



Research Article

Portraits of Indian Tribal Women: A Multidimensional Visualization through Cultural, Socioeconomic, and Educational Lenses

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Abstract

Purpose: This study synthesises scholarly literature and secondary data to examine the cultural, socioeconomic, educational, and health dimensions of tribal women's lives in India. It seeks to move beyond deficit-oriented narratives by highlighting tribal women's agency as custodians of indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions, and community resilience.

Methodology: A qualitative document analysis was conducted using peer-reviewed studies, government reports, and anthropological literature. Secondary data on literacy, educational participation, employment, and labour force engagement were analysed to support the study.

Key Findings: Tribal women experience intersectional disadvantages arising from gender, ethnicity, geography, and socioeconomic marginalisation. Although literacy and educational participation have improved substantially, significant dropout rates persist at higher levels of education. Employment remains concentrated in informal and agricultural sectors despite relatively high labour force participation. At the same time, tribal women play vital roles in cultural preservation, spiritual leadership, ecological stewardship, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Policy measures such as the Forest Rights Act and self-help groups have generated positive outcomes, though implementation challenges prevail.

Implications: Effective policy interventions should move beyond generic empowerment approaches and adopt culturally sensitive, participatory, and intersectional strategies that address educational exclusion, economic vulnerability, and land-related inequalities.

Originality/Value: By integrating cultural, socioeconomic, educational, and health perspectives, this review offers a holistic and agency-centred understanding of tribal women's status and empowerment in contemporary India.

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KEYWORDS: Tribal women; Scheduled Tribes; intersectionality; indigenous feminism; cultural identity; education; socioeconomic marginalisation; India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women have made sacrifices throughout history to achieve empowerment (Koshulko, 2021). Situated at the crossroads of gender, ethnicity, culture, and historical disadvantage, tribal and indigenous women experience unique social realities. The percentage of Scheduled Tribes (STs) among India's total population is close to 8.6%, but despite this fact, they still lag behind in the realm of social, economic, and developmental aspects (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024). Tribal women, in turn, suffer from being discriminated against twice: first and foremost, they belong to historically disadvantaged ethnic groups, and secondly, there is still much patriarchy around that limits their freedom and potential (Toppo *et al.*, 2024). The lack of opportunities in terms of education, healthcare, and employment makes them even more vulnerable and disadvantaged (Indu *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, the processes of globalization, urbanization, and development lead to the erosion of the previous structures, including those connected to the cultural heritage and traditions of tribal communities (Choudhury & Kumari, 2025).

Nonetheless, tribal women are more than just mere subjects of deprivations; rather, they are active agents of cultural survival, sustainability, and resilience. Their important role as bearers of traditional knowledge, ecological wisdom, and indigenous culture makes them indispensable in sustaining their group's collective identity and community resilience (Oraon, 2025).

However, this critical dimension of tribal women's lives is frequently overshadowed by development policies and interventions that prioritize economic empowerment while paying comparatively less attention to cultural identity, social positioning, and educational realities. Such a narrow focus often fails to capture the complex and interconnected challenges that shape the lived experiences of tribal women. Therefore, understanding the status of tribal women requires a multidimensional perspective that acknowledges the interconnected influences of culture, socioeconomic conditions, and education.

Against this backdrop, the present study undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the existing literature on tribal women in India by simultaneously examining their cultural identities, socio-economic circumstances, and educational experiences. By adopting this integrated lens, the study seeks to illuminate both the structural barriers that perpetuate marginalization and the diverse ways in which tribal women exercise agency, negotiate social change, and pursue empowerment. In doing so, it provides a more nuanced understanding of tribal women's realities, highlighting empowerment not merely as an economic outcome but as a process shaped by cultural resilience, educational advancement, and socio-economic transformation.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Cultural Identity and Indigenous Feminism

Cultural positioning of tribal women in India has remained a topic of academic discussion. Tribal societies have been depicted by earlier anthropologists as more egalitarian compared to the caste-based social hierarchy of Hinduism. Therefore, in the view of early anthropologists, tribal women

had higher status, economic and political freedom compared to women who did not belong to tribes. Nevertheless, recent research indicates that tribal societies do not share common features as some of them follow patrilineal traditions while others follow matrilineal systems of organizing social and economic relations, which leads to the variation in tribal women's positioning.

According to Bordoloi (2024), based on subaltern and postcolonial theory, there is a distinctive oppression faced by tribal women, as it does not fall under Brahmanical patriarchy, which emphasizes oppression in relation to class, caste, and gender in the Hindu social hierarchy. Intersectional oppression for tribal women encompasses not only gender-related issues but also cultural aspects related to ethnic background and socio-economic position of this group. It should be acknowledged that tribes in India represent subalterns due to the historically established marginalisation of their social position.

The processes of colonisation and post-colonization have affected the tribal gender relations to a great extent. According to Ekka and Giangthandunliu (2024), the Indian Adivasi/tribal land rights struggles are also essentially feminist struggles since Adivasi/tribal feminism remains neglected in the mainstream feminist discourse due to the failure to identify the suffering of tribal women under colonialism and imperialism. They further theorize that Adivasi feminism develops naturally out of the indigenous perception of land, opposing the colonialist view of the body/earth binary relationship. For Adivasi peoples, life itself is linked to nature, land, and resources, and the role played by women cannot be underestimated in its perception and transmission.

