



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIO-CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND WOMEN EDUCATION IN TRIBAL SOCIETY  
A STUDY ON TRIBAL POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

Scheduled Tribes (STs), the socially and educationally disadvantaged groups are one of the most exploited and deprived sections of the population in Indian. Tribal women are deprived of education which is the integral part of life. The Indian Tribal family organisation makes discrimination between the sexes regarding education and empowerment. Needless to say, that exclusion from fruits of development has adversely affected the quality of life of the tribal people. And Tribal children are no exception. So, the Tribal society is marked by inequality, discrimination, exploitation, domination and deprivation. This paper examines issues concerning school access and equity for Women of Scheduled Tribe communities and also highlights their unique problems, which may require divergent policy responses. There are several studies available on various aspect of socio-cultural anthropology of tribal people. But very few attempts have been made to study on Socio-cultural Tradition and Women Education in tribal society in the study area. The present paper attempts to highlight the problems of women education in tribal society through observation and case study method on Tapan Block of South Dinajpur District of West Bengal (India).

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INTRODUCTION

The framers of the Constitution took note of the fact that certain communities in the country were suffering from extreme social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of age-old practice of untouchability and certain others on account of this primitive agricultural practices, lack of infrastructure facilities and geographical isolation, and who need special consideration for safeguarding their interests and for their accelerated socio-economic development. These communities were notified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as per provisions contained in Clause 1 of Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution respectively. In India, there are 574 tribal groups who have been identified schedule tribes. They have been described as 'Aborigines', 'Aboriginal', 'Primitives', 'Adivasis', 'Vana-jatis', etc. special provisions have been made in articles 46, 275, 330, 332, 335, 338, 340 etc. to safeguard the interest of schedule tribes and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation. The term 'Adivasi' (meaning original inhabitants) has been self-consciously adopted by the tribal communities in an effort to reclaim their history and a unique place in Indian society. Scheduled Tribes are the terms of reference listed in the Indian Constitution, and in government, legal and scholarly writing, particularly of the colonial period. The terms such as 'depressed classes' and 'backward classes' are also used for the tribes. Scheduled Tribes have different histories of social and economic deprivation, and the underlying causes of their educational marginalisation are also strikingly distinct. However, a comparison of educational outcomes among other caste and

Scheduled Tribes yields a common picture that the government has sought to address through a common set of policy prescriptions. In this paper, I examine both shared issues concerning school access and equity for Scheduled Tribe groups and also highlight their unique problems, which may require divergent policy responses. Scheduled Tribes are similarly distinct from mainstream Hindu society, with lifestyles, languages and cultural practices different from the known religions of India.

**Aims and objectives of the study**

The present study was undertaken with an overall objective to identify the socio-cultural status and women education in tribal society. The main objectives of the present paper are following

- To understand and state the special reasons for the educational under development of the Scheduled Tribes;
- To understand and state the reasons for the educational underdevelopment of the Tribal Women and Girls;
- To study the socio- economic status of tribal women and girls in study area.
- To examine the nature and characteristics of socio-cultural conflicts faced by the tribal women and girls.
- To analyse the dynamics of social adjustment by the tribal women and girls in the study area have to make in relation to employment and residential facilities.

- To discuss and understand the ramifications of exploitation of tribal women and girls in the area.
- To suggest remedial measures of discouraging tribal migration to rural to cities.
- To understand and state the educational problems arising out of these reasons;
- To understand and enumerate various schemes to ameliorate these problems; and
- To analyse cause and effect relationship and possible corrective measures.

## METHODOLOGY

To fulfil the aforementioned objectives Primary data, collected through direct questionnaire method and personal interview from tribal and non-tribal people living in the Block, has been supplemented to the secondary information as per requirement. In order to discuss the educational status of tribal women in the present society, it has been studied through primary survey method and presented in the form of percentage distribution. The villages are chosen in random purposively on consideration of conveniences, such as access and communication, security, expenditure involved in survey etc. However most of the features of the tribal society of study area have much in common in the aforesaid selected villages and it was decided to cover 150 households from Tapan Block. Considering the sensitive topic of inquiry and to finalize methodology, a feasibility study was undertaken on July, 2012. The household survey was undertaken as a cross-sectional study across rural areas with an individual household as a sampling unit. Information was collected through a door-to-door survey. Detailed socio-demographic information was collected from a responsible respondent in each household.

