

Status and Empowerment of Central Indian Tribal Women

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Abstract

Empowerment is an active and multidimensional process. Empowerment involves awareness; enhancement of ability and involvement in decision making; possession of assets and power and a state of proper execution of rights and responsibilities. Thus, empowerment may be in various fields, such as, social, economic, political, religious, etc. State of empowerment reflects the stage of developmental process in a particular field or overall development. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. Tribal women in India amply contribute in livelihood activities along with performing household chores and family responsibilities. Despite several economic, political and social changes, tribal women are still far behind. This paper assess and reviews the status of empowerment of tribal women in central India through her role and status in social, economic, religious and political spheres along with status of her education, liberty, authority and possess rights.

Keywords: Social status; Role; Asset; Livelihood; Education; Development; Empowerment.

Introduction

Women constitute almost half of the total population in the world and out of which two third of the world's adult illiterates are women. According to Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2005), the most disadvantaged section of society is the women; they are the 'silent majority' of the world's poor. Seventy percent world poor are women and they face peculiar social, cultural, educational, political and allied problems [1]. Hence, empowerment of women of any flock is critical not only for their welfare but also for the development of the country. Empowerment is a multidimensional term used with varied understandings. 'Empowerment is the

process that allows one to gain the knowledge, skill-sets and attitude needed to cope with the changing world and the circumstances in which one lives' [2]. "The term empowerment implies change: enhancing people's capacity and propensity to influence decisions that affect them (in their locality and in other aspects of their lives)" [3]. As per my understanding, 'empowerment' involves awareness; enhancement of ability and involvement in decision making; possession of assets and power and a state of proper execution of rights and responsibilities. Thus, empowerment may be in various fields, such as, social, economic, political, religious, etc. Its state reflects the stage of developmental process in a particular field or overall development. The definition of women's

empowerment status is measured using different indicators in different frameworks. Gender Empowerment Measurement (GEM) developed by UNDP focuses on the women's political and economic power at the aggregate level.

'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' [4].

Status of Women in Tribal Society

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 most important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and management depends on them [5]. Even after industrialisation and the resultant commercialisation swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forests produce is done mostly by women and children. Many also work as labourers in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income.

Tribes too have son preference but do not discriminate against girls by female infanticide or sex determination tests. Boys and girls do not have similar inheritance laws. Tribal girls do not inherit land, except in matrilineal societies or under special circumstances. Nonetheless they are not abused, hated, or subjected to strict social norms. Girls are free to participate in social events, dancing and other recreational programmes. There is no dowry on marriage. Among tribes, the father of the bridegroom pays a bride price to the father of the girl. Widowed or divorced women are free to marry again. As incidence of child labour is high among the tribes, girls are no exception. Girls care for younger siblings, perform household jobs and work in the fields along with their brothers. This leaves no time for education of girls; consequently there is gender

gap in education. Both boys and girls are equally exposed to hazards, infections and malnutrition. Infant and child mortality among tribal is high due to poverty and its related malnutrition for both boys and girls. However, all household members are heavily involved in agriculture and subsistence tasks, and that all family members contribute long hours each day to the household economy. Tribal women in India contribute positively to the local economy and participate along with men in subsistence activities. In reality, women do more work than men. They participate in all agricultural activities (except ploughing) and other sectors of indigenous cottage industries. They share major responsibilities in the production process. Married women carry out all types of work at home as well as outside that are demand of mixed agro-pastoral economy. Apart from looking after the house and cattle, major portion of the agriculture is done by women who do weeding, hoeing, harvesting and threshing along with men. In addition, they have to manage household chores, which is a stupendous task. Child rearing is also the responsibility of the women.

Current Situational Analysis

Among tribes girls are not considered as burden because of their economic value. In most of the tribal societies girls participate in all types of work at home and agricultural activities along with their mothers. The girls are trained to be good housewives and motherhood, together with behavioural pattern that are consistent with obedience, being ladylike and as expected passive. While boys are trained in the fields or pastures under the supervision of their fathers or in the educational institutions and youth dormitories, the girls are trained at homes under the strict supervision of their mothers. Even in youth dormitories they are taught mostly ladylike works. They are taught to take care of themselves, family members and household work. They act as pseudo-parents and look after their siblings. If they have spare time in spite of all these activities and obtain permission from their parents then they may go to school. But, in few matrilineal tribal societies the status and role of women is quite stronger. They have right to property and family decisions.

