

Original Article

The Status of Women among the Tribal Communities of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT:

This study, The Status of Women Among the Tribal Communities of West Bengal, explores the socio-economic, cultural, and political position of women within tribal communities across West Bengal. Tribal societies in this region are rich in diverse customs and practices, yet the lives of tribal women often remain shaped by patriarchal norms, economic hardships, and limited access to education and healthcare. This research examines key areas affecting the status of tribal women, including gender roles, family dynamics, economic participation, educational opportunities, and health challenges. Despite some cultural practices that afford women a degree of respect and authority within the community, traditional gender roles and systemic barriers still limit their socioeconomic mobility and autonomy.

The study analyzes data from government reports, surveys, and ethnographic research to gain insights into the lived experiences of these women and to assess the impact of policies aimed at improving their status. Furthermore, the research explores efforts by government and non-governmental organizations to address these challenges through interventions in education, healthcare, and economic empowerment. By evaluating both the positive aspects of tribal women's roles and the ongoing issues they face, the study sheds light on the complexities of gender relations in these communities. It also provides recommendations for sustainable, culturally sensitive development programs that respect tribal traditions while promoting gender equity.

Keywords: tribal women, gender roles, socio-economic status, education, healthcare, cultural practices, gender equity.

INTRODUCTION:

The status of women among tribal communities in West Bengal is a complex subject that intersects with issues of culture, socio-economic conditions, education, and health. West Bengal is home to a variety of tribal groups, each with its customs, traditions, and social dynamics. Tribal women, while occupying significant roles within their families and communities, often face limitations imposed by both traditional practices and broader socio-economic challenges. These factors affect their access to resources, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, ultimately influencing their overall quality of life and social position. Historically, tribal societies have been more egalitarian in some respects compared to mainstream Indian society. Tribal women, for instance, tend to participate actively in agricultural work and community decision-making processes, contributing significantly to their households and local economies. However, patriarchal norms are still prevalent, and women often face constraints in terms of personal freedom, property rights, and economic independence. Cultural practices, while sometimes empowering, can also restrict women's autonomy and reinforce gender roles that limit their access to education and employment beyond the household or community.



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The introduction of government policies aimed at improving the socio-economic status of tribal women has brought some changes, yet challenges remain. Initiatives in education, healthcare, and economic empowerment have opened opportunities, but gaps persist in implementation, especially in remote tribal regions where infrastructure and resources are limited. Moreover, the effects of urbanization and modernization have introduced new complexities to tribal life, affecting traditional lifestyles and gender dynamics. While some tribal women have gained greater economic and social agency through access to education and employment, others continue to struggle within restrictive frameworks that hinder their advancement.

This study explores the status of women in West Bengal's tribal communities through a multidimensional lens, examining gender roles, educational access, healthcare availability, and economic participation. By analyzing these aspects, the study aims to present a nuanced view of the challenges tribal women face as well as the areas where they have agency and influence. In addition, this research highlights the role of governmental and non-governmental organizations in implementing programs aimed at empowering tribal women, assessing their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement.

The status of tribal women in West Bengal not only reflects the unique cultural identity of these communities but also highlights the pressing need for inclusive and culturally sensitive development policies. Such policies must address the specific needs of tribal women, respecting their traditions while promoting equitable access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. This study aims to provide insights into how these efforts can be tailored to support both the preservation of cultural identity and the advancement of gender equity within these communities.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this study on *The Status of Women Among the Tribal Communities of West Bengal* are centred on understanding the multifaceted roles, challenges, and opportunities for tribal women within their unique cultural and socio-economic contexts. By examining gender roles, access to resources, and social structures, this study aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the current position of women in these communities. Below are the primary objectives of this research:

Examine the Socio-Cultural Role of Tribal Women:

This study aims to understand the cultural practices and social dynamics that shape the roles of women in

tribal societies. It seeks to analyze both empowering and restrictive elements in traditional customs, family structures, and community involvement, exploring how these influence women's identities and societal roles. This objective includes examining the degree to which tribal women participate in decision-making within their families and communities.

