

Crises in Tribal Women's Empowerment in Orissa, India.

Can 'empowerment' through State-led measures be effective?

By Carol Wrenn¹

"The Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association (ASECA) is only for men. There is no money for women to attend because the annual membership fee is Rs30 (€0.50)², and who will pay that for their wives?" Mr Suresh Majhi³, Maddur Village.

"Women are not permitted to attend religious ceremonies because they are impure" Mr Rajesh Murmo, Maddur Village.

"I left the Gram Sabha early, because I did not understand what the Sarpanch was talking about, I had not eaten since morning and I was hungry" Ms Sarita Tudu, Maddur Village.

"I would like to get back into politics, but for that I would need the support of my family. I feel that if I stood for election now, I would be standing alone with no family support behind me" Ms Mahak Majhi, Rajbati Village.

"Men get paid more than women for agricultural work. That's the way it has always been and it won't change" Self Help Group (SHG) member, Maddur Village.

Introduction

There is a general perception in India that women in tribal societies face fewer restrictions than Hindu women. However, the comments above highlight certain restrictions placed on women in a Santhali community, their feelings of subordination, and maintenance of the status quo. My field research with a rural Santhal community in Keonjhar District, in the eastern state of Orissa, India, highlights the constant daily struggles of tribal communities and the severe limitations placed on women in formal public life. The Orissa State government and the India Central government have introduced a number of important measures to 'empower' women in India. For example, the National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women, a

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² Exchange rates are based on the rate Rs60 = €1

³ The names of the people and villages in this article have been changed to protect their identities.

33% reservation for women in local politics was passed in the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992, and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was developed in 2001. India has also signed a number of international conventions that aim to ensure the rights of women, such as the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), CEDAW⁴ (1993), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). While these commitments are commendable, they operate in parallel to existing tribal values and customs which often contradict the objectives of the State.

This paper is based on research with a Santhal community in Northern Orissa, and focuses on the impact of State led measures to empower women, with a particular focus on the impact of the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution. It is based on ethnographic research, which has proved to be an important methodology in drawing out complex issues, particularly in this case, around issues relating to contradictory consciousness and formal and informal modes of power. This mode of research has facilitated a ringside seat to observe the new opportunities and challenges created by the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI), and how these opportunities and challenges play out in the thoughts and actions of individuals concerned. The paper is divided into four sections. Section one outlines the history behind the 73rd Amendment, section two describes the overall context of the research area, section three highlights some of the problems associated with State-led empowerment in the Tribal context, and section four analysis the effectiveness of the State-led interventions in the context of the 73rd Amendment.

⁴ CEDAW is the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Section one – Empowering from the top.

Achieving truly decentralised democracy in India has been a long and arduous process. While Gandhi strongly advocated for decentralised democracy, the creators of the Indian Constitution only included the role of village panchayats in the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 40 of the Indian Constitution states “The State should take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government” (Mathew, 2002: 6). However, this statement does not come under the legally enforceable section of the Constitution.

It was not until the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 that Gandhi’s vision of a devolved Government finally seemed a reality. A *panchayat*, which was originally viewed as an assembly of five persons, has now been redefined as the ‘third tier’ of administration after the Centre and the State government, and constitutes elected representatives at the village, block and district level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which came into effect in 1993, has drastically changed the Indian political process, with far reaching consequences for Indian federalism, decentralisation, gender equality, social justice, grassroots democracy and people’s participation in planning for development (Baviskar and Mathew, 2009:2). The Amendment led the way to a decentralised Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI), providing more power and autonomy to local level institutions.

In Orissa, the PRI is now comprised of three tiers of government. At the village level is the Gram Panchayat (GP), which is the first level of the elected body and covers a population of up to 5,000 citizens. A Sarpanch is the elected Chairperson of the GP, and the Naib Sarpanch is the elected assistant Chairperson. At the next level, the Block, is the Panchayat Samiti, which is the elected body covering between 10 – 20 panchayats. Finally, at the District level

is the Zilla Parishad, which covers 4 - 10 Blocks and is the link with the state government. The Gram Sabha, which constitutes all eligible voters within a Gram Panchayat area serves as a principle mechanism for transparency and accountability, and is required to meet at least twice a year. As many villages in Orissa are small and in remote areas, a Palli Sabha has also been established. The Palli Sabha constitutes all eligible voters within a ward, usually up to 250 voters. The Palli Sabha is thus a further, lower level mechanism for citizens to hold their local representatives to account. A ward member is the elected chairperson of the ward.

One of the fundamental features of the 73rd Amendment Act is reflected in Article 243D, which states that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women. Furthermore, clause (4) of the Act states 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. The Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964 (amended in 1992), goes a step further and states that if the chairperson is male, the assistant chairperson must be female, and vice versa.

