

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION AND TRIBAL WOMEN: POLITICAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION AMONG THE THARU OF UTTARAKHAND

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In India, politics has largely remained a male domain. The reason for this lies in the fact that traditionally, barring a few, nearly all ethnic groups, including the scheduled tribes have been patrilineal in nature. Even in the few matrilineal tribes, e.g. Khasi and Garo of North-East, or the tribes of Lakshadweep, women do not wield any political authority and generally have to depend on consent of the men for taking major decisions. Attempts have been and are being made to bring the women section in the active participation of the democratic stand point. It is no doubt and essential task to draw the womenfolk in this domain because of the fact that they contribute the half of the population of the country. Though sincere attempts are being made through various constitutional amendment but the result are not satisfactory. This specific situation demands through and integrated enquiry. The present paper makes an attempt to highlight some of the basic situation context through a close study of the political awareness and participation of the Tharu Women in the democratic Set up.

The Tharu were taken as the universe of study because the past literature indicates that the Tharu women enjoyed a very high status in their social setting and therefore would assumably have taken full advantage of the benefits offered by the government. The study has been based on primary data collected from the target group. To evaluate the level of political awareness and political participation among the Tharu women, a structured interview schedule consisting of both open and closed ended questions was used. Data was collected in 2010 from 145 women respondents residing in five villages (Amaun, Bigrabagh, Bhudai, Gosikuan and Sripur Bichwa) of four Village Panchayats/Gram Panchayats, namely Amaon, Bhudai, Sripurbichwa and Vigrabagh. All four of these Village Panchayats belong to the Intermediate Panchayat Khatima and Zila Panchayat Udham Singh Nagar (Uttarakhand).

I

The Tharu belong to a Scheduled Tribe (ST) that is spread over a vast tract at the Indo-Nepal border and inhabit the districts Nainital and Udham Singh Nagar in Uttarakhand. They are also found in parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Assam and Nepal. According to the census report of 2001 out of the five STs namely Tharu, Bhotia, Khasa, Bhoksa and Raji found in Uttarakhand, the Tharu are the most populous numbering 85,665 and accounting for 33.4 per cent of its total ST population.

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The Tharu belong to the Mongoloid race, based on their physical characteristics, and claim to be of Rajput descent from their mother's side although they have not been able to put forward any concrete proof for this belief of theirs. The Tharu are a patrilineal and patrilocal group, with the eldest male member as the head of the family. Traditionally women were considered to be superior to men and thus held a dominant position in the tribe (Majumdar, 1944; Srivastava, 1958 and Hasan, 1971 and 1993). 'In fact a story goes that so deep was the feeling of superiority engrained in the minds of the Tharu women that, earlier, men were not allowed into the kitchen and were served food outside the house in plates kicked by the wives towards them' (Maiti 1999: 76). Of late, however this dominance seems to have drastically changed with women in most Tharu households sharing either an equal or lower status when compared to their men folk (Maiti 2004) A demographic analysis (Maiti 2011) of the population under study revealed that on the positive side the sex ratio of the group stood at a perfect 1000 indicating that there was no discrimination on the basis of sex in the tribe.

'Once declared a Scheduled Tribe, the government began to take several measures for the all round development of the Tharu, which included several economic upliftment, health improvement educational, family planning, etc. schemes, the positive results of which have started showing' (Maiti 2008: 190).

II

Srivastava (1958), who had worked among the Tharu of Khatima during the early 50's does not mention about the involvement or non involvement of the tribal women in politics, administration or decision making at the village/ community level. However, Majumdar (1944: 89) clearly mentions that "women do not interfere with the affairs of the tribe, and a division of function is tacitly recognised in the Tharu country... [however] no proposal or suggestion for reform is discussed by the panchayat which has not already been examined by the women at least informally, for it is they who are ultimately concerned."

