

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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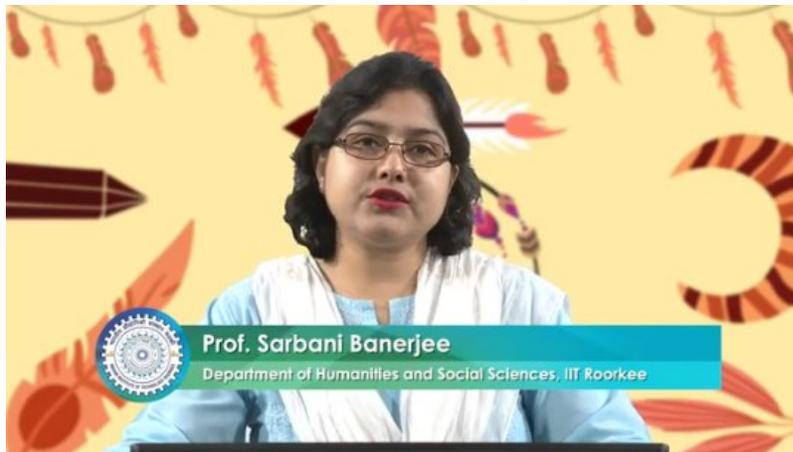
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Lecture07

Lecture 07: Women in Tribal Societies

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we are going to discuss women—the role of women and the position of women in tribal societies. Now, India's tribal communities demonstrate significant diversity across various aspects, which include their languages, physical features, population demographics, economic activities, cultural practices, ethnicity, general ethos, as well as the social standing of women in each of these tribal communities.



It is evident in the literary works from each indigenous group how women are positioned and located in these tribal societies or communities. For example, we have authors like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Mamang Dai. These two prominent tribal authors write in English. They produce fictional works in English, which discuss the role and position of tribal women in their respective communities. Scholar and critic Virginius Xaxa observes that the focus on women within tribal studies has progressively gained

importance and prominence in recent times, largely stemming from growing global awareness and concern for women's issues.

He states that a survey by the Indian Anthropological Society in 1978 revealed a significant gap in existing research on tribal women. While some scholars like Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf have addressed tribal women's roles in their societies, most studies centering on tribal scholarship have either neglected the question of women or provided only limited and superficial insights into women's status within tribal societies. Studies focusing on tribal women have steadily proliferated in the last two decades of the 20th century. For example, in the 1988 work titled *Tribal Women and Development*, written by J.P.

Introduction

- While some scholars like Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf addressed tribal women's roles, most studies either **neglected them entirely** or provided only limited and **superficial insights** into their status within tribal societies.
- Studies focusing on tribal women have steadily proliferated in the last two decades of the 20th century. For instance, the 1988 work, *Tribal Women and Development* by J.P. Singh, N.N. Vyas, and Rann Singh Mann, along with a 1993 special issue by *Social Change* on the status of tribal women in India, are significant in presenting a holistic approach for understanding the position of women in tribal societies.
- Research by scholars like Abha Chauhan (1990), Kamlesh Mann (1996), and Lucy Zehol (1998a) offer a more intricate and accurate portrayal of the circumstances of tribal women compared to earlier studies.



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Singh, N.N. Vyas and Rann Singh Mann, we see that there is significant mention of the position of women. We also see that there is a 1993 special issue by *Social Change* which discusses the status of tribal women in India. These works are very important interventions, presenting a holistic approach to understanding the role of women in tribal societies. Research by scholars such as Abha Chauhan, Kamlesh Mann, and Lucy Zehol offers a more intricate and accurate portrayal of the circumstances of tribal women compared to earlier studies.

Recent scholarship on tribal women increasingly aligns with the broader field of gender and cultural studies, moving beyond traditional anthropological or ethnographic frameworks. According to Arup Maharatna, despite a substantial body of anthropological research documenting the diverse characteristics and experiences of India's tribal populations, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary research exploring the demographic trends and the status of women within these communities has largely remained limited,

leaving much to be desired. They leave a lot of, you know, lacunae and loopholes that still need to be filled.

