

Chapter-VII

Juang Women's Participation in Political and Welfare Activities

“Human development if not engendered is endangered” was the main focus of the UNDP Human Development Report 1995, highlighting the need to view development from the realm of gender. The two concepts that are involved in this statement are development and gender. The former one is subject to different interpretation and views. To begin with, development is often treated synonymously with economic growth. The second interpretation seeks to remedy this by concentrating on indices of living standard, whereas the third view puts the spotlight on human potentials and capabilities in the context of relation with other social groups. The three views are not mutually exclusive and the optimal pattern of development should embody elements of all three (Ghai, 1994). In the last two decades, there has been a very significant shift in the development sphere from addressing and viewing subordination of women merely as women’s concern to gender concerns. The term WID, Women in Development, was coined in the 1970s by the women’s committee of the Washington DC Chapter of the society for international development. This term was rapidly adopted by the USAID in their Women in Development approach (Moser, 1993). The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) examines whether women and men are able to actively participate in economic and political life and take part in decision making. This is measured on indices pertaining to three variables namely (1) power over economic resources depicted by per/capita income, (2) access to professional activities and participation in economic decision-making and (3) political opportunities and decision-making reflected by share of parliamentary seats (Mehta, 1996).

After 54 years of Independence, and despite advancements in various fields, India stands today with a dismal record in several social development sectors. We have a polity that has well over 450 million people without access to the written word. The literacy of women is at the appallingly low level of 39.42 per cent, with only 21 per cent of rural women being literate. In UP, Bihar and Rajasthan female literacy is at 9 per cent among scheduled castes and 7 per cent among tribal populations. The lack of health facilities in rural areas has made the maternal mortality rate of rural women between 15-45 particularly high at 12.5 per cent. India's MMR rate is 50 times that of developed countries. The Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) records show that age specification death rates reveal that up to the age of 35 more women than men die at every age level. Virtually one third of the world's child labourers live in India. If you consider the female labour force, then Indian women contribute a much larger share of their earnings to basic family maintenance in the 60 million Indian households that are still below the poverty line. Women form the largest body of unskilled workers, being 90 per cent of rural and 70 per cent of urban unskilled workers. The deaths of young girls exceed those of boys by almost one third of a million every year in India. 60 per cent of the 50 million urban poor constitute women and children. On all the counts of income, education, mortality, morbidity, health, violence, political participation, access to water, sanitation and electricity it appears that women have had to shoulder extraordinary burdens of both inequitable development strategies and skewed sets of power relations (Raghuram, 2002).

Among all the tribes of India, the village is a well-defined political and administrative unit. The unity and solidarity of the village emerge most clearly in relation to government. The unit is governed by an administrative mechanism that not only regulates life within the village, but also orders the villager's relations with the world outside.

This mechanism functions through its officers who are known by different designations among the various tribes. In the simpler societies the ordering of the social, political and ritual relations of the village are in the hands of one man. But in the more complex societies, we find a differentiation of function and authority vested in two headmen, each with its own field of interest and prescribed duties. A primary differentiation of function splits village affairs into secular and sacerdotal spheres of activity with a headman responsible for each and among some tribes, differentiation is further emphasized by the assistants to help each headman in the discharge of his duties.

Recent changes brought in the form of women's emancipation and development and the modern political system breaks the traditional hurdle where woman was not a part of their political unit. In this chapter we will discuss about the role of women in traditional panchayat, modern political system and also go through their welfare activities.

Women and the Nature of Judgment by the Traditional Panchayat

In the Juang traditional Panchayat code of conduct approved by the *pirh* council, Inter-village councils and village councils are enforced by the *Bara*

Bhai (elderly men) to regulate the Juang life. Though men frame the rules and regulations, yet they are applicable to both men and women. Similar is the case with Ao of Nagaland among whom the village affairs are entirely governed by the council of elders, which is exclusively a male affair (Bhowmik, 1990). Even among the strongly matrilineal Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, the chiefs are male, the system of succession being Nepotic (Majumdar, 1980). But the case is quite different among the Blil women. Mann (1983) suggests that customarily, Bhil women cannot participate in leadership hierarchy. She is however, free to put her before the traditional council and get her arguments heard. Though Juang women are not direct participant in the traditional council still they get their arguments heard through close male members of the family.

In the *pirh* council that is headed by a male *Sardar* (leader), women never become the deciding authority. Even they are never allowed for representation in a meeting where the discussion is related to a woman and decision is taken against or for the woman she is let known by her relative. This council decides cases related to incest, premarital pregnancy, witchcraft, sorcery and homicide. The convicted woman is never invited to this place but her relatives attend the meeting. However, if the woman if is found guilty, she has to pay the fine herself or by her relatives. In minor cases, the offender is fined with a few mounds of rice, one or two goats and a few rupees for liquor. Besides if she is married woman her husband or if she is a girl then her father has to feed the *Desa* (delegates from different villages) once. The fine realized from an offender is spent for a feast on the spot. In case of incest

the guilty person is ostracized from the village. All her belonging are either destroyed or sold away.

Cases related to divorce and separation of women is decided in the Inter-village council. Delegates from both husband and wife's village meet at the dormitory of village and decide the case.

But cases related to minor taboos in the village, failure to discharge the duties in case of unmarried girls, breaking down of joint family and love cases between boys and girls of *bandhu* (relative) clans are decided in the village council by the *Nagam*, *Boita* or *Dehuri* (ritual head) and the *Ardhan* or *Pradhan* (the secular head). Here twelve elderly members of the village decide the case in a democratic way.

