

Decentralised Governance and Socio-Economic Status of Tribals in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Vidarbha constitute 32.1 per cent of the total population and are socially excluded and denied equal opportunities. Despite having a one-third reservation in Panchayati Raj, the issues of social exclusion and lack of participation of tribals in socio-political and economic activities raises a question for their development. In this context the paper examines the socio-economic conditions of tribals in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, accessibility of political power and their level of participation in decision-making for implementation of programmes/schemes meant for their development. Literature has been reviewed, data published in leading newspapers, magazines, reports, working papers were used and personal field observations were made to assess the effect of decentralisation on the development and welfare of the tribals. The paper concludes that concerted efforts for the development of these groups by the Central and State Governments have had only marginal impacts on their socio-economic conditions inspite of the various welfare measures and constitutional protection. An honest initiative of Gram Panchayat can bring forth a public delivery system ensuring a reasonable and quality service to the disadvantaged tribal community. It can overcome the present issues and challenges involved in the implementation of tribal specific schemes and programmes for their development.

Keywords

tribals, gram panchayat, decentralised governance

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Introduction

India, with a tribal population of 85 million (Census of India, 2011), has the largest tribal population in the world and 573 tribal groups belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Shirsath, 2014). STs, also called adivasis, encompass the groups isolated and disadvantaged by their low status in the caste hierarchy (Deshpande, 1971; Gare, 2000; Gavit, 2008; Bankar, 2011). Broadly defined, STs are groups delineated on the basis of relative isolation, economic backwardness and cultural autonomy in relation to the non-tribal population (Ghurye, 1969, 1980; Hasnain, 1983; Bhukya, 2010; Ramotra et al., 2011). The STs population represents one of the most economically impoverished and marginalised groups in India. They are socially excluded and denied equal opportunities and thus are unable to participate in the political, economic and social functioning of the society. STs are lagging far behind in the different walks of life such as education, employment, political, social position, good health and empowerment (Das and Dutta 2007; Ramaswamy and Bhukya, 2011).

Vidarbha is the eastern region of Maharashtra, comprising of the Nagpur and Amravati divisions constituting approximately a 97,321 sq. km. area and holds 21.3 per cent of the total population of the State (Census of India, 2011). It is covered by thick forest and one-fourth part is occupied by the Pench and Navegaon National Park and Nagzira reserved forest in the Gondia district. As per the 2011 Census, 9.4 per cent of the population belong to the STs in Maharashtra, whereas in Vidarbha 32.1 per cent of the population belong to STs. Eleven districts fall under it viz., Akola, Amravati, Bhandara, Buldana, Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Gondia, Nagpur, Wardha, Washim and Yavatmal. The Gadchiroli, Yavatmal Chandrapur, Gondia and Amravati districts of the Vidarbha region consist of the highest tribal population (Census of India, 2011). Vidarbha has about 53 per cent of the State's total forest cover (Ministry of Environment, 2017). It holds two-thirds of Maharashtra's mineral resources, three quarters of its forest resources and is a net producer of power. Still it is less economically prosperous compared to the rest of Maharashtra and is plagued by poverty and malnutrition.

This area, with its large tribal population, suffers from inadequate development, poor infrastructure, poverty, unemployment, agrarian crisis and migration from rural areas. Tribals live in three inaccessible hilly and remote forest regions of the State, namely, Sahyadris, Satpudas and eastern

Gondwana in Vidarbha. The State has identified 45 communities denoted as STs. In terms of size the most significant communities are Bhils, Gonds, Mahadeo Kolis, Warlis, Koknas, Thakars, Andhs, Halabas, Katkaris, Malhar Kolis, Korkus, Kolams, Dhor Kolis, Pardhis, Pardhansand Gamits. The Katkaris, Kolams and Madia Gonds have been classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) due to low levels of acculturation as compared to other tribes (Government of Maharashtra, 2013; Tribal Indigenous Peoples Development Plan, 2003; Tribhuwan, 2004; Karade, 2008). Although they speak a tribal dialect, they can speak the Marathi language as well. They profess a primitive religion known as animism in which the worship of ghosts and spirits is the most important element. Due to the absence of livelihood and employment opportunities, tribals in Vidarbha mostly depend on the primary sector such as agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishing for their subsistence (Ramotra et al., 2011).

