

Research Paper



EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The main of the present paper is to study status of tribal women and their empowerment process under panchayat raj system in India. . In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They constitute about half of the total population but in tribal society women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and management depends on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. The present study reveals the fact that through PRI provided an important opportunity to participate in political process. Little consciousness has been increased among tribal women, about their subjugated position in the society. However this little awareness is important in context of empowerment process of tribal women. The study also indicates political participation of tribal of women in PRIs.

KEYWORDS: Tribal, Women, Income, Employment, Education, Health Empowerment, PRIs.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as their roles within the family, the community and society. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They constitute about half of the total population but in tribal society women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and management depends on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produce is done mostly by women and children. Many also work as laborers in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income. Despite the exploitation by contractors and managers, tribals are more sincere and honest than non tribals. However, tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to environmental degradation and the interference of outsiders. The strategy for tribal development, and specially women, needs improvement, betterment, development and upliftment to effect their empowerment. Tribal women have adjusted themselves to live a traditional life style in the local environment and follow occupations based on natural resources. Undoubtedly, the programmes, oriented towards the empowerment of tribal's, particularly women, have improved their socio-economic conditions and status.

However, there are wide variations across regions and tribes in terms of work participation, sex ratio, economic productivity and social life. The impact of development planning needs to be evaluated in terms of desired and unanticipated consequences. The development process should be perceived as an involvement and reorganization mechanism of not only the socio-economic system but the entire ecosystem. Against this backdrop, the present paper reviews the emerging perspective in the context of the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women and changing paradigms of development (Mohammad.A, et al, 2009:1).

Looking to the gender as one mode of fragmentation of identity in both dominant caste as well as tribals, we shall see that women of both groups are placed very differently both in their own group and the other. Tribal women are such a separated segment of Indian society. The tribal women who comprise a number traditionally low order castes have been the virtual under longs of hinder social life, they continue to be kept out of the main stream of Hindu social life. The level of awareness among tribal women in India regarding their rights including political, legal, economic rights and how to take advantage of them is still very low. They still lag behind in almost all fields and are undergoing hardship and sufferings.

The Power structure among tribal community is highly differentiated. The power among them vertically this is to be because tribal women in Indian society suffer from dual disadvantages of being women and being tribal women. As we all know tribal group itself is differentiated by non-



tribal groups. Tribal women are discriminated against and dominated by surroundings high caste people. In larger context also, they are neglected in terms of class ethnic practice, education, occupation and political participation etc.

Besides the domination of non-tribal groups in the society, they have to undergo additional hardships because of their gender position. In their families, adult males dominate tribal women, even with a cursory glance one gets a distinct feeling that are discriminated by male members, in their families terms of decision-making, decision of participation and decision alterations. Hence, tribal women suffer from the double discrimination of their low social status/position as well as the gender bias.

However, with the emergence of modern social forces and because of Indian contact with the West, gradual changes are taking place in attitude of the Hindus towards the low castes. After independence, especially after the establishment of democratic republic of India, a number of steps were taken by the central and state government to raise the socio-economic status of tribal groups towards this. The Indian government has announced elaborate scheme for empowerment of women and the safeguards of women's rights, but still women especially tribal women due to double discrimination are suffering from disabilities and inequalities. The tribal women constitute a separate category; they have typical problems as compared with other women in society. Most of the studies on tribal women have concentrated on their socio-cultural conditions and physical violence, non-tribal groups men have subjected to which tribal women often. Only a few studies have shed light on their interconnection between tribal and gender.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Keeping the above analysis, literature pertaining to the present topic has been reviewed and analysed here.

A study conducted by **Manikyamba, P(1989)** entitled 'Women in Panchayat Raj Structures' is an examination of the working of PRIs in general, the role of women as beneficiaries and benefactors in the socio-economic and political process of development, assessing the role of women presiding officers of the PRIs. She was of the view that given the opportunity, talented and interested women can play very effective leadership role politics.

