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Interrogating Women Empowerment
The Global Experience

Editor
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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH: AN URGENT NEED OF THE HOUR

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in development is closely related to the socio-economic and political development of any given society. Any society, which neglects the need for enhancing the role of women as a dynamic factor and a valuable asset, for the overall process of development would be left trailing behind. Women play a very strategic role in the development of society in particular and development of economy in general. Since empowerment is considered a multi-dimensional concept, it is determined by many socio-economic factors and cultural norms. The importance of women’s political participation and mobilization for a viable Democratic Polity is
being increasingly realized in nook and corners of the world. Women constitute about half of any given society’s population that is not being utilized in the development process due to their low skill, less education and less empowerment in the realm of politics. Any democratic structure cannot work properly with just half of the population and other half is marginalized. In Arunachal Pradesh, the role of tribal women in the socio-economic and political development of a society is under-estimated and underscored. Political participation is a major component of empowerment. This paper tries to highlight the barriers faced by tribal women in entering politics. It also tries to draw attention to the position of tribal women in state politics and the adverse effects of low participation of women in political process. Besides, it also tries to suggest some strategies for political empowerment of tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh.

**Keywords:** Tribal Women, Political Empowerment, Political Participation, Arunachal Pradesh.

**INTRODUCTION**

The word ‘women empowerment’ has become admired in the development field since 1980s. It is vividly recognized that women empowerment is essential for sustainable economic growth and reduction in developing countries (Gendernet, 2012). It is one of the momentous issues of contemporary development policies in developing countries. The women are different by nature yet this difference does not mean inferiority. The empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerned in the 21st century not only at the national level but also at an international level.

The role of women in development is closely related to the socio-economic and political development of any given society. Any society, which neglects the need for enhancing the role of women as a dynamic factor and a valuable asset, for the overall process of development would be left trailing behind. In Arunachal Pradesh, the role of tribal women in the socio-economic and political development of a society is underestimated and underscored. Right from
In the cradle, tribal women are forced to uphold tedious practices forever in future.

Women’s political representation and participation is one of the most vital indicators of development together with an assessment of gender inequality in all societies across the globe (Ramya, 2014: 98). Tribal women, though constituting almost half the population in the Arunachal Pradesh which this paper concerns itself with, yet their representation remains immaterial in formal political structures and processes where decisions concerning the use of societal resources generated by both men and women takes place. They are stereotyped as followers and not leaders. It is necessary to break this stereotypes of the past and move towards a new generation of tribal women working together to face the challenges of equality and development. The pre-requisite for this is empowerment, a process of creating awareness about one’s rights and responsibilities and socio-economic, educational and political opportunities.

The UNDP Human Development Report identifies four basic forms of participation for empowerment of women.

1. Household Participation: Women’s involvement in decision-making at home is the first step towards empowerment.

2. Economic Participation: Women’s economic empowerment act as a base for political empowerment.

3. Social and Cultural Participation: Women preserve the culture of land and their presence can lead to effective solution of social problems.

4. Political Participation: Democracy becomes meaningful with effective participation of women in decision-making.

The extent of empowerment of women in the natural hierarchy is determined largely by three factors-her economic, social and political identity and their weightage. These factors are interrelated...
and cannot be viewed in isolation. It is only when all the three factors are simultaneously addressed and made compatible with each other then only women can be truly empowered. Therefore, for holistic empowerment of the women to happen social, economic and political aspects impacting a women’s life must converge effectively. Empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change. Political participation is a major component of empowerment. Political participation may be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support Government and politics. In order to have effective and meaningful participation of women in politics a three dimensional approach is needed that is political will of the people, people’s general political awareness and the constitutional and legislative measures.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study has been framed with objectives:

i. To highlight the impediments faced by the tribal women in political participation.

ii. To find out the position of tribal women in State Legislative Assembly.

iii. To examine the causes of low political participation of tribal women.

iv. To suggest strategies for political empowerment of tribal women.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The information for this paper has been primarily collected from secondary sources i.e. books, journals, Government Reports, etc.
BARRIERS FACED BY TRIBAL WOMEN IN ENTERING POLITICS

Personal and Familial Factors

The primary area of subordination is the family where the patriarchal values are enforced and where the control over women’s person-hood is really questioned. Women in the family are viewed as liabilities because of which gender-based discrimination in all dimensions of their lives prevails. This is reflected in alarming proportion of violence against women within the family in the form of female feticide, infanticide, malnourishment, dropouts, neglects and deprivation through limited access to resources.

Milbrath and Goel (1977) observed that it is a tradition in almost all societies that politics is mainly an affair of men and that women should fall in line with them politically. Support from other family members to play a dominant role in the public domain is not forthcoming and the only time they do so is when they have complete control over the women. This control takes the form of families only supporting women to get elected in order to keep the position in the family but they refuse to help her participate in the daily task of political processes.

