



Tribal Women in India and the Narrative of Development

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Abstract:

People belonging to various tribes live in India. Many tribes around the country have their own sustainable way of life. In reality, half of these tribes are comprised of women. But in the race for development, they have been uprooted from their traditional way of living. On the one hand, huge companies have been established in their land; on the other hand, development plans without vision have made them helpless. The independent life of tribal women is now at a crossroads. The government's development plans have a limited perspective, and in light of this, the present article has attempted to examine the condition of tribal women in India today.

The condition of tribal women in India is a tale of how their once dignified and independent lives have become entangled in the pursuit of development. The tribal population consists of 8.2% of the total Indian population. Most of the country's tribal communities live in central and northeastern India. About half of them are women. Modernity and development have shattered the lives of tribal women, who are socially and economically empowered compared to the status of other women in India, leaving them helpless and destitute. The destruction of their livelihood has further devastated their lives. They are deprived of proper education and health facilities. Unable to go back to their roots and build a new life, their condition makes us take a serious look at our concept of progress.

Social status

Tribal women used to enjoy a certain amount of freedom and rightsⁱ when compared to other women. Tribal communities have a better sex ratio than other communities. In addition to this, gender discrimination, work discrimination, and stratification are rarely seen

among them. There is no evidence of female infanticide among tribal people. The absence of child marriage, the possibility of widow remarriage, and the possibility of divorce are indications that the condition of women is better. Women have the right to make their own decisions regarding marriage.

Women play an important role in everyday life. Since most tribal communities are matrilineal,ⁱⁱ the woman is the center of the household. In tribal communities, women typically hold a more prominent role in the workforce. Therefore, they hold significant importance from an economic standpoint, as women are often viewed as property. In the past, when humans were food gatherers, women played an important role in food collection. Later, in the context of shifting cultivation and traditional farming, women could be seen collecting seeds and deciding the choice of crops.

Women were central to the decision-making process and had rights to property. Women owned the majority of the movable property. Tribal communities observe the practice of Vadhu Dakshina (money given to Bride's family)ⁱⁱⁱ due to the importance of women. When it came to marriage, the groom's side had to give the bride a dowry. Many of the statuses and opportunities that tribal women had were not available to women from other communities. Looking at how their lives changed in the last century and the first decade of this century shows how indigenous, dignified life has changed.

Havocs caused by development:

It's true that industrialization and globalization's dream of development has become a nightmare for many. The rush to acquire forest resources and build civilization has rendered the lives of the forest people insignificant. The areas inhabited by tribal communities are rich in natural resources. Therefore, the attention of industrialists naturally gravitated towards these areas. In tribal communities, big companies like Vedanta and Jindal have emerged. Similarly, the construction of dams to quench modern India's thirst also sparked a large-scale population mobilization. The relocation of local residents, which began in this process, continues to this day. Tribal comprise 8.2 percent of India's population, but it is alarming that they account for more than 50 percent of all migrants. Orissa, a state with a large tribal population, has seen a migration of 7-8 million people since 1980.

Therefore, the displaced individuals work at various jobs in towns and urban areas to make a living. Both men and women work in kilns and in construction. The helplessness of life has driven many women into prostitution. Human trafficking and bonded labor victimize a large number of tribal people. Communities that once led a stable life are now

suffering from high infant mortality, malnutrition, and anemia. Their lives have been blighted by exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, and poverty. Large-scale implementation of development projects has resulted in the widespread displacement of tribal communities, highlighting the urgent need to reevaluate our understanding of development.

The governments have failed to provide education, health, and food security to the tribal communities. Their desperation over the government's response sparked anger among them, which in turn led to protests and various pro-people movements. Numerous organizations were established in these areas. In some places, some of the tribal communities have also joined the Maoists. This is why the government is suspicious of them. On the other hand, Maoists suspect them of being government informers. Reports indicate that these developments have exposed women to a range of atrocities. The writings of Mahashweta Devi, an important Indian writer and an activist, reveal how tribal women are being harassed. They continue to fight for Jal, Zameen, and the jungle.

