

**ABSTRACT:-**

EMPOWERMENT is a multi-dimensional concept and relates to the social attainment, economical participation and political participation of people. Further, empowerment being ongoing process, there is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. The 73rd Amendment to our constitution in 1993 was a major milestone in this direction. The amendment, besides making provision for reservation of seats for scheduled castes and tribes proportionate to their population in the panchayat area, also ensured reservation of not less than one third of these reserved seats for the women. The impact of reserving one third of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been fruitful, and has empowered women both

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politically and socially. At present, there are approximately 260,000 panchayat representatives in India, out of which around 75,000 are women making it the largest number of elected women in the world. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged sections of the society like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women. The present study looks into some of the aspects relating to dalit women representation and participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions with special focus on active participation in decision making processes and involvement in planning and implementation processes of Government Programmes. Self-governing villages communities have existed in India since time immemorial, at the Panchayats have served as the backbone of Indian civilization for many centuries. Recognizing its importance, the Government of India introduced Article 4p in the Constitution to give constitutional power to the people's institutions. However, owing to inherent weakness, the Panchayats were not very effective. Through Constitutional amendments steps are taken to remove the inherent weakness. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution envisages that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) be endowed with adequate power and responsibilities to enable them to function as institution of self governance. Apart from this formal institution of local self governance, the voluntary agencies in India also promoted concept of informal institutions of local self governance in terms of self help groups since mid eighties.



## **EMPOWERMENT OF DALIT WOMEN THROUGH LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE” - with reference to Kandhamal District of Odisha**

**KEYWORDS:**

Empowerment , Dalit Women Through , Self-Governance , political participation .

**INTRODUCTION:**

Despite the problem and issues (lack of experience, political influence, corruption, gender insensitivity) associated, there is also very clear message from the field that good practices of efficient and effective functioning of local self governance do exist.

The actual function of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) which is otherwise known as institutions of rural local self governance is of greater significance now more than ever before. Institutions of rural local governance are considered as partners of the Central and State Governments in carrying out development functions. Article 243-G introduced by the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution empowers State Governments to vest powers and responsibilities with village Panchayats to prepare plans for their socio-economic development and ensure social justice to the people through implementation of different schemes with their active participation.

The Women's Reservation Bill 2010, approved by the Upper of House of Parliament is another major step, basically aimed at giving more political space to the women and ensure their active participation in the development process. While reservation in panchayats or Parliament is important, the real challenge is to ensure that women are involved in the decision making process at home, and in the society. The challenge will be to develop their capacity so that they can perform their roles properly. In India the constitution has provided with the fundamental rights and directive principles to every citizen without any discrimination in sex, caste and religion.

Dalit women, in India's highly patriarchal and caste-based society, bear the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. Being positioned at the lowest social order of Indian society, Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribe women suffer from many forms of discrimination, including lack of education, economic disadvantages, social disempowerment, domestic violence, political invisibility, and sexual oppression. Decision making processes in Panchayats need to be better defined, to diminish the possibility of elite capture, proxy participation and single point decision.

The Dalit women are in double jeopardy because of their social background. Caste and male chauvinism have wrecked Indian society. If caste has divided Indian society into four main categorized and thousand more sub-categories, patriarchy has exploited women. Women in the name of caste patriarchy and religion have been suppressed and treated as objects. While in the primitive society women did enjoy equal status with the process of Hinduisation of Indian society women gradually lost all their rights and become subjected to male control and hegemony. There was no possibility of occupying an autonomous space.

A developing democracy like India needs wider participation of the people irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex etc. in its political process. In order to provide this opportunity, the system of democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has long been introduced in our country. As the women constitute a very sizeable portion of the total population of India, their participation at grass root politics is so essential to make the democratic governance more successful. The question of their participation arises because of their long standing neglected social status in the male dominated Indian society. Immediately after framing of the Indian Constitution, constitutional safeguards along with the provision of reservation of seats in legislative bodies, public offices and public educational institutions, were, therefore, provided to them for their uplift.

In Odisha, women constitute a very little bit less than 50 percent of the state's total population. Despite some favorable traditional values and customs and emergence of powerful women personalities, the position of the women is not very rosy. Their socio-economic status is, however, relatively low and they are discriminated in all walks of life. For centuries, women have been confined to home and suppressed and deprived of their rights to get a fair treatment from the male dominated society. Empowerment of women has, therefore, been one of the major issues in Odisha.

Odisha has gradually transformed from Women in Development to Gender and Development in the policy approaches. Affirmative action policies are developed to reach the goal of inclusive democracy and sustainable development. At state level special measures have been designed to ensure women's participation, development and empowerment. These changes in awareness, expertise, policies, laws and women's voices are efforts of many actors. At grass-roots though translating these is very important.

**PAST RESEARCH**

A number of literatures and so many research works have already been done in this field. Desai and Thakkar (2001) tried to explain the history of women's major issues and actions since the 19th century. They tried to focus on the complex nature of work contributed by women, their educational status, their contribution in the organized and unorganized sectors, their political participation, and legal status, their position in the family and outside world. While R. Mishra (1998) argues that husbands and family members influence the women representatives in taking decisions in Orissa, R. Arun (1997) in a case study of Madhya Pradesh found that in most cases women representatives are housewives, first time entrants into politics and most of them are illiterate or educated up to primary level. G. Palanithuri (1997) in his case study of Tamil Nadu reported that women were not reported or invited to the meetings in male headed Gram Panchayat. Husbands of the members used to accompany them (women) when they come to attend the meetings. S. Pai (2001) in her field notes in Meerut District found that Pradhanis in Panchayats were illiterate and only able to put their signatures on officials papers. The women representatives contest for election due to family pressure and also the decision of their community and not because of their own

