

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH PRIS OF LOCAL-SELF GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

In the civil society of India, though women constitute a numerically a dominant category, but they have been marginalized, suppressed, dominated and somehow exploited in different spheres. Although women in India including tribal women play a vital role in their social, cultural, economic and religious ways of life, but gender inequality has been reflected their marginalized socio-economic and political status over the decades. Since independence of India, various policy initiatives have been undertaken for improving the socio-economic conditions and empowering tribal women in India. Political empowerment involves creating favourable policies that would best support gender equality and agency for women in both the public and private spheres. In this regard, 73rd Amendment of Constitution has provided a common platform of Local Self-Governance through PRIs for political empowerment of tribal women in India. This paper based on an extensive review of literature reveals that in spite of acute poverty in tribal areas, there are a number of problems and challenges in the PRIs which has also hampered political empowerment of tribal women in India. It suggests some recommendations for political empowerment of tribal women in the country.

Introduction

Development of a nation state always requires the participation of all sections of the society in different activities. Out of different dimensions of participation, political participation is one of the means through which people can fulfil their desires and aspirations. In fact, the level of political participation always reflects the strength and health of a democratic political system. Political participation encompasses the

freedom to speak out, assemble, associate and the ability to take part in the public affairs at all levels of government system. Among all sections of Indian society, women constitute about half of population. Woman constitutes 48.27% of total population in India. Most disappointing fact is that, India having such a high ratio of women section, still lacks behind many countries of the world not only in terms of HDI (Human Development Index) but also in terms of women's status and empowerment. In fact, the utmost development of any country depends on the status of the women in different spheres like socio- political, cultural and economic sector (Ranjan Acharjee and Surajit Debnath 2021). However low participation of women in politics is a problem in all the democratic countries of the world including India even today (Palmu Kaleon 2018). The level of women's participation in political affairs of a country indicates both the level of women's empowerment and development in a democratic nation state like India. But, the situation is more severe and precarious among the tribal women in primitive communities, the population of which constitutes approximately 8.6% of the total population of the country numbering 104.30 million (104281034) of India's total population (as per the census of India 2011), out of which 5.2 crore are male and 5.1 are females (See: www.censusindia.gov.in). Among all categories, the Schedule Tribes are the most backward, exploited and marginalized communities in India. Even in the tribal society, women lag behind their male counterparts in different spheres of their life including health, education and participation in various political

and economic activities. In fact, gender inequality in the socio-economic status is also visible now-a-days in the tribal communities of India. Thus, empowerment of tribal women is considered as a prime aim of government. Empowerment involves various aspects such as political, economic, social and cultural. Promoting tribal women's political participation and involvement in public affairs does not benefit women alone, but also their men and community as a whole. Women's participation in politics may take various forms such as active involvement in community life, civil society organizations, local bodies and government institutions. In all such instances, women should be equally and effectively represented in various processes of decision making (Nayak, K.B.2020).

The role of women's empowerment for a just society was highlighted in the Beijing Conference (1995) and later in other international conferences as well as in platforms at national level. Women in India including tribal women play a vital role in their social, cultural, economic and religious ways of life. In fact, among all categories of women in India, tribal women are considered as an economic asset in their society. But they are lagging far behind in the different walks of life like education, employment, good health and economic empowerment etc. Poverty is one of the major factors that not only degrade their socio-economic life but also it deprives the tribal women to participate in development programs, mobility strategies and decision-making processes. In tribal area, the condition of women is very measurable, they spend the greatest amount of their time and energy in collecting fuel, fodder water, while side by side looking after their children, livestock and kitchen. Thus, poverty pushes them downwards towards the lowest strata of society. Therefore, first of all, there is need of political

empowerment of tribal women in India (Nayak, K.B. 2008, 2014 and 2020).

In fact, political exclusion of tribal women is closely interrelated to their marginal status in different domains of life. A long history of exclusion from political power has added their struggle for existence. Since independence of India, both governmental and non-governmental organizations have been striving to bring about their empowerment and development of tribal women, but still they have been largely deprived of their basic needs of life and reeling under acute poverty, malnutrition and starvation over the decades. In spite of provisions of active participation in local self-governance through PRI (Panchayati-Raj Institutions), tribal women are still lagging far behind their male counterparts in terms of political empowerment even today. Although there are a number of constraints on tribal women's political participation, but certain factors that are fundamental in empowering them include strategies of sustainable development, pro-tribal policies, access to resources, and human resource development. While tribal women are living at subsistence levels and are most concerned with meeting basic needs of life. Their geographical isolation has further added fuel to the already existing problems and constraints, separating them from the larger socio-economic canvas, while reducing their access to resources, information and knowledge (Nayak, K.B. 2008, 2014 and 2020).

Political empowerment involves creating policies that would best support gender equality and agency for women in both the public and private spheres. Methods that have been suggested are to create affirmative action policies that have a quota for the number of women in policy making and parliament positions (Duflo, Esther 2012:1051). Political supremacy of mainstream society, party politics, politics of appeasement, lack of

coordination among tribal politicians, populism, social identity, multiculturalism and linguistic diversity, socio-economic and educational backwardness, etc., are many serious issues that pose serious constraints and challenges to the political empowerment of the tribal women in India. Although due to the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, through social media, there has been increase in the level of education and awareness among the tribal youth, but tribal women are still lagging behind their male counterparts in terms of political consciousness and active participation in politics. The biggest problem of Indian politics has been the weakening of the political ethics. This indicates the moral degradation of Indian politics, where the powerful persons from the dominant sections of society often use the system and institutions of democracy in order to stay in power and maintain their statuesque. This has limited the public only to the right to vote. Even the pattern of voting behaviour in tribal areas shows that maximum of tribal women is very indifferent to politics and political affairs of the country. Therefore, special organizational efforts are essential in order to empower tribal women politically, while linking education and employment with their training for leadership and skill development (Nayak, K.B. 2008, 2014 and 2020).

