Democratic Decentralization and Women's Political Participation: A Study of Adivasi Women Sarpanches in Telangana

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) in Social Exclusion Studies

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

The overarching framework of this thesis has been the feminist methodology developed by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in *Recasting Women* referred to at the beginning. Sangari and Vaid had warned us against a tokenist inclusion of women, against framing women against this or that context, against seeing patriarchy as singular, against reading class, caste and region-specific moments and movements as universal. Most importantly, they had asked us to see gender as an element in all structures and formations and not as one choice among competing perspectives.

It is with this perspective in mind that we must assess the achievements and limitations of the adivasi women sarpanches whom we have met in this study and of this thesis as well. There are several points of analysis that need to be outlined in our assessment of this moment in adivasi women's position in Telangana. It is clear that just including women in the processes of governance and development is tokenist and does not change structural conditions. Indeed, this is the over-arching insight of this thesis: that inclusion or even positions of power are no guarantee of social change because if structural conditions remain the same, all these changes are defeated.

While there is no doubt that the achievement of women through political and governance-based reservation has been remarkable, it is naïve to think that it has led to any structural or social transformational change has been effected. While the idea of reservation in the panchayats has opened up avenues for women that hitherto did not exist, it is not as though they have magically transformed the lives of adivasi women overnight.

Just as the PESA Act made it mandatory for gram sabhas comprising adivasis to pass development projects before they proceed but despite the Niyamgiri tribal gram sabhas all voting against the Vedanta project did not stop the project from continuing or the violence against adivasis, it is important to realise that structural conditions are much larger than the micro empowering strategies of laws like PESA.

The seven major insights that emerged from the study are

1. Just including women is tokenist and does not change much

2. Women sarpanches with husbands running the show are indicative of the fact that political power cannot be determined only by positions at the governance table

3. Upper castes still dominate the scene and structurally inhibit the ability of Dalit and adivasi women and men to change structural hegemonies and consequently the conditions of their lives

4. The lack of access to land (most of the adivasis are landless in terms of land ownership) and to different kinds of economies makes it difficult for adivasis, especially women, to change the conditions of their lives

5. Low levels of education among adivasi women make it very difficult for women to take decisions on their own lives and livelihoods.

6. The upper caste political funding of elections make the whole process money-run rather than run by processes of democratisation and change which women show they are very capable of.

7. Political awareness is a crucial factor that is missing among the women. By political awareness, I mean the consciousness-raising that is a vital part of helping women recognise and work to dismantle structures, institutions and ideas that dominate their lives. Programmes like Mahila Samkhya, now dismantled by the government, achieved this to a remarkable extent and that methodology has to be replicated in Telangana. Only when traditional and constricting ways of thinking change in the psyches of women can any structural and transformational change become possible.

The reservation of seats for ST women has granted political empowerment to women. It may be concluded that the interviewees' responses prove the hypotheses proposed in the research. First, the political empowerment of tribal women despite lower socio-economic status improved social inclusion in formal and non-formal justice institutions. Reservation of seats has given them a more important role in determining the development of the rural communities, and they have tried to allocate importance to issues like health and education that are held at a higher priority by the women sarpanches. It is important that for most of the women interviewed during fieldwork, the post of sarpanch was intimidating at first, but most of them later became more comfortable, conducting the panchayat affairs independently and garnering social respect as well. As described earlier, the social status of the women sarpanches improved and they were given a lot more respect both within the village and by the administration as well.

Less social empowerment hampers political empowerment though the former is likely to improve social inclusion in formal and non-formal justice institutions. As we saw, the successful managing of the sarpanch's responsibilities also led some of the women to take up a number of

local social issues and try to resolve them with direct, decisive action, Whether the campaign against country liquor or the demand for the setting up of a university, women sarpanches have become important opinion-makers and social-political representatives for village communities.

