

# **Adivasi-Dalit Women's Collective**

**Atmashakti Trust**

## **Concept Outline**

### **DALIT AND ADIVASI WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST OPPRESSION AND MARGINALISATION**

Dalit and Adivasi women contribute significant to the development of the community, particularly in rural areas. Such contributions are seldom acknowledged and further the question of their rights and priorities did never become important on ground, nor is it sufficiently addressed in legal frameworks, national and local policies, budgets as well as in any other strategies of the government. The multiple patterns of deprivation, gender-based stereotypes, discrimination and oppression deny them equal rights, opportunities, resources and services. Historically caste system has dominated the socio-cultural, economic and political framework of Indian life. This has also impacted the Adivasi domains of the country.

Women in the rural areas of Odisha consistently face marginalisation in access and control over resources, particularly Adivasi and Dalit women. Various developmental projects along with dominant socio-cultural, economic and societal changes have eroded the spaces that these indigenous women enjoyed within the social settings. Women being victimised by structural, societal and socio-political exclusion, marginalisation, isolation, poverty, and violence, they are systematically and strategically pushed to the fringes either as individuals or groups. Caste, class, ethnicity, and other identities easily align with the gender disparity based on the value chain constructs of several scriptures of religions. This separates or cuts them off from the rest of the society and therefore their participation is the least counted.

However oppressed and marginalised women have countered such state of affairs to the best in all parts of India. Despite the paramount pressure and the capacity of resilience, the types and patterns of resistance in the quest of justice is a natural response of both Dalit and Adivasi women. Such background of victimisation leads to the situation where Dalit and Adivasi women across Odisha have been coming out in order to seek small yet important spaces to resist. Such associations are a reflection of the lived experiences where they break the stigmatisation by way resistance in the struggles for justice and rights. Therefore the hitherto underdogs are turning out to be political actors and are redefining the gender roles in multiple ways. Through their physical participation in movements of resistance against usurpation of natural resources such as land, water, forest and hills, and also by challenging the social dogmas of hierarchies they have proven this trend time and again.

In many ways this radical politics from the fringes of margins is in many ways diametrically opposite that that of the men in similar movements. These women's battle within and without the group has actually punctured the pompous the claims of masculinity and patriarchy that has been roving inside and outside many resistance movements. Further such resistances to domination and rejection of patronising overtures do not find essential space within the classical feminist/ women's movements too and thus the battle to align and find solidarity with other upper caste and urban womenfolk is too rare and often gets contested in the theoretical debates of feminist constructs. It would not be out of place to state that these unwritten and unspoken philosophical and ideological postulations have the strong base of identity and therefore they are different in their tenor and character. It is this particular context that beckons for organised mobilisation of such womenfolk across rural Odisha since the objective condition is fit for a change in the structure and system while the subjective masses are yet to be organised appropriately.

### **YET THE DREAM IS NOT DEAD!**

Despite the difficult context and different mechanism of resistance from multiple sections, the dream of a better humane society has not extinguished by far. Indigenous people have a history of being accommodative, non-dominant, not succumbing to pressures, a balance between nature and human and geocentric culture. These first nations therefore are the children of the soil and the first owners of land. Through a series of traditional and cultural mechanism they developed a symbiotic relationship with nature. Their history, tradition and culture view human labour as dignified engagement of learning, unlearning, discovering, rediscovering and evolving wisdom. They produce wealth that the mechanism of caste and class views as a commodity to be consumed and therefore loots for the market. In this rush of events, even the men had turned against the women.

For a different dream one needs to take inspiration from the thick history, ancestral spirits and rich culture for the future engagement. Hence it is the visualisation of a different dream from that of the mainstream ones. It consists of a value chain for women within and outside with equal rights, respect, and violence free and the process for a just, egalitarian, peaceful, fraternal and harmonious world. This is the creation of a society free from the despaired bindings of caste, class, religion, race, ethnicity and above all gender.

For the women it would be a process beyond the strings of social oppression, political exploitation, economic deprivation, cultural domination, gender discrimination, class isolation, and deliberate exclusion. A society beyond is the premises of the dream. The thrust is to give space and respect to diversity and promote the culture of love, compassion, collectivism and sustainability with specific focus on constitutional values of socialist, secular, democratic and decentralised norms.