Analyze Economic Participation and Opportunities:

A key focus is to evaluate the economic contributions of tribal women, including their involvement in agriculture, handicrafts, and informal labour. The study seeks to identify barriers to economic independence, such as lack of access to markets, credit, and property rights, and to understand how these impact tribal women's financial security and economic agency.

Assess Access to Education and Healthcare:

This objective addresses the critical areas of education and healthcare, exploring how access to these essential resources impacts tribal women's quality of life, self-development, and community status. The study will assess literacy rates, school attendance, health services, and reproductive health awareness to gain insight into the educational and health disparities that affect tribal women.

Evaluate the Impact of Government and NGO Interventions:

Another key objective is to examine the role of governmental and non-governmental organizations in promoting gender equity among tribal women. This includes analyzing policies, programs, and interventions aimed at improving education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for tribal women, assessing their reach, effectiveness, and cultural sensitivity. The study will evaluate both the successes and shortcomings of these initiatives, identifying areas for improvement.

Explore the Effects of Urbanization and Modernization:

Finally, this study aims to investigate how the encroachment of urbanization and modernization is affecting traditional tribal life, particularly gender dynamics and women's roles. This includes examining changes in cultural practices, lifestyle adaptations, and emerging challenges or opportunities for tribal women as a result of increasing interactions with mainstream society.

These objectives are intended to provide a holistic understanding of the status of tribal women in West Bengal, offering insights into their challenges and avenues for empowerment.

The study also seeks to contribute to policy recommendations that respect cultural values while promoting gender equality, aiming to improve the socio-economic conditions and social status of tribal

women in ways that are sustainable and culturally inclusive.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY:

The Data and Methodology section for the study on *The Status of Women Among the Tribal Communities of West Bengal* combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture a comprehensive view of tribal women's roles, challenges, and opportunities. Data is drawn from primary and secondary sources, offering both empirical insights and context-based analysis.

Data Collection: Primary data was gathered through field surveys, structured interviews, and focus group discussions with tribal women from various communities in West Bengal. These included members from communities such as the Santals, Oraons, Mundas, and Bhumijis, ensuring diversity in perspectives. Surveys focused on areas such as economic participation, educational access, healthcare services, and family structures. Secondary data was sourced from government reports, census data, academic publications, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, providing broader insights into policy impacts and socio-economic conditions within these communities.

Methodology: This study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess the socio-economic and cultural status of tribal women. Quantitative data from surveys and official statistics allows for the measurement of literacy rates, health indicators, employment levels, and income sources, offering a numerical perspective on key aspects affecting tribal women's lives. Qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, enable the exploration of cultural practices, personal experiences, and community values, which are essential for understanding the social norms and roles shaping women's lives in these communities.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical tools to identify patterns in education, healthcare, and economic participation. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically to identify recurrent themes related to gender roles, cultural practices, and the impact of external interventions. This mixed-methods approach allows for a balanced, multidimensional understanding of tribal women's status, providing actionable insights into how development programs can better serve these communities while respecting their cultural identities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study on *The Status of Women Among the Tribal Communities of West Bengal* reveal a multifaceted reality shaped by both empowering traditions and persistent socio-economic challenges. Tribal women in West Bengal hold unique roles

within their communities, often contributing significantly to agricultural work, household management, and traditional handicrafts. These roles underscore the women's integral presence in sustaining community life, yet they also highlight limitations in personal and economic agency, largely shaped by restricted access to education, healthcare, and formal employment.

