

Contribution of Rural Development Programs in Empowerment of Tribal Women: A Case Study

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Abstract

Empowerment of tribal women is critical for inclusive development of tribal communities. This study aims to analyze the contribution of rural development programs in empowering tribal women in Dhalbhumgarh, Jharkhand. The research involved a survey of 200 tribal women beneficiaries of programs, focused group discussions, and interviews with stakeholders. The study assessed the impact on social, economic, and political empowerment parameters. Key findings show limited outreach and utilization of programs by tribal women. The programs have moderately improved education, health, and livelihoods. However, impact on reducing gender disparities, improving participation in governance, and addressing systemic discrimination is inadequate. Patriarchal norms, lack of awareness and mobility, poor program quality and targeting are key challenges. The study recommends redesigning programs to suit local context, greater investment, participatory planning, and sensitization of tribal communities to achieve holistic empowerment.

Keywords: Tribal women, empowerment, rural development, gender, Jharkhand

I. INTRODUCTION

India is home to over 700 different tribal groups that comprise 8.6% of the total population (Census 2011). Tribal communities have historically faced exclusion and deprivation, trapped in intergenerational cycles of poverty. With female literacy rates below 35% and high maternal and child mortality rates, tribal women are particularly vulnerable and marginalized. Their empowerment through access to education, health care, livelihoods, justice and participation in local governance is imperative for inclusive and sustainable development.

The Indian government has instituted various policy interventions and rural development programs aimed at improving human development indicators and reducing regional disparities. Key programs include the Public Distribution System (PDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), skill development initiatives, housing and income generation schemes, among others. A significant proportion of program funds and benefits are reserved for marginalized groups including Scheduled Tribes. Assessment of the contribution of these programs towards empowerment of tribal women can provide valuable insights into their limitations and potential in facilitating social, economic and political empowerment.

The state of Jharkhand has a predominantly tribal population, with Scheduled Tribes comprising 26% of the total population. However, it ranks among the lowest in terms of human development indicators such

as literacy, infant mortality and poverty. Studies have pointed to continued exclusion errors where intended beneficiaries are not covered, lack of awareness about programs, issues with quality of service delivery, gaps in translating enhanced capability into higher agency and achievements, and lack of micro-level evidence on program effectiveness (Mohindra et al. 2015; Narayanan 2020; Rao 2017). As such, there is need for micro-level studies to analyze the outreach and impacts of rural development programs on marginalized tribal women using multidimensional indicators of empowerment.

This study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the contribution of key rural development programs towards empowerment of tribal women in Dhalbhumgarh block of Jharkhand. The specific objectives are to assess the awareness, access and utilization of programs by tribal women, analyze impacts on social, economic and political indicators of empowerment, and identify gaps, challenges and areas of improvement. The study employs a mixed methods approach combining a survey of 200 tribal women beneficiaries, focused group discussions with community collectives, and in-depth interviews with tribal leaders, frontline workers and block officials. The research is situated within Amartya Sen's capability approach and applies frameworks by Kabeer and Malhotra to provide insights into design and implementation of gender-sensitive and socially transformative programs for marginalized tribal women.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature highlights that women's empowerment is a complex, multidimensional process of transforming power relations and gaining control over resources and decisions that shape one's life, capabilities and dignity (Batliwala 2007; Kabeer 1999; Mosedale 2014). Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach provides the theoretical anchors, defining empowerment as process of expanding freedoms and valuable capabilities to lead the life one has reason to value. Capabilities denote the opportunities and abilities people have to achieve valuable functionings - the beings and doings they can undertake to improve their wellbeing, such as being healthy, educated and participating in society (Robeyns 2005). The capability approach has been extensively used to conceptualize and measure development, poverty and gender inequalities.

Feminist scholars have built on Sen's work to highlight key elements of women's empowerment. Nussbaum (2011) delineates central capabilities for women to live a life of dignity including bodily health and integrity, emotions and affiliation, practical reason and choice, and participation in society. Kabeer (1999) views empowerment as interplay of resources (access and future claims to material, human and social resources); agency (ability to define one's goals and act upon them); and achievements (wellbeing outcomes). Enhancing women's access to resources and livelihoods, decision-making abilities within households, communities and governments, freedom of movement, and shifts in patriarchal norms constitute empowerment. Malhotra et al. (2002) delineate six domains - economic, socio-cultural, inter-personal, legal, political and psychological - to assess changes in women's empowerment from individual to collective levels.

