



## WOMEN STATUS IN TRIBAL SOCIETY

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### INTRODUCTION

#### The tribes of Karnataka

*Bhils* are adivasis of Central Indian origin. The *Bhil* tribes are divided into a number of endogamous territorial divisions, which in turn have a number of clans and lineages. Most *Bhils* now speak the language of the region they reside in. Originally hunters and soldiers, they are mostly agricultural workers with hunting and gathering remaining a significant subsidiary occupation. The *Bhil* population in Karnataka is 6,204 and are scattered in most districts of the State, more so in Uttara Kannada and Belgaum districts.

The population of *Jenu Kurubas* is 36,076 in Karnataka mostly living in the districts of Mysore, Kodagu, and Chamarajanagar. A few are also found outside the State mostly in the border forests of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Also known by the names '*Then Kurumba*' or '*Kattu Naikar*', they are members of the primitive tribal group and are now mostly occupied as daily labourers for landlords in plantations in the region. They have a close-knit community and rarely mingle with other neighbouring tribal communities. The literacy rate is 47.66 per cent. The *Kadu Kurubas* are the original inhabitants of the forests of Nagarhole and Kakanakote in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. *Kadu Kurubas* are about 11,953 in number, mostly living in Mysore, Kodagu, Chamarajanagar, and other districts of Karnataka and the remaining in the forests of Tamil Nadu. They are primarily Hindus, speaking Kannada language. The *Kammara* live in Dakshina Kannada district and Kollegal *taluk* of Chamarajanagar district of Karnataka. They speak local language and are 949 in number and the majority of these tribe are scattered in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and Chattisgarh. They are blacksmiths, carpenters and also involved in cultivation. The *Kaniyan* is a tribe from Kerala found mostly in Kollegal *taluk* of Chamarajanagar district of the State. Only 413 in number reside in the district. These people speak local language although the majority of these tribes speak Malayalam. The members of this tribe are mostly Hindus. Among the approximate 3,00,000 members of the *Katkari* and Marathi-Konkani speaking *Kathodi* or *Katkari* tribe, only a few (275) live scattered in the State of Karnataka. The *Kathodi* are recognized as the primitive tribal group by the Government of India in the State of Gujarat.

The Tribal people in India have a long history even before the arrival of the colonial government. The Tribal societies that existed prior to the colonial intervention had their own rights and duties within their autonomous sovereign framework. Apart from the encounter of the Tribals with the various civilizations, there was also the influence of the foreign missionaries in the past and of the dominant society through the fundamentalist forces in the recent past (Minz, 1993) There is a little doubt that Tribal communities continue to be the most marginalized group in India. Social indicators of developments tell that Tribal people have life expectancies that are decades shorter than the non-tribals are. Any other social indicator, be it standards of health facilities education opportunities and attainment, level of employment or standard of housing, sees Tribal communities enjoying fewer opportunities, and suffering greater burdens, than the rest of the Indian population.

India is the 7th largest country in terms of area and has the 2nd largest concentration of tribal population in the world. Education is a very important factor of human resource development and

management. After a long period of independence, our nation is yet to achieve desired level of education. This is worst in tribal societies. Tribes are the primeval communities that constitute a considerable proportion of national population. Each of the tribal communities has its own cultural identity. But in general they are very poor. Educational backwardness lies at the root of their economic, social and political backwardness. The schools have very poor student-teacher ratio and classroom-pupils ratio. Most of them have no library rooms and well maintained playgrounds. Moreover, toilets and lavatories are poorly maintained. The schools have very large feeder areas. Therefore, students are to move a large distance to reach their schools. In most of the Gram Panchayat areas there are very few numbers of higher schools in comparison to the number of lower and primary schools. That is one of the reasons why the rate of drop out is found to be very high for the tribal students. Though the students are very obedient, diligent, physically sound and have many good habits, they perform very poor in academics.

### **Tribal Development Programmes to promote Human development**

In the context of tribal development, it aims at increasing the income and strengthening the material aspects of tribal culture through better utilization of the environmental resources i.e. forests, minerals, flora and fauna, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, industrial potential as well as skill of the tribal people.