According to the respondents, traditionally, as in most patrilineal societies, the Tharu women did not have any role to play in the political life of the community since it was considered bad for women to sit and work along with unrelated men, and this was an essential requirement of the political life. Besides this, the respondents mentioned that since in earlier times women were unaware of their rights, uneducated and not politically conscious, they did not assert themselves and their views publically. Further, citing the reservation given to women in politics today, many stated that since there was no such provision and no encouragement what so ever from any quarter, women did not venture into politics. The condition being such, women could not become a head or *Pradhan* of the village nor did they have a say in his selection. The fact that women had to shoulder a lot social, familial and economic responsibilities acted as a deterrent for most women to take

any kind of interest in politics and political activities. Today, however, things have changed to a great extent.

Women's participation in the electoral process is undoubtedly a clear indication of their political awareness and consciousness and also the first step towards active participation. This, however, is also the easiest step and does not need much effort or determination on part of the women. It is revealed (Table 1) that among the Tharu, 67.5% women always go to cast their vote, come what may, thus voicing their choices. 20.6% women said they mostly go to cast their vote, but were not able to exercise their rights on a few occasions. Similarly, 9.6% women stated that depending on whether they get time off from their routine work, they sometimes do go to cast their vote. A minority of 2% women said that they do not have time or inclination for voting, since whoever comes to power only thinks of their personal benefit and does nothing for the masses.

It is gathered from Table 2 that while 51% women take the decision of whom to vote themselves, 48% women mentioned casting their vote on the basis of decision taken by men of the house, or after consultation with other household members. One woman said the question of deciding whom to vote did not arise since she did not go for voting. Radha of Gosikuan, a 27 year old high school pass out said "Why should anyone tell me whom to vote for? I listen to what others say but decide on my own only." Bhuli, 50 years old and uneducated on the other hand informed, "I just go and vote for whom my husband and son decide. I don't have so much brain to decide all these. How would I know who is good and who is bad? It is better for the men only to decide. That way there will be no *jhig jhig* (altercation) later." These examples show the divergent view existing among women of the tribe.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY OF WOMEN CASTING VOTE

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never	Total
1	Amaun	18	07	02	01	28
2	Bhudai	19	03	02	01	25
3	Bigrabagh	20	10	01	-	31
4	Gosikuan	22	03	05	01	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	19	07	04	-	30
	TOTAL	98 (67.5)	30 (20.6)	14 (09.6)	03 (02.0)	145 (100)

TABLE 2: BASIS OF DECIDING WHOM TO VOTE FOR

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Own decision	Men of family	Family decides	Others	Total
1	Amaun	13	06	08	01	28
2	Bhudai	15	06	04	-	25
3	Bigrabagh	14	11	06	-	31
4	Gosikuan	19	07	05	-	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	13	05	12	01	30
	TOTAL	74 (51.0)	35 (24.1)	35 (24.1)	01 (0.6)	145 (100)

Reservation for the women in the *Panchayat* which was introduced in India through the 73rd amendment Act was specially meant to ensure equal opportunity for women to participate in the political life of the community. However, despite great effort from planners and administrators the actual aim has not yet been realised. Among the Tharu nearly 25% women are till now unaware of the reservation for women in the *panchayat*, while a majority of the women who were aware were under the impression that only when a seat is reserved as a '*mahila*' seat can a woman stand for election and not otherwise. Harni devi, 70 years, of Bigrabagh questions "What will women do in the panchayat? We already have enough work to do. And how will a woman understand what is going on in the panchayat? I do not know of this representation for women. I have never heard or seen any woman of this village taking part in politics. Women here are not as smart as you are. We are not educated like you to understand all this." Forty five year old Bhuli of Gosikuan responds in a matter of fact way, "Yes, yes, I know... every second term a seat is reserved as a *mahila seat* and so a woman candidate has to stand for election. But the actual Pradhan is her husband only." Statements like the above ones are a clear indication of the ignorance and partial awareness among the women.

Since awareness is the first step to active participation, women were asked if they have, or have ever had, a lady Pradhan and whether the *panchayat* has women representative. While all the villages covered during the study currently had, or did at some point of time in the recent past have a woman Pradhan, only 71% answered in the affirmative as seen from Table 3. 11% women denied ever having a woman Pradhan, while 11.2% and 6.2% said they had 'no knowledge' about it and 'did not remember' respectively.

