

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

Mr Kukheswar Borah

Assistant Professor, Sissiborgaon College, Dibrugarh University, Assam

ARTICLE INFO.

Keywords: Socio-economic status, tribal women, discrimination.

Abstract

The term "Tribe originated around the time of the Greek city states and the early formation of the Roman Empire. The Latin term "Tribe "has been since been transformed to mean "A group of person forming a community and climbing descent from a common ancestor".

The range of meaning however, has grown even further over the intervening years, for example- Any of various systems local villages, bands, districts, linages, or other group and sharing a common ancestor, languages, culture and name.

Tribes are a racial group, a particular class of people who live primarily in the highlands and forest. They are really simple innocent, and primitive. Every tribe has its own way of living, including a culture, artistic tradition habits and customs. (Pattanayak, D. 2007)

In India, the tribes are both indigenous and inhabitants, they grow in the intimacy of the social atmosphere of his community. Tribes close association with nature inspires him to lead a carefree life. They feel pleasure in roaming about hills, forests and fields. Nature makes him intimate with the environment. They often meets friends and visit occasion and in periodical new relation and association with people. (Pankaj A.K.)

Since history, tribe women have faced problems on basis of two aspects, first one is Caste Discrimination is the social evil. Various legal measures are being implemented to eliminate caste discrimination. However, caste discrimination could not be stopped. This discrimination is still practiced in the society till today. Second one is gender discrimination and women are not treated equally to men. Women are treated as inferior to men and they do not even get their basic rights. Their rights are denied by men. In these backgrounds the studies tries to investigate historical perspectives of tribal and women and to understand socio-economic status of tribal in Assam.

<http://www.gospodarkainnowacje.pl/> © 2026 LWAB.

Introduction:- The tribal population in India numerically constitutes a small segment of the total population of the country, but is significant part of the population. According to 2001 census data, the total population of Scheduled Tribes constitutes 8.2% of the total population of the country. The tribal population in India though a numerically small minority, represents an enormous diversity, common

culture and at the same time vary in different aspects like the size of the population, modes of making a livelihood, level of development, social stratification etc.

Adivasi is a collective term for the tribes of the Indian sub-continent, who are considered to be the indigenous people of India. Tribes consist of a group of families who are bound together by kinship, usually descending, from a common mythical or legendary ancestor and who live in a common dialect and have a common history.

The Scheduled Tribes, who are also referred to as ‘Adivasis’ meant original inhabitants. For long periods of history, the tribes were always socially and geographically isolated. In the constitution of India, article 366 (25) defines scheduled tribes as ‘Such tribes are tribal communities or part of own groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be the scheduled tribes (ST) for the purposes of this constitutions.

The status of tribal women can be judged mainly by the roles they play in society, their roles are determined to a large extent through the system of descent the families try to pass their property by the line of descent. The family surnames too are traced on the basis of the system of descent.

Objectives:-

The main objectives of this paper—

- (1) To identify and find out the socio-economic status of tribal women in India.
- (2) To analyze the challenges faced by tribal women.
- (3) To suggest some strategies for handling the challenges faced by tribal women in India.

Methodology:-

This is a theoretical research paper, where secondary information produced by different authors and researchers has been used. For obtaining necessary information, various books, journals as well as websites have been explored by the researcher which has been mentioned in the reference section.

Review of literature:-

There are a good number of studies explaining the causes and consequences of backwardness and the low social-economic status of tribal women. Such studies are related to a general enquiry on women exploitation and dependency. The studies have identified lack of education, absence of skill and training, lack of property rights, social isolation and segregation and male control over resources and reproductive rights as responsible for women disempowerment.

Awias (2009) explained through his work that tribal women play a major role in the co-management of natural, social, economic resources and crop production, livestock production horticulture but they remain backward because their traditional values, illiteracy, superstitions, indecision making, social evils, and many other cultural factors.

