

Multifarious Economic Activities of Tribal Women in India

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The tribal women, constitute as in any other social group, about half of the total tribal population. However, the importance of women in the tribal society is more important than in other social group in India, because of the fact that tribal women, more than women in any other social group, works harder and the family economy and management depend on her. Discussing about the social inclusion, the World Bank defines the term as “the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in the society”. Social inclusion aims to empower poor and marginalized people to take advantage of the opportunities in equitable and non-discriminative modes. It ensures that people have a voice in decisions which affect their lives and that they enjoy equal access to markets, services and political, social and physical spaces¹ (World Bank report, 2013).

Economic activities of tribal women thus can be used to describe a series of positive actions:

- to achieve equality of access to goods and services,
- to assist all individuals to participate in community and society,
- to encourage the contribution of all persons to social and cultural life and challenge all forms of discrimination.

In all societies economic activities constitute the main source of survival and sustenance and women have always been an important part of work and economy. However because of difficult economic situations and lack of bargaining power, women workers all over the globe, especially in the developing world, have to accept low wages and work under debilitating conditions. Tribal women have the primary responsibility for food gathering from communal lands and forests. In most countries livestock husbandry is also the responsibility of women. Despite women’s enormous contribution to agricultural sector, much of domestic and agricultural work done by women is unpaid and more often overlooked. Women workers in the tribal areas tend to be consistently handicapped owing to the traditional division of labour. The lack of adequate data on women’s role used for data collection do not reflect small-scale or subsistence agriculture, ignoring important parts of women’s work and overall economic production.

Though everyone is now recognizing the invisible economic contribution of women, methodological problems persist in measuring certain aspects of women’s work. By far the most “invisible” of all work done by women the world over, is domestic work, which continues to go unrecognized, unpaid, undervalued and largely ignored, despite its crucial importance to society. It has been argued that if domestic work were to be quantified, it would contribute up to forty per cent of the gross national product. In both the developed and developing world, women work on an average of sixty hours a week around the house. Yet social values are such that most women whose job description reads “housewife” do not consider themselves economically active (Singh, 2001: 118).

¹ World Bank. 2013. “Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity” (Advance Edition). Washington, DC: World Bank

The status of women in tribal economy is closely linked to the mode of production prevalent in that tribe. The economic activities vary from one society to the other depending on their exposure to the outside world. They have their set of economic activities and the women contribute maximum of it directly and indirectly. The tribal women's economy that mainly centers round agriculture and forest depending on their natural environment, the main source of income for them therefore comes from food gathering, cultivation, handicrafts and labour work.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this paper are:

- To find out the social inclusion and inclusive growth of women in tribal life
- To analyse the economic pursuits of tribal women in India
- To analyse the status they enjoy in their own set up
- To analyse the challenges faced by tribal women in India

Methodology

This paper is outcome of qualitative research in some major tribal pockets of India where secondary information through literature published by different authors and researchers has been used. Also reference has been explored from websites.

Women and Agricultural Operation

The Tribal on the hilltops and slopes largely practices shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation is a traditional method governed by environmental conditions, rainfall, steep slopes, thin population density and inaccessibility. The number of years of holding land for shifting cultivation and the number of years for which it is left fallow for regeneration of forest depend upon factors such as rainfall, pressure of population and condition of the terrain. As a general rule, tribal hold the land for shifting cultivation for two or three years and wait for five to six years for regeneration of forest cover.

Significant use of indigenous knowledge is seen in the various agricultural practices of the Juang (one primitive tribe found in Odisha, India) women. They are very knowledgeable about the kind of crops that can be cultivated in each type of land. Their use of the local resources and even their food habits reflect their knowledge of their environment.

To maintain the fertility of the soil, the tribal use cattle waste, ashes and compost. Every few years they also change their cultivation from one traditional rice variety to another in order to conserve their traditional paddy varieties and to prevent the loss of fertility in their soil. They also use the traditionally followed method to prevent the yard from insect repellents and spider webs.

The year round agricultural activities for tribal women is found starts with different activities as per the available land. The categorization of land differs from tribe to tribe and also as per their exposure to the mainstream world with land holding system. Some major activities that can be noted is i.e. helping in felling of trees, debushing, watching the crops, harvesting, degassing, weeding.

When we analyze the work distribution in terms of participation in agricultural work we find in the works like ploughing, broadcasting seeds, stacking and storing, women do not participate, as it is a taboo for them in the tribal communities. But in other agricultural operations like leveling the field, field preparation, carrying seeds, transplanting, weeding, manuring and fertilizing, harvesting, threshing, winnowing and drying women are engaged fully or partially.