The availability of resources, the places they used to work, and the distribution of the products they made have all gone out of their hands. They used to have an inseparable relationship with the forest. Forest products served as one of their primary sources of income. However, laws such as the Forest Rights Act and the Wild Life Protection Act prohibit the collection and sale of forest produce. As a result, these people, who believed in the forest and did not know any other means, have become helpless. Many tribal women used to earn their livelihood by selling betel nuts and forest produce in the nearby villages. Now, it's out of their hands. There are no alternative sources. These people have no rights to the forest they live in. Tribal communities have never believed in private property. Thus, those who lived together in an area could not prove that it was theirs, subject to modern legal regulations. Though they are in large numbers, they are not politically powerful. Women's participation in politics is still low. Despite some women winning elections at the panchayat level, they lack the autonomy to work independently. Therefore, their voice could not reach where it should be.

In addition, the innocence of these people, who live far from civilization, makes them a straightforward prey for exploitation. As a result, they are facing lower wages and higher unemployment. The fertility rate is higher among tribal women. Furthermore, they frequently experience pregnancy and childbirth without the necessary awareness. The lack of modern education and knowledge made them vulnerable. According to the 2011 census, the country's total literacy rate is 73%, while tribal communities' literacy rate is 59%. The literacy rate among women is even lower. Today, the market sells tribal women's specialized skills as

commodities. Middlemen profit by utilizing their handicrafts, weaving, and other skills to create art and clothing. The artists are not reaping the fruits of their labor.

Indeed, women possess significant power. Tribal women played an exceptional role in the Chipko movement to stop deforestation. Women were at the forefront of this movement in Uttarakhand.^{iv} They are also involved in many community development activities. In this context, tribal women offer a wealth of knowledge and skills, such as crafts, traditional knowledge, and environmental understanding, that people devastated by the relentless exploitation of the environment should learn from. On the one hand, there hasn't been any attempt to acknowledge this; on the other hand, modern development has diminished the significance of this skill.

The government has launched several schemes for the welfare of tribal people, especially women. Schemes like Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and Special Component Plan (SCP), along with the Tribal Welfare Department, have taken up several programs to empower these people. Most importantly, these schemes aim to uplift their living standards through poverty alleviation, providing infrastructure, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The United Nations has devised several programs to foster tribal culture. At the international level, the United Nations, mindful of the interests of tribal communities worldwide, organized a conference in Geneva in 1982, where women actively participated. In 2007, the United Nations adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRP) to prevent discrimination and violence against indigenous people. Thus, at the regional, national, and international levels, voices are being raised in favor of tribal communities, and many schemes have been implemented for their upliftment.

Despite all these development projects, they have not fully enabled tribal communities to develop. While the majority of the population participates in early-stage production and manual labor, they continue to lag behind in skill development, self-employment, and leadership development. Divergent ethnic communities can be observed in our country. Therefore, programs should be tailored to the specific region and their unique lifestyle. If they don't, it could make things worse. Given all this, it is imperative that we thoroughly reassess the existing ideas and take them forward. We must develop a long-term vision within the framework of understanding community ways of life. We must understand that if we do not change our definition of development, the tribal communities and the entire human race will face a catastrophe.

ⁱ Manna, Samita, and Rima Sarkar. “The Status of Women in Tribal Society: A Study on Three Tribal Communities in Paschim Midnapore, W.B.” *Gender Asymmetry in Contemporary India*, 1st ed., Mangalam, 2016, pp. 226–34.

ⁱⁱ Roy, Burman. “Status of Tribal Women in India.” *Mainstream Weekly*, vol. 12, 10 Mar. 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy, Burman. “Status of Tribal Women in India.” *Mainstream Weekly*, vol. 12, 10 Mar. 2012.

^{iv} Jain, Shobita,. “Standing up for the Trees: Women’s role in the Chipko Movement” *Women and the Environment: A reader on Crisis and Development in the Third World*, 1st ed., Earthscan, London 1991, pp. 163-178