interest. S.Panda (1996) in her study of Village Panchayats in Orissa found that women entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservation or pressure from their family members or pressure from their village community. Manikyamba (1990) in her study of Andhra Pradesh found that socio-economic background in general and political background in particular are important determinants of shaping the nature and level of participation of women members in political institutions and her study concludes that the participation of poor women members is mostly found insignificant. Dr. Sing (2004) presents the findings of an empirical study of the elected women representatives of the PRIs of Haryana for exploring the extent of their empowerment as a result of the implementation of 73rd Amendment Act. Dr. Bharti (2011) explains that before 73rd Amendment came into force, Government of Orissa had adopted some of the important provisions such as reservation of seats for women, SCs, STs in its existing Panchayati Raj Acts. Kaul and Sahni (2009) tries to explore the extent of political participation of women elected representatives in Panchayats and the problems faced by them in two districts of Jammu and Kathua. Patnaik (2005) finds out the participation of elected representatives belonging to weaker sections in the functioning of four gram panchayats in Orissa's Dhenkanal district, in order to observe the extent to which numerical representation has been successful in the actual exercise of power by these sections.

However, we need to look critically at the political participation that is envisioned and the actual implementation. Would political participation also facilitate women's independent decision-making? Is the process of political participation inclusive and empowering? Does formal participation means actual representation of Dalit women? Although these questions portray a need of rigorous research and study. I limit my focus on the political participation of Dalit women. Thus the lines of enquiry I intend to draw focus on the impact of Dalit women's political participation at various levels like Dalit women themselves, village and society at large.

#### CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND POLICIES FOR WOMEN

Before coming to the real picture of women's participation in the Panchayat activities, it is essential to have a focus on the constitutional provisions which have been provided them for their development. Immediately after the framing of the Indian Constitution, certain provisions have been made in the Constitution in order to make them equal with their male counterparts. The Preamble of Indian Constitution recognizes the principles of social, economic and political justice to all its citizens and also equality of status and of opportunity and to promote among them all. The Fundamental Rights as guaranteed by the Constitution (Part III, Articles 12-35) tries to remove inequalities which Indian women had suffered a lot. In this regard, Article 14 promises equality before the law and equal protection by the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race caste, sex or place of birth and also provides that the state may make special provisions for women and children. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in public employment. Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings as well as forced labor. Besides these important provisions in the Fundamental Rights, some guidelines are also given in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part-IV, Articles. 36-51) which are non-justiciable. Article 51(e) (Fundamental Duties, Part IVA 42nd Amendment Act, 1976) directs the state to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Besides these provisions, some seats are reserved for women in legislative bodies starting from grass root institutions to the Union Parliament.

#### 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, Instrumental for Women Participation:

The historic 73rd constitutional amendment was passed and came into force with effect from 24th April, 1993. The most significant and salient features of the 73 Amendment Act is the provision of reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in all the 3-tiers of rural local governance system. It lays down in Article 243D (3) 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 and that such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. The Constitutional amendment further lays down in Article 243-D (1) that seats shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat and Article 243-D (2) states that not less than one third of the total number of the seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The number of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes women would be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Article 243-D(4) provides that the office of the Chairperson in the Panchayats at the village or any other level shall also be reserved for, women and such reservation shall not be less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level. The offices so reserved at the level of the Chairperson would also be allotted by rotation to different Panchayats at each level. Besides, where there are no women Chairpersons at all 3-tiers of Panchayati Raj system, the post of Vice-Chairman shall be reserved for women at all levels of rural local governance. After this constitutional amendment, a large number of women have been elected to the PRIs as a result of the mandatory reservational provisions. The reservation provision under the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, 1993 made to ensure that women play a major role in rural local self governance system. It also provided women an opportunity to demonstrate their potential and to prove their capability as partners in the process of rural development by participating with their male counterparts.

### Rural Local Governance in Odisha and Women Participation:

Odisha is one of the pioneering states in the field of Panchayati Raj initiatives in India. Soon after the independence of our country, the Government of Odisha enacted Orissa Gram Panchayat Act in 1948. After that Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959 was enacted and executed on 26th January 1961 in Odisha. Biju Babu when became Chief Minister during sixties, he had made concrete efforts to revitalize Panchayati Raj system. He is one of the pioneers in the field of women participation who strongly advocated for women participation in the local governance system in Odisha. His vision and policy was to empower the Panchayati Raj system with powers and active participation of women.

In fact during his second term as Chief Minister (1990-95) and under his dynamic leadership, Odisha became the first state in India to implement the sound provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 in advance to give opportunities to the women by making reservation of 1/3rd seats for them and women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes out of the total seats. It also adds to the credit of Biju Babu that after a long gap he conducted Panchayat elections in Odisha in the year 1992. He was an ardent advocate of devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the PRIs and was most emphatic about participation of women in the rural local governance system. For the first time in the history of independent India, women were given 30% reservation in the three-tier PRIs in Odisha prior to implementation of 73rd amendment Act.

He was bold and broad in his vision and approach to ensure the participation of women in rural local self governance systems in Odisha. Biju Babu was also emphatically emphasized on the political and administrative training and orientation of elected women representatives to acquire skill and knowledge on politics and administration. His proactive vision was that local Government is the level of Government where women can enter into political life with relative ease, as the costs of mounting election campaigns are relatively low and issues at the local level tend to motivate women to enter politics. Further, local Governments are good training grounds for women politicians who want to reach higher levels of elected or appointed office in Government.

