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Empowerment of Tribal Women in West Bengal in the 21st Century: On the Context of Purulia District.

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is one of the most important social and developmental issues in the world today. For a long time, due to the patriarchal social system, women have been deprived of education, economy, property rights, decision-making and political participation. The impact of this discrimination is even deeper in the tribal society of India, where poverty, illiteracy, geographical remoteness and social marginalization have long acted as major obstacles to the development of tribal women. This reality is particularly noticeable in Purulia district of West Bengal, which is a tribal-dominated and relatively backward region. However, in the 21st century, due to the expansion of education, spread of information technology, democratic development, expansion of Self-Help Groups, participation of women in the Panchayat system and various welfare programs of the Central and State Governments, significant changes have been observed in the social, economic and political position of tribal women in Purulia. They are currently playing an increasing role in education, small scale enterprises, livelihood activities, local self-governance, forest and natural resource management and social leadership. In particular, 'Kanyashree', 'Lakshmi Bhandar', self-help group-based programmes and tribal development projects have played an important role in increasing their self-reliance and social status. This article analyzes the current status of empowerment of tribal women in Purulia district in the light of field research and relevant data. The main objective of this study is to present a comprehensive picture of the progress, limitations and future prospects of empowerment of tribal women by assessing education, health, economic participation, political representation, impact of government projects and existing challenges.

Key words: Tribal women, women empowerment, Purulia district, West Bengal, self-help groups, political participation, education, social development.

Introduction

Empowerment is an important concept in development thinking, human rights and social justice in the 21st century. Empowerment refers to a process through which individuals or groups gain the ability to make decisions about their lives, establish control over resources, exercise rights and participate effectively in social, economic and political spheres. Empowerment in the case of women is not limited to economic self-reliance;

education, health, property rights, social status, decision-making, leadership and political participation are also important components of it. According to Naila Kabir's Resources, Agency and Achievements framework, true empowerment of women is possible only when these three elements are combined: access to resources, the ability to make decisions about how to use those resources, and the results they achieve.

In this context, the empowerment of indigenous women is of particular significance. Historically, indigenous women have played an important role in agriculture, forest resource collection, household economy and cultural activities, but they have faced various limitations in education, health, resource ownership, employment, political representation and decision-making. As a result, the empowerment of indigenous women needs to be analyzed in light of gender inequality as well as the interrelated issues of poverty, geographical marginalization, educational limitations, livelihood insecurity, and rights to resources.

According to the 2011 census, the Scheduled Tribes population in India is about 104.5 crore, which is 8.6 percent of the total population of the country. In West Bengal, the Scheduled Tribes population is 52,96,953, which is about 5.80 percent of the total population of the state; out of which, about 26.47 lakh are women. There are significant tribal populations in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, West Midnapore, Birbhum and various districts of North Bengal in the state. The Ajodhya Hills and adjacent areas of Purulia district are one of the important settlements of Santal, Munda, Orao, Paharia, Kheria Sabar, Kora, Vhumij and other tribal communities.

Although the tribal women of Purulia have long contributed significantly to agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, handicrafts and the family economy, poverty, limited educational opportunities, malnutrition, lack of healthcare, lack of employment and geographical remoteness have hindered their development. After independence, constitutional protections, women's protection, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Forest Rights Act, 2006 and various government development programs have created new opportunities to change their condition.

SHG-based initiatives in particular have provided rural women with opportunities for savings, credit, financial inclusion, micro-enterprises and social organization. The Anandadhara programme of West Bengal and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM/DAY-NRLM) has institutionalized this process. Through various training and livelihood-based activities, a section of tribal women have moved towards financial self-reliance. This has resulted in increased economic contribution to the family, social connectivity, self-confidence and in some cases decision-making power. However, this change is not uniform everywhere; poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality, social norms and geographical barriers are still important constraints to empowerment.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of the study are—

1. To assess the current social and economic status of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region.

2. To analyze their income, savings, credit and livelihood changes as a result of participation in SHGs.

3. To determine the extent to which SHGs have affected women's confidence, leadership and decision-making power in the family.

