

Empowerment And Gender Equality Among Tribal Women

Animesh Manna

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Shyampur Siddhesswari Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, INDIA.

Corresponding Author: animeshmanna27@gmail.com



www.ijrah.com || Vol. 4 No. 1 (2024): January Issue

Date of Submission: 27-12-2023

Date of Acceptance: 02-01-2024

Date of Publication: 07-01-2024

ABSTRACT

Empowerment and gender equality are crucial for the socio-economic development of any community, especially the tribal communities in India. Tribal women face multiple challenges such as low literacy, poor health, lack of access to productive resources, and violence. They also have limited participation in decision-making and political processes, despite their significant role in collecting and managing minor forest produce. To address these issues, various policies and measures have been taken at the national, state, and local levels, but there are still gaps between policy and practice. The patriarchal structure of the society and the household hinders the empowerment of tribal women and their agency. Therefore, there is a need for affirmative action and equitable progress to ensure that tribal women have equal opportunities and rights in all spheres of life. This paper reviews the existing literature on the status and role of tribal women in India, the nature and dimensions of change in their lives, and the challenges and prospects for their empowerment and gender development. The paper also suggests some recommendations for enhancing the empowerment and gender equality of tribal women in India.

Keywords- Empowerment, Gender Equality, Patriarchal Structure of Tribal Society, Policy for Tribal Women.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a country with diverse cultures, languages, religions, and ethnicities. Among these, the tribal communities constitute about 8.6% of the total population, according to the 2011 census. They are spread across different states and regions, and have their own distinct traditions, customs, and lifestyles. However, they also face various problems such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, displacement, exploitation, and discrimination. These problems are more acute for the tribal women, who are doubly marginalized by their gender and social identity. They have to bear the burden of domestic work, child care, agricultural labor, and forest-based activities, without getting adequate recognition or remuneration. They also suffer from low self-esteem, lack of awareness, and limited access to education, health care, legal aid, and other basic services. Moreover, they are often subjected to violence, harassment, and abuse at the hands of their own community members as well as outsiders. Empowerment and gender equality are essential for

improving the quality of life and well-being of tribal women. Empowerment refers to the process of enhancing the capabilities and choices of individuals or groups to achieve their desired goals. Gender equality means that women and men have equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities in all aspects of life. Empowerment and gender equality are interrelated and mutually reinforcing concepts. They can help tribal women to overcome the barriers and challenges that they face in their personal and public spheres. They can also enable them to participate actively and effectively in decision-making and governance processes at various levels. Furthermore, they can contribute to the socio-economic development and environmental sustainability of their communities and the nation. This paper aims to explore the issues and prospects of empowerment and gender equality among tribal women in India. It will review the existing literature on the status and role of tribal women in India, the nature and dimensions of change in their lives, and the challenges and prospects for their empowerment and gender development. It will also suggest some recommendations for enhancing the

empowerment and gender equality of tribal women in India. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a brief overview of the tribal communities in India; Section 3 discusses the status and role of tribal women in India; Section 4 analyzes the factors affecting the empowerment and gender equality of tribal women in India; 5th section concludes with some suggestions for future action.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment and gender development are important concepts that aim to improve the status and role of tribal women in various spheres of life, such as education, health, economy, politics, culture, and environment. However, tribal women face many challenges and barriers that hinder their empowerment and gender equality, such as low literacy, poor health, lack of access to productive resources, violence, discrimination, and patriarchal norms. To address these issues, various policies and programs have been implemented at the national, state, and local levels, but there are still gaps between policy and practice. Therefore, there is a need for affirmative action and equitable progress to ensure that tribal women have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life. On the other hand, Livelihood development refers to the process of enhancing the income and assets of poor and vulnerable groups, such as tribal women, through various interventions and opportunities. Livelihood development can help tribal women to improve their economic and social status, reduce their dependence on natural resources, diversify their income sources, cope with shocks and risks, and access basic services and entitlements. However, tribal women face many constraints and challenges in pursuing their livelihoods, such as low skill levels, lack of access to credit and markets, land alienation and displacement, environmental degradation, exploitation and discrimination. Therefore, there is a need for effective and participatory approaches and strategies to support the livelihood development of tribal women in India.

