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SHG & Women's political participation: Examining Mission Shakti intervention in Bhubaneswar slums

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Abstract

Public policy plays a key role in modern-day welfare regimes, influencing development and politics. The Self-Help Group movement in India is a successful policy initiative that holistically impacts women's lives, empowering them and promoting gender equality. Political participation is one of the important dimensions of political empowerment. This study focuses on the impact of the state-sponsored Self-Help Group movement programme, i.e. Mission Shakti, on slum women's political participation in Bhubaneswar city. Drawing a comparative analysis, it is found that members of Mission Shakti groups have a higher level of political participation than women who are not members of that group.

Keywords: Public policy, political participation, slum women, mission shakti, self-help groups

Introduction

Public policy is an important tool of transformation that is very often used by all contemporary governments of the world. It eradicates not only poverty but also brings all-around visible changes in people's lives. It plays an emancipatory role, which always wants to establish a self-sustainable society. The Self-Help Group movement in India is such a type of approach which brought massive change in women's lives. Some scholars consider that Self-Help Groups have promoted an overall gender-based empowerment that positively affected all facets of women's lives (Kulandaivel 2005,75-91) ^[1]. The transformation process of women is faster and easier due to Self-Help Groups (Mathew 2005,103-116) ^[6]. Though it majorly focuses on the financial empowerment of women but it also empowers women socio-politically. This paper tries to explain the intervention of a public policy, i.e. the Mission Shakti Programme, in women's political empowerment, especially associated with their political participation. Political participation is one of the prime factors which helps women to empower themselves politically.

This study primarily did a comparative analysis on women's political participation especially those who are members of Mission Shakti Groups and the non-members who are residing in the slums of Bhubaneswar city.

Defining political participation

Political participation is an essential factor which makes democracy sustainable. It is much more inevitable when we dream up a gender-based egalitarian society. As per data from UN Women, globally, women have less participation both in executive as well as in legislative i.e. 22.8 and 26.5 percent respectively. It is a little better in the case of local-level participation, i.e. 35.5 percent ^[19]. Broadly, political participation is associated with freedom of expression and association to express your voice or opinion for your rights. Milbrath considered political participation as an individual-level act aimed at influencing the governing system in some way, and he graded participation at a lower level as individual exposure to politics, at a higher level to holding a position in a party or public office (Milbrath 1965, 1-5) ^[12]. So, it is clear that political participation is not confined to the tendering of votes, which is a universal official medium to express somebody's opinion. Adding to it, political participation is also associated with somebody's membership in any political party, his or her financial contribution to any political party, involvement in election campaigning, holding any official positions in any political party or contesting for any elections.

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Participation in political discussions as well as taking part in demonstrations also comes under political participation. According to Verba, these wider parameters of political participation make the study of political participation more complex. For them, political participation is always associated with government. The purpose of it is to influence the outcomes of the government (Verba & Nye 1972, 2-3). It also aims to establish social values which help to achieve community-level goods or universal public goods. It is clear that political participation is inevitable both for empowerment as well as development.

Self-help group movements and mission shakti programme

The Self-Help Group Movement in India has been influenced by eminent economist, Noble Laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus's Grameen Bank and started as a civil society of women i.e. SEWA under the leadership of Ela Bhatt 1972 [20]. Though in the initial phase, the Self-Help Group Movement was developed from individual's effort, later the state agencies and central agencies are involved in it gradually. The government adopted and encouraged different self-help group organisations through different public policy initiatives, mainly supported by NABARD [21]. During 1985-87, NABARD supported and funded an active research project on "Savings and Credit Management of SHGs" of the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRDA), was the first move towards the Banking-SHGs linkage process. In 1992, it has started with 500 groups now reached nearly 1 crore groups having more than 10 crore women members in it. Lakhpati Didi is one of the important SHG centric capacity building programme of the current union government. After the successful intervention of NABARD, different state governments promoted this model in different names as Jeevika in Bihar, Kudumbashree in Kerala and Mission Shakti Programme in Odisha. Self-Help Groups in different states are becoming major stakeholders in public policy implementation. They promote different public policy schemes such as She Shuttle, She Means Business, Commercial farming etc. Mission Shakti Programme is a flagship welfare initiative by the Government of Odisha, which was inaugurated in 2001. It has empowered more than 70 lakh women, mainly those who are working in the unorganised sector. It has organised them into different Mission Shakti Groups and helped them to generate income through different activities. An accumulation of social capital happened and a sisterhood is created among the members of Mission Shakti groups.

