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EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA: AN ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women has emerged as an important issue in our society in recent times. The economic empowerment of women is being regarded these days as a sine-qua-non progress for a country. Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Women are better known as half of the humanity has long been neglected in their role as beneficiaries in the process of development. So also, the role of tribal women in rural economy is determined by the overall socio-economic, cultural situations and it is true especially in developing countries. Tribal women's participation in local government is an important issue that has gained increasing attention in recent years. Historically, tribal women have faced multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization, which have prevented them from participating fully in decision-making processes. However, with the growing recognition of women's rights and gender equality, there has been a push to promote and support the participation of tribal women in local government. Through their participation, tribal women can help ensure that their voices are heard and their perspectives are taken into account in policy-making and implementation. These barriers include lack of education, limited access to resources, cultural norms that restrict women's mobility and participation in public life, and discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. This paper focuses on the socio-economic status of tribal women in general and in this paper the researcher makes an attempt to assess and examine the situation of tribal women in India having different historical experiences, social organizations, cultural values, religious identities, economic systems and degrees of exposure to modernization and commercialization. The researcher also makes a study on empowerment of tribal women and protection of their rights and conditions in the present society.

Keywords: empowerment, rights, tribal women, society.

Introduction

The tribal people in India comprise about 8.2 percent of the national population. The population of tribal communities is scheduled in the Constitution of India and known as Scheduled Tribes (STs) as per 2001 census. The tribes have been undergoing a variety of socio-political changes, particularly for the last 150-200 years. A large number of these changes have been initiated by external factors. Unprecedented economic, administrative, legal, religious and political forces have successfully infiltrated into the tribal areas, within a diversity of purposes and motives starting influencing tribal life directly or indirectly.¹ One of the most important indicators of cultural distinctiveness of the tribal society is a highly systematized distribution of gender roles well suited to the prevailing economy. Ethnography bears ample testimony to the significant complementary roles, the tribal women play in the society in managing the household and filling the food basket, appropriately positioning themselves in social and cultural spheres and establishing their distinct individuality in the household and the society at large.² However, tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to environmental degradation and the interference of outsiders. The strategy for tribal development and especially rural tribal women needs improvement, betterment, development and upliftment to affect their empowerment. There is indeed a growing wealth of literature developing on these aspects. Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society and due to increasing marginalization and the sense of annihilation being experienced by the tribal communities, compels one to analyze the extent of empowerment of tribal women and their role in structural transformation for a better way forward in the society.

Objective of the study

1. To clarify the concept of empowerment of tribal women.
2. To evaluate the importance for empowerment of tribal women.
3. To analyze the challenges faced by the tribal women.
4. To propose the strategies for the above challenges

Methodology

This research study is based on secondary data that has been analyzed by a number of authors and academics. For the relevant information and knowledge that is listed in the references section, a search has been done in a number of books, journals, and reliable websites. All the statistical and numerical data gathered from Ministry of tribal, Office of the Registrar General census 200-2011 and Election Commission of India.

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RoyBurman,JJ, 'Status of Tribal Women In India', *Mainstream*, vol.12,March 10(2012) p-11

² Nadel, S.F 'Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An Essay in Comparison', *American Anthropologist*, vol.54, (1952) Pp.18-29

Table 1: Percentages of Schedule Tribe to total population: **2001- 2011**

Percentage of STs in 2001			Percentages of STs in 2011		
	Total	8.2%		Total	8.6%
1.	Rural	10.4%	1.	Rural	11.3%
2	Urban	2.4%	2.	Urban	2.8%

Source: Census of India **2001-2011**, Office of the registrar of general

Table 2: Schedule Tribe Population by sex and residence: Census **2011**

Male			Female		
Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
5,24,09,823	4,71,26,341	52,83,482	5,18,71,211	4,66,92,821	51,78,390

Source: Census of India **2001-2011**, Office of the registrar of general

Socio-Economic Status of Tribal Women in India:

The status of women in a society is significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as their roles within the family, the community and society. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They constitute about half the total population but in tribal society women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and management depends on them.³ In social household matters, the status of tribal women is generally higher than that of non-tribal.⁴ Tribal economy is characterized as subsistence oriented. The status of tribal women usually depends on the economic roles they play in the society. They are also recognized as '*forest dwellers*'. The forest dweller women's relationship with the forest is much closer than that of men. In fact, the forest dweller women may be described as the backbone of the forest dweller economy because of their role in the supply fuel, a major portion of their food, medicines and fodder.

