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## **Empowerment of Tribal Women in Panchayat Raj System: A Sociological Study**

**Dr. Giridhar, S.**

*Post Doctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology, Kuvempu University,  
Jnana Sahyadri, Shankaraghatta, Shimoga*

### **Abstract**

*The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution is a step forward in providing an opportunity to hitherto socially excluded groups, including the women, to participate in the grass root level development process with the Constitutional authority as members of the multi-federal institutions i.e. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI's). These grass root level institutions have come into existence as a constitutional obligation of decentralization of power and this has ensured the empowerment of those collectivities which were socially, culturally and politically excluded from the mainstream of societal processes. In this background, 73rd Amendment of the Constitution has given new fillip to the women to participate in the decision-making process at grass root level as forerunners of the development. Large number of Tribal women got elected to these bodies. Hence, it is very important to evaluate whether and to what extent, after 73rd Amendment Act their status and position in rural areas have improved? In this context the study aimed at examining the awareness among Tribal women representatives about their newly assumed authority and extent to which they can participate effectively in the functioning of the local bodies.*

***Key Words: Empowerment, Tribal women, PRI's.***

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**Introduction:** In Indian society even though sacred texts depicted women in very respectable position the status of women in the society has always remained very low. The reason for this could be attributed to patriarchy which kept women at a lower rung in the social and economic hierarchy by denying them basic right to land, assets, health care, sanitation, and hygiene, and by placing low value at their existence. On the other hand, the changing socio economic scenario and the phasing out of joint family system along with the poor community based protection system are responsible for poor conditions of women (Report of Ministry for Women and Child Development; 2006: 3).

Women all over the world suffer from certain disabilities; History reveals that no where men and women were treated equally, rather she was the subject of inequality,

discrimination and exploitation. Anju Bhatia (2000:32) believes “In India for centuries women have been pushed aside from the race of development in the name of customs, traditions and religion. As a result, they have been denied the opportunity for their social, economic, and political development leading to a lower status in society”. Hence, it is rightly observed that “In India women are discriminated due to several historical, religious and other reasons. A girl child is suppressed from the moment she is born; she is made to undergo the feelings of being inferior and feeble. She is denied the prospects for personal expression” Veena Basin (2007:7). There are various hypotheses about why women have relatively higher or lower status. The common premises are that women status is high when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities, and women’s position is low in the societies where food getting is entirely men’s job. Like wise men in most societies contribute more to primary subsistence activities, as women have infant and child care responsibilities and at the same time women contribute to primary subsistence activities which most of the time over looked.

However, with the emergence of modern social forces and because of Indian contact with the west, gradual changes taking place in attitude of the Hindus towards the low castes. After independences, especially after the establishment of democratic republic of India, a number of steps were taken by the central and state government to raise the socio-economic status of women towards this numerous facility are extended women. In the year 2001 has been declared as women’s have typical year, in this connection, the Indian government has announced elaborate scheme for empowerment of women and the safeguards of women’s rights, but still women especially due to double discrimination, their suffering from disabilities and inequalities. In this context the present study is attempting to look closely into the tribal women problems of powerlessness, sense of identity, and empowerment of this ignored and marginalized groups that are tribal women.

***Status of Tribal Women:*** The status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women’s status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as their roles within the family, the community and society. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They constitute about half the total population but in tribal society women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder, and the family economy and management depend on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produce is done mostly by women and children. Many also work as laborers in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income. Despite exploitation by contractors and managers, tribals are more sincere and honest than non tribals. However, tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to environmental degradation and the interference of outsiders. The strategy for tribal development, and specially women, needs improvement, betterment, development and upliftment to affect their empowerment.

Tribal women have adjusted themselves to live a traditional life style in the local environment and follow occupations based on natural resources. Undoubtedly, the programmes, oriented towards the empowerment of tribal's, particularly women, have improved their socio-economic conditions and status. However, there are wide variations across regions and tribes in terms of work participation, sex ratio, economic productivity and social life. The impact of development planning needs to be evaluated in terms of desired and unanticipated consequences. The development process should be perceived as an involvement and reorganization mechanism of not only the socio-economic system but the entire eco-system. Against this backdrop, the present paper reviews the emerging perspective in the context of the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women and changing paradigms of development.

***Empowerment of Tribal Women:*** Empowerment of women is one of the most important key factors for the welfare and development of any society. It is felt that without the empowerment of women development of society is not possible in right direction and at a desired pace. "Empowerment of women is a slow process woman must come up to play their role in planning, decision making, and implementation" (Aruna Goel, 2004:55). Women empowerment has been identified as an essential commitment in the developed goals of national government and international agencies. India is no exception to this. The concept of empowerment is understood differently, every society has its own local expression to represent this idea. The terms like autonomy, self- direction, self- confidence, self-respect, self-realization and self worth are corresponding expression of empowerment. "However, what is new in the empowerment discourse of today is an attempt to quantify it and to develop functional framework to formulate strategies and programmes for achieving women empowerment" (Narayana Deepa 2005:3). According to Sujatha K S (2006:30) "the idea of power is the root term of empowerment. The concept of power is a historically widely debated issue. The term power may broadly be functionally defined as control over resources and ideology. The resources over which control can be exercised may be physical resource, human resource, intellectual resources, financial resources and the self".

