

TRANSFORMATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN PRESENT INDIAN SCENERIO.

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ABSTRACT-

Tribal constitute almost 9% of the Indian population and tribal women hold an important position in the social fabric of the Indian population. The status and condition of the tribal women have changed from what it was during the time of independence to the early decade of this century. This paper seeks to examine the transformation and status of these tribal women in socio-cultural, political, educational, health and economic fields. The transformation and the changes have not been the same among the various tribal society. The paper discusses the difference among such society. The role of women as a care-taker of the family, passer on of the myths and cultures gives them an edge but the still favouring of a son as a successor, the rigid marriage system and restricted social interaction of tribal women still are a problem. The health status of the women showed poor results. Being the age of modernization, they are being pushed away from their natural dwelling, which is affecting their physical well-being. But the economic status of these women has changed for the better. Where previously they used to be dependent on their husbands financially, they are now working more than their male counterparts and adding to the family income. The women are now getting a say in making the family decisions. This paper also discusses the various other economic and political advantages and disadvantages still faced by this strata of population. Tribal women are not being given their due credit in the political arena and are still being undermined. But it is a high time to recognize these women as an agent of change, as they have themselves changed with change in time.

India has the tribal population as an integral part of its social fabric. It has the second largest population of the tribal people after the African continent. Tribal people constitute 8.6% of the nation's total population, over 104 million people according to the 2011 census. Tribals have traditionally lived in about 15% of the country's geographical areas, mainly forests, hills and undulating inaccessible terrain in plateau areas, rich in natural resources. They have lived as isolated entities for centuries, largely untouched by the society around them. This seclusion has been responsible for the slower growth, dissimilar pattern of their socio-economic and cultural development and inability to negotiate and cope with the consequences of their involuntary integration into mainstream society and economy. Tribals continue to be socio-economically backward.

India as a whole is characterized by sharp gender disparities, although women's status varies considerably by region. On virtually all frontiers of human societal pursuits -economic, educational, scientific, legal, political, official, political and religious sphere Indian women suffer profoundly. For all time there are socio-cultural factors, which validate for the status of women in particular society. It is always culture which is a set of collective experiences of ideas, norms, values and beliefs associated with a people with its gender role inequalities and the intricate process through which culture is transmitted from one generation to another which determines the position of women in a society. Thus, gender roles are socially constructed and is carried on from time immemorial.

Indian society is marked by inequality, discrimination, exploitation, domination and deprivation. The family structure in India is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Patriarchy denotes a culture of power relationship that promotes man's supremacy and women subjugation. It encompasses institutional endorsement of man's ascendancy within the family and other social structures. It justifies the normative process pertaining to the recognition and sustainability of his dominance in society. Consequently a boy is looked upon as the perpetuator of the family line, and a girl a bird in a cage. The Indian family organisation makes discrimination between the sexes. It promotes a hierarchy of classification in which male-centered issues take dominance where as women derive their personalities from their fathers', husbands', brothers' and sons. With a secondary status, women play but a submissive role in social life.

The status of women in a society is a 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. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produce is done mostly by women and children. Many also work as laborers in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income.

Tribals are one of the most exploited and deprived sections of the Indian society. In fact, the use of the category 'tribe' has greatly shaped the discourse on tribes in India. From this angle, the critical issue is their isolation, both geographical and social. The onus of the problems of tribes is squarely put on their isolation and economic, social and cultural features of their societies. While this has been the dominant view, exploitation of tribes by non-tribes, especially in the form of alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes has not altogether been overlooked. All development indicators show them to be the most excluded from mainstream Indian society despite the fact that various kinds of policies and programmes have been pursued and executed for their social and economic upliftment in post-Independence India. Upon independence in 1947, the Government of India spent lot of resources to improve the life of the Scheduled Tribes through legislations, developmental programmes and various progressive welfare schemes.

