



THE ROLE OF INDIAN TRIBAL WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL PANCHAYATS

BODA VAMSHI NAIK

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad

ABSTRACT

History is moving and it will trend toward hope. But that presupposes a trusting partnership based on clarity and transparency. It is our responsibility to make that happen. It should leave no one in doubt that economic reforms have created more possibilities of upward mobility than spectrum would have us believe. There is a general tendency to focus on the negatives. We have to stop skepticism and focus on the positives. The greater requirement is generating awareness among the tribals and the women at large about the politics and human rights. The true magnitude of disparities can be understood in terms of the social status, the corresponding life-style of the women. Taking account of their cultural diversity, lifestyle, standard of living, income and communication facilities appear to key elements in a their development strategy, the need is to look into human rights, development and good governance as an integral whole. Unfortunately, the women mostly had no active participation in politics. They had no say in the governmental policy decisions, no hope of making gains and no capacity to offer resistance in administrative and policy matters. Culture and development need to be scrutinised simultaneously. When poverty is widespread the structure of political power and the political process cannot assure social harmony without bringing about fundamental changes in the norms and functions of politics. In the present age as people want solution to their basic problems.

INTRODUCTION

In India roots of Panchayati Raj are very deep. Panchayati Raj Institutions in India are the prime instruments of decentralization at the grass root level. One of the important principles of democracy is that one should not feel powerless or feel that he cannot do much to change his situation. But he should feel that he is able to influence events and process surrounding him. We must see and analyze the Panchayati Raj system after Independence.

Poverty is the economic consequence of social backwardness and political deprivation. Participation in local administration will be helpful in enabling people below the poverty line to express and analyse the realities of their social status and economic inadequacy, evaluate by themselves their action in furtherance of their objectives, each person is the best judge of his circumstances, and hence, he must be given an opportunity to participate in all matters concerning alleviation and elimination of the difficulties in which he is placed such as poverty. In the word of Dr. Mahajan, "Panchayati Raj is no doubt a bold experiment in democratic decentralization of administration.

The success of such programme would depend upon the emergence of an appropriate leadership in the rural areas as well as the cooperation it is able to get



from the people. As the experience of Indian Economy shows Panchayati Raj, has yet to go a long way before it is able to find a firm root in the soil.” The importance of Panchayati Raj should be obvious in a country where four, out of every five citizens live in the villages and where the incidence of poverty is much higher than in towns. Thoughts on rural local Government or Panchayati Raj are thus an integral part of the concern for social and economic amelioration of the rural people.

The PRIs in India have traveled a long way to acquire constitutional recognition from a mere mentioning of it in the Constitution in the form of Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 40). It is envisaged in Article 40 that “state shall take steps to recognise Village Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as unit of self-government”. This article got a mere lip service for many years before finding a place of some importance in the form of the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team Report in 1959. In January 1957, Balwantrai Mehta committee was appointed to study and report the finding on community development programmes based on economy, efficiency and the extent to which the movement used local leadership.

The Government of India observed in the Third Year Plan that “The primary objective of Panchayati Raj is to enable the people of each area to achieve intensive and continuous development in the interest of the entire population. The elected representatives should be encouraged to evaluate the development of Panchayati Raj as offering new avenues of service to the people rather than the opportunities for the exercise of authority. The concept of Panchayati Raj is not limited to the non-official and democratic organisation associated with it. Representing as it does a distinct level of responsibility of functions within the general schemes of administration, Panchayati Raj comprehends both the democratic institutions and the extension services through which development programmes are executed.

In order to remove the shortcomings of community development programmes such as lack of involvement of local people in the project and wastage of public expenditure, the Committee recommended that the entire rural development work should be entrusted to the elected member at the village, the block and the district level. This three tier democratic decentralization was given the name of Panchayati Raj, which was also a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. Thus, on the recommendation of Balwantrai The introduction of Panchayati Raj system in the country is no doubt a very bold experiment. Rajasthan became the first state to pass Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad Act. On 2nd Oct. 1959. Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, then Prime Minister inaugurated the Panchayati Raj at Nagore and later at Shadnagar (Andhra Pradesh) in October 1959 Prime Minister Nehru praised the pioneering efforts of these two states in taking the most revolutionary and historic steps.