The tribal population in the State of Maharashtra and in Vidarbha as a whole is the most deprived and vulnerable community that faces severe economic exclusion. Although certain constitutional safeguards are provided, there has been marginal socio-economic and political mobility across these communities. Contrary to other Backward Castes (BC) who witnessed certain degrees of progress because of protective discrimination policies of the government and electoral participation, the STs remain abysmally backward and socially excluded, still living in harsh environments. Despite having a one-third reservation in Panchayats they are unable to participate in decision-making and hardly enjoy or exercise power due to their poor socio-economic conditions. Gadchiroli and Melghat has the highest index of deprivation based on four basic necessities such as housing, access to drinking water, good sanitation and electricity. As per the Society for Education, Action and Research in Community (SEARCH) report, 0.175 million children die every year in the State, mostly in Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, Amravati, Nandurbar and Dhule districts (Jawale, 2015). In Melghat, thousands of pregnant, lactating tribal mothers and infants have died, due to acute malnutrition. Despite a Mumbai high court order, the Maharashtra government has failed to improve the living conditions of tribals (*The Free Press Journal*, 2019).

The objective of this paper is to delineate the socio-economic conditions of tribals in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. The other specific objectives are:

- To review the accessibility of political power and the challenges they face in decentralised governance.
- To examine the participation level of tribals in implementation of development programmes/schemes.
- To assess whether decentralisation has led to development and welfare of the tribals.

Literature was reviewed, data published in leading newspapers, magazines were used and personal field observations made to understand the role of decentralised governance in tribal development.

Socio-Economic Status of Tribal Communities

The socio-economic conditions of thousands of primitive tribes particularly the Kolam, Gonds, Pardhi and Korku in the Vidarbha region, are worse than that of other tribal communities who are all egedly facing starvation. Gond tribes have sub-tribes, mainly Raj-Gonds, Madia-Gonds (Maria Gonds), DhurveGonds, Khatulwar/Khatole Gonds and Naik Gonds. Banjara tribes which havetheir main habitat in the Yavatmal district are classified as Nomadic tribe and display altogether different characteristics as well as levels of acculturation. The Korkutribes in the Melghat region of the Amravati district comprises 89.3 per cent of the tribal population and Gonds, Nihals and Mongias, Balais, Vanjaris and Gaolies constitute the remaining population of tribes. Melghat comprises of mainly two tehsils of the Amravati district, namely Dharani and Chikhaldhara. The region spreads across 315 existing villages and encompasses an area of 140,025 hectares. Out of 20 villages which come under the Tiger Reserve buffer zone and the reserve forest area, two villages have been evicted (Jawale, 2015).

Most of the tribes are concentrated in forest areas. They have traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs, astronomical bodies, primitive agriculture, multiple uses of trees and plants and skills such as metal works, woodwork (including bamboo handicrafts), musical instruments, dancing, singing, archery, fishery and oil extraction. They depend on the forest for their daily needs like food, fodder and medicines. However, the forest department has prohibited access to natural nutrition and medicinal plants traditionally relied upon by the Korkutribes. The economy of most of the tribes is based on agriculture produce, collection of minor forest produce and hunting of birds/wild animals. They cultivate vegetables like Cowpea,

Chillis, Brinjal, Sweet potato, Ginger, Medicinal plants and Bananas (Deshpande and Kulkarni, 2013; Gunaji, 2005). They collect forest produce such as gum, tamarind, adda leaf, myrobalans, mohua seeds, mohwa flowers, nux-vomica, soap nuts and honey. Owing to their poor socio-economic conditions, they face many hardships in the selling of minor forest produce. The illiterate and innocent tribals are sordidly exploited by the unscrupulous money lenders and traders. In the absence of marketing facilities, the poor tribals have no choice except to bear the brunt of the inequitable exchange system extended to them by traders. They face cultural and economic marginalisation, particularly through the deprivation of their traditional rights over forests and other resources (Jha and Jhingran, 2005; Veerbhadranaikaet al., 2012). The socio-economic condition of the tribals in Vidarbha clearly demonstrates the developmental gap between them and the rest of the population. Many studies revealed that they are in a situation featured with poverty, deprivation and disadvantages.

