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Empowering tribal women through education: Challenges, opportunities and pathways to inclusion

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Abstract

Education stands as a cornerstone for women's empowerment, serving as a powerful tool to unlock opportunities and challenge entrenched inequalities. However, tribal women often face compounded marginalization due to the intersectionality of gender, socio-economic status and tribal identity. This paper explores the multifaceted role of education in empowering tribal women by analysing the structural, cultural and systemic barriers they encounter. These challenges include limited access to schools, language barriers, patriarchal norms, early marriage and socio-political exclusion. Drawing on a synthesis of existing research, this study emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive, community-driven educational initiatives that respect indigenous knowledge systems and promote inclusivity. The paper argues that education is not only essential for breaking cycles of poverty and marginalization but also for fostering economic independence, improving health and well-being, enhancing self-worth and encouraging active participation in social and political spheres. Ultimately, empowering tribal women through education is critical for achieving broader goals of social justice, equity and sustainable development.

Keywords: Women empowerment, education, gender equality, economic independence

1. Introduction

The advancement of any society is closely linked to the empowerment of women. This empowerment necessitates equal opportunities for women to engage fully in social, economic and political spheres, contributing directly to national development. Education stands out as a critical enabler in this process, providing women with the essential knowledge, skills and confidence to break free from poverty, resist traditional gender norms and engage meaningfully in decision-making at all levels. Throughout history, women worldwide have faced entrenched discrimination and inequality, largely influenced by cultural, religious and patriarchal systems. Extensive research has documented the historical marginalization of women from both public life and formal education. Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) ^[12] highlights how institutional structures have long disadvantaged women. In many traditional societies, education was primarily reserved for men, while women were relegated to domestic roles. Women were typically viewed as caregivers and homemakers, with little emphasis placed on their education. Amartya Sen (1999) ^[17] notes that this longstanding neglect has significantly constrained women's capabilities and freedom of choice. The 19th and 20th centuries marked pivotal moments in the global struggle for women's rights, particularly in education. Feminist movements and the advocacy of suffragettes played a vital role in challenging oppressive norms and promoting equal educational opportunities. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), argued that education is crucial for women's intellectual and moral development laying a foundation for modern feminist thought.

Reforms such as universal education policies and gender-responsive frameworks have been instrumental in improving women's access to education. International commitments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have reinforced the call for gender equality in education. Similarly, global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have underscored the need to ensure educational access for all girls and women (Levy *et al.*, 2015) ^[13].

Education is now widely acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic progress (Cefalo *et al.*, 2018) ^[5]. Yet, despite notable progress, many women and girls continue to face persistent obstacles in accessing and completing their education (Bellitto & Melissa, 2015) ^[3]. These challenges are even more acute for tribal women, who endure intersecting layers of disadvantage due to both their gender and indigenous identity. While tribal communities possess rich cultural legacies, they often suffer from severe socioeconomic marginalization, which restricts educational opportunities for women (Kumar & Vinod, 2024) ^[11]. Common barriers include geographic remoteness, poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, cultural exclusion and systemic neglect by mainstream educational policies.

This paper seeks to explore the specific barriers that hinder tribal women's access to education and to analyse how education can be a transformative force in their empowerment. It emphasizes the need for inclusive, culturally sensitive and community-based educational models as key strategies for achieving meaningful social inclusion and sustainable development.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive research method, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through gazetteers, personal interviews, and direct observation, primarily from the Sundargarh district of Odisha. Some interviews were also conducted informally via mobile phone conversations. Secondary data were gathered from books, scholarly reviews, and academic journals, depending on the specific requirements of the study. After the data collection process, the information was analysed using both quantitative and descriptive methods.

3. The Significance of education for tribal women: A Transformative Pathway

Education serves as a powerful instrument for tribal women, offering a transformative pathway to navigate complex social structures and assert their fundamental rights. By providing access to knowledge and skills, education empowers these women to break free from cycles of marginalization, achieve economic independence, improve their health and well-being, actively participate in social and political spheres and safeguard their cultural heritage.