Education is considered to be an important mechanism for development in India, especially for scheduled tribes. Since these sections of our society were traditionally and historically deprived of their basic right, education was far away from their reach. For the upliftments of tribals from the Fifth Five Year Plan new



strategy was adopted and the concept of Tribal Sub Plan (T.S.P.) Area came into focus. The aim of T.S.P. is to promote the education and economic development of scheduled tribes and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation. (Report Tribal Area Development 1986-87, p.133). Incentives have been provided by the constitution to these sections mainly in three sectors, i.e. education, employment and representation.

The problem of education among the tribals is related with their economic problems. The tribal children as soon as they attain the age of five or six, become economic assets to the family and help their parents in their various economic activities. Mere opening of more school will not serve the desired purpose unless some economic incentive is provided to compensate the loss, which these economically helpful hands render.

The rights to basic education and primary health care have been recognized as human rights in the UN charter of Human Rights promulgated in 1948. India being signatory to the UN convention on Human Rights, is duty bound to provide primary health care to every citizen of the country. Problems of health and hygiene have a direct bearing on the economic and demographic aspects of the tribes. The problem of housing conditions, living space per head, drinking water and environmental cleanliness are some of the major issues which require special attention.

The focus of the present study is on political empowerment of tribals. Empowerment implies giving tribals the capacity to influence the decision – making process by integrating them into our political system. Implementation of this is the policy of reservation. Reserving seats for tribals in the political institution will provide them an opportunity to raise their grievances and other related social and economic problems in a formal manner. This is necessary in order to ensure better position for tribals in all spheres of life.

The level of the participation of tribals in political life is an issue of concern. This is because achievement of equality in all areas is seen as inseparable from active political participation. Here political participation includes the right to vote, right to contest, right to candidacy, tribals as campaigners, tribals as members, tribals involvement in the decision-making process and appointment of tribals at all levels of government, including the participation of tribals at the grassroots through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The development programmes are channeled through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. In this regard, the study seeks to answer certain questions like, are the tribals aware of these programmes. If they are aware of these, to what extent have they been benefited? If benefited which category of tribals benefited?

Development of masses of rural areas depends upon the motivation, awareness, literacy, health and knowledge about the programmes formulated by the government for their upliftment. Government since Independence has been working on this but Panchayati Raj system can play more important role in the rural



development. Without effective leadership at local level and enthusiastic participation on the part of rural population the desired results cannot be achieved.

However, the Panchayats are meant to secure the participation of the rural people in the various activities of the rural sector. The involvement of the people in planning at village level is bound to arouse consciousness in them. Aim of PRIs is granting the people a significant role and to work for possible political responsibility. Such participation in planning will raise the level of people's consciousness of their rights and responsibilities and will be helpful in social change. People's involvement through panchayats in planning would result in better and more efficient planning, because they have a better perception of their needs, which would be useful in the identification, formulation and selection of schemes and programmes of local importance. They are better acquainted with local resources, this knowledge would be helpful in collection of reliable data, evaluation and monitoring of project for their betterment. People's involvement in planning will enhance their awareness and would be helpful in making them more active and assertive about problems coming in their way.

Tribal societies in our country have a very ancient history and heritage of their own. Tribals of India have their own cultural, religious, social, economic and political structure since centuries. Nature, environment and ecology affect their lives very much. Their religious beliefs and practices are all influenced and developed around the environment and ecology which are their life giving forces. The general people due to their beliefs and rituals call these tribals as jungle, barbarious and to some they are animals.

During field survey question regarding behaviour of the general people towards them were asked, most of them answered that they are getting equal treatment but some high caste treat them untouchable now-a-days It is the fact tribals have been able to find a new identity as representatives with equal status, able to participate in the work of Panchayats which affect the whole rural communities is certainly a step forward. To evaluate participation of elected female members some variables are to be taken into account party membership, holding office in a party, women as electorates, women contesting elections, canvassing, women attendance in meetings, participation in committees, moving resolutions, taking part in discussions, their relations with the electorates of the constituency, participation in decision-making, implementation of the decisions taken. It is an established fact that no developmental scheme can be effectively implemented if panchayats do not have administrative control over the agencies. The nation's development is dependent on its leadership.

Actions of the political leaders reflect the common people in many ways, and their actions are changed according to need at every steps of political process by the energy, reaction and demand of active and less privileged people. The primary work of leadership is to release body, mind, heart and spirit towards great purposes. Good governance, development and leadership could also be helpful in mission. Elected members stimulate interest in politics and public affairs and increase participation.



