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Tame Ramya (Tarh)
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Author(s):
Tame Ramya

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Political Representation of Tribal Women in Arunachal Pradesh: The Case of 2013 Panchayat Raj Election in Kurung Kumey District

Tame Ramya

Abstract

Women play an important role in every society across the globe. Within tribal societies, the tribal women which constitutes nearly half of their community’s population holds special status. Thus it is imperative to ensure their equal political presence and participation in the larger process of decision-making. As studies suggest (Ota & Acharya, 2012; Satyam, 2013; Nagaraja & Kusugal, 2013) there is not a single state in the country where tribal women are given equal status with men in matter of governance including Arunachal Pradesh. In this regard, reservation under the 73rd Amendment Act (1992) has been fundamental in facilitating equal representation and participation of women in the three-tier Panchayat Raj System in India. As a result, Arunachal Pradesh is among the few states where tribal women have seen an increased representation in the Panchayat election of 2013. However, in the light of increased numbers getting into leadership roles in the Panchayats, it becomes imperative to know the quality of participation and the processes herewith. This study explores these dimensions and investigates the quality aspects of their power and authority in Nyapin Block of Kurung Kumey district in Arunachal Pradesh.

Tame Ramya is Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Rajiv Gandhi University Arunachal Pradesh, India and can be reached at: taramya@live.com

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Introduction

Panchayat Raj System has a long and interesting history. It holds an important place not only in the overarching political canvas of the Indian state but it also has direct implications on contemporary development debates of India with promises to deepened inclusive growth, envisioning where every citizen as an active participants.
Political participation generally refers to the way through which citizens of a state take part in the electoral as well as in policy making process (Gochhayat, 2013). In other words, political participation is a way or a process through which the aspirations and needs of the people can be represented. Generally, the term “political participation” refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. These activities include casting votes, seeking information, holding discussions, attending meetings, staging strikes and demonstrations, communicating with the legislators, etc.

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. Women, though constituting half the population in the study area 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. Women’s political representation covers broad arrays of actions and strategies which include voting and voter edification, candidature in state and local elections, merging political parties, bestowing support to candidates holding gender-sensitive agendas, campaigning against policies that are ‘anti-women’ and promoting for the incorporation of a women’s rights agenda in the manifestos of candidates and political parties. It could also mean acting as mediators in both the selection process and grassroots voter mobilisation.

As women constitute a crucial segment of human resources in tribal society, due importance has to be accorded to the role and contribution of tribal women in the diverse socio-economic, political and cultural activities. Regrettably, despite the numerical strength, the role of tribal women has been repulsively underplayed and the developmental efforts by the government have only ensured their further marginalisation in the development process. In fact, tribal women notwithstanding the constitutional and legal safeguards are still struggling for equality of status and equality of participation in the development process within the rationale state.

The Panchayat Raj, launched in 1959 ensures people’s participation in the development process, associate rural people in grass-root democracy and devolves powers to the people till the village level. This has also made impact for other marginalised sections that have not enjoyed the fruits of development for more than 60 years of planning and
development in India and for more than 27 years of state planning and development in Arunachal Pradesh. It has been basically due to their inadequate and ineffective participation and involvement in decentralised governance, planning and development. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act has tried to fix the faults by providing reservation for these groups for the posts of members and chairpersons at three levels of the Panchayats.

In this paper, the author studies the role and performance of elected tribal women representatives in the functioning of Gram Panchayat in Nyapin Block in Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh. With newer groups of women representatives taking leadership roles in the Gram Panchayat as per provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, reservation has created space for tribal women’s needs within the structural framework of politics and issues pertaining to women’s realities.

The key objectives developed for the study was to determine the performance and level of participation of elected tribal women representatives in the functioning of Panchayat; is to spot the factors affecting the performance of tribal women representatives in the decision making process and to propose measures for effective participation of tribal women in the Panchayat Raj bodies.