The literacy rate of tribal males and females lag behind the general population of the State by almost 20 per cent and 41 per cent respectively. The literacy rate of Madia Gonds, Bhils and Katkaris females is as low as 23, 21 and 16 per cent respectively, while the State average literacy is 69 per cent (Government of Maharashtra, 2013). Katkaris literacy rates are lower than even the other PVTGS such as the Kolams and Madia Gonds (Tribhuwan and Patil, 2008). The school gross enrolment ratio of tribal children is low while the school drop-out rate is very high. Children not going to school in the age group 6-17 years are 34.5 per cent of STs as against 15.9 per cent of the general population of the State. Nambissan (2009) and Kurane (2008) have pointed out that poverty and the practice of child labour have continued to be major deterrents in enrolment of tribal children in schools. Access to basic education still remains a challenge for a large segment of this population across the country, especially in economically and educationally backward areas (NCERT, 2006; Rustogi et al., 2012). Mane (2010) and, Jha and Jhingran (2005) reported that migration, high incidence of poverty and landlessness among tribal communities is a crucial challenge for retaining tribal children within education. Mane (2010) also noted that gender discrepancies tend to be high, with boys more likely to be educated compared to girls, due to social and economic factors such as a desire to shelter girls from the outside world or, more frequently,

requiring girls to participate in household and agricultural activities.

The average annual expenditure by the State per student in the age group 5-29 years for tribals is Rs. 1,297, whereas the expenditure on general students is Rs. 4,511 per capita. Immunisation of children in tribal communities is 39.3 per cent while for the general population it is 62.5 per cent. The economic survey of the State presented in the State Assembly on 20 March 2013 indicated the inequality in per capita income between the State average and the majority of the tribal districts. (Economic Survey of Maharashtra, 2012-2013). The per capita income of predominantly tribal districts such as Nandurbar is Rs. 46,415 and for Gadchiroli it is Rs. 48,311, whereas the State per capita income is Rs. 95,339 (Government of Maharashtra, 2013). The conditions of the tribes in Nandurbar, Gadchiroli, Gondia, Amravati, Chandrapur and Yavatmal districts are worst among the 36 districts of Maharashtra (Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2013). According to a benchmark survey conducted by the tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI), 91.11 per cent of the ST population in Maharashtra was below the poverty line, having an income of less than Rs. 11,000 per annum. The status of tribals is lower than the general population in every aspect related to health, education, infrastructure, civic amenities and government services. The Taluka Development Index (TDI) shows that, out of 356 talukas, 15 tribal dominated talukas are at the bottom in Maharashtra. The topmost taluka is Pune and bottom-most talukas are Korchi, Kurkheda and Dhanora in the Gadachiroli district; Dharni and Chikhaldhara in the Amravati district; Deori and Salekesha in the Gondia district and Ramtek in the Nagpur district in the Vidarbha region (Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2013).

The prevalence of underweight children among non-tribals was 19.2 per cent compared to 32.1 per cent in tribal children. The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) of tribals in the Melghat and Gadchiroli districts is about 60-70 per cent higher than the State average (Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2013). As per the Economic Survey of Maharashtra (2012-2013) the proportion of families with tap water supplies in the tribal Gadchiroli district was 19.5 per cent against the State average of 63 per cent, whereas the proportion of families with toilet facilities in the houses was 27 per cent compared to the State average of 53 per cent (Government of Maharashtra, 2013). The Health Facilities Index of tribal talukas is poor

compared to State levels in terms of physical infrastructure and functioning services (Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2012). This indicates uneven regional development and top-sided development in the State and the position of tribal people at the bottom of the pyramid.

The highest rate of child mortality has been reported in the Melghat and Gadchiroli districts. Thus, there is a drastic decline in the population of the Korku tribe i.e. around 11 per cent. Ninety per cent of Korkus and other tribes in the Melghat region live below the poverty line. People in this region have been deprived of their right to development with barely any development plans being implemented; rather many restrictions are being imposed by the State. The rehabilitation committees have not implemented resettlement of two villages from where tribals are left in the vicious circle of poverty. The status of tribal people on various indicators is much lower than the State average, the deficit ranging from 37 to 142 per cent. Tribal people in Vidarbha are not only the poorest and most disadvantaged section but are also the most exploited and neglected groups in the region.

