

Between Institutions and Movements: Exploring the Political Empowerment of Tribal Women in Telangana

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Abstract

One of the most complex and unstudied aspects of democratic governance in post bifurcation of India is the political empowerment of tribal women of Telangana. Tribal women in the state come from various tribal communities like Gonds, Koyas, Lambadas, Chenchu, Kolam etc., and are living in condition of triple marginalisation, labour condition, which is based on gender, tribal group and poor economic position. Tribal women across the state belong to different tribal communities. This article looks at the nature, extent and limitations of the political empowerment of tribal women in Telangana inculcated in the historical, social-cultural and the constitutional and institutional contexts. It presents an account of how the traditional governance systems of the colonies were disrupted, followed by the land alienation and forest rights erosion processes in the post-colonial context, that resulted in the current conditions of tribals' marginalisation. It outlines the constitutional and policy landscape of the judicial inclusion of women in tribal politics, highlighting the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayats Act 1996, Telangana Panchayat Raj Act 2018, and Forest Rights Act 2006, and their scope for transformation, along with the disparity between discourse and practice. Although numerical representation of tribal women in gram panchayats and local governance institutions has risen significantly in the scheduled areas of Telangana, their substantive political empowerment is still restricted by the fact that their literacy level is significantly lower than their counterparts in out-of-scheduled areas, they are economically vulnerable, and they are represented by male relatives, and that they receive insufficient administrative assistance as well as structural exclusion within political parties and state bureaucracies. Included in this is the rich history of movement-based political mobilisation beyond institutional avenues, such as against displacement, forest rights etc., a form of political agency which is also crucial but less formally recognised. The role of civil society organizations, self-help group federations and Integrated Tribal Development Agencies in enhancing the capacity of the tribal women's political participation is critically examined. Based on the existing literature from both political science and gender studies, development economics and tribal studies, the article concludes that this substantive failure to empower tribal women can be resolved only by addressing the gaps in political, economic and institutional dimensions in a complementary fashion, such as improving and enforcing the PESA, ensuring secure forest and land rights for tribeswomen, ensuring political parties are accountable, and continuing to invest in tribal women's capacity-building for current and ongoing capacity building programmes that are based in the lived reality of tribal communities. Political empowerment of Telangana's tribal women is not only about representation but a condition to drive deeper political democratization in Telangana.

Keywords: Tribal women, political parties, women empowerment, Panchayat Raj, hierarchy, Constitutional amendments, etc.

Introduction

India's democratic journey has always been fraught with problems due to the intense social polarization that characterised Indian society. Tribal women are one of the residual groups in this multifaceted society, who are at the bottom of a hierarchical structure, which is further influenced by caste and gender along with economic



marginalisation. Tribal women or Adivasi women are an important yet consistently underrepresented constituency in the newly created Union Territory of Telangana and their political engagement is limited by structural, cultural and institutional barriers. The new state of Telangana, created out of the former state of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, does have significant population of tribal communities especially in the north and east districts of the state which include Adilabad, Bhadradi Kothagudem, Mulugu and Jayashankar Bhupalpally. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) population is around 9.34% of the state's total population with women constituting almost half of the population (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, government of India, 2011). In spite of the constitutional protection and affirmative action policies and the rising attitude towards women empowerment, tribal women in Telangana still face an inclusive but exclusive political scenario.

Political empowerment is an issue that must be seen in the social, economic and historical context. Scholars have stressed that empowerment is a multidimensional phenomenon with access to resources, ability to participate in decision making, and exercise power in public life as its dimensions. (Kabeer, 1999) These dimensions are interlinked with individual histories of displacement for tribal women, loss of rights to forest resources and by erosion of traditional governance structures. It would be wrong to see tribal women as only victims, however. In the tribal belt of Telangana, women have shown up as challengers, organizers and elected representatives, confronting people's marginalisation from the inside of the institutions. It is important to see both aspects of the opportunities given to state people through reservation policies and the restrictions that remain on how these reservations can be practised by them.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context

It is essential for any discussion about tribal women's political situation in Telangana to grasp the issue of tribal communities in Telangana. Tribal communities in the present-day state of Telangana, such as the Gonds, Koyas, Lambadas, Chenchus, Kolams and Bondas, lived in the forested areas of the Deccan peninsula for centuries and had distinctive cultures, forest-dependent livelihoods, and moderate levels of gender equity in their governance institutions (Beteille, 1998). The processes were totally reversed during the colonial era. The colonial policy of reserving forests led to the displacement of the tribal groups and their traditional way of living and the process of economic and political marginalisation of these people did not abate much after independence (Guha, 2007).

