Are tribal women empowered: understandings from Sustainable Tribal Empowerment Project (STEP) and IKP in ITDA Paderu of Visakhapatnam districts, Andhra Pradesh

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Introduction

“Empowerment of women” and “women empowerment” is the buzz word across the globe. The first phrase emphasizes on the process while the later explicitly deals with the level of women empowerment.

Very often it is interpreted that women really empowered? And then where is it leading them to? In moving forward, it is emphasized on inclusion of the marginalized and excluded from the mainstream living to the overall process of development and growth (IFAD, 2002). The common denominations accredited to the side of tribals are that they are poor, marginalized and are away from mainstream living. The process of sasaktiritization and globalization do have negative impact on their life and livelihood and pushed them to the corner of development.

The fifth five year plan in this effect has given focus on the development of tribals categorically and with special focus on development of tribal women (Rao, M, 1999). Subsequently, since 2002 and with support of World Bank it has been persistently tried to empower the tribal women of agency areas of Andhra Pradesh. Adding to the empowerment drive, the execution of European Union supported Sustainable Tribal Empowerment Project-STEP (EU India Update 2001). Both drives are executed in agency area of Paderu to empower the tribal women and economically alleviate them to the next level empowerment and development.

STEP was executed through the grass-root Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), while Indira Kranti Pratham (IKP) is being executed in Agency Areas in coordination with the established Integrated Development Agencies (ITDA’s) of the state.

In this context, empowerment is viewed as the process of increasing assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowered people have freedom of choice and action. This in turn enables them to better influence the course of their lives and the decisions which affect them. The social relations of gender, in fact, mediate women’s experience of poverty. This implies that it is only by looking at the context that we can deduce whether social relations of gender act to exacerbate or relieve scarcity (Kabeer, 1996,1997).

The paper is therefore attempted to understand the level of women empowerment economically, politically and socially at different levels.

Study methodology:

The study has primarily relied on information from people’s mouth and institutions working at village level. Opinion of women and men across the agency area of Paderu has been sought to assess the level and extent of freedom exercised to access the use the services offered.

Interestingly, focus has also been given on understanding the nitty-gritty of projects/programmes executed for the development of tribals and especially the IKP and STEP. Sector and theme-wise opinion has been taken across the agency area. Survey of beneficiaries, group discussion and Focus Group Discussion has been carried out on length on the multiplicity of issues of development and women participation in the process. Household as an institution is thoroughly scanned for assessing the role and importance of women at household decision as well as economically.

Study findings:

This paper has attempted to view the level of women empowerment at three broad levels i.e. Household, Village, Panchayats and/or Mandalas, and District level with respect to their participation as well as contribution in different activities in shaping the economy and institutions concerned. It is also pertinent to mention that there are 10 different tribal and Primitive Tribal Groups resides in the agency area of Visakhapatnam district, formed to the total population of 5.66 lakhs (See table 1) and spread over the geographic area of 2629 square kilometers.
It is also important to mention that the sex ration in agency area is 1007, reveals the fact that there are more number of women per male and a skewed literacy level is witnessed towards male in comparison with female.

**Women Empowerment at Household Level**

Women are considered to be one of the strongest pillar of house in tribal society. Their contribution is not purely confined to the economic gains rather beyond. Overall contribution to the household is far beyond. Despite their contribution, they are under estimated, under valued and in most often neglected with low and no self-esteem. In a male dominated society, role of women is multiplied but with low acrediction to their contribution.

The paper found that involvement of women in decision making in household matter is very much regulated and guided by the level of education as well as the economic contribution to the household income kitty. The foregoing table reveals that a host of factor regulate the decision making power of the tribal women in agency area.

