

## Original Article

# Gender, Agency and Policy: Can Inclusion in Policy Empower Tribal Women?

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## Abstract

*There is considerable overlap in the priorities when one aims to address the issues of gender equality and environmental justice. When thinking about climate change policies, it is essential to think in truly inclusive terms; this requires letting go of approaches that have traditionally guided policy formulation and have led to isolation of various vulnerable elements in society. Tribal women are one such group that represents a dichotomy in terms of its perception; they are considered empowered within the tribal cultural settings, yet they represent the most suppressed group in Indian society because of the intersection of problems of both women and the relegated tribal communities. These problems are exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change. The socio-economic oppression of tribal women becomes evident when one considers their lack of input in decision making at the micro (household) level as well as at the macro (policy) level, even while their physical labour is irreplaceable in the forest and the farm. Policymakers and international funding institutions view tribal women merely as vulnerable groups rather than agents of change, thus restricting their ability to fulfill their leadership potential. This paper intends to analyse this lack of agency of tribal women through contemporary research on the subject, and to explore if and how policy options can be the mechanism for their empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Gender Policy, Environmental Justice, Tribal Women, Empowerment and Agency, Sustainable Development

## Introduction

Environmental justice in times of climate change encompasses the most significant of issues for policymakers. Climate change was for long, and in some ideological circles still is, viewed as the unfortunate yet unavoidable side-effect of the process of development. Addressing the impacts of climate change requires consistent efforts and financial commitment from institutions, companies and governments, efforts that they believe can be better utilised for the purposes of profitmaking. What we end up with as a result are half-hearted policies and initiatives that superficially address some climate issues while the poor and vulnerable remain consistently overlooked. Women and girls, particularly from rural areas and indigenous groups are the most affected in this regard. To complicate matters further, gender inequality and unequal access of women to land, natural resources and other assets constrains their ability to deal with climate and environmental crises and disasters, and to fully enjoy their environmental rights.

Thus, our approach towards climate change needs a drastic change. In the last few decades, gendering of policy sectors has become a topic of discussion, more recently, the concept of gender mainstreaming has become widely utilised, at least in theoretical terms, in many policy documents of international institutions like the UN and World Bank, as well as in budgets and policies of Indian government and some state governments.

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While these are steps in the right direction, the cross-cutting of the priorities of gender equality and environmental justice has not yet been addressed by the government. Issues of tribal women's agency is not distinct from the issue of availability of material and non-material resources. This paper intends to argue for the recognition of the intersection of these two needs through policy efforts.

### Objectives

The research has two primary objectives, which are as follows:

- 1) To understand the crosscutting of priorities between gender equality and climate governance to achieve environmental justice.
- 2) To analyse the ways in which policies can be planned, formulated and implemented in order to empower tribal women and ensure their agency in a way that can help them be active participants against the issues arising from climate change.

### Data and Methodology

This study employs an exploratory approach, wherein we use available data to explore the possible impact and avenues of improvement. The research mainly utilises secondary sources, relying on a diverse array of published articles, books and research papers as well as reports from government agencies and international organisations. The theoretical approach is taken mainly from international agency policy documents like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and World Bank and for the concept of agency and empowerment the work of Naila Kabeer has been referred to. Data has been collated and analysed in order to fulfil the objectives of the research which are to delve into the ways in which climate change policy can be formulated in such a way as to help tribal women empower themselves.

### Results and Discussion

#### Tribal Women in India

As per the Census of India (2011), the population of tribes or *Adivasis* is 10.45 crores, which is around 9% of the Indian population. Out of this, women's population is about 5.20 crores while that of men is 5.25 crores. This indicates that women constitute almost half of the tribal population. Tribes in the Indian context exhibit

significant variations in terms of their ethnicity, residence, ecology, economy, oral history, religion, and other socio-cultural institutions. Tribal women in India are a diverse group belonging to various indigenous communities or tribes across the country, their ethnic differences and sociocultural gap do not permit the formation of collective tribal identity, and also makes development and empowerment much more complex. These communities are often located in remote and inaccessible areas and are considered to be among the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of Indian society. The recent focus towards tribal women in research has been in concordance with the emergence of global waves of feminism and the rise in general interest in women-related issues across the globe (Sahal, 2023).

