

Status and Main Issues of Tribal Women in India

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Abstract

Tribes in India are characterized by significant variations in terms of their ethnicity, residence, ecology, economy, oral history, religion, and other socio-cultural institutions. As per the Census of India (2011), the population of tribes or *Adivasis* is 10.45 crores out of which women's population is about 5.20 crores while the population of men is 5.25 crores. This indicates that women constitute almost half of the tribal population. Yet while discussing the tribal situation in India, they are often ignored or overlooked. Women gaining the prime focus of inquiry in tribal studies are a recent phenomenon as argued by Xaxa (2004). This was in concordance with the emergence of general interest in women-related issues all over the globe. This paper aims to critically examine the various problems and issues faced by tribal women in the Indian context based on an exhaustive literature review. The main issues of education, health and nutrition, employment, and participation in agriculture among tribal women are discussed at length. It concludes with a need for a more humanistic approach to address the issues and problems faced by tribal women in the Indian context.

Key Words: Tribal Women, Education, Health, Nutrition, Employment, India

INTRODUCTION

“India will prosper when our tribal communities will prosper. The welfare of our tribal communities is our foremost priority” – PM Narendra Modi (Min. of Tribal Affairs, 2022)

India is home to the second-largest tribal population in the world. The tribal population constitutes about 9% of the total population in India as per the Census, 2011. Though the tribes in India are numerically minuscule, they are spread across the length and breadth of our vast country and are regarded as the original inhabitants of this landmass. They are characterized by rich culture and traditions which are in sync with the conservation of their natural resources- *Jal, Jungle, and Jameen*. Tribes in the Indian context exhibit significant variations in terms of their ethnicity, residence, ecology, economy, oral history, religion, and other socio-cultural institutions. Ethnic differences and sociocultural gaps among the tribes in India do not permit the formation of collective tribal identity in terms of social reality.

However theoretically speaking, it is possible to consider the tribes as a single cohesive unit based on their shared historical, social, and political experience in the Indian context.

Tribal women in India are a diverse group of women belonging to various indigenous communities or tribes across the country. These communities are often located in remote and inaccessible areas and are considered to be among the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of Indian society. As per the Census of India (2011), the population of tribes or *Adivasis* is 10.45 crores out of which women's population is about 5.20 crores while the population of men is 5.25 crores. This indicates that tribal women constitute almost half of the tribal population. Yet while discussing the tribal situation in India, they are often ignored or overlooked. Women gaining the prime focus of inquiry in tribal studies are a recent phenomenon as argued by Xaxa (2004). This was in concordance with the emergence of global waves of feminism and the rise in general interest in women-related issues across the globe.

This paper is mostly analytical in its approach. The present paper is based on the secondary data collected and analysed from various sources like monographs, research studies, government reports like census, committee reports on tribals, annual reports of ministry of tribal welfare, Report on Selected Educational Statistics, and NFHS reports, newspaper articles etc.

STATUS OF THE TRIBAL WOMEN

Though region-specific differences occur in women's status, sharp gender disparities and inequalities characterize India as a whole. As per the recently released Global Gender Report 2022, India ranks 135 among a total of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022. It is the worst performer in the sub-index of "health and survival" and ranks lowest at 146 (The Hindu, July 14, 2022).

In simple words, status can be defined as a "collection of rights and duties". The 'status of women' is defined by United Nations (1975) as the "conjunction of position a woman occupies as a worker, student, wife, mother....of the power and prestige attached to these positions and of the right and duties she is expected to exercise" (cited in Bhasin, 2007). It is important to note that "to what extent, do women compared with men, have access to knowledge, economic resources, and political power and to what degree of personal autonomy do these resources permit the process of decision making and choices at crucial

points in lifecycle” (*ibid*). The status of women enjoyed in a particular community is an important indicator of the overall well-being of that community.

The popular general perception is that tribal women enjoy better status as compared to their non-tribal counterparts in the Indian context in terms of decision-making, economic independence, and autonomy (Raj, 2018). Many anthropological and sociological studies that were conducted before the independence supported this claim. For example, the anthropological studies conducted by Furer-Haimendorf (1943), and Hutton (1921) reported the high social status of tribal women among Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh, Nagas, and Garos of North-East India (Sahal, 2022). Tribal women play an equal role in decision-making and supporting the household.

