



Empowerment of Tribal Women and Gender Equality in India: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract:

Tribal women in India occupy a unique socio-economic and cultural position shaped by indigenous traditions, historical marginalization, and structural inequalities. Despite constitutional safeguards and development interventions, tribal women continue to face challenges related to education, health, livelihood security, political participation, and gender equality. This review paper synthesizes existing literature on the empowerment of tribal women in India, drawing on 25 key studies spanning economic, social, educational, political, and legal dimensions. The review highlights major empowerment pathways such as education, self-help groups (SHGs), and employment programs like MGNREGA, forest rights, and local governance participation. It also identifies persistent gaps, regional disparities, and emerging challenges. The paper concludes by outlining future research directions and policy implications for achieving sustainable gender equality among tribal women.

Keywords: Tribal women, empowerment, gender equality, India, SHGs, education, MGNREGA

Introduction:

Empowerment of women is recognized as a critical prerequisite for achieving gender equality and inclusive development. In India, tribal women constitute a significant proportion of the Scheduled Tribe population and play a central role in household economies, forest-based livelihoods, and cultural continuity (Bhasin, 2007; Fernandes & Menon, 1987). However, their contributions remain undervalued, and they face multidimensional deprivation due to poverty, illiteracy, social exclusion, and limited access to resources (Mitra, 2008).

Gender equality among tribal communities presents a paradox. While tribal societies are often perceived as relatively egalitarian compared to mainstream patriarchal structures, tribal women continue to experience

economic vulnerability, political marginalization, and limited decision-making power (Rao, 2014; Bhukya, 2015). This review critically examines scholarly literature to understand how empowerment has been conceptualized, measured, and operationalized for tribal women in India. In this context, understanding the empowerment of tribal women requires a nuanced and multidimensional approach that moves beyond simplistic assumptions of cultural egalitarianism. This review critically examines existing scholarly literature to explore how women's empowerment has been conceptualized, measured, and operationalized in relation to tribal women in India. By synthesizing studies across economic, educational, political, and legal domains, the paper seeks to identify key empowerment pathways, persistent challenges,

and gaps in policy and research, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of gender equality among tribal women in India.

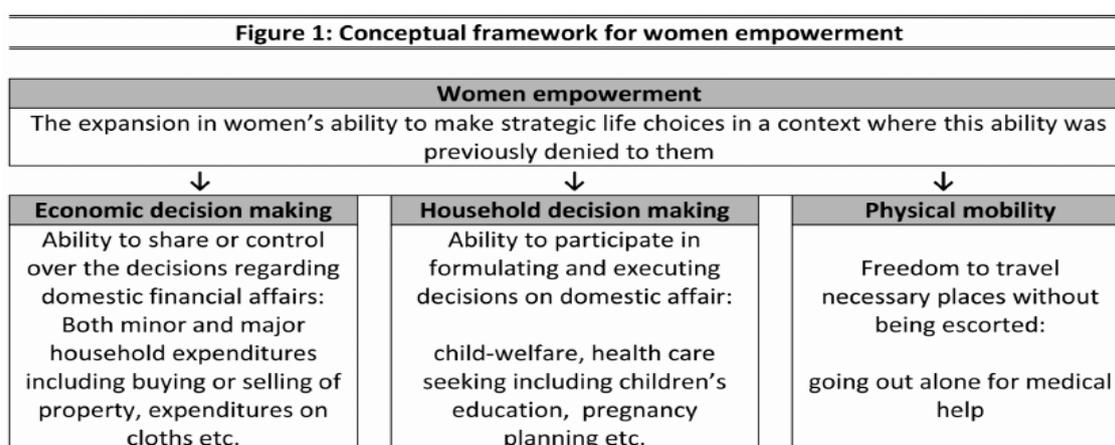
Conceptual Framework of Women's Empowerment:

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept encompassing economic independence, social status, political participation, and psychological self-confidence

(Duflo, 2012). Mayoux (2001) emphasizes empowerment as both a process and an outcome, involving access to resources, agency, and achievements.

Mohapatra (2009) links feminist theory with tribal women's lived experiences, highlighting intersectionality between gender, tribe, and class. Mitra (2008) further argues that empowerment among tribal women cannot be understood independently of caste and ethnic identity.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Tribal Women's Empowerment



https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Conceptual-framework-for-women-empowerment-doi101371-journalpone0104633g001_fig1_264705091

Socio-Economic Status of Tribal Women:

Several studies indicate that tribal women's socio-economic status remains lower than national averages despite their high work participation rates (Bhasin, 2007; Rao, 2014).

