Why are Women's Self-help Groups on the Periphery of Adivasi Movements in India? Insights from Practitioners

Parijat Ghosh
Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN)

Dibyendu Chaudhuri
Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN)

Debasish Biswas
Indian Grameen Service (IGS)

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By Parijat Ghosh[1], Dibyendu Chaudhuri[2], Debasish Biswas[3]

Abstract

'Adivasi' is an identity of protest against the oppressive practices of displacement and dispossession faced by tribal communities across India. As the social and political scenario of the vast Central Indian Plateau (CIP), the homeland of many such communities, is shaped by the social dynamics of oppression and resistance, any social or political organisation working in this region for justice and equity has to not only understand this adivasi consciousness of resistance against the concentration of capital and accumulation of surplus through a process of dispossession but also evolve their strategy in the context of adivasi consciousness. The authors have many years of experience of working with women's group in the CIP. In this reflective piece they critique their own action as failing to assimilate the important socio-political dynamics of the adivasi consciousness. As a result the women's groups promoted by them have remained peripheral in the struggle against dispossession. Non-inclusion of women in traditionally male dominated forums in adivasi society is a hindering factor for the women to take leading part in the adivasi movements. The authors conclude that it is important to work with both men and women to fight against dispossession which will also change the culture of male dominated committees within the Adivasi society.

Keywords: women's self-help groups; male dominated forums, Adivasi movement, dispossession, microfinance, women in India

Introduction

It was the spring of 2015. We were sitting with two young men from Dhanardih village of Kashipur block in Purulia district of West Bengal, India. They had come to meet us at Adra, almost 20 km away from their village, to discuss the villagers' protest against the setting up of a stone

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quarry in their village. They had come to us as we worked in their village on behalf of a national level NGO and promoted 5 Self Help Groups (SHG)[4] there. They wanted to discuss future strategy. We suggested involving the women SHGs in the movement so that it gained more momentum and they liked the idea.

While discussing about this brief interaction among ourselves, it triggered some uncomfortable but important questions in our mind. Our organisation talks about social change and conceptualises SHGs as the change agent. There are five SHGs in Dhanardih village. Why then was the movement not initiated in the SHG space? Why, until then, were the SHGs not even involved in the movement? To what extent does this have to do with our approach to SHG promotion?

Adivasi—identity based on long struggle against dispossession

The terms Tribe, Scheduled Tribe (ST) or Adivasi are used interchangeably to refer to social groups that may not have originally been part of the caste system and may have got co-opted later (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2014). The British colonisers' experience of Africa and America made them think about these groups as kinship based groups with primitive traits and in a stage of evolution. In articles 366(25) and 342 of the Constitution of India, a Scheduled Tribe (ST) is defined as a social group with primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographic isolation, shyness of contact and general backwardness. This characterisation reflects the colonial mindset in which *development* is seen as an evolutionary process in which tribes are backward, and have primitive traits.

Most of these tribes were dependent on both agriculture and the forest. In the era of development (Escobar, 1995), in the post- independence period in India, they have been displaced for the sake of building large dams and exploitation of mineral reserves. The popular discourse of the dominant classes and state about the tribes as backward, primitive, criminal, etc legitimised their dispossession for the development projects of the state and the raw material exploitation by the big industries with direct support from the state.

In response to this oppressive discourse, tribes started claiming that they were the original inhabitants—'adivasi'— of the region (Prasad, 2016). This adivasi identity contains two different political ideas. The first one is that the Adivasis are original inhabitants of the places where they now live, so they are not only dependent on the resources but have a historical right to their original homeland. This claim of originality may not be based on historical or anthropological evidence, but comes from a strong sense of resistance against the oppression they have faced over the last 2000 years which intensified during and after the colonial period. The second form of the Adivasi political identity is based on the idea that tribal culture is superior because it is more egalitarian and ecologically sustainable as compared to modernity or capitalism. The working class movement of the tribes against land grabbing capitalists at Niyamgiri or the political mobilisation by Shankar Guha Niyogi in mines area of Chhattisgarh (India) were of the first kind, whereas there has been mobilisation, especially in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, led by elite tribal leaders with the ideological base of cultural superiority. This, however, is limited to questioning capitalist modernity rather than its structure which is responsible for dispossession and marginalisation of the adivasis, and, as a consequence, has ultimately become part of the political forces represented by big industrialists (ibid).

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[4] SHG is a small group of 10-12 women who meets weekly around thrift and credit activities.

Background of Santhals in the Purulia district, West Bengal, India

Purulia district is situated at the eastern- most part of the Central Indian Plateau (CIP) and is not an exception to the above scenario. Apart from coal mines, granites are quarried and used as building materials. There are other precious minerals such sillimanites (Kyanite), copper, crystalline limestone, etc. Either state or industries backed by the state extract those minerals. Stones and minerals are mostly available in places such as small hillocks or highlands. These are common lands according to the adivasis and used as grazing-land, places of worship, source of fuel etc. However, official records may claim that those lands belong to the state. With the increasing demand for these stones and minerals, more and more quarries are getting set up and adivasis are losing access to those lands.