At present, Odisha has three-tier system of rural local self Government system — the first tier being at the village level i.e. Gram Panchayat, the second tier at the Block level i.e. Panchayat Samiti and the third at the district level i.e. Zilla Parishad and 50% of seats for women has been reserved in all the tiers. The present Panchayati Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishads with 854 elected Zilla Parishad Members, 314 Panchayat Samitis with 6,235 elected Panchayat Samiti Members, 6236 Gram Panchayats including 6,236 elected Sarpanchs and 87,551 elected Ward Members out of which 46,643 Women Ward Members constitute the rural local governance system. Thus, in Odisha now there is a total of 1,00,8765 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local self governance system out of which 50% women elected members that underlines the importance of women participation in the three-tier rural local self governance system.

### Reservational Participation of Women in Rural Local Self Governance:

As a constitutional mandate under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, provisions have been made for reservation of seats for women in the 3-tier rural local governance system in Odisha like other states. Accordingly and prior to the present 50% reservations for women in the 3-tier rural local bodies, reservations were made for women upto 33% in all rural local bodies as per the provisions of Orissa Gram Panchayat Act 1964, The Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act, 1960 and The Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991 as modified and amended up to date. The objectives of reservation for women in the above three important Acts was to encourage women to participate in the rural local governance system through the provision of reservations. Hence, it may be called as reservational participation of women in rural local self governance system. The rationale for reservations for women and other disadvantaged groups in the rural local self governance system intended to give voice and therefore influence to these disadvantaged groups in local governance. According to political theorist Anne Phillips(1995) the 'politics of presence' can provide such groups with guaranteed representation in public institutions - such as quotas in law making bodies, so that they may effectively represent their own needs and interests. The visionary leader of Odisha, Biju Patnaik for the first time in the history of independent India, announced that women will be given 33% reservation in the three- tier rural local governance systems since he was most emphatic about the participation of women in the rural local governance system i.e. Panchayati Raj Institutions. According to his announcement, the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act 1964, the Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act, 1959 were amended by Orissa Assembly during 1991 and 1992 and the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991 was enacted by the Orissa Assembly in 1991 and that provided 33% reservations for women in conformity with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992.

As a mandate and according to the above constitutional and legal provisions, the general Panchayat elections were held in Odisha during 1992 and a total of 28,0696 women representatives were elected for the first time to the 3-tier rural local governance system from 5,262 Gram Panchayats. This is the first Panchayat election in Odisha where such a large number of women representatives were elected to the 3-tier structure of rural local governance system to participate in the local governance system.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) facilitating women participation in Panchayat Raj system are as follows.



- I. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in every Panchayat to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat [Article 243D(3)].
- II. Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairperson in the Panchayats at each level to be reserved for women [Article 243D (4)].
- III. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes of the total number seats to be filled by direct election in every municipality to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by to different constituencies in a municipality [Article 243(3)].
- IV. Reservation of offices of chairpersons in Municipalities for the Scheduled Castes scheduled tribes and the women in such a manner as the legislature of a state may by law provide [Article 243T(4)].

The 84<sup>th</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution will also expect one-third of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies to be reserved for women including those from the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. All the Five Year Plans have given importance for the development of women, with a major objective of raising their economic and social status. Despite all such constitutional provisions, there is no satisfactory development in their social status. Because they are not yet behaving as active citizens and now they are living in a very parochial traditional culture. In order to study the political behavior of women, an attempt has been made to study their electoral behavior which is the only indices of the political behavior of women as a whole. By studying the electoral participation and empowerment of women of Kandhamal district, we can know to what extent their political development has been taken place since independence.

#### RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ODISHA AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Odisha is one of the pioneering states in the field of Panchayati Raj initiatives in India. Soon after the independence of our country, the Government of Odisha enacted Orissa Gram Panchayat Act in 1948. After that the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959 was enacted and executed on 26th January 1961 in Odisha. Biju Patnaik when became Chief Minister during sixties, he had made concrete efforts to realize Panchayati Raj system. He is one of the pioneers in the field of women participation who strongly advocated for women participation in the local governance system in Odisha. In fact during his second term as Chief Minister (1990-95) and under his dynamic leadership, Odisha became the first in India to implement the sound provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 in advance to give opportunities to women by making reservations of one-third seats for them and women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes out of total seats. It also adds to the credit of Biju Babu that after a long gap he conducted panchayat elections in Odisha in the year 1992. He was an ardent advocate of devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the PRIs and was most emphatic about participation of women in the rural local governance system. For the first time in the history of independent India, women were given 30% reservation in the three-tier PRIs in Odisha prior to the implementation of 73rd Amendment Act. Biju Babu was also emphatically emphasized on the political and administrative training and orientation of elected women representatives to acquire skill and knowledge on politics and administration. At present, Odisha has three-tier system of rural local self government system- the first tier being at the village level i.e. Gram Panchayat, the second tier at the Block level i.e. Panchayat Samiti and the third at the district level i.e. Zilla Parishad and 50% of seats for women has been reserved in all the tiers. The present Panchayati Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishads with 854 elected Zilla Parishad members, 314 Panchayat Samitis with 6,235 elected Panchayat Samiti members, 6,236 Gram Panchayats including 6,236 elected Sarpanches and 87,551 elected Ward Members out of which 46,643 Women Ward Members constitute the rural local governance system. Thus, in Odisha now there is a total of 1,00,876 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local self governance system out of which 50% women elected members that underlines the importance of women participation in the three-tier rural local self governance system. As a mandate and according to the constitutional and legal provisions, the general panchayat elections were held in Odisha during 1992 and a total of 28,069 women representatives were elected for the first time to the three-tier rural local governance system from 5,262 gram panchayats.

The next general elections to PRIs were held in Odisha in the year 2007. The abstracts of total elected representatives of rural local governance system along with women elected representatives of 30 districts of Odisha elected to the rural local governance system during the Panchayat General Elections 2007 are given in Table No.1.