In the Indian context, studies have analyzed the impact of rural development programs and women-centric policies on gender empowerment. Access to education, health care, water and sanitation facilities, income generation opportunities, food entitlements, assets and infrastructure enabled through programs have significantly enhanced women's well-being and productivity (Khera and Nayak 2009; Narayanan 2020; Rao 2017). However, scholars note that considerable inter-state, intra-state, caste and ethnicity based inequalities persist. Tribal women continue to face exclusion in availing benefits as seen in lower enrollment ratios, high malnutrition and mortality indicators (Sabharwal 2011).

Challenges pertain to problems with beneficiary identification, lack of legal documentation, low awareness and participation, social restrictions on mobility, poor quality of services and infrastructure in remote villages inhabited by tribal groups (Panda 2014; Sudarshan and Bhattacharya 2009). Researchers emphasize need for more context-specific designs aligned to tribal women's needs, improving last-mile access, mobilization by community based organizations, and sensitization of tribal communities and frontline workers towards gender equitable norms and women's rights (Mohindra et al. 2015; Sinha et al. 2017). Evidence from Jharkhand shows that despite a plethora of programs, tribal women continue to experience severe deprivation and marginalization warranting bespoke interventions (Guha 2015; Mohanty 2013).

There are significant research gaps with respect to micro-level evidence on the outreach, utilization and effectiveness of rural development programs towards holistic empowerment of tribal women. Most studies rely on secondary data at best, with a dearth of field-based studies involving primary surveys and qualitative tools to assess impact on the lived realities and empowerment trajectories of marginalized tribal women. This underscores the need for in-depth enquiry into how rural development programs enable or constrain capabilities of tribal women within their socio-cultural context using multidimensional indicators of social, economic and political empowerment. The present study aims to address this gap through a mixed-methods study situated in a tribal village in Jharkhand.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to assess the impact of rural development programs on empowerment of tribal women in Dhalbhumgarh block, Jharkhand.

1. Research Approach

This study will adopt a mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative techniques for comprehensive inquiry into a complex social phenomenon of women's empowerment. A pragmatic paradigm supports integrating different methods to derive complementary strengths (Creswell 2014).

The quantitative component will comprise a survey to assess awareness, participation and outcomes related to rural development programs across a sample of tribal women in the study area. The qualitative aspect will include in-depth interviews and focused group discussions with beneficiaries, community representatives and program implementers to gain detailed perspectives on enablers, challenges and impacts.

The research will apply a feminist lens and Amartya Sen's capability approach which views development as freedom and focuses on expanding human capabilities to lead lives they value (Sen 1999). Multidimensional frameworks of women's empowerment will inform data collection tools and analysis (Kabeer 1999; Malhotra et al. 2002).

IV. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the proposed study are:

1. To Assess The Outreach And Utilization Of Key Rural Development Programs Among Tribal Women In The Study Area

2. TO ANALYZE THE IMPACT OF THESE PROGRAMS ON SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN
3. TO IDENTIFY GAPS, CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF EXISTING PROGRAMS
4. TO PROVIDE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR HOLISTIC EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN

V. STUDY AREA

Dhalbhumgarh is located in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and is characterised by high tribal population, low literacy rates and considerable development deficits. As per 2011 Census, 73% of the population belongs to Scheduled Tribes, primarily from Ho, Santhal and Oraon communities. The female literacy rate is 37% compared to male literacy of 67%, highlighting high gender disparity. Agriculture and forest produce collection are the primary economic activities.

Key rural development programs being implemented in the block include the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) with 300 women self-help groups (SHGs), Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana which has provided housing to 2000 households, and skill development initiatives targeting rural youth and women. However, the reach and effectiveness of programs in improving human development outcomes among tribal communities has been limited.

The pronounced marginalisation and deprivation among tribal women in Dhalbhumgarh underscores the need for research to assess grassroots impacts of rural development programs on expanding capabilities and facilitating empowerment. The study aims to fill this gap through a context-specific inquiry involving women from vulnerable tribal communities. Findings will provide insights to guide policy and practise for more inclusive, participatory and transformative developmental initiatives.

VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

This study utilizes Amartya Sen's capability approach as the theoretical lens to analyze women's empowerment. Sen defines empowerment as expanding freedoms and capabilities to lead the life one values (Sen 1999). Capabilities refer to the opportunities and abilities people have to achieve functional beings and doings like being healthy, educated, and participating in society.

Women's empowerment involves enhancing both well-being capabilities like nutrition, health, literacy and agency capabilities like decision-making power, participation in governance (Nussbaum 2000). Unequal family, market and institutional structures constrain women's capabilities. Rural development programs can expand capabilities by improving access to resources, services, opportunities and challenging patriarchal norms.

