

## Towards Achieving Equity: Empowering Tribal Women and Reducing Gender Gaps

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**Abstract:** *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 the grounds of caste and ethnicity. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (2018), over 84 million people belonging to 698 communities are identified as members of Scheduled Tribes (ST) in India. 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. However the tribal women have been facing 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. Of course, 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. Therefore, the inclusion of 'Women Empowerment' as one of the prime goals in the eight Sustainable Development Goals underscores the relevance of this fact. Thus, in order to achieve the status of a developed country, India needs to transform its colossal women force into an effective human resource and this is possible only through the empowerment of women. Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential in building stronger economies to achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for every individual of the society.*

**Keywords:** *Education, Women, Inequality, Discrimination and Entrepreneurship.*

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### I. Introduction

The present paper seeks to analyse the various dimensions of social, economic and political empowerment of tribal women of Odisha. The concept of "empowerment" traces its history in the mid-17th century with the legalistic meaning "to invest with authority". Thereafter, this concept was modernized to mean "to enable or permit". Empowerment is a multidimensional process, occurring at different levels, and in different ways depending on individuals, communities, the environments in which they live which should enable the individuals or a group of individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Empowerment of woman may also mean equal status to the woman, opportunity and freedom to develop her. Empowering women socio-economically through increased awareness of their rights and duties as well as access to resources is a decisive step towards greater security for them.

### Empowerment of Women:

Women empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that includes (rural/urban), educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on women empowerment exist at national, state and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation.

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The scope and coverage of the schemes launched have been expanding that include initiatives for economic and social empowerment of women and for securing gender equality. In spite of the effective implementation of all the above schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between policy achievements and actual practice at the community level.

**Employment and empowerment:** The most common argument says that women's participation in income-generating activities will lead to women's empowerment because by having access to resources a woman can improve her bargaining position, thereby allowing for greater control over decisions and life choices. If a woman has income of her own, she presumably has a greater ability to take care of herself and is therefore less dependent on her husband or others for survival.

The present paper examined the empowerment of women by addressing three dimensions: social empowerment, economic empowerment and political empowerment with the objectives:

- To explore the various programmes promoting socioeconomic empowerment for the tribal women.
- To find out the role of tribal women in the decision making process (both at family and political level).
- To analyse the constraints to empowerment of tribal women and to make recommendations for their effective participation in every sphere of society.

Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to building stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities as a whole. There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in almost seven decades of Independence, but they still have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male-dominated society. *Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first Prime Minister) said "when women move forward the family moves, the villages move and the nation moves."* In the opinion of *Kofi Annan "There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women."*

#### **(a) 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 girl 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, 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**

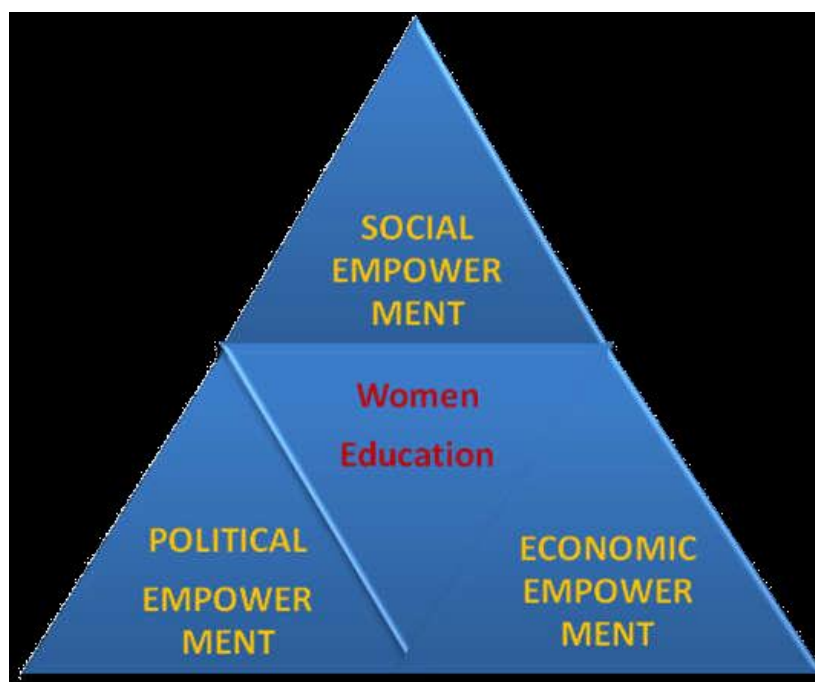
Odisha has been witnessing an unprecedented surge in people's movement against liquor in many parts of the State, especially among tribal women of the marginalised sections in rural areas. The movement demands complete ban on sale and consumption of liquor by the Government. The ordinary women from their own every day experiences are narrating their problems and how liquor consumption has impact on 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.

#### **Education**

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 Sikha 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 girl child. Though there was an increase in total as well as female literacy among tribals, 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).

### **Empowerment of Women through Education**



### **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.

#### **(b) Economic Empowerment**

Development is meaningless if women are not involved and it is possible through economic empowerment of women. The main objective of women empowerment is to create more and more awareness in every field like agriculture, cottage industry etc.

#### **Agriculture**

Most of the tribal women (80%) 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, (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.