The effect of globalization and modernization on the cultural identity of tribal women has become an area of discussion for many scholars. In his study on the role of Kumaoni Bhotia women of Uttarakhand, Waldia (2024) explores how the shift of the community from trans-Himalayan trade to a sedentary lifestyle contributed to the development of a social framework within which women experienced less discriminatory treatment than in other communities and were involved in trade, household management, and woolen industries. The process of Sanskritization, whereby the adoption of upper-caste Hindu traditions led to the perpetuation of gender inequality, brought about cultural changes that resulted in a shift in women's identities. Nonetheless, cultural aspects like weaving and brewing prevailed despite the transformation.

The contribution of tribal women in preserving cultures has received much attention, according to Naik & Dasaratharamaiah (2019), tribal knowledge, which includes governance, medicinal practices, agriculture, stories, and craft-making, comes from the environmental, spiritual and cultural experience of past generations, with women being the custodians of such traditions. Similarly, according to Sharma, Aggarwal, and Ray (2025), tribal women play a very critical role in passing on knowledge systems, both orally and practically, including aspects such as ecological knowledge, health care, agriculture, and cultural traditions. Nonetheless, tribal women's cultural custodian status is facing serious challenges as a result of development projects that force them out of their ancestral habitats.

2.2 Socioeconomic Status and Marginalization

Tribal women in India have been experiencing poverty, socio-economic marginalization, and lack of access to productive resources. Paray (2019), studying data from the Census of India, has observed that the socio-economic status of tribal women regarding education, occupation, and health is relatively worse not only in comparison to tribal men but even in comparison with general women in India. The fact is that tribal women work hard and earn money contributing significantly to the total income of their households; however, they face difficulties in earning a living. The economic activity of tribal women can be mostly associated with the informal economy, agriculture, and extraction of minor forest products with low wage rates, job insecurity, and lack of social protection. The socioeconomic marginalization of tribal women was identified in various geographical locations. As reported by Baisane and Sonawane (2024) after studying tribal women with no education of Dhule district, Maharashtra, the employment of such women is mostly informal and unstable, leaving them without access to important amenities like healthcare facilities or education. Similarly, Roy (2024) documents that Adivasi women in the Dooars and Terai region of North Bengal are primarily engaged in tea garden labor, with little interest in formal education and insufficient government facilities to support their educational aspirations.

The economic empowerment of tribal women through collective action and skill development has emerged as a significant area of research. Studies on self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperative initiatives indicate that group activities in tribal regions have shown potential for transforming leadership capabilities and enabling economic independence. For instance, the revival of indigenous millet cultivation among tribal women in Madhya Pradesh under the Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Programme has increased their authority beyond traditional roles as knowledge keepers, boosting household decision-making participation and food sovereignty. However, the sustainability of such interventions remains contingent on addressing structural barriers, including land alienation, market access, and supportive policy frameworks.

Rights over land have been found to be essential in determining the social and economic empowerment of tribal women. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, based on gender equity and joint land rights, has been a game changer for tribal women in India, empowering them in many ways. However, custom laws in Scheduled Areas still leave out women from land inheritance, and a landmark ruling of the Supreme Court of granting women the same share as men in their fathers' properties marks another milestone in this regard.

The effects of neoliberal policies have been explored in the case of tribal women. Indigenous women in India have to deal with the pressures of colonialism, development, and neoliberalism while trying to preserve their culture, educational background, and means of survival. The loss of land and control over resources in the indigenous territories has compelled them to refrain from engaging in productive activities. The policy trend nowadays is towards vocational education and training of tribal women, but there is evidence of an incongruity between policy goals and actual needs of indigenous women.

2.3 Education and Literacy

Education has been widely recognized as a transformative tool for empowering tribal women, yet persistent barriers continue to limit their educational attainment. Choudhury and Kumari (2025) emphasize that, despite the existence of constitutional provision and policy actions, tribal women are still deprived of quality education, which intensifies their existing problems. Furthermore, according to Krishnakumari, Yamuna, *et al.*, transformation of tribal women through education entails incorporation of cultural traditions, gender-related approaches, and skills development, implying a departure from the universal solution that ignores tribal epistemology.

Moreover, a considerable gap still persists between the level of literacy of tribal women and women in other social categories. In particular, Paray (2019) points out that, although literacy has been growing among the tribal population, they still fall far behind when compared to tribal men and even non-tribal women. As indicated in the research, low literacy rate can be attributed to inadequate level of education, awareness, and financial situation. In its turn, regarding the findings of Sharma, Aggarwal, and Ray (2025), conducted on the population of Upper Bonda tribes, low literacy rate can be explained by lack of awareness and money along with inaccessibility of schools and lack of parental support.

The educational scenario for tribal women is further complicated by structural and cultural factors. Roy (2024) surveyed that the maximum number of women in tribal families are engaged primarily in tea garden labor, and they do not have interest in education, while government facilities are insufficient to support their society. The gap between general communities and Scheduled Tribes in the Dooars and Terai region in terms of low literacy may be attributed to multiple intersecting issues, and tribes remain illiterate in comparison to other societies. In Maharashtra, tribal women are being trained to maintain residential schools under state government initiatives, combining skill development with sustainable livelihoods, though payment-related challenges persist.