However, this fallacy of better status of tribal women was refuted by the anthropological and sociological studies conducted in the post-independence period. The studies by Mehrotra (2004), Singh, Vyas, Mann (1988), and Mann (1987) indicate the subjugation of tribal women under patriarchal values. Several taboos are being practiced in the tribal communities that reflect the low and impure status of women. For example, Toda and Kota women in Southern India are not permitted to cross the threshold of their temples (Singh and Rajyalakshmi, 1993). There are taboos to forbid the tribal women to touch the plough in Oraon and Kharia (*ibid*). Tribal women do not enjoy property rights.

There is no dearth of tribal studies in the Indian context but anthropological and sociological studies with a focus on the condition of tribal women are limited. Region-specific tribal studies are the need of the hour to gain a better understanding of the situation of tribal women as pointed out by Singh (1988). It is needed for better planning and effective implementation of the development plans to empower tribal women. The condition of tribal women differs from tribe to tribe but it is clear from the above discussion that they do not specifically enjoy better status as compared to their non-tribal counterparts in India. There are various factors like health and nutrition, education, and employment that reflect on the status of tribal women. These are discussed at length in the next section.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE STATUS OF THE TRIBAL WOMEN

1. Health and Nutrition

Health is a state of overall physical, mental, and social well-being. It is a function of not only medical care but overall integrated social, cultural, economic, and educational development.

Health deprivation is at a high level as far as tribal communities are concerned as these are extremely marginalized and vulnerable groups (Agrawal,2013).

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) care is defined by WHO as “promoting, preventing, therapeutic or rehabilitation facility or care for the mother and the child”. Maternal and child health (MCH) care is an important dimension of health-seeking behavior which is often neglected in tribal women. Unintended pregnancies are quite high in tribal women (Ram, 2001) as the use of safe contraception is much lower (Sharma and Rani, 2009). Multiple reasons like “early marriage, successive pregnancies with low calorie of food intake and inaccessibility of medical facilities” result in high maternal and child mortality rates (Reddy, 2008). Basu (1990) pointed out that early marriage, successive pregnancies, and continuous lactation leads to ‘maternal depletion’ in tribal women culminating in anemia, malnutrition, and other related health conditions. The rate of institutional delivery is also the lowest among tribal women. This could be due to factors like “unfriendly behavior of health care workers, language gap and lack of trust in the modern medical system” (Reddy, 2008:4).

Child mortality rates are also comparatively high in tribal communities in India. Kapoor and Kshatriya (2000) pointed out that postnatal mortality components indicate that childhood mortality constitutes the bulk of postnatal mortality, suggesting that children under 5 years need better health care in the tribal groups of Sahariya, Mina, and Bhil of the State of Rajasthan, north-western India, and Munda, Santal, and Lodha of the State of West Bengal, eastern India.

As per NFHS-4 data conducted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, in respect of Scheduled Tribes, the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) has declined from 62.1 (2005-06) to 44.4 (2015-16); Under Five Mortality Rate has also declined from 95.7 (2005-06) to 57.2 (2015-16), and Institutional Delivery has increased from 17.7% in 2005-06 to 68.0 % in 2015-16 (PIB Delhi, 2021). Moreover, the percentage of underweight ST children under the age of five years has declined from 54.5 in 2005-06 to 45.3 in 2015-16 (*ibid*). Data indicate a slight improvement in IMR and institutional delivery practices. However, there is still a need to focus on improving the nutrition and health requirements of tribal women and children.

Nutritional knowledge has great importance for the proper management of food, intake of adequate nutrients, and a balanced diet. Tribal women and children are vulnerable sections of the Indian population in terms of malnutrition and undernutrition (Sahal, 2022). There is a lack of awareness about health, sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition knowledge among the

tribals (Singh and Samal, 2016; Maiti, Unisa, and Agrawal, 2005). Mandal et al (2019) point out the low nutritional status (energy, protein, calcium, and iron) of pregnant tribal women in their community-based research in Jharkhand and West Bengal. Nutritional anemia is an acute problem prevalent in tribal women. National Family Health Survey-3 data shows that 65% of tribal women (in the age-group 15-49 years) suffer from anemia as compared to 46.9% of other women. Nutritional knowledge for the woman is an important role as she oversees the food preparation for all the family members. It should be well suited and following the local food habits and availability of food resources keeping in mind the socio-economic conditions of tribals (Singh and Samal, 2016).

2. Education

Education and literacy level are vital indicators of the development of a society. Education is important in today's world irrespective of one's class, caste, gender, ethnicity, or religious identity. Education is equally important for men and women. It is a tool to ensure the overall development of women in society. However, access to formal education is one of the major problems faced by tribal women (Maji, 2016). The situation was so grim before the 1950s as no direct government programs were targeting tribal education (Hasnain, 1991). But with the adoption of the constitution, central as well as state governments provided special attention to promote tribal education. Table 1 provides the data for literacy trends of Schedule tribes from 1961-2011.