Fernandes and Menon (1987) document how deforestation and loss of forest rights disproportionately affect tribal women's livelihoods.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Tribal Women

Dimension	Major Issues
Education	Low literacy, school dropout
Health	Malnutrition, poor access to services
Employment	Informal, low-paid work
Assets	Limited land and property rights
Dimension	Major Issues

Education and Empowerment:

Education is a fundamental right and a critical driver of socio-economic development. However, tribal women in India face significant

barriers that hinder their access to education. Despite various government initiatives and policies aimed at promoting education among tribal populations, the educational attainment of

tribal women remains considerably low compared to their non-tribal counterparts.

Education is widely recognized as a foundational driver of empowerment. Chaudhary (2008) and Padmavathi & Rama Devi (2024) demonstrate that literacy enhances tribal women's awareness of rights, participation in decision-making, and economic independence.

However, barriers such as poverty, early marriage, and lack of educational infrastructure persist (Jena & Dash, 2018). Gender gaps in education continue to undermine long-term empowerment outcomes.

Economic Empowerment and Live hoods:

Economic empowerment has been extensively studied through employment programs and microfinance initiatives.

1. MGNREGA and Employment: Ahangar (2014) and Das (2012) highlight the role of MGNREGA in providing wage employment, financial inclusion, and increased bargaining power within households.

2. Self-Help Groups (SHGs): SHGs have emerged as a powerful tool for tribal women's empowerment. Studies by Jena & Dash (2018) and Mallick et al. (2025) show improvements in savings behavior, entrepreneurship, and social mobility. enhanced awareness of rights and welfare schemes, and improved participation in household and community-level decision-making. These groups also function as platforms for skill development, leadership training, and collective bargaining, thereby facilitating social mobility and greater visibility of tribal women in local development processes.

Table 2: Impact of SHGs on Tribal Women

Indicator	Observed Outcome
Income	Increase
Savings	Improved
Decision-making	Enhanced
Social participation	Strengthened

Political Participation and Local Governance:

Participation in local governance is a crucial indicator of empowerment. Chiring and Komow (2025) document increasing involvement of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, leading to greater visibility and leadership.

However, Sinha & Sinha (2007) note that participation often remains symbolic due to limited autonomy and patriarchal control.

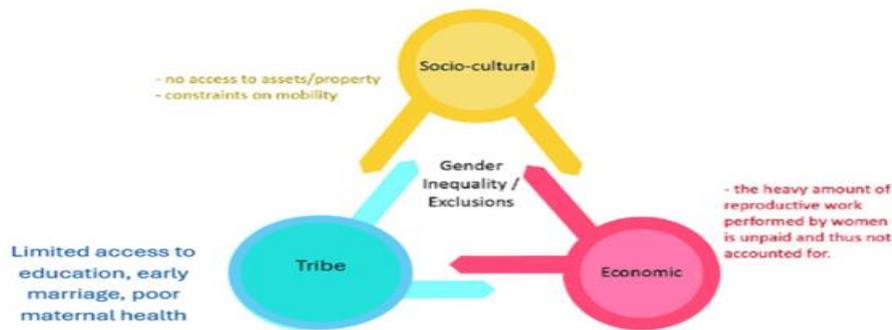
Legal Rights, Forest Rights, and Gender Equality:

The Forest Rights Act (2006) has significant implications for tribal women. Zaidi (2019) emphasizes that secure land and forest rights enhance women's economic security and social status. Nevertheless, implementation gaps limit its transformative potential.

Gender Equality and Intersectionality:

Gender equality among tribal women is shaped by intersecting identities of caste, tribe, and class. The 2024 *Social Science & Medicine* study highlights persistent disparities in empowerment indicators across caste and tribal groups.

Manna (2024) and Sonad & Sangan (2014) argue that empowerment strategies must be culturally sensitive and context-specific to address these inequalities. **In India:** Dalit and tribal women face unique struggles accessing education, healthcare, and legal protection due to intersecting caste, gender, and religious discrimination.