Since independence of India, various initiatives have been undertaken for improving the socio-economic conditions and empowering tribal women in India. In this regard, the Constitution of India guarantees socio-economic and political equality and the provision of equal rights for availing different opportunities to all social sections of people in the country, including the Scheduled Tribes women. Increasing emphasis has also been placed on initiating variety of development schemes and welfare programmes by both central government as well as state governments for

maximizing the participation of the Scheduled Tribes women in different activities. Various legal reforms and resolutions in the form of laws and Acts have also been introduced in order to improve their socio-economic status, reduce gender inequality and empower them in the Indian social system (Mehta, G.S.2002:7). In fact, the principles of gender equality have been enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. Just after independence, there was a deep concern of the framers of the Indian Constitution for the uplift of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes which is reflected in the elaborate constitutional provisions and institutional mechanisms as set-up in the country for their upliftment. In this regard, the Articles 15, 16, 39, and 42 of the Indian Constitution have ensured the freedom to women in every sphere of life. The Constitutional of India provides a number of safeguards and measures for protection and promotion of interests of the SCs and the STs in India. These provisions are as follows: Article-15(2): the provision related to prohibition of restriction of any access to public places; Article-16(4): reservation of post in Government services for marginalized backward classes; Article-17: abolition of untouchability; Article-23: restriction of traffic in human beings and forced labour; Article-29.2: protection of right to admission to educational institutions; Article- 46: special care for promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes; Article-244 and Scheduled V & VI: social administrations arrangement and control over Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in the States; Article-335: reservation in services; Article- 339: Union government direction to state government for welfare of Scheduled Tribes (Prashant Kumar Baghel and Anindhya Tiwari 2021).

To explain it in more detail, the Article 17 abolishes untouchability in society. Article 46 requires the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and also to protect them from social injustice and all forms for exploitation. Article 335 provides that the claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State. Article 15(4) refers to the special provisions for their advancement. Article 16(4A) speaks of “reservation in matters of promotion to any class or classes of posts in the services under the State in favour of SCs/STs, which are not adequately represented in the services under the State”. Article 338 provides for a National Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with duties to investigate and monitor all matters relating to safeguards provided for them, to inquire into specific complaints and to participate and advise on the planning process of their socio-economic development etc. Article 330 and Article 332 of the Constitution respectively provide for reservation of seats in favour of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People and in the legislative assemblies of the States. Under Part IX relating to the Panchayats and Part IXA of the Constitution relating to the Municipalities, reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in local bodies has been envisaged and provided. Part IX and Part IXA of the Constitution respectively permit the legislature of a State to make provision for reservation of seats in Panchayat and Municipalities in favour of backward classes citizens. Article 340 of the

Constitution provides for appointment of a Commission to investigate the conditions of backward classes. Article 16(4) and 16(4A) respectively permit reservation of appointments or posts and in matters of promotion in favour of backward classes not adequately represented in the services under the State. Article 15(4) permits the State to make special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizen. In addition to these, there are also other Constitutional provisions for the welfare and socio-economic empowerment of the Scheduled Caste, the Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes (Prashant Kumar Baghel and Anindhya Tiwari 2021).

In spite of the manifest, avowed and determined concern of the Constitution, the real objectives of socio-economic development of tribal people in general and the tribal women in particular have not yet been fully achieved and whatever has been done over the decades after independence, it has been done hesitatingly, half-heartedly and as a measure of concession to those classes (Whitaker 2007). In terms of Neo-Marxism and particularly in the sense of sociological theory of Dependency and Underdevelopment, in India, the “Centre” of power (means the dominant segment of rich people in the country) has continuously appropriated access to every aspect of development of services and resources at the cost of vast “Periphery” (means the subservient, dominated and marginalized categories of poor people) (Nayak, K.B. 2008, 2014, and 2020).

To view it critically, the text of the Constitution has created a lofty mix of Fundamental Rights and a set of Directives enjoining upon the State the obligation to promote and to secure to the citizens, the enjoyment of rights that provide the citizen an environment allowing his/her growth and development with social justice, equal opportunity, right to work and access to

basic needs and opportunity without discrimination. While the text has created a noble and genuine texture, the key players are the State, the legal system, the dynamics of social development and the social forces as generated by the socio-political processes in the country. However, the linkage between these key players provides some explanations to the path that the nation has traversed in economic growth, social development and pursuit of equal justice. But, the processes of economic growth or economic development do not necessarily lead to equitable income distribution among people in the whole country. In fact, these often result in appropriation of national resources by a small percentage of the dominant people. Although over the years, the social services in the field of education, health, transportation and tertiary sectors have increased, but there has been an inherent distortion in their universal access (Prashant Kumar Baghel and Anindhya Tiwari 2021).

In fact, the policy instruments in India as loaded with different objectives produce a paradoxical regime of results, which is fairly seen in the areas where Indian Constitution assigned the role of basic font of delivery to the state. The legal regime also confronts people with paradoxes. Whereas the legal text in the Constitution of India is explicit in seeking remedies, but the implementation process appears to evade performance. However, in implementation of laws and the working of the legal system, several trends emerge. In fact, laws and legal processes are not self-executing and these depend on the players such as the administrative structure and its processes. While the judiciary faces with the anticipation and the social attitudes of common people are driven by enlightened notions such as equity, social justice, freedom and fair play. Even the responses of the key players in the implementation of laws protecting the weak,

the oppressed, women and children and the socially disadvantaged sections, have over the years become increasingly indifferent. As a result, the injustices have been allowed to persist and the system has also been failed to provide for self-correction. Thus, somehow distortion and denial of the right have crept in the interpretation and implementation of the Constitutional law.