Tribal women contribute the major part of labour required for agriculture and collection of forest produce. But due to deforestation and other factors such as intervention of middlemen, have changed the work pattern of women considerably. With the decrease in the forest area in many places, the distance between the village and the forests has increased and the availability of produce decreased. Secondly external influences coming with the immigration of non-tribals and the intrusion of outside culture via the cities, town etc., have caused considerable changes in their traditional economic pattern. An important change has been private ownership of land for shifting cultivation.⁵ For example, the Juang, Hill Bhiyan, Lanjia Saora, Kondh Oraon, Koya,

³ Awais Mohammed, '*Socio-economic empowerment of tribal women: An Indian Perspective*', International Journal of Rural Studies, vol.16 no.1 October (2009) p-1

⁴ A series on Self-Governance for tribals, Management of Minor Forest Produce and Common Property Resources (Hyderabad: National Institute of Rural Development), vol-III *Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India*, (2005), p-48.

⁵ Fernandes.W, Geeta Menon, '*Tribal Women and Forest Economy:Deforestation, Exploitation and Status Change*' Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, (1987) Pp 75-76

Gond, Bondo, etc., are the tribes of Orissa who practice both hunting and shifting cultivation. A study⁶ quoted in Chambers et al., in one area of South Bihar in the early 1980s, described how every day 300 women went into the forests to collect firewood from illegally cut timber. They earned Rs.120/ month, an amount so paltry that half of them were permanently in debt. To reach the forest, they walked as far as 12km and then, when they had finished collecting wood, travelled by train with their head-loads to town. During the whole process they were obliged to bribe the village headmen to allow them to do it, the forest guard to look the other way and railway staff to allow them to travel 'free' on the train. Hardly, they are left with much profit at the end of the day.⁷

Women's burdens are further increased when the economic situation within their families becomes so severe that the men are forced to migrate in search of work, be it seasonal or permanent. When this happens, the women end up trying to do the cultivation in addition to all the fetching and carrying the housework, the mothering, and the caring for the elderly. In many cases this proves to be an impossible burden. In order to survive, women may have to borrow from money -lender, to whom they become indebted, and to whom they may eventually lose their land, even though it is illegal for non-tribal people to own tribal land. Even apart from such extremes, the position of tribal women can be severely undermined through the commercialization of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), which makes gender relations more inequitable because earlier before the commercialization women decided many things about the collection and allocation of NTFP, but commercialization takes away their decision-making power and puts it in the hands of men, a situation which can spell disaster for women. With the basic needs beyond their reach, the tribal women bear brunt of severe hardships faced by the villagers as the major part of their lives is spent in fetching water and firewood. These women work from morning till midnight even in the fields equally with men. Their life is spent doing work inside and outside the home, resulting in poverty aggravated by scarcity of work and low wages compounds their hardships, making their survival extremely difficult, consequences is more on tribal women with additional workload.⁸ With the transition of settled agriculture, also many tribal communities particularly in areas where shifting cultivation has been banned have adopted work practices of neighboring caste societies that discriminate against women. Also in case of tribal women, it is lack of economic and employment alternatives that has forced them to become wage labourers. In other words, while the distance from forests and environmental deterioration increase the women's workload, external caste influences that accompany the commercial interests, add to her workload and result in the deterioration of her status. With additional workload and also of environmental deterioration and related factors, malnutrition and ill health are much more common among forest dweller women than among men.

⁶ S.Ninan, Women in Community Forestry, included in the Report of the Seminar on the Role of Women in Community Forestry, Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operation, Government of India, Dehradun, (1981).

⁷ Joe Human and Manoj Pattanaik, " *Community Forest Management: A casebook from India* " Oxfam Publication, Oxford,(2000) p-54

⁸ *supra* fn 4, pp.110-112.

Government Initiatives for the Empowerment of Tribals in development and planning:

The National programmes that are implemented by the State Government recognize the importance of an all-round development of tribal people through special and targeted planning. The Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) was started during the fifth Five-Year Plan in the Scheduled Areas in the tribal concentrated States in India. The Tribal Sub-Plans in the fifth and sixth Five-Year Plans were ambitious programmes aimed at economic development of tribal populations. During the seventies, the expectation was that the general development programmes would cater to the needs of these weaker sections and would provide the much needed thrust as an additive to the general efforts and this has not occurred.⁹

Further, the special provisions for the welfare and development of the backward classes began to supplant rather than supplement the general provisions. It was in this context that the two innovative strategies of the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) for STs and the Special Component Plan (SCP) for SCs were launched during 1974 and 1979 respectively.¹⁰ These two special strategies were expected to ensure that all the general development sectors, through adequate benefits from all the sectors concerned flow to these two disadvantaged groups. However, the TSP and various schemes that were implemented as a part of it, makes no special programme designed for women and tribal women in particular. It is evident that though some of the non-government organizations have played an effective role in mobilizing in extending services for the welfare of these tribal communities and through awareness and by educating them in best ways possible, but these services are utilized only to a limited extent by the tribal people. In some cases many services do not reach the needy ones or otherwise such programmes are rarely attended by the tribal women. The government has implemented various programmes which encourage tribals to take up new ventures.¹¹ These programmes at large have not had the desired effect on the socio-economic development of tribal groups. Empowerment of women and Rural Development go together. Rural Development Schemes which are implemented over the years are target oriented. The benefits are not proportionately reached to women.