TABLE 3: WOMEN'S RESPONSE TO EVER HAVING A WOMAN PRADHAN

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Yes	No	Don't know	Don't remember	Total
1	Amaun	23	-	02	03	28
2	Bhudai	22	-	03	-	25
3	Bigrabagh	24	01	05	01	31
4	Gosikuan	27	-	02	02	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	07	15	05	03	30
	TOTAL	103 (71.0)	16 (11.0)	17 (11.7)	09 (06.2)	145 (100)

Awareness of the existence of women representatives (Table 4) was worse since only 22% women answered in the affirmative while 47.5% women answered in the negative despite every panchayat having women representative. 25.5% said they had no knowledge about this while 4.8% said they did not remember the current position of women in the panchayat.

TABLE 4: ARE THERE ANY WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN THE PANCHAYAT?

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Yes	No	Don't know	Don't remember	Total
1	Amaun	07	11	08	02	28
2	Bhudai	03	16	05	01	25
3	Bigrabagh	15	08	08	-	31
4	Gosikuan	04	18	09	-	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	03	16	07	04	30
	TOTAL	32 (22.0)	69 (47.5)	37 (25.5)	07 (04.8)	145 (100)

The reason for ignorance of the existence of a woman Pradhan and women *Panch* members was to a certain extent because of the fact that although women in rural areas of the country are elected to the posts of Pradhan or as *Panch* members, they are seldom seen actually participating in the political and village decision making process. The evidence of male dominance was easily noticeable even in the electoral campaigning posters. The poster of every women contender for the post of Pradhan had the photos of her husband and father-in-law alongside her own. Not only this, each of these posters introduced the candidates in bold as ‘wife of X and daughter-in-law of Y’. When elected too, these women remain in power only on paper, while actual power and authority is vested in the men of their family – their husband, son, father-in law etc.

Nearly all the Tharu women Pradhan and representatives were also seen in a similar situation of ignorance and complacency as the common tribeswomen. During the study, a current woman Pradhan, a woman ex-Pradhan, and two Gram Panchayat women members were interviewed. Of these, barring one Panchayat member the rest hardly were aware of even the rights, duties and obligations of a Pradhan or member of the Panchayat, let alone having knowledge of the development programmes being run in their village panchayat. All these women merely laughed away my questions lightly and called the men of their house who began to respond to my queries. When questioned about the ignorance of the women, the men began to give excuses saying the “women were overburdened by work and so did not have time to remember minute official details although they have a broad idea of it” or that “the women have complete knowledge but feel shy to speak in front of outsiders.”

Twenty eight year old Meena the Pradhan of one of the large Village panchayats covered during the study was very elated at the fact that she had become the Pradhan and I had gone to take her interview. She told me how much her husband “loved and respected” her since he had spent around two lakh rupees on campaigning for her and how she had won hands down because of it. When I began to quiz her on the working of the Panchayat and development programmes being run in the area, she called for Bimla, a panchayat member who, I was slyly informed by Meena, was much more knowledgeable and in a better position to respond to my queries.

She also informed me that the best person to give me information on this would have been her husband but since he was away to the Block office for some official work she was calling for Bimla. In the meantime Meena informed me in her ignorance that the rooms around in her courtyard belonged to various members of her joint family and were funded by the various *Aawas Yojnas* (Housing Schemes) funded by the government for people in the BPL category. This was a big give away when considering the two lakhs spent on the election campaigning and showed the blatant misuse of power to manipulate the list of members in the BPL. Bimla, on her part proved very well aware of the working of the panchayat, responsibilities of its members as well as the various developmental programmes and schemes being run in the area.

This being the condition, it is assumable that a majority of the women political representatives are hardly performing their duties with sincerity and zeal since undoubtedly awareness is related to performance. It was probably due to this partial involvement of the women representatives that among the respondents who answered in the affirmative regarding there being women representatives in the panchayat, a very small percent of women, i.e. 6.2, were totally satisfied and happy with their working as can be seen in Table 5. A maximum of 62.5% women were 'moderately satisfied' with their working and 12.5% were only 'slightly satisfied' with them. Nearly 19% women were totally dissatisfied with the women representative since they felt that the women worked only for the benefit of their own family and relatives, so ultimately it did not matter who comes to power – a man or a woman.