S. No.	Year	Total Population	ST	ST Male	ST Female
1.	1961	28.3	8.53	13.83	3.16
2.	1971	34.45	11.30	17.63	4.85
3.	1981	43.57	16.35	24.52	8.05
4.	1991	52.21	29.60	40.65	18.19
5.	2001	64.84	47.10	59.17	34.76
6.	2011	72.99	58.96	68.53	49.35

(Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013)

TABLE 1 Literacy trends for Schedule Tribes (ST) from 1961-2011 (figures in percentage)

As per the Census 2011 data, the overall literacy rate is 72.99 but for Schedule Tribes, the literacy rate is 58.96. If we consider the overall literacy rate from 1961 to 2011, there has been a considerable increase in the literacy rate of tribals i.e., from 8.53 % to 58.96 %. The literacy rate for women increased from 3.16 to 49.35 % in the same period. But the gender gap in education among tribal populations is considerable. According to Census 2011 data, the Female literacy rate among tribes is only 49.35% as compared to the male literacy rate of 68.53%.

Rami (2012) describe the status of primary education in the tribal-dominated Dang district of Gujarat and pointed out that the common toilet facility is the major reason for the high dropout rates of tribal girls beyond the 5th standard in the government primary schools. Ghosh's (2007) study among Ho and Mahali in Jharkhand and Lodha in West Bengal reflected that female enrolment rates are lower as compared to their male counterparts. The dropout rates are particularly higher during the cultivation period as the children assist their families in sowing, plantation, weeding, etc.

The dropout rates for tribal girls are much higher as compared to the general population, especially in rural areas. There have been various reasons that can be attributed to the phenomenon of the high drop-out rate of tribal girls. The following external reasons are used to explain the high drop-out rate of tribal girls (Mohapatra, 2020):

- Location of the school is very far
- Lack of proper infrastructure including separate functional toilets for girls
- Lack of security at the school premise
- Lack of female teachers in school and teacher absenteeism
- Lack of relevant curriculum in their local language

Various internal factors promote the high dropout rate of tribal girls:

- Parental lack of awareness about the importance of education for their girl child
- Cultural and societal pressure for early girl-child marriage

- Requirement of girl child for domestic work and child-rearing work

It is required that parents are sensitized and trained to realize the importance of education for the well-being and overall development of their girl children. Along with the focus on primary education, skill development, and vocational training especially in the rural area (Sandhya Rani et al, 2011) should be given proper attention as envisaged in the New Education Policy, 2020 (Sen and Barik, 2020). Contextualization of the curriculum is also required to include tribal culture, folklore, and history that help the tribal children to gain confidence. To increase enrolment and retention in the schools, the adequate focus should be given to promote the tribal storytelling, painting, local dance, music performances that envisages to promote the indigenous knowledge (Brahmnandam and Babu, 2016). Likewise, government should focus on harnessing the tribal natural talent by promoting sports academy in tribal areas. It is pertinent to provide the opportunities to the budding sportsperson including tribal girls for sports like athletics, archery, running, boxing, football, cricket etc. where they might represent the nation at the international sports events. Mary Kom and Dutee Chand have won several prestigious awards and become the role model for tribal women to excel in sports. Similarly, girls should be motivated to attain education by sharing the inspirational success stories of tribal role models for example the current and first tribal President of India- Honourable Smt. DroupadiMurumu. They should be provided adequate career counselling to achieve their dreams and participate in the national economy in effective terms.

The problems and challenges to ensure the education of tribal women are complex and manifold in nature. To overcome this, a concerted effort of different stakeholders is needed- central and state governments, local panchayats, and NGOs. Awareness of tribals and the sincere dedication of teachers can help to overcome this impediment rather than solely relying on government policies and sub-plans (Metete and Mondal, 2012).

3. Participation in agriculture and Employment

Women's status in society is often a reflection of their economic status and income. The economic role of tribal women is substantial and they are major contributors to the tribal economy (Naresh, 2014). Tribal women are engaged in much of the work related to the collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) like fruits, flowers, herbs, and roots. These MFP

have medicinal properties and are used as medicines. Women become the main contributor to agriculture as they are engaged in agricultural work along with household work. The nature and extent of participation of women vary with the family land holdings. Their roles vary from managers to landless laborers (Kumar et al, 1985). According to Mohanta (2017), tribal farm women play a significant role in agriculture on small and medium-sized farms. They are engaged in almost 90 percent of the farm activities, especially in the rural areas where men migrate to urban centers in search of better and secured employment opportunities. Various research studies reflect upon the high participation of tribal women in the agricultural sector (Dhruw et al, 2020; Mythili, 2019; Kalyani et al. 2011).

