Decentralization has assumed a vital role in matters of governance in almost all the developing countries of the world. In their efforts to democratize the governing structure and to involve people in the process of governance and decision-making, most of the developing countries around the world are carrying out measures to decentralize governance. Thus, decentralized democratic governance is being regarded as “both a right in itself and a means of ensuring basic human rights observance” (Gloppen et. Al 2003:1). The major promise of democratic decentralization is that it brings more popular participation without discrimination between men and women. But, in spite of many conventions and time bound measurable goals, world statistics speak of deplorable state of women, and they are marginalized from enjoying the fruits and benefits of equality and independence status. Women in both socio-economic and political levels have been inferior to men in the context of Indian Society.

The Constitution of India has provided equality of men and women but family status in Indian context is judged on account of male superiority. Rural development is the main pillar of state development. But, while the half of the population, the women are neglected and away from the active participation in the development process of country, it is difficult to attain the goal of the state. Hence, the half of the population i.e. the women section necessitates to attain their socio-economic and political empowerment through Panchayati Raj System which has provide the broadbase participation for men and women. Therefore, the Government of India, through its constitutional provisions has undertaken endeavour to uplift the women as per men through Panchayatiraj System. This paper is intended to focus on the empowerment of women in Odisha, through the Panchayatiraj System, specifically through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which has opened up process of what actually our policy makers wanted. The makers of Panchayati Raj System desired rural women should not only become a beneficiary of development, but more importantly contribute to it. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act involves the participation of women as voter, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women as elected members of PRIs taking part in decision-making, planning implementation and evaluation.

**Panchayatiraj in Odisha : An Overview:**

Odisha became a separate province in 1936. It is one of the few States in the post-independent period to take up the Panchayatitrj as its main fulcrum of rural administration. The significant step in the decentralization process
came after independence in 1948 when the Gram Panchayat Act was enacted. 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. It was designed to be a body corporate having fund rising out of land revenue, fees, tolls, cesses and taxes. Besides, Education Fund was made to finance educational programmes of the Sasan. The officers of the institution were to be paid out of the Anchal fund. But, the Anchal Sasan Act was not implemented which prevented Odisha pioneering role in the democratic decentralization process much earlier to the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report. 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.

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 Zilla Parishad Acts were enacted. In July 1962, a new Department of Community Development and Panchayatiraj was created. The Panchayats, Samiti, Parishads and former District Boards came under its purview. Thus, the three-tier Panchayatiraj System introduced in Odisha took few years to get established. In 1967, Odisha came under Swatantra-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 Samities.

After the abolition of Upper tier of PRS, the District Advisory Committee of which the Collector was the Member-Convener started functioning. A non-official member was elected to preside over DAC as and when it met. Besides the DAC, there was District Development Committee presided over by the Collector. Both these bodies were attended by the district officers. In Odisha, there were violation of the B.R. Mehta Study Team observations. However, the PR bodies in the State were criticized as inefficient and centre of nasty politics. They were replaced by the bureaucratic wing of the government, which suppressed the initiative of local people, in decision-making process on implementation of developmental programmes in rural areas. The elections to the Panchayatiraj bodies became irregular. Odisha, who introduced legislation on grass-root 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.

By 1990 the attempts had been made at the national level to form a grassroot body so that planning can operate from below. Ultimately, it was agreed that none other than the age-old Panchayat System with a new face and constitutional recognition can help twin objectives of equity and social justice to eradicate poverty and cause growth. The P.K. Thungon Committee recommended for such type of PR bodies. The Union Government under Rajiv Gandhi and V.P.Singh tried but ultimately P.V.Narasimha Rao’s government which could initiate 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill which became 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act with effect from
24th April 1993. But, in 1990 Odisha under Biju Patnaik acted ahead of the Central Government’s initiative. 27 years ago, when he was Chief Minister of Odisha, he could create a pro-active government for democratic decentralization. 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.