Sivanna, N (1990) in an empirical study dealing with the PRS under the Act of 1959 argues that, the involvement of women members in PRIs was not up to the expected mark. He observes that, although there are statutory provisions to ensure their representation, their socio-economic conditions are not conducive to their effective involvement.

Chandra Sekhara and Anand Inbanathan(1991)'s study of Women Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat Members in Karnataka revealed that the reservation of seats for women has given them an opportunity to take an active part in the political processes of the state and rural areas in particular.

Susheela Kaushik (1993):"Study of Women and Panchayati Raj"- The Author has given detailed information regarding women and Panchayati Raj. In the first part, she has presented women in the election process, and the problems and kind of support in terms of remedial measures to overcome etc. She has stated the formal and informal process of women in politics. In the second part she has analysed historical account of P.R.Is and positions of women and changes in women

positions. She has observed that the 73rd Constitution Amendment had guaranteed representation of women in the elections at all the three tier structure of P.R.Is. It was also found that the states of the panchayats like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala had witnessed good number of women turn out as voters as well as candidates not for the reserved constituencies but even for the general constituencies.

The book Panchayati raj in India (Rural local Self Government) written by **B.S. Khanna (1994)**, is an extensive book which analyses the development of panchayati raj system. In the first part the author gives the general review of the development of panchayat raj system particularly in the national perspective like heritage, Self Government during the first decades, and community development programme, genesis of panchayati raj and growth of the panchayati raj and Ashok Mehta Committee Recommendations, present position of PRIs and also conferment of Constitutional status, steps towards the implementation of panchayat raj system in India. In the second part the author reveals that panchayati raj in the various states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, the author has concentrated on Karnataka and he has made 2 case study also like Tumkur and D.K. In Karnataka rural environment, panchayatraj in first phase, main features, Mandal Panchayat Samiti, and also Zilla Parishad, and system of work of the panchayatiraj and also reveals the dissolution of P.R. Bodies. In the third part the author is giving the description of conclusion and some suggestions and he divided the states like First Category and Second category states and Third category states, while concluding he has given some suggestions which may be incorporated as measures in the future for achieving desirable improvements in panchayats.

Susheela Kaushika's(1995) study of PRI in action and the challenges to women's role focuses on specially the experience of women in election process, the hardship and obstacles they undergo and the kind of support in terms of remedial measures to overcome etc.

Shakuntala Narasimhan(2000) her study on the empowerment of women reveals that though many of panchayats women are illiterate and poor and come from backward community, many of them have proved their metal and won action as able administrators

AIM FOR THE STUDY

In modern days the concern for empowerment of tribal women has occupied the attention of many sociologists because of its social relevance. A good number of studies have been done on the status of women in general. Most of the studies have dealt with women's conditions, education and employment. Various sociological studies on tribal women are available now. Most of these studies on tribal women have concentrated on their problems and sufferings. Studies on political participation of tribal women in particular are rarely found. For this purpose, a systematic sociological study is the need of the hour. This necessitates an empirical study on tribal women in the context of political participation. The present study is an attempt in this direction.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The term empowerment refers to wide range of activities from self assertion to collective resistance.

Assessment of this term is not an easy task. The concept of empowerment is manifested in different aspects of person's social life. It encompasses life spheres including the realization of one's capacity and potentiality, determining her/his choices and to have control over them. Empowerment is a multidimensional process which should enable individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have the ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and be free from customs, beliefs and practices. Generally, development with justice is expected to generate forces that lead to empowerment of various section of population in a society to raise their status.

Empowerment of women is one of the most important key factors for the welfare and development of any society. It is felt that without the empowerment of women development of society is not possible in the right direction and at a desired pace. "Empowerment of women is a slow process women must come up to play their role in planning, decision making, and implementation" (Aruna Goel, 2004:55). Empowerment as a concept was first brought at the international women's conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The conference concluded that empowerment is a redistribution of power and control over resources in favour of women through positive intervention.