Review of Literature

The review of the literature helped to develop an understanding of the previous work on the intervention of public policy in gender-based development. It also examines the earlier work on self-help groups and their impact on women. Public policy in developing nations especially plays an emancipatory role. It gradually eradicates the traditional gender-based disparities and establish an egalitarian society (Goel & Ravishankar 2022, 1-22) [10]. The government of India has also promoted a new avatar of public policy through the initiatives of gender budgeting and gender-based planning, equal access to and utilisation of government services, promotion of gender sensitive languages in administrations, etc. According to the data of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), female literacy

went up from 55% to 68% due to policies like the National Policy for Women's Empowerment (2001) and the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (2011). The Self-Help Group initiative is one of the important aspect coming under National Empowerment Mission. Eswaraiah (2014) [7] studied the impact of SHGs in the drought-prone Ananthapuramu district in Andhra Pradesh. He found that SHGs have made a positive impact on the women's empowerment process, especially in the spheres of social status, economic empowerment and decision-making on various aspects of life (Eswaraiah 2014, 198-216) [7]. Singh (2013) [18] studied the role of Self-Help Groups in women's lives. He argued that Self-help Groups helped to develop economic self-reliance among women, ultimately helpful to change patriarchal norms of the society by reducing economic interdependence (Singh 2013, 54 - 61) [18].

Another scholar Jain, (2003) [15] has studied the impact of Self-Help Groups in all aspects of women. According to him, Self-Help Groups has affected women's life various ways. Apart from economic benefits like income generation, asset creation, it has also enhanced social position in decision making both within and outside families. This change has also long-term effect on Indian cultural system (Jain, 2003, 10) [15].

If we look at the literature on Odisha specific SHG movement then we found that Mission Shakti programme has positively achieved the very purpose of the self-help group movement i.e. empowerment of women especially economic empowerment as mentioned in the Institutional Assessment Report (2012). Dash (2013) [5] conducted a study on the role of self-help groups in the empowerment of women in the Bargarh district of Odisha and found that after joining Mission Shakti Groups, rural women have experienced empowerment in every aspect of their life (Dash 2013, 70-74) [5]. Sahoo and Rout (2024) conducted a study on the impact of Mission Shakti Groups on rural livelihood and women's empowerment in the Koraput district. They found that MSGs have enhanced the livelihood opportunities of rural women and led to the empowerment of women (Sahoo & Rout 2024, 114-124). The above review showed that the Mission Shakti programme has created a deep positive impact on women's lives.

Mission shakti and female political participation in Bhubaneswar slums

Though there are numerous studies on the contribution of Self-Help Groups to rural women's empowerment, there is still very little work on Self-Help Groups' contribution to the urban poor women who are living in different slums. Apart from the above research gap, I also found that the majority of scholarly work on Self-Help Groups was concentrated around the economic dimensions of women's empowerment. Drawing gaps from the previous research, the context of the present research is focused on the non-economic dimensions of women's empowerment, i.e. political empowerment. It has also limited the research to only one dimension of political empowerment, i.e. political participation. Unlike the mainstream Self-Help Group studies, which always show interest in studying rural women, this study has focused on urban poor women who are living in slum areas.

Objective of the study

The proposed study is meant:

- To compare the level of Political participation between the members and non-members of Mission Shakti Groups
- To understand the role of the Mission Shakti Programme in the Political Participation of slum women

Methodology

The chosen area for this study is Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha. I have chosen Bhubaneswar due to two factors. Firstly, Odisha is one of the least-performing states in achieving the gender equality (SDG 5 goals), as mentioned in the NITI Aayog SDG India Index 2024. Secondly, it has highest concentration of urban poor women which is the universe of this study. A multi-stage sampling design with purposive sampling has been used to represent the total population. The researcher has selected 3 slums (based on their Population) from three zones i.e. northern, south-west zone, and south-east zone, purposively. The researcher has selected 120 members from 9 Mission Shakti Groups. An equal number of non-members were selected from the sampled slum areas for comparison. The researcher has used the survey method to compare the level of political participation of slum women and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for in-depth analysis.

Here, I have primarily measured the level of political participation of slum women through a comparison between the members and non-members of Mission Shakti Groups. I have taken 11 parameters to measure the level of political participation among members of Mission Shakti Groups and Non-members who stayed in that same locality. These are

- Participating in voting
- Attending political party meetings
- Participating in election campaigning
- Membership of political parties
- Financial contributions to political parties
- Occupying official positions in decision-making bodies of any political party
- Contesting in any election
- Visiting local Administration
- Participation in demonstration
- Participation in political debates and discussions
- Status on the lineage of political participation

Results

In a democratic regime, participation in voting is one of the formal primary-level participations through which a citizen gets acknowledgement from the State. The first wave of feminism revolves around women's political rights. The first step of that political right that the then feminists had demanded was the right to vote. So it is one of the prime factors which determines the level of political participation. The result shows that the voting percentage among slum women is higher both in the members and non-members categories. 87 percent in the context of Mission Shakti members and 74 percent in the context of non-members. One of the primary factors common between members and non-members is both are relevant in terms of clientelism. The organisational dynamics is an add on in case of Mission Shakti members. During Focus Group Discussions with the members of Mission Shakti Groups, it was found that the

voting decisions of group members are largely influenced by their weekly group discussions.