4. To analyze the relationship between SHGs and women's participation in local panchayats and developmental activities.

5. To evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of government initiatives like NRLM and Anandadhara.

6. To identify the existing problems and future prospects in the path of tribal women empowerment.

Research Methodology

The study is mainly based on field research and interviews. Primary data has been collected through field surveys in selected tribal-dominated villages adjacent to Ajodhya Hills of Purulia district. A total of 50 tribal women has been included in the study. Their participation in SHGs, savings, credit, income, livelihood, training, benefits of government schemes, and family and social decision-making were explored.

Primary data collection was done through participatory observation, personal interviews and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from SHG members and group leaders as well as local Panchayat representatives and people associated with government schemes in relevant areas. Secondary data were collected from Census of India, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, DAY-NRLM, Anandadhara and relevant government reports and publications.

In addition to the quantitative data collected in the study, the direct experiences and statements of women were analyzed so that the effectiveness of SHGs could be assessed not only in terms of income generation but also from the perspective of social and political empowerment.

Literature Review

There has been significant research on tribal women, women’s empowerment and SHGs in India and internationally. However, local field studies on SHG-based multidimensional empowerment of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia are relatively limited.

Naila Kabir's "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment" (1999) is particularly important in building the conceptual foundation of women's empowerment. Kabir has shown that access to resources is not synonymous with empowerment in itself; the ability to make decisions and achieve desired outcomes using those resources is equally important. The present study uses this framework to analyze women's access to savings, credit and income through SHGs, as well as household decision-making and social participation.

Virginius Xaxa's State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India (2008) is important in understanding the social, economic and political position of tribal societies. Xaxa analyzes the interrelationship between tribal society, state, development, rights and cultural identity. This perspective is particularly relevant to the tribal women of the Ajodhya hills, as their empowerment is linked to government development programs as well as local social and cultural structures.

R. C. Mishra's "Tribal Development in India: Problems and Prospects" (2013) discusses various aspects of tribal development in terms of education, livelihood, social change and government initiatives. On the other hand, Veena Bhasin's "Status of Tribal Women in India" (2007) highlights important aspects of the family, social and economic status of tribal women. These studies show that although tribal women play an important role in livelihood and family, their position in terms of wealth, decision-making and social power is not always equal.

The Census of India 2011 is an important statistical source for analyzing tribal population, literacy and social indicators. Similarly, the DAY-NRLM Annual Report of the Ministry of Rural Development is helpful in understanding the institutional framework for financial inclusion, savings, credit and livelihood development through SHGs. The Anandadhara Annual Report of the Government of West Bengal provides a picture of SHG-based rural livelihood and women's development in the state. In addition, the report of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Forest Rights Act, 2006 are important for understanding the larger context of development, livelihood and forest rights of indigenous peoples.

Bengali language literature also contains important discussions on tribal society and women's politics. Rajshree Basu's "Santal of West Bengal—Ethnopsychology and Political Participation"(2000) is helpful in understanding the cultural characteristics and political participation of the Santal society. Books like Sumhan Banerjee's "Prasanga Adivasi" (2014), Kumar Rana and Bara Baski's "Adivasi Bharat" (2024), Arun Chowdhury's "Adivasi Jiban O Sangram" (2013) etc. help in creating a larger context of the social reality, changes and struggles of Indian tribal society. Besides, Prasanga Manabi Vidya (2008) edited by Basabi Chakraborty and Rajshree Basu and Kalyani Banerjee's Rajniti O Nari Shakti (2009) are relevant in understanding the relationship between women, power and political participation.

It is clear from the above literature that there has been considerable research on tribal development, women empowerment, SHGs, political participation and government initiatives separately. But in the case of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region, relatively few studies have examined SHGs, economic self-reliance, family decision-making, social status, government schemes and political participation in the same analytical framework through field studies. There is scope for research, especially in linking women's own experiences and direct statements with quantitative data.

Research Gap

The main research gap of this study is to analyze the empowerment of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region as an integrated process of social, economic, political and institutional empowerment, not just by looking at economic development indicators. The extent to which SHGs have helped women increase their income and savings—as well as how much they have influenced their decision-making, leadership, social status and local political participation—is also at the center of the study.

