



## **CULTURE AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF TRIBES OF INDIA**

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### **Abstract:**

Existing norms, belief systems, heritage, and customs all contribute to the formation of a society's culture. Society's culture varies by region. A society's established culture dictates gender roles and relationships. Gender is a western concept that refers to the division of labour in terms of male and female. This means that while sex is a biological term, gender is a social construct. Gender denotes the expected roles of men and women in the realms of production, reproduction, and power relations in various spheres of society. Culture evolves and changes to take on its current form. Thus, the factors that shape culture have a substantial effect on gender. India is the world's second-largest home to tribal people. There is a widespread perception that tribal women enjoy significantly more freedom in the workplace, decision-making, and empowerment than the women of other castes in society. Gender roles and relationships are not uniform across the country's tribal communities, but rather vary. Additionally, the process of mainstreaming, displacement, and globalisation have altered their traditional culture and gender relationships significantly. With the introduction and exposure to a modern economy, the concept of women empowerment is rapidly changing among tribes. With the exposure to a market-oriented economy and industrialised society played a significant role in altering tribal women's roles at home and in society. The present paper will throw light on the changing scenario of culture and gender relationships among the tribal communities of the country.

**Keywords:** Culture, Gender relation, Tribes, Empowerment.

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**Introduction:**

Culture is the most important social trait of human civilization. It is the complex accumulation of knowledge, thought, beliefs, customs, heritage and norms of society (S. C. N. Rao, 2007). Every society has its own culture. Thus, different societies over the world have different cultures. Even it varies within the country. The knowledge of the people of a society, their beliefs, their language, values they keep, rituals they practice, the way they think, the attitude they show and habits they follow mirror the inward nature of men. Culture governs every aspect of society. Here it is pertinent to mention that it is not necessary that with the progress of the civilization the existing culture will also change. Culture determines the role of human beings in society. In the broader sense, it distinctly separates the role of men and women in society. The biological difference between male and female is coined by the term sex. Further, the difference in social roles played by male and female members of a society is termed as gender. Thus, gender is a socially constructed difference between males and females. Culture also defines the division of labour. The division of labour may be society oriented; cast oriented or sex-oriented. The sexual difference of the child determines the social role, relationship, identity, position and socio-economic responsibility. Thus, the gender role and gender relationship are constructed. Gender construction differs according to society. Gender denotes the expected roles of men and women in the realms of production, reproduction, and power relations in various spheres of society. With the changing notion of culture, gender roles and relationships are significantly redefined. Being the second-largest home of the tribal communities, the country exhibits different unique tribal cultures. Thus, India is the homeland of several races which ultimately turned the country into a cultural plurality. In tribal culture also the gender role and relationships vary. Though in maximum tribal society unorthodox attitudes towards the women are shown still in some tribes it is complex. Moreover, the socioeconomic dynamics have introduced several barriers before the tribal women in the sphere of their role, relationship and empowerment (Xaxa, 2004). Thus, to understand the process of assimilation it is important to analyse the changing nature of the relationship between culture and gender, further its impact on tribal society.

**Objectives:**

The present paper mirrors the existing culture of different tribal communities in India and gender roles in those societies. Further, it extrapolates the changing gender role, status and gender conflict in the context of cultural dynamics experienced by the tribal societies. It further reflects how with the changing socioeconomic structure the traditional culture-gender relationship is witnessing changes.

**Methods:**

The present study is qualitative in nature. The descriptive survey method is followed in this research. Secondary data is collected from various articles, books, journals and government records. A case study has been done to collect real time data from field survey done among the Lodha, the Oraon and the Munda tribes residing in Chakdaha municipal area, Baidyapur Gram Panchayet and

Muragacha Gram Panchayet respectively. For conducting the pilot study an open-ended questionnaire containing 25 questions has been prepared. Total 90 people, 30 each from three tribal community are interviewed. The data collected from field survey interfaced with primary data.