Needless to say that exclusion from the fruits of development has adversely affected the quality of life of the tribal people. Tribal children and women are no exception. Tribal societies have been by and large characterised as egalitarian societies especially in relation to the hierarchical character of caste society. However, it cannot be said of women status. Status of women varies in different societies. All societies offer its children the presence of two genders and related roles, according to kinship, sexuality, work, marriage and age. It also supplies the broad guidelines for undertaking these roles through a body of attitudes, specifications, metaphors and myths.

Despite several economic, political and social changes, women, are still far behind. One of the most unflattering statistics concerning India's girl child shows that the preference for a son runs across rich as well as poor households, educated as well as illiterate families. Widespread use of modern technology, a joint failure of medical ethics and failure to shed concept of a male heir has pushed female foeticide to high proportions. Female foeticide, infanticide are just one side of the vast anti-women behavioural range in India. The tragedy what is even more striking is the fact that such prominent societal features are mostly based on the lines of caste, tribe, religion, language, region, etc. There is hardly any segment or dimension of life that are not characterised by one or more of such features. Even children have been unable to escape the all-pervasive effects of such features.

Social change, which is a multidimensional and complex process, occurs in all societies irrespective of their structure, compactness, integrity and stage of development. But for a change to be termed development, it must occur continuously in a desirable dimension and direction. These desired goals are specified by the values and needs of the society concerned. While change results in modification or alteration or replacement of the old by the new ones, development aims to achieve human well-being and enhance the quality of life. With a distinctive socio-cultural system, own cultural ethos, an unique way of adaptation to different ecological niches and a distinctive social structure of their own, the tribal groups seem to respond to processes of social change and development quite differently compared to other communities. In this context the role of women is vital as women are an active agent of change.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FRONT-

Socio-cultural change is the transformation of culture and social organization/structure over time and place. In the modern world society is never static and the social, political, economic and cultural changes occur constantly. Social change means, the alteration of patterns of culture, social structure, and social behavior over time. It involves the complex interaction of environment, technology, culture, personality, political, economic, religious change. Social change among tribal women created awareness about the new issues, opportunities and challenges in modernized society. Hence, social change influenced by the modernization, urbanization and globalized world.

Women's role as wives, mothers, and organizers and as basic foundation of other dimensions of social life is of extreme importance. Among Gaddis, as men are out for pastoral duties, the socialisation of children automatically becomes mother's business, in the early years of life at least. The Gaddi family assumes mother centeredness with the children and some important decisions falling to the sphere of women's intervention. The role of women in childbirth, funerals and fairs and festivals is an important part of village life. Here women are carriers of traditional information in absence of written records. They are crucial actors in the preservation and dissemination of such knowledge. They are not only competent food producers and house makers but are also the transmitters of rich local oral traditions.

But the social transformation of tribal women and children are not same throughout the country. Though most of the societies have modernized and are accepting modernity as a tool to develop them, Lambada people of Telangana have not yet warm up to the idea of modernization and still following their age old rituals like wearing traditional clothes, birth and death rituals, etc.

Due to the influence of urbanization and westernization the system of joint family practice that acted as a support network among all the tribal groups is waning at present. This has increased the burden of womenfolk both at home and work. The proportion of nuclear families is higher than joint families, indicating a changing social milieu within the tribal region. Among some tribes like the Karbis and the Misings, still maintain the traditional ties among the family members and have loosely preserved the system.¹

The institution of marriage is universal and compulsory in traditional society. At present child and puberty marriages are exist in rural and tribal society. The traditional Indian family, marriage is regarded as a religious sanctity. It is believed that, by performing religious ceremony, it is considered as valuable. But in modern times, registered or simple marriages have popular and are regarded as ideal. Marriage is a universal phenomenon, the basic objective of companionship, besides fulfillment of sexual instinct and procreation. Keeping the needs of family in mind, in India, it is the parents, who select the spouse. In recent years, the process of urbanization and modernization has brought significant social changes in term of mate-selection. In tribal societies

¹ Socio-Cultural Change in Tribal Society: A Sociological Analysis- Volume : 3 | Issue : 3

the selection of mate is very rigid and complex. Hence, even today tribal society people depend upon tradition and custom regarding marriage and mate selection is concern.

