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88

POLITICS OF INCLUSION: SCHEDULED TRIBE WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Vijayalakshmi

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POLITICS OF INCLUSION: SCHEDULED TRIBE WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE*

V. Vijayalakshmi**

Abstract

Despite the political inclusion of Scheduled Tribe women in panchayats and the claims to equality of opportunity in political participation, the political marginalisation of Scheduled Tribe women continues. Political exclusion is a consequence of their exclusion at the macro and micro levels of social and economic domains. To make their presence in governance more effective institutional strategies should be complemented by political commitment to improve their access to development resources, training and extension, and a facilitating role by civil society associations.

Decentralisation theorists in the context of developing countries have argued that devolution of power and greater people's participation in governance will lead to increased development. In India, the devolution of power to local institutions is a principle that has been in the public perspective since independence. Decentralisation was envisaged as a mechanism to achieve both economic development, and a more effective democratic system that involved people's participation in governance and development efforts.¹ Affirmative action was considered as an important means to ensure that decentralised institutions became participatory, and disadvantaged sections could be represented in political institutions. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment furthered the commitment to local governance also by making provisions through reservation of seats for the representation of disadvantaged sections of society.² Seats have been reserved for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and groups that were earlier only marginally represented in governance.

Inclusion of disadvantaged sections has in principle ensured equality in political opportunities.³ However, despite the institutional changes which were intended to facilitate political

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** E-mail: vijayalakshmi@vsnl.com

equality, the outcome for individuals and groups has not met expectations. The skewed power relations in local governance is an indication that inclusion alone is not a solution to the earlier exclusion of different sections of the population from politics and governance. Given the optimism that the reservation of seats has generated, it would be pertinent to examine the actual changes that have come into being. The paper discusses issues related to representation and participation of Scheduled Tribe women in local governance in Karnataka.

The reservation of seats in the institutions of local governance had been in effect in Karnataka even prior to the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.⁴ The 1983 Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act was a progressive enactment in many ways. Reservation up to 25 per cent of the seats for women, and a proportion of seats commensurate to their population was reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the 1983 Act. It was for the first time in the country that such a high proportion of seats had been reserved for women. For the first time, there was a substantial number of representatives from these groups in a political institution such as the panchayats. However, their number was extremely small in the executive positions, as these positions were not reserved.

In the panchayat system based on the 1993 Act, which followed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, the reservations for women were increased from 25 per cent to one third of total seats.⁵ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have got the same proportion of reservations as before and a category of Backward Classes has been provided with reservations of one third of the seats. Executive positions (i.e. presidents and vice presidents) are also reserved in the same proportion as the ordinary seats.⁶ The posts of president and vice president have been filled to the required minimum too by members of specific groups. After the Karnataka panchayat elections of 2000 there are 7110 Scheduled Tribe representatives in grama panchayats (5570 women and 1540 men), 169 in taluk panchayats (104 women and 65 men), and 54 in zilla panchayats (31 women and 23 men).

The inclusion of Scheduled Tribe women in the political order of local governance needs special emphasis. It is often presumed that the problem of women's political participation is one of exclusion, and representation by itself would solve the

problem.⁷ Political marginalisation among women, however, is not similar as it is related to their level of exclusion from social and economic bases of power.⁸ The complex issues related to tribal women's political status suggest that it is not just a matter of mere exclusion from politics.⁹ The problem of these women is one of lack of economic and social power. The disadvantages arising out of poor economic condition, their position in the social hierarchy and exclusion from the mainstream development process make political role performance a difficult task. The acknowledgement of differences among women assumes significance in the context of changes in the proportion of women belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other disadvantaged class groups in local governance. The integration of the Scheduled Tribes into the political mainstream and governance needs a clear understanding of what inclusion offers to these groups and the process that would facilitate achieving political effectiveness. With a majority of the Scheduled Tribe population living at subsistence levels, their effective role in local governance is important to bring tribal problems into the development agenda and planning.

There are certain issues that need to be understood regarding the political participation of Scheduled Tribe women.¹⁰ First, their participation in governance is related to their level of social and economic development and their access to various resources. Second, to facilitate the participation of tribal women an understanding of the significance of the diversity and differences among women representatives is important. Third, the consequences of ethnic and social divisions in a society on women's role in governance cannot be ignored while planning interventions. And, finally if women are to be effectively involved in governance there should be corresponding changes in their access to various domains of social and economic life.

Political Empowerment and Development

Political *exclusion* of women, Scheduled Tribes and other disadvantaged sections of the population is closely related to their marginal status in different domains of life space. A long history of exclusion from political power needs many favourable conditions to resist the dominant social order.¹¹ Although generalisations regarding the nature of constraints on tribal women are not desirable there are certain factors that are fundamental in achieving political power. These include sustainable development, pro-tribal

policies, access to resources, and human resource development. While tribal women were living at subsistence levels it is more likely that they do not exhibit the 'ideal' level of political efficiency. These women were most concerned with meeting basic survival needs. Their geographical isolation compared to the non-tribals adds to the already existing constraints, separating them from the larger socio-economic processes, and reducing their access to resources, information and knowledge.

The resistance to tribal women playing a greater role in politics and the constraints arising out of it can be better understood if we examine their inclusion and exclusion from important domains of life space.¹² Five domains that are considered here are private (household), institutional structure (involving state), political community (political organisations), economy, and civil society. These domains are complex entities that are fragmented and gendered. Each domain has a core area that is the source of power. Women's performance in each of these domains has consequences for their participation in governance and its possible outcome. For example, the household is not entirely a woman's sphere. The fragmentation of the household into spaces of consumption and decision-making are responsible for inequalities of power. Women are involved in consumption activities but not in decision-making roles which form the actual base of power. Similarly, tribal women's role in the economy is limited to subsistence activities and their role in civil society (such as tribal committees, associations, and neighbourhood groups) is negligible. The power that women possessed depends on their access to each domain and their ability to mobilise resources. A strong power base developed from various spaces of interaction is a facilitating factor in political participation. To enable effectiveness in the polity and to maximize the benefits of *inclusion*, approaches to participation should be linked to economic development and social change.¹³ This means that political empowerment would be related to social and economic empowerment.¹⁴

The manifestation of the exclusion of tribal women is both at the macro and micro levels of social and economic domains. At the macro level Scheduled Tribes as a group are subject to economic and social exclusion. There are several dimensions of it, reflected in their poverty, limited access to basic goods, low education, poor housing, lack of health and other basic amenities. The spiralling effect of the exclusion was also evident in their low political

participation. Apart from these larger processes tribal women are subject to gender based exclusion.