### **THE VISION**

The larger and long-term vision is to create a system and space for women based on participation, collectivism and sustainability –where JUSTICE, LIBERTY, EQUALITY AND FRATERNITY prevail beyond all rhetoric of differences.

### **THE MISSION**

To mobilise and organise the indigenous women (both Dalit and Adivasi) into a strong organised federative structure across Odisha in the initial phase and extending it to other parts of India at a later stage.

### **THE ISSUES AND QUESTIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT**

- Violence and legislative reforms
- Participation in governance
- Prevalence of discrimination and violence
- Caste exclusion and violence
- Access to public spaces
- Access to justice
- Access to legitimate rights
- Access to rights over land, water, forests and other resources
- Questions of internal and external patriarchy
- Educational Status
- Health Status
- Financial Stability and Sustainability
- Political Status
- Forms of Oppression

### **THE KEY OBJECTIVES**

1. Ensure constitutional, legal, political, social, cultural, religious, educational, economic and customary rights of Dalit Adivasi women.
2. Access to justice and rights through empowerment of Dalit-Adivasi women towards self-sufficiency and self-sustainable economy.
3. Ensure indigenous women's rights in ethnic, linguistic and regional autonomous bodies through participation, organisation building and capacity development.
4. Need assessment of Dalit-Adivasi women keeping in view the socio-cultural settings.
5. Consistent research the unique cultural, problems, and find solutions.
6. Networking the different village level organisations into a mass federation of Dalit-Adivasi women at the state level.
7. Initiate a process of Dalit-Adivasi women's cooperative in order to ensure the self-sufficiency and financial stability through entrepreneurial initiatives and engagements.
8. Engaging in vocational training to these women based on their interest, expertise and entrepreneurial value.
9. Ensure accountability and transparency right from the village level organisation to the federative structure.

### **CORE STRATEGY**

**Community Participation:** Community participation of the women as a collective by building community organisations from village to state level. Assumedly the Dalit and Adivasi women as a

whole would convert and converge into a community in order to take the responsibility for the justice, rights, peace, welfare, happiness, capacitation, development, harmony and mutuality. Thus this is an active process whereby this community would eventually increase and exercise control over resources and institutions. At the community level there are two possible approaches of participation a) for an overall development of the community through women's participation and leadership and b) evolution of a new level of community conscientisation.

**Collectivism:** Collectivism has been the strong philosophical and ideological proposition on which the Dalit-Adivasi history has been founded on. This collectivism has been at stake in the whirlwind of individualism which only the women could bring back. Collectivism is process by which the individual interests are kept aside and the community (common) interest comes to the centre. This collectivism turns out to be the moral concern of the oppressed and marginalised sections in any society which has a different dream and a new vision to grow. This solid cultural element would lay the fundamentals of upholding the participation in decision making and also to ensure that no-one is being excluded from accessing the common good. Thus it is also the basics of governance where the notion of governance is not to exercise power over others, rather it is to reduce oneself so as to give and make space for all. Thus the accommodative history would reverse back and turn out to be the pillar of community institutions and all other institutions of power and governance.

**Sustainability:** Sustainability is another key strategy which involves multiple components such as the sustainability of the process, rights, collectivism, community participation, leadership and the socio-cultural, economic and political changes such an exercise would bring in. The protection of basic rights and sustainability of it are the two sides of the same coin. As such empowerment is a mechanism whereby the existing citadels of power are challenges and a new mechanism of power is evolved, but it is difficult to hold on the last straw of egalitarianism if its sustainability is at stake. Thus the combination of participatory collectivism of engaging with multiple problems and upholding to each in phases of crisis is the most important element.

Financial stability and livelihood sustainability of the women's collective and the federation is utmost important too. As such the livelihood questions of indigenous people in Odisha have been under severe erosion in the past three decades and hence a combination of self-sufficient livelihood security along with the questions of justice and rights would surface the fore. Thus a new format of organisational and community sustainability would evolve out of this process. A gender responsive sustainability beyond the extends of social exclusion, caste disparity, cultural inequalities, the cycles of poverty, the multiple formats of violence, psycho-emotional damages and economic stability are essential characteristic of a sustainable process.