



Examining Gender Inequality Among Tribal Women in Modern India: Challenges and Empowerment Strategies

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Abstract

In modern India, gender inequality continues to be a prevalent problem among tribal tribes. This problem has a significant impact on the social, economic, educational, and health-related elements of the life of tribal women. Tribal women continue to experience systematic discrimination, restricted access to resources, patriarchal norms, and marginalisation, despite the constitutional provisions and several government programs that have been put in place to protect them. This article investigates the complex nature of gender inequality among tribal women, focussing on the cultural, geographical, and institutional impediments that stand in the way of their empowerment. In addition to this, it investigates effective case studies and policy measures that were designed to improve their position by means of education, self-help organisations, land rights, and political engagement. The research highlights the need of inclusive development methods that are sensitive to cultural norms and are driven by the participation of the community.

Keywords: *gender inequality, tribal women, empowerment, marginalization, education, policy intervention, inclusive development.*

Introduction

A complex tapestry of cultural variety, traditional knowledge systems, and indigenous customs can be found within India's tribal populations, which, according to the Census of 2011, account for around 8.6% of the country's overall population. On the other hand, inside these communities, indigenous women frequently find themselves in a precarious situation, stuck between the junction of gender and social marginalisation. Despite the fact that tribal women have played significant roles in agriculture, forest protection, and household management throughout history and in the sociocultural context, they continue to suffer persistent inequities in education, health, employment, and decision-making. For tribal women, the shift to a modern economy and the rise of globalisation have not necessarily resulted in development; rather, these factors have often made their vulnerabilities even more severe by causing them to be displaced, alienated from their land, and having their traditional support structures eroded.

Due to factors such as geographical remoteness, a lack of infrastructure, and socio-political neglect, tribal women are frequently excluded from mainstream development programs. In spite of the fact that government programs and constitutional safeguards like reservation policies, the Panchayati Raj system, and gender-sensitive laws are written with the intention of promoting equality, their effects are not uniform and their scope is quite restricted. In addition, patriarchal systems, which exist in both tribal and non-tribal contexts, impose limitations on the autonomy, mobility, and agency of women. When viewed against this backdrop, the examination of gender disparity among indigenous women becomes vital not only for the purpose of guaranteeing social justice but also for the purpose of attaining greater goals of expanding inclusive development and creating the country. The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature of the gender inequalities that tribal women in contemporary India experience, to analyse the underlying reasons of these disparities, and to suggest potential empowering techniques that might encourage growth that is both sustainable and equitable.

Objective

1. To uncover socio-cultural, economic, and institutional causes marginalising tribal women in modern India.
2. Assess current policies and empowerment measures and propose lasting, culturally responsive interventions to empower tribal women.

Methodology

According to the findings of a secondary source of information, the current investigation was carried out. Publicly available information has been utilised by humans in a variety of formats, including but not limited to books, journals, newspapers, government reports, census reports, websites, and so on.

Status of Tribal Women in India

There are 705 known tribes that have called the Indian subcontinent home. Meghalaya (86.1% of the total), Nagaland (86.5% of the total), and the northeastern states of Mizoram and Lakshadweep are home to the vast bulk of the tribal population. Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, and Pondicherry are the states that do not include any indigenous people. The overall tribal population of India is 8.6% of the total population, as we previously said. In patriarchal tribal cultures, women face intense prejudice. In addition, aboriginal women in urban areas are denied basic rights. Regardless of field, they are powerless. Without their consent, decisions are made that affect their life. Cultural norms, ceremonial servitude, and traditional practices that keep women subjugated and oblivious to their rights are common causes of gender discrimination. Having said that, it did show that women's socioeconomic standing in tribal society is generally not tribal at all. But the truth is that they face oppression, sexual harassment, and dominance just like any other social group.

There is a high incidence of sexual harassment against indigenous women. They encounter a similar predicament in the cities where they seek employment. The tribal women are seen as objects of sexual desire and dark beauty, who may be used in any manner, subjected to taunting and mockery, and even forced to sell their bodies for money. In tribal civilisation, sexual freedom will never be granted by the metropolitan community. It is believed that tribal women are untamed and used to having sexual relations freely; as a

result, when they go to distant areas in search of work, they are subject to sexual harassment, exploitation, and even forced prostitution. Poor and uneducated women make up the majority of tribal communities. They have no choice except to sell their bodies for money, which is the raw reality. To help pay the bills and provide for their families, some women take on manual labour in fields and woods. No one pays attention to the plight of the helpless and vulnerable indigenous women, and no one takes enough action to safeguard and assist them.

