RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRENGTHENING TRIBAL WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN JHARKHAND

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the Panchayati Raj system and the role of Panchayati Raj system in Strengthening tribal women's leadership in Jharkhand. Women's leadership plays an important role in ensuring the effectiveness of the Panchayati Raj system in Jharkhand. These leaders, emerging from within their communities, act as agents of change and playing an aspirational role in decision making, advocating for local needs and guiding developmental initiatives. Despite recognizing the important role of women leaders in driving progress and community engagement. There are many challenges which act as a barrier in tribal women leadership. Initiatives like, improved communication, accessibility, transparent governance, interactions. Between local leaders and administrative bodies are important for sustainable development. Local leaders within the framework of the Panchayati Raj system in Jharkhand have a diverse role deeply Interconnected with governing their communities.

INTRODUCTION

India has a rich tradition of democracy dating back to the 6th century BCE. There is numerous evidence that proves that India had a vibrant local self-government system under various monarchies. After British colonial rule in India this culture of local self-government and democracy came to its demise. Indian independence movement and efforts of Mahatma Gandhi revived the hope for the local self-government and grassroot democracy in India. After independence, the Constitution of India paved the way for development of local government and decentralization. The preamble of the Indian constitution states its commitment to "social, political and economic justice" and Panchayati Raj system is an initiative for power sharing. Leadership not only forms a valuable training ground for the elected leaders at higher levels of representative institutions but also becomes a source of political education of citizens in general. Political education means that citizens knowledge and experience the political machinery operating at local levels and understand their role in it. Local government is a door-to-door government. Panchayati raj has given the rural people an opportunity which they never had before. Now people have the power to solve their own problems and to do things by themselves. Local leadership plays an important role in ensuring the effectiveness of the Panchayati Raj system in Jharkhand. The Panchayati Raj system is a significant instrument of decentralized governance in India, empowering rural communities to participate in

decision-making. For tribal women in Jharkhand, this system has been a crucial platform for political empowerment, ensuring their representation in local governance. Their primary focus is on representing their communities and ensuring that marginalized, Socially, economically and politically disadvantaged sections and minority groups are given importance in decision making. Despite constitutional provisions and affirmative actions, tribal women face challenges in assuming leadership roles effectively. This article explores the impact of the Panchayati Raj system on tribal women's leadership in Jharkhand, highlighting challenges and suggesting measures for further strengthening their political participation.

Historical Background of Panchayati Raj and Tribal Governance in Jharkhand: Jharkhand, known for its rich tribal heritage, has a long history of self-governance rooted in traditional village institutions. The Panchayati Raj system in Jharkhand has evolved over time, influenced by traditional governance structures and constitutional reforms. Jharkhand has a strong history of community-led governance, particularly among its tribal communities. Tribal councils such as Munda Manki (Mundas), Parha Panchayat (Oraons), and Majhi Pargana (Santhals) played significant roles in decision-making at the village level. During British rule, the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (1949) provided some autonomy to tribal communities in land and governance matters. However, British policies weakened traditional self-governance structures. Formal establishment of

the Panchayati Raj system through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) mandated reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. Jharkhand implemented this system in 2001, ensuring 50% reservation for women, including tribal women, in panchayat elections (Government of Jharkhand, 2021). This legal provision created avenues for tribal women to assume leadership positions and actively participate in grassroots democracy.

Impact of the Panchayati Raj System on Tribal Women's Leadership

Increased Political Participation: The reservation policy has significantly increased the representation of tribal women in panchayats. Reports indicate that in the 2015 Jharkhand panchayat elections, approximately 58% of elected representatives were women, many of whom belonged to tribal communities (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021). These women now engage in decision-making processes that affect their communities, breaking traditional barriers of male dominance.

Social Empowerment: Participation in panchayats has led to greater social recognition for tribal women. Traditionally confined to domestic roles, many now actively contribute to governance, influencing policies on education, healthcare, and livelihood (Sharma & Kumar, 2020). Their leadership has also inspired younger generations to aspire for political roles, gradually shifting societal norms.

Economic Development and Resource Management: Tribal women leaders in panchayats play a crucial role in managing resources, particularly in forest and land governance. Jharkhand's tribal economy largely depends on forest produce, and elected women representatives have facilitated better implementation of government schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and self-help group (SHG) initiatives (Singh, 2019). This has improved rural employment opportunities and economic independence among tribal women.

Improved Governance and Policy Implementation: Tribal women in panchayats have been instrumental in addressing local issues such as education, sanitation, and healthcare. The presence of women leaders has led to more gender-sensitive policies, improving maternal healthcare and school enrollment rates (Das & Verma, 2021). Their leadership has enhanced governance at the grassroots level, ensuring that policies are implemented effectively for community welfare.

Sustainable development: There are Numerous challenges to sustainable development in India. While many of these problems are caused due to insensitive use of natural resources, governmental responsibilities also trifle in solving the critical issues. The deterioration of environment has a direct impact on the life of individuals, affecting the longevity of life. Deforestation, threat to biodiversity, climate change, increasing pollution level. Groundwater depletion is directly related to Sustainability challenges. The role of tribal women is very crucial in sustainable development. The involvement of tribal women, local communities and Panchayats is a must toward creating sustained and self-reliant communities.