Here we find a clear division of labour between tribal men and women in the agricultural sector. It is also important to note that without women's participation the agricultural work gets hampered. The invisibility of women as the primary breadwinner is ignored in the tribal community.

Women and Non-agricultural Operation

The evidence of diversity of women's expertise is strong in the field of technical changes in agriculture. It is associated with higher capital intensity, greater mechanization of production and post harvest operations, the introduction of exogenous knowledge and the development of crops and livestock with diverse characteristics geared to the requirements of commercial commodity production. It has been accompanied by changes which women experience in unique ways. Women's knowledge has been the mainstay of the indigenous dairy industry.

Animal husbandry as a non-agricultural work of a tribal woman is very much linked to her agricultural tasks. For agricultural purposes generally the cattle are kept. Other animals like goat, pig, sheep and chicken are kept for entertaining guests and also for sale. Everyday women use to clean the cattle shed. For fodder they bring wild grass, green leaves with them while coming back from forest. To keep the insects away she burns fire at the shed. Dogs she keeps that helps her husband in hunting and also watching crops. The chicken is mainly used for rituals, slaughtered for meat to entertain guests and marketing. Cows she takes care for milk and milk products and Buffaloes for ploughing the field.

The narrow streams being full of stones and boulders are not suitable for fishing. The tribal women are found to catch fish with the help of their saree in the rainy season. A portion of the catch it is consumed at home and the rest is sold in the market. However, that is not a stable source of income.

The difficult economic situation and a lack of bargaining power resulting from gender inequality, many tribal women have been forced to accept low wage and poor working conditions and thus have often become preferred workers. They have entered the workforce increasingly by choice as the family situation compels them to earn for maintenance of the family. But, they never prefer to go far away places or are engaged in such activities like wage earning on a regular basis.

Whenever there is a wage earning opportunity, a tribal woman goes accompanied by her husband to the work place. The general preference is to work at a place close to their home so that it will not affect their home management. In the last few decades there has been a marked difference in the standard of living of the tribal population with much emphasis on alternative livelihood pattern through different schemes and programmes where women are the major participants. Not only it has checked migration but also ensuring young girls and women out of the risk of trafficking.

Tapping Forest Resources

Minor forest produce forms a major source of income in the tribal community. Women and children are almost exclusively involved in collection of minor forest produce, its storage, processing and marketing. Increased government control of forests has distributed the tribal economy adversely affecting their lives, particularly that of women. Appointing of agents from outside for collecting forest produce has not only affected their livelihood, but has also made the work of women more difficult. Collection of fuel wood has become more difficult since it is less accessible and more time-consuming. The time invested restricts them from other remunerative activity for the day they invest for fuel wood collection. Beauty is when you watch women collecting the dried part of tree for fuel wood and here her close attachment to the tree is

also observed. She collects that much required for her and not more than that. Fueling and tending the household fire has always been women's work. So they have much harder job of collecting and transporting the fuel. They have acquired an intimate and practical knowledge of the suitability of different tree species for cooking. They know which wood burn slowly or fast, which smoke and which kindle easily. The wood must be dry and be able to give fire for a long time. They, collect some extra wood to store for rainy season.

In the tribal community a special relationship exists between women, the family and trees. This fact has not been properly acknowledged in all earlier works. The agricultural products they can collect from their cultivable yard can manage to feed the tribal family only for for three to five months. The government's scheme with providing rice and fuel oil with subsidized rate is a bit helpful for women to manage the kitchen. Mainly they depend on forest based products to meet their daily meal. United Nations report found food rich in vitamins consumed in African countries are collected from forest (UN, 1994: 4). Trees also provide food in a number of indirect ways, tribal people use nearby forest as an important source of collecting honey and edible fungi.

Tribal women are found, engaged in collection of different food items from the forest throughout the year. However they are not allowed to engage themselves in hunting. tribal women spend major part of their life in going to the forest and collecting different items from forest. *Mahua* (a flower) she collects for liquor while it accompanied with *tendu*, seeds of fruit such as chironji, honey, mushroom she collects, give her a good amount in return. Pulses she uses as exchange products. Brushing stick collected by women from forest are used in home as well as marketed throughout the year. Fruits she gets plenty in summer while mash rooms are available in rainy season. Tribal women rely on the collection of non-timber forest products that include medicinal herb, home based processing foods, fibers, dyes and liquor. They also prepare different type of handicrafts for sale in the local market. Tribal women collect the fodder for domestic animals from the forest.