### **Gender and traditional tribal society:**

The tribal societies of the country exhibit simple to complex social structures and organizations. In most tribal societies kinship is the basis of societal operations and it also influences the relationship to some extent (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1977). The primary forest dwellers, the hunter and gatherers; and nomadic tribes have different world views than those who pursue settled agriculture. The way of earning a livelihood is devoid of any sense of possession of personal property, so the society is without descent kinship. The gender relationship is much more liberal than any other society. Gender relationship is the basis of negotiation and necessities. Marriage is something like personal liking and living with each other. Men and women often remarry and relocate themselves to another tribal band. As the concept of kinship is absent so these societies are neither patrilineal nor matrilineal rather it was more commune based. The egalitarian gender role and relationship is found in them. The minimum division of labour, mutual respect, the equal right of property, greater right to divorce and greater right to sexual matters are major characteristics of a gender relationship. Interestingly we find hybrid characteristics specially among the 'enclave tribal band' whose socioeconomic operations are limited in the vicinity of the settled village. The Paliyan tribe of Tamil Nadu shows different cultural traits according to their residence. The Paliyans who live near the Tamil villages have adopted the local Hindu culture whereas the Paliyans who live in remote areas near forests practice their original culture and tradition (Gardner, 1988). Though the changes that occur due to cultural transition and invasion is not total. the cultural transmission introduces the culture of virilocality i.e., living with a husband like the local Tamil people. Uxorilocal is found among the forest-dwelling Paliyans. It is well-established fact that in foraging societies the gender inequality and gender conflict are minimal. Morris (1982) in his study had shown that in several foraging societies there is no existence of gender division of labour, men and women have equal access to resources, and there is no ritualistic or cosmological division of gender (Morris, 1982). It is due to the absence of descent kinship among these tribal communities. But the gender relationship is not uniform throughout all tribal communities of the country. Elwin in his work on the Naga women opined that though the Naga women enjoy high status and rank in the society and even have representation in the administrative council, the Naga women are no different than general Indian women in respect to love and affinity towards husband, children and family (Elwin, 1961). In the case of the Baiga tribe also observed that there was no clear gender division of labour (Elwin, 1986). Moving one step forward Furer-Haimendorf opined that Naga women enjoy more status and honour than their counterparts in a so-called civilized society (Furer-Haimendorf, 1933). In matrilineal tribal societies like the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, though women enjoy a central position in their society but authority over the family retains in the hand of men (Nongbri, 2016). In tribal societies which are based upon subsistence agriculture, the men and women play an equal role but rights over the property vary across the tribal societies. The Naga girl

children at the age of 13-14 generally help their mother with household works but boys of the same age play and have fun. In the case of the Todas, a herding and pastoral community, gender relationships in very unequal. The Toda women are regarded as ritually polluting and even ranked below buffalo. Toda women are not allowed to walk on the road which passes through their sacred diary temple. They extol masculinity, regard women as an object of sexuality and house of reproduction. Interestingly another pastoral community the Bhotiyas show opposite traits in gender relationships. The Bhotiya women enjoy equality in almost all spheres of life (Channa, 2020). The migrated tribal community in Lakshadweep is matrilineal and enjoy equal status and power. But the several anthropologists argue that even in matrilineal societies men are treated as ambivalent and enjoy real authority over almost all spheres of life. Nongbri (2016) is in view that the Khasi women are treated as weak sex, physically and intellectually inferior to men. Even the women of settled agriculturist tribes like Gonds, Mundas and Santals, enjoy liberty in marriage and labour (Carrin, 2007).