Data for the study was sourced from empirical observations collected from selected respondents by employing survey and interview schedule. Secondary data was obtained from various published and unpublished records, books and journals. The district selected Kurung Kumey where there are 13 ZPMs (Zilla Parishad Members), 155 ASMs (Anchal Samiti Members) and 555 GPMs (Gram Panchayat Members) was selected through purposive sampling method. Further in order to assess the effectiveness of political empowerment and level of Political participation of rural tribal women, the present micro study was carried out at Nyapin block of Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh.

**Tribal Women’s Representation: From Context to Text**

Below is presented field data relating to the Panchayat Raj Elections (2013) and the tribal women’s representatives who were elected to the respective post.

**Table 1: Tribal Women Representatives in Panchayat Raj Election, 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Zilla Parishad Members</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Anchal Samiti Members</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Gram Panchayat Members</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidated Results of Panchayati Raj Election, 2013 (http://secap.nic.in/docs/results/13/ConsolidatedResultsofPanchayatiRajElection2013Panchayat.pdf)
As is evident from the above table, out of total of 37 tribal women representatives, the 2 (100%) were represented by women through reservation as Zilla Parishad Members, 5 (29.41%) as Anchal Samiti Members and 30 (45.45%) as Gram Panchayat Members.

Table 2: Break-Up of Tribal Women Representatives on the Basis of Political Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>INC</th>
<th>BJP</th>
<th>PPA</th>
<th>IND</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zilla Parishad Members</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchal Samiti Members</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>(29.41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gram Panchayat Members</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>(45.45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Representatives in PRIs (Party-wise)</td>
<td>20 (54.05%)</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>11 (29.73%)</td>
<td>06 (16.22%)</td>
<td>37 (43.53%)</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidated Results of Panchayati Raj Election, 2013 (http://secap.nic.in/docs/results/13/ConsolidatedResultsOfPanchayatiRajElection2013Panchayat.pdf.)

Table 2 highlights the segregation of the women representatives on the basis of political parties they affiliated. From the table, it is evident that PRIs were mainly dominated by the women representatives who were affiliated to Indian National Congress (INC) numbering 20 (54.05%). The only existing regional party of the state People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) was represented by 11 women (29.73%) whereas 6 representatives (16.22%) were elected as independent (IND) candidates. It was surprising to note that there was not a single representative belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) despite being the main opposition party at centre and the state. This shows that people are more inclined towards ruling parties; INC, to get more favours in terms of development packages and funds.

It has been noticed that due to reservation of seats, many tribal women were elected to local bodies. Reservation has created space for tribal women’s needs within the structure of the state. Reservation has also led to the recognition of the identity of tribal women and their presence in the public life. This is a remarkable change in comparison to earlier periods. It is also noticed that there is an upsurge in the power that tribal women have at the grass root bodies led to great degree of social transformation in society. Some of the tribal women representatives are slowly and steadily gaining confidence and trying to perceive their roles by familiarising themselves with Panchayat rules and regulation.
During field visits it was observed that most of tribal women leaders who were interviewed did not hold formal position of power. In some places it was seen that tribal women associate with the informal structures were more capable in voicing women’s concerns. Empowering tribal women by their active participation in local self government has to an extent helped in developing a more genuine voice of tribal women. Crucially, reservation has helped change tribal women’s perception of themselves. Tribal women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources. Reservation has also given many tribal women a greater understanding of the working of political engagements in particular the importance of organised political parties. Reservation in Arunachal Pradesh offers an opportunity to tribal women to change the face of political leadership. However, there is still a need for struggles to ensure that these spaces are genuine grounds on which the negotiation of power can take place. One could conclude that reserving one-third of seats for tribal women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been fruitful and has greatly empowered tribal women both politically and socially.