Mechanisms of participation should, therefore, address the constraints emerging out of women's limited access to resources and their social exclusion. Tribal women's participation should be seen in the context of their distinct ethnic identity within a specific spatial context. And, political empowerment should be perceived in conjunction with economic and social empowerment. It is suggested that participation of men and women in tribal communities cannot be explained in isolation from these factors. The linkages between economic development and political empowerment are vital and need to be strengthened to make the representation of Scheduled Tribes more effective.

Tribal women's inclusion in local governance has often been exaggerated as political empowerment.¹⁵ Part of the reason for this is that the reservation of seats is not considered as a means to enable political participation. It is rather seen as an end in itself. However, changes in women's political role are not automatic. By itself the reservation for Scheduled Tribes or other disadvantaged sections has limited potential.¹⁶ If social and economic exclusions are widely prevalent, the reservation of seats will not result in political empowerment. It needs to be augmented by interventions from within and outside the political system. The notion of inclusion should be seen in a broader perspective to include equality in power. Enhancing political efficacy of Scheduled Tribe women involves deconstruction of representation/inclusion as a sufficient condition for political change.¹⁷ The construction of an alternative participatory paradigm should take into consideration economic and social empowerment as essential criteria.

Scheduled Tribe Women in Panchayats¹⁸

The following analysis is based on research carried out in H.D.Kote taluk of Mysore district.¹⁹ The Scheduled Tribe population in Mysore is 3.32 per cent (49008 out of 1477661). Although the proportion of tribals makes Mysore 15th in the state their relative geographical isolation and backwardness makes them a distinct group. The distribution of tribal groups in various districts is presented in Table 1. (see Appendix). In the panchayats of Mysore district during the period 1993-2000 the Scheduled Tribe representatives in grama panchayats were 459; eight in taluk panchayats; and there were

two representatives in the zilla panchayat.²⁰ In the recently conducted elections (February 2000 to grama panchayats, and June 2000 to taluk and zilla panchayats) 290 were elected to grama panchayats (51 men and 239 women); eight to taluk panchayats (1 male representative and 7 women); and one woman representative was elected to the zilla panchayat.²¹

Since seats are reserved in proportion to the population of Scheduled Tribes, there is considerable variation in their number at different levels of local government. Scheduled Tribes are numerically more significant in grama panchayats where tribal populations are concentrated, than in taluk and zilla panchayats (see table 2, Appendix). The lower representation of Scheduled Tribes at the middle and higher levels of panchayats affects the nature of participation in local governance. Their numbers were not adequate to facilitate a greater role in panchayat decision-making.

Among Scheduled Tribe representatives, the proportion of women representatives is higher than men in all the tiers of panchayats (see tables 2 and 4, Appendix). Although it is encouraging from the perspective of the representation of women, this is not related to their political evolution or empowerment. According to the Panchayati Raj Act, one third of the seats should be reserved for women in each of the three categories (i.e. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes). If there was one seat reserved for Scheduled Tribes in a panchayat, it was reserved for a woman. Thus, most of the seats reserved for the Scheduled Tribes became seats reserved for women. The higher percentage of women representatives is the result of the 'rounding off' process to fulfill the mandatory one third reservation for women 'in each category.' There was no instance in our study where tribal women contested for *women 'General'* seats. Despite their relatively high representation, the participation of tribal women in the panchayats was limited. The nominal role of women was evident during elections—in their low awareness about the procedures, and lack of interest in the issues related to panchayats. Reservation per se had a limited impact, as formal access to political positions was not translated into power or enable a greater role for these women in governance. The source of inequality in power sharing between tribals and non-tribals was the differences in access to resources and low levels of human capital.²²

Considering the problems arising out of their displacement from forest areas, there were many constraints on the participation of tribals. Also, the conflict between tribals and non-tribals and among tribals (some communities, which were a recent inclusion into the Scheduled Tribe list and the original tribals), adds to the problems. There were differences of interests between the Parivara Nayakas and other Scheduled Tribes, such as Jenu Kurubas, Kadu Kurubas and Soligas. The latter groups claimed that the inclusion of Nayakas as a Scheduled Tribe was detrimental to the interests of the *original* Scheduled Tribes (as these groups claimed to be). There was no shared identity of Scheduled Tribes as one group, because there were clear boundaries separating tribes into distinct groups with diverse interests.

The conflict between the two groups of tribes was apparent during the local elections. In the constituencies reserved for tribals, the contest was between the *original* Scheduled Tribes (Jenu Kurubas, Kadu Kurubas, Sholigas) and neo tribals (Parivara Nayakas).²³ Both these groups were of the view that to have a greater role in panchayat decision-making, they should be numerically larger. Each of these groups wanted to win as many seats as possible to have an edge over the other. Winning more seats also meant they could have a better claim over the executive posts if they were reserved for Scheduled Tribes. The *original* tribes alleged that development funds were utilised by *neo* tribals for the benefit of their community and not for all tribes. The relatively prominent status of the neo tribals in politics was reflected in their higher representation in panchayats, more so in the higher tiers. In H.D.Kote taluk, 27 Scheduled Tribe representatives belonged to *original* tribal groups.²⁴ All these candidates contested for Scheduled Tribe reserved seats. The non-tribal local leaders supported the neo tribals in the panchayat elections.