**TABLE-2: PARAMETERS OF WOMEN INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION MAKING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.L No.</th>
<th>Parameters of women involvement</th>
<th>Level of involvement (in Per Centage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Contribution to Household Income</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Member in SHG/VO/MMS</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Member in other Village level Institutions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Exposed to City Culture</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Have Interaction with Government Officers</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Member in Panchayat</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Owning the Valuables</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Self-employed/ Salaried</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>1st wife</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Village Survey, ITDA, Paderu, Visakhapatnam District

Moving beyond the house, women’s participation is seen in various local institutions. The IKP and STEP formulated and supported Self-help Groups (SHGs) are the platforms for the village tribal economy and for the tribal women as well. 8325 Self-help Groups (SHGs) with a membership of 43,387 are engaged in different activities of sewing; Lady driving, She Association of Ki-mens, Soap Manufacturing etc.

**Economic contribution of tribal women to alleviate household vulnerability is grossly visible across all communities.**

Tribal women are no more strictly confined to the traditional age-old practice of agriculture and also agriculture following the shifting mode. They are now in to petty-business and jobs. There are almost 86,680 petty-shops exclusively run by the tribal women in the agency area and more than 2450 are engaged in value addition of the agricultural and/or horticultural products is minimal but very often guided by the parameters mentioned in table 2.

Economic contribution of tribal women to alleviate household vulnerability is grossly visible across all communities. Tribal women are no more strictly confined to the traditional age-old practice of agriculture and also agriculture following the shifting mode. They are now in to petty-business and jobs. There are almost 86,680 petty-shops exclusively run by the tribal women in the agency area and more than 2450 are engaged in different activities of sewing; Lady driving, She Association of Ki-mens, Soap Manufacturing etc.

**Women empowerment at village, panchayat, mandal level and agency level**

Moving beyond the house, women’s participation is seen in various local institutions. The IKP and STEP formulated and supported Self-help Groups (SHGs) are the platforms for the village tribal economy and for the tribal women as well. 8325 SHGs with a membership of 43,387 are engaged in the financial need of 693.72 lakhs across the agency area. The amount of fund is injected in to the tribal economy and exclusively through the Self-help Groups of tribal women to take up Income Generation Activities both at individual level as well as in groups. The study also noted that women involvement in group Income Generation Programme is more than individually.

The market study in the agency area reveals that most of the women in the fold of Self-help Group are in to petty business at Shandy Points and also engaged in value addition of the products available naturally e.g. adda leaf, tamarind, turmeric, broom stick, incense stick preparation etc.

Source: Village Survey, ITDA, Paderu, Visakhapatnam District
The Micro Credit programme executed under both the interventions has marked an era for promotion of leadership among the tribal women. All these SHGs (see table-4) have experienced leadership of rotation for past four years, which invariable given chance to most of the women to regulate, manage and plan for successful operation of the SHGs and thereby broaden the vision of participation, exposure and courage and the same is applied to their day-to-day life.

Table-4: Micro Credit Plan for Income Generation in Paderu Agency Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of SHGs</th>
<th>No. of Beneficiaries</th>
<th>Amount supported</th>
<th>Schemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>2674</td>
<td>13855</td>
<td>389.14</td>
<td>CIF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>1303</td>
<td>9532</td>
<td>384.58</td>
<td>CIF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>7484</td>
<td>398.58</td>
<td>ESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>3861</td>
<td>274.06</td>
<td>ESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5490</td>
<td>54732</td>
<td>1366.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Indira Kranthi Pratham, PMRC, Paderu, Visakhapatnam District

Note: Community Investment Fund (CIF) is exclusively supported under the World Bank Project- IKP while Economic Support Schemes is the support leveraged from ITDA, Paderu.

Women are not only engaged in Self-help Groups, where women exclusively works in teams for economic as well as social up-liftment of family as well as the village tribal economy rather participates in state promulgated institutions at habitation and Panchayat level and work in tandem with male. It is pertinent to mention that there are several Committees promoted by the state Government to work for the development of village. The common committees found are Village Forest Committee, Mothers Committee, Education Committee, Health Committee, Land and Natural Resource Committee, Agriculture Committee etc. Women participation is invariable seen and recorded in all Committees. However, role of women in Mother Committee and Health Committee is of paramount importance to all tribal habitations as reported. 80 per cent women across the agency area reported of monitoring the health and education issues of the village.

Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area (PESA) is executed in the agency area to restore the ecology, economy, culture as well as political participation tribal. Women participation in celebration of PESA day speaks of the level of awareness of the issue (see table-5). Not only participation in public meeting but also direct participation in operation of local tyre i.e. Panchayat Administration is evidenced in the recently held election.

Table-5: Women Participation in Celebration of PESA Day in Paderu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>12,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>14,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>16,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>22,080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dhimsa (Tribal NGOs) Network, Paderu, Visakhapatnam District

There are almost 322 tribal women are elected as word members and 24 as Sarpanches in the recently held election in agency area.

Women and livelihood diversification:

Overall trajectories of livelihood shift are evidenced in agency area for either sex, while the shift is favorable for women. Women are now engaged in petty-business, embroidery works, sewing works, and technical jobs like driving, working in shopping mals and mills etc. All activities executed are centering around women and women only to play a lead role for sustainable use.

Table-6: Livelihoods Diversification in Agency Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl No</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>No of beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Lac Cultivation</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>SRI method of Agriculture</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Para Vets</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sewing</td>
<td>792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>National Academy of Construction</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>She Association Ki-men’s</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Lady Driving</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Indira Kranthi Pratham, TPMU, and STEP, Paderu, Visakhapatnam District

As revealed from the table above, apart from bringing-in technicality to the agriculture sector, attempt has been made by both projects to introduce new methods of livelihoods for promotion of income kitty of the tribal. Women are eagerly participating in the drive for more income and power and self-esteem. The SRI has yielded increased productivity on land as well as reduction in cost of cultivation by 40% per cent.

Similarly, women engaged in different non-agriculture activities experiencing enhanced income on a sustainable manner. The occupational shift is evidenced in case of women and practically very slow and sluggish for male. The financial and technical assistance injected through the interventions may be the motivating factor for women to shift the occupation.

Women empowerment and food security

Food Security is an alarming issue with tribals. Agriculture through the shifting mode followed by a handful of income from labour forms the major source of household income to address the food requirement of tribal. Within agriculture, the segmentation of activities shows that women participation in agriculture activities is significantly more than male. They are the conscious decision maker for effective management of food during the lean and pick season.

Income from all sources added together is not providing two squares meal a day. 4413\(^3\) grain banks have been open up with women Self-help Groups to address the food security

Conclusion:

Women as the catalyst for changing themselves as well as the society are visualized to a greater degree in all spears. Retention of identity and self-esteem at household and community level is well accredited. Participation in Income generation, institutional management, food security, administration of programmes etc. is well recognised.

Challenges ahead:

Just mere engagement of women in achievement of short term objectives will not bring in economic, social as well as cultural sustainability for all generation to come. A long way is still to go. More complicated and higher order issues like retention and sustainable use of achievements are long term issues of concern for the up-coming institutions. Benefits of doubt still herald on the efficacy of the institutions created for

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\(^{3}\) Farmers adopting SRI reported of One and half time increase in Per Acre Land Productivity as well as almost 40 per cent reduction in operating cost in terms of reduced seed use, low and no use of chemical fertilizer and less requirement of labour/manpower for weeding

\(^{4}\) IKP and STEP together opened up 4413 grain banks across the agency area to cater the need of seasonal food requirement of tribal. These Grain Banks are linked with the Women Operated Self-help Groups. IKP and STEP Annual Report, 2007
emphasizing women in agency area. This also leads to the higher order question of who will take care of women empowerment issues? And then what issues will be taken up?

The paper concludes the study with the findings that tribal women are retaining their identity and self-esteem at household and community level but with opening up new areas of challenge for the development thinkers and social activists these includes,

a) Are tribal losing the tradition and culture in the wake of development?
b) How sustainable is the technical intervention for agriculture?
c) Are all issues of tribal addressed?
d) How long the handholding support? Help us to stand up on our own

e) No more subsidy please?

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