

**STATUS AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN TRIBAL SOCIETY: A STUDY
ON TRIBAL POPULATION OF TAPAN BLOCK OF SOUTH DINAJPUR
DISTRICT**

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ABSTRACT

Human dignity is the prime condition of Human Rights. As per law of nature, this is the fundamental right to enjoy it for betterment of life. But in present, it has become violated concern with targeted tribal women group in the study area. The tribal women, in all social groups, are more illiterate than men. When primary and secondary subsistence activities are counted, women work more than men. But the status of women varies in different societies for economic, political and societal facts. The conceptual framework to analyse women's status comprises the seven roles of them i.e. parental, conjugal, domestic, kin, occupational, community and as an individual. Empowerment is an active and multidimensional process, which enables women to realize their identity and power in all aspects of life. But the Indian family organisation makes discrimination between the sexes. It promotes a hierarchy of classification in which man centered issues take dominance and women derive their personalities from their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. There are several studies available on various aspects of socio-cultural anthropology of tribal people. But very few attempts have been made to study on status and empowerment of women in tribal society. The present paper attempts to highlight the status and empowerment of women in tribal society through observation and case study method on Tapan Block of South Dinajpur District of West Bengal, India.

KEY WORDS: Fundamental Right, Violated, Subsistence, Conceptual Framework, Discrimination, Hierarchy, Submissive.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'empowerment' is used in different context and by many organizations. For example, literature about empowerment is found in the fields of education, social work, psychology and community development groups as well as in the work of feminist and development organizations. There are a variety of understandings of the term 'empowerment' due to its widespread usage. Although the term is often used in development work, but it is rarely defined (Scrutton and Luttrell, 2007). Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action (Narayan, 2002). For poor people, freedom is severely curtailed by their voicelessness and powerlessness in relation particularly to the state and markets. Thus, empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. Empowerment goes beyond socio-economic or political attributes and essentially refers to a process of becoming psychologically empowered. Poverty inflicts deep-rooted wounds on the psyche of individuals. If they cease to be oppressed, their first task would be to empower themselves psychologically. In this context, empowerment would mean increasing one's capacity to define, analyse and act upon one's own problem (Sengupta, 1998). About half of the tribal population is the tribal women, which constitutes like any other social group, shares problems related to reproductive health. Role of women is important both in economic and non-economic

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activities equally. The tribal women are more industrious than the men. All the tribal societies in the study area are of patriarchal society. However, in their own world, women have freedom and self-esteem. With the onset of development programmes, economic changes take place but the tribal women remain traditional in their dress, language, tools and resources, because they grow food crops rather than cash crops. Modernisation has brought changes among men and women differently. In spite of having plenty of evidence of gender bias in India, the status of women varies considerably from region to 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. 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 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. With a secondary status, women play a submissive role in social life. Despite several economic, political and social changes, women, are still far behind.

STUDY AREA

The study area, Tapan Block is located in the Southern middle portion of South Dinajpur District of West Bengal in India extending between 25° 08'15" N to 25°21' 30" North latitude and 88° 24' 30"E to 88° 42'15" East longitudes. Total population of the study area is 226136 and area is 445.63 km². The area comprises 279 villages. It supports 13.53 per cent of total population and 20.08 per cent of total land area of South Dinajpur District. The tribes of Tapan Block are mainly of proto-australoid group and they belong to various racial groups which include Santal, Oraon, Munda, Mahato *etc.* 22.34 per cent of the population of study area is the tribal population.

OBJECTIVES

The present study was undertaken with an overall objective to identify the status of women in tribal society. The main objectives of the present paper are following-

- To study the socio- economic status of tribal women and girls in study area.
- To examine the nature and characteristics of socio-cultural conflicts faced by the tribal women and girls.
- To analyse the dynamics of social adjustment which the tribal women and girls in the study area have to make in relation to employment and residential facilities.
- To evaluate the extent to which tribal women and girls adjust themselves in the new social milieu.
- To elucidate the impact of social and cultural conflicts which the tribal women and girls face in their social milieu and the resultant socio-cultural consequences of such conflict.
- To discuss and understand the ramifications of exploitation of tribal women and girls in the area.
- To elucidate the extent of sexual and financial exploitation of tribal women and girls in the area.
- To develop a system of help and rehabilitation of migrant tribal women and girls so that they can achieve the goals of their life.
- To suggest remedial measures of discouraging tribal migration from rural to cities.