Members of the Scheduled Tribes were elected to executive positions only when they were reserved for Scheduled Tribes; they did not contest for an executive position when it was a General seat. The elected executives were from the group which had larger representation in the panchayat. In some grama panchayats, an arrangement that each of the executive posts would be occupied by one of the groups was achieved between the *original* and *neo* groups.²⁵ There was only one instance where a Scheduled Tribe representative was elected to the post of vice president in a taluk

panchayat. Barring a few cases, most of the panchayat representatives were first time contestants and were ignorant of their role in local governance. Before analysing the constraints in political participation, the levels of human capital of tribal women representatives and their access to various development resources are briefly examined.

Scheduled Tribe women representatives were in the age groups 25-30 years (21 per cent) 31-35 years (43 per cent) and 35 to 40 years (36 per cent). The low levels of human and social development that was characteristic of the Scheduled Tribe communities was reflected in the profiles of the women representatives. However, the standard of living was to a limited extent, better among the neo tribals compared to the original tribals. The literacy level was low with 88 per cent of representatives being illiterate while the remaining members had four to five years of schooling. In the zilla panchayat, the only Scheduled Tribe woman was a Jenu Kuruba, and she was educated up to high school. The Scheduled Tribes also had low levels of income and had few assets. Except for the zilla panchayat representative, the others were from a poor economic background working as wage labourers or engaged in traditional livelihood practices such as hunting, gathering and subsistence farming. Most of them combined all these livelihood practices, depending on the availability of wage work and agriculture. Regular wage work was not available in the area where they lived and most of them migrated to other places, seeking work. These women representatives found it difficult to be actively involved in panchayat affairs when their major concern was survival.

Government development schemes were not effective, considering the economic backwardness of the tribal communities. The general health status of these women was low because of poor nutrition, high fertility rate and lack of health facilities. Although data on development indicators (such as income levels, health, nutrition level, infant mortality rate, fertility rate and female employment) for tribal populations are not available, places where tribals are concentrated are low on these indicators.

The self-esteem of Scheduled Tribe women representatives in the context of their new political role in panchayats was very low. There was a strong feeling of alienation from the broader social and political structures. Their perception of the differences

between tribals and non-tribals was to a certain extent responsible for this alienation. Irrespective of the level of panchayats, they were indifferent to their newly acquired political role. The social environment in which they lived was also not conducive for effective political participation.²⁶

There was a sense of ambivalence among most representatives about what they consider as important: whether to be integrated into the mainstream development and political process or seek tribal autonomy that is distinct from the non-tribal institutional structures. Since there has been a reorganisation in livelihood systems even among the matriarchal tribal groups (such as Jenu Kurubas), women were not in a position to exert any power. With no manifestation of power tribal women faced domination and control not only from men within their communities but also the non-tribal elites. Since gender was not on the agenda of development planning, women were increasingly marginalised. Legislation to include tribal women in governance did not automatically ensure participation. Representation in their case has become only a symbolism. It was obvious that as institutional changes do not operate in a vacuum, they should take into consideration ground realities if the process of reform is to be effective.

Role in Local Governance

Other than the fact that all the seats reserved for Scheduled Tribe women were filled, there was little evidence of their participation in governance. There was no local tribal leader who had the potential to take a lead role in either creating awareness among the tribals or in the selection of appropriate candidates and instilling confidence in them to contest in elections. The dominant actors in the election of women to panchayats were non-tribals or political party workers. Women were consulted about their candidature only on the day of filing the nomination papers. A few women did not even know that they were contesting elections and were to be elected to panchayats, although they had fulfilled the requirements of the nomination procedures. The consent of the candidate did not matter and women representatives themselves were not particularly concerned about it. It was made clear to them that their representation was nominal and they were not expected to be actively involved in the functioning of the

panchayats. Such a proposition suited most tribal women as governance and political participation were among the least of their concerns. A similar trend was noticed in the recent elections to panchayats. Most of the women representatives were not even aware that they would be filing nomination papers. Some of them fulfilled the nomination procedures without questioning anything and not even having any idea about what it entailed. Their involvement was not considered necessary even for election campaigning. Two thirds of the Scheduled Tribe candidates contesting for grama panchayat seats in H.D.Kote were either elected unopposed or the contest was one-sided. Out of the 290 Scheduled Tribe grama panchayat representatives in Mysore, 112 (38.6 per cent) were elected unopposed. And, out of the 112 elected unopposed, 99 (88.4 per cent) were women candidates. There were contests of a serious nature only when it was between *original* tribal and *neo* tribal candidates. At the taluk and zilla panchayats, the elections to the panchayat seats were perceived as between political parties rather than just the candidates. However, the involvement of tribal candidates/representatives in party politics was not significant.

The awareness level regarding the functioning of panchayats among tribal representatives was very low. They were not informed about the reservation for disadvantaged sections of the population, what panchayats signify, or their duties as representatives. Some of them did not even know that they were elected on a reserved seat. The only association they could make with the panchayats was to identify beneficiaries and give them loans. In grama panchayats, women attended panchayat meetings only when they did not have wage work. According to the Panchayati Raj Act, if the representative did not attend three consecutive meetings his/her seat would be declared vacant. In practice, attending the panchayat meetings was not considered compulsory and did not warrant disqualification. There was no instance where any representative lost his/her seat for not attending panchayat meetings.