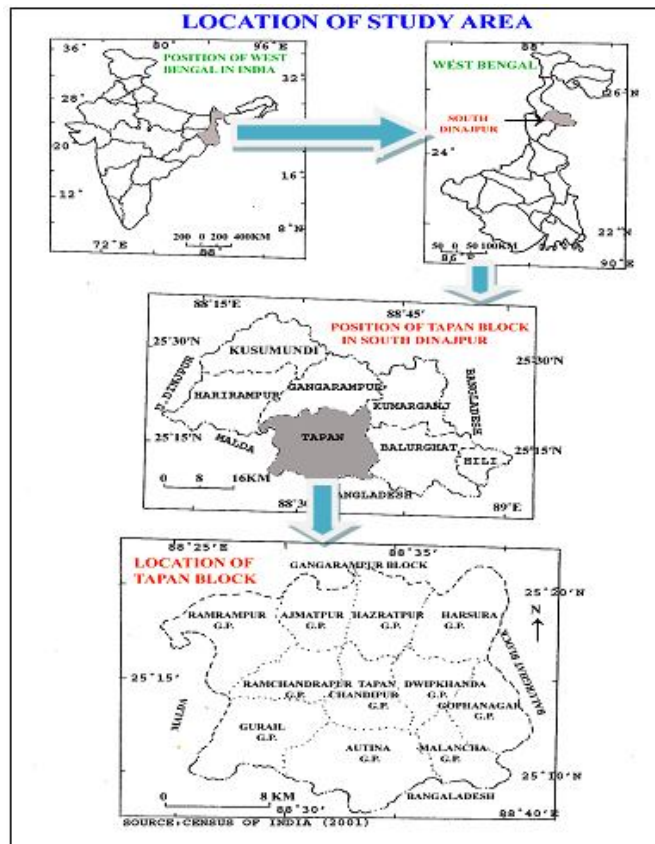
## Study area

The study area Tapan Block is located in the Southern middle portion of South Dinajpur District of West Bengal in India extending between  $25^{\circ} 08' 15''$  N to  $25^{\circ} 21' 30''$  North latitude and  $88^{\circ} 24' 30''$  E to  $88^{\circ} 42' 15''$  East longitudes. Total population of the study area is 226136 and area is 445.63 km<sup>2</sup>. The area comprises 279 villages. It supports 13.53 per cent of total population and 20.08 per cent of total land area of South Dinajpur District. The tribes of Tapan Block are mainly of proto-australoid group and they belong to various racial groups which include Santals, Oraons, Munda, Mahali *etc.* 22.34 per cent of the population of study area are belongs to tribal community.

## Who are the tribes?

The Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) defines Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to the scheduled Tribes (STs) for the purposes of this Constitution". In Article 342, the procedure to be followed for specification of a scheduled tribe is prescribed. However, it does not contain the criterion for the specification of any community as scheduled tribe. An often used criterion is based on attributes such as:

- Geographical isolation - they live in cloistered, exclusive, remote and inhospitable areas such as hills and forests.
- Backwardness - their livelihood is based on primitive agriculture, a low-value closed economy with a low level of technology that leads to their poverty. They have low levels of literacy and health.



- Distinctive culture, language and religion - communities have developed their own distinctive culture, language and religion.
- Shyness of contact – they have a marginal degree of contact with other cultures and people

### Status of women in tribal society:

Women constitute almost half of the total population in the world and out of which two third of the world's adult illiterates are women. According to FAO, the most disadvantaged section of society is the women; they are the 'silent majority' of the world's poor. Seventy percent poor of the world are women and they face peculiar social, cultural, educational, political and allied problems (Sharma and Varma, 2008). Hence, empowerment and status of tribal women of any flock is critical not only for their welfare but also for the development of the country. Status of women in a tribal society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as their roles within the family, in the community and society. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They supplement their income by doing arduous work. Their family depends on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produces is done mostly by women and children. Most of them also work as labours in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income. However, tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to environmental degradation and the interference of outsiders. The strategy for tribal development, and specially women, needs improvement, betterment, development and upliftment to effect their empowerment. Tribal women have adjusted themselves to live a traditional life style in the local environment and follow occupations based on natural resources. Undoubtedly, the programmes, oriented towards the empowerment of tribes, particularly women, have improved their socio-economic conditions and status. Against this backdrop, the present paper reviews the emerging perspective in the context of the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women and changing paradigm of development.

