

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY IN ODISHA**DILLIP KUMAR MALLIK**

Abstract: Decentralisation promotes participation and improves the controlling function held by the lower levels of the political system and hence could be a good policy option for enhancing women's political participation. Decentralization has assumed a vital role in matters of governance in almost all the developing countries of the world. Empowerment is the most recent policy approach to women in development. It takes into account not only both the practical and strategic gender needs of women but also recognizes their triple role in development. Empowerment has a number of dimensions with political participation as being one of them. The present paper divided into two parts. The first part covers the theoretical aspects of the 73rd Amendment Act and the second part discusses how women are empowered or developed through the participation of lower level of political system in Odisha and what is the status of women, their role in governance and political empowerment in Odisha after the implementation of 73rd amendment act.

Key words: Decentralization, Empowerment, Panchayat, Participation.

'Educate one man, you educate one person, but educate a woman and you educate a whole civilisation',
Mahatma Gandhi.

Introduction: India being a country of village, true meaning of democracy cannot be achieved unless the power is shared and exercised by the people. Democratic government, according to Abraham Lincoln is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. With the proliferation of state activities in recent times, the government is now tending towards centralisation. Thus now a days, there is the need for democratic decentralisation or development of participatory democracy. Mahatma Gandhi said that the soul of India is to be found in villages. India is a country of village, as per the 2011 census, the total population of Odisha 4,19,47,358. Out of these 3,49,51,234 people live in rural area. In the task of economic regeneration and social transformation of our nation, government action will have to be supplemented by people's efforts. The active participation of the people is the prerequisite for socio-economic progress. Ultimately, the people will have to assume the responsibility for building the nation it is necessary that people should be given power. To achieve this objective, there should be decentralisation power. Decentralisation power will lead to the establishment of regional and local governments, which facilitate local development. Benefit of development must reach the rural areas. In fact, local development will check the migration of rural people to urban areas and it will lead to the reduction in rural-urban disparities. Thus, rural local government is a necessity for democratic decentralisation.

The status of women social, economic, political and general in India today is much higher and improved than it used to be in ancient and medieval periods. Today, women are enjoying many more rights, social and legal, and having greater freedom and voice, are participating more freely, in public affairs. Today the modern Indian women are more exposed to the outer world. They are not confined to the work of housekeeping and bringing up children. Over the years, some structural and cultural changes have been brought

about due to the constant efforts of women's movements and some measures taken by government. As a result of which, women have been provided, equality of opportunities in education, employment and political participation. Further, these changes have reduced their exploitation and oriented them, to develop organisations, which take keen interest, in their problems. But as a matter of fact, these changes are only cosmetic and superficial and in actual practice due rights are denied to women and they continued to be the victims of male domination, they are still discriminated, harassed, humiliated and even exploited. Now a day, the women are given an opportunity to participate in politics in a more active and direct way. No doubt, the assimilation of women in the freedom struggle to free the nation had given them confidence and access to positions of power and responsibility. The political interventions done by women in India, range from movements for peace and good governance to protest against rape, dowry, domestic violence, food adulteration, the price-rise and deforestation. They are raising their voices against discrimination and injustice in social, economic and political spheres. Politics for them does not mean only the activities of electing representatives and governing. It also includes efforts raising consciousness and changing the unequal power structure for a just and equal system.

Historical background: The history of local government in India has a rich past. Its evolution can be traced back to the Vedic times. Modern local self-government was introducing in India for the first time in the year 1882. The brain behind such foundation is Lord Ripon. He took the initiative for systematic and fruitful introduction of local self-government. He stood for fullest possible liberty of action. In a memorandum to the secretary of state dated December 25, 1882, Ripon suggested to train the Indians in the art of self-government in order to give them political education. The resolution initiated by him is regarded as "the

Magna Carta of Local self-government". The decentralisation commission of 1907, resolution of 1907, resolution of 1918, Govt. of India Act of 1919 and Govt. of India Act of 1935 contributed a lot in giving a basic framework for these august institutions. Mahatma Gandhi was also a staunch advocate of rural local-government. During his historic non-cooperation movement against the British rule in 1920, he put emphasis on a constructive programme for promoting the material and moral welfare of the rural India. To him, every village would be a republic and its panchayat should have full power for its welfare. This is popularly known as Ram Rajya of Gandhi our national father. This is based on the revival of village panchayat and introduction of "democratic decentralisation" through devolution of power.