They communicate to people their worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves. They facilitate the way for helping people to optimise their capacities and potential. They allow others to fulfil their purpose and contribution for the benefit of both individual and organization. These principles are the foundation for creating lives.

Economic and social interests and conditions influence the voting behaviour of majority of the people so we can say that support and respect cannot be assumed, it needs to be earned. We cannot say that most people are obviously influenced by their own immediate interests, while casting vote, but there is relationship between people's voting behaviour and their economic and social levels. Many people vote as they think will benefit most immediately their pocket, their caste or community and further more the needs of the area they belong. People who are active in politics and seek their Individual and Collective (Community and area) interests through the political party can play a leader's role because one lone individual's character can make a difference in his or her circle of influence. Few people pay attention to the working of government and who can analyse the working of Government for time can become a leader and can render voice to the needs of the Locality and Community because it is said that "The wheel that squeaks, gets the grease", so we can say that collective voice can pave the way for development. The mandate to any party for rule and governance is entirely for the welfare of the people and is not for pleasing people. The important need is to generate in the local community the feeling that panchayat can shape development activity.

POLICIES FOR TRIBAL WOMEN

A level of development for the sake of greater equality of distribution should be accepted by the government. In the Fifth Plan for the first time a strategy of earmarking funds for the development of scheduled tribes was evolved. For the scheduled tribes, because of their population concentration in specific areas, the instrument of Tribal Sub Plan was developed to ensure flow of benefits from sectoral programmes and to provide integrated delivery of service in the tribal areas. 'During the Fifth Plan with the objective of an integrated development of the entire tribal area in the country with two long term objectives viz. (a) to narrow the gap between the levels tribal communities. This new strategy was adopted in 1974-75 and a new 'Tribal Area Development Programme' was started in that year with a view to eliminate exploitation of the tribals by the money lenders, middlemen, prosperous and different farmers and the development of an institutional frame work which would meet all their credit, consumer and produce marketing needs while formulating this programme, the socio-cultural environment of the tribals and the ecological imbalances have been taken into account.

The significance of every welfare schemes or programmes are only when such schemes or programmes are implemented or brought out of paper. Implementation depends upon the knowledge of programmes by the implementing agencies. Panchayati Raj Institutions have been made the co-ordinating agencies for rural development activities, specially for implementing state and centrally sponsored



schemes for the development and welfare of different sections of the rural society. Today maximum of the welfare programmes are implemented through PRIs. The involvement of women leaders in planning process and implementation of development schemes is quite significant. Educated people who realise the importance are not emotionally involved in the exercise. The decision will substantially ease

SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TRIBAL WOMEN

Women's development is directly related to national development. In the sixth five year plan a special chapter has been added 'Women Development'. In this it has been mentioned that the strategy should be three fold i.e. education, employment and health. They are inter-dependant and dependant on the total development process. The socio-economic background of the individuals is a relevant variable in the understanding of his place in the social structure.¹ The biological division of humans into male and female is the basis for the most elementary social classification everywhere.² 'Social and political consequences are also acute in the society.'³ Royal Commission on Labour, 1931 expressed its view. To be equal partners in national development women of India should be provided with the facilities of education, employment and health. Status of any community cannot be determined by not taking into account the health status of women and this can be understood according to social conditions which include basic needs like education, employment and health facilities which are unavailable or inaccessible due to poor infrastructure like transport and communication, also rural PHCs are poorly equipped with basic facilities and medical staff. This can be achieved only by strong will of the government to implement the various legislature related to these overall basics.

Education

Main hurdle in empowering the women is their illiteracy. The progress in women's education in India is far from satisfactory. Scholar of 19th century Mumtaz Ali said, 'An educated woman can take care of herself better than an inexperienced, uneducated, mentally confused bundle of veils which has not been allowed to develop self confidence and cannot take care of herself.' In fact the status of women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall development. The constitution of India has brought the Indian women into a new era equipped with all rights and privileges and enjoy the same rights which men do. Only proper and fruitful education can play vital role and make women understand and aware about these rights which are specially formed for them.

According to IHDR 1999 all India literacy rate was 53 per cent with gender disparity of 0.62 whereas Rajasthan had total literacy at 58.5 per cent with 0.66 as gender disparity which is 0.04 better than national level. It is further observed that gender disparity has a declining tendency when we take the lower age group, which is 0.92 in age group 6-9, 0.86 in age group 10-14 and 0.83 in age group 15-19. It is heartening to observe that people are starting to think about giving education to the girl child. No section of society should feel that it is not being given social justice and protection.