**Table No. 1:**

#### **General Panchayat Elections 2007 - Status of Women Participation in Odisha**

| PRI Elected Representatives | Total PRI Representatives | Scheduled Caste Women | Scheduled Tribe Women | Backward Class Women | Reserved for Women | Total Women Representatives |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Ward Member                 | 87542                     | 7172                  | 9665                  | 9148                 | 5719               | 31704                       |
| Sarpanch                    | 6234                      | 344                   | 907                   | 471                  | 466                | 2188                        |
| Panchayat Samiti Member     | 6233                      | 455                   | 699                   | 632                  | 422                | 2208                        |
| Zilla Parishad              | 854                       | 58                    | 85                    | 88                   | 70                 | 301                         |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>100863</b>             | <b>8029</b>           | <b>11356</b>          | <b>10339</b>         | <b>6677</b>        | <b>36401</b>                |

#### KANDHAMAL:

The district “Kandhamal” is located in central Odisha and bounded by Boudh district from its North, Rayagada district from South, Ganjam and Nayagarh district from East and Kalahandi district from West.

As per 2011 census, Kandhamal has returned 50.89 percent female population of 372,551 out of 731,952. The sex ratio in 2011 improved substantially from 1,008 females in 2001 to 1,037 females in 2011 per 1,000 males, against the State average of 978 in 2011. The child population (0-6 year age group) of the district is 106,379 in 2011, (54,266 boys and 52,113 girls). The district reported a 52.0 percent ST population of 336,809 (i.e., 166,283 male and 170,526 female) and 16.97 percent SC population of 109,506 (i.e., 54,417 male and 55,089 female) in 2001. Total population of the main disadvantage groups including women, ST and SC communities was 546,102 or 84.25 percent of total population in 2001.

The sex ratio for child population (0-6 year age group), was only 970 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001. This has further come down to 960 in 2011. Chart 6.1 summarises the results of this analysis with regard to sex ratio of SC and ST for rural and urban population as well as Child Female Male Ratio (CFMR) in Kandhamal for the census year 2001. Sex ratio also varies across different blocks and urban centres of the district. Chart 6.2 gives the block-wise sex ratio in Kandhamal as per census 2001. Sex ratio is above 900 for all the blocks except in G. Udayagiri.

The district, Kandhamal came into being on 1st January 1994 by dividing parent District Phulbani into Kandhamal and Boudh. Kandhamal comprises of 2 sub-divisions, 4 tehsils, 12 CD blocks, 2 NACs, 153 G. P. 1 parliamentary constituency and 3 assembly constituencies.

| Table No. 2:<br>General Election to Panchayats 2007 - Elected Sarpanches and Samiti Members of Kandhamal District <sup>15</sup> |                |            |           |                   |           |           |           |           |           |           |          |
|---|----------------|------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Name of Panchayat Samiti / Block  | Total Sarpanch | ST M       | ST W      | Total P.S. Member | SC M      | SC W      | ST M      | ST W      | BC C      | BCC W     | UR       |
| K. Nuagaon  | 11             | 7          | 4         | 11                | 1         | 0         | 4         | 2         | 0         | 3         | 1        |
| Kotogada  | 11             | 8          | 3         | 11                | 1         | 1         | 4         | 2         | 2         | 1         | 0        |
| Khajuripada   | 13             | 8          | 5         | 13                | 3         | 1         | 4         | 3         |           | 1         | 1        |
| G. Udayagiri  | 8              | 5          | 3         | 8                 | 1         | 0         | 3         | 2         | 1         | 1         | 0        |
| Chakapad  | 10             | 6          | 4         | 10                | 2         | 1         | 3         | 2         | 0         | 1         | 1        |
| Tikabali  | 12             | 9          | 3         | 12                | 2         | 1         | 4         | 3         | 1         |           | 1        |
| Tumudibandha  | 9              | 6          | 3         | 9                 | 1         | 1         | 4         | 1         | 1         | 1         | 0        |
| Daringbadi  | 24             | 16         | 8         | 24                | 1         | 1         | 9         | 6         | 4         | 2         | 1        |
| Phiringia   | 20             | 13         | 7         | 20                | 2         | 1         | 8         | 4         | 3         | 2         | 0        |
| Phulbani  | 11             | 7          | 4         | 11                | 1         | 1         | 4         | 2         | 2         | 1         | 0        |
| Balliguda   | 14             | 10         | 4         | 14                | 1         | 1         | 4         | 3         | 3         | 1         | 1        |
| Ralkia  | 10             | 6          | 4         | 10                | 1         | 2         | 3         | 1         | 2         | 1         | 0        |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>153</b>     | <b>101</b> | <b>52</b> | <b>153</b>        | <b>17</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>54</b> | <b>31</b> | <b>19</b> | <b>15</b> | <b>6</b> |

The district lies between latitude 19.34 and 20.50 degree North and Longitude 80.30 and 84.48 degree East. It spans over a total geographical area 7654 Sq.Km. that is 7.14% of Odisha’s geographical area. It is situated at a height of 300 – 1100 m mean sea level (MSL). The temperature of the district varies from – 10 C (min) to 40 C (max). It has recorded an average annual rainfall of 1587 mm.

The meaning of Kandhamal is valleys of Kandhas. Kandha is a major tribe (ST), living in the district abundantly with small number of OBCs. The district of Kandhamal and serpentine Ghat roads for the tourists who need to relax and unwind. It has attractions, like panoramic coffee gardens, pine jungles, Ghat roads, hills and waterfalls, virgin forest and typical tribal village life. Almost 66% of the land area of the district is covered with dense forest and towering mountains, which provide shelter to the inhabitants like Kandhas, classified under the ancient Gondid race of Proto-Austroloid group. Rich in green meadows at the altitude of 2000 ft to 3000 ft, the terraced valleys thronged with these colourful ST in their natural heritage, dancing and sporting has its own appeal. Kandhamal is also famous for handicrafts such as Dokra, Terra Cotta, Cane and Bamboo works.