In 1992, Orissa became the first state in the country to make provisions for the reservation of seats for elective functionaries in the local institutions even before the enforcement of the 73rd Amendment (Mohanty, 2009: 46). However, despite higher level commitments to devolve government, the on-the-ground realities often paint a different picture. As Madan (2002: 20) explains, the Act does not take into account the fact that the successful implementation of Panchayati Raj depends to an extent on parallel changes in other aspects of rural life, such as the caste system, gender inequality, poverty and illiteracy levels.

These issues stem largely from the fact that the PRI in its current form was developed through a series of Committee recommendations since 1957. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) stated that community development would only be deep and enduring when the community was involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation processes. One of its recommendations was an “organically linked three tier structure of elected bodies” (PRIA, 2006: 5). While these recommendations were not taken on board, subsequent committees such as the K.Santhanan Committee (1963), the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978), the G.V.K Rao Committee (1985), the L.M Singhvi Committee (1986), the Justice Rajinder Singh Sarkaria Commission (1988) and the P.K. Thungon Committee (1988) all made similar recommendations, which finally led to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992.

On their research in the State of Karnataka, Vyasulu et al (1999) claim that the 73rd Amendment did not happen because of a mass movement by the people, or because women actually demanded their due share in power, or contested in large numbers to capture seats in these bodies. As a result, they claim that the PRI system co-exists with traditional institutions in Karnataka, although they do not detail which system is considered to be the most important by the communities concerned.

Imposing a democratic system entails certain contradictions – the PRI was not demanded from the people concerned, and therefore there is no real ownership of the process. As a result, there is also a lack of capacity to ensure its proper and effective implementation. These issues become more pertinent in areas that fall under the 1996 Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, including Keonjhar district, Orissa. PESA aims to ensure that the PRI is implemented in an appropriate manner in tribal areas so that it does not undermine

traditional tribal values. Rimani Soren, the Sarpanch in Maddur panchayat, explained that PESA has been difficult to implement in her panchayat because the community does not understand the power it can have. The majority of the villagers are illiterate, and do not see the direct benefit of the processes that PESA has to offer. Furthermore, in all tribal societies in Orissa, governance structures are made up of an all-male traditional village council. Women play no part in the public political sphere. Therefore the 33% women's reservation directly contradicts the tribal traditional structures and is a direct imposition on their way of life. This is perhaps one reason why the PRI, despite its 33% women's reservation, has to date been unable to address issues of women's inequality in other spheres of life.

Section two – Santhali life in Northern Orissa

The majority of the Santhals live in the hilly range of Chotanagpur plateau, covering parts of the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. They played an instrumental role during the independence movement, and are one of the few tribes in Orissa who have developed their own script – Olchiki.

Santhals have a very sophisticated political and judicial structure, with a number of different levels: The Majhi Baba system is the political system at the village level, a Pir is an area covering 50-60 villages, and is presided over by the Pir Pargana, a Disham is a larger area of governance, which incorporates the state of Orissa, and is presided over by the Disham Pargana. The main role of the Majhi Baba and Pargana systems are to ensure the maintenance of Santhali culture in their areas. In the past, the Majhi Baba system was hereditary, but this has changed in recent decades to incorporate a more democratic structure. Majhi Babas generally serve a three to five year term; however, women play no formal role in this system. Women cannot be elected as Majhi Baba, nor do they generally take part in the election

procedure. The Santhali political system and the PRI system therefore differ markedly from each other in terms of formal female participation.

My research is based in Keonjhar district, Orissa, in a village called here as Maddur. According to a micro-level plan that was conducted in 2006, the population of the village is 1010, of which 498 are male and 512 are female (CYSD, 2006). The majority of the villagers are Santhals, although approximately one third of the population are from the Sounti tribe. Traditionally, the Sountis assumed themselves superior to the Santhals. In the past, these tribes refused to eat together or touch each other. While this is slowly changing as a result of education, marriages between these tribes are still prohibited, and the Santhals and Sounthis live in separate hamlets in the village.

Facilities in Maddur

Facilities in the village are basic – electricity is available, but power cuts are frequent and most households cannot afford to use the electricity, as the majority of villagers live below the poverty line. Latrines are currently being constructed in the village, but only a handful of households have a water connection to the recently constructed water tank, and two of the five tube wells in the hamlets are currently broken. There are two health centres, one primary school and one secondary school in the village.

Livelihoods

The majority of villagers are involved in rice cultivation, however daily wages differ markedly for men and women. On average, women receive Rs35 (€0.58) a day for land cultivation, while men receive Rs60 (€1). In terms of construction work, women traditionally carry the bricks on their heads while men construct the building. Women earn Rs70 (€1.16) a

day for carrying the bricks and men earn Rs150 (€2.50) a day for the actual construction. The women in the village do not see their wage differentials as an issue, and have not argued for equal wages. Despite the fact that in government schemes such as NREGA⁵, wages for men and women are equal, this understanding has not influenced private contract work, whereby the wages are decided by the local (all male) village council.