3.1 Breaking the Cycle of Marginalization

Education serves as a powerful tool in dismantling the systemic barriers that tribal women face. It provides them with critical knowledge about their legal rights, health, and available resources areas that are often withheld or inaccessible in marginalized communities. With a deeper understanding of these frameworks, tribal women are better equipped to challenge the discriminatory practices that have historically restricted their autonomy and opportunities. For example, access to legal literacy enables women to resist and fight against issues such as land alienation, forced marriages and domestic violence. Knowledge of legal recourse empowers them not only to protect themselves but also to advocate for the rights of others in their communities. Research published in the *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* (D. Bhattacharyya, 2023) highlights a direct correlation between education and a woman's ability to defend herself against

exploitation and abuse. Moreover, education fosters critical thinking skills, encouraging women to question and critique the prevailing social norms and cultural beliefs that perpetuate their marginalization. Through education, they gain the confidence to participate in decision-making processes, assert their voices in public spaces, and envision alternative futures rooted in equality and justice. In this way, education does not merely inform it transforms, serving as a catalyst for personal empowerment and collective change.

3.2 Economic Independence

Skill development and vocational training are essential components of education that pave the way for economic independence among tribal women. By acquiring practical skills in areas such as sustainable agriculture, traditional handicrafts, small business management, and digital technologies, women are better positioned to engage in income-generating activities that are both dignified and sustainable. This shift allows them to move away from precarious and often exploitative forms of labour, creating pathways toward long-term financial security. Education not only equips women with the technical know-how but also instils entrepreneurial confidence and financial literacy. With access to information about markets, credit, and savings mechanisms, tribal women can make informed economic decisions and manage resources more effectively. Studies such as "*Education and Economic Dimension of Tribal Women Empowerment in Mayurbhanj*" (Tudu R, Khatua P & Panda L, 2025) ^[20] underscore the strong correlation between education and improved economic status, showing how even basic education significantly enhances women's earning capacity. Economic independence, in turn, has transformative ripple effects. Women who earn and control their income tend to invest in their families' health, nutrition, and education, fostering intergenerational change. Moreover, with greater financial autonomy, they gain increased bargaining power within their households and are more likely to participate in community leadership and development initiatives. Thus, education is not merely a means of livelihood but it is a foundation for economic empowerment and social progress.

3.3 Enhanced health and well-being

Education plays a pivotal role in enhancing the health and well-being of tribal women by raising awareness about reproductive health, nutrition, sanitation, and personal hygiene. Educated women are significantly more likely to make informed decisions regarding family planning, seek timely medical care, and adopt preventive health measures. These decisions not only improve their own health but also have lasting positive impacts on the health of their children and families. As highlighted by Smith *et al.* (2000) ^[10], education is strongly correlated with improved maternal and child health outcomes. Women who are aware of the importance of prenatal care, safe childbirth practices, immunizations, and balanced nutrition are better equipped to ensure safe pregnancies and raise healthier children. In communities where health literacy is low, even basic education can serve as a life-saving intervention. Furthermore, education empowers women to challenge harmful traditional practices, demand quality healthcare, and advocate for improved health infrastructure within their communities. It encourages critical engagement with public health policies and enables women to become active

participants in shaping health initiatives that reflect their unique needs and cultural contexts. The education goes beyond imparting knowledge it fosters the confidence and empowerment tribal women need to take charge of their health, care for their families, and contribute to the well-being of their communities.

3.4 Social and Political Participation

Education fosters confidence and communication skills, enabling tribal women to participate actively in community decision-making processes. By gaining knowledge about governance and civic engagement, women can voice their concerns, advocate for their rights and contribute to the development of inclusive and equitable societies. Education empowers women to take on leadership roles, challenge patriarchal norms and influence policies that affect their lives. This participation leads to more representative and responsive governance, benefiting the entire community (Nussbaum & Martha., 2000) ^[16].