The fieldwork also brought to light the important transformations that were taking place in the family structure as well. As women have begun to take on posts in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, it has become clear that the division of responsibilities in the households has had to change in order to accommodate the duties of the sarpanch. It may be concluded that lower political empowerment, in the presence of better psychological and social empowerment in the form of support and adjustment from the family and community at large is likely to improve social inclusion in formal and non-formal justice institutions. The social respect that comes with the post of sarpanch has also meant that many of the women interviewed told about their improved position within the household as well. At the same time, there is much that remains to be done, as not all the women have been able to develop a strong position of negotiation within the family. Thus the psychological empowerment of women that occurs due to successful handling of the responsibilities of the gram Panchayat has the effect of improving their social inclusion as well as their position within the family.

Nevertheless, it is important not to over-estimate the change that political representation brings. This brings us to the first point in the list that we began this Conclusion with. The mere inclusion of women into political processes does not automatically mean equality or social transformation. For example, we saw that many women's husbands merely used their wives election as a way to become sarpanches themselves in a form of proxy politics. This phenomenon is indicative of the

fact that patriarchal structures are deep-rooted and the inequality of the family as an institution cannot be eradicated by merely offering women positions outside of it.

The study showed that a part of the problems faced by the women sarpanches arose from the structural limitations of the panchayati raj model. While, on the one hand, the empowering effects of Panchayati Raj Institutions and reservation of seats within them are clear in many instances, on the other, the powers of the institutions themselves have been so restricted that the sarpanches cannot do much more than carry out basic infrastructural development work like building roads or facilities for drinking water supply. The ambiguities in the financing of panchayat projects lead to non-payment of dues, corruption, and favouritism.

This is symptomatic of the larger structural constrictions of the caste/class system that positions adivasis outside it and at the very bottom, in positions who's than Dalits. Adivasis face harassment even from Dalits and definitely from the middle and upper castes that own the land and dominate the markets. Caste plays an important role in adivasi life though adivasis, strictly speaking, have nothing to do with caste. Upper caste domination and harassment of adivasis is common and keeps them out of economic and political power as the strings are still pulled by the upper castes and tribal groups are still beholden to them.

The domination is compounded by the fact that most adivasis are landless or have marginal land holdings and the fact that they have no hold on the economic systems of the market of which they do not control means that the domination of them is near total. Within these three

formations – caste, land and market – the structural exploitation of women is worse than that of men and women face these structural constraints doubly.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the differential access to education between tribal men and women and the lack of education means that women do not have the ability to chart the course of their own lives. From basic literacy (to enable them to sign forms) to more advanced forms of education to help them understand the systems of which they are part, the lack of education is a serious structural impediment to women.

Finally, all the possibilities of the Panchayati Raj and ST women's reservations have not been fully realised because of the rampant money that uppercastes invest in the election process because of the financial gains from elected positions over time. This money power again structurally disadvantages adivasi women as political representatives as they simply do not have the purchasing power but, more importantly, it keeps at bay all the changes these women might well bring if they had access to political positions.

The main objective of this thesis is to study if political empowerment of Adivasi women enables an improvement of other social indicators, including education, psychological empowerment and access to social justice institutions. Further, it sought to show the practices and institutions through which these changes were effected. The study looked at how structural inequalities in society have a detrimental effect on empowerment of women and the ways in which political empowerment can help in pushing back the negative effects of these forms of social inequality.

Specifically, the research focused on how hierarchies of caste and gender are factors in determining Adivasi women's participation in the institutions of local self-governance.

The modern institution of Panchayati Raj was intended as a form of local self-governance that would enable decentralisation of control over resources as well as the decision-making regarding their allocation. However, as shown in the dominance of vested elite interests ensured that the transformative possibilities of Panchayati Raj are severely restricted. This was done through the setting up of rules and jurisdictions that created ambiguity regarding the scope of powers vested in Panchayati Raj institutions; intentional administrative apathy; or in other cases through direct intimidation of elected functionaries. Thus, even though Panchayati Raj has been able to provide some measure of political representation to marginalized groups mainly through reservation of seats, it has not economically or socially empowered these communities to any great extent. As a result, Panchayati Raj has not been able to develop institutions that can carry out transformative social change. Instead of becoming an agent that can act against the prevailing social inequalities of caste, class, and gender, they have become deeply entrenched in perpetuating these inequalities.

