

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 among themselves? What is the role of leaders and what do they get in return? These are some of the issues which we will study in this chapter. We will study how decisions are taken in a society of people of the same community.

Tribes - Societies where all the people are equal

Different kinds of societies who generally live in forest areas are called tribes. In Telangana we have tribes such as Chenchus, Konda Reddys, Gonds, Koyas, and Savaras. Almost all the states in our country have one tribe or the other living in the forests. They all have different ways of life, different languages, cultures etc. Why are they called tribes despite these differences? It is because they share certain common characteristics. What are they?

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

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

- iii. In tribal societies there are no acute 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, once in a few years, all land may be redistributed or redivided among the families. In some tribes, all the members 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 as the owner of the land. No one can keep more land than they can till or use.

- iv. Generally, all the families of a tribe do all kinds of work like cultivation, gathering food from the forests, grazing animals and making clothes, baskets, tools etc.
- v. Women, 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 a lot of importance to the celebration of festivals and rituals to please the tribal gods and ancestors. They also have distinct beliefs, customs, songs, dances and arts and crafts.

- ♦ What are the major occupations of the tribes?
- ♦ In what way are the people of a tribe equal?

A tribe may settle in several small villages or habitations over a large area.

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, handles these issues. We are giving you a short summary of the description from Haimendorf's book on the Gonds of Adilabad.

Scholars called anthropologists have been studying the tribal people. They live among the tribes and note down their observation about the culture, lifestyle, beliefs, decision making etc of the tribes. One such famous scholar who studied the tribes of Telangana was Furer Haimendorf, who came to Telangana 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 Gonds

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 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.

Some of the functions of the Panch are: fix the dates of major festivals, allow/reject marriages or divorces, set down norms for marriages or death rites, settle disputes etc. 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 (prohibition).

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

When a dispute is presented to the Panch, the first aim 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. They also ask the witnesses 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. Since this is not the final decision, the person affected can propose some changes. After hearing his or her response, the panch will take the final decision.

- ◆ Who cannot be the members of the Panch?
- ◆ Is it important for all the houses to be represented on the Panch? Why?
- ◆ What things do the Panch take into account while resolving a problem?

Here is an interesting example of how they do justice:



Fig. 9.3: A Gond Panchayat is about to begin its discussion (from Haimendorf collections)

One day a girl brought a case before the Panch against a man who teased her. 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 said that he should be given the most insulting punishment and that he should give in writing that he would not trouble her anymore in future. The Panch then ordered him to stand in the middle of the Panch, bow down before the girl and beg for pardon.

- ◆ Do you think the girl was satisfied with the decision?
- ◆ Why do you think the Panch heard the case of the girl?

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 answerable 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. Usually, he is from the family of the person who had led the formation of the village in the beginning. The main function of the Patla is to ensure the unity of the villagers and negotiate with the outsiders and government agencies on behalf of the villagers. He also coordinates various

community activities of the village including festivals. He also has to entertain and feed guests of the village. In return for all this, all men and women of the village work in his fields for one day. This assistance enables him to till more land than his own family can, 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. Alternatively, 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 Marathas and Telugus and as the modern Panchayati Raj elections began to take place. Many people started going to the police or courts to settle their disputes. The headmen lost their position of importance with the election of Sarpanches through direct 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 another 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 read that the customs of the tribe, as understood by all the adult male members of the community, were very important in conducting the activities of the community. We also saw that every family had a say in the activities 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 read 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 for the welfare of the tribe. Such was the arrangement in many of the tribes.

Keywords

Hereditary
 Shared celebrations
 Anthropologist
 Common Resources

Improve your learning

1. Why do you think was Panch and Patla possible only within a tribe? Why is it not possible in societies with people from different communities?
2. Have you heard of any such community panchayat in your area? Discuss its functioning with your teachers, parents and elders.
3. Would you accept the judgement of the Gond panchayat without going to the police or the court?
4. If the Panch did injustice, what alternatives did the tribes have?
5. Locate the following districts in the Telangana map where more tribal people live.
 - a) Khammam
 - b) Adilabad
 - c) Mahaboob Nagar
6. Read the para under the title Village Headman and comment on it.

