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Decentralized Political Institution in Madhya Pradesh (India):

Inclusion of the Marginalized through Local Self Government

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Index

Abstract	3
Part I: Introduction	3
Part II: Decentralization in India: Contextual Framework	4
Chapter 1: Decentralization Process	5
Chapter 2: Inclusion (Social and Political) through Decentralization: Evidence from Madhya Pradesh [India]	6
2.1 Madhya Pradesh: An Overview	6
2.2: Representation of Marginalised Sections of Society .	7
2.3 Women's Participation in Panchayats	8
Part III: Conclusion	9
References.....	10

Abstract

The change through grassroots democratic processes in the Indian political system is the result of a growing conviction that the big government cannot achieve growth and development in a society without people's direct participation and initiative. The decentralized political institutions have been more participatory and inclusive ensuring equality of political opportunity. Social exclusion in India is not a new phenomenon. History bears witness to exclusion of social groups on the bases of caste, class, gender and religion. Most notable is the category of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women who were denied the access and control over economic and social opportunities as a result they were relegated to the categories of excluded groups. It is true that the problems of the excluded classes were addressed by the state through the enactment of anti-discriminatory laws and policies to foster their social inclusion and empowerment. Despite these provisions, exclusion and discrimination of these excluded groups continued. Therefore, there was a need to address issues of 'inclusion' in a more direct manner.

Madhya Pradesh has made a big headway in the working for the inclusion of these excluded groups. The leadership role played by the under privileged, poor and the marginalized people of the society at the grassroots level is indeed remarkable because two decade earlier these people were excluded from public life and political participation for them was a distant dream. Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to unfold the changes that have taken place in the rural power structure after 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. To what extent the decentralized political institutions have been successful in the inclusion of the marginalized section of the society in the state of Madhya Pradesh [India]

Part I: Introduction

India lives in villages. Local self government (**Panchayati Raj system**) has influenced the village life extensively as one of the most important units of democratic decentralization. Decentralization of powers is nothing but transfer of powers from one segment of the society to another or from one tier of government to another. The power is transferred from the dominant class to the oppressed, from men to women, from high caste to low caste, and from bureaucrats to people's representatives.

It is not an easy task to shift such a power equation in a heterogeneous society like India. A huge driving force and a strong political will were needed to construct a society where everyone would have an equal share in decision making process.

At the time of Independence, the rural society was mostly feudal in nature where dalits (constitutionally categorized as 'Scheduled Caste' and 'Scheduled Tribes') were socially excluded from the mainstream of society in every aspect i.e. cultural, social, political and economic. They became the victims of the rigid and immobile caste system. Dalits had no place in social and political decision-making. The ideas and orders were imposed on them by the dominant upper castes. They were denied the access and control over economic and social opportunities as a result they were relegated to the category of excluded groups. This was the main hindrance in the nation building process after independence. Same was the condition of the women.

Thus, inclusion of the excluded groups in local governance has been a serious problem in this society. Inclusion in this context means the inclusion of the marginalized sections- Dalits, Tribals and Women in local governance. However inclusion cannot be understood without having acquaintance to 'exclusion'. Social exclusion is the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live on the basis of perceived group attributes like social origin, ethnicity and religious conviction. It is the denial of equal opportunities imposed by certain groups of society upon others which leads to inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society (Chinna Rao, 2010).

It is true that the problems of the excluded classes were addressed by the state through the enactment of anti-discriminatory laws and policies to foster their social inclusion and empowerment. The Anti Untouchability Act of 1955, Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976 and the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989 were some of the legal steps taken by the Government for the welfare of these communities. In addition to legal protection, the states also used affirmative action of reservation policy to provide due share in education, employment and other services.

Despite these provisions for equal participation and empowerment, exclusion and discrimination of these excluded groups continued; so there was a need to address issues of 'inclusion' in a more direct manner. It took nearly four decades for the Indian Parliament to pass the epoch-making 73rd Constitution Amendment Acts on 23rd December 1992. This constitutional amendment has influenced the village life extensively as one of the most important units of democratic decentralization. Decentralization of powers is nothing but transfer of powers from one segment of the society to another or from one tier of government to another. There was a transfer of power from the dominant class to the oppressed, from men to women, from high caste to low caste, and from bureaucrats to people's representatives. It was not an easy task to shift such a power equation in a heterogeneous society like India. A huge driving force and a strong political will were needed to construct a society where everyone would have an equal share in decision making process.