Tokenism marked the role of tribal women in the panchayats. These representatives were from families that did not have any political background. Most of them were the first in the household to have entered politics. They carried out the instructions of a few non-tribal representatives who played a

dominant role in the functioning of the panchayats. Even in the grama panchayats where there was a greater proportion of tribal seats, the panchayat secretary and non-tribal local leaders played a key role in the functioning of the panchayats. There were layers of domination, essentially by the non-tribals over the tribals. The non-tribals belonged to Vokkaliga and Scheduled Caste communities. Vokkaligas were the more dominant group here. In non-tribal areas, Scheduled Caste representatives did not play any dominant role in the panchayats, particularly in conjunction with Vokkaligas. However, in panchayats of predominantly tribal areas, Scheduled Caste representatives were in an economically better position than the tribal representatives. When they functioned in association with the Vokkaligas they saw themselves in a much more powerful situation. For both these communities the binding factor was their non-tribal status which operated much more strongly when it was in the context of tribals. The extent to which the reservation system can act as a facilitating factor to negotiate the political space of the tribals would depend to a large extent on the strategies to advance them economically and socially.

Boundaries of Representation: Constraints on Political Participation

The role of tribal women in panchayats cannot be discussed in terms of the ideal participation paradigms. These women shared an intense feeling of alienation from mainstream politics. They did not consider inclusion as a means of political equality in governance. Non-participation was a consequence of their alien status within society. Unlikely as it may seem, the real issue about the tribal women was not their level of political participation, knowledge of politics, or whether they have a distinctive perspective about their role in local governance. The main problem of the tribal representatives was their social and economic status.

While low political participation was a common feature among most women, irrespective of caste, class and ethnic background the nature of constraints for tribal women was distinct from the others. The lack of interest in the political process should not be construed as a failing of the tribal women. There is a need

to go beyond the abstract reasoning of their political inclusion and non-participation to concrete factors that act as impediments in the political empowerment. Non-participation was to a large extent related to their *exclusion* from different domains of life space. There were further limitations on them due to their existential conditions. The interpretation of the political role of tribal women could be in two ways. First, that women do not have a distinct perception of governance and as lacking political efficiency. And second, looking at non-participation as a larger process, it is a consequence of their exclusion from the core domains of resource base. However, the non-performance of the tribal women representatives cannot be overlooked or ignored as it has consequences not only for the functioning of the panchayats but also for the tribal welfare (as women tribal representatives are higher in proportion in the panchayats). If the representation of tribals is to inspire participation, there should be a realistic assessment of the constraints.

The major constraints on Scheduled Tribe women are:

1. Limitations of the State Policy

In Karnataka there are certain constraints that delimit the benefits of representation for tribals in panchayats. They are the lack of provision of non-scheduled area status; the structure and functions of panchayats (such as delimitation of the constituencies and devolution of powers, and authority to manage forest conservation and protection); *Original vs neo* tribals; and reservations based on the proportion of population.

Provision of Scheduled Area : The debate for constituting tribal panchayats in Karnataka is a long drawn one. There have also been arguments in favour of this in the backdrop of the Bhuria Committee Report. It is essential that Karnataka be declared as a scheduled area if tribal panchayats are to be constituted. Then the provisions of the Extension Act (1996), an important legislative framework in the context of scheduled areas, could be enforced. In the present structure, the grama panchayats do not have powers of consultation and recommendation which would provide greater autonomy to panchayats in tribal areas. The Extension Act has enormous potential to empower tribals, providing greater control over resources, autonomy and also to preserve their culture and identity.

Considering the low proportion of tribal groups in the population of the state, there is a tendency to understate the issues related to tribal autonomy. Non-tribals control land and other natural resources in most of the tribal areas in the state. There have been instances where the non-tribals purchased or leased land from the tribals for a small amount. Declaring Karnataka as a scheduled area would reduce unfair exploitation of tribal resources.

Institutional Structure : In the present institutional structure, the district (zilla panchayat) and sub-district level of local governance (taluk panchayats) have relatively more powers and funds. Grama panchayats do not have regulatory powers and are involved in planning only to a limited extent. The size of the grama panchayat being small, it is not practical to devolve more resources. There is also a limited possibility of undertaking major development planning. Financial devolution to the panchayats in Karnataka is of a limited nature and funds are mostly tied.²⁷

Given these limitations in terms of the structure and the devolution of resources, the implementation of various programmes through the respective departments was also not satisfactory. For example, under the Tribal sub-plan, dairy development was undertaken through the Department of Animal Husbandry. Under the annual plan of year 1999-2000, Rs.9 lakhs was earmarked for this purpose and 80 Scheduled Tribe beneficiaries were to be selected. Scheduled Tribe families below the poverty line can get two milch animals at a 60 per cent subsidy. The scheme was to be implemented in Mysore, Dakshina Kannada, Kodagu, and Chikmagalur. In the past, such programmes had limited success in tribal areas such as H.D.Kote. Under the Tribal sub-plan, over the past four years 60 tribals were beneficiaries of similar schemes in H.D.Kote. However, none of these beneficiaries are practising dairy farming. There are two reasons for this. First, there were lacunae in the implementation of the programme, with misappropriation of funds from the loans that should have gone to the tribals. Second, since there were no infrastructure facilities, the tribals were not willing to take up dairy farming. In situations such as these, when the implementing department is not effective, the panchayats should play a constructive role like suggesting priority areas and ensuring that the funds are not misappropriated. However, panchayats had a limited role to play. Similarly, allocations

are made every year for the health care of Scheduled Tribes. Under the present annual plan, Rs 33.25 lakhs has been earmarked for health care measures for Scheduled Tribes. But tribal areas still lack basic health care facilities.

If the tribals are to effectively participate in panchayats and have more autonomy, there has to be greater emphasis on devolution of powers to the lower tiers. This also implies that there would be a change in the 'top-down planning' as it exists now and the funds from centre and state could be spent as the panchayats decide. This would be possible if the tribal panchayats are formed as recommended by the Bhuria Committee. Grama panchayats should be the core area of devolution with greater autonomy in planning, formulation of development programmes, implementation and management of natural resources. Grama Sabhas, which have the potential to enable people's participation in grass-root governance are not functioning effectively.²⁸ The Bhuria Committee in its recommendations for the Scheduled areas, has proposed that grama sabhas should be made the focal point of decentralisation.²⁹

Another aspect that is related to the powers of panchayats which affects the tribals in some ways, is the role of panchayats in forest management. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution (Art. 243 -G) 'endows the panchayats with powers and responsibilities— in respect to environment.' And the IX Schedule refers to items such as forest and land consolidation, soil conservation, social and farm forestry, and management of minor forest produce. In the 1993 Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act similar powers and functions are stated. However, the panchayats do not have any authority to manage forest conservation and development, including forest protection. There are areas where authority has been conferred upon local institutions but they rank low in priorities.