### Empowerment and gender inequality:

For the accelerated socio-economic development of any community, the active participation of women is essential. In Indian society, their participation has to be ensured through tangible measures, taken at various levels, which results in their empowerment in the real sense. Empowerment of women is one of the concepts that have developed in connection with improving their status. Empowerment includes higher literacy levels, education, better healthcare, equal ownership of productive resources, and increased participation in economic and commercial sectors, awareness of rights and responsibilities, improved standards of living, self-reliance, self-esteem and self confidence. Raising the status of tribal women is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic one. Within the framework of a democratic policy, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. Recently, the empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue

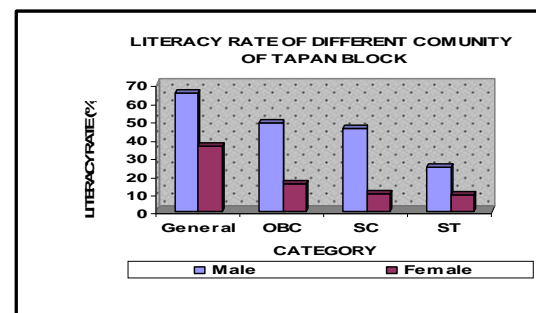
in determining their status. Tribal women, while being disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are nevertheless, better placed, in many respects, than their counterparts in the general population and are, in certain areas, more empowered. They do not suffer segregation or lower status. This is reflected in their higher sex-ratio vis-à-vis the general population (977 as compared to 933 - 2001 census). The child sex-ratio for tribal women also compares favourably vis-à-vis the general population, being 972 as against 919 for the general population -2001 census. The child female to male sex ratio shows a decline from 985 (per thousand males) in 1991 to 972 in 2001 while in areas such as education and health tribal women lag behind significantly.

### Tribal Women in Education

Lack of education which is a crucial requirement for the sustain growth of a developing society is largely responsible for the exploitation and pitiable plight of the tribes. The literacy rate of tribals was 8.53 % in 1961 and steadily increased to 47.10 % in 2001, yet it is far below the national rate of 64.84 % (2001 census).

**Table 1: Compression of Tribal Literacy Rate with Other Community**

Category	Literacy Rate (%)	
	Male	Female
General	65.25	35.75
OBC	48.45	15.40
SC	45.72	10.06
ST	24.42	9.10



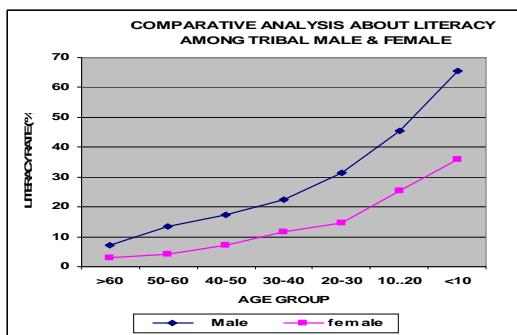
Source: Prepare by Author (from field observation and with the help of District Census Handbook-2011)

There has been an overall increase in the enrolment of children belonging to STs. At the primary stage, against an overall increase of 15%, ST enrolment increased by 25%, whereas that of ST girls increased by 36% against overall increases of 23% from 2000 to 2004. The dropout rate among tribal school children is alarming. Various steps taken by State Governments to check the number of dropouts, including free distribution of books, scholarships, reimbursement of examination fees, mid-day meals, etc. have had an impact but still fall short. The performance of certain states in providing matching grants, maintenance of service and management of hostels is not encouraging. The pace of construction of hostels has been very slow and the basic amenities provided therein are substandard. Low literacy especially among tribal girls and high dropout rates at elementary and higher levels are areas of serious concern. The main causes for this scenario are (i)

poverty, (ii) contents of the education, (iii) inadequate educational institutions and supporting services in tribal areas, (iv) absenteeism, (v) medium of instruction and (iv) education policy.