Based on field research and interviews with 50 tribal women, the study will therefore attempt to connect previous theoretical and institutional discussions with local realities. Through this, it will be possible to build a realistic picture of the current status of empowerment of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region, the effectiveness of SHGs, the impact of government initiatives and existing constraints.

Brief Historical Background of Indian Tribal Women

The tribal communities of India have historically lived in the hills, forests and remote areas and are recognized as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ in the Indian Constitution. Colonial rules, changes in land tenure, state control over forest resources and subsequent developmental activities have profoundly affected the livelihoods and social structure of tribal communities. These changes have also affected tribal women, although they have historically played an important role in agriculture, forest resource collection and household economy.

After independence, constitutional protection, conservation policies, opportunities for education and employment and representation of women in the Panchayat system created new institutional opportunities for tribal women. Later, various initiatives including SHG, MGNREGA, NRLM, Anandadhara and Forest Rights Act played a role in changing their economic and social status. As a result, the position of indigenous women in the 21st century needs to be analyzed not only in terms of marginalization, but also from the perspective of change, agency, and the potential for new socio-political participation.

Barriers to Empowerment of Tribal Women

Although government initiatives, education and self-help groups have increased their role in empowering tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia district, in reality they still face various social, economic, political and institutional barriers. Geographical remoteness, poverty, educational limitations, employment insecurity, language barriers and limited access to information technology hinder their empowerment process.

Limited access to education is a significant problem. Due to remote villages, distance from schools, pressure of family labour and economic vulnerability, many women are deprived of higher education. Differences between mother tongue and the language of instruction in school can also create problems in education. At the same time, lack of digital literacy limits access to online education, digital banking, government services and employment information.

Economic uncertainty is also a major obstacle to empowerment. Many families in the region depend on agriculture, forest resources collection and daily wages. Although women make a significant contribution to agriculture and unorganized labor, their labor is not always properly valued. Many women cannot expand their small enterprises due to lack of adequate capital, market linkages and skills. As a result, despite income, control over resources and independent decision-making power remain limited.

Social and family structures also affect women's empowerment. Opportunities to participate in public life are reduced due to household work, child-rearing and social responsibilities. Although reservation in panchayats has increased the representation of tribal women, in some cases, male family members instead of elected female representatives exert de facto influence in decision-making. Lack of political training, financial vulnerability and limited access to administrative information also create obstacles to independent political leadership.

Therefore, financial support alone is not enough to empower tribal women. A coordinated effort is needed to develop mother tongue-sensitive education, skills development, digital literacy, fair wages, market linkages, legal awareness, and political leadership.

Political Participation and Empowerment

Political participation is an important indicator of women's empowerment. Political empowerment is manifested through voting, contesting elections, serving as elected representatives, participating in decision-making in Gram Sabhas and Panchayats, and monitoring development programs.

Reservation for Scheduled Tribes in Panchayats and reserved seats for women through Article 243D of the Constitution has increased the opportunities for tribal women to participate in local governance. As a result, women in the Ajodhya Hills region have got the opportunity to work as elected representatives at other levels of

the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat system. Their participation in local issues such as education, drinking water, health, roads, social security, and implementation of government projects has also increased.

However, representation and actual empowerment are not the same thing. Poverty, lack of political training, limited information, and family influence often limit women's independent decision-making. Therefore, regular training of elected representatives, awareness of constitutional rights, active participation in Gram Sabhas, and increasing digital capabilities are essential.

Role of SHGs in Social and Economic Empowerment

Self Help Groups (SHGs) are an important institutional vehicle for social and economic empowerment of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region. SHGs are helping women to increase their financial capacity through regular savings, group-based loans, bank linkages and small-scale enterprises. The experiences of women participating in the field study show that joining SHGs has instilled a habit of saving and increased their access to institutional loans when needed.

SHG-based participation in activities such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*) leaf processing, tasar, laksha, animal husbandry, poultry farming, vegetable cultivation and various handicrafts has created a supplementary source of family income for women. This has made their economic role in the family visible and in some cases, decision-making power has also increased.