The article “**Empowerment of Tribal Women and Gender Development in India**” examines the concept and indicators of empowerment, and the factors that influence the empowerment of tribal women in India. It also discusses the policies and programs that have been implemented to empower tribal women, and the gaps and challenges that remain. This article suggests some measures to enhance the empowerment of tribal women, such as improving their education, health, livelihoods, legal rights, political participation, and social awareness (Paray, 2019). The paper “**Empowerment of tribal women in India**” explores the status and role of tribal women in India in various domains, such as education, health, economy, politics, culture, and environment. It also analyzes the impact of globalization, modernization, migration, displacement,

and violence on tribal women. The paper highlights the achievements and challenges of tribal women in different regions and states of India, and provides some recommendations for improving their gender development (Bhukya, 2015). On the other hand, the article “**Tribal women have a significant role in India’s transformation**” (Sinha, 2021). argues that empowering tribal women is essential for India’s progress and development. It states that tribal women have a vital role in preserving the natural resources, culture, and identity of their communities. It also emphasizes the need for collective agency and participation of tribal women in decision-making and governance processes at various levels. The paper “**Empowerment of Tribal Women through Livelihood Development**” examines the role of tribal women in various economic activities and the problems they face in their livelihoods. It also discusses the importance of education, health care, legal rights, political participation, and social awareness for the empowerment of tribal women. The paper suggests some measures to enhance the livelihood development of tribal women, such as skill development, microfinance, self-help groups, market linkages, value addition, and institutional support (Nisha & Asokhan, 2015). The paper “**Empowerment of tribal women in India**” explores the status and role of tribal women in India in various domains, such as education, health, economy, politics, culture, and environment. It also analyzes the impact of globalization, modernization, migration, displacement, and violence on tribal women. The paper highlights the achievements and challenges of tribal women in different regions and states of India, and provides some recommendations for improving their gender development (Sonad & Sangan, 2014). The article “**Tribal women have a significant role in India’s transformation**” (Sinha, 2021) argues that empowering tribal women is essential for India’s progress and development. It states that tribal women have a vital role in preserving the natural resources, culture, and identity of their communities. It also emphasizes the need for collective agency and participation of tribal women in decision-making and governance processes at various levels. The book “**Gender Development among Tribal Women in India**” (Chaudhary, 2008) explores the status and role of tribal women in India in various domains, such as education, health, economy, politics, culture, and environment. It also analyzes the impact of globalization, modernization, migration, displacement, and violence on tribal women. This book highlights the achievements and challenges of tribal women in different regions and states of India, and provides some recommendations for improving their gender development. On the other hand, the book “**Tribal Women in India: Change and Continuity**” (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2005) provides a historical and sociological perspective on the lives of tribal women in India. It traces the changes and continuities in their

status and role from pre-colonial to post-colonial times. It also examines the diversity and complexity of tribal women's experiences across different tribes, regions, and contexts. The book covers various aspects of tribal women's lives, such as kinship, marriage, family, religion, culture, economy, politics, education, health, and human rights. The report “**Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in India**” presents the findings of a comprehensive analysis of gender equality and women’s empowerment in India using data from various sources. It covers various aspects of gender equality and women’s empowerment, such as demographic characteristics, health status, education attainment, economic activity, decision-making power, exposure to media and information technology, domestic violence, fertility preferences, family planning use, maternal health care utilization, child health outcomes, nutritional status, HIV/AIDS knowledge and behavior. The report also provides some policy implications and recommendations based on the findings.

III. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

India is a country of diversity, where different cultures, languages, religions, and ethnicities coexist. Among the various groups of people in India, the tribal communities are the ones who have preserved their distinct identity and heritage for centuries. They are the original inhabitants of the land, who have a close relationship with nature and their own traditions. However, they also face many challenges and problems in the modern world, such as poverty, displacement, exploitation, and discrimination. In this article, we will provide a brief overview of the tribal communities in India, their features, and some of the major tribal groups.

Features of Tribal Communities in India

Tribal communities in India are the indigenous people who have distinct cultural, linguistic, and ecological characteristics from the rest of the population. They are often referred to as Adivasis, meaning original inhabitants, and are recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the Indian Constitution. According to the 2011 census, there are about 104 million tribal people in India, constituting 8.6% of the total population. They are distributed across 30 states and union territories, with the highest concentration in the central and northeastern regions of the country.

