

Socio-economic Status of Tribal Women in India

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Abstract

The word “tribe” is generally used for a socially cohesive unit, associated with a territory, the members of which regard them as politically autonomous. Comprising about eight percent of the total population of India, the tribal people are among the most vulnerable groups in the country. The tribal women constitute like any other social group, about half of the total population. Provisions made in the Constitution have brought about changes in their position but still, they are confronted with several challenges. The role of women is not only of importance in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. Tribal women in India are hardworking than tribal men and they contribute significantly towards their family income but their income generating sources are limited. The status of tribal women in terms of education, employment, and health is low not just compared to tribal men but also in comparison to women belonging to the general population. This paper attempts to find out the problems faced by tribal women in India and to discuss the strategies that they can consider for handling these challenges successfully.

KEYWORDS:Status of Tribal women, Tribal Women in India, Challenges faces by Tribal Women.

Introduction:

The tribal population in India numerically constitutes a small segment of the total population of the country but is a significant part of the population. The total population of Scheduled Tribes is 84,326,240 as per the Census 2001¹ which accounts for 8.2% of the total population of the country. The majority of the Scheduled tribe population live in rural areas and their population is 10.4 % of the total rural population of the country. The term ‘scheduled tribes’ first appeared in the Constitution of India, to confer certain constitutional privileges and protection to a group of people who are considered disadvantaged and backward. In the Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) defines Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to the Scheduled Tribes (STs) for this Constitution"^{2,3}

Tribal or Adivasis, as they are popularly known as a symbol of self-assertion, comprise around 8.2 percent of the national population. The tribal are concentrated mostly in the central belt of India and parts of the North-East. The status of women in the tribal societies is comparatively better than that of the women in general society—apparently so. The sex ratio of the tribes in India during 1991 showed 971 females per 1000 males while it was 927 females among the general population. Before India’s independence, the tribals were headed by Kings. When the Britishers entered, they were dominating under their reign. Due to the dominating tendency of Britishers, many revolts and rebellions took place which was led by the tribal community. In the Indian

constitution, there are more than 20 Articles and 2 Schedules (Schedule-V & VI) embodied to protect them from inequality and injustice. These are for the welfare of the tribal population which technically includes tribal women as well. Like all other communities, the development of the status of tribal communities also to a large extent depends on the upliftment of the status of tribal women. The popular perception of the tribal women indicates two differing views.⁴Some researchers believe that the tribal women enjoy higher social status compared to their non-tribal counterparts and some other studies indicate a low status for the tribal women.⁵Provisions made by the Constitution over the years have not made much difference to the status of tribal women. Their status is found to be lower than that of women belonging to the general population, Scheduled caste women, and also lower than that of the status of Tribal men.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this paper are:

1. To find out the social and economic status of tribal women in India.
2. To analyze the challenges faced by tribal women.
3. To suggest some strategies for handling the challenges faced by tribal women in India.

Methodology:

This is a theoretical research paper, where secondary information produced by different authors and researchers has been used. For obtaining necessary information, various books, journals as well as websites have been explored by the researcher which has been mentioned in the reference section.

Discussion:

Status of Tribal Women in Society:

The term status means the position of a person in a society. Status has been defined by R.Linton (1936) as a position in a social system.⁶The status of any social group is determined by its levels of health nutrition, literacy education, and standard of living. The tribal women, like women in all social groups, are more illiterate than men. The low educational status is reflected in their lower literacy rate, lower enrolment rate, and their presence in the school.

Women's Role in Social Sphere.

The status of tribal women can be judged mainly by the roles they play in society. Their roles are determined to a large extent through the system of descent. The families try to pass their property by the line of descent. Most of the tribes in India follow a patrilineal system. There are exceptional cases like the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, and Lalung of Meghalaya in the North-East that follow the matrilineal system. The Mappilas of Kerala to are a matrilineal community. There are very rare cases of bilinear descent. The Khasis are often believed to follow matriarchy. The position of a woman to a large extent depends on the kind of family one is placed in. The type of family differs to a large extent