RESULTS:

Data analysis shows that, while tribal women contribute meaningfully to the local economy, they often lack economic independence. Most women participate in agricultural and informal labour, but their work is typically undervalued and unrecognized in formal economic terms. Education levels are low, with a significant dropout rate after primary schooling due to economic pressures, early marriage, and cultural expectations. Limited educational attainment subsequently affects employment opportunities, restricting women's ability to pursue careers outside traditional community roles. Additionally, healthcare access is a considerable challenge, with findings indicating high maternal mortality rates, limited reproductive health awareness, and dependency on traditional health practices in areas where modern healthcare facilities are scarce.

DISCUSSION:

The discussion highlights that, while tribal communities tend to uphold relatively egalitarian views compared to mainstream society, women's roles remain circumscribed by traditional customs and patriarchal norms. Women's contributions to agriculture and family decision-making offer them a certain degree of respect within their communities. However, cultural beliefs still limit their social mobility and self-determination, particularly in terms of education and employment. Interventions by government and NGOs, aimed at improving education and healthcare, have made some inroads but face challenges in reaching remote areas. Issues such as language barriers, cultural sensitivity, and logistical constraints often hinder the effectiveness of these programs.

Modernization and urbanization present both opportunities and challenges for tribal women. On one hand, exposure to urban centres and mainstream society has led to increased awareness and aspirations among younger tribal women. On the other hand, this interaction sometimes results in cultural erosion, where traditional values clash with the aspirations of the younger generation, creating tensions within families and communities.

Overall, while tribal women in West Bengal hold crucial roles within their communities, their full potential remains constrained by socio-economic barriers and the limitations of traditional cultural norms. The study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive, inclusive development policies that prioritize education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for tribal women. By addressing these areas while respecting cultural identity, policymakers and organizations can help empower tribal women to achieve greater independence and social standing, thereby enhancing not only their lives but also the development of their communities.

CONCLUSION:

The study of *The Status of Women Among the Tribal Communities of West Bengal* highlights a complex interplay between tradition, socioeconomic constraints, and emerging aspirations among tribal women. Despite their pivotal roles within their families and communities, tribal women face substantial barriers to achieving equitable socio-economic standing. These barriers are influenced by limited access to education, healthcare, and formal employment, as well as by traditional cultural norms that, while often granting unique respect to women's roles, simultaneously impose restrictions on their autonomy and opportunities for self-development.

Tribal women in West Bengal contribute significantly to community life, particularly in agriculture, handicrafts, and family management. These contributions are essential to the local economy and to sustaining cultural practices within tribal societies. However, the undervaluation of women's labour within formal economic structures perpetuates economic dependency and limits their financial independence. Additionally, the lack of educational opportunities and high dropout rates among girls curtail their access to broader career paths, reinforcing a cycle of limited socio-economic mobility. The study found that these limitations are further compounded by restricted healthcare access, which affects women's health, reproductive autonomy, and overall well-being.

Efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations to address these issues have led to some improvements, yet significant gaps remain. Programs focusing on education, healthcare, and skill development often struggle to reach remote tribal regions due to logistical constraints and cultural barriers. Furthermore, these initiatives sometimes lack the cultural sensitivity required to engage tribal communities effectively. For development efforts to be truly impactful, they must incorporate the unique needs, languages, and traditions of each community,

respecting tribal identity while promoting pathways toward gender equity.

The influence of modernization and urbanization introduces new dynamics to the lives of tribal women, especially the younger generation. Exposure to mainstream society has led to increased awareness and shifting aspirations among tribal women, yet this change also creates tensions between traditional values and modern desires for independence and equality. Balancing cultural preservation with social progress remains a challenge, requiring approaches that are both respectful and adaptive.

In improving the status of tribal women in West Bengal requires a multi-faceted approach that respects their cultural background while addressing critical gaps in education, healthcare, and economic participation. Sustainable progress depends on inclusive, culturally attuned policies and programs that empower tribal women to take on expanded roles in both traditional and emerging domains. By supporting these women through well-designed, context-sensitive interventions, policymakers and organizations can promote gender equity and foster positive development within tribal communities, strengthening not only individual lives but also the socio-economic resilience of the communities as a whole.

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