Preservation of cultural heritage: Efforts have been made to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of tribal communities, with a focus on empowering women as custodians of cultural knowledge. Leadership of tribal women is also important for preserving indigenous languages and natural identity.

Water harvesting: Tribal women leadership is very crucial for traditional and modern water conservation techniques. Such as step wheels, Check dams and bamboo drip irrigation to store and distribute water efficiently. They promote and implement rainwater harvesting systems in homes and community spaces. Many tribal women participate in deforestation prevention, Soil Conservation, and maintain natural catchment areas to improve groundwater recharge. Their role is also significant for water sanitation. Tribal women ensure the purification of water using traditional methods like boiling, filtering through sand and using plant-based purifiers.

Challenges Faced by Tribal Women in Panchayati Raj: Tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system face unique challenges that stem from socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers. Despite constitutional provisions ensuring their participation, their leadership is often constrained by deep-rooted systemic issues. The key challenges they face are as follows:

Patriarchal and Cultural Barrier: Despite constitutional provisions, tribal women continue to face patriarchal resistance. Many elected women representatives function as proxies for male relatives, limiting their autonomy in decision-making (Roy & Choudhary, 2018). Deep-rooted gender biases hinder their ability to exercise independent leadership.

Lack of Education and Awareness: Educational barriers remain a significant challenge. Jharkhand's literacy rate among tribal women is lower than the national average, affecting their confidence and effectiveness in governance (Census of India, 2011). Lack of awareness about rights and governance mechanisms further restricts their participation.

Limited Financial and Institutional Support: Financial constraints and inadequate institutional support hinder the full participation of tribal women in panchayats. Limited access to government funds and bureaucratic hurdles often delays project implementation, reducing their ability to bring tangible changes to their communities (Gupta, 2020).

Political and Administrative Challenges: In many cases, elected tribal women leaders are controlled by their husbands or male relatives. This undermines the actual empowerment of women and reduces them to mere symbolic figure. Many tribal women lack prior political exposure, making it difficult to navigate the complexities of governance. Political parties often overlook them for higher leadership positions, and they face challenges in asserting their voices in decision-making bodies dominated by men (Verma, 2021).

Remoteness: Many tribal communities live in geographically isolated areas, which limits their access to participation in the decision-making process. The isolation of tribal regions make it difficult for women to access resources, opportunities and ideal platforms for leadership. Lack of roads, transportation and communication networks makes it difficult for tribal women to attend training programs and participate in governance meetings. Lack of external exposure restricts their ability to challenge traditional norms and demand leadership positions.

Strategies for Strengthening Tribal Women's Leadership

Capacity Building and Leadership Training: To empower tribal women, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should conduct regular training programs on governance, leadership, and financial management. Capacity-building initiatives can enhance their confidence and decision-making abilities.

Enhancing Educational Opportunities: Improving literacy rates among tribal women through targeted education programs can strengthen their leadership roles. Special scholarships and vocational training programs should be introduced to equip them with the necessary skills for governance.

Strengthening Institutional Support: Governments should ensure timely financial disbursement to panchayats and simplify bureaucratic procedures. Providing mentorship programs and legal assistance can further help tribal women overcome administrative challenges.

Encouraging Political Mobilization: Political mobilization refers to the process of organizing and engaging individuals in social movements to advocate for specific causes or goals. Women collectives and self-help groups should be encouraged to support elected representatives. Political parties should also prioritize the inclusion of tribal women in leadership positions beyond the panchayat level, ensuring their continuous political growth.

Addressing Societal Attitudes and Gender Bias: Awareness campaigns should be conducted to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality in tribal communities. Encouraging male allies to support women's leadership can facilitate a more inclusive governance structure.

Health and wellbeing: Ensuring access to quality healthcare services including maternal health, family planning and mental health support is very vital for tribal women leadership. Provide nutritional support and education to improve the health and well-being of tribal women and their families.

Collaboration and partnership: Collaboration with NGOs in tribal areas to leverage their expertise and resources in empowering women. NGOs can engage tribal communities in the process of empowering women, ensuring their support and participation.

By implementing these strategies, we can create an environment where tribal women can fully utilize and realize their leadership potential. Contributing to the progress and prosperity of their communities and giving the Panchayati Raj system a real meaning.

CONCLUSION

The Panchayati Raj system in Jharkhand has provided a platform for tribal women to engage in governance and decision-making. While significant progress has been made, persistent challenges hinder their full empowerment. Despite recognizing the pivotal role of women in driving progress and community engagement, persistent issues like government negligence, limited resources, communication gap and concern about transparency and accountability are evident. Addressing these barriers through education, capacity-building, financial support, and societal change can further strengthen tribal women's leadership. As more tribal women assume leadership roles, their contributions will pave the way for a more inclusive and effective grassroots democracy in Jharkhand.

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