**Women in Odisha PR System:**

Biju Patnaik, the most dynamic Chief Minister of Odisha was most emphatic about participation of women in the Panchayatiraj System. He announced that for the first time in the history of Independent India those women will be given 33 percent reservation in the three-tier Panchayat Raj Institutions. And true to his word, he saw to it that the Odisha Zilla Parishad Act of 1991 and the Gram Panchayat Samiti Amendment Act of 1992 were passed by the Odisha Assembly that provided for 33 per cent of reservation for women including Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women. For the first time more than 25 thousand women were elected to various Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishads. It was further provided that one-third of Zilla Parishads would have exclusively women Chairpersons. In the case of the Panchayat Samities and the Gram Panchayats, one of the two office-bearers, i.e., Chairpersons or Vice-Chairpersons must be women. Chief Minister Biju Patnaik also emphasized that all the elected representatives of the PRIs should receive adequate political and administrative training. It must be pointed out that Odisha Government’s policies on reservation of women were followed by many other state governments in India that culminated in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts to the Constitution. It also adds to the credit of Mr. Patnaik that after a lapse of eight years, it conducted elections to Gram Panchayats in the year 1992 for 5264 Gram Panchayats in the state. When the devolution of powers envisaged in the 73rd Amendment Act and the women empowerment scheme implemented, these were already incorporated in the vision of the then Chief Minister of Odisha Biju Patnaik. In Odisha, the 73rd Amendment Act and its important provisions were incorporated through confirmatory legislation and fresh elections were held in 1997. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution has conferred constitutional status to PRIs. Over the past five decades, PRIs have emerged as the powerful institutions in bringing about rapid and sustainable development and socio-economic transformation in rural Odisha.

Overviewing some of the empirical works on empowerment of women in Panchayatiraj System in Odisha, specially works of Snehalata Panda (1996, 1999), Bidyut Mohanty (2002), Sachidananda Satpathy (2002), Dayanidhi Parida (2010), it is revealed that:

- The women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility.

- Due to strong caste feelings women belonging to upper caste 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.

- About 80-90 percent of women attend the Panchayat meetings regularly. Given the sure number, one might conclude that the democracy has become participatory than before at least at the grassroot level.

- The socio-economic background of these women showed that majority of them came from the lower income group particularly at the village Panchayat level.

- The working culture of the Panchayat has changed because of the presence of the women.

- A part of the increase of the female literacy rate can attribute to the presence of the women in Panchayat and their willingness of get educated.

- The standard of political institution at the grassroot level has not been lower because of women reservation.

- Women are not only working for women’s development but also really putting their interest in general matters and getting success also. So, the concept that women can not lead in developmental process is found wrong.

- With great effort the women leaders did the development works and the files were maintained perfectly and the government institutions were followed with greatest care.

- The involvement of women leaders in different developmental works definitely increased their awareness and confidence in themselves.

The role of women leaders in developmental process is a mixture of some sort of harassing and meaningful. 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, women leadership has come under immense pressure due to the criminalizing Panchayat elections including harassment and murder. For instance, Dalimba Sahu was elected ward member uncontested in her village in Kalahandi district. But she faced an unimaginable pressure to cast her vote for the election of Naib Sarpanch. When Dalimba refused to buckle under pressure, she was kidnapped and kept captive for five days away from her family.

Second instance, Anjana Dehury was a popular candidate in her Gram Panchayat in Keonjhar district. When she stood for the post of Sarpanch in the Panchayat election of 2007, it was not acceptable by her husband that she should enter the election fray. The consequence was that Anjana was killed by her spouse.

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.
However, the above instances do not mean that women leaders in Panchayatiraj System in Odisha became failed. In Odisha, women made the Panchayat different. The 73rd Amendment of 1993, providing reservation for women at grassroot level, has gone long way in the empowerment of Indian Women. While Odisha’s women leaders explain more about the social transformation and the difference it had made in rural Odisha. Some instances are there:

As Litali Das, a social activist works with women’s issues, cites some instances.

1. In 2009, in Nuapada District of Odisha, some women Panches in Boden Block wanted to convene a Gram Sabha. But the Block Development Officer was not convinced. The ladies then showed him the Odisha Panchayatiraj manual that stipulates the mandatory holding of Gram Sabhas at least four times a year. The BDO capitulated.

2. In another instance, Sangeeta Nayak, Sarpanch of Borda Gram Panchayat in Kalahandi District mobilized around 3000 people to block the Collector’s path. They got a doctor appointed in the village primary health centre that had not seen a doctor for years.