The region is proud of its rich cultural heritage. Mauryan Emperor Ashoka mentioned in Jaugada (Ganjam) edict about the people of this hill tract as Atavikas who practised their own religion. The ghat tract of Kandhamal “Kalinga” was known to the travellers of medieval history. The tract was used for the

transportation of salt to the central India. Again the route running through Daringbadi was known in history as Great Military road discovered by Britishers who happened to come over Daringbadi for pleasure trips to enjoy the natural beauty and cool climate during summer.

Most of the people inhabiting Kandhamal are very poor and fall under BPL category like other districts around 90% of these people depend on agriculture. They grow only rain fed paddy. In most of the areas they are using Chuans (earthen shallow wells) for drinking water as well as irrigation. People are vulnerable as the water is not safe for drinking a very few people grow second crop because of scarcity of irrigation water.

Consecutive natural calamities destroy the little yield lands. More often input goes higher than output in sericulture sector. Lack of skills and equipment for agriculture, lack of transport facility, and less resource as well as mismanagement of natural and other minor food products cannot be sold at right time and right place due to unavailability of transport system. The entire forest products are being sold to the local traders and local traders further sell it to the neighbour districts and towns, thus the whole profit goes to the limited traders. The vegetable and other agriculture products are sold in low rate and therefore they earn little income from vegetable cultivation. Lack of employment compels some villagers to migrate to other places for work.

#### **Panchayat Raj Institutions/ Local Self-government Systems:**

The form of decentralisation; its content and purpose, reflect the different traditions of politics and administration operating in the different parts of the state. In a backward district like Kandhamal, the challenge is to find the proper balance between centralised and decentralised arrangements and to link them in ways that promote development most effectively. At present, the district has two Notified Area Councils located at Phulbani and G.Udayagiri under the Orissa Municipal ACT, 1950. The other local self-governing bodies are the Gram Panchayats, the Panchayat Samities and the Zilla Parishad.

**ZILLA PARISHAD:** The Panchayati Raj as democratic decentralisation of power came into force in the district during 1961 with the constitution of Zilla Parishad. This body was an advisory body at the district level to advise the government in all developmental matters relating to the district. Under three-tier system of democratic decentralisation, Zilla Parishad is the apex body at the district level followed by Panchayat Samitis at Block level and G.Ps as second-tier & third-tier.

**PANCHAYAT SAMITIES:** At present, there are 12 Panchayat Samities in the district. Each Panchayat Samiti is coterminus with the Community Development Blocks created by the government in the Community Development Deptt. (now Panchyati Raj Deptt.)

Each Panchayat Samiti consists of official and non-official members. The official members are the Block Dev. Officer and the Officers of various State Govt. deptt ordinarily stationed at the Block level. The non official members include the Panchayat Samiti members and the Sarapanchas of the Gram Panchayats .. Chairman is the head of the body and is elected directly by the Panchayat Samiti members.

The main functions of the Panchayat Samitis are planning, execution and supervision of all developmental programmes in the Block. It also supervises the works of Gram Panchayats within its Jurisdiction.

**GRAM PANCHAYATS:** Gram Panchayat is the primary unit of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The district has 144 Gram Panchayats. Each Gram Panchayat comprising some villages and is divided into wards. The election of Sarapanch, Naib-Sarapanch & members are conducted according to the provisions of the Orissa Gram Panchayat Election Rules, 1965. Sarapanch as the head of the GP is directly elected by the voters of the G.P. But the Naib-Sarapanch is elected from among themselves by the Panchayat members.

Gradually transformed from Women in Development to Gender and Development in the policy approaches in our state, Affirmative action policies are developed to reach the goal of inclusive democracy and sustainable development. At all level special measures have been designed to ensure women's participation, development and empowerment. These changes in awareness, expertise, policies, laws and women's voices are efforts of many actors. At grass-roots though translating these is very important.

#### **Dalit Woman: Dalit within Dalit**

According to the "broken man" theory of Dr. Ambedkar, Dalits are those who were out of the Varna System of the Hindu Society (Agarwalla, S. 1994: XI). Dalit is not a caste; it is a constructed identity (Bharati, S. 2002). In the 1973 manifesto of Dalit panther movement in Maharashtra revived the meaning of Dalit. It includes members of SCs, STs, the landless and poor peasant, women and all those who were exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion (Murugakar 1991:237 in Kumar, V.2009:64). The term Dalit is emerging gradually. There is a large discourse in Dalit literature on the term. For my study purpose, I restrict the definition of Dalit as SCs of Maharashtra.

Dalits specifically in village India suffer severe forms of humiliation, stigmatization and exclusion even today. Caste prejudices and discrimination against Dalits is a social fact (Kumar,V. 2009:65). Historically Dalits have been excluded from enjoyment of social, economical, cultural, civil and political rights. This is due to the customary restrictions imposed on them by the social hierarchy being born into so called 'impure, polluted caste'.

Vivek Kumar locates Dalit women on the basis of their structural positioning, occupations performed and the societal treatment. He argues the specificity of Dalit women. Dalit in general are treated in an inhumane ways and Dalit women are marginalized even further in three folds on the basis of Caste, Class and Patriarchy. Dalit women are raped, beaten up and paraded naked to break the morale of the whole community. This Intersectionality of caste-based patriarchy makes Dalit women, Dalit within Dalits.

