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# **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF GENDER EQUALITY IN TRIBAL SOCIETY**

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## **Abstract-**

The structure of tribal society is based on equality. It has been observed that women have more than equal social status in tribal communities as compared to Indian women. But this belief is controversial when we analyze today's scenario of tribal women when it comes to legal or educational status. However, it cannot be debated that tribal women have an important role to play in the customary practices, following their own rituals and cultural activities. Tribal women enjoy every right equally to men in society. The census report of 2011, HDI, health issues in tribal areas, various welfare schemes provided to tribal women, and their implementation are in doubt. Tribal communities generally lived in isolated places in hilly and rural areas, where no government or its machinery reached for the empowerment of tribal women. Tribal women face many problems relating to their economic backwardness, health (Reproduction and Nutrition issues), and education. For this research article, the researcher's purpose is to use the primary and secondary data available and analyze the facts with social reality. Researchers want to attempt how tribal society treats tribal women on various occasions and how tribal women participate in social change. For this, researchers have opted for doctrinal research and informal observation. Researchers want to focus on how modernization or liberalization impacts tribal women's livelihood, various issues and challenges before gender equality, and justice relating to tribal women in India.

**Keywords-** Gender Equality, Tribal Society, Women, Social Status.

## Introduction

After Independence, first time in Indian history, a scheduled tribe's women were elected as the President of India. And this is nothing but a victory of Indian democracy that the Women belonging to the tribal community are the first Citizens of Nations. A tribal society is a society that believes in labor, culture, and community worship. There is no gender discrimination in tribal society. Women have a place of honor in the tribal society women are given a better position and status than men. Tribal women were comprised half of the Indian Tribal Population and deeply connected to the customary practices.

### 1. Customary Practices And Tribal Women

Mainly tribal women take priority in various social and cultural activities of tribals. Tribal women have the lead role in various festivals, birth and death rituals, marriage ceremonies, and nature worship. Tribal Women have their place in every cultural program held in the tribal society. Thus, we say that the place of women is very important in tribal customs and traditions.

It can be seen that women are not much involved in settling disputes or conflicts and settling issues in the tribal society. Tribal Women do not have a special place in the 'Panch' people who function as village Judge. It can also be said that women are not called as judges (Panch) to adjudicate the matter. However, women have indeed been given a place in the tribal justice system. The women's involvement and active participation are in the tribal justice system. In case of any women's issues, women are consulted.

Women were given special status as witnesses and women were called witnesses. The freedom of tribal women is mainly taken up in the tribal social structure. Tribal Women have the freedom to choose their partners. A widow is remarried. Tribal women are not suspected of character. Without a girl, the tribal family cannot be completed. Thus, tribal women do not have to pay dowry in marriage. It will be seen that the practice of paying 'dowry' to the girl's parents at the time of marriage is practiced in almost all tribal communities. Tribal women are well versed and skilled in mud pots for daily use, know about traditional medicine, are acquainted with forests very well, and use all the natural things for their survival. Thus, tribal women have high immunity and physical strength as

compared to other women.

## 2. Role of Tribal Women in Tribal Society

Although the tribal culture is sometimes male-dominated, women's position in this society is high and respected. It depends on how much women help in facilitating economic and social life while moving in society. Tribal culture and tradition have given equal rights to women. Everywhere women have free movement. Due to labor power, she is the support of the family in daily housework and economic activities. The quality of labor power and fertility make him a useful person in the family.

While discussing the issues of Indian women, the issues of tribal women have been consistently neglected. Even today tribal women living in primitive states are free. The established society believes that they live independently, so they have no questions. Tribal women who are the pike of the matriarchal system are seen living in poverty today.

So, there is no organizational unity in this tribe. Considering the tribals of Maharashtra, the tribal issues have changed according to that region's geographical, political, and social conditions. At present, the tribal woman is in a desperate struggle for survival. Her life is full of many contradictions. Even today the influence of the matriarchal system is felt in tribal tribes. Since the British era, the tribes started to turn towards patriarchy as they came in contact with the established people. Although these women are far away from the problems created by religion and the caste system, their journey has started in the opposite direction. Today the process of Hinduization of tribals is dynamic. In this, the problems of tribal women are becoming more serious.

A tribal woman who was once sexually free is today a victim of sexual violence. Isn't this a journey of woman's destruction? As the evolution of man from the primitive stage was divided into religion and caste reality, the journey of women became more difficult. Even the tribal woman who lives in the forest and is considered to be the symbol of the primitive matriarchal culture could not stay away from this exploitation.

