

Role of Tribal Women in The Decision Making Process: A Case Study in the Jalpaiguri District with Special Emphasis on Constitutional Amendment Acts

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I. Introduction

The largest democracy in the world needs wider participation of the people irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex etc. in its political system. And in order to provide this opportunity, our Constitution consists proper provisions too (e.g. Art. 326). Not only that, to ensure the implementation of the motto 'local development through local people', democratic decentralisation system [by means of implementing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)] has long been introduced in our country. What is more, as women constitute a very important portion of the total population of India³, their participation at grassroots level political system is also crucial. It will help the democratic decentralisation programme to become a successful project.⁴ There is hardly any confusion that the participation of women in politics is neglected for a long time in India⁵. Even immediately after framing the Indian Constitution, there was no constitutional safeguard for reservation of seats in any election process in India for women. Not only that their socio-economic and political status are also neglected in the male dominated Indian society. This picture is not so different in Jalpaiguri

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3 Sex ratio of India was 940 during 2011 census. Source: http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter5.pdf (Viewed on 10 January, 2019 at 10:45 am).

4 Kumar, Dr. Raj. *Women Empowerment*. Neha Publisher, 2011. New Delhi.

5 In 1962 Lok Sabha election, women participation was 46.6 per cent. And in 2009 Lok Sabha election it was 55.8 per cent. Source:

https://www.csds.in/uploads/custom_files/1529066526_Electoral%20Participation%20of%20Women%20in%20India.pdf (Viewed on 10 January, 2019 at 3:30 pm).

district of West Bengal too. Women constitute little bit of less than 50 per cent of the total population in West Bengal⁶. As per census, 2011, it has also been seen that tribal women are the half of the total tribal population in Jalpaiguri District⁷. The position of the tribal women is not very rosy. Their socio-economic and political status is, however, relatively low and they are discriminated in all fields of life. For centuries, tribal women have been confined to home and suppressed and deprived of their rights to get a fair treatment from the society. The development of tribal women has, therefore, been one of the major issues of Jalpaiguri in particular and West Bengal in general.

II. Status of Tribal Women

Large number of tribal population is found in hilly and rural area of the district. This is so because their livelihood and their base of economy are traced in agrarian and livestock practices. Change in these set up in any form disturbs their living and survival condition.⁸ Tribal people have strong attachment with their land and it is their basic element where their life revolves around. Tribal women enjoy significant autonomy and equal basis of treatment comprising with that of mainstream society women. Tribal 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.⁹ In tribal communities, the role of tribal women is substantial and crucial. In tribal society, Tribal women are having important social roles than social groups, because they are equally responsible for public activities involving social, economic and political obligations.¹⁰

6 Sex Ratio of West Bengal in 2011 census was 950. (Source: <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html>). Viewed on 1 February, 2019 at 3:30 pm.

7 Total tribal population was 5740. Male and female were found 2902 and 2838 in the 2011 year census. Source: <https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistrict/jalpaiguri-block-jalpaiguri-west-bengal-99968> (Viewed on 15 January, 2019 at 12:30 pm).

8 Behera, Jayanta Kumar. *Tribal Women in Central India-Issues and Challenges*. The Women Press. 2017. Delhi.

9 Rao, V. M. *Tribal Women in India*. ABD Publisher. 2014. Delhi.

10 Bhowmik, Krishna Nath. *Status and Empowerment of Tribal Women In Tripura*. Kalpaz Publications, 2005. Delhi.

III. Political Participation of Tribal Women in India

The study of electoral behaviour constitutes a very important empirical investigation into the nature of political participation and patterns of political behaviour. It is one of the fundamental components of political system¹¹. Political participation refers to wide spectrum of political activities and commitments rising from the simple act of voting which may involve in political process. Women have long been systematically suppressed by their male counter parts in every walk of life. The role of women has been mainly confined to housekeeping. The question of participation of women in politics began to gain in the 20th century. The UN declaration International Women's Decade 1975-1985 has brought a remarkable change in the status of Indian women. The spent force of yesterday observed improvement today in their status in all spheres of day to day life except in decision making process. The Constitution of India has proclaimed the sovereignty of the people in its opening words. Article 326 declares that the elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis adult suffrage¹². The new Constitution of India with liberal democratic value, gender equality and basic postulates of Universal Adult Franchise would automatically lead to women development and participation of politics. Political participation of women is considered to be one of the crucial aspects of development. It indicates women's political consciousness as well as the status of enhancement. As enhancing individual capacity involves new skills as well as new ways of viewing oneself. It may also help her to work towards a better adjustment to domestic power relations as well as her attitude to a wider environment.