from the type of marriage prevalent in the community. The nuclear family formed through monogamy is the most common type of family prevalent in the tribal communities in India. Some of the tribes in India enter into polygamy. The Todas of Nilgiri or the Bhutias of Ladakh and Sikkim are polyandrous. It is quite often found that two or three wives marrying four or five brothers. This system is called polygynandry. This system is quite common among the Jaunsaris of JaunsarBawar in Uttarakhand. In such marriages, the eldest woman usually wields greater respect and command. Among the Jaunsaris, each family is usually found to have dwellings at different elevations along with the hill ranges. Various studies (Mitra, 2007; Burman Roy, 2012) have suggested that the Garo and Khasi tribes of North East India assign relatively higher positions to women due to the system of matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, and inheritance of property through the female line.^{7,8} But other tribal communities which follow patriarchal norms, the status of women is not as high as it is in matriarchal societies. For some other tribes, such as Ho, Gond, the husband does not always enjoy a dominant role. A Gond woman enjoys equal status with their male counterparts in many aspects of their social life. A study on the Naga women by Hutton (1921) indicated that they have substantial freedom and higher social status.⁹ This indicates that the status of tribal women is not the same in all places, rather they vary according to the tribal group and the social structure.

Women's role in Health Status.

Status is also determined by health conditions. The tribal group's health status is lower compared to that of the general population. They have a high infant mortality rate, higher fertility rate, lack of awareness regarding diseases and health care, drinking water provisions, hygiene. In many parts of India tribal population suffers from chronic infections and water-borne diseases, deficiency diseases. The incidence of infant mortality was found to be very high among some of the tribes. Malnutrition is common among them and it has affected the general health of the tribal children. It increases vulnerability to infection and leads to chronic illness which sometimes may affect the brain.¹⁰

Literacy Trends in Tribal Women.

Due to a poor education system or lack of quality education, tribal women remain in a cycle of illiteracy. The school curriculum and education system do not create much interest in them. Chowdhuri(1988) attempted to examine the socio-economic condition of the Scheduled tribe women in West Bengal in a comparative setting with scheduled caste and nonscheduled women. The main findings were that only 5.01 percent of Scheduled Tribe females were noted as literate in comparison to Scheduled Caste women who were 13.70 percent and the nonscheduled population was 37.43 percent. This level was quite low as compared to the overall rate of females who are literate. This study was mainly based on the data collected from the Census office and different studies conducted by the Cultural Research Institute, Calcutta. Various reasons have been attributed to the low level of literacy among the scheduled tribe girls.¹¹

Women's Role in Economic Sphere.

The status of the tribal women usually depends on the economic roles they play. They are economically dis-empowered by not having land tenure despite their role and contributions as custodians of the land and natural resources. Millions of tribal women depend on the land, forest, and water for their livelihoods and for providing food security to their families and communities. The labor of tribal women are valued less and paid less than men in the private and public sectors despite the national scheme of MNEREGA under which equal wages are required. The tribal women in the North-East were famous for their weaving skills. Almost every tribal girl used to learn to weave at home. But now with the commercialization of the products, the women have lost control over the designs as the market has come to be the decisive factor. Tribal women as such enjoy very little control over immovable property. They hardly ever inherit the land, particularly in patrilineal societies. The tribal women generally inherit the ornaments from the mother. The customary laws do not permit them to own land. It is mainly due to this reason that often the Santal widows are declared as a witch and murdered by close relatives. Women among some of the tribes of the North-East are very proficient in doing business. It is mainly the Khasi women who run shops in the markets of Shillong and Longhope in Meghalaya. Women play an important role in their household economy. They work in most operations of all sectors of the local economy and for longer hours each day than men. In addition to the domestic and reproductive activities associated with household maintenance, they also collect and gather free goods especially fuel, fodder, and water. Tribal women operate effectively in most economic and social institutions, participating in both local and migrant labor activities. Women's autonomy in terms of decision-making is highly constrained among tribals. They have little access to, and exercise limited control over resources, and few are free from threats and violence at the hands of their husbands. Working for wages is not necessarily an indicator of autonomy. The wage-earning tribal women cannot decide to work on their own, nor do they have control over their earnings. The marriage pattern and family ties ensure that women are not cut off from family support. In a study by Singh and Rajyalaxmi (1993), the status of tribal women in terms of their demography, health, education, and employment have been discussed. Since independence, various protections have been given to the tribal population by the Constitution of India. The study highlighted some aspects of tribal work; tribal women work equally with their male counterparts with lower pay, sexual exploitation. Tribal women don't have property rights, they have a lower literacy rate than scheduled caste and the general population. Tribal women are not healthy and suffer from malnutrition and various diseases. The study highlighted the need to improve the status of tribal girls, to bring about change in the status of a tribal woman.¹²

Challenges faced by Tribal Women:

Most tribal's faces several challenges which they need to overcome to improve their status in society. The researcher intends to discuss here the issues faced by tribal women in particular.

