

## Cultural and Educational Status of Tribal Women in India



Shivakumar S. Sangan , Suryakant S Sonnad

Guest Lecturer , Guest Lecturer  
Dept. of Women's Studies Gulbarga University, Gulbarga Karnataka

### Abstract:

*At the dawn of Indian history women possessed a high social status and some of them were widely reputed for their learning. But the social, economic and political changes of later years levered their position and gradually denied them their right to education too. The social code for women, their early marriage and seclusion restricted their life t home by the end of the eighteenth century. But the Indian renaissance in the following period increasingly touched all aspects and problems of national life, position of women not exempted, till finally under the inspiring leadership of mahatma Gandhi it assumed the form of political struggle and social reforms in which women joined freely and shared equally with men the burdens and honors. With the coming of independence the constitution provided them equality f statues and greater opportunities and once again they looked forward to regaining their earlier pristine glory. The paper analysis cultural and educational status of tribal women in India.*

**Key Words:** Women, Tribal, Education, Cultural

### Introduction:

Women have not been treated on par with men in any aspect of life though their role is crucial for the sustenance of family as well as of society and also for the development of economy as a whole, patriarchal systems of family relations have been identified as the root cause of subjugation of women. the inferior position of women can be seen in all the

countries, but the degree of subordination vary according to the level of development on the one hand and the ownership of means of production on the other. The discrimination against women is more pronounced in the Third world countries consequent to the prevalence of poverty, ignorance and illiteracy. India is one such Third world country, which is characterized by poverty and unemployment. According to the estimates huge shares of developmental benefits are going in favour of a small section of the society, who has high socio-economic status. This has been resulting in the widening of income and wealth disparities. Consequently, the intensity of poverty has been rising and as a result, high incidence of poverty has been falling on women. Women face different problems for their existence depending upon the class to which they belonged. Therefore, treating all the women as one category may not be helpful in proper understanding of the phenomenon. The women belonging to the upper strata are relatively at some advantage, while women in poorer section are to start struggles for their existence. The women in the upper strata of the society have the problem of leisure and the problems that go with the leisure, the middle class women are under the stresses and strains of deteriorating living standards. It is the middle class women who compete for the jobs in the organized sector and encounter stiff competition. The third category of women who belong to the poorer classes and are engaged in the basic struggle for existence, particularly in the rural areas face a different type of problems.

Generally it can be stated that the status of any section of population in a society is closely connected with its economic position. Therefore, many researchers are of opinion that the economic dependence is the main cause for the inferior place of women in the society. Jawaharlal Nehru once observed that the freedom depends on economic conditions even more than political independence. If a woman is not economically free and self-earning, she will have to depend on her husband or some one else and dependents are never free.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, any measure to provide them an opportunity to earn independent income assumes significance in liberating women. Hence, throughout the world there is a hue and cry regarding development of female section of the society. In this context, it is notable that separate departments have been established in our country at the centre as well as in states to improve social and economic status of the women and children. Towards education development free education has been accepted as a policy strategy upto the level of high school. Under the healthcare and population control system marriage limit is considered to be beyond eighteen years for female. Child nutrition programmes have been launched in backward development blocks by the central government and in some others by state governments. Basic objective of the programmes is to protect the mother and child from malnutrition and health hazards. Besides, family welfare programmes are carried out to protect the female from over bearing the children and to upkeep the health of mother. These policy strategies have been accepted almost all the under-developed and developing nations of the world. After Independence, some efforts brought out positive and constructive results. Constitutional provisions were made with the attitude and objective to protect socio-economic interest of women in the society.

Country experiences indicate that during the UN Decade for Women many countries established governmental machinery, either as part of the existing administrative structures, as independent agencies for women's affairs, or in the form of National Councils, which were extra-governmental organizations. Most of these mechanisms were created with the objectives of establishing responsibility and accountability within the government for planning, programming and implementing programmes for women and to act as a catalyst: providing the necessary infrastructure and resource support and training personnel; and reviewing, monitoring and evaluating policies and programmes and their impact on women.

