

TRIBAL WOMEN IN KERALA-A CHANGING CONCEPT IN MODERN SCENARIO

Dr.HaseenaV.A*

ABSTRACT

Scheduled Tribes in India are generally considered to be 'Adivasis,' meaning indigenous people or original inhabitants of the country. The tribes have been confined to low status and are often physically and socially isolated instead of being absorbed in the mainstream Hindu population. Psychologically, the Scheduled Tribes often experience passive indifference that may take the form of exclusion from educational opportunities, social participation, and access to their own land. All tribal communities are not alike. They are products of different historical and social conditions. They belong to different racial stocks and religious backgrounds and speak different dialects. Discrimination against women, occupational differentiation, and emphasis on status and hierarchical social ordering that characterize the predominant mainstream culture are generally absent among the tribal groups. Adivasis are not as a general rule regarded as unclean or polluted in the same way as the Scheduled Caste population is perceived by the mainstream culture. However, the mainstream Hindu population considers the general tribal population as primitive, technologically backward, and illiterate. Since the 16th century, the tribes have been perceived as sub-humans who live under primitive conditions. Scheduled Tribe population represents one of the most economically impoverished and marginalized groups in India. Although Scheduled Tribes are a minority, they constitute about 8.2 % of the total population in India, or 85 million people in absolute number. The Scheduled Tribes are not discriminated against in the same way by the mainstream Hindu population as the Scheduled Caste population in India. While the latter group belongs to the lowest hierarchy of social order and is often considered impure or unclean, the Scheduled Tribes have, for the most part, been socially distanced and living outside the mainstream Hindu society.

Key words: Scheduled Tribes, impoverishment, alienation, mainstream population.

* Assistant Professor, Post Graduate Department of Economics, M.E.S Asmabi College, P.Vemballur, Pin 680671

In most of the tribal societies in Kerala women enjoy equal status with men and are the cornerstone of the social structure of the tribal societies. Tribal women enjoy certain economic and social equalities and are equal partners in family and conjugal rights. But they do not enjoy pre-marital freedom. Even though they have an important position in tribal society, they are debarred from exercising power over land, performing poojas, sacrifices and other customary religious practices. They also do not hold any properties as these are always vested with the males. Though these tribal women enjoy some freedom with regard to marriage and family as compared to other societies in Kerala, they are marginalised in the socioeconomic and political spheres of life. Even tribal women who belong to matrilineal societies do not enjoy a superior position than those belonging to patrilineal societies. Due to the impact of modernization and influence of non-tribal societies on tribal societies, women are losing the socioeconomic and cultural positions that they enjoyed earlier. In many socioeconomic characteristics, the tribal women lag behind tribal men (Aerthayil, 2008): literacy rate (illiteracy rate was 32% for men and 41% for women); education at the school level for boys was higher than for girls; and there are more widows (10%) than widowers (2%). About 45% of women were unemployed, whereas only 32% of the men were unemployed. The average pay for men was Rupees 68 whereas for women, it was Rupees 40. In the context of frequent price rise of essential commodities, the unequal pay for man and women leads to a lesser quality of life for women (Aerthayil, 2008: 136). Aerthayil (2008) concluded that women are not economically independent as they used to be since they do not get enough work or equal pay. The forest produce used to be a source of income, especially for women in olden times, but they are deprived of such source of income because forests have either been or strict laws have been enforced for the existing ones. The Paniyas and Adiyans are suffering from severe structural backwardness in terms of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. Therefore, the crucial problems which the tribal communities face today in Wayanadu is not empowerment, rather issues that are more fundamental such as illiteracy, poor health, poverty, and lack of land holdings, unemployment, and cultural diffusion (Lukose, 2004). However, since women empowerment closely interacts with these socioeconomic realities, it cannot be studied in isolation. Developing a systematic knowledge base for empowerment needs of tribal women in India for their greater community participation is a critical need for designing developmental, health and welfare programmes and policies in the

country (Justin and others, 2009). The present study was designed from within these socio-economic contexts where tribal women live; thereby exploring their specific empowerment needs social problems and level of community participation. The problem under the study was conceptualised within the theoretical framework proposed by Amin and others (1998). This model is a three component model of women empowerment along with the political empowerment of women (Handy and Kassam, 2006). Empowerment was measured in four domains namely, the inter-spouse consultation index, personal autonomy index, the authority index and political index. The current study also measured levels of empowerment needs, experience of social problems in terms of severity of difficulties and dissatisfaction in social life and quality of community life.

