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EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRIs) IN ODISHA: A REVIEW OF ISSUES AND EVIDENCE

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The term 'empowerment' is essentially an enabling process to make people capable of taking decisions concerning their development and for changing their lives for better. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), through 73rd Constitutional Amendment, have been designed to empower the people at three appropriate levels. The Amendment provided institutional mechanism and was meant to rekindle the flame of self-governance. The basic objective of the democratic decentralisation through reactivation of the Panchayati Raj system was to realise Gandhiji's concept of 'Gram Swaraj' (Aslam, 2007:79). The most important aspect of the widening democratic decentralisation has been the reservation of seats, for the women and Dalits. Studies show that by extending reservation to women, PRIs have certainly led to the increased participation of women in panchayats as voters, candidates, as elected members of PRIs taking part in decision making, planning, implementation, and evaluation. However, certain constraints which stem from traditional village institutions and familial and socio-cultural forces still remain (Mathur, 2008:84). In this context, the article attempts to study the emerging patterns of women's leadership and empowerment aspects among the Dalit and tribal groups in the state of Odisha in eastern India.

INTRODUCTION

THE RURAL development strategy in India has undergone a paradigm shift from 'philanthropy' to 'welfare' and at present from 'welfare' to 'rights-based approach' towards poverty alleviation. India is an incipient welfare state with inclusive growth as planned strategy of rural development. The participation and representation of people in planning process is as

important as ownership and leadership of delivery process at grassroots level (Government of Odisha, 2013-14:1). Literally, 'Panchayat' means assembly (*Ayat*) of five (*Panch*) persons who are generally wise and elders being chosen and accepted by the village community. Prior to Independence these councils were present in Indian villages and used to settle disputes between individuals and villages. The term 'panchayat' is relatively new, having originated during British Administration". 'Raj' literally means government. Thus, Panchayati Raj is the government at village panchayats which can be treated as decentralised form of government where panchayats are responsible for their own affairs like planning, developments, social justice, etc. (Government of Odisha, 2013-14:7).

Extending reservation to women in PRIs has certainly led to the increased participation of women in Panchayats as voters, candidates, as elected members of PRIs taking part in decision-making, planning implementation and evaluation (Mathur, 2006:130). Participation of women in panchayats dates back to 1963-68, when there was an all-women panchayat in Nimbut village in Pune district of Maharashtra. However, in recent years, participation of women in panchayats is mandated for all panchayats throughout the country. However, this formal position has not necessarily led to substantivise participation. While reservation has resolved some of the problems, the constraints which stem from traditional village institutions and familial and socio-cultural forces still remain. Protagonists of reservation argue that the male-dominated political system has so far refused to provide space to women and that reservations can create the space to enable women to exert pressure on the system to bring their issues on the political agenda (Sharma 1998:36; Mathur, 2006:130).

There is evidence to show that in many areas women attempt to address the more vital needs of women. As such, they work on schemes for bringing piped water into the village, inspect development works and nutrition centres under the ICDS and pay particular attention to children's education. They also take the initiative in a variety of family and matrimonial matters, from abusive or alcoholic husbands to settling land disputes (CWDS, 1999:137 quoted in UNDP, 2003, Mathur, 2008:85). However, certain constraints which stem from traditional village institutions and familial and socio-cultural forces still remain (Mathur, 2008:84). Social constraints feature: (a) patriarchal ordering of society that leads to tokenism and surrogate representation; (b) illiteracy which deprives women participation in decision making; and (c) low caste position combines the oppression of caste and patriarchy (UNDP, 2003:42; Mathur 2008:86).

It is in this perspective, that the article attempts to study the women's

patterns of women leadership among the Dalit and tribal groups in the state of Odisha.

