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Political Empowerment of Tribal Women in Telangana – An Overview

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Abstract

Telangana is a land of villages. So, rural development is the main pillar of Telangana development. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was affected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantage section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. The prime objectives of Panchayati Raj Institutions are to eradicate poverty, uplift standard of living of people living in rural areas and bring about a healthy society by creating awareness for hygiene, sanitation, eradication of illiteracy and to ensure social justice to the rural people. The present study was an effort to know the extent of participation of women elected representative in Panchayat and the problems faced by them. The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats.

Keywords: Women, Participation, Panchayati Raj, Governance.

Introduction:

Women represent half of the world. They have equal rights as men. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most.

Although, in India, there is a vast difference between the idealized concept of women and the real life situation in which all of them find themselves. In both the industrially advanced and less advanced countries, women are burdened with cumulative inequalities as a result of the many social, cultural and economic discriminatory practices and many a time women are taken for granted as though they were part of the immutable scheme of things established by nature.

Today women in the Indian society have a degraded status because of the prevalence of multiple factors such as illiteracy, exploitation, unemployment, female infanticide, child marriage, dowry, prostitution, rape, widowhood, devadasi system, wife beating, purdah system etc all of which have prevented the Indian women from attaining greater heights. It must be remembered that women's status is not a just a matter of cultural and social history of traditions but it is basically rooted in the political

and economic structure of our society which needs to be changed. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful.

Schedule tribe women in India

Tribals or adivasis, as they are popularly known as a symbol of self-assertion, comprise of around 8.2 percent of the national population. The tribals are concentrated mostly in the central belt of India. They are for instance, depict as a preserve of culture and social life.

Literacy leads to social, cultural, and economic development. Additionally, it gives women more autonomy and freedom. In many tribal societies, especially in matrilineal societies, female literacy and higher female labor market participation are encouraged and women's economic contribution gives women greater autonomy and involvement in family and social activities. The female literacy rate among tribal population is far lower (39.44 per cent) when compared to overall female literacy of the other castes groups (61.59 percent) and schedule caste (49.9 per cent) (2011 Census). Table 4 shows the female literacy rate of other castes, schedule caste and schedule tribe's population. It is important to remember that 'tribal women' are diverse ethnically, linguistically, geographically and also historically. Often progress made by middle class tribal women is taken as an indication of their high position. But the ground reality is that the majority of them are found in rural areas where they are disadvantaged in terms of education, occupation etc. One may also note that women in tribal societies could be considered doubly disadvantaged, in the first instance as tribes and in the second, as women. The status of the tribal women usually depends on the economic roles they play. The tribals in the past were usually forest dwellers and their livelihood to a great extent depended on the food-gathering economy. More than the men, the women walked long distances to fetch wood and fodder. Besides, they also collected fruits, roots and tubers, lac, gums and leaves for self-consumption and sale. The men also complemented them by collecting timber and logs. They climbed the trees to shake down the fruits that were gathered on the ground by women. As there has been large scale deforestation, women have to slog harder to retain the gathering economy.

Tribal community have significant portion of their geographical area is under forest and uncultivable land leaving a small percentage for cultivation. Physio climatic conditions have led to poor economic and social infra structural facilities. Lack of infra structural facilities hinder the growth of productive sectors. They have covered a long journey from subsistence economy to a competitive economy, from isolation to involvement in the local mainstream and from lawlessness to a law-abiding community. The traditional animistic religious beliefs of the tribal have been largely influenced and modified by the impact of Hindu sects.

Schedule Tribes in Telangana

Telangana is newly formed state in India with a geographical area of 1,12,077 square kilometers and located on the Deccan Plateau and lies in the southern region of India.. It is the twelfth largest state in terms of area in India. The state is surrounded by Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. At the time of formation of the Telangana State in 2014, it consisted of ten districts (see Map 1), namely Adilabad, Nizamabad, Karimnagar, Warangal, Medak, Rangareddy, Hyderabad, Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda and Khammam. As per 2011 census, total population of the state is about 3.50 crore. Majority of the population in the state reside in rural areas and mainly depend on agriculture for their livelihood. In order to bring administration closer to the public and to ensure the benefits of development and welfare schemes the state was re-organised its districts and formed 31 districts in 2016. Apart from the existing 10 districts 21 new districts were created, which are Bhadrachalam, Kothagudem, Jagtial, Jangaon, Jayashankar,