This also means that the subject matter of legislation, such as the Karnataka Forest Act, excludes the panchayats. The Karnataka government introduced a Bill to amend the Forest Act, to provide for the constitution of Village Forest Committees for Joint Forest Planning and Management.³⁰ The Panchayati Raj Act should be amended to give more powers to the panchayats to manage environmental forestry. This would be one of the ways by which tribals can be involved in forest and bio-diversity conservation.

Original and Neo Tribals : There was evidence to suggest that benefits of the reservation, and development programmes were largely utilised by certain tribal communities, which were recently included in the Schedule of tribes. The *original* tribals who were the most backward both economically and socially, derived few benefits. In the panchayats too the Parivara Nayakas and Odigowdas claimed most of the benefits that were due for Scheduled Tribes. Technically, there is no anomaly because they were included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. However, the controversial claim made by the original tribals that newly included groups did not have any tribal origin finds support from anthropologists and administrators working in the area. The administrators we spoke to were of the view that the designation/classification of certain communities as Scheduled Tribes was a political decision and did not have anything to do with their social backwardness or tribal origin. In panchayats, when there was an electoral contest between the *original* and *neo* tribals, the latter were in a much more advantageous position to win. The neo-tribals could mobilise the support of non-tribal local leaders and political parties.

A possible solution to such a situation is to have within the category of Scheduled Tribes, a sub-classification based on their economic backwardness. The original tribals may be given preference in development and reservation benefits.

Proportional Representation: The reservation of tribals is based on the proportion of tribals to the total population. In such a system, the representation of the Scheduled Tribes in the panchayats at the middle and district levels is numerically small. Although their numerical representation is significant in certain grama panchayats (in tribal areas) very little could be achieved considering that the authority, powers and functions of the lower tier are limited. Since it would be undemocratic to argue for greater reservation for the tribal population, the possible alternative is the formation of tribal panchayats. If the tribal population is to participate in the decentralisation and development process, tribal panchayats should be constituted as recommended by the Bhuria Committee.

2. Domains of Social Space

Limits on the political participation of tribal women and areas of resistance in four domains of social space were examined. They

were household (private), economy, political community, and civil society. In each of these domains, the tribal women's space and their access to spheres of activity that give them power were limited.³¹ They occupied a subordinate position in each of these domains and their presence was negligible in political organisations and civil society.

Women had different roles in household, economy, spiritual and social domains, which had gendered and non-gendered spaces. In gendered spaces women did not have control over resources or had restricted access to them. For example, within the household, the areas of power, i.e. control over resources such as labour, women's time and land, and decision-making were considered as male domains. Although women's contribution to the livelihood system was substantial, they did not have control over their labour, which was the only resource these women possess. In some areas where joint ownership of the land was given as a part of the government rehabilitation programme, women did not have control over the land. There were many cases where men disposed off the land for a small amount, without the consent of the women who were the joint owners.

Equality in gender relations in tribal societies is often exaggerated and it is generalised that women in all tribal groups enjoyed a better status. Panchayat representatives, however, were of the view that gender inequalities were prevalent in tribal households and community. Women's marginal position in politics was perceived as a consequence of the androcentricism in most of these communities.

The sites of inequalities in power and authority in tribal communities were the ritual domains of men and women. The gender hierarchy in tribal society was related to rituals, inheritance of knowledge, and sacred domains, permissible to men or women. Association of men with rituals in the public space, and women with household rituals led to hierarchical power relations. Men also dominated the joint ritual spaces. There were non-negotiable spaces such as leadership, from which women were excluded often through the use of myths. Women contested elections only because of the reservation of seats for tribals and the local tribal leaders supported their candidature.

One of the areas of the public domain that was not gendered was economic activity where men and women equally

participated (the exception being hunting in which women did not participate). There were several aspects of economic behaviour in the tribal households which are too complicated to be explained as comparative advantage or in terms of market forces. The non-substitutability of the labour of women in the tribal livelihood system makes it difficult for them to spend sufficient time for panchayat related work. The livelihood system of tribals in the forest areas comprised hunting, collecting of minor forest products, subsistence agriculture, and wage labour. Despite equal participation in the tribal economy, women's role in the livelihood system was not a source of power because of the low monetary returns and subsistence levels of these households. Most of the representatives were dependent on the returns from minor forest products (such as honey, gooseberry, soap nuts, etc.) and wage labour in plantations in Kodagu (a neighbouring district) or in the border districts of Kerala.³² They were away from their constituencies for a considerable period of time when they went out to work in plantations. Similarly, collecting forest products was also time consuming. When they returned to their respective constituencies after a long absence, they were not aware of issues related to their panchayats. There was also a tendency among the tribal representatives to relate panchayats with any immediate benefits that they could get. For example, the benefits which they looked for were to be beneficiaries of various programmes. They did not consider it necessary to spend time on panchayat activities when they were not directly benefited. Large-scale non-participation of this nature affects accountability in governance. A few representatives and dominant local leaders who were non-tribals managed the activities of the panchayats. In taluk and zilla panchayats, the number and political power of tribal representatives was too small to affect their functioning.