3. Similarly Nayana Patra, a lady ward officer in Baruan Gram Panchayat in Dhenkanal District has set an example in improving the educational system in her village (the School drop-out rate has since declined considerably) and in protesting local forests.

4. In Koraput District, when Smt. Aparajita Sarangi, the District Collector started a movement in the district called “Jagaran Abhiyan” where the women took true leadership in empowering themselves along with others in the district. The women leaders from the villages were given a special power of police by administration. The illiterate women fruitfully led the campaign for total literacy and anti-addiction movement in the district.

The Orissa Nari Samaj (ONS), a state level federation of 55 block level tribal women’s organizations has made its presence felt during the last Panchayat elections, as 1,226 of its nominees selected through ONS has not only succeeded electorally, it has also trained these women on the PR System and equipped them to make their Panchayat a model of development. Sources of the ONS claimed that candidates picked by Nari Samaja had contested as independents. They have own 89 Sarpanch posts, 78 Samiti Sabha posts, and 1,065 ward member posts. Thread, the Odisha based training institutes which initiated these organizations 12 years ago had trained over 1100 tribal women intensively in three phases and exposed another 1500 men and women to a number of workshops on Panchayatiraj. The 55 block level tribal women’s organizations selected these tribal women and some men for contesting 2007 Panchayat Elections, supported their social and development activities in the villages for last two years. Thus, the grass-root level tribal women’s organizations also involved in the process of social development in their respective communities have now come out successful to be actively involved in the political process ensuring active participation in the decision-making through Panchayatiraj (Achievement News, March 21, 2007).

It is reported by the then State Election Commission Mr. Sanjiv Chandtra Hota, that in the last Panchayatiraj elections (2007) in Odisha, 32,100 ward members, and 101 Sarpanches have
been elected uncontested which was a very good sign of communities reposing faith on community leadership without differences. Portraying the Gram Sabha as the “heart” and Gram Panchayat as the ‘brain’ of the PRS, he said that “Gram Swarajya” can be realized through this PRIs and Odisha Nari Samaj. Tribal women organizations in the state are sufficiently prepared through various experimental training and political parties need to be kept out and this can be done if organizations and service minded outfits as well as individuals take position at the grass-root level.

A nationwide study on Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) commissioned by Ministry of Panchayatiraj in 2007-08 had concluded that the earlier notions of women being mere proxies for male relative have gradually ceded space to the recognition that given the opportunity to participate in the political system, women are as capable as their male counterparts. EWRs have used their office not only to mainstream gender issues but also address the developmental needs of the community as a whole and also issues such as health, sanitation, early childhood care, drinking water etc., that have a special impact of the lives of women (Information given by the Minister PR Sri V. Kishore Chandra Deo in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha).

In a bold move with far reaching impact on electoral politics at the grass-root, the Odisha Government has made 50 percent reservation for women in Panchayatiraj institution to achieve gender equality in the representation in Panchayatiraj bodies. The state legislature unanimously gave its nod to the Odisha Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Bill 2011, by amending the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, Odisha Panchayat Samiti Act and the Zilla Parishad Act enhancing the quota for women from existing 33% to 50% in February 2011 in the three-tier Panchayat bodies (The Economic Times, 8.4.2011). By amending the Panchayat laws, the Bill also provided reservation of the seats and office of the Chairpersons for two terms as it was felt that the operation of single term did not attract more candidates. The experience of first term would be useful in the second term for the women to prove themselves as the true representative 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 take forward and empower the women in decision-making process at local self government. However, those examples of women’s empowerment in Odisha are very scanty. It requires a lot for their empowerment. The Odisha PR 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 Telegraphs, 17.7.2011)

Suggestions:

- An important requirement for bringing about empowerment of rural women is to bring about attitudinal change in both men and women. Therefore, they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.
• There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of Panchayats at all the levels. It will help them to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and confidence so that they can perform in a better way.

• The Government should provide financial support and infrastructure to successful women organizations to take up the responsibility encouraging the women elected representatives. This could be taken up by the leaders of women’s movement in the state. They can also provide support to sensitize the rural women.

• The Government should provide security to women candidates from criminals, during and after elections, till they are in office.

However, a sincere will of the Government, co-operation of the people as a whole would encourage and increase the empowerment of women in turn, would lead in true sense, the development of a society.

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