Conceptualizing women empowerment

The concept of empowerment has been the subject of much intellectual discourse and analysis. According to the United Nations (2001), empowerment is defined as the process by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Thus, it is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability has previously been denied. Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as ‘the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them’. Almost all definitions of women’s empowerment include some reference to an expansion of choice and freedom to make decisions and take the actions necessary to shape life-outcomes. The core elements of empowerment have been defined as agency (the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them), awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem and self-confidence. Empowerment can take place at a hierarchy of different levels — individual, household, community and societal — and is facilitated by providing encouraging factors (for example, exposure to new activities, which can build capacities) and removing inhibiting factors (for example, lack of resources and skills). Two vital processes have been identified as important for empowerment. The first is social mobilisation and collective agency, as poor women often lack the basic capabilities and self-confidence to counter and challenge existing disparities and barriers against them. Often, change agents are needed to catalyse social mobilisation consciously. Second, the process of social mobilisation needs to be accompanied and complemented by economic security. As long as the disadvantaged suffer from economic deprivation and livelihood insecurity, they will not be in a position to mobilise. The effects of

women empowerment create a powerful influence on family, community norms, values, and finally the laws that govern these communities. Women’s empowerment is the restoration to individuals of a sense of their own values, strength, and their own capacity to handle life’s problems. Household and inter-familial relations is the pivotal focus in the measurement of the level of women empowerment including political participation. Women’s empowerment is distinct from the empowerment of other disadvantaged or socially excluded groups because, first, women are not just one among several disempowered sub-populations; instead, they are ‘a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlap each of these other groups’. Second, women’s disempowerment is caused and reinforced through household and family relations much more than what is true for the disempowerment of other socially disadvantaged groups. Hence, the current study measured the tribal women’s empowerment needs in the areas of personal autonomy, family decision making, and domestic consultation within household and political process.

Table 1
General aspects of tribal women’s life

Variable Level	Attributes	Frequency	Percent
Respondents’ Tribe	Irula	30	60
	Muduga	20	40
Husband’s tribe	Irula	30	60
	Muduga	20	40
Occupation	Domestic helpers	10	20
	Home makers	20	40
	Daily wage earners	20	40
Marital status	Married	42	84
	Widowed	6	12
Type of marriage	Arranged by family	10	20
	Self arranged	40	80
Principal helper	Husband	5	10
	Siblings	5	10
	Self	30	60
	Husbands family	10	20

Personal Autonomy

The personal autonomy measures women’s independence from their husbands in decision making, including their physical movements outside house and spending some money on their own. Both these constructs are related to the patriarchal Indian society where these roles are traditionally dominated by males. These constructs were measured in five items spread over women’s freedom to visit parental homes, a hospital or clinics, village market, help a relative with money, and set some money aside for personal use indicating highly limited personal autonomy enjoyed by the study population.

Table 2
Personal Autonomy enjoyed by the Tribal Women

Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Personal autonomy		
Family decision index		
Domestic consultation		
Political freedom		

Family Decision Making

The domain represents women’s decision-making power over some important aspects of family life, which are generally undertaken in traditional patriarchal families by male members. Seven items spread over the areas of decision making on children’s education, family planning, family’s daily expenditure, seeking help, entertaining guests, and buying respondents’ favourite items were measured. The survey revealed that tribal women enjoy low level of decision making power over the important aspects of family life. Consistent with quantitative results, tribal men often have final say in the decision making process in family affairs though women are consulted at different levels in family decision making. Many women lack the critical power to influence their husbands, which may be better attributed to women’s disadvantageous position in the male dominated social structure where they are treated as subordinates.

Domestic Consultation

The domestic consultation signifies the extent to which husbands consult their wives in household affairs. Tribal women are consulted by their husbands in the contexts where they decide to buy household furniture and utensils, land for home, spending for education of children, medical treatment for the family, buying respondents' clothes, children's clothes and daily food indicating a moderate level of consultation in domestic affairs from the side of husbands. As compared to other spheres of tribal women's empowerment — such as personal autonomy, family decision making and political empowerment, women enjoy relatively better position in domestic consultation.

Political Empowerment

Measuring women's awareness on political issues and participation in the political process was critical in the context of reservations they enjoy through legislations in India, where they enjoy reserved seats in elected bodies. Tribal women's political empowerment was measured in five items that spread over voting decision, awareness about the political issues of their local areas, participation in public protest, and campaigning for the political candidate and contesting for political office. There is a critical need for empowerment initiatives for the tribal women. Subsequent qualitative exploration revealed that women's decision is influenced in a greater level by husband's political orientation and will, even though the confidential nature of voting procedure occasionally helps tribal women to vote for the candidate of their choice. Tribal women have little involvement in the political process and they hardly participate in any political or social protests. But some women are empowered enough to decide on whom to vote for by themselves, in spite of pressure exerted by their own husbands and other local political leaders. However, none of the participants who participated in in-depth interviews could articulate their awareness about the political issues of their area or participated in political actions such as *dharnas* and processions.

Difficulties and Dissatisfaction in Social Life

Table 3

Domains of Social Life

Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Housing	13	26
Work	6	12
Household activities	8	16
Marriage	5	10
Family of origin	5	10
Friends and neighbours	6	12
Relatives	2	4
Children	2	4
Current living status	1	2
Others	2	4

Social problems were measured in terms of the extent of dissatisfaction and difficulties associated with various domains of social life of tribal women who were traditionally married and were living with their spouses.

