

Mapping Gender (In)equality among Tribals/Santhals: Myth Vs Reality

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Abstract

The Tribal society is praised for the freedom and rights it gives to women such as equal participation in running their households and freedom to work outside their houses. However, it is altogether wrong to believe that they have equal status in the family or society. In both places they are subordinates. There are many social and customary laws which prohibit them to achieve equality in society. The tribe that seems outwardly simple and peaceful actually struggles with internal issues, especially with regard to women such as witchcraft, women's rights, social taboos, etc. Every now and then news stories of crimes against women come from tribal belts that shake the very foundation that claims gender equality in the tribal communities.

This paper intends to explore women's status in tribal society and aims to break the popular myths pertaining to gender equality among tribals especially among Santhals to provide a realistic picture of tribal women's status in the family as well as in society.

Keywords: Santhals, tribal, gender (in)equality, rights, responsibility.

There is an evident gap between the status of men and women in all societies throughout the world. This gap can be narrower in some societies as compared to others. But the existence of this gap cannot be denied. However, the popular belief about tribals is that in tribal communities this gender gap is non-existent since their women are provided with some rights and freedom. They can move freely outside the boundaries of their houses. They mark their presence in all familial and social activities which are taken by many scholars as their equal participation. Though the tribal women are liberated to some extent, the degree of their participation in decision-making in the family, as well as society, is a matter of contestation and research. Also, their rights are very limited. The social taboos are disguised with the intensions of amputating women of their abilities to live by themselves and have made them dependent upon the male members of their families. It is a fact that women's social and familial status cannot be understood in isolation. In order to map women's position in society, we need to study their existence in relation to the men of their society which then requires an understanding of a few terminologies such as Sex, Gender, and Gender (in)equality i.e., equality as well as inequality. While Sex is biological, based on the body parts we are born with, Gender is how society expects us to behave according to our biological sex. For example, in the Indian context women are expected to do all the household work. Such stereotype makes one gender more powerful than the other. Gender equality is the equal treatment and opportunity offered to all genders be it male, female or transgender. Gender inequality on the other hand is the unequal treatment given to people based on their gender resulting from the belief that men and women are not equal. Hence, the opportunities are distributed discriminately and unequally. For example, in education and workplaces, men and women are treated differently in terms of wages, workloads, and work types. Some indicators pertaining to gender inequality are unequal opportunities, unequal participation, and unequal income offered to people based on their gender. It is a well-known fact that women are at the receiving end of this discriminatory practice known as gender inequality.

There are many factors that lead to gender inequality. Some of the major factors affecting gender equality in the field of education are -

- **Uneducated parents:** The parents who are not educated are mostly not aware of the value of education for women. They don't know how education can help their

daughters in future. Also, they believe in gender stereotypes blindly, and often faithfully. They prioritize their son's education over their daughters'.

- **Fewer opportunities:** Girls are believed to learn household chores since their childhood and are always required at the home for different reasons. They are not given the opportunities given to boys of the house whether it is related to studies or sports. Whereas sons are allowed to move to different cities for higher studies, daughters are not in most cases.
- **Poverty:** In poor families, parents or guardians are forced to prioritize the male child's education over the female child since they cannot afford to educate all their children and since girls are to be married off, they invest in their sons.
- **Gender stereotypes:** It is the most affecting factor of gender inequality. Stereotypes such as women should know all the household work, should take care of family, should sacrifice their career and dreams for children, etc. These stereotypes hinder their access to equal participation and opportunities.
- **Lack of facilities:** Unavailability of resources like schools, colleges, training institutions, and transportation facilities in the area significantly affects gender equality barring women's personal and professional growth.

In 2010, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the Gender Inequality Index (GII) an index for measurement of gender disparity in its twentieth-anniversary edition of the *Human Development Report*. According to the UNDP, this index is a composite measure that captures the loss of achievement within a country due to gender inequality:

It measures gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development—reproductive health, measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates; empowerment, measured by the proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females and males aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education; and economic status, expressed as labour market participation and measured by labour force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years and older.

According to the 2019 Human Development Report, India was ranked 123 in the gender inequality index and 131 in the Human Development Index. The report noted that the labour

force participation rate of women in the country was 20.5 per cent, while it was 76.1 per cent for men. And only 13.5 per cent of women held seats in Parliament. The report also noted that the difference in parents' response toward girls and boys has led to higher malnutrition among girls. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, India has ranked 140th among 156 countries, becoming the third-worst performer in South Asia.

With regard to these poor rankings of India in global reports, some scholars have suggested the example of Adivasi communities to improve gender equality and women empowerment in the country. Karan Singhania writes: "The lives of our Adivasi fellow people are hard but they have been competent enough to acknowledge the rights of women and integrate them into society. They know that the involvement of women in various aspects of life is essential and their role is just as important as men". He mentions five ways in which Adivasis teach us gender equality:

- i. Economic Involvement
- ii. Marriage Practices
- iii. Property Rights
- iv. Sexual and Social Freedom
- v. Contribution to Defence

Before discussing the aforementioned five ways to gender equality followed by Adivasis, let us first understand, who are Adivasis? The Adivasis are globally known as Tribals. The Chanda Committee in 1960, has provided five standards to include any caste or community in the tribal group. These standards include Geographical isolation, special culture, characteristics of tribes, backwardness and shyness.