Figure 2: Intersection of Gender, Tribe, and Socio-Economic Inequality

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Gender-inequality-exclusions-derived-from-Gupta-2017_fig1_344663809

Challenges and Research Gaps:

Despite policy initiatives, several challenges remain:

- Regional disparities in empowerment outcomes
- Limited longitudinal studies
- Over-reliance on economic indicators
- Underrepresentation of tribal women's voices

Nisha and Asokhan (2015) stress the need for livelihood diversification and skill development tailored to local contexts.

Policy Implications and Future Directions:

Based on the policy frameworks and initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) and associated organizations in India, the pathways for empowering tribal women focus on education, economic independence, and health.

Based on the reviewed literature, the following policy directions emerge:

- Strengthening education access for tribal girls
- Expanding SHG networks with market linkages
- Ensuring gender-sensitive implementation of forest and land rights
- Promoting genuine political participation

Figure 3: Policy Pathways for Empowering Tribal Women

This review confirms that uniform policy interventions fail to address diverse tribal contexts, leading to regional disparities in empowerment outcomes. Culturally insensitive programs risk reinforcing exclusion rather than alleviating it.

Discussion:

This review synthesizes interdisciplinary literature to examine the empowerment of tribal women in India across socio-economic, educational, political, and legal dimensions. Although tribal women often display relatively higher labor participation within indigenous contexts, their empowerment remains constrained by structural inequalities, weak policy

implementation, and intersecting identities of gender, tribe, and class.

Literature emphasizes that empowerment cannot be measured solely through economic indicators such as income or employment. As argued by Duflo (2012), Mayoux (2001), and Mitra (2008), empowerment is a multidimensional process involving access to resources, agency, and outcomes shaped by social norms and institutions. Despite perceptions of greater gender egalitarianism in some tribal societies, substantive empowerment remains limited. Studies by Rao (2014) and Bhukya (2015) highlight persistent challenges such as restricted control over assets, inadequate access to education and healthcare, and limited political autonomy, particularly in regions affected by displacement and forest alienation.

Education emerges as a critical pathway for empowerment, enhancing rights awareness, confidence, and participation in household and community decision-making (Chaudhary, 2008; Padmavathi & Rama Devi, 2024). However, barriers including poverty, language exclusion, early marriage, migration, and inadequate infrastructure continue to impede educational attainment among tribal women (Jena & Dash, 2018).

Economic initiatives such as MGNREGA and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have contributed to improved financial inclusion, livelihood security, and bargaining power (Ahangar, 2014; Das, 2012; Jena & Dash, 2018; Mallick et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the literature cautions against equating income generation with empowerment, as issues of income control, increased workload, and livelihood sustainability remain inadequately addressed.

Political empowerment through reservation policies has increased the representation of tribal women in local governance institutions (Chiring & Komow,

2025). Yet, participation often remains symbolic due to proxy leadership, patriarchal norms, and limited administrative capacity (Sinha & Sinha, 2007). Similarly, while the Forest Rights Act (2006) offers significant potential by recognizing women's land and forest rights, its impact is constrained by poor implementation, low awareness, and bureaucratic challenges (Zaidi, 2019).

Recent studies employing an intersectional framework (Mohapatra, 2009; Social Science & Medicine, 2024) underscore that tribal women experience compounded disadvantages arising from the intersections of gender, tribe, caste, class, and geographical isolation. These findings highlight the need for context-specific, gender-sensitive, and inclusive empowerment strategies.

Conclusion:

This comprehensive review demonstrates that the empowerment of tribal women in India is a complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent process shaped by education, economic opportunities, political participation, legal rights, and deeply embedded social norms. While constitutional safeguards and development programs such as MGNREGA, SHGs, and the Forest Rights Act have contributed to incremental progress, structural inequalities and implementation gaps continue to constrain transformative change.

The findings highlight that empowerment cannot be achieved through isolated interventions. Instead, it requires integrated, gender-sensitive, and culturally grounded strategies that recognize tribal women not merely as beneficiaries but as active agents of development. Education remains the most sustainable driver of long-term empowerment, while economic initiatives must prioritize control over resources and livelihood diversification. Political empowerment must

move beyond tokenism toward genuine decision-making power, and legal rights must be translated into enforceable and accessible entitlements.

Ultimately, achieving gender equality among tribal women demands intersectional policy frameworks, participatory governance, and inclusive research methodologies that foreground tribal women's voices and knowledge systems. Future research should adopt longitudinal, qualitative, and community-based approaches to capture the dynamic nature of empowerment and inform policies that promote social justice, dignity, and sustainable development for tribal women in India.

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