



Women Empowerment in Tribal Society: A Case Study of Purulia District, West Bengal

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Abstract:

Empowerment of women is crucial for achieving gender equality and social progress, especially in tribal societies where traditional customs and socio-economic backwardness hinder women's participation in development. This research explores the status and process of women empowerment in the tribal society of Purulia District, West Bengal. Utilizing a qualitative and quantitative mixed-method approach, this case study examines the educational, economic, and socio-political dimensions of empowerment among tribal women. The findings reveal both significant progress and persistent challenges. Recommendations focus on context-specific policy measures to ensure holistic empowerment through education, livelihood programs, and political participation.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Tribal society, Gender equality, Social progress, Traditional customs, Livelihood,

1. Introduction:

Empowerment of women remains a central issue in the discourse of development, especially in marginalized communities such as tribal societies. In India, tribal women often experience dual marginalization—first, as members of indigenous communities and second, as women in patriarchal structures. The tribal-dominated Purulia district of West Bengal represents a microcosm of these challenges and opportunities.

Purulia, located in the western fringe of West Bengal, is predominantly rural and has a significant population belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs), including Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij communities. These communities are historically disadvantaged in terms of education, health, and employment. Despite several governmental schemes and non-governmental initiatives, tribal women in Purulia continue to face barriers in accessing opportunities and asserting their rights.

This paper investigates the multidimensional aspects of women empowerment among tribal communities in Purulia. It explores how cultural traditions, economic conditions, educational access, and political representation shape the experiences of tribal women. The study aims to identify gaps and recommend actionable measures to accelerate the empowerment process in this region.

1.1 Literature Review:

Empowerment of tribal women has been an important but under-researched area within gender and development studies. Scholars such as Nandini Sundar (2010) and Virginius Xaxa (2004) have highlighted the structural disadvantages faced by tribal populations, including land alienation, cultural marginalization, and political invisibility. In tribal societies, women play critical roles in household economies, agriculture, and community life, yet their contributions are often undervalued or rendered invisible in policy frameworks (Sharma & Joshi, 2015).

Studies in West Bengal and neighboring tribal areas show that lack of education, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and social norms limit women's mobility and decision-making power (Basu, 2017; Ghosh, 2020). However, interventions such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), education schemes (like Kanyashree), and livelihood programs under NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission) have shown positive impacts on women's agency and autonomy (Roy & Chatterjee, 2019).

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in translating policy into ground-level change. Cultural stigmas, infrastructural deficits, and political exclusion continue to obstruct tribal women's empowerment. This study contributes to the literature by providing a district-specific empirical analysis of these issues in Purulia.

1.2 Objectives:

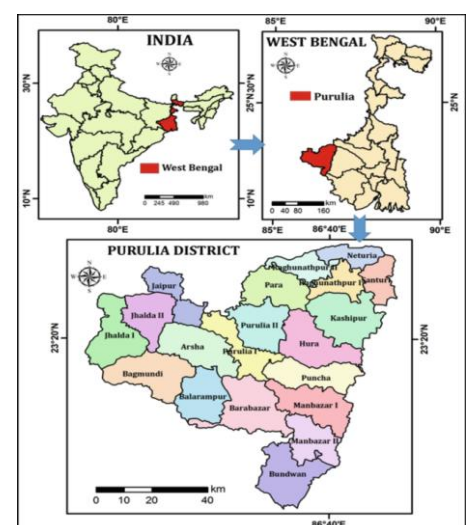
The major objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the socio-economic status of tribal women in Purulia District.
- To examine the level of educational attainment and access to education among tribal women.
- To assess the participation of tribal women in economic and livelihood activities.
- To identify the barriers to empowerment and suggest policy recommendations for sustainable development.

1.3 Study Area: Purulia is located in the western most part of the state of West Bengal. The northern, southern and western part of the district is bound by the districts of Burdwan, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur. The district lies between 22°4' North and 23°45' North latitude and 85°55' East and 86°55' East longitude. Total area of the district is 6259 sq km. The district has 28 urban units with municipalities and consists of 170 gram panchayats covering 2667 villages (census 2011).

2. Overview of Tribal Communities in study Area:

Purulia District, nestled in the western part of West Bengal, India, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, diverse topography, and vibrant tribal communities. Home to several indigenous groups, the district serves as a microcosm of India's tribal diversity, with each community contributing to the



region's unique socio-cultural tapestry. Here is an overview of some of the prominent tribal communities found in Purulia:

Santhals: One of the largest tribal communities in Purulia, the Santhals are known for their distinctive language, music, dance forms, and agricultural practices. They primarily inhabit the rural hinterlands of the district and maintain a strong connection to their ancestral lands and traditional way of life.

