Democratic Decentralisation and Participatory Natural Resources Management: A Study of Amangal Mandal in Mahabubnagar District of Andhra Pradesh

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One of the most popular state reforms that have opened ‘spaces’ for a wider and deeper participation of citizens at the local level has been the decentralisation process. Democratic Decentralisation is the transfer of resources and power to lower level authorities which are largely or wholly independent of higher levels of government and which are democratic. In India, certain cases of Democratic decentralisation have achieved both greater participation of marginal groups and social justice like in the left ruled states of West Bengal and Kerala. In both cases, decentralisation has been credited with ensuring the participation of subordinate groups – such as women, landless groups, sharecroppers and small peasants – and being directly linked to the pursuit of redistributive policies that have had pro-poor outcomes.

Decentralised natural resources management has assumed importance as a development strategy, because of the claims that it can contribute towards sustainable livelihoods. Almost all the developing countries have initiated the process of decentralisation and India is one such country that was involved in this process for a long time. The introduction of development programmes with people’s participation as the core theme is an indication of the progress of this process. Particularly, in the programmes like Watershed Management, Water Users Associations, and Joint Forest Management this becomes evident.

Generally, the discussions on local self-governance or democratic decentralization and participatory natural resource management do not intersect and take place in somewhat independent domains. Baumann (1998; 2000) had also emphasized the need to bring the two domains together. It is argued that it is essential to discuss democratic decentralization and participatory natural resource management together because one cannot be understood or
achieved without the understanding or achievement of the other. At the grass-root level, these issues can be translated into the functioning of various ‘participatory’ development programmes such as watershed development, water users associations, and joint forest management. These institutions assume a certain ‘capacity’ or ‘capability’ of people, especially those belonging to the “underprivileged” categories such as women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

Statement of the problem

Both Democratic Decentralisation and Participatory Natural Resource Management imply empowerment of people to make their own decisions. The focus of the study would be to look into the implications of Democratic Decentralisation and Participatory Management in the implementation of various development programmes at the grass root level, viz., Watershed management, joint forest management, and water users associations.

Objectives

- What is the impact of decentralisation on participation in the context of local governance and natural resources management?
- What are the changes brought about in the governance scenario at the village level due to the emergence of new leaders in place of the traditional elite?
- Whether decentralised natural resources management bodies and social capital are promoting sustainability?
- What is the affect of changing power relations on the social fabric of the village – how far is it leading to the empowerment of marginal sections?
Methodology:
Amangal mandal of Mahabubnagar district has been chosen as the study area. There are 18 villages in the mandal spread over a radius of 55 Kms. Three villages were selected for intensive study but, otherwise, all the villages in the mandal were covered in the study. The study villages were selected after brief visits to all the villages in the mandal. Three specific criteria were followed for selection of the villages-

1. The presence of decentralised NRM bodies like Vana Samrakshana Samiti, Watershed Committee and Water Users Association.

2. The nature of dominance and control over the positions of power in the village.

3. The caste composition and associated land distribution of population.

Importance was given to the presence of the households of Reddy caste which is the dominant one in the study area. Other Backward Castes (OBCs) form the majority at the mandal level comprising forty six percent of the population. Reddypalle, Pahadipur and Edigapalle were the villages selected (names changed) for study.

Data Collection

Fieldwork was carried out by using participant observation method by staying in the villages. Basic information was gathered through a structured questionnaire (for household survey) followed by informal in depth interviews, and group discussions during a period of fourteen months stretched over three years during 2001 to 2004. Brief trips were made to the field again during 2006. After spending an initial time of four months in the field, specific trips were made to attend meetings of the gram panchayat and general body meetings of the NRM bodies.

Scheme of Chapters
This thesis consists of eight chapters including the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to the process of decentralisation followed by methodology. Second chapter provides a discussion on the conceptual framework of Democratic Decentralisation. An attempt has been made to explore the applicability of the concept of political capital. The third chapter provides a background to the study as reform process in the regimes of Chandrababu Naidu and YS Rajasekhar Reddy (YSR) was discussed. This section is followed by the institutional structure of the Panchayat Raj and the NRM bodies where in the manner of election to Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the formation of committees in Joint Forest Management (JFM), Watershed and Water Users Associations (WUAs) has been outlined. The fourth chapter describes the field setting. The fifth chapter focuses on the explanation of the interplay of power relations between the existing elite and the newly emergent political class belonging to backward communities. The sixth chapter looked into the functioning of various NRM bodies like JFM, WS and WUAs. This chapter looks into the actual functioning of the new leaders within the constraints imposed by the existing elite. The seventh is a mini chapter in which we looked at the concept of power as the elected representatives of local bodies both old and new cling on to some position of power once they got elected. The eighth chapter concludes the thesis, where an outline of the socio-political development was given followed by a general analysis of findings.

**Conceptual Framework**

We have made an attempt to look into the functioning of Democratic Decentralisation and DNRM bodies using the concepts of participation, Social Capital and Political Capital. We had also used the ‘spaces for participation’ theme echoed by John Gaventa and developed by Andrea Cornwall.