Women in Tribal Society

- Recent scholarship on tribal women increasingly aligns with the broader field of **gender studies**, moving beyond traditional anthropological frameworks.
- According to Arup Maharatna (1998), despite a substantial body of anthropological research documenting the diverse characteristics of India's tribal populations, **interdisciplinary research** exploring the demographic trends and the status of women within these communities **remains limited**.
- Aparna Mitra (2006), in her research on 'The Status of Women among the Scheduled Tribes in India,' writes that "**tribal women display considerable heterogeneity** in terms of their role and status within the tribal community. The same tribe in different regions may show significant differences in fertility patterns, educational attainment, labor force participation, and other important variables."



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Scholar and critic Aparna Mitra, in her research on the status of women among the Scheduled Tribes in India, writes, I quote Mitra here, 'The same tribe in different regions may show significant differences in fertility patterns, educational attainment, labor force participation, and other important variables,' unquote. Mitra has mentioned that tribal women are active participants in all aspects of community life, contributing significantly to the economy and society. Their labor force participation rates are markedly higher than those of non-tribal women. Similarly, Mann's study of the Bhil tribes reveals a high level of female participation in economic activities, with almost more than 99% of women involved in agriculture and more than 93% in livestock rearing.

Economic Contribution

- Mitra (2006) adds that tribal **women are active participants** in all aspects of community life, **contributing significantly to the economy and society**. Their labor force participation rates are markedly higher than those of non-tribal women.
- Mann's (1987) study of the Bhils reveals a high level of female participation in economic activities, with 99.09% of women involved in agriculture and 93.64% in livestock rearing.
- **Matrilineal tribal societies often prioritize female literacy** and encourage women's participation in the workforce. This economic contribution **empowers women**, enhancing their autonomy within the family and their involvement in community affairs.



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Matrilineal tribal societies often prioritize female literacy and encourage women's participation in the workforce. Such economic contributions empower women, endow them with agency in social, cultural, and economic terms, and enhance their autonomy

within the family while boosting their involvement and participation in community affairs. In many tribal societies, women are viewed as valuable and important economic assets, with significant emphasis placed on their industriousness, diligence, hard work, and dedication to their traditional roles. Verrier Elwin, in this regard, highlights the esteemed position of Naga women, who actively participate alongside men in agricultural labor and significantly contribute to tribal councils. Similarly, Elwin observes that Baiga women enjoy a high degree of social freedom and authority within their community.

Economic Contribution

- In many tribal societies, women are viewed as **valuable economic assets**, with significant emphasis placed on their **industriousness and dedication** to their roles.
- Verrier Elwin (1961) highlights the esteemed position of **Naga women**, who **actively participate alongside men in agricultural labor** and significantly **contribute to tribal councils**.



A tribal woman in Odisha collects paddy grains on a flat bamboo tray called Kato or Sapa, for winnowing.

Picture: Deepansha Gita Niyogi
Source: pexels.co



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What is noteworthy here is that Elwin also emphasizes the absence of any strict division of labor between men and women in Baiga society. Further, according to Stephen Fuchs, tribal women happen to be key contributors to the tribal economy. They shoulder the majority of agricultural labor while also fulfilling their domestic duties on the side. Now, Mitra suggests—I quote again from Mitra—'Many tribal societies are matrilineal, and women in such social structures enjoy inheritance rights and privileges that are absent in patriarchal societies.' So, in this context, Fürer-Haimendorf's observation about Naga women in the northeastern states is quite remarkable.

Haimendorf says the following, I quote, 'Many women in the most civilized parts of India would well envy the women of the Naga hills,' 'their high status and free, happy life. If you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages.' In the same vein, J.H. Hutton has highlighted that Naga women enjoy substantial freedom and hold a high social standing within their community. Notably, these women possess the right to choose their spouses and are never forced into unwanted marriages where they lack consent or consultation.

Social and Cultural Roles

- J. H. Hutton (1921) also highlights that Naga women enjoy substantial **freedom** and hold a **high social standing** within their community. Notably, they possess the **right to choose their spouses and are never coerced into unwanted marriages**. Elwin (1961) corroborate these findings, emphasizing the significant **decision-making power** exercised by Naga women within their society.
- Minicoy (Lakshadweep) was described as the 'female island' by Marco Polo due to its matrilineal social system. In this society, property and lineage are inherited through the maternal line. Both men and women inherit their mother's house name.
- **Upon marriage, a man adopts his wife's house name**, reflecting the matrilineal system. Senior women play a pivotal role in household management and decision-making



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Elwin corroborates the findings by Hutton, emphasizing the significant decision-making power exercised by Naga women within their society. As an example, we see that Minicoy in Lakshadweep was described as the female island. Minicoy has been described as a female island by Marco Polo because of its matrilineal social system. In Minicoy society, property and lineage are inherited through the maternal line. Both men and women inherit their mother's house name, right?