There are tribes in Assam where widow remarriage is allowed which was not previously allowed whereas in some Naga tribes, there is no recourse for them still. Polyandry and polygamy marriage practices are on the decline among the notified tribal regions of Kinnaur, Lahaul, Spiti, Pangi and Bharmaur of Himanchal Pradesh and the incidence of child marriages has declined in almost all the tribal areas. Some tribes which had matriarchal line of inheritance are now shifting to the prevalent hindu- custom patriarchal line of inheritance whereas there are tribes which still consider female line inheritance In recent years tribal people too have started favouring male children. Formerly both male and female children were allowed to mix freely in tribal society, but now outside interactions have imposed certain restrictions on the movement of girls.

Modernization is achieved through change in the mindset of the people living in particular community. While the government has a larger role to play in development of the people and community the various agencies and departments share their role and responsibilities in bringing such people living in depravity out of apathy and help them receive the benefits which they are entitled to through awareness programmes, education and health campaigns, providing employment opportunities through employment missions.

HEALTH STATUS-

The health and physical condition of tribal women and children show a poor result. The percentage of institutional deliveries was mere 17.1 in the case of tribes as compared to 33.6 for the general population. As for ANC checkup, the figure was 56.5 for tribal population, and 65.4 per cent in case of the general population. The incidence of anaemia, too, is more among tribal women than other women.

Such a state of development in tribal society is a combination of various factors that have a bearing on the well being of tribal/*adivasi* children. Malnutrition is one malaise afflicting the tribal children. Poverty, low literacy, unsafe drinking water, poor environment, lack of sanitation, lack of basic health services as well as traditional beliefs and customs add to malnutrition among tribal children. Widespread malnutrition exposes these children to infection and infectious

diseases, resulting in high mortality among them. Infant mortality among tribals was 84.2 in comparison to 67.6 per 1000 for the general population in 2002. Child mortality was 46.3 in comparison to 29.3 for the general population. The figure for under-five mortality among tribals was as high as 126.6 per cent as compared to 94.9 per cent for the general population. The percentage of undernourished children (weight for age) was 64.9 in case of tribes; the figure being 51.8 for the general population. Childhood vaccination reached a mere 26.4 per cent in comparison to 42.0 per cent for the general population².

Tribal people also scored low on health indicators. Health indices like birth-weight, life-expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, prevalence of various diseases have been pointers to it. The tribal population is also affected by chronic energy deficiency in school going children, adolescent boys and girls and women of reproductive age. Around 70-80 per cent of the tribal population seem to suffer from various stages of anaemia – mild, moderate or severe.

Tribes, in fact, subsisted for generations with a reasonable standard of health, because the forest provided them with food, such as fruits, leafy vegetables, honey and fish, and medicinal plants that they have been using for treatment of diseases and maintaining health, and are today the source of modern medicine. Tribal children are not only familiar with all the biological species around them, but they also understand perfectly well, the ecological and symbiotic relationship between the various forest components.

The standard of life of tribals who lived within their traditional social system may have been low on quality but poverty in the form of hunger deaths was generally absent. If at all there were starvation and hunger deaths, they were more on account of natural calamity and the community as a whole suffered. In fact, the proportion of tribal population had increased from 2.26 to 3.26 per cent during 1881-1941 whereas the Hindu proportion had steadily declined from 75.1 per cent to 69.5 per cent during this period. This difference was due to high fertility of the tribal population as compared to the Hindu population. This was probably more due to relatively low mortality rate among the tribal population compared to those of the mainstream population

² IHD - UNICEF Working Paper Series Children of India: Rights and Opportunities Working Paper No. 7

ECONOMIC FRONT-

The economic power of the women in the household is not translated into a corresponding community authority. They are not ignored at household level but are not given due credit and importance alongside. However, female labour is central to all economic activities among tribals. Women perform waged and non-waged, productive and unproductive labour. The workload that is associated with these activities most unlikely does not give women any time to indulge in community affairs. Women's autonomy in terms of decision making is highly constrained among tribals. They have little access to, and exercise limited control over resources; and few are free from threat and violence at the hands of their husbands.

