

TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA: THE GENDER INEQUALITIES AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

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Abstract

There is a kind of misbelief that tribal women have usually enjoyed a higher social status in their communities than Indian women in general. However, some legal studies contravene this belief. In tribal societies, the role of women is pivotal and superabundant. According to the 2011 Census, the tribal population constitutes almost 8.6% of the total population of the country, and the demographic statistics reveal that they have been underprivileged for many decades because of the mass number of the tribal population residing in different rural zones. Like other social groups, tribal women have been facing problems related to reproductive health, economic backwardness, and education. For the research purpose both primary and secondary data have been utilised; pre-existing literature, preliminary studies, published data set of government reports and surveys, so the present paper focuses on the deleterious impact of gender disparities among tribal women through an analysis of the GDI indicators like literacy rate, health, work participation, poverty, and economic resources. The GDI indicators have been extensively observed and indicated as the primary cause of these issues is prevailing inequalities in the tribal communities, lack of awareness, illiteracy, land alienation, and being isolated from the outer world. Therefore, the primary goal of this research paper is to identify the significant gender issues that have considerable implications on the social life of tribal women and critically examine the key factors that contribute to gender disparities.

Keywords: education, gender disparities, reproductive health, tribal women.

“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.”

— Swami Vivekananda

Introduction

At present, the tribal population of India (104.28 million), which means 8.6 % of the total population, is ampler than that of any other country in the world. Only 10 percent of them live in urban areas and the rest of them a significant part live in rural areas, which leads them all socio-economic and as well as political backwardness. The tribal communities have been correctly described as victims and refugees of development in the country. Dr. D.N. Mujumdar, in his book, ‘Race and culture of India’ describes the tribe as such, “Tribe is a collection of families or a group of occupying the same territorial region, speak their mother tongue and observe certain optimistic regulations and religious taboos regarding marriage, professions, and occupation. Additionally,

they have developed a well-assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligation.”¹ The colonial administration used the term ‘tribe’ first time for identifying the primitive communities with distinct culture and language. The realm outlooks of tribes are dominated by some influences such as animism, naturism, shamanism, and occultism. They are also assumed as ‘Adivasis’ because they are deemed to be the autochthones of the nation. ‘Adivasis’ are also known as ‘Vanyajati’ as they are habitually dwelling in forestry, undulating, mountain terrains, and remote areas.²

After Independence, a great awakening had emanated in India. The political leaders, framers of our Constitution, had seen the plight of the tribal people. Therefore they adopted various measures to protect and promote the interest of the tribal population. The recognition of the welfare state gave new hope to the status and sufferings of the tribal people, from centuries who had neglected, isolated, exploited, discriminated degraded, and remained far behind the national mainstream.

Notwithstanding, there have been huge debates and arguments about gender and gender-related issues in tribes of India over several years. Tribal Women are still treated unequally in various areas, including women’s status in society, their education, health, economic position, gender equality, etc. The vast majority of the women population who are surviving in rural areas or tribal areas are still facing systemic barriers and poverty. These vulnerable women strive not only for gender equality but for their very survival.³

India is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979. In the Convention, it has been clearly stated that all forms of discrimination against women must be eliminated, and they have the right to equality with men. The Convention broadly defines discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made based on sex which has been intentionally or unintentionally impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of women’s rights and also recognises the fundamental causes of gender discrimination and genders stereotyping.”⁴ India is one of such countries where gender discrimination is prevalent; in fact, male domination is quite strong, and so is the oppression of women.

Review of Literature

Azra Musavi and Juhi Gupta (2020) have represented a comprehensive analysis of different aspects of concerns about the exclusion of women of marginalised communities of India. It explored a fruitful discussion on the various magnitudes where women confront challenges and complexities of the life associated with them. The study is not limited to explore issues and challenges, but also it has thrown a light on constitutional, judicial, and political aspects on the concerned topic. It also provided fresh perspectives for understanding the present scenario of the marginalised women in India.

Nadeem Hasnain (2007) has glimpsed the concept and definition of ‘Tribe.’ The study provided the ethnographic profiles of the selected Indian Tribes. A detailed history of their culture and community has been evaluated.