Tribal societies have a complex system of patriarchal control which in some ways, is different from that of the caste Hindu. Some tribal groups traditionally granted women more social licence regarding who they could marry, chose to attend community activities, and enjoyed greater freedom of movement as compared to the concept which was religiously imposed upon upper caste Hindu women (Xaxa, 2004). But this relative freedom has often been interpreted as gender equality. In reality, the subordination in the domestic sphere by the men, inability to access formal community institutions, and marginalisation of tribal women as women, poor and tribal themselves has made them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation such as trafficking, sexual violence, and labour-driven exploitation (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991).

Post-independence integration of tribal communities with the mainstream political economy worsened gender relations in the tribal communities. Incorporation into mainstream society led to new patriarchal norms and land alienation, displacement by big infrastructure projects and abolition of forest rights drove tribal households to greater poverty. This burden was borne primarily by women, and intensified as they had to collect forest/garden produce and water and for firewood, and as forests became scarce (Agarwal, 1994). It is important to understand this socioeconomic context to explain why although tribal women are formally part of political institutions through reservation, in some ways their empowerment is weak.



Constitutional Provisions and Policy Framework

Constitution of India offers substantial, though limited, basis for political empowerment of tribal women. However, there is a special provision enshrined in the Indian Constitution, through its Fifth Schedule, regarding the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India which deals with Tribes Advisory Councils in States where significant tribal population exists and special powers for Capitals to protect the interests of tribes (Government of India, 1950). PESA is a more important piece of legislation that broadened the application of Panchayat Raj system to Scheduled Areas, with a specific mention of the Gram Sabha and its control over resources in the local community, positioning the governance power closer to tribal communities (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1996).

Sub-reservation scheme for women of Scheduled Tribes in scheduled areas has been introduced in the 73rd Constitutional amendment of 1992 which institutionalized Panchayati raj system throughout the country, with a 1/3 reservation for women (Government of India, 1992). The Telangana Panchayat Raj Act 2018 was subsequently passed by the Telangana government to extend this reservation to 50% with effective implementation ensuring equal representation of women at the grassroots level, a few states ensure women's equal footing on the ground (Government of Telangana 2018). This, at least on paper, provides massive room for political involvement among women in tribes. There are formal positions of political power in the communities reserved for women from ST backgrounds in scheduled areas, reflecting that tribal women in these areas are constitutionally entitled to formal positions of political power.

In addition to Panchayat Raj, the tribal women have also had reservations in the state legislative assembly. As per the Election Commission of India (2014), 12 assembly seats are reserved for STs in the state of Telangana out of all the 119 seats. In some way, the trend of reservations development would help the entry of tribal women candidates into legislative politics but it is not in itself a specific reservation for women candidates. Although the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, has recently been enacted at the national level, it has significant implications for the political empowerment of tribal women as it imposes two obligations, one that STs and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers have community rights over forestland, and one that the forest rights committees under the Act require women's participation (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2006). With proper application, it can provide political ownership on a formal basis to tribal women in the form of ownership over natural resources, something that is connected to their everyday lives.

Panchayati Raj and Grassroots Participation

Tribal women in Telangana have gained access to formal politics through the main institutional space of the Panchayat raj system. Due to giving power to the villages level and making reservation for the women, the numbers of tribals women in villages have increased a lot. However, research was conducted on three tribal dominated districts of erstwhile Andhrapradesh (before bifurcation into Telengana and Andhrapradesh) that the number of tribal women elected to the panchayat posts of sarpanches and ward members grew tremendously after every panchayat poll after the 73rd Amendment was implemented. In the scheduled areas of Telangana, this has continued and tribal women from various districts in Adilabad, Mulugu and Bhadradri Kothagudem enjoy a prominent stake in the gram panchayats.

But, the "formal representation but non-substantive participation" has remained a stark and abominable dimension of tribal women's political life. Proxy representation, which involves the formal election of a woman into a position of power but where the real power is held by another, usually a man, in this case by a husband and/or father-in-law, has consistently been documented in the study of women's political empowerment in South Asia and it has been labelled "Pradhan Pati" in the context of North India. Telangana's tribal areas are no different. A study conducted in the scheduled area panchayats, revealed that often the men of the household attend Gram Sabha meetings on behalf of the elected female sarpanches, sign all formal documents, and interact with

government officials, side by side whom she is usually not present. The basic issue with this practice is that it fundamentally detracts from the idea of a 'reservation', fostered in the false notion that women are represented, but not necessarily given an equal opportunity to assert themselves within political power. Very basic issue here is that it undermines the principles of 'reservation', giving the impression of female representation without necessarily giving their equal footing in political power to assert themselves.