A related issue of socio-political dynamics in India is the opportunity and the access to the disadvantaged sections to take advantage of forums of the enforcement process and social mobilization. While the polarization of castes and classes in the recent years across the country has also shown disturbing trends, in as much as the administrative system, the judiciary, the legal processes that reflect the social reality of a given area or region. Even the enforcement agencies have themselves responded to these urges for social protests and desire for enforcement using the legal and social processes with indifferences and indeed ostensibly with resistance. Increasingly it was shown that whereas processes were available to the disadvantaged, the weak, the oppressed sections including women and children, but the access to those processes was denied because of its cost and remoteness. Even though the State created some shelters through various form of Legal Aid to the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, women and other sections of the oppressed, but they were only reduced to tokenism because of the quality and availability. Indeed, the higher levels in the judiciary system intervened with vigour against the injustice manifest in the social system in the form of bonded labour, child labour, crime against the women and Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, etc. But it is to be noted that the legal and institutional processes of redressal, wherever provided, are available only formally and have made a little or no impact. For instance, see Various Provisions of

the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. In fact, the disadvantage sections of Indian society have difficult access even to the shelters and sanctuaries created for them under the law. Thus, the manner and frequency with which social protests have, in some cases, been snuffed out by the very system created to protect it, is revealing. This is the major challenge for the legal system which incorporates in its formal text, the creation and the sustenance of a civil society (Prashant Kumar Baghel and Anindhya Tiwari 2021).

In the civil society of India, though women constitute a numerically a dominant category, but they have been marginalized, suppressed, dominated and somehow exploited in different spheres. After independence, India adopted a federal system of government in which powers are divided between the central government and the states and union territories. Within the framework of democratic policy, Constitutional laws and development policies, Five Year Plans and programmes have been made which aimed at improving women's status in various spheres. From the fifth five-year plan (1974-78) onwards, there has been a marked shift within the approach to women's issues in improving the status of women. Then a decade after the National Commission of Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlement of women. During the period of 1990s, the main social issue which was highlighted in media was the issue of "women's empowerment" through a local level political platform namely the Panchayati-Raj system of local self-government in rural India. Even just after independence, the framers of the Constitution of India included Article 40 among the Directive Principles: "The state shall 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". Subsequently, four committees (between 1957 to 1986) which

conceptualised local self-government in India and paved the way for establishing the Panchayati-Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural India and those committees were: Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977-1984), GVK Rao Committee (1985), and the LM Singhvi Committee (1986). The recommendations of these committees were as follows:

- **Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957):** This committee recommended for the establishment of PRIs at the village, intermediate, and district levels. It also recommended that PRIs should be given financial resources and powers to decide on local issues.
- **Ashok Mehta Committee (1977):** This committee also recommended that PRIs should be given more powers and resources and that they should be made responsible for planning and implementing development projects at the local level.
- **G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985):** This committee also recommended that PRIs should be given greater autonomy and that they should be made accountable to the people whom they serve. It also suggested that PRIs should be given the power to levy taxes and fees.
- **L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986):** The L.M. Singhvi committee recommended the need for constitutional recognition and legal framework for both Panchayat Raj Institution as well as urban local bodies in order to strengthen the local self-governance in India.
- **P.K. Thungon Committee (1989):** It also recommended for constitutional recognition for the local government bodies. Eventually, the local Governance was given Constitutional Status with the 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992. However, the Amendment Acts of

1992 added two new parts IX and IX-A to the Constitution. Two new Schedules 11 and 12 were also added which contain the lists of functional items of Panchayats and Municipalities.

Although the Panchayati Raj system was first established in India in the 1950s, but it was only with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 that it was given constitutional recognition and a formal structure. Among a number of studies, a study conducted by Manikyamba, P (1989) entitled 'Women in Panchayat Raj Structures' and examined the working of PRIs in general, the role of women as beneficiaries and benefactors in the socio-economic and political process of development. It also assessed the role of women as presiding officers of the PRIs. During three decades of early Panchayati-Raj system, a number of problems were observed. She was of the view that given the opportunity, talented and interested women can play very effective leadership role politics. Another study by Sivanna, N (1990) while dealing with the Panchayati-Raj system under the Act of 1959 revealed that, the involvement of women members in PRIs was not up to the expected mark. He observes that, although there are statutory provisions to ensure their representation, their socio-economic conditions are not conducive to their effective involvement.

However, in the early 1990s, the relevance of Panchayati-Raj system was recognized with greater scope and the Local Self-Government in India was systematically re-established as the third tier of government beneath the Central Government and State Government. The Local Self-Government is considered as a system of administration where local bodies, elected directly by the people, manage the affairs of the local community, such as villages, towns, or cities. It aims to devolve powers and resources to the local level so as to empower local people

to have a say in matters that impact their daily lives. The Constitution of India defines the structure of local self-government in the country through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which were passed in 1992. These amendments created two new governance structures: The Panchayats (for rural areas) and the Municipalities (for urban areas). In India, the structure of local self-governance involves two types of institutions/bodies – Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and Urban Local Bodies (ULB). The present paper is concerned with the PRIs in rural India. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) refer to the system of 'Rural Local Self-Governance' in India i.e. a system of governance of rural areas through the representatives directly elected by the people. The 73rd Amendment introduced Part IX into the Indian Constitution, detailing the structure and functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) at various levels—village, intermediate, and district. Its key features include the following points:

1. **Panchayati Raj System:** It mandates a three-tier system of local governance, except for states with populations below 20 lakhs.
2. **Gram Sabha:** The Amendment establishes Gram Sabhas at the village level, consisting of all registered voters, thereby promoting grassroots democracy.
3. **Elections and Terms:** Regular elections for Panchayati Raj institutions are mandated every five years, overseen by a State Election Commission.
4. **Powers and Functions:** Panchayats are empowered to prepare plans for economic development and social justice concerning subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule, which includes 29 functional items such as agriculture, education, health etc.