The goals of tribal development can be summarized into

- i) Long term objectives, and
- ii) Short term objectives

The long term objectives are (a) To narrow the gap of development between tribals and non-tribals (b) to improve the quality of life without disturbing their ethnicity. The short term objectives are (a) elimination of exploitation by all means by rapid Socio economic development (b) improving organizational capabilities and (c) Building up inner strength of the tribal people.

There are mainly five approaches which have been employed so far in the welfare of tribals in India (Vidyarthi 1977). These are:

- Political Approach
- Administration Approach
- Religious Approach-with special reference to missionary approach.
- Voluntary Agencies Approach, and
- Anthropological Approach

But as has been admitted in the Human Development Report, 2002 of UNDP, the human development approach to development has fallen victim to the success of its Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI has reinforced the narrow, oversimplified interpretation of the human development concept as being only about expanding education, health and decent standard of living.

Indeed, this is true for the rural population of the Third World Countries as a whole. Even after six decades of national independence and planning, basic needs and infrastructural development sectors of our economy have remained neglected and malnourished. In the light of planned development, as undertaken by Indian policy makers, rural development has been the thrust area over the last fifty five years. Special programmes are being implemented to improve the socio-economic conditions of the people. Statistically, this means the peasants, workers, women and weaker sections of our society.

### **TRIBAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**

The tribes in India have distinct health problems, mainly governed by multidimensional factors such as habitat, difficult terrains, varied ecological niches, illiteracy, poverty, isolation, superstitions and deforestation. The tribal people in India have their own life styles, food habits, beliefs, traditions and socio-cultural activities. Health and nutritional problems of the vast tribal populations are varied because of bewildering diversity in their socio-economic, cultural and ecological settings.

The health, nutrition and medico-genetic problems of diverse tribal groups have been found to be unique and present a formidable challenge for which appropriate solutions have to be found out by planning and evolving relevant research studies.

### WOMEN HEALTH

Women health among tribals is a grossly neglected concept. Almost all tribal women follow unhygienic practices as far their maternal health is concerned. Nutritional anaemia is a major problem for women in India and more so in the rural and tribal belt. This is particularly serious in view of the fact that both rural and tribal women have heavy workload and anaemia has profound effect on psychological and physical health. Maternal malnutrition is quite common among the tribal women especially those who have many pregnancies too closely spaced. Child bearing imposes additional health needs and problems on women - physically, psychologically and socially.

The chief causes of maternal mortality were found to be unhygienic and primitive practices for parturition. Some crude birth practices were found to exist in various tribal groups like Kharias, Gonds, Santals, KutiaKhondhs, Santa Is Jaunsaris, Kharias, etc. The habit of taking alcohol during pregnancy has been found to be usual in tribal women and almost all of them are observed to continue their regular activities including hard labour during advanced pregnancy. As far as child care is concerned, both rural and tribal illiterate mothers are observed to breastfeed their babies. But, most of them adopt harmful practices like discarding of colostrum, giving prelacteal feeds, delayed initiation of breast-feeding and delayed introduction of complementary feeds. Vaccination and immunization of Infants and children have been inadequate among tribal groups. In addition, extremes of magic-religious beliefs and taboos tend to aggravate the problems.

### SOCIAL OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

The term status means position of a person in a society. Status has been defined by 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 behavior 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 closely related to one another. The higher level of education will generate health awareness, employment opportunities and decision making ability among these groups. The status of women in a society depends to a large extent on the social structure and the type of society. In Indian social context, there is a predominance of patriarchal family structure where males predominate in all settings and social contexts. However, among many tribal communities, predominance 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<sup>11,12</sup>. But other tribal communities which follow patriarchal norms, the status of women is not as high as it is in matriarchal societies<sup>7,8</sup>. For some other tribes, such as, Ho, Gond, the husband does not always enjoy a dominant role. Gond woman 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 substantial freedom and higher social status<sup>13</sup>. This indicates that the status of tribal women are not same in all places, rather they vary according to the tribal group and the social structure. However, in tribal societies, tribal women are more important than women in any other social groups because tribal women are very hardworking and in almost all the tribal communities they participate in economic activities almost equally with men or works harder than men and the family economy and income also depend on women<sup>14</sup>. Status is also determined by health conditions. The tribal groups 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 International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS), 2014, Vol 2, No.2, 55-60. 57 children. It increases vulnerability to infection, and leads to chronic illness which sometimes may affect brain<sup>15</sup>. Their health status is also related to economic and educational aspects. Their lack of ability to participate in the industrial economic activities of modern societies has deteriorated their living conditions. The tribals are mostly engaged in occupations which do not generate much income such as hunting, crafts making, agriculture. Industrialization and urbanization has brought about a change in the life and living of the tribals by uprooting them from their day to day activities and making them dependent on the vagaries of non tribals.

