

# Review of Literature on the Factors Affecting the Status of Tribal Women in India

## Abstract

The objective of the paper is to highlight the major and important review of literature on the factors which are affecting the status of tribal women in India. Generally, it is believed that women in every country are like a lamp, that burns itself to light the whole world, get its own lower part is ever sunk in darkness. The tribal women constitute half of the total tribal population. The role of tribal women in the tribal society is very important. Here it is worth mentioning that they work hard for the economic growth of their family. In most of the tribal societies their family economy, economic growth and management are completely depend on her. However, Sociological and anthropological studies show that the tribal women's status is better than their non-tribal counterparts in terms of freedom, autonomy and decision making. They are playing equal roles in the production process as well as decision making within the family. But many other studies expose illiteracy, lack of awareness, poverty are the issues that are lowering their status in comparison to general women. This paper is about the review of literature of different factors which affect the status of tribal women in Indian context.

**Keywords:** Women, Tribes, Tribal women, Socio-economic Status.

## Introduction

Tribes are integral part of the Indian society. Tribal community is most backward community in Indian society. They suffer from various forms of economic exploitation, social stagnation and political isolation. Even today tribes represent the most neglected group of Indian society (Sivanand, 2001). In India 8.2% of the total population belongs to tribal community. Bose (1981) said that Indian tribes cannot be compared with African tribes or Australian tribes. Therefore, he almost rejected the characteristics of the tribe given by British anthropologists. People of India project say there are 462 tribes with 168 segments. Schedule V and VI Scheduled Tribe list of Government of India has more than 900 tribes because the same tribe is found in different states and the state lists are added to aggregate more than 900 tribes (Chaudhury and Patnaik, 2008). He said that there has been a continuous relationship between the tribes and the castes in India. If the caste people are literate and civilized then the tribals were not away from the above two factors. Hence, they cannot be called uncivilized.

Describing Bose's idea, Beteille (1975) said that Bose provided a comparison between Indian tribes and non-Indian tribes. For Bose the situation in Africa and in India are completely different. In Africa tribes are found in isolation, living in forest and not having any civilization and not having any contact with outsiders. On the other hand, Indian tribes were never found in isolation and they were a part of Indian civilization, they have been directly or indirectly related to their ancient kingdoms. Thus, the main idea is that tribes in India were never isolated completely. Chaudhury and Srivastava (2009) said that Bose provided a civilizational perspective for the Indian society, in which Bose pointed out mainly to how tribes have been interacting with the Hindu communities since long. Bose gave the concept of tribe-caste continuum. He gave the examples of Juangs of Mayurbhanj, Orissa. The Juangs were shifting cultivators. The Britishers had put a ban on shifting cultivation. The Juangs started looking for some alternative occupations. They left their villages and shifted to neighboring caste villages. They became a part of jajmani system and became a part of pure & impure hierarchy. However, fowl sacrifice in various Hindu worships went on. Gradually they became a part of the wider caste system. Further,

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today when we discuss the features of a tribe, we must include the factors of change and transformation in it. Due to the forces of modernization several changes have occurred in the tribal society in India. Today they are no more isolated and they cannot say to be relatively isolated. The situation has improved due to communication and transportation facilities (Chaudhury, 2004).

#### **Status of Tribal Women**

Any society can be determined by the status of women given in that society. Women are playing a vital role in uplifting their family status since centuries. Like any other women tribal women are also contributing a lot for their family as well as for society. Tribal society is also a patriarchal society. The domination of male members over their female counterparts is as obvious as in the non-tribal society. Condition of tribal women is relatively better. So far male-female relationship is concerned, largely because the women in the tribal society play significant role in the production process and are equal economic partners with their male members (Sikligar, 2006).

