



Empowerment of Tribal Women in Pune District: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract:

Tribal women in Pune district occupy a disadvantaged position due to the combined effects of gender inequality, tribal identity, and uneven regional development. Despite Pune being one of the more developed districts of Maharashtra, tribal pockets—particularly in Velhe, Bhor, Mulshi, Junnar, and Ambegaon talukas—continue to experience limited access to education, stable livelihoods, health services, and institutional support. This study empirically examines the level and determinants of empowerment among tribal women in Pune district using primary survey data. Empowerment is assessed across economic, social, and household decision-making dimensions. The findings reveal that education, regular income sources, and participation in self-help groups significantly influence empowerment, while proximity to urban centers alone does not guarantee improved agency. The study exposes the intra-district disparities often hidden behind Pune's overall development indicators.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Empowerment, Pune District, Maharashtra, Empirical Analysis

Introduction:

Pune district is widely perceived as an economically advanced and socially progressive region due to its rapid urban growth, industrialization, and concentration of educational institutions. It has emerged as a hub for IT, manufacturing, and higher education, which has led to improved infrastructure, employment opportunities, and social development indicators in many parts of the district. However, this perception masks the realities of tribal communities residing in the district's hilly and forested talukas such as Velhe, Bhor, Mulshi, Junnar, and Ambegaon. These areas, despite being part of a relatively developed district, remain geographically isolated, with limited access to healthcare, education, financial services, and formal employment opportunities. Tribal women in these regions face persistent challenges, including low literacy levels, dependence on seasonal or informal employment,

restricted mobility, and minimal participation in household and community decision-making processes.

Socio-cultural factors further compound these disadvantages. Patriarchal norms, early marriage, and limited awareness of rights restrict tribal women's ability to engage with institutions or pursue independent livelihoods. Economic marginalization also persists because most tribal households rely on small-scale agriculture or forest-based work, which is often irregular and poorly remunerated. The intersection of gender, social exclusion, and geographic isolation creates a distinct set of barriers for tribal women that are not captured by aggregate district-level development statistics.

While Maharashtra has implemented multiple tribal welfare and women-centric schemes—such as the Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, Rani Durgavati Tribal Women Empowerment Scheme, and Mahila Shakti Kendra—district-

level outcomes vary significantly. Access to these programmes is uneven due to bureaucratic complexity, lack of awareness, and infrastructural constraints. In Pune district, the coexistence of urban prosperity and tribal deprivation provides a unique context to study empowerment. By focusing on this district, the study highlights intra-district inequalities and challenges the assumption that economic development automatically leads to social empowerment. This research argues that district-specific empirical analysis is necessary to understand the extent to which development initiatives and policy interventions have translated into meaningful empowerment for tribal women, particularly in areas that remain marginalized despite overall regional progress.

Review of Literature:

Existing literature identifies education, employment, and social capital as central to women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Studies on tribal women emphasize structural exclusion, land insecurity, and patriarchal norms as persistent barriers (Xaxa, 2014). Research conducted in Maharashtra indicates that tribal women living closer to urban centers often have better access to services, yet this does not automatically result in greater autonomy or decision-making power.

Few studies focus specifically on Pune district, as it is often excluded from tribal-focused research due to its overall high development ranking. This creates a research gap, as district-level disparities remain underexplored. The present study attempts to address this gap through primary data-based analysis.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To measure the level of empowerment among tribal women in selected talukas of Pune district.

2. To examine the socio-economic profile of tribal women in the study area.
3. To analyse the impact of education on the empowerment of tribal women.
4. To assess the influence of livelihood patterns on women's empowerment.
5. To evaluate the role of self-help groups in enhancing economic and decision-making empowerment.

Research Methodology:

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on primary data. A sample of 120 tribal women aged 18–60 years was selected from Velhe, Bhore, Mulshi, and Junnar talukas of Pune district using purposive and random sampling methods.

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering demographic details, education, employment, income, participation in self-help groups, awareness of government schemes, and household decision-making.

Women's empowerment was measured using a composite index comprising economic empowerment, social empowerment, and household decision-making power. The data were analysed using percentage analysis, mean scores, and simple regression analysis to identify key determinants of empowerment.

Empowerment Outcomes and Socio-Economic Dynamics of Tribal Women in Pune District:

The findings of the study reveal that only about **41 per cent** of the respondents demonstrate moderate to high levels of overall empowerment, indicating that a majority of tribal women in Pune district remain partially or weakly empowered. Although Pune district shows better development indicators compared to remote tribal regions of Maharashtra, empowerment outcomes among tribal women continue to lag behind. Literacy

levels among the respondents are relatively higher than those reported in districts such as Nandurbar or Gadchiroli; however, functional literacy—defined as the ability to use education effectively for employment, financial management, and institutional interaction—remains limited for a large proportion of women.