In fact there is every reason to believe that women will be able to move forward and we are looking forward. What is important for us is to keep the improvement intact. The improvement graph must go up. There is an urgent need to give the whole issue a rethink and decide on what the future should behold. There is need to stem the tide through a tremendous amount of awareness building and this should be our immediate objective.

OCCUPATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN

In the past employment of women was almost unthinkable. It was not liked by the society. If any woman dared take up a job, she was invariably a subject of social criticism and contempt and she was not considered a good woman. The people thought that an employed woman lacked virtue and dignity. In the mean time a great change has taken place in the attitude of society towards employed women. Similarly employment has taken place and a great increase in the confidence of women to take up jobs. Now the educated women feel that employment far from inviting dishonour is a good source not only of income but also of social prestige and personal satisfaction. They feel that one income is generally not enough to satisfy the basic needs of the family. The economic condition of the family greatly improve if family members get employed add to family income. An educated and employed woman feels that she has some prestige in the society and other listen to her with dignity. Moreover she has sense of satisfaction that her education is not a waste and she is not useless for the family and the society.

It has been acknowledged that in poor communities, each member of the family has to contribute his or her mite to the economic activities. Among tribals, woman is an important contributor. The tribal women possess greater economic independence and freedom of movement than their counterpart in non-tribal societies cannot be disputed. Tribal women are as adept at agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry etc. as their male counterpart. The tribal female is an overworked person and is conservative by nature. The overwhelming majority of rural women work in agricultural sector- cultivators and marginal farmers and agricultural labours. Employment is the deciding factor by way of which quality of life of people can be measured, WPR'S as per IHDR 1999 based on HDI survey 1994, at India level male is 52.6 per cent, female is 26 per cent and ratio of female / male comes to be 0.50, work participation rate for Rajasthan male being 48 per cent, female 25.8 per cent and ratio of female / male comes to be 0.54. In Rajasthan can be seen women are doing better than average Indian women is working but when we see it in context to work participation rate is usual status which definitely affects more to the income of any family, Rajasthan has female / male ratio 0.22 as compared to 0.35 at national level.

CHALLENGES FOR TRIBAL WOMEN

The whole world is concerned with the upliftment of women. We all say we should empower them. Let us see whether we really mean empowering them. Let us see whether we really mean it or we simply say it. When we talk of women empowerment we, by implication convey that they, even in this twenty first century,



remain feeble, poor, unprotected, helpless and oppressed destitutes. How shall we move forward? Undoubtedly, achieving the goal of women's empowerment and gender equality is possible. What is needed are political leadership and commitment, systematic and concerted action, and accountable policies. Moreover, we all need to continue our efforts to tackle ignorance, stereotypes and attitudes that work against the rights of women and girls and their rightful aspirations for equality. Women have made a considerable progress in urban India, but in rural areas a typical Indian woman neither reads nor writes. She rarely moves out of her home. She receives lower wages than man do when she works outside, and despite having an income has no control over the way the money she earns is spent.

Investing in the women's education results in substantial social and economic gain. Educated women have fewer children, have healthier children as well. Educating women has a stronger positive effect on children's health, education, and welfare. Mothers are also more closely involved in the immediate care of children and in the critical decisions about food, sanitation and general nutrition, all of which influence children's health and development. Women education provides them with great opportunities for employment and income and raises the opportunity in economic activities, compared to child rearing. Education is not a way to escape poverty, it is a way of fighting it. Poverty is much more complex than simply income deprivation. Poverty entails lack of empowerment, lack of knowledge and lack of opportunity as well as lack of income and capital. Despite increased access to education the poor disproportionately women, socially disadvantaged groups, the physically disabled, persons in remote region-are often deprived of a basic education. And when basic education is available the poorest are unable to avail to it because the direct and opportunity costs attached to it are quite high for them.

Education will empower women opening up avenues of communication that would otherwise be closed, will expand personal choice and control over social environment. It will give women access to information through both print and electronic media, will equip them to cope better with work and family responsibilities. It will strengthen their self confidence to participate in community affairs and influence political issues. It will give disadvantaged women the tools they need to move from exclusion to full participation in society. It will empower entire nation because educated women have the skills to make democratic institutions effectively to meet the demands for a more sophisticated workforce to work for a cleaner environment and to meet their social obligations as wives and mothers. It will make an average woman capable of coming to term with positive aspects and not with other negative realities.

