

Empowerment of Tribal Women: A Case Study of Odisha

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Abstract

The tribal women of Odisha have been enjoying honourable position in their respective communities, they play important role in socio-cultural, political as well as economic life. Tribal Women are constituted with 62 categories of Odisha. Out of them 15 tribal are major categories. They have various role perception in different issues on livelihood programmes, the development and major irrigation projects, etc. In the year 2006, Resettlement and Rehabilitation policy was formulated for the tribal women. A survey identifies that during the period 1951-1995, 2 million people have been shifted by development projects, out of them 40 percent were tribal people. Tribal women have linked with forest economy. They depend on forest. The Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest Dwellers Act 2006 were provided for them. The tribal women and sustainable development, both are coordinative. The forest policy 1988 is a symbol of development between tribal and forest. Role Perception of the Legislators and Parliamentarians of tribal women has taken many major issues and challenges to Odisha politics. It is significant to note that Droupadi Murmu, who was a former Minister of Odisha and a prominent tribal women leader has appointed to the coveted office of the Governor of Jharkhand. Tribal women leaders in political sphere, they have taken major portfolio and ministerial position in Odisha. A tribal MLA from Mayurbhanj district named Saraswati Hembram had taken Ministerial responsibility. In the J.B. Patnaik's council of Ministers, she became a Deputy Minister in 1980. Total 13 numbers of tribal women legislations and parliamentarians have participated in many major debates and discourses of various issues. The present paper seeks to analyse the various dimensions of social, economic and political empowerment of tribal women of Odisha. The paper has been concluded with an optimistic note that tribal women of Odisha have made tremendous progress in the socio-economic and political fabric of Odisha.

Keywords: Empowerment, Decision-Making, Development, Multi-Dimensional

Introduction

Empowerment of tribal women is one of the central issues in the process of development all over the world. It is a multifaceted, multi-dimensional and multi layered concept. Women empowerment is a process in

which women gain greater share of control over material, human and intellectual resources as well as control over decision-making in the home, community, society and nation with men. However the tribal women faced many problems in our society. There is basic cultural and psychological tendency on the part of men to dominate the women, which is also seen among the tribal men. On the part of the tribal women too, due to sociological or cultural reasons, they are unable or unwilling to come out of their clichés. There are no doubts that ignorance and illiteracy play a major role in hampering the empowerment of tribal women. It is indeed a herculean task on the part both of government and voluntary agencies to find different ways and means to assist the tribal societies in general and the tribal women in particular to climb the ladder of knowledge, awareness, development and progress.

The tribal societies in India are considered as the weakest sections of the population in terms of common socio-economic and demographic factors such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of developmental facilities and adequate primary health facilities. For many decades, 'growth with equity and social justice' has remained on the development agenda of developing countries, but from the historical point of view Indian society suffers from substantial disparity in education, employment, and income based on caste and ethnicity. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, over 84 million people belonging to 698 communities are identified as members of Scheduled Tribes (ST) in India. Among the 28 states in India, Odisha, being socio-economically backward and culturally sound, occupies a unique place in the tribal map of the country having largest number of tribal communities (62 tribes including 13 primitive tribes) with a population of 9.59 million constituting 22.86% of state's population and 9.17% of the total tribal population of the country according to the 2011 census. They mainly live in isolated areas and far away from the modern civilization with their traditional values, customs, beliefs and myth. Out of 30 districts in Odisha, nine are considered as tribal districts. The Koraput, Malkangiri, Rayagada, Nabarangpur, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj, are fully tribal district and 9 blocks of Kandhamala, 10 blocks of Keunjhar, 1 block of Balasore 1 block of Deogarh come under tribal area of the state.

