

# Tribal Women's Empowerment: Including the Voices of Marginalized

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**Abstract:** *In the 75<sup>th</sup> year of independence, (also known as 'Amrit Kaal') nation is being run by a tribal woman - Ms. Draupadi Murmu, honorable president of India. Being tribal and reaching the pinnacle of success is a huge achievement. It would be interesting to find the scenario of tribal women's empowerment in the country. This paper tries to (a) the meaning and significance of tribal women's empowerment (b) explore the current situation of tribal women's empowerment (3) a systematic analysis of Kinwat's Tribal Women's current situation, status, and empowerment. Method: A review of the literature is the prime method of secondary data collection. The case study method is the source of primary data collection. In - depth case studies of 5 tribal females were conducted in Kinwat district, a remote area of the Marathwada region. The exploratory method is used to access the grassroots - level reality. Result: Tribal women are being aware of their rights and trying to use their power nowadays. One can see the efforts the government and society are making for the empowerment of tribal women. Yet there are many issues unstated, unresolved. Education and awareness programs can be helpful in this regard. A strong social security system seems the need of time.*

**Keywords:** Tribal Women, Empowerment, Marathwada, Kinwat, Status of women, Development, Human Rights, Freedom, Education, Economy and Politics, Participation, Maharashtra

## 1. Introduction

As India is being run by an Adiwasi lady Ms. Draupadi Murmu, it would be appropriate to find out what is the situation of average Indian tribal women. For this paper, the research area is Kinwat district of the Marathwada region, of Maharashtra state. This is the tribal belt on the Telangana - Maharashtra border. Major tribes in this area are - Gond, Andh, Bhil, Kolam, and Pardhan. We are taking a sample of 4 tribes. The base of selection is the Census Report 2011. Villages are selected based on population. The villages chosen are Bhandarwadi - Bhil, Navargaon - Gond, Jawarla - Kolam, Bhilgaon - Pardhan. Among these, Kolam is a PVTG Community in Maharashtra.

India declared the year 2001 as the 'Women Empowerment Year' to support the cause. Marginalized people, particularly tribal women are the worst hit of any problem, be it poverty, illiteracy, or discrimination. To solve problems, the 'Empowerment' of these women becomes essential. The government of India aims at the empowerment of tribal women. The government, particularly the Maharashtra government has various schemes and programs for the empowerment of tribal women. NGOs and SHG are playing a vital role in empowering the tribes.

All these are tools. The real question is are they potent? Are they addressing the ground - level issues? Are they empowering the tribal women?

Shastri RK (2002) identified Empowerment as a multi - dimensional active process, which enables women to get full identity and power in all areas of life. (4)

As Robert Adams states, empowerment is the capacity of a person/group of people/community to take control of their circumstances, practice power to achieve their targets, to excel in the quality of life. (1) Overall, if you feel you can take charge of your life and feel confident, you are empowered. 'Power' is an integral part of the term

empowerment. The power to choose what is suitable for the growth of individual/group/community is empowerment. Is this 'Power' with the tribal ladies of Kinwat? Is empowerment endowed upon the niche? This paper tries to answer this question.

Women's status is often judged by their income/salary, employment, education, health and fertility, and role in the family.

The income or salary of tribal women is an important factor in reducing inequality and discrimination towards the female gender. Sethuraman K. (2008) stated that women's empowerment can be a powerful tool to reduce domestic violence. (2)

The main occupation in the Kinwat region is farming. So, cash in hand is very limited. Most of the women do household work and go to other farmer's land for work. For women workers, the wage is less than for men. Equal pay for equal work? Still a dream. This employment is seasonal. So some of the women go to nearby cities like Adilabad (Telangana) after the crop season is over.

Despite all hard work, the ladies remain poor. Education can reduce their misery. Dr. Sunirmal Kar's article 'Atrocity Against Women' focuses on the fact that tribal women are deprived of mainstream education. Reason is -

- 1) Lower enrollment of girls in school
- 2) Higher rate of dropout rate among girls

The COVID - 19 pandemic has changed the mode and method of the teaching - learning process. Schools were run online during the pandemic. Online education is the buzzword now. In the absence of modern technology - internet, cell phones, and computers girls were thrown out of the path of education.

Decision - making can be a parameter to determine one's autonomy and freedom. Decision - making power enables women to take charge of their lives. Most of the time

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women's voice in the family's decision - making process is ignored. If SHE participates in decision - making, She will understand real issues faced by family and society at large.

There is a co - relationship between the socioeconomic status of women, and freedom and decision - making power. The more economic power, more the empowered women. The basis of all types of freedom lies in economic freedom.

