



LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

EDITOR
DR. RAJESH KUMAR SINHA

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Editor

Dr. Rajesh Kumar Sinha

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ABHIJEET PUBLICATIONS

4658-A, First Floor, Ambika Bhawan,

21 Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002

Phone: 011-23259444

E-mail: abhijeetpublication@gmail.com

twitter:- @AbhijeetPub21

whatsapp:- 8076785356

instagram: @abhijeet_publications

LinkedIn: jitendra-singh-7729292b/

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Empowerment of Tribal Women in India: Grassroots Rural Perspective

Ravaji Gaunkar

Introduction

India is a diverse democratic country in the world. It is the home of millions of tribal communities. Tribals are the indigenous population of a country often called marginalized in a contemporary commercial globalized world. Historically, these communities shared unique commonalities and had been governed through their governance system, varying from community to community. But their systems are hardly recognized in the mainstream politics of India. Tribal governance system was equal to both the gender; women had been playing a key role to shape the governance in tribal societies (Mokhopadhyay, 2002). But unfortunately, due to the dominance of other societies over the tribal, their practices were eroded by the alien system. The crude practice and influence of the rising system have reduced the status of tribal women in India. But due to the active role of social reformers (Guha, 1996), who realized the role of marginals, especially women in society, serious

attempts were made to empower these marginalized groups. Over a period, the promises of upliftment of the tribals, including tribal women, were incorporated into the Constitution. Accordingly, it compelled the state to enact legislation and policies for the empowerment and welfare of women in tribal communities. Most of the time, due to the patriarchal and elite influence, these directions remained on paper and lacked implementation. Tribal communities' existences are seen as being one with nature, especially land. Without land ownership rights, tribal communities are without souls. As land is not just a source of occupation, but forms an integral component of tribal identity, the idea of social justice for tribal population in India is fundamental to land ownership. Their empowerment is inherently linked to recognition of their *de facto* land ownership rights in contemporary capitalist society. To achieve these ends, Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) need to play an active role. In a modern capitalist society, tribes, especially tribal women became more vulnerable due to the influence of various cultures, which were directly or indirectly accepted by the tribal groups themselves or forcefully imposed on them (Mukerjee, 1937). Empowerment of tribal women is a necessity for the advancement of tribal society in India. This empowerment can be achieved through a holistic approach by emphasizing land distribution and land ownership to tribal women and access to forests and other natural resources.

Empowerment to Achieve Social Justice

Empowerment is a multidimensional concept used to represent various ideas to describe the outcome (Spreitzer, 1995). It must be quantified and measured based on a particular context (Mehra, 1997). Scholars use the concepts according to their own framework.

According to the World Bank (2005), “empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes” (Gosh, Chakarvati & Mansi, 2015). In the context of women in tribal communities, it refers to the psycho-sociological process which requires women to understand one’s intrinsic capability, self-confidence, support, and the transformation of consciousness that enable them to overcome all sorts of challenges of life. Tribal women’s empowerment needs to focus on two-level, individual, and community levels. Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru believed that to awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened- once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, and the nation moves (Beniwal, 2013). It is through their empowerment, social justice is possible.

The idea of justice is constructed and not limited to any boundary. It has a comprehensive meaning and changes with time and place. Justice is fundamental to human life, aims to make the world a better place to live life. Peace, self-respect, dignity, understanding, harmony, etc., are some of the words associated with justice. In the political sphere, it is used to guide public policy. Social justice in the Indian Constitution addresses the historical injustice towards specific communities and assures them protection against all forms of discrimination and injustice. In contemporary times the tribal society is in search of social justice.

Overview of Tribal Society in India

India is a home of millions of divers’ tribal groups staying in all parts of the country but dominantly in Northeastern and central regions of India, these tribal groups belonging to different racial stocks. The tribe in India refers to people belonging to particular social group categories based on certain primitive features like definite

area or territory, language, culture, specific lifestyle, ritual, shared resources, property practices, etc. According to DN Majumdar (Manjhi, 2015), "A tribe is a collection of families, bearing a common name, members who occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligation." The Imperial Gazetteer of India 1911 defines a tribe as a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory, etc (Sharma & Borgohain, 2020).

