



Cover Page



IMPLEMENTATION GAPS AND CULTURAL BARRIERS: A STUDY OF TRIBAL WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

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Abstract

Tribal women in India constitute one of the most marginalized sections of society. Despite constitutional safeguards, reservations in Panchayat Raj Institutions, and various welfare schemes, their political participation remains largely symbolic. This paper examines the "Implementation Gaps and Cultural Barriers" that hinder the emergence of substantive tribal women leadership in India. Using secondary data, government reports, and case studies, the study argues that while legal frameworks like the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and PESA Act 1996 provide opportunities for representation, structural and socio-cultural factors limit their effectiveness.

The key implementation gaps identified include inadequate capacity building, lack of financial autonomy, bureaucratic apathy, and political interference by male family members leading to proxy leadership. On the other hand, cultural barriers such as patriarchy within tribal communities, low literacy levels, domestic responsibilities, and social stigma restrict women's mobility and decision-making power. The paper further highlights how intersectionality of gender, tribe, and class creates a "triple burden" for tribal women leaders.

The study finds that reservation alone has resulted in quantitative increase but not qualitative empowerment. Most tribal women representatives function as rubber stamps while real power remains with their husbands or local elites. The paper concludes that for meaningful political empowerment, the state must move beyond tokenism and invest in education, training, financial independence, and protection mechanisms. It recommends strengthening PESA implementation, creating women-only tribal forums, and ensuring accountability of local administration. The study contributes to the discourse on gender, governance, and social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Political Leadership, Panchayat Raj, PESA Act, Gender, Implementation Gap, Cultural Barriers, India

INTRODUCTION

India is home to the largest tribal population in the world, with over 10.45 crore Scheduled Tribes as per the 2011 Census, constituting 8.6% of the total population. Tribal communities have their own distinct culture, customs, and governance systems. However, in the realm of formal politics, tribal women have remained at the margins for decades. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 and the Provisions of Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 were landmark legislations aimed at decentralizing power and ensuring representation of marginalized groups including women and Scheduled Tribes.

The provision of 33% reservation for women and proportionate reservation for STs in local governance was expected to bring about a transformative change. In theory, it opened political space for tribal women who were traditionally excluded from public decision-making. The expectation was that increased representation would lead to better articulation of tribal women's issues such as health, education, water, and forest rights.

However, two decades of experience reveal a different picture. While the number of tribal women elected to Panchayats has increased significantly, their actual participation in governance remains limited. This paradox raises critical questions



Cover Page



about the nature of political empowerment. Is representation equal to empowerment? Why do tribal women, despite legal provisions, continue to face obstacles in exercising leadership?

This paper argues that the problem lies in two domains: implementation gaps and cultural barriers. Implementation gaps refer to the failure of state machinery to translate constitutional provisions into ground reality. This includes lack of training, absence of support systems, and domination of local bureaucracy and male politicians. Cultural barriers refer to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within tribal societies that view political leadership as a male domain.

The intersection of tribe and gender creates unique challenges. Tribal women face discrimination both from the mainstream society and within their own communities. They are often expected to manage household duties along with political responsibilities, without adequate resources or recognition. Moreover, violence and intimidation are used to silence women who try to assert their authority.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on tribal women as political actors rather than mere beneficiaries of welfare. By analyzing the structural and cultural obstacles, the paper seeks to contribute to policy debates on inclusive governance and gender justice in India. It draws upon political science, gender studies, and development literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite constitutional reservations and legal provisions like the 73rd Amendment and PESA Act, tribal women's political leadership in India remains largely nominal. They face systemic implementation gaps such as lack of training, financial dependence, and bureaucratic control, along with deep-rooted cultural barriers including patriarchy, illiteracy, and social restrictions. Consequently, most tribal women representatives function as proxies for male family members rather than independent leaders. The core problem is the gap between legal representation and substantive political empowerment of tribal women in India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the implementation gaps in policies related to tribal women's political participation in India.
2. To analyze the cultural and social barriers that restrict tribal women's leadership.
3. To assess the impact of reservation on the quality of tribal women's participation in governance.
4. To suggest policy measures for strengthening substantive leadership of tribal women in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on tribal women and politics in India can be broadly categorized into three strands: studies on decentralization and reservation, gender and tribal society, and implementation of PESA and Panchayati Raj.

1. Decentralization and Reservation: Scholars like Jayal (2006) and Buch (2000) argue that the 73rd Amendment was a watershed moment for women's political participation. Reservation created unprecedented opportunities for women from marginalized communities to enter formal politics. However, Ghosh (2009) notes that numerical representation did not automatically translate into empowerment. The concept of "sarpanch pati" or proxy leadership emerged where husbands control the office on behalf of elected women.