The Santhals are the major tribe in Purulia. There is a *Manjhi Baisi* (traditional village council) in every Santhal village of Purulia of which all adult males are members. The *Kuli Dupurup* (general body meeting of the *Manjhi Bais)* plans their festivals, fixes dates for the festivals and resolves social conflicts in the village. There is an associative tier of this committee at block level too. Discussion of festivals and conflicts, both internal and with the external world, exposes committee members to Adivasi consciousness. The movements against the outside oppressive forces are led by the leaders of these committees. However, because women are not part of these committees, they are not traditionally part of the discussion around conflict.

Our NGO's strategy of mobilizing women into SHGs

Our organisation works mostly in this tribal heartland, in the CIP. The employees mobilise women from the village into small Self Help Groups (SHGs) around a very tangible activity of pooling small savings and credit, which is an everyday need for poor families. It is also expected that these groups will provide an enabling and supportive environment in which women from marginalized communities will be able to change their situation. We help SHGs to plan around livelihood activities and implement those plans. We also work on issues related to gender and governance, through imparting training and facilitating discussions in the SHGs on gender and governance. More specifically our interventions are supposed to help women to know about their rights and entitlements, how to access them, whom to hold accountable, and how to become involved in local governance.

We started working in Kashipur block of Purulia in the year 2000. Since then, around 400 SHGs have been promoted by us in this area. In Dhanardih village five SHGs were formed in the year 2001; one of us was involved in the SHG formation. In the last 15 years, these SHGs have taken up activities around enhancing productivity of food, cultivation of vegetables for cash income and soil and moisture conservation. They also participated in training on gender issues.

It is expected that through our intervention the women will not only work on the livelihoods but will raise their voices against oppressive practices in the family and in society. The women in the SHGs, to some extent, have been able to raise their voice against discriminatory practices in the family, but they, so far, failed to launch any significant protest against the outside forces responsible for the marginalisation of adivasis. Our intervention on gender does not integrate the historical oppressions of adivasis by the ruling caste and class. As a result SHG has never been the space for raising adivasi consciousness. So, on the one hand, non-inclusion of women in the *Manjhi*

Baisi, and on the other hand the SHG space remaining silent about the adivasi issues, kept women at the periphery of any adivasi movement.

Dhanardih movement

Dhanardih is one of the hamlets of Palsara village in Kashipur and is around 60 km away from the district headquarter of Purulia. The village is comprised of 60 Santhal households. Dhanardih is surrounded by two hillocks, about 700-800 feet high, on its eastern and western sides. Both the hillocks are made of granite. The villagers have planted trees on both hills. They consider these hillocks as places of worship. They used to collect fuel wood from the hillocks and use them as grazing land for their animals.

In 2015 a stone crusher company got permission from the Government to set up a stone-chips plant in the area as well as a stone quarry in one of the hillocks of Dhanardih village. When the villagers got the news and comprehended that the hills they had been maintaining for years would completely vanish within a few years, they started discussing it in the *Manjhi Baisi*. Some of the leaders also met me several times during the movement to discuss issues. The villagers wrote several letters to the concerned department to stop the process, but that didn't yield any result. The movement leaders mobilised all the people of Dhanardih and also conducted meetings in the adjacent villages to spread the message that a fight had begun against the proposal of destroying the hillocks of an Adivasi village. In the campaign they talked about their rights as adivasis around control over natural resources. This movement was covered by several newspapers such as *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Purulia Darpan*, etc. The Chief Minister of West Bengal also heard about the movement and called the leaders to her office for a discussion. A three member delegation, one of whom was an SHG member, met the Chief Minister and explained why they opposed destruction of the hillock. They explained that they worshiped nature, they were dependent on it and at the same time they had historical rights as Adivasis to the hillocks. The Chief Minister promised to stop the project and also promised that unless and until the village people wanted, no activity would be taken up in the area for stone-chip production.

Peripheral role of SHG in this movement

The movement against dispossession of the hillocks is an example of a successful movement. But, when seen from the perspective of women's participation and leadership, or the role of SHGs in the movement, a different picture comes up. Though the SHGs are conceived as a mobilisation for social change, they actually did not initiate the movement. The movement was initiated by the *Manjhi Baisi,* and the leaders of that committee, with their adivasi consciousness, mobilised all the villagers including SHG women and people from other neighbouring villages. On the other hand, the SHG spaces mobilised through our intervention remained uninvolved until they were invited to join the movement by the movement leaders. Rather than becoming the agent of change these SHGs were merely drawn into the movement.

Conclusion

Non-inclusion in *Manjhi Baisi* is a hindering factor for the women to take leading part in the movements. It is unlikely that *Manjhi Baisi,* which has been traditionally a space for men, will provide equal space to *Adivasi* women in near future. It is possible through our intervention in the

SHGs to generate adivasi consciousness among the members of the SHGs. But they cannot fight against dispossession alone. They must have the support of male allies and leaders. Working with men, thus, become imperative to set the stage for generational change. This will change the culture of other male dominated committees. Women and men together can, then, launch movement against dispossession. This will change the gender equation in Adivasi society.

Recommendations

Agencies, working with adivasi women to help them come forward and take space in the society as equals, have to work around generating adivasi consciousness among them. It is also important to work with men around gender for changing the culture of the male dominated committees in the village and to involve women in those committees. Further, the leaders of adivasi movement can be linked to the national and global indigenous peoples' movement to harness the national and transnational power.

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