

## TRIBAL WOMEN IN TRANSITION- ROLE OF SHGS: A STUDY IN SIDHI DISTRICT

ARIF RASHEED<sup>1</sup> & ABDUL MATIN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Sociology, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

### ABSTRACT

The empowerment of women refers to the attributes of economic opportunity, social equality, and personal rights. Ironically women are deprived of these essential human rights. Often these rights are denied as a matter of culture and tradition of certain regions especially in rural areas. In rural areas, it is generally considered that women are not capable enough to generate income. As a result, they are considered mainly to household duties and low wages for the same nature of work as is being done by its counterpart. Since, they are economically unequipped, therefore, ineligible for availing a powerful position in the society and raising voice in traditionally patriarchal societies. Rural women as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Keeping in view the present research paper mainly focuses over the efforts taken by the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) through SHGs (Self-help Groups) to inculcate necessary attributes among the tribal women. The paper, in order to exemplify the scenario in which the women SHGs are functioning, tries to extract the essence of SHGs and its impact over the personality of women to raise their understanding and claim their rights both in the household scenario and the government promoted schemes and programmes. The paper emphasizes over the power structure of upper caste and the segregation of tribal community as well as the preparation for the reclaiming of their human rights through awareness and economic empowerment.

**KEYWORDS:** Cluster, Decision-Making, Group Discussion, Mahila Mandal, Participation

### INTRODUCTION

The study is based on the participatory observation and analysis in two places of the Sidhi District of Madhya Pradesh. The one is *Deosar block* and the other *Kursa Panchayat*. The researcher collected the information from the *Aamoh* village during his village stay in Aamoh. The visit involves the participation in the meetings of *Mahila Mandal*, learning and understanding the tribal village life through the internalization of 'learning by living concept' and focused group discussion. It involves the personal interview with the support of the Hindi and tribal speaking person. In this paper the researcher tried to analyze the essence of the practice of *Mahila Mandal* through engaging himself in the real tribal situations of the area. The description of the mountain clad area and its difficulties have been highlighted. The elaboration of real life circumstances in tribal areas facilitates the readers to understand the functioning of the rural development organizations and the dedication of social workers living away from the family and urban life. This research paper includes the contents like rural infrastructure, the meaning of SHGs, village profile, nature of work of *Mahila Mandal*, and the objective of cluster meeting.

### METHODOLOGY

This research paper is basically a work based on primary source. The data is taken from the help of secondary

source. The paper adopted the simple methodology of participant observation through learning by living approach. The focused group discussion was one of the methodologies to gather the data. The village stay was the source for the first hand information through focused group discussion and personal interviews.

## THE RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

### The Hindu Upper Caste

Deosar is one of the blocks in Sidhi district. Beyond Deosar, towards the north direction the road turns and reaches to the village named *Aamoh*. In between Deosar and *Aamoh*, existence of other village could be seen. The villages either were outside or far away from the periphery of Sonapar (*Vindianchal*) mountain range, sensibly occupied by the upper caste people particularly the Brahmins. The lands under their control speak about the fertility of the land. The division of upper caste land in square shape was larger. The occupied land stretched into several acres. The eyes can see the occupied land up to its maximum capacity.

Their houses were made up of bricked wall and roof constructed with the assistance of *Khaprail* hitherto in a traditional manner. The houses cover big courtyard and several rooms. The land adjacent to the village periphery was under their control in which their herd of animals could be seen grazing quietly without any botherance. The big temple, the installment of huge transformer, area adjacent from all sides; the temple; houses, roads, innumerable number of milk giving animals shows their influence in the area. More obvious picture was of small children in full fancy clothes; playing and enjoying the life.

### The Tribal Community

The other phase of life was of tribal life in mountains. In the mountains one can find stone clad lands having less fabric of fertility; children moving towards their village bearing the burden of wooden logs on their heads with silent eyes. The scene revealed their pathetic conditions. The houses were constructed on insulating mountains. They were mostly small and *kachcha*; but generally of two story; demonstrating the logic and tribal skill. The square cut land was small in size comparatively to the Brahmin controlled land. People can be seen moving towards hand pump with a purpose of bathe and to store water for drinking. The SC/ST lives in the area. The area which was mostly difficult to cultivate. Crop cultivation needs too much endeavor and pain. They do not find much benefit due to the lack of irrigation; rainfall and infertile land consist of stone leaving less chance to grow crop. They depend upon the collection of *temdu patta* and woods from forest to cut and sell in the market away from their land. Indeed, mostly tribal community is ignorant and poor in all aspects. The main road to the market is under the control of dominant and influential caste. Always felt under pressure. The scheduled caste and scheduled tribes seemed to be the subject of exploitation. These were the places located far from the urban locales and glamour. Still children use to run by hearing the sound of the vehicles with a purpose to have a glance of it. The human beings, although not all, look like Negros due to the intensity of sunlight.

