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Empowerment of Tribal women through Panchayati Raj

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Women play a significant role in all walks of life. Empowerment of women is necessary for the development of society. Although women constitute one half of the population, they continue to be subjugated, unequal in socio-economic and political status. Women have been struggling for self-respect dignity and autonomy. Since mid-1980 owing to questioning by women themselves about their oppressed status and plight through varied women's movements, the issue of "women empowerment" came into focus.

Empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj institutions has not only promoted gender equality rather has made grass-root democracy more effective and meaningful enriching social solidarity. After the 73rd Amendment, Odisha became the first state in India going ahead by reserving 50% seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions. In the year 1992 after passing of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, the Act provided for gender equality in the grass-roots democracy by reaching Power to the women through the reservation. The present paper focuses on the women empowerment through Panchayati Raj and unfolds the insight story, the continuance of gender discrimination in the local bodies of the state. In independent India, the state governments adopted certain legislative and administrative measures with a view to expanding and developing rural local self-government. In this connection, three main influences tended to make an impact upon policy-makers. One was the viewpoint of Mahatma Gandhi who had been pleading over the years that village panchayats should be treated as the primary grass-root democratic unit. Another was that of a newly framed democratic constitution of the country in which has been incorporated a concrete provision about state's duty to develop panchayats as local self-governing units. The third was that of the viewpoint of the launching of five year plans that people's participation should be promoted in the management of rural development through local representative institutions. These three influences have continued to motivate with fluctuating intensity the policy-makers and public leaders even subsequently regarding the development of the panchayat system in the country.

The empowerment of women is becoming an increasingly popular term in development scenario. Women's empowerment is a process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society. Empowerment is concerned with power, particularly with changing the power relations between individuals and groups in

society. The outcome of empowerment should manifest itself as a redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, races, ethnic groups. Empowerment means the transformation of structures of subordination, through radical changes in law, property rights, control over women's labour and bodies, and the institutions, which reinforce and perpetuate male domination. Therefore, empowerment means making informed choices within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis of available options. Women's empowerment is not against men but against the system of patriarchy and all its manifestations. The empowerment spiral transforms every person involved-the individual, the collective and the environment. The method of measuring and evaluating women's empowerment and progress is by looking at

- Whether women status has improved as a result of being in panchayats?
- Whether awareness levels of women in panchayats has increased?
- Whether the ability of effective participation in panchayats has increased?
- Measure whether the women have been raising problems in panchayat meetings.

The Beijing conference drew particular attention to the neglect of women in political structures all over the world and the importance of bringing women into a political arena. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment providing for one-third of the seats to women members in Gram panchayat is considered a landmark attainment towards women empowerment. These provisions are basically to create more awareness among women and to strike a greater gender balance in the decision-making process. The provision of reservations for women in the panchayats provides tremendous scope and opportunities for women to participate in public life and decision-making process; It is a big step in the process of political empowerment of women. Though initially, at least reservation appears to be the only way to bring women into panchayats, there is a need to ensure their effective participation in the functioning and decision making the process at the grass-roots level through a process of sustained capacity building. Women are empowered to play an effective role in panchayats, in terms of being fully aware and able to use their full potential in carrying out their roles and responsibilities, in making decisions etc. the present study is aimed at looking at the levels of empowerment of women.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in which a provision has been made for 33.33 percent women's reservation is an act of positive discrimination. It has not only unpacked gender relations but also transformed the quality and thrust of local self-government. It provides opportunities for women to assert their rights over resources and have a definite say in the development process. While it enables women to develop a greater understanding of the political structures and systems of governance and how to

participate in the panchayat. Empowerment means very different things to different groups of women and varies according to the level of development in particular society.

“A women’s empowerment begins with consciousness – perception about herself and her rights, her capabilities and her potential awareness of how gender and socio-cultural and political forces affect her”. Women’s empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition at par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. But, what is empowerment through Panchayati Raj?

According to the UNO document on women’s Development. Women’s role in the political process Broad-based political participation of women has been severely limited due to various traditional factors such as caste, religion, feudal attitude and family status. As a result, women have been left on the periphery of political life. Observing this dark picture, 73rd constitutional Amendment Act is passed to provide them an opportunity to ventilate their grievances and to take an active part in the decision-making process at the local level.

Women’s empowerment challenges traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy. Empowerment is the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. It requires political action and collective assault on cultural as well as national and community power structures that oppress women and some men. Thus while acknowledging the need to improve the lives of grassroots women, Batliwala insists that women’s empowerment requires transformative political action as well. According to Rowland’s “Empowerment is more than participation in decision making, it must also include the process that leads people to perceive as able and entitle to make decisions. It is personal, relational and collective”.

