



TRIBAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Rekha J. Parlikar, Ph.D.

Principal, Let. Laxmibai Deshmukh College, Parli-Vaijnath, Dist - Beed (Maharashtra)

Abstract

Indian Constitution is a unique model of inclusiveness in the world. For variety of Indian society particularly the marginalized section, it promotes an access to participate and empower themselves through the reservation and participatory method in Panchayat Raj Institutions.

The provision of 73rd amendment Act was enacted to the 5th Scheduled Areas through the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA Act 1996). This paper examines whether the deprived section have started exerting some influence in the functioning of the Panchayats as platform to ventilate their grievances and the implements in their genuine empowerment.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is a step towards all inclusive representation as well as Empowerment of all social groups in the country. Reservation for marginalised sections of the society like SCs, STs and women is a special feature of this provision.

The tribal population is identified as the aboriginal inhabitants of our country. They are seen in almost every state of India. For centuries, they have been living a simple life within the natural environment and have developed cultural patterns congenial to their physical and social environment. References of such tribal groups are found even in the ancient literature dating back to the period of Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Tribals may be geographically located in four groups and tribes in Maharashtra are in central and western zone of India.

'Adivasi' or 'Tribe': A conceptual framework

As the name implies, tribals are 'Adivasi' or original dwellers, living in the subcontinent from unrecorded time and possibly driven into the forests by more aggressive settlers - Aryans being the earliest one to socially subjugate them. In order to resist complete domination, tribals evolved their distinct identity through endogamy, their cropping pattern, hunting and food gathering. Above all, in their intensely personal relationship with the forest around them, they formed perfectly balanced rhythms which can best be described as symbiotic. (Mehta Prakash Chandra, 2000)

According to L.P. Vidyarthi; the tribe is a social group with definite territory, common name, common district, common culture, and behavior of an endogamous group, common taboos, and existence of distinctive social and political system, full faith in leaders and self-sufficiency in their distinct economy. (The Constitution of India, Article 342)

Similarly various authors have described the tribes by different nomenclature. Dr. Ghurya named them 'backward Hindus', Dr. Das and Das rename them as 'submerged humanity'. The other names are 'Aboriginals', 'Primitive tribe', 'Adivasi', 'Vanyajati', 'Vanavasi', 'Adimjati' etc. In the ancient literature of India such as the Vedas, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the tribals appeared as 'Nishad', 'Sabarars', 'Kiratas', and 'Dasyas'. They are believed to be the earlier among the present inhabitants of the country.

The term 'tribe' have not been defined clearly anywhere in the Indian constitution. Only the term 'Scheduled Tribe' occurs that describes "the tribe or the tribal communities or parts of or group within tribes or tribal communities. These groups are presumed to form the oldest ethnological sector of the people. (Brinkerhoff, Derick W., 2006)

Legal provisions for Tribals

Pre-independence tribals living in forests, hills and even on the plains were isolated from the mainstream. They suffered neglect and exploitation during princely and colonial region with their land and forest being slowly and gradually grabbed by the rich people like landlords and money lenders. They were turned into bonded labors, leading a life of extreme poverty and misery. The excessive encroachment on their rights in forest land led to an expression of anger in the form of riots. Thus independent India inherited a complex tribal problem' from the British colonial system. The major thrust is to solve the tribal problem in view of our commitment to the objectives of social justice, social, economic and political equality of status and opportunity as enshrined in the preamble to the constitution. The makers of the constitution paid special attention towards the tribal problems and made an attempt to eradicate it.

The Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission for the Tribal Welfare and Development, 1961 headed by Sri U.N Dhebar observed that the constitution provided for resources and the required institutional apparatus in respect of tribals. Some of these safeguards remained in operation for the initial ten years of the functioning of constitution. In fixing this period, the constitution had envisaged an effective follow - up mechanisms conducive to the welfare of tribal population across the country. The idea was to achieve the desired results within ten years so that there would be no need to extend the period later. This

hope, however did not materialize and the period needed to be extended further, not necessarily due to any deficiency in the constitution itself, but largely as a result of deficiency in performance.' (Mishra, R.P., 1983)

The constitution deliberately laid emphasis on both aspects – protective as well as developmental. The makers of the constitution were keen that the tribals join the mainstream of the national life while retaining their 'traits and cultural heritage. Keeping this in view, the tribal status in constitution, therefore, made special provision for their social and economic development. The provisions are contained in Articles 46,244,330, 332, 334, 335,338, 339, 342and schedules V, VI to the constitution of India. The constitution also permits for change in laws, according to the tribal situation in concerned area.

Panchayat Raj: As a Democratic Decentralization System

As a part of grass root, the Panchayats and the elected representatives have an understanding of the ground realities, sufferings of people and local conditions. The effectiveness of providing services through local bodies cannot be over-emphasized as they know their real requirements, and are familiar with every nook and corner of the village and, above all, they are answerable to the people. The involvement of Panchayats ensures greater transparency in working and fund utilization than when execution is carried out by state agencies. However, since Panchayati Raj is a State subject, it is for the States to take steps to devolve necessary powers to the Panchayats.