Studies have shown that women used to shy away from taking recourse to law to claim their inheritance. The reasons for this ranged from considerations of 'the prestige of the family' to getting a 'bad name among relatives and others. It was also that there was a common belief that it was 'wrong' for women to claim property from their parents

But the economic value and worth of women therefore as (a) independent and necessary unit of economy without which the given economic system will not survive, (b) complementary to the men as work force, in organized functioning of the whole economic system is now being recognized. Women exhibit ingenuity, creativity and initiative in solving their daily problems of sustenance and survival and often demonstrate organizational skills as revealed during labour exchange (mutual aid groups) and communal service ventures. These social networks are important for the local economies. women 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 give them important and irreversible position.

The male head, which is custodian of property, manages the family finance. Selections of the bridegroom for the daughter or sister, acquisition or disposal of property are all domains of the male members or eldest male. In spite of a substantial contribution in the subsistence economy, a women's right is not recognised in the transmission of landed property and this makes her dependent upon men. The socio-economic equality of sexes can only be seen in the attitudes and practices concerning marriage, divorce and household harmony.

But with time things have changed. Now even the tribal women are earning and contributing to their family income. They are now doing more gainful work than their male counterparts. They are not that much dependent on their husbands as their ancestors were. While tribal women have more say in family decisions than their non-tribal counterparts, they also share more responsibilities. But the wage earning tribal women cannot make the decision to work on their own, nor do they have control over their earnings. The marriage pattern and family ties ensure that women are not cut off from family support.

In the economic sphere, another appreciable change noticed is that, in Karbi society a son inherits property, if there is none, the brother. The women have no right over land and property. But in Pan Engti village it is seen that a prospective farmer has given his daughter in marriage a sizable portion of landed property along with a newly constructed pucca house with all modern fittings. This shows the trend of change in case of property inheritance.³

Women play an important role in their household economy. They work in most operations of all sectors of the local economy and for longer hours each day than men. In addition to the domestic and reproductive activities associated with household maintenance they also collect and gather free goods especially fuel, fodder and water. Tribal women operate effectively in most economic and social institutions, participating in both local and migrant labour activities.

But earlier when a woman was working on her farm or collecting minor forest produce from the forest for her family, she felt belonged to it. However with the change in scenario, when she has to do the labour work, she has to collect forest produce for the other agencies, her economic role becomes different. They feel as they are working as unskilled labourers, it does not help in improving their position. Providing skilled training to women may help in elevating their status. Tribal women insist on a need based plan for providing work on year round basis, in line with the multiple occupational pattern of their work.

EDUCATIONAL FRONT-

An education system should provide a new culture of work ethos and an array of young talented, skilled and well equipped target group who will be able to shoulder the developmental

³Bhasin, Veena “ Status of Tribal Women” Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, New Delhi.

responsibilities. It should make an individual better suited to the needs of the ever changing dynamic world. The status of any social group is determined by its levels of literacy, education, standard of living and health nutrition. The tribal women constitute like any other social group, about half of the total population. Education imparts knowledge, knowledge of self and infuses a sense of confidence, courage and ability among the tribal women to know and overcome their problems associated with exploitation and to avail socio-economic and political opportunities extended to them. It has been recognized as a major instrument which societies can use to direct the process of change and development towards desired goals. The earliest period of independence has ushered in a new era in the field of women's education in general and tribal women in particular in the country.