While the tribal livelihood system was mostly non-gendered the political sphere remained entirely a male domain.³³ Tribal women's role in the traditional administration was inconsequential. Leadership in tribal communities was androcentric. All the tribal settlements that were studied in the taluk had male chieftains. Tribal committees that were formed more recently at the settlement, taluk, and district levels did not exclude women. These committees were intended to facilitate the coordination between tribals, government departments and panchayats. Representatives at each level were members of these committees. Women were

included as members in the tribal committee because of their elected status in panchayats. However, in the functioning of the tribal committees the presence of women was not perceived to be necessary. Male committee members were of the opinion that women were not politically aware to participate in committee meetings, and their role as mothers and caretakers of households should take precedence. Similarly, tribal laws were made and executed by men. In some areas where NGOs had intervened, women's committees were formed and efforts were made to include women in tribal committees. Since there was no follow up after their formation the women's committees were non-functional.

In Karnataka the tribal community is not a significant vote bank to compel higher representation in political parties. Women, whether tribal or non-tribal, were never considered a political constituency. Thus, tribal women were not represented in political parties. Women's involvement in the struggle against policies that affect tribal interests, and protest movements against the forest and rehabilitation policies, were also limited.³⁴ Some of the representatives were members of the NGOs (FEDINA, DEED) working in the area. NGOs are presently organising women into self-help groups that would be engaged in taking up various issues related to tribals.³⁵

3. Awareness Levels

Tribal women at all tiers of the panchayats had very low levels of human capital in terms of education, political awareness, and administrative skills. There was a strong perception among tribal women that acquiring political and administrative skills do not translate into long-term political prospects. There was no enthusiasm to invest time and energy into activities which they perceived as less rewarding. The major factors responsible for the poor awareness of tribal women were lack of information, poor networking, and absence of adequate training. Also, the significance of women's empowerment in planning and development was not realised. The access to political positions should be followed by a corresponding access to information, knowledge, and training.

A majority of the tribal women became mothers in their early teens. From the perspective of the elites who controlled the panchayats, these women were perfectly suited as representatives because they did not participate in governance. A large section of

representatives (40 per cent) did not receive any training, while the rest attended a two-day training programme. The training has not been adequate in preparing them to overcome the limitations arising out of lack of education, and low expectations from them due to their ethnic, class, and gender background.

The political empowerment of tribal women cannot be conceived as an isolated phenomenon. It should be seen in conjunction with the empowerment in other areas, such as attitudinal changes and better access to information. There was no counselling available for the tribal women. Counselling programmes to psychologically empower the tribal women would have been a facilitating factor in their political participation. The local NGOs restricted themselves to creating awareness about government policies and programmes. There was no initiative to create a support network for women. Once they were elected to the panchayats there was no supporting system to prepare women through creating awareness about the panchayats.

Inclusion to Empowerment

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that affirmative action, although an essential prerequisite, does not ensure women's participation in local governance. The wide disparities in social and economic conditions of tribals and their marginal position in the development process are major constraints in their participation in governance. Reducing disparities in the levels of development among different sections of the population implies that there is a need for a change in priorities. The weakness in a conception of women's political participation limited to the reservation policy alone is that it does not address the core issues that are responsible for their relative deprivation and exclusion from political participation.

At the macro level Scheduled Tribes face marginalisation and deprivation. And at the micro level women within this group have to face the additional problems arising out of gender inequalities. The non-participation of Scheduled Tribe women in local governance is the continuation of the process of exclusion from other domains of life. It is a multidimensional exclusion³⁶ in economic and social spheres that have consequences for participation in the political sphere. The extent to which inclusion would help in negotiating a political space for women is related to

the processes that cause deprivation and exclusion in other domains of life space.

Social and economic exclusion are the root of ineffectiveness in the political sphere.³⁷ This points to the need for a holistic approach where these women are empowered (both economically and socially) to enable them to participate effectively in the governance process. There is also urgency for strengthening the capabilities of the tribal women and improving their entitlements. Entitlements alone may not solve tribal women's problems but how effectively they enable them to achieve goals in different spheres (i.e., economic, social and political) would make a difference to the conditions of tribal women. Sen's (1981) entitlement approach draws our attention to one of the factors involved in the situation of tribal women and that is, political representation alone does not empower tribal women.

The political inclusion policy of the government without adequate measures and policies that would ensure availability of basic needs, improve livelihood practices, and increased access to development resources has resulted in tribal women still being excluded from governance. These women who lived in extreme poverty were not able to take advantage of the benefits of political inclusion. Their perceptions on political participation were related to the economic and social barriers that they faced.³⁸ Although several arguments have been advanced for the representation of women in governance there is little recognition that effective performance is not usually found in the absence of a relatively higher economic and social circumstances of tribal women. Recognition of the complex forms of interaction between various factors contributing to the Scheduled Tribe women's non-participation is important for a radical restructuring of the strategies that should follow affirmative action.

Notes

- 1 Adishesahai, 1994.
- 2 Provisions made for Scheduled tribes in the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution are:

243D. (1) Seats shall be reserved for (a) the Scheduled Castes; and (b) the Scheduled Tribes, in every Panchayat and the number of seats so reserved shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in that Panchayat as the population of the Scheduled Castes in that Panchayat area or of the Scheduled Tribes in that Panchayat area bears to the total population of that area and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

(2) Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or, as the case may be, the Scheduled Tribes,

(3) Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

(4) The offices of the Chairpersons in the Panchayats at the village or any other level shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women in such manner as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide." Provided that the number of offices of chairpersons reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in the Panchayats at each level in any State shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to the total number of such offices in the Panchayats at each level as the population of the Scheduled Castes in the State or of the Scheduled Tribes in the State bears to the total population of the State: Provided further that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women: Provided also that the number of offices reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to different Panchayats at each level.
- 3 Disadvantaged sections refer to individuals who have less access to collective resources and, therefore, exert limited influence over decisions that are made on their behalf.
- 4 For details on Panchayat Raj in Karnataka see Ray, 1987; Chandrashekar, 1984, 1989; Manor, 1993, 1999; Sivanna, 1990; Inbanathan, 1992; Jain and Hochgesang, 1995.
- 5 The 1997 Act is considered as a retrograde step when compared with the 1983 Act as fewer powers and resources have been devolved to the panchayats (Manor, 1993; Inbanathan, 1997).
- 6 Inbanathan, 1999.
- 7 The argument about exclusion/inclusion is a complex and contentious one (see, Friedman, 1992). Inclusion here is seen as a broader process, which is related to an individual or group's potential to derive maximum benefit out of their social and economic resources.