Mundas: The Munda tribe, known for their warrior traditions and vibrant cultural festivals, are primarily concentrated in the hilly regions of Purulia, such as the Ajodhya Hills. They have a rich oral tradition, with stories, songs, and myths passed down through generations.

Kharia: The Kharia communities, primarily found in the forested areas of Purulia, are known for their hunting and gathering practices, as well as their expertise in traditional herbal medicine. They have a deep spiritual connection to the natural environment and worship ancestral spirits.

Kherias: The Kheria tribes, also known as Kherwars, are spread across various parts of Purulia District, with a significant population residing in the western plains. They are skilled artisans, known for their bamboo and cane craft, as well as their intricate tribal jewelry.

Bhumij: The Bhumij communities, predominantly found in the central and eastern regions of Purulia, have a diverse cultural heritage influenced by both tribal traditions and mainstream Hinduism. They are known for their agricultural expertise, particularly in terraced farming practices.

These tribal communities in Purulia District exhibit a rich tapestry of cultural diversity, characterized by unique languages, customs, rituals, traditional knowledge systems, and social structures. Despite facing various socio-economic challenges, including land alienation, poverty, and limited access to education and healthcare, these communities have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of changing times.

Comparison of total population with S.T population in rural urban areas

Year	Total population	Rural	% Rural Pop	Urban	% Urban Pop	S.T population	Rural	% ST_Pop_Rural	Urban	% ST_Pop_Urban
1961	1360016	1267538	93.20%	92478	6.80%	262858	261559	99.50%	1299	0.50%
1971	1602875	14705058	91.70%	132367	8.30%	313793	311448	99.25%	2345	0.75%
1981	1853801	1687039	91%	166762	9%	348375	345442	99.15%	2933	0.85%
1991	2224577	2014571	90.60%	210006	9.40%	427766	423415	98.98%	4351	1.02%
2001	2536516	2281090	89.80%	255426	12.70%	463452	456573	98.51%	6879	1.49%
2011	2930115	2556801	87.30%	373314	12.70%	540652	531822	98.36%	8833	1.64

Source: census 2001-2011 (Govt. of India)

4. Socio-Economic Structure of tribes in Purulia District:

The socio-economic structure of tribal communities in Purulia District, West Bengal, India, is characterized by a blend of traditional livelihoods, socio-cultural practices, and contemporary challenges. Here's an overview of the key aspects:

Livelihoods: The primary livelihoods of tribal communities in Purulia are often tied to agriculture, forest-based activities, and traditional crafts. Subsistence farming, including

cultivation of rice, pulses, and vegetables, is prevalent among many tribes, with agriculture forming the backbone of their economy. Additionally, forest-based livelihoods such as hunting, gathering, and non-timber forest product collection contribute significantly to household incomes, particularly for communities residing in forested areas.

Artisanal Skills: Tribal communities in Purulia are renowned for their artisanal skills, including bamboo and cane craft, pottery, weaving, and metalwork. These traditional crafts not only serve as sources of income but also as repositories of cultural heritage, passed down through generations. However, the advent of modernization and market forces has led to challenges in sustaining these artisanal practices.

Land Tenure: Land is a crucial asset for tribal communities in Purulia, often representing not just economic value but also cultural and social significance. However, historical land alienation, inadequate land titles, and encroachment have posed challenges to land tenure security for many tribal households. Landlessness and land fragmentation are prevalent issues, impacting agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods.

Infrastructure and Connectivity: The rugged terrain and remote location of many tribal villages in Purulia pose challenges to infrastructure development and connectivity. Basic amenities such as roads, electricity, clean water, and sanitation facilities are often inadequate, hindering socio-economic development and quality of life. Improving infrastructure and connectivity is crucial for enhancing access to markets, healthcare, and educational opportunities for tribal communities.

Social Organization and Governance: Tribal communities in Purulia often have their own traditional governance systems and social institutions, based on kinship ties, village councils, and customary laws. These institutions play a vital role in mediating disputes, managing natural resources, and preserving cultural heritage.

Income Diversification: With changing socio-economic dynamics, there is a growing need for income diversification among tribal communities in Purulia. Initiatives aimed at promoting alternative livelihoods, such as eco-tourism, sustainable agriculture, handicraft marketing, and skill development programs, are being explored to supplement traditional livelihoods and enhance economic resilience.

