

# SOCIO-POLITICAL STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN SOUTH INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The status of tribal women has been like a moving equilibrium at various times and in various parts of the globe. It has sometimes been liberal and other times of constraint and subordination. With regard to India, gradual variations are marked in the writings of Vedic, Puranic, Medieval and modern age writers. The constitution of India guarantees several rights to Scheduled Tribes. Indian social situation characterizes heterogeneity in regard to social structure and social organization. There are variations at the level of ethnicity, language, culture, region, race, religion. Men and women contribute to this scenario in their respective and combined capacities. And also women are the chief factor in giving rise to humanity. A woman has been playing a very important role in the society and culture. Various studies on South Indian tribal have always ignored tribal women though they continue to constitute half of the tribal population in south India.

Key words: Tribal, Social Culture and Races.

## Introduction

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ignored tribal women though they continue to constitute half of the tribal population in south India.

## The Tribal Women of South India

All over the world women occupy an unviable position. They are denied of opportunities to develop their potentialities or to utilize them. Empirical studies on women started only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the women issues have attracted the attention of social scientists very late there are many unexplored areas

for research. Thus study of social and political status of women is important because it forms one of the most trustworthy and reliable indices of the state of society, and indicates the nature and direction of social change.

In tribal society of India, women are found to have been occupying a prominent place as a critical variable to understand the changing phenomenon. Status has been reckoned in terms of the degree to which a person possesses the qualities or attributes, which are considered valuable in a particular society and perform his role according<sup>2</sup>. Participation on economic activities is not a sufficient criterion in itself to determine the status of women. However the discrimination between man and women is visible from the ancient societies itself. Say for instance in primitive societies it is a crime for a woman to touch her man's hunting tools. She is ostracized if she becomes pregnant before marriage and is associated with witchcraft if remains barren<sup>3</sup>. But when we make a comparison we can say that women in tribal society enjoy better status than women in caste society. In tribal society they have certain indicators like her freedom of choice and movement in social matters, types of taboos, her role in tribal economy and her legal and political status.

### **Some criterions that determines the position of women in a society**

Women's positioning and society is determined by what decision making power women have in different spheres of life, what choice of freedom, what degree of control and what duties, rights and privileges they enjoy. Even among matrilineal societies women have no role in political sphere and their own property is always managed and controlled by mother's brother<sup>4</sup>. Even though tribal take part in the economic activity they cannot choose the type of work they wish to do. In the primitive societies there is a lot of freedom to choose her marriage, but tribal women cannot remain without marriage. She has to marry and take up duties at home<sup>5</sup>. And in that societies there are men's job and women's job in the simplest hunting and gathering bands.

This effects their inner fulfillment as persons and their social development. In India it is still worse because the sex segregated nature of society, the conditions of poverty and the traditionally established value system. According to the UN's report "Women constitutes half the world's population perform nearly two-third of its work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property"<sup>6</sup>.

### **Women in various tribal communities of South India**

There are myriads or tribal communities in south India having diverse physical appearance, social customs and traditions. Some of the important tribal communities and their concept about their women are following.

The Kota women are of moderate height of fair built body and not nearly so good looking as the men. Most of them have prominent foreheads, with a snub nose and a somewhat vacant expression<sup>7</sup>. Another important tribal community they inhabit in south India is Kurumbas, according to Mr. Nelson (a leading Anthropologist) they are “The descents of one of the first castes that settles in the south and are supposed to be a branch of Idaiga caste”<sup>8</sup>. The Kurumba women have much the same features as the men, only somewhat softened in expression, and slightly modified in feature, with a small pug nose, and surly aspect.

Toda women are lighter in colour than the men, and contour of the body warm copper hue. Their dressing is also similar to man. Both men and women cover their bodies with a white mantle with blue and red lines, called a putkoli. This is sometimes embroidered by the Toda women. To an extent we can say that the Toda women following life equal to the male members. When compare to other tribal women, the Toda women are bold and frank. Commenting on their boldness and frank manner, Breeks says “Their frank bold manners are however, entirely peculiar to themselves, and very attractive”<sup>9</sup>.

Savaras another important tribal group of south India, they also have an equal status with their men. The Badagas who are the agriculturists of the order naturally live mostly in villages from where they can closely supervise their fields. They are lighter stained than other hill tribes and the women have a comparative pallor of skin. The Badaga women are very hard working and do a lot of labour and outside. Her hard work in the own and hired fields shows the economic independence of the Badaga women<sup>10</sup>. Adiyani one of the important tribal groups but, gives very low position to their women. They consider that women are meant only for cooking of food, washing utensils and rearing children. But the Kurichiya women have a considerable share in the tribal life. Thus these divergent tribal groups follow different life when compare to each other.

## Position of Tribal Women

As per Malinowsky, the position of women in tribal society can be assessed and analyzed “after taking into consideration the mutual duties between the sexes and the safeguards provided for the protection of each sex against the high-handedness of the other”. The word status, here, is largely used as a synonym for role. And this is how the status has been defined in the above definition of Malinowsky<sup>11</sup>. Among other criteria for status included equal opportunity for work, and political and economic independence. In a version Majumdar argued that it would be a scientific error to approach the women of a society with a rigid bias to the view that they have either a low or high status<sup>12</sup>. And that such dichotomies are generally misleading Kamalesh, Mann, Tribal Women In Changing Society.

## Conclusion

The position of tribal women has not changed appreciably all these days. In a purely matrilineal and matrilineal society the women's status is certainly superior in comparison to that of her sisters in a patrilineal and patrilineal set up. In the shifting cultivation the tribal women shouldered heavy responsibilities on the farm front besides keeping the house, feeding and raising the family the maintaining the social relations. Women in tribal communities enjoy an enviable position. The reasons for this special culture wait are the economic and social equality of women from their childhood. The women-folk are the most useful persons in the family, since teenaged girls are capable of housekeeping and talking care of the children and then elders. Tribal women do not enjoy pre-marital freedom. They are parents throughout their life. The inherent modesty of tribal women is also found among the tribal women. The fundamental issue, of the establishment of a social order founded on equality, opportunity and the elimination of exploitation. As I have mentioned above, the particular tribal community Adiyam, they did not give any important status to their women. They conceived as the group who should never see the light of freedom. The important decision of the family was taken by male members only. Socially and politically they are considered as excluded. Thus a tribal woman occupies an important place in the social and political structure of the society.

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