Tribal women work harder and family economy and management depend on them. It has been reported that illiteracy, in tribal as well as non-tribal population, is positively correlated. The rate of girl tribal students is increasing but is still lower than their male counterparts. Education gives them decision making, economic status and empowerment always go hand in hand. Today's tribal women society wishes that their future would be good. They do not want their children to suffer as they have suffered. They demand good educational and job facilities for their children. Slowly educational status of women and their children, accessibility to all kinds of infrastructural activities improved decision making capacity in all important aspects is appreciable in states like Gujarat. Article 46 of the Constitution of India lays down that the state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the scheduled tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation

There are various factors responsible for the slow advance of the educational development of tribal women. The factors like poverty, unbiased attitude of the parents, irrational and bias, problem of suitable teacher, language and communication, inadequate infrastructure facilities in education institution, high loss and stagnation.

First and foremost indicator is poor economic status is a great deterrent to successful education of the tribal children especially for female children. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial and women are more important than in other social groups, because they

work harder and the family economy and management depends on them .The tribal community think that if the child is taken away from his normal economic work to attend school, the family deprives of the little income, which she brings. The tribal community feels that there is no need for the girls to go to school and waste their time. Psychological and social factors like illiteracy of the parents and their indifference to education, lack of encouragement by the community, motivation and "insecurity" of future for being educated.

Other factors like low social interaction between students and teachers, and between teachers and parents, suspicion over the sincerity of the non-tribal teachers and in many cases shortage of tribal teachers also discourage parents to send their children to school.

Female are now being educated. Education imparts knowledge, and knowledge of self-identity and human environment will infuse a sense of confidence, courage and ability among the weaker sections of the society to know and overcome their problems associated with exploitation and deprivation, and avail socio-economic and political opportunities extended to them. There is a saying that “if you educate a boy, you only educate an individual; if you educate a girl you are educating the whole family”. This statement is proving true in the current scenario, where the tribal women after being educated are observed to look after the family in a better way. Overall literacy rates have increased and female literacy has also increased and gender disparity in this regard has declined. Enrollment in primary education has increased but it has not increased at the same pace in secondary and higher education.

LITERACY RATES OF SCHEDULED TRIBES (STS) BY SEX AND URBAN/RURAL 1961 TO 2001-

Year		Male	Female	Persons
1961	Rural	13.37	2.90	8.16
	Urban	8.16	13.45	22.41
	Total	13.83	3.16	8.53

1971	Rural	16.92	4.36	10.68
	Urban	37.09	19.64	28.84
	Total	17.63	4.85	11.30
1981	Rural	22.94	6.81	14.92
	Urban	47.60	27.32	37.93
	Total	24.52	8.04	16.35
1991	Rural	38.45	16.02	27.38
	Urban	66.53	45.66	56.60
	Total	40.65	18.19	29.60
2001	Rural	57.39	32.44	45.02
	Urban	77.77	59.87	69.09
	Total	59.17	34.76	47.10

Internet Selected Educational Statistics, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resources, Statistics Division 2007

It shows the percentages of literacy rates of STs by sex and urban/rural from 1961 to 2001. It is evident from the above table-2 that there has been a considerable increase in the literacy rates of tribals from 1961 to 2001 i.e 8.53 to 47.10. The Literacy rates among females also raised significantly during this period. Among the tribal women, living in urban areas there is nearly

four fold increase in the literacy rates i.e. 13.45 in 1961 to 59.87 in 2001. Simultaneously the literacy rates among rural tribal women also increased from 2.90% to 32.44% during these four decades. This is due to the continuous efforts of the Government towards educational development among STs.⁴

The fact remains that a large number of tribal women in rural areas might have missed educational opportunities at different stages and in order to empower them varieties of skill training programmes have to be designed and organised. The skill could be for assuming political leadership or for economic self-reliance or even social transformation.

POLITICAL FRONT-

Women, Dalit and tribal have suffered social and economic marginalization for a long time and therefore are considered for positive action. Particularly in the rural setting, the socio-economic hierarchies are interrelated. The Indian Constitution has been committed to introduce socio-economic and political transformation. The initiatives of empowering women and the marginalized sections are the reflection of its democratic spirit that can be noticed from a number of amendments in these fields. Especially, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts provide for an opportunity for women's entry into political spheres especially Tribal Women. These Amendment Acts provide for a 33 percent reservation of seats for Tribal women in the governance of local bodies both rural and urban with target of good governance and fair representation in the development process at grassroots level.