The shyness of tribal women, who are understandably wary of social stigmatisation, may play a role in this kind of bargaining; as a result, they are less likely to speak out when their rights are violated, instead opting to go to higher authorities or the police. The majority of tribal members live below the poverty line and are economically unstable due to the tribal community's educational backwardness and illiteracy. As a result, prejudice and marginalisation against women and indigenous populations persist. Achieving gender justice is an arduous endeavour. Everyone has their own unique perspective on gender problems.

Gender Biases in Education

Education serves as a means by which a community can grow more civilised, which ultimately results in the development of a sovereign nation. Additionally, it helps to maintain the traditions and values that are associated with human ethics. A person's socioeconomic rights may be envisioned in the future with the help of education, which functions as a tool for it. females from tribal communities are purposefully denied access to this fundamental right, which positions them at a disadvantage in terms of future progress in comparison to other females in the country and boys in their culture. There are a number of factors that contribute to the obstacle, including economic constraints, financial backwardness, poverty, humility, early marriages, and an illiterate mindset and a restricted view for the education of girls among parents and other members of the family all over the world. A girl from a tribal community does not have a choice in the matter of schooling. All of the decision-making power is with the parents. In the realm of tribal societies, it's possible that certain communities seek to educate their women and girls. On the other hand, they are much less. Despite the fact that some people believed that it was pointless to educate girls, others desired to send their daughters to school. It is greatly urged that they participate in labour activity and that they assist in improving the financial situation of the household. During the first three to four years of their daughters' schooling, they send them to school to receive a primary school education and to learn how to write and read their names. After that, they withdraw their daughters from school. In addition, there is a significant gender gap in the attitudes of parents, especially when it comes to the provision of full possibilities to their daughters and the preference for males in terms of schooling.

One of the fundamental rights that all inhabitants of India are entitled to is the "right to equality," which was acknowledged by the Constitution of India. As a component of their right to exist, which is outlined in article 21, all children in the age range of six to fourteen years old in India have the right (under article 21A) to get an education that is both free and mandatory. In addition, Article 46 places a strong focus on the "Promotion of Educational and Economic" interests of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other disadvantaged sectors, which includes women. This objective is seen as the primary obligation of every state in India. Additionally, in addition to these fundamental rights, the government of India has implemented a great deal of policies and programs that are tailored exclusively for women and STs.

The following is a list of some of the key actions that have been made by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in order to ensure that the educational development of tribal women is inclusive:

- The plan for Ashram schools to be established in tribal regions.
- The plan wants there to be hostels for both girls and boys for STs.
- For the purpose of improving the educational level of ST girls living in regions with low literacy rates, the initiative was designed.
- The Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship, the Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarship, and other similar programs are examples of the types of scholarship programs that are available to encourage students to pursue higher education.

In addition, the Women and Child Development Ministry is in charge of the administration of the "BetiBachaoBetiPadhao" plan, which is intended to be beneficial to all women, including women who are classified as STs. However, despite the fact that the Constitution contains particular provisions that are intended to fulfil the educational requirements of women belonging to the ST group, the situation has continued to be far from adequate. The likelihood of the children being excluded is increased if they are girls and if they live in locations that are considered to be tribal. When it comes to other groups, the level of growth might be anything. When it comes to education, the women in tribal communities face a number of insurmountable and more glaring obstacles. The literacy rate varies significantly among socioeconomic groups, geographical areas, and between the sexes. Literacy rates in ST communities are relatively low.

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

Category	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	16.30

In addition, if we are discussing higher education, it is extremely important to note that the portrayal of students who are members of the Dalit and Adivasi communities is not adequate, despite the fact that there is a well structured and comprehensive strategy to positive discrimination. In addition, the image that they provide of women is unimportant. As a general rule, they enrol in regular training courses, however they are not permitted to enrol in more advanced courses or attend prestigious universities. As to the findings of the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report for the academic year 2017-2018, the percentage of indigenous students enrolled in higher education was found to be 25.8 percent. This percentage was calculated for the age range of 18 to 23 years old. In this location, the GER for the male population is 26.3 percent, while the GER for the female population is 25.4 percent. ST students made up 15.9 percent of the total, with 17.0 percent of ST male students and 14.9 percent of ST female students. This is in contrast to the results for GER, which were 25.8%. The chauvinism that exists in higher education has a significant impact on tribal women in terms of obtaining work, notably in the field of professional training, and achieving top leadership positions in any economy as well as other fields of endeavour.