#### **Status of Women in India:**

Until the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the status of women was almost the same throughout the world. In the Greek states, while woman was a subject of admiration for her grace and motherly qualities, she was completely subordinated to men. The position of women was no better in the Roman Empire. This position was maintained throughout the middle ages. In feudal societies, however, one finds a special status accorded to women in society. This was due to the social values of the time like chivalry, which was imbibed in every noble boy as a very important virtue to be cherished and preserved. Materially this did not alter the positing of woman nor did it change the sexist roles established by tradition.

Through the centuries, generally women from the lower strata of society worked in fields helping in agricultural operations and allied activities to supplement the family income. Comparatively participation of women from the middle and upper strata was generally low. By and large, women in lower, middle and upper strata had more or less the same status in contrast to men and this was one of subordination to male. With the progress of the industrial revolution and the large-scale entry of women into factory jobs, change took place in their six roles. As technology improved, industrial organization became bureaucratic and a group of workers engaged in white collar jobs emerged into prominence. This category of workers was characterized in two ways: they were better educated than their blue-collar counterparts, and they performed clean jobs, i.e. jobs which were office based and involving less physical labour compared to other who did manual labour which was strenuous and which was performed in a less comfortable environment. Because of the comparatively less strenuous work, women began to be recruited in larger number to various jobs women were paid lower wages than men for the same work inspired by being more amenable to control and discipline than men precisely the reason for employers preferring women for such jobs women's status got a fillip with the onset of the industrial revolution.

#### **Cultural Status of Tribal Women in India:**

Status is customarily defined by social scientists as a recognized social position or socially defined position of an individual or a community within a society. In recent times many attempts have been made to understand the status of women in the tribal society. Robert Lowie (1920) has suggested four different criteria to determine the status of women in a society i.e. (i) actual treatment, (ii) legal status, (iii) opportunity for social participation and (iv) character and extent of work. Mujumdar and Madan (1956) state that "expressed, some of which take a stand that primitive society" women are generally a

depressed group". For this reason Robert Lowie has stated that any general statement regarding relation of women to the society must be taken with caution.

The women in the tribal community about half of the tribal population. Their role in the tribal society is even more important than in other social groups in India, because the tribal women, more than women in any other social group, work harder and the family economy and management depends on them.

**A). Higher Social Status of Women :**

It was reported by Furer Haimendorf (1943), Hutton (1921), Hunter (1973) and Firth (1946), that among Tharus of U.P and Nagas and Garos of the North-East there is no child marriage and no stigma on widowhood. The tribal woman enjoys the right to decide about her marriage. Instead of dowry there is bride price which indicates a high social status of tribal women. They earn and are therefore, to a great extent, economically independent. Among the tribal society, birth of a girl is not looked down upon because they are considered as economic assets. They participate in all agricultural operations (except ploughing), they work in all sectors of indigenous cottage industries, tribal arts and production of artc rafts. Tribal women enjoy lot of freedom before and after marriage. The wife may divorce her husband on the grounds of cruelty, impotency, incompatibility, poverty, infidelity or negligence.

Traditionally the institute of divorce exists and divorce is granted by the village Panchayat. The tribal woman may just walk out of her husband's house with/without intimation to her husband. Though she enjoys full liberty to choose her life partner and also to break the marital bond and marry with another person, for the tribal men it is not possible to cause harm to the modesty of a married woman. Severe penalties and punishments are inflicted on the man in all such cases. The women thus enjoy an almost equal status with men except in all such cases. The women thus enjoy and almost equal status with men except in the sphere of rituals.

**B) Law Status of the Tribal Women :**

The tribal woman does not have property rights excepts in a matrilineal society which is a small proportion of the tribal population. She is paid less wages than her male counterpart for the same work. Besides this, the women work for more time than men, they receive wages in kind which are enchased by males. The women do not have the decision making power. The division of work is heavily loaded against the tribal woman because in addition to and equal share in the economic production process she has to take the sole responsibility of household chores. In certain tribes only the males can participate in ancestor worship. Usually she cannot hold the office of a priest.