METHODOLOGY

To fulfil the aforementioned objectives Primary data, collected through direct questionnaire method and personal interview from tribal and non-tribal people living in the district, has been supplemented to the secondary information as per requirement. In order to discuss the status of tribal women in the present society, it has been studied through primary survey method and presented in the form of percentage distribution. The villages are chosen in

random purposively on consideration of conveniences, such as access and communication, security, expenditure involved in survey etc. However most of the features of the tribal society of study area have much in common in the aforesaid selected villages and it was decided to cover 100 households from Tapan Block. Considering the sensitive topic of inquiry and to finalize methodology, a feasible study was undertaken on January, 2012. The household survey was undertaken as a cross-sectional study across rural areas with an individual household as a sampling unit. Information was collected through a door-to-door survey. Detailed socio-demographic information was collected from a responsible respondent in each household.

STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN

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 FAO, the most disadvantaged section of society is the women; they are the 'silent majority' of the world's poor. 70 percent world poor are women and they face peculiar social, cultural, educational, political and allied problems (Sharma and Varma, 2008). Hence, empowerment of women of any flock is critical not only for their welfare but also for the development of the country. Status of women in a tribal 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 community and society. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They supplement their income by doing arduous work. Their family depends on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produces is done mostly by women and children. Most of them also work as labours in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income. However, tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to environmental degradation and the interference of outsiders. The strategy for tribal development, and specially women, needs improvement, betterment, development and upliftment to effect their empowerment. Tribal women have adjusted themselves to live a traditional life style in the local environment and follow occupations based on natural resources. Undoubtedly, the programmes, oriented towards the empowerment of tribes, particularly women, have improved their socio-economic conditions and status. Against this backdrop, the present paper reviews the emerging perspective in the context of the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women and changing paradigms of development.

EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER INEQUALITY OF TRIBAL WOMEN

For the accelerated socio-economic development of any community, the active participation of women is essential. In Indian society, their participation has to be ensured through tangible measures, taken at various levels, which results in their empowerment in the real sense. Empowerment of women is one of the concepts that have developed in connection with improving their status. Empowerment includes higher literacy levels, education, better healthcare, equal ownership of productive resources, and increased participation in economic and commercial sectors, awareness of rights and responsibilities, improved standards of living, self-reliance, self-esteem and self confidence. Raising the status of tribal women is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic one. Within the framework of a democratic policy, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. Recently, the empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue in determining their status. Tribal women, while being disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are nevertheless, better placed, in many respects, than their counterparts in the general population and are, in certain areas, more empowered. They do not suffer segregation or lower status. This is reflected in their higher sex-ratio vis-à-vis the general population 977 as compared to 933 (2001 census). The child sex-ratio for tribal women also compares favorably vis-à-vis the general population, being 972 as against 919 for the general population (2001 census). The child female shows a

decline from 985 (per thousand males) in 1991 to 972 in 2001 while in areas such as education and health, tribal women lag behind significantly.

TRIBAL WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Over 80 percent of tribal women work in the primary sector against the general population. About 44.75 percent are cultivators and 36.30 percent are agricultural labours. Unlike other communities, among tribes, there are no restrictions on women’s participation in the cultivation process. A tribal woman can participate actively in all agricultural operations including, ploughing, digging, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing, winnowing and storing food grains. In agriculturally back ward areas, tribal women are forbidden to touch a plough and cannot dig the ground but in all other agricultural operations, women participate actively and traditionally these are a female’s job. Processing of food grain is exclusively a woman’s job. Every morning, tribal women husking paddy in husking levers and thus cleans the grains and cooks them. They not only save money but also earn it, unlike females of other communities. Tribal women work as men’s partners in agriculture, yet their status remains the same. Tribal women work very hard for the livelihood of their family. They live a poor life in spite of having their contributions in the house as well as in the farm. They have pivotal role in agriculture, performing many household affairs and agricultural jobs. Without them, tribal welfare in agriculture is meaningless.