The tribal society is praised for the freedom and rights it gives to women such as equal participation in Economic involvement i.e., running their households, and freedom to work outside their houses. It is true that women's involvement in earning has provided them with some liberties which women of non-tribal communities do not have. However, it is a matter of contestation whether this role of superwoman capable of working in and outside their houses is desired or forced upon them. In most cases, women are compelled to take charge of their family because men who are the actual head of the family fail to do so.

Therefore, it is altogether wrong to believe they have equal status in the family or society. In both places, they are subordinates.

Among tribes, marriage is rarely forced upon women. They have the freedom to marry men of their choice from their own tribe provided that they do not come into an incest relationship. Inter-tribe marriage is slowly being accepted but marriage with non-tribals is still unaccepted. Ironically, whereas non-tribal brides are easily accepted in tribal society, tribal girls' marriage to non-tribal men is not accepted. Hence, women do not enjoy equal freedom pertaining to marriage. Even when they are married to their own tribesmen there is no security guaranteed to them. Their husband can leave them at any time for any reason be it women's barrenness, infirmity, or simply men's desire to marry another woman. In such a situation, a woman can neither claim her rights on her husband's property nor her father's. With regard to property rights, a distinction should be made between inherited property and acquired property. In very few tribal communities, women are given rights to ancestral property. Only those who bring *gharjamai* (a son-in-law who after his marriage goes to live in his father-in-law's house) through marriages can inherit ancestral property. So, this generalization is incorrect that women have property rights. They only have rights on the property which they buy or make themselves.

Tribal women's sexual and social freedom also cannot be passed without contestation. It is a fact that among tribes pre-marital sex is not prohibited contrary to the mainstream societies where it is considered a taboo. But it is never encouraged openly and chastity of women is always desired. The marriage proposal is sent to the girl's family often after enquiring about her character. If singing and dancing are to be considered social freedom then of course women have social freedom but when it comes to authority and rights, women are non-existent. There is rarely any village which has a woman as the head of the village. In village organizations or the justice system, women are hardly seen holding any position or giving their opinions. If they did, they are rarely taken. Religion is an important part of any society and the same is the case with tribes. But it is again very unfortunate that in many tribal communities women are believed to be impure and not suitable for worshipping their family deities; village deities are far-off things. Social freedom, thus, is not equally distributed among the genders in tribal communities.

The women's contribution in defence or any battle is indeed praiseworthy and beneficial for society. However, it should be noted that it does not really give any advantage to women. They contribute to the welfare of their society but in return they get nothing; no special treatment or privilege is offered to them. The men have very conveniently used women by lifting some of the restrictions once imposed upon them. About Santhals, a major tribal community of eastern India mainly found in the States of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam, W. G. Archer writes in *Tribal Law and Justice: A Report on the Santal* (2013) that women were not allowed to use bows and arrows in the past. However, in the 1850s during the Santhal rebellion women participated in great numbers and fought with bows and arrows and other weapons.

Archer has further recorded some prohibitions and taboos observed among Santhals that prohibit women to achieve equality in society:

- i. Climb a tree in the *Jaher* (Sacred grove) or break its branches.
- ii. Mount a roof for thatching it.
- iii. Plough a field.
- iv. Touch the handle or carry another part of a plough other than on her head.
- v. Use a leveller or if she carried it then only on the head.
- vi. Shave a person.

(339-341)

A close reading of these prohibitions shows that these customary laws have made women crippled, and dependent on men for their survival. Gender equality in the tribal community is a myth. Women's status in society is no better than that of cattle and furniture – as long as they have the strength and are able to work, they get some value. They are seen merely as helping hands. No authority is given to them ever. Marriage also is done chiefly only for getting another pair of hands. The Santhal custom of *Gonong Pon* (bride price) manifests it well. *Gonong pon* is paid to the bride's family by the groom's family in cash and sometimes in the form of cattle as well to compensate for the loss of a pair of hands on the farm. (Hansda, 42)

There is inequality in the work division also between tribal men and women. According to Santhal tradition, as recorded by P O Bodding in *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* (2016), in the beginning, men and women were assigned separate jobs by one of

their deities Marang Buru. Women were given the household work and taking care of the family. Men on the other hand were given the fieldwork that required physical exertion. However, at present Santhal women not only take care of their family and do their household chores but also participate in farming and earning their livelihood. But men never bothered to share women's jobs, and sometimes they miserably failed to do their own jobs. The Santhal society rarely had any customary law to provide some comfort or privilege to women. On the contrary, it believed in witchcraft and the fact that only women practice it. Due to this blind faith in witchcraft, many women have suffered and died. The helpless and single women are often falsely accused of practising witchcraft. They are inhumanely tortured and stoned to death many a time. Such incidents often occur even today and become the headlines of newspapers. Many writers have written about this shameful practice of witch-hunting in their works. Innocent Soren's play *Puruchun: A Cleansing by Love* (2016) and Sanjay Bahadur's novel *Hul: Cry Rebel* (2013) depict such criminal and inhuman acts of witch-hunting which is a dark reality of the tribal/Santhal society. In the light of these bitter realities, it is hard to believe that tribal women enjoy equality and liberty in their communities or societies.

Hence, it can be concluded that gender equality among tribals/Santhals is merely a myth and a dubious claim. Through this article attempt has been made to give new insights to the academicians, social scientists and policymakers to bring about positive change in tribals' life, especially in tribal women's life besides inviting further research in this field.

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