Dalit women number 80.517 million or approximately 48 percent of the total Dalit population, 16 percent of the total female population and 8 percent of the total Indian population (Irudayam, A. Mangubai, J. Lee, J. 2006:1). Dalit women make majority of unorganised labourer in urban settings and landless labourers in rural. Systemic violence is built in to the structure of the dominant society, which doesn't acknowledge the basic human rights of Dalits. Dalit women's entry in politics is perceived as a threat by the dominant caste groups as it means securing entitlement to public resources. Gender based inequalities perpetuated by patriarchal power relation and intensified by caste discrimination result in structural inequality. The structural inequality and powerlessness will only be addressed by strengthening the marginalised groups. India is a Constitutional Democracy which is why politics becomes a key for socio-economical emancipation of Dalit women.

In this light the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act plays a significant role. There has been increased political participation of the marginalized groups (SCs, STs and women). Formal participation and involvement of SCs, STs and women has increased in local Government. There is a need to undertake a reality check on this. Does formal participation means actual representation of Dalit women? Is the process of political participation inclusive and empowering? Does assertion of Dalit women leads to atrocities as they are 'not meant to participate'? These questions portray a need of research and study the field of political participation and its newly entered entity 'Dalit women'. At academic level, I believe there is an urgent need to study the experiences of Dalit women participating in politics. Hence I take up this task.

#### EFFORTS TO RAISE THE STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN:

Panchayati Raj Provided a system of self-governance at the village level, however, it did not have a constitutional status. The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 provides a framework on which to build the third level of governance panchayats.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation once stated, "Independence must being at the bottom ... it follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs..."

April 23, 1993 is a landmark day in the history of Panchayati Raj in India as on this day, the institution of Panchayati Raj was accorded constitutional status through the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992, thereby seeking to transform Mahatma Gandhi's dream of Gram Swaraj into reality.

#### The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 mandates provisions for :

Establishment of a three-tier structure (Village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti or intermediate level Panchayat and Zilla Parishad or district level Panchayat).

- ☑ Establishment of Gram Sabhas at the village level.
- ☑ Regular elections to Panchayats every five years.
- ☑ Proportionate seat reservation for SCs/STs.
- ☑ Reservation of not less than 1/3 seats for women.
- ☑ Constitution of State Finance Commissions to recommended measures to improve the finances of Panchayats.
- ☑ Constitution of State Election Commission.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 vests power in the State Government to endow Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government such as :

- ☑ Preparation of plans and their execution for economic development and social justice in relation to 29 subjects listed in the XI schedule of the Constitution.
- ☑ Authority to Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees.
- ☑ Transfer of taxes, duties, tolls and fees collected by the States to Panchayats.

The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 envisages empowered Panchayats as institutions of self-government at the village level capable of :

- ☑ Planning and executing village level public works and their maintenance.
- ☑ Ensuring welfare of the people at the village level including health, education, communal harmony, social justice particularly gender and caste based discrimination, dispute resolution, welfare of children, especially the girl child.

The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 also envisages empowered Gram Sabhas



as the Parliament of the People at the grassroots level to whom the Gram Panchayats are solely accountable.

#### 1. Empowerment of Dalit Women:

Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is the capacity to implement) in people for use in their own lives, their own communities and in their own society, by acting on issues that they describe as important. Above all, empowerment is a result of participation in decision-making.

Women's empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition at par with men, to participate in the development process through political institutions as a partner with dignity. Kandhamal, being a tribal dominated district shows less discrimination against women.

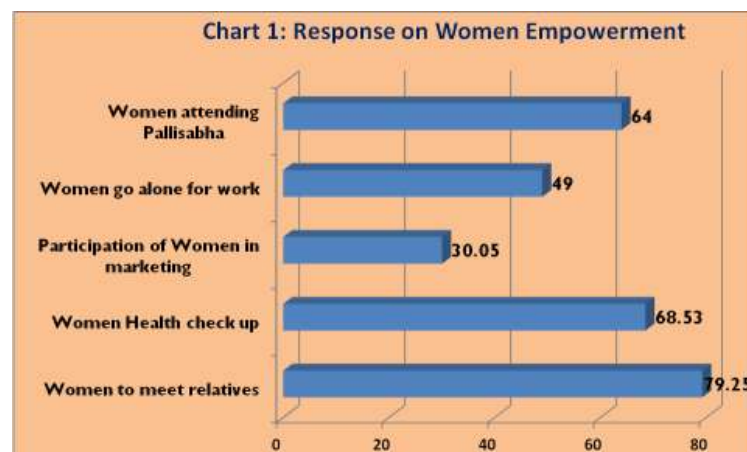
Women empowerment involves social, economic, political and legal empowerment at individual and community levels. Decision making, connectedness, mobility, voicing and participation are important indicators to understand the level of women empowerment. During our Focus Group Discussions we found good participation of women and qualitative findings suggest that women participate in livelihood activities and are given freedom to some extent in the tribal society.

#### 1.1 Dalit Women Participation and Mobility

The number of women in elected bodies is less in Odisha. There is no women representative from Kandhamal in Odisha assembly. Women reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has facilitated their participation in decision making. One-third seats are reserved for women candidates in PRI system. In case of SC, reserved seats for women are 46.72 percent and for ST reserved seats are 39.51 percent. As per the Odisha Panchayat Act 1994, one of the two top office bearers must be a woman at each level of PRI at GP, block and district levels.

3/4 of Dalit Women in the Panchayat are proxies (mostly for their husband) and they faced strong oppositions while attempting to work for the benefit of their community. Only 1/3 of 300 Dalit women elected president are able to discharge official responsibilities with freedom and independence. Dalit Women are either not taken seriously. Indeed, when women are raising issues during the Panchayat meetings, it is rarely discussed or approved.