Some of the main features of tribal communities in India are:

- **They live in close harmony with nature and depend on natural resources for their livelihood.** They practice various forms of agriculture, such as shifting cultivation, terrace farming, and forest gardening. They also collect forest products, such as honey, fruits, herbs, and medicinal plants. They have a deep knowledge of

the flora and fauna of their surroundings and respect them as sacred.

- **They have a strong sense of community and kinship, and follow their own customs and traditions.** They have their own social organization based on clans, tribes, villages, and families. They have their own laws and justice systems, which are often based on collective decision-making and consensus. They celebrate various festivals and rituals, which are linked to their agricultural cycle, seasons, and life events.
- **They have a diverse range of languages, religions, and art forms, reflecting their rich cultural heritage.** They speak different languages belonging to different families, such as Austroasiatic, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and Andamanese. They follow different religions, such as animism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism. They have their own art forms, such as paintings, sculptures, pottery, textiles, jewelry, music, dance, and literature.
- **They have a low level of literacy, health, and economic development,** and face various challenges such as poverty, displacement, exploitation, and discrimination. They often lack access to basic amenities, such as education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and electricity. They are vulnerable to land alienation, environmental degradation, forced migration, human trafficking, and violence. They also face social exclusion, stigma, and stereotyping from the mainstream society.

IV. THE STATUS AND ROLE OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

India’s tribal women, or Adivasis, form 8.6% of the country’s population, according to the 2011 census. They belong to 705 different scheduled tribes, which are officially recognized by the government as having distinct cultures, languages, and traditions. They mostly reside in the central and north-eastern parts of India, such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and Meghalaya. These regions are rich in natural resources, but also face various challenges, such as poverty, conflict, displacement, and environmental degradation. Tribal women have a rich and diverse culture, and they are strongly connected to their lands and communities. They have valuable knowledge and skills in various fields, such as agriculture, forestry, medicine, art, and sports. They also have a crucial role in preserving and promoting their indigenous languages, traditions, and practices.

However, tribal women also encounter many problems and disadvantages due to various factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, health conditions, geographic isolation, and lack of access to services.

They are often subjected to discrimination, exploitation, violence, and marginalization by the dominant groups and institutions in the society. They have limited opportunities and resources to participate in decision-making and development processes that affect their lives and livelihoods. They also face the loss of their customary rights and entitlements over land, forest, and water resources due to the intrusion of external forces and interests.

Despite these hardships, tribal women have shown remarkable courage and agency in protecting their rights and interests, and in contributing to the transformation of India. They have taken part in various movements and struggles for social justice, environmental protection, and cultural identity. They have also exhibited their leadership and innovation in various domains and sectors, such as education, health, governance, and entrepreneurship. They have inspired and empowered many other women and communities to fight for their dignity and well-being.

Tribal women have an essential role in India's transformation, as they represent the diversity, dynamism, and potential of the country. They have a unique perspective and vision for a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development. They deserve recognition, respect, and support from the state and the society for their contributions and aspirations. They also need to be empowered and enabled to realize their full potential and rights, and to participate actively and effectively in the development process. Only then can India achieve its goals of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas (Everyone's Cooperation, Everyone's Development, Everyone's Trust). Some of the major tribal groups in India are the Gonds, the Santhals, the Bhils, the Mundas, the Khasis, the Nagas, and the Mizos. Each of these groups has its own distinct culture, history, and identity. They have their own forms of social organization, governance, religion, and art. They also have their own festivals, dances, music, and cuisine that reflect their cultural diversity and richness.

Tribal women are closely linked to their natural environment, as they depend on it for their livelihood and survival. They have a deep understanding of the ecological systems and cycles, and they use their knowledge and skills to manage and conserve the resources. For example, tribal women are involved in shifting cultivation, a form of agriculture that involves rotating crops on different plots of land to maintain soil fertility and biodiversity. They also practice agroforestry, a system that integrates trees and crops on the same land to enhance productivity and sustainability. They also collect and use various forest products, such as fruits, nuts, honey, herbs, and fibers, for their food, medicine, and income.