Part II: Decentralization in India: Contextual Framework

Decentralization usually refers to as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Crook and Manor: 1998). It is the restructuring

of authority in such a way that there is a system of co-responsibility between the government at the Centre, State and Local levels thus increasing the overall quality and effectiveness of the system of governance, while increasing the authority and capabilities of sub-national levels.

Chapter 1: Decentralization Process

India has experimented with decentralization process in the colonial and post colonial period. The first initiative of decentralization in India dates back to the year 1882 when the resolution was enacted on the recommendation of Lord Rippon. Since then a considerable number of decentralization initiatives have been taken by different governments in various forms.

1.1 Post Independent Scenario

After Independence several efforts have been made in the direction of making village self-reliant. Several committees were constituted from time to time to reform the decentralized structure of government at the local level. These committees recommended the participation of community people in the management of local affairs with an objective of strengthening the capacity of local level organizations. But the efforts of the government at the centre could not produce the desired result. The three decades of 1950s to 1980s saw phases of revival and neglect of these vital grassroots institutions of local governance with heavy social and political cost for the rural areas. The patchy progress of development initiatives, lack of people's participation and support led to realization to deepen democracy and develop inclusive and capable institutions of local governance (**Buch: 2004**).

Unfortunately in the initial 50 years, the response of the state governments was of very different nature and as a result the pace and pattern of establishment of rural local political institutions was not very enthusiastic in the initial phase. The state governments showed very little interest to empower these institutions and transfer of power to the representative institutions was almost negligible. However, the political leadership of some Indian states like Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal came forward to establish panchayats at local level but on the whole the pace of development was restricted that left much to be desired. Advocates of local self-government argued that the development planning was faulty, that the results did not reach the people concerned despite plethora of schemes and massive investments in rural sector. It was also realized that the infrastructure at the local level was in a very bad shape and one of the obvious reasons was poor delivery system through local bureaucracy. People's participation was rarely seen and the development model was of 'top down approach'. Accountability of the delivery mechanism was nominal as it rested with the bureaucratic hierarchy that looked at rural mass(s) as mere recipient.

1.2 73rd Constitutional Amendment and after

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Indian Constitution has been a mile stone in the history of India resulting in decentralization of highly centralized system of parliamentary democracy. The amendment marked a strong shift from representative to participatory democracy. More important was the introduction of Gram Sabha or Village assembly where all the members registered in the electoral role of the village are the members. The Gram Sabha has been empowered to approve plans and programs for social and economic development, select beneficiary of all types of programme and social audit.

The 73rd Amendment Act could not be perceived as a response to pressure from the grassroots but an increasing recognition that the existing structure of the government needed to be transformed. It was a political drive of the centre to see the PRIs as a solution to the Governmental crisis that India was experiencing (**World Bank: 2000**). The purpose behind the devaluation of power to the village panchayats, through 73rd amendment act, was to mobilize people towards the socio-economic development and to involve them in all the activities of the communities. Its objectives include reduction in the size of work of the higher level government and leaving the responsibility to the people to decide their destiny as per the new dispensation (**Sisodia: 2005**)

The execution of the Act was made mandatory for all the Indian states and panchayats have been provided a constitutional status. A special chapter has been added to the Indian Constitution on Panchayats. The 73rd Amendment Act has provided uniformity and formal structure to these traditional institutions of self-governance for the sake of their effective functioning. The 73rd Amendment Act has initiated a fundamental restructuring of governance and administrative system of the country, based on the philosophy of decentralisation and power to the people. Policy planners have realised by now that the new panchayat raj institutions have the potential to usher in a new era of change and development in accordance with people's needs and priorities, and to revitalise a deeply troubled system of democracy (**Behar & Kumar: 2002**).

Besides the creation of uniform three tier local bodies in rural and urban areas, reservation has been provided to the excluded and the marginalized groups. This development has built a feeling among the academicians that the representative democracy has been transformed into participatory democracy and that the excluded groups have been included in governance and administration through reservation of seats in the local bodies. However, there are several problems regarding the inclusion of the marginalized in elected bodies. By merely creating an institution or providing space to these groups is not going to guarantee participation. Bringing the marginalized groups closer to the political sphere requires addressing the issue of exclusion both at the level of institution and process.