In India, conceptualizing the tribe is a complex task, but various scholars have given their understanding based on certain tribal societal features, which vary from each other. (Xaxa, 1999). Tribes in India refer in many ways: Adivasis, Vanvasi, Ãborigines, Primitive tribes, Indigenous People, First Settlers, Vanyajatis (Forset groups), Girijanas (Hill Tribes), etc. The variedly used terms indicate that they live in diverse and primitive ecological settings that differ in their habitation and lifestyle. Tribes vary in the socio-economic and cultural-religious background and practice, mode of food production, size of tribe, language, physical traits, livelihood strategies, economic activities, stage of social transformation, and development. Though they live in different parts of India, a majority of them are concentrated in the central region, northeastern region, and island regions of India. There is no specific definition of tribes in the Constitution of India. The Constitution of India classifies the communities mentioned above as Scheduled Tribes listed based on specific indicators prescribed by various commissions (Srivastava, 2008).

As per the 2011 census, the total population of Scheduled tribes (STs) is 10.45 million, constituting 8.8% of the country's population and covering 15% of

geographical space spread across 94,000 tribal villages. Most of the (93,819,162) tribal population resides in rural areas and significantly less (1,461,872) in urban areas of a country. Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Andhara Pradesh & West Bengal has a sizable tribal population. In contrast, Northeastern States Mizoram (94.19%), Nagaland (88.98%), Meghalaya (86.43%) Arunachal Pradesh (64.63%) is almost tribal dominant states (MoTA, Verma, 1990).

Presently there are 705 tribal groups referred to as Scheduled Tribes (ST) of India. There are two categories of tribal areas that are governed under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. The fifth schedule is implemented in tribal-dominated regions in ten states, namely Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Gujrat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Telangana. The rural governance of these tribal-dominated areas is carried out as per the provisions of the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) act. The sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution applies to the tribal regions of the northeast comprising Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram.

Since independence, tribal issues are variedly discussed within a dominant nationalist framework, from Nehru's Panchsheel "Five Pillar of Tribal development" to Modi's "Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas" to "Atmanirbahr Bharat" (Self Reliant India). The well-sounding concept did not bode well for the Indian Tribals. Since independence, the capitalistic policies of the regimes have impacted the tribal livelihood since the past decade till date. Forceful dispossession and eviction are common phenomena towards tribals of India (Fernandes, 2006). Today, Tribal groups are the most marginalized groups of India (Sharma, 2002). Their level of literacy, employment, earning, and landholding is low compared to other communities of India (Census 2011). Tribal

lifestyle and cultural practices are attached to the land. They have a symbiotic relationship with the environment and nature. In this symbiotic relationship, tribal women play an essential role (Fernandes, 2006). "Tribal societies have been by and large characterized as egalitarian societies in relation to the hierarchical character of caste society" (Soni, 2019). However, due to the influence of capitalist society, the tribal population is becoming more marginalized and dispossessed. Overall they lack the resources to compete in mainstream society. The situation is even more challenging for tribal women. As most tribal women live in rural areas and rural regions are full of livelihood challenges, unemployment, poverty, access to basic amenities like food, clothing & shelter, land rights, etc. Therefore they are required to empower to retain their indigenous identity. Most of these rural problems are the problem of tribal's mainly tribal women. In a caste-driven patriarchal Indian society, most of their obstacles are neglected by the authorities.