1D. N. Majumdar, “Races and Cultures of India”(4th ed.),Asia Publishing House, Bombay, (1944) p. 15.

2S. Sahu, “Tribal Women and their Participation in Developmental Activities,” In S. Tripathy, Unorganised Women Labour in India. Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi(1996), pp. 53-54.

3M. Mukhopadhyay, “Silver Shackles: Women and Development in India”, Oxfam, Oxford, (1984).

4UN. *Convention on Elimination of all kinds Of Discrimination Against Women*. United Nations, UN Generl Assembly, New York, (1979).

Ashwini Deshpande & Smriti Sharma (2015) concerning India, the study has identified disadvantages that multi-faceted, caste, and gender are recognised as two identical factors of social stratification. Women and girls of lower caste groups experience a range of inequalities: in health and nutrition, education, wages, occupation and ownership, control, and access to assets and resources. It is one of the studies on women in economic development in India. This study has examined the difficulties and issues of women in India. It concluded with an observation that illiteracy, poverty, early marriage, and undernutrition are massive hurdles in their way of development and empowerment.

Dr.Ramakrishnappa (2015) this paper addresses the socio-economic status and empowerment of the scheduled tribes' women in Karnataka. The study observed that there are significant gaps between policy and advancements and the actual emancipation of tribal women. Women's empowerment is also determined as women's economic, social and political identity and their weightage. The majority of tribal women are in rural areas, and they got less education, health, and productive resources, among others, are inadequate.

Objectives

- To assess and review the status of tribal women in India.
- To explore the plight of tribal women concerning the extent of gender inequalities.

Methodology

The present study has been undertaken based on a secondary source of data. We have utilized published data in many forms, which encompass books, journals, newspapers, Governmental reports, Census reports, websites, etc.

Hypothesis

1. There is a considerable negative impact of gender disparity on the socio economic-condition of tribal women in India.
2. Tribal women have been facing problems related to reproductive health, economic backwardness, and education due to gender disparity.

Status of Tribal Women in India

Across 705 distinct tribes have been inhabited in different regions of the Indian subcontinent. The majority of the tribal population are residing in the north-eastern states of Mizoram and Lakshadweep (94.4 %), Meghalaya (86.1 %), and Nagaland (86.5 %). The non-tribal States are Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, and Pondicherry. As we earlier mentioned that India has a total tribal population of 8.6 percent of the total population of India. The discrimination against women is intensive in the patriarchal tribal areas. Also, in big cities, tribal women are deprived of fundamental rights. They have no choice in any sphere. Decisions of lives are taken without their consent. One typical reason for gender discrimination is the rigid culture, ritual servitude, and strict customs of their community that keeps the women suppressed and unaware of their rights. However, it also revealed that the socio-economic status of women in tribal society in general comparatively non-tribal. However, what the real scenario is, like other social groups, they are oppressed, sexually harassed, and dominated in some way or other.

Moreover, the tribal women are prone to sexual harassment in their society. Also, they face the same situation in the urban areas where they venture for work. The tribal women are considered as a sex symbol, black beauty, who could be used in any possible way, could be ridiculed, and teased, and compelled to offer their bodies for a few bucks. The urban community can never grant sexual freedom in tribal society. The tribal women are thought to be chaotic and accustomed to free sexual intercourse. Therefore, when they travel to far off places for the need for employment, they are prone to sexual harassment, exploitation, and forced to act as a sex worker. Most of the tribal women are unwaged and unskilled. Hence, the naked truth is that they sell their body for money because they have no other options. They have family and kids to support, and some women work

as physical labour in agricultural fields and forests to meet their daily needs. The hardships and struggles of the powerless and defenceless tribal women go unnoticed by society, and no adequate measures are taken to protect and support them.

One of the reasons for this type of dealing could be the timid nature of the tribal women who are always fearful about their social defamation, and they rarely file a complaint about a violation of their rights and not prefer to go to the eminent authority or the police. Since the tribal community is found educationally backward /illiterate, the majority of the tribes live below the poverty line, and they are economically unstable. So, tribal communities and women remain marginalized and continue to suffer discrimination. The right to achieve gender justice is a cumbersome task. The perception of gender issues varies from person to person.