Defining Women's Empowerment

Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decisions. For poor people, that freedom is severely curtailed by their voicelessness and powerlessness in relation particularly to the state and markets. There are important gender inequalities, including within the household. The World Bank adopted an institutional definition of empowerment in the context of poverty reduction, and defines empowerment as the process of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (World Bank 2002: xviii). The UNICEF women's equality and empowerment framework emphasises women's access, awareness of causes of inequality, capacity to direct one's own interests, and taking control and action to overcome obstacles to reducing structural inequality (UNICEF 2001). The United Nations Development Programme's Gender Empowerment Measure focuses on inequalities in economic and political participation and decision making power and power over economic resources (UNDP 1995). The definition used by the International Fund for Agricultural Development includes both access to productive resources and the capacity to participate in decisions that affect the least privileged (Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty, 1995).

Empowerment is the most frequently used term in the development discourse in contemporary times. In the World Summit for Social Development held at Copenhagen in March 1995, empowerment featured prominently as an objective. The Draft Declaration of the Third Preparatory Committee adopted by the heads of states and governments asserted that 'the most productive policies and investments are those which empower people to maximise their capacities, resources and opportunities'. It also emphasises that the main objective of development is to empower people, particularly women, to strengthen their capacities. This is to be achieved through the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and wellbeing of society (Bura *et al.* 2005:44-45). The Indian Government's country paper for the Copenhagen Summit included a section on 'Empowering the People: Models of Mobilisation'. This article discussed the empowerment of people in enabling them to help themselves and removing social, economic, cultural and psychological barriers, which would transform them from being passive recipients of government programmes to being active participants and managers of their own affairs (GoI, 1995 cited in Burra *et al.* 2005). In the

fourth World Conference on Women convened at Beijing, China, the resolution was adopted to promulgate a set of principles concerning the equality of men and women. More importantly, the declaration emphasises to intensify efforts to ensure equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women and girls who face multiple barriers to their empowerment and advancement because of such factors as their race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, or disability, or because they are indigenous people.

There exists a wide range of studies on women's empowerment within the field of gender and development studies. In an extensive exploration of the term empowerment, Kabeer (1999, 2001) focuses on three dimensions that defines the capacity to exercise strategic life choices: access to resources, agency, and outcomes. Amartya Sen (1985, 1999) has written extensively on the importance of substantive freedoms and the individual freedom to choose and achieve different outcomes. Mayoux (2000) has classified three dimensions of empowerment: power to, power with, and power within. Power to, refers to the power of individuals first to survive, gain control over labour, their body, their family resources and also including freedom from violence and fertility and decision making process within their household. Power with refers to women's collective ability to negotiate their gender, caste, class and other initiatives in institutions of the market such as labour market, commodity market, financial market, the state government offices and gram panchayats. And power within refers to the desired power of individuals and collectives both involving three dimensions such as self-awareness, confidence and assertiveness. According to Andre Beteille (1999), much of the literature on empowerment is context-driven and is about radical social transformation, oppressed-oppressor relationship, redistribution of power and social change. The critical question to him is linked with the nature of social transformation and its measurability. Empowerment could be invoked in the context of human rights, basic needs, economic security, capacity building, skill formation, condition of dignified social existence. Implicit in the idea of empowerment is a certain theory of social change from hierarchical to an egalitarian and democratic type of society.

The most distinctive feature of the term 'empowerment' is that it contains within it the word power. Empowerment is, therefore, concerned with power, and particularly with changing the power relations between individuals and groups in society. Women's empowerment is thus the 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 of women in all the institutions and structures of society (Batliwala, 2013:43).

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru stated that "You can tell the condition of a

nation by looking at the status of its women” and Eleanor Roosevelt said, “A woman is like a tea bag: you cannot tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water (Eleanor cited in Ayres, 1996:199). The concept of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. India has also ratified various International conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. The women’s movement and a widespread network of non-government organisations which have strong grassroots presence and deep insight into women’s concerns and have contributed to inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. However, there exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislation, policies, plans programmes, and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other (Amutha and Rajkumar, 2007).