SUMMING UP

Most of the leaders are uneducated do not have the fundamental knowledge of public dealing, they have poor decision-making abilities and they fail to initiate any development programme or redress the grievances of the people. Educational development is participatory process and it will help them to understand the rules, regulations and fulfill the objectives of Panchayati Raj Institutions and help them in



carrying out their day-to-day functions and will also help in the development of personality, social mobility and change in occupation. Every person has in him the potential to excel and all these had to do is to create a favorable environment. Both these reasons make it obligatory for them to have education. In view of the poor standard of literacy and poor knowledge of various matters, it is desirable that members should be instructed thoroughly about their duties and functions. In the tribal area where the tribal populations is the most oppressed and backward among the whole population of the country. Education was incorporated in the list of facilitate evaluation of all Indian policies in the field of education.

The women leadership can be more effective by educating the people. If the population and leaders are educated it will accelerate their awareness and involvement in dealing with government officials. Most of the women panchayat members lack awareness about their powers and duties provided in panchayati raj act, the government should impart training regarding their powers and duties, which can be defined as functional literacy. Education changes the attitude towards life, our outlook on relations between people and also between government, society and people

In the case of Panchayati Raj leaders, it can be observed that the commitment, dedication and involvement of elected leaders can play a vital role in educating the rural mass because majority of people is illiterate and ignorant about their welfare. "No socio-economic change is possible without a suitable political structure to mobilize the local people and involve them in participatory work especially in a country of magnitude and complexities."³

There is so much of paper work in PRI's that if one does not know to read and write, the person (elected members) will feel isolated and will also loose confidence. It is also felt by the researcher that they will be guided by other persons as per their wish. So it is suggested that there should be minimum qualification for contesting elections. To take advantage of the various development schemes, a certain degree of education is necessary. For the elected members in present panchayats separate training should be given to educate them about all government policies, their duties, their rights, all government welfare schemes should be explained.

The health status or sickness of a community especially within a modern nation state is required to be understood according to the social conditions. Now is the time to recognise the critical roles women play in our country's future, roles they can fulfill if they lead healthy lives. The social conditions include access to the basic needs and amenities like food, drinking water, housing, education, employment, transport, communication etc. Government providing medical facilities to the rural and tribal population gives more stress on family planning ignoring the health sector of the population. So the population has to depend upon the private and expensive medical facilities, which is burden on the shoulder of the rural and tribal populations. Disease syndromes have pushed the families of rural people towards persistent poverty.



REFERENCES:

1. Aiyappan, A. 1962: "Pattern of tribal leadership" in L.P. Vidhyathy (ed) Leadership in India, New Delhi, Asia Publishing House
2. Barnes, JA. 1954: "Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish" Human Relations
3. Bogards, E.S. 1934: "Leaders & Leadership" in Richard L Park (ed) Leadership and Political Institutions in India, London, Oxford University Press
4. Dhillon, H.S. 1955: Leadership and Groups in south Indian Village, New Delhi, Government of India press
5. Dube, S.C. 1977: "Caste Dominance and Factionalism" Contribution to Indian Sociology, (New Series) No. II (Dec.), pp: 58-81
6. Dube, S.C. 1977: Tribal Heritage of India, Vol. I, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House
7. Gangrade, K.D. 1974: Emerging Patterns of Leadership, Delhi Rachana Publications
8. Hoebel, E.A., 1954: The Law of the primitive Man – A study in Comparative level Dynamics, Harvard University press
9. Jha Shashishekhar 1972: Political Elite in Bihar, Bombay, Vora & Co.
10. Kattakyam, Jacob J. 1983: Social structure and change among the tribals, Delhi, D.K. Publications
11. Lewis, Oscar 1955: Village Life in Nirthern India, New York, Random House
12. Malhotra, S.P. and A.B. Bose 1967: "The Nayat" as an Agency of Social control among the Banjaras' is L.P. Vidhyarthi (ed) Leadership in India, New Delhi, Asia publishing House
13. Pamecha, Ronuka 1985: Elite in a Tribal Society, Jaipur, Pritwell Publisher
14. Rao, K. Prakash 1954: "Vollage Organisation and Authority among Lambadas of Deccan" in K.S. Mathur (ed) Tribe, Caste and Peas ANtry, Lucknow, Prem Printing Press.