### **Self Help Groups**

About 70% of Tribal Women Self Help Groups are working holistically to encompass different aspects of empowerment through SHG movements. These include expansion of credit linkage to as many SHGs as possible so that SHGs have paid-up capital to start economic activities, through these loan they manage natural resources like (bamboo basket making, khalipatra (leaf plate) stitching, ayurvedic medicine, candle, wood toy, tamarind packing, turmeric grinding and packing) and Snacks making like (papad, badi, and pickle) Domestic Tailoring, Hand Embroidery, Machine Embroidery, BeautyParlor, Interior Decoration, Fashion Designing, Cloth Painting and the like. 50% of the family incomes have been supplemented by the women of the families.

### **Entrepreneurship and Skill Development**

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 counselling and guidance centres for youth to help them make informed choices. NGOs will also be empanelled for running of these centres in their areas of operation.

### **Globalization and women**

Globalisation has represented a new challenge for realization of the goal of women equality. There is re-farming, policies for access to employment equality and empowerment of tribal women. Benefit of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in informal economy and tribal areas.

### **Witch Hunting**

Witch hunting is a common practice of tribal area. The real motivation for witch-hunting is the desire to eliminate the woman and take away her land. Witch-hunting reflects the immediate economic objective of taking away of widow's rights to the land in favour of the husband's male relatives. Among the Santhals, where widows have a relatively stronger transition of rights on land, witches are exclusively women, whereas among Munda, Oraon and Ho it can be both men and women. Odisha is one of the few states in the country to have a law against witch-hunting. Like the Odisha Prevention of unsuccessful. The hilly tribal people deny the rules and regulations of the government.

### **(c) 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. This makes women's effective involvement in politics a crucial issue with far reaching consequences on the development of society as a whole. Women's participation in politics may take various forms such as active involvement in community life, civil society organizations, local bodies and government institutions. In all such instances, women should be equally and effectively represented in various processes of decision making.

### **Decision Making**

Political empowerment of women is a part of the overall empowerment process. It 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 Panchyat election has increased in comparison to 2007 Panchyat election.

### **Role of NGOs**

Union and State government funded local NGOs are working for the social, economic and political empowerment of tribal women leading to poverty reduction and to manage natural resources for livelihood promotion efficiently and effectively. The organizations are working on field demonstration interventions related to skill development, community based natural resource management, livelihood enhancement and women health including advocacy on quality public service.

The government should promote free higher education and technical education with scholarship for all tribal women. Tribal women's practices like witch-hunting which includes extreme violence and deep rooted beliefs have led to the torture and murder of alleged witches, for which government should take strong action in this regard how to tackle the social evil. The network of distance education should be developed in tribal area. Women self-help groups should be organized to promote economic emancipation of tribal women. New skill development training and entrepreneurship training with scholarship should be imparted to tribal women. Proper health facility especially the facility of medical deliveries should be provided to all tribal pregnant women through government policy. Civil society groups should arrange awareness programmes for tribal people to fight against blind beliefs and evil practices like witch hunting. Tribal women and girls should be guaranteed equal rights at the social, political and economic sphere. Tribal women should be provided safe and secured working place with proper privacy. All forms of violence against women physical and mental, whether at domestic or societal level.

### **Constraints to 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
- Wide spread Poverty

## **II. Conclusion**

Women have limited decision making power in some major areas, limited mobility, and limited control over resources. Employment can play an important role in the process of improving women's empowerment, but there are numerous barriers to overcome it. Employment to be made more empowering to women and empowerment to be facilitated in general for women, the structural barriers to women's rights and equality must be addressed at the household level, the community, the state, the nation and the globe.

The first ever *India Inequality Report (2018)* argued that contrary to popular equality perception, India is a high inequality country by global standards. Inequality in India is multi-dimensional manifested in the areas of wealth, income and consumption as well as structural inequalities of opportunity, region and social groups. Further, what is worrying is that inequality has been on the rise over the last 3 decades. What makes inequality a particularly volatile and potentially disrupting phenomenon in India is because of the existence of structural and historical inequalities in the society.

The present paper is a thematic analysis of the existence of Gender Inequality. The main focus should be to promote awareness through its partner grassroots agencies, for facilitating and developing models of community-based monitoring and management of schools and public health facilities, creating common platforms for village, district and state level networks towards improving access to quality health and education services. Various awareness like access to Medicine Campaign in Bihar and Odisha was received well by the people and the government. It involved working with CSOs and health networks to demand state governments to implement 'Free medicine schemes' to ensure access to medicine on a sustainable basis through public health facilities. It is also necessary to take forward the "Bano Nayi Soch" campaign in the focus states to respond to the flood situation under its humanitarian mandate in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam and Manipur during the year. It is reported that with the humanitarian response, the year long DRR work reduced the vulnerabilities during the pre, happening and post crisis situation. Dedicated indices based on environment, sustainability and governance (ESG) factors have been developed to deal with the situation. For ensuring livelihood, Individual Forest Rights (IFR) claims and the Community Forest Rights (CFR) claims can be successfully handled through legal provisions.

The civil society arena is also undergoing dramatic transitions when issues are highlighted as major challenges. In this context, we do need to take a pause from doing routine things and re-visualize our role and responsibilities. Women need to act not only differently, but to think differently, to value themselves more, and to really believe that they are equal. Of course the challenge lies not just in individual women, but also in the society. Promoting individual women's empowerment is incredibly important, but not enough to change the environment for women in India or in other developing countries. Women must be empowered in the home, in the community, in the economy and in politics for a better society, based on an intrinsic and holistic model for sustainable development.

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