Gender Biases in Education

Education is a medium through which society becomes civilized, which leads to the advancement of a country. It also sustains the cultures and values of human ethics. Education works as a tool for the future visions of the socio-economic rights of a person. Tribal girls are intentionally deprived of this fundamental right so that their future advancement lags behind that of other girls in the country and boys of their society. The reasons behind the hurdle are economic limitations, financial backwardness, poverty, humility, early marriages, and illiterate set of mind and narrow perception for girl education of parents as well as other members of the family worldwide. A tribal girl has no choice to say on the topic of education. It is all up to the parents' decision. Perhaps some communities in the tribal world want to educate their women and girls. However, they are significantly less. Some wanted to send their girls to school, but some thought that it was useless to educate girls. They are strongly encouraged to join labour work and to help in the economic condition of the house. They send their girls to school only for 3 to 4 years to get primary school education and to learn how to write and read their names and, after that, withdrawn from it. There are also high gender disparity feelings in parents to provide full opportunities to their girls and give more preference to boys for education.⁵

The Constitution of India recognised the 'right to equality' as a fundamental right of all citizens of India. All children in the Indian age group of 6-14 have the right (under article 21A) to free and compulsory education as part of their right to live stated in article 21. Further, the Article 46 is exclusively emphasis the 'Promotion of Educational and Economic' interests of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other weaker sections (that also include women), as the fundamental duty of all the state of India. Besides these constitutional rights, the government of India has taken up many policies and schemes specifically for women as well as STs.

There are some significant measures taken up by the ministry of tribal affairs that aim to safeguard the inclusive educational development of the tribal women, are given below:

- The scheme of Ashram schools in tribal areas.
- The scheme of girls and boys hostels for STs.
- The scheme for STs Girls of low literacy districts to strengthen the education level among them.
- To promote Higher Education, there are some schemes in the form of scholarships such as Pre- Matric and Post Matric Scholarship, Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship, etc.

5V. Bhasin, "Status of Tribal Women India". Studies on Home and Community Sciences, 1(1), (2007) pp.1-16

Further, the 'BetiBachaoBetiPadhao' scheme is administrated by the Women and Child Development Ministry, which is projected to provide the advantage of all women, including STs Women.⁶

Despite special provisions embedded in the Constitution to meet the educational requirement of group STs Women, the situation has continued to far from satisfactory. The probability of exclusion is aggravated, if the children live in tribal areas and if they are girls. The level of development of other groups is whatever. The tribal women meet extreme and more striking disadvantages in the field of education. There are substantial social, regional, and gender disparities in literacy. ST communities have shallow levels of literacy.

Table 1 is testifying the gender gap in literacy rate among tribal women and men. Instead of going down, it shows a snowballing trend over every year. In 1961, the gender gap in literacy among STs was only at a rate of 10.67%. However, now, during the year 2011, it reached a rate of 28.18%. While, if emphasising on the whole population, the literacy rate shows a converse trend. In 1961 it was 25.05%, but in 2011, it was 16.3%.

Table 1: Literacy Rates (%) in India from 1961 to 2011.

Year	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Persons (ST)	8.53	11.30	16.35	29.60	47.10	59.00
Male (ST)	13.83	17.63	24.52	40.65	59.17	68.53
Female (ST)	3.16	4.85	8.04	18.19	34.76	40.35
Gender gap in Literacy Rate (ST)	10.67	12.78	16.48	22.46	24.41	28.18
Persons (All)	28.30	34.45	43.57	52.21	64.84	73.00
Male (All)	40.40	45.96	56.38	64.13	75.26	80.90
Female (All)	15.35	21.97	29.76	39.29	53.67	64.60
Gender gap in Literacy Rate (All)	25.05	23.99	26.62	24.84	21.59	16.3

Source: Office of the Registrar General of India.