There are a number of reasons this phenomenon continues. The poor literacy rate among the tribal women hampers their capacity to read government documents, comprehends the legal provisions and concerns the process and system of government bureaucracies relating to local governance. The literacy rate among women in the tribal community is about 49.7% (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011), which is significantly lower than the literacy rate for women which is 59.4% in Telangana, and well below the required literacy rate for efficient political functioning. Economically dependent women have less political power. Working as daily wage earners or forest produce collectors limit women's ability to attend meetings, visit government offices, or build relationships, the backbone of effective political action and representation. This cost is so high that many tribal women don't participate in politics (Duflo, 2012).

The level of mobility is lower in tribal communities than for some caste Hindu communities, but is a constraint in tribes, especially for those who have internalised and incorporated mainstream male-dominated norms through recognising and linking with non-tribal society. The physical geography of the scheduled area of Telangana, comprising of forest terrain, inadequate infrastructure of roads and low density of habitation, further limits the scope of the political participation (Planning Commission of India 2008).

However, there are well-documented cases of tribal women wielding real political power under the Panchayati Raj system given these restrictions. Tribal women sarpanches have proven to be effective grassroots leaders in areas such as forest claims, drinking water supplies and women's safety in several gram panchayats of the districts of Mulugu and Bhadrachalam, powers they've acquired from their community roles and their firsthand experience of the issues they speak for (Guha 2007). There have been a number of self-help group federations affiliated with NGOs that have engaged in enhancing the political ability of tribal women through training on how to function in a panchayat, how to advocate their rights in court and speaking in public. There has been a concerted effort to equip tribal women's political capacities through various organizations, like the Telangana Girijan Mahila Sangham and self-help group federations organized by various NGOs which train women in dealing with panchayats, legal rights and public speaking. The capacity-building aspects of these efforts, though small, suggest some possibility for transformation when used in conjunction with the substantive support structures.

Representation in State Legislature and Higher Politics

Even at the state level, there is a dearth of tribal women's participation in the legislative houses of state governments in Telangana and party-political bodies beyond gram panchayat level. At the state assembly level, 12 constituencies were contested for in the 2018 assembly elections in Telangana, but there were a very low percentage of women candidates among the candidates of the major political parties, such as Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS, now Bharat Rashtra Samithi), the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Election Commission of India, 2018). This is true of most states in India where there are candidates who are female niche only in local body elections while the elective list of candidates is invariably elected by the parties through a gender-blind process, if they aren't motivated by a gender movement or their own party promises.

There are further challenges in the politics of the tribal areas in Telangana. Contractors, liquor shop owners and non-tribal political entrepreneurs are strong influential players in these regions who dictate who gets money for campaigning, political connections and access to government patronage. A lack of financial and social



power which could aid them in organizing campaigns, puts tribal women at a structural disadvantage in this setting. Furthermore, there has been a complicated relationship among women's political agency, on one hand, and historical linkages of political parties, especially the leftist political parties that worked in the Telangana forest belt, on the other hand. Although women cadre members and women activists were formally included in Naxalite organizations in the region and some tribal organizations' actions did, occasionally, stop gender-based exploitation, their effect on women mainstream political participation has been not clearly understood, rather their conflict environment, as they said it, often restricted women's involvement in the mainstream political institutions (Kannabiran, 2010).

To some extent, it can be learnt from the Telangana formation movement itself, which led to the creation of the State of Telangana in 2014. Women of the tribes were not part and parcel of the Telangana movement, but were active rather and protested, participated in hunger strikes and even mobilised the communities in the northern districts. Poor, marginal groups, the Adivasi and their rights were often brought up by the language of the movement. However, the establishment of the new State and access to power was done in a manner that ended up marginalizing both women and men of the tribes again in the political settlement. The claims of the movement improving implementation of PESA, safeguard of forest rights, restoration of land alienation were embodied in policy and realized only piece-meal and unevenly, due to structural patterns of political consolidation of the movement which serve the dominant groups interests best.