Generally, tribal women are participating in all types of political affairs but they have not much more control on such matter as their male counterparts. The power to take decision on behalf of tribal women is an extremely important matter from the view point of their empowerment because it is often seen that their voice is not properly listened. The decision making power of tribal women should not be ignored. The real development cannot take place without active participation of tribal women.

IV. Objectives of the Paper

11 Singh, Arabindar. *Women: In search of Political Empowerment*. Unistar Publication. 2015. Chandigarh.

12 Pylee, M. V. *India's Constitution*. S. Chand Publication, 1979. New Delhi.

This paper examines the role of tribal women in decision making process through Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs).

IV.I. Area of Study, Data Baseand Methods:

Present paper is based on primary data and survey conducted in Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal, selected respondents are 100 tribal women including elected members of PRIs.

| Name of the Block | Total Population | ST Population | % of ST Population |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Mal | 299556 | 103356 | 34.5 |
| Matiali | 117540 | 51789 | 44.06 |
| Nagrakata | 127397 | 62624 | 49.16 |
| Dhupguri | 414854 | 87273 | 21.04 |
| Rajganj | 373776 | 15386 | 4.12 |
| Maynaguri | 329032 | 4328 | 1.32 |
| Jalpaiguri | 323445 | 19592 | 6.06 |

Table 1.1 : Blockwise Population in Jalpaiguri¹³

From the table 1.1we can easily notice that in case of ‘highest number of tribal population are found’ category, Mal Block tops the rank in the district. But in terms of ‘highest percentage of tribal population are found’ category, Nagrakatais placed on the top of the list. So, we have selected to do our empirical study on both Blocks¹⁴. TwoGram Panchayats are selected purposively namely Sulkapara Gram Panchayat (Nagrakata Block) and Rajadanga Gram Panchayat (Mal Block).From the above study it was revealed that tribal women are now very much interested to take part in Panchayat Administration. Although it is the fact that they also have desired control in decision making process but they are able to influence the decision making process in grassroots administration.

13 <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%2023%20Issue2/Version-7/G2302075263.pdf> (Viewed on 13 January, 2019 at 4:15 pm).

14 Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

| Total Member | Male | Female |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 21 | 12 | 9 |

Table 1.2: Sulkapara Gram Panchayat: Nagrakata Block (Panchayat Election, 2013)¹⁵

| Total Member | Male | Female |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 10 | 05 | 05 |

Table 1.3: ST Member in Sulkapara Gram Panchayat¹⁶

From the Table No. 1.2 we find out that Sulkapara Gram Panchayat consists of 21 members with 9 women members. Table 1.3 shows that there are 10 tribal members, out of them 5 members are tribal women. All the elected women members from tribal community are pleased to say that they are now involved in local administration and decision making process which was absent in their earlier life. BrishmuniKujur, Rima Saibya, Monika Oraon, PinkeyOraon, Sima Lama, was the members of Sulkapara Gram Panchayat. According to a tribal women (Former member of Sulkapara GP) nowadays, tribal women are getting position in the power of village administration. Furthermore, when these women are playing vital role in Gram Panchayat, their positions within their families are also uplifted¹⁷. In a single word we can say that women are social empowered after becoming representatives in PRIs.

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Yes | 72 | 72 |
| No | 28 | 28 |
| Total | 100 | 100.00 |

Table1.4: Tribal Women attending meetings of Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad¹⁸

15 Source: Field Survey. Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

16 Source: Field Survey. Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

17 Interview with PinkeyOraon, a former member of Sulkapara GP (Interview date was 06.12.18).

18Source: Field Survey. Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

From the table 1.4, it has been seen that a good number of tribal women attend meetings in Gram Sabha along with Gram Sansad. It reveals that tribal women are conscious about local administrative and political decision. In the study area tribal women are not only participating in politics to cast their votes but also they are trying to influence decision making process in local administration.