TABLE 5: LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH THE WORKING OF THE WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

<i>Sn.</i>	<i>Village Khatima (USN)</i>	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Very little</i>	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Amaun	-	07	-	-	07
2	Bhudai	01	02	-	-	03
3	Bigrabagh	01	07	04	03	15
4	Gosikuan	-	03	-	01	04
5	Sripur-Bichwa	-	01	-	02	03
	TOTAL	02 (06.2)	20 (62.5)	04 (12.5)	06 (18.7)	32(100)

In a democracy, every citizen must have the right and opportunity to voice their opinion, ideas and grievances. This right is provided to every member in rural India by allowing them to actively participate in the open meetings of the Village Panchayat (Gram Sabha), which controls the resources, responsibility and decision making authority for all local matters. Thus, participation in the meetings of the panchayat is an essential step to empowering every person by giving them the opportunity to participate in the decision making process of the village and region

and ultimately the nation. Coming to mass participation in the open meeting of the panchayat, it is revealed from Table 6 that 30.3% of the respondents opined that women always take part in these meetings, while 17.9% women opined that most of the times women do attend these meetings. An equal 17.9% of the women were of the opinion that women participated occasionally when there was something of their interest to be discussed. However, 13.7% women reported that women rarely attend panchayat meetings and, a nearly similar, 13.1% reported that women never attend these meetings unless they are its elected members or the matter being discussed directly affects them, or their family and relatives. Another reason given by many for not attending the meetings was that they were never informed about these well in time and mostly meetings were without proper information being dispersed. To a certain extent this was because 40% of the respondents themselves do not take an active part in the panchayat, as seen in Table 7, and rarely show any interest in knowing about its proceedings. 24.1% women said that sometimes when they find the issue being discussed important enough they do participate in the meetings of the panchayat, while 17.2% women reported mostly taking an active part and 18.6% said they always play an active role in the panchayat activities and its meetings.

TABLE 6: FREQUENCY OF WOMEN ATTENDING MEETINGS OF THE PANCHAYAT

<i>Sn.</i>	<i>Village Khatima (USN)</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Mostly</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Amaun	02	04	12	06	04	28
2	Bhudai	14	04	06	01	-	25
3	Bigrabagh	11	07	04	02	07	31
4	Gosikuan	11	04	07	03	06	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	06	07	07	08	02	30
	TOTAL	44 (30.3)	26 (17.9)	26 (17.9)	20 (13.7)	19 (13.1)	145 (100)

TABLE 7: FREQUENCY OF RESPONDENT PLAYING AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE PANCHAYAT

<i>Sn.</i>	<i>Village Khatima (USN)</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Mostly</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Amaun	05	03	08	12	28
2	Bhudai	07	04	08	06	25
3	Bigrabagh	08	05	06	12	31
4	Gosikuan	06	08	05	12	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	01	05	08	16	30
	TOTAL	27 (18.6)	25 (17.2)	35 (24.1)	58 (40.0)	145 (100)

Furthermore, merely attending panchayat meetings is undoubtedly not of much value if one is not vocal about her/his views also. In this context Table 8 reveals that 28.2% women said that women always put forth their opinion and suggestions

in front of the panchayat, while 14.4% women preferred saying ‘mostly’ put forth their views instead of ‘always’. 28.9% said that occasionally if one feels strongly about any issues, they (the women) do voice their opinion, while 11.7% women said only in rare instances do women put forth their views and 16.5% women said that women never have the courage of voicing their views in front of the panchayat even if they feel very strongly about an issue. Phoola devi, 50 year old from Sripur Bichwa said, “Women hardly go to the panchayat meetings and why should we go? Who listens to a woman’s views?” Her 22 year old daughter, Sita, immediately quipped in “It is not so. When women tell something that is right, they are heard. Problem is most of the Tharu women are uneducated and start shouting and talking senselessly at times. Naturally no one will listen to such women and because of these women other women too are not respected sometimes.” Sita and her likes represent the younger, unbiased and educated generation of Tharu women who are not only aware of their rights but also ready to change things with their patience and logical understanding as compared to the older generation who lack confidence and are not ready to be a part of the change.