3.5 Cultural Preservation and Transmission

Education can be tailored to incorporate traditional knowledge systems, ensuring that cultural heritage is both preserved and valued. This is especially important, as traditional knowledge often contains vital ecological, medicinal, and social insights that are essential for community resilience and sustainability. Scholars such as David Corson (1999) ^[6] have emphasized the importance of valuing indigenous knowledge within educational settings, highlighting its relevance to local contexts and its critical role in fostering cultural identity. Tribal women, in particular, can serve as stewards of their cultural heritage, playing a vital role in transmitting traditional knowledge, languages, and practices to future generations. By recognizing and integrating this role into formal education, we empower women to maintain, strengthen, and revitalize their communities' cultural practices. Research by Leanne Simpson (2017) ^[18] illustrates how Indigenous women are actively engaged in cultural renewal through education and knowledge sharing, often becoming key agents in preserving their communities' legacies. Integrating cultural education with modern skills creates a balanced approach, where contemporary learning complements rather than replaces traditional knowledge. This synergy ensures that communities retain their rich heritage while also equipping women with tools to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Organizations such as UNESCO (2009) ^[21] advocate for culturally relevant education, stressing the need to embed indigenous knowledge in curricula to prevent cultural erosion and identity loss. Such integration also fosters a strong sense of pride and cultural identity, which in turn strengthens community cohesion. Studies by Castagno and Brayboy (2008) ^[4] confirm that culturally responsive education nurtures a deeper sense of belonging and reinforces social bonds within Indigenous communities. Furthermore, education can facilitate intercultural dialogue, allowing tribal communities to share their knowledge, values, and worldviews with broader society. This exchange promotes mutual understanding, challenges stereotypes, and creates opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Initiatives that document and disseminate Indigenous knowledge through digital platforms, storytelling, or community forums support these intercultural efforts. As Battiste (2000) ^[2] notes, such inclusive educational

approaches help bridge the gap between Indigenous and mainstream societies while honouring the wisdom of Indigenous peoples.

4. Challenges and Considerations

The path to empowering tribal women through education is fraught with significant challenges that require targeted and culturally informed interventions. These obstacles span socio-cultural norms, geographical limitations, linguistic differences, economic hardships and the very quality and relevance of the education provided.

4.1 Socio-cultural Barriers

Patriarchal norms, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities often hinder girls' access to education in tribal communities. Traditional gender roles frequently prioritize household duties and early marriage for girls, viewing formal education as secondary or unnecessary. These expectations are reinforced by patriarchal structures that limit women's agency and decision-making power, particularly concerning their education and future opportunities. Studies on gender and education in India have consistently shown that deeply ingrained social norms act as major barriers to girls' education, especially in rural and tribal areas (Dreze & Sen, 2013) ^[8]. Cultural sensitivity is therefore crucial in designing educational programs that respect and integrate tribal traditions. Educational initiatives that disregard these cultural practices risk facing resistance and low participation. Programs that incorporate tribal art, music, stories, and indigenous knowledge systems not only enhance the relevance of learning but also foster a sense of identity, pride, and belonging within the educational experience (Nayak & Beretta, 2018) ^[15].

4.2 Geographical Isolation and Limited Infrastructure

Remote locations and inadequate transportation significantly hinder access to education for tribal communities. Many tribal groups live in geographically isolated regions with difficult terrain and poor connectivity. The lack of roads and affordable transportation options often makes it unsafe or impractical for children especially girls to travel long distances to school, particularly during adverse weather conditions. Additionally, the absence of basic infrastructure such as clean drinking water, electricity, and functional sanitation facilities further exacerbates the problem. Schools in remote tribal areas frequently lack separate toilets for girls, reliable power supply, and safe learning environments. These infrastructural gaps not only deter enrolment but also contribute to high dropout rates, particularly among adolescent girls (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2021-22) ^[9].

4.3 Language Barriers

The use of dominant regional or national languages in education can alienate tribal children, many of whom speak entirely different mother tongues. This linguistic disconnect creates major obstacles in comprehension and classroom participation, often resulting in academic struggles and higher dropout rates. For young learners, especially in early grades, being taught in an unfamiliar language can be both confusing and discouraging. Bilingual education models that incorporate tribal languages are essential for promoting inclusive and effective learning. Research has consistently demonstrated that children learn best when instruction

begins in their mother tongue, with the dominant language introduced gradually (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) ^[19]. Such approaches enhance comprehension, reduce dropout rates, and support stronger academic foundations among linguistic minority students.

4.4 Economic Constraints

Widespread poverty in tribal communities often compels families to depend on their children's labour, making school attendance difficult. Children particularly girls are expected to contribute to the household economy through agricultural work, livestock care, or collection of forest produce. The opportunity cost of schooling, including lost labour and income, can be too high for families living in subsistence conditions. Financial incentives and targeted scholarships can play a crucial role in addressing these economic barriers. Initiatives such as conditional cash transfers, stipends for tribal girls, and the provision of free school uniforms, meals, and learning materials significantly reduce the financial burden on families. These measures have been shown to improve enrolment, attendance, and retention rates among marginalized children (Baird *et al.*, 2013) ^[11].

