



## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA: THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

The Scheduled tribes constitute a small proportion of the total population of the country and they are marginalized from the society in many respects. Provisions made in the Constitution have brought about changes in their position but still they are confronted with a number of challenges. Tribal women in India are hardworking than tribal men and they contribute significantly towards their family income but their income generating sources are limited. Low income necessitates more hands in labour as a result they are reluctant to send their children to formal schools. Moreover due to general low level of education their awareness level is also low and so they tend to ignore the basic conditions of health. Status of tribal women in terms of education, employment and health is low not just compared to tribal men but also in comparison to women belonging to the general population. The purpose of this theoretical paper is to find out the challenges faced by tribal women, and to discuss the strategies that they can consider for handling these challenges successfully. The findings can be beneficial for implementing projects that can help in improving their situation of backwardness.

**Keywords:** Scheduled Tribes, Status of tribal women.

### Introduction

One of the best ways to understand the processes inherent in a society and to appreciate its excellence or limitations is to study the history of the status and role of women in it. No doubt, the study of the status and role of women at various levels of culture has for decades engaged the attention of historians, sociologists and anthropologists. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From a largely unknown status in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. Women's status has been considered as an important measure of social development in a community. It is a relevant tool for planning also. The definition of women's status is measured using different indicators in different frameworks. The frameworks used to study status were defined more by default than discourse, the parameters used by a given study or analysis becomes the de facto definition of the frame work to study status. Most women's studies research, at least in India, have used a sectoral approach, analyzing the situation of women vis- à-vis men in some key sectors such as demography status, economic and work status, education status, health status and political status.

Tribals are said to be original inhabitants of India before settlement of Aryans. The Aryans forced them to move in to isolated regions. Majority of these tribes live in remote and in accessible regions and hilly areas (Sujhata). The proportion of scheduled tribe population to total population in India has increased to 8.6% in 2011 from 8.2 % in 2001. One of distinguishing feature of tribes is that most majority of them live in scattered habitations located in interior and remote regions. Tribal's were for the first time defined in the history of Indian census not on the basis of religion (animism) but on the basis of their origin in 1941. Tribal's are not homogenous group of people but heterogeneous, each tribe having its own culture tradition, social practices. These tribes have been isolated by mainstream Hindu population and their lifestyle is altogether different from Hindu population.



The Scheduled Tribes, who are also referred to as 'Adivasis', meant original inhabitants. For long periods of history, they were always socially and geographically isolated. They belonged to different races with diverse cultural characteristics, speaking varied languages, following a variety of religions and spread across various ecological zones. Process of Sanskritization has affected them culturally, and other processes of displacement have made them a marginalized segment of the society. Since independence, various measures have been taken up at the national level for protecting the interests of the scheduled tribes of the country and particular attention has been given to tribal development in the different plan periods. Out of the total tribal population, tribal women add up to almost half. Like all other communities, development of status of tribal communities also to a large extent depends on the upliftment of the status of tribal women. The popular perception of the tribal women indicates two differing views. Some researchers are of the opinion that the tribal women enjoy higher social status compared to their non-tribal counterparts and some other studies indicate a low status for the tribal women.

### Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are –

1. To find out the social and economic status of tribal women in India.
2. To assess the challenges faced by tribal women.

### Methodology

This is a theoretical research paper, where secondary information produced by different authors and researchers has been used. For obtaining necessary information, various books, journals as well as websites have been explored by the researcher which has been mentioned in the reference section. Discussions Social and economic status of tribal women in India The term status means position of a person in a society. Status has been defined by R.Linton (1936) as a position in a social system<sup>10</sup>. The term role is closely linked to the notion of status. It refers to the behavior expected of people in a status. The status of a person or a group in a society is determined mainly by the educational status, health status, employment status and decision making ability. All these factors are closely related to one another. The higher level of education will generate health awareness, employment opportunities and decision making ability among these groups.

