



# Empowerment of Tribal Women in Tripura: A Theoretical Framework

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## Abstract

Empowering as a strategy proposed internationally in the 1980s, although the strategy had been proposed since from industrial revolution by a group of activists to challenge the hegemony of feminists in international discourse regarding women. The term empowerment has swift mainstreamed by international development agencies as a way of mobilizing women's well-being for development of their goals. In the course of this transition, women's empowerment get through to be associated from grassroots level to participatory level that allows women to raise their voice to thrive for approaching to power. Despite the green revolution and feminization of the labour force in India, poverty remains huge and massive inequalities between men and women in the current scenario remain constant. Thus, the development of tribal women cannot be understood without proper infrastructural development. The significance of this study intends to pinpoint the scopes to realize their full potentiality in the decision making processes, power and capability present in democratic state as it specifies for equal rights and status, furthermore to determine and highlight the possibilities for empowerment of tribal women in terms of their socio-economic and political status in Tripura. Therefore, despite encountering such a complicated phenomenon the paper attempts to initiate from theoretical perspectives relying on secondary sources of information.

**Keywords:** Women, Tribal, Empowerment, Society, Gender inequality

## Introduction:

Traditionally tribal women were considered to be the symbol of self-sacrifice, tolerant, subservient and submissive in the tribal patriarchal society, which is quite natural as such tribal women does not enjoy equal status with men extensively. Tribal women are considered as the backbone of pastoral economic structure in tribal society, as production and participation is dependent on them. Although there is a significant rise in the literacy rate of population of women in India, yet the rate of education among tribal women in Tripura is not indeed very encouraging and remained far behind from national stream. Yet their effort, realisation and consciousness to be economically independent has thrive to awaken them to continue to pursue their higher

studies. Therefore, despite emphasis has been laid by the union and state government for the implementation of various educational schemes for the upliftment of the educational system, they are accustomed to simultaneous role of being a wife, mother, daughter, sister etc., moreover their activities are mainly discern within a boundary of walls as part of their life. As their foremost traditional allegiance are involved with the jhum cultivation, crops harvesting, engaged themselves in paddy field including forest life since pre historic age, bearing, rearing the children, collecting vegetables from the forest, brewing rice beer, providing labour, maintaining households works which includes cooking, washing etc. Hence, their primary chore is to understand the needs of the family. The status of tribal women to name a few northeast regions like Meghalaya, Nagaland etc. hold high status in the society. Nevertheless, tribal women in Tripura to some extent without exception hold equitable status with the span of time since the era of globalisation has expanded, it enhanced the present status of tribal women to be empowered in terms of social, economic and political aspect which is neither so rigid nor so flexible. The women in rural area constitute 35% of total population (Census of India, 2011), to some extent tribal women in rural areas have been deprived from enjoying certain fundamental rights in recent times, due to lack of proper awareness contrasting several other circumstances. Although, considerably a great initiative since then independence, the government of India has been introducing several schemes for their development, providing and supporting free education to female child, improving healthcare, malnutrition to lactating women yet unable to make women thoroughly empowered.

The enactment of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India has elevated the status to some extent for empowerment of tribal women in Tripura at the grassroots level that has led to advantage for empowering women through different varied elucidation. This reservation of one third of seats in all categories and 50% reservation for women in Tripura at all levels of the grassroots institutions as women has raised the expectation among all sections of the community including the tribal community, thus this section of women would create a revolutionary phase which in turn would mark on the management at the grassroots. (Buch, 1998: 82). Notwithstanding the 'critical mass' of women engendered by the reservation system has not performed the critical function at the expected scale. By the term empowerment we mean development of an individual's livelihood in addition to the development of tribal women including all sections of the society across the country. A tribal society cannot develop exceedingly without the progress and upliftment of the tribal women, who nearly constitute almost half of the tribal population in Tripura. Tribal women in rural areas characterize a crucial role in developing the economy and further extend support to participate to stable their economic standard.