Decentralised Governance and Tribals

Decentralised governance from the national level to States, districts, towns, municipalities, rural settlements and communities enable the people to participate more directly in the governing process. It empowers people who were previously excluded from the decision making process. Johnson (2003) mentioned that democratic decentralisation entails the system of governance in which citizens possess the right to hold local public officials accountable through the use of elections, grievance meetings and other democratic means. It is believed that decentralisation strengthens representation for various political, religious, ethnic and tribal groups in development decision-making that could lead to greater equity in the allocation of government resources and investments. Further, in a pluralist system like India, decentralised governance could address the local development needs effectively while promoting equity in the delivery of goods and services. In order to fulfil the objectives of decentralisation, the three-tier Panchayati Raj system has been implemented and in that direction the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) have been enacted.

The available literature on grass-roots leadership shows that the number

of tribals in Panchayati Raj institutions was meagre before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act when one or two tribals were either co-opted or nominated (Kaushik, 1986). After the 73rd and 74th amendment to the Constitution, the historically excluded groups and communities were included in decision-making bodies of Panchayati Raj (more than 660,000 elected members, i.e. 22.5 per cent, in the rural and urban local bodies are from SCs and STs) (Mathew, 2013). The reservation enables disadvantaged groups to occupy seats of power, however, they are unable to exercise their power. Various studies have pointed out that reservation has improved the perception levels of tribals and has created an urge in them to participate in the governance (Rath, 2006). The power of the tribals over resources has increased marginally through the PRIs and the representation in Panchayats has minimally helped them to improve their administrative skills and articulate in local governance. However, Panchayats have opened up the possibilities of bringing to the surface most of the things previously swept under the carpet. Even then, socially and economically excluded tribals are trapped in a cycle of problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poverty, housing and health. The social exclusion of tribals in the decentralised governance in Vidarbha is of major concern since it involves the denial of access to social space, ownership and control over resources, denial of opportunities and basic needs and denial of rights to represent and participate in socio-economic and political matters. The poor socio-economic conditions of tribals contribute to their fragile political position in the Panchayats in Vidarbha.

Representation of Tribals in Panchayats: Issues and Concerns

Maharashtra local governance is broadly classified into two categories: Urban Local Governance and Rural Local Governance. The Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat came into existence when the Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 came into force and was implemented on 1 May 1962. This three-tier system of democratic decentralisation was implemented in all districts of Vidarbha. The State has a long tradition of having statutory bodies for planning at the district levels. There are 36 districts, 33 Zilla Parishads, 351 Panchayat Samitis and 28,813 Gram Panchayats in the State. In Vidarbha, the Amravati

and Nagpur divisions have 3,949 and 3,701 village Panchayats respectively (Audit Report Local Bodies, 2016). Maharashtra has been in the forefront of the move towards decentralisation in governance. The development work in the tribal areas is hardly looked at in Vidarbha. Tribals face discrimination in terms of the poor representation in the local governance processes. Tribals have less participation in Panchayats as compared to other social groups in Vidarbha. They face a number of problems and challenges in Panchayats in day to day affairs, from election to being a Sarpanch or member in Gram Panchayats all over the Vidarbha region. There are numerous cases of tribals being used as proxies and being coerced to carry out the dictates by the dominant castes. Even after coming to power, as elected representatives they are restricted in effective exercise of their power as Sarpanch or members. They hardly enjoy any status due to their identity as tribals. The elected tribal members in Panchayats are not able to take a stand on the tribal issues because of the pressure from the dominant caste members. In fact, very few issues with regard to tribals are discussed, whereas a variety of other issues get more importance in the meetings. Most of the time they are deliberately kept away from the Panchayat proceedings and their posts are declared null and void after a certain period of time by the Panchayat members. Tribals who are in positions like Sarpanch are toppled within a short period by bringing in a no-confidence motion. This has barred many tribals from exercising their rights in the Panchayat institutions.