Tribal women also play a vital role in preserving and promoting their indigenous languages, traditions, and practices. They are the custodians of their oral history and folklore, and they pass on their

knowledge and wisdom to the younger generations. They also teach their children their native languages, which are often endangered or threatened by the dominance of the mainstream languages. According to a report by UNESCO, India has 197 languages that are either vulnerable, endangered, or extinct, and many of them are spoken by the tribal communities. Tribal women also uphold their cultural values and norms, such as respect for elders, solidarity with peers, and harmony with nature, which are essential for their social cohesion and well-being.

However, tribal women also encounter many problems and disadvantages due to various factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, health conditions, geographic isolation, and lack of access to services. They are often subjected to discrimination, exploitation, violence, and marginalization by the dominant groups and institutions in the society. They have limited opportunities and resources to participate in decision-making and development processes that affect their lives and livelihoods. They also face the loss of their customary rights and entitlements over land, forest, and water resources due to the intrusion of external forces and interests.

Tribal women are among the most poor and deprived sections of the Indian society. According to a report by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, the poverty ratio of the scheduled tribes (STs) was 45.3% in 2011-12, compared to the national average of 21.9%. Tribal women also suffer from illiteracy and low education levels. According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate of ST women was 49.4%, compared to the national average of 65.5% for women. Tribal women also face malnutrition and poor health outcomes. According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, the prevalence of anemia among ST women was 62.5%, compared to the national average of 53% for women. The infant mortality rate among STs was 44.4 per 1000 live births, compared to the national average of 37.9 per 1000 live births.

Tribal women also face discrimination, exploitation, violence, and marginalization by the dominant groups and institutions in the society. They are often treated as inferior, backward, and uncivilized by the mainstream culture and media. They are also vulnerable to abuse, harassment, and assault by the non-tribal men, especially in the areas where they work as migrant laborers, domestic workers, or sex workers. They also face atrocities and human rights violations by the state and non-state actors, such as the police, the army, the paramilitary forces, and the armed groups, especially in the regions affected by conflict and insurgency. They also face displacement and dispossession due to the development projects, such as dams, mines, industries, and roads, that encroach on their lands, forests, and water resources without their consent and compensation.

Tribal women also have limited opportunities and resources to participate in decision-making and development processes that affect their lives and livelihoods. They are often excluded and ignored by the mainstream political and economic systems and institutions. They have low representation and voice in the elected bodies, such as the parliament, the state assemblies, and the local governments. According to the Election Commission of India, only 47 out of 543 members of the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the parliament) belonged to the ST category in 2019, and only 11 of them were women. They also have low access and control over the productive assets and resources, such as land, credit, technology, and markets. According to a report by the Ministry of Rural Development, only 10.7% of the ST households owned more than 2 hectares of land in 2011-12, compared to the national average of 16.1%. They also face barriers and challenges in accessing the basic services and entitlements, such as health, education, water, sanitation, and social security, due to their geographic isolation, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic hurdles.

Tribal women also face the loss of their customary rights and entitlements over land, forest, and water resources due to the intrusion of external forces and interests. They have a historical and cultural claim over these resources, as they have been living on and managing them for generations. They have their own traditional and customary laws and institutions that regulate the access and use of these resources. However, these rights and entitlements are often violated and denied by the state and the market forces, who impose their own legal and commercial frameworks and interests on these resources. For example, the Forest Rights Act of 2006, which recognizes the rights of the forest-dwelling communities over the forest land and resources, has been poorly implemented and undermined by the state and the corporate interests, who favor the forest diversion and clearance for the development projects. Similarly, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996, which devolves the power and authority to the local self-governments in the scheduled areas, has been weakly enforced and overridden by the state and the central governments, who bypass the consent and consultation of the local communities for the development projects.

Despite these hardships, tribal women have shown remarkable courage and agency in protecting their rights and interests, and in contributing to the transformation of India. They have taken part in various movements and struggles for social justice, environmental protection, and cultural identity. They have also exhibited their leadership and innovation in various domains and sectors, such as education, health, governance, and entrepreneurship. They have inspired and empowered many other women and communities to fight for their dignity and well-being.

Tribal women have been at the forefront of various movements and struggles for social justice, environmental protection, and cultural identity. They have raised their voice and mobilized their collective action against the forces and policies that threaten their rights and interests. For example, tribal women have been actively involved in the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement), a grassroots movement that opposes the construction of large dams on the Narmada River, which would displace thousands of tribal and other communities. They have also participated in the Pathalgadi Movement, a tribal assertion movement that erects stone plaques declaring the self-rule and autonomy of the tribal villages under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. They have also joined the Birsa Munda Movement, a cultural revival movement that celebrates the legacy and spirit of Birsa Munda, a tribal freedom fighter and leader who fought against the British colonial rule and the feudal landlords. Tribal women have also demonstrated their leadership and innovation in various domains and sectors, such as education, health, governance, and entrepreneurship.