In this way, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act defines the Panchayati Raj

system as a "three-tier system" consisting of :

1) **Village Panchayats:** The lowest level of local government, responsible for village-level administration and development; 2) **Intermediate Panchayats:** Intermediate level of local government, typically responsible for a group of villages; and 3) **District Panchayats:** The highest level of rural local government, responsible for district-level administration and development.

In fact, as the third tier of the government, the Local Self-Government in India carries multifarious significance which can be explained in terms of following points:

- **Participatory Democracy:** Local self-governance fosters citizen participation in decision-making processes, ensuring that governance is more inclusive and representative of local needs and priorities.
- **Citizen Participation:** It fosters a sense of ownership and civic engagement among residents, encouraging them to actively participate in decision-making processes.
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Elected representatives at the local level are more accessible to the community, which enhances accountability and transparency in governance.
- **Responsive Governance:** Local bodies can respond swiftly to issues and challenges specific to their area, leading to more effective and efficient service delivery.
- **Improved Efficiency:** Local bodies often possess a deeper understanding of local needs and challenges, allowing for more efficient allocation of resources.
- **Inclusiveness:** Local governance provides a platform for marginalized communities such as SCs, STs, Women, etc to have their voices heard and their needs addressed.
- **Empowerment and Capacity Building:** Decentralization of power empowers local communities by building their capacity to

manage resources, plan development activities, and resolve conflicts.

It is pertinent to note that the local self-governments in the form of PRIs have no relevance if they are not responsive, transparent, participatory and accountable to the local people in India, where the most deprived sections of society are the Dalits, tribals, and women. It is said that 'politics is about power', but democratic politics is and should be about bringing power down to the local people and empowering them. Decentralization of power, therefore, may be defined as the empowerment of the local people through PRIs of local self-government. The Constitution of India defines Panchayats as "institutions of local self-government" and requires the state legislature to create such institutions (Nagaraja. S and Pallavi. S. Kusugal 2013).

However, the PRIs have been established in all States of India by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) as the third tier of government in the rural areas. Aiming to build democracy at the grassroots level, they ensure that local populations participate directly in the decision-making process and bring about their development. The decentralization of governance in India which has taken place after 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has increased political participation of tribal women in decision making process. It has attempted to empower local communities and enhance their capacity in order to manage their own affairs. In this way, the Local Self-Government in India is a cornerstone of a vibrant Indian democracy. By enabling grassroots participation in decision-making and implementation, Local Self-Governance in India has helped in transforming the representative democracy into a participatory democracy. In fact, the Local Self-Government in India has attempted to help in strengthening the grassroots-level democracy. In this respect,

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, it means empowering tribal women and bring about development in tribal communities.

In fact, during the post-independence period of India, women have achieved unprecedented political breakthrough with the reservation of seats in the Panchayats and other public bodies. In this regard, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1993 mandating at least 1/3rd of the seat reservation for women, is an important landmark in the history of Indian women's participation in the formation of democratic institutions at the grass root level. It provides a political space or platform to the disadvantaged sections of the society like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women to be self-empowered. However, the reservation policy for women could be an important initiative of awareness for maximizing their role, responsibilities and participation in Gram Panchayats. During the period of Post 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the introduction of reservation policy in favour of Scheduled Tribes women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions clearly specified that the government intervention for increasing the participation of scheduled tribes' women in different activities at Gram Panchayat levels and thereby to bring about progress in their socio-economic status. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good local self-governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment provided a hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantage sections of Indian society such as the Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes and women. The primary objectives of Panchayati Raj Institutions are to eradicate poverty, uplift standard of living of people living in rural areas and bring about a healthy society by creating

awareness for sound health, hygiene, sanitation, making strategies to eradicate illiteracy and ignorance and also ensuring social justice to the rural people (Jetti Rajendar 2022).

However, in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, a provision has been made for 33.33 per cent women's reservation which is an act of positive discrimination. It has not only unpacked gender relations but also transformed the quality and thrust of local self-government. It provides opportunities for women to assert their rights over resources and have a definite say in the development process. While it enables women to develop a greater understanding of the political structures and systems of governance and how to participate in Panchayat system. In this regard, political empowerment is a process by which marginalized groups including women recognize their powerlessness and address deprivation and discriminations in their individual capacities as well as through collective bargaining. It is also defined as a process that fosters power (that is the capacity to implement) in people for use in their own lives, their own communities and in their own society, by acting on issues that they describe as important (Palanthurai, G 2001:38-50). Thus, political empowerment of tribal women is the result of their participation in decision-making which can improve their socio-economic status.

Thus, a great change has been taken place in the mindset of tribal women as well as their family members when 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act came into existence. Earlier the Scheduled and Tribal areas were exempted from implementing the Panchayati Raj system. While the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996 has provided a provision for the extension of the 73rd Amendment (with certain modifications and exceptions) to tribal and forested areas across

10 states of India, (excluding tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, which were governed by District or Regional Councils). However, these provisions have been put in place to protect customary law, social and religious practices, and traditional management practices of community resources. Besides, a minimum of one-third of the seats in all local bodies are reserved for women. Moreover, seats are also reserved for people belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes in proportion to their population. In this regard, the 73rd Amendment also brought a sea change in the outlook of tribal population towards tribal women. Thus, the political participation of tribal women and their involvement in the decision-making process and other affairs of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are gradually emphasized by local people and government agencies as well.