The study uses Kabeer's framework that views empowerment as the interplay of resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer 1999). Resources denote access and future claims to material, human and social resources. Agency is ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Achievements refer to well-being outcomes. Access to programs augments resources, agency enhances participation and influence over development processes, contributing to substantive freedoms.

Malhotra et al. provide the dimensions of empowerment spanning economic, socio-cultural, familial, legal, political and psychological components (Malhotra et al. 2002). The study assesses impact across these domains. Empowerment is also contingent on women's roles and status within households,

communities and broader structures. The social ecology framework by Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights these nested contextual systems shaping women's empowerment.

VII. THEORETICAL APPLICATION

The capability approach provides the overarching theoretical framework to analyze the impact of rural development programs on tribal women's empowerment. The quantitative survey and qualitative tools measure capabilities across health, education, livelihoods, self-esteem, mobility, participation in gram sabha, access to justice and freedom from discrimination.

Kabeer's model is applied to guide analysis on whether programs have expanded resources, agency and achievements. The study examined access to housing, sanitation, income generation assets, PDS, skill training, credit (resources); decision-making participation in household, community and local governance (agency); and outcomes related to education, health, nutrition, income security (achievements).

Malhotra's multidimensional empowerment domains shape the research tools and analysis to understand changes at individual, household and community levels across economic, socio-cultural, legal and political dimensions.

Bronfenbrenner's framework highlights the influence of patriarchal norms, community structures, program implementation gaps and broader policy limitations on women's empowerment. The qualitative research explored these contextual factors.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to assess the contribution of rural development programs towards empowerment of tribal women in Dhalbhumgarh block of Jharkhand. A mixed methods approach was adopted combining a survey of 200 tribal women, 8 focus group discussions with 80 SHG members, and 28 key informant interviews with tribal leaders, frontline workers and block officials. The key findings are summarized below:

1. Limited Outreach and Utilization

The study reveals significant gaps in awareness and utilization of key programs like PDS, MGNREGA, skill training, housing and income schemes among tribal women constrained by low literacy, poverty, remoteness, and socio-cultural restrictions. Lack of information, cumbersome procedures and exclusion errors have restricted the outreach. However, women organized into SHGs exhibit relatively greater awareness and participation.

2. Partial Social and Economic Empowerment

Rural development programs have contributed to moderate improvements in education, health awareness, nutrition and livelihood assets for tribal women. Access to PDS, housing, water, LPG connections, skill training, livestock and credit has enhanced income security and living standards for beneficiaries. However, non-beneficiaries continue to face deprivation. Patriarchal norms limiting mobility and asset ownership persist.

3. Limited Political Empowerment

Tribal women's participation in village councils, public meetings and engagement with local authorities remains very low. Lack of literacy, self-confidence, restrictive norms, household work burden, lack of family support and limited sensitization of leaders constrain public and political participation. SHG membership has only modestly enhanced confidence.

4. Implementation and Targeting Gaps

A key issue is accessibility of programs in remote villages given lack of infrastructure, personnel shortages and limited monitoring. Quality and reliability of services like health, education and nutrition is poor. Tribal cultural needs and contexts are often not adequately addressed. Convergence and coordination between programs and departments is lacking. Targeting errors exclude the poorest households and women.

5. Patriarchy, Poverty and Social Exclusion

Patriarchal norms, attitudes and discriminatory practices against women and tribal groups undermine empowerment initiatives. Poverty and livelihood insecurity amplify exploitative conditions and power imbalances. Lack of tribal women's representation and voice in local governance marginalizes their interests.

IX. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings have important implications for policies and programs aimed at tribal women's development. Key recommendations are:

Design locally suitable empowerment models: Programs should be tailored to suit tribal women's needs and capabilities like flexible timings for illiterate women, indigenous livelihoods promotion.

Enhance awareness and access: Lack of awareness and accessibility are major hurdles. Effective use of tribal community organizations, women collectives, local volunteers, radio, and ICT tools can improve last-mile outreach.

Enable participation: Tribal women's participation in program planning, governance and evaluation should be mandated to make interventions responsive to their needs and priorities.

Invest in gender sensitization: Frontline workers, village heads, and households need sensitization on gender equality and women's rights to change patriarchal mindsets and norms.

Fill implementation gaps: Improved staffing, infrastructure, monitoring and convergence across programs departments is vital to deliver quality services to remote villages.

Support community-led initiatives: Complement government programs with tribal women's collectives for peer learning, solidarity and cooperative community action against discrimination.

Conduct periodic evaluations: Regular process and impact evaluations, participatory audits, and grievance redressal mechanisms should be instituted.

The empowerment policy and program matrix must be strengthened to translate tribal women's enhanced capabilities into equitable development outcomes.

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