⁹ Vijayalakshmi.V, "Scheduled Tribes and Gender: Development Perceptions from Karnataka", *Working Paper 128, Institute For Social and Economic Change*, Bangalore, (2003), p-6.

¹⁰ The objectives of the Tribal Sub-Plans are:

- To enable tribal families, both in ITDP areas and non-ITDP areas to come out of poverty.
- To lay down policies that will protect tribal culture and promote tribal welfare.
- To provide a basic minimum infrastructure to tribal habitats.
- To accelerate social and economic progress and remove the obstacles in development.

(Source: Tribal Sub- Plan, Annual Report, Government of Karnataka, 1997-98)

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1. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NAREGA) 2006.
2. Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) 2008.
3. Indira Awas Yojana (IAY)
4. National Rural Health Mission (2005-2012).

Constitutional provisions concerning the rights of tribal in India

The Constitutional vision of an egalitarian society demands both legislative and executive measures for the reconstruction of the social order by corrective and distributive justice through the rule of law. The Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles are the means to achieve the above objective of democratic socialism. The word 'socialist' used in the Preamble must be read in conformity with the goals of the provisions set out in Articles 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 23, 38, 39, 46 and all other cognate articles. We must seek to reduce inequalities in income and status and to provide equality of opportunity and facilities, pragmatic, broad and wide interpretation of the Constitution makes social and economic democracy with liberty, equality of opportunity, equality of status and fraternity a reality to we, the people of India' including the Scheduled Tribes. All state action should be to reach the goal of establishing a socialist, secular, democratic, republic under the rule of the law.

The principles enshrined in Part III of the Constitution protect the basic rights of the citizens of India. Of these rights Article 14 – 17 and 19 – 21 are relevant for the purpose of the study. Where part IV of the Constitution is more specific in protecting the retaining the rights and culture of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) which are envisaged in **Article 46 and 39(b)**.

Article 14 provides that State shall not deny any person equality before law or the equal protection of laws within the territory of India. **Article 15** operationalizes the concept of equality in a manner which specifically touches upon the conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Schedule Caste and Tribes being mentioned with the 'backward classes' in **Article 15(4)** is evident by the express 'backward classes', the clauses refers to the classes of persons other than the members of the Schedule Caste and Scheduled Tribes. At the same time, the fact that the Schedule Caste can be enumerated by a Presidential Order and the fact that for the members of the Scheduled Caste and Tribes there is provision for reservation in the Constitution¹²

The Constitution also contains provisions which guarantee certain minimum rights for all its citizens and also specifics duties which the State should discharge for social and economic development of backward classes. Especially Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The rights of the citizens are guaranteed under the Chapter on Fundamental Rights contained in Part – III of the Constitution. The duties of the State are included in the Chapter on Directive Principles of the State Policy.

Articles 46 mandates the States to promote, with special care, the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people and in particular, of the SCs and STs and protect them from injustice and all forms of exploitation. This article embodies the concept of 'distributive justice', which connotes the removal of economic inequalities and rectifying the injustice resulting from dealings or transactions between the unequal in society Similarly, when **Article 39(b)** of the Constitution enjoins upon the state to frame its policy towards securing that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed

¹² Vasanth Kumar V. State of Karnataka AIR 1985 SC 1495

as best to serve the common good, what is connotes is a duty of the state for building a welfare state and an egalitarian social order. The object is that the basic needs of the common man must be fulfilled and that the state should endeavor to change the structure of the society. There cannot be any dispute that the neglected tribals do not get equal opportunity with their counterparts in other developed parts of the state and the state should be employed to make laws for protection of tribals from being exploited by the non-tribals. The state should take all effective steps to eradicate inequalities. This is also to make socio-economic justice, assured in the Preamble and Articles 38, 39 and 46 a reality to the tribals.

Moreover, the legislative power of the State under **Article 245** is subject to Schedule V. In other words, as the Scheduled tribes come under the purview of Schedule V, it is constitutionally obligatory on the part of the state government that the state legislation does not violate the objects of Schedule V and that the state legislature is required to be enacted to fulfill the objects of the Schedule V¹³.