**Table: 2 Literacy among different age groups**

Age group	Literacy rate (%)	
	Male	female
>60	07.25	3.05
50-60	13.45	4.20
40-50	17.35	7.30
30-40	22.50	11.65
20-30	31.35	14.55
10-20	45.54	25.36
<10	65.45	35.85



Source: Prepare by Author (from field observation and with the help of District Census Handbook-2011)

In Tapan Block, there exists so many tribal communities (i.e. Oraon, Santal, Munda, Mahali, etc.) and they have different kind of interest in education. In every community man is commandant of family and they make decision about all the matters. They think education is only for male and females are born for housekeeping and cooking. Community wise educational intake is as follows; Extending the system of primary education into tribal areas and reserving places for tribal children in middle and high schools and higher education institutions are central to government policy, but efforts to improve a tribe's educational status have had mixed results.

**Table 3: Different Tribal Community and Education Level**

Community	Level of Education (%)							
	I - IV	VI-VIII	IX-X	XI-XII	Graduation	Masters	Total	%
Oraon	45.25	40.55	25.15	16.35	1.75	0.08	129.13	33
Santal	44.65	38.85	22.36	12.2	0.95	0.05	119.06	30.43
Munda	35.36	25.55	15.25	11.15	0.12	0.01	87.44	22.35
Mahali	25.28	18.75	10.75	0.85	0	0	55.63	14.22
Total	150.54	123.7	73.51	40.55	2.82	0.14	391.26	100

Source: Prepare by author

**Table 4: Body Mass Index by Sex**

Body Mass Index	Males		Females		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Underweight	110	55	115	57.5	225	56.25
Normal weight	84	42	78	39	162	40.5
Overweight	6	3	6	3	12	3
Obesity	0	0	1	0.5	1	0.25
Total	200	100	200	100	400	100

Source: Prepare by author

Recruitment of qualified teachers and determination of the appropriate language of instruction also remain troublesome. In some regions, tribal children entering school must begin by learning the official regional language, often one completely unrelated to their tribal tongue. Many tribal schools are plagued by high dropout rates. Children attend for the first three to four years of primary school and gain a smattering of knowledge, only to lapse into illiteracy later. Few who enter continue up to the tenth grade; of those who do, few manage to finish high school. Therefore, very few are eligible to attend institutions of higher education, where the high rate of attrition continues. Members of agrarian tribes are reluctant to send their children to work in the fields.

### Health

Healthcare is a major problem in far flung isolated tribal areas. Lack of food security, sanitation, and safe drinking water, poor nutrition and high poverty levels aggravate their poor health status. The problem of malnutrition is multidimensional and intergenerational. Health institutions are few and far between. Till recently, an abundance of fruits, tubers, roots and leaves in forests on the one hand and indigenous health-care systems on the other, contributed positively to tribal health. For centuries tribal people have over the developed their own medicinal system based on herbs and other items collected from nature and processed locally. They have their own system of diagnosis and cure. But the skills and medicinal plants are fast disappearing. Moreover, the traditional systems can not treat or prevent many diseases that modern medical science can. On the basis of the formula given by Martin and Saller (1957), Body mass index (BMI) was calculated, which is the percentage ratio of the weight to height.

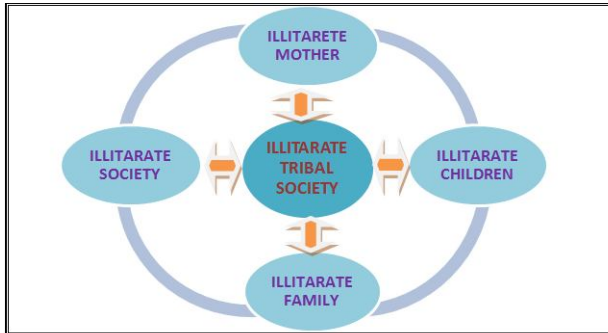
$$BMI = \frac{\text{Weight (in kg)}}{\text{Height (in metres}^2\text{)}} \times 100$$

The standard measures; Underweight = < 18.5; Normal weight = 18.5 – 24.9; Overweight = ≥ 25.0

### Findings of the study

The above discussion on the socio-cultural tradition and women education in tribal society of Tapan reveals that while the system of patrilineal is being followed, patriarchal ideologies and principles also operate within the system and ultimately define the roles and responsibilities of the tribal women that allow room for deprivation and inequality with the developmental changes of the society.