Chapter 2: Inclusion (Social and Political) through Decentralization: Evidence from Madhya Pradesh [India]

2.1 Madhya Pradesh: An Overview

The power structure in Village Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh prior to 73rd Amendment Act was in favour of the upper castes and locally dominant castes in the society. The emergence of such type of power structure not only defeated the basic implications of democratic decentralisation but also the aim of rural development with social justice. In this context, reservation provided scope for women and for the members of SC/ ST communities to have participation in Panchayats. Madhya Pradesh Government has been doing remarkable work for the strengthening of panchayat raj system since its inception. The state government has responded with innovativeness and remarkable commitment to making the system sustainable and successful. The effort of state to institutionalise the system is evident in the number of amendments that have been made to the State Panchayat Acts as a dynamic response to the problems at the ground level. During the implementation of panchayat raj system, the state has faced several opportunities and difficulties. The experience of the state is extremely rich and provides vital insights into the process of institutionalizing panchayat raj. On the one hand, the story is of bureaucratic resistance, functional problems, political and institutional challenges, financial inadequacy and mismatch of capacities and roles. On the other hand, it involves the grassroots

level in a democratic and participative governance system, and therefore potentially unleashes its considerable energy. Looking in to the relevance of new system, an attempt is made to evaluate the ground reality and potentiality of the panchayat raj system in Madhya Pradesh.

2.2: Representation of Marginalised Sections of Society

The state legislations have made provisions for the reservation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes. All these groups had negligible presence in the rural politics before this statutory provision. It is definitely a very important step through which largest political recruitment has become possible.

The Scheduled Castes have been provided reservation in proportion to their population. A basic difference between the SC and the ST is that while the latter reside in specific habitats, the former live along with the people of the general category. As a result, they face more difficulties because of social deprivations. Acute poverty, illiteracy and predominant position of rural elite have incapacitated them in discharging their duties effectively. Panchayats, which are 'institutions of self-governance', cannot function in a society that is ridden with caste, feudalism and poverty. Therefore PRIs should be made effective instruments of social transformation through a vibrant democratic political process at the local level (**Methew: 1996**). The initial dissent and non-cooperative attitude towards SC leadership is gradually changing.

The tribals have also been given reservation in proportion to their population. When one examines the degree of their participation in the panchayat raj system in Madhya Pradesh, it emerges that much needs to be done to equip them for facing the new task. Many reasons can be pointed out for this situation: illiteracy, poverty, lack of awareness, socio-cultural deprivations, lack of experience and training etc. The new Acts, provided respectable space to the tribal people in the working of the panchayat raj system, such legislation could not make the tribal communities the sole masters of their socio-political destinies in their homelands. The need was always felt that the institutional structures within the Scheduled Areas were to be in consonance with the tribal needs, ethos and tribal institutions with which these people were familiar for ages (**Purohit: 2002**). Accepting the felt needs Union Government passed an amendment known as Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas), 1996 and accordingly the state government has also made Amendments in its legislations. A perusal of catalogue of powers of scheduled area panchayats convinces that they have been equipped with special powers for the preservation of tribal identities. The gram panchayat in scheduled areas shall work under the general superintendence, control and direction of the gram sabha.

Panchayat raj system in scheduled areas of Madhya Pradesh has empowered gram sabhas with all such powers and duties to become the real unit of self-governance. As a result, there has been a growing concern for the speedy development of tribal areas. The state governments transferred nearly all powers previously exercised by gram panchayats to gram sabha. It has thus gone from representative democracy at the grassroots to direct democracy but the fact remains that despite this endeavour, there is a clear cut gap between macro level decisions and grassroots reality.

At the micro level, the gram sabha is a peoples' institution and has been made a statutory body through a Constitutional Amendment. Panchayat raj system in scheduled areas has provided all powers and duties to gram sabha. The resource flow to gram sabha and its ever-increasing powers and authority has generated a lot of interest in people. It is expected that this interest is likely to be trans-

lated into a more broad based and participative leadership at grassroots level. However, a gradual process of change can be discerned. The tribal leadership is getting increasingly involved in understanding the system and coming to grips with it (**Sisodia: 2002**).

