

Economic Empowerment of Scheduled Tribe Women through Panchayati Raj Initiatives

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Abstract: Economic empowerment of women is a cornerstone of inclusive development and social justice. In India, Scheduled Tribe (ST) women face double marginalization—both as women and as members of disadvantaged communities. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992), by institutionalizing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and reserving seats for women, provided a critical pathway for their participation in governance. This article examines the impact of Panchayati Raj initiatives on the economic empowerment of ST women. It highlights their involvement in decision-making, access to development schemes, role in self-help groups, livelihood generation, and policy implementation. The study also explores challenges and suggests future directions.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Scheduled Tribe Women, Economic Empowerment, 73rd Amendment, Self-Help Groups, Rural Development, Livelihood Security, Political Participation, Social Inclusion, Grassroots Democracy.

Introduction

The economic empowerment of marginalized communities has long been a central concern of development policy in India. Among these groups, Scheduled Tribe women remain one of the most vulnerable sections due to historical isolation, poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchal constraints. Despite tribal societies often being regarded as more egalitarian than caste-based rural societies, tribal women are not free from socio-economic exclusion.

The Panchayati Raj system, institutionalized through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution (1992), has been a turning point in local governance and inclusive participation. The reservation of one-third seats for women (later extended to 50% in many states) within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) created opportunities for tribal women to engage in decision-making processes. These platforms also became instruments for economic empowerment through control over local development schemes, mobilization of women's groups, and access to resources.

This article explores how Panchayati Raj initiatives have shaped the economic empowerment of Scheduled Tribe women, focusing on their role in governance, livelihood programs, self-help groups, financial inclusion, and community development.

Historical Context

Tribal Women in Traditional Economies

Tribal women traditionally participated in agriculture, forest collection, handicrafts, and animal husbandry.

Their contribution to household economy was substantial, but recognition and control over resources were limited.

Land ownership and access to credit were often denied to women.

Women and Panchayati Raj

Before 1992, women's representation in rural governance was negligible.

The 73rd Amendment mandated women's reservation, opening avenues for ST women to enter local politics.

This institutional reform integrated economic development and women's empowerment at the grassroots level.

Panchayati Raj and Economic Empowerment

1. Access to Government Schemes

PRIs act as channels for implementing government schemes such as MGNREGA, NRLM, PMAY, and PDS.

ST women leaders ensure fair distribution of wages, food security, and housing benefits in tribal villages.

Economic decision-making shifted from male-dominated spaces to more inclusive forums.

2. Role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Panchayats support the formation of SHGs, linking tribal women with banks and micro-credit institutions.

SHGs empower women to engage in income-generating activities like poultry farming, weaving, food processing, and handicrafts.

Financial independence through SHGs enhances bargaining power within households and communities.

3. Livelihood Generation Programs

Through PRIs, ST women gain access to skill development programs (weaving, bamboo craft, eco-tourism, agro-based industries).

Panchayats facilitate linkages with government markets and cooperatives.

Women leaders often prioritize livelihood schemes for marginalized groups.

4. Financial Inclusion

Panchayats, through coordination with banks, promote financial literacy among tribal women.

Opening of Jan Dhan accounts and direct benefit transfers (DBT) reduce dependency on middlemen.

Women's involvement in Panchayats improves access to credit facilities and reduces exploitation by money lenders.

5. Participation in Resource Management

Tribal economies are heavily dependent on natural resources.

ST women in Panchayats play crucial roles in forest management committees, water user groups, and community resource management.

Their leadership ensures sustainable development and equitable resource distribution.

6. Social Capital and Collective Action

Economic empowerment is not just about income—it is also about agency.

Panchayats provide ST women a platform to negotiate with state institutions and advocate for their economic rights.

Collective participation in Gram Sabhas strengthens solidarity and bargaining power.

Case Studies

Jharkhand

Women-led Panchayats implemented watershed projects that improved irrigation and boosted agricultural productivity.

SHG initiatives in Khunti district increased women's income through tasar silk production.

Odisha

In Mayurbhanj, ST women sarpanches promoted mushroom cultivation and poultry farming through SHGs.

Women ensured better access to forest produce markets, cutting out exploitative intermediaries.

Chhattisgarh

In Bastar, tribal women leaders prioritized MGNREGA projects that generated local employment.

Women Panchayat members initiated collective farming models, benefiting landless women.

Madhya Pradesh

In tribal districts like Mandla and Jhabua, women-led Panchayats facilitated SHGs focusing on handicrafts, leading to better market linkages.

Challenges

1. Proxy Leadership – Male relatives often exercise authority on behalf of elected women.
2. Low Literacy – Limits women's ability to manage accounts, understand financial procedures, or access technology.
3. Patriarchal Norms – Persistent gender biases restrict women's autonomy in decision-making.
4. Lack of Training – Insufficient capacity-building programs weaken economic governance.
5. Resource Scarcity – Poor infrastructure and remoteness of tribal areas reduce effectiveness of development schemes.
6. Market Barriers – Tribal women face difficulties in accessing wider markets for their products.
7. Intersectional Marginalization – Discrimination due to both gender and tribal identity.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthening Capacity-Building Programs for tribal women representatives in governance and financial management.
2. Increasing Reservation to 50% across all states to ensure greater representation.
3. Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Training tailored to tribal contexts.
4. Digital Literacy Initiatives to enable women to access e-governance platforms and digital banking.
5. Direct Market Linkages for tribal products through cooperatives and e-commerce.
6. Monitoring Mechanisms to prevent proxy leadership and corruption.
7. Integration of Gender-Sensitive Policies in tribal development programs.

Conclusion

Panchayati Raj has emerged as a transformative institution for the economic empowerment of Scheduled Tribe women in India. Reservation in PRIs has opened avenues for participation in decision-making, access to development schemes, and creation of livelihood opportunities. Through SHGs, financial inclusion, and resource management, ST women have enhanced their economic independence and social status. However, structural challenges such as proxy leadership, low literacy, and patriarchal resistance persist. A sustained focus on capacity-building, digital empowerment, and market linkages can further strengthen the role of Panchayats as engines of inclusive economic development, ensuring that tribal women become true agents of change.

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