Overall it is observed that the participation of tribal women in grassroot politics through reservation at the Panchayat level is an effective instrument in empowering tribal women. This political participation have also created better spaces for engagement of tribal women beyond their own religious grouping which by all accounts is a welcomed change taking into consideration that diverse religious and cultural reality of Arunachal Pradesh. However, it must be noted that while the overall impact has been nothing less than extraordinary, yet the quality of participation remains wanting. Data reveals that there are elected tribal women representatives who are treated ‘as puppet’ of male counterparts in the local bodies. Majority of them stay silent in Gram Panchayat meetings and seldom take part in the deliberations. They hardly assert their own view relating to identifying beneficiaries, assigning contracts, locating development projects, budget preparation, planning etc. some of the key reasons for these drawbacks from a assertion perspective are identified as lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, skill, leadership quality, low level of education, lack of exposure, influence of family, social outlook, patriarch etc. Illiteracy is also a major obstacle in the path of assertion within these rational legal spaces.

Another reason worth the notice is that husbands and family members do not want their women representatives to interact with government officials and others in matter of taking decisions because of socio-cultural constraints. It is observed that there are multiple
factors affecting the process of participation and level of performance of tribal women in these grass roots bodies that could be categorised as internal factor and external factor. The internal factors are identified as: lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, skill, leadership quality, low level of education, lack of exposure etc. It is noticed that tribal women representatives are not aware of their functions, duties and responsibilities. In fact, they do not know what role they have to play in the functioning of local government. Lack of education or low level of education has become a major obstacle in the path of playing active role in the functioning of Panchayats. The elected members are unable to understand the basics of the working of Gram Panchayats. As a result they are felt wanting in providing effective leadership. Due to lack of exposure and experience, tribal women members in several cases are dependent on their husbands in matters of decision making.

The external factors which affect the process of participation are influence of family, social outlook and patriarchy.

The Quality of Participation: Field Realities

The participation of citizens in the political process in any nation associated closely with the availability of political rights. In India such rights are provided by the Constitution to both men and women. But even after 60 plus years of the working of the Constitution, the women, especially the tribal women are yet to fully realised their different constitutional and legal rights in the realm of the social, economic and political liberty. This is probably one of the main reasons for a low percentage of women involvement in active politics.

Factors for astoundingly low figure of participation of tribal women in political processes in Arunachal Pradesh in particular and in the nation in general are mainly because of traditional socio-religious and cultural ethos of the society where tribal women are considered as the ‘passive’, ‘home-oriented’, subordinate ingredients and an affair predominantly related to their male counterparts only. A few tribal women who have entered into active politics had either a long political background of their families being in politics or because of a greater liberal outlook on politics and education.

Socio-structural constrains also add to the adverse affect on the life of tribal women who somehow are socialised into managing household chores from their childhood. In the latter period also they find it extremely unusual and difficult to shun the habitual grooming into these specified roles. Having to rely upon their male counterpart even for very trifling matter, they are socialised not to take part in the process of decision making in the social,
familial or political matters. Incidents of having to seek a male counterpart’s opinion on casting their votes in elections are heard everywhere.

Explaining what constitutes political empowerment, almost half of the women representatives cited participation in elections and performing of political activities by the tribal women. Moreover some of the representatives said that political empowerment would comprise the aspects like generating political knowledge and awareness, solving tribal women’s problems through political means, reservation of seats for tribal women in election, and greater mobility of tribal women.

Most opine that to politically empower tribal women, an awareness campaign should be set by state media, NGOs, political parties, etc. These institutions have immense responsibility to create awareness about the importance of political empowerment of tribal women. In the context of economic stability, most respondents stated that the state should work towards empowering tribal women economically through microfinance programmes and also encourage greater participation of tribal women leaders in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs).

The Quality of Participation: Problematising the Text

Tribal women’s role in the political process of Arunachal Pradesh has virtually remained unchanged since statehood in 1987. Broad-based political participation of tribal women has been severely limited due to various traditional factors such as religion and family status as a result tribal women have been left on the margin of political life.

Tribal women’s political empowerment challenges traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy. Those tribal women who have already entered Panchayat through election need to be politically educated and informed regarding the concepts and relevance of Panchayat Raj Institutions, the functioning of state machinery, the Indian Constitution, the nature of Indian democracy and the policies and programmes for tribal women and other weaker section of the society.