Human Development Report of 1995 defines 'empowerment' as 'participation'. It argues that development must be by the people and not only for the people. The World Bank source book on empowerment and poverty views it as "increasing poor people freedom of choices and action to shape their own lives. It identifies four important key elements that can change power relation between poor people and powerful actors are: access to information, inclusion and participation, social accountability, and organizational capacity" (Narayan Deepa 2005:43). According to United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) "gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power and developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes, the right to control one's life".

***Political Empowerment of Tribal Women:*** The Political empowerment of women is most important aspect of empowerment which give capacity to influence the decision-making

process. Despite of vast numerical strength women occupy a marginalized position in politics due to several socio-economic constraints. Majority of women are illiterate, not politically conscious. The real empowerment of women requires through ongoing renewal of the political process on democratic basis. It is often argued that education is a powerful tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. It helps her to gain knowledge and provides necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges of life.

Political participation is one of the major ways to ensure women's empowerment to increase decision-making power and greater ability and to influence matters that affect their lives in the community and the larger society. In the broader sense participation in politics gives for beyond electoral politics, such as voting and election to public office. Women empowerment begins with their consciousness, perceptions about herself and her rights, her capabilities and her potentials, awareness of her gender and socio-cultural, economic and political process that affects her.

What participation means is in the functioning of the whole carry of public institution and forces which are involved in molding the lives of people by way of decisions and policies that impinge on their relation with one another (Kaushik 1992, trivedi 2009). Participation of women in the Panchayat Raj or local bodies, women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women as elected members of local government bodies taking part of decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation, women as a members of women as a members of women's in development works and dealing priority issues in the village level.

Gender empowerment is determined by the degree to which women and men participate actively in economic, professional and political activity and take part in decision making. Women's political participation was hindered by a system of social relations in the male dominated society reflecting the orthodox male-centric mentality like religious fundamentalism. Only men were consistently educated and trained for leadership, while very few rural women had the opportunity to pursue their education because of tradition. Women themselves had strongly influenced by male dominated village communities and had little faith in their own capacities to take leadership roles.

***Importance of the Study:*** The study assumes importance from multi perspectives. Similarly, PRI's among rural and tribal areas are seen as a major factor in empowerment of women. In this context the present study fills the gap of knowledge regarding the level of empowerment that has been achieved by the PRI's in rural and tribal areas. Since women in general and tribal women are very backward in development indicators. The study also gains importance because, the present study is conducted in Davanagere district which has some of the highest development indicators in the state as well as in the country. Similarly the analysis of the study can certainly help the policy makers to chalk out appropriate policy framework for women's empowerment and poverty alleviation.

**Objectives of the Study:** The present study intends to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To explore into the socio-economic and educational status of Tribal women.
2. To find-out political awareness among Tribal women.
3. To examine their political aspirations.
4. To understand the process of change among Tribal women in the changing scenario of the power structure in rural society.
5. To analyze the fundamental challenges and problems Tribal women in discharging their duties as members of PRI's.

**Methodology and Sample Size:** Present study is based on primary and secondary data. Data has been collected from the sources such as books, news papers, articles and women development department. The research undertaken covers Davanagere district rural areas of Karnataka state. It is proposed to select 50 tribal women respondents who are the members of panhayat Raj Instituitons (GP, TP and ZP) from all the taluks of the district. The study will be done after brief visit of the field. Random sample technique will be used for the present study. And also group discussions with members of PRI's.

**Results and Discussion:** The study shows that the majority (83%) of the tribal communities in Davanagere District live in rural areas. And the level of education is very low, majority (71%) of the respondents are either uneducated or educated only up to the primary level. Most of the (62%) tribal women are engaged in coolie or agriculture labour which has resulted in low individual income and low family income.

Most women have not completed their basic primary education and there is considerable number of school drop outs among the respondents. The major reasons for this are attributed to the negative attitude towards female education, economic problems in the family, lack of awareness about the importance of the education and lack of schools. Majority of (89%) women could realize the importance of education after Political member when they found difficulty in taking responsibilities.

**Political Participation of Respondents:** After studying the all the factors and causes to enter politics as explained through earlier findings researcher has made an attempt to know the political participation of respondents. The table No. 01 shows the different opinion regarding the political participation of the respondents in study area.

**Table-01**  
**Political participation of respondents**

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	11	22.00
No	39	78.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

Table No.1 reveals the political participation of respondents only 22%(11) tribal women leader mentioned that they were in politics before this election few years ago and 78%(39) of women members are newly elected and they don't have any political career. This data clearly indicates that PRIs have brought the drastic changes in rural and tribal areas that to women in development process and active political participation of the country.