Problems in the village

Despite the fact that Maddur is well connected by road to the nearest town less than 10km away, life is tough for the majority of the villagers who struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis. Issues such as water scarcity, deforestation, illiteracy, malaria and alcohol consumption hugely impact on the health and livelihoods of the majority of villagers. Absence of water harvesting and irrigation systems has meant villagers are reliant on monsoon rains, which have been insufficient and erratic in recent years. The villagers explained that in the past, they cultivated both paddy and jute, but as a result of the insufficient rains in recent years, jute cultivation is no longer possible.

Villagers have adapted to deforestation by burning leaves instead of wood for cooking. However, deforestation has resulted in some drastic changes in people's livelihoods, as they previously earned their incomes from selling forest produce, but are now reliant on purchasing these items and as a result they seek employment as daily labourers – making them vulnerable to exploitation by local contractors. Deforestation has compounded the effects of water scarcity, and has also had an impact on the resources Santhals own – many

⁵ NREGA is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. It entitles families who are willing and able to work to 100 days employment a year at the minimum wage. If families apply for the scheme and are not given work within 15 days of submitting their application, they are entitled to claim unemployment benefit.

villagers have had to sell their land because of lack of income. As a result, very few people now own landed property.

The need for immediate income has resulted in seasonal migration and subsequent student drop outs. Women are less likely to be as educated as men in the village. As of 2006, 150 men and 104 women from the village had completed primary school, 84 men and 40 women had completed secondary school and 78 men and 21 women had completed higher education (CYSD, 2006). Illiteracy levels hugely impacts villagers' awareness of their rights and entitlements, and subsequently their levels of empowerment, as is evident from the examples in the next section.

Section three – real empowerment?

The state government and Maddur panchayat have implemented a number of schemes to address levels of poverty in the area. However, as my research in Maddur village highlights, lack of awareness and lack of empowerment remain pertinent issues in the area. The PRI has given a select number of women in the village important opportunities to be involved in formal public life and to highlight women's needs in the public arena. However, despite this, for the majority of women in the area, to date the women's reservation seems to have had negligible impact on their lives.

This may be due to the fact that these women themselves did not demand the women's reservation. 'Empowerment' is something that has to come from within – we cannot be given empowerment – it is something we need to fight for. As Mohanty (2008: 85) maintains, the concept of the rulers' understanding of empowerment "implies that an external agency has given power to or 'empowered' another section – a patronising idea rather than power

redistributed through a process, including a process of struggle.” The Sarpanch in Maddur seems to be the only woman in the village who has formally fought for power, as she contested her second term in an open election. However, the majority of the other women in the village do not understand the power that the Palli and Gram Sabhas can potentially have, and even though they attend the meetings, they state that they do not find them useful. Furthermore, the majority of women who do attend these meetings do not speak at them – they let the “women leaders” like the health worker speak on their behalf. The following examples highlight some serious issues in terms of lack of awareness, disillusionment with the PRI, limited opportunities and lack of capacity.

Awareness?

For the women and men of Maddur, life is tough, but for widows like Sarita Tudu, or illiterate men like Surendra Majhi, life is even tougher. Sarita helps make the mid day meal in the local school, but she has not been paid for the last twelve months. She survives on her widow’s pension of Rs200 (€3.33) a month, and lives with her son and daughter-in-law. Her survival strategy includes continuing to work in the school, as she is given a meal there. She does not understand why she has not been paid and she does not know who to complain to. She has discussed the issue with the headmaster of the school, but he claims he has not been given the money from the government to pay her. Sarita has not raised this issue with the ward member or Sarpanch in her village – she tells me she is illiterate (as are her son and daughter-in-law) so she does not understand such matters. She attends the palli sabha meetings, but she does not understand the proceedings.

Surendra’s wife recently gave birth to a baby girl. Surendra works as a daily labourer, but finds it difficult to get work throughout the year. Surendra would like to be involved in

NREGA, but he knows that to register for the scheme he needs a bank account as he will be paid by cheque. However, Surendra does not have a bank account, and has been told he requires Rs300 (€5) to open one. Surendra believes the middleman who told him this false information, and as he is illiterate, he requires help in filling in the forms for his account. As he does not have Rs300 (€5) to spare, he cannot open his account and subsequently cannot register for NREGA. He has therefore been denied his right to work.

Disillusionment

Kalpana Kisku is also a widow, and has two daughters, she had a son, but he died from a fever. Kalpana also receives a pension of Rs200 (€3.33) a month, and supplements this by stitching leaf plates. For every 1000 plates she stitches, she earns Rs90 (€1.50). It usually takes her about three days to stitch 1000 plates. Kalpana lives with her unmarried daughter, Rani, who has been educated up to tenth class⁶. Rani earns Rs30 (€0.50) a day for cultivation work or Rs50 (€0.83) a day for construction work. On this meagre income, these women survive. Kalpana states that she attends the palli sabha meetings, but their problems do not get solved in these meetings. Basic issues such as the broken tube well in their village have not been solved for the last 12 months, despite the fact that it has been raised numerous times in palli sabha meetings.