After seventy one years of Independence, the goal of tribal education has not been achieved so far. According of census 2011, the literacy rate among the scheduled tribe population of India is 58.96%, out of which 68.53% are males and 49.35% are females [6]. In spite of the remarkable

expansion of the elementary education system in the last three decades, a very large number of tribal children and more among tribal girls who are deprived section of the society in India continue to out of school. Out of all the children enrolled at primary stage, a very high percentage of drops out are witnessed. Nearly 160 million children of 6 to 14 age-groups, do not enrolled in school (based on sixth education survey data and available statistics on 5 - 14 age group children in India, NCERT, 2002) and among those who enrolled, nearly half drop out before completing the primary education. A data revealed at the Primary level, the dropout rate among STs in 2003-04 was 48.9 percent and 70.1 percent at the Upper Primary level [7]. According to selected educational statistics of India 2004-05, the dropout rate of ST girls between classes one to tenth is 80.7 percent [8]. Much stress is not given on girl education as they have to look after house and younger siblings.

The ideal tribal marriage is the arranged marriage between an unrelated pre-pubertal boy and girl, both coming from different villages holds good for all the communities. However, as pre-pubertal marriages are prohibited, girls and boys do come in contact and want to have their say in selection of the partners. The girl choice is also considered but the boy has to fulfil the other conditions. The custom of bride price is prevalent among tribals because here the father considers a girl as an asset as she contributes a lot to the family economy and it facilitates marriage expenditure.

Tribal women in the economic field, if they are working outside the household, have an unequal situation in the labour market. They are treated unequally under social welfare systems and that affect their status and power in the family. Women receive a small share of credit from formal banking institutions, as they have no collateral to offer. Women normally receive a much lower average wage than men. They are paid less than men for equal work. According to Human Development Report, 1995, the average female wage is only three-fourth of the male wage in the non-agricultural sector in 55 countries that have no comparable data; all regions record a higher rate of unemployment among tribal segment.

Empowerment of Tribal Women

It is a general phenomenon, reflected through various social studies and census reports, that the sex-ratio in tribal communities is more in comparison to the non-tribal communities of India.

Still, her representation and status in tribal society is quite low in comparison to men. Her status of empowerment can be assessed majority through her role and status in social, economic, religious and political spheres along with status of her educational, liberal, authoritative and possess rights.

Women's Education: The education is a fundamental right (93rd amendment on 28th November 2001 and article 46 of Constitution of India) that provides opportunities for socio-economic uplift. The tribal girl child is deliberately denied for formal education, which decreases the future opportunity of the total development. The reasons associated with not educating girl child are financial constraints, early marriages, submissiveness, motherhood, and parental perception of education on women's worldview. Girls have no say on the topic of education. It is entirely parents' decision. Elementary education is a priority area in the Tribal sub-plans since 5th Five Year Plan. Education of ST children is considered important, not only because of the constitutional obligation but also as a crucial input for total development of tribal communities. Another important development in the policy towards education of tribals is the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 which specified among other things the following:

- (i) Priority will be accorded to opening primary schools in tribal areas.
- (ii) There is need to develop curricula and devise instructional material in tribal language at the initial stages with arrangements for switchover to regional languages.
- (iii) ST youths will be encouraged to take up teaching in tribal areas.
- (iv) Ashram schools/residential schools will be established on a large scale in tribal areas.
- (v) Incentive schemes will be formulated for the STs, keeping in view their special needs and lifestyle.

In few states, like Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, girl education is promoted through various schemes, such as providing free bicycle to girl students at secondary school level. All such types of Govt. efforts and due to invent of modern progressive thinking among the tribal societies, the percentage of girl's education among the tribal societies are increased. But, still big educational gender gap persists among the tribes of India. Factors like poverty, indifferent attitude of the parents and children, superstitions and prejudice, lack of suitable teacher, problems of language and communication, inadequate facilities in the

educational institutions and high wastage and stagnation causes major hindrances in the process of spread of education among tribal women [9].