The knowledge of tribal women in protecting her family from insect bite is also praiseworthy. Women use neem sticks and neem leaves to keep mosquitoes away by setting fire to it. She smokes fish and meat on fire. In the night she light the house with fire. By boiling leaves and bark women prepare natural medicine to be used for minor diseases.

Tribal women also rely on forest to maintain many parts of their household. Women always do minor household repairs. Trees provide nearly all that is needed: poles for building shed, leaves for thatch, canes and steams of large grass for wattle, fibers for twine. brushing stick, bawls, mortar and pestles used for processing and preserving the grains are prepared by women by materials collected from forest for use at home and sale at market. Small-scale forest based enterprises such as the collection and processing of raw materials into useful products are a major source of income for tribal women. They use canes for making furnitures, fibers for net, ropes and mats, bamboo for basketry, gums and resins and *tendu* leaves for making *bidi*.

Women collect the beads for necklace, flowers for decorating hair bun from forest. Ireson found that, in Laos, women in the Bolikhamsai province gather or hunt 141 different forest products, including food plants, medicinal products, household items and small animals for domestic consumption and sale (Ireson, 1991: 23-26). I have not calculated each item of MFP used in the tribal community, but I feel it may cross the number stated by Ireson. For collecting these forest products women have to cover 0 to 11 kilometers.

tribal women who provide a major contribution to family economy through agriculture and minor forest produce are now overburdened as deforestation has made them to cover more distance to meet their needs that was an easy task for them in the past. Again restriction from side of government to protect forest has introduced a lot of law that sometimes restricts them to follow the age old pattern. Whatever it may be, the invisible contribution of women to tribal economy cannot be overlooked as portraying their work, a duty for family maintenance. The foregoing analysis shows a clear picture of the contribution of tribal women to household economy.

One may at the outset feel that issues like rest, leisure or holidays have no meaning for tribal women. But any discussion on women in general, and working women in particular, is likely to be left incomplete if an important question like leisure time is not raised and answered.

Work and leisure are the two aspects of human life, which is found among tribal women in the form of dwelling at home, farm, forest or construction site and leisure when they sleep.

Learning the Skill to Work

Whenever a reference to work is given there the question arises how women learn these skills, and the answer is that the environment in which they grow gives them the opportunity to learn themselves in the process of doing these works. Though there is lack of formal education to learn the skill to work, in a tribal society a woman's education is a lifelong learning. It is a lifelong process by which every female starting from childhood till old age acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment. Continuous learning is enforced through: stories, songs, observation, social interaction, speech and conduct towards elders. They transmit knowledge and social customs, and define relationships and belongings in the society. Here the lines written by Riesman very well fits into the Juang women's learning the skill to work where he quotes, "proverbs are one means of sharpening adult consciousness and of fixing in memory the truths that seem necessary for social life" (Riesman, 1992: 150). The traditional attitudes of the tribal very well mesh with their economic activities. The division of labour between men and women makes their knowledge base gender-specific according to their roles and perceived responsibilities.

Understanding the indigenous knowledge system is key to understand skill acquisition among women in the tribal social structure. This is because there is transfer of skills from the household and culture to work. Skill acquisition integrates with household relations. The idea of education in the tribal tradition cannot be separated from that of training. Women learn by their socialization process from key figures in their lives (mother, aunt, or any other older female relative) and through the long-standing traditional apprenticeship system in the tribal social structure. All of these are embedded in the everyday life of their society. The system itself teaches both specific skills for social behaviour and working ability. It provides internal structure for ways of knowing and a means to transfer that knowledge.

No specialized training course is needed for a tribal woman to learn the household and extra-household activities. She learns by visualizing and accompanying her elders doing those activities. It is always associated with the environment where the girl is brought up. Taking care of the younger brothers and sisters, works related to agricultural operations, washing clothes and fetching water all become a daily schedule of activity as a girl grows up in the tribal social structure. Thus, she experiences of doing all the household and farm activities before marriage that continues as a routine work after her marriage.

Concluding Remarks:

Social inclusion of tribal women refer to the extent that women as individuals, family and community are able to fully participate in the households, social chore and control their own destinies by improving the value chains of the natural resources endowed in their own surrounding. There have been a number of studies on the tribes, their culture and on the impact of acculturation on tribal society. There have also been studies on the status of women relating to their socio-cultural problems, their economic rights, their participation in management, their access to employment, food, health, etc. but these issues have not been properly focused in relation to the tribal women and their social inclusion. For this, there is a need for proper understanding of their problem specific to time and place so that relevant development programmes can be made and implemented. We need to create legal, regulatory and policy frame works that promote social inclusion and inclusive growth a success.

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