Moreover, If we talk about higher education, It is very notable that regardless of an exceptionally all around planned approach of positive discrimination, the depiction of Dalit and Adivasis students is not satisfactory. Also, the picture of women from them is trivial. They, by and large, join standard training courses and are denied access to dexterous courses and elite institutions. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report of 2017-18, all India GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio) in higher education reported 25.8 percent, which is figured out for the 18-23 age of the group. Here the GER for men and women population is 26.3 percent and 25.4 percent, respectively. In contrast to the figures GER of 25.8%, the ST students constituted 15.9 percent in

⁶Govt. of. India, Welfare of Tribal Women. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Press Information Bureau, (2017).

which 17.0 percent it is for ST males and 14.9 percent it is for ST female students⁷. The chauvinism in higher education hit tribal women very hardly in getting employment, particularly professional training, and in conquering top leadership in any economy as well as the political field.

Gender Biases in Work Participation

Economic Development is a critical factor for development. In this respect, Scheduled Tribes is the most vulnerable section in India in comparison to other social groups of the country. Now, the study tries to understand gender roles in the workplace or gender discrimination in employment, which is commonly encountered by tribal women in various areas of work. Tribal women have been working shoulder to shoulder with tribal men to make a financial contribution to the household economy. Quite often, they do more physical labour in their agricultural fields and forest than that of the tribal men. The position of the tribal women usually depends on the economic roles they play. The tribal women in India have virtually no role to play in the social and political spheres. They contribute positively to economic pursuits by participating equally with the menfolk.⁸ A vast majority of the tribes (almost 90%) are engaged in agriculture, their other economic activities being food gathering (including hunting and fishing), pastoral, handicrafts, trade and commerce, and industrial labour. Rarely are they engaged in only one occupation. Tribal women are very free and get the freedom to do the work outside their home as per the demand of the society. Though, in a few states or some instances, females are restricted and not allowed to do work. Generally, tribal women do work in informal regions, for example, as agricultural labourers, do husbandry related work as animal husbandry management, household work. They cope with their domestic matters themselves. They work as co-partners in the farming profession since gender discrimination, and gender partiality is not at all noticeable in informal zones.

Nevertheless, now, the scenario has changed for some reason. Firstly, informal sectors have a low guarantee of work. Most tribes are losing their lands and forests because of commercialisation and urbanization, prompt migration, or random displacement. Secondly, women are not getting equal for equal work or paid less than the menfolk. So, women prefer the formal sector for their upliftment, although illiterate, non-skilled, and inexperienced women fight even more in this field against their marginalization. Women and girls face several issues such as gender biases, lack of community support, less accessibility, lack of knowledge, communication and language barriers, financial, physical, and sexual exploitation, lack of employment opportunities, and many others. These are cumbersome obstacles that deteriorate their situation. Such a negative impact continues to create a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment that is hard to break. Gender inequality is a universal phenomenon and is not only a women's issue but also a development issue. Tribal women could become independent, work-oriented, in fact, leaders of the society if they retaliate and stand up for themselves against social injustice and gender stereotyping.

Gender Biases in Health

Unlike many countries around the globe, in our country, women do not enjoy equal opportunities and access to health care and nutrition. Usually, women are still under-represented in various prominent fields. However, women's equal involvement in the decision-making process at all levels is necessarily required to achieve the desired women's positions worldwide. Furthermore, it would help in eliminating all women related issues and provide encouraging procedures to improve the status of women.

Most studies have demonstrated that different facets of gender disparity have remained an undying problem. It is widely entrenched tribal regions and backward class of the Indian society,

7Govt. of. India, ALL India Survey on Higher Education 2017-18, Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi (2018).