Higher education and social inclusion remain significant challenges for tribal women. Sathiyaraj, Geetha, Krishnakumari, and Yamuna (2025) note that tribal communities in India remain significantly underrepresented in higher education despite decades of affirmative measures. While constitutional provisions and policy reforms have expanded formal access, meaningful participation and completion rates remain low. The digital divide has further exacerbated educational disparities, with research documenting how the COVID-19 pandemic and associated digital divide deteriorated the educational system among socially deprived tribal groups, placing them in a disadvantageous position.

The relationship between education and women's empowerment in tribal contexts is complex and context-specific. Mal and Saikia (2024), in their comparative analysis of matrilineal and patrilineal tribal societies in India, found that while matrilineal tribal women from Meghalaya were more empowered in freedom of movement and decision-making power, patrilineal tribal women from Assam demonstrated stronger empowerment in attitudes toward violence. Social independence remained poorly empowered for women from

both societies, indicating that education alone cannot address deeply embedded patriarchal norms. The study concludes that empowerment for tribal women is an interplay of lineage structure, tradition, geography, and socioeconomic conditions, and policymakers must address socioeconomic disparities through skill-building and social support networks.

2.4 Intersectionality: The Triple Burden

Intersectionality is an approach that has been pivotal in highlighting the combined discrimination faced by tribal women. As highlighted by Choudhury and Kumari (2025), “tribal women face double discrimination due to their gender and community that denies them access to equal health facilities, education, and employment.” According to Limboo and Karki (2024), who view the issue from the sociocultural angle, “the women in Assamese tribal tribes have been facing the challenges related to role play, rights, and restrictions despite having many tribal communities in Assam where more gender equality prevails compared to other societies.”

Studies on denotified and particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) reveal extreme forms of marginalisation. Research on Nat tribal women in Chhattisgarh by Singh (2026) documents how colonial criminalisation of the Nats continues to restrict their access to socioeconomic opportunities and political representation, with patriarchal control over mobility, education, and health manifesting as unequal power dynamics, gender-based violence, and limited agency. Before colonisation, Nat women had a comparatively strong socioeconomic position, but colonial stigmatisation, postcolonial narratives, and changing socioeconomic dynamics have created strictly gendered spaces that have impacted their once-emancipated status.

The intersection of caste, patriarchy, and gender further compounds the marginalisation of tribal women. Some scholars argue that while caste is often identified as the root cause of discrimination, patriarchy and gender play abetting roles in keeping tribal and Dalit women at the lowest position in the Indian social fabric. This triple nexus of class, caste, and gender locates tribal women in a powerless situation, particularly in contexts of development-induced displacement where they become the worst sufferers.

2.6 Policy and Empowerment

The Indian state has enacted numerous policies and programs aimed at tribal welfare and women’s empowerment, yet significant gaps in implementation persist. The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to tribal women, but they continue to strive for full equality. The Parliament has enacted specific laws to meet the constitutional mandate of women’s empowerment, and the Central Government, in conjunction with state governments, has initiated multiple programs geared toward empowering women, including the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative and the National Skills Development Mission. Despite these measures, tribal women’s access to resources and opportunities remains constrained. Choudhury and Kumari (2025) identify gaps in policy implementation and underscore the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to address the systemic barriers faced by tribal

women. Recommendations include promoting gender equity, improving access to education and healthcare, and empowering tribal women economically and socially through targeted interventions that respect indigenous knowledge systems.

Recent policy developments offer cautious optimism. The Supreme Court’s landmark judgment upholding tribal women’s equal property rights represents a vital turning point, sending a clear message that gender justice and equality are non-negotiable when it comes to property rights in India’s tribal communities. The Forest Rights Act’s emphasis on joint land titles has been especially transformative, with over 325 tribal women elected as village representatives, panchayat presidents, and vice chairpersons of their blocks. The National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation provides loans of up to Rs. 2 lakhs to tribal women for self-employment and entrepreneurship under the Tribal Women Empowerment Scheme. However, critical voices argue that empowerment programs often fail to incorporate the perspectives and aspirations of indigenous women. Sharma (2022), analyzing vocational education and skills training programs, finds a significant mismatch between policy objectives and the requirements and desires of indigenous women, suggesting a participatory planning approach that integrates self-determination into a subaltern framework. The paper brings attention to the need for representation and inclusion of indigenous women in skills development planning and implementation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach to document analysis is employed in this research, along with secondary data analysis involving quantitative information drawn from official government sources. This approach will work well because it will enable combining evidence and drawing conclusions about policies’ effects on tribal women.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Lighting the Path: Education and the Rise of Tribal Women

Education is a pivotal force in empowering women, equipping them with knowledge, skills, and self-assurance to actively participate in development and assert their rights (Engida, 2021). Education is the bridge to a brighter, more equitable future, and its importance is magnified when applied to the unique circumstances of tribal women. Tribal women empowerment, a significant aspect of women’s empowerment as a whole, stands at the intersection of gender and indigenous identity. Moreover, education is pivotal in empowering tribal women by enabling them to break free from cultural practices such as early marriage (Kartika, *et al.*, 2017) and fostering social inclusivity (Meher, 2021).

The Figure (Figure 1) displays the trend of literacy increase in India since 1961 until 2020-21, contrasting the literacy rate of both the general population and the Scheduled Tribes, in terms of male, female, and total number of individuals. This trend demonstrates an appreciable increase in literacy for all the categories involved over several decades, though there is also a

remarkable difference in literacy rates between tribes and non-tribes, and especially for females.