Key Issues and Challenges

In the context of the field study, several issues are particularly noteworthy in the empowerment of indigenous women. First, lack of education and digital skills limits their access to government services and new employment opportunities. Second, the precariousness of agricultural and forest-based livelihoods and weak linkages to markets destabilize their incomes. Third, the complexity of government project information, application processes, and administrative systems keep many women away from benefiting. Fourth, despite increased political representation, family and social influence still exists in independent decision-making and leadership. Fifth, limited access to institutional services in the areas of health, safety, legal aid, and social protection is also a significant problem.

Data Collected in Field Survey

The data collected in the field survey can be divided into three broad indicators for ease of analysis—

Sl. no	Main fields	The main areas that have been specifically measured/analyzed are
1	Current situation	Education, employment, income, participation in SHGs, decision-making in the family, access to government benefits and political participation
2	Potential	Education and skill development, SHGs and small enterprises, sustainable use of forest resources, digital financial inclusion and political leadership
3	Constraints	Poverty, illiteracy, patriarchy, social prejudice, limitations in government services, communication problems and lack of political awareness

In the research sample project, structured questionnaires, direct interviews, personal interviews and field observation were taken from 50 tribal women in selected villages centered around Ajodhya Hills in Purulia district-

1. Current Picture

Sl. No.	Indicator	Respondent	Number of figures	Percentage
1	Primary/Secondary Education	50	34	68%
2	Higher Secondary/Higher Education	50	12	24%
3	Regular Income-generating Activities	50	36	72%
4	Self-Help Group (SHG) Members	50	32	64%
5	Has own bank account	50	39	78%

6	Participates in family financial decisions	50	30	60%
7	Receives benefits from government schemes	50	37	74%
8	Voted in elections	50	45	90%
9	Participated in village council/local meetings	50	27	54%
10	Has some control over one's own income	50	31	62%

The data suggested by the field survey shows that a positive change in empowerment is being observed among the tribal women of the Ajodhya Hills region. Out of 50, 32 or 64% women are associated with SHGs and 39 or 78% of women have their own bank accounts. Similarly, 37 or 74% of women have received benefits from government schemes. In terms of political awareness, 45 or 90% of women vote in elections. However, participation in gram sabhas or local political decision-making compared to voting is only 54%, which still indicates a gap in political empowerment.

2. Potential of Empowerment

Sl. No.	Potential Area	Respondents	Positive Response	Percentage
1.	Interested in taking skill development training	50	41	82%
2.	Interested in expanding business through SHG	50	38	76%
3.	Interested in joining small/cottage industries	50	35	70%
4.	Interested in forestry and local resource-based initiatives	50	34	68%
5.	Interested in using digital banking/online services	50	33	66%
6.	Interested in increasing their income	50	43	86%
7.	Interested in providing higher education to their children	50	44	88%

8.	Interested in becoming more active in local politics	50	29	58%
9.	Interested in learning more about government training and projects	50	40	80%
10.	Interested in building their own ventures in the future	50	36	72%

The survey shows that there is considerable potential for future development among tribal women of Ajodhya Hills. 86% of women are interested in increasing their income and 82% have expressed interest in taking skill development training. In addition, 76% of women want to expand their business through SHGs. Forest resources, handicrafts, small enterprises and local resource-based economic activities can be important areas of potential for women. However, the interest in becoming more active in the political sphere is 58%, which indicates a relatively low potential for political empowerment compared to economic empowerment.

3. Constraints to Empowerment

Sl. No.	Main Problem/Constraint	Total Respondents	Mentioned Problem	Percentage
1.	Poverty and Insufficient Income	50	37	74%
2.	Lack of Adequate Educational Opportunities	50	30	60%
3.	Lack of Employment	50	34	68%
4.	Problems in marketing	50	32	64%
5.	Lack of adequate information about government projects	50	24	48%
6.	Social and family barriers	50	29	58%
7.	Patriarchal mentality/male dominance	50	27	54%
8.	Communication and transportation problems	50	26	52%
9.	Lack of political awareness	50	25	50%
10.	Problems in obtaining credit/capital	50	28	56%

In the field study, poverty and insufficient income appear to be the most important obstacles to empowerment; 37 out of 50, or 74% of women, mentioned these problems. In addition, 68% of women mentioned lack of employment and 64% mentioned problems with marketing. That is, even if they have SHGs or small

enterprises, the opportunity to sell their products in the market and ensure adequate income is still limited. Social and family barriers (58%), lack of capital (56%) and patriarchal mentality (54%) also affect women's decision-making ability.