Absence of any fixed livelihood:

With the impetus to the development process after independence, pressure on land and forests increased. With the concepts of protected forests and national forests gaining currency, the tribes felt uprooted from their cultural moorings and with no secure means of livelihood. Tribal women are mainly not engaged in any kind of continuous work and much like their male counterparts are found to work in agriculture. The economic conditions of households are related to other aspects of their life.

Lack of Education:

Most of the tribal women work outside their homes and are engaged in various activities. They work to earn money for their family. The women's work involves daily labor, agricultural work. Even young children and girls go to work along with their mothers. Most of the time they do not go to school regularly or become dropouts from school. Even the parents in very poor families don't always want to send the children to school because then their helping hands in work would be reduced.

Problems of Health and Nutrition:

Because of economic backwardness and insecure livelihood, the tribal women face health problems, such as the prevalence of disease, like malaria, cholera, tuberculosis, diarrhea, and jaundice, problems associated with malnutrition like iron deficiency and anemia, high infant mortality rates, low levels of life expectancy, etc.

Gender Issues:

The degradation of the natural environment, particularly through the destruction of forests and a rapidly shrinking resource base, has had its impact on the status of women. The opening of the tribal belts to mining, industries, and commercialization has exposed tribal men and women to the ruthless operations of the market economy, giving rise to consumerism and commoditization of women.

Strategies for promoting a change in the status of tribal women in India Suggestion:

Low levels of economic activity and living conditions below the poverty level are a major problem faced by tribal women. A practical way of dealing with this problem can be to provide skills and training to women which will help them in building up self-help groups. A proper awareness campaign should be organized to create awareness about the importance of education. Extensive literacy campaigns in the tribal-dominated districts may be undertaken on a priority basis to literate the tribal. The health of the tribal women is another aspect that needs attention because the tribal women work very hard and the income of the family depends on the efforts of the tribal women. Among the tribal women, the infant mortality rate is found to be higher as compared to the national average, which is mainly due to their lack of awareness and facilities of childcare. Tribal women suffer from nutritional deficiency. If economic, educational, and health aspects are given adequate attention, then these factors may contribute to an increase in the

decision-making abilities of the tribal women. If they are convinced about the significance of financial institutions and if the banks extend their co-operation to these women then their security about financial matters will be enhanced. Moreover, if efforts are given to make women literate then that may help them to face the outside world in a confident manner, which in turn will enrich their lives.

Conclusion

Despite various constitutional provisions and policies for the tribal population as a whole, it is a hard reality that the tribals in general & tribal women in specific, still are lagging in many respects. Their low level of economic activities, social backwardness, low level of literacy, poor health conditions makes it important for a systematic process of tribal development. They work very hard and contribute significantly towards the economic condition of the family, but they are still in poverty mostly because no proper efforts are oriented towards them.

During the plan periods, various programs are taken up for the development of the Scheduled Tribe population and a lot of betterment has been already done, but still, a lot more requires to be done. The families need to have a sufficient income to enable them to cross the poverty levels. Since economic status determines other aspects of life and living conditions, it is of utmost importance. Education for tribes is an essential aspect of development and their upliftment.

It is a vital instrument to bring about a change in the cultural norms and patterns of life of the tribes and to change their outlook and made them economically independent. Education will enable them to take up jobs so that they can improve their situation. The social and economic status of the scheduled tribe to a large extent depends on educational attainment. In the present context, no one can remain completely isolated, but they are influenced by the growth of modern society and culture. The government has been providing a lot of support and grant for the education of Tribal students.

This will help to increase the literacy rate and it will lead to the right way to development. The health status of the tribals is explored to assess their awareness regarding their health. Sometimes they lack the essential nutrients. Many times they suffer from various diseases as there is a lack of health and hygiene awareness. Thus increasing the literacy rate and providing opportunities for gainful employment for tribal women will be instrumental in bringing about a change in the status of tribal women in India and to handle challenges successfully.

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