



HISTORICAL ANALYSIS ON SOCIAL STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN RURAL INDIA -SPECIAL REFERENCE WITH BANJARA WOMEN

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Abstract

In tribal society women are not treated as inferior to their male counterparts. This status of the tribal women is in existence from ancient times as can be seen from rock paintings found in India. These paintings were executed as early as 5 to 50 centuries BC. In the scenes that depict everyday life, women are shown to be involved in food gathering, basket weaving, singing and dancing. Pregnant women, women giving birth, and nursing mothers are also depicted. This perhaps indicates that the women represented fertility, motherhood and were the progenitors of the tribe.

Introduction

Indian tribal women comprise almost half of the total population and are less literate than men. Moreover, they face several problems related to reproductive health. With primary and secondary subsistence activities taken into account, Indian tribal women work harder than men. Status of tribal women fluctuates in various tribal societies. To ascertain the status of Indian tribal women in the ecological regions, their position can be divided as daughter, unmarried woman, married woman, widow, divorcee and infertile woman. Function of women is important in economic, social and domestic activities.

Gradual development and economic changes influence men and women in diverse ways. Despite the new wave of modernisation, Indian tribal women are essentially traditional in their language, dress, tools and resources. India has observed unequal distribution of resources and this is very apparent by the fact that a tribal mother is over 12 times less likely to be delivered by a medically trained person. A tribal woman is one and a half times more likely to suffer the consequences of chronic malnutrition as compared to women from other social categories.

Types of Indian Tribal Women

The tribal people of India have been in contact with the urban society, for a very long time and have been greatly influenced by them. Tribes-people like the Gond, Bhil, and Halbi almost live like Hindus do in the outside world. There are still a few tribes in the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh that are totally unaffected by developmental programs. The tribes of the Bastar District are mostly confined to Narayanpur tehsil (county). Their everyday activities are very well coordinated and inter-linked. Irrespective of one's gender, every person has a vital role to play in the welfare of the community.

Indian Tribal Women in Bastar

These women not only perform duties of a tribal housewife, but also assist their spouse in all agricultural activities. Material wealth and riches are not the indices of happiness to the Indian tribal woman. Fond of ornaments, a typical tribal woman has just a piece of coarse cloth to cover her womanhood. Poverty redefines her womanliness, her sheer existence. They usually contain some bangles, earrings and necklaces made of cheap metal. These women are rather cheerful and light-hearted, without much perturbed by the intricacies of life. Sheer poverty cannot keep them aloof from the minimum standard of living. They are much complacent with the life they have lived and are living irrespective of the hardships, the inhuman struggle they indulge in.

Indian Tribal Women in Ghotul

The female workers of the Ghotul are known as Motiyaris and they are assigned important administrative duties at the Ghotul. They are responsible for the general cleanliness of the building and premises, the punctual arrival of members, the taking of the attendance, the supervision of sitting arrangements, and the assurance of liberal supply of fire wood, mustard oil, tobacco and landra. Each girl has to attend to a male member of the Ghotul. The mother teaches the girl child all the rules so that she can enter the Ghotul. A woman has a free hand to select her groom and is never compelled to marry a man against her choice. Child marriage is not permissible either.

At times the tribes also run into marital problems. If a husband turns out to be brutal, crude, insane, impotent, unfaithful, criminal or diseased, then the wife has every right to complain about him to the tribal head Manji (or Patel). He in turn assembles his advisory council and gives an opportunity to the couple to plead their cases. If the council is convinced of the husband's guilt, the wife is allowed to get a separation and marry anybody she chooses.

Indian Tribal Women in Meghwal

Besides the usual chores the Meghwal women find time for their avidly sought after embroidery work. Their work is distinguished by their primary use of red. This red colour comes from a local pigment produced from crushed insects. The Meghwal women artisans of Thar Desert in Sindh and Baluchistan, and in Gujarat are considered master of the traditional embroidery and Ralli making. Exotic hand-embroidered items form part of dowry of Meghwal woman.

Banjara Community

The Banjaras usually refer to themselves as Gor and outsiders as Kor but this usage does not extend outside their own community. A related usage is Gor Mati or Gormati, meaning Own People. Motiraj Rathod believes that the community became known as banjara from around the fourteenth century AD and but previously had some association with the Laman, who claim a 3000-year history. Irfan Habib believes the origin of banjara to lie in the Sanskrit word variously rendered as vanij, vanik and banik, as does the name of the Bania caste, which historically was India's "pre-eminent" trading community. However, According to B. G. Halbar, the word Banjara is derived from the Sanskrit word vana chara. Despite the community adopting a multitude of languages, Banjara is used throughout India, although in Karnataka the name is altered to Banijagaru. A survey conducted in 1968 by the All India Banjara Seva Sangh, a caste association, recorded 27 synonyms and 17 sub-groups. Recorded groups include Charan, Dharia, Mathuria, Multani (salt), which was a principal product that they transported across the country.

The indigenous tribes draw India closer to an obscure and indifferent picture far from the contemporary trend and economic development. As such the Gor Banjara is one of the historic tribes ethnically identified by isolation, their own language, culture and traditions, festivals, cuisine, dance and music. This tribe significantly holds such an enigmatic culture and hospitality and contrasting patriarchal and matriarchal society. It is an indigenous and popular ethnic tribe, which is also known by different names in various parts of the country namely, 'Gor, Gour Banjara, Laman, Lambani, Lambadi, Gour Rajput, Nayak, Baldiya, and Gouriya'. They are mainly distributed in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal States and living in all the other States except the North-Eastern States and Union Territories. Gor Banjaras speak their distinct language known as 'banjara' which is also called as 'Gour Boli', 'Lamani' or 'Lambadi' or 'Gormati' or 'Banjari'. They have their oral literature and traditions, but do not have any written literature because of not having script for their language. As their history and traditions are not in written form, it has become difficult for historians and social scientists to chronicle their past. It is said that even their subsequent history up to the Aryan migration is shrouded in obscurity, as not much was discussed about them in the books of history and culture and no significant evidences were traced about them though they are survivals from the later prehistoric period.