Priya Murmu has also become disillusioned with the PRI process. Her husband died seven years ago, and even though she is entitled to a widow's pension, she has not yet received it. She has spoken to the Sarpanch about the issue, and also the Naib Sarpanch, who is actually her sister-in-law. Her case was sent to the block level, but it has not yet been approved. Priya does not attend the Palli Sabha meetings, her daughter-in-law goes on her behalf. Priya is

⁶ Tenth class in the Indian education system refers to students who are 15-16 years old.

another example of some one who is illiterate, and who does not know how to effectively demand her rights.

Limited opportunities

While women such as Kalpana Kisku, Sarita Tudu and Priya Murmu have become disillusioned with their devolved government, for women like Mahak Majhi and Saloni Majhi, it has opened up opportunities. Mahak Majhi, a graduate student, was the first female and youngest person to be elected Block Chairperson, at the age of 23 in 1997 and served a five year term from 1997 – 2002. Her interest in politics stems from her family background, as both her father and uncle were government employees, and political discussions were a frequent feature of family life. Mahak is still keenly interested in politics, and is still involved with the Congress party. However, household activities and caring for her father, husband and four year old son now take up the majority of her time. If she was to go back into politics, she would require the support of her family.

Mahak believes that women play a crucial role in politics because only a woman can properly understand the problems other women face and can develop appropriate strategies to address them. She has seen a change in women's participation in politics in recent years, as previously only female ward members or women involved in party politics attended the Palli and Gram Sabhas, whereas now other women who are not directly involved in politics are also attending these meetings. She thinks these meetings provide an important opportunity for women to voice their needs and concerns.

However, despite this, Mahak does not consider control over property as a woman's need. Mahak's mother died soon after Mahak's marriage, and Mahak and her husband moved back

to her family home to care for her father. Even though Mahak has spent the last 8 years caring for her father, she sees no entitlement to his property upon his death. Her brother will inherit the family home and Mahak sees no problem with this. She stated that if she was not married, she would be entitled to a small portion of her father's property. In saying this, Mahak also admits that she sometimes feels inferior to men, that men are more important and there is an issue of dependence on men in Indian society. She thinks that even if a woman is highly educated, she will still have a low morale because of male domination. Mahak does not seem to see the link between not having control over resources, and feeling inferior.

Furthermore, Mahak follows the community's restrictions placed on women during their menstrual cycle. If a woman is menstruating, she is not allowed to attend festivals, places of worship or to touch the bride and groom during a marriage. She is also not allowed to cook for or serve men during this time. Mahak believes that when a woman has her period, she is not pure. If she touches food, "bad things" will happen to the family.

Mahak comes from and has been inspired by an educated Santhali family who strongly believe in keeping the Santhal culture alive. Her upbringing, as well as the women's reservation system in the PRI, have provided her with a number of opportunities and have allowed her to take part in what was traditionally a man's world. Mahak feels a strong sense of identity towards her culture and feels proud that she can read and write the Santhali Olchiki script, which her mother taught her. Male domination and female subordination are clearly issues which she has thought about. However, while she is empowered to take decisions on her own income, she is not willing to disrupt family relations by demanding her entitlement to property, nor is she willing to risk cursing her family by cooking or worshipping during menstruation. Mahak still has a deep passion to be involved in politics,

but she does not think her family would support her in standing for the next election, as she is now married and has a child. While she is confident, strong willed, and financially independent, she also carries the identity of a “good Santhali woman” and does not seem to question the cultural restrictions placed upon her purely because she is female.

Lack of capacity

Saloni Majhi was elected to the position of Naib Sarpanch in 2007. She explained that her family supported her and the villagers forced her to take up the reserved posting. While Saloni is literate (she has been educated up to class 8⁷), her two young children take up the majority of her time, which means she is unable to carry out her Naib Sarpanch duties properly. She is unable to explain what her duties actually are, and a number of male villagers in the community have stated they are not happy with Saloni’s work as she has been unable to get work for them under NREGA. During the Gram Sabha that I observed in February 2010, Saloni spent most of her time walking around the grounds of the panchayat office with her three year old daughter, rather than participating actively in the meeting proceedings.

Saloni also complained to me about the non-functioning tube well in the village, however she did not seem to see it as her role to address the issue and advocate for its renovation on behalf of her community. Saloni also seemed to be powerless in addressing Priya’s pension problem. She explained that if the Sarpanch told her to follow up on the issue at the Block office, she would go, but the Sarpanch has not yet requested her to do so. Saloni clearly has a subordinate role in the village, and has not taken her own initiative in demanding rights on behalf of her sister-in-law.

⁷ Class 8 in the Indian Education system refers to students within the age group 13-14 yrs

Saloni is also the secretary of a Self Help Group (SHG) in her village. Each member of the group has been saving Rs10 (€0.16) a week for the last year, but as yet are not involved in any income generating activities. While other women secretaries in the SHG Federation (Group of 19 SHGs) can cycle, Saloni is unable to. She is therefore reliant on her husband to take her to the bank 8km away.