JogulambaGadwal, Kamareddy, Kumuram Bheem, Mahabubabad, Mancherial, Medchal-Malkajgiri, Nagarkurnool, Nirmal, Peddapalli, Rajanna Sircilla, Sangareddy, Siddipet, Suryapet, Vikarabad, Wanaparthy, Yadadri Bhuvanagiri, and Warangal Rural. The Schedule tribe population is distributed in all the districts of Telangana State. Nevertheless their proportion to total population is higher in the district like, Mahabubabad (37.80%), Bhadradi Kothagudem (36.66%), Adilabad (31.6%) and Kumuram Bheem (25.91%). However, the present study analyzed the data on the basis of the original ten districts of the state for which information is available.

The concept of women empowerment

The concept of empowerment has evolved from the crux of being underprivileged, deprived, neglected and vulnerable. Empower means “to invest with legal power”. Empowerment can be defined as a process or a mechanism by which people, organizations and community gain expertise over their efforts and involve themselves in the democratic processes of their community and employing institutions.

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people’s participation in governance and development without equal participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. In view of women’s participation in PRI, empowerment is the first foremost step. Once women become technically sound, they will be in a better position to play active role in decision making.

Concept of Panchayati Raj Institution

The “Panchayati Raj” is the oldest system of local government in the Indian subcontinent. The word "Panchayat" literally means "assembly" (ayat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. However, there are different forms of assemblies. Traditionally, these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and villages. Modern Indian government has decentralized several administrative functions to the local level, empowering elected Gram Panchayats. Gram Panchayats are not to be confused with the unelected caste Panchayats found in some parts of India.

Panchayati Raj system is a three-tier system in the state with elected bodies at the Village, Panchayat and District levels. India has a chequered history of Panchayati Raj starting from a self-sufficient and self-governing village communities that survived the rise and fall of empires in the past to the modern legalized institutions of governance at the third tier provided with Constitutional support.

Panchayati Raj system was started in India on the recommendation of Balwantrai Mehta committee in 1959. It is a system of decentralization and participation of people in developmental efforts. In Rajasthan it was first introduced on 2nd October, 1959 and then it was followed by other states. The introduction of Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan led to the creation of three tier system *i.e.* village level, block level and district level. At the village level Gram Panchayat is the primary and basic unit of this institutional framework Panchayat being an elected body works on people's support and acts under their control. They are agencies for executing and implementing developmental programmes at the village level. "Sarpanch" is the head of Panchayat and ward panch are the subordinators.

At the block level, Panchayat Samiti constitutes the intermediate tier. It has been considered the focal point of PRI. It generally consists of the Sarpanchas of the Panchayat within the Samiti's jurisdiction. Reservation is provided for women and scheduled castes. They have been entrusted with the

execution of developmental work in their jurisdiction and have been made responsible for the area planning. The chairman of Panchayat Samiti is known as "Pradhan".

Third tier is at district level, known as Zila Parishad. It consists of representatives of the Panchayat samitis and some representatives of the weaker sections. Head of Zila Parishad is designated as "Zila Pramukh".

The importance of Panchayati Raj should be obvious in a country where four, out of every five citizens, live in the village and where the incidence of poverty is much higher than in towns. With the introduction of Panchayati Raj there has been complete transformation of the role of Village Panchayat with which rests the basic responsibility of planning and execution of rural welfare programmes at the village level under the guidance of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad.

Gram Sabha is one of the basic and important a general body of Panchayati Raj system of all the voters residing in the jurisdiction of Gram Panchayat which extends over one village or group of villages. It has a crucial role in making democratic decentralization complete. In Rajasthan Gram Sabha is a statutory body. Gram Sabha generally meets minimum twice a year. It discusses the budget of the Panchayat, the administrative report and the developmental works to be under taken in its area. The Gram Panchayat is a statutory body covering one or more villages with an average population varying 1000 to 3000. It is an executive body consisting of all the members directly elected by the people of that rural area. The number of members varies from 5 to 31. Reservation for women and for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is provided.

The elections are held by a secret ballot paper in all states except Jammu and Kashmir. All adult residents of the village above the age of eighteen years and whose names have been enrolled for the election of legislatures are eligible for casting the vote.