When we think about tribal women in terms of health, employment, and survival, their current situation is very well remembered. Today, looking at issues of malnutrition,

maternal and child mortality, and exploitation of tribal women in tribal areas, it can be seen that women in tribal society are moving towards self-sufficiency and their future is based on self-empowerment.

There are certain specific criteria for tribal women and their status in tribal society. These criteria are the status of tribal women in society, legal status, and space given in public employment, and the nature and scope of work of tribal women. Based upon this criterion we can evaluate the status of tribal women and their place in the tribal society. Apart from these criteria, traditional rituals, women's status after marriage, women's participation in government processes, and economic stability are important criteria.

### 3. Present Status of Tribal Women and Ground Reality

Tribal women lag far behind in terms of health, education, employment, and empowerment compared to other women. A big difference between the issues of other women and the tribal women can be seen. Tribal women have to do labor work, sometimes tribal women do more work than men. Tribal women engage in self-independence, arts, skills, and other developmental activities within the social framework. It will be seen that tribal women are conscious of their language, traditional jewelry, dress code, folk songs, dance, and ritual ceremonies. It is always been seen in the tribal culture that certain sets of collective experiences of customary ideas, norms, values, and beliefs are associated with tribal people vis-a-vis tribal women. There is a very thin line between gender inequalities and the socialization process of tribal society. This perception of the tribal community determines the position of women in society.<sup>1</sup>

The tribal women are differentiated on their participation in assisting the economy and the customary practice of bride price that supported equality in tribal society or the high status of tribal women as compared to other women.<sup>2</sup>

The status of tribal women quite often depends on the system of authority that they enjoy in the tribal community. The freedom given in the society itself demarcates the line of freedom of tribal women. If tribal women have their own space and certain rights to enjoy

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<sup>1</sup> Veena Bhasin, "Status of Tribal Women in India", STUDIES ON HOME AND COMMUNITY SCIENCE, 1:1, 1-16, DOI: 10.1080/09737189.2007.11885234 (Visited on October 9, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Kamal Misra and Jenet Lowry (eds.), RECENT STUDIES ON INDIAN WOMEN, 1st ed. 2007, p. 64

in the community itself then only tribal women enjoy those rights. The position of indigenous women mostly depends on the jobs they perform in the economy. In the past, tribal peoples typically lived in the forests and relied heavily on the food-gathering economy for their subsistence. The tribes have indeed been subjected to the industries in central India for a long time. Numerous large and small dams as well as development projects have been built. The tribes are forced to work as coolies in the industrial sector due to the destruction of the forests and the lack of suitable land for farming. The tribes are also being compelled to labor in brick kilns and the construction industry in several areas of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. Tribal men and women who visit these locations seasonally are taken advantage of by contractors and middlemen. The suffering of the women is made worse by their sexual assault. Additionally, they receive substantially lower pay.<sup>3</sup> Though it has been seen that the women in the indigenous community in India enjoy wider freedom to live and go ahead around, their social commitment and institutions are still more or less discriminatory in particular to regard to the customary laws that guide the ownership of property and inheritance or also with subject to enjoying freedoms at the level domestic and public at large.

The instances and social reality of tribal women are misery. The tribal women are at stake in a modern world where their space and freedom are not recognized by the state as well as the community. In cultural regimes, the voice of tribal women is in trope as non-speaking participants, passive subjects of cruelty, and awaited women to participate in governmental and community decisions. It is time to provide an opportunity for the voice of tribal women in the mainstream to lead the community with a high value of social-political thinking.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Issues Of Tribal Women In India

The issues of tribal women are getting more complicated and serious day by day. However, the problems faced by mainstream women and tribal women are different. Therefore, we need to think pragmatically and innovatively while looking for solutions to the problems of tribal women. There are various issues related to tribal women in

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<sup>3</sup> J.J. Roy Burman, "Status of Tribal Women in India", MAINSTREAM, Vol. No 12, 13 March 2012 <https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article3314>.(Visited on October 9, 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Trisha Shreyashi, *Tribal Women's Movement in Modern India*, Mar 5, 2021 <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/03/05/tribal-womens-movement-modern-india/> (Visited on October 9, 2022)

education, health, employment, and day to day-based injustice-tyranny cum discrimination faced by tribal women, their living conditions, and the disadvantaged position of women in tribal society are different from the problems dealing with other societies' women. Among the various factors regarding the socio-geographical conditions of tribal women, the cultural-political atmosphere should be considered while dealing with the issue of tribal women.