The tendency is increasing with the increasing involvement of male in the socio-economic activities, expansion of education, emergence of nuclear families etc. However in the family there is huge discrimination among the male and female child regarding education. This is partly because of the economic independence of the males and their customary laws, which is still dominant in the tribal society. Male are the supreme of decision maker. So they always try to regard female as house servant. The head of the family never thinks about women education; because they think education is only for males and females are born for manage their family as well. Some time it is viewed that males are force them to do work at home and field rather going to school and spoil all the books.



**Fig: Direct and indirect impact of education in Tribal Society**

Some males are think women education means worst of money and worst of time. After few days girls are going to their father in laws house. So there is no need of education, there is need knowledge about cocking and maternity. This thinking of male creates lot of problems within the society. Because, illiterate mother never nourish her children with batter care. If mothers became illiterate then their sons will be illiterate no doubt. Yet the female manage better the family and give more emphasis on the human development indicators like education, health etc. As female manage family better, they would be able to further the welfare of the family members and thus the society. Therefore, real improvement can only happen when the patriarchal mindset of this society is reversed. The females need to be pursued to take part in decision making democratically so that they can work in more organised way and literate themselves. It is only the inclusion of women in decision making process which will enable a change in attitudes in a far more effective manner than any legislation and amendments. The society will move forward if there is an equal partnership between men and women.

### Concluding remarks

Education is the single most important means by which individuals and society can improve personal endowments, build capacity levels, overcome barriers, and expand opportunities for a sustained improvement in their well being. In this era of globalization and modernization it is necessary to protect the dignity and status of women in these societies with the adoption of essential measures for the improvement of education, income of the females to fill the gap between male and female, reduction of poverty, preventing households from being single parentage or one side's desertion, re-examination with regard to property rights, termination of physical violence on womenfolk for the comprehensive development and progress of the whole society. The women under study

reported a number of constraints which are given in the preceding paragraphs which could be encountered bravely by the women entrepreneurs only if certain measures were taken care of by the family, society, policy makers, legal institutions etc. They first of all wanted that support of family members to women should be there in family life such as taking care of children, help in household work and they also wanted opportunities for more and more exposure to every sphere of life with more free avenues of expression. The women under study wanted that education to the girls should be provided free of cost and enough educational institutions should be established in nearby areas. Functional literacy to tribal women should be provided. Training to tribal women about income generating enterprises so as to engage them in self-employment needs to be ensured. Reservation for women or girls is needed. Provisions should be made for maintaining equal status of women with that of men in the society. There should be implementation of various programmes for the tribal women, both economically as well as socially. Strict law should be exercised against the injustice of tribal women so that the women can feel safe, secured and self-dependent and Right To Education (RTE) Act must be implemented for the betterment of tribal women and girls. Over all the following suggestions are forwarded here to overcome the constraints faced by tribal women in the society;

- To upgrade the level as well as standard of education Government needs to build educational institutional and libraries for rural development and raises the standard of education.
- Programs run by the government and nongovernmental organization (NGO) should be activated and operated in full swing to expand the literacy rate across the region and religion to make them conscious.
- Special package should be allotted for tribal population to raise their literacy rate. They should be providing with employment opportunities in secondary sectors as per their qualification.
- Female should be given more priority for employment in secondary activities, which may have significant role in socio-economic development for tribal society.
- Family planning programmes should be operated at grass root level to check the alarming growth of tribal population.
- Planners, policy makers and academicians are suggested to conduct more researches at micro level to find out the root causes of socio-economic backwardness of the area.
- For rural people Government should implement the schemes (i.e. MGNREGS, NRHM, RHS, PMEGP, BAUP, etc.) that may help to save rural households from poverty and hungry.
- Government should have taken some strategy for the tribes by the tribes for tribal development without disturbing their own rituals which is more accepted to them.
- To minimize the infrastructural cost, priority should be given to the development of basic infrastructure in the district so as to minimize the overhead cost in particular.
- Focus on 'girls' education, inclusive of context-specific traditional and innovative innervations. Launch special

and sustained education drives in low female literacy tribal pockets.

- Teach tribal children in their mother tongue at least at primary level and also ensure gender based educational infrastructure.

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