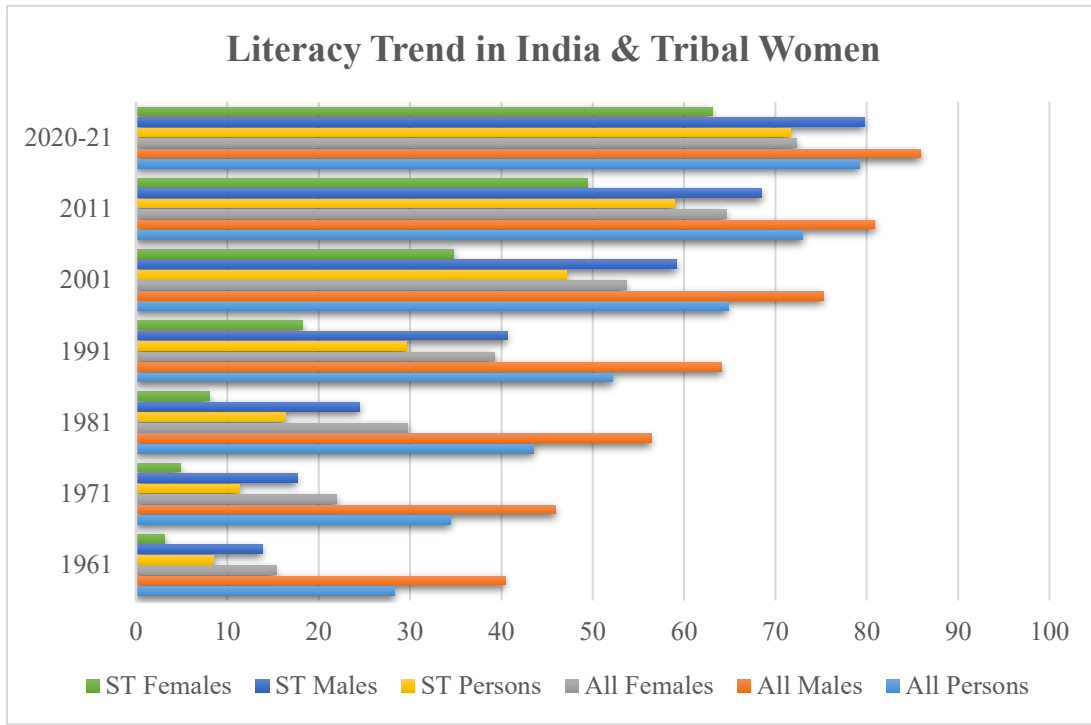


Figure 1: Literacy trend in India and Tribal Women (Ministry of Tribal Affairs-2022-23)

It can be seen that, in 1961, literacy rates were relatively low amongst tribal groups, especially amongst female STs where the literacy rate was less than 5 percent, along with relatively low rates for male STs. Literacy rates amongst the general population were much higher during this period, demonstrating the exclusion of tribes from education.

Between 1971 and 1991, there was an increment in the literacy of ST males and females. The trend was positive and continuous, but the literacy increase for tribal females was lower compared to those of males. This implies that the process of increasing literacy among females is still difficult due to factors like poverty, social discrimination, poor educational

resources, early marriages, and awareness about the benefits of female education among the tribes. On the other hand, there was an increase in the literacy rate of Indians due to government programs on education and availability of educational institutions.

There was rapid increase in the literacy rate after 2001. The literacy of ST people increased dramatically, due to the effects of numerous educational policies formulated to improve education in the tribal areas. Examples include reservations, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan program, mid-day meal scheme, residential schools, and scholarships. The increase in the literacy of ST females was outstanding between this period.