Education and Healthcare: Access to education and healthcare remains a concern for tribal communities in Purulia. While efforts have been made to expand educational infrastructure and healthcare services in remote areas, challenges such as low literacy rates, inadequate school facilities, and limited availability of healthcare professionals persist. Cultural factors and geographical barriers further contribute to disparities in access to quality education and healthcare.

Percentage of S.T literacy rate by sex in C.D. Block (2011)

Sl. No	Name of Blocks	Literacy Rate			Gap in Male-female Literacy Rate	Literacy Rate			Gap in Male-female Literacy Rate
		TOT_LIT	LIT_M	LIT_F		ST_TOT_LIT	ST_M_LIT	ST_F_LIT	
1	Jaipur	57.94	72.06	42.8	29.26	48.02	61.27	34.01	27.26
2	Purulia-II	63.39	76.72	49.51	27.21	51.5	63.95	38.86	25.09
3	Para	65.62	79.61	50.73	28.88	60.6	75.51	44.78	30.73
4	Raghunathpur-II	67.29	80.95	52.79	28.16	56.73	71.45	41.5	29.95
5	Raghunathpur-I	67.36	78.73	55.14	23.59	50.32	63.06	37.44	25.62
6	Neturia	65.14	77.38	52.06	25.32	52.32	65.8	38.48	27.32
7	Santuri	64.15	76.32	51.45	24.87	54.95	68.26	41.68	26.58
8	Kashipur	71.06	82.83	58.91	23.92	60.88	74.13	47.73	26.4
9	Hura	68.79	81.95	55.27	26.68	60.21	74.32	46.37	27.95
10	Purulia-I	64.77	78.37	50.37	28	54.87	68.23	41.02	27.21
11	Puncha	68.14	81.16	54.82	26.34	58.81	72.92	44.85	28.07
12	Arsha	54.78	70.36	38.75	31.61	45.48	59.22	31.8	27.42
13	Jhalda-I	66.18	80.15	51.61	28.54	57.43	71.13	43.22	27.91
14	Jhalda-II	54.76	72.53	36.29	36.24	45.83	60.07	31.12	28.95
15	Bagmundi	57.17	72.14	41.42	30.72	47.18	61.23	32.82	28.41
16	Balarampur	60.4	74.18	45.82	28.36	47.08	61.18	32.62	28.56
17	Barabazar	63.27	77.84	48.37	29.47	52.59	68.04	36.86	31.18
18	Manbazar-I	63.78	77.88	49.38	28.5	56.72	71.71	41.58	30.13
19	Manbazar-II	60.27	74.64	45.76	28.88	54.51	69.59	39.46	30.13
20	Bundwan	61.38	74.61	48.03	26.58	53.73	67.44	40.23	27.21
	Total:	64.48	77.86	50.52	27.34	53.68	67.71	39.54	28.17

Source: District Census Handbook, 2011

Gender Dynamics: Gender roles and relations play a significant role in the socio-economic structure of tribal communities in Purulia. While women are often involved in agricultural activities, household chores, and traditional crafts, they may face barriers to accessing resources, decision-making, and participation in public life. Efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for inclusive socio-economic development.

5.Data Analysis:

The data collected from 150 tribal women respondents across five villages in Purulia district reveals important patterns regarding their social, educational, economic, and political status.

Educational Status:

* 39.54% of respondents are illiterate.

* 42% have completed primary education.

* Only 10% have completed secondary level and a mere 2% have attended higher education institutions.

* High dropout rates were found among girls aged 10–16 due to economic constraints, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities.

Economic Participation:

* 58% of the women are engaged in unorganized labor, mostly as agricultural laborers or forest product collectors.

* Only 12% are involved in any kind of entrepreneurship, often supported by SHGs.

* Around 40% of working women lack access to their own income due to male-controlled households.

Political Awareness:

* Only 22% of respondents are aware of their voting rights or local panchayat activities.

* Just 6% had ever attended a Gram Sabha meeting.

* Women elected as panchayat members often serve as proxies for male relatives.

Access to Government Schemes:

* 68% are beneficiaries of welfare schemes like Kanyashree, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and Public Distribution System (PDS).

* However, only 30% understood the purpose of these schemes or had direct access to benefits.

Social and Health Indicators:

* 62% of the women are married before the legal age of 18.

* 74% reported not having access to proper health facilities within 5 km of their village.

* Domestic violence and lack of mobility remain significant issues for over 50% of the respondents.