Women empowerment has been identified as an essential commitment in the developed goals of national government and international agencies. India is no exception to this. The concept of empowerment is understood differently, every society has its own local expression to represent this idea. The terms like autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence, self-respect, self-realization and self-worth are more or less corresponding to the expression of empowerment. "However, what is new in the empowerment discourse of today is an attempt to quantify it and to develop functional framework to formulate strategies and programmes for achieving women empowerment" (Narayana Deepa 2005:3). According to Sujatha K S (2006:30) "the idea of power is the root term of empowerment. The concept of power is a widely debated issue. The term "power" may broadly be functionally defined as "control over resources and ideology". The resources over which control can be exercised may be physical resource, human resource, intellectual resources, financial resources and the self".

In the last two decades, the concept of empowerment of women is being associated increasingly with gender justice and gender equality. Empowerment of women does not mean giving them power to dominate others or establish their superiority over others, it is empowering themselves. Empowerment of women means equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant and to have a positive attitude to face difficult situations. In other words, women should be participating in the process of decision-making. One can feel empowered only if there is recognition of one's status externally.

Women's empowerment means entitlement of women to have and enjoy power over their lives both as individuals and members of social system. The empowerment process encompasses several mutually reinforcing components but begins with and supported by economic independence. In determining the empowerment of women,

factors such as role in the decision-making power in the family and community, their educational status, their participation in social and political activities, their position in various professions, their legal status of in terms of marriage, divorce, and inheritance of property, seeking healthcare and so on should be taken into consideration. The approach to women's empowerment should be comprehensive and integrated in nature.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Political participation is one of the major ways to ensure women's empowerment to increase decision-making power and greater ability and to influence matters that affect their lives in the community and the larger society. In the broader sense, participation in politics gives far beyond electoral politics, such as voting and election to public office. Women empowerment begins with their consciousness, perceptions about themselves, and their rights, their capabilities and their potentials, awareness of her gender and socio-cultural, economic and political process that affects their.

Participation means the functioning of the whole carry of public institution and forces which are involved in moulding the lives of people by way of decisions and policies that impinge on their relation with one another (Kaushik 1992, Trivedi 2009).

Participation of women in the Panchayat Raj or local bodies implies women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women as elected members of local government bodies taking part in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation, women as members of women's in development works and dealing priority issues in the village level.

Gender empowerment is determined by the degree to which women and men participate actively in economic, professional and political activity and take part in decision making. Women's political participation was hindered by a system of social relations in the male dominated society reflecting the orthodox male-centric mentality like religious fundamentalism. Only men were consistently educated and trained for leadership, while very few rural women had the opportunity to pursue their education because of tradition. Women themselves had been strongly influenced by male dominated village communities and had little faith in their own capacities to take leadership roles.

PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN

Democracy is considered as one of the best forms of governments because it ensures liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity as well as the right to participate in political decision-making. Participation and control of governance by the people of the country is the essence of democracy. Such participation is possible only when the powers of the state are decentralised to the districts, block and village levels where all the sections of the people can sit together, discuss their problems and suggest solutions and plan, execute as well as monitor the implementation of the programmes. It is called the crux of democratic decentralisation (R.P.Joshi&Narwani, 2005:11).

Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as "the government of the people, by the people and for the people".

But, in the present context, people can participate in the government at the top level only indirectly by electing their representatives to run the administration, but at the lower levels, they can participate directly by identifying their needs and prepare micro-level plans as well as execute such plans (ibid, 2005:12).

In India, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Jai Prakash Narayan described democracy as the government that gives 'power to the people'. Gandhi said: "True democracy could not be worked by some persons sitting at the top. It had to be worked from below by the people of every village". Nehru also advocated democracy at the lower levels when he opined: "Local self-government was and must be the basis of any true system of democracy. People had got into the habit of thinking of democracy at the top and not so much below. Democracy at the top could not be a success unless it was built on this foundation below". Jai Prakash Narayan also favoured power to the people of the village along with the government at the centre when he remarked: "To me the Gram Sabha signifies village democracy. Let us not have only representative government from the village up to Delhi, one place, at least let there be direct government, direct democracy. The relationship between the Panchayat, and the Gram Sabha should be that of the Cabinet and the Assembly" (Joshi & Narwani, 2005:13).