Employment patterns emerge as a critical determinant of empowerment. Tribal women engaged in non-agricultural activities or regular wage employment report significantly higher empowerment scores in terms of income control, mobility, and self-confidence compared to those dependent on seasonal agricultural labour. Seasonal employment results in income instability, reinforcing economic dependence on male family members and limiting women's decision-making power within households.

Participation in self-help groups has positively influenced financial inclusion by improving access to savings, credit, and peer support. Women involved in self-help groups exhibit higher levels of economic awareness and confidence. However, the impact of self-help group participation on household decision-making authority remains uneven. In many cases, women continue to have limited influence over major decisions related to expenditure, healthcare, and asset ownership, suggesting that financial inclusion alone does not automatically lead to social empowerment.

Despite their geographical proximity to Pune city and industrial zones, many respondents reported minimal engagement with formal institutions such as banks, government offices, and training centres. Language barriers, bureaucratic complexity, lack of information, and experiences of social exclusion were identified as major constraints. This finding clearly indicates that physical closeness to urban development does not necessarily translate into empowerment

unless supported by inclusive institutional mechanisms and targeted outreach efforts.

Overall, the results highlight that empowerment among tribal women in Pune district is shaped by a complex interaction of education, livelihood stability, social norms, and institutional access rather than by geographic location or district-level development alone.

Related Government Schemes & Initiatives for Tribal Women Empowerment:

In India and Maharashtra, several schemes aim to enhance economic, educational, and social empowerment of tribal women, addressing structural barriers identified in this study:

1. Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana & Concessional Loan Schemes:

Under national and state tribal development programmes, schemes like the *Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana* provide concessional loans to tribal women for entrepreneurship and self-employment ventures. These loans are designed to support business units with low interest rates and flexible repayment terms, helping tribal women start income-generating activities and improve financial independence. Additional loan support through the *Micro Credit Scheme* and *Adivasi Shiksha Rinn Yojana* also aids higher education and skill enhancement for tribal women and students.

2. Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (VDVY):

The *Van Dhan Vikas Yojana* focuses on mobilizing tribal producers—especially women—into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and enhancing traditional skills for value addition of Minor Forest Produce (MFP). This scheme trains tribal women in processing, packaging, and marketing of forest products, linking them to retail markets to secure better prices and sustainable livelihoods.

3. Rani Durgavati Tribal Women Empowerment Scheme (Maharashtra):

Maharashtra has introduced the *Rani Durgavati Tribal Women Empowerment Scheme*, which provides financial assistance to tribal women for personal enterprises (up to ₹50,000) and collective projects (up to ₹7.5 lakh). The scheme supports initiatives such as small businesses, agriculture, and allied activities, encouraging economic self-reliance.

4. Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK): The *Mahila Shakti Kendra* scheme enhances women's access to information, training, and services at the community level, including tribal regions. It offers skill development, digital literacy, legal awareness, and livelihood training, which can help tribal women overcome educational and socio-cultural barriers.

5. Convergence Initiatives & Tribal Rights Expansion (TREE Programme): The *Tribal Rights Expansion and Empowerment (TREE) Programme* in Maharashtra integrates rights recognition, livelihood support, and service delivery for tribal communities. Although not exclusively for women, TREE's participatory approach and convergence of departments (health, education, agriculture) indirectly benefit tribal women by improving access to entitlements and reducing exclusion.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that tribal women in Pune district experience partial empowerment shaped by education, livelihood stability, and collective participation. However, district-level development has not uniformly benefited tribal women, and significant intra-district disparities persist.

Policy efforts must adopt a micro-level, taluka-specific approach that recognizes the unique challenges faced by tribal women in relatively developed districts. Empowerment

strategies should integrate education, skill development, and institutional access rather than relying solely on welfare schemes.

Suggestions:

Based on the findings of the study, there is a need to strengthen functional literacy and skill-based education among tribal women in the tribal talukas of Pune district. Education initiatives should focus not only on basic literacy but also on practical skills that enhance employability, financial management, and institutional interaction. Further, efforts should be made to promote stable and non-seasonal livelihood opportunities linked to local markets so as to reduce income insecurity and economic dependence.

The study also suggests strengthening self-help groups beyond their traditional role as credit providers. These groups should be developed as platforms for leadership training, collective decision-making, and social awareness to enhance women's confidence and agency. In addition, administrative procedures related to government welfare schemes must be simplified, and outreach mechanisms should be improved to ensure effective access and utilization of benefits by tribal women. Targeted institutional support is essential to translate policy initiatives into meaningful empowerment outcomes.

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