Obstacles in Tribal Women's Empowerment

1. *Triple subjugation*: Women in tribal communities faces multiple types of subjugation, i.e. being women (gender), being tribal (tribe), being rural (locality), and being poor (economic status). Whenever they try to overcome some or other hurdles, restrain them. Most of the subjugation is due to the patriarchal structure of the society.
2. *Displacement and loss of land ownership and access to forest resources*: Due to displacement problems, tribals are forced to give up their traditional occupation and migrate to cities and towns to work as temporary wage laborers. Today such laborers, especially women, face ill-treatment and exploitation.

3. *Lack of understanding of the mainstream administrative process:* Tribal societies have their own indigenous languages. The modern educational system based on the language of dominant society compelled tribals to demonstrate little interest in education and apparently affected their performance, which has negatively impacted their understanding of mainstream administrative processes.
4. *Violence and victimization:* In spite of many schemes and programs, there is a rise of atrocities against tribal women. They are subject to trafficking and exploitation. Malnutrition among tribal women is at an alarming rate (Committee on empowerment of women- 6th report 2015-16).

Need for a Focus on Tribal Women's Empowerment

Tribal women are socially, economically, educationally, and politically vulnerable. Their freedoms are constantly encroached by the contemporary dominant patriarchal and caste-based structure of the society.

Before deciding tribal empowerment mechanism, it is necessary to understand the nature of tribal society. So far, tribes and their problem have been usually constructed by outside society. India has many tribal communities, which vary from each other, but at the same time, these communities share some commonalities. Each tribe has its name, culture, territorial space, social structure, rituals and values, lifestyle, problems, etc. They have passed through different phases of survival. Still, most tribal communities emerged as settled agriculturalists and owned community land without ownership.

India has ratified several international conventions and instruments to secure equal rights for women and tribes. The instruments promote visionary commitment

as far as empowerment of the marginalized is concerned. The core values of Justice, Equality, and Freedom are visible in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles of State Policy. But despite such acceptance, there are wide gaps between the goals declared in the Constitution, policy, plans, programs, and the realities obtaining on the ground. The Constitution of India empowers the state to adopt affirmative action in favor of tribal women. Within these constitutional frameworks of our democratic polity, laws, policies, and program are planned to develop tribal women.

The state initiated a capitalist development model in rural and forest areas, which disadvantaged rural people, especially tribals. "Ensuring effective and independent land rights for Tribal and especially Tribal women is important, as it can serve multiple functions in rural women's lives and would empower them to challenge the norms of patriarchal society" (Agarwal, 2018 cited in Reddy, 2020). The groups whose living depends on land resources, without land ownership rights, pose a severe threat to their identity and survival (Kelkar, 2013 cited in Reddy 2013). Eighty-four percent of female workers in rural India are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods (ILO, 2018 cited in Reddy 2012). Gender equality in land rights is thus both livelihood objective in itself and a powerful means of eradicating poverty apart from providing recognition & social status (World Bank, 2016 cited in Reddy 2012). Hence, it can be argued that increasing women's control over land can positively and significantly influence the welfare of the country's future generation. Conversely, the absence of women's control over land and resources would make them vulnerable, dependent, and uncertain in earning livelihoods at times. Women perform more than 80 percent of the agricultural operations, but they

are not considered farmers and do not possess land titles in their name (Reddy, 2012).

Tribal society in India witnessed various revolts during pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods against unfavorable policies & treatment of the regime towards tribal. Most of the tribal movements were against exploitation and land grabbing (Sharma & Borgohain, 2020). Tribal society has community-based practices. The community members shared their sorrow and joy, and so of their mode of food gathering and production, lifestyle was the outcome of collective efforts of the community. Most of the natural resources, primarily land, were collectively owned and managed by tribal communities. The great virtue of tribal society was that they worshiped nature and has respect for the land, water, trees, etc. initially, in a tribal traditional society, there was no desire to own private property. Tribal society was egalitarian. But consequently, the invasions of their territory silenced and destroyed their natural community rights. It is through this process tribal women lost their identity and land resources.