Political Empowerment

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equality in the society. 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. The Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, everyone has the right to take part in the government 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.

Barava and Subha, define political empowerment 'as the capacity to influence the decision-making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system. It implies political participation which includes the right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment.

According to Siwal 'political empowerment is a process of the awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, greater decision-making power and control leading to transformative action.' Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system.

Holcombe observes that participation is an essential ingredient of empowerment. Empowerment represents sharing of control, the entitlement and the ability to participate, to influence decisions, as no the allocation of resources. Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institution thereby leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance. Unfortunately, women participation has failed to move beyond local government in India.

Constraints to Tribal women in Empowerment

Period to the Vedic civilisation, there was a well developed Indus Dale civilization which flourished from about 3000 B.C to 1500 B.C in the north-western part of India. The archaeologist, ethnologist and anthropologist have identified the existence of Indian primitive social evaluation into three stages: savagery, Barbarism and civilization. From their findings, it is inferred that the primitive Indian society was based on the common ownership of the means of production. There was no private production. no private consumption and no private property yet, Everything was owned in common and was for common use Relations with the human beings were governed by the collective nature of production and consumption. Men and women enjoyed equal status in raising food and in their family relations. The women's work and their contribution to the family were same as that of men. In the due course of time, women's role as progenitor of the family began to be recognised as an additional qualification for their attaining superior status over them. As a result of this development in the social evolution, women became the only property owners which right was willingly accepted by their men-folk. This matrilineal system continued for long and women's status seem to have attained a superior one over men.

Constraints to women's Participation in politics

Ohene-Konadu points out that the current state of women's participation in politics and public decision-making is disappointing. He calls it a global phenomenon. Even from history, it is evident that men have always monopolized and dominated strategic decision-making positions. Despite considerable efforts, women still remain marginalized and underrepresented in those areas of public life where important decisions and policies are made. Constituting almost half of the world's population and making half of the electorate, women do have an important role to play in politics. There are a number of factors that constrain participation of women in politics. These can be categorized as structural, cultural and institutional factors. Structural factors comprise the 'supply side' variables'. It would include e.g. women's literacy rates, their educational levels and average incomes. Women's participation in elections will largely depend on the extent of availability of these basic resources. Structural factors as constraining to women's participation in politics are more prominent especially in developing countries where limited resources are made available for e.g. for education and preference is given to the Education of young sons instead of daughters. Structural factors can hinder women's participation in politics as Ohene-Kunadu points out in his survey of Ghanaian women that one of the major reasons of women's low participation in local politics was the lack of personal resources.

A general perception in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies, both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors may also impact women's political participation. An Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation. The quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in the legislature.

Empowerment is a multi-faced, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. As such, it is not this or that but is the action and interaction of various factors-physical, socio-economic, political, mental, psychological, and attitudinal and so on. Women's empowerment could be described as a process in which women gain a greater share of control over resources-material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain power'. The term women's empowerment has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality. Sharma points out that the term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to

collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power Ideology'. As Nate and Chatterjee stated that for true empowerment', what is most significant is the control of ideology, i.e., control over thoughts and perceptions that shape individual beliefs, values and attitudes-ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and analysing. This control, in turn, confers decision making power which increases access to and control over resources. According to the country report of the government of India empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women's inherent strength and positive self-image. To empower women does not mean to give them the power to dominate others or to use power to establish their superiority over others, as it may be commonly understood. Akhtar has rightly observed, we would not like women's empowerment to result in women's taking over men's power within the same exploitative and corrupt society. Women moving to a position of power do not mean that she is going to abuse power to ill-treat and exploit men. Women's empowerment, in reality, is to empower herself, and not to overpower men.

A society in which women contributors and activists will be able to influence change in social development by being well informed, confident to express opinions, and knowledgeable on how to use technology to improve their work and empower other women.

Women in Panchayati Raj Institution

Political system and decision-making process are seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of 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 the desired level through making the provision of linking and associating the maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institution, the policy for reservation is in favour of women. Therefore, the thought is an important approach to maximize their participation at the local level, political system and decision-making process in the activities of the rural area.

Under the 73rd amendment of the constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one-third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Gram Pradhan of the village panchayat, Block panchayat, and District panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institution could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional felling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing

restrictions by the households and society against them in the available of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional binding disfavoured them for improving personal lifestyle and status in existing social and economic setting. Consequently, this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings status and role to play in the household and the activities performed outside households and different decision-making processes of the family among men and women. This would also develop the understanding of women regarding their duties and right about national welfare and its integrity and they will be able to contribute effectively along with their male counterparts.

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