The education level of the tribal population is low and formal education has made very little impact on tribal groups. The level of literacy among the tribals in most states in India is very low<sup>11</sup>. Reservation policy of the Government has made some changes in the educational status. One of the main reasons for low level of literacy is their assigning relatively less significance on formal schooling. The school curriculum and education system do not create much interest in them, rather a much more practical based curriculum would be helpful for them. Moreover, since the tribes live in poverty they do not like to send their children to schools as they are considered to be extra helping hands for generating income. 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 per cent of Scheduled Tribe females were noted as literate in comparison to Scheduled Caste women who were 13.70 per cent and non scheduled population was 37.43 per cent. This level was quite low as compared to the overall rate of females who are literate. This study was mainly based on the data collected from Census office and from different studies conducted by the Cultural Research Institute, Calcutta. Various reasons have been attributed for low level of literacy among the scheduled tribe girls<sup>16</sup>. Work participation rate among scheduled tribe women were higher in percentage as compared to others. Poor economic condition has a direct bearing on the degree of participation. Scheduled tribe workers are engaged in agricultural sector and in non gainful occupations. Considering the education, economic and health of the tribal women, their positions were not at all satisfactory. A study by Singh and Rajyalaxmi(1993), status of tribal women in terms of their demography, health, education and employment have been discussed. Since independence, various protections have been given to the tribal population by the Constitution of India. The study highlighted some aspects of tribal work; tribal women work equally with their male counterparts with lower pay, sexual exploitation. Tribal women don't have property rights, they have lower literacy rate than scheduled caste and general population. Tribal women are not healthy and suffer from malnutrition and various diseases. The study highlighted the need to improve the status of tribal girl, to bring about change in the status of tribal women.

### INTEGRATED TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Indian Constitution enjoins on the State the responsibility to promote, with special care, the educational and economic interests of the scheduled tribes, and to protect them from social injustice and from all forms of exploitation. Their development is a special responsibility of the President; the Governors are responsible for reviewing the administration and development of tribal areas and for reporting to the President. The problem of development of tribal areas is primarily linked with the backwardness of these areas, poverty of the people and the concept of integration of tribals with the rest of the population. For promoting the welfare of scheduled tribes and for raising the level of administration of scheduled and tribal areas to the State level. Article 275 of the Constitution provides for grants-in-aid from Consolidated Fund of India to states for implementation of developmental programmes. Also, special funds have been provided in each Plan for welfare of scheduled tribes in the sector of welfare of backward classes. The assumption behind such an arrangement is that these funds will be additive to general developmental outlays which will accrue to the tribal people and areas. Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub-Plan (SCA to TSP) is provided by this Ministry to the State Governments as an additive to the State Plan in areas where State Plan

provisions are not normally forthcoming to bring about a more rapid economic development to tribals in the States. The Scheme was launched in Fifth Five-Year Plan in the year 1974. Till the end of Ninth Five Year Plan, the SCA to TSP was meant for filling up of the critical gaps in the family-based income-generating activities of the TSP.

According to the note on the preparation of sub-plan issued by the planning commission, a general strategy to achieve the objectives has to be evolved in the sub-plan keeping in view the special problems of the tribal region in each state.

### PROBLEMS FACED BY TRIBAL WOMEN

Most tribals faces a number of challenges which they need to overcome in order to improve their status in society. The researcher intends to discuss here the issues faced by tribal women in particular. Absence of any fix livelihood: Various literature studies reveal that although work participation among tribal women is higher compared to scheduled caste and general population but the livelihoods of the tribal people are neither permanent nor fixed. Most of them do not have a regular source of income, and they live below the poverty level<sup>10</sup>. Tribal people residing in the rural areas pursue diverse low level activities for fulfilling their basic needs. Mostly they are engaged in agricultural activities. Apart from that, they are engaged in pastoral, handicrafts and at times as industrial labourers. Tribal women are mainly not engaged in any kind of continuous work and much like their male counterparts are found to work in agriculture.