Gaventa suggested different entry points for understanding power in new political spaces. These involve how spaces are created, the levels of engagement and the degree of visibility of power within them. There are ‘invited spaces’ into which people are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities. Another set is the ‘claimed spaces’ which are claimed by struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-option and transformation. Cornwall argued that efforts to engage participation can be
thought of as creating spaces where there was previously none, about enlarging spaces where previously there were very limited opportunities for public involvement, and about allowing people to occupy spaces that were previously denied to them. She had also made a distinction between ‘popular spaces’ and ‘invited spaces’. We tried to look at the processes of negotiation, contestation and accommodation by using the concept of political capital.

**Analysis and Conclusion**

The traditional social structure in the study area had altered a great deal during the decades of 1980’s, 1990’s and in the present decade. Basically it was a system of land based power and control where the Reddys held supreme authority by virtue of their land ownership, contacts and political power. The other dominant caste of Telangana, Velamas were not there in the mandal except in one village. They were greatly aided by the ‘Patel-Patwari’ system which dates back to the Nizam period (18th to 20th centuries) where members belonging to the dominant castes (Reddy, Velama and in some cases Brahmins) held positions. During the Nizam period they were the link between people and government. Consequently they had developed immense hold over the day to day affairs of the village. This had continued after Independence and even after introduction of Panchayat Raj institutions in 1959 they held their sway in the village affairs. Villages were completely under the hold of Reddys, Velamas, and sometimes Muslims. Zamindari/Inamdar abolition in the 1960s brought about a few changes in the social structure and landholding pattern in the study villages. Some of the big landlords started leaving the village thereby resulting in transfer of power to new leaders although, these new leaders still belong to the dominant caste Reddys.

The most significant impact on the social fabric had been the abolition of ‘Patel-Patwari’ system in 1985. It had a profound impact on the socio-political conditions throughout Telangana region, where the occasion was celebrated as a big festival by several villagers. One OBC leader from the study villages had said that they got their true Independence in 1985. One can understand the impact and control of the system on village affairs by this statement alone. The emergence of TDP in the 1980s
had provided the OBCs a new political space to contest the dominant caste Reddy elite who predominantly belonged to Congress party.

Simultaneously changes in economy/education provided them new opportunities for economic growth. Especially the Gouds and Edigas of the study villages started becoming more innovative in selling toddy by transporting it to nearby towns and by the end of 1980s they had gained a foothold in the political scene by successfully contesting against the dominant castes. Among the study villages we had seen this happening in Edigapalle. During the 1990s some of the other changes that took place like outmigration of upper caste landowners resulting in sale/lease of land also resulted in significant economic changes. Special events that took place around this time like ‘prohibition of liquor’ also provided an economic opportunity for Gouds, Edigas and Lambadas. Generally the lands from the upper castes were bought by OBCs - especially Gouds and Edigas from money made through various economic opportunities.

Another important event which took place around this time was the introduction of bore well irrigation. Although bore wells were there in the mandal earlier also, they started increasing from the 1990s. Availability of water through bore wells had enabled the farmers to grow paddy and cotton which helped in greater income from agriculture. At the same time, bore well irrigation also brought about problems like failure of bore wells which in turn resulted rising debt trap and declining water table in some of the study villages. But in the early years of bore well irrigation it brought great profits for the farmers.

Thus by mid 1990s, in several cases, Reddy domination continued aided by the structural factors and especially in the villages where outmigration had not dwindled their numbers too drastically. In some cases, OBC groups were able to successfully challenge the traditional domination of the Reddys. This was possible due to the improved economic status through various opportunities including the increase in land holding and numerical advantage. We had seen that in all the study villages they were a majority in terms of population.
It is in this environment that the institutional changes were made in Panchayats that led to reservations and the idea of Decentralised Natural Resources Management (DNRM) took shape resulting in the formation of various ‘participatory’ organisations like VSS, WC, and WUAs etc. The coming of these bodies had created ‘spaces for participation’ for the marginal sections. This had a profound impact on the traditional power structure which faced a threat from the new leaders. As a result of these changes, unopposed traditional power and control is over.

In response to the new changes the traditional power groups had to adapt new strategies for retaining their control. The structural political capital of the traditionally dominant communities was a huge asset in their hands. The process of adaptation could be clearly seen in Reddypalle village where the unopposed traditional leader SNR had lost his Sarpanch position to reservations and he was made to accept ‘new’ leaders into the position. His earlier efforts in not allowing any factions to grow as opposing spectres of influence helped him in the changed scenario. Thus by following a process of adaptation he had tried to balance the power structure in his village. Here the ‘spaces’ that were created are ‘invited spaces’. As against this in the other study villages we could see the struggle for ascendancy between the traditionally dominant groups and the newly emergent leaders with an OBC core. This could be viewed as a conflict between the new structural political capital of the OBCs against the old structural political capital of the dominant groups. The ‘spaces’ that emerge here would ‘claimed spaces’ as they were a direct result struggles, co-option and transformation.

