

**Original Article****Tribal Women Empowerment and Cultural Inclusion: A Pathway towards Viksit Bharat 2047****Pratima M. Suryawanshi**

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Abstract

India's vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* aims to transform the nation into a developed country by its centenary year of independence. However, achieving this ambitious goal requires addressing the persistent marginalization of tribal women who constitute approximately 4.5% of India's female population. This research examines the current status of tribal women across educational, health, economic, and social dimensions, analyzes existing policy frameworks and their implementation gaps, and proposes comprehensive strategies for their empowerment while preserving cultural identity. Using secondary data from Census 2011, NFHS-5, and various government reports, this study reveals that tribal women face severe disadvantages with literacy rates at 49.4% compared to 65.5% for all women, higher maternal mortality, and limited economic opportunities despite high work participation rates. The research identifies critical barriers including geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, cultural insensitivity in service delivery, and implementation gaps in existing schemes. Through analysis of successful intervention models and best practices, this paper proposes an integrated roadmap for tribal women's empowerment that balances modernization with cultural preservation. The findings demonstrate that tribal women's empowerment is not merely a social justice imperative but an essential prerequisite for achieving inclusive and sustainable development envisioned in *Viksit Bharat 2047*. This research paper examines the critical role of tribal women's empowerment and cultural inclusion in achieving India's vision of *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) by 2047.

Keywords: Tribal women empowerment, cultural inclusion, *Viksit Bharat 2047*, indigenous communities, gender equality, sustainable development, Forest Rights Act, PESA, educational access, healthcare equity

Introduction

India's aspiration to become a developed nation by 2047, commemorating 100 years of independence, represents a transformative vision encompassing economic prosperity, social welfare, environmental sustainability, and inclusive growth. This vision of *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) necessitates addressing the developmental challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly tribal women who experience intersectional discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. India is home to approximately 705 tribal communities comprising 104 million people or 8.6% of the total population according to Census 2011. Among these, tribal women number around 51 million and face unique vulnerabilities. They inhabit predominantly remote, forest-fringe areas with limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Despite constitutional protections and numerous welfare schemes, tribal women continue to lag significantly behind national averages on almost all human development indicators.

Viksit Bharat 2047 and Tribal Women

The *Viksit Bharat* vision encompasses several pillars including economic development, infrastructure, human capital, social justice, environmental sustainability, and effective governance. Tribal women's empowerment intersects with all these pillars. Their economic participation can contribute to GDP growth; improved health and education outcomes enhance human capital; their inclusion strengthens social cohesion; their traditional knowledge supports environmental sustainability; and their participation in governance enhances democratic deepening. However, current trajectories suggest that without targeted interventions, tribal women will remain marginalized, undermining the inclusive development vision of *Viksit Bharat*.

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This research examines how tribal women's empowerment, coupled with cultural inclusion that respects and preserves tribal identity, can serve as a pathway toward achieving India's developmental aspirations by 2047.

Objectives

1. To assess the current socio-economic status of tribal women in India
2. To examine existing policy frameworks and programs
3. To identify key barriers
4. To analyze successful models and best practices
5. To explore the concept of cultural inclusion
6. To establish the linkage between tribal women's empowerment and *Viksit Bharat 2047*
7. To develop comprehensive strategies and recommendations

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design employing mixed-methods approach. It combines quantitative analysis of secondary data with qualitative examination of policies, programs, and case studies to provide comprehensive insights into tribal women's status and empowerment pathways.

Methodology

Data Collection: Secondary data was systematically collected from government databases, official publications, academic journals, and authenticated online repositories. Data was compiled for tribal women across various states to enable comparative analysis.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data was analyzed using comparative statistical analysis, examining tribal women's indicators against national averages and tribal male indicators to understand gender gaps. Trends were analyzed to assess progress over time. Qualitative data from policy documents and case studies was analyzed thematically to identify patterns, challenges, and success factors.

Comparative Analysis: The study compares tribal women's status with non-tribal women and tribal men to understand the intersectional nature of disadvantages. It also examines variations across states and regions to identify context-specific factors.

Framework Analysis: Existing policies and programs were analyzed using a framework examining design, coverage, resource allocation, implementation mechanisms, and outcomes. Gaps between policy intent and ground-level reality were identified.

Case Study Method: Successful intervention models were examined as case studies to understand what works, under what conditions, and how successful approaches can be scaled up. Cases were selected based on documented positive outcomes and reliability potential.