The tribal women constitute half of the total tribal population. The role of tribal women in the tribal society is very important. Here it is worth mentioning that they work hard for the economic growth of their family. In most of the tribal societies their family economy, economic growth and management are completely depend on her. However, many sociological and anthropological studies show that the tribal women's status is better than their non-tribal counterparts in terms of freedom, autonomy and decision making. They are playing equal roles in the production process as well as decision making within the family. But many other studies expose illiteracy, lack of awareness, poverty that are the issues which lowering their status in comparison to general women. The tribal women enjoy more freedom in various walks of life. Traditional and customary tribal norms are comparatively more liberal to women (Dhebar commission report, 1961).

Studies on tribal women show that, women in tribal society enjoy little better status. There is no child marriage, no restrictions of widow remarriage, women have right to decide her life partner, instead of dowry, there is bride price in some tribes. She is economically independent to some extent. However, there are many socio-economic factors which indicate lower status of tribal women, for example, she does not have property right in the patrilineal society, they do have this right in matrilineal society, but proportion of this society is quite low, as compared to the total tribal population in India. The development projects have adversely affected the tribal women. With deforestation they have to travel a longer distance to gather forest produce and fuel. A large proportion of tribal women (almost 90 per cent) are engaged in collecting forest products, agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Major proportion of tribal women are agricultural labourers and industrial labourers, their participation in service sector is very low. They are paid less wages for the same work, than their male counterparts. Tribal women cannot hold an

office of a priest, are some of the major factors affecting their status in the society. They are very often sexually exploited by forest and mining contractors. The incidence of sexual assaults on tribal women have increased with the time. In the remote hill areas, the rate of literacy among the tribal women is alarmingly low. It is a social fact that educated society needs educated women. Further, there is positive correlation between literacy and health as well.

There is high infant mortality, high fertility and greater incidence of malnutrition among them (Basu, 1993). The low health and educational status adversely affect the economic status. Development of their existing and coming generations depend on the literacy and economic independency of women. For all round development of the society, socio-economic status of tribal women has to be improved. Without their genuine empowerment, the desired goal cannot be achieved. A study on Kondh tribe of Odisha by Chaudhury (2004) suggests that the development schemes given by government agencies to the Kondh women have created economic assets among them. But women could not be empowered specially in decision making for using the money earned by them because Kondh is a patrilineal and patriarchal society. Element of power could never be transferred to women. Undoubtedly they have a better position than the non Kondh women concerning divorce.

Although, the tribal women needed to have a deserved place in the changing social conditions but due to illiteracy, lack of awareness towards their rights, high rate of poverty among them they remained backward even today. Hence in consonance with the above concern this paper contains an extensive literature review of the status of tribal women in India like educational status of tribal women, health status of tribal women economic status of tribal women and awareness of tribal women regarding their rights etc.

#### **Review of Literature on the Status of Tribal Women in India**

For understanding any aspect clearly and to know the gaps in that area, it is very essential to have a brief review of the earlier studies in that specific area. Hence, an attempt has been made in this paper to review briefly the existing literature on the different dimensions of status of tribal women in India.

#### **Studies on Educational Status of Tribal Women**

Singh and Ohri (1993) on their study of Educational Backwardness among Tribal Women of Himachal Pradesh have suggested that the educational programmes in the development scheme under the tribal sub-plans need to be oriented more towards people's participation. Awareness campaigns need to be launched to make the tribal population gain from literacy and become sensitized to the cause of education of the girl child. Ambasht (1993) in his paper discussed the educational status of tribal women and its implications. He has analyzed that the literacy among tribal women has been lagging behind all other sections - urban males, urban females, rural males, rural females, SC males (urban and rural), SC females (urban and rural) and tribal males. It is at the lowest rung. He has found out that the tribal girls'

enrolment and drop-out cases from the school are higher than the other sections. He has stressed on the tribal girls' education and suggested that a remedial action with regard to a complete overhauling of households in the tribal areas is needed. He has also analyzed that the tribal women's participation and contribution in labour is very high but not in education. Singh and Ohri (1993) in their paper on 'Educational status of Tribal Women in India' reviewed the educational status of tribal women in India and suggested measures for their improvement. They observed that tribal education cannot achieve its objectives unless it is based on the identification of educational needs and problems of tribal communities. They also stated that there has been a wide gap in enrolment of girl child in tribal society for universalization of elementary education as well as school education. It is also reported that drop-out rate at primary stage of education is more among girls than boys and it is higher in rural girls and the highest in tribal girls.