Despite her limitations, it seems as though Saloni has gained in confidence since being elected, and she would like to run for the position of Sarpanch in the next election. However, while the PRI seems to have expanded her horizons, she has not applied this thinking to her own cultural context. Saloni has no interest in becoming a Majhi Baba, because “it would involve a lot of hard work, and I would need to travel to different villages”. Is this not also the role of a Sarpanch? Saloni’s view is that travelling to different villages for Government work would be acceptable, but doing so for Santhali based work would not be permissible. Similarly, Santhali women are not allowed to visit the Santhali sites of worship such as the Jaher Garh⁸. Saloni has no interest in visiting this area, and does not seem to have questioned the fact that she is restricted purely because she is female. The fact that Saloni does not want to be a Majhi Baba, and has no interest in going to the Jaher Garh area, yet she would like to be a Sarpanch shows the clear division between the opportunities provided by the government policies, and how these are in no way permeating into Santhali culture.

Opportunities and Restrictions

In Orissa, Santhali culture is largely promoted by the Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association (ASECA), which is both a social and political arm of Santhali communities. The association runs Santhali schools, teaches Santhali and aims to promote the Santhali language. ASECA also deals with societal issues, for example it prohibits child marriages and

⁸ The Jaher Garh is a sacred Sal tree area at the edge of the village.

ensures dowries are not given during weddings. According to Nirja Baske and his wife Mahak Majhi from a neighbouring village, both men and women can be members of ASECA. However, the situation in Maddur village is very different, as only men are permitted to attend the ASECA meetings, as was explained to me by Mr Suresh Majhi.

Suresh Majhi was a Majhi Baba in Maddur for 10 years, he is now a ward member for his hamlet and is also an ASECA member and a school committee member. He is married with three children - one daughter and two sons. Suresh himself has received an education up to class 7, but his wife is illiterate. One of his sons is a graduate in commerce, the other son has completed class 10. His daughter is illiterate and has had no school education. Suresh explained that when his daughter was born, he was very poor, his parents had died, and they had no property or land. He therefore had no money to send his daughter to school, whereas three years later, they could afford to send his son to school. While Suresh explained that he believes there should be equal rights for boys and girls, the fact that both his wife and daughter are illiterate shows that his actions do not correspond with his words.

Suresh resigned from his post as Majhi Baba due to an incident between a married couple. A husband was neglecting his wife and Suresh called a meeting where the couple were separated. Suresh decided that the woman should marry some one else, but it was the man's own wish to marry his new partner. Suresh resigned because he felt that if he was involved in controversial situations it may have an impact on his children's future. He explained that the position of Majhi Baba is a very responsible one, and if a controversial situation is not handled properly, it could cause major problems in the village.

Suresh is serving his first elected term as ward member, for which he was nominated by the community, during a meeting which was facilitated by the current Majhi Baba. The community decided that if two or three people stood for election, there would be quarrels, so they decided it would be better to sit together and select one suitable candidate. While Suresh is happy to be elected, he would not have been able to refuse the position, as the villagers would not have had faith in a second choice candidate.

Suresh stated that he believes the 33% women's reservation in the PRI is not sufficient, he believes there should be a 50% reservation, so that female participation will increase. He believes that if there was no reservation, there would be more abuse of women. However, Suresh also explained that ASECA is only for men in order to limit the numbers and "there is no money for women to attend, because the annual membership is Rs30 and who will pay that for their wives?"

While Suresh believes in equal rights for men and women, his sons are well educated but his wife and daughter are illiterate. While he agrees with the 50% reservation in the PRI, he does not think that women should participate in ASECA meetings. While he became involved in a situation where a husband was neglecting his wife, his solution was to choose an alternative husband for the woman, while the accused man was able to choose his own new wife. Suresh's dominant influence in the community seems to limit opportunities for women.

Men clearly have a dominant role in the community and set the cultural rules that women abide by. Women are not permitted to attend religious ceremonies and they are not permitted to visit the Jaher Garh – the spiritual area. However, this area is not just a spiritual area, it is also the site where men meet to discuss issues such as daily wages in the village.

Pratachandra Tudu, the village priest, explained that the village wages are decided by the men in the community. He said these meetings take place in the Jaher Garh after religious ceremonies, because this is a time when most men in the village are available to discuss the issue. The fact that this area is off limits for women shows how they can therefore have no influence over the decisions on wages they receive, and women's wages are always set at a lower rate than men's. Seema Hasda, Priya's daughter in law, mentioned that she would like to earn a wage equivalent to her husband's wage, but women have always been paid less than men, and Seema did not know how this could possibly change. As a result of the restrictions placed on women in Santhali culture, they may see the Palli and Gram Sabhas as an avenue for voicing their needs rather than through associations such as ASECA.