Needless to say, the devolution of powers and functions to Panchayati Raj Institutions is a step in the right direction and over time these Institutions are expected to emerge as strong Centers of local governance responsive to the needs of the local community. What is needed today is the display of political will and a willingness to make the PRIs both effective and accountable. Another urgent need is an extensive exercise in the capacity-building of elected PRI representatives.

Through 73rd Constitutional Amendment and implementation of PESA act these expectations are expected to take a practical shape. But the question is, is tribal Panchayat representatives empowered through these passive steps taken by the government? It specifically analyses how much the community has achieved or benefited after the introduction of Panchayat Raj. The objective is to determine how the power structures of tribal communities have been influenced by the socio-political changes and institutional innovations, like the extension of representative democracy at the grassroots level; what kind of changes have taken place in the study area with the institutionalization of Panchayats; and

the politicization of the tribal people. This is the question of enquiry of this present research. For this enquiry we choose tribal panchayat leaders as a sample from Maharashtra state.

PESA Act 1996

The provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) have come into force on 24th December 1996. The Act extends Panchayats to tribal areas of eight States namely, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan; it will enable tribal society to assume control of its destiny to preserve and conserve the traditional rights over natural resources. (Azfar, Omar, 2006)

This is the first law that empowers people to redefine their own administrative boundaries. PESA provides that the tribal '*gram sabha*' so defined would be empowered to approve all development plans, control all functionaries and institutions of all social sectors. In one stroke, the Act creates space for people's empowerment, genuine popular political participation.

Community Empowerment

Combining community with empowerment emphasizes the essentiality of collective action. Community empowerment concerns how members of a group are able to act collectively in ways that enhance their influence on, or control over, decisions that affect their interests. Although a community is often defined generically as a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government, we employ a working definition that focuses on the collective action dimension: a community is a group that shares a sufficient commonality of interests such that its members are motivated to engage in collective action.

We define community empowerment operationally in terms of four elements. Communities are empowered if they: 1) have access to information, 2) are included and participate in forums where issues are discussed and decisions are made, 3) can hold decision-makers accountable for their choices and actions, and 4) have the capacity and resources to organize to aggregate and express their interests and/or to take on roles as partners with public service delivery agencies. Information is essential to engaging communities in democratic governance and/or service delivery; when citizens lack information about what local governments are doing they are powerless to move beyond being passive recipients of whatever public officials provide them. Empowerment requires that communities are able to gain access to the venues in which deliberation and decision-making take place, and that they have the capacity to participate effectively. Empowered communities can take steps to assure that public officials adhere to their promises and plans

through the exercise of accountability mechanisms. Finally, empowerment calls for sufficient organizational capacity of local groups to take on a variety of functions, depending upon particular situations. Local groups engaged in lobbying for their interests and pushing for reforms need organizational capacity to forge alliances with others, develop advocacy campaigns, address technical policy issues, and mobilize political clout. (<http://socialissuesindia.wordpress.com>)

On the background of these empowerment criteria we try to assess the performance of PESA Act and Panchayat Raj institution, and the extent to which it is successful for the empowerment of tribal community in Maharashtra. This constitutes the core of our enquiry.

Empowerment of Tribal Panchayat Leaders in Maharashtra

Of all empowerments political empowerment may be considered more important. The empowerment is meant for participating in political decision-making process. And the process normally affects society. The reason is that the process has to do with power or influence which can make others fall in line with others wishes. Tribal political empowerment has to do with political influence of tribals and the institutionalization of their participation in political decision-making process. Political empowerment of tribals is important on two counts: one, it will be a direct challenge to all traditional institutions where tribal representation is denied or absent. And two, the tribal society shall certainly experience new taste of their own political leadership.

1. Reservation of Constituency:

73rd constitutional amendment act provides for the reservation of constituencies for STs in PRIs, facilitating the advent of political institutions as well as decision-making process. Under PESA Act the reservation of seats in the Scheduled Areas at every Panchayat shall be in proportion to the population of the communities in that Panchayat for whom reservation is sought to be given under Part IX of the Constitution.⁶ Provided that the reservation for the Scheduled Tribes shall not be less than one-half of the total number of seats; Provided further that all seats of Chairpersons of Panchayats at all levels shall be reserved for the Scheduled Tribes; In Maharashtra there are reserved constituencies for STs in PRIs as follows.

2. Contesting Elections

Contesting election for a formal position in elective and statutory bodies like panchayat, legislature or union parliament, is a more conscious act motivated by interest and power factors. A person contests an election to get into government and to join the bandwagon of real decision-makers. However, notwithstanding getting elected or defeated, contesting an election in itself is a very important mode of political participation. It is the higher and more serious form of political participation than voting, campaigning, and joining a party or voluntary organization.

We began our analysis with the identification of the respondents who have contested some type of election. Further, an attempt has been made to discuss the issue in the context of their term.