Then after, the Government of India ushered in the new millennium by declaring the year 2001 as Women's Empowerment year to focus on a vision where women are equal partners like man. Thus, the Government of India also adopted the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women on 20th March 2001. The main objective of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women by giving them an environment, fundamental freedom, equal access to participation, decision making and legal protection. It is also aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against the women and to ensure their active participation in all spheres of life and activities. This Policy was thought to be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goal. This policy includes the following prescription for promoting women's empowerment: 1) Legal-Judicial system will be made more responsive and gender sensitive; 2) Women's equality in

power sharing and active participation in decision making, so as to encourage women to participate effectively in the development process; and 3) Policies, programmes and system will be established in order to ensure mainstreaming of women's perspectives in all development process, as catalyst, participants and recipients (Govt. of India, Census of India, 2011). India also needed a new act which is reflected in the 110th Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2009 and 112nd Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2009. These Bills were introduced in the Lok Sabha in the year 2009 but due to various reasons, these were not passed. If passed, reservation for women in Panchayat and Municipality (throughout the country) will be increased to 50 per cent from present 33 per cent. These Bills are very important for political empowerment of the women. For instance, the state legislature of Orissa Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2011 by amending the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, Orissa Panchayat Samitee Act, and the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act has enhanced the quota for women from the existing 33% to 50%. The 50% reservation for tribal women in Panchayati Raj institutions is an important part of this empowerment of tribal women (Bhajan Basak and Kaushik Ghosh 2018:134-145). Similar initiatives have also been taken by other state governments in India in order to increase the participation of women in PRIs.

Critical Observations through a Review of Literature: -

Generally, it is believed that the tribal societies are well organised and have well developed political and judicial system of their own. In fact, gender inequality is reflected in their participation in political life. In traditional tribal communities, actually women have no political and religious role at all. Even they are not allowed to hold office in the village council and to participate in the council meetings. They usually convey their opinions to the village

council through their husbands and other menfolk. Although they can raise voice in the decision-making process at the family and home but they have no direct say in the matters relating to the community. Now a days, changes are occurring in the traditional system within the tribal society too, the tribal women are gradually coming forward to carry on the political post in their community as well as at regional and national level. Today the tribal community is no longer homogeneous. Some tribal people have moved up in the social and economic ladder and it is difficult to distinguish them even from the non-tribal people. At the same time a large number of tribal people including women still continue to live as hunter gathering and subsistence level peasants. However, recently some educated tribal women have taken up position as teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, officers, and so on (Poonam Binjha 2020:34).

From the beginning, the PRIs have faced a number of problems in respect of active participation of women in political affairs and their empowerment. Some studies like a study of Srivasthav. V. Shah (1992) examined on political orientation of rural housewives and their problems in PRIs. Susheela Kaushik (1993) in a study on Women and Panchayati Raj observed a number of problems for women in the election process and she suggested a kind of support for them in terms of remedial measures to overcome problems. She has also analysed a historical account of Panchayati Raj system in India and position of women and changes in their status. She has observed that the 73rd Constitution Amendment had guaranteed representation of women in the elections at all the three-tier structure of P.R.Is. It was also found that the panchayats in a number of states of India like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala had witnessed good number of women turn out as voters as well as candidates

not for the reserved constituencies but even for the general constituencies.

While another study by B.S. Khanna (1994), which analysed the development of Panchayati Raj system in India, particularly related Local Self-Government during the first decades, community development programme, genesis and growth of the Panchayati Raj and Ashok Mehta Committee Recommendations and also conferment of Constitutional status, as well as the position of PRIs and steps towards the implementation of panchayat raj system in India. The author had studied Panchayati Raj system in various states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, the author had also conducted two case studies in Tumkur district of Karnataka. The author observed that in Karnataka there was a situation like dissolution of Panchayati Raj bodies due to many problems. In another study report, Susheela Kaushika (1995) also observed challenges to women's role while focusing on specially the experience of women in election process, the hardship and obstacles they undergo and the kind of support in terms of remedial measures to overcome etc. Kanango (1996) also studied on Panchayati Raj and emerging women leadership.

While Jayalakshmi (1997) focused on empowerment of women in PRI's and their experiences in Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, John, M.S, (2000) studied on empowerment of women Panchayat members in Kerala. Then after some studies highlighted on potential of women and different problems faced by them in the PRIs (For instance See: Joshi.R. P and Narwani 2005; Ambedkar. S.N and Nagendra. S. 2005; Chitrasen Pasayat 2006). Umadevi.K.et, al (2006) studied on "Tribal Rights in India and also observed their problems in respect of PRIs. Geeta Singh (2007) emphasized on empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions. While

Trivedi.B. R (2009) highlighted on problems of women in Panchayat Raj system. The Government of India constituted another Committee during 2009-2010 and emphasized on empowerment of women through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). Mohamad Awais, et al (2009) also highlighted on problems related to socio-economic empowerment of tribal women with regard to PRIs in India.

In fact, tribal women's inclusion in the system of local self-governance has often been inflated as political empowerment. Part of the reason for this is that the reservation of seats is not considered as a means to enable political participation. It is rather seen as an end in itself. However, changes in women's political role are not automatic. By itself the reservation for Scheduled Tribes or other disadvantaged sections has limited potential (Shah, Ghanshyam 1991). But it manifested the increasing number of the Scheduled Tribe women in the political arena. Although the Panchayati-Raj system has provided a platform of local self-government in tribal areas of India political empowerment of tribal women and improvement in their socio-economic status through their active participation, but the reality is different. In fact, the extent of participation of tribal women as elected representatives in Panchayats and the problems faced by them raise a number of questions. A number of studies reveal that the tribal women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands and other male members of their families to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats (Jetti Rajendar 2022).