Summary:-

The term status means position of a person in a society. Status has been defined by the R. Linton (1936) as ‘a position in a social system. The term role is closely linked to the notion of status. It refers to the behaviour expected of people in a status. The status of a person or a group in a society is determined mainly by the educational status, health status, employment status and decision making ability. All these factors are related to one another.

The status of women in a society depends to a large extent on the social and types of society. In India social context, there is a predominant of patriarchal family structure where males predominance in all settings and social context.

Tribal women in India are hardworking then tribal men and they contribute significantly towards their

family income, but their income generating sources are limited. Low income necessitates more hands in labour as a result they are reluctant to send their children to formal schools. Status of women varies in different societies. The conceptual framework to analyze women's status comprise the seven roles women play in life and work, i.e. parental, conjugal, domestic, kin, occupation, community and as an individual. In order to appraise the social status of a women in these diverse ecological areas, the findings have been divided in to subsequent categories; (a) a girl; daughter; an unmarried women (b) a married women (c) a widow (d) divorce, and € a barren women. Role of women is not only of important in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. The tribal women work very hard, in some cases even more than the men. All the tribal societies in the study area are patriarchal in which are dominant in public sector. In the world women have a freedom and a self-expression with the onset of development programmes economic changes are taking place but tribal women remain traditional in their dress, language, tools and resources, because they grow food crops rather than cash crops characterized by sharp, gender disparities, although women's status varies considerably by region. Modernization is bringing changes which affect men and women differently. India as a whole is on virtually all frontiers of human societal pursuits-economic, educational, scientific, legal, political, official and religious sphere Indian women suffer profoundly. For all time there are social-cultural factors, which validate for the status of women in particular society. Gender roles are socially constructed. The family structure in India is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Patriarchy denotes a culture of power relationship that promotes man's supremacy and women subjugation. The Indian tribal family organization makes discrimination between the sexes. It promotes a hierarchy of classification in which man centered issues take dominance where as women derive their personalities from their fathers, husband, brothers, and sons with a secondary status women play but a submissive role in social life. Despite several economic, political and social changes, women are still far behind.

The socio-economic status of women in tribal societies can vary depending on the society and the individual, but it often includes a combination of factors such as—

Inheritance rights:-In matrilineal societies, women often have inheritance rights and privileges that are not present in patriarchal societies.

Work participation:-Tribal women often have a higher work participation rate than non-tribal women. They are often involved in agricultural activities, pastoral work, handicrafts and sometimes as industrial labourers.

Discrimination: - Some studies claim that tribal women face less discrimination than women in Hindu caste societies. However, other studies claim that tribal women face discrimination within their own societies.

Isolation: - Tribal women can be isolated from the mainland in terms of education, employment, and health facilities.

Livelihood: - The tribal people often do not have a regular source of income and live below the poverty level.

Decision Making:- Marital status and age can affect a women's level of autonomy in a community. For example, widows and unmarried women often have more decision-making power than married women.

Socio-economic status (SES) is a board term that encompasses income, educational attainment, financial security, and perception of social status and social class.

Low income:-Tribal women often live below the poverty line and lack a regular source of income.

Low educational level:-Tribal women often have low levels of education, which can lead to low awareness levels and a lack of attention to basic health conditions.

Reluctance to send children to school:-Low income means that families need more hands to help, so tribal women are often reluctant to send their children to school.

However, tribal women do play an important role in their communities, and often have a higher work participation rate than non-tribal women.