TABLE: 1 CLASSIFICATION OF TRIBAL WORKERS

Category	2001		2011	
	M (%)	F (%)	M (%)	F (%)
Cultivators	45.8	36.5	52.6	44.75
Agri. Labours	36	32.25	43.5	36.3
Livestock, Forestry etc.	2.2	1.8	4.25	3.5
Household industry	1.8	2.1	2.5	3.65
Construction	1.45	0.7	2.6	1.25
Trade & commerce	0.8	0.2	1.25	0.45

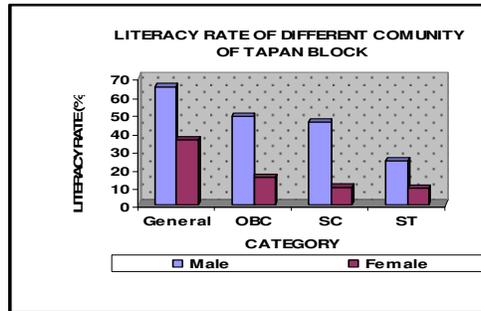
Source: Census Report 2001, 2011

TRIBAL WOMEN IN EDUCATION

Education is a crucial requirement for the sustained growth of a developing society and lack of it is largely responsible for the exploitation and pitiable plight of the tribes. The literacy rate of tribals was 8.53 in 1961 and steadily increased to 47.10 in 2001, yet it is far below the national rate of 64.84 (2001 census). There has been an overall increase in the enrolment of children belonging to STs. At the primary stage, against an overall increase of 15%, ST enrolment increased by 25%, whereas that of ST girls increased by 36% against overall increases of 23% from 2000 to 2004. The dropout rate among tribal school children is alarming. Various steps taken by State Governments to check the number of dropouts, including free distribution of books, scholarships, reimbursement of examination fees, mid-day meals, etc. have had an impact but still fall short. The performance of certain states in providing matching grants, maintenance of service and management of hostels is not encouraging. The pace of construction of hostels has been very slow and the basic amenities provided therein are substandard. Low literacy especially among tribal girls and high dropout rates at elementary and higher levels are areas of serious concern. The main causes are (i) poverty, (ii) contents of the education, (iii) inadequate educational institutions and supporting services in tribal areas, (iv) absenteeism, (v) medium of instruction and (iv) education policy

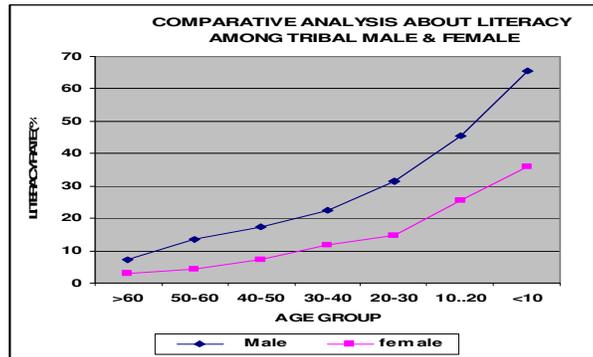
TABLE: 2 LITERACY RATE OF DIFFERENT COMMUNITY OF TAPAN BLOCK

Category	Literacy Rate (%)	
	Male	Female
General	65.25	35.75
OBC	48.45	15.40
SC	45.72	10.06
ST	24.42	9.10



Source: District Census Handbook-2011

TABLE: 3 LITERACY AMONG DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS



Source: District Census Handbook-2011

HEALTH

Healthcare is a major problem in far flung isolated tribal areas. Lack of food security, sanitation, and safe drinking water, poor nutrition and high poverty levels aggravate their poor health status. The problem of malnutrition is multidimensional and intergenerational. Health institutions are few and far between. Till recently, an abundance of fruits, tubers, roots and leaves in forests on the one hand and indigenous health-care systems on the other, contributed positively to tribal health. For centuries tribal people have developed their own medicinal system based on herbs and other items collected from nature and processed locally. They have their own system of diagnosis and cure. But the skills and medicinal plants are fast disappearing. Moreover, the traditional systems can not treat or prevent many diseases that modern medical science can.

MIGRATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN AND GIRLS

A large number of women and girls from tribal areas migrate to cities and towns all over India. Most of these women and girls are illiterate and unskilled. They work in inhuman conditions in cities as their living standard is extremely poor. A great number of these migrants are being exploited by middle men, contractors, construction companies and other types of employers. Many of these women and girls work as house maids where their working hours extend up to 18 hours per day. A large number of tribal women and girls become victims of sexual and financial exploitation. Their children rarely get an

opportunity to go to school and learn a productive skill. Gradually, many women and girls lose contact with their kith and kins back home and become alienated from their culture and roots. In tribal areas, land is a symbol of the organisation of the community. When a transfer takes place beyond the threshold point, the community looks upon the process as alienation. It is thus obvious, that transfer of land is not merely a question of exploitation of innocent tribals by cunning people, there are more complex factors involved (Chaudhuri, 1990). One of the important problems which is arising in some areas, after enthusiastic response to the programme of education, is the psychological resistance amongst the tribals. For some time, the educated youth was able to get absorbed in the new opportunities in the surrounding region. They find themselves blocked by the more advanced groups, who are more articulate and educationally better off. They, psychologically, detach themselves from their local surrounding but when they fail to get a foothold in the modern sector, they get disappointed and develop frustration. Another important fact is that the tribal has no social linkages with the urban areas. These socio - psychological problems can be considered inevitable concomitant of the process of change. Hence, these will need to be accepted as a possible socio-psychological impediment which would arise in the process of change and which should be taken care of as a part of educational programme itself. When land alienation takes place, migration of tribals is inevitable.

EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBALS IN DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

The need for empowerment of tribals hardly needs justification. Their primitive way of life, economic and social backwardness, low level of literacy, outdated 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.

TRIBAL SUB-PLAN STRATEGY (TSP)

The tribal sub plan was adopted for the first time at the beginning of the 5th Five Year Plan in 1974-75. It applies, at present, to 21 states and two Union Territories, where tribals constitute a sizeable population and provides for the allocation of funds in proportion to the tribal population in the country by each of the concerned central ministries/departments in proportion to the tribal population of that state. The TSP as originally conceived had a two prolonged strategy: promotion of development activities to raise the living standards of tribals, and protection of their interests through legal and administrative support. The TSP mechanism has however become routine and humdrum in most states with little awareness of its original objectives. TSP has become a loose agglomeration of schemes prepared by line departments and driven more by departmental priorities than by any broad philosophy or thrust on development of tribals and tribal areas. After the adoption of this approach, since fifth five year plan, the flow of funds to TSP areas has significantly increased. TSP expenditure which came down to poor 0.51% during the 4th five year plan increased to 9.47% during the 8th five year plan. The objective of the Tenth Plan was to empower STs through their educational, economic and social development. An outlay of Rs. 1,719.71 crore was provided in the Annual Plan for 2007-08, which is 3.79% higher than the outlay of Rs. 1,656.90 crore for 2006-07 (RE). The outlay includes Rs. 816.71 crore provided as Special Central Assistance (SCA) to Tribal-Sub Plan (TSP) which includes Rs. 220.00 crore for development of forest villages and Rs. 150 crore for Minor Irrigation of tribal lands. SCA to Tribal Sub-Plan is a 100% grant extended to States as an additional funding to undertake developmental, family-oriented income-generating schemes, the creation of critical infrastructure, the extension of financial assistance to Self Help Groups (SHGs) for community-based activities, Groups (PTGs) and forest villages. Grant-in- aid under Article 275(1) is also being provided to the States to promote the welfare of STs, improve administration and take up special welfare and development programmes which are not included in the Plan. Under the TSP strategy, a number of development schemes have been evolved to bring Scheduled Tribes up on the ladder of development. One strategy has been