The *Aamoh* village was in forest. Tribal used to visit market at *Deosar* block on their feet. They cover 15-20 km in hot air and sunlight. The non-governmental organizations work for the implementation of government schemes and programmes in such rural areas. The government schemes for wells and hand-pumps percolated down to the area in charge but work is just done only on the paper. This is, indeed, the place in mountains where thousands and lacs of rupees are allocated for the wells and other water facilities to the marginalized people. The people were compelled to dig their own wells in the absence of government works. They also involve their women folks in the work of digging wells for

water availability. The pain was taken because of the ignorance about the programmes and its implementation. People used to construct their road for convenience. Ironically, it was claimed constructed by the authorities without payment. The forest area tribal were compelled to drink yellow water fetch from the well unlike mineral water.

### SHGS- MEANT FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programs (World Bank, 2001). Women's collectives as forums of women's empowerment have not been a new phenomenon in the country. The *Mahila Mandals* as part of community development initiatives, dates back to the 1950s. Experiences of SEWA and of WWF showed that women were not defaulters with regard to repayment of credit. The collective ensured that there was peer pressure on women to repay loans and the resulting high repayment rates meant that lenders were willing to forego collateral. (Sharma, Arpita: Aug. 2013). PRADAN, the rural development NGO, took the task to work in such areas. In order to claim their rights, the concerned community must be ready to take initiative and develop self reliance. In the absence of such willingness, rights could not be availed. Thus, the empowerment of women through SHGs is an effective approach to let them live a dignified life and link them with the mainstream.

### MAHILA MANDAL- WOMEN'S ENTERPRISE

#### Structure

The members of *Mahila Mandal* use to choose one president (*Adhyaksha*), one Vice- Presidents (*Upadhaksha*) and secretary for one year. They are not liable to be reappointed for the same in the next year. They also do appoint one finance person. The finance person may be a literate girl or the boy from the same village. He/she has to maintain the records of meeting proceedings under the shadow of a tree. The Mahila Mandal decides the payment of salary to the financier on monthly basis out of the collected money. The maximum number of members in a *Mahila Mandal* could be 20. The minimum number should be at least 8.

#### Rules

The members of a *Mahila Mandal* used to sit in circled form under the shadow of a tree or the other suitably identified place in someone house or in a varandah. They used to deposit rupees 6 on weekly basis. The act of depositing such amount of money is to let them practice and develop the habit of saving. This practice facilitates them to get linked with the banks. The other benefit of the act implies the purpose to avoid extravagant on *tobacco, bidi, cigarette* etc. Indeed no *Mahila Mandal* is provided money for Stationery rather *Mahila Mandals* use to extract money from the box for spending upon stationery i.e., *Agarbatti* (incense stick), match box, carbon copy etc. One important question related to it is that why they sit in round shape? In tribal communities, too, the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law do have traditional restrictions not to sit face-to-face and without *ghoonghat*. Hence, in order to demand the equal rights of women, firstly, the women folk should began to give equal status to other women. Hence, they are requested to sit in circle wise in group 1, 2,20 with a view to develop discipline among them as well as to develop the habit of face to face interaction. In the meetings of *Mahila Mandal*, members used to develop their speaking power at the gathering. They do have a provision of fine upon the member who used to absence in the meeting without informing the responsible position holders of *Mahila Mandal*.

### Participation

The meeting of Mahila Mandal usually starts with the traditional prayer songs or the songs related with the village tradition. The theme of the song might also be the pathetic conditions, compulsions of tribal people, government forest policies and its affects, as well as it may relate to the motivation of tribal women and its achievements in the field of equal status in the tribal society. It's a participatory approach of the Mahila Mandal just to involve the members around so as to remove hesitation and developing participation in the process of the functioning of Mahila Mandal.

### Decision-Making

Before giving loan all *Deedies* or members should give their consent or provision of providing loan is through consensus. In case of conflict like one ask loan for medicine and the other for crop then the *Deedies* will decide what is more necessary? This act indicates the act of developing decision-making capacity. One more important rule is there that after every 15 weeks the interest rate increases up to Rs. 2 per 100 rupee loan.

### SELF-HELP GROUPS AND THE PATTERN OF TRIBAL LIFE

The SHG was appropriately named as '*Shivji Mahila Mandal*'. The name is usually chosen by the tribal community members. The name of the participants is registered in the Mandal register. The attendance register and the account register are the two important pieces of papers. The meeting time is fixed. The researcher interacted with the older person such as Mr. Gehdul Singh age 60 and Mr. Budhsen Singh 55. So, on the basis of interaction the researcher came to know about the conditions of *Gonds*, a tribal caste, and the prevailing corruption which causes harm a lot to the caste. The researcher, thus, collected information about the marriage, funerals, child birth, health, Education, conflict resolution, resources, live stocks etc.