Political participation of women is broader than their participation in the electoral and administrative process. It includes the whole gamut of voluntary activities with a bearing on the political process including support of political groups, dissemination of political views, involving in any form of organized activities that effect or seeks to effect power relationships. It refers to activities not only formally empowered to make decisions, but also intends to influence the attitudes and behavior of those who have powers for decision-making. A significant move in this regard is the adoption policy to enlarge the base of political participation of women and Tribal women.

⁴“ An Analysis of Tribal Women's Education in India” 2011 International Conference on Social Science and Humanity. vol.5, IACSIT Press, Singapore.

The role of women's empowerment for a just society was highlighted in the Beijing Conference 1995. The economic power of the women in the household is not translated in to corresponding community authority. They are not ignored at household level but are not given due credit and importance at official level. Women supremacy is restricted within the family domain and does not extend to social or political spheres.

It is interesting to note that although by convention every village Panchayat has a female member, the lady never bothers to attend the meeting or to take any active interest in the proceedings of Panchayat. Sikkim has a tradition of collective decision making by communities through the institution of Dzumsha. However traditional institutions do not witness a significant role for women and Dzumsha is constituted of males only. In the absence of a male member, a female can represent her family unit. If a male head is absent from Dzumsha meeting, he is fined, however if represented by female head, she is liable to pay half the amount for her absence. This shows that women have a secondary importance in public affairs and community decision-making. Women are generally bypassed and marginalized either they lack the requisite skills, or because women's heavy and unending domestic responsibilities makes attending meetings and participating in decision making difficult. It always happens that men take over the more profitable⁵.

Mainly Tribal Women facing lot of problems due to performing dual role. Here collected information about dual role in discharging household work and panchayat work. While discharging duties as panchayat member have problem in both the side of work they have to maintain at household work and panchayats work.

CONCLUSION-

Development programmes meant for tribes, it is argued, fail to reach them, as they live in geographical isolation. They have thus remained excluded from the fruits of development. This in a sense is a continuation of the discourse that had been the guiding spirit of tribal policy in India. Lack of infrastructure such as schools, health centres as well as personnel is one set of critical factors in terms of which the poor social development indicators among tribal communities have

⁵ Ambedkar. S.N & Nagendra. 2005: "Women Empowerment and Panchayat Raj", Jaipur : ABD publishers

been discussed and studied. This argument is often linked to the argument of inadequate resource allocation for tribal development. However, even with an increase in resource allocations since the Fifth Five-Year Plan beginning in 1974, the material conditions of tribals have failed to improve proportionately.

The ineffective implementation of the programmes is seen as another line of argument by which the issue of social development among tribals could be meaningfully explained. In this discourse, the thrust of the solution lies in accelerated and effective implementation of state sponsored development programmes and schemes, whether these pertain to livelihood/ income-generation activities or education or health or communication facilities.

It thus appears that although there exists variations in respect of the positions of each tribal group in different development fronts, on the whole some tribes occupy considerably better position as compared to the others. The variation in the levels of social change and development among different groups of tribal women is the result of varying degrees of influence of the processes of urbanization, westernization and other related processes of modernization among them including historical legacies, prevailing socio-cultural practices, locational accessibility, varying degrees of interaction with other population groups and the overall process of development.

Lack of development may not be so much due to their social structure as the overall cultural framework and the value system of the state's development process. The framework of development is after all not so alien in the case of the larger society, as it is in the case of tribes. For example, language and curriculum of education imparted to the larger population, including scheduled castes is not alien in case of wider society but is so in the case of tribal society. The same applies to the personnel involved in the development and administration of tribal people. Groups other than tribes do not suffer such constraint and hence the process of social development in the case of tribes is far from smooth.