Role of Civil Society and Social Movements

Civil society organisations, social movements have been an essential component to develop platforms for political empowerment of tribal women in Telangana, at times filling the vacuum left by the government and political parties. Tribal women have been mobilised as actual claimants and on tribe committee members by organisations involved in forest rights, including those that have been supporting the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, and as a result their capacity to collectively act and govern in a formal sense is enhanced (Springate-Baginski & Blaikie, 2007). Although primarily an economic institution, the Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) has developed forums for tribal women to build their confidence in group decision making on livelihoods matters which can translate to political confidence.

Self-help groups (SHGs) for women is one political arena that has gained importance in the process of political socializing among tribal women, as in the promotion of SHGs under the welfare program of the state government and endorsement by the national government through the creation of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). SHGs establish periodic spaces to deliberate, manage finances and negotiate with governments and banks, all skill building activities around political participation. In India, studies indicate that membership of an SHG is positively related to political awareness, voting and sometimes willingness to participate in the electoral process (Sanyal, 2009). At the Panchayat and block level there are reports of SHG federations organising joint representation for needs, sometimes working on a collective political level in tribal areas, where the ability exists to take joint political action.

The politicians are also involved in the political empowerment equation through their role in operating the Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs) in Telangana's scheduled areas, which works out through welfare schemes and implementation of PESA. The effectiveness has been limited with their lack of channelling of resources for administration, inadequate staffing, and development planning ignoring development processes in which tribal women may have a collective voice (Bijoy 2012). It is thus an extremely ambivalent affair between the tribal women and the state machinery; and simultaneously the state extends sets-up of inclusiveness while it ensures sets-up of exclusiveness from possibly the agency implementing it.

Apart from the formal civil society, it is important to give credit to the tradition of civil society by the forest Telangana tribal women of the forest belt. Women's political agency in movements opposing displacement, opposing illegal liquor trade, which eventually became much larger anti-arrack movement was to engulf Andhra Pradesh in the early 1990s and in accessing forest property rights is long standing and predates the formal representative institutions and indeed is a realistic form of political agency, (Kishwar, 1996). The movement to end arrack use which began in the district of Nellore, in the then undivided state of Andhra Pradesh in 1992 and was nurtured by the marginalised women's experience, changed the experience of their suffering into the same in terms of its political ramifications and to a formal shift in policy. Tribal political activation by the movement is a crucial component of tribal women empowerment politically in Telangana state.

Intersecting Barriers: Caste, Class, and Patriarchy

It is important to consider seriously the intersectionality of multiple sufferings of subordination when analysing tribal women's political empowerment in Telangana. For tribal women, the gender discrimination/inequality does not exist alone and separable from other treatment based on class position and social stigma based on tribal identity. These forms of oppression are interlocking and intersect to produce compounded disadvantages that cannot be solved by numbers, as Crenshaw (1991) has shown. The woman who is elected as a sarpanch have to deal with not only the patriarchal structures in their own community, but also the caste and class prejudices of the government officials, contractors, and political intermediaries that they will interact with in the process of doing her job.

Political empowerment is a field of discussion which deserves a special emphasis on the economic dimension of political empowerment. Resources, including time, money and social capital, are unevenly distributed in political participation. Tribal women have been very marginalised at the tail-end of Telangana's economic activity and are thus suffering from severe constraints with respect to political participation. Though banned under the Constitution, debt bondage still persists in some tribal areas which further undermines the independence of women and their capacity to be involved in activities that would be displeasing to the employer who may be tied with tribal political network (Srivastava, 2005). This vulnerability is exacerbated by a lack of land rights, or rather by lack of land rights, as relevant. Women's rights to land ownership are in particular weak – tribal land ownership does not enjoy any stronger rights than non-tribal land, and the weakening rights of the women to tribal land are reinforced by the lack of any enforcement of the prohibition on land alienation in this context despite the Constitution's explicit banning of such practises, and by the inability to protect the political independence of its owners, against the ensnaring power of patron-client relationships (Agarwal, 1994).

Literacy, education and political empowerment are interconnected but not necessarily causal. Tribal women's ability to participate in politics, regardless of their level of formal literacy, is inevitably restricted by their inability to readily interpret or use the formal written language and mechanical forms of their surrounding world. However, education alone does not lead to empowerment. Even well-informed and educated tribal women have been discovered to have structural barriers to political engagement that stem from the prevailing patriarchal notions and economic subordination (Drèze & Sen, 2013). On the other hand, women low on formal education have proven to be very effective when they are empowered by strong community organizations and when they inhabit a space of politics that is articulated with their community power and lived experience. It's not just about education, but rather an extended culture of support, solidarity and structural transformation in which political involvement is realized.