In a patriarchal society, a woman’s views are hardly given much weight or taken seriously in most cases even when they are very wise and practical. Thus, the question here also arises as to whether even after voicing it, a woman’s opinion is given due importance and weightage. It can be gathered from Table 9 that 17.2% Tharu women felt their views were ‘always’ kept in mind when taking a decision and 13.7% women reported this was done in most cases by replying ‘mostly’. A majority of 30.3% women stated that depending on the fact that if a woman’s view is very logical, prudent and acceptable to the men too it is ‘sometimes’ given importance. 13.7% and 24.8% respectively stated that women’s views were ‘rarely’ and ‘never’ given importance since it hurts the ego of the men in power to give an kind of weight to a woman’s views. Bimla, 37 year old a ninth standard dropout of Bhudai justified, “Women do voice their opinion on important issues and their views are taken into consideration also. It is only that when men take right decisions, there is no need for women to object or contradict them.”

TABLE 8: FREQUENCY OF WOMEN VOICING THEIR OPINION/ VIEWS IN THE PANCHAYAT MEETINGS

<i>Sn.</i>	<i>Village Khatima (USN)</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Mostly</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Amaun	08	02	13	02	03	28
2	Bhudai	10	03	07	03	02	25
3	Bigrabagh	07	07	08	01	08	31
4	Gosikuan	08	05	07	03	08	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	08	04	07	08	03	30
	TOTAL	41 (28.2)	21 (14.4)	42 (28.9)	17 (11.7)	24 (16.5)	145 (100)

TABLE 9: FREQUENCY OF WOMEN'S VIEWS/ OPINION BEING GIVEN IMPORTANCE WHILE TAKING DECISIONS IN THE PANCHAYAT?

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
1	Amaun	05	01	13	03	06	28
2	Bhudai	04	05	08	03	05	25
3	Bigrabagh	08	06	07	02	08	31
4	Gosikuan	03	05	07	05	11	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	05	03	09	07	06	30
	TOTAL	25 (17.2)	20 (13.7)	44 (30.3)	20 (13.7)	36 (24.8)	145 (100)

Given the above statistical data it is obvious that one cannot expect the women to be satisfied with the working of the Panchayat and that is exactly what is derived from Table 10. The Table shows that 20.6% women were totally satisfied with the working of the panchayat while 28.2% were 'quite satisfied' and 22% stated their level of satisfaction was very little since women were not given an equal importance as the men of the tribe. The highest percentage of 28.9% women said they were not at all happy or satisfied with the working of the panchayat since office bearers hardly helped them out with their grievances or encouraged them to speak. Almost all women complained that "once elected, the representatives started behaving like strangers and gathered all benefits of government schemes for themselves and their close associates. Is there no way to stop this?"

TABLE 10: LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH THE WORKING OF THE PANCHAYAT

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Very satisfied	Moderately	Very little	Not at all	Total
1	Amaun	04	08	08	08	28
2	Bhudai	07	08	06	04	25
3	Bigrabagh	08	06	08	09	31
4	Gosikuan	08	09	04	10	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	03	10	06	11	30
	TOTAL	30 (20.6)	41 (28.2)	32 (22.0)	42 (28.9)	145 (100)

III

The next step to awareness is active participation in the political process. As far as views towards participation goes, a majority of the Tharu women are in support of women actively participating in politics because they felt that a woman will be in a better position to understand the problems and needs of other women and children and therefore would lay more importance on such issues. They feel that women representatives will work towards bringing new schemes for women's development, especially economic development which according to them has been neglected by the government for long. Several women said that it would be easy for them also to

put forth their grievances and problems in front of a woman without much hesitation and embarrassment. A few women also justified their support stating “when women are working equally with men in all areas and fields then why not in politics and the decision making process of the tribe and region?”