Synthesis: Findings from quantitative analysis, policy examination, and case studies were synthesized to develop comprehensive understanding and formulate evidence-based recommendations.

Results and Discussion

Current Status of Tribal Women

Educational Status

Educational indicators reveal severe disadvantages faced by tribal women. According to Census 2011, the literacy rate among tribal women is 49.4% compared to 65.5% for all women and 68.5% for tribal men, indicating both an overall disadvantage and a gender gap within tribal communities. The situation is more concerning in states like Rajasthan (tribal female literacy 38.5%) and Andhra Pradesh (tribal female literacy 41.7%). Gross Enrollment Ratio data shows that while enrollment at elementary level has improved due to interventions like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, significant dropouts occur at secondary and higher secondary levels. Only 26.3% of tribal girls complete secondary education compared to 44.8% for all girls. Higher education participation remains extremely low, with tribal women constituting less than 1% of university enrollment. Multiple factors contribute to educational disadvantages. Geographical remoteness means many tribal habitations lack schools within reasonable distance. A study by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs found that 38% of tribal villages do not have schools within 1 km. Infrastructure in existing schools is often inadequate with shortages of teachers, classrooms, and learning materials. Language barriers pose significant challenges as medium of instruction rarely includes tribal languages, creating learning difficulties and cultural alienation. The curriculum often ignores tribal knowledge systems and cultural contexts, making education seem irrelevant. Poverty forces tribal families to prioritize immediate survival over education, leading to child labor and early dropout. Gender discrimination within some tribal communities, influenced by patriarchal norms from mainstream society, leads to preference for boys' education. Early marriage, despite legal prohibitions, curtails girls' education. Safety concerns and lack of separate facilities for girls, especially at secondary level, further limit access.

Health and Nutritional Status

Health indicators for tribal women are alarming. According to NFHS-5 (2019-21), 64.6% of tribal women aged 15-49 suffer from anemia compared to 57% among all women. Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) in tribal areas is estimated to be significantly higher than the national average of 103 per 100,000 live births, though precise tribal-specific MMR data is not systematically collected. Only 79.3% of tribal women have institutional deliveries compared to 88.6% for all women, indicating continued reliance on home births without skilled attendance. Adequate antenatal care (at least 4 ANC visits) is received by only 52.5% of tribal women compared to 58.1% for all women. Full immunization coverage for children in tribal families lags at 76.4% compared to 76.4% nationally, but with significant interstate variations. Malnutrition rates among tribal women and children are substantially higher. The NFHS-5 data shows that 37.9% of tribal children under 5 are stunted compared to 35.5% nationally, and 27% are underweight compared to 32.1% nationally. These figures reflect both poor maternal nutrition and inadequate child feeding practices. Multiple factors contribute to poor health outcomes. Geographical remoteness limits access to healthcare facilities. Most tribal areas lack Primary Health Centers with adequate staff and infrastructure. The doctor-population ratio in tribal areas is far below national norms. Many tribal women continue to rely on traditional birth attendants due to absence of institutional facilities or cultural preferences. Poverty limits ability to afford healthcare costs including transportation, medicines,

and informal payments. Cultural factors also play a role. Language barriers with healthcare providers create communication difficulties. Healthcare systems often lack cultural sensitivity to tribal practices and beliefs. Some tribal communities have traditional taboos related to diet during pregnancy and childbirth that affect nutritional status. Food insecurity due to displacement from forests, land alienation, and inadequate public distribution coverage contributes to malnutrition.

Economic Status

Tribal women demonstrate high work participation rates at around 40% compared to 25.5% for all women, indicating their crucial role in household economics. However, high work participation does not translate into economic security or empowerment. The majority of tribal women are engaged in agriculture (as cultivators or agricultural laborers) and forest-based livelihoods with minimal and uncertain income. According to NSSO data, 86% of tribal workers are in the informal sector without any social security or employment protection. Tribal women predominate in low-productivity, labor-intensive activities such as collection of minor forest produce, agricultural labor, and small-scale animal husbandry. Earnings are extremely low with significant gender wage gaps even for similar work. A critical issue is lack of ownership of productive assets. Despite working on land, most tribal women do not have land ownership rights. The Forest Rights Act 2006 provides for recognition of forest rights including joint pattas for couples, but implementation has been slow and uneven. According to official data, only about 50% of eligible claims have been settled, and joint pattas constitute a small proportion. Access to credit remains a major constraint. Formal banking penetration in tribal areas is limited. Even where bank branches exist, tribal women face difficulties in accessing credit due to lack of collateral, documentation requirements, unfamiliarity with procedures, and distance. Consequently, many depend on informal moneylenders at exploitative interest rates. While Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have expanded financial inclusion, coverage in tribal areas remains inadequate. Market access is another challenge. Remote locations, poor road connectivity, and absence of storage facilities mean tribal women cannot access markets to sell produce at fair prices. Exploitative intermediaries often purchase forest produce and agricultural products at prices well below market rates. Displacement due to development projects, mining, and conservation policies has disrupted traditional livelihoods without providing adequate alternative employment or rehabilitation.