The status of women in a society depends to a large extent on the social structure and the type of society. In Indian social context, there is a predominance of patriarchal family structure where males predominate in all settings and social contexts. However, among many tribal communities, predominance of matriarchal families could be found. Contrary to patriarchal societies, status of women is found to be higher in matriarchal families. Various studies (Mitra, 2007; Burman Roy, 2012) have suggested that the Garo and Khasi tribes of the North East India assign relatively higher position to women due to the system of matrilineal descent, matrilineal residence and inheritance of property through the female line. But other tribal communities which follow patriarchal norms, the status of women is not as high as it is in matriarchal societies<sup>7,8</sup>. For some other tribes, such as, Ho, Gond, the husband does not always enjoy a dominant role. Gond woman enjoys equal status with their male counterparts in many aspects of their social life. A study on the Naga women by Hutton (1921) indicated that they have substantial freedom and higher social status. This indicates that the status of tribal women are not same in all places, rather they vary according to the tribal group and the social structure. However, in tribal societies, tribal women are more important than women in any other social groups because tribal women are very hardworking and in almost all the tribal communities they participate in economic activities almost equally with men or work harder than men and the family economy and income also depend on women. Status is also determined by health conditions. The tribal groups health status is lower compared to that of the general population. They have high infant mortality rate, higher fertility rate, lack of awareness regarding diseases and health care, drinking water provisions, hygiene. In many parts of India tribal population suffers from chronic infections and water borne diseases, deficiency diseases. Incidence of infant mortality was found



to be very high among some of the tribes. Malnutrition is common among them and it has affected the general health of the tribal children. It increases vulnerability to infection, and leads to chronic illness which sometimes may affect brain. Their health status is also related to economic and educational aspects. Their lack of ability to participate in the industrial economic activities of modern societies has deteriorated their living conditions. The tribals are mostly engaged in occupations which do not generate much income such as hunting, crafts making, agriculture. Industrialization and urbanization has brought about a change in the life and living of the tribals by uprooting them from their day to day activities and making them dependent on the vagaries of non tribals.

### **Problems faced by tribal women in India**

Most tribals faces a number of challenges which they need to overcome in order to improve their status in society. The researcher intends to discuss here the issues faced by tribal women in particular. Absence of any fix livelihood: Various literature studies reveal that although work participation among tribal women is higher compared to scheduled caste and general population but the livelihoods of the tribal people are neither permanent nor fixed. Most of them do not have a regular source of income, and they live below the poverty level. Tribal people residing in the rural areas pursue diverse low level activities for fulfilling their basic needs. Mostly they are engaged in agricultural activities. Apart from that, they are engaged in pastoral, handicrafts and at times as industrial labourers. Tribal women are mainly not engaged in any kind of continuous work and much like their male counterparts are found to work in agriculture.

A meager number of tribal men and women are engaged in government services. Economic conditions of households are related to other aspects of their life. Lack of access to education: Most of the tribal women work outside their homes and are engaged in various activities. They work in order to earn money for their family. The women's work involves daily labour, agricultural work. Even young children and girls go for work along with their mothers. Most of the time they do not go to school regularly or become drop outs from school. Even the parents in very poor families don't always want to send the children to school because then their helping hands in work would be reduced. Effect of patriarchy could be strongly seen in most tribal groups and so whatever money women get from their work they give it to their husband and the husband very often spends the money on activities like drinking. Household works are done by the female members of the family. Household work involves cooking, cleaning, washing utensils and clothes, collecting fuel for cooking. The young girls who are studying in primary level in schools hardly learn anything in school and they don't study at home also. The government has announced free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14 years, which nowadays encourage parents to send their children to schools with the hope that if their children receive proper education, then their conditions will improve. The children are given free school uniforms, books and mid day meals. However, the girls don't continue school at a stretch. Sometimes they go to school, some other times they do not go to school and stay at home and go to work with their mothers and help their mothers at household work. As a result, they tend to forget what they have learned in school. After the girl child attains teenage the parents stop sending them to schools. Poor condition of health: Lack of awareness about nutritional requirements mostly leaves the tribal women weak, anaemic and they suffer from various diseases. During pregnancy, special attention is required to be given to women otherwise that will affect the health of both the mother and child. Educational level, employment status, health status and decision making ability helps to measure the status of women in society. Women's education has to be channelized to employment opportunities. This in turn, will increase the decision making ability of women. Women's ability to communicate with other family members and to be able to convince them indicates a decision making ability of women. When the decision making ability is higher, women can have a higher status in the household.