Men of the tribe are not ardent supporters of the reservation for women or their active participation in politics thereof. Whenever their views in this regard were sought, in an attempt to be politically correct, they half hearted and superficially, said at the beginning of the conversation that it is a good step and should be followed. However, after sometime of discussion it became evident that they felt that the women of the tribe were incapable of handling political positions and responsibilities. Ram Singh, voicing the opinion of a majority of the men of the tribe stated “Women mind here is preoccupied with other things. They are always worrying and thinking about their children, household chores and what is going on in their relatives and neighbours place. Even when they are sitting in the panchayat meetings they do not concentrate fully on what is going on. During meetings they raise issues concerning only themselves and their relatives. In such a state how can one expect them to solve the problems of the village?” He went on to say that hardly any of the women of the tribe are aware of what is going on in the State or Nation. They rarely read the papers and have no interest in knowing about it. He also said “We are forced to elect women, otherwise no one would vote for them. How can we expect any development from ignorant women representatives?”

A small percentage of women were also of the view that how so ever hard a woman of the tribe may try she cannot compete with men in politics and so they are not in the favour of women joining politics. Their main reservation was that it is impossible and unsafe for the women to travel alone to far of places and at night. This being an important need of such a responsible position, a woman must think twice before joining politics.

Despite the above a majority of 78% women said they would like to stand for elections and become an office bearer if given the opportunity. However, most of these women also mentioned the fact that although they are interested and willing they would not be able to contest any election due to shortage of money, time and support from the community members. All the women stressed the fact that standing for an election required a substantial amount of money which they could under no circumstances afford. Besides even if someone else financed them, it would not be possible for them to perform this task with full dedication and attention since they had several household responsibilities to perform and which would then have to suffer. Most women also said that only the elite and rich of the community could gear up enough support to win an election, while the general masses of the tribe did not wield that kind of power. They also pointed to the fact that only women from families with political experience and influence stand for election. This notwithstanding, they also mentioned that if elected they could work towards solving

the problem faced by women and help in their own and women's economic upliftment since they understand these issues very well. Bimla (the woman panchayat member who was found to be politically most active and aware among all those interviewed during the study) when asked why she did not stand for the post of the Pradhan said "I am from a poor family. We cannot afford the kind of money needed to stand for the elections. If the government supports me with money maybe I will be able to stand for the *pradhani*, otherwise how can a poor person stand for this post?"

Nearly 22% women on the other hand said that they were not educated and capable enough to stand for an election. They also cited all the above mentioned problems as added drawbacks *viz.*, paucity of fund and time besides no support from family and community. Some also said that since they were not confident travelling alone without the company and support of male members, they could not imagine to take up such a responsible assignment.

Traditionally patriarchal societies have always considered women to be less capable of leadership and therefore one hardly finds women leaders. However, gradually this scenario is changing. In a bid to involve women, give them equal opportunities in the political arena and tap their capabilities, the 73rd and 74th amendment Act of the constitution reserves 33% seats for women in the Panchayati Raj and local urban bodies. Under the circumstance, the question arises whether this initiative has been accepted in its true spirit and brought about the desired positive changes in both attitude and perspective towards women leaders. In this context it was found that while nearly 40% women were of the view that men and women are equally capable of leading or representing the community, since both are equal in all ways, 10% were of the view that men were more capable because they had much more exposure to the outer world and were better equipped to interact with unknown people on a formal basis, besides being in the position to travel freely as and when needed. A majority of 50% women, however, believed that women are better qualified to be leaders or representatives because, compare to men, women are more aware of the day to day problems and needs of the community members, especially those of the women and children who form 2/3rd of the society. The reason for this, according to them, is firstly because almost all people in the village have similar needs and problem and secondly because it is the women who have to deal with, and are responsible for matters/problem relating to the family, relatives and neighbours. They feel all women are keen about better education and occupational facilities being available in the village and its vicinity, and better transport facility for women being made available. This concerned attitude of the women placed them as better capable of being representatives in the eyes of half of the women respondents.

Among all the villagers cover, it was only in the village Bhudai that a *Mahila Mangal Dal* (MMD) existed, or rather had been formed more than a year ago.