The women of tribal communities of Odisha work more than men and they constitute major work force and help in the enhancement of the social, political and economic prestige of men. In the process of the shifting cultivation the contribution of tribal women is indispensable. The most of the agricultural works are exclusively done by the tribal women in addition to their daily household works. That is why the tribal women of Odisha by virtue of their substantial economic contribution are regarded as vital assets to their family. Not only in agricultural field but tribal women also play an important role in each and every household economy. They work in most operations of all sectors of the local economy and for longer hours each day than men. With domestic and reproductive activities associated with household maintenance they also collect and gather free forest goods especially fuel, fodder and water etc. Women in Odishan tribal communities generally operate effectively in most economic and social institutions, participating in local labour activities. In Odisha's tribal communities, the role of tribal women is substantial and crucial. They do not suffer segregation or lower status in their communities. This is reflected in their higher sex-ratio vis-à-vis the general population.

Even in a patriarchal social situation, woman's economic and political status in different tribal communities of Odisha is not inferior. There is need to create avenues so that they empower themselves without any

exogenous interference. Of course the trend is not uniform throughout; the tribal women in the hill area and cut-off area are less advanced and there is need for special campaign for the enhancement of their awareness level. In a nutshell, the women in tribal communities of Odisha are hard working, sincere and capable of shouldering responsibilities and given appropriate scope they would participate actively and equally as their male counterparts. The objectives of the paper to explore the various programmes promoting socioeconomic empowerment of tribal women, to find out the role of tribal women in the decision making process of the state and to analyse the constraints to empowerment of tribal women and to make recommendations for effective participation of tribal women in every sphere of society.

Profile of tribal women in Odisha

Tribals are the indigenous people who live in the lap of the nature, and depend on natural resources for their livelihood constitute the major segment of Indian society. About 44.70% of the area of the State has been notified as the Scheduled Area and comprises the entire seven districts of Mayurbhanj, Koraput, Malkangiri, Rayagada, Nabarangapur, Sundargarh, and Kandhamal. The total population of Scheduled Tribe in Odisha is 22.8% as per Census 2011 and has increased marginally from 22.1% in 2001. As per the 2011 census data 22.3% are male and 23.4% are female.

There are several category of tribal peoples are live in Odisha, like Santal, Orano, Gond, Soras, Bonda, Paroja, Kondha, Munda, etc. The Bonda is an ancient tribe people of numbering approximately 12,000 according to the 2011 census who live in the isolated hill regions of the Malkangiri district of southwestern Odisha, in Bonda society, the women enjoy a privileged position. They are the primary workers and providers of food for the community. Bonda girls largely marry boys who are at least five to ten years younger than them. Thus the girl looks after her husband as he grows up and in turn he cares for his older wife. The Kondha are indigenous tribal groups of India. The highest concentration of Kondha 16, 27,486 found in Kandhamal, Koraput and Rayagada district of Odisha. Kondha women are very laborious, therefore female family members are considered assets, because of their contribution inside and outside the household and women are on equal footing with the male members in constructing a house to cultivation. The Santal or Saontal are 2nd highest scheduled tribe of Odisha. Promoting Tribal Rights and Culture of the workforce, income and wellbeing of the family are accorded due respect and credit. The husband consults his wife in all important questions, including property matters. Though significantly contributing to agricultural activities, women are debarred from trade, services, etc., which require greater mobility and contact with strangers. For all other purposes, they enjoy a more or less equal status. Traditional customs are comparatively more liberal to women. Oraon is one of the tribal communities found in India, which mainly depends on agriculture for earning their living. They are also known as Kurukh tribes. The Oraon people have a rich range of folk songs, dances and tales, as well as traditional musical instruments. Both men and women participate in dances, which are performed at social events and festivals. The Soras are a prominent tribal community in the Rayagada district of Odisha and specific pockets of Koraput and Gajapati districts. The Sora family is polygamous. The total household economy revolves around the woman member who is hardworking and who helps her husband in ploughing and harvesting crops in addition to attending household chores exclusively. The Gondi or Gond people are Adivasi people of central India. The Gond women drape a saree in a different fashion and adorn their necks with a number of long black bead necklaces. Traditionally they do

not wear blouse. They are non-vegetarians who eat fish, chicken and mutton. Rice and Jower are the staple cereals. The men drink alcohol occasionally. The Gond has a rich tradition of art and craft which includes body tattooing, floor-painting, pottery, basket-making etc.