Women having young children in the family do not get the support to participate in activities outside the home. Young and unmarried women have more restrictions placed on their participation because of the control exercise on their sexuality. At the personal level, due to the socialization process, reinforcing her subordinate position, private and public dichotomy results in lack of self-esteem and confidence in women and the internalization of these value systems. This is one of the biggest hurdles to their development and participation in public life and activities.

Triple Role of Women Play

Women typically are forced to play a triple role when they enter politics, namely they to work at home, in their jobs and in the
political institutions. Since, it is hard for a woman to sustain this triple burden, it can pose as a barrier to her political work or her political work can interfere with her work at home or in her vocation. There are no mechanisms to reduce the burden of women in fulfilling their domestic responsibilities. In particular, poor women who are engaged in long hrs of non-waged productive activities like collection of water, fuel, fodder, grazing etc. the absence of support services to free women to participate in political activity limits their participation. The family responsibilities and cultural values, traditions and practices of confining women to the activities at home have excluded them from actively participating and fulfilling their as elected representatives, the burden of triple roles on women restricts the exercise and enjoyment of their rights in various political processes. The demand of the job and family, in the effective discharge of responsibilities as elected representatives.

The number of children a woman has does not have a direct impact on her right and ability to participate in political activities. But certain policies adopted by the state as a family planning measures has indirectly affected women’s potential to participate in political activities. The number of children that a citizen has can impede his/her participation in elections. By the time they stand for election they already have two or more children, and therefore are not qualified to contest election. Though his policy is meant to help control population, it can as a direct impediment to women’s participation in the Panchayats. The implementation of a legislation of this nature has serious implications on women since it excludes a vast majority of them from participating in politics. A large number of women with more than two children have gained tremendous experience in governance during their terms in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Such legislation would deny them not only the opportunity to contest elections in subsequent terms but would also result in the loss of the experience gained by these women. Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women.

In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower
castes have lesser access to public for a, which is compounded by their gender. This exclusion makes it difficult for these women who-to represent and articulate the voices of their constituencies and their demands are often overlooked or subsumed by the dominant sections of the society. Social divisions on the basis of caste often limit the potential for gender solidarity between women, there by thwarting attempts at developing a common political agenda.

Women are victims of triple discrimination, i.e. caste, class and gender which has the effect of limiting their potential for solidarity, there by hindering efforts towards developing a common political agenda. At an individual level, women suffer discrimination and subjugation. A combined effect of these factors adversely impact on women as a political entity and a leader. The class-caste nexus has the effect of nullifying the affirmative action of the government, which provides for 33% reservation for women. It has been observed that powerful men in the community field candidates who are in articulate and in experienced thereby defeating the very purpose of the reservation policy for women.

**Literacy**

Literacy on the one hand is linked to women’s socio-economic status and on the other hand, her status as a woman has an independent and equally strong implication for her access to this realm. Illiteracy can also act as a barrier towards getting elected. Very often literate women are typically from the more privileged backgrounds. These results in the poor women not being able to represent their communities and not even being able to relate easily to the more privileged women who are in power. Illiteracy therefore is one of the key elements, which impedes women’s empowerment and more especially her political empowerment. Unless importance is given to the education of the girl child and adult literacy, women will not to be able to access the opportunities created for them. Lack of literacy skills affects herself confidence and impedes her effective participation in politics. Such women would not be able to enjoy their rights as elected representatives and demands for resources and participation
in decision making.

**Back lash to Entry into Politics**

Women who have entered the political process are faced with a lot of resistance. There are many instances where they have been subjected to physical violence, threats and intimidation. This has especially occurred when elected women representatives aspired to be articulate, assertive and effective in discharging their responsibilities.

**Character Assassination**

Patriarchal values relegate women to the home. By the very nature of this value system, any woman bold enough to come out in the open and into politics is viewed with suspicion. It is natural that she is particularly targeted for slander and character assassination. It is always her sexuality that is first questioned. Furthermore, when a woman in power becomes a political threat her being a woman is used against her in the entering politics or being visible in politics.

**Lack of Interaction**

Women have entered the political arena in large numbers at the level of local self-governance through the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. Sharing of experience and struggles of elected women is lacking between themselves and among those at the different tiers. This is due to division on party lines and on caste/class identities. The bonding and solidarity building is almost non-existent. There is lack of interaction between women at the State and National level politics and those holding positions at the lower levels of governance. The absence of elected women’s interaction both horizontally and vertically reduces their unity in representing the women’s agendas.

**Reservation**

33% reservation has been provided to women in local self
government. However, this reservation quota is misinterpreted to imply that women can contest only 33% seats and not against the general seats. This interpretation by the vested interest groups has limited women from exercising their right to contest beyond the reserved quota.

The policy of rotation reservation of the constituencies for women and other reserved categories in local self-governance has proved to be detrimental to the enjoyment of their right to political participation.

PARTICIPATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN POLITICS

Historically, in Indian context, many women have been active in the informal political sphere in terms of political mobilisation and they have participated in large numbers in political demonstrations and agitations as well as in the activities of nationalist and political bodies and organizations. The political mobilisation and participation has been impressive in the Indian National Movement particularly under Gandhiji’s leadership when they participated actively in the cause against colonization for e.g. Civil Disobedience Movements and Salt Satyagraha. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, though the state graduated to a parliamentary form of democracy in 1978 with the first election to the 30-member assembly, but women are yet to show their presence in the house. Despite the immense contribution of the fairer sex to the socio-economic development of this tribal dominated state, women representatives in the assembly have been negligible so far. Sibo Kai was one of the three members nominated by the governor to the house, which held its first session at Itanagar on March 21, 1978, when P.K. Thungon of the Janata Party (JP) was the chief minister. The other ministers were Gegong Apang, Tadar Tang, Sobeng Tayeng and Nokme Namati.
It is very clear from the above statistics that percentage of women in legislatures and decision making positions always remained low. Women do not share the power of decision making and are not involved in policy making in Arunachal Pradesh state politics in proportion to their numerical strength. Thus, there is a gap between the formal idea of women’s participation and their meaningful use of power (Kaushik, 1993).

Thus, it seems clear that the actual political power remained something of a male domain and only few crumbs are thrown to women. Women are unjustifiably rare in decision making bodies. Moreover, if anybody is elected to such bodies they will have to struggle hard to be counted for notable posts. This is the real situation that exists in Arunachal Pradesh in terms of political participation. Hence, their quest for greater political representation of women is still relevant.

**EFFECTS OF TRIBAL WOMEN’S LOW POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The meagre representation of tribal women in decision making process results in women’s agenda not getting reflected and addressed in policies and programmes. This hinders them from negotiating for vital portfolios which are usually controlled by men.
It has been observed that women are allotted soft portfolios such as those related to women and children, information, culture, social welfare etc. which are relatively less important and have correspondingly fewer resources both financial and human. They are unable to negotiate for resources to develop their constituencies. They cannot mobilize the necessary financial resources to meet the demand for their electorate, which facilitates women being accepted as political leaders.

Inadequate number of women in governance makes them vulnerable and voiceless. Women’s self confidence and esteem is affected in a predominantly male set up, as their male colleagues view them as being weak and ineffective. Arunachal Pradesh has been ranked 26th position amongst 31 States/Union Territories in terms of gender equality in McKinsey Global Institute’s research report, The Power of Parity: Advancing Women’s Equality in India (2015) that assessed the distribution or resources and opportunities among males and females.

Under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is in this context that women’s greater political representation becomes all more necessary.

STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING TRIBAL WOMEN

1. The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill or Women’s Reservation Bill pending in the parliament should immediately enact to pave a way for women to get a reservation, thereby involving more and more women in the political and decision-making processes.

2. Governments at both Centre and State should not delay any further to complete the devolution and decentralization of powers from higher bodies in the Panchayati Raj structure. This devolution right is lagging in almost all the States. The delay in genuine devolution and decentralization in causing a serious set back to the political empowerment of the locally elected bodies.
3. Electoral reforms should provide for State funding for women contesting for elections to parliament, state assemblies, urban local bodies, and panchayati raj institutions.

4. To ensure that women are taken seriously in their elected post by allotting important portfolios and limiting their functions to social welfare and women and child development.

5. To ensure awareness amongst women through mass media about the electoral process and also the candidates contesting for election, thereby eliminating powerful men taking advantage of the ignorance of women and controlling their decisions in exercising their right to vote.

6. To ensure that women have adequate space in trade unions and co-operative societies and such other registered institutions.

7. To amend the Representation of People Act, making it mandatory for every political party to have one-third of its cadre to be women.

8. To enhance the existing training for elected women representatives in terms of content. The packages must address the gender responsiveness and issues affecting the women life, in addition to the necessary input of the functional responsibilities that would enable women to govern effectively. More training should be imparted in a conducive and enabling environment without creating a burdensome situation like convenient timing, facilitate mobility, child care support, etc.

CONCLUSION

Women’s participation in the political process is critical both to the strengthening of democratic traditions and to their struggle against oppression. Political activism of women as for other underprivileged groups is integral to social transformation. Unless women are brought to the decision-making levels directly, important women
issues will never be tacked with the seriousness they require.

The momentum therefore requires considerable strengthening and acceleration. Countries that promote women’s rights and increase their access to resources and schooling have lower poverty rates, faster economic growth and less corruption than countries that do not. Countries with smaller gaps between women and men in areas like education, employment, property rights not only have lower child malnutrition and mortality, they also have more transparent business, Government and faster economic growth, which in turn helps to further narrow the gender gap. In short, education, health, productivity and governance all work better when women are involved. Political empowerment of women is critical for them to achieve an equal status in the political arena and have a say in any decision-making process for overall social and economic development.

REFERENCES