Since 1951, women have been participating, in the formal of politics as voters, s party workers, as candidates contesting various elections and as legislators, and ministers involved in deliberations, and policymaking. There only a few woman who have been able to occupy decision-making positions. The United Nations adopted the convention on the political rights of women in 1952. Since, 1975 four international conferences on women have been held under its auspices; all the conferences have emphasised women's political empowerment as a key concern. Now political parties have started giving some attention to women and their votes, but the inclusion of some issues in their manifestoes and declaration of schemes, not backed by a firm commitment and a definite plan of implementation, has failed to make any impact. Women's organisations, such as Vimochana, Forum for women's rights in Bangalore, Street Mukti Adolan Samiti in Pune, and SEWA in Ahmadabad have reacted to the casual attitude of the parties, towards women and their manner of distributing tickets to candidates with questionable background and have made special appeals for voting. Almost, all political parties are generous, in giving promises for a better future for women. The "women's movement" and the declaration of 1975, as the "women's year" and later 1975-1985, as the "women decades" brought some change in the perspective of political parties towards women.

Impact of the 73rd constitutional amendment on women's empowerment:

The constitution 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 can be described as an epoch-making event in the history of democratic decentralisation in the country, which provided for 33 per cent of reservation for women in panchayat and urban local bodies. These amendments, as the strategy of affirmative action served as major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures. The most significant and salient features of the 73 Amendment Act is the provision of reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in all the 3-tiers of rural local governance system. It lays down in Article 243D (3) that not less than one third of the total number of seats to be

filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and that such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. The Constitutional amendment further lays down in Article 243-D (1) that seats shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat and Article 243-D (2) states that not less than one third of the total number of the seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The number of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes women would be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Article 243-D(4) provides that the office of the Chairperson in the Panchayats at the village or any other level shall also be reserved for, women and such reservation shall not be less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level. The offices so reserved at the level of the Chairperson would also be allotted by rotation to different Panchayats at each level. Besides, where there are no women Chairpersons at all 3-tiers of Panchayati Raj system, the post of Vice-Chairman shall be reserved for women at all levels of rural local governance. After this constitutional amendment, a large number of women have been elected to the PRIs as a result of the mandatory reservation provisions. The reservation provision under the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 made to ensure that women play a major role in rural local self-governance system. It also provided women an opportunity to demonstrate their potential and to prove their capability as partners in the process of rural development by participating with their male counterparts.

In the post 73rd Amendment period there are quite many success stories pointing to the political empowerment of women as well as their constructive role for the community development. It has resulted in the increased participation of women in the political life at the grassroots level, growing political awareness among the women, enhancement in the self-esteem and prestige of women, better political orientation of the women. Their growing involvement in the community development works leading to the better management of community development. There are several examples of successful women panchayat chiefs who have contributed to the development of their areas and have become the role models. For instance, Miss Nishika Sabitri who heads a panchayat in a remote tribal area of Orissa has taken initiatives to augment the income of a panchayat by leasing out the ponds and mango orchards. She also ensured the basic needs of the rural people such as bathing and toilet facilities to be hygienically provided. She also took care that the other social welfare schemes such as poverty eradication schemes, widow's pension old age pension, lost cost housing public distribution system etc. are efficiently managed and people are getting benefited by these schemes. Another such example is of Meena Rani Bahera, a SC woman who took up the cudgels against

the corrupt practices plaguing the Panchayats in the distribution of money for low cost houses and stood up against the office bearers. There are many more examples of strong leadership by women in other states as well. In Karnataka, women have proved their leadership qualities if given required support in terms of training and resources; in Andhra Pradesh women in PRIs resulted in the development of social identities and political awareness. There is another study exploring the impact of 73rd Amendment Act on women's leadership in PRIs in Punjab that found that reservation has made significant difference both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The study highlights the fact that if constraints (like domestic responsibilities, caste and gender biases etc.) are overcome, women can prove leadership qualities. Recently members of Norwegian Embassy Delegation interacted with the elected women representatives of PRIs in Rajasthan (Jaipur and Tonk district) and observed that women had developed the abilities to articulate the priorities of their respective areas and were influencing the decision making process effectively.