Other Backward Caste (OBC) holds a position different from that of the SCs and the STs. Even before reservation they had representation in the panchayats as well as in other Institution. Their social position in the traditional social set up was also more respectable. The same can be said about their economic standing. As a result of these factors they have made use of the new panchayat raj system more effectively.

It is, therefore, essential that while the position of the OBCs needs further consolidation that of the SCs and the STs should be ameliorated a great deal. In this endeavour though legislation is important, much more important is attitudinal change on part of the administration and also of the society at large. The weaker sections need more training and experience in the exercise of their powers. Equally important are concrete measures to remove illiteracy and poverty from amongst them.

Only political recruitment of all the sections of society will never attain the desired goal. The basic idea behind the reservation was to provide an opportunity to the depressed classes to come forward and be a part of the total development process. In spite of all bottlenecks, gradually the changes are taking place. It happens so in a new system where representatives are not familiar with the working of the system. Even then slowly and steadily changes are visible. Taking lessons from the working of the panchayats, the leadership is getting skilled. At the same time the other person of the society are sharing several experiences as well. This process of decentralised governance will provide opportunity to rural people, particularly the persons of backward classes, to involve in development activities and several other works for the betterment of their life. The common man of the society will gradually become aware about day-to-day functioning and that way the coming generations will be well acquainted with the processes of development. This will certainly enthuse younger people to participate in the political process in the larger interests of the community.

2.3 Women's Participation in Panchayats

Women representation through 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is a landmark decision through which 33 per cent of the seats were reserved for women. Women are being considered as a backward class because of their negligible representation in political process. As a result of this statutory provision for reservation for women, situations have dramatically changed. It is generally believed of the rural women that their responsibilities are confined merely up to kitchen and farms. This prolonged myth is changed. Big numbers of women are joining the panchayat elections.

To ensure adequate and effective participation of women in the panchayat raj system, the Panchayat Raj Acts, after an amendment many states reserved half of the seats for women in all the three tiers. Most of these women representatives have entered in the political process for the first time. However, many of them in general and the OBC category belonged to the families, which had traditional political base. Yet the situation of women leadership and its working is not very encouraging. The reasons of their poor performance are more or less because of their overall backwardness. Other important bottlenecks among women representatives are interference of male members of their families' viz. of the husband, brother, father, son etc. However, in many cases now such interference is gradually declining. The reasons behind involvement of male members are very clear: first, rural

women do not have the required exposure; secondly, lack of experience of working in panchayats; thirdly, there is a non co-operative attitude of other panchayat raj representatives and government officials.

If an evaluation of their functioning is done, it becomes clear that with the passage of time the women leadership became more assertive and independent as well as aware of the systemic processes. However, to strengthen this segment it is necessary to do away with illiteracy, socio-economic deprivations and many other complexes. It is equally important that to equip these women properly sufficient training programmes should be organised for them. There should also be a change in the attitude of their men folk and the administration. If women's empowerment has to be successful then the existing feudal patriarchal structure in most parts of the country has to be dismantled. Moreover, women's empowerment through the panchayats requires a sustained campaign and vigorous efforts for creating awareness about their rights and duties (**Datta: 1997**).

Part III: Conclusion

To conclude it can be inferred that the inclusion of the marginalized in the process of development is a herculean task which cannot be accomplished by only developing the institutional structure or providing constitutional status to it. It requires a movement of the masses from within our society.

PRI has brought about a change in the rural power structure of Madhya Pradesh. Through a system of reservation, participation of the weaker sections has also been ensured. There has been a major shift in the leadership pattern as well as the authority structure in rural areas. It cannot be denied that the PRIs have made it possible for the weaker sections to get into elective offices and get into the pace of further development. However, much needs to be done as yet. Reservation has provided an opportunity to all backward classes to come out and play significant role but the process of political socialization is slow among these classes. Women representation in panchayats is a matter of some satisfaction but their performance is poor as compared to other classes of the society.

The process of empowerment of the marginalised especially the women and the dalits through panchayat raj institutions in the state of Madhya Pradesh have raised the hopes that it would alter the development priority in favour of the peoples' need and aspirations. In the next decade or so the SCs, STs OBC's and women are bound to make future progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational position and political awareness. This will facilitate them to claim and acquire a legitimate share in the power structure. Local government is only the beginning for many as it is just a nursery of leadership where from an inclusion has started taking place.

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