Pandey (1993) in his paper on 'Education of SC and ST girls in Orissa' discussed the status of education among the scheduled castes and scheduled tribe girls in Orissa. He has reported that the educational status of SC/ST girls is much lower than the educational status of the boys. It is also found to be lower than that of the girls in general population. Though there has been an increase in the enrolment of girls, it is still less than that of boys. He has also mentioned poverty, lack of literacy among parents, ignorance, lack of motivation, social stigma attached to girls, low weightage to female life and lack of proper infrastructural facilities in schools are the reasons for low enrolment and high drop-outs of these girls. Further, he also pointed out that these girls played the mother's role in their homes when they themselves were in need of love and affection of the mother. He has suggested in his paper for improving the educational levels of the SC and ST population in general and girls in particular, it was necessary to review the programs in the light of physical, sociological, cultural, economic and religious factors, which were impeding the progress of education and progress should be planned very seriously and cautiously keeping in mind the local needs. Oraon (1993) conducted a study on different tribal groups in Chhotanagpur to study the education among the tribals and the attitudes and aspirations of tribal women regarding the education of their children. He has found out that many of the tribals were still illiterate. The socio-economic status was related to their educational level and with their aspirations for the educational achievements of their children. He has also identified the reasons for irregular attendance and non-enrolment were lack of interest and the necessity for girls to do the household work.

#### **Studies on Health Status of Tribal Women**

Kar (1993) in his paper on 'Reproductive Health Behaviour of the Nocte Women in Arunachal Pradesh' has revealed that the reproductive health behaviour of the Nocte women is intimately related to their value system and cultural tradition. Cultural values and practices have a deep influence on health

behaviour in general and productive health in particular. Chatterjee (1993) in his paper discussed the health of the tribal women in three eco-zones, namely, forest-based areas, denuded forest areas and industrially polluted areas and pointed their major problems. He has observed that the incidence of disease is found to be lowest in the forest areas and highest in the industrial areas. It is also pointed out that the health of the tribal women also pointed out that the health of the tribal women is intricately related to their occupation. Ray and Banerjee (1993) in their paper argued that the very little work has been done on the health status of tribal women. Status of women among the tribals is slightly deviated from that in the urban communities. They have mentioned that the tribal people are an important section of our population and a proper planning should be done with the help of social scientists in their society. They have also suggested that the Government has to establish health centres in many remote areas and focus on the trained women workers to work among the tribal women. Arora and Choudhary (1993) conducted a study on Health Modernity in Rural Tribal Women of Chhotanagpur and Santal Pargana stated that the health modernity scale has seven dimensions, namely, PH, MH, DN, FP, BF, CC, HH and consists of attitudinal as well as behavioural items. They found that the extent of health modernity on these dimensions varied from 0 to 3 per cent and the health modernity was very low in the entire sample of the study. They identified that area of ignorance and misconceptions related to the aware dimensions of health modernity. Singh and Rajyalakshmi (1993) have highlighted the status of tribal women in terms of their demography, health, education and employment. They revealed that despite constitutional protection and assurance, even after four and a half decades, the status of tribal women is found to be lower than not only that of women in the general population and the Scheduled Caste women but is also lower than the status of tribal men. It is characterized by over-work, invasion of sexually exploitative market forces in tribal society, illiteracy, sub-human physical living conditions, high fertility, high malnutrition and near absence of modern health care facilities. They suggested that to improve the status of the tribal women the focus has to be on the tribal girls.