The popular general perception is that tribal women enjoy better status as compared to their non-tribal counterparts in the Indian context in terms of decision-making, economic independence, and autonomy (Sahal, 2023). Many anthropological and sociological studies that were conducted before independence supported this claim. For example, the anthropological studies conducted by Furer-Haimendorf (1943), and Hutton (1921) reported the high social status of tribal women among Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh, Nagas, and Garos of North-East India (Sahal, 2022). Studies conducted in post-independence period refuted these claims. Some of these studies like by Mehrotra (2004), Vyas, and Mann (1988), indicate the subjugation of tribal women under patriarchal values. Several taboos are practiced in the tribal communities that reflect the "low and impure" status of women (Mehrotra, 2004). For example, Toda and Kota women in Southern India are not permitted to cross the threshold of their temples (Singh, 1993). There are taboos to forbid the tribal women to touch the plough in Oraon and Kharia (*ibid*). In terms of material resources as well, tribal women are inferior to the men. They do not enjoy property rights. Thus, it is seen that they are equally or more disempowered as a result of their marginalization, lack of land rights, and/or control over sales of the forest produce they collect. In other words, tribal women are asset-less and mainly perform unpaid labour, like other women, for the household economy and have low status in the social hierarchy (Zaidi, 2019).

There is no dearth of tribal studies in the Indian context but anthropological and sociological studies with a focus on the condition of tribal women are limited. The condition of tribal women differs from tribe to tribe but it is also evident that they do not specifically enjoy better status as compared to their non-tribal counterparts in India. Region-specific tribal studies are needed for better planning and effective implementation of the development plans to empower tribal women, particularly through acknowledgment of their contribution to the forest economy.

Historically, women have ensured sustainable use of forests while safeguarding their own livelihoods and food security (Agarwal, 2003). It is usually women who visit forests to collect firewood and fodder, graze cattle, collect minor forest produce, and for myriad other reasons. When legal and policy efforts are made for the betterment of tribal communities, this part played by tribal women remains unaddressed, they are viewed as beneficiaries rather than contributors. After many years of struggles with the state, the Forest Rights Act was finally enacted in 2006, which recognised, among other things, the tenurial rights of forest dwellers. In recognizing these rights of forest dwellers, the Act recognized the rights of women to get legal title to land as equals of men. Land transfer through family and kinship has traditionally not been an option even for tribal women, hence, by conferring land titles jointly in the names of both men and women in case of married persons under FRA, 2006 meant that women would have legally recognized ownership rights over land for the first time.

### **Tribal Women and Climate Change**

The United Nations defines Climate Change as the long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns (United Nations). This process has been unnaturally accelerated by human activities and, as a result we are facing consequences such as intense droughts, water scarcity, flooding, severe fires, rising sea levels, declining biodiversity, among many others. According to the World Water Development Report 2020, the devastating impacts of climate change will disproportionately affect the world's poor, which as of 2017, includes 800 million people (Engage, 2022). A majority of these are situated in rural areas and

rely heavily on the primary sector for their livelihoods. This not only puts them at risk individually, but also has dire consequence for the family unit as a whole. Within the family unit itself, the report predicts that the magnitude of impact on women and girls will be significantly higher and much worse. For instance, not only are women and children reported to be 14 times more likely to die than men during disasters, about 80% of the people displaced by climate change are women. Moreover, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has also found that increased environment stress and resource scarcity leads to increase in gender-based violence, which includes domestic abuse, sexual assault, rape, forced prostitution, forced marriages and even a higher incidence of human trafficking in naturally distressed regions (Engage, 2022). These are in addition the socio-cultural disabilities and issues of general mobility women face in normal times.

Despite this, climate governance policy remains strikingly ignorant of the gender and social inequity that surrounds it. Given that access and control of certain resources to better manage climatic and livelihood uncertainties would require different kinds of solutions for men and women across different social groups, climate variability and environmental change are also closely related to already existing issues of women's personhood and agency, the precariousness of their livelihoods, violence, and bodily integrity.