"How to give power to the people" has been an issue of concern and debate in our country. India, as a welfare state, has to discharge multifarious functions, efficiency cannot be ensured. Hence, it becomes essential to decentralize powers and responsibilities to the local bodies, which may plan programmes as per the local needs and aspirations, as well as execute them efficiently with the help of the local people. The late Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri, was also of the opinion that "only the panchayats know the needs of villages and hence development of villages should be done only by the panchayats. Prosperous people in villages should ensure that powers given to the panchayats are used in the interest of the poor. The panchayats are the foundations of democracy and if the foundation is based on correct leadership and social justice, there can be no danger to democracy in this country. Efforts should be made that the institutions established for community development and Panchayati Raj, after independence, are used for establishment of real democracy and improving economic and social conditions of the people" (Ibid, 2005:14).

It is essential to decentralise the powers, especially relating to the social services sectors and welfare functions. Moreover, it was also necessary to consult people for whom such schemes were being implemented.

In a democracy, the decision-makers should use their powers, as far as possible, with the consent and understanding of all concerned. By way of Panchayati Raj, people participate more and more in politics and administration. The key to the success of democracy lies where more and more strength is given to peoples' elected bodies at the district, block and village levels. At the village level, even the poor people, including the SCs, STs, women and other marginalised sections of the community get a chance to participate in the administration of the village. Thus, Panchayat Raj is a system which ensures people's participation at the lowest levels. It is democracy at the base level. PRIs become a training ground for developing leadership at the primary stage because they become well-versed with the local problems and ways to deal with such problem (Ibid, 2005:16).

The constitution has introduced universal adult franchise in the country which has a tremendous impact on village India. The peasants, including tribes, suddenly began to play a critical role in Indian politics it should, therefore not be surprising if during the last two decades, the political participation of the tribes increased considerably. In the context of some of the political process such as voting, electioneering only increased but has become effective also. The highly significant index of the participation of tribes in the political processes is the importance that they attach to elections as a legitimizing process. It is elite in terms of their participation in elections, the extent and bases of their influence and the perspective orienting their behaviour.

The Constitution has passed the 73rd Amendment Act in order to revise the existing Panchayatraj Institutions with its structural and functional inadequate. This Act makes it mandatory on the part the states to reserve a minimum of 33, 1/3 % of seats to women in the panchayat so as to involve them actively in the decision making process. The statutory reservation of seats for women in Panchayatraj bodies has provided an opportunity for their formal involvement in the development and political process at the grass root level there by enabling them to influence the decision making process in local government. The participation of woman in PRIs is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realizing the developmental programmes for women. Participation of women in PRIs involves: women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidate's women as elected member of the PRIs taking part in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation. The 73rd Amendment is a mile stone in the way of women assuming leadership and decision making positions, as it makes such a role mandatory and universal for the whole of India.

The Constitution's 73rd & 74th Amendments Act have the noble intention of brining power to the women in general and tribal women in particular. These Amendments further provided a platform for direct and active participation of women in various levels of development and nation building process. One important objective of these Amendments was to empower women and tribal women particular.

CONCLUSION

The present study reveals the fact that through PRI provided an important opportunity to participate in political process. Little consciousness has been increased among tribal women. About their subjugated position in the society. However this little awareness is important in context of empowerment process of tribal women. The study also indicates political participation of tribal of women in PRIs. Naturally increased and this participation has lot of them to empower in male dominated society. And the reservation is also helped to the tribal women. Because of this reservation the tribal women is in process of empowerment and they are decision markers, policy makers, socially, economically, politically recognized with other general women. Totally they are in way of empowerment process and also empowered but not upto the level of satisfaction.

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