Recent Developments and State Initiatives

Since its inception the Telangana state government has been pursuing various activities which indirectly impact the political empowerment of tribal women. More agricultural in orientation, the implementation of Rythu



Bandhu scheme and basically various projects for land registration in scheduled areas have political implications as it can enhance the economic status of women in the tribal communities. The exposure of funds to improve Gram Sabha functioning in scheduled tribal areas under PESA, under the thrust of the state government, is more relevant, if it is implemented in spirit, would form constant forum for tribal women's collective voice on issues of resources management, development planning and governance of the community (Government of Telangana, 2018).

The Telangana state government's Dalit Bandhu scheme is a case in point of direct benefit transfer schemes that, while of economic benefit, do not necessarily translate into political empowerment, although it is primarily for Dalit communities. Empowerment demands transfer of resources, but also the reallocation of decision-making power, which includes community resources, priorities for development and access to political representation. Thus, the state's record is mixed. PESA has been incorporated into the formal framework but in local body and tribal Assam villages, Gram Sabha meetings are seldom held regularly, are not attended by many, and are presided over by local elites and not tribal women as envisaged in PESA.

The pandemic COVID-19 created some challenges and, in a strange twist, some new opportunities as well. The economic shock caused by the pandemic has been a bigger burden, especially in regional areas, where the majority of the population relies on daily wage labour and forest produce, so that the economic crash affected everyone as soon as they had to stay at home during the lockdowns. The economic hardship also has limited the ability of tribal women to engage in political participation. The access to digital communication also meant the introduction of some new mediums to share information regarding governance and rights during the pandemic: groups on WhatsApp, online meetings; which could reach tribal women who may not always have access to such information.

Pathways Forward

Political empowerment of tribal women in Telangana is no iron-clad argument nor can it be taken for granted. It is an advancing, contested and multidirectional process, which should be performed at the same time at an institutional, social and economic level. The findings in this article can inform a couple of general tracks that could be further developed to enhance substantive political participation by tribal women. What is needed is not just the strengthening of the number of political reservations but also their quality. This equates to building the capacity and supporting the representatives of tribal women and the political system in a robust framework that prohibits proxy representation. It involves ensuring accountability of political parties for having tribal women candidates as legislators in scheduled areas even without having the enforcement of gender quota. And, seriously working with the substantive work of Gram Sabha processes not allowing them to be rubber-stamp bodies of decisions taken by the male elites or by the government officials.

Structural transformation to overcome economic hindrances towards political participation lies in measures that go beyond income support, and these involve secure access to and tenure of land by tribal women, decent wages for forest produce collection and access to credit (and savings accounts) on non-exploitative terms. The Forest Rights Act, if effectively implemented, can be a potent instrument to this end, by ensuring community land rights, which would enhance the economic status of tribal women and establishing community governance institutions by making participation of tribal women mandatory. A mechanism must be developed to capture and share successful cases of tribal women's political leadership and create a repository of models which can inform and inspire others to do the like in other parts of the world.

Last but not least, the political empowerment of tribal women needs to be linked to the larger issue of tribal rights, forest rights, land rights and rights of self-governance under PESA. Better economic security, better land security, better recognition and strengthening of governance institutions, those of the tribal community is a



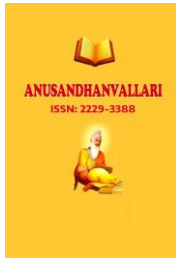
big boost in women's political empowerment. The inclusion of tribal women in the existing political system is not the same as political agency; it's a matter of changing the nature of the political system to become truly responsive to tribal women's needs and priorities.

Conclusion

Political empowerment of tribal women in Telangana has been an incomplete narration, one of a huge formal improvement with a continued substantive challenge. Tribal women now occupy a large space in formal politics via constitutional provisions, through PESA and through Panchayati Raj reservations. However, the exercise of real political power is still limited due to low literacy rates, economic dependency, gender norms and political party and state-bureaucracies which are subjected to structural bias. There is no doubt that some grounds for optimism exist based on the significant strides made in tribal areas in overcoming the obstacles of tribal activism, the increasing ability of civil society organisations there and the courage and determination of individual tribal women leaders who have managed to overcome these challenges despite great odds. What is needed is a sustained effort from the government, political parties, civil society, and tribal communities themselves, to shift away from formal inclusion to substantive empowerment to make a way for tribal women to be an active part of political institutions, and then for tribal women to be truly represented by political institutions. This isn't only a social justice demand by the marginalized, but also for deeper democratic nature of the political life of Telangana.

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