Upon marriage, we further see that a man adopts his wife's house name. This reflects the matrilineal system. Senior women play a pivotal role in household management and decision-making. According to G.G. Kingdon and the World Bank report, literacy emerges as a crucial factor or parameter in determining the development of any given community.

In that respect, one sees that for women, higher literacy rates are associated with significant improvements in development, including lower infant mortality rates, reduced fertility rates, as well as enhanced social and domestic status. When education or literacy becomes a marker of a community's development, from that perspective, tribal women, especially from the northeastern states—particularly Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland—exhibit significantly higher literacy rates, given the substantial tribal population in all these states. Thus, we see that the literacy rate is quite high in the northeastern tribal states.

In their study on literacy rates and schooling among tribal women, Aparna Mitra and Pooja Singh observed that tribal women in urban areas of Mizoram exhibit the highest literacy rates in entire India, surpassing even those observed in Kerala, a state renowned for its high female literacy rates. Right. So, Mizoram actually scores higher than Kerala as far as women's literacy rate is concerned. On the other hand, tribal literacy rates are

considerably lower in states such as Rajasthan, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh, despite these states having a relatively small tribal population within the overall demographics.

Literacy among Tribal Women

- According to G. G. Kingdon (1999) and the World Bank report (1997), literacy emerges as a crucial factor in the development of tribal communities. For women, **higher literacy rates** are associated with significant improvements, including **lower infant mortality rates, reduced fertility rates, and enhanced social and domestic status.**
- Tribal women in northeastern states, particularly Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, exhibit significantly higher literacy rates, having a substantial tribal population.
- In their study on literacy rates and schooling among tribal women, Aparna Mitra and Pooja Singh (2008) observe that tribal women in urban areas of Mizoram exhibit the highest literacy rates in India, surpassing even those observed in Kerala, a state renowned for its high female literacy rates.



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However, these states collectively account for a significant portion of India's total tribal population. Mitra and Singh's research also observes that psychologically, the scheduled tribes often experience a subtle but pervasive form of marginalization—a continual marginalization of the scheduled tribes that history has witnessed. This passive indifference toward the tribal populace manifests in different ways, including limited access to quality education, restricted social participation, as well as restricted access to their ancestral lands.

While increased female labor force participation and literacy are often surmised as factors that enhance women's autonomy and overall agential position, a study of tribal women from the Garhwal region by Maharatna reveals a different reality. Despite such factors, sociocultural norms significantly influence the extent of women's autonomy within the household space. So, we do not see a straight line that defines this cause-and-effect relationship. So, it is not always the case that labor force participation by the female tribal population always occurs,

Literacy among Tribal Women

- While increased female labour force participation and literacy are often hypothesised to enhance women's autonomy, a study of tribal women from Garhwal region by Maharatna (2000) reveals a different reality.
- Despite these factors, socio-cultural norms significantly influence the extent of women's autonomy within the household.



Tribal girls during their study time.
Source: notion.com




Swayam

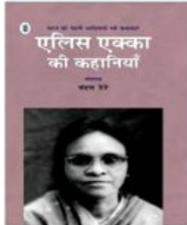
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Ends up enhancing or boosting their agency and autonomy. The Garhwal region tribals are an example of such a case where women do participate in the labor force. However, it does not really add to their autonomy. Right. So tribal women writers are increasingly making significant literary contributions.

They are taking control of their own narratives. And so the narrative voice has now shifted from someone talking from outside the threshold of the tribal ecosystem to someone who is speaking and sharing experiences from within the ecosystem. So the focus has now shifted from being subjects of research. The tribal women, who have traditionally been subjects of research

Literary Contribution

- Tribal women writers are increasingly taking control of their own narratives, shifting the focus from being subjects of research by outsiders to active agents in knowledge production.
- Drawing inspiration from folklore and traditional songs, their writings offer unique perspectives on **gender equality, social justice**, and the **challenges faced by tribal women**.
- Alice Ekka (1917-78), described as "India's **first female tribal storyteller**", powerfully portray women's struggles for rights and self-respect while simultaneously exploring the nuances of **gender dynamics** within tribal society.