Generally, it is assumed that the socio-economic status of tribal women in the North-

Eastern states is far better than tribal women in other parts of India. But, in the sphere of political status and empowerment, the situation is not satisfactory. It is a fact to be noted that in majority of tribal communities of India, every community has a head or leader, who is usually the man. This man is treated with honour, respect and regard and his decisions are placed above all the other tribal people in that community. The political sphere does include the Panchayati raj or other forms of local governance, however, even within these spheres, it is the men who engage in the politics and real decision-making process. Although after the introduction of the 73rd Amendment, 33% seats were reserved for women, but women are still severely under-represented in all spheres and domains of life. Even when these women acquire the positions of power, they are usually suppressed and subjugated by the opinions of their menfolk and do not have much say in the village council meetings. For instance, the tribal groups in Nagaland show a highly patriarchal political sphere. The council in the village is dominated by males. Despite the acts that mandate the representation of women in the 5 year tenure, they are not followed in true sense. Moreover, men elect only one female as the chairperson of the council or member and the women who are in position have no say in the decision making. (Nathan, 2012)

Some other studies in the North-Eastern states of India also reveal similar facts. When we look at the position of tribal women in the traditional political structure, they are often seen as sidelined. Every head of a community is generally a male who is usually honoured, obeyed, and accepted as the head of the group. It is hereditary and the final authority is vested in him. For instance, amongst the Aos tribe of Nagaland, all the decisions in the villages are made by men elders in the council. In the Arunachal Pradesh tribe Padam Minyong, a

woman is not allowed to join Kebug which takes major decisions (Sharma and Mittal, 1998).

Even in the case of the North-Eastern matrilineal tribe, women are discouraged from being a part of political affairs. Even they cannot attend Durbar (council meeting) and they are not allowed to speak in any public meetings. Therefore, even though women played an important role in the tribal economy, their status in the political sphere remained comparatively low which caused immense problems for them, since they did not have anyone who really understand and comprehend them to voice their concerns and safeguard their rights and privileges. Coming to tribal women's representation in political space in India, the situation remains dismal. Enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993 which makes it mandatory to reserve 33% seats for women at different levels of local governance in both rural and urban local bodies, has led to increased participation of women in politics however the situation is not so great at legislative level with only five women, so far, has served as Members of Legislative Assembly of Mizoram State (Vanlalrani, 2007). Similarly, in the matrilineal society of Jaintia, a similar political structure is followed, wherein women are prohibited from attending the Durbar or council meeting. Although these policies have improved the representation of women, the attitudes prevailing in their communities continue to be sexist and misogynistic. Therefore, increased state efforts are required to ensure the protection and well-representation of the tribal women (Varte, 2013; Majhi, 2017). While some other studies done on the topic of quotas for both gender and minorities have found that subgroups that face 'double barriers', such as Dalit women, in some cases fall between the cracks and fail to gain representation either as women or as minorities

(Hancock, 2007). In fact, the political participation of women in India is increasing slowly and steadily but at a snail's pace. As asserted by Dr. T. Vanlalrani (2007), the recent spate of violent attacks on women can be directly or indirectly attributed to the absence of women in the North-Eastern State Legislative Assembly because of which women are unable to voice their concerns and fight for their rights and dignities (Shivakumar S. Sangam 2014).

The tribal women in India have virtually no role to play in the social and political spheres. Even in the past, though for many tribes in central India and in the North-East region, there were bachelor's dormitories, there was hardly anything for the girls. The girls used to fag around for the boys residing in the dormitories. In fact, the tribal women had no place in the village councils. The women were never represented in the traditional panchayats. It is only now, due to the mandatory provisions of the state, that some women are getting elected in the panchayats. But even in such cases, usually the women are dictated by husbands or relatives who have already wielded enough power in the locality. Even then there is hardly any independent tribal woman MLA or MP in the country. In the case of Agatha Sangma, the Union Minister of Social Welfare, she is an exception. Her father Purno Sangma happened to be a prominent politician of the country and also served as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha in Parliament for one term (J.J. Roy Burman.2012; Asha Sougajam 2017).

In fact, tribal women's leadership has faced a number of problems. During the recent upsurges in the North-East or central India, many tribal women have joined the underground army. They are found leaving their homes and undergoing military training. In the North-East, many of the girls or women were known for running errands for the underground. Several of them have laid down

their lives too. But even among them, the women have never been known for wielding the leadership. However, the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) has earned some good name in recent times for becoming interlocutors between the underground and Indian security forces. Even during the head-hunting days, the Naga women acted very bravely to usher in peace between warring villages. They operated as peacemakers between the warring villagers (Zehol: 1998) “If we recall that the Tangkhul, like other Naga society who were feuding communities, we find that in the Tangkhul society, the women are assigned some responsibilities of critical importance. In an account on head hunting among the Nagas, a special section has been assigned to women’s role. It is mentioned there that, when a party was pressed very far killing a warrior or two, and the verdict was known, a neutral force come in. The neutral force belonged whether to the neighbouring villages or the neutral ladies called Pukhareila, they could not be harmed as a rule. She was highly respected for neutrality, and they were called as ambassadors of peace. In the bygone days, when head hunting was practiced, these Pukhareilas played vital role in saving lives of men.” Vitso (2003) also observes that among the Chakhesang Nagas of Nagalnd, the wife of the traditional village priest wielded a lot of power and respect. She also notes that though traditionally the women had no political power, their decisions, particularly related to women’s issues, were always respected (J.J. Roy Burman.2012; Asha Sougajjam 2017).

In the course of history, one comes across the names of only two queens who had fought against their enemies. The name of Rani Durgabati of Garh Mandla in Madhya Pradesh is of course too well known. The other figure is Rani Gaidinliu, the Naga leader who headed a revolt against the British. She also led the Zeliangrong Nagas for a homeland in the

contiguous areas of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. She was named as a Rani by Jawaharlal Nehru who came to learn about her during the freedom movement. Gassah has stated that women rulers had appeared even among the Jaintias in Meghalaya. In recent times, the Bhotia tribal women of Kumaon came to the fore when they led a forest movement—the Chipko Andolan—against the timber contractors. The tribal women of Reni village in particular became famous as they hugged the pine trees to save them from the saws of the loggers (J.J. Roy Burman.2012; Asha Sougajjam 2017).