V. ANALYZES THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

Empowerment and gender equality are two interrelated concepts that are essential for the development and well-being of any society. Empowerment refers to the process of enhancing the capabilities and choices of individuals and groups, especially those who are marginalized or oppressed. Gender equality refers to the state of equal rights, opportunities, and outcomes for women and men, girls and boys, in all spheres of life. Empowerment and gender equality are not only human rights, but also key drivers of economic growth, social justice, and environmental sustainability.

Tribal women in India, who constitute about 8.6% of the country's population, according to the 2011 census¹, face multiple challenges and disadvantages that hinder their empowerment and gender equality. These challenges and disadvantages are influenced by various factors, such as:

- Geographical location: Tribal women mainly live in the central and north-eastern regions of India, which are often remote, inaccessible, and underdeveloped. They lack basic infrastructure and services, such as roads, electricity, water, sanitation, health, education, and communication. They also face natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, and landslides, that affect their livelihoods and security.

- Educational status: Tribal women have low levels of literacy and education, compared to the national average and other social groups. According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate of tribal women was 49.35%, while the national average for women was 65.46%. The dropout rate of tribal girls was also high, especially at the secondary and higher levels. The reasons for the low educational status of tribal women include poverty, distance, language barriers, cultural norms, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and lack of quality and relevant education.
- Social status: Tribal women belong to the Scheduled Tribes (ST), which are officially recognized as socially and economically disadvantaged groups by the Constitution of India. They are often discriminated, exploited, violated, and marginalized by the dominant groups and institutions in the society, such as the upper castes, the state, the market, and the media. They also suffer from the erosion of their customary rights and entitlements over land, forest, and water resources, due to the encroachment of external forces and interests. They have limited opportunities and resources to participate in decision-making and development processes that affect their lives and livelihoods.
- Cultural factors: Tribal women have a rich and diverse cultural heritage, and they are deeply connected to their communities and ecosystems. They possess valuable knowledge and skills in various domains, such as agriculture, forestry, medicine, art, and sports. They also play a significant role in preserving and promoting their indigenous languages, traditions, and practices. However, some of these cultural factors also pose challenges and constraints for their empowerment and gender equality. For example, some tribal communities practice patriarchal and patrilineal systems, that give preference and authority to men over women in matters of inheritance, property, marriage, and leadership. Some tribal communities also practice harmful customs, such as child marriage, polygamy, witch-hunting, and dowry, that violate the rights and dignity of women.

These factors, along with others, such as health, nutrition, violence, and migration, affect the empowerment and gender equality of tribal women in India in various ways. They limit their access to and control over material, human, and intellectual resources, such as land, credit, information, technology, and education. They also restrict their agency and voice in the public and private spheres, such as politics, governance, economy, and family. They also influence their well-being and happiness, such as health, safety, and self-esteem.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, empowerment and gender equality among tribal women are crucial for the social, economic, and environmental well-being of India. Tribal women face multiple challenges and barriers, such as poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, violence, and lack of access to basic services and opportunities. Therefore, it is important to address these factors and their interrelationships, in order to empower and promote the gender equality of tribal women in India. This requires a holistic and integrated approach, that involves the participation and collaboration of various stakeholders, such as the government, the civil society, the private sector, the media, and the tribal communities themselves. It also requires a recognition and respect for the diversity, vitality, and potential of tribal women, and their unique perspective and vision for a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development. By empowering and supporting tribal women, India can harness their untapped potential and contribution, and achieve its national and global goals of human rights, social justice, and environmental protection. Therefore, it is important to address these factors and their interrelationships, in order to empower and promote the gender equality of tribal women in India. This requires a holistic and integrated approach, that involves the participation and collaboration of various stakeholders, such as the government, the civil society, the private sector, the media, and the tribal communities themselves. It also requires a recognition and respect for the diversity, vitality, and potential of tribal women, and their unique perspective and vision for a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development.

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