Decision-Making

The decision-making power of the tribal representatives and presidents varies from area to area across Vidarbha. In many villages the ideas of tribal Sarpanchs and members are not valued or taken seriously, therefore tribal members or Sarpanchs refrain from expressing their opinions. As the population of tribals is low they are likely to be dominated by upper castes and have very little scope for independent functioning even if they are elected to Panchayat posts. The Panchayat elections are a nightmare experience for tribals. Several elections in reserved Panchayats in various blocks in Vidarbha could not be held because not a single nomination paper was filed in the face of threats from the upper caste and Naxalites. In many Panchayats, tribal candidates live in terror because filing their

nomination papers is seen as an act of defiance. The tribals of Gadchiroli and surrounding districts live in perennial fear of Naxalites, particularly Aheri, Sironcha, Bhamragarh, Etapalli and Dhanora tehsils and are grappling with the rebel menace. In most areas under these tehsils, tribals are apprehensive of the Naxalite attack. Naxal terror prevents tribals from filing a nomination in Panchayat elections in Gadchiroli and surrounding districts. For instance, in 2012, the mid-term Gram Panchayat elections, Naxals had warned people to give up their posts and keep away from filling the nomination form or face dire consequences. Thus, most of the people did not fill the nomination forms to contest the Gram Panchayat election.

The region also witnessed a series of political killings (Maitra, 2012). There have been instances where higher castes have challenged the reservation for STs in a court of law and when this attempt failed, they announced a boycott of elections. Tribal members are made to sit outside the Panchayat offices on the floor while the traditional village headmen occupy the chairs. This oppression is more in the case of tribal women members. Moreover, tribal Sarpanchs are forced to give priority to activities favouring upper caste members. It is evident that the upper castes have been controlling the affairs of the village and the local community. They are yet to reconcile to the empowerment of tribals, which has exacerbated tensions and inspired violence against them. Panchayat related ethnic violence continues unabated and has become a part of the social reality. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in ethnic/caste-based violence in the Panchayats in the last 20 years. The elections of Panchayats have been the first and foremost point of attack. At the grass-roots level, traditional leadership of the upper class gets more importance. The handful of elite dominating the Gram Panchayat do not allow the poor and marginal tribals to perform any effective role in village affairs. Elected STs representatives face the problem of non-cooperation from the official and upper castes/dominant sections of the Gram Panchayats. These problems have not only been obstructing developmental works but also not enabling elected representatives to participate in the Panchayats.

Problems faced by Tribal Women

Very few tribal women are able to participate and act with freedom to win Panchayat elections in the Vidarbha region. Most of the time they are pushed

by their husbands or the dominant castes, so they become proxy politics. Dominant castes and tribal men help them to get elected and then they take control, menacing and threatening them. The elected tribal women representatives are treated differently from others and face strong opposition in the Panchayat if they attempt to work for the benefit of their community. Quite a few tribal women elected as president are able to discharge official responsibilities with freedom and independence. They are either not taken seriously and the issues which they raise are rarely discussed or approved. Thus, there is a clear obstruction to tribal development. The Panchayat does not prioritise tribal development needs and the dominant castes refuse to share the knowledge that could enhance women's responsibilities and capabilities. Tribal women are restricted by others from active participation in Panchayat council meetings. Mathew and Mathew (2003) observed that tribal women have little or no participation in Gram Sabha. Tribal women are respected as president but not as tribal women in the region. Active participation in the form of involvement in the decision making process was found to be rare in the case of women representatives. Financial matters are not tackled by the women representatives and for this they depend upon their husbands or sons or any other male relatives. Most of the elected women Sarpanchs are regarded as a mere 'Rubber Stamp' and all the functions of the Panchayat are being performed by their husbands or local elites. Attendance of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayat meetings is found to be very low. The majority of them do not attend the meetings regularly. Another important stumbling block in the way of women empowerment is family influence. Many families do not allow their elected women representatives to work together with government officials and others. The upper caste people are either hesitant or unwilling to honour or implement decisions taken by tribal women leaders. Thus, there are many factors upsetting the process of participation and level of performance of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions and they are not seen as political entities. They are seen as a source of status enhancement. Women Sarpanchs who go out with men for work related to the Gram Panchayat or Zilla Parishad, are castigated as 'bad women' and they become victims of character assassination. In one of the villages in Vidarbha, Ratnainala Vaidya faced the bad tactics of the opposition party during the district level election. In 2004 she won the election of Gram Panchayat and has done good village

development work which people appreciated. This created problems for her by opposition people. At the next Zilla Parishad (district level) election, the opposition party started spreading rumours that her character is bad and she has two husbands. They also published a pamphlet, which amounted to her character assassination in the worst form. As a result, she was defeated in the election.