Overcoming Restrictions

Rimani Soren, the Sarpanch in the village, seems to be the one woman who, to an extent, has been able to overcome the restrictions placed upon her. However, in order to do this, she has had to reject her own culture, as it is currently defined. Rimani is a well educated (graduate student), comparatively affluent, strong, Santhali lady who along with her husband commands respect in the village. She has been Maddur's Panchayat Sarpanch since 2002 and since then has grown in her role and gained in confidence. She is knowledgeable about the various government schemes and Acts for which she is responsible, and has made some important changes to her panchayat since her election.

Growing up, Rimani had no interest in politics, but her in-laws encouraged her to get involved. She then realised that if she was an elected official, she could help people who are suffering. When she was first elected to a reserved seat for women, she was nervous and unaware of the extent of her role and responsibility. Initially the community was not

supportive of her and made passing comments regarding her inability to lead, but her family supported and encouraged her. When she was first elected, her husband had a high level of control over her activities - he did not like her attending meetings and would decide which projects she could work on.

Towards the end of her first tenure, Rimani had a far better understanding of her roles and responsibilities and decided to contest for a second term. However, the role of Sarpanch was no longer a reserved seat for women, so she had to run for election in an open contest. She was the only woman to contest the Sarpanch seat, against three other men, and she won. The fact that she won an open seat is an important indicator of the success of the women's reservation in the PRI. If there had been no reservation system, Rimani would not have contested for a seat in the election. However, as a result of her entry into politics, her confidence increased to the extent that she could successfully win an open election.

Despite this, Rimani's husband, an engineer by trade but currently not working, clearly has a level of influence over her work. Rimani explained that her husband assisted her frequently during her first tenure. She had to go to Delhi eight times, and he accompanied her on three of those occasions. She explained that he now helps her with training programmes – ensuring food and logistics are organised. He also helps with bill payment, and she emphasised that he helps mainly for “urgent” work. However, on every single occasion that I have visited the panchayat office (which is now over twenty times over a four month period) he is always present, while she is present approximately half of the time. Her statement on helping mainly for “urgent” work is therefore questionable.

Despite the fact that Rimani relies on her husband, she is also able to hold her own ground and is knowledgeable about government policies and their implementation. She is leagues ahead of the Naib Sarpanch, Saloni Majhi in this regard. The positive impacts of her tenure are clearly evident: Palli and Gram Sabhas now take place regularly, and more women than men attend. Prior to her election, very few women would attend these meetings. The Public Distribution System is now working properly, whereby families who are below the poverty line receive rice, sugar and kerosene at subsidised rates. When Rimani started as a Sarpanch, she gave priority to sanitation work and now almost all families have a latrine. In 2009 she received an award from the Governor of Orissa for the Sanitation Programme.

Rimani seems to strongly believe in gender equality, and clearly fought hard to be where she is today. While her in-laws house is currently in the name of her father in law, she wants both her son and daughter to equally inherit the property. She takes a keen interest in women's problems and the women in the village have become more involved in political life since her election.

Rimani is very different from the other women in her village. The fact that she is one of the few female graduate students in the area makes her stand out, but she is also different from some of the other well educated Santhali women in the area, such as Mahak Majhi, the first female block Chairperson. While Mahak has maintained strong connections to her Santhali culture, Rimani has not. Although Rimani is Santhali, she wears the traditional Hindu bindi on her forehead, numerous bracelets on both her arms and gold necklace and earrings. She is literate in Oriya, and she speaks Santhali, but she cannot read the Olchiki script.

Not being able to read Olchiki is a cause of embarrassment for Rimani. When she is invited to a youth festival or a club in a Santhal village as Chief Guest and finds notices written in Olchiki, she is unable to read or refer to them. She therefore tries to limit the number of such events that she attends. While her maiden name is Baske, she uses her husband's name, Soren on all official documents. This goes against Santhali culture where women keep their maiden name after marriage. Therefore, Rimani seems to have fused Santhali culture with aspects of mainstream Indian culture to some extent. She may have done this so that she is more accepted in mainstream society, or she may have done this to transcend the cultural limitations placed on her by Santhali culture – a culture in which women have no role in formal political life.

Rimani is not a member of ASECA, nor is her husband. She is not sure what ASECA actually does or what is discussed during their meetings. On the other hand, while Mahak is also not a member, she is well aware of the activities of ASECA. While Rimani works with the ward member, Suresh Majhi, and has been invited to ASECA meetings in the past, she seems to simply ignore their activities and therefore any potential restrictions which might be placed upon her. Unlike Saloni and Mahak, Rimani's role as a mother has not prevented her from carrying out her responsibilities towards her electorate. This is largely a result of the fact that her in-laws have supported her and care for her children in her absence, a support system which both Saloni and Mahak do not seem to have.

Despite the fact that Rimani's husband clearly has some level of control over her work, he is also supportive and she is knowledgeable of her role and responsibilities. Rimani may also be using her husband's support as a strategy to engage with the male senior authorities with whom she is required to interact. As Mohanty (2007) explains, the husbands or other male

relatives of female Sarpanchs shield them from the panchayat secretary and block development officers if they try to harass the women. In fact, some state governments (Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan) have passed a rule that women elected representatives should be accompanied by their male relatives to the panchayats. This is because in some cases, the secretaries of the panchayats and male colleagues try to implicate inexperienced women by asking them to sign blank cheques, and in many cases, no-confidence motions were passed in the panchayats against the women chiefs on false charges (Mohanty, 2007: 301). While these strategies are important, Rimani also needs to start building up a second line of command, so that there is an equally, if not more empowered woman to take her place when the time comes.