Set against this background, this study sought to look at the continuing effects of caste, class and patriarchy in Adivasi women's participation in grassroots political institutions. Historically, Adivasis have been a marginalised community, excluded from the mainstream and misrepresented in the dominant cultural imagination. The process of massive displacement and widespread exploitation of Adivasis, through the introduction of modern land tenancy laws and reserve forest areas, is a trend that has come to be intensified in post-independence India. In this

context, we have pointed to how Adivasi women are doubly disadvantaged. Not only do they suffer from class discrimination and Brahminical domination, they are also subjected to the violence of patriarchal forces. Adivasi women are subjected to exploitation by non-tribals, from the mainstream caste Hindu society, from Dalits, from their own men.

Through the many instances demonstrated, it was shown that there was an increase in women's social status after being elected as panchayat sarpanch and that it gave women far more say in shaping the development agenda of their gram sabhas by providing for drinking water, electricity, schools and Anganwadi ccntres. The study was able to show that the political empowerment of tribal women, despite lower socioeconomic status, has improved much social inclusion in formal and non-formal justice institutions. Further, it was shown that more social empowerment in presence of psychological and political empowerment is likely to improve social inclusion in formal and non-formal justice institutions: the successful managing of the sarpanch's responsibilities also led some of the women to take up a number of local social issues and try to resolve them with direct, decisive action,

Finally, it was also noted in some instances that increased women's political participation also led to changes in the division of responsibilities within the family and household as well. Chapter 5 sought to show how caste remains a barrier to the substantive political participation of Adivasi women in grassroots political institutions. It was found that proxy candidature, sponsored by local caste elites was a major problem faced by Adivasi women candidates in panchayat elections. Further, it was found that the network of entrenched interests of caste and landed elites

were an important pressure factor that had a detrimental effect on the Adivasi women sarpanches' ability to carry out an independent developmental agenda.

The present study, however, remains limited in scope, primarily because it mapped political and economic developments more than psychic and cultural impediments from within women's minds. At the same time, it provides some important findings that can be further studied and proved through a framework that takes into account the psychic as much as the economic in re-framing the very parameters of inclusion and exclusion.

It is hoped that this study will add to the small pool of existing studies on political empowerment of Adivasi women and open up new avenues for research. In particular, the researcher would be interested in extending the findings regarding improvements in the social and psychic status of Adivasi women as a result of their political empowerment. This, the researcher feel, will allow us to get a clearer picture of the deep-rooted and long-term effects of improved political representation among Adivasi women, and their emergence as important public actors, political representatives and as agents of change. Finally, the researcher would like to extend the present research to study in detail one aspect that was not taken up in detail. As already described, the most debilitating obstacles to the proper functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions were structural in nature and must be addressed as such. Further, it was shown how these obstacles were directly related to the dominance of caste and patriarchal interests in society.

This being the case, in my subsequent research it would be interested in studying the ways in which Adivasi women are organising themselves in various ways to confront and transform the

specific structural problems that afflict the Panchayati Raj institutions, thus making it a site in the continuing struggle for genuine grassroots democracy. Such a study would be wide-ranging and comprehensive in its, scope, looking at the entire complex network of institutions, norms and social actors through which the hierarchies of caste and patriarchy are effective in society and how these can be transformed into a democratic social consciousness through the conscious action of those who continue to remain marginalised within the system. Only then can Ambedkar's vision of real democracy be realised within the system of Panchayati Raj.

Alongside the gender implications of political empowerment of Adivasi women through panchayati raj institutions, this research was also interested in studying the ways in which the structure of caste continues to operate in panchayati raj institutions. More so, the study looked at how this affects Adivasi women in particular.