The tribal women’s role and status in economic affairs and property relations is also found as subservient indicating gender inequality. Their individual ownership also reduces the little power that women have in their tradition over their CPRs. Thus, gender relations become an area of concern. For instance, before the Rubber Board began to provide subsidies and loans only to individual owners and heads of families understood as men, the Nokma or chief heiress used to take decisions on land though men played an important role in them. With the State dealing with men alone in decisions on land transfer, the Nokma’s husband has become the main decision-maker especially in the distribution of individual pattas (Fernandes and Pereira 2005: 201-202).

In fact, the tribal leaders, especially the elite who consolidate such change triggered by external inputs like the formal law and education, by internalising the dominant ideology. In the past, men interpreted the customary law in their own favour. For example, during the Naga Nationalist Struggle, most Angami Naga men who led it went underground. Women took charge both of the family and of their society. They also gained access to schools that were built in their area in the 1970s. As a result, two thirds of the graduates among them were women. However,

men continued to demand adherence to their customary law according to which the husband had to be better educated than the wife. Since there were relatively few educated young men among them, a large number of women remained unmarried (Kekrieseno 2002: 182-184). The State of Nagaland also seems to take the man as the breadwinner though two thirds of their graduates are women. Even 75 percent of the persons there having a salaried job in the administration are men (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 108-112).

Another example of modernising the tradition and consolidating social power is elections to the legislature. For over a decade after its formation, the state of Meghalaya did not have a single woman legislator though all three of its major tribes are matrilineal. At present it has 3 or 4 legislators in a total of 60 legislators. Besides one Rajya Sabha member Ms Rano Shaiza in the 1970s, the state of Nagaland also did not have a single member of Parliament or a single member of the State legislature. Some women wanted to contest the parliamentary elections in 2004 but they were dissuaded from doing so in the name of their customary law that confers all political power on men. Even the DACs have not had any women member as such. A few who contested the Karbi DAC but could not win (Fernandes, Pereira and Khatso 2005: 97-98).

Besides, religious conversion also adds to men's power but it remains ambiguous. Hinduism to which some sections of tribes like the Boro and others have been converted (Roy 1995) and Christianity that many tribal groups have embraced in recent decades are actually male dominated. There is, however, a difference between the supporting structures of two religions. Being a religious body with an organised structure, Christian churches have gone beyond religious conversion to serve for education of tribal people. However, access to schools depends on the situation of each tribe.

As stated above, Angami women gained access to them because in the 1970s when many schools entered their area, a large number of men had gone underground. Since Hinduism lacks such structures and investment on education has been low, relatively few schools were opened among them and women's access to education was limited. Despite religious change, Garo people's access to schools is less than that of the Angami. It is true particularly of women. Where there was access to education, for example among the Angami, women have gained greater awareness of their rights but men continue to interpret the customary law in their own favour. Thus, it is not religious change as such but their access they gained to education after it, that has made some changes possible. However, because of the divide between the religious and secular spheres, the tribal women have gained access to education without necessarily becoming equal in the Churches (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 171-172).

Similarly a study by Bhasin V. (2007) reveals that women power in the North-Eastern region does not extend to societal or political spheres. The economic power of the women in the household is not translated into corresponding community authority. Although they are not ignored at household level but they are not given due credit and importance at official level. Thus, women's supremacy is restricted within the domain of family and it does not extend to social or political spheres. It is interesting to note that although by convention, every village Panchayat has a female member, but the lady never bothers to attend the meeting or to take any active interest in the proceedings of Panchayat. The state of Sikkim has a tradition of collective decision making by communities through the institution of Dzumsha. However traditional institutions do not witness a significant role for women while the Dzumsha is constituted of males only. In the

absence of a male member, a female can represent her family unit only. If a male head is absent from Dzumsha meeting, he is fined. However, if represented by female head, she is liable to pay half the amount for her absence. This shows that women have a secondary importance in public affairs and community decision-making. Generally, women are bypassed and marginalized either they lack the requisite skills, or because women's heavy and unending domestic responsibilities makes attending meetings and participating in decision making much more difficult. Thus, it always happens that men take over the more profitable activities. However, the tribal women take pleasure in their voting rights only and about 85 per cent of women in the study area exercised their voting right. Most of them follow the advice of their husbands and other male members or some of them are under pressure to accept the wishes of their husbands and other male members (Bhasin V. 2007).

In fact, little progress has been visualized in the participation of women in different activities of PRIs. A number of studies as discussed above reveal failure of PRIs in achieving the expected objectives. It is observed that many of the tribal women as PRI representatives have been 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. Even several challenges are coming up on the way that have hampered the realization of its true potential. Thus, necessary steps should be taken in order to strengthen their active participation in PRIs so as to ensure that local self-governance is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Major Challenges and Problems of Local Self-Government in India

In spite of more than three decades after 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the system of local

governance has been facing a number of problems. The major challenges and problems related to the Local Self-Government in India are as follows:

- **Excessive Bureaucratic Control:** Local bodies often operate under significant bureaucratic oversight, limiting their autonomy. In some States, the local bodies have been placed in a position of subordination to the government offices. This hampers their ability to make and implement decisions.
- **Political Interference and Inadequate Devolution of Functions:** The political landscape can hinder effective functioning due to interference from higher levels of government. Excessive interference by higher levels of government can undermine the autonomy of local self-governing bodies. Besides, most of the states in India have been reluctant to devolve functions to the local bodies. There are functional overlaps with other government agencies such as Block offices, Para-state agencies, etc. This creates confusion and conflicts.
- **Dominance of local groups:** Generally, it is observed that there is groupism in PRIs where dominant groups (numerically, financially and traditionally) often play local politics in their own favour and dominate over others which also affects the participation of weaker sections including women.
- **Mismanagement of resources by dominant local groups:** It is also generally observed that the dominant local groups favourably manage or mismanage local resources at their disposal. Even the virus of corruption is not fully absent in local bodies.
- **Financial Constraints and Inadequate Financial Resource:** Many local governments struggle with inadequate

funding and lack of financial independence. Limited powers of levying taxes and very few grants from the state mean that the local bodies have inadequate finances. This restricts their abilities to undertake development projects and provide essential services.