- 8 Their social and material circumstances make their experiences of gender significantly varied. And these differences and the experiences should be valued and respected rather than denied in the interest of gender equality (Pateman, 1988).
- 9 See Pateman, 1992.
- 10 The paper is based on case studies of Scheduled Tribe representatives of Mysore District in Karnataka. There are some differences in the economic status and living conditions of tribals living in forest and hill areas and those living in mixed settlements. This has consequences for their political participation. Some of the observations made here might not apply to tribal groups living in mixed and less isolated settlements.
- 11 Feminist approaches offer explanations on factors affecting differential political participation, differences among women, and relation between gender and citizenship. I am not attempting to examine these approaches here.
- 12 Friedman (1992) used four overlapping domains of social practice while discussing exclusion/inclusion.. They are the state, civil society, the corporate economy, and the political community.
- 13 The alternative paradigm of political participation is not intended to undermine the importance of reservation of seats for the disadvantaged sections.
- 14 See Friedman, 1992.
- 15 The point here is that in most districts the proportion of women representatives in panchayats is well above the required one-third and there are more women representatives among the tribal members. While this is through reservations, it has been projected as being an indication of the people's vote for women even in general seats.
- 16 See Shah, 1991.
- 17 There is a perspective that external strategies of empowerment would negatively affect tribal identity. However, empowerment (political and economic) is important, to avoid the exclusion of tribals from the development process. But whatever cultural changes take place, they should not affect their group identity.
- 18 Scheduled tribes constitute 4.25 per cent of the total population in Karnataka. They are also among the most economically backward sections of the population.
- 19 The observations are based on case studies of Scheduled Tribe representatives elected to the panchayats of the period 1993-2000; non-tribal representatives; officials and NGOs.

Quantification is not attempted here because the number of Scheduled Tribe representatives was small. Issues related to their participation are discussed.
- 20 Karnataka Election Commission.
- 21 The decrease in the number of elected representatives for Mysore district in the elections of 2000 as compared to the elections in 1993/95 is due to the bifurcation of Mysore into two districts, now comprising Mysore and Chamrajanagar.

- 22 Political participation is also low among non-tribal women in panchayats (see Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar, 2000).
- 23 Original tribals are more economically backward than the groups recently classified as Scheduled Tribes. For greater clarity the words 'original' and 'neo' are being used here.
- 24 Source, FEDINA VIKAS, H.D.Kote.
- 25 In the taluk and zilla panchayats where the rotation system was already in force, election to executive positions were conducted thrice during the five year term. Each term of the president and vice-president is for 20 months. There is a new rule that there would be rotation of executive posts in the gram panchayats. The president and vice-president will have a tenure of 30 months. This will take effect in the current panchayats.
- 26 Alcohol and drug abuse was also fairly common in the households of these people. This was a factor in reducing their effectiveness in the public sphere. And, women were also among the alcoholics, and victims of drug abuse.
- 27 Satishchandran, T.R., 1994.
- 28 In the area where the study was conducted, one of the demands of the tribal women was to enforce prohibition since alcoholism was a major problem. The gram panchayat does not have powers under the present structure to impose prohibition. The Extension Act probably would have endowed them with power to enforce prohibition in the areas where there is a high prevalence of alcohol consumption.
- 29 In the Scheduled areas where the Extension Act was implemented, the respective state governments (barring Rajasthan and Bihar) amended the Panchayati Raj Act in conformity with the Extension Act (Pal, 2000).
- 30 See Vijayalakshmi, 2001.
- 31 Friedman (1992) refers to these as core areas.
- 32 Although there was a possibility of getting wage work in the plantations for most of the year, the tribals migrated for short periods. When they returned to their settlements they did not have regular work and soon exhausted their meagre savings.
- 33 Greater conjugal freedom among tribals gives an impression that there is greater gender equality.
- 34 In Karnataka there was no major anti-dam or tribal movements over displacement and the right to natural resources. The only anti-dam movement which had an impact in terms of abandoning the project was the opposition to the Bedthi Project by the influential spice garden farmers, largely Brahmins in Uttara Kannada (Gadgil and Guha, 1994).
- 35 There is growing cynicism among the tribals about the role of NGOs in tribal development. There was also a perception that NGOs were more interested in the funds that tribal issues can generate than in ameliorating their condition. Gram panchayat representatives who worked as community workers with local

NGOs reported that there was misappropriation of funds meant for tribal development. Due to these negative perceptions, there was a lack of enthusiasm to work with the NGOs.

36 See Silver, 1994

37 Sen (1998) is one of the strong proponents of the 'social exclusion framework' which emphasises the roots and various features of deprivation. Such a framework of analysis would also help in policy making as it would be specific to a particular context.