Source: mizbooks.com




Swayam

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by outsiders, are now becoming active agents in knowledge production, right? This knowledge could be historical knowledge, and it could also be creative writing. So all kinds of knowledge being produced from within the tribal society are considered, in fact, extremely valuable documents that edify, that teach about how the tribal societies have been and how they are metamorphosing with changing times and situations. So, drawing

inspiration from folklore and traditional songs, the tribal women's writings offer unique perspectives on gender equality, social justice, as well as the challenges they have historically faced and still face.

For example, Alice Ekka is described as India's first female tribal storyteller. Ekka powerfully portrays women's struggles for rights and self-respect while simultaneously exploring the nuances and complexities of gender dynamics within tribal society. Contemporary tribal literature encompasses a diverse range of themes, including traditional epistemologies, feminist perspectives, as well as critiques of reductive narratives, which have historically marginalized or, in a way, marginalized, incarcerated or limited, greatly limiting the Adivasi women. So through their own writings and activism, tribal women are now asserting their agency and challenging the dominant narratives that have reduced them, that have somewhat limited them, that have

somewhat portrayed them in a diluted or romanticized fashion in a wrong way. And now they are, you know, talking about their own lives and experiences, which are like voices coming from within. Sunita Purty writes that tribal women authors like Rose Kerkatta, Vandana Tete, Jacinta Kerkatta, Vasavi Kiro, and Alma Grace have significantly contributed to feminist discourse by portraying their varied experiences as well as their everyday, their day-to-day struggles as Adivasi women, and they have presented their unique perspectives, thereby greatly enhancing tribal feminist scholarship, taking it to another level altogether, making it achieve another milestone altogether. Jacinta Kerketta's poetry poignantly depicts the dispossession of Santhal lands by politicians as well as the government conniving in such activities, the government actually supporting such activities, alongside the sexual exploitation that tribal women regularly face.

Literary Contribution

Contemporary tribal literature encompasses a diverse range of themes, including traditional epistemologies, **feminist perspectives**, and critiques of reductive narratives that have historically marginalized Adivasi women. Through their writings and activism, these women assert their agency and challenge the dominant narratives about their lives and experiences.



Jacinta Kerketta
source: [Ancestral](#)

Sunita Purty (2022) writes that tribal women authors like Rose Kerketta, Vandana Tete, Jacinta Kerketta, Vasavi Kiro, and Alma Grace have significantly contributed to feminist discourse by portraying the experiences and struggles of Adivasi women through their own unique perspectives.

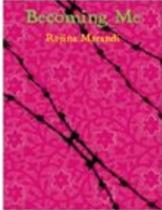


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Further, writings such as *Becoming Me*, which came out in 2014 by Regina Marandi, explore themes of resistance, empowerment, as well as the layered identities of tribal women. So what is noteworthy is the narrator's position in Regina Marandi's *Becoming Me* and her 'I' is that of a tribal female who accounts for her otherness, her marginalization at several levels, in terms of her gender, ethnicity, class, as well as literacy. So the narrative becomes the metamorphosis of the protagonist Liya, which happens through the several layers of liminality and fragmentation that she posits and that she undergoes at different stages in her life. At school, Leah is identified and marked as a Kisku, Santal, one of the largest tribes in India, by her political science teacher. While the Santals suffer marginalization once by the Dikus or the non-tribals and then again by the

Literary Contribution

- Jacinda Kerketta's poetry poignantly depicts the dispossession of Santal lands by politicians and the government, alongside the **sexual exploitation of tribal women**.
- Writings, such as *Becoming Me* (2014) by Regina Marandi, explore themes of resistance, empowerment, and layered identities of tribal women.
- Notably, the narrator's position and her 'eye' is that of a tribal female who accounts about her **'otherness' in terms of gender, ethnicity, class and literacy**. The narrative 'becomes' through pointing out the several layers of liminality and fragmentation that Liya the narrator-protagonist posits.



Becoming Me by Regina Marandi
source: cheapoia.in






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Majority tribes from the northeast, the majority tribes, you know, in Assam, and there is minimal assistance that they are receiving from the government, Leah herself is further jeopardized in terms of being a female member from a minor tribal group. So, she is a tribal, she is from a minor tribal group.