Section four – effective functioning of the PRI

While the PRI is supposed to be autonomous with its own direct powers and functions, in practice, it seems to be a mere arm of the State and Central government with no real power of its own. The panchayat structure in Orissa is reliant on State and Central government funds to implement its programmes. This severely reduces the autonomy it has (Bandyopadhyay et al, 2007: 71). This is perhaps one reason why women like Sarita and Kalpana are disillusioned with the PRI as they do not think it is able to address their concerns. Furthermore, as Bandyopadhyay et al (2007: 66) explain, the panchayats were a ‘gift’ from the top, “superimposed on a very powerful and historically structured system of bureaucratic, non-accountable, non-responsive and autocratic district administration”. As a result of this, the Palli and Gram Sabhas are an ineffective structure for holding government to account, because such a system has not existed before, and communities do not seem to realise the potential that this structure can have. This was clearly evident in the Palli and Gram Sabha

meetings in Maddur panchayat that I observed, which did not function as per the norms laid out in Orissa Gram Panchayat Act and by the Panchayati Raj Department.

Palli and Gram Sabhas

I observed two Palli Sabhas and one Gram Sabha in Maddur panchayat in February 2010, where I witnessed a number of malpractices. In all three meetings, people signed the minutes book before the meeting even took place – this is supposed to be signed at the end of the meeting, after the villagers attending have read and understood the minutes. The seating layout in all three meetings reflected the importance of men in the village, as they either sat on chairs or on logs, while the women sat on the floor. The Maddur Palli Sabha took place in the panchayat office, which consists of three rooms off a corridor. The Sarpanch and Executive Officer⁹ were seated at a table at one end of the corridor. Approximately twenty men sat on plastic chairs along the wall of the corridor, while approximately forty women sat on the floor in one of the office rooms. This set up meant that the men had a clear view of the Sarpanch and the Executive Officer, who were easily audible. The majority of the women, however, were unable to see the Sarpanch, and hearing her would have been difficult for the women seated towards the back of the room – holding a government to account when one cannot hear what is being discussed is obviously problematic.

Attendance for all three meetings was very low. Despite the fact that in all three meetings more women than men attended, in total less than the required quorum of 10% of the panchayat population were present at the Gram Sabha, and the majority of the people did not stay for the whole meeting. When I asked some women the following day why they had left the meeting early, they said they did not understand what the Sarpanch was talking about,

⁹ The Executive Officer is a government appointee.

they had not eaten all day and they were hungry. This highlights the issue of trying to decentralise democracy when people are living at basic subsistence levels.

In all three meetings, both the women and the men remained largely silent, while the Sarpanch and Executive Officer did most of the talking. When villagers were asked to state their needs for the coming year, there seemed to be little analysis of the needs, instead random suggestions came from various villagers, such as a bore well, improvement of the village road, and pond renovation. There was no discussion or prioritisation around these needs, they were simply recorded in the minutes book.

Only in one Palli Sabha were the recorded minutes read out to the villagers at the end of the meeting. However, not everyone who had signed the minutes at the beginning of the meeting stayed throughout the meeting to listen to the minutes recorded. In fact, some people arrived just at the end of the meeting and signed the minutes, without reading them, even though they had not participated in any of the discussion. This issue highlights three problems: either the villagers are unaware of how the palli sabha should function and do not realise its role in holding the government to account; or the villagers are aware and are disillusioned with the process and therefore do not see the importance of attending the entire meeting; or the meeting was organised at a time that did not suit the majority of villagers who were engaged in what they perceived to be more important activities.

Meeting the needs of the community

Effectiveness of the panchayat system at the village level is largely dependent on the capacity of the Sarpanch to carry out his/her responsibilities, but is also dependent on the funds available. While Rimani Soren is aware of the issues such as water scarcity, lack of work

opportunities and the alcohol problem in the area, progress in addressing these issues has been both slow and difficult. In 2006, with the assistance of a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), Rimani Soren initiated a “micro-level plan” (MLP) in the panchayat. This plan analysed the various issues in the village and outlined basic strategies to address them. However, Rimani Soren has stated that if the issues highlighted in the MLP reflect the government priorities, they are easy to address because government funding is available for them. Therefore many of the village roads have been improved through work done under NREGA, but irrigation systems have not been developed because these are not currently a government priority in the area.