Women's Role in Politics: The role of women's empowerment in the developing countries, women still constitute less than a seventh of administrators and managers; and women still occupy only 10 percent of parliamentary seats and only 6 percent of the cabinet positions. 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*. This shows that women have a secondary importance in public affairs and community decision-making. Women are generally bypassed and marginalised 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 profitable activities. This scenario is generally visible in all the patrilineal tribal societies of India except few exceptions and matrilineal tribal groups. Very few tribal women leaders or social activists are actually working in the field of Indian politics.

Women's Role in Religion: Women are never appointed as priests in tribal societies, and are skilfully manipulated against themselves. Both sexes participate in ceremonies, but men shoulder major responsibilities. Men mainly play musical instruments. Women do take part in dancing but their movements are different from men. As the religious sphere is most dominating among tribals it constitutes a major field for male domination. The women are deprived of public authority. Religion legitimises gender hierarchy. The religious sphere is a major field for male dominance, and a strategy to deprive women of public authority. There are a few innovations in religious sphere, and hence these changes must exist within a traditional, ritual and textual structure. Religious institutions are resistance to gender equality. In structure an explicitly male religious framework contains the tribal societies. Though the secular institutions strive to eradicate inequality but it was seen that women of these areas were lagging behind in all fields. Even the economic power of the women in

the household is not translated into a corresponding community authority.

Women's Socio-Economical Gender Role: Role of women is not only of importance in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. The tribal women work very hard, in some cases even more than the men. With the onset of development programmes economic changes are taking place but tribal women remain traditional in their dress, language, tools and resources, because they grow food crops rather than cash crops. Modernisation is bringing changes, which affect men and women differently. India as a whole is characterised 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 (a set of collective experiences of ideas, norms, values and beliefs associated with a people) with its gender role inequalities and socialisation (the intricate process through which culture is transmitted from one generation to another) determines the position of women in a society. Gender roles are socially constructed. 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 dominance 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 of passage'. The Indian family organisation makes discrimination between the sexes. It promotes a hierarchy of classification in which man centred 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 tribal women share problems related to reproductive health. When primary and secondary subsistence activities are counted, women work more than men. Status of women varies in different societies. 'The conceptual framework to analyse women's status comprise the seven roles tribal women play in life and work: - parental, conjugal, domestic, kin, occupational, community and as an individual. In order to appraise the social status of women in these diverse ecological areas, the social

status and role of tribal women can be divided in to subsequent categories: -

- (a) Girl / daughter / unmarried woman
- (b) Married woman
- (c) Widow
- (d) Divorcee
- (e) Barren woman' [4]

Tribal women play various sorts of roles in different stages of her life. 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. Now, in some instance, during my fieldwork, it is witnessed that as an ill-effect of caste communities of India, Dowry system has taken place in the tribal societies. This is again challenging and degrading the socio-economic significance of women in tribal society of in India.

Conclusion

Empowerment is an active and multidimensional process, which enables women to realize their identity and power in all aspects of life. The need for empowerment of tribal women hardly needs justification. Their primitive way of life, economic and social backwardness, low level of literacy, out dated system of production, absence of value systems, sparse physical infrastructure in backward tribal areas and demographic quality of tribal areas make the development of tribals and tribal areas essential. Government of India launched a lot of programme for development of tribal area, viz. Tribal Sub-Plan strategy, Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, State/UT Minor Forest Produce Act, 2005 including other Development and Employment Programme etc. Self Help Group-Bank Linkage Programme of the government of India is designed to alleviate poverty and empower women of the country. The status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Tribal women play a major role in the co-management of their natural, social, economic resources and agricultural

development including crop production, livestock, etc. But, they remain backward due to traditional values, illiteracy, superstition and many other social and cultural factors [10]. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. Though the major tribal communities of India, give equal respect to the women, still the elevation in the socio-economic and political status of tribal women is awaited.

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