In the current picture, it can be seen that 32 out of 50 respondents, or 64 percent, are associated with Self-Help Groups. 39 or 78 percent have their own bank accounts and 37 or 74 percent have received benefits from government schemes. 60 percent of women participate in family financial decisions. In terms of political awareness, 90 percent of women vote in elections; however, the participation rate in gram sabha or local decision-making is relatively low. This suggests that while awareness of political rights has increased, active political empowerment has not yet been fully established.

In terms of potential, 86 percent of women are interested in increasing their income and 82 percent have expressed interest in taking up skill development training. 76 percent of women want to expand their business through SHGs. In addition, there is considerable potential for expanding forest resources, cottage industries, small enterprises and local resource-based livelihoods. The interest of 88 percent of women in higher education of their children also indicates positive potential for social development of the future generation. On the other hand, poverty and insufficient income have been identified as the main problems for 74 percent of women. Lack of employment, marketing problems, limitations in education, social and family barriers, patriarchal mentality and lack of capital are still important obstacles to empowerment. In particular, the geographical remoteness of the Ajodhya hills and limited connectivity with the market create obstacles in linking women's productive activities with the larger economic system.

Therefore, from the overall analysis of the field study, it can be said that a clear trend of change has emerged in the empowerment of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region. Education, SHGs, banking, government projects and political participation have created new opportunities for women's empowerment. But to make this progress sustainable and effective, it is necessary to further increase skill development, market linkages, easy access to credit, digital literacy, access to higher education and women's participation in local political decision-making. That is, in the current situation, the empowerment of tribal women is an ongoing process of change, in which there is potential as well as socio-economic and cultural limitations.

Constitutional Protection of Tribal Women

The Indian Constitution has made several special provisions for the social justice and development of the Scheduled Tribes. Article 342 provides for constitutional recognition of the Scheduled Tribes. Articles 15(4) and 16(4) provide the constitutional basis for taking special measures for the development of the socially and educationally backward classes and the Scheduled Tribes. Article 46 directs the State to take special care of the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Tribes.

In the field of political representation, Articles 330 and 332 provide for reservation of seats for the Scheduled Tribes in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. In the field of Panchayats, Article 243D has created a constitutional basis for the representation of the Scheduled Tribes and the reservation of women in local self-government. As a result, the opportunities for entry of tribal women into local political institutions have increased significantly.

The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes has been established under Article 338A, which plays a crucial role in monitoring the implementation of their constitutional and legal protections. Article 350A stipulates the responsibility of the State to provide primary education to linguistic minority children in their mother tongue; this is particularly relevant in view of the importance of language-sensitive education in tribal-dominated areas.

However, despite the constitutional right, in practice, not all women can equally avail these opportunities due to lack of information, poverty, administrative complexity and social discrimination. Therefore, effective implementation, legal awareness and administrative support at the local level are essential in addition to constitutional protections.

Assessment

Overall, the situation of tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia has changed positively in the 21st century. Education, SHGs, government development programmes, panchayat reservation and financial inclusion have increased their self-confidence, economic role and social participation. In particular, SHGs have emerged as an effective means of empowerment by providing opportunities for women to save, access credit, engage in micro-enterprises and take collective decisions.

However, this progress is still uneven. Education, livelihood insecurity, digital inequality, lack of market connectivity, lack of political training and socio-institutional barriers are hindering their full empowerment. Therefore, future policies should aim not only to bring women under the ambit of development projects, but also to increase their assets, agency and decision-making power in practice. By linking SHGs with education, skills, digital capabilities, market connectivity and political leadership, tribal women in the Ajodhya Hills region can become active partners in local development.

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