Barsha, President of Banadurga Swayam Sahayak Gosthi said that, apart from group activities, we also make common decisions on different social issues. Government welfare activities, local politics and elections are also part and parcel of our discussions. Casting votes is also collectively decided in group meetings. It motivates all our members to cast their votes. Though we are not pressurising our members to vote for any particular party but group interest plays an important role while we are thinking about voting.

From the above data, it shows that the sisterhood of Mission Shakti Groups indirectly motivates member women to take part in voting, which ultimately increases the level of political participation.

Like casting a vote, another important parameter of formal political participation is attending the meetings of different political parties. Political parties are inevitable actors through which modern-day democracy sustains. Therefore, all the activities related to political parties play a crucial role during the measurement of the level of political participation. 97(81 percent) out of 120 Mission Shakti members have attended political meetings of any political party once or more than once, whereas it has 44(37 percent) in the case of non-members. It shows that Mission Shakti members are closely linked with different political parties. During my discussions with the members of different Mission Shakti Groups, I found that the informal association of women works as a primary caucus for political parties and acts as an agency of vote mobilisation. Pranati, a member of Jaya Maa Tulasi Swayam Sahayak Gosti said that, when any big meeting occurred, our local area leaders and party officials first contacted to our group members and took us to those meetings. For them, it is easier to contact group members than any normal woman. Our family members also give consent without any hesitation for such type of political meetings due to the company of other group members.

The above example shows that the group identity of Mission Shakti Group provides easy access to political parties for political communication. On the other hand, this kind of political participation widens the political experiences of group members also.

Election campaigning is another important form of political participation where active members & sympathisers of different political parties play a forefront role. It is one of the important tools which political parties use for vote mobilisation. Different political parties use different mechanisms for election campaigns and try to influence the opinion of voters. It shows that 112 out of 120 members of Mission Shakti Groups have participated in any form of election campaigning, whereas a mere 65 women from the non-members have participated in the election campaigning. If we compare with these two categories, we found that 93 percent of Mission Shakti Group members actively involved in party activities such as going for election campaigns, holding election rallies, distributing political leaflets, participating top leaders road shows etc. It is lower in normal slum women i.e. mere 54 percent. This shows that Mission Shakti Group members are also highly involved in political party-based activities. Mission Shakti Members have a higher level of political participation due to this involvement. During the Focus Group Discussion with the members, I observed that Mission Shakti Members show

interest in political campaigning. They thought it was a medium to establish relations with political leaders. Political leaders also give importance to these members in election campaigning. Tuni, a member of Lingaraj Swayam Sahayak Gosthi, said that, Due to group identity, we can easily enter anybody's houses in our locality. Everybody pays respect to us and listens to our voices. We can convey the messages of political parties very easily. I think that is the reason why political parties show interest in us and persuade us to be part of the election campaign.

From the above, it is clearly understood that the level of difference occurred in the participation. Election campaigns between members and non-members are not because of the easy accessibility of political parties to groups, but because of the group identity and convincing capacities that Mission Shakti Groups have.

Membership in political parties is also a form of political participation through which citizens are involved in direct politics. A very small number of slum women took formal membership in any political parties. It is 16 percent in the case of Mission Shakti Group members and 9 percent in the case of normal slum women who are not members of any Mission Shakti Groups. It is understood from the above data that the Mission Shakti Programme did not create any significant impact in the process of formal membership of different political parties. Here is one peculiar thing, I have noticed that slum women have a higher level of political participation in the form of attending political party meetings and participating in election campaigns, but paradoxically, they have very little participation when it comes to formal memberships in any political party. We need further research to understand this phenomenon.

Financial contribution is an indirect form of political participation which involves people as stakeholders of political parties. It shows that both in the case of members as well as Non-members have contributed less to different political parties financially. It happened because slum women are themselves suffering from acute poverty.

Official positions of political parties are the nucleus of contemporary democratic politics. It is as important as occupying of govt. offices. It is an important parameter which helps to gauge the level of political participation among the members and non-members. Data from the field survey shows that neither members nor from non-members have occupied any office of any political party. It shows that slum women are underrepresented in official positions of different political parties. Mission Shakti Programme does not have any positive impact on the political participation of slum women as a form of occupying official positions in different political parties. The under-representation of the slum population, especially women within political parties, shows that political parties are not only gender biased but also socio-geographically biased.