Tribal women and Panchayati Raj Institution

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act aimed at transforming the structure and pattern to Panchayati Raj system by inserting a new part (part xi) in the Constitution. The new system has been given a constitutional status and by which it has got permanence in the Indian political system as a third government. It has a three tier structural arrangement; this new system has been vested with the power of taking decisions on twenty nine subjects listed in the 11th schedule. One of the important aspects of the 73rd Amendment, which is relevant to this study, is reservation of seats for women and tribal community. The Panchayati Raj election has a great significance in Indian political system as it spreads the sense of involvement of people in democratic process at local level. In Panchayati Raj election rural population can participate as voter, campaigner and candidate without having high level of experience. In the earlier Panchayati Raj system women did not have much space. The provision of co-option system recommended in Balawanta Rai Mehta Committee and Ashok Mehta Committee did not leave scope for women to acquire adequate power and authority to perform actively in the PRI. They were utilized as rubber stamp members and could not really participate in decision making process. In 1993 the 73rd Amendment Act was passed and declared 33% reservation of seats for women in PRI. Through the implementation of reservation policy in Panchayats, women have got an opportunity to raise their presence and voice their opinion in PRI. A large number of women and especially tribal women entered in PRI as elected representatives in post 73rd Amendment phase.

At national level, after the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act was implemented about one million women entered in the first elections of Panchayats. About 40% of women got elected and got the opportunity to represent the marginalized sections of our society. In general, elected women are fast making a place in Panchayats all over India. The 73rd Amendment Act 1992 has certainly changed the situation of tribal women and ensured their adequate representation at different levels of Panchayati Raj

institutions. Women have shown remarkable maturity which has closely aligned them with the mainstream. The situation can become better over a period of time with men changing their mind set.

The need for building up women power as visualized by Mahatma Gandhi is being more strongly felt today than ever before. Government action for women's equality can be neither effective nor adequate unless women themselves become more aware of their rights and the corresponding responsibilities. Despite their numerical strength women occupy a marginalized position in society and their role in political structure has virtually remained limited. They are still left on the periphery of political system. The participation of women in the Panchayati Raj is considered essential not only for ensuring political participation in the democratic process but also for rising developmental goals for women. The committee on the Panchayati Raj institutions (1978) recommended the reservation of two seats for women in Panchayats or two co-opt women in case they do not come through elections. It was also suggested that a committee of women be set-up within Panchayat to operate specific programmes for women and children.

Impact of participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

The presence and participation of tribal women in Panchayati raj institutions have brought about a formidable change in their position within the tribal social organization, as well as in the overall hierarchical structure of the Indian society leading towards their empowerment. This has been the result of the enactment of Panchayati Raj Act (1992), which provided for one-third representation to women in Panchayats including those belonging to the Scheduled Tribes.

The history of tribal people suggests their continuous exploitation and marginalization. The tribal people remained at the periphery of the wider political system and kept their women marginal to their own tribal polity. In certain places, especially where the tribal were in a majority, they established their authority and rule. But women played a limited role in the tribal political institutions. In other regions, where their strength was less and their interaction with the non-tribals greater, they adopted ways and means to improve their status.

Unlike in many other communities, tribal women are considered indispensable, especially for the role they play in the socio-economic life. There is a difference of values related to morality regarding sex and sexuality and much lesser degree of stigma attached among the tribals. A woman's entry into Panchayat is similarly not opposed, at least not for the similar reasons. Among the tribals, besides the difference in value system, there is an additional factor that it brings their family and community a status and respect, of which they were long denied. The men belonging to the higher castes, on the other hand may perceive women's entry by 'allowing' them to keep the seats safe for them.

The tribals on the whole have been usually looked down upon as 'backward' ignorant and illiterate people who should be 'developed' so to make them a part of the 'mainstream'. It is well known by now that the tribals are not only the preservations of natural resources and knowledge base, but are also placed higher on what are regarded as the indicators of development like the sex-ratio and the age at marriage. On the contrary, the in-roads made by the process of development have led to their exploitation and harassment. Introduction of alien culture, values and perception not accompanied by awareness, knowledge or education has added.

This control of the situation by the non-tribals over the years, and the constant increase in their numbers has left the tribals ignorant and unaware, except the very few ones. The Panchayati Raj Act and extension Act therefore, could generate a backlash on the one hand, and give opportunity to find a loophole by the outsiders.

With the participation of women in PRI, interpersonal relations within their families have changed for the better and this political process has heightened women's perceptions of their own capabilities. Even much marginalized women have taken participation further to become activists despite constraints like illiteracy, lack of experience, family responsibilities, restrictive social norms, lack of enabling environment and violence. Participation of women in the village based formal and informal organization has thus made significant changes in their social status as well as their position within the family. Furthermore participation of women in these organizations is a clear indication of a change in the traditional norms which restricted free movements of female members in society for social and political activities.