### **Developmental Dynamics of culture and gender:**

We have a general perception that in tribal societies the gender relationship is more liberal than in non-tribal societies. But this is partly true. As the movement of the tribal women is comparatively less restricted so this type of perception is developed. Actually, in a subsistence economy men and women equally work to earn wages that is the probable reason for their unrestricted movements. Today development induced displacement, urbanisation, mainstreaming in society has a deep impact on gender roles and relationships among tribal communities (Mohanty, 2011). With the introduction of urbanisation, land property relations are changing. In this context, the relation is pushed from community ownership to individual ownership. Men emerge as primary workers and owners of the property which leads to greater control over women. Moreover, restrictions over women become more rigid specially among the modernised urban tribal community by imitating the norms of the majority non-tribal community. The process of Sanskritization which got momentum after independence is marked with the onset of early marriage of the women, discouraging widow remarriage and divorce (Roy Burman, 1988). The tribes who are converted to Christianity or other religions have adopted the culture, rituals of a new religion (Sachchidananda, 1988). This conversion has significantly changed the gender role and relationships. For example, among the tribes converted to Christianity the ritual of taking bride price is now discontinued. Further, the tribal women who are converted to Christianity can worship the god along with their husband which was restricted in their original community. At the same time, various restrictions have been imposed on them by the church as ethics and regulations. Christianity also gives access to modern education to the tribal women. Cases are not rare that now well-educated tribal people even marry non-tribal individuals. The change in earning a livelihood most magnificently describes the changes. From food gathering to a producer, from shifting to settled agriculture, from forage to a white-collar job have introduced cultural dynamism which in turn also affect the gender role and relationship. Acculturation and integration into the mainstream, coming in contact with the complex cultures transformed the gender roles. The militant insurgency

and drug peddling have shattered society and changed the gender role in Nagaland, Manipur. Apart from their household work and economic activities they have to advocate for peace and security (Dzuvichu, 2012).

In addition to this, industrialization has wreaked havoc on gender relations. Immediately after independence the Government of India emphasised rapid industrialization as the mode of development. Mining activities are increased on large scale. These processes of non-inclusive development wreak havoc on the tribal societies specially on the women. Dispossessed from their land without or meagre compensation, the tribal communities lost their cultural identity (Mahana, 2019). The insecure livelihood affected their gender role and relations. Their voice was silenced by the state machinery and corporate bureaucrats. Massive and large-scale mining cause displacement of tribal of their traditional habitat resulted in loss of livelihood, inaccess to forest, water bodies. Displacement also shattered their sociocultural structure (Narasimham & Subbarao, 2018). As they migrated from their original habitat, they lost their community resource management. Several indigenous families in Talcher have been displaced from their communities without being properly compensated. Women now work in the forest products and fuelwood industry from early morning to late at night. The tribal women of the Kolar mine region now have to travel 100-150 kilometres each day to work as labour and maids in cities because their husbands lost their jobs when the mine was closed down. Mining projects alone have displaced approximately 10 million people, with women accounting for 40% of those relocated (Sahoo, 2015).

### **Globalization and dynamics of culture and gender:**

The consumer driven globalization shifts the societies from local to global. The role of government was changed from welfare government to corporate government resulting in drastic cut down of funds for welfare of the people. The GDP of the country is increased but at the cost of tribal people. The tribal people even often blamed as against the process of development. The media also project them as ignorant, primitive and least civilised. In the era of globalization, the tribal women are subjected to multi-layered sufferings in any existing socioeconomic context (De, 2014). The effect of globalization diminished their traditional culture and changed gender roles leaving deep impact on gender relations too (Hazra, 2021). The introduction of modern technologies and equipment are not always in favour of tribal women. Earlier tribal women collect forest products and fuelwood and sell in the market. As the profit is kept them so they enjoy some sort of economic empowerment. But with the introduction of bi-cycle and improved other modes of transport, tribal men are going to market results in the loss of economic liberty of tribal women (Rao, 2004). Drinking traditional liquor like 'Haria', Chang' or 'Mar' on normal days and in the festive season are part of traditional tribal life. But with the introduction of country liquor or foreign liquor, the cases of alcohol addiction among the tribal people are increasing. They have started spending the maximum portion of their hard-earned money on consuming liquor. Even now cases are registered about the beating of a tribal wife in an intoxicated condition by her husband. This changing pattern of liquor consumption proves to be havoc on gender relationships. With the shift towards private

property ownership, now the Naga tribal women are excluded from the inheritance of property. In the name of tradition and ethnicity patriarchy is imposed against feminine interests (Zehol, 1988). Even though the law was made in 2006 for ensuring 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in municipalities but it was ultimately implemented in 2012 due to strong resistance from the Naga males (Dzuvichu, 2012).