Panchayat Raj Institution in Odisha and women participation: Orissa became a separate province in 1936. Soon after the independence of our country, the Government of Odisha enacted Orissa Gram Panchayat Act in 1948. After that Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959 was enacted and executed on 26th January 1961 in Odisha. Biju Babu when became Chief Minister during sixties, he had made concrete efforts to revitalize Panchayati Raj system. He is one of the pioneers in the field of women participation who strongly advocated for women participation in the local governance system in Odisha. His vision and policy was to empower the Panchayati Raj system with powers and active participation of women. In fact during his second term as Chief Minister (1990-95) and under his dynamic leadership, Odisha became the first state in India to implement the sound provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 in advance to give opportunities to the women by making reservation of 1/3rd seats for them and women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes out of the total seats. It also adds to the credit of Biju Babu that after a long gap he conducted Panchayat elections in Odisha in the year 1992. He was an ardent advocate of devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the PRIs and was most emphatic about participation of women in the rural local governance system. For the first time in the history of independent India, women were given 30% reservation in the three-tier PRIs in Odisha prior to implementation of 73rd amendment Act. He was bold and broad in his vision and approach to ensure the participation of women in rural local self-governance systems in Odisha. Biju Babu was also emphatically emphasized on the political and administrative training and orientation of elected women representatives to acquire skill and knowledge on politics and administration. His proactive vision was that local

Government is the level of Government where women can enter into political life with relative ease, as the costs of mounting election campaigns are relatively low and issues at the local level tend to motivate women to enter politics. Further, local Governments are good training grounds for women politicians who want to reach higher levels of elected or appointed office in Government.

At present, Odisha has three-tier system of rural local self-Government system — the first tier being at the village level i.e. Gram Panchayat, the second tier at the Block level i.e. Panchayat Samiti and the third at the district level i.e. Zilla Parishad and 50% of seats for women has been reserved in all the tiers. The present Panchayati Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishads with 854 elected Zilla Parishad Members, 314 Panchayat Samitis with 6,235 elected Panchayat Samiti Members, 6236 Gram Panchayats including 6,236 elected Sarpanchs and 87,551 elected Ward Members out of which 46,643 Women Ward Members constitute the rural local governance system. Thus, in Odisha now there is a total of 1,00,8765 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local self-governance system out of which 50% women elected members that underlines the importance of women participation in the three-tier rural local self-governance system.

Impact of the 73rd constitutional amendment on women's empowerment in Odisha: As a constitutional mandate under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, provisions have been made for reservation of seats for women in the 3-tier rural local governance system in Odisha like other states. Accordingly and prior to the present 50% reservations for women in the 3-tier rural local bodies, reservations were made for women up to 33% in all rural local bodies as per the provisions of Orissa Gram Panchayat Act 1964, The Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act, 1960 and The Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991 as modified and amended up to date. The objectives of reservation for women in the above three important Acts was to encourage women to participate in the rural local governance system through the provision of reservations. Hence, it may be called as reservational participation of women in rural local self-governance system. The rationale for reservations for women and other disadvantaged groups in the rural local self-governance system intended to give voice and therefore influence to these disadvantaged groups in local governance. The visionary leader of Odisha, Biju Patnaik for the first time in the history of independent India, announced that women will be given 33% reservation in the three-tier rural local governance systems since he was most emphatic about the participation of women in the rural local governance system i.e. Panchayati Raj Institutions. According to his announcement, the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act 1964, the Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act, Orissa Assembly amended 1959 during 1991 and 1992, the Orissa Assembly enacted the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991 in 1991, and that provided 33% reservations for women in conformity with the 73rd

Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. As a mandate and according to the above constitutional and legal provisions, the general Panchayat elections were held in Odisha during 1992 and a total of 28,0696 women representatives were elected for the first time to the 3-tier rural local governance system from 5,262 Gram

Panchayats. This is the first Panchayat election in Odisha where such a large number of women representatives were elected to the 3-tier structure of rural local governance system to participate in the local governance system.

PRI Elected Members	Total Elected Members	Schedule Caste Women	Schedule Tribe Women	Backward Class Women	Reserved for Women	Total Elected Women Members
Ward Members	81,077	6,348	8,060	6,858	7,329	28,595
Sarpanch	5,261	396	579	0	887	1,862
Panchayat Samiti Members	5,260	399	562	411	498	1870
Zila Parishad Members	854	54	86	63	91	294
Total	92,452	7,197	9,287	7,332	8,805	32,621

PRI Elected Members	Total Elected Members	Schedule Caste Women	Schedule Tribe Women	Backward Class Women	Reserved for Women	Total Elected Women Members
Ward Members	87,547	7,056	9,164	8,665	6,529	31,414
Sarpanch	6,234	336	694	462	496	2,188
Panchayat Samiti Members	6,227	449	674	577	488	2,188
Zila Parishad Members	854	54	85	82	75	296
Total	1,00,862	7,895	1,0817	9,786	7,588	36,086

The next general elections to PRIs were held in Odisha in the year 1997. The abstracts of total elected representatives of rural local governance structure system along with women elected representatives of 30 districts of Odisha elected to the rural local self-governance system during the Panchayat General Elections 1997 are given in detail below Table-1. The Table-1 reveals that during 1997 General Panchayat Elections, out of total 92,452 elected PRI members, women constitute only 32,621 of total elected members. Similarly, the abstracts of total elected members of PRI structure along with women elected representatives of 30 districts of Odisha elected to the three-tiers rural local self-governance, system. During the Panchayat General Elections 2002 mentions in table-2, it is found that during the 2002 General Panchayat Elections, out of

1,00,862 elected PRI members, women constitute only 36,086 of the total elected members.