38 Scheduled Tribe men too have similar perceptions.

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Appendix
Table 1: Scheduled tribe population in Karnataka

District	Total population	Scheduled tribe population	Percentage	Rank
1. Bangalore (U)	661457	14155	2.14	21
2. Bangalore (R)	1342866	43828	3.26	16
3. Chitradurga	1096525	198456	18.10	1
4. Davanagere	1120831	130587	11.65	2
5. Kolar	1690673	142366	8.42	7
6. Shimoga	945412	24295	2.57	19
7. Tumkur	1903587	150829	7.92	8
8. Chikmagalur	825388	24239	2.94	18
9. Dakshina Kannada	1130008	59123	5.23	11
10. Udipi	867399	35347	4.08	13
11. Hassan	1330627	15188	1.64	25
12. Kodagu	438477	39147	8.93	6
13. Mandya	1399111	9859	0.70	27
14. Mysore	1477661	49008	3.32	15
15. Chamrajanagar	747073	28839	3.86	14
16. Belgaum	2806077	67038	2.39	20
17. Bijapur	1225645	15456	1.26	24
18. Bagalkot	969748	18370	1.89	22
19. Dharwad	633784	11581	1.83	23
20. Gadag	560607	16634	2.97	17
21. Haveri	1023516	55283	5.40	10
22. Uttara Kannada	906688	9073	1.00	26
23. Bellary	1095942	110873	10.12	4
24. Bidar	986748	96767	9.81	5
25. Gulbarga	1944163	94114	4.84	12
26. Raichur	1036889	109905	10.60	3
27. Koppal	814730	54810	6.73	9
Total	30981632	1625170	5.25	—

Source: Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Karnataka, 2000.

**Table 2. Scheduled tribe representatives
in the panchayats of 1993- 2000**

District	Grama panchayat	Taluk panchayat		Zilla panchayat	
		ST repre- sentatives	ST repre- sentatives	ST repre- sentatives	ST repre- sentatives
		Men	Women	Men	Women
1. Bangalore (U)	121	—	1	—	—
2. Bangalore (R)	249	—	5	—	1
3. Chitradurga	734	17	13	5	3
4. Kolar	456	6	11	2	2
5. Shimoga	409	2	4	1	1
6. Tumkur	482	8	9	2	2
7. Chikmagalur	234	—	2	—	1
8. Dakshina Kannada	426	2	7	2	1
9. Hassan	260	—	—	—	—
10. Kodagu	137	2	3	1	1
11. Mandya	228	—	—	—	—
12. Mysore	459	2	6	1	1
13. Belgaum	548	2	4	1	1
14. Bijapur	380	—	2	—	1
15. Dharwad	492	1	6	1	1
16. Uttara Kannada	218	—	1	—	—
17. Bellary	435	8	7	2	2
18. Bidar	323	5	5	2	1
19. Gulbarga	442	3	7	2	1
20. Raichur	542	7	11	3	2
Total	7575	65	104	25	22

Source: Karnataka Election Commission

**Table 3. Representation of Scheduled Tribes
in the panchayats after elections in 2000**

District	Grama panchayat		Taluk panchayat		Zilla panchayat	
	Total seats	ST re- presen- tatives	Total seats	ST re- presen- tatives	Total seats	ST re- presen- tatives
21. Bangalore (U)	1696	115	68	3	17	1
22. Bangalore (R)	3252	243	139	8	38	1
23. Chitradurga	2097	382	115	22	31	6
24. Davanagere	2759	384	115	14	31	4
25. Kolar	4146	445	181	16	47	4
26. Shimoga	2394	248	99	7	27	1
27. Tumkur	4878	471	195	18	52	4
28. Chikmagalur	2016	220	103	7	30	1
29. Dakshina Kannada	2824	244	115	6	31	2
30. Udipi	2160	171	88	4	24	1
31. Hassan	3245	232	139	8	37	1
32. Kodagu	3481	137	46	5	26	2
33. Mandya	3762	212	144	7	39	1
34. Mysore	1529	290	152	8	41	1
35. Chamrajanagar	1085	89	81	4	21	1
36. Belgaum	6985	532	287	12	76	21
37. Bijapur	2965	195	124	5	32	1
38. Bagalkot	2414	155	99	6	26	1
39. Dharwad	1947	205	66	5	18	1
40. Gadag	1391	103	66	5	17	1
41. Haveri	2431	225	109	8	29	2
42. Uttara Kannada	2483	202	123	11	35	1
43. Bellary	2714	378	112	14	32	3
44. Bidar	2487	280	101	10	26	3
45. Gulbarga	4917	421	198	13	55	3
46. Raichur	2655	344	107	12	29	3
47. Koppal	2053	187	88	6	23	2
Total	76766	7110	3255	244	890	54

Source: Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Karnataka, 2000.

**Table 4. Scheduled tribe women representatives
in the panchayats after elections in 2000**

District	Grama panchayat		Taluk panchayat		Zilla panchayat	
	Total ST seats	ST women representatives	Total ST seats	ST women representatives	Total ST seats	ST women representatives
13. Bangalore (U)	115	110	3	3	1	1
14. Bangalore (R)	243	224	8	8	1	1
15. Chitradurga	382	172	22	10	6	2
16. Davanagere	384	239	14	6	4	2
17. Kolar	445	312	16	11	4	2
18. Shimoga	248	245	7	7	1	1
19. Tumkur	471	310	18	10	4	2
20. Chikmagalur	220	212	7	7	1	1
21. Dakshina Kannada	244	205	6	5	1	1
22. Udipi	171	145	4	3	1	1
23. Hassan	232	228	8	8	1	1
24. Kodagu	137	100	5	3	2	1
25. Mandya	212	212	7	7	1	1
26. Mysore	290	239	8	7	1	1
27. Chamrajanagar	89	62	4	4	1	1
28. Belgaum	532	468	12	10	21	1
29. Bijapur	195	187	5	5	1	1
30. Bagalkot	155	147	6	6	1	1
31. Dharwad	205	202	5	5	1	1
32. Gadag	103	100	5	5	1	1
33. Haveri	225	189	8	7	2	1
34. Uttara Kannada	202	194	11	11	1	1
35. Bellary	378	227	14	8	3	1
36. Bidar	280	177	10	5	3	1
37. Gulbarga	421	337	13	10	3	1
38. Raichur	344	193	12	7	3	1
39. Koppal	187	134	6	4	2	1
~ Total	7110	5570	244	182	54	31

Source: Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Karnataka, 2000.

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Phone : 0091-80 - 3215468, 3215519, 3215592 ; Fax: 0091-80 - 3217008

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