### AREA PROFILE

The settlement pattern can be understood in the following manner.

#### Demography

There were 47 houses each from the distance of around 500 metres. The group of houses in small numbers at a particular place was the phenomenon of the village. The total population was approximately 355. The number of women was more in comparison the male. Mainly the adults used to work outside the village for better earning. The old aged people were illiterate, so causing unawareness to give information about the population in percentage. However, they informed that the number of SC is more than the STs. The STs consist of the tribes like *Kol*, *Gonds*, *Kumhar*, *Lohar* etc.

#### Child Birth

*Mista (Mahish)* activity is done on or in between 6-7 days after the birth of a child. It is also called as *chatti* during the period the mother is not given food except rice mixed with *haldi and ghee* (clarified butter). The umbilical cord is cut by the lady belongs to the *chamar* (SC) caste. They take the help of Sickle to cut the umbilical cord. However, now the trained *dai* is available in the village but she was from the same *chamar* caste. The village *dai* is appointed by the government body or through *Anganwadi*. Moreover, the community member considers it suitable to cut the umbilical cord with the help of the blade. According to other sources, after the birth of the baby, on the 12<sup>th</sup> day the ritual of bath is performed by the washer man or *Dhobi*. The ritual is done with the belief that the child will be purified. Later on in the

6<sup>th</sup> month the ritual of 'Parason' is performed in which they used to feed the caste people and *Pandit*, keeping in mind their economic condition.

### Health

About health they informed about the hospital treatment. For that they use to go to *Deosar* by taking the patient on the cot or sometimes through the help of vehicle in case of serious nature. They also use to give polio drop to their children without any objection. The facility of polio is at their doorsteps and sometimes in the *Aangawari* centre or in the Schools. The important thing, besides it, is not to take the help of *ojha* and the like

### Education

On asking about their opinion regarding education the response was positive. The children use to go to the schools in the vicinity up to class 8<sup>th</sup> Standard. Schools here are the result of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*. Later on for further study the children may go to block for high school education. The government has provided facility of hostel in the school free of cost. Indeed they consider the benefits from education. According to them education gives chance to get job otherwise in case of lack of opportunity the children use to cultivate in the field.

### Impacts of Schools

Obviously the school has impact upon the life of the people. Children use to go to school on foot or by the help of bicycle covering the distance around 9 kilometers for the high school study. The facility up to class 8<sup>th</sup> Standard is available in the village. According to the tribal people, teacher come and teach while some other complaint that the teachers only collect their salaries and children even do not know how to write their names.

### Achievements

Nevertheless, the boy who had studied up to class 10<sup>th</sup> standard works as the accountant in the SHG and had also joined the *Gondwana* party known as *Gondwana Gadtantra Party* (GGP). Sibling is on their flags, and now usually visit block to enquire about the assurance make to them. About the construction of wells and other basic amenities. The other boy named Mr. Tirath Singh has been selected in rank and file position in the police and his brother who has done his graduation seemed to be always busy in one and the other works. Two more boys named Mr. Ramesh and Mr. Gandhis performed their jobs as accountants in the SHGs, their getting Rs. 5 each week. In this way the impact of education is obvious. But the education to the girls is lagging behind. As a result, the new generation is gaining awareness through education and can demand their right as against the older ones.

### Marriage

About marriage ceremony, they shared that the elder persons of the family use to go to the other family with the marriage proposal. Generally, the boy's family member visits the girls. Then the girl's parents in turn see the bride grooms family. The marriage rituals are usually performed by the *Brahmin or Pandit*, but old trend is gradually discarded. Now they let to perform their own caste member to perform the rituals. Particularly the *Gondwana party* started the campaign and thus provides learned people among themselves. If in case the marriage ritual is performed by *Pandit* so, in turn, he seeks some wishful amount of money. Money may be Rs. 1000-12000 or whatever demanded. However, earlier the trend was to search the girl by the boy's family. Now the trend has reversed and the girl's family is left to search out

the boys for the marriage. The *Gonds* also give invitation to the near and dear ones including the members of other caste living to their house or in the *tola*. They shared that the dowry system is also in prevalence but consider it bad. However, hopes and console themselves that whatever will happen will be from god's will.