**Reservation Policy:** Reservation of women in the panchayat raj is not only increasing their number of women members but also allow the women in rural and tribal areas to develop themselves and contribute to the society. Participation in the development process brings about a variety of new opportunities and challenges for the elected representatives need to enhance their ability and confidence to handle the responsibilities. Here, researcher studied that whether respondents elected under reservation policy or not. The table No. 2 shows different opinion regarding this statement.

**Table-02****Elected under women's reservation**

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	47	94.00
No	03	06.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field Survey*

The table No. 2 illustrates the impact of reservation has brought about in study area. The common perception is that due to reservation women representatives able to participate in the affairs of panchayats with much more confidence they also feel much more secured. 94% (47) of respondents are entered politics with reservation policy and only 6% (03) of respondents says that they not came to politics under reservation policy. This data give clear scenario of fruitfulness of reservation policy. Here majority of women members' i.e 94% of the women respondents are in politics because of women reservation. Perhaps this is positive impact of reservation in favour of women in panchayat raj institutions.

**Motive factors of the women representation in political participation:** Participation of women, tribal women representation in politics is mainly motivated by several factors like educational opportunities, empowerment process, changing roles by the women, reservation policy and decentralization of power. Hence researcher tried to find out the motivating factors of tribal women representation in study area, table No. 3 shows the different motivating factors which influence tribal women in take part in politics.

**Table-03****Motive factors of the women representation in political participation**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Economic empowerment	09	18.00
Encourage of literacy	07	14.00
Changing perspectives of women's	05	10.00

representation		
Women's reservation	22	44.00
Development of women's political capacity	05	10.00
Increasing of training and information	02	04.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Field Survey

In table No. 3 shows the Motive factors of the women representation in political participation. 44%(22) respondents have motive factor like economic empowerment, 14%(07) respondents have motive factor of encourage in literacy, 10%(05) respondents have motive factor of changing perspectives of women's representation, 18%(09) respondents have motive factor of women reservation, 10%(05) respondents have motive of development of women political capacity and 4%(02) respondents have motive of increasing in training and information. The data reveals that economic empowerment is the main important motivating factor to tribal women representation in politics. And such other factors also influenced by the motive factors like education, reservation, information, training, enhance the capacity of women representation in politics.

**Table-04**

**Awareness level of the Respondents about the Panchayati Raj**

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
Knowledge of Panchayati Raj Act 73rd Amendment	19	38.00
Sources of Income of Panchayats	13	26.00
Power & Works of Panchayats	15	30.00
Seats reserved for women in PRI's, Assemblies & Parliament	21	42.00

Source: Field Survey

Table No. 4 shows that respondents have very less awareness about the Panchayati Raj Institution. They have very little knowledge about the Panchayati Raj Act 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, power and works of the Gram Panchayats, sources of income of Gram Panchayats and reservation of seats PRI's, assemblies and parliament. So, we found less awareness of the respondents about various issues of PRI's and constitutional bodies.

**Self-confidence regarding changes:** To analyze the any persons character self confidence is very much essential factor to determine the empowerment. Hence researcher wanted to know that whether changes occurred in respondents behavior after entering to the panchayat politics, regarding changes women respondents have self confidence or not. Different opinions regarding this collected data analyzed in the Table No. 5.

**Table-05**  
**Respondent is having self confidence regarding changes**

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	43	86.00
No	7	14.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Source: Field survey*

Above table No. 4 shows the data analyses regarding participation of women in politics create in their behavior as increase in Self confidence. In table out of 50 respondents, 86%(43) respondents they felt that there is a change in their behavior and created self-confidence and 14%(07) respondents were think that there no change in their behavior and increased the self-confidence. The whole table data analyses that regarding their changes they have very good confidence with their family support and few respondents don't feel that they have increased their self-confidence due to some reasons.

The study shows that the political awareness and participation of tribal women is very low compared to the general women. The factors like low literacy level, lack of exposure and traditional restriction on women have stopped tribal women from entering the political field. Most of the (53%) women are unaware about the political reservations for women and those who have contested in the election are also having very negative attitude towards the politics. But most of them have realized the importance of political representation and voting rights only after participate to the election. Thus women could realize the need for women representation in the politics to create their own identity and to find out solutions to the major problem of women's life. Most of women who are interested to join politics feel that they lack the confidence and courage to play an active role in the field of politics. In this regard there is need for the PRI'S involvement in creating positive environment for the political participation of tribal women and facilitating for more and more tribal women's representation in the politics.

**Conclusion:** Finally the findings of the study show that there has been considerable improvement in the status of tribal women after they joined the PRI's. The PRI's have been able to improve the self confidence of the tribal women and helped in creating awareness regarding the major issues like political reservation, voting rights, political participation, and political representation. Even though tribal women have become the aware of political participation they lack the confidence to become active Participants in the political process. Tribal women were able to develop the self confidence and abilities of self expression. On the other hand PRI's have successful in mobilizing women and encouraging for political participation but have failed to encourage for self employment through which economic liberation of tribal women could be attained. Whereas the overall contribution of PRI's towards the empowerment of tribal women in Davanagere district is appreciable.



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