In another case, Rupali (name changed) was elected as the Sarpanch of Shirasgaon Pandhari village in Vidarbha and took charge of her office. On the day of the first Gram Sabha, the Gram Panchayat Secretary was reading the information about the administrative procedures of the Panchayat. At this instance, the Ex-Sarpanch and his supporters got up and created a ruckus. They denied the appointments of Sarpanch and deputy Sarpanch and demanded to stop Gram Sabha. They created a big drama. The Ex-Sarpanch and his men threw chilli powder in the Sarpanch's eye, as well as the Secretary, deputy Sarpanch and other members of the Gram Panchayat. Soon they started beating them and abusing the tribal Sarpanch. The elected women members often face non-cooperation, manipulative staff and officialdom. Harassment is common for elected women Sarpanchs. In the Nagpur district an elected tribal women was sexually harassed by the Gram Panchayat secretary. He used to write vulgar letters to her. One day after receiving the same type of letter she committed suicide. In the Kotgal Gram Panchayat of the Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra, for the first time 11 candidates from tribals won the elections in 2002. The post of Sarpanch was reserved for ST women. People from the upper caste were shocked by the fact that though they had the majority, a candidate from a ST community won the Sarpanch elections. They tried to create obstacles to the working of the Panchayat. In the first Gram Sabha held in December 2002, they protested against the right of the Sarpanch and Secretary over authority in financial transactions. Forcefully, they made a resolution that the Sarpanch and the Secretary would have no authority in financial transactions. Her basic fundamental right by the virtue of being the Sarpanch was denied.

The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006 for Tribal Development

The decentralised local governance is gradually being strengthened in terms of the adoption of local planning processes and the direct allocation

of funds to the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996 (PESA). The PESA endeavours to enhance tribal representation in local governance and uplift them socio-economically (Chauhan, 2003), even though tribals face a problem in the enactment of the PESA Act. The Maharashtra State has given less attention towards implementation of the PESA Act and to the preparation of decentralised planning. The rapid economic growth of the State, under neo-liberalism and globalisation, has unravelled a new set of questions on the role and mandate of Panchayats relating to governance. For the tribal regions which fall under PESA, both the government and industry have collaborated to negotiate directly with people without engaging Panchayats in the region. For instance, Vidarbha holds two-thirds of Maharashtra's mineral resources, three quarters of its forest resources and is a net producer of power.

Between 2011 and 2014, 48 mining leases were approved in tribal areas across the country by the union ministry of mines. Surjagad in the Gadchiroli district, on a swathe of land which bears about 60 per cent of Maharashtra's mineral wealth, includes 17 minerals including coal, limestone, iron ore and manganese ore with reserves of 5,753 million tonnes, or 22.56 per cent of India's mineral reserves. In 2017 the government had issued the licence for 25 new mining projects, across more than 18,000 acres across six talukas (sub-divisions). Tribals feared that the mining would wreck their habitat like *jal, jangal, Jameen* (water, forest, land) and felt that the lives of the people needed to be conserved. The tussle in Gadchiroli is illustrative of larger battles unfolding across India's tribal homelands. On 23 December 2016, 80 trucks and an earthmover were burnt, allegedly by Maoists opposed to mining projects. In 2016, the State asked companies that had halted mining in the Madia Gond village of Surjagad for fear of Naxal attacks to resume work. Tribals were angry that their Gram Sabhas, or local village councils, were not consulted when mining licenses were given out. Government had only consulted with the Gram Sabha for minor mineral mining. This violation of Section 4(k) of the Provision of the PESA Act, 1996 makes it mandatory for Gram Sabhas to be consulted before a mining lease is awarded for minor minerals in scheduled areas. Even after a decade and a half after the PESA Act, there is very little awareness about the Gram Sabha being designated as a self-governing body or having legal jurisdiction over the natural resources and forests.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 recognises traditional forest dwellers' rights to own and govern forest land in their possession. In spite of the FRA, 63 per cent of districts in the State of Maharashtra have zero compliance (Chatterjee et al., 2018). Data shows that Maharashtra's average performance would be 10 per cent of its minimum potential instead. Gadchiroli is the best performing district in the FRA compared to other districts in the region. For instance, MendhaLekha in the Dhanora taluka of Gadchiroli became the first village in the country to exercise its rights to bamboo under the FRA in August 2009. Drawing inspiration from Mendha Lekha, more than 1,500 villages in the Vidarbha region have opted out of the traditional governance and marketing of non-timber forest products (NTFP), controlled by the forest department. These villages have taken the initiative and, sometimes the support of grassroots organisations, to identify contractors and sell NTFP from their villages for better prices. More significant is how Gram Sabha members assert their rights to NTFP even when their Community Forest Rights (CFR) claims are yet to be recognised by the district administration (Sahu, 2020).