Tribal Women in Banjara community

Banjara was once known as the bee-keeping tribe. The Banjara women are found in groups throughout the central and southern parts of India, selling cloth at markets and beaches. Their work contributes considerably to the income of their families. The Banjara women embroider bright rainbow-coloured fabrics covered with a mosaic of patchwork mirrors.

The Banjara women commonly wear large, silver earrings laden with bells called Loila and a large silver torque around the neck to which two large silver pyramid forms are attached. Banjara Tribal Women Dedicated to their ancient mode of dressing which is perhaps the most colourful and elaborate of any tribal group in India, this dressing mode sets them apart from the rest of the tribes in India. Their full length skirt is blazing red with borders embroidered in mustard and green thread. The elaborately embroidered and mirror studded Cholis or blouses and the brightly coloured Odhni (mantle) which covers the head is long enough to drape down their backs almost touching the feet.

The women wear pretty silver anklets which clink as they walk barefoot. Long silver earrings and patterned Cowrie shells decorate their hair, and are worn on their wrists and ankles. Silver, brass, some gold, cowries, ivory, animal bone and even plastic are some of the metals used for their ornaments. Mainly labourers, these women still wear all their attire even while doing heavy work.

Migration of Indian Tribal Women

Thousands of tribal women and girls migrate from their hinterlands in tribal areas to urban city centres mainly in search of employment. They are new to the city life style and environment and find it difficult to make adjustment with the changed situation and environment. Moreover, they are exploited, both financially and sexually. A large majority of migrant tribal women are in the age group of 24 to 47 years and the tribal girls in the age group of 16 to 23 years. They face problems like difficulty of communication in local

language, residential accommodation, and employment, education of children, local contacts, and adjustment with city life and environment etc.

Role of Gender

Banjara families prefer to have both sons and daughters. The son is considered necessary because they are a patrilineal society, whilst at least one daughter is deemed desirable because she can look after the parents in their old age if the son is too pre-occupied in his marriage. Daughters also contribute greatly to the running of the family unit prior to their own marriage and are prized by their mothers for that reason, being trained in various domestic tasks that benefit both the unit and their future married life. Aside from strictly domestic tasks, they are an economic boon because they help with herding and grazing the family's cattle and with work in the crop fields.

A Banjara wife is subservient to her husband and is expected to perform daily tasks for her parents-in-law. Whilst she and her husband live with her parents-in-law, she is also subservient to her mother-in-law. This period of co-habitation with the extended family usually lasts until the husband has helped to arrange the marriages of his brothers and is often the cause of arguments between the wife, the mother-in-law and any sisters-in-law. Once the husband is free of his obligation to his brothers, his wife will apply pressure to achieve a separation from the joint household, which grants her a measure of independence although she remains economically reliant upon her husband. The separating of the households causes her husband to receive some property from his parents, such as land, livestock and money, but it is a patrilineal society and so the wife has nothing.

Banjara men take the lead in religious festivals, with women playing a subsidiary role. The men sing the devotional songs and perform the temple rituals but it is the women who do most of the singing and dancing. The women are also expected to work with men when groups go to enact performances in front of non-Banjara audiences to raise money for the celebration of festivals, but most of that money is then consumed by the men in the form of liquor. The one religious function in which the women are paramount is the preparations for marriage, a ceremony which usually takes place in the house of the bride's family.

It is the men who also perform political functions, settling disputes and dealing with other problems through the Gor panchayat. Any matter that involves a woman is dealt with by the men and it is a man who represents her interests, an example being the dealings for marriage proposals which always require the consent of the Gor panchayat. If a woman leaves her husband and the marital abode then that, too, is a matter to be judged by the men. Banjara men are poorly educated and the women are worse still. Little value is placed on education, in part because children are needed at home to help women run the household. A wife whose husband has sufficient education to become an employee[d] finds herself displaced from the Banjara tanda community, having to live instead in a multi-caste area, perhaps learn a new language and abandon the customs with which she is familiar, including her traditional dress. It is in this circumstance, where the husband has some education, that the trend is to favour the dowry system over that of bride price involving cattle.

Conclusion

For the tribal of India, forests are considered as sacred and an important support system for their lives. Forest resources provide them with food, medicine, fodder and grass, fuel wood and water for irrigation. Women rely on the collection of forest products and also

play a part in protecting forests. The tribal households depend almost entirely on forest products for their livelihoods. They collect non-timber products as Tendu Patta, Char and Sal Seeds, Palesh, Sarai, Mahua/Dori, Harra, Kusum, Sisal, Bamboo, Chhind, Mango, Jamun, Ber. From the products they collect, the women obtain foods such as fruit and oil, and medicines. Forest products also become raw materials for making a number of items for the home, such as bidi, brooms, baskets, mats, rope, homemade toothbrushes and leaf plates. Certain tribes collect forest products for their main occupations.

To a limited extent, women also participate in forest protection activities. 10 to 15 years before the Forest Department came up with the idea of forest protection, several village communities began to organise protection of the forests, as villagers saw outsiders come in and destroy the forests. The forest management committees have had a number of women representatives since then. Tribal forest economy is primarily a women's economy and it is women who are most directly affected by the corporate exploitation of their traditional lands.

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