The second dominant factor is the marital status and age of the lady. If the women are married, having kids (That also BOY child) is respected by family, community, and society at large. Married women need to get 'permissions' from their husbands and in - laws. It is interesting that widows may not get invitations in family functions, but enjoy comparatively high decision - making power.

Women's security can be a point of concern. Although no report of actual crime is found in Kinwat, many hidden forms of violence against women are seen in this tribal community. Preference for a boy child is common, and illegal sex - selective abortions and discrimination of girl children in many forms can be seen. Malnutrition of girl children is common. Discrimination in providing education, and health facilities can be found. (10)

Women's empowerment is an issue of human rights too. Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the USSR once said - "The status of women is the barometer of the democratism of any state an indicator of how human rights are respected in it." (5) According to Dr. Sunil Kumar Sinha empowerment of tribal women can be achieved by installing human rights. 'She' is a human being, and has a natural right to be treated like a human being. Her rights are 'inalienable'. Anything that is against freedom, justice, and peace in the world, is against human rights. The Declaration of Human Rights supports the civil and political rights of tribal women like any other human being. (8)

Sarilatha (1994) states that empowerment is the process of challenging existing power relationships and gaining power control over sources of power. (11) This definition can safely be called the Marxist definition.

Empowerment is a multidimensional process involving awareness, ability enhancement, decision - making involvement, asset possession, and rights execution. In tribal communities, women play a crucial role in livelihood activities and household chores. Despite economic, political, and social changes, tribal women still lack empowerment in areas like education, liberty, authority, and rights. To observe this theory, some case studies are presented here.

### Case Study 1

**Name:** Sumanbai Ponnawar Muchalwad,

**Tribe:** Bhill

**Village:** Bhandarwadi village

**Family background:** A widow (Age - 51 years) with a son (Age - 20years)

**Employment:** Landless - Farm laborer,

**Education:** Illiterate.

Sumanbai, a Bhill lady, believes that she is the successor of Shabri, the disciple of lord Rama, and is living her life in a miserable condition with minimum education, no financial security, and no control over decision - making power. But it is not a miserable condition for her as she was born and brought up in the same conditions.

Sumanbai's son, at the age of 20 is turning into the family head, due to patriarchy. Very soon he will get married and his wife will take charge of decision - making power in the family. The power structure of this family depends on the following factors-

- 1) Assets - Land, gold, or money.
- 2) Authority - The decision - making power
- 3) Status - A woman's status in society is determined by her marital status, and having a/many son/s.

If we check these factors in the case of Sumanbai, she seems a person to be empowered. Without social security, she is powerless and vulnerable.

The very aim of our constitution is to support and empower such people. The government spends a lot on the well - being of such people. The question is - is it helpful? To understand this, we should figure out what should be the parameters of empowerment. And how can we empower her?

Women empowerment means to have total control over their lives, both inside and outside of their house and place of employment;

freely live their life with a sense of self - worth, respect, and dignity;

To make their own decisions and exercise their right to free will (i. e., to say yes or no);

Equal rights to engage in public, religious, and social activities;

Equal social standing in society;

Equal rights to social and economic justice;

To make financial and economic decisions;

To have equal access to education;

To have equal employment opportunities free from discrimination based on gender;

To have a safe and comfortable working environment.

A woman has the unrestricted freedom to openly express her views and opinions.

Sumanbai is powerless and vulnerable due to three reasons - Gold, Land, and Cash one or all can be the base of any person's power. If Sumanbai has anyone of it, her status in the family will be improved. Unfortunately, she doesn't have any of it.

Authority or decision - making power can be derived from education, experience, and exposure but she is illiterate, with little exposure to know how's of modern world.

Status in family and Society is based on the marital status of women, whether they have male kids or not.

To empower her -

The social security net should be strengthened. Without monetary support, at the elderly age, she will be at the mercy of Siddhappa.

Sumanbai works as hard as a man would, as a farm laborer, but equal pay is still a dream. In this area, a male farm worker gets twice the payment of a female worker. Equal pay for work should be the policy.

Lack of formal education is a reason for her dependency on her son, or any educated man. Adult education will empower her to participate in the decision - making process of family and society at large.

Women like Sumanbai are not aware of their legal and democratic rights like demanding the right for inheritance and property, participating in gram panchayat etc. So awareness program should be executed.

#### Case Study 2

**Name:** Vandana Ulhas Uikey

**Tribe:** Pardhan

**Village:** Patoda (Bu.) village

**Family background:** Member of a joint family of 9

**Employment:** Anganwadi Sevika, Landless.

**Education:** 12<sup>th</sup>

A Pradhan Community member, and a key person in the family, Vandana, seems a fairly empowered lady - as an outsider. She is educated, has a government job, and lives in a big joint family. Looks like she has it all.

But is she able to spend her salary according to her will? No. She needs to ask her sons, in the absence of her husband.