### **Understanding Concept of Empowerment**

Empowerment of tribal women may be defined as an individual's capacity to grasp including controlling over her own life along with material resources, as well to take hold of appropriate decisions about strategic choices in her life, to alter power sharing that constrain her options, autonomy, decision making and well-being, despite making an effort to achieve her desired end. Inclusively due to lack of proper

evaluation, awareness, lack of low status their contribution and activities towards the society remained unrevealed. Thus, the whole world has enormous concern regarding the development of women in the society. Whereas empowering tribal women would create a new phase of equality between men and women in tribal society while aspiring confident to control over their own labour, income, sexuality and reproduction, mobility in lieu to diversion of their minds from existing beliefs in social stereotypes roles and division of labours vis-a-vis. The concept of empowerment is a process of transformation from being disadvantaged by power relations that leads to reshaping of choices in addition to well-being into her position of essence to create constructive decisions. However, pressures by international economic institutions to reduce inflation led governments to cut back state expenditures on services that facilitate social reproduction, i.e., unpaid work largely done by women to maintain homes, care for children and being dependent on family stated some sort of relief to the women in social networks.

## Objectives

This paper examines the socio-economic and political status for empowering tribal women from theoretical perspectives.

This paper attempts to analyse the challenges as how far tribal women are empowered in tribal society.

## Methodology

In order to fulfil the objectives, this paper relies on the secondary sources of information and traditional oral information.

## Women Empowerment – Theoretical perspective

*“Empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation.”*

A.P.J Abdul Kalam

According to UNDP report, women form the largest category yet unstable for attraction even as social equals to men despite of the fact, they constitute being the subordinate role player to men in social aspects of life. The first wave of women’s movement came up with a broad mind-set from the west almost a century to liberate women from bondage of labour, free from being sexually harassed. Henceforth, feminist’s perspective

in the nineteen and twentieth century's which struggled to augmentation against the voiceless women to fight for their rights and equalities. The second wave of feminism struggled certainly not considered as a political movement rather it's the movement either the struggle widely known for their movement to liberate women from all sort of discrimination from men in every social and economic sphere, likewise compel them to be free from sexual exploitation, similarly to make free from inferior status and injustice, additionally with the exception to educate women with proper health status and together stand with the decision making power along with the mindset to eliminate the system of patriarchy. Post feminism asserts that women should consider themselves as active agents rather than as victims comprising within the society. There is a long tradition of working with empowerment in feminist organisation, recent trend of feminist theory focus to a large extent on removing educational and professional disparity with men, advocating for education and health promotion. Nevertheless, further with the current technological advancement the increasing demand of contemporary talented, skills and professional challenges had given tribal women the opportunity for demonstrating themselves as capable warriors and revealing their abilities in the tribal society. This modern era had encouraged women to assemble them for performing the same jobs as equivalent to men along with authorizing them to reflect critically and positively in their lives, what needs to be done is to dismantle those obstacles yet create sustainable pathways to a more just and further equitable world.

### **Historical Perspective on Reformation and Status of women empowerment**

The history of ancient India predicts that women enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects rather choose their own husbands in holistic manner as well women were not deprived of education. In order to retain a greater understanding of the contemporary social status of women, significantly crucial to know various stages on historical perspective of the status of tribal women in Indian society ranging from ancient age to modern age. During medieval age the two major issues which drew attention of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are the social reform movement and Nationalist movement. Both these movement raised the question of equal status of women. The social reforms i.e., 'Sati', ill-treatment of widows and polygamy, child marriages, discrimination and objection to women education and property rights to women has been neglected. Thus, the social reform movement has been considered as a corner stone for building up of modern India. It was perceived that status of women began to decline with the Islamic invasion of Babar and Mughal Empire which led to introduction of Purdah along with adoption of child marriage and banned widow re-marriage. However besides all hurdles and struggles some women like Razia Sultan, Noor Jehan, Chand Bai along with others enjoyed power in this medieval period. During British rule, the status of tribal women started to improve as reformation has taken shape, to name a few like, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswathi, Ishwar Chandra, Jyothi Rao and many others along with few other women freedom fighters like Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, Lakshmi Sehgal had given their effort to fight for the status, upliftment and betterment of women in India for their freedom. Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya, popularly known as the modern architect of Tripura, had played a significant role in 1870's, unlike Raja Ram Mohan Roy in abolishing the sati system, better education where sankritisation had been introduced for the upliftment and development for its own people and

moreover emphasised on bringing gender equality in Tripura during colonial rule. On the other hand, Nationalist Movement for women had organised themselves into groups and were favour to join scary profession like terrorists groups, helped in editing and distributing banned newspapers and participated in manufacturing bombs, face police firing and ready to go prison. It was strongly believed in reviving the old society that presumed to be an ideal society for women in India, such as raising their voice to give access to education as well as against ambiguous practices throughout the country.