However, the level at which a person contests an election is not simply a matter of choice. It is conditioned by the influence, availability of funds and above all the will of party high commands (especially at higher levels). Political parties are too reluctant to give tickets to Scheduled Tribes. Majority of the Scheduled Tribes contest elections at grass-root level simply because there are reserved seats for STs. Thus, they have opportunities to contest elections and occupy positions of power in the panchayats.

3. Work in Political Party

It clears that most of the tribal panchayat leaders are working in the political party at local, village or block level because their area of working is limited. They have a little access to higher echelons of power within a party.

4. Income

Financial condition is a prior requirement of political activities in the present Indian political scenario. The Political empowerment follows the economic prerequisites of the community. It is therefore imperative to know the economic condition of the particular tribal community. Considerable income positively affects political empowerment and vice versa.

village level tribal panchayat representatives are mostly from the lower socio-economic status group. This may be areas on why tribal people have lower political participation.

Conclusion:

Consequent to the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, political decentralization has taken place in almost all the States where elections have been held. However, progress on fiscal and functional decentralization has been mixed.

The power structures of tribal communities have been influenced by the socio-political changes and institutional innovations, like the extension of representative democracy at the grassroots level. Some significant changes have been found in the study area with the institutionalization of Panchayats; and the politicization of the tribal people by the different parties. (Monditoka, ArunaKumar ,2010)

The 73rd constitutional amendment act and quest for the decentralization and strengthening of local self-government is step ahead in the path of adivasi/Tribal empowerment. In Maharashtra most of the tribal zone is under the Fifth Schedule of the constitution. There is a provision of PESA Act after 1996 for devolution of power to the local panchayats.

But in reality reservation for tribals in PRIs is a quantitative fact that has not materialized into a qualitative participation. The tribal community is participates in local politics as a voter and at the most contesting election at local level thanks to reserved constituencies. Their economic condition is very weak because of which they can't even attend meetings at district level. They don't have proper information about politics and the policies and programmes of government. The officers and bureaucrats do not guide them properly. They are unable to take decisions at local level.

The tribal panchayat leader's level of political information is very low. They don't even know how much percentage of seats are reserved for them or what are the names of national political leaders, and those of schemes meant for tribal welfare.

In short tribal community entered into political globe only because of reservation in PRIs and the provision of PESA Act that ensures transfer the power to the local institutions such as 'Gramsabha'. But the local tribal leaders and their followers are hardly aware of what PESA means. They remain an ignorant and uninformed lot. So the quest for political empowerment of tribals by democratic decentralization seems a distant dream.

On the positive side, educated tribal panchayat leaders are coming up in panchayat raj institutions. They are keen to know about government policies and programmes affecting the tribal community. This offers some hope for political empowerment of tribes. But viewed on a broader canvas, it is necessary to change the attitude and response of government officers and personnel towards this indigenous community.

Suggestions:

Following suggestions may be offered for the empowerment of tribals through democratic decentralization.

- 1. Awareness:** Empowerment of Gram Sabhas would require efforts at mobilization of the village community for mass participation in meetings of the Gram Sabha. Further, a massive awareness generation programme needs to be taken up to inform Gram Sabhas about their rights.
- 2. Accountability:** To what extent are the village panchayats accountable to the common people and looking after public interest? Do the ordinary masses feel involved and participate? Steps in the direction of making village panchayats more accountable to common people are necessary.
- 3. Positive Attitude:** The government officers and personnel need to have sympathy for the cause of tribal empowerment.
- 4. Political Will:** What is needed today is the political will and wisdom necessary to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions that will lead to the empowerment of tribal panchayat leaders. There is a need for establishing a mechanism for capacity-building of elected representatives. The State should provide space and freedom for people to engage in collective action.

Empowerment of tribals cannot come along without effective support from the other social groups/communities and the government. Strengthening democratic decentralization in genuine manner will go long way in ensuring real tribal empowerment.

References:

- Mehta Prakash Chandra, *Tribal Development in 20th Century*, DurgaTaldar Shiva Publishers, Udaipur, 2000 p.7
- Vidyarthi L.P., *Tribal Development and its Administration*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1981, pp12-14.
- The Constitution of India, Government of India, Article 342.*
- Mishra R.P., (ed.) *Local Level Planning and Development*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1983, p. 23.
- Derick W. Brinkerhoff: *Decentralization and Community Empowerment: Does community empowerment deepen democracy and improve service delivery?* Derick W. Brinkerhoff, with Omar Azfar, October 2006
- https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:fRBX7FQAQdkJ:pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADH325.pdf+Decentralization+is+frequently+recommended+as+a+means+to+enact+and+deepen+democratic+governance+and+to+improve+administrative+and+service+delivery+effectiveness
- [Grass-root Democracy in India: Status of the Panchayati Raj System](http://socialissuesindia.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/grass-root-democracy-in-india-status-of-the-panchayati-raj-system)
- <http://socialissuesindia.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/grass-root-democracy-in-india-status-of-the-panchayati-raj-system>
- Monditoka Aruna Kumar, *Decentralised Governance in Tribal India: Negotiating Space between the State, Community and Civil Society*, May 2010