Decentralisation and PRIs

Decentralisation has emerged as the key element in the present discourse of improving governance. It has become a very fashionable term and all countries, whatever their mode of government, are vying each other in experimenting with decentralisation (Manor, 1999 cited in Mathur, 2006:124; 2008: 72). In Gandhi’s dream, India was seen as a decentralised polity, with its villages having extensive political and economic autonomy. The dominant concept was of village republics, village self-sufficiency, and gram swaraj (village self-rule). A web of interdependent political and economic networks through the creation of a self-reliant village economy and local self-government was regarded as the most effective way of meeting the basic needs of people. Gandhi elaborated that each village must be a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital needs and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening but ascending circles. He emphasised that life will not be a pyramid, with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual, always ready to sacrifice for the village (Ghosh 2005; Mathur, 2006:125).

Gandhiji’s ideas about decentralisation and panchayats effectively meant self-rule of the village community, leaving minimal functions to the governments of the provinces and the Centre. He conceptualised organising the Indian polity based on communitarian principles where power does not

flow from the top to bottom, but travels from the village communities to the districts, and then upwards to the provinces and the Center (Bandhopadhyay *et al.* 2003:3986; Mathur, 2006:125). While the concern for national unity formed the background of the debates in the Constituent Assembly, the discussion was also marked by issues of social and economic exploitation of the depressed classes. B.R. Ambedkar, who represented the depressed classes, strongly argued that empowering village institutions would perpetuate the dominance of the upper castes who would continue to exploit the lower castes and the poor people. He applauded the fact that the draft constitution had 'discarded the village', which he damned as nothing 'but a sink of localism, den of ignorance and narrow-mindedness' (Mathur 2006:125). Gandhi's panchayat offered entirely a new pattern of structuring the Indian economy and polity. However, it could not fit into the framework of the representative system of parliamentary government and its strategy of economic development. The Constitution considered the individual and not the village as the basic unit of the political system. The Constitution of India that was adopted was parliamentary federal in nature with a pronounced bias towards centralisation. As a concession to the advocates of the panchayat system, the Constitution included the *Directive Principles of State Policy* which states that: 'The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.' The panchayat system was not accepted as an alternative form of political and economic organisation but the government was encouraged to organise panchayats within the proposed federal parliamentary structure (*ibid.*, 125).

Panchayati Raj in Odisha—An Overview

Odisha became a separate province in 1936. It is one of the few states in the post-Independence period to take up the Panchayatit Raj as its main point of rural administration. The Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1948, is the first legislation prescribing constitution, power and functions of Gram Panchayas in the State of Odisha. During the Chief Ministership of Nabakrushna Choudhury, a further attempt was made through constitution of Anchal Sasan and creation of Anchal Fund under the Orissa Estate Abolition Act of 1951. The Anchal Sasan Act (1955) was intended to accord full power to Anchal, a local authority which was at the higher level than the Gram Panchayat. But the Anchal Sasan Act was not implemented which prevented Odisha pioneering role in the democratic decentralisation process much earlier to the Balwantraji Mehta Committee Report (J. Xaxa, 2013:117). The fate of Gram Panchayat during 1950s and early 1960s was under the mercy of several departments like Board of Revenue Department, Department of Agriculture and Community Development and then moved to the Political and

Services Department. In December 1959, it was placed under the Department of Planning and Coordination with a Secretary to head the Department (J. Xaxa, 2013: 117). The B.R. Mehta recommendations were given effect in the year 1961 and the three-tier system of PRIs was introduced in Odisha. Both Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad Acts were enacted. In July 1962, a new Department of Community Development and Panchayati Raj was created. The Panchayats, Samiti, Parishads and former District Boards came under its purview. Thus, the three-tier Panchayati Raj System introduced in Odisha took few years to get established. In 1967, Odisha came under Swatantra Party Jana Congress coalition government. As a part of poll promise, the State Legislature abolished the Parishad in 1968 and a two-tier system was in operation. This enhanced the role and responsibility of the Panchayat Samitis. Odisha, which introduced legislation on grassroots democratic bodies ahead of many states in India, could not retain its tempo. The Five Year Plan was dormant and there was visible stagnation. It remained relegated for two decades including the second generation PR bodies recommended by Ashok Mehta Committee (*ibid.*, 117).