6. Findings:

- **Low Literacy and School Retention:** A majority of tribal women are either illiterate or have very basic education. Cultural norms and financial burden are major causes of early dropout.
- **Limited Economic Independence:** Even though many women work, their financial decisions are largely controlled by men in the family, reducing real economic empowerment.
- **Weak Political Representation:** Women's political participation is symbolic. Awareness of rights and direct participation in governance is minimal.
- **Inadequate Access to Services:** Health care, education, transport, and financial services are either absent or insufficient in remote tribal areas.
- **Cultural and Patriarchal Barriers:** Deep-rooted patriarchal traditions restrict tribal women's mobility, access to decision-making, and self-expression.
- **Positive Role of SHGs:** Self-help groups have played a transformative role in building confidence and generating income among women in some pockets.

7. Discussion:

The analysis indicates that while there have been policy-level efforts to empower tribal women in Purulia, the actual impact remains partial and uneven. Education continues to be the cornerstone of empowerment, yet the dropout rates remain alarmingly high due to systemic socio-cultural and economic factors. Gender roles in tribal communities, although somewhat more flexible compared to mainstream Hindu society, still restrict women's autonomy in crucial domains such as marriage, mobility, and income control.

Government schemes like MGNREGA and Kanyashree have had a positive impact, but the lack of awareness and bureaucratic inefficiencies limit their reach. Political reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has not yet translated into active leadership due to proxy practices and lack of capacity building.

Moreover, infrastructural neglect in tribal areas—such as poor roads, limited digital connectivity, and inaccessible health services—further compounds the disempowerment of women. The relatively better outcomes seen among SHG participants indicate the importance of grassroots capacity-building and peer support in driving sustainable change.

The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and poverty needs greater recognition in policy formulation. A targeted, culturally sensitive approach is required—one that combines education, health, economic security, and legal awareness with community-based interventions.

Based on the findings and discussion of your research on **"Women Empowerment in Tribal Society: A Case Study of Purulia District, West Bengal,"** here are some practical and policy-level **suggestions** to overcome the challenges faced by tribal women:

8. Suggestions:

Strengthen Educational Access and Retention: Establish more residential schools (like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas) in remote tribal villages to reduce dropout rates among girls.

Provide free transportation, sanitary facilities, and nutritional support to encourage girl child attendance.

Introduce local language-based curriculum and tribal teachers to bridge the cultural gap in education.

Promote Economic Empowerment: Expand Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with access to skill training, microcredit, and market linkages in forest produce, weaving, handicrafts, etc.

Set up women-run cooperatives for processing and selling Mahua, Lac, Sal leaves, and agricultural products.

Provide training in digital literacy and mobile banking to give women financial independence.

Increase Political Participation and Legal Awareness: Conduct leadership and legal literacy workshops for elected tribal women representatives to build capacity and confidence.

Ensure monitoring of proxy representation in Panchayats and promote active participation through community support.

Promote women's rights awareness campaigns in tribal dialects using folk media, street plays, and local radio.

Improve Health and Reproductive Services: Set up mobile health clinics in remote tribal hamlets with female healthcare workers.

Integrate maternal health, nutrition, and family planning services** with community-based schemes like Anganwadis.

Launch campaigns to eliminate child marriage and malnutrition, linked with incentives for late marriage and institutional delivery.

Strengthen Infrastructure and Connectivity: Prioritize the development of roads, electricity, and internet in tribal areas to improve access to schools, hospitals, and markets.

Create digital resource centers in villages with information on schemes, rights, and grievance mechanisms.

Encourage Community-Based Interventions: Involve tribal elders and opinion leaders in gender sensitization workshops to challenge regressive norms and practices.

Encourage male engagement programs to build gender-equitable attitudes among tribal men.

Policy Integration and Monitoring: Design a district-level integrated tribal women empowerment policy with measurable goals.

Regularly monitor the implementation of schemes like Kanyashree, MGNREGA, and NRLM through third-party audits and community scorecards.

8. Conclusion:

The case study of tribal women in Purulia District underscores the complex and layered nature of empowerment in marginalized communities. While policies aimed at improving education, economic participation, and political inclusion exist, their implementation remains inconsistent. Tribal women continue to face systemic barriers rooted in poverty, patriarchy, illiteracy, and lack of access to resources.

This research reveals that mere participation in programs is not sufficient; empowerment must be measured in terms of autonomy, agency, and awareness. Self-help groups have shown promise, but require scaling up and deeper integration with state-led programs. Strengthening grassroots leadership, ensuring access to quality education, promoting local entrepreneurship, and enhancing awareness of legal rights can significantly improve the status of tribal women.

A culturally sensitive, community-based, and intersectional policy approach is essential. Empowerment must go beyond token representation and become a tangible, lived experience for tribal women in regions like Purulia. Only then can inclusive development become a reality.

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