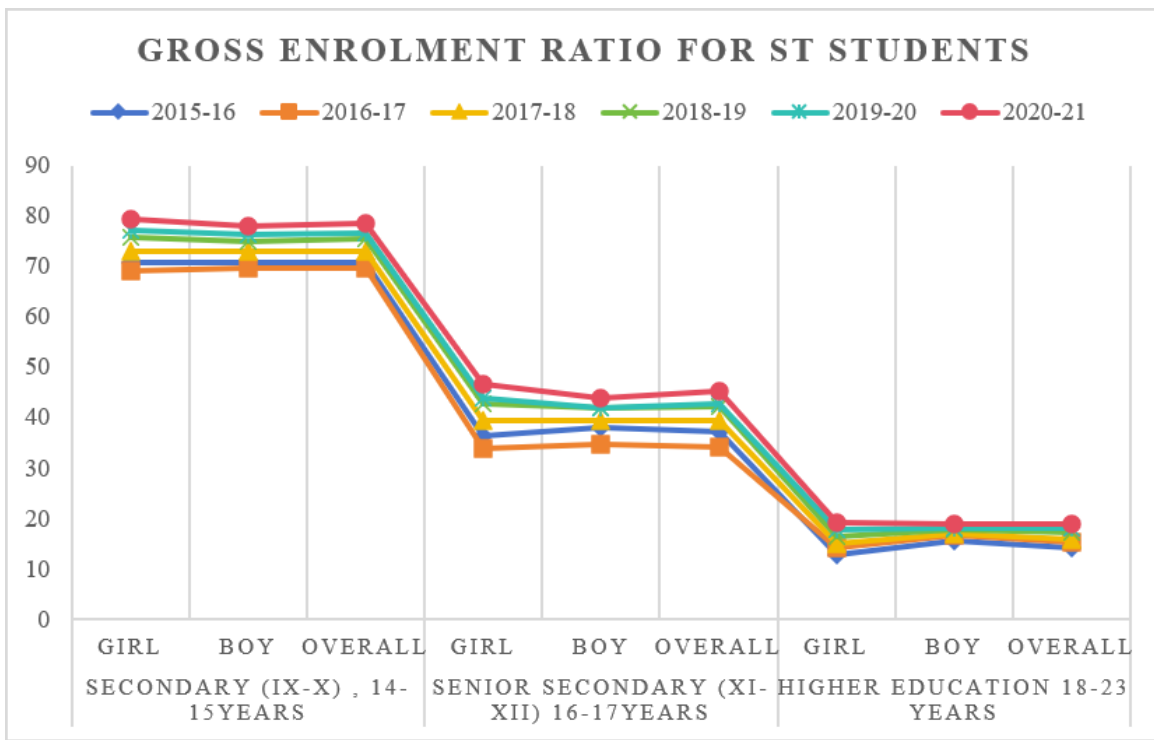


Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio of ST Students (Annual report, 2022-23, Ministry of Tribal Affairs).

The figure (Figure 2) indicates a clear and persistent educational funnel among Scheduled Tribe students, with participation remaining high at the secondary stage, dropping sharply at senior secondary, and falling to very low levels in higher education. At the secondary level (IX–X), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) stayed consistently strong throughout 2015–16 to 2020–21, rising from roughly 70–74 percent to about 78–80 percent, with girls slightly outperforming boys across the period. However, this relatively favourable pattern weakens substantially at the next transition, where GER declines to around 35–47 percent at the senior secondary level,

even though a gradual upward movement is visible over time. The steepest attrition appears at the tertiary stage, where GER remains below 20 percent in every year, increasing only modestly from about 14–16 percent to 18–19 percent by 2020–21. Gender differences are minimal across all stages, but female GER is generally equal to or marginally higher than male GER, suggesting incremental progress in girls’ educational inclusion. Overall, the trend reflects improving access within the school system, but serious structural barriers continue to limit the transition of ST students—especially into senior secondary and higher education—making retention, transition support, and targeted equity interventions critical.

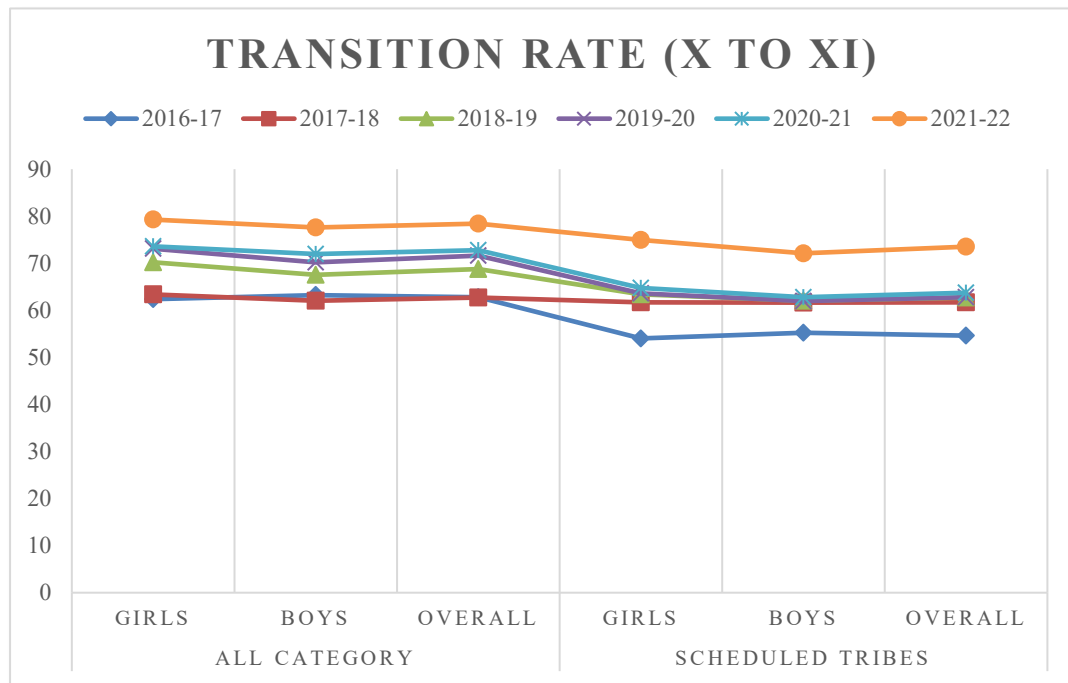


Figure 3: Transition Rate for Tribal (Annual report, 2022-23, Ministry of Tribal Affairs).

The trend of transition (Figure 3) from Class X to XI is clearly falling after the year 2018-19 and the maximum decline is evident around 2019-20, whereas only some improvement is seen in 2021-22. In all years under consideration, All Category students had the highest rates of transition in comparison with ST students, indicating that there are still inequalities in the field of education. It must be said that despite all mentioned challenges, tribal girls performed better compared to tribal boys, showing great endurance in continuing their studies. This positive trend proves that certain initiatives aimed at supporting the education of girls have already produced favourable results. At the same time, the relatively low rates of transition indicate that issues such as poverty, remoteness, lack of higher secondary schools, socio-cultural problems, etc. remain the main obstacles on the way to educational success.