In 1990 Odisha under Biju Patnaik acted ahead of the Central Government's initiative. Twenty-seven years ago, when he was the Chief Minister of Odisha, he could create a pro-active government for democratic decentralisation. He had also introduced the concept of Panchayat industry and award to Samiti for visible industrial development. His short tenure prevented Panchayat System to get his dynamic vision and wisdom being translated into action. In the year 1991, three landmark legislations were enacted to facilitate devolution of power to the PR bodies to bring about rural development through people's participation and co-operation. The elections for PR bodies were held in 1992. A new social, revolution in rural Odisha ushered and one-third seats were reserved for women in all the tiers of PR bodies (*ibid.*, 18).

However, in its present form, it came into existence in 1994. Gram Panchayats are treated as the unit for formulation of developmental programmes, Panchayat Samitis emerged as an important institution for implementing different developmental programmes like poverty alleviation programmes and social security schemes, etc. and Zila Parishads function as supervisory bodies. In order to avoid overlapping and duplication of work in the field, Zila Parishad is to prepare a Master Plan for the district as a whole undertaking all the aspects of integrated development (Panchayati Raj Department, GoO 2013-14:7). Before 73rd Constitutional Amendment came into force, Government of Odisha had adopted some of the important provisions such as, reservation for women and SCs/STs, in its existing Panchayati Raj Act. Subsequently, the Odisha Panchayati Raj Act was further amended

for full conformity with the Constitutional amendment. Elections to the gram panchayats and panchayat Samitis in Odisha were held before the 73rd Amendment came into force. Accordingly, Odisha became the first state to introduce one-third reservation for women in panchayats. The State conducted elections to PRIs during January 10 to January 15, 1997, and implemented 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions at a time when the Centre was still deliberating on the issue. The percentage of elected women representatives is slightly higher than 35 per cent against a reservation percentage of 33 per cent under the provisions of Panchayat legislations. In Zila Parishads, 14 women have been elected against unreserved posts whereas in Panchayat Samitis there are 133 women. In Gram Panchayats there are 2,652 women against unreserved posts. The reservation is rotated at the time of Panchayat elections that is, every five years. In Odisha, the two-child norm is in force. No special safeguards are available against the removal of women Sarpanchs and they are treated at par with male Sarpanchs.

In 2011, the Government of Odisha has made 50 per cent reservation for women in PRIs to achieve gender equality in the representation in panchayat raj bodies. The state legislature unanimously gave its confirmation to the Odisha Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2011 by amending the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act and the Orissa Zila Parishad Act enhancing the quota for women from the existing 33 per cent to 50 per cent (*The Economic Times*, April 8, 2011). By amending the Panchayat laws, the Bill also provided reservation of seats and offices of the Chairpersons for two terms as it was felt that the operation of single term did not attract more candidates. The experience of the first term would be useful in the second term for women to prove themselves as the true representatives of women as well as the entire community. It was implemented in the PR elections in February-March 2012. This was being done in view of the efficiency, abilities and success shown by women in various spheres and in order to empower the women in decision making process at local self-government (Johani Xaxa, 2013: 121). The Odisha Panchayati Raj Department and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women) have signed an agreement for promoting women's political leadership and empowering the elected representatives in the local government. At present, the programme is being implemented in six states, i.e. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan. The main objectives of the programme are capacity building of the elected women representatives at the Gram Sabha level, research and policy advocacy to address the legal and political issues pertaining to local self-governance and evolution of a centre of excellence (*The Telegraph*, July 17, 2011). Reservations for SCs

and STs in Panchayats are made in accordance with their percentage in the population. SC representation is 16.36 per cent and ST representation is 26.71 per cent.

Extension of Panchayats to the Scheduled Tribe Areas (PESA)

Odisha also falls under the purview of the Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act. The state has districts, which either fall partially or completely under this Act. Fully scheduled area includes Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh and Koraput districts whereas PESA is implemented in some parts in eight districts of Raigada, Keonjhar, Sambalpur, Boudh, Ganjam, Kalahandi, Bolangir and Balasore districts in Odisha.