Indicators of empowerment of Tribal Women in Odisha

The empowerment process is difficult to measure quantitatively. Various authors have used education, work participation, and exposure to mass media, the means or sources by which women are expected to develop decision making authority, greater freedom of movement, autonomy, and attitudinal changes in favour of gender equality, as indicators to measure empowerment. The Government of Odisha has implemented all the welfare schemes framed by Government of India as well as the State has been giving all the priority to the women as per the Constitution of India. There are several areas on which the government of Odisha taken several steps for improve or empower the positions of tribal women. These are

➤ Social Empowerment

The schemes inaugurated by Odisha Government are multidimensional leading to social empowerment of tribal women. Biju Kanya Ratna Yojana creates an environment for girls that promotes equal opportunities, eliminates discrimination, and ensure empowerment through change in social attitude. Mukhyamantri Mahila Sasaktikarana Yojana aims at empowerment of women and gender equality. Odisha government provides the schemes like Public Distribution System (PDS), Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), Annapurna Scheme, Antyodaya Anna Yojana and Mid-day.

Meal Scheme (MDMS) have been launched especially to provide food security to all age groups women. For the old women government has launched National Old Age Pension

Scheme (NOAPS), National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) and Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) which are undertaken to provide social security for workers in unorganised sector. Similarly, at State level the schemes like National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS), National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS) and Madhu Babu Pension Yojana (MBPY) are being implemented to ensure social security in unorganised sector in Odisha.

➤ Anti-liquor Movements

Odisha has been witnessing an unprecedented surge in people's movement against liquor in many parts of the State, especially among tribal women of the marginalised sections in rural areas. The movement demands complete ban on sale and consumption of liquor by the Government. The ordinary women from their own every day experiences are narrating their problems and how liquor consumption has impacted their socio-economic life and pauperized many households. Consumption of alcohol has been identified as one of the major causes of poverty and violence in social life, especially against women and children. It has been contributing to loss of quality of life, working hour, ill health and influencing the decision making process in many ways in the matter of public importance.

➤ **Educational Empowerment**

Equal access to education for women and girl is the guiding principle of education policy in Odisha. Special measure have been undertaken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender sensitive educational system, increased enrolment and retention rates of girl and improve the quality of education to facilitate lifelong learning as well as development of vocational technical skill by women. Reducing gender gap in secondary and higher education would be the focus area. Sectoral time existing policies have been achieved with a special focus on girl and women, particularly belonging to tribal women. Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (education for all 6-14 year age), Ashram schools, mid-day meal schemes the number of Adivasi (tribal) children going to school and finishing at least primary school is low. The number of ST girls in school is even lower. Maltidevi Prak Vidyalaya Paridhan Pre-school creation, Biju Juba Sasaktikaran Yojana providing laptops to meritorious students between age group of 18 to 25 and Mid-day Meal Scheme (MDMS) have been launched especially to provide food security to 6-14 year girls. Though there was an increase in total as well as female literacy among tribal, it is still at a slower pace as compared to the overall population. In case of tribal female the literacy rate has increased from 23.37 % (2001 census) to 41.20 % (2011 census).

➤ **Maternal Health and Nutrition**

Health of tribal women is mainly associated with their existing environment, social isolation, poverty, inadequate housing, mental illness, widowhood etc. Generally, at household level cultural norms and practices and socio-economic factors determine the extent of health problems among tribal women. Tribal communities in general are highly disease prone. Their misery is compounded by poverty, illiteracy, ignorance about causes of disease, poor sanitation, lack of safe drinking water and blind beliefs. As a result of which birth rate, death rate, infant mortality rate, life expectancy rate, maternal mortality ratio, total fertility ratio etc. of Odisha lags behind the national average. The health status of tribal people is poor because of the isolation, remoteness and being largely unaffected by the developmental process. In India several focused interventions for improvement in health and nutritional status of tribal women have been initiated in the last three decades, to improve the prevailing situation, the Government of Odisha launched the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) programme, Mamata Yojana to alleviate the issue of maternal and infant under nutrition. Anganawadi Workers ASHA karmi and ANM play a great role in making conscious the tribal women about their health and nutrition.