### **Festivals**

The people of the caste (*Gonds*) celebrate the festivals like *Deepawali and Holi* in *Phagun* month. Earlier they use to celebrate the *Dussehra* also but right now they don't enjoy it because according to them there is no logic behind celebrating *Dussehra*. The children may burn the small effigies of *Ravan* or play with effigies of *Ram and Ravan*. But the elder ones are keeping themselves away from the act.

### **Crops**

The people use to cultivate crops like *Makai, Dhan, Jundhri, Urad, Chana Gehun, Arhar, Rai, Tilli* etc in the month of *Savan and Kodov*. However, these are not cultivated by all the people. The cultivation of crop depends upon the capacity of land and irrigation facility. In case, crop required more water like *gehun* (Wheat) and *dhan* (Rice), therefore, they generally avoid cultivating it due to water inadequacy. River is there but completely dry.

### **Conflict Resolution**

The conflict is unavoidable in the group or community so the way to solve is through the involvement of elder ones from the community. But it is possible only when the conflict is small or on petty matters. In case of difficult and complicated conflict, the matter is generally resolved by involving the government machinery.

### **Funerals**

The ritual of funeral is performed in the form of *Agnidahan* or funeral pyre. They do not have their own crematory. Even the Brahmin does not have their crematory. But some people do have crematory including lower and upper caste. They generally use to install funeral Pyre in their own field. Since there is no river so they do not stream away the ash of the funeral. However, some people use to collect it and send it to the places as *Banaras, Allahabad, and Uttarkashi* etc. to stream it away.

## **KURSA PANCHAYAT**

Kursa Panchayat was encompassing around 3000 population. Kursa is a place which includes varied caste people i.e., Scheduled castes involving, *Valmiki, Prajapati, Kori, Kumhar, Chamar, Charmakar, Dhaikar (badsor), Lohar* Scheduled Tribe consist of *Gond, Panka, Kharwar, Baiga, Agarya, Kol*, Other Backward Caste (OBC) includes *Kachchi, Yadav, Kunbi Banswari* whereas general category people implies to Muslim and Brahmin. Indeed not only Kursa but almost all areas where PRADAN is working in the Sidhi district are quite appreciating due to the pain that they have to face in the process of empowerment. The concept of *deediji* and *bharryaji* seems to imply the promotion of equal status and at the same time discourage giving unnecessary respect to the government personnel, the corrupt and so on. All are like family no one is high nor low whether *Adivasi* or *Harijan*. As much as you will organize, you will be strong. The development schemes formulated at the central level will come directly to the people. The purpose is to collectivity attack over corruption.

## CLUSTER MEETING

The cluster meeting is organized generally to mobilize community members on larger scale. The purpose is to collect the women leaders from all the Mahila Mandals in a Panchayat. Furthermore such cluster meetings gives an opportunity to the women to speak in front of large gathering which in turn boost them up to develop confidence and the skill to put the causes before the government authority. It also encourages the weak Mahila Mandal to learn from the act of sharing experiences of the other. Cluster meeting are generally organized on certain intervals and usually on quarterly basis.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion could easily be drawn that the work that the organization is doing having clear fabrics of last long impact over the development of the society. It not only provides an opportunity of saving and credit to the rural poor women but also endeavor to make them empowered. For example, during the initial efforts taken by the development organization, the innocent tribal were made fearful by the persons, with vested interest, who try to make propagandas that the organizational facilitators will be with you till the box is full of money. Thus, they will take it back along with them or by depositing all money to the banks they may withdraw it and escaped away. Now, after a lot of efforts and trust-building amongst the tribal who are slowly and gradually developing the capacity of decision-making, discipline, responsibility, boldness for the claim of their rights, employment opportunity, enabling them at least to make signature, counting money, identifying coins and rupees speaking in the gathering, developing songs on *Mahila Mandal* which clearly shown the creativity among the members. For example one song contains the wording which indicate about the removal of untouchability and making group so that they could stand upon their feet. Hence, truly an impressive genuine effort is under way by the organization to empower the rural women. Interestingly, the male members also help in the process. Here people do not involve themselves in discussing about political personalities rather participates in the activities related with their own cause. Further all such good efforts had been possible just because of the sincere, disciplined and genuine efforts made by the organization. So as it is obvious that since all means by the organization is good so the end result will automatically be good, however, still miles to go.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first author acknowledges the field support forwarded by the Rural Development Non-Governmental Organization-PRADAN. The author is really indebted to the ICSSR for doctoral fellowship. Without such financial support the author may be unable to produce such a research report on ethnographic study.

## NOTES

The author had collected descriptive data with the help and support of PRADAN. The fifteen days village stay with the tribal in Sidhi district was the main method used to collect first hand primary data. During the stay author talked to various age group male and females to collect data regarding their life and related issues. No help of secondary source was taken for the purpose because of its ethnographic nature.

