



Women Empowerment in Tribal Communities

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Abstract:

India is home to a large number of tribal communities, most of who reside in forested and remote regions and have remained largely isolated from mainstream society. Although the condition of tribal populations has improved since independence, it would be incorrect to claim that they enjoy living standards similar to those in urban or rural areas. Tribal groups face several unique challenges that the rest of the population does not experience. Deprivation of basic necessities is common, and survival takes precedence over comfort or luxury.

The condition of women within tribal communities is particularly distressing and significantly worse than that of women in urban and rural settings. Tribal women encounter serious issues related to health, education, exploitation, and insecurity. Their primary aspiration is to live peacefully without constant fear or hardship. While women everywhere face struggles, tribal women suffer more acutely due to lack of resources and the heavy burden of survival. This paper seeks to analyze the present status of tribal women and explore their ongoing struggle for dignity and empowerment in contemporary society.

Introduction:

History clearly demonstrates the prolonged suffering of women, a reality that continues even today. A nation cannot truly claim progress if it fails to ensure safety, equality, and justice for women. The plight of women belonging to tribal communities is particularly severe. Their daily hardships are beyond easy comprehension.

Despite facing multiple social and economic challenges, several tribal women have shown remarkable resilience and have fought for their rights. As citizens of India, tribal people possess the same constitutional right to live freely and with dignity. Being the traditional custodians of forests and natural resources, it is essential that their rights are protected.

Unfortunately, tribal women often lack external support systems. Their lives revolve around basic survival—feeding their families and

sustaining them through daily labour. Comfort and security remain distant dreams. Due to widespread ignorance about their struggles, it becomes crucial to study their conditions, create awareness, and develop strategies to uplift them.

What is a Tribe?:

A tribe refers to a group of people sharing common ancestry, culture, and traditions, whose livelihood depends primarily on land and natural resources. Tribes generally live in secluded areas and prefer minimal interaction with the outside world. They represent some of the earliest ethnic groups in India and follow traditional occupations such as hunting and collecting forest produce. Due to limited access to education and economic opportunities, they remain socially and economically backward. In India, tribes are also referred to as *Adivasis*.

Scheduled Tribes:

The framers of the Indian Constitution acknowledged that certain communities remained socially and economically underdeveloped due to isolation, traditional lifestyles, and exploitation. Article 366(25) defines Scheduled Tribes as communities recognized under Article 342 of the Constitution. Article 342 empowers the President of India to notify Scheduled Tribes through official declaration. As per the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes constitute about 8.6% of India's population, comprising nearly 645 distinct tribal communities recognized constitutionally.

Tribal Groups in India:

Tribal populations are primarily located in hilly, forested, and north-eastern regions of the country. They represent one of the most marginalized sections of society and have historically been subjected to discrimination, violence, and exploitation. Despite possessing constitutional and legal protections, their conditions remain poor. Although all members of tribal society face challenges, this study focuses specifically on the situation of tribal women.

Perception of Tribal Women:

There exists a stereotypical image portraying tribal women as forest dwellers adorned with tattoos and jewellery, enjoying greater freedom than non-tribal women. This belief, glorified during the colonial period, persists even today.

In reality, except in a few matrilineal societies, tribal women face severe discrimination. They lack property rights, receive lower wages for equal work, and are subjected to restrictive taboos that undermine their status. Over time, deforestation and loss of land have deprived women of traditional livelihood sources,

transferring ownership and authority largely to men.

Status of Tribal Women: Health, Education, and Employment:

Women play a vital role in tribal households, contributing significantly to economic and family management. However, their participation in decision-making remains limited. Empowerment is impossible without their meaningful involvement in social and economic processes.

Role of Women in Tribal Society: Tribal women are central to social, cultural, religious, and economic life. Despite forming half the population and bearing greater responsibilities, they lag behind in education, employment, health, and financial independence.

Health Status: Tribal women face higher infant mortality rates, malnutrition, anaemia, sickle cell disease, and reproductive health issues. Early marriages, excessive physical labour, inadequate healthcare facilities, and poor nutrition contribute to maternal depletion and high maternal mortality. Anaemia affects a large percentage of tribal women, leading to fatigue and reduced work capacity. The increasing spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, is another serious concern, worsened by lack of awareness and education. Government health programs exist, but poor awareness and access limit their effectiveness. Social barriers prevent open discussions on family planning, highlighting the urgent need for sex education and community outreach.

Education: The educational status of tribal women is alarmingly low, marked by poor literacy, low enrolment, and high dropout rates—especially in rural areas. Education empowers women by enabling economic independence, awareness of rights, and participation in development.

Despite constitutional provisions under Articles 15(4) and 46, progress has been slow. Cultural barriers, unsuitable curricula, language differences, and lack of local teachers discourage schooling. However, initiatives promoting education in mother tongues have shown positive results in states like Odisha. Though female literacy among tribes is improving gradually, it remains significantly lower than male literacy. Skill development programs are essential to empower adult tribal women socially, economically, and politically.

Employment Status: Tribal women depend heavily on forest-based livelihoods and are disproportionately affected by deforestation and environmental degradation. Limited employment opportunities force many into seasonal migration, often without wages, security, or dignity.

Globalization and liberalization have displaced tribal women from traditional occupations, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Poverty remains concentrated in tribal regions, particularly among women. A comprehensive human development approach focused on employment is essential to ensure sustainable empowerment.

Inheritance of Property:

Tribal women generally lack inheritance rights, unlike non-tribal women. Laws such as the Hindu Succession Act do not automatically apply to Scheduled Tribes. In some states, women are explicitly barred from inheriting land. Even in matrilineal societies, real authority often lies with men.

Judicial decisions have sometimes applied Hindu laws when tribal customs align with them. However, a separate and just legal framework is required to protect property rights of tribal women.

Impact of Displacement:

Displacement due to development projects has severely impacted tribal women. Loss of land and livelihood leads to early marriage, health deterioration, exploitation, and breakdown of community networks. The absence of social support systems increases vulnerability, morbidity, and mortality among displaced Adivasi women.

Issues with Reservation for Scheduled Tribes:

While reservations were introduced to address historical discrimination, misuse has reduced their effectiveness. Benefits often fail to reach the most deprived tribal communities. Reservation policies need reform based on current socio-economic realities. Instead of mere quotas, tribes require access to education, healthcare, housing, and livelihood opportunities to truly benefit from affirmative action.

Women Empowerment and Government Schemes:

History and contemporary society offer inspiring examples of empowered tribal women such as Rani Durgavati, Rani Chennamma, Tulsi Munda, Mary Kom, and many others. Their achievements highlight the potential of tribal women when given opportunities.

Government initiatives like TRIFED, Van Dhan Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and women-centric development policies aim to improve tribal women's conditions. However, effective implementation and awareness are crucial for real impact.

Draupadi Murmu: President of India:

President Draupadi Murmu's journey from a Santhal tribal background to the highest constitutional office symbolizes hope and empowerment for tribal women. Her achievement demonstrates that with opportunity and education,

tribal women can rise to leadership positions and inspire generations.

Conclusion:

Although the condition of tribal women has improved over time, significant gaps remain. Education is the most powerful tool for their empowerment, enabling independence, awareness, and dignity. Government initiatives must be strengthened, and social attitudes must evolve to ensure equal opportunities.

As the saying goes, educating a woman means educating a nation. Tribal women deserve to be heard, respected, and supported. The emergence of women leaders from tribal communities marks the beginning of a more inclusive and hopeful future.

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