

# Social Justice, Panchayati Raj and Women Empowerment

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## **INTRODUCTION :**

The Constitution of India is the best known for its magnificent social treatise, begins with the glorious preamble which guarantees the key-concepts as liberty, equality, justice and fraternity to the entire people of the country. These expressions postulate an unwritten pledge that everyone will do justice to one another especially for the common man – for the man on the street and in the farm, for the driver of the bullock-cart and for other suppressed and neglected sections. This was the reason why the Founding Fathers had chosen to prefer justice to Liberty, Equality and Fraternity for placement in order; again social justice was assigned a preferential place over economic and political<sup>1</sup>. Otherwise the expression in the preamble – “We the people of India ..... give unto our-selves this Constitution” loses its meaning and import, as much as the promise in Article 38 – (The State) shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice – social, economic and political shall inform all institutions of national life.

Thus, Social Justice in a comprehensive sense must penetrate in depth and permeate in its widest spectrum to all aspect of social life, including the stigmatized untouchability and the so-called members of the Backward classes. The concept of Social Justice must take within its sweep the objective of removing all inequalities

and affording equal opportunities to all citizens in social and economic affairs. Our country is not a utilitarian State, but a Democratic Republic with committed to welfarism. The problems enumerated above which concern the overwhelmingly large number of the citizens, could never be successfully tackled unless the State uses its most effective ameliorating devices against socio-economic and socio-legal instrumentalities that necessarily calls for a total reform for balancing economic structure and thereby relieve the body-politic of the tension.<sup>2</sup> In the process, the new era of Social Justice in the Democratic Republic of India could be surely ushered, when our condition favours introduction of democracy at the grass-root level i.e., the creation of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) which embodied in Article 40 of the Constitution<sup>3</sup>. The basic conviction that Village Panchayats could play an important role in the social transformation and implementation of development programmes. In this paper, an attempt has made how far the Village Panchayat contributed for achieving the empowerment of women.

## **CONSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TOWARDS REPRESENTATION :**

The women of India have been torch-bearers of its democratic advancement since the time that Gandhiji gave them a clarion call to leave their courtyards and emerge as equal partners in the progress of the nation. Women fought shoulder to shoulder with men in the freedom

movement and they have shouldered more than their fair share of hard work in the task of nation building. This gives them the legitimacy to play an important role at the grass root level. Indeed, the equality guaranteed by the Constitution of India, demands active political participation by women which is integral to the whole issue of the progress of women.

Issues of equality and rights for women were always claimed as crucial components in state policy. Much of the justification for rights, justice and equality for women came from the need for 'emancipation' or 'liberation' of women. When the language of empowerment gained currency in the nineteen eighties, the claims changed and to some extent the means by which empowerment was to be brought about. The institutional reform envisaged in the governance agenda involved the incorporation of an 'empowerment' component, more in terms of capacity building<sup>4</sup>.

The late nineteen nineties and the period thereafter saw a rallying of forces among women's groups on the issue of reservation for women in elected bodies. The struggle to enhance women's representation in elected bodies which had first emerged in the 1920s and 1930s had been revisited in the 1970s by the Committee on the Status of Women in India while examining the political status of women. The Towards Equality report drew attention to the deeply entrenched discriminatory structures that inhibited women's representation in political bodies, and to the fact that the number of women legislators was declining as a result of the reluctance of political parties to field women candidates. The Committee recommended one-third reservation for women in elected bodies at the Panchayat level. A demand for increased representation of women was made again in the late 1980s, but the women's movement's critique of the government's National Perspective Plan for Women, emphasized reservation up to one-third in grass-roots bodies

for local-self government – to throw up 'new leadership from below' – and rejected reservation in State Assemblies and Parliament. The National Perspective Plan for women issued by the government in 1988, under pressure from the women's movement, recommended a 30 percent reservation of seats for women at the Panchayat and Zilla Parishad levels. In 1993 the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts provided constitutional recognition and status to local elected bodies in villages (the Panchayats) and cities (the Municipalities), respectively. Apart from putting in place institutions of local governance and decentralizing power structures, the amendments also sought to deepen democracy by ensuring that hitherto excluded social groups like Women, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are adequately represented in these bodies. The amendments provided, therefore, reservations for all these social groups, with the condition that no less than a third of the seats (including those reserved for women belonging to the SC and the ST communities) be reserved for women.<sup>5</sup>

#### **STATE SUPPORTED COMPONENTS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT :**

Reservation of women can be a temporary sort of relief, for which the Government of India has incorporated a special 'Women Components' under the Ministry of Rural Development. Under this women components, various programmes have lunched viz., Swarnjayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY), the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), the Restructured Centrally Rural Sanitation Programme, the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) and the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY) etc.

Ministry of Women and Child Development also has been implementing various schemes towards both economic and social

empowerment of women. *Swayamsiddha* is the flagship scheme of the Ministry of Women which aims at holistic economic empowerment. It includes the *Support for Training and Employment Programme* (STEP) for Women and aims to upgrade their incomes by updating their skills in the traditional sectors. The Ministry has also set up support systems like working women hostels and crèches to help women in their struggle towards economic empowerment. *Swadhar* and Short Stay Homes have been set up to provide shelter and care services for women in distress. Besides the above, the special intervention *Kishori Shakti Yojana* (KSY) and Nutrition Programme for Adolescent Girls (NPAG) are being implemented for adolescent girls, using the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) infrastructure. These interventions focus on school dropouts, girls in the age group of 11-18 years, to meet their needs of self-development, nutrition, health education, literacy and recreational skill formation.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the above schemes focus on alleviation of poverty and generation of self-employment for women.