Alienation and Otherness

- At school, Liya is identified and marked as "Kisku, Santal, one of the largest tribes in India" (108) by her political science teacher. While the Santals suffer marginalization, once by the *dikus* (non-tribals) and then again by other tribes of the north-east with a minimal assistance from the government, Liya's jeopardized position is further understood in being a **female member from a minor tribal group**.
- The narrative of her becoming therefore happens through piecing together the shards of her identity that emerge at the crossroads of her community, femininity, beliefs, habits and pedigree.






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So, in Assam, we see that there is this Bodo-Santal conflict constantly arising from time to time. The Santals are a minority tribe; they are tea tribes and they are not receiving as much attention regarding tribal, you know, status and facilities that this status entails as much as the Bodos receive. And so, being from a minor tribal group and further being a female member from such a group, Right.

She faces, you know, marginality. She faces jeopardy at several levels, across several layers. So, the narrative of her becoming, therefore, happens through piecing together the different shards of her identity, which emerge at the crossroads of her community, her femininity, her habits, beliefs, and pedigree. Many tribal movements that have shaped the contemporary struggles were integral components of the Indian independence movement. Folklore accounts of the Santal Hul rebellion celebrate the revolutionary spirit of Phulo Murmu and Jhano Murmu, the two Santal sisters who reportedly killed 21 British troops before their martyrdom.

And during the whole Utsav or the whole Parab, you know, their status as martyrs from the community is celebrated every year, right? So this whole festival that takes place at the end of June, on the 30th of June, is when we see that all the heroes from the community, including the Murmu sisters, are commemorated and celebrated. Despite their significant contributions, however, these female heroes, such as Phulo Murmu and Jhano Murmu, are often marginalized in the historical narratives. In mainstream history, we do not find their mention within the corpus of anti-colonial struggles. In the larger narratives of anti-colonial struggles, they are invisibilized, which reflects the societal constraints that limit women's self-identity, their self-esteem, and their self-expression within the larger, you know, male-centric schemes.

Political and Social Movements

- Many tribal movements that have shaped contemporary struggles were integral components of the Indian independence movement.
- Folklore accounts of the **Santhal Hul** (1885) rebellion celebrate the revolutionary spirit of **Phulo Murmu** and **Jhano Murmu**, two Santal sisters who reportedly **killed 21 British troops** before their martyrdom.
- However, despite their significant contributions, these women heroes are often **marginalized in historical narratives**, reflecting the societal constraints that limited women's self-identity and self-esteem within male-dominated societies.



Beave Mamma sisters
Source: channayalghosh.in



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The male-dominated society tends to, you know, marginalize them, giving them a very peripheral position within the anti-colonial struggle narrative. Right. In that discourse, they happen not to, you know, posit a very strong voice or a very strong position. According to ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, women, particularly those who are closely connected with nature, such as tribal women, exhibit a deeper understanding of ecological issues. Their strong social and cultural ties to the flora and fauna, to the forests, the water resources, as well as the land, drive their efforts to protect these vital resources.

In this regard, we need to mention the Koel-Karo movement, which was rooted in Gandhian principles of nonviolence and truth, and it aimed to reclaim tribal rights. However, women's resistance against the CRPF, which was the first Satyagraha Andolan organized on the 23rd of March 1994, was characterized by its stubborn and radical nature, demonstrating their commitment to land and nature protection. So we see that the tribal women during the Koel-Karo movement came forward and resisted against the CRPF, and this is considered their first Satyagraha Andolan. It was not violent in nature, but it was a very radical expression, and the message sent out

There was strong support for land protection and preservation of natural resources. Such fierce differences, born from their deep emotional connection with land, forests, and water resources, align with and augment the principles and cause of ecofeminism. In an interview with Tariq Anwar, Lakshmi Mandi describes the status of tribal women, highlighting daily reports of rampant injustices meted out to tribals, including land encroachment, violence, and sexual assault against tribal women. Historically and traditionally, non-tribals have treated tribals with contempt, labeling them as uncivilized and untouchable. The Adivasis' physical characteristics, physiognomic features, and livelihoods have been viewed as unworthy of a civilized society.