### **National Commission for Women in Tripura**

The National Commission for Women (NCW) is a statutory body established in January 1992, under the 1990 National Commission for Women Act. It's mandatory to advice the government on all policy matters concerning women, to review legislations and to intervene or initiate proceedings in the Supreme Court on matters concerning women. Henceforth, gradually a statutory body got established in different states for the same purpose. Similarly, in Tripura, the State Commission for Women was formed by the Tripura Commission for Women Act, 1993 (Tripura Act no. 1 of 1994). SCW has been fulfilling serious major concerning gender discrimination based issues such as ensuring protection and welfare of women, suggesting and recommending to state government on women related issues, handling gender based circumstances in case of violation. Therefore, besides fulfilling the certain objectives, the State Commission for Women had enumerated some functions in the Act are herein below:-

- a) Investigate and examine all matters relating to the safeguards provided for women under the constitution of India and other laws and recommend steps to be taken by the state Government for effective implementation of such safeguards.
- b) To review the existing provisions of the constitution and other laws affecting women and recommend amendments there to suggest remedial legislative measure.
- c) To take up the cases of violation of the provisions of the constitution and of other laws relating to women in the state.
- d) To look into the complaints and take suo moto notice relating to deprivation of women's rights, non-implementation of laws enacted to provide protection to women, non-compliance policy decisions, guidelines, instructions aimed at mitigating hardships and ensuring welfare and providing relief to women, subsequently call for special studies or investigations into specific problems or situations arising out of discrimination and atrocities against women. Accordingly, evaluate the progress of advancement of women in the state, visit a jail, destitute girls home women's institution or other place of custody where women are kept as prisoners and take up with the concerned authorities such matters for remedial action as may be indispensable conversely different matter which may be referred to it by the State Government.

Although, several projects like International Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) 1993, Swa Shakti Project which is also known as Rural women's Development

Projects, formation of Self Help Groups, Indira MahilaaYojana etc., had been introduced for freeing all kinds of discrimination yet it could not traced to that extent. Apart from that another important institutional mechanism has been established i.e., National Commission for Women (NCW) 1992, to review the working constitutional system of safeguards, laws and regulations are functioning to sought out the complained filed by the women victims. In order to bring equality for women in all walks of life and to give a meaningful access to resources, also help women to reach in the mainstream of economic development. The year of Empowerment of Women was declared in 2001 and during the same year National Policy for the Empowerment of Women has been declared.

### **Meaning & Definitions of Empowerment**

Definitions of empowerment generally is an international ongoing process centred from local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources (Cornell empowerment Group, 1989) or the process by which people gain control over their lives.

The empowerment approach was first clearly articulated in 1985 by Development. Alternative with Women for a New Era (DAWN), this term received prominence in early nineties in Western Countries. In India the central Government and its welfare programmes shifted concept of development to empowerment only in the ninth plan (1997-2002) and observed the year 2001 as 'Women Empowerment Year'.

The Social Work Dictionary (Barker 1991) defines empowerment 'the process of helping a group or community to achieve political influences or relevant legal authority'

According to Bandura ( 1986), 'Empowerment is the process through which individuals gain efficacy, defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that he or she controls his or her environment'.

The concept of empowerment was adopted after Beijing Conference (1995). The Beijing declaration (section 13), presents women empowerment as a key strategy for development, women's ' empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access power are fundamental for achievement of equality, development of peace'. Nevertheless the approach was used by development bodies and offered quantitative indicators tend to reduce its scope to women's ability to take individual responsibility by their own. The indicators do not consider changes in the economic and social structures, those that refer to collective empowerment linked to social change.

According to Jo Rowlands, empowerment can be understood in different forms of powers, they are:

- a) Power over control or influence over others, instrumentation of domination.
- b) Power to –generative or production power which creates new possibilities and action without domination.
- c) Power with- a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together, and
- d) Power from within – the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and make us truly human. Its basis is in self-acceptance and respect, which extent in turn respect for and acceptance of others equals. However, the interpretation of power is related to empowerment, it's concerned with the process by which people become aware of their power and how those relates to the interests of others but also participate in decision making and influence such decisions that affects them.