Despite the enactment of the FRA and provisions for community rights to NTFP, Gram Sabhas continue to face hurdles and harassment at the hands of contractors and the forest department (Sahu et al., 2017). Realising the power of contractors and the forest department and the monopoly they have over forestlands and NTFP, several Gram Sabhas have come together to form Gram Sabha federations at the taluka level without compromising their autonomy and rights recognised under the FRA. Also, institutional challenges exist such as the continued low awareness about CFRs, the lack of district-level training/meetings, dedicated staff and mistrust between Gram Sabhas and the forest department. In 2015-16 the Maharashtra government granted over Rs. 2.58 billion to tribal Panchayats for the accounts of 2,874 tribal village Panchayats in 13 districts covering 47 tribal groups. Due to lack of planning, the training session, utilisation of funds, budgeting and maintaining account books were not implemented properly (Srivastava, 2015).

Apart from PESA and FRA there are a number of government schemes and Acts for tribal development, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojana, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and

the National Rural Health Mission. For effective implementation of the schemes in the tribal areas, constant monitoring and review is a prerequisite. Rigorous efforts are being taken by the State to improve the socio-economic conditions of tribes. Consequently, there are lacunae in the proper integration of services and supervision with accountability for the project schemes. As a result, these schemes and programmes have helped only very small sections of poor tribals in the Vidarbha region and the majority of them are left behind due to a lack of proper implementation of programmes/schemes meant for them. Despite the Constitution Amendment Act and the confirmatory Acts for inclusion of the tribes through affirmative action, they occupy very low positions in the social and economic hierarchy and within the local governments in the Vidarbha region.

Conclusion

The democratic decentralisation has marginally empowered the disadvantaged tribals in the Vidarbha region. However, it has not succeeded in facilitating an efficient and equitable delivery of various services meant for them. Only a small section of tribals has benefited from political developments, while the large number of tribals, due to their disadvantaged position, could not benefit from it. The State is unable to implement reservation in Panchayat Raj which reduces the ability of the Panchayat to fulfil the core objectives of equitable development and social justice for tribals. The tribal members have to assert their constitutional rights. There is a need to recognise political participation of tribals without isolation. Creative ways must be explored with tribals to capitalise on the success stories of tribal political leadership. Efforts should be made for the political participation of tribals in order to transform and control the resources and for the promotion of human rights. Funds and functionaries need to be transferred to the Panchayat institute. National perspective plans should be developed with explicit short and long term goals for the overall development of tribals. Tribal women should be trained to strengthen the actual networks in Panchayats. There is a need for a widespread social education campaign through the media for eradication of tribal problems and their effective participation in Panchayats. There is an urgent need to amend the Indian Forest Act, Land Acquisition Act and other related Acts so that the ownership of minor forest produce, water bodies and land

resources are explicitly handed over to the Gram Sabhas of the PESA areas. Emphasis must be laid on the active participation of tribal women in decision-making with a view to enhancing their role and capacity, status and leadership in local self-governance. Interventions in strengthening PRIs should focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership among tribes. There is also a need for positive attitudinal changes and mental make-up of the dominant folk in favour of the participation of women. Without the support of the civil society organisations, the full potential of the decentralisation of powers cannot be harnessed.

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