Engagement of tribal women in the informal workforce is increasing, due to the expansion of urban and metro cities owing to the forces of industrialization and globalization. They work in the informal sector as construction laborers and as domestic workers in urban centres (Shree, 2012). Very few percent of tribal women are educated and engaged in white-collar or private-sector jobs in urban centers.

Economic activity can be defined as any activity that includes the production of goods and services that adds to the national product. Engagement in any economic activity is considered work (Min. of Tribal Affairs, 2013). The Census of India defines the Workforce participation rate (WPR) as the percentage of total workers to the total population. The percentage of cultivators in STs declined in 2011 as compared to 2001 while the percentage of agricultural labourers increased (Min. of tribal affairs, 2013). While comparing the 2011 and 2001 census data, it was observed that 43.5 % of ST males were main workers, and only 23.9 % female main workers (*ibid*).

MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY TRIBAL WOMEN

The major problems faced by the tribal women are discussed below:

1. Problem of deforestation and land alienation: The collection of minor forest produce (MFP) serves as a major source of income for many tribal communities wherein women and children are involved in the collection, storage, and processing of MFP (Naresh, 2014). Due to massive-scale industrialization, the economic role of women has been diminished. Increased government control over forests in tribal-dominated areas has adversely impacted women. Government control over the forests has also led to a decline in hunting practices as rituals. Deforestation and large-scale felling of trees in tribal-dominated areas have increased

the strain on tribal women as they now struggle more time to procure fuelwood and other forest-based products. The large-scale land alienation in tribal areas has added to the woes of tribal women as it renders earlier independent women to dependent and subordinate to other outsiders and moneylenders.

2. Problem of migration: Migration of tribal women from their tribal hinterlands to urban and metro cities in search of employment opportunities is a widespread phenomenon in the Indian context. There is various push and pull factors that contribute to the process of migration. The various push factors are low wages, land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, and unemployment in rural areas that force tribal women and girls to migrate to urban centers in search of a better future. Migrant tribal women face lots of difficulties right after migration to the cities like problems in communication, residential and accommodation, employment and low income, lack of social contacts, etc. (Devasia, 2013; Singh and Jha, 2004). They are prone to experiencing lots of problems due to their economic and sexual exploitation at the hands of middlemen, contractors, and even their employers (Naresh, 2014). Jha (2005) describes in his study that female tribal migration leads to the trafficking of women, sexual exploitation, and diseases.

3. Problem of unequal wages: Apart from agriculture, women contribute to industrial workforces like the mines and minerals sector. There is a differential wage structure prevailing that puts tribal women at an economic disadvantage in this regard. This difference in wages paid to men and women laborers is prevalent over the country. The exploitation of cheap women's labor can be seen in the case of construction-related work and collection of *tendu* leaves. These examples reveal the stark reality wherein the indiscriminate wage exploitation of women takes place under the forces of commercialization and industrialization.

4. Problem of exploitation at the workplace: Tribal women are often exploited sexually by agents, contractors or middlemen, and fellow male co-workers. Tribal women are the worst sufferer who faces physical, mental, and economic exploitation not just because they belong to tribal communities but because being mere 'women' is enough. Prasad (1988) pointed out that the *Rejas*, the tribal women laborers of the Chota Nagpur region were made to work for a

longer duration for a small amount of money which was often withheld by the intermediaries. Thus, we see that industrialization has favored the exploitation of tribal women.

CONCLUSION

Tribal women in India face lots of issues and challenges. Apart from facing limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, they also experience domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of discrimination. Many of these women do not have the legal awareness to seek support and protection. From the above discussion, it can be inferred that all these issues and problems are interlinked. The status of tribal women cannot be improved until an improvement in their status is achieved overcoming all these issues. A holistic approach is required to achieve social, cultural, educational, economic, and political improvement in the status of tribal women in the Indian context. Tribal development planning needs to be more 'human-centered' with a focus to provide women access to health, education, and capacity building within the framework of sustainable eco-system and land-use policy (Sahal, 2022). All these are interlinked and overall development can be achieved by targeting all the aspects rather than only one aspect of development. Tribal communities will be benefitted immensely if the women will progress and excel.

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