***Absence of proper livelihood-*** Even today, in tribal areas, there are no roads, water, toilets, proper houses, health centers, electricity, and various other infrastructure facilities. As the abode of the tribal community is in remote and mountainous areas, it takes a lot of effort to reach the government schemes, systems, and facilities. Nowadays tribal areas or villages do not get facilities like banks, Anganwadi, and primary health centers. Tribal women do not get an adequate meal two times a day. Thus, problems like Health and nutrition are faced by tribal women today.

***Lack of access to education-*** The ratio of education of tribal women is very low and dropout and stagnation are the main problems in tribal girl education. Lack of girl schools in tribal areas, dis-interested of tribal parents towards girl education, school distance from home-village is in remote areas, lack of educational environment, failure of government schemes, lack of hostels facilities for secondary-higher secondary education, dependence of metro city based higher education, lack of financial support, etc. are the problems faced by tribal girls while taking education. The reasons are become hurdles and difficulties in the education of tribal girls.

***Poor condition of health-*** Tribal women are physically weak and sick in nature. The various social and other problems directly effect on health of tribal women. Among these problems, Malnutrition is a very common health problem among tribals. In addition to this, communicable diseases such as TB, malaria, and STDs are the main public health problems. Some of the tribal groups are also at high risk for sickle cell anemia. Normally, tribal diets are seen to be deficient in protein, iron, iodine, and vitamins. Malnutrition among children and tribal women is a general issue of health. Anemia, being underweight among women, Vitamin Deficiency, and Sickle cell are the major health issues that adversely affect tribal women's all-around development. There is a lack of access to

public health facilities in tribal areas. Proper and adequate healthcare facilities are not available to tribes. Non-availability of health staff in centers, the quality of services is very poor, and traditional health practices and superstitions are nothing but obstruct the health of tribal women.<sup>5</sup>

***Social-political exploitation-*** Tribal women have very little participation in social and political processes. Although the Indian Constitution provides reservations for women in the Panchayat Raj system, even today in most of the Panchayat Raj elections, women's participation in the decision-making process can be seen to be negligible. That no one can deny the husbands of the elected women are involved in politics. Addiction of alcohol, tobacco, and bidi has a serious impact on women's health in tribal society and women as well. Although tribal women have more freedom in the social framework, tribal women struggle more to earn two meals a day for the family. Women who migrated to work at Construction sites, sugar factories, and house working, are sexually assaulted.

There is an example of Kumari Matas (unwed mothers) among tribals of Maharashtra in the Yavatmal district where tribal girls are lured by non-tribal men in the name of marriage, gifts, and offerings sexually exploited through fraudulent illicit relationships. The matter is known when tribal girls, followed such encounters and gave birth to a child without socially and legally recognized relationships. The children born out of these relations were termed as “*Kumari Mata*” in a general sense.<sup>6</sup> It will be seen that tribal women have to be victims of social and political injustice- oppression at many levels especially when they migrate for labor work.

***Involuntary displacement and migration-*** Big projects, roads and railways, various environmental projects, river dams, and lack of employment in tribal areas lead to massive displacement of tribals. It has serious social, cultural, and health impacts on women and children. While tribal women left their homes for employment and migrated to big cities,

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<sup>5</sup> Bala SM, Thiruselvakumar D. *Overcoming problems in the practice of public health among tribals of India*. INDIAN J COMMUNITY MED. 2009 Oct;34(4):283-7. doi: 10.4103/0970-0218.58383. PMID: 20165618; PMCID: PMC2822185. (Visited on October 9, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> Prashant Bansode, *Stigmatisation and Exclusion of Tribal ‘Kumari Matas’ in Yavatmal*, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, Vol. 43, Issue No. 4, 27 Jan. 2018 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/4/insight/stigmatisation-and-exclusion-tribal-%E2%80%98kumari-matas%E2%80%99-yavatmal> (Visited on October 9, 2022)

drag is the fate of tribal women. Migrant tribal women have to live in barren places or fields by pitching tents in cities. All routine activities have to be performed there in the open. Therefore, comes the issue of tribal women's health and safety.