Social and Political Status

Social indicators reveal multiple vulnerabilities. Tribal women face higher risks of trafficking and sexual exploitation due to poverty, lack of awareness, and geographical isolation. According to National Crime Records Bureau data, crimes against tribal women have been increasing, though underreporting is suspected to be high due to remoteness and weak law enforcement. Awareness of legal rights and entitlements is limited. Many tribal women are unaware of schemes and programs meant for their benefit. Low literacy, language barriers, and inadequate outreach contribute to this awareness gap. Mobility restrictions due to cultural norms in some communities, safety concerns, and household responsibilities limit tribal women's ability to access services and participate in public life. Political participation remains constrained despite constitutional provisions for reservation. In Panchayati Raj Institutions, while seats are reserved for tribal women, actual participation is often nominal with proxy representation by male relatives. According to studies, many elected women representatives lack awareness of their roles, face social resistance, and have limited decision-making autonomy. At higher political levels, tribal women's representation is minimal. Traditional governance systems in some tribal communities accorded women significant roles, but these have eroded over time due to sanskritization and mainstream influence. Gram sabhas empowered under PESA Act 1996 provide opportunities for participation, but women's attendance and voice in these forums remain limited due to social norms and lack of confidence.

Policy Framework and Implementation Gaps

India has a comprehensive policy framework for tribal development and women's empowerment. Constitutional provisions include Articles 15(4) and 16(4) enabling special provisions, Article 46 promoting educational and economic interests, and Article 244 with Fifth and Sixth Schedules for governance in tribal areas. Legislative measures include the Forest Rights Act 2006 recognizing forest dwellers' rights, PESA Act 1996 extending Panchayati Raj to scheduled areas with special provisions, and SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989. Numerous schemes target tribal development including Eklavya Model Residential Schools providing quality education, scholarship schemes at various levels, Van Dhan Vikas Yojana for entrepreneurship based on forest produce, and PVTG development programs. Health initiatives include National Health Mission with tribal focus, Janani Suraksha Yojana for institutional deliveries, and anemia control programs. Economic empowerment schemes include MGNREGA ensuring employment and wage equality, microfinance programs, and entrepreneurship support schemes like Stand-Up India and MUDRA. Despite this comprehensive framework, significant implementation gaps persist. Budget allocation for tribal development remains inadequate. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs budget for 2023-24 was Rs. 12,461 crore for a population of 104 million, translating to about Rs. 1,200 per capita annually, which is insufficient for comprehensive development. Fund utilization is often poor due to capacity constraints and procedural delays. Coordination between different departments and schemes is weak, leading to fragmented and ineffective service delivery. While multiple schemes exist for education, health, livelihoods, and governance, they operate in silos without convergence at the grassroots level. Bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and elite capture divert benefits away from intended beneficiaries. Remote locations make monitoring difficult, allowing poor implementation to continue unchecked. Cultural insensitivity in program design and delivery undermines effectiveness. Programs often ignore tribal languages, cultural practices, and traditional knowledge systems. Service providers lack understanding of tribal contexts and communities. Top-down approaches without adequate community participation, especially of tribal women, lead to programs that don't address real needs or face resistance. The Forest Rights Act, despite being enacted in 2006, has seen slow implementation. As of 2023, only about 50% of estimated claims have been settled, and individual and community rights recognized fall short of potential. PESA implementation varies greatly across states, with many states failing to devolve genuine powers to gram sabhas. Women's participation in forest rights gram sabhas, mandated by the Act, remains inadequate in practice.