Thus, as revealed in Table 11, only 2.7% women said there was a MMD in the village, while 73.1% responded in the negative and 24% women said that they were not aware of what a MMD was and did not know about its existence. MMD's are generally formed in each village by a group of 10-20 women with the aim who help each other at times of need and to solve common problem which effect women or the entire village. In Bhudai village about a year ago women had organized themselves and formed a MMD to dissuade men from their excessive drinking habit since this used to lead to regular and repeated fights among men and also led to domestic violence and arguments. In their attempt they had been quite successful and had forcefully broken and close down most of the liquor shops in the village and its neighbouring area. Men who drank too much and habitually were beaten up and insulted by the members of the MMD and conditions had began to improve. But within a short span of time the *Dal* stop functioning due to lack of funds and resultant infighting. Thus, the aim with which the MMD was formed in Budhai village could not be attain completely though it had been partially successful. This attempt on part of the women shows that if encouraged, guided and supported, the women here can become a source of positive changes for their tribe.

TABLE 11: RESPONSE TO THE EXISTENCE OF MAHILA MANGAL DAL'S IN THE VILLAGE

Sn.	Village Khatima (USN)	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
1	Amaun	-	18	10	28
2	Bhudai	02	21	02	25
3	Bigrabagh	-	22	07	31
4	Gosikuan	01	23	07	31
5	Sripur-Bichwa	01	22	07	30
	TOTAL	04 (02.7)	106 (73.1)	35 (24.1)	145 (100)

IV

Although, ever since independence attempts have been made to empower women in every possible sphere, including the political field, a lot more needs to be done. Many of the very well formed plans too have not been able to achieve their aim due to lack of proper implementation or poor people's participation. Under the circumstances it is essential to make certain changes to bring about positive results. Keeping these facts in mind, the respondents were asked for a few suggestions to improve the situation of women's political awareness and participation in their community. Unfortunately, nearly 50% women merely asked for monetary help from the government, justifying that if that had enough money they could turn their attention to political activities. This undoubtedly is a gross misinterpretation of the government's efforts to bring about overall development in the community.

In many instances beneficiaries just take these programmes and schemes merely as a way of getting easy money and free services without understanding the fact that it is aimed at encouraging them to work in a sustainable manner for their own betterment in the related direction. Educated or relatively more aware and rational women of the tribe, however, gave some wise, logical and useful suggestions -

- The foremost among the suggestions was educating women, since education a key factors and quality essential to take up the responsibility of representing the tribe. Education is important for these women not only since it boosts one's confidence but also because it aids in proper communication which is essential in politics to convince others and be vocal of one's ideas.
- Create awareness among women of the tribe by providing proper information of their rights and duties in the political arena.
- Encourage women to participate in the political process by reserving more seats for women in the panchayat and other local bodies.
- Ensure support from the men of the family and community. This undoubtedly is a very urgent need, since women's active involvement in any field can become a reality only when the community to which they belong accepts, allows and encourages their participation and involvement. This can be achieved by sensitising the community members towards gender equality and respecting the capabilities of their womenfolk.
- Provide proper security facilities to the women so that they may be able to travel freely whenever needed.
- Government official should be sent to the village from time to time during the period between nomination and election so that any problem that arise during this time period can be solved immediately thus making the process easy for the women to understand.

Besides the aforementioned suggestions provided by the Tharu women, a few more points can be considered to improve political participation among the Tharu women –

- Capable and qualified women should be identified, trained and if needed also given monetary help to compete in the election.
- SHG's and MMD's should take the responsibility of encouraging its members to take an active role in policy formations by actively participating in the political process. Women must be made aware of their importance and power as a constituency since they form 50% of the voters.
- Immediately after being elected, an orientation programme should be held for the women at the state level wherein they are briefed about their role

and responsibilities as elected representatives of their community members and also get an opportunity to interact with other women leaders.

- Elected women members should be sent on field excursions to areas where women Pradhans and panchayat leaders have brought about drastic and positive changes. This will help them realise their power and also greatly encourage them to act in a similar manner by taking initiative in their own villages.

Given the unsatisfactory level of awareness and participation among the Tharu women of Uttarakhand, more effort is needed to create a situation where women become equal participants with the men. Merely reserving seats is not sufficient. The need of the time is proper formation of social capital among both the tribal masses and leaders. If the aforementioned suggestions are implemented there is no doubt that it would ensure complete qualitative involvement and participation of the women in place of the mere quantitative and superficial participation taking place currently and thus not only fulfil the aim of the New Panchayati Raj Institution but also help develop the society in totality.

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