As her salary is honorary, a small amount is paid, making her dependent on the forest for survival. Fuel for cooking is brought from the nearby forest. Her sons and daughter - in - law are reluctant to bring it, as they believe it is below their dignity. She has to bring it in the morning before school opens.

Her son - Gajanan - works as a laborer and Ganesh is a local politician. And daughter - in - laws are housewives. Whenever a family needs money, Vandana has to take a loan. Vandana is a government employee, so she can easily avail of the loan. May it be from Bachat gat or bank or Savakar, paying debt is her responsibility.

Like all Tribal people, this family is a non - vegetarian. Tribal ways of hunting are banned by the government, and due to poverty, families can't afford to eat non - veg. food.

#### Case Study 3

**Name:** Suvarna Jaw

**Tribe:** Bhill

**Village:** Bhandarwadi village

**Family background:** nuclear family

**Employment:** ASHA Worker

**Education:** 12<sup>th</sup>

ASHA worker is a nodal officer for almost all primary services provided in rural areas. But her rights are not safeguarded by the government and family alike. With a minimum salary and hectic work, she has to face all the problems like any other lady in the village. Bringing potable water from a public tap, cleaning, and cooking - before and after the job timings is her routine. This double duty is taking a toll on her mental as well as physical health. Her weight at the time of the researcher's visit was way below average.

While commenting on this work, she stated that "bayanna kamavarun yeun kamala jumpavach lagate, Tai." Meaning All female workers, after the shift, come back home for another shift of work. This is unpaid labor, where nobody helps them.

#### Case Study 4

**Name:** Kaushalya Sukhdev Meshram

**Tribe:** Gond

**Village:** Umari Bajar, Navargaon village

**Family background:** Joint family, with kids.

**Employment:** Sarpanch, Landowner (40 Akers)

**Education:** 10<sup>th</sup>

Kaushlyabai, a middle - aged lady, leads the village of Umari Bajar. Her house is a typical rich farmer's house. Everything in the house showcases the agrarian economy and culture. Apart from some cultural traits, events, and festivals, these people are completely submerged in agrarian Hindu culture. Kaushlyabai can speak Gondi, Marathi, Telugu, and due to television, Hindi too.

Although she is Sarpanch of the village, the political and village - related decisions are taken by her husband, Sukhdev Meshram. One can assume that decision - making power is with the husband only. This dominating nature of the husband is the outcome of patriarchy. The message is clear - 'as long as you follow my instructions, you can enjoy the position of village head.'

This gold - clad lady has no power to decide what to cook for dinner. Even if she is 'rich', she works on her farm and tries to earn some money to fulfill small wishes like - sending a gift to 'Maher che lok' Meaning relatives from her patrilineal home. This lady has realized the importance of education and being financially independent. She is keen to educate her daughter, and trying to prolong the decision of her daughter's marriage age.

#### Case study 5

**Name:** Namitai Santosh Gedam

**Tribe:** Kolam

**Village:** Jawarla village

**Family background:** Joint family

**Employment:** Sarpanch, landowner (More than 5Akers)

**Education:** 12<sup>th</sup>

Finding Namitai, a family member, a village head was a pleasant shower, among all cases. Namitai, a 30-40 - year - old lady was leading Jawarla village capably. This Gond Community leader believes that the tribal people should have rights over minor forest products. She uses it regularly. Mahua flowers, medicinal herbs fodder, fuel wood, and honey, are the products she brings from the forest, enriching the food and lifestyle of her family. This family stays in Kaccha Ghar, made out of stones and mud. The compound wall of the house is made of "Tattya" Meaning a Bamboo wall - like structure. This structure is durable, eco - friendly, and budget - friendly as raw material is available nearby.

Namutai's family head is Santosh Gedam, her husband. Being the first male of the family, he enjoys authority. But his power is not ultimate, he needs the approval of Namutai too. Namutai has equal rights over family property and she is well

aware of it. Holding a position in society makes her less vulnerable to injustice, as compared to other women in society. Yet, her financial decisions are taken by her husband. The absence of financial literacy is the reason behind it.

**Discussion:**

**Conclusion:**

**Literacy**

**Financial Independence & Financial Literacy**

**Exercising democratic rights like voting,**

**Participating in the decision - making of family and society at large**

**References**

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**Table 1**

S. No	Village name	Tribe	Tribal Population %
1	Bhandarwadi, Gopalwadi	Bhill	78.09%
2	Nawargaon, Umari Bajar	Gond	100%
3	Jawarla, Kazipod	Kolam	78.15%
4	Bhilgaon	Pardhan	58.48%

Source: Census of India 2011

**Pic.1**



**Photo:** Researcher along with participants of the field - Bhandarwadi.