**C) Economic Role :**

Tribal women in India contribute positively towards economic pursuits by participating equally with men folk. They participate in all agricultural operation like sowing seeds, weeding and harvesting, felling and burning trees. In plough based cultivation, transplantation, weeding winnowing and dehusking is done entirely by women. They work in all sectors of indigenous cottage industries, tribal arts and production of artifacts. Generally, the ploughing is done by men but in some tribal societies, women do

the ploughing too. Though the women work for more time than men, they receive less wages and that too in kind which are encashed by males. However, there are some tribes where men and women are equal partners in socio-cultural and economic life and hence women are traditionally assigned an important role in the society.

**D) Cultural Role :**

The Cultural life of tribal communities is very rich and music dancing and singing occupy pivotal place in their culture. They have community entertainment with total village participating and the men, women, boys and girls all participate at equal level. They freely sing and dance with each other and joking, laughing goes on freely specially on the occasion of marriages, and/on festivals like Holi, Dashera, etc, Men & women of all ages dance in ecstasy on the rhythm of the drums throughout the night. It is only in the tribal rituals connected with religious practices that the men folk get a priority over the women. Alcoholism among tribal also contributes towards the misery of the women in the house. Apart from giving rise to conflict between the spouses, it also creates economic crisis in the family. In cases of excess, the wife may even desert her husband and enter other man's house as per her choice.

**E) Education among the Tribes:**

Education is not only a means of adjustment into the society and all round development, but it is also an end in itself. Education affords perfection to life, and it is closely associated with socio-economic development. After a long struggle when India gained independence, Government of India in article 45 of the directive principles. In this article, there is a "Provision for free and compulsory education for children". It directs that the state shall endeavour to provide, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.

For the promotion of educational interests of the Scheduled Tribe the constitution includes an article in the chapter relating to the directive Principles of the State Policy stating that the "State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all form of exploitation". As a result of this, now there is at least a primary school in every remote corner of the tribal belts within their easy approach. Literacy levels of the various tribal groups in India differ widely.

There are tribal groups with zero literacy rate. The urban Nagas had literacy rates of 71 per cent, 61 per cent and 66 per cent for males, females and total population respectively in 1981. On the other hand, in several tribal groups the rural female literacy was about 1 percent; in Bhils of Rajasthan it was even less than 1 percent. In Santals, which is one of the large tribal group, the rural female literacy rate was 4 to 5 per cent in Bihar, Orissa and west Bengal. In 1991, The rural tribals had a literacy rate 21.81 percent compared to 46.35 percent in the urban tribals.

According to Anthropological Survey of India Report, 194, in 1961 census the literacy rate among the Scheduled Tribes at the national level was 5.53 percent, which increased to 11.30 per cent in 1971 and to 16.35 percent in 1981. Thus it is observed that during a

period of two decades (1961-81) the literacy among the Scheduled Tribes has almost doubled. Similarly, the sex wise literacy rate during this period shows a positive trend. According to 1961 census 13.89 per cent of the males and 3.16 per cent of the females were literate. This number increased to 17.63 per cent of the males and 4.85 per cent of the females in 1971, which further increased to 24.52 percent of males and 8.04 percent of females. Hence, this supports the findings that the girls are favoured in matter of education and there is no discrimination on ground of sex in matters of education. For the promotion of educational interests of the Scheduled Tribes, the number of educational institutions as well as teachers has been increased every year and today there are schools and colleges in every district town. There are special incentive schemes of scholarship and grant of books for scheduled tribe children to encourage the intelligent students to continue their education up to higher level. These facilities are provided by the Government and Christian Institutions. Hence, value of education is increasing day by day. The highest literacy rate of North-East tribe shows that they are very enthusiastic about education, they feel that without education their society as a whole cannot be advanced. Generally they know that educated children when grown up will get white collar jobs/will get Government jobs/other honorable professions, raise standard of living and have a secure life. The well to do families hire tutor at home for coaching their children, and they also do not hesitate to send their boys and girls to different Universities. The State Government has provided a number of facilities as a part of the tribal education programme in the tribal areas. The rate of scholarship for girls is slightly higher.