But the story has some negative parts also. In Gram Sabha, many of the tribal women are complaining that they are not having Below Poverty Line ration cards. As a result, they are not given electricity connection of Government Project to their houses. Some of the villagers are also not receiving old age pension. Furthermore, they also complained that, the cultivation is not satisfactory due to acute water scarcity in the study area. The research disappointed us that only the educated girls are raising their issues or problems in front of the officials and others are just discussing in a mode of groups. Though women are participating in group meetings, it is men who catalytic behind them in crucial decision making.

| Total Member | Male | Female |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 22 | 12 | 10 |

Table 1.5: Rajadanga Gram Panchayat: Mal Block (Panchayat Election, 2018)¹⁹

| Total Member | Male | Female |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 10 | 05 | 05 |

Table 1.6: ST Member in Rajadanga Gram Panchayat²⁰

From the table 1.5 and 1.6, it has been clear that Rajadanga Gram Panchayat of Mal Block consists 22 panchayat members, out of them 10 members are female. In Rajadanga Gram Panchayat, there are 10 Scheduled Tribe members and out of them 5 members are female. The study reveals that tribal women are now very much interested to participate in Panchayati Raj Institutions, though they have no total control in decision making process but they are able to influence the decision making process in

19 Source: Field Survey. Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

20 Source: Field Survey. Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

grassrootsadministration. The members of Rajadanga Gram Panchayat from tribal community are BiplabOraon, Sanjay Oraon,ParishramChikBaraik, SudhirSaibya, SumanOraon. They all are male members. The female tribal members of Rajadanga Gram Panchayat are MinatiOraon, UgitaLakra, Susumaoraon, AmitaOraon and Monika Maji. All tribal members are very conscious about local politics particularly related to Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even some tribal female members are found prominent leaders in local politics.

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| Yes | 58 | 58 |
| No | 42 | 42 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

Table1.7: Interest of tribal women in decision making process²¹

From the table1.7, it has been noticed that a good number of tribal women have interests in decision making process (58 per cent). But still 42 per cent tribal women are not finding any interest playing role in decision making process. This is really an alarming matter and we have to rectify this apathy. A non-tribal member of Rajadanga Gram Panchayat views that tribal women are getting facilities to participate in local politics and they are performing their duties for local development.²²Mejbasti and Sologuri area of Rajadanga G. P. are almost 100 per cent ST dominated area. Anandapur and Kailashpur Tea Garden area have also majority tribal population. Research shows that the socio-economic condition of tribal women is not better in the study area. They have to fulfill so many basic needs. And these will come faster if they take part in the PRIs.

V. ImpactofPanchayati Raj Reforms Actson Women Participation

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 might be regarded as heralding a new beginning in the structure of the Panchayati Raj System.Indian Constitution made provisions relating to the establishment, powers, and responsibilities of the panchayats through the 73rdConstitutional Amendment Act, 1992 with three tier system that is Gram Panchayats at the villege level, Panchayat Samity at intermediate or

²¹Source: Field Survey. Survey Period was during 2017-2018.

²² Interview with present Gram Panchayat member of Rajadanga GP and former member of JalpaiguriZillaParishad, Mintu Roy (Interview dated 06.12.18)

block level and Zilla Parishad at district level in every state²³, except provision of skipping intermediate level in states with less than 20 lakh population. The states have been empowered through law for the composition of panchayats. The reform provided for reservation of both seats and leadership positions for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. A normal duration of five years for panchayats have been provided with the authority of financial autonomy. The State Governments are also empowered to make laws providing criteria for disqualification of candidature from panchayat elections and also to legislate with respect to maintenance of accounts by the panchayat and their audit. Apart from providing political empowerment, The Panchayati Raj Reforms Act endow the panchayats with necessary powers and authority to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayats at each level for economic development and social justice under their jurisdiction. This provision has helped all the sections of the society particularly weaker sections including women to take part and to share the responsibility of governance. In this regard, it has been seen that seats shall be reserved for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population in the area, but out of them 1/3 seats shall be reserved for women under such category. It has been universally acknowledged that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) established in 1959 have become ineffective in many States due to a number of reasons. One of the important reasons is that insufficient representation of weaker sections like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and women.

Gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges in the global development debate. Social scientists and development activists are giving increasing emphasis to these fields in their agenda for social development. As Amartya Sen has pointed out, "Democracy is not only the goal of development; it is the primary means of development." Women's participation in political processes is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalization, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issue can be taken care for the policy formulation and implementation.

23 Except Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Hilly parts of West Bengal.

This kind of Constitutional Amendment Act (73rd) has created a scope for accomplishing development with social justice, which is the mandate of the new Panchayati Raj system. There can't be real progress if women of a country are not made partners in the subject of development. Mahatma Gandhi also believed that full and balanced development of the nation and establishment of a just society is possible only when women actively participate in politics. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee on Panchayati raj System emphasized that rural women should not become mere beneficiaries of the development but should be made equal partners in its affairs as contributors²⁴.