Like the above factor, it is also associated with issues of representation. The only difference is that the previous factor is intra-party, and the present one is related to occupying public office through elections. We find that more members of Mission Shakti groups have contested elections than the normal women who reside in those slum areas. It happened because the members have a positive identity in their locality, which in some or other way has a positive impact on the winnability of candidate as well as the party concerned. It is very natural for the political party to choose the candidate that has more winnability. But in

toto, there is very little political participation in the form of contesting for public office. The Mission Shakti members have different views on it. Mamata, a member of Maa Bhubaneswari Swayam Sahayak Gosthi expressed her opinion with displeasure that:

We are living in this slum. We are more in numbers and always working for the betterment of the local community. Still, we cannot represent ourselves. Though political parties are interested in putting us into their bags but never offer any leading positions neither in the party nor in public offices. Always We get our leaders from outside of this basti.

From the above data and statement, we found that though slum women, especially members of Mission Shakti groups got participated in politics but it is limited, and the scope for formal political leadership is much less for slum women. The deepening of democracy is required both in the realm of welfare measures as well as in electoral representation when we think of about the upgradation of informal settlements.

Visiting local public offices is a sign of vibrant political participation of aware citizens of any society. 81 percent of slum women from Mission Shakti Groups have visited local administration which is higher in comparison with 24 percent of non-member women. It shows that Mission Shakti Members have a higher level of political participation in comparison to non-members in the form of visiting local administration. It has happened due to different official assignments of Mission Shakti Groups, normally given by different state agencies as well as the NGOs who are associated with different developmental practices. As per Jharana, secretary of Budhi Jagulai Swayam Sahayak Gosthi.

We are always working with different departments of the Odisha government. Government is gradually including us in different public service delivery activities such as mid-day meal preparations of anganwadies and schools, cafeterias in different office spaces, billing of electricity charges and the job of conductress in City Bus services. Due to that, we frequently visit different public officials. It enhances our knowledge, performance and mobility. We feel free and empowered by these kinds of involvement.

From the above discussion, we found that the Mission Shakti programme plays a key role not only in political participation but also in increasing the mobility of women.

Participating in political debates always helps to create a vibrant public sphere. Women who regularly participate in public discussions can easily form their opinions on different issues. Therefore, participating in political discussions ultimately gave a feeling of empowerment. It is an essential feature both for democracy in general and women's emancipation in particular. The data from the field study shows that Mission Shakti members are involved more in political debates and discussions, i.e. 86 percent in comparison with normal slum women i.e. 34 percent. To know the factors behind this type of difference, when I have asked this to the members of Mission Shakti Groups during an in-depth focus group discussion, Rabina from Lingaraj Swayam Sahayak Gosthi replied that,

Initially, I did not have any interest in politics but after the joining of Mission Shakti Groups, we frequently talked about politics in our group meetings because it largely interconnected with each nook and corner of our group activities. Local politicians, government officials and civil society members, everybody always encourages us and give

priority to our opinion in all political and developmental issues. This gave us satisfaction and self-respect. It also motivates us to be actively involved further in political discussions.

From this It is clear that the Mission Shakti Programme have a positive impact in slum women's political participation.

Apart from the above conventional participation, there is one unconventional parameter i.e. participation in demonstrations. 93 percent of women belonging to Mission Shakti Groups have participated in demonstrations which is slightly higher than the normal women's participation. This commonality in this unconventional participation between both categories is occurred due to one specific reason. As we know, slums are informal settlements residing mainly in encroached government land within the city area. Due to rapid urbanisation and city aesthetics, there is a constant fear of demolition of these informal settlements which slum people are continuously facing. To stop such kind of demolition slum people are using demonstrations, road blocks as a technique. Demolition directly affects both members and non-members who reside in particular slums. Therefore, there is no such big gap in this participation between the members and non-members of Mission Shakti Groups.

From the beginning of politics, lineage has played an important role in political participation. Data from the field study shows that very less slum women, i.e. 4 percent in case of members and 1 percent in the case of non-members, have their family members in politics. From this, it is clearly understood that historically, there is very little scope for slum people to take part in direct politics. It has occurred due to poverty and social backwardness of slum people.

Conclusion

By analysing the above 11 parameters of political participation factors, it is concluded that the Mission Shakti Programme plays an important role in the political participation of slum women. I also found that those women who are members of Mission Shakti Groups have having higher level of political participation than the normal slum women.

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