#### **F) Migration Tribes :**

The process of land alienation is having a fast increase now a day. In a predominately agrarian economy land alienation is characterized by highly distorted distribution of land and adverse land-man ratio aggravates the inequality in terms of income and wealth. The speedy increase of land alienation gives rise to a major change in the occupational distribution and creates tenants, agricultural laborers and at times paupers who leaving their heart-land in search of occupation other than agriculture, live a hard life in urban areas. Even after selling their lands the conditions of tribals in Indian States is very poor, and they are being continuously exploited by the able people. The genesis of land alienation began from the new pattern of social transformation taken by the tribal Society. This new formation of the tribal society is characterized by the forces of modernization and migration.

The development process initiated by the Government and the voluntary agencies among the tribals have, on the one hand, created situation for structuration of tribal society and on the other, given rise to some structural problems. This has resulted in some changes in quality of life of the tribals, but new problems resulting from these changes are, never the less, minor. One of the structural features of social formation and modernization is the occurrence of Migration among the Tribals, Demographically speaking the economic non-viability of land acts as a push factor to send the tribals to industrial towns and cities for earning a livelihood. A few of them living in the neighborhood of the states have migrated to urban centers. This depeasantised working class is found in factories, hotels and business



centers. The household servants in the cities who sweep and clean utensils and do other domestic work are mostly women and girls.

The big cities in India work as receiving places for the tribal migrants moving from their hinterland. Tribal migration is somewhat different from migration among non-tribals, both at national and international levels. Generally, the decision to migrate is taken at the level of individual and family. This is found all over the world. Among the tribals the decision for migration is primarily taken at the level of kin, clan and village. If the Village or people migrate to a particular place, a particular tribal family has not to decide about the place of the destination.

Sociologically speaking when members of a society or community migrate to another community there is always a change in the community of origin and also in the community of destination. Viewed from the sociological perspective of migration, it could be said that when tribals migrate from their hinterland there is a definite change in their social structure and also cultural system is essentially one or that of the village which are located in the place of residence. The tribal region consists largely of hills and forests. The topography and terrain in such place of origin is too difficult and unfriendly that it becomes nearly impossible for a tribal to overcome these and come to the plains. However, today most of these unfriendly barriers have been overcome with the help of development programmes.

This level of place of origin in terms of migration is one which is backward, mostly illiterate, animistic in religion and vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation. When tribals migrate from the first level of social structure and cultural system they find themselves introduced to the social level which is that of the cluster of villages in the plains. Here the contours are altogether different. The structure of the family, clan, kin, pattern of habitation and economic and political dimensions in the caste villages with whom the tribals reside is entirely different. The cultural aspects also undergo a drastic change. The fairs and festivals, the customs and ceremonies, in fact the total idiom of social and cultural life is under the influence of caste Hindus and non-tribal groups. This pattern of social structure and cultural system is oriented to better education and more opportunities of service.

When tribals belonging to first level of hinterland migrate to the third level of destination, jumping over in physical proximity of a community which is a big city or an urban or industrial town, perhaps in a state which is not their own. It is also possible that the tribals may migrate from second level of place of origin to the third level of a big city outside their own state. When tribals cross the boundaries of their hinterland, they are exposed to a new kind of social structure and cultural system at the place of their destination. In such a case of migration the tribals ride over one or two generations in both the social structure and cultural system.

Migration, therefore, makes a social and cultural transformation at both the places. Before independence the out-migration of tribals to the urban and industrial cities was very meagre. This was due to the physical environment constraints. The limited needs of the tribals also did not motivate them to come to cities. After independence the picture has changed considerably. The change has been due to the implementation of Five-Year plans,

which had and has a bias towards the tribal development. The directive principles of the state policy have made special programmes for the social, political and economic development of the tribals with the objective of integrating them at the various levels of rural and urban communities.