However, among many tribal communities, pre-dominance of matriarchal families could be found. Contrary to patriarchal societies, status of women is found to be higher in matriarchal families. Various studies (Mitra, 2007; burman Roy,2012) have suggested that the Garo and Khasi tribes of the North-East India assign relatively higher position to women due to the system of matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence and inheritance of property through the female line. But other tribal communities which follow patriarchal norms, the status of women is not as high as it is in matriarchal societies. For some other tribes, such as, Ho Gond, the husband does not always enjoy a dominant role. Gond women enjoys equal status with their male counterparts in many aspects of their social life. A study on the Naga women by Hutton(1921) indicated that they have sustainable freedom and higher social status, this indicate that the status of tribal women are not same in all places, rather they vary according to their tribal group and the social structure. However, in tribal societies, tribal women are more important than man in any other social groups, because tribal women's are very hardworking and in almost all the tribal communities they participate in economic activities almost equal with men or works harder than men and the family economy and income also depend on women. Status is also determined by health conditions. The tribal group's health status is lower compared to that of the general population. They have high infant mortality rate, higher fertility rate. Lack of awareness regarding diseases and health care, drinking water provisions hygiene. In many parts of India tribal population suffers from chronic infections and water borne diseases, deficiency diseases, incidence of infant mortality was found to be very high among some of the tribes. Malnutrition is common among them and it has affected the general health of the tribal children.

Industrialization and urbanization has brought about a change in the life and living of the tribal's by uprooting them from their day to day activities and making them dependent on the vagaries of non-tribal. Chowdhuri (1988) attempted to examine the socio-economic condition of the scheduled tribe women in west Bengal in a comparative setting with scheduled caste and non-scheduled women. The main findings were that only 5.01 percent of scheduled tribe females were noted as literate in comparison to scheduled caste women who were 13.70 percent and non-scheduled population was 37.43 percent. The tribal women in the North-East were famous for their weaving skills. Almost every tribal girl used to learn weaving at home. The usually used to learn weave in their leisure time and for self-consumption. Each textile used to portray a certain history of the respective tribes. But now with commercialization of the products, the women have lost control over the designs as the market has come to be the decisive factor.

Tribal women as such enjoy very little control over immovable property. They hardly ever inherit land, particularly in the patrilineal societies. Among the Khasis as well, it is mainly the youngest daughter or "Khadduh" as she is locally known, who inherits the house and property, the tribal women generally inherit the ornaments from the mother.

(Kelkar and Devathan: 1993) Lalhriatpuli (2010) writes about the Mizo women in Mizoram that they were extremely discriminated against with regard to the inheritance of property as they were never given rights over the landed property. It is, however, seen that there is no son in the family. The family property including ancestral home should go to the nephew of the father. The pigs, goats and chicken too are owned by her.

Women among some of the tribes of the North-east are very proficient in doing business. The sale proceeds of the domesticated animals are retained by the housewife and she makes purchases of her own liking when visiting her parental home. Women are also adapting at selling fruits and forest

products in the weekly markets. Vegetables and horticultural products are usually sold by them in the markets.

The status of the tribal women usually depends on the economic roles they play. The tribal in the past were usually forest dwellers and their livelihood to a great extent depended on the food-gathering economy. More than the men, the women walked long distances to fetch wood and fodder. Besides, they also collected fruits, roots and tubers, lac, gums and leaves for self-consumption and sale. The men also complemented them by collecting timber and logs. They claimed the trees to shake down the fruits that were gathered on the ground by women. As there has been large scale deforestation, women have to slog harder to retain the gathering economy. Choudhary (2010) observes that in the tribal areas of Betul in Madhya Pradesh collecting and marketing of firewood is generally the domain of tribal women. They sell it at sahpur and whatever income they have, they immediately spend it on meeting the basic requirements such as rice, pulse, edible oil, soap, detergent power, tobacco, bidi and so on.

In many parts of the country, swidden cultivation or slash and burn cultivation or Jhum cultivation, as it is called in the North-east was in vogue. Boserup calls Swidden cultivation as a women's enterprise since it is they who almost entirely managed the show. While the man mainly felled the trees and spread them around on the ground to dry before collectively kindling fire, it is the women who were engaged in broad casting the seeds, weeding and harvesting.

