact that they are being given an opportunity to consider the future of a larger section of the society. They have to rethink before they abandon meeting as the nation and society have effused so much faith on them.

There is a need to persuade the women members to come forward and participated openly and actively. At the same time, other members have to take extra responsibility in the process of nation-building. They should support and extend full cooperation to the women members and tribal women in particular. It is true to note here that the general tide of events seems to be moving in favour of women, but some opportunities are snatched away from their grasp. As far as politics is concerned, the dominant section does not like to see the world from the eyes of others. But, in view of the rapid temperamental changes it would not be unwise to avoid all unnecessary conflicts. Tribal women have to wait and make initiatives slowly to make their view know. During past four years, situation has improved and as the local bodies progress situation will improve further. This is undoubtedly, a big boost to moral of tribal women members. Nonetheless, special orientation camps for the rural elites are essentially required. Ours is a male dominated society and this dominance is relatively more visible in the tribal and rural areas. It is essential to encourage tribal women to play a more active and constructive part. Exchange of views and ideas between them is found lacking in practice. Sometimes and press for demands for women.

Any kind of confusion or disagreement in the affairs of panchayats is purely the result of diverse opinions and there is no reason why there should be personally affected. There is absolutely no point in getting discouraged and depressed. Local bodies have also other women members have to establish a rapport with the female members and give due respect and attention to their view. There is also denying the fact that the prevailing male –dominated power structure is not ready to accept easily women as their chairpersons and sarpanches. At works and in all routine tasks of local bodies tribal women have no other choice but to press on even if the carpet is being pulled from under their to inculcate confidence among tribal women and also required to bring attitudinal changes among them. There is need for appropriate training and education relation to different aspects of functioning of local bodies to make women members conscious of their effective organized at the district aspects of functioning of local bodies to make women members conscious of their effective role and representation. This kind of training may be organized at the district or block or GP or Municipality/ NAC level immediately following the election. The main objective of

local bodies to involve tribal women and to cultivate in them initiative and self reliance should not be allowed to take a back seat. Involvement of tribal women will definitely expedite and ensure successful and smooth running and implementation of various developmental and welfare activities in the tribal areas.

It is felt that judicial and legal powers with special status to tribal women may be given to the GPs particularly in the tribal areas. In the administrative structure, the provision of a judicial Panchayat may be put into effect, partly because past experiences show discrimination in awarding punishment to weaker sections and the prevailing legal provisions and judicial system are alien to many tribal communities and their tradition and culture. Even today, the tribal people are guided by their respective traditional and culture in dealing disputes and problems. Forests which come under the control of the GPs. May be allowed to be managed by the tribal people without interference of the Forest Department. We have to understand the fact that tribal women members may play a vital role in the formulation and implementation of various women and child development programs for tribal communities. This would increase the efficacy of tribal related programs. For instance, women members and GPs should have adequate control over the primary education, primary health care and also running of the public distribution system in the tribal areas. The eleventh schedule contains 29 items including the above mentioned items. But the transfer of these subjects has not been made legally binding. In the context, it may be mentioned here that the state government of Odisha is seriously considering this issue for general welfare of the tribal people. Since tribal women have representation indifferent development committees in panchayats, such committees may meet at regular intervals of time and ensure their more and active participation. Moreover, in order to create greater interest among women functionaries of attendance and participation in the Panchayat meetings, the prevailing token of payment by a more regularize and to some extent higher payment may be taken into consideration.

Illiteracy is recognized to be the most important impediment hampering active involvement of tribal women in the political process at the grass-root level. The percentage of tribal female literates to total tribal female population in Odisha is only 8.29 per cent. Maurbhanja has recorded the low tribal female literacy rate i.e. 1.93 per cent which is just unthinkable.. This has direct bearings on their deliberations in taking appropriate decisions on technical matters or matters of complicated nature. Under the process of democratic decentralization a lot of powers are being handed down to tribal women. But in the administration tribal woman may not have much success in getting their share in development and welfare due to their illiteracy. She has visualized that the need of the hour is to generate awareness among them and to make them conscious about their enhanced rights and responsibilities. So, rallies and camps have been organized in tribal and rural pockets of the district to motivate the illiterate women in particular so that they can actively participate in various Panchayat matters. Now, the government of Odisha has given power to the

panchayats to look into the matters relating to education, health, water and light in rural areas.

Tribal women are a combination of vulnerability and fiery confidence which may be a sure recipe for success they are sensitive to the needs of other women and requirements of community in large. They may open to hearts to a much broader vision of the society. So, they have to argue with those who have been obstruction their ways. They have to relook at them who have been neglected due to tension in various spheres and work to restore relationships which are in trouble. They may easily get others on their side and exceed their widest expectations. There is an optimistic flavor to the proceedings of local bodies and they are bound to make the best of whatever comes their way. There is nothing to worry about in a phase of transition and they will come to know when it does get better. Until then, it would be best to plan their future methodically. It is time to make a comeback and scotch all those nasty rumors that women are not capable of holding important positions in local bodies. They have to face the truth about a series of relationships and hopes which should avoid to go behind anybody's back, even if it appears to be the best way to avoid trouble in short term. Their strength, undoubtedly, is their determination to succeed. If anything at all, will push and pull them to succeed, it would be their unmitigated confidence. Last but not the least, functioning of local bodies in a coherent and disciplined manner is essentially required.

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