Panchayati Raj Department, Odisha

The Panchayati Raj department carried out its activities through 30 Sections at government level, and 30 Zila Parishads, 314 Panchayat Samitis (PS), 6232 Gram Panchayats (GP) at the field level. Zila Parishads and District Rural Development Agencies (DRDA) at district level, Panchayat Samitis at Block level and Gram Panchayats at village level are the existing structures through which panchayati Raj Department activities are being carried out in rural Odisha. Besides, there is State Institute for Rural Development (SIRD) established in 1964 at Bhubaneswar for training and capacity building of PRIs elected representatives and field functionaries at the State headquarters level. Likewise, there are three Extension Training Centres (EXTCs) at Bhubaneswar, Bhawanipatna (Kalahandi) and Keonjhar for imparting such training at regional level (GoO 2013-14:8).

In order to support the rural artisans and producers in facilitating marketing of their products, the Panchayati Raj department constituted an autonomous body at the State level called Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society (ORMAS) in 1991 under Societies Registration Act, 1860. The counterpart of ORMAS at district level is known as District Supply and Marketing Societies (DSMSs) which plays an active role as a catalyst for providing all kinds of training, capacity/building and marketing support to rural artisans and producers.

The Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Odisha is committed to strengthening PRIs as 'Institutions of Self Government'. Out of 29 enlisted subjects of 11 Departments were transferred to PRIs in the line of 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992). District-Level Officers, Block-Level Officers and Village-Level functionaries of 11 Departments have been made accountable to Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samitis and Gram Panchayats respectively for implementation of the subjects or schemes transformed to PRIS.

Odisha had taken the lead in providing reservation in favour of SCs, STs, and women in 3-tier PRIs even before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. A

distinguishing feature of the Panchayati Raj system in Odisha is that either the Chairperson or Vice-Chairperson of all the three tiers of PRIs is a woman (Panchayati Raj Department, GoO 2013014:9).

The basic function of the Panchayati Raj Department is to realise the objectives of alleviating rural poverty and providing improved quality of life for the rural population especially people living below the poverty line (GoO 2013-14:9). While the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India implements various schemes and programmes including the wage-employment schemes, self-employment schemes, and rural housing schemes, matters relating to devolution of powers to PRIs, decentralised planning, Finance Commission grants, and the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) are dealt with by Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India (MoPR, GoI, 2012:21).

Under the legislation, it stands amended, Panchayats at all the three levels have been entrusted with duties and functions with regard to 21 out of 29 matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution (Table 1).

TABLE 1: DEVOLVED SUBJECTS/ACTIVITIES

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Name of the Department</i>	<i>Activities Devolved</i>
1	Agriculture	Kharif and rabi programme, soil conservation, horticulture, and watershed activities
2	Food, Supplies, and Consumer Welfare	Public distribution system
3	Health and Family Welfare	Healthcare including hospitals, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), dispensaries, and Maternal and Child Health (MCH) centres
4	Women and Child Development	Socio-economic development of women, integrated child development, welfare of disabled, adoption of children, and welfare of the aged
5	Water Resources	Minor irrigation, water management
6	School and Mass Education	Expansion and development of educational facilities, establishing and maintaining hostels and other welfare literacy campaign (TLC) measures, adult and non-formal education
7	Fisheries and Animal Resources Development	Development of livestock, veterinary services, feeding and fodder, dairy development, inland fisheries, marine fisheries, marketing processing infrastructure, and welfare measures
8	Cooperation	Agricultural credit and risk management
9	Panchayati Raj	Regeneration of minor forest produce species, training, MFP collection, processing and marketing charges, rural housing including Indira Awas Yojna, rural water supply, roads, culverts and bridges, waterways, non-conventional energy, poverty alleviation programmes, wage employment programmes, and markets and fairs
10	SC and ST Development	Eradication of untouchability, curbing atrocities against SCs/STs, educational and economic development

SOURCE: MoPR, GoI Report, 2012, p. 21-22.

There has been devolution not only of functions but also of functionaries. District and block level officers and village level functionaries of the 11 departments are accountable to the Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti, and Gram Panchayat respectively for implementing the schemes transferred to PRIs although they continue as employees of the respective departments.