Gender Biases in Work Participation

A development's ability to prosper depends on economic growth. When compared to other social groups in India, Scheduled Tribes are the most vulnerable in this regard. This research now moves on to examine gender discrimination and traditional gender norms in the workplace, two issues that indigenous women face in many different occupations. In order to help support their families, tribal women have started working side by side with tribal men. Compared to the indigenous males, they frequently put substantially greater physical hours tending to their crops and forests. The economic roles that women perform in tribal societies often determine their social status. There is a severe lack of representation for indigenous women in Indian politics and society at large. Their participation on an equal footing with the menfolk have a good impact on economic endeavours. ⁸ Nearly all of the tribespeople work in agriculture, however some make a living through pastoral work, food collecting (including fishing and hunting), trade, commerce, and industrial employment. They seldom stick to a single profession. As long as it's needed by society, tribal women are allowed to labour outside the house. Though women face restrictions or are outright forbidden from working in certain jurisdictions or situations. Agricultural workers, animal husbandry managers, and housewives are some examples of the kind of jobs that indigenous women often perform in informal settings. They take care of their home affairs alone. Since gender bias and prejudice are completely nonexistent in informal zones, they cooperate as equals in the agricultural sector.

But, for some reason, things have altered now. To start, there is no assurance of employment in the informal economy. Commercialisation, urbanisation, rapid migration, and arbitrary displacement are causing most indigenous communities to lose their land and forests. Also, women are still paid less than males and do not receive equal pay for equal effort. Women want advancement in the formal sector, despite the fact that

marginalisation is more pronounced for women who are uneducated, unskilled, and lack experience in this context. Gender prejudices, a lack of community support, limited accessibility, ignorance, language and communication obstacles, financial, physical, and sexual exploitation, a lack of job possibilities, and countless more challenges are among the many that women and girls encounter. These are heavy roadblocks that make things worse for them. Such unfavourable effects perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. Inequality between the sexes is a problem in every society; it affects women specifically but also development efforts worldwide. By taking a stance against gender stereotypes and societal injustice, tribal women have the power to become self-reliant, career-focused, and even society leaders.

Gender Biases in Health

Our country is one of the few where women do not have equal rights to education, healthcare, and nutrition, unlike many others in the world. As a general rule, women continue to be grossly under-represented in many prestigious professions. To get the necessary gender parity in leadership roles globally, however, women must have equal say in all decisions. On top of that, it would be a huge assistance in getting rid of any problems that women have and in providing inspiring methods to raise women's standing. According to the majority of research, gender inequality in all its forms has persisted throughout history. Women in India's traditionally oppressed tribal communities have a worse nutritional condition than men, a problem that has long been linked to the country's sexist norms.

Unconscious prejudices harm women. Consequently, a multitude of health conditions further marginalises them, and they face an increased risk of abuse, financial difficulties, social rejection, and domestic violence. A large body of evidence from studies examining women's and newborns' health confirms that societies with high son preferences contributed significantly to the emergence of severe gender discrimination, which has had negative impacts on women's health and the survival of infants throughout history. Gender inequality and gross human rights abuses against women are reinforced by prenatal preferences. The vast majority of Indian families have long held the view that girls should be wed at a young age so that their parents may relieve them of the responsibility of raising them. This view encourages early marriage, which in turn increases the risk of unwanted pregnancies. There are a number of reproductive health issues that disproportionately affect girls, including frequent miscarriages, stillbirths, sex-selective abortions (a preference for sons), and others. Inadequate nutrition, which can be caused by both a lack of knowledge and a lack of resources, together with a lack of prenatal care or time to rest and recuperate, all contribute to poor reproductive health.

Efforts to raise women's economic standing and guarantee their safety have been met with some impressive results. Despite this, women still face substantial health challenges, including anaemia, filariasis, diarrhoea, malaria, tuberculosis, and a lack of access to adequate drinking water, particularly in tribal regions. Furthermore, there is a serious danger to infant health due to a lack of pre- and post-delivery care facilities, inaccessibility to hospitals in tribal areas, irregular postnatal check-ups, and poor nutrition standards. These factors also contribute significantly to high maternal and infant mortality rates.

Table: 2 Infant Mortality Rate (%)

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

For example, compared to the national average, the infant death rate was higher among indigenous mothers (table 2 shows NFHS 3 and NHFS 4). Both the 2005–06 fiscal year and the 2015–16 fiscal year have recorded IMR values of 62.1 and 44.4, respectively. However, when considering the entire population, the rates were 57 and 40.7%, respectively. Because the epidemic has received so little attention in indigenous communities, women living there are at a higher risk of contracting HIV. Among women, just 38.6% were familiar with the AIDS epidemic. However, 63.9% of tribal males were aware of the AIDS epidemic. 10 More males than women in tribal communities know what causes HIV. But most of the time, indigenous women don't know or have the wrong information. Members of the community discussed the gender gap, namely how HIV-positive women face social stigma and treatment disparities compared to HIV-positive men.