They have become objects of hatred, within non-tribal societies. They have often been relegated to daily labor activities. Until very recently, they have been denied any role in leadership or administrative positions. Tribal women face double marginalization, experiencing even greater vulnerability than Dalit women.

When comparing the plight of tribal women, their position is even more vulnerable than that of Dalit women. They endure discrimination both within and outside their homes. They face violence from within their community as well as at the hands of non-tribals. While tribal women generally play crucial roles in economic, social, and cultural spheres,

exhibiting higher work participation rates than their non-tribal counterparts, their experiences are far from homogeneous. Factors such as regional variations, environmental conditions, and migration patterns have significantly influenced their roles, status, overall well-being, and position in the larger community.

Status of Tribal Women

- In an interview with Tarik Anwar, Laxmi Mandi (2022) describes that the daily reports highlighted the rampant injustices faced by the tribals, including land encroachment, violence, and sexual assault.
- Non-tribals have traditionally treated the tribals with contempt, labelling them as uncivilised and untouchable. Adivasi's physical appearance and livelihoods become objects of hatred within non-tribal societies, where they are relegated to daily labour but denied leadership and administrative roles.
- Tribal women face double marginalization, experiencing even greater vulnerability than Dalit women. They endure discrimination both within and outside their homes.



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One of the examples of the tribal populace's exploitation and their plight, their jeopardy and vulnerable position in the larger society is the tragic suicide of Chunni Kotal. So, one of the cases in point that actually explains how the tribals are treated in the larger society is the tragic suicide of Chunni Kotal. Chunni Kotal, who was a tribal student harassed by upper-caste teachers, becomes a living example of the barriers and difficulties to education that tribal girls face on a day-to-day basis.

So, how difficult it is for them to go and participate in so-called mainstream institutions. The process of mainstreaming is fraught with difficulty, and they are not accepted the way they are. They are often harassed by the school authorities. And, as I said, Chunni Kotal's tragic suicide becomes a case in point that explains their plight and their vulnerability.

Sexual oppression and poverty force some tribal women into prostitution. Their grievances are often dismissed. They go unnoticed even by the authorities. And such experiences have been depicted in Laxmi Mandi's poem, 'One Day in My Life.' Now, talking about the status of tribal women, there are different scholars looking at tribal women from different positions.

Status of Tribal Women

- While tribal women generally play crucial roles in economic, social, and cultural spheres, exhibiting higher work participation rates than their non-tribal counterparts, their experiences are far from homogenous. Factors such as regional variations, environmental conditions, and migration patterns significantly influence their roles, status, and overall well-being.
- The tragic suicide of Chuni Kotal, a tribal student harassed by upper-caste teachers, exemplifies the barriers to education faced by tribal girls.
- Sexual oppression and poverty force some into prostitution. Their grievances are often dismissed, even by authorities, as depicted in Laxmi Mandi's (2022) poem "One Day in My Life (Part One)".



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A number of tribal female scholars would assert that The women's position in tribal societies is, you know, something very positive, something that should be emulated by other societies. It points to a very egalitarian, you know, community that the tribals enjoy. So, in the words of Sanchita Kisku, I quote, 'The indigenous Santal community is, in history and essence, an egalitarian community' where women are regarded highly.

In every sphere of life, they enjoy equal respect with men. Women's presence is normative for any religious or cultural performance. Therefore, it is understood that Santal women have occupied an important place in social and religious functions. Further, and similarly, Timothy Hemrom would say, I quote, 'The social position of Santal women is far higher than that of women in many other ethnic groups in India,' unquote. However, other non-tribal sources have different things to say in the same regard.

For example, L. O'Malley observes that I quote O'Malley here, 'The religion of the Santals is essentially a man's religion.' 'Women are not allowed to be present at sacrifices except when they are offered in the house to their sisters and family gods.' 'And then only if there are no men to help with these sacrifices,' unquote. Similarly, A.B.

Chowdhury states the following regarding the status of the Santal women in Santali rituals. I quote Chowdhury: 'The women may take part in ritualistic dances at Jaharthan and Manjithan after the rituals are over, but they cannot actively associate themselves with the worship,' unquote. So this, you know, this marginalization from within the community by the male counterparts has often led to women forming their own cohorts, their own secret conclaves. And they have been, you know, very often, in fact, accused of practicing. So, witch hunting is a

or at least for a long time has been a rampant practice—and we could say a malpractice—among many tribal communities: the beating up and even killing of women on mere suspicion that they are witches. This has been there for a long time. It is going away, but the problem still remains in many tribal societies. According to a well-known Santal myth, the Santal women deceived their ancestor, their forefather and deity, Marang Buru, by disguising themselves as their respective husbands, and they obtained the knowledge of witchcraft from Marang Buru.