Three-Tier Structure of PRIs

Odisha has 30 districts, 58 sub-divisions, 316 tehsils, 1,863 revenue circles, 314 blocks, and 51,061 villages, which have been grouped into 6,234 Gram Panchayats. Out of these, there are 12 tribal districts, 18 tribal blocks, and 1,902 tribal Gram Panchayats, which come under the purview of the PESA Act. PRIs at the district, block, and village level are the Zila Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Gram Panchayats, respectively. Table 2 gives the breakup of elected representatives (ERs) at the various levels.

TABLE 2: SOCIAL BREAK-UP OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRIs) - ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES (ERs)

<i>Level</i>	<i>Total ERs</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>ST</i>	<i>Women</i>
District	854	139	219	296
Block	6,227	1,025	1,074	2,188
Village	93,781	15,746	25,453	33,602

SOURCE: Panchayati Raj Department, GoI, 2012

Palli Sabhas

Odisha also has Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas at the village and ward levels respectively. There are 87,542 ward members in the state. Voters from a revenue village constitute the Palli Sabha and ward members preside over its meetings. One-tenth of the members present must be women (MoPR, GoI, 2012). At least two weeks' time is given for holding a Palli Sabha. The Gram Panchayat convenes the meetings once a year in February. The Gram Sabha fixes the place of the Palli Sabha if there are many wards in a revenue village. The Palli Sabha takes all the important decisions like selection of beneficiaries and preparing schemes, as well as selection of the village labour leader.

There are support functionaries at all the three levels in the form of seven Standing Committees (SCs) for the planning, finance, anti-poverty programmes, agriculture, animal husbandry, soil conservation, horticulture, watershed development, and fisheries. The support functionaries also look into the public works, irrigation, electricity, drinking water supply, and rural sanitation. The functionaries also look into the matters of health and social welfare including women and child development, public distribution system, welfare of weaker sections, forest, fuel, and fodder. They also pay attention to the promotion of handicrafts, cottage industry, khadi and village

industries, and rural housing and finally in promoting education, sports, and culture. Apart from the SCs, there are also government functionaries who are support staff and assist the Panchayats in carrying out their functions at each level (Table 3).

TABLE 3: PRI SUPPORT FUNCTIONARIES IN ODISHA

<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	<i>Panchayat Samiti</i>	<i>Zila Parishad</i>
SC members	SC members	Collector
Gram Sachiv (Panchayat Secretary)	Junior Engineer/Add 1. JE	Project Director, DRDA
Panchayat Executive Officer	Gram Panchayat Extension Officer	SC members
Rozgar Sewak (NREGS)	Programme Officer (NREGS)	Zilfa Parishad CEO
ASHAs (under NRHM)	BDO	
AWWs (ICDS)		

Source: Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Odisha website.

Odisha Panchayat Elections, 2012

Odisha conducted its panchayat elections in the month of February, 2012, which was spread over five phases. Over 2.4 crore voters elected 1,00,841 leaders as sarpanches, block samiti nominees, ward members, and zila parishad members. These leaders consist of 87,528 ward members and 6228 sarpanches at the panchayat level, 6231 nominees at the panchayat samiti level and 854 at the zila parishad (ZP) level. Again for the first time, Maoists took part in the panchayat elections in two tribal-dominated districts in western Odisha and won unopposed. Interestingly, earlier they had given a call to boycott the elections in eight districts, including Malkangiri, Kandhamal, Koraput, Nuapada and Nayagargh. But in these instances they put up candidates and ensured that no one else contested in those seats. Thus, in the recent elections Maoists have won in 30 blocks. About 25,000 members and 32 sarpanches have been elected unopposed in those blocks. This phenomenon is a major concern not only to the State but also to the Central Government, since this has serious implications for the use of development funds which are at the disposal of the panchayats of the backward districts under various schemes like the MGNREGS, Backward Region Development Fund, etc. (Bidyut Mohanty, 2012). Another interesting feature of the recent poll is that the Jhodia community of Koraput District boycotted the polls on the demand that they should be declared as a Scheduled Tribe. Since they are currently listed as OBC, their land is easily taken over by the upper castes. Hence, in Kashipur Block, nobody had

filed nomination and no election was held in three zones of the tribal block. The villagers also boycotted the panchayat election in other districts such as Balasore and Mayurbhanj to demand access to basic services. Another notable feature of this election was that out of a total of 3989 candidates who were elected unopposed in Ganjam district as many as 2115 were women. Among them there were 2014 ward members, 49 sarpanches, 51 nominees and just one zila parishad member (*ibid.*).