Witch-hunting is a centuries-old phenomenon that is presently on the rise at an alarming rate. Widows who held sole claim to their deceased husband's lands are particularly vulnerable to witch-hunting (Kelkar & Dev, 1993). Witch-hunting is fairly common in Assam, which is mostly due to cultural tension over globalisation, a lack of education, and, of course, the socio-economic factor (Neogi, 2021). Even though it has become substantially less common over time, it is still practised in West Bengal. Not just women, but even men, have been accused of witchcraft ("Campaign against 'Witch-Hunting' to Be Stepped up in Bengal," 2012). Some tribes have even been forced to sell their women and girls. The disintegration of tribal lifeworlds, loss of livelihood, displacement, and knowledge systems have a significant impact on gender relations, with women being the most vulnerable (Alam & Raj, 2018).

Generally, the marriage age of tribal women is decently normal in the prescribed limit. But instances are coming out that several tribal communities are now opting for giving marriage of their girl child at the age of 13-14. It is increasing at an alarming rate specially among tribal communities who are residing near or within the urban centre. With the loss of their habitat and traditional livelihood earnings, girl children are now treated as a burden to the family. Actually, the process of globalization heavily impacted tribal socio economic and cultural structure. It pushed the indigenous people towards further marginalization and powerlessness (Pushplata, 2019).

### **Field survey outcome:**

Even their traditional culture is fading away due to uprooting from their original habitat. A survey among the Lodhas residing in chakdaha block, West Bengal; the Mundas living in Muragacha Gram Panchayet, WB and the Oraons living in Baidyapur Gram Panchayet, WB reveal some shocking fact. The Lodhas and the Mundas living in urban or semi-urban setups give marriage to their daughter in childhood because of livelihood insecurity. In a field survey conducted among the semi urbanised tribal communities residing in Nadia district and North 24pgs district of West Bengal, it has been found that semi-urbanised tribal girls are now even married to a non-tribal person without any second thought. Even they are not allowed to prepare their traditional liquor 'Haria' which led them to consume country liquor or foreign liquor. The consumption of foreign liquor creates tensions within the family and cases are increasing at alarming rate specially among the Mundas where women and children are beaten up regularly for protesting against this.

Among the three tribes under study specially the women from the Lodhas and the Munda tribe forced to work as daily wage labour in different sector. At least 5 cases are found where the Munda women get married to non-tribal persons living in other states and most worrying fact is that

they don't know whereabouts and present condition of these women. In all three tribal communities the women compel to work as daily wage labourer to earn their livelihood leaving the children in the hands of elderly people. Earlier they used to do household work and look after their children. But the socioeconomic distress has changed their role. Thus, displacement and migration shattered the traditional gender role and relationship of tribal women.

### **Conclusions:**

Culture determines gender role and relationship in every society. On the other hand, cultural mutation has been observed due to external socioeconomic forces. The tribal societies are also no exception of it. Indiscriminate industrialisation, urbanisation, mining activities and other development projects not only displaced the tribal community of the country but at the same time wreaks havoc on their sociocultural aspects. It is needless to say that negative cultural changes, forced acculturation adversely affect the gender role and relationship. The tribal women are worst victim of so-called development. Displacement and dispossession further marginalized the tribal women. Starvation and malnutrition are now a common feature among the tribal women. In the name of development, their life, livelihood and economic empowerment is fading away. The wrong notion of development based on the principle of economic growth make the dream of every tribal woman that living with dignity and liberty become a nightmare. The spread of education, socioeconomic empowerment of tribal women can be instrumental to prevent adverse impact of development. Inclusive developmental projects, pro-tribal approach, securing their livelihood and make them stakeholder of planning process are few steps towards preservation of tribal culture and prevention of further deterioration of gender role and relations.

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