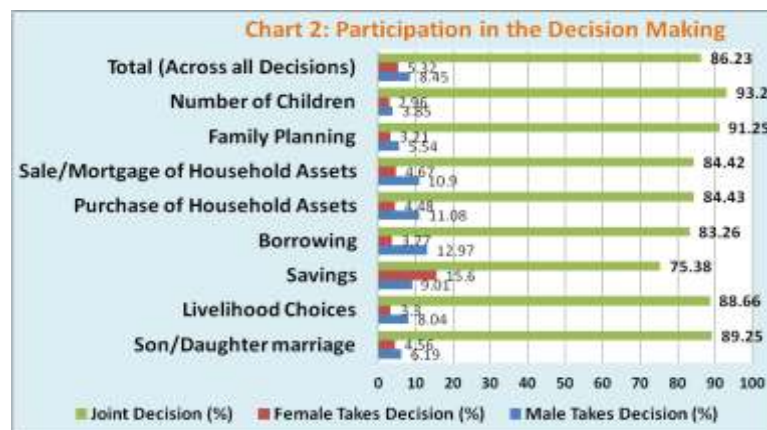
An analysis of responses given by the women in the household on their participation and mobility reveals that 69 percent of women participated in the last palli sabha in contrast to 79.51 percent in case of men. About 31 percent women however, never participated in palli sabha while 30 percent agreed to have participated in palli sabhas regularly.



Absenteeism in palli sabha for men is only 20.49 percent while in case of women it is almost double at 41.24 percent. Chart 1 gives breakup of responses of women on mobility and participation. The primary survey indicates that women were relatively better empowered and participated in different activities in the village. About 68.53 percent of women participated in work and went alone for marketing, 79.25 percent of women went alone to meet relatives and 30.05 percent women were found to attend palli sabha. The higher level of participation can be attributed to tribal customs where the woman member is encouraged to participate in livelihood activities.

#### 1.2 Decision Making by Women

NFHS-3 data reveals that 55.3 percent women participate in household decision making in Odisha. The DHDR primary survey indicated that in 8.45 percent of the households, the male took all the decisions at home. In 5.32 percent of the household decisions were taken only by women and in 86.23 percent of the household decisions were taken jointly by men and women. In the matter of savings women took the lead in decision making (15.60 percent), while the decisions on borrowings were taken mostly by the male alone (12.97 percent). Chart 2 gives detail on decision making at the household level.



### 1.3 Schemes for Economic Empowerment of Women

Kandhamal falls in the southern National Sample Survey (NSS) region which had the highest incidence of poverty of 87.05 percent in 1999-2000 (55th round of NSS). As per the BPL census carried out by the State Panchayati Raj Department, 78.42 percent households were reported as BPL in 1997 as against 88.62 percent in 1992. The State average for percentage of BPL families stood at 66.23 percent in 1997 BPL census. Though the incidence of poverty has come down as per 2004-05 and 2009-10 estimates, it is still very high.

**Chart 3: Women Beneficiaries Covered Under SGSY**

| Name of the Blocks | Social Group wise Beneficiary Under SGSY |            |            |             | Women       |
|--------------------|--|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
|                    | SC                                       | ST         | General    | Total       |             |
| Balliguda          | 56                                       | 112        | 39         | 207         | 180         |
| Chakapad           | 32                                       | 69         | 24         | 125         | 109         |
| Daringbadi         | 84                                       | 174        | 61         | 319         | 277         |
| G. Udayagiri       | 22                                       | 43         | 15         | 80          | 70          |
| Khajuripada        | 35                                       | 63         | 22         | 120         | 104         |
| Kotogada           | 31                                       | 61         | 22         | 114         | 98          |
| K. Nuagaon         | 34                                       | 66         | 23         | 123         | 107         |
| Phiringia          | 46                                       | 97         | 34         | 177         | 154         |
| Phulbani           | 23                                       | 46         | 16         | 85          | 74          |
| Raikia             | 29                                       | 63         | 22         | 114         | 99          |
| Tikabali           | 31                                       | 63         | 22         | 116         | 101         |
| Tumudibandha       | 31                                       | 63         | 22         | 116         | 101         |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>454</b>                               | <b>920</b> | <b>322</b> | <b>1696</b> | <b>1474</b> |

Source: District Statistical Handbook, Kandhamal 2005

The district has been implementing several women empowerment programmes like SGSY and Mission Shakti with the intention of bridging the gender gap and empowering women. The Swarnajayanti Gram Swaraj Yojana (SGSY) promotes self employment through Self Help Groups. The objective of the programme is to support BPL families by providing income generating assets through credit linkage and subsidy. Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) are a major beneficiary of the programme. SGSY promotes micro enterprises and self employment options and encourages women beneficiaries. Table chart 3 gives the coverage of men and women beneficiaries as of 2005. In the year 2008-09, a total of 2,744 beneficiaries were covered under SGSY. Of the beneficiaries, ST were highest followed by SC and general caste.

Special focus was given to women SHGs through promotion of suitable micro enterprises. Women beneficiaries under SGSY were 220 in 2004 and went up to 1,474 in 2005. For the year 2008-09, the physical target for the district was 2,744 Swarojgaris (2,470 Swarojgaris in 247 groups and 274 individuals). For the year 2008-09, the action plan under SGSY focused more on women and disabled with a total financial investment of Rs. 49 lakh with Rs. 33.5 lakh credit coverage and Rs.15.5 lakh subsidy. About 1,279 women were targeted to be benefited under SGSY in 2009-10.

### 1.4. Political and Social Empowerment

The Constitution of India recognizes the political rights of women without any discrimination, distinction or qualification, to participate in the decision-making process at all levels. After five decades of strides in democracy and development, women's participation and their role in public life has not made the desired headway. The field reality is that women's constitutional right in decision-making at all levels, whether national or local is still marginal.

1.4.1 Generally speaking, the Indian society and its dominant culture over the centuries have downgraded the status of women, socially and economically depriving them of opportunities for development,

participation and management. Women, who form the majority of country's illiterate, are underpaid or unpaid servants of society and family with no chance of expressing free opinions of their own. They are also objects of oppression or subjects of welfare. They are often relegated to the background and marginalised.