International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS), 2014, Vol 2, No.2, 55-60. 58. A meager number of tribal men and women are engaged in government services. Economic conditions of households are related to other aspects of their life. Lack of access to education: Most of the tribal women work outside their homes and are engaged in various activities. They work in order to earn money for their family. The women's work involves daily labour, agricultural work. Even young children and girls go for work along with their mothers. Most of the time they do not go to school regularly or become drop outs from school. Even the parents in very poor families don't always want to send the children to school because then their helping hands in work would be reduced. Effect of patriarchy could be strongly seen in most tribal groups and so whatever money women get from their work they give it to their husband and the husband very often spends the money on activities like drinking. Household works are done by the female members of the family. Household work involves cooking, cleaning, washing utensils and clothes, collecting fuel for cooking. The young girls who are studying in primary level in schools hardly learn anything in school and they don't study at home also. The government has announced free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14 years, which nowadays encourage parents to send their children to schools with the hope that if their children receive proper education, then their conditions will improve. The children are given free school uniforms, books and mid day meals. However, the girls don't continue school at a stretch. Sometimes they go to school, some other times they do not go to school and stay at home and go to work with their mothers and help their mothers at household work. As a result, they tend to forget what they have learned in school. After the girl child attains teenage the parents stop sending them to schools. Poor condition of health: Lack of awareness about nutritional requirements mostly leaves the tribal women weak, anaemic and they suffer from various diseases. During pregnancy, special attention is required to be given to women otherwise that will affect the health of both the mother and child. Educational level, employment status, health status and decision making ability helps to measure the status of women in society. Women's education has to be channelized to employment opportunities. This in turn, will increase the decision making ability of women. Women's ability to communicate with other family members and to be able to convince them indicates a decision making ability of women. When the decision making ability is higher, women can have a higher status in the household.

### 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 to provide skills and training to women which will 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 trainings 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<sup>18</sup>. In an article by Nidheesh, the role of Self help groups in Kerala in empowering women have been highlighted where women worked to bring about a change in their identity at the local level 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. Preparing themselves for future lives will be possible through adequate education. It is essential to aware and motivate the tribal children the reasons why it is important to have education. It is not just for acquiring money but to improve their decision making ability.

International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS), 2014, Vol 2, No.2, 55-60. 59. The health of the tribal women is another aspect which needs attention because the tribal women work very hard and the income of the family depends on efforts of the tribal women. Among the tribal women, infant mortality rate is found to be higher as compared to national average, which is mainly due to their lack of awareness and facilities of child care. Tribal women suffer from nutritional deficiency. They have lower life-expectancy than the national average because they do not take the required amount of food and rest. From various reports it has been found out that, illiteracy is a cause of lack of awareness about health.

If economic, educational and health aspects are given adequate attention, then these factors may contribute to an increase in the decision making abilities of the tribal women. If they are convinced about the significance of financial institutions and if the banks extend their co-operation to these women then their security about financial matters will be enhanced. Moreover, if efforts are given to make women literate then that may help them to face the outside world in a confident manner, which in turn will enrich their lives.

### CONCLUSION

The tribals have been treated as mere receivers of the benefits and they have not been involved either in the decision making progress or in formulation or implementation of the plans and programmes. As the problems of the tribals are unique, it is essential that they are actively involved in planning as well as in the implementation of the programmes. Effective participation of the tribals in decision making would not only bring about successful implementation of the programmes but also create confidence among them in the policies of the Government. Such an approach would make the planned efforts of the Government more meaningful. The families need to have a sufficient income to enable them to cross the poverty levels. Since economic status determines other aspects of life and living conditions, it is of utmost importance. Education for tribal women is an essential aspect of development. Education is a vital instrument to bring about a change in the cultural norms and patterns of life of the tribal women and to change their outlook and made them economically independent.

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