4.2 Roots of Resilience: The Socio-Economic Reality of Tribal Women

Employment is considered one of the major tools for socio-economic empowerment of tribal women, enabling them to gain more economic freedom, improves decision-making power, and enhances their position within families and communities (Rani & Devi, 2021). Apart from providing a means for earning money, engaging in productive work empowers tribal women, boosts their confidence, and increases their involvement in the process of community development. Nevertheless, in spite of playing an important role in maintaining the economic stability of families and communities, tribal women still remain vulnerable to various socio-economic disadvantages such as lack of education, poor state of health, low wages, poor skill

enhancement programs, as well as low engagement in entrepreneurship and self-employment (Panigrahi, 2017; Paray, 2019).

In the midst of several empowerment mechanisms, Self-Help Groups have proved to be very significant in improving the socio-economic status of tribal women. Through access to savings, credit, entrepreneurship, and collective behaviour, SHGs have helped to increase the involvement of women in economic activities and community governance (Mwanza, 2015; Nidheesh, 2009). However, the success of these efforts has not been even across the board, with social exclusion, political marginalization, technical inadequacy, market restrictions, and psychological problems continuing to restrict the benefits of empowerment among tribal women (Das, 2021; Malyadri, 2020). Besides, lack of adequate information about welfare programs offered by the government has made it difficult for eligible individuals to make use of the resources available (Sunitha & Mahadevappa, 2015). It shows (Figure 4) an enormous gap between rural and urban unemployment levels in the Scheduled Tribe population with the level of rural unemployment being relatively low, compared to persistently high urban unemployment from the period 2020–21 to 2022–23. Unemployment in rural areas remains significantly less than 3 percent for both males and females. Tribal women have the lowest unemployment rates and they are in the vicinity of 1 to 1.4 percent implying greater involvement in agricultural activities, household occupations, and informal sector work. On the contrary, urban unemployment is significantly higher and it remains in the vicinity of about 6.0 to 7.8 percent for males and 6.2 to 7.5 percent for women, signifying extreme labor market exclusion from non-agricultural occupations.

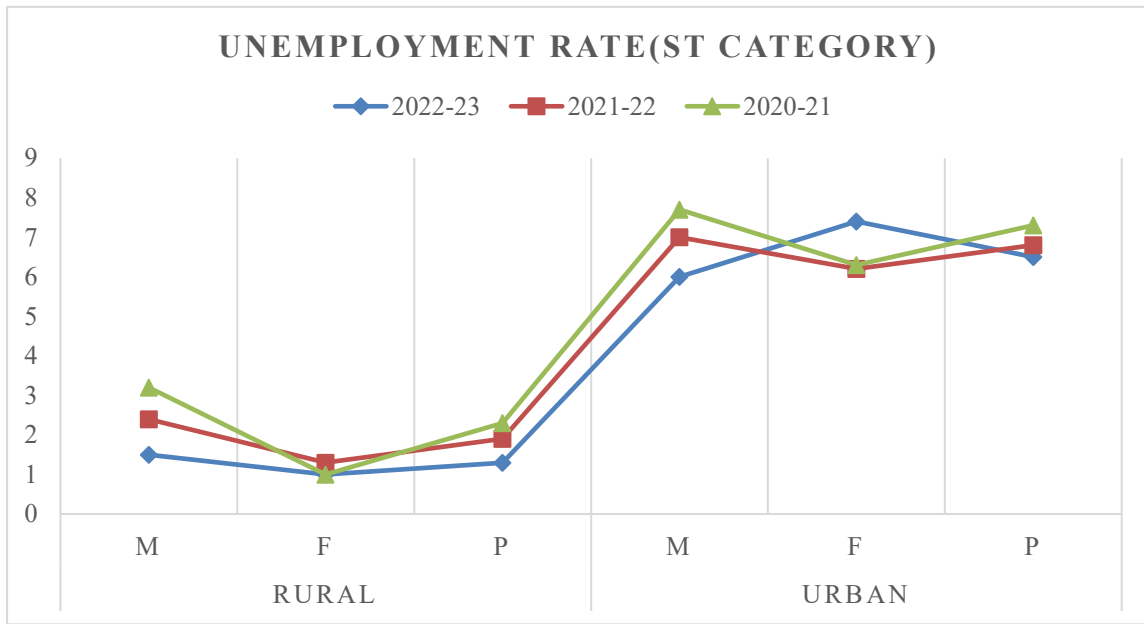


Figure 4: Unemployment Rate among (Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report, 2022-23, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation)

The highest level of unemployment was observed in 2020–21 possibly due to the Covid-19 pandemic and partial relief is noted in subsequent periods but urban unemployment levels remain relatively high. It must be noted that there is no wide gap between the two genders indicating that tribal men and

women equally bear the brunt of unemployment issues. However, tribal women are particularly vulnerable since limited labor force participation among them indicates their inability to find secure, paid, and socially upward mobility-oriented occupations.