Secondly, the safeguards provided by the constitution have made them available great opportunities of education, entrepreneurship and jobs in Government service and in organized sector. Reservations in service have opened up new avenues for the tribals. The process of social mobility has given a high status to the tribal migrants. As a matter of fact, the implementation of more than 100 development schemes for the tribals by different government departments has created a favourable ground for the immobile tribal population to undertake out migration to big cities and towns. However, there are a large number of tribals who did not get any benefit from these development Schemes. Even such tribals ha to migrate to other urban towns and big cities in search of livelihood as they were left with no resources to stay in their hinterland and there was no other alternative left than to migrate to urban areas.

Along with men, tribal women and girls also migrate to urban towns and cities in different situations. For them the society and cultural system in the cities is totally new and different and adjustment is difficult in the initial stage. These tribal women and girls are facing a number of problems in the big cities in India where they have taken shelter. Their housing conditions are miserable, economically hey are still poor, only few of them are in regular employment and they are financially and sexually exploited in these big cities. With a view to study their problems, their socio-cultural and economic status and conflict and social intervention, the present study is undertaken. The main thrust of the study will be on the socio-cultural constraints and the adjustment in a new environment totally different from their hinterland.

#### **G) Migration of Tribal Women and Girls:**

A large number of women and girls form tribal areas migrate to cities and town 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 externally 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 form their culture and roots.

In tribal areas land is a symbol of the organization 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 tirbals by cunning people, there are more complex factors involved. 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. But in those areas where the level of education has risen this is now becoming increasingly difficult. They find themselves blocked by the more advanced groups, who are more articulate and educationally better off. They psychologically distance themselves from their local surrounding but they fail to get a foothold in the modern sector, they get disappointed and develop frustration. The gulf between the life in the tribal home and the life in a residential hostel particularly in urban areas is an important contributing factor for no adjustment.

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, immigration of tribal is inevitable.

### **Conclusion:**

The only thing that distinguishes tribal women from their non-tribal counterpart is that no strict demarcation exists among them regarding "private" and "public" spaces/appearances and between man's and woman's domains. This is there despite the presence of patriarchy and some related egalitarian norms and practices. Absence of some of the restrictions of Hindu society among the tribal people, nexus between ecology and culture, equal partnership in livelihood earning, a sense of economic independence, education and modern jobs and culture contact (with missions etc) characterize tribal women. Empowerment of tribal women is an inevitable corollary of such a summation of factors in their favour. Since impact of these factors is uneven, social stratification in the tribal society continues to be there. If one goes into the genesis of the uneven consequences, one can find differences among various tribes as the root cause of uneven development of tribal men and women.

### **References:**

1. K. Manjula Devi "Rural Women: Poverty Alleviation programme" Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1997.p.43.
2. Ibid. p.43
3. Kumar Ashok, "Indian Women towards 21<sup>st</sup> Century" Criterion publications, New Delhi, 1989. p.111
4. Manohar, Murali (Ed) "Women's Status and Development in India", SOWSTUD, And IIPA, Warangal, 1984.p.84.
5. Laxmi Devi, "Women in Medial India" Women and Development Anmol Publication Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1998.p.9.
6. Vina Muzumdar, "Towards Equality: Status of women in India" in women of the world, Illusion, and Reality", Urmila Phadnis and Indira Malani, (ed), Vikas Publishing House. 1978.p.76.
7. chatopadhyay, Kamala Devi, "Indian Women's Battle for Freedom" Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1983.p.43.

8. Ibid.
9. Indira Devi M. "Women Education Employment and Family Living- A Study of Emerging Hindu Wives in Urban India" Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.p.40
10. Vijay Kaushik et al., "Women power and Development " in Encyclopedia of Human Rights and women's Development vol. IV. New Delhi, SAVRP and Sons, 1996.p.56.
11. Op. Cit. No. 3