Similarly, latrine construction is currently underway as a result of Central Government “Nirmal Gram Puraskar” Award – an award given to individuals, organisations and gram panchayats who have been the driving force for effecting full sanitation coverage for a geographical area. Rimani Soren may be awarded Rs100,000 (€1666.66) if she achieves 100% sanitation coverage in terms of (a) 100% sanitation coverage of individual households, (b) 100% school sanitation coverage (c) free from open defecation and (d) clean environment maintenance (Dept of Drinking Water Supply, 2010). While there is funding and help available for latrine and water tank construction, there seems to be no funding available to fix the broken tube wells in the village.

In relation to alcohol consumption, Rimani Soren acknowledges that the production and sale of local liquor is a source of livelihood for many villagers, and the issue of high levels of alcohol consumption cannot be addressed until alternative livelihood sources are developed. It is generally the women who sell this liquor. However, despite the fact that the government has formed a number of female SHGs in the area, and has provided them with Rs5,000

(€83.33) under the Mission Shakti scheme once they have shown that they have been saving for six months or more, these SHGs have not been given any entrepreneurial or business plan training, or support, and are therefore not involved in any income generating activities. As a result, the SHGs cannot currently provide an alternative to the production and sale of alcohol business – in fact, it is more than likely this business that is providing the savings for the SHG members.

If the needs of and problems within the community are not addressed, it can lead to both disillusionment and disinterest in the political process. This issue has been the main reason for the rise in Maoist activities in recent years. From West Bengal, the movement has spread to Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh through the activities of underground groups like the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has declared the Maoist movement as the most serious internal threat to India's national security. The Maoists claim to be supported by the poorest rural populations, and have frequently targeted contractors, police and government workers in what they say is a fight for improved land rights and more jobs for neglected agricultural labourers and the poor.

However, with increasingly aggressive State suppression of the movement, and subsequent Maoist backlash, many tribals in Orissa are starting to argue that they are stuck in the middle of the violence. The media termed police operation -“Operation Green Hunt”- has resulted in a massive deployment of forces to Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh and Orissa since November 2009. This operation has only resulted in increased retaliation from the Maoists. When Home Minister P Chidambaram vowed to “wipe out the Maoists in two to three years” during a visit to the blood soaked West Bengal district of Midnapore, the Maoists subsequently killed eleven police officers in Koraput, South Orissa on April 4th 2010 and 76 Central Reserve

Police Force Officers in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, two days later. While the Maoist movement has not yet affected Maddur village, there are serious Maoist threats from neighbouring blocks and districts which, given the opportunity, could easily spread. There is already an increased police presence in neighbouring blocks, who are carrying out random questioning of tribal villagers. Panchayat offices in Keonjhar district have also been targeted by Maoists. If this situation worsens and spreads, the villagers of Maddur could be caught in the middle.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a number of crises within Santhali culture and the PRI system in Northern Orissa. The PRI may have had some influence on the Santhali Majhi Baba system, as it has changed from a hereditary to an elected posting. However, the 33% women's reservation in the PRI has not influenced this system. If ASECA and the Majhi Baba system in Maddur is largely a society for men, and the panchayat system is encouraging increasing numbers of females to participate, it could result in a decision making divide, whereby Santhali women see the PRI as their opportunity to improve their standard of living, and Santhali men see ASECA as an avenue for promoting Santhali culture (and thereby restricting women in certain areas). Through increasingly active participation of women in the PRI, the very dynamics of both the functioning of ASECA and the PRI may change. As Baviskar and Mathew (2009), note, the reservation system in the PRI has meant that "the floodgates have been opened and there is no way they can be closed" (Baviskar and Mathew, 2009: 16). However, while Santhali women continue to live at basic subsistence levels, and thereby leave panchayat meetings early due to hunger pangs, a devolved system of government can never be effective.

In parallel to this, is the crisis of effectiveness of the PRI and the growing threat of the Maoist movement in the area. The more people become disillusioned with the PRI process, the less effective it will be. While the State is trying to suppress the Maoist movement, if the fundamental causes of the problem – corruption and the inability to meet people’s needs – are not addressed, no sustainable solution will be achieved.

One of the reasons the 33% women’s reservation was included in the 73rd Amendment was to ‘empower’ women, to ensure their needs are both highlighted and met in the political process. While this has led to increased female participation in Palli and Gram Sabha meetings, aside from Rimani Soren and to some extent Saloni Majhi, other women in the panchayat do not seem to have benefited from this reservation system. Therefore, the benefits of the PRI do not seem to have yet percolated to women outside of politics. While Rimani has encouraged the establishment of SHGs in the area, they are not carrying out any entrepreneurial activities as yet, and are therefore not financially independent. Furthermore, none of the women in the SHG federation question the unequal wages they receive as daily labourers. Thus, the SHGs set up by the government have done little to empower them.

While most villagers now receive their pensions regularly and are also receiving rice, kerosene and sugar at reduced rates on a monthly basis through the Public Distribution System run by the Panchayat, there are a majority of women, who like Sarita, Kalpana and Priya are extremely vulnerable and live at basic subsistence levels. True democracy and empowerment will not ensue until these women and their neighbours have the energy to fight for their rights. Until then, the Maoists will continue to fight on their behalf – with worrying consequences for the security of the country.

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