However tribal women have always had the capacity and the desire for leadership, but were restricted by male centric structures to express their potential. Now that these restrictions have been somewhat reduced, they are able to take up leadership roles. Woman by any yard stick are the real shaper of the future, in the sense that she guides the younger generation. What a child imbibes in the earliest years has a lasting influence on their lives.
Comprehending the significance of tribal women’s welfare, the founding fathers of Indian constitution have made special provisions in the constitution to guarantee tribal women’s rights and gender equality. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992-93 opened a new chapter in the history of democratic decentralisation in India by transferring power to the people and giving tribal women their right to be heard in the decision making process. Reservation in Panchayats has also led to the recognition of the identity of tribal women and their importance and presence in public life. This is a significant change from the earlier perceptions and prevailing situations. It is also observed that there is an increase in tribal women’s sense and real power at the grass root level. Tribal women have started conceiving themselves as a vital weapon towards social change. Some of the key findings of the study are listed below:

Participating in meetings provided the opportunity to majority of women representatives to express their views on important issues and make efforts to meet the needs and demands of the people of their area; the respondents who were educated opined that the participation provided them an opportunity to work for welfare of the people.

However, high proportion of tribal women representatives very rarely attended the general meetings of PRIs as they were busy with the family work. Astonishingly, many of them were represented by their husbands in the meetings; the majority of tribal women representatives either always or very often addressed the grievances of people who approached them directly. Many of tribal women representatives depend on their husband or family members to help the people and finally many of women representatives very rarely met the Panchayati Raj officials because their husbands and relatives don’t want to do so.

Some of the suggestions for effective participation of tribal women representatives in the PRIs derived from data collected could be:

i. The first and foremost measure for empowering tribal women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions is to give them education to confiscate the illiteracy tag attach amongst them. There should be a binding decree for both men as well as women leaders to have attained minimum education up to primary or middle level. This would enable them to read and write besides they can go through the decisions taken by the Panchayats.

ii. The need of the hour is to engage tribal women representatives in the planning and execution of various development and welfare programmes of the government to provide
them vista for practical learning of the process of development planning and programme implementation at local level.

iii. The voluntary agencies, social organisations and women organisations can play major roles to stimulate political awakening among tribal women in general and tribal women representatives in particular. Short duration camps, training workshops and orientation programmes/seminars can be conducted in rural areas to inspire the illiterate tribal women to actively participate in political activities.

iv. The governments at centre and state should generate extensive promotion to prompt the rural tribal women to partake in Panchayat activities by means of pamphlets, audio-visual aids and message through newspapers, radios, televisions, etc.

v. It has been observed that many a times their voice in the meeting is not given due weightage. There is no meaning in attending the proceedings, if tribal women are unheard, no opportunity is provided for them to articulate their views and they are not recognised as leaders of the people. Thus, due importance should be given to their ideas or views in Panchayat meetings.

vi. There is an urgent need on the part of governmental agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to muster and hearten tribal women representatives to come forward and participate in the PRIs at least at the local level.

vii. The tribal women leaders are needed to instil self-confidence by imparting recurrent training on various aspects of the PRIs.

viii. It has been observed that many of tribal women contest Panchayat elections because their husband/family members want them to do so. While very few of them contest elections of their own spirit. The larger sections of tribal women should contest the elections of their own so as to realise the epitome of actual participation of women leaders.

ix. At last, there is a pressing call for of cooperative and positive attitude of bureaucracies towards empowerment of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The devolution of powers and finances to reinforce the instructions of self-governance are the need of the hour which can be viable only through political will of the state. The women development programmes ought to be linked with Panchayats for more efficient involvement of tribal women and for establishing linkages between tribal women representatives and development functionaries at the grassroots level.
Now that some degree of political space has been created constitutionally for tribal women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Arunachal Pradesh, the quality of participation should be the next major concern of all those who would like to deepen democracy in the state. The pattern and structure of local leadership is altering rapidly and tribal women leaders must play their part towards strengthening their position in governance that will go a long way in their own empowerment.

References