Cover Page



2. Tribal Women and Patriarchy: Studies by Xaxa (2004) and Miri (2008) highlight that tribal societies, often considered egalitarian, are not free from patriarchy. While tribal women enjoy relatively more freedom in economic activities, political leadership is still considered a male domain. Joshi (2011) points out that tribal women face "double marginalization" - as tribals in mainstream society and as women within their own communities. The burden of domestic work and lack of education further limit their political aspirations.

3. Implementation of PESA and PRIs: The PESA Act 1996 was meant to empower Gram Sabhas in scheduled areas. However, researchers like Singh (2010) and Corbridge (2002) found that state governments diluted PESA provisions. Bureaucrats and local elites continue to dominate decision-making. Baviskar (2007) argues that without financial devolution and administrative support, elected tribal women representatives remain powerless.

4. Capacity Building and Training: Several studies emphasize the need for capacity building. Kumar (2015) found that most tribal women representatives are first-generation politicians with low education levels. Without training in governance, budgeting, and law, they depend on officials and family members. NIRD reports also indicate that training programs are irregular and not tailored to tribal contexts.

5. Violence and Political Interference: Pandey (2018) documents cases of violence and social boycott against assertive tribal women leaders. Political parties often field tribal women as candidates but do not support them after elections. This creates a climate of fear and dependence.

Research Gap: While existing literature discusses reservation and tribal issues separately, there is limited work that specifically analyzes the intersection of implementation failure and cultural barriers for tribal women leaders. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings:

- 1. Proxy Leadership is Widespread:** In over 60% of cases, tribal women sarpanches act as figureheads while husbands or relatives take decisions.
- 2. Implementation Gap:** State governments have failed to devolve funds, functions, and functionaries as mandated by PESA. Bureaucrats control Gram Panchayat finances.
- 3. Cultural Constraints:** Patriarchal norms, domestic responsibilities, and low mobility restrict women's participation in meetings and public forums.
- 4. Lack of Capacity:** Most tribal women leaders lack education, awareness of legal rights, and training in governance procedures.
- 5. Political and Social Violence:** Women who assert independence face threats, abuse, and social boycott from community and political actors.

Suggestions:

- 1. Strengthen Capacity Building:** Regular, residential training programs in local tribal languages on governance, RTI, and financial management.
- 2. Financial Autonomy:** Direct transfer of funds to women-led Panchayats and provision of honorarium to cover travel and childcare costs.



Cover Page



3. **Support Systems:** Create "Tribal Women Leaders Forum" at block and district level for peer support and grievance redressal.

4. **Legal Protection:** Fast-track courts for cases of violence against women representatives and strict implementation of SC/ST Atrocities Act.

Recommendations:

1. **Full Implementation of PESA:** State governments must genuinely devolve power to Gram Sabhas and ensure tribal women's participation in decision-making.

2. **Education and Awareness:** Launch special literacy and leadership programs for tribal girls to create a pipeline of future leaders.

3. **Accountability Mechanisms:** Social audit by women's groups to monitor functioning of Panchayats and prevent proxy rule.

4. **Political Party Reform:** Parties should mentor tribal women candidates beyond elections and give them tickets for higher offices.

5. **Media and Visibility:** Showcase success stories of tribal women leaders to challenge stereotypes and inspire others.

CONCLUSION

The political empowerment of tribal women in India remains an unfinished agenda. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and PESA Act created the legal framework for representation, but representation without power is meaningless. This study demonstrates that tribal women leaders face a dual challenge: implementation gaps in state policy and cultural barriers within society.

Reservation has brought tribal women into Panchayats, but the state has failed to provide the necessary support systems for them to function effectively. Bureaucratic control, lack of funds, and absence of training keep them dependent. At the same time, patriarchal norms within tribal communities and the wider society limit their mobility, voice, and authority. The result is tokenism rather than transformation.

For democracy to be substantive, it must include the voices of the most marginalized. Tribal women, as custodians of culture and community, have unique perspectives on development, environment, and social justice. Their exclusion impoverishes governance.

Moving forward, the focus must shift from mere numbers to quality of participation. This requires political will, administrative reform, and social change. The state must ensure that reservation is accompanied by resources, training, and protection. Communities must challenge patriarchal norms and recognize women's leadership. Civil society and media have a role in amplifying tribal women's voices.

In conclusion, tribal women's leadership is not just a women's issue or a tribal issue. It is a question of deepening democracy in India. Only when tribal women move from the margins to the center of decision-making can we claim to have achieved inclusive and participatory governance.

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Cover Page



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