Despite the critical role women have in the management of land and natural resources and climate action, research indicates that in 123 countries (roughly in two thirds of all the States in the world), traditional, religious and customary laws and practices limit women's freedom to claim and protect these assets (Correa, 2022). National legal and policy frameworks on climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction often do not provide a basis for gender-responsive governance. And even in cases where laws and policies do incorporate gender equality, they often treat women as vulnerable groups rather than as agents of change. Conversely, research shows that there is much recognition of the essential role of women in resource governance structures. For instance, at the local level the participation of women in natural resource management is

associated with better resource governance and conservation outcomes (Correa, 2022).

### **Tribal Women and Agency**

According to Bina Agarwal, women's right to land ownership need to be distinctly recognised by law as separate from that of men. The need for independent rights over land serves the following objectives: welfare, efficiency, equality and empowerment. While the first of these two are targeted in approaches to improve the conditions of women, "equality and empowerment" have the potential to transform the position of women vis-à-vis men within households and society (Agarwal, 1994). In addition to the lack of decision making within the households, tribal women are also seldom consulted while framing rules for forest use or preparing micro-plans for forest development. This also leads to failure by community forest groups (CFGs) to use women's knowledge effectively regarding the diverse species to be found in forests and in the collection practices of minor forest produce. Therefore, women's economic empowerment is not a function of attaining control and ownership rights over land alone, but is also associated with effective access to other productive resources such as rearing cattle, forest produce, productive technology and non-material resources such as access to information, opportunities for skill enhancement, rights to influence ideologies and norms (Zaidi, 2019).

The Global Gender Gap Report 2024 has a score of 68.5%, meaning 31.5% of the gap is unaddressed showcasing that gains in the arena of gender equality have been quite slow, and there is very little improvement in the last few years. India, on the other hand, has digressed in the field, having slipped from its position of 127<sup>th</sup> in 2023 to 129<sup>th</sup> this year (WEF, 2024). This shows the gains that are still required to be made while talking about the empowerment of women. Improving women's agency is crucial for shrinking these gender disparities and advancing gender equality. Agency is important intrinsically as well as having instrumental value for other dimensions of empowerment, including the transformation of resources into well-being outcomes (Fernandez, 2015).

What encompasses agency is a contested conceptualisation among researchers. A perspective

that is widely accepted as a definition is that of Naila Kabeer (1999), which says that agency is "the ability to define one's goals and act on them". The individual may not actually act, or create an underlying shift in power relations, but is able, through direct decision-making processes or indirect means, to step out of routine behaviours and try to change her environment or outcomes (Aletheia Donald et al, 2017). Agency is closely related to empowerment, although the latter is a broader concept, typically associated in the literature with improvements in wellbeing across health, education, economic opportunities, public life, and security. It has been previously argued that while empowerment includes components such as resources (pre-conditions) and achievement (outcomes), agency is the process that binds the former to the latter, although well-being outcomes and resources themselves affect agency (Kabeer, 1999). Agency is thus distinct from (though related to) empowerment and well-being. It is conceptually closely aligned with autonomy as defined in the psychology literature, and bargaining power in the economics literature (Zaidi, 2019).

While speaking of tribal women it is important to recognise the interconnection between access to resources and agency. Most policies address one or the other aspect of empowerment for tribal women, particular the idea of availability and access to resources without a comprehensive perspective on the women's ability to make decisions or choices regarding these resources.

### **Role of Policy**

Policies are government statements of what it intends to do or not do, including laws, regulations, decisions, or orders. Public policy, on the other hand, is a more specific term, which refers to a long series of actions carried out to solve societal problems (Deth, 2010). Hence, (public) policies can be conceived of as the main output of political systems. Policies can contribute to poor people's empowerment if they help build their assets, skills, and social capital to fully benefit from changes in the market, if they help address inequalities and exclusion underpinned by unequal power relations, and if the processes through which they are made and implemented promote active and inclusive citizenship. Participation and some degree of influence in political processes are pre-

requisites for policies to lead transformative change in various sections of society. Consideration of gender is imperative for the effective formulation and implementation of policy. Legally, we see the Indian government take steps that attempt to address the issue of agency of women in the country. Laws that guarantee bodily autonomy like the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, acts dealing with divorce and alimony across cultures, as well as laws of succession and transfer of land rights and ownership have been passed by the parliament, they have also been strengthened by judgements by the higher judiciary in India. But these laws also demonstrate how far we still have to go to ensure true empowerment of our female citizens.