The efforts of these groups had been met with both success and failure as we could see the unfolding of these processes in Pahadipur and Edigapalle. While in one case, we have a situation where new alliances were being forged to safeguard the traditional dominance in the other case alliances were being broken to disrupt the successful coalition of the OBCs by the dominant caste Reddys to regain their ascendancy over them. Negotiation and struggle for power is a continuing process between the traditionally dominant groups and the OBCs. But the OBCs stand to benefit a lot due to reservation policy in panchayats, although rotation in reservations means they would not be able to consolidate their power which gives scope for the traditionally dominant leaders to assert their supremacy by making and breaking factions. Either way, the OBC factions are beginning to get a share of the power
whether opposed or aligned to the Reddys. This had happened in Pahadipur and could happen again in Edigapalle.

The role of DNRM bodies in this negotiation/struggle for power between the opposing groups is that of a catalyst for more change. Except the watersheds the traditional leaders were not that much interested in VSS and WUA activities leaving the door open for the new leaders to occupy these positions and emerge as challengers to the dominant sections. This phenomenon is yet to happen in the study villages, but it took place in two other villages in the mandal. During the field work we noticed that most of the DNRM bodies were being used by the traditionally dominant groups to accommodate new leaders and strengthen their positions in their respective villages. This was a common theme in all the study villages. Except in Reddypalle, where an opposing faction was never allowed to form in Pahadipur and Edigapalle the traditionally dominant Reddy leaders were dependent on the support of OBCs without whom, they would not be able to maintain their domination. So the members of these factions were to be accommodated in positions of power continuously. Thus in Pahadipur which happened to have several DNRM bodies we saw the same people occupying positions in different bodies from time to time.

The strategies followed by the dominant groups in the study villages varied from negotiation, adaptation, accommodation to co-option. Distinct examples for these processes had been adaptation in Reddypalle where the dominant leader changed his style from absolute control to patronage of certain sections in the village into the power structure; in Pahadipur, the OBCs and SCs had to be co-opted into the power structure in order to maintain his dominance. In Edigapalle, the traditionally dominant group which lost its position to the dynamic coalition of OBCs in the late 1980s regained it by breaking the coalition and accommodating them into the power structure.

Another important category of people who had been ever present in the village political system had been the pyaraveekars/political fixers. They can belong to any caste/class but mostly they were OBCs, SCs and STs. These political fixers are generally more aware, better educated, and show entrepreneurial spirit. Their regular activity was to help the people of their respective caste/faction in
the village level and mandal level works. During the election time their help was sought by politicians and leaders for getting votes and provide them with money and resources to help their cause. In return, political fixers accumulate and build up instrumental political capital which they use in getting their works done or getting an odd contract. There were instances where some of them went on to occupy higher positions of power at the state level by clever use of their instrumental political capital. In the study villages, reservations and DNRM bodies provided them an opportunity to step into positions of power, as they were the biggest beneficiaries of these institutional changes.

Finally coming to the issue of how domination was maintained and the challenges faced by the existing elite, there were three processes at work. An integrated total control of the village power structure which brooks no dissidence and no opposing groups as is the case with Reddypalle. In contrast to this, we have the model of an integrated challenge posed by the undivided OBCs in Pahadipur before 1995 which got divided into two different factions over a period of time in their negotiation for power. The third process was the presence of two opposing factions in the same village with members of several different castes as part of a larger coalition against one another. This was evident in Pahadipur and Edigapalle with a difference in their operational procedure.

In Pahadipur the quest for power broke the OBC alliance and a break-away faction allied itself with the traditionally dominant group headed by a Reddy. This was necessitated by the desire of both the groups to have representation in the power structure. If the existing OBC leadership allowed the break-away faction to what it had asked for, within a very short period of time they would have completely overthrown the dominance of the Reddy leader as they OBCs would have become a very strong integrated challenge. But it remained an unfulfilled scenario. In Edigapalle, an integrated challenge resulted in replacing the traditionally dominant group which got further weakened with the outmigration of Reddys to Hyderabad. In this context they broke the OBCs by co-opting the break-away faction into the power structure. The fragile nature of leadership among the Reddys – main leader passed away and replaced by a novice in politics enabled the new leadership from OBC have a stronger presence in the power structure.
Despite some of the changes that took place in the social structure like the economic and political growth of OBCs and STs, political growth of SCs through means of reservations the marginal castes (SCs) were still dependent on traditional power holders. They were dependent for labour, loans etc, although winds of change are sweeping through with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NAREGA) which ensures a minimum 100 days of labour. The lower castes tend to negotiate more with the traditional power holders rather than associate themselves with the newly emergent OBCs in the study villages. They were either completely subservient as in Edigapalle or grow with dependence/assistance of the dominant leaders as in Reddypalle and Pahadipur. As Cohen (1985) had argued, inclusionary programmes may result in forms of control that are more difficult to challenge as they reduce spaces of conflict and thereby disempower them to question structural constraint.