Basu (1993) has stressed on the health status of the tribal women in relation to sex ratio, age at marriage, fertility, mortality, life expectancy, nutritional status, maternal and child health care practices, sexually transmitted diseases, genetic disorders, etc. He found that the health status of tribal women is to be lower than that of the Indian women in general on most of these aspects. In this study the gaps in knowledge regarding the health of tribal women have been identified and a plan of action has been suggested for improving their health. Karmarkar, Sampath Kumar, Jayalakshmi and Abel (1995) in their study have highlighted the reasons for under-nutrition among tribal women that could be poor diet intake, ignorance, early marriage and high morbidity due to unhygienic practices and surroundings. They

suggested by their study that there is a need to provide special attention to this group in improving their nutritional status by intervening appropriate health and nutrition programmes like nutrition, education, iron supplementation and deforming both during adolescence and during adulthood.

Kumar and Mitra (1975) conducted a study on Tharu women. They have found out that high infant mortality and fertility among 199 Tharu tribal women of Nainital. Despite the availability of modern facilities of treatment, Tharu had their own beliefs and concepts of diseases. They also observed that the Tharu women are not aware about the medical facilities. Murty (1987) investigated the Soliga women of Karnataka in order to find out their fertility behaviour. He has found out that the Crude Birth Rate (CBR), General Fertility Rate (GFR) and Total Fertility Rate (TFR) among the Soligas were higher in comparison to the general population of Karnataka. The unusual high fertility rate was influenced by their age at marriage that was ultimately influenced by the age at menarche. He has also pointed out that the early age of marriage and low level of family planning acceptance seemed to be responsible for the high fertility among the Soligas women.

Sharma and Khan (1990) on their study Fertility and Mortality Trends of the Khairwar Tribal Women of Madhya Pradesh have observed that the average fertility rate among Khirawars of Sarguj district (Madhya Pradesh) was 4.85. The highest reproductive wastage (9.67 per cent) was observed in the age group of 40-44 years and the pre-reproductive mortality was highest (6.84 per cent) among mothers in age group 35-39 years. Ray and Roth (1991) studied the fertility pattern of Juangs (Tribes) of Orissa. It was observed that the marital age specific fertility rate was highest (0.336 per cent) among mothers in the 20-24 years age group whereas, it was lowest (0.75 per cent) among the 45-49 years age group. The total marital age-specific fertility rate was 1.157 among the Juang mothers. It was also observed that the Index of Overall Fertility and the Index of Marital Fertility among the Juangs were 0.49 and 0.50 respectively. Prema and Thomas (1992) conducted a study on the problems of Kanikkar women in Kerala. In their study they have notified that the Kanikkar tribal women of Trivandrum district, Kerala faced the nutrition and health problem in normal and physiological conditions like pregnancy and lactation. They have highlighted that the pulses, milk and milk products and other animal foods that were the main source of protein were lacking in their diets. Average calorie consumption was found to be below the recommended level for the normal, pregnant as well as lactating women. Consumption of calcium was noticed to be highest in normal women whereas it was poorest the lactating women. The intake of iron and vitamin A were found to be low. Detailed clinical examination of the Kanikkar tribal women showed that anaemia (90 per cent) and Vitamin A deficiency (30 per cent) were prevalent among them. The morbidity status of the tribal women revealed the prevalence of pyrexia, respiratory complaints, gastro-intestinal diseases and rheumatic diseases. They have found

out that the gynaecological complaints and deficiency diseases were common among the adult women.