So, they dressed up as their husbands and took the knowledge of witchcraft from Marang Buru. As compensation, Marang Buru later conferred the knowledge of witch-finding to the Santal men. So, this also has a very gendered, you know, angle where, women are the source of problems. So, women are the ones practicing witchcraft, whereas the witch doctors are usually males who cure these women.

Status of Tribal Women

- According to a well-known Santal myth, the Santal women had deceived Marang Buru by disguising as their respective husbands and got hold of the knowledge of witchcraft from him. As compensation, Marang Buru had afterwards conferred the knowledge of witch-finding to the Santal men.
- This myth typecasts any knowledge or agency presented by the Santal female in terms of disease, damage and death, in other words the disruption of social balance, whereas it upholds the skills possessed by the Santal male in terms of diagnosis, regulation and thereby preservation of the larger society (*ojha*).
- Vinita Damodaran's study reveals that witch-hunting is the result of "pressures of rapid ecological changes combined with the erosion of common property rights and deforestation" ("Gender, Forests and Famine" 147).



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This myth actually casts any knowledge or agency presented by the Santal female as something negative. So, if a woman possesses any knowledge outside of, you know, the basic domestic roles, that is understood in terms of disease, damage, and death. In other words, that is witchcraft. So that would actually cause disruption of social balance;

whereas the skills possessed by the men from the community are understood in terms of diagnosis, regulation, and thereby preservation and status quo of the larger society. So the men are actually seen as the *ojha*. So, in this regard, Vinita Damodaran's study reveals that witch hunting is the result of, I quote Damodaran, 'pressures of rapid ecological changes combined with the erosion of common property rights and deforestation,' unquote. In the case of the Adivasi communities, the weakening of traditional collective ethos, the emergence of feudal land relations, exploitation by middlemen as well as the

moneylenders, most of them coming from the Hindu community, these moneylenders who have exploited the tribals are mainly from upper-caste Hindu society;

Conclusion

- In the case of the 'adivasi' communities, the weakening of traditional collective ethos, the emergence of feudal land relations, exploitations by middlemen and money-lenders, and the development of mercantile capitalism are the major factors that have contributed to the breakdown of social safety mechanisms around widows and single women.
- The failures of land reform policies, indebtedness and poverty, land alienation and cultural changes as perpetuated by technological development have caused a decline in the domestic economy of the 'aborigines.'



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as well as the development of mercantile capitalism, all these factors, you know, together have contributed to the breakdown of social safety mechanisms around the vulnerable section of tribal people, especially the widows and the single women. All these exploitative mechanisms, this mercantile capitalism, feudal land relations have greatly, you know, affected, greatly exposed the widows and the single women from tribal societies to, you know, jeopardies, to new forms of exploitation. The failures of land reform policies, indebtedness, the permanent state of indebtedness owing to lack of literacy in many tribal villages and the permanent state of poverty where even the government, even any larger body does not come forward to help; land alienation and cultural changes as perpetuated by technological development, all of these factors have caused an overall decline in the domestic economy of the aboriginal people. Further, within the community, we see that alcoholism and gambling among the tribal men, wife-beating and abandonment as well as material and sexual exploitation of these women become factors that function towards the detriment of the women's position in industrial as well as agricultural labor.

So all the outside influences have drastically changed the rural society at large, as well as transformed the domestic space, as in the man and woman relationship, the familial space, the domestic space, the rural culture—everything changes because of outside influences. All these factors have not only aggravated gender tensions but also raised fear and suspicion—a permanent suspicion of female sexuality. And they have effected a steady rise in cases of witch accusations, witch hunting, and very violent forms of punishment associated with such suspicions, such hunts.

So, as a way of concluding, despite their significant contributions, tribal women continue to face various forms of challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the strengths and resilience of these tribal women and understand how their identities are shaped and how their identities emerge at the crossroads of agency as well as oppression. I will stop my lecture here today. Let's continue with another round of discussions in our next lecture.

Thank you.