Generally five types of policy approaches have been practised for women development and empowerment. Such as

- a) **Welfare Approach**, the earliest approach based on the residual model of social welfare and women are seen as passive beneficiaries of development and focuses on women reproductive role.
- b) **The second Equity Approach** is the original development for women adopted during the Women's Decade (1975-85). It focuses on meeting the long term strategic needs and identifies and challenges the subordinate position of the women to men.
- c) **Anti –poverty approach** and in this approach, women's poverty is seen as a problem of underdevelopment and not of their subordination,
- d) **The fourth i.e., Efficiency approach** in this approach women's economic participation is seen as associated with enquiry. It places more stresses on making women more efficient so as to enhance their effective participation in economic development and
- e) Finally, **Empowerment Approach** and it seeks to empower women through greater self-reliance and sees women subordination as a problem not only related to men but also of the colonial and neo-colonial oppression. (Batiwala,1993:12), it has been notified that individual empowerment is one of the ingredient in achieving empowerment at the collective and institutional levels concentration on the individuals alone is not sufficient. Changes are needed in the abilities of collectivises of individuals to take charge of the identification and meeting of their own practical and strategic needs. Women's empowerment cannot transform society unless it becomes an organised mass movement that challenges and transforms the existing power structures.

The word empowerment has started from the consciousness of women mind for their equal opportunity and development.

- it starts from the change in her attitude and approach to understanding life and her very beliefs about herself and her rights, capacities, and potentials;
- From a transformation of her self-image and an emerging consciousness and how gender as well as other socio-economic and political forces are acting against her;
- From breaking free of the inferiority complex imprinted on her since early childhood;
- From gaining an ability to recognise her strengths in terms of knowledge, intelligence and skills, and above all;
- From her growing belief in her innate right to live a dignified life with freedom and justice.
- From the consciousness of women mind for their equal opportunity and development.

A major theory regarding empowerment has been discussed in order to acquire clear-cut idea as how to comprehend and why there exists a social distinction between male and females, besides the cause of establishment. Gender difference is the principal cause rather than biological context, yet each approach focuses on culture.

### **Barriers to disempowerment**

The multiple levels of challenges to empowerment efforts provide an understanding of its prerequisites and barriers in various dimensions. The prerequisites to empowerment include participation, innovation, sharing of power rather than participation, access to information and accountability. Empowering tribal women rather than participation which involves only sharing of power is not encouraging, yet several other measures also indicates that there are barriers to empowerment which can lead to disempowerment. As reported in The Wall Street Journal (1991), some of the barriers to empowerment include: incongruence between empowerment's goal of inclusion and organisational culture; low need for autonomy among people, overloaded with extra work, managerial fear related to distribution, lack of opportunities improper education, lack of fund generation for the women. Thus the barriers hampers the life of tribal women consistently as continuing process that might leads to be dominated in tribal society. Globally the present contemporary situation makes women's empowerment a challenging task, whereas, empowerment is commonly used to indicate twin outcome in which a person or group enjoys a state of equal sphere, together with a process including an action that moves a group or person from a lower to a higher stratum of empowerment. The study shows that tribal women occupies a marginalised position in society because of several socio-economic constraints. Although women throughout the world have gained many rights according to law, in fact complete political, economic and social equality with men remains to be achieved. Despite several multiple barriers faced by the

tribal women in this dominated society, nevertheless thriving efforts to empower in terms of decision making will enormously remain considerable and debatable in world dominated tribal society.

## Conclusion

Theoretically empowerment of tribal women is considered as an important task but practically seems to be an ideal in nature. In spite of many statutory protections they remain underprivileged, unvalued and exploited on the basis of discrimination which continue to persist against them. Further it should be a kind of joint endeavour for both men and women to overcome social challenges towards empowering women's status. Empowerment of tribal women is essential to increase awareness and capacity building for transformation and maximum participation in the decision making. The term empowerment conversely human empowerment is concerned with different sets of views, interpretations, definitions etc. However, empowerment can be mainly associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality moving from powerless to dominant. Yet, sociological aspect of empowerment often delineate members of groups that social discrimination processes have excluded from decision-making processes through discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, caste, class, race and gender, although empowerment as an approach which is correlated with feminism has significant issue at present age. Noteworthy, it must remember that a change cannot be brought about overnight. As empowerment of tribal women in a society is the most effective index of measuring modernisation and development including every aspects of life, every women needs to be designated special inputs in terms of school education, health education, sex education with the intent that they can improve their status in the society and established the better quality in life.

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