Table 4

Quality of community life

	Frequency	Percent
Relationship with colleagues	2	4
Community efforts for sanitation	6	12
Support of relatives	10	20
Support of family	5	10
Support of neighbours	6	12
Support of friends	4	8
Medical and other facilities	3	6
Social contact and community information	4	8
Law and order problem	8	16
Caste and Religion	2	4

The difficulties and dissatisfaction associated to various domains of social life were shown significant correlations.

Social Problems and Community Life

Social contacts and community information has shown an inverse relationship with a direction that less social contacts and community information lead to high difficulties and dissatisfaction in financial status of informants. The domain of work was inversely correlated with community efforts for sanitation with a direction that higher the difficulties and dissatisfaction associated with work, less the amount of initiatives taken by community members for sanitation. Similar significant negative correlation was found between the domain of work and access to medical and other community facilities. High family support the informants receive, less the difficulties and dissatisfaction in relationship with children. Support of friends was negatively correlated to experience of social discrimination. The difficulties and dissatisfaction in work was positively correlated with informants' relations with their colleagues. Better the families' neighbours' supports available better the relations with colleagues.

Conclusion

To conclude, the overall results reiterate the importance of empowerment initiatives for better satisfaction and fewer difficulties in community life thereby promoting the quality of community life. Promoting and self-help and social support groups and meeting their capacity building needs to take up leadership, management of group activities, including micro credit programmes are the critical programme needs. Such programmes initiated at community groups' level may produce a trickledown effect into the interfamilial spheres and enhance and empower tribal women in long run.

REFERENCES

Amin, R.,: Becker, S. and Bayes, A. 1998, NGO Promoted Microcredit Program and Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh: Quantitative and Qualitative Evidences, *Journal of Developing Areas*, 32(2), 222–236.

Aerthayil, M.: 2008, *Impact of Globalization on Tribals in the Context of Kerala*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute and Rawat Publications.

Batliwala, S. : 1994, The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concept from Action. In F. Sen, A. Germainn and L.C. Chen (Eds.), *Populace Polices Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 127–138.

Bisnath, S. and: Elson, D. 1999, Women's Empowerment Revisited. Background Paper for Progress of the World Women 2000. from <http://www.undp.org/unifem/progressww//empower/html>. Retrieved December 2, 2004.

Bush, R.B. and: Folger, J. 1994, *The Promise of Mediation*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Corney, R.H. and: Clare, A.W.1985, The Construction, Development and Testing of a Self-Report Questionnaire to Identify Social Problems, *Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 15(3), 637–647. IJSW, 71(2), 243–266, April 2010 *Tribal Mothers in Kerala (India)* **263**.

Datta, R. : 2003, Development to Empowerment: The Self Employed Women's Association in India, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 16(3), 351–368.

Handy, F. and: Kassam, M.,2006, Practice What you Preach? The Role of Rural NGOs in Women's Empowerment, *Journal of Community Practice*, 14(3), 69–91.

Hashemi, S.M., : Schuler, S.R. and Riley, A.,1996 Rural Credit Programs and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh, *World Development*, 24(4), 635–653. Indian Council for :Medical Research,1994,Quality of Community Life Questionnaire, New Delhi.

Kabeer, N. :2001,Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerments. In *Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice*, (SIDA Studies No. 3), Stockholm: Novum Grafiska.

Kishor, S.: 1995 Autonomy and Egyptian Women: Findings from the1988 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, *Occasional Paper 2*, Calverton: Macro International, Inc.

Lukose, K.:2004, A Study on the Psychosocial Problems of Tribal Unwed Mothers of Wayanadu, Kerala (Unpublished), HiLDA Trust.

Malhotra, A. and :Mather. M.1997, Do Schooling and Work Empower Women in Developing Countries? Gender and Domestic Decisions in Sri Lanka. *Sociological Forum*, 12(4), 599–629.

Malhotra, A. and: Schuler, S.2005, Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development. In D. Narayan (Ed.), *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 71–88.

Mathur, R.P.G.:1996, Encyclopaedia of Dravidian Tribes. *International School of Dravidian Linguistics*, Volume 1, 87 89. Micro-credit Summit: 1997 Declaration and Plan of Action, Washington.

Mosedale, S. : 2005, Assessing Women's Empowerment: Towards a Conceptual Framework, *Journal of International Development*, 17(2), 243–257.

Narasimhan, S. : 1994 *Empowering Women: An Alternative Strategy for Rural India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications. Page, N. and Czuba, C. : 1999 Empowerment: What is it? *Journal of Extension*, 37(5), 1–5.

Surva Shiksha : Abhiyan,2007, *Tribal Development Plan*, New Delhi: Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resources , Development.,l