The constitutional scheme embodied in **Article 15(4)** and **Article 46** as well as the power conferred upon the governor of the state under Schedule V is intended to preserve and protect the interests of the tribals. Considering the past experience and the exploitation of the tribals ignorance by the non-tribals. It became imperative by statutory safeguards to preserve the land other resources which are their natural endowment and the mainstay for their economic empowerment. The Schedules V and VI constitute an integral scheme of the Constitution with a direction, philosophy and anxiety to protect the tribals from exploitation and to preserve valuable endowment of their land and other resources for their economic empowerment, to elongate social and economic democracy with liberty, equality, fraternity and dignity of their person. The predominant object of Para 5(2) of Schedule-V of the Constitution is to impose total prohibition of transfer of immovable property to any person other than to a tribe for peace and proven good management of a tribal area and to protect possession, right title and interests of the STs held in the land at one time by the tribals.

In addition to the applicability of Schedule-V to the ST's, through the formation of Scheduled Areas, the object is also preserve tribal autonomy, their culture and economic empowerment to ensure social, economic and political justice for the preservation of peace and good government in the scheduled area. The notification of certain tribal dominated areas as "Schedule Areas" by Presidential order enables the governor of the respective state to hold and use immense power to ensure peace and good governance. Scheduled Areas have been notified in the state of Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat. However, the tribal areas of Karnataka as also in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal are yet to be scheduled despite increasing demands for the same.

In *Samatha V/s. State of A.P.*¹⁴ The Supreme Court by a majority, held that the expression 'person means a natural person as well as a artificial person including the constitutional government justification for such an interpretation was found in the constitutional scheme in which the State is consider a juristic person with

¹³ See Indian Constitution, 1950 Schedule V & VI.

¹⁴ AIR 1997 SC 3297 at p. 3337.

responsibilities of bringing an egalitarian order and in which, the weaker sections, including the tribals are granted the right to live with dignity. *Justice Ramaswamy* observed:

“The tribals have fundamental right to social and economic empowerment. As a part of right to development to enjoy full freedom, democracy offered to them through the States regulated power of good government that the lands in Schedule Areas are preserved for social economic empowerment of the tribals.”

Conclusion and Suggestions:

From the above research, it is analyzed that the tribal women's participation in the socio- economic activity is significant and her status in the society is important based on the work attained by her in her daily life. Work participation of tribal women is influenced by a combination of number of social, economic, and demographic factors. The present study reveals the premise that the women's status is high when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities. Although they lack control of material and social resources, their contribution to subsistence economy gives them remarkable and irreversible position. It can be concluded, that in many areas, various factors have given the tribal women a special economic power and an elevated status. Although tribal women play a significant role in economic activities yet, there is no encouragement for women to take up the leadership roles in the society.

At the outset it can be said that all the tribal societies are patriarchal in which men dominate. Despite many development programmes and legislations for the welfare of the tribal communities' viz., there are provisions in the Indian Constitution that aims to protect and safeguard the interests of tribals but the rights concerning tribal women have always remained invisible, neglected and unrecognized. The tribal women in India have virtually no role to play in the social and political spheres. The marginalization of women in the political sphere, which is common phenomenon in non-tribal communities, is also evident among the tribal people.

As a matter of fact, the role of tribal women is obviously handicapped on most fronts. There is the biggest casualty of the participation in rural economy. The alarming low rate of female literacy prevents women from imbibing new ideas and programmes related to their welfare. This handicap has come in the way of creating women consciousness and in getting full benefit of opportunities created by developing process. It acts as a barrier to any kind of modernization and helps in perpetuation of living patterns in the family and outside which are discriminatory to them. Therefore, it can be suggested that the areas of particular concern in the development and welfare of tribal women are:

- Women's access to resources, low literacy rates, lack of community services and active participation and a need for awareness generation programmes, as there are no specific interventions targeted which would improve their standard of living of tribal women.
- The participatory role of tribal women in improving their living conditions by fully exploring natural endowments and alternative uses must find an appropriate place in the strategic approach.

- Appropriate training, awareness and education on various developmental activities and programmes would improve their knowledge, attitude and skill to perform their job efficiently and effectively.
- Specific responsibilities to be assigned to Panchayats or Gram Sabha in villages for the welfare of tribal women in particular.
- The tribal policies should, therefore, comprise to address issues on gender interests at priority, which would enable the rural tribal women to output from their various livelihood strategies and improve the quality of living of the tribal women.

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