Further, the dominance of non-tribal society failed to understand this practice, and as a result, the tribal system was destroyed in various ways. The concept of private property was relatively new to tribal people. With time, tribal's desire for personal property gave rise to conflict within the tribal society. On the other hand, non-tribal dominance regimes officially started ignoring the inheritance tribal land rights. As a result, tribals became alien to their land and administratively referred to them as encroachers. But due to awareness and consciousness among the tribals for their inheritance land rights, a hard battle with State and landlords forced the State to enact tenancy and other land-related legislation.

Legislation

To protect them against all forms of injustice, the integrationist approach of the nationalist empowered the parliaments to enact specific laws for systematic assimilations of tribal society into mainstream society. These laws seem to be considered a tool to achieve social justice and empowerment of women in tribal society. Some of these are as follows: (i) Areas for tribals in the form of fifth and sixth schedules; (ii) Panchayat Extension and Scheduled Area Act 1996 (PESA); (iii) Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989; (iv) Right to Fair compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013; (v) The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 and (vi) Domestic Violence Act 2006.

Policies and Programme

The central and State governments implement various welfare schemes for Tribals and particularly for women in tribal communities. Following are some of the important central ministry which has specific provisions for tribal women: (i) Schemes of Ministry of Tribal Affairs; (ii) Schemes of National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation; (iii) (Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana (AMSY); (iv) Institutional support for development and marketing of tribal Products/Produce; (v) marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) and Development of Value Chain For MFP (vi) Van Dhan Vikas Karyakram (VDVK); (vii) Schemes of Ministry of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj; (viii) Schemes of Ministry of Women and Child Development. But none of the policies supports the immediate land right to women in tribal society.

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

The practice of self-governance has a long history among the tribals in India. After independence, Mahatma Gandhi's suggestion for Panchayat democracy (local self-governance) finds its place in Art 40 under the DPSP of the Indian constitution. Accordingly, Parliament enacted legislation for PRIs in India to address the rural issues. The government of India set up various commissions and committees to study the problems of rural people. The issue of women's participation in Panchayat was first proposed by Balwantraji Mehta Commission in 1959. Later on, the 73rd amendment act is the landmark initiative in the history of India. The initiatives enable the people, especially excluded marginalized sections (tribal and women), to participate directly in the governing process of rural areas and empower themselves to influence the decision-making process at the grassroots level (Sekhon, 2006). Today Panchayat institutions are seen closer to the people and considered as the vehicle of development and transformation. If this vehicle drives appropriately, it can practically solve the marginalized issue.

Empowerment of women in tribal societies should be done through societal and structural changes such as land distribution, recognizing community's defacto claims on land, providing land right ownership, promoting farm employment, non-farm self-employment, etc. The government took the initiative to foster rural livelihoods through MGNREGS at the grassroots level, which resulted in the enhancement of livelihoods and economic freedom for tribal women. There is an urgent need for government intervention to initiate legislation granting direct land ownership to tribal women. Their economic activities such as cultivation, collecting forest produce, domesticating animals, hunting, and other activities are directly attached to the land. The land is

the only source for their livelihood and survival (Fernandes, 2006).

Conclusion

There is a big shift in women's access to resources from traditional tribal society to modern structured caste and class-based society. To protect the existence of tribal communities and their contribution to the development of this diverse country, they must be empowered to attain constitutional principles. Women constitute half of the population and are considered to play a vital role in the country's development. But in reality, they continue to be subjugated, and their empowerment can no longer be overlooked or relegated to the back burner of priorities by the state. Now there is an urgent need to focus on tribal women's empowerment to attain the objectives of Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas by making tribal women Aatmanibhar for Unnat Bharat. Appropriate policy intervention is required based on a contemporary assessment of tribal women's need. PRI, being closer to the grassroots, need to work towards the above objectives. The life of rural tribal women is so much knotted with the environment that the entire ecosystem revolves around them, and they cannot think of their survival without it. So land ownership and the right to access natural resources is the only way to provide them justice.

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