4.5 Quality of Education

The quality of education provided must be relevant to the lives of tribal women, providing practical skills and cultural sensitivity." A curriculum that is irrelevant to the lived experiences, cultural context and future aspirations of tribal girls is unlikely to be engaging or effective. Education needs to go beyond rote learning and focus on developing practical skills that are relevant to their local economies and empower women to become self-reliant. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, cultural sensitivity in the curriculum and teaching methodologies is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Teacher training programs should equip educators with the skills and understanding necessary to effectively teach in diverse tribal contexts (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2005) ^[14]. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a holistic and collaborative approach involving governments, tribal communities, civil society organizations and educators working together to create an enabling environment for tribal women's education.

4.6 Influence of peer group

Tribal students may be more likely to drop out of school if their peers do so, as this can normalize the behaviour. Additionally, involvement in extracurricular activities that don't directly relate to academics can divert students' attention from their studies. Peer pressure, alongside family factors, is a significant contributor to school dropout, particularly among students who have seen their friends leave school early. Frequently, young tribal boys and girls engage in migrant work and their different and enjoyable lifestyle upon returning to the village influences their peers. The family environment and local surroundings are crucial factors in a person's development. Many tribal communities face challenges like illiteracy and addiction to alcohol, which often hinder children's education and the family's financial stability.

5. Strategies for Effective Empowerment:

To ensure that education effectively empowers tribal women, the following strategies are crucial:

- **Community-Based Education:** Involving tribal communities in the design and implementation of educational programs fosters ownership and sustainability. Community-based schools and learning centres can provide accessible and culturally relevant education.
- **Culturally Sensitive Curricula:** Integrating tribal languages, histories and cultural practices into the curriculum enhances engagement and relevance. Promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding can bridge the gap between tribal and mainstream societies.
- **Vocational Training and Skill Development:** Providing training in relevant skills, such as agriculture, handicrafts and entrepreneurship, empowers women to achieve economic independence. Linking vocational training to market opportunities ensures that women can utilize their skills to generate income.
- **Financial Incentives and Support:** Providing scholarships, stipends and childcare support can alleviate the economic burdens that hinder girls' education. Conditional cash transfer programs can incentivize families to send their daughters to school.
- **Awareness Campaigns and Advocacy:** Raising awareness about the importance of girls' education through community outreach and media campaigns can challenge social norms. Advocating for policy changes that promote girls' education and women's empowerment is essential.

6. Conclusion

Education stands as a critical and indispensable catalyst for the true empowerment of tribal women. It equips them with essential tools and knowledge to dismantle the deeply entrenched cycle of marginalization that has historically constrained their opportunities and potential. By fostering literacy, critical thinking, and awareness of their rights, education enables tribal women to take control of their lives and actively contribute to the development and progress of their communities. However, the path to effective empowerment requires a nuanced and intentional approach. It demands a deep understanding of and direct engagement with the unique and multifaceted challenges faced by tribal women. These challenges, often rooted in socio-cultural norms, geographical isolation, language barriers, and economic constraints, call for carefully tailored solutions. Therefore, the design and implementation of culturally sensitive, community-driven educational programs are paramount. Such programs must respect and integrate tribal traditions, languages, and knowledge systems, ensuring both contextual relevance and fostering a sense of ownership and engagement within the community. By embracing these principles, we can begin to unlock the immense and often untapped potential of tribal women. Their active participation and leadership are not only beneficial but fundamental to building a more equitable and just society. When empowered through education, tribal women become agents of change strengthening families, revitalizing communities, and enriching the broader national fabric. Looking ahead, future research must play a vital role in advancing this crucial endeavour. There is an urgent need for rigorous studies focused on the development and evaluation of culturally appropriate educational interventions. Research should explore innovative pedagogical approaches, effective curriculum designs that

integrate both traditional and modern knowledge systems, and sustainable models for community engagement. Moreover, it is essential to allocate resources for documenting the long-term impacts of such interventions on the lives of tribal women and their communities. Longitudinal studies tracking educational attainment, economic empowerment, health outcomes, and social and political participation will provide invaluable insights to guide future policies and practices. Ultimately, a sustained, evidence-based commitment to education is key to realizing the full potential of tribal women and fostering a truly inclusive and equitable society both in regions like Bhubaneswar, Odisha, and across India.

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