In the course of the interviews, it became evident that even though reservation was able to ensure a far improved level of representation for Adivasi women in panchayati raj institutions, it has so far been unable to ensure their substantive political participation to the same extent. Moreover, this was not, as has often been argued, simply due to the lack of political awareness and experience among Adivasi women participating in panchayat politics. On the contrary, it was found that time and again, state apathy towards addressing the broader developmental and political needs of marginalised communities such as Adivasi women has meant that the provision of reservation in representation has remained an isolated initiative, unable to create genuine transformative change. In the present study, it was found that most women who are elected as sarpanch have very little formal literacy, and this has a negative effect on their ability to

negotiate the technical and legal aspects of their duties. The so-called "lack" of political experience and awareness among Adivasi women is thus a structurally maintained aspect of the apparatus of grassroots democracy in India. These inequities and imbalances in education and access to political resources is being maintained and sustained by entrenched casteist and patriarchal interests that continue to have a strong hold on the state and its functionaries.

In the course of the study, the researcher found that for most Adivasi women, the hierarchies of caste are a real factor in determining the scope of political emancipation. Previous studies have suggested the vulnerability of women to proxy candidature[313] and also for Dalit women in particular.[314] During fieldwork, it was found that proxy candidature is a problem for Adivasi women as well. The priorities of caste and patriarchal hierarchies often determine the scope of work that an Adivasi woman sarpanch is able to undertake. The vast and complex networks of social relations of caste limit her financial abilities, as well as decision-making authority in sanctioning development projects aimed specifically at marginalised groups.

This was noticeable in the Adivasi women sarpanches' ability to authorise developmental projects. While they were able to provide a stronger emphasis on projects for drinking water, roads, etc. there were also limitations on their work. They faced pressure from contractors of dominant caste groups, and also apathy from government officials in sanctioning projects that would benefit marginalised groups in the community.

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[313]*From Reservation to Participation Capacity Building of Elected Women Representatives and Functionaries of Panchayati Raj Institutions.* UNDP-India, pp. 22

[314]JayshreeMangubhai et al. *Dalit Women's Right to Political Participation in Rural Panchayati Raj: A study of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu.* IDEAS, JustitiaetPax, Equalinrights: The Netherlands. 2009.

Moreover, it was found that while in many cases being elected as sarpanch led to a positive change in the social status, mobility and authority of the women candidates, as they were able to take up social reform initiatives by adopting a leadership role in the community. At the same time, there were also other cases where the hierarchies of caste and patriarchy continued to limit the Adivasi women's ability to effectively conduct panchayat meetings, participate in meetings, sanction funds, etc.

It may be noted in conclusion that while reservation of seats for Adivasi women has helped in enabling their political empowerment, there is still a long way to go. The obstruction of Adivasi women's functioning in panchayats by local Brahminical and patriarchal elites remains a constant feature of grassroots democracy. In fact, this may even be regarded as a structural feature of grassroots democracy in India the continued influence of these forms of hierarchy in politics today arises from the historical failure and weakness of the modern Indian state in confronting these forms of social hierarchy. Rather than destroying such forms of social hierarchy as part of its project of creating a society of freedom and equality, the Indian state has accommodated and integrated them within the various levels of the state apparatus itself. In such a situation, the real effectivity of constitutional measures for equal representation is continually undermined and subverted by these entrenched interests. A substantive grassroots democracy is possible only when these pernicious forms of social hierarchy are contested and eradicated.

But, equally, it is important to examine psychic resistances and contradictions to change within adivasi women. This is not to set up a dichotomy between structure and individual agency – one definitely forms the other and vice versa – but to point to the fact that we also have to work at the

contradictions and inhibitions in the minds of Adivasi women to be able to make political governance take on a socially transformative capacity. This thesis has been a small step in the quest to understanding those contradictions and inhibitions.