Occupation of tribal women:-

In the past employment of women was almost unthinkable. It was not liked by the society. If any women dared take up a job, she was invariably a subject of social criticism and contempt and she was not considered a good woman. The people thought that an employed woman lacked virtue and dignity. In the meantime, a great change has taken place in the attitude of society towards employed women. Similarly, employment far from inviting dishonor is a good source not only of income but also of social prestige personal satisfaction. They feel that one income is generally not enough to satisfy the basic needs of the family. The economic condition of the family greatly improves if family members get employed add to family income. An educated and employed woman feels that she has some prestige in the society and other listen to her with dignity. Moreover, she has some sense of satisfaction that her education is not a waste and she is not useless for the family and the society.

It has been acknowledged that in poor communities, each member of the family has to contribute his or her mite to the economic activities. Among tribe's woman is an important contributor. The tribal women possess greater economic independence and freedom of movement, than their counterpart in non-tribal societies cannot be disputed. Tribal women are as adept at agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry etc. as their male counterpart. The tribal female is an overworked person and is conservative by nature. The overwhelming majority of rural women work in agricultural sector, cultivators and marginal farmers and agricultural labours. Employment is the deciding factor by way of which equality of life of people can be measured, WPR's as per. (IHDR 1999 based on HOI survey).

Strategies for promoting a change in the status of tribal women in India:-

As it has been pointed out, low levels of economic activity and living conditions below the poverty level is a major problem faced by the tribal women. A practical way of dealing with this problem can be provided skills and training to women who help them in building up of self-help groups. Awareness can be created through effort to empower these women, various NGO's can come forward to provide necessary training which will help them in becoming empowered and generate livelihood. Bridge trust an NGO has been working with tribal women in areas near Mumbai for generating empowerment for them. In an article by Nidheesh, the role of the self-help groups in kerala, in empowering women have been highlighted where women work to bring about a change in their identity at the local and also beyond the local level. If the economic aspect is taken care off and awareness generated, then the tribal children can attend school which will help them to develop a strong base for their future.

Problems faced by tribal women:-

Problems faced by tribal women, the researcher wishes to explore the challenges that tribal women in particular, encounter in this section. Absence of any stable source of income, the majority of them does not have a stable source of income and live at or below the federal poverty level. Tribal people who live in rural areas engage in a variety of low-level activities in order to meet their basic requirements and supplement their income. The majority of them are involved in agricultural operation of some kind. Besides this, many of them work in agriculture, handicrafts and even as industrial labourers on rare occasions. Only a small portion of tribal men and women are employed in government related positions.

Special initiative for women:-

1. The National Commission for Women was set up in 1992 by the Indian government provide shelter to women's rights. It studies all the matters and safeguards provided in the constitution, and accordingly monitor the existing legislations.
2. To ensure reservation of one third of the total seats for women in all elected offices in local bodies, whether rural or urban.
3. The " Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" is a very significant setup administered by the women and child development Ministry, which aims at providing the advantage to all women including ST women.

Conclusion:-

It is harsh reality that tribal women continece to lag behind in many areas, despite the existence of various constitutional provisions and policies for tribe's. They also face a number of challenges. They work really hard and make a considerable contribution to the family's economic wellbeing yet they remained impoverished mostly as a result of the lack appropriate efforts directed towards their needs.

Various programmes for the development of the scheduled tribe population are implemented during the plan periods and while much progress has already been made, there is still much more that has to be done. The empowerment of tribal women through education is a critical component of development. Education is a critical tool in bringing about a shift in tribal women's cultural norms and life patterns, as well as in changing their viewpoint and enabling them to become economically independent. It would help them to organize themselves to analyze their situations and living conditions and be aware of their rights and responsibilities. Education will enable them to take up jobs, so that they can improve their situation. Social and economic status of the scheduled tribe to a large extent depends on the educational attainment. Present context, no one can remain completely isolated, but they are influenced by the growth of modern social and cultural.

Reference:-

1. Chaudhary, S.N.2010, Tribal Economy at Cross Roads, New Delhi; Rawat.
2. Report of the expert committee on tribal Health by Ministry of Tribal health and Family Welfare, Tribal Health in India.