➤ **Economic Empowerment**

Development is meaningless if women are not involved and it is possible through economic empowerment of women. 80% of tribal women in Odisha are engaged in agriculture. Though they are living in hilly areas they are always working in field and cultivate different hilly crops like rice, groundnut, ginger, oilseeds, pulses, corn, barley, ragi, mustard, and vegetables. The beneficiaries have been engaged in Farm Forestry, like fisheries, poultry, duckery and goatery. Biju Krushak Vikash Yojana aimed to maximise the irrigation potential through panipanchayats. Biju Krushak Vikash Yojana, Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) creating an environment for tribal women that promotes equal opportunities, eliminates discrimination and ensures empowerment through changes in societal attitude. These programmes benefit tribal women workers in

agriculture and train them in organic farming. Kaushal Vardhan Kendras (KVKs) at Panchayat level for mobilising and imparting skills pertaining to local employment/livelihood opportunities to school drop-outs, adolescent girls, housewives and rural youth. Each KVK will be linked to the nearest ITI/MSI/ATI for capacity building, curriculum development, assessment and certification. The KVKs will also function as counseling and guidance centers for youth to help them make informed choices. NGOs will also be empanelled for running of these centers in their areas of operation.

➤ **Political Empowerment**

Promoting tribal women's political participation and involvement in public affairs does not benefit women alone, but also men and communal life generally. Political empowerment of women is a part of the overall empowerment process. Political empowerment is a major path to women's empowerment and participation in the decision making process will lead to women empowerment in the true sense of the term. The PRIs are playing a central role in the process of enhancing tribal women's participation in politics and decision-making process. The state legislature of Orissa Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2011 by amending the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, Orissa Panchayat Samitee Act, and the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act enhanced the quota for women from the existing 33% to 50%. The 50% reservation for tribal women in Panchayati Raj institutions is an important part of this empowerment of tribal women. In the above table in all Districts tribal women's participation in 2012 Panchayat election has increased in comparison to 2007 Panchayat election.

Hindrances to empowerment of Tribal Women

From the above study the researchers have found various obstacles in the way of empowerment of tribal women.

- 50% of tribal women are illiterate even they do not know the official language of state which creates a big hindrance to express their view in the meeting of local affairs.
- Lack of recognition of the collective rights of indigenous people to their lands and recourses.
- Scarcity or the loss of access to forests and natural resources needed to maintain the family's livelihood.
- Forced displacement brought about by development aggression.
- Improper facility for attendance to educational Institutions.
- Limited access to social services such as education and health.
- Loss of traditional roles and knowledge.
- Domestic violence
- Poverty

Conclusion

Women in tribal communities of Odisha play very significant role in the co-management of their natural, social, economic resources and agricultural progress. A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic and village political structure of her community or society, she is found to be exercising a relatively free and firm hand in all aspects related to her social life unlike in non-tribal societies. Most of the tribal communities of Odisha are patriarchal where women have a freedom and self expression. They can only be understood on their own terms. 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. Generally in a tribal family husband plays the head role, the wife also plays a large part in its control and overall management of daily family affairs. Again, there are many facts which indicate a low status for the tribal women in Odisha. For example, she does not have property rights except in a matrilineal society which is a small proportion of the tribal population. She is paid less as wages than her male counterpart for the same work. Several taboos discriminating against tribal women exist in certain tribal groups implying impurity and low status. The tribal women cannot hold the office of a priest. There are taboos related to menstruation. As a result of which tribal women suffer both by tribal customary practices as well as the state machines and they continue to live with the various discriminations. A tribal woman always busy not only in domestic works but also she plays a vital role in family income both directly and indirectly by gathering of forest products, cow dung and firewood etc. Divorce is very common in many tribal communities of Odisha. A married tribal woman may say before parents and village level community Panchayat that she does not want to stay with her husband and then she can leave her husband's house. When she remarries, brideprice given by the first husband is demanded from the second one. Tribal women in Odisha have more say in family decisions than their non-tribal counterparts, they also share more responsibilities. Their latent leadership quality has been manifested in the assumption of roles under Panchayatiraj institutions and they have become reasonably vocal to express their own ideas for betterment of their community as a whole.

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