#### **Studies on Employment and Income Status of Tribal Women**

Kar (1982) calculated the ratio of male to female investment in labour in shifting cultivation to be 100:136 days per year. The contribution of women was more in almost all activities like clearing (169:120), sowing (102:60), weeding (272:182) and cotton harvesting (56:6). Roy Burman (1988) has pointed out that the work participation rates among tribals are higher than those among Scheduled Castes and general population. The work participation rate among tribal women has been increasing over a period of time (1971-1991), it is lesser than that for the tribal males, but higher than that for the general female. He also revealed that the tribal women play a major role in agricultural operations and she also involved in collection of minor forest produce, its storage, processing and marketing. He brought our attention to the question of tribal women in the face of increased government control of forests. It disturbed tribal economy adversely affecting tribals' lives, particularly that of women. Appointing of agents from outside for collecting forest produce has made the work of women more difficult. The non-tribal men socially and sexually exploit them. Dasgupta (1988) conducted a study on Kondhs and revealed that women put in an average of 14 working hours per day as compared to 9 hours put in by men. Given this additional workload, even women in advanced stages of pregnancy were required to work in the agricultural fields or walk long distance to collect fuel and minor forest produce. He also stated that the over-strain on tribal women however, was not adequately compensated due to the non-availability of minor forest produce and decrease in foodgrain production.

Mawar, Jain, Verma, Kaushik, Karmahe and Tiwari (1993) on their paper aim to understand the employment and economic status of Gond women of M.P. and its relation to their decision-making ability. They have argued that their income level can be increased by raising their literacy level and giving them training for income-generating activities. They have also highlighted that though women work for more time than men and perform both heavy and light work, they generally receive wages in kind which are encashed by males and women have no control over them. They do not have the decision-making power even in relation to basic needs. The study indicates that there is an urgent need to increase the awareness of tribal women through non-formal education and would enable the empowerment of women. They also suggested the ways to increase their decision-making capacity by establishment of women's organization to optimally utilize the benefits of the development programme. Sharan and Dayal (1993) on their paper 'Deprivation of female farm labourers in Jharkhand region of Bihar' have investigated the nature, causes and consequences of the economic discrimination and deprivation of tribal women farm labourers. They also have suggested measures for removal of the discrimination against and exploitation of tribal women labourers and for

empowerment of such labourers as it would remove stagnation and poverty of the tribals.

Deoghasia (1993) has revealed that the extent of work participation of the tribal women in the south Chotanagpur region. In his study the participation rate is found to vary with the occupational status. He has observed that female participation among the tribals in south Chhotanagpur was found in subsistence activity. Apart from domestic work, women from all categories were engaged in many types of subsistence and other economic activities, which were important for the existence of their families. He has also pointed out that because of lack of sufficient work in the region these workers migrated to other regions. Chauhan (1999) has examined the contribution of Gaddi tribal women in farm and household economy and their participation in decision-making of various activities. He has revealed that the contribution of women was more than that of men in the activities performed near to their dwellings. In decision-making process, the participation of women was found to be higher in activities which were to be performed near their living places and required the involvement of their family members but their participation in making decision on activities such as purchase of land, infrastructure development, financial allocation, etc. was low. Lodha (2003) has cited about the work participation of the tribal women and its impact upon their decision-making capacities. This study entails in-depth inquiry regarding applicability of cultural factors, structural variables, the process of economic and social development and the process of economic and social development and the influence of science, technology and modernization to tribal women, extent to which, tribal women make use of such technology and its impact on their decision-making status.

Mann (1987) examined the status of Bhil women within the ideological as well as the actual frame of native social structure and evaluated the parameters of change taking place therein. He also surveyed the areas of compatibility and incompatibility in the persisting and changing paradigm. Despite the adverse effect of culture contact with the caste Hindus and the process of Sanskritization, the traditional norms of Bhil society continue to be the chief determinant of social status among Bhil women. The appalling poverty among the Bhils forces the women into involvement in various traditional economic pursuits, denying them the opportunities to benefit from the programmes introduced of late to ameliorate their condition. It also engenders a pessimistic disposition that induces apathy towards betterment and progress. Jahagirdar (1988) has conducted a study on status and roles of the Minyong tribal women in the North-Eastern region of India. He examined their status and roles through the factors like work-participation, control over the resources and decision-making in the perspective of the society they live in. The study shows that women's entrepreneurship and their role in the economic productivity are the positive indicators which help profusely in the process of development.