At last, it can be said that 33 per cent reservation for women in PRIs is an important step but it should be supplemented with effective measures that ensure the qualitative aspects of women's participation in decision making process. As the Panchayati Raj Report, 2001 reveals that women's expectations and hopes for representative politics have been increased. PRIs activities are on the basis on women's empowerment and social development. For that reservation needs to be accompanied by considerable amount of affirmative action programme. To influence and lead effectively, women representatives must develop and should use legal power. To empower is giving women the capacity to influence the decision making process by integrating them into political scenario. Therefore, empowerment of rural women can be made possible not only through reservations but it also requires removal of the causes of disempowerment whether social, political or psychological. Another important thing is that the Fifth Schedule was intended as an innovative device for promoting the welfare and advancement of Scheduled Tribes and the administration of Scheduled Ares. But it is felt that with some key reforms, the Fifth Scheduled can be transformed into a purposeful instrument for the upliftment of STs²⁵.

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 provides a new dimension for women to take participate in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. This amendment act facilitated the participation of millions of women in rural local self-government in India. The UPA II Government on 27th August, 2009 took a further step (110th Constitutional Amendment Bill) to enhance

24 Women and Our Panchayat Raj System. Kulhari M.S. (2011). Neha Publishers, New Delhi.

25Singh, Bhupinder. "The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution- A Critique" *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 4 (2019), 28-34.

reservation of seats for women in rural local self-government from 33 per cent to 50 per cent but the bill ultimately lapsed. But these types of constructive positive steps are currently required for women empowerment in India²⁶.

VI. Problems of Tribal Women in the Process of Their Empowerment

Though 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act made a wide scope to tribal women to participate in decision making process, but it has been observed that 73rd Amendment could not touch its objectives totally in the study area. It was expected that reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions will go long way in empowering in political sphere. But there are some practical obstacles to tribal women which are not yet overcome. Some of these obstacles are as follows:

1. Lack of knowledge and poor level of education.
2. Lack of leadership in quality and quantity.
3. Lack of self-confidence to participate in public affair.
4. Deny for effective participation due to the burden of domestic responsibility such as home making and child caring.
5. Lack of knowledge of law related to Panchayati Raj institutions.
6. Weak financial support and expensive for electoral politics.
7. Political party generally allows accepting male leadership.
8. Even sometimes it is also noticed that running panchayat members' wives or close relatives are getting nomination by the various political parties. It means the power ultimately remains in the hands of male counterparts.
9. Women do not get support to participate in politics from their male counterparts.
10. Poor knowledge on bureaucratic administration.
11. Lack of training about Panchayati Raj Institutions.

26 Dash, S.K. *Political Empowerment of Tribal Women*. Sonali Publication. 2012. New Delhi.

VII. Conclusion and Suggestions

India has a rich history of measuring political participation of women since her independence. The decentralization of governance which is taking place after 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and increased political participation of women which involved them in decision making process. In our study area we have noticed that 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is really helpful. Right now more laws are necessary. Empowerment of tribal women does not simply mean that they are present in regional politics or in electoral representative bodies, particularly in Panchayati Raj Institutions. On the other hand, many of the tribal women as PRI representatives have failed to discharge responsibilities entrusted upon them. Only few tribal women have been capable to empowering themselves. Majority of tribal women are far away from their empowerment and decision making process. Though a large number of tribal women are backward in all respect, there is some positive sign that has come out from this survey. Some of tribal women as we have found in our survey are very conscious and actively participate in the affairs of Panchayati Raj Institutions and they have also interest to contest in the election in order to exercise power and taking decision. A great change has been taken place in the mindset of women as well as their family members when 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act came into existence. This amendment act also brought a sea change in the outlook of tribal population towards tribal women. So the political participation of tribal women and involvement of their decision making process in the affairs of Panchayati Raj Institutions are gradually being developed. In this point we should mention about one thing that right now India needs a new act which is reflected in the 110th Constitutional Amendment Bill²⁷, 2009 and 112nd Constitutional Amendment Bill²⁸, 2009. These Bills were introduced in the Lok Sabha in the year 2009 but due to various reasons till date these are not passed. If it will pass in future, reservation for women in Panchayat and Municipality (throughout the

27 Source: <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/mar/27/no-decision-yet-on-legislation-for-50-per-cent-womens-reservation-in-ulbs-government-1793430.html> (Viewed on 22 March, 2019 at 6:00 pm).

28 Source: <https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/the-constitution-one-hundred-and-twelfth-amendment-bill-2009-amendment-of-article-243t-947> (Viewed on 22 March, 2019 at 6:10 pm).

country) will be increased to 50 per cent from present 33 per cent. These Bills are very important for social empowerment of the women.