### Strategies for promoting a change in the status of tribal women in India

Women form about half of the population of the country, but their situation has been grim. For centuries, they have been deliberately denied opportunities of growth in the name of religion and socio-cultural practices. Before independence, women were prey to many abhorrent customs, traditional rigidities and vices due to which their status in the society touched its nadir and their situation was all round bleak. They were victims of widespread illiteracy, segregation in the dark and dingy rooms in the name of purdah, forced child marriage, indeterminable widowhood, rigidity of fidelity and opposition to remarriage of widows turning many of them into prostitutes, polygamy, female infanticide, violence and force to follow Sati, and the complete denial of individuality. Besides, the economic dependence, early tutelage of husbands and in-laws, heavy domestic work-load which remained unpaid and unrecognized, absence of career and mobility, non-recognition of their economic contribution, poor work conditions and wages, and monotonous jobs which men generally refused to do was also responsible for their pitiable conditions. At the socio-political plain, women suffered from the denial of freedom even in their homes, repression and unnatural indoctrination, unequal and inferior status, rigid caste hierarchy and untouchability. Consequently, most women were reduced to dumb cattle and had lead to inhuman beastly life.

As it has been pointed out, low levels of economic activity and living conditions below the poverty level is a major problem faced by the tribal women. A practical way of dealing with this problem can be to provide skills and training to women which will help them in building up of self help groups. Awareness can be created through effort to empower these women. Various NGO's can come forward to provide necessary trainings which will help them in becoming empowered and generate livelihood. Bridge trust an NGO has been working with tribal women in areas near Mumbai for generating empowerment for them. In an article by Nidheesh, the role of Self help groups in Kerala in empowering women have been highlighted where women worked to bring about a change in their identity at the local level and also beyond the local level. If the economic aspect is taken care off and awareness generated, then the tribal children can attend school which will help them to develop a strong base for their future. Preparing themselves for future lives will be possible through adequate education. It is essential to aware and motivate the tribal children the reasons why it is important to have education. It is not just for acquiring money but to improve their decision making ability.

The health of the tribal women is another aspect which needs attention because the tribal women work very hard and the income of the family depends on efforts of the tribal women. Among the tribal women, infant mortality rate is found to be higher as compared to national average, which is mainly due to their lack of awareness and facilities of child care. Tribal women suffer from nutritional deficiency. They have lower life-expectancy than the national average because they do not take the required amount of food and rest. From various reports it has been found out that, illiteracy is a cause of lack of awareness about health. If economic, educational and health aspects are given adequate attention, then these factors may contribute to an increase in the decision making abilities of the tribal women. If they are convinced about the significance of financial institutions and if the banks extend their co-operation to these women then their security about financial matters will be enhanced. Moreover, if efforts are given to make women literate then that may help them to face the outside world in a confident manner, which in turn will enrich their lives.

### Conclusion

In spite of various constitutional provisions and policies for the tribals, it is a hard reality that the tribal women still are lagging behind in many respects and they have to face many challenges. The study emphasized the need for tribal development in India. Their low level of economic activities, social





backwardness, low level of literacy, poor health conditions makes it vital for a systematic process of tribal development. They work very hard and contribute significantly towards the economic condition of the family, but they are still in poverty mostly because no proper efforts are oriented towards them. During the plan periods, various programmes are taken up for the development of the Scheduled Tribe population and a lot of betterment has been already done, but still, a lot more requires to be done. The families need to have a sufficient income to enable them to cross the poverty levels. Since economic status determines other aspects of life and living conditions, it is of utmost importance. Education for tribal women is an essential aspect of development. Education is a vital instrument to bring about a change in the cultural norms and patterns of life of the tribal women and to change their outlook and made them economically independent. It would help them to organize themselves to analyze their situations and living conditions and be aware of their rights and responsibilities. Education will enable them to take up jobs so that they can improve their situation. Social and economic status of the scheduled tribe to a large extent depends on the educational attainment. Educated women will be able to face the present day society better than earlier times. In the present context, no one can remain completely isolated, but they are influenced by the growth of modern society and culture. Government is providing a lot of support and grant for the education of Tribal students. This will help to increase the literacy rate and it will lead to the right way to development. The health status of the tribals is explored to assess their awareness regarding their health. Sometimes they lack the essential nutrients. Many times they suffer from various diseases as there is a lack of health and hygiene awareness. Thus increasing the literacy rate and providing opportunities for gainful employment for tribal women will be instrumental in bringing about a change in the status of tribal women in India and to handle to challenges successfully.

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