Barriers to Empowerment

Multiple interconnected barriers impede tribal women's empowerment. Structural barriers include geographical isolation making service delivery difficult and expensive, inadequate infrastructure in tribal areas compared to national standards, and

displacement from ancestral lands due to development projects disrupting livelihoods and social structures. Poverty creates a vicious cycle where lack of resources prevents investment in health and education, perpetuating disadvantage across generations. Social and cultural barriers include patriarchal norms increasingly influencing tribal societies, early marriage despite legal prohibitions, social stigma and discrimination as women and tribal members, and sometimes tensions between certain traditional practices and gender equality principles. Educational barriers include language barriers with instruction rarely in tribal languages, curriculum irrelevance to tribal contexts, inadequate school infrastructure especially at secondary level, and quality concerns with teacher shortages and poor facilities. Health system barriers encompass access issues due to remoteness and inadequate facilities, cultural insensitivity of healthcare providers, shortages of health personnel willing to work in tribal areas, and food insecurity contributing to malnutrition. Economic barriers include limited asset ownership despite labor contribution, financial exclusion from formal banking and credit, market access constraints limiting fair prices, skill gaps restricting employment diversification, and exploitative terms of engagement with minimal earnings. Institutional barriers involve implementation gaps between policy and practice, corruption and elite capture, inadequate accountability mechanisms, and limited meaningful participation of tribal women in program design and governance. These barriers interact and reinforce each other, requiring holistic rather than piecemeal solutions.

Linkage with Viksit Bharat 2047

Tribal women's empowerment is intrinsically linked to achieving Viksit Bharat 2047 across multiple dimensions. In economic development, their entrepreneurship and employment can significantly contribute to GDP growth. Economic empowerment of 51 million women has substantial multiplier effects on household income and national economy. Traditional livelihoods including forest-based enterprises, agriculture, and handicrafts contribute to economic diversity and resilience. For human development, improving tribal women's health and education directly enhances human capital crucial for development. Educated and healthy mothers ensure better outcomes for next generation, creating positive intergenerational effects. Skill development and employment enhance productivity and innovation capacity. For social justice, tribal women's empowerment addresses inequalities based on gender and ethnicity, advancing constitutional commitments to equality and dignity. It strengthens social cohesion and national integration. Environmental sustainability benefits from tribal communities' traditional knowledge and sustainable practices crucial for conservation and climate adaptation. Women's active participation in forest management has demonstrated better conservation outcomes. Traditional agricultural practices offer lessons for sustainable farming. In governance, strengthened local governance through PESA implementation enhances participatory democracy. Women's political participation deepens democratic institutions and accountability. Community-based decision-making with women's voices improves governance quality. India's global standing is enhanced by demonstrating inclusive development respecting indigenous communities and achieving Sustainable Development Goals requires addressing tribal women's status as they are central to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and multiple other goals.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Conclusion

This research establishes that tribal women's empowerment and cultural inclusion constitute not merely a social justice imperative but an essential prerequisite for achieving India's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. The comprehensive analysis of tribal women's current status reveals persistent and severe disadvantages across education, health, economic participation, and social dimensions despite constitutional protections and numerous policy interventions. Key findings indicate that tribal women face intersectional discrimination with literacy at 49.4% compared to national average of 65.5%, higher maternal mortality and malnutrition, and economic vulnerability despite high work participation. The research establishes that cultural inclusion—respecting and preserving tribal identity while providing access to opportunities—is both possible and necessary. Development and cultural preservation are complementary rather than contradictory when approached correctly. Tribal women's empowerment directly contributes to all pillars of Viksit Bharat 2047 including economic growth, human development, social justice, environmental sustainability, and governance. To achieve comprehensive empowerment by 2047, integrated strategies are required across education (expanding quality schools with cultural sensitivity and multilingual approaches), health (strengthening infrastructure and culturally competent services), economic domains (implementing forest rights, ensuring financial inclusion, and

supporting entrepreneurship), and governance (effective PESA implementation and women's political participation). The pathway to Viksit Bharat 2047 must be inclusive, ensuring no community or woman is left behind. Tribal women, despite historical marginalization, possess immense potential, strength, and valuable knowledge. They are not passive beneficiaries but active agents of change. The transformation requires removing barriers, providing opportunities, respecting identity, and supporting aspirations. By 2047, the vision is of tribal women achieving parity in development indicators, participating fully in all spheres, with flourishing cultures and languages, and recognized as equal partners in India's development story. This vision is achievable with commitment, appropriate strategies, and sustained action beginning now.

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