In case of love intrigues between *bandhu* boys and girls, the offender is detected by asking the girl. The boy if found guilty is fined and also has to marry the same girl. In other cases the guilt person is fined with some rupees, a few mounds of rice, a goat and a few rupees for liquor. The convicted woman if is earning repays or her relatives take the charge. The fines are utilized for a common feast in order to mark the mitigation of quarrels and conflicts. Though women do not representative the traditional panchayat, yet they are given justice in the Juang society.

Women and Nature of Participation in Political Organization

The women in tribal India have not adequate opportunities in the social, economic or political spheres in spite of making significant contributions to national development. This is mainly due to deep-rooted gender biased social

attitudes and practices. Further, tribal women are, by and large, considered as passive beneficiaries rather than active contributors in most of the development programmes. Realizing this problem arising in tribal and rural India it was needed to encourage women's active participation in political affair for making them realize their problems and to overcome them.

Our sample villages come under three different Grampanchayats. The villages of Bali and Phulbadi come under Baragada, Budhighar under Gonasika and Panasanasa under Kuanar Grampanchayats. Presently there is no women member in these panchayats from our sample villages. It is found that most of the Juang women are interested in participating in various political activities like, attending public meetings, casting of vote during election, etc. The first Juang graduate Srikant Juang is responsible for creating this awareness among people, who tried to convince these people the advantages of the modern political organization. This does not mean that all those women who participate in public meetings and cast their vote during election have required level of political awareness but they take it as a time pass or marry-making activities. The Juang women have a good response to the political activities but that does not mean that they are politically aware and know their rights and duties. Most of the time party workers and local leaders motivate them.

Still interesting is their knowledge about current political functionaries. Due to lack of media and communication system none of the women know the name of the present political functionaries of the country and state like the prime minister and the chief minister. The Report of the committee on Panchayati Raj institutions (1978) pinpoints the role and relevance of women

representatives in decision-making process of the village. However this is still to be realized by the Juang women.

Women's Organization, Welfare Agencies and their Activities

Development is a wide and complex subject that is being continually debated in both governmental and non-governmental circles, in the bureaucratic as well as academic world. To some, it means the provision of basic economic services, while to others it is nothing but social progress. Keeping this in view one of the major concerns of India planning has been the welfare and development of weaker section of society, especially that of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. As required by the Directive Principles of Article 46 of our Constitution, concerted efforts have been made in different plans to raise the social and economic status of these backward classes.

Generally villagers who evince keen interest in public life and try to channelize their political ambitions through some formal organizations stand a better chance of being elected to leadership positions. However, given the gender biased tribal political set-up, few women have an opportunity for exposure to political or social experiences. It is thus interesting to examine whether Juang woman has any experience of participating in formal organizations. After all, association with such organizations enhances one's area of influence.

There are a number of programmes under Juang Development Agency (JDA), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Public Distribution System, Village Reconstruction Organization (VRO), Harizan and Tribal

Welfare Department (HTWD), Banks are in work in this area for the development of the area and people and the Juang women are thus related to such schemes. The only village level female organization, called Mahila Swasthya Sangh is not functioning well, as nobody is interested in it.

ICDS, a special nutrition programme was introduced in Orissa in 1971-72. It has the provision of funding for food and health inputs for needy children and nursing mothers. The emphasis is on the supply of special feeding rations including wheat and iron foods and fortified salt to pregnant and nursing mothers. The scheme has separated provisions for the moderately malnourished and the severely malnourished, hoping that anemia especially in pregnant women; the high rate of infant mortality and the serious effects of malnutrition can be combated. But due to transport and communication problem the scheme has been delegated to the Mahila Samitis that are no more active in these villages. Women are provided with ration in a subsidized rate by the Public Distribution System.

The VRO arranges literacy session for the Juang women and also is making effort to develop the Juang language and popularize their culture to be able to gain their confidence. It has also set up a Dispensary at Bhyakhumutia. The function of it is confined to services in family planning and maternal and child health. They also provide both curative and preventive services to women to cope with diseases and ailments specific to the area.

The HTWD introduced by government of Orissa aims at popularization of female education. It is running a Kanyashram at Suakathi. Along with

education, female students are imparted training in art and crafts like tailoring, weaving. But the Kanyashram is not nearby to our sample villages.

There is a local bank called the Baitarani Gramya Bank at Gonasika. But the distance factor dissuades women of our sample villages to avail of the facilities extended under different schemes of the banks.

JDA has indirectly helped women by providing their families with seeds and fertilizers, animals for animal husbandry and necessary farm implements and free medicine for expectant mothers. For women in particular it has started a *Tasara* Programme and provided sewing machine. Now it has introduced adult education programme where women have been special focus of attention.

The real functioning of these welfare agencies can only be assessed through the Juang women's reaction about their activities. Mishra (1997: 1-17) in her work related to rural Orissa found that some development programmes have been trying to integrate rural women into economy through home-based production carried inside one's own home with the help of old equipments and traditional skills. Unfortunately such programmes are not functioning to the required extent in any of our sample villages.

The United Nations has defined the status of women as the "conjunction of position a woman occupies as a worker, student, wife, mother or of the power and prestige attached to those positions, and of the rights and duties she is expected to exercise" (UNO, 1975). "To what extent do women, compared with men, have access to knowledge, to economic resources and to political power, and what degree of personal autonomy do these resources

permit in the process of decision-making and choice at crucial point in the life cycle" (ibid). In terms of the aforesaid parameters, it was found that women are subservient to men in all major decision-making processes in the family. Though they perform all their duties with sincerity, yet they are not given equal rights with men in different spheres of life.

The above discussion clearly reveals that Juang women remain inactive in political activities. Besides casting their votes in elections, they remain unconcerned about village politics. The Juang tradition also puts restrictions on women's participation in public decision-making. However, a few active women do participate in some of the welfare/development activities of their village. The extreme low literacy level among women is another important factor for the present state of affair.