

Community Decision Making in a Tribe

How do people who live together in large numbers take decision about their common problems? How do they settle disputes that arise among them? What is the role of leaders and what do they get in return? These are some issues which we will be studying. In this chapter we will study how decisions were taken in a society in which only one community lived and in which all were more or less equal.

Tribes - Societies where all people are equal

Many different kinds of societies are called tribes. In Andhra Pradesh we have the Chenchus, the Konda Reddys, the Gonds, Koyas, Yanadis, Savaras etc. Almost all states in our country have one tribe or the other living in the forests. They all have different ways of life, different languages, culture etc. Why are they all called tribes despite these differences? It is because they share certain similar characteristics. What are they?

- i. Usually all members of a tribe consider themselves to be descendents of a common ancestor. Therefore all members of a tribe consider each other to be their relatives.
- ii. They believe that all their resources like land, forests, pastures and water are the common

wealth of the entire tribe and not of individual families or persons. Therefore all members of the tribe can share and use these resources subject to the rules they frame together.

- iii. In tribal societies there are no sharp differences like rich and poor as everyone has a share in the common resources of the tribe. For example, tribal land may be divided equally among all families depending upon the size of the family. In some cases every few years all land may be redistributed or redivided among the families. In some tribes all members of a tribe may till the soil together and share the produce equally. No one can sell the land given to them as the entire tribe is considered the owner of the land. No one can keep more land than they can till or use.

- iv. Generally all families of a tribe do all kinds of work like cultivation, gathering food from the forests, grazing animals, making cloth, basket, houses, tools etc. There are few or no special craft persons.
- v. Women and men and even children share the work of the family. However, in many tribes men have greater power and role in decision making than women.
- vi. The tribes give lot of importance on shared celebration of festivals and rituals to please the tribal gods and ancestors. They also have distinct myths, customs and ways of singing and dancing and painting which is common to all the members of the tribe.

- ◆ What are the major occupations of the tribes?
- ◆ In what way do you think the people of a tribe are equal?

A tribe may settle over a large area in several small villages or habitations. You saw one such habitation of the Konda Reddy tribe.

How do tribes take decisions about matters of common concern? How do they settle disputes among their members? We will see how Gonds, a tribe living in Adilabad district handle these issues. We give you here a short summary of a description from Haimendorf's book on the Gonds of Andhra Pradesh.

Scholars called anthropologists have been studying the tribal people. They lived among the tribes and noted down their culture, lifestyle, beliefs, decision making etc. One such famous scholar who studied the tribes of Andhra Pradesh was Furer Haimendorf who came to Andhra Pradesh in the 1940s. He studied the Chenchus, the Konda Reddys and the Gonds and wrote books about them. He also studied several other tribes of India, especially in the North Eastern states.



Fig: 9.1. Furer Haimendorf



Fig: 9.2. Haimendorf among tribal men of Andhra Pradesh

Gond Panch and Patla

“The village headmen derive their authority from the village ‘Panch’ or the council of adult male householders. This council has the last word in matters concerning the village as a whole and the headman is no more than its chairman. The village Panch in a sense represents the Gond society as a whole.

The Panch does not meet regularly but only when necessary. When matters of importance are discussed all adult men will be present and young boys and women watch the proceedings. Women have no voice in the council but can freely put their case before it.

Among the functions of the Panch is the fixing of the dates of major festivals, allow marriages or divorces, set down norms for marriages or death rites, and settle disputes. The Panch can impose fines and may even force a person to leave the village or even order all other Gonds not to have any relation with him.

When a dispute involves people from many villages then council of all the villages concerned will meet in a joint panchayat.