1.4.2 The process of empowerment will open a new vista of human resource development to them and bring them in the mainstream of social and economic development. The task that faces the government and society in setting right this inequality in sharing of power in a diverse and complex country with many religions and linguistic variations is how to overcome the attitudinal, institutional, cultural and social restrictions that have grown over the centuries.

1.4.3 Women's progress has been painfully slow and even today they remain the poorest of the poor. In the emerging new economic order and liberalized world order the women who have lower level skills will get further marginalised. Almost 90 per cent women in employment work in the unorganised sectors and therefore outside the purview of protection. The provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendments and the Panchayati Raj Acts would give opportunities for their socio-political advancement. Guided and well-planned empowerment thus, can make them overcome the inferior status in the family and society and emerge as capable equal partners of men. Such equal participation will lead to a qualitative change not merely in women's lives but in the functioning of public institutions and nature of politics in our democracy.

1.5 Status of Dalit Women in the Society: In Indian society, the Dalits woman is not treated as a human being. Both economically and socially, these women are marginalized. They are helpless beings and their life is cheap and unimportant in this caste society. They are the victims of caste, class and sex. For the majority of women in India, the greatest problem is that of survival. Poverty, dowry murders, widow burning, female infanticide have assumed new dimensions with modernization and technological advancement. The rural Dalit women face more atrocities from the upper caste men and women. In this society they have no safety and security. Any time the upper caste men can use them the way they like. Untouchability is forgotten here, if an upper caste man wants, he can to rape a poor, pale, weak, unhealthy, dark, voiceless Dalit woman. There is no end in India for the sexual violence against Dalit women.

#### 1.6 Role of Panchayat Raj Institutions / Local Self Governance

The gender representation in the local self government or the PRIs has been more than satisfactory. Though only one-third of seats were reserved for women by the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment, the actual representation is much more at all levels. The percentages of women at district, block and village levels of Panchyat are 41, 43 and 40 respectively. Though there is a belief that these women leaders are only proxies for men, yet these women gradually become independent. In fact they have begun to contest from unreserved seats also. It has led to empowerment of not only those women who are in the Panchayats but also in the rural areas of India. However much more needs to be done to empower women in local self governments so that they can play a more proactive role in decision making and by their very presence encourage more and more women to come forth and demand their rights. For this capacity building is required through knowledge and education and training in diverse areas pertaining to women such as laws and rights, programs for women etc.

#### SUMMARY:

The findings of the study revealed that political participation and empowerment of dalit women in the functioning as well as in the electoral process of the panchayats is not satisfactory. Some of the respondents even do not know the names of political parties and they casted their votes identifying the symbols of political parties. Most of the women have great apathy towards politics. The parochial culture, patriarchal society and low level of education are greatly responsible for their backwardness.

The study then moves on to documenting the impacts of political participation. There is impact at various levels like Dalit women themselves, village and society at large. The specific impact on self are listed as risen sense of dignity, self respect. Consciousness about caste-gender intersections this also shows their potentials and willingness to assume a strong leadership. Impact on family is that they are viewed as a responsible person and they can exercise autonomy in fulfilling task most of the time without hindrance from family.

Dalit's women's political participation has also impacted on other Dalit women from the community. There is an increased mobility of Dalit women in panchayat. Dalit women presidents are viewed as a source of inspiration for other Dalit women. Interaction between Dalit women and non-Dalit women is improved as a result of Dalit women's political participation.

There are also changes viewed in attitude of dominant caste members towards Dalit women. A visible attitudinal change is in terms of acceptance. Dalit women president interact more frequently with the dominant caste members after being president. Dominant caste villagers in several cases have appreciated work of Dalit women presidents, especially elderly who have benefitted by the pension scheme implementation. Village as whole looks up the Dalit women president as efficiency of their work can be seen through the implementation of schemes and transparency in functioning.

**CONCLUSION:**

To conclude, it is not sufficient to only pass the Acts although the Act in itself is a step towards empowerment of Dalits. To bring in sustainable and developmental change in all the spectrums the overall culture that respects and promotes the rights is very important. We can't see the political rights of Dalit women in isolation as there is structural subjugation of women at all level that should be targeted and addressed. Along with policy interventions, organization of people, capacity building of the victims and marginalized, mass movement for the changing the structure and mind set is required. To foresee this change in the lives of Dalit women who are entering in the public sphere gradually, effective implementation of Constitutional provisions such as 73rd Amendment is crucial. My findings from the study of Dalit women's experiences political participation enforce this aspect very strongly.

Empowerment of the dalit women is much more essential in present day context. To stop the against them, it is very much essential that they must empower towards sustainable development in achieving their rights. By fulfilling its state, national and international obligations to protect Dalit women from violence, complemented by adequate focus on improving the socio-economic conditions of Dalit women, the Indian State could contribute to enlarging the choices and agency of Dalit women. Increased Dalit women's agency, in turn, would contribute to social change not only for their families and their communities, but also for the wider Indian society. The goal of Dalit women's empowerment will not be accomplished by reservations alone, and there are a number of obstacles identified by the respondents. It can be noted that there are more restraining than facilitating factors for the entry and participation of women in political arena, and it is equally interesting to find out that the restraining factors are so many and so diverse.

Political participation of women demands the values of equality and justice in daily life, the support of citizens groups in protest against oppressions, and acceptance of the feminist perspective in the public sphere. Women have to recognize, collectively and critically, the forces that limit them and to work collectively and continuously to change the unequal power structure. The family, community and state should together create a situation wherein elected women representatives act effectively in PRIs. They need to be endowed with capacities and incentives to tackle the emerging challenges after entering into PR system. More favorable environment should be created which would enable the women to play more effective role in the decentralized development.

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