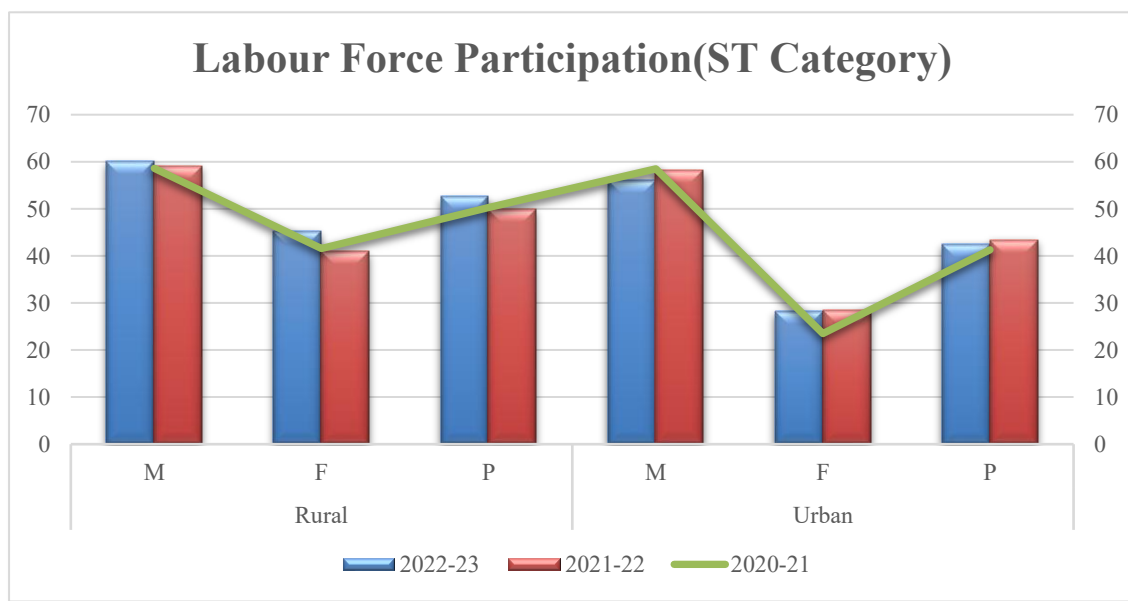


Figure 5: Labour Force Participation among Tribals (Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report 2022-23, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation)

Labour force participation trends (Figure 5) of Scheduled Tribes (STs) also indicate a distinct gender and regional difference. Even while tribal women have continued to participate actively in the economy, they have done so at a much lower rate compared to tribal men, especially in urban regions. Tribal women in rural areas participated in the labour

force above 40% throughout, indicating their heavy involvement in agricultural work, forest-based occupations, and informal economic sectors. Urban tribal women, on the other hand, showed much lower levels of participation in the labour force and were consistently below 30%. Such trends reveal the structural challenges faced by tribal women in accessing formal

jobs due to the lack of skills and education, as well as social and cultural restrictions. It can be concluded that the economic strength of tribal women is underutilized, especially in the urban sector. Hence, more efforts are needed for empowering tribal women economically and promoting development among them through entrepreneurship and job creation.

4.3 Echoes of Ancestors: The Place of Tribal Women in Tribal Culture

Notwithstanding the stereotypical depiction of tribal women as vulnerable and marginalized, their cultural positioning is more complicated, comprising a range of power relations, responsibilities, resilience, and restrictions. Tribal women often play the roles of keepers of indigenous knowledge, cultural tradition carriers, ritualists, and keepers of collective memories (Cadena & Jiménez, 2022; Tugang, 2024). Women from tribal communities use oral traditions, folklore, music, agricultural activities, and rituals to maintain the cultural foundation that indigenous communities rest on. The engagement of tribal women in agricultural ceremonies, reverence to ancestors, respect for nature, and rituals indicates a strong link between tribal women, spirituality, nature, and culture (Syahrul *et al.*, 2026). Being ritual leaders and spiritual mediators, women frequently act as mediators between the material world and the otherworldly, thus facilitating cultural transmission and integration (Popick, 2006).

However, the portrayal of tribal societies as inherently egalitarian warrants critical examination. While tribal women often enjoy greater mobility, economic participation, and social visibility compared to women in many mainstream patriarchal settings, such advantages do not necessarily translate into substantive gender equality (Mal & Saikia, 2024). Studies have shown that despite their cultural significance, tribal women continue to face barriers in land ownership, political representation, formal decision-making processes, and access to educational and economic opportunities (Limboo & Karki, 2024; Paray, 2019). Further, the Tribal Customary laws are not merely symbolic mechanisms that perpetuate gender asymmetry; they often function as powerful instruments of patriarchal control, regulating women's access to education, healthcare, property rights, and knowledge while simultaneously restricting their autonomy, decision-making power, freedom of choice, and sexual agency (Sabar, 2022).

Moreover, the processes of modernity, marketization, state action, and Sanskritization have also led to changes in the social structure of traditional tribes, leading to conflicting consequences for women (Waldia, 2024; Srinivas, 1966). Though these changes have opened new educational and economic avenues for women, also have imposed patriarchal structures that could diminish the spaces where women used to exercise their power according to tradition. Consequently, the modernity forces tribal women to reconcile their desire to maintain their culture with their wish to be socially mobile and economically independent, reflecting that culture is neither entirely emancipatory nor wholly oppressive; rather, it constitutes a dynamic arena in which power, identity, resistance, and transformation are continuously contested (Bordoloi, 2024).

Meanwhile, A critical approach using an intersectional lens allows one to realize that tribal women's issues cannot only be seen from a gendered viewpoint. Tribal women, like any other ethnic group, experience marginalization not only due to gender roles but also on the basis of their belonging to the particular community, class membership, geographical location, and history of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Ekka & Giangthandunliu, 2024). On the other hand, indigenous women retain the agency of maintaining traditions and changing the social structure from within. By taking a leading role in rituals, environmental preservation, educational programs, and culture revival initiatives, indigenous women subvert the victimizing images of tradition-bound females (Syahrul *et al.*, 2026; Tugang, 2024). Recognizing this dual reality is essential for understanding the contemporary position of tribal women, whose contributions remain fundamental to the resilience, continuity, and future development of indigenous societies.