8G. Menon, & W. Fernandez, "In Tribal Women and Forest Economy: Deforestation Exploitation and Status Change". (W. Fernandez, Ed.) Indian Social Institute, Delhi(1987).

tribal women, had lower nutritional status than men that is deeply associated with the ambiguous status of women in the Indian society. Women suffer implicit biases. Subsequently, they are at a more considerable risk of abuse, financial hardship, social exclusion, and domestic violence and are more marginalized due to various health issues. Many health-related research findings affirm that society with strong son preference plays an important role that led to the rise of intense gender discrimination that historically prevalent practice has adverse effects on women's health and infant survival. Prenatal preferences perpetuate gender disparities and severe violations of women's rights. Most Indian families have been practicing sharp gender disparities where girls are seen as burdensome liabilities and can be relieved through marrying off them that leads to early marriage that drives early pregnancy. Girls often suffer recurrent pregnancy loss, stillbirth, sex-selective abortions (preference to son), and several other reproductive problems. Added to this, inadequate nutrition – partly due to monetary insufficiency and partly due to lack of ignorance – limited prenatal check-ups or less opportunity to bed rest and relax further worsens reproductive health.⁹

Several remarkable attempts have been made so far to improve women's socio-economic status and to ensure the security and safety of women. Still, they are far behind, especially in tribal areas women have been encountering various problems in terms of hygiene, sanitation, and lack of safe drinking water, resulting in significant health issues such as diarrhoea, malaria, filarial, TB, anaemia, and others. More, lack of pre-and post-delivery care facilities, non-accessibility to hospitals in tribal areas, irregularity of postnatal check-ups, and poor nutrition standards constitute a severe threat to the health of infants and also contribute significantly to high IMR (Infant mortality rate) and MMR (Maternal mortality rate).

Table: 2 Infant Mortality Rate (%)

Indicator	Persons (All)	Scheduled Tribe	Report
Infant Mortality Rate	57	62.1	NFHS-3 (2005-06)
	40.7	44.4	NFHS-4 (2015-16)

Source: National Health Family Survey-4, 2015-16.

For instance, as table 2 is showing the NFHS 3 and NHFS 4, the infant mortality rate was relatively high among the tribal women in comparison to the overall population of the country. During the financial year, 2005-06 IMR was recorded 62.1 and during 2015-16, the reported IMR was 44.4. While overall, it was stood at a rate of 57 and 40.7 among the total population, respectively.

Tribal women are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS because limited attention has been paid to HIV/AIDS among tribal society. Only 38.6 percent of women had heard or knew about AIDS. While AIDS awareness among tribal men was higher compared to that is 63.9%.¹⁰ Tribal Men are aware of the causes of HIV than women. However, tribal women are usually unaware or misinformed. Community members described gender inequality that HIV-positive females are less accepted by society, although males are treated typically.

Tribal people are known to have sexual practices that vary from those of mainstream cultures. Lessor nothing is known about the prevalence of HIV and AIDS among tribal people in India, except perhaps in some of the tribal states of the North-East of India as these have a high incidence of drug use. HIV and AIDS have become the fourth largest killer worldwide and in Asian counterparts, which are scattering at an alarming rate.

9S.R. Balgir, "Impact Of Gender Bias On Health And Nutrition Of The Tribal Women In Relation To Dynamics Of Development In India." The Internet Journal of Biological Anthropology, 3 (1) (2008) pp. 4-6.

10De, Dr. Kankana. "Health Awareness Among Tribes of Rural India." Journal of Molecular and Genetic 11 (1): (2017) pp. 2-4.

Age at the marriage in tribal females in India is recorded low, minor medical check-ups during pregnancy, mostly deliveries done at their homes, and less awareness about maternal health among schedule tribes. Women are pressured to have children soon after their marriage to prove their fertility and worth. Hence adolescent marriage becomes synonymous with adolescent childbearing. Early marriage increases health risk for mother and child. The high rate of pregnancy complications, premature birth, and infant deaths are devastating outcomes of early marriages.

The only need is to understand disparity among the tribal communities and implement schemes/policies accordingly. Tribe-specific facilities, voluntary actions, and programs surely bridge the gap. A sustainable model for infant survival and trained staff from within the tribal community must be hired to reduce the risk of infant mortality rate.