### **5. Patriarchal Property Laws And Family Structure**

Tribals believe that the land, water, and forest are the property of nature. They have no rights over it and they have only a duty to preserve and protect the Natural environment. The various aspects of inherited property rights transfers of tribal society intersect with gender justice and its very important role in this process. The inheritance of property rights generally devolves from the father to his sons, who get majority shares of ancestral property. But there are instances where the daughter gets some shares of ancestral property. Such as the daughter inherits all the ancestral property when other class one heirs. Sometimes daughters have equal rights with sons over movable and immovable ancestral property. Special care has been taken by the daughter in tribal society. In tribal society, sons and daughters are equally treated and inherit equal rights.

### **6. Schemes For Empowerment of Tribal Women And Their Implementation**

The central and state government frames a certain special scheme for the advancement and empowerment of tribal women. The National Scheduled tribes financial and Development Corporation and Tribal Ministry implement the Adivasi Mahila Shashktikaran Yojna exclusively for the economic development of tribal women. Mahila Bachat Gat has been created and financially assisted by Central and state governments for small businesses. The scheme of strengthening education among Scheduled Tribes Girls in law Literacy Districts has been implemented to increase the ratio of tribal girls in education, Special grants have been provided under the heads of Article 275(1) of the Indian Constitution, and special central assistance has been given to Scheduled and Tribal Areas. The funding of Central and State Governments supported the tribal women through educational awareness, health services to remote areas, Emergency Ambulance services for pregnant women, ASHA Workers-Health workers for help to guide patients, explaining the doctor's prescriptions to help tribal women take advantage of welfare schemes. Though the state announces various schemes and policies to empower the tribal women state fails to execute and implement these policies, which ultimately fails in state machinery concerning tribal women's empowerment in India.

For the Empowerment of tribal women, the government needs to take the initiative to execute and proper implementation of such schemes. Also, the government should monitor the functioning of its officials and NGOs to ensure that the tribal women are benefitted. They should run campaigning for schemes provided by the Government, laws and policies enforced and promote education, scholarship fellowship for Higher education, Health and hygiene, Sports facilities and encouragement, and computer and skills-based education for the empowerment of tribal women in the true sense. As we consider and think that tribal women are physically and mentally strong personalities, who enjoy life despite the hardship in life.

#### **7. Gender Justice and Equality in Tribal Women**

The cultural norms and practices were highly protective of the freedom of tribal women. Generally, tribal women are free and independent to choose their partners. The folk songs and goddess of tribes was based on the female character.

Most of the Indian Tribals perform the 'Fer' dance (Tribal women and men hold each other hands and dance in groups) while celebrating festivals. It is not considered bad in tribal society to drink alcohol. Population report shows that the male-female ratio of the population is better in the tribal society as compared to the non-tribal society. Tribal women did not have to struggle for internal social freedom in community life, reasoned that men and women are equal in tribal society. Tribal women are not treated as inferior to men. Tribal women marry off their own free will. The freedom is given to decide or to end the marriage if the marriage does not work out. The concept of widow remarriage existed in tribal society for a long time. Women are given special protection in tribal society by customary practices and social norms. Today, while non-tribal women are demanding special protection, tribal women are given social protection in their customs and rituals. Generally, the offenses like Rape and outraging women's modesty have no place in tribal society. A woman is self-sufficient. But as the tribals started imitating urban people for technology and material convenience, it can be said that tribals got into bad habits.

#### **8. Future Issues And Challenges**

Despite of various laws protecting women in India, still women are unsecured, unsafe,

and harassed by male dominant society in day-to-day life. In the last few decades, there has been an increase in crimes against women based on sex discrimination, domestic violence, inferior treatment, etc. There are many incidences of Sexual assault against women in workplaces, even in educational institutions. Though women in India irrespective of such discrimination have shown outstanding performance in various sectors such as business, education, politics, and culture, etc. therefore, Tribal women should be encouraged in education, business, sports, and protection of the natural environment to empower themselves and advancement of Tribal society. By this, we can achieve the best position for tribal women in Society. While discussing issues of tribal women, such as unemployment, health-related issues of Sickle cell Anaemia, Cultural dissimilation, literacy, financial helplessness, sexual exploitation, lack of technology-computer-based skill education, child marriage, Addiction of tobacco, etc. we need to have a special approach to deal with those issues of tribal women. Opportunity should be given in all the private and government sectors to empower and improve the status of Tribal women.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the constitutional Provision for the protection of women, the right to equality, right to education still women in India struggle for their own identity irrespective of merit. It seems difficult to maintain and survive tribal women in the modern world. Education is a tool for the transformation of tribal women's perspectives of improving and strengthening the status of tribal women. However, there is an urgent need for attention to more focused and tribal women-centric policy dealing with the issues of tribal women as well as tribal society.

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