Gangwar, Kandekar, Mandal and Kandekar (2004) have pointed out that the membership of a dairy cooperative helped woman to become economically independent and self-confident with improved prestige in the community and the formal social participation and group actions increased and hence the overall empowerment of cooperative members was more. They suggested that the women's participation should be ensured in cooperatives, training institutions, credit institutions, agricultural labour institutions, etc. so that they can be able to organize themselves, identify their needs build positive image and be aware of their rights and responsibilities. Nath (2005) conducted a study on "Status and Empowerment of Tribal Women in Tripura" and stated that the status and empowerment of tribal women of Tripura, though much better in comparison with other tribal women of India, is on the line of slow but steady progress. This study analyzed the social, economic and marital status of tribal women of Tripura and attempted to answer the multifarious facts and the obstacles that come in the way of their empowerment. Sikligar (2006) has mentioned that the women in tribal society play significant role and are equal economic partners. He examined that the *Wavli* is a traditional system for empowering women, under which tribal women have been involving in vegetable cultivation, selling of calf, goats, hens and cock, etc. The income derived by women through *Wavli* is their own and men have no claim over it. This study concluded that the *Wavli* system ultimately promotes women empowerment through income generation, role of institution in promoting income generating activities for tribal women.

#### **Studies on Impact of Development Programmes on Tribal Women and their awareness level**

Tekhre (1989) evaluated the impact of the family welfare programme on tribal women through a study on 300 tribal women of Tamean Development Block of Chindwara district of Madhya Pradesh. He has observed that tribal women gave more attention to child welfare and child development programmes rather than mother care or family planning programme. This may be because of their inherent maternal instinct and protectiveness towards their children. He pointed out that they contacted doctors more for antenatal care than postnatal care because of their concern with the welfare of the foetus in the womb and preparing for a safe labour.

Brandon and Dixit (1983) conducted a sericulture project for tribal women in Udaipur and they highlighted the impact of development programmes on tribal women. They revealed that the impact of development programmes has been different on different sections of tribal women. A small number of tribal women have taken advantage of education, new opportunities for employment and self-fulfillment. In the study of Udaipur (Rajasthan) a remarkable change in the quality of life of the tribal women was reported. Besides economic benefits they had more leisure, self-reliance, innovativeness, adaptability and a more aware social outlook. They also mentioned some negative effects of development

programmes. Ramalingaswami (1986) conducted a study on 372 tribal women in 15-45 age group living in Paderu Block of Visakhapatnam district in Andhra Pradesh, to understand the impact of government programmes on women from economically weaker sections. She has revealed that although these tribal women were illiterate and were living in a remote place away from urban influence, they showed awareness about these programmes, especially the health and developmental programmes, unfortunately the programmes have not reached them nor benefited them. Menon (1987) in her paper on "Tribal Women: Victims of the Development Process" has focused on the impact of deforestation on tribal women. She has argued that the management of the natural resources particularly forests, has resulted in inequalities, which are reflected in economic and social position of tribal women who have become victims of cumulative inequalities, i.e., economic impoverishment, deterioration of social status and sex discrimination. Chauhan (1993) has analyzed the position of tribal women of Madhya Pradesh amidst the process of continuity and change by focusing on the various aspects of their life – social, religious, economic and political. This study reflects Saharia women's struggle, their confrontation, survival and adjustment that occur silently. She has also emphasized the need for formulation and implementation of gender specific and contextually relevant programme for tribal women's development.

### Conclusion

As discussed above tribal women constitute nearly half of the total tribal population. Women's inability to control over productive assets and process is the major factor for their low status in the society and lack of power within the family. Although, there are various development programmes and policies for tribal women but they are still lagging behind in various fields. Many studies show that, women in tribal society enjoy little better status but there are many socio-economic factors also which indicate lower status of tribal women, for example, she does not have property right in the patrilineal society, they do have this right in matrilineal society, but proportion of this society is quite low, as compared to the total tribal population in India. On the basis of all the above studies it indicates that there is a strong need for development of tribal women. So that they can achieve better life in terms of better education, health and employment.

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