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Editorial

Dawn of grassroots democracy in Jharkhand

December 2010 witnessed the dawn of grassroots democracy in Jharkhand, which is one of the poorest and Maoist-infested tribal states of India. Polls were held on a non-party basis.

Jharkhand panchayat polls marked the beginning of a new era in grassroots governance. That the voter turnout was large speaks volumes of people's commitment to democracy. Initially, there were many stumbling blocks mostly institutional, skepticism - a state with myriad problems that prevented the state from having panchayat polls. Several organisations including the Association of Local Governance of India (ALGI) organised meetings and protest marches demanding panchayat polls. Though central issue was the struggle between Sadaans (non-tribals) and tribals, panchayat polls were announced ultimately and the first panchayat elections since the state was formed in 2000, took place, which has created waves in many ways. Today, both the polls and outcome of these polls are being viewed with great hope across the country.

Panchayat polls involving 1.43 crore electorates in 24 districts, 14 of which are Maoist-infested, to elect 3,207 rural representatives for the first time in 32 years, were by and large peaceful. A total of 51,433 nominees of four posts - member (gram panchayat), mukhiya (gram panchayat), member (panchayat samiti), and member (zilla parishad) contested for as many as 16,201 posts. Polls spread over five phases in 13,368 gram panchayats of 77 blocks in 24 districts despite threats from the Maoists to disrupt the election process. According to State Election Commission, turnout in several Maoists stronghold was quite high. In Potka and Musabani blocks of East Singhbhum district, voting percentage was 74 and 63 percent respectively, despite a boycott call by the Maoists. Even stray incidences of firing on voters by the Maoists could not deter the voters from the polls. Call for the *bandh* by the Maoists did not dampen their enthusiasm and made little impact on the voters. The peaceful holding of panchayat elections in the state has sent a positive message across the country. After holding the panchayat elections, the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department of Jharkhand has geared up its machinery to implement power transfer in a phased manner to the panchayats as laid down in the Constitution. Fifty eight percent seats were bagged by women. Fifty percent of the seats were reserved for women and 34,750 women candidates were declared successful. The winner with the biggest margin was Rajlaxmi Devi who won from Bhagmara, defeating her nearest rival Mamta Sinha by 9,909 votes. The state now can boast to have eighteen-year-old Jhony

Oraon as the youngest mukhiya in the country from Saher panchayat. Kith and kin of political heavyweights failed to lure the voters. Among the losers was Geeta Devi, the daughter-in-law of CPI (Maoist) ex-zonal commander Kameshwar Baitha, who had won the Lok Sabha elections from Palamau on JMM ticket last year. Bitha's sister-in-law Kusmi lost from Bishrampur. Former minister and LJP leader Madhu Singh's daughter Anapurna Devi and Congress leader Siraz Ahmad's wife Hamida Bibi, BJP also lost. This kind of involvement of masses in electoral process, despite all kinds of threats has created a scope for accomplishing development with social justice, which is the mandate of the Panchayati Raj. The inclusive development based on democratic principles is possible only when women participate actively and fully in the political activities of the country and women of Jharkhand this time have emerged as a strong force at the foundation level of the democratic polity.