### **THE STATE OF ODISHA – AS A TORCH BEARER**

It is significant to discuss here that after the good number of deliberations, discussions and recommendations of various Committees<sup>7</sup>, Indian Parliament has able to enact 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act in the year 1992 in which across the country today, there are estimated to be more than one million women in all three tiers of PRI. Bringing these women into politics was an act of positive discrimination.<sup>8</sup> In this connection, it may be said that Odisha is first state to streamline the Panchayati Raj and Local-self Government Institutions by enacting the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, the Orissa Panchayat Samities Act, 1959 and the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991, to make democracy participatory and not the aristocracy of a few nitpicking intellectuals.

These acts have been extensively amended to bring it in conformity with the provisions of the Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. When the amended GP Act came into force considerable speculations were made about the ability of women in performing their duty or making any meaningful contribution to improve village administration.

Obviously illiteracy, poverty, lack of awareness and communication skill, family responsibility with the prime responsibility of earning livelihood was cited as hurdles for women's participation. Perpetuation of male dominance through kin and traditional high caste leadership were also alluded to deter the objective of restructuring village level administration. The perceived incapability of women in the public activity spawned primarily from the threat to male dominance. Therefore, women outside the kin category were de-motivated to contest after the notification for the holding panchayat election was issued. But the unwillingness of high caste young educated women to participate in the election facilitated tribal women without political background to enter the Gram Panchayat. In fact, the disadvantages of women were reflected in the absence in meetings, silence during the meetings, lack of interest in articulating community problems and proxy control. But in subsequent elections the consensus method of selection of women candidates has been replaced by contest in few areas and women have been trying to make their presence visible.<sup>9</sup>

### **INSTANCES OF SELF EMPOWERMENT**

The impact of the various developmental policies, plans and programmes implemented by the government over the last sixty years has brought forth a perceptible improvement in the socio-economic status of women. Although the entry of women to Panchayat Offices was negatively viewed, yet the women representatives have become assertive, courageous to interact on certain community issues which mark the sign of

their empowerment. *Sarpanchs* and *Naib Sarpanchs* have given up their fear and shyness to speak on issues related to the villages. They visit offices along with the male members and their relatives to appraise the officials about their problems like agriculture, revenue, banking and other allied community problems. Coming up of *Self-Help Groups* has facilitated the leaders of the group, some of whom are representing the ward, to listen to the problems of the group members. They are regular in attending Gram Panchayat meeting after the incentive allowance came into force. Participation in demonstration against sale of liquor, displacement and congregating for forest preservation indicates that these women are self empowered as well as have motivated others to participate in community issues.<sup>10</sup>

The community issues like health, sanitation, education, childcare etc., are not solely due to the women office bearers of the Panchayats. Rather, it was a cooperative effort of the villagers especially among women, which cannot be ignored.

## CONCLUSION

For participative democracy, it is true that empowerment of women should be fully alive at the grass root level. For ensuring rural development as well as eradication of rural poverty in a sustainable manner at the grass root level, establishing good governance in Panchayati Raj system should be a prerequisite. In order to achieve the good governance in rural sector, the Government (both Centre and State) should attempt to delimit the bureaucratic pressure, to promote local leadership, to remove structural deficiencies, to raise more financial resources and at the same time establishing "SOCIAL AUDIT" in all PRIs network is also one of the best opportunity for shaping the concept of "Bharat Nirman", "Shining India", "Feel Good" and this is not possible without participation and empowerment of rural downtrodden women.

## References :

1. Justice R.N. Mishra, on October 20, 1987 remarked against the book written by Amit Sarkar (1988): "Social Justice: Rhetoric and Reality", Capital Law House, Delhi.
2. Ibid., at Pp.8-13.
3. The State shall take steps to organize Village Panchayats, and endow them such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.
4. Anupam Roy (2008) : 'Empowerment for Social Change', *Jojana*, Vol.52, No.10, Pp.20-24.
5. Ibid.
6. N.C.Joshi (2008): 'Women Welfare – A Priority on the Government's Agenda', *Kurukshetra*, Vol.56, No.II, Pp.7-9.
7. On October 2, 1952, Prime Minister Nehru inaugurated the Community Development Programme (CDP) in the whole of our country. The CDP was followed by the National Extension Service (NES) Blocks in 1953 which were earmarked as the lowest unit of development of administration. But both the Programmes marked insignificant growth for which the GOI appointed a Committee headed by Balwant Rai Mehta in 1957. The Committee recommended a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj from village to the district level. In 1977, a committee headed by Ashok Mehta was appointed to review the working of the PRIs. Besides this, Mr. G.VK.Rao (1985) and L.M.Sanghvi (1986) were appointed as Chairperson under the respective Committees.
8. D.Jain (1980): *Manipur; Night Patrollers in Women's Quest for Power*, Vikash Publishing House, New Delhi. See also, Meenakshi Joshi, Manisha Joshi and Jaya Pandey (2011): 'Women Participation in Panchayati Raj: Experience from Uttarakhand, *Social Welfare*, Vol.58, No.5, Pp.5-13.
9. Snehalata Panda (2007): 'Political Empowerment of Tribal Women in Orissa', *Kurukshetra*, Vol.55, No.5, Pp.29-32.
10. Ibid.,

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