The Repercussions of Gender Disparities

- Less access to education would degrade the employment opportunity, which further deprived women of economic empowerment.
- The wrong belief of society that only boys should have the right to get an education because they will become one day the bread earners for the whole family empower the mindset of patriarchal nature.
- Women are facing barriers to work in state mines or factories in night shifts; hereby, they are permitted to work in private mines but the administration typically does not hire women to employ to avoid maternity costs, paid leave, equal wage, rest shelters, and amnesty schemes.
- Tribal women are forcefully sent and kidnapped for immoral trafficking by labour contractors.
- In rural and tribal families, send their daughters in schools only up to the secondary level, and most girls are often married off at puberty due to Social pressure.
- They tribal females regularly perform the dual role of taking care of the dependent family members and kids and working outside to support the family and reduced financial burden. Nevertheless, the juggling act is hard to maintain, especially in a male-dominated society. Despite the various government privileges, the tribal women population is still illiterate and tribal women have neither the economic wealth nor the adequate skill for a job in the formal sector. As a result, she either remains unemployed or gets very low-status jobs in this sector. However, women get much respectful status relatively in the informal economy because the tribal population is the weakest section of the society where girls start working too early to become a helping hand in the family.
- Tribal areas are under-developed so that it is more difficult for them to arrange necessities, and in the scenario, the female child remains at home. In contrast, the male child gets a preference to access education and economic opportunity. Women's subjugation reveals inevitable barriers to their development, male supremacy, and economic exploitation, and the capitalist system gives absolute priority to men to oppress women. Patriarchal male power creates both class and gender disparities to control women's participation and representation in society.
- Chances of experiencing sexual harassment, bullying, physical abuse, mistreatment, exclusion, promotional bias, terminations, and rape threats are ever higher in the workplace. These prevalence barriers make women more vulnerable, disempower, and discourage, and this unfair organizational conduct contributes to sex-based discrimination.
- Irrespective of recent advancement, women are still marginalised and disadvantaged due to their family commitments and impaired chance to get a healthy life and productive jobs. Women are double prejudiced, such as facing historical gender disparities and systematic human rights violations since ages. However, many women have gained equality of treatment through far-ranging legal rights. Still, gender inequality is an unresolved issue. It remains with inadequate health care, insufficient education, and limited income to drive

these deprivations among women, and conventionally paternalistic policies and programmes are made to comply with the demand for women's economic upliftment.¹¹

Conclusion

The paper "Tribal Women in India: The Gender Inequalities and its Repercussions" was carried out to determine the reasons behind gender disparity in tribal communities and its corrosive implications on the lives of women, particularly women of tribal areas in general.

World Economic Forum in its report of "Global Gender Gap 2020" placed India at 112th position out of a total of 153 countries. It has slipped down from 108th rank grappled in the 2018 report. Iceland, Norway, and Finland once again cap the top rankings. The survey of the report exemplifies the results based on the progress of the States which they have made in the sectors of employment, literacy, political participation, and health as indicators of gender parity¹².

Tribal Women face discrimination in almost all dimensions of life. Several taboos discriminating against tribal women exist in certain tribal groups implying impurity and low status. They are the least advantaged groups and highly backward in various fields such as occupation, education, healthcare, and political representation, whereas it is at a peak in social behaviour. One of the primary reasons for their miseries is that they confine themselves to original forest habitats and taking agriculture and other allied occupation.

Though, the framers of the Indian Constitution have given an important place in the Constitution(1950) to the tribal people. Even today, they are continuously attempting the welfare and advancement of the community. However, they remain the utmost 'deprived' ethnic community in India. Access to education, employment, social inclusion, and carries out the practical application of existing laws, change in social structure are empowering features for protecting tribal women. At last, it is recommended that for removing the gender disparity against tribal women, the focus should be given on the "Gender Sensitivity" concept.

Acknowledgments Section

I wish to thank some people for their contribution to this research work and for sharing their pearls of knowledge with me during this research, and I thank Ziya Hasan for her constructive support and suggestions. I am also immensely grateful to Dr. Ghazal Parveen, my research supervisor, for her patient guidance, enthusiastic encouragement, and useful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript, although any errors are my own and should not tarnish the reputations of these persons.

11Azra Musavi, Juhi Gupta, *Women of Marginalised Communities: Concerns about Exclusion*, Sarup Book Publishers, New Delhi, (2020), p 172.

12World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap 2020*. WEM, Geneva, (2019).

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