When a dispute is presented to the Panch the first aim of the panch is to get the facts of the case. The two parties are allowed to make detailed presentation of their points of view. Then

some elder member of the community may cross question them to ascertain the actual facts and also ask witnesses of the case to give their evidence. After this the Panch discusses the provisions of the traditional customs of the Gonds and the decisions in previous cases of similar kind. They try to arrive at a solution acceptable to both parties. When all aspects of the case have been debated one of the senior members proposes a settlement. This is no means a final decision as the person affected may want some change. After hearing his or her response the panch will take a final decision.

- ◆ Who could not be members of the Gond Panch?
- ◆ Why do you think it is important for all houses to be represented on the Panch?
- ◆ What facts the Panch take into account in deciding upon a case?
Here is an interesting example of how they deliver justice:



Fig: 9.3. A Gond Panchayat is about to begin its discussion

One day a girl brought a case before the Panch against a man who teased her and when she slapped him for it he hit her and she fell on the ground, but managed to run away. Then the accused man was asked what he had to say. He admitted his guilt. The Panch asked the girl what she wished to be done to the accused. She replied, 'I want the greatest possible insult should be done to him and that he should give in writing that he will not trouble me anymore. The Panch then ordered him to stand in the middle of the Panch and to bow down before the girl, asking her pardon.

- ◆ Was the girl who complained satisfied with the decision?
- ◆ Why do you think the panch pacified the aggrieved person?

Village headman (Patla)

Every village has a headman or 'Patla' who is generally hereditary (an arrangement in which the son/ daughter gets the father/mother's title or property automatically after their death is called 'hereditary'). He is responsible to the Panch but in many cases he can be an effective leader. While the Panch only meet once in a while the headman functions on a daily basis. He is usually from the family of the person who would have led the formation of the village in the beginning. The main function of the Patla is to ensure the unity of the villagers and to negotiate with the outsiders and government agencies on behalf of the villagers. He also coordinates various community work of the village including festivals. He also has to entertain and feed

guests of the village. In return for all this he gets one day's labour in a year on his field from all men and women of the village. This assistance enables him to till more land than his own family can till and thus to feed the guests of the village.

Whenever a headman becomes arrogant and goes against the wishes of the people, the Panch may remove him and replace him with another person. Or the other families may just leave the village and settle in a new place.

- ◆ Who becomes the headman?
- ◆ What is the relation between the Panch and the Patla?
- ◆ What is the special role of Patla?
- ◆ When can a patla be removed?

Haimendorf also pointed out that this system was gradually changing even in the 1940s and 50s as the Gond villages were inhabited by other communities like the Marathas and Telugus and the modern Panchayati Raj elections began to take place. Many people started going to the government police or courts to settle their disputes and the headmen also lost their position of importance with the election of new Sarpanches through general elections.

- ◆ Discuss the salient features and short comings of this system.
- ◆ Answer the following questions after reading the description of the Gond Panchayats:

- i. Do you think any member of other caste would be allowed to be a member of the Panch?
- ii. According to Haimendorf a popular Patla would have more lands cultivated than an unpopular Patla. Can you explain why this could be so?

We saw that the customs of the tribe as understood by all the adult male members of the community were very important in conducting the affairs of the community. We also saw that every family had a say in the affairs of the community and together they were more powerful than the headman. The headman had to persuade and keep the members of the community happy to retain his position and could not go against their

wishes. We also saw that in return for his services to the tribe he received some special privileges in the form of free labour on his field. This gave him more wealth than the other members of the tribe, but he was expected to spend this on the welfare of the tribe. Such was the arrangement in many of the tribes.

Key words

Hereditary
Shared celebrations
Anthropologist
Common Resources

Improve your learning

1. Why do you think this was possible only within a tribe whose members were more or less equal? What will happen if the members were not equal or if people from different communities lived together?
2. Have you heard of any such community panchayat in your area? Discuss about its functioning with your teachers, parents and elders who know about it.
3. Do you accept the judgement of the panchayat irrespective of police and court?
4. Collect information about the relationship between Furor Haimendorf and Tribes.
5. If the tribe gets injustice in the Judgement of the panchayat what are the alternative legal remedies?