The next General Panchayat Election was held in the year 2007. As per the this Panchayat election data in Odisha there was 314 Panchayat Samitis and 6,234 Gram Panchayats. The total number of Zilla Parishad constituencies was 854 and there was a total number of 6,233 Panchayat Samiti Members in the state. The total number of Ward Members of the state was 87,542. Thus, there was a total of 1,00,863 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local governance system in the state during the 2007 Panchayat Elections. The Table-3 describes in detail about the total elected representatives along with total women members of the rural local governance system in Odisha during the 2007 general elections:

PRI Elected Members	Total Elected Members	Schedule Caste Women	Schedule Tribe Women	Backward Class Women	Reserved for Women	Total Elected Women Members
Ward Members	87,542	7,172	9,665	9,148	5,719	31,704
Sarpanch	6,234	344	907	471	466	2,188
Panchayat Samiti Members	6,233	455	699	632	422	2,208
Zila Parishad Members	854	58	85	88	70	301
Total	1,00,863	8,029	11,356	10,339	6,677	36,401

Initiatives taken by Government Odisha: Several administrative and policy decision measures have been taken by the Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Odisha in the recent past to create an enabling environment, to make the Panchayats more vibrant for effective implementation of rural development programmes, to promote grass root leadership and participatory planning. These includes training and capacity building of the newly elected PRI members on a mission mode, conduct of Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha in a campaign mode, training of officials of Panchayat, Block and district level, devising Job Chart and orientation for the officials engaged in MGNREGS, Odisha Modernizing Economy, Governance & Administration (OMEGA), setting up of Panchayat Helpline, Grievance Redressal Cell, Odisha Livelihood Mission and Odisha State Social Audit, Accountability & Transparency (OSSAAT).

Impact of Women's Participation in Panchayats: Despite several barriers, both institutional and social, the participation of women panchayat representatives has resulted in both developmental and empowerment outcomes. It has often been observed that women prioritize those developmental needs that seem to be more pressing from their perspective. As opposed to the infrastructural development (carrying the enticing promise of contracts and kickbacks) favoured by men, women have initiated work on plans to bring piped water into the village or to build a middle school or high school in the village so that their daughters can study there. Women are also seen to be more involved in monitoring the presence of teachers and medical staff in the school or health centre, and inspecting nutrition centres under the Integrated Child Development Scheme. They have taken the lead in making efforts for smokeless stoves, crèches, community halls, and have taken the initiative in family and matrimonial matters, counselling abusive and/or alcoholic husbands. Sometimes, women-headed Panchayats have even experienced a dramatic increase in their revenues, sponsoring the auction of village ponds, community

forests and village markets for the larger welfare of the community. Above all, it has been observed that women accord great importance to education. The experience of being unable to read agenda papers or minutes, or even to follow the proceedings of Panchayat meetings, has contributed to this awareness of the importance of education, especially for girls. This is why we find many elected women representatives placing high on their agenda the goal of getting a middle or high-school for girls for the village.

Conclusion: 73rd Constitution Amendment Act was legislated to give full opportunity for grassroots democracy to be strengthened with an added special right for women's participation in all the activities. As the field reality is that women's participation in decision-making at all levels, whether national or local, is still marginal, this calls for concerted and committed efforts with initial support from agencies such as committed NGOs to assist them in their efforts. Empowerment is an essential ingredient to uphold the dignity of individuals and bring out originality and initiative for working for the common good. The vision, mission and goals of the Women's Empowerment through Panchayati Raj project are laudable and appropriate for ushering in democratic decentralised developmental initiatives in the rural areas of India. The nature and extent of participation of women is limited to a few areas of rural local governance system and not up to the expected extent. Women have been given opportunities to lead through the reservation provisions imparted in the shape of constitutional amendments. On the contrary, undermining the capacities of women, this opportunity is in majority of cases being utilized by their male counterparts and not by them. In practice their participation is missing and restricted to tokenism participation. Notwithstanding the reservation provisions under constitutional obligations, the rural women are being deprived of real participation in the rural local self-governance system in Odisha. Their participation is confined to their representation and reservational participation only reserved in all the tiers.

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