Empowerment of Women in Panchayati Raj System in Odisha

Review of empirical studies on empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj system in Odisha, by Snehalata Panda (1996, 1999), Bidyut Mohanty (2002), Sachidananda Satpathy (2002), Dayanidhi Parida (2010) reveals that, due to strong caste feelings, women belonging to upper castes have not come forward to represent the Panchayat which provided an opportunity to the women from the labour and lower caste to emerge as a potential force in village politics. It is found that, due to illiteracy and poor socio-economic status, the women leaders could not assert their influence on the decision making process. Though reservation has made women able to participate in the electoral process of the local self-governance system in a large way, woman leadership has come under immense pressure due to the criminalisation of panchayat elections, including harassment and murder. Due to social tradition of male superiority, women leaders are not getting any chances to defend their voice before elderly male persons. They are feeling shy while talking in a meeting. Women leadership faced tremendous pressure in their normal functioning as power-hungry male members did not accept them at par. The percentage of women at various levels of political activities increased dramatically, but it is found that women were still not able to exercise their power, in many cases they were just rubber stamps either in the hands of their family members or in the hands of their senior party members (Xaxa, 2013:119).

The system of Panchayati Raj, which was initiated mainly for people's participation in political and economic processes somehow, has not been successful in ensuring women's participation. Though women have significant contribution to politics, their representation to political institutions like Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha is very insignificant. Parida and Nayak (2009) writing on empowerment of Women in India with specific reference to Odisha, explored that subordination of women in society acts as a structural constraint to their participation in political activities. This constraint operates more or less for all classes and communities of women (Parida and Nayak 2009: 214-215). It is often seen that husbands and family members influence the women representatives in taking decisions. In most cases, the women representatives are ignored and they are invariably

influenced by male family members. Another fact is that women members depend considerably on their men folk for decision making. The relatives of women representatives sometimes take active part in their official activities (Study conducted in Odisha by ISED 1994). Thus, reservation under Panchayati Raj for women is at present in the transitional phase and women are not adequately empowered in practice to play an effective role because of social, economic and political factors. Although women's participation in PRIs is very high in absolute sense, yet analysis in relative terms shows that the participation in decision making is very low. Women have waited for centuries without striving hard to achieve their rightful position and status. They should strive seriously to unshackle themselves, from the chains. They should, therefore, transform as 'women vote bank' and 'pressure group' and exert sufficient pressure on the political heavyweights to gain their rightful share. Only when women succeed in getting larger political decision making power, they can use it to formulate necessary enactments and safeguards to eliminate gender bias, which would therefore pave way for their securing economic power as well. Therefore, gaining of political power is a prerequisite without which other societal injustices can never be rectified (Parida and Nayak 2009:215).

Conclusion

From the above analysis of women's participation in panchayats, we can conclude that though reservation has enhanced women's participation in the electoral process of the local self-governance system in a large way, women leadership has come under immense pressure due to the criminalisation of Panchayat elections. The Maoist control of panchayats in Malkangiri and Koraput districts of Odisha is a negative development noticed in the last panchayat election held in 2012. The main concern is that the Maoists are controlling the development funds like MGNREGA, Backward Area Grant Fund that accrues from the devolution package. It is found that, due to illiteracy and poor socio-economic status, the women leaders could not assert their influence on the decision making process. It is suggested that economic development, restoration of law and order, and increased participation of women in panchayat meetings at all the levels may help them to promote and enhance their leadership qualities. Attitudinal change in both men and women is required to encourage rural women to enter into politics. Education can certainly play an important role in bringing social and political awareness among people.

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