- **Tied Nature of Funds:** Over 90% of the funds that the local bodies handle are tied to some schemes. Insufficient untied funds demotivate them from meaningful planning processes.
- **Capacity Constraints:** Local bodies often face a shortage of trained personnel and resources, hindering their effective functioning. Also, most of the ULB members are either illiterate or semi-literate and know little about their roles and responsibilities. This further hampers their effective functioning.
- **Illiteracy and Ignorance of People:** A large segment of tribal people are still illiterate and even those who are just literate up to primary level, are not aware of many welfare schemes and programmes which are meant for them.
- **Acute poverty:** After seven decades of independence of India and in spite of a large number of government schemes and programmes for their welfare as well as intervention of voluntary organizations in tribal areas, a large segment of tribal people throughout country are reeling under acute poverty, malnutrition and hunger. A number of studies reveal this real fact which is also a major factor of low participation of tribal women (See: Nayak K.B. 2008, 2014, and 2020).

Recommendations of 15th Finance Commission for strengthening the local government

- **Comparison to 14th FC:** The 15th FC has included all levels of rural panchayats and

also the panchayats in scheduled areas in contrast to the 14th Finance Commission, which considered only village panchayats for grants and excluded scheduled area village panchayats.

- **Grants to local bodies:** The 15th Finance Commission has recommended the grant of Rs 4.36 lakh crore from the central divisive tax pool to local governments, both rural and urban, for 2021-26.
- **Setting up State Finance Commission:** No grants will be released to local bodies of a state after March 2024 if the state does not constitute State Finance Commission and act upon its recommendations by then.
- **Grant Criteria:** Grants to local bodies (other than health grants) will be distributed among states based on population and area, with 90% and 10% weightage, respectively.
- **Online auditing:** Besides, there should be online auditing of the local bodies so as to enhance their accountabilities.

Recent Amendments and Recommendations for Development

While the foundational structure for local self-governance was established by the 73rd and 74th Amendments, several recent developments have aimed to strengthen these institutions:

- **Empowerment Initiatives:** Various state governments have introduced measures to enhance the autonomy of local bodies, ensuring they have adequate financial resources and decision-making powers.
- **Digital Integration:** Efforts are being made to integrate technology into local governance through e-governance platforms that streamline administrative processes and improve transparency.
- **Capacity Building:** Training programs for elected representatives and staff are emphasized to enhance governance quality at local levels.

- **Recommendations from Committees:** Reports of special committees like that of L.M. Singhvi Committee advocated for stronger legal frameworks, better financial management systems, and clearer delineation of functions between state and local bodies.

Some Other Recommended Steps: - The following steps could be taken in order to strengthen the Local Self-Government in India:

- In order to increase their financial resources and make them financially independent, the local bodies should be given independent sources of finance. For example, the power to levy local taxes should be given to the tribal people.
- As recommended by the 15th Finance Commission (discussed below), there should be online auditing of the local bodies so as to enhance their accountabilities.
- The states should be incentivized in order to devolve more functions to the local bodies. There should be clear-cut demarcation of functions between PRIs and other government agencies.
- Besides, the concept of Competitive Federalism among states needs to be extended to the third tier of government (local bodies) as well. This will help improve their performance.
- All the members of the local bodies including women should be imparted special training to enhance their capabilities.
- Some new special welfare schemes and programmes should be implemented in tribal areas for the upliftment of tribal people in general and improvement in their socio-economic status as well as for the empowerment of tribal women in particular.

Conclusion: -

In fact, the local self-government bodies in India has played a crucial role in fostering democratic participation at grassroots levels. In this respect, the constitutional amendments have laid a strong foundation for their functioning. Even then, further efforts are needed to empower these institutions fully. By addressing challenges related to autonomy, finance, and political dynamics, India can strengthen its commitment to the decentralization of governance and can enhance the effectiveness of local self-government bodies. Over the last decades, there has been spread of a virus known as moral degradation in the sphere of politics throughout India. Everywhere, the powerful persons from the dominant sections of society often strive to use the power of the system and institutions of democracy in order to stay in power and maintain their statuesque. In fact, playing politics has become a profession for many leaders. Political intervention in almost every aspect of life of common people has become a current trend or fashion. As a result, the public or the common people are scared at dirty politics which not only affects political and economic affairs of country but also it hampers day-to-day life of common people. This has limited the public only to the right to vote. It is also observed that the voting pattern and voting behaviour of people during every election for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha is not so much impressive and satisfactory. About 60 percentage of voting of common people for these higher levels election in India is an indicator of judging the level of development of democracy in India. Although, during election at lower level of PRIs, the participation of common people has increased over the decades, but participation of women in these bodies is not satisfactory. In the interior parts of rural India, women's active participation in the PRIs of local self-governance is not up to the mark as expected in comparison with their male

counterparts. Even the current pattern of voting behaviour in tribal areas shows that maximum of tribal women is very indifferent to politics and political affairs of the country. Therefore, besides new provisions welfare schemes, organizational efforts are needed to be made in order to empower tribal women politically, while linking education and employment with their training for leadership and skill development.

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