the attempt to earmark funds for the TSP in TSP states/UTs which are equal in proportion to the ST population in the state/UT. Pooling of funds has been envisaged from various sources like central Schemes, state plan and institutional funds. The strategy has been largely successful in garnering more funds for the TSP.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The above discussion on the status of women in the tribal society of Tapan reveals that while the system of patrilineal is being followed, patriarchal ideologies and principles also operate within the system and ultimately define the roles and responsibilities of the tribal women that allow room for deprivation and inequality with the developmental changes of the society. The tendency is increasing with the increasing involvement of male in the socio-economic activities, expansion of education, emergence of nuclear families etc. However in the family, there is some discrimination among the male and female child. This is partly because of the economic independence of the males and their customary laws, which are still dominant in the tribal society. Women in the rural tribal society are free from any limitation and can participate freely in any function of social and religious importance. Also they can move freely without the company of male or others and without the permission of male or other seniors. So, there is very less insecurity problem unlike the other societies. The females have the right to select their own husbands which leads to higher status of dignity and position of women in the society. The implication is that even though the educated females acquire the ability to think better and earn the capability of economic independence, a major part of them do not want to remain in isolation of male counterpart because of future security. Though earlier female used to dominate in the field of various economic activities, now-a-days male are also involved in different activities. Yet the females limit the size of the family as they are more aware of the benefits of a small family. Now the high collar jobs are mostly occupied by the males and the income of the female-headed households are relatively less and associated with significant inter-family variation. On the whole, female are relatively in a lower level of occupation than their counterpart men in the study area. Moreover, poverty cuts across the society where it is the womenfolk in particular who become vulnerable with little or no bargaining power to fight it. Yet the female manage better the family and give more emphasis on the human development indicators like education, health etc. As female manage family better, they would be able to develop further the welfare of the family members and the society. Though traditionally the women (especially the youngest one) are supposed to inherit ancestral property, men also inherit property under different circumstances. Most of the tribal womenfolk do not believe in reservation in the local bodies or other constitutional areas that would help raising their status in the society. Therefore, real improvement can only happen when the patriarchal mindset of this area is reversed. The females need to be pursued to take part in decision making democratically so that they can work in more organised way and empower themselves. It is only the inclusion of women in decision making process which will enable a change in attitudes in a far more effective manner than any legislation and amendments. The society will move forward if there is an equal partnership between men and women.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this era of globalization and modernization, it is necessary to protect the dignity and status of women in these societies with the adoption of essential measures for the improvement of education, income of the females to fill the gap between male and female, reduction of poverty, preventing households from being single parentage or one side's desertion, re-examination with regard to property rights, termination of physical violence on womenfolk for the comprehensive development and progress of the whole society. Tribal women play a major role in the co-management of their natural, social, economic resources and agricultural development including crop production, livestock production etc. but they remain backward due to traditional values, illiteracy, superstition and many other social and cultural factors. The participatory role of tribal's in improving their living

conditions by fully exploring natural endowments and alternative uses must find an appropriate place in the strategic approach. The women under study reported a number of constraints which are given in the preceding paragraphs which could be encountered bravely by the women entrepreneurs only if certain measures were taken care of by the family, society, policy makers, legal institutions etc. They, first of all wanted that support of family members to women should be there in family life such as taking care of children, help in household work and they also wanted opportunities for more and more exposure to every sphere of life with more free avenues of expression. The women under study wanted that education to the girls should be provided free of cost and enough educational institutions should be established in nearby areas. Functional literacy to tribal women should be provided. Training to tribal women about income generating enterprises so as to engage them in self-employment needs to be ensured. Reservation of women or girls is needed. Provisions should be made for maintaining equal status of women with that of men in the society. There should be implementation of various programmes for empowering the tribal women, both economically as well as socially. Strict laws should be exercised against the injustice of women so that the women can feel safe, secured and self-dependent. Over all the following suggestions are forwarded here to overcome the constraints faced by tribal women in the state;

- ❖ To upgrade the level as well as standard of education, Government needs to build educational institutional and libraries for rural development and raises the standard of education.
- ❖ Programs run by the government and nongovernmental organization should be activated and operated in full swing to expand the literacy rate across the region and religion to make them conscious.
- ❖ Special package should be allotted for tribal population to raise their literacy rate. They should be provided with employment opportunities in secondary sectors as per their qualification.
- ❖ Female should be given more priority for employment in secondary activities, which may have significant role in socio-economic development for tribal society.
- ❖ Family planning programmes should be operated at grass root level to check the alarming growth of tribal population.
- ❖ Planners, policy makers and academicians are suggested to conduct more researches at micro level to find out the root causes of socio-economic backwardness of the area.
- ❖ For rural people, Government should implement the schemes (i.e. NREGS, NRHM, RHS etc) that may help to save rural households from poverty and hungry.
- ❖ To minimize the infrastructural cost, priority should be given to the development of basic infrastructure in the district so as to minimize the overhead cost in particular.
- ❖ Increased agricultural production and other allied production through conservation to settled agriculture, where possible, with linkage to easy credit and markets and assured irrigation.
- ❖ Promote the diversification of agricultural and non-farm sectors to create job opportunities.
- ❖ Impart practical knowledge and give training with modern techniques to all tribal women regularly so that their work becomes easier and production increases.
- ❖ Focus on 'girls' education, inclusive of context-specific traditional and innovative interventions. Launch special and sustained education drives in low female literacy tribal pockets.
- ❖ Teach tribal children in their mother tongue at least at primary level and also ensure gender based educational infrastructure.

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