The fact that women do play pivotal role in the development of society and nation has been widely recognized now. Various studies conducted in the country also reveal and support that Indian women, more especially rural women, play multifarious socio-economic roles inside as well as outside the home. Therefore participation of rural women in any developmental programme is must.

The objective of bringing improvement in the socio economic condition of women and tribal women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. Panchayati Raj system brings a thought of important approach to maximize women participation at local level and makes improvement among them on various aspects as:

Political participation and women empowerment

It is envisaged that despite governmental intervention and encouragement, no section can attain empowerment without conscious effort and willingness on their part too. Empowerment in the true sense should come more from within than from without. Until and unless women are sensitized and made equal partners in the political process, empowerment and gender-equality will remain a far cry. Participation at different levels of political processes sharpens the intellect and enlightens the views and attitudes of women. It awakens the latent powers in them and offers scope for their full expression which will naturally contribute to the upliftment and reformation of entire society of which women constitute half the strength.

When women participate in public life on their own, thoughts and language get polished and sharpened which will improve the quality of their political and social behavior. It is a generally accepted fact that only by participation and involvement in the political institutions that one can obtain first hand information regarding the nature, functioning and utility of such bodies. Civic virtues like tolerance, patience, broadmindedness etc. is born of participation in political life.

Reservation and women empowerment

The idea of reservation empowerment, which provides a royal road to women's enlightenment and enhanced political participation, comes first. The significance of this level of empowerment is that it is initiated from the part of the state. State wants to uphold the status of women and empower them by offering reservation of seats in representative bodies of administration.

This aspect of empowerment has been assessed only by taking into account the ideal of democracy in the sense of ensuring empowerment and enlightenment to all sections of society especially women who, in spite of their numerical strength have had traditionally little say in the running of the political and administrative establishments of the country.

Weaker sections always need crutches like the handicapped in their march to equality and an egalitarian society. The experience in the Panchayati Raj institutions has given an impetus to the cause of reservation at all levels for women, SC and ST. The effective and ingenious methods of administration adopted by elected women Panchayat members at various levels have proved beyond doubt the correctness of governmental decision to reserve seats for women in local self-government institutions.

The provision of reservations is the part of efforts to bring the women in active politics. The reservations will provide the opportunity for women candidates to understand and solve the local problems. The local self government has to deal with local problems. These problems are related with day to day life of people. The problems of village are supposed to be solved at village level. Thus local self government is an important part of life of people. The women can understand the problems more sensitively. The problems related to the unemployment, drinking water, roads, electricity, schools and health can be solved by women with greater priority. The other problems especially related to women like domestic violence, malnutrition, maternal mortality etc. can be tackled by sincerity by women candidates.

The women can change the face of Indian democracy. The progress of local units will surely accelerated due to responsible women candidate. The positive effects of reservations will change the dynamics of politics.

Decision making and women empowerment

Indian society is male dominated. Generally, male leadership dominates the process of decision making. The women's participation in this decision making process currently is negligible. Reservation will surely provide the platform for women to decide and generate the policies for welfare.

The opportunity to participate and represent is the real gift of this quota system. The reservations are significant in our democracy. When the reservations for women were introduced in 1993, the benefits of reservations are enjoyed by male candidates as women are used as just rubber-stamps. The women also entered politics as a need of their family. But now the situation is changing. The educated women candidate are using the political opportunity to serve society. They are enjoying the pride to be a representative of people in democratic country. The women candidates are more aware of their role in urban area. But in rural areas, women candidates are still dominated by males.

Conclusion:

In conclusion it may be remarked that Tribal women must get greater social and political exposure so that they can be dynamic in active politics. If they take active participation, they can contribute a lot to the all-round development of their regions. They must be provided with better education 240 facilities and offered necessary training at all levels. Efforts must be made to bring about a thorough transformation in their attitude and mindset. Only then the process of Tribal women empowerment through political representation becomes meaningful and realistic. This is not impossible but requires committed and dedicated efforts. All these observations should not lead us to a negative conclusion about the very policy of reservation to Tribal women. It has opened many opportunities to them in terms of participation and to fight against negative impact of patriarchy. The research has shown that the process needs to be carried forward and not halted.

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