It is well-known that tribal people's sexual customs differ from those of dominant civilisations. Lessor The incidence of HIV/AIDS among India's tribal population remains unknown, with the possible exception of several tribal areas in the northeast, where drug use is rampant. In Asia, where the disease is spreading at a frightening pace, HIV/AIDS has surpassed all but three killers to become the fourth leading cause of death globally.

Schedule tribe women in India have a lower average age before marriage, fewer prenatal visits, more home births, and less knowledge about maternal health. There is societal pressure on women to procreate quickly after marriage as a measure of their fertility and value. So, having children at a young age is closely related to marriage at a young age. Mother and child health is jeopardised when marriage occurs at a young age. The tragic results of early marriage include a high incidence of problems during pregnancy, early delivery, and infant mortality. The key is to identify areas of inequality within tribal communities and craft policies and programs to address them. There's little doubt that programs, facilities, and volunteer initiatives tailored to certain tribes help close the gap. To lower the newborn death rate, it is necessary to recruit qualified individuals from within the tribal group and implement a long-term plan for baby survival.

The Repercussions of Gender Disparities

The employment opportunities would be worsened if women had less access to education, thus robbing them of economic empowerment. The patriarchal worldview is reinforced by the mistaken societal idea that only males should have access to education, as they will inevitably become the family's breadwinners. While women can legally work night shifts in private mines, the government often avoids hiring them in order to skirt maternity benefits, paid leave, equal pay, rest shelters, and amnesty programs.

Human traffickers use tribal women for sexual exploitation by abducting and sending them against their will. Most girls are wed off at puberty owing to societal pressure, and most rural and tribal households only send their daughters to education up to the secondary level.

Native American women often juggle two jobs: caring for children and other dependent family members and earning a living to help ease financial strain. Still, keeping up the juggling act is challenging, particularly in patriarchal cultures. The majority of indigenous women still do not have high school diplomas or the necessary work experience to enter the workforce in the formal sector, and this is in spite of the many benefits provided by the government to this demographic. This causes her to either stay jobless or settle for low-level positions in the industry. Because tribal communities are among the most vulnerable in society, and because girls often begin working at a young age to help support their families, women enjoy a higher level of respect in the informal sector than they do in the official sector.

In this particular instance, the female youngster stays at home since living in an underdeveloped tribal location makes it more difficult to gather basic supplies. The opposite is true when it comes to educational and economic opportunities for male children. Capitalism provides males the upper hand in oppressing women, and women's subjection exposes male domination, economic exploitation, and insurmountable impediments to women's growth. In order to limit women's agency and agency in society, patriarchal male power structures exacerbate existing gender and class gaps. There is a growing epidemic of sexually motivated bullying, harassment, assault, maltreatment, exclusion, prejudice in promotions, terminations, and rape threats in the workplace. Unfair organisational behaviour adds to sex-based discrimination, which in turn makes women more susceptible to harm, less powerful, and discouraged.

Despite progress, women continue to face discrimination, sexism, and a lack of opportunities in the workplace and in health care, among other disadvantages. Historical gender imbalances and persistent human rights abuses are two forms of double discrimination that women experience. Yet, because of extensive legal protections, many women have achieved parity with males. Gender inequality remains a problem that has not been overcome. Traditional paternalistic policies and programs are created to meet the desire for women's economic empowerment, yet these deprivations persist among women due to poor health care, low education levels, and restricted income.

Conclusion

Policymakers, public society, and academics must address the crucial issue of gender inequity among tribal women in modern India immediately and consistently. Much while indigenous groups have always been quite egalitarian, tribal women are much more at risk due to the fast socioeconomic changes brought about by globalisation, industrialisation, and modernisation. Poverty, illiteracy, cultural exclusion, and systematic neglect all contribute to the myriad of challenges they encounter. Problems with execution, ignorance, and cultural and social obstacles mean that the intended benefits don't always make it to the grassroots, even while there are welfare programs and constitutional protections in place. Therefore, empowering indigenous women calls for a multi-pronged strategy that stresses the importance of healthcare and education, promotes self-help organisations and livelihood programs, guarantees land and forest rights, and encourages political engagement. Recognising the distinct identities and perspectives of tribal women, development initiatives should be culturally sensitive, inclusive, and participatory. India can make great strides towards inclusive development and the attainment of genuine social justice for all of its inhabitants by tackling gender inequities in tribal regions.

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