The FRA (Forest Rights Act) of 2006 is one such minimal step in the right direction because, apart from restoring land rights and access to forest produce, it also stipulates compulsory minimum membership of women in the forest rights committee (FRC), a body that undertakes a leadership role and supports the gram sabha (village general assembly) in documenting and collecting information in prescribed formats on forest claims by forest dwellers and community members to establish their rights over the forest land and resources covered by the FRA. By including women in these processes, the Act ensures they are included in community decision processes of seeking forest rights (Zaidi, 2019).

For furthering the gains arising out of steps like the FRA, it is first essential to adopt a gendered approach in climate policy. A gendered approach implies that gender is one of the considerations in the policy-making process, either through the active participation of advocacy, through its inclusion in administration or even as general citizens. When a policy statement, legislation or administrative response is gendered it means that it has different consequences for men and women. This gendered perspective in policymaking has not been embraced in India, particularly not in the case of tribal development. A gender perspective has been applied to tribal schemes only when the results of a scheme could not meet planners' expectations. This was seen in

the APJ Abdul Kalam Amrut Aahar Yojana<sup>1</sup>, wherein the scheme implementation faced obstacles at the community level mainly due to men's reluctance to what they saw as urban and government affiliated interventions in their households, this was resolved through the active involvement of Anganwadi workers mainly through informing and creating awareness among tribal women through creative ways and incentives, sometimes even paying out of pocket for the food products to be provided (Firstpost, 2020).

This examples also showcases the importance of information being provided to tribal women and how that can be an important step towards their empowerment. The lack of information with regard to local solutions to climate change is also an issue that tribal women face, as the research by R. Rengalakshmi, Manjula M and M Devaraj. They found that two-way communication systems delivered through local intermediaries with established relations of trust to be the most effective in communicating climate information to women farmers (R Rengalakshmi, 2018).

Thus, addressing patriarchal knowledge systems through efforts at the ground level can be a way of empowering tribal women in coping with and reducing adverse impacts of climate change. Another more direct way that the government looks at empowerment of tribal women is through financial empowerment. Direct Benefit Transfer schemes<sup>2</sup> and loan schemes like the Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana have been encouraged in this regard. Both these solutions need consolidated efforts in gender sensitisation for their successful implementation, because even though they are well-intentioned, they will not be employed as intended unless the local employees and beneficiaries are also made equal participants in this process of inclusion of gender.

## Conclusion

Climate change as an issue requires a shedding of approaches of the past. The developmental approach that has exacerbated the

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<sup>1</sup> This scheme was launched by the Government of Maharashtra in 2015 to provide adequate nutrition to pregnant women and lactating mothers and children to reduce malnutrition in tribal areas.

<sup>2</sup> Like the Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarship Schemes for Tribal students



problem of climate change cannot be used to reduce it; a new perspective is required. This can mean applying the tried and tested local knowledge of tribal communities, while acknowledging their inherent patriarchy and finding a way to address it. And it can also mean application of newer methods and technologies with the help of communities that were previously neglected and suppressed. This change in approach is not only essential for the continuation of various ecosystems and communities but also for the safeguarding of the rights and livelihood of future generations.

This study has attempted to understand the various issues tribal women face as a result of their position in the social hierarchy, aggravated by the effects of climate change, which are all the more severe for them due to the intersection of issues of gender and those of tribal and indigenous communities. It has also tried to explore how solutions currently being utilised can be made more efficient and targeted towards the problems of tribal women and their agency by adopting a gendered approach in formulation and implementation of policies and schemes. A consideration of gender is indispensable for empowering tribal women.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

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