5. IMPLICATIONS

In this context, the results of this research hold considerable relevance and ramifications regarding tribal women of India from the perspectives of policymaking, practice, and academia. To begin with, the results derived from the analysis of education suggest that while considerable progress has been achieved as regards increasing literacy levels among tribal women over the past six decades, substantial disparity still remains as far as higher education and transition into education is concerned. As such, policy interventions should go beyond mere efforts aimed at enrolment and concentrate on retention, transition, residential education, digital literacy, and culturally inclusive curricula.

Furthermore, socioeconomic results indicate an interesting situation of economic involvement of tribal women in contrast to their economic vulnerability. Although the low unemployment rates reported by rural regions are seemingly positive, they can be explained by economic involvement in informal and poverty-driven activities rather than being a result of economic empowerment. Consequently, there is a need for livelihood policies that would address skill formation, entrepreneurship, institutional credit, and market linkages.

Third, the study highlights the importance of tribal women as keepers of indigenous culture and knowledge. This means that the development programs have to not only consider them as beneficiaries but also engage them as stakeholders who possess knowledge about various issues related to land rights, governance of forests, conservation of biodiversity, and protection of cultural heritage.

Moreover, the interlinked problems experienced by tribal women necessitate comprehensive solutions that would tackle all the existing issues such as gender discrimination, tribal discrimination, lack of education, and poverty at once. Otherwise, there will be no sustainable development even through sectoral approaches to addressing different problems.

Overall, the study makes it clear that there is a pressing need for implementing participation governance mechanisms and increasing tribal women's participation in local governing structures such as village committees, educational committees,

etc. It is evident that empowerment cannot happen without participation.

6. CONCLUSION

Indigenous women hold an important and dynamic place in India's social structure, forming a convergence point between traditional culture, socioeconomic problems, and education. This study brings together contemporary academic literature and secondary sources to present a multifaceted view of the situation faced by tribal women through the prism of culture, education, and socioeconomic status.

It becomes clear from the results of the study that despite centuries of neglect and numerous obstacles, indigenous women have shown incredible strength and flexibility. Much has changed over recent years in terms of rising literacy rates, increasing educational participation, and growing governmental attention. Indigenous women have become integral parts of their communities, working towards economic independence and preservation of their cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to overlook the fact that there are still significant disparities in the situation of indigenous women in India. Their educational attainment is limited mostly to basic levels, participation in the workforce is largely informal, healthcare is still insufficiently accessible, and there are still many obstacles on the way to empowerment and advancement.

Additionally, the research stresses the importance of recognizing the role of tribal women not just as recipients of development programs but as key players in cultural continuity, ecological sustainability, and resilience of the communities. The traditional knowledge and skills of tribal women and their adaptive mechanisms are assets to the process of sustainable development.

Thus, for tribal women to be empowered, it is important to develop a holistic model of empowerment based on education, employment, health care provision, protection of culture, and gender equality. The approach to the development of tribal women should move away from welfare and towards participatory and culturally-sensitive rights-based models which will view tribal women as agents of change and not passive subjects of development policies.

Importantly, this research shows how multifaceted and interconnected the issues pertaining to tribal women really are. Being tribal, female and poor in a globalizing economy means that the vulnerabilities faced by tribal women multiply and require a holistic and multifaceted response. However, the rise of Adivasi feminism, the adoption of the Forest Rights Act, and participation in panchayati raj bodies present the avenues towards empowerment grounded in indigenous traditions. The conclusion is cautiously optimistic: with culturally sensitive, participatory, and intersectionally informed policies—and with sustained attention to the structural barriers of land alienation, educational attrition, and labour market exclusion—tribal women can move from the margins to the centre of India's development story, not as beneficiaries but as equal stakeholders and leaders. In essence, the future of tribal development in India is inseparable from the future of tribal women. Strengthening their capabilities, protecting their rights, and amplifying their voices will not only contribute to gender

equality but also foster inclusive and sustainable development within tribal communities and the nation as a whole.

7. Future Research Scope of the Study

Although extensive research has examined India's tribal communities, relatively few studies have focused specifically on tribal women and their lived experiences. Existing scholarship often prioritizes community-level issues, leaving women's agency, challenges, and aspirations underexplored. This gap is particularly evident among women from Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), warranting more gender-sensitive and context-specific research.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deep digital divide affecting tribal communities, yet research on tribal women's access to and use of digital technologies remains sparse. Future studies should examine the potential of mobile-based education, tele-health, and digital financial inclusion (e.g., through SHGs) to overcome geographical isolation, as well as the barriers of digital literacy, infrastructure, and cost. Action research on co-designed digital interventions with tribal women could generate scalable models.

Finally, while this exploration focused exclusively on India, situating Indian tribal women's experiences within comparative regional (Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) and global (indigenous women in Latin America, Africa, and Australia) frameworks would enrich theoretical understanding and policy learning. Questions of land rights, cultural survival, educational access, and the impact of neoliberal development are shared across contexts; comparative research could identify transferable strategies and avoid reinventing solutions.

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