

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Status of Tribal Women in Jharkhand: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic conditions of tribal women in Jharkhand within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically focusing on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Drawing on data from multiple authoritative sources such as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), Census 2011, Jharkhand Economic Survey (2023), National Sample Survey (NSS 78th Round), National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB 2023), and reports from various social science institutions, the paper presents a data-driven evaluation of the socio-economic challenges faced by tribal women. The research integrates a detailed literature review of scholarly contributions on tribal development, gender inequality, and socio-economic marginalization in India. By adopting a multi-dimensional approach, this study underscores the intersectional challenges of poverty, limited access to education, healthcare inequities, gender-based violence, and economic disenfranchisement experienced by tribal women in Jharkhand. The findings reveal that while some progress has been made in poverty alleviation and access to basic services, there remain significant gaps in policy implementation and socio-cultural barriers that hinder sustainable development. Recommendations are made for targeted interventions that prioritize culturally sensitive solutions, economic inclusion, and gender equity in addressing the socio-economic disparities faced by tribal women in Jharkhand.

INTRODUCTION

Jharkhand, a state rich in mineral resources and natural wealth, is home to a significant portion of India's Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, with 26.2 per cent of its inhabitants belonging to tribal communities (Census, 2011). Among them, tribal women make up nearly half, yet they represent one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in India. Their challenges are multifaceted, spanning social, economic, and political dimensions, and they are often exacerbated by the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity. Despite tribal women's crucial role in sustaining their communities, their socio-economic status remains alarmingly low.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, offer a global framework to address pressing issues such as poverty eradication, health and well-being, education, gender equality, and economic empowerment, with the aim of achieving these targets by 2030. However, for tribal women in Jharkhand, realizing these goals remains a distant dream due to persistent inequalities in health, education, economic participation, and gender rights. These disparities are compounded by historical exclusion and systemic barriers that inhibit their progress.

Gender inequality within tribal societies adds another layer to these challenges. Though tribal societies are often considered more egalitarian than non-tribal or caste-based communities, Xaxa (2011) notes that tribal women, while having greater autonomy in certain household or community decisions, still face significant disadvantages. Limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities restricts their overall participation in both public and economic life. This paradox of autonomy and marginalization is a critical area of concern that is frequently overlooked in broader development policies (Shah and Shroff, 2018).

Economic vulnerability is a central issue, with the majority of tribal women engaged in informal, low-wage sectors such as agriculture and wage labor. According to Nathan and Kelkar (2005), these women face a dual burden of unpaid domestic

work and participation in underpaid sectors of the economy. Industrial development and environmental degradation further exacerbate their economic marginalization, as many are displaced from traditional livelihoods that depend on natural resources (Basu, 2016). The displacement caused by land acquisition for mining and other industrial projects disrupts not only their economic stability but also the social fabric of their communities.

Health inequities among tribal women are equally pronounced. Access to healthcare remains limited due to geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers, including mistrust of formal healthcare systems. Rao (2019) highlights that healthcare services in tribal areas are often inadequate, with a shortage of trained medical personnel and culturally appropriate interventions. This is reflected in NFHS-5 data, which shows high rates of maternal mortality, anemia, and malnutrition among tribal women in Jharkhand. The reliance on traditional healers, coupled with male-dominated decision-making in health matters, further exacerbates these challenges (Guha and Shah, 2020).

Education, a vital tool for empowering tribal women, also remains limited. Sharma (2017) points out that tribal girls face higher dropout rates compared to their non-tribal peers, with socio-economic pressures, early marriages, and poor school infrastructure being the primary factors. Literacy rates among tribal women are significantly lower than the national average (Census, 2011; NFHS-5), and without targeted interventions, the gender gap in education will continue to limit their participation in formal employment and economic empowerment (Basu, 2016; Nathan and Kelkar, 2005).

While government policies like MGNREGA, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, and BetiBachaoBetiPadhao have been implemented to address these socio-economic challenges, their success has been mixed. Sharma and Das (2018) critique these programs, noting that while they hold potential, their impact has been limited by issues such as bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and the lack of adaptation to the specific needs of tribal communities. Rao (2019) also highlights that although MGNREGA has provided employment to tribal women, the benefits have been undermined by delayed payments and insufficient job availability in remote areas.

This study examines the current status of tribal women in Jharkhand, evaluating their socio-economic conditions within the framework of the SDGs. Using data from NFHS-5, Census 2011, the Jharkhand Economic Survey (2023), NSS 78th Round, and NCRB (2023), the research provides a data-driven analysis of the persistent challenges and offers recommendations for culturally sensitive, inclusive policies to promote sustainable development and gender equity.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

SDG 1: No Poverty

The Jharkhand Economic Survey (2023) reveals that the state's overall poverty rate stands at 34 per cent, with tribal households being disproportionately affected. For tribal women, poverty is not just an economic condition but a cycle that influences their access to education, healthcare, and employment.

- **Poverty Rate Among Tribal Communities:** According to the Jharkhand Economic Survey (2023), over 50 per cent of tribal women live below the poverty line.
- **Access to Resources:** NSS 78th Round shows that only 12.5 per cent of tribal women in rural Jharkhand own agricultural land, compared to 25 per cent of men. The lack of access to productive resources such as land and credit further deepens their poverty.
- **Employment and Income:** NSS data indicates that tribal women are predominantly employed in low-paying, informal sector jobs. The survey highlights that 76 per cent of tribal women work as wage laborers in agriculture or construction, earning significantly lower wages than men.

Policy Gaps: Despite the presence of social welfare programs like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana and MGNREGA, the implementation is marred by administrative delays and corruption, leading to tribal women being left out of key poverty alleviation programs.

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Healthcare access in Jharkhand remains a significant concern, particularly for tribal women, who are often deprived of basic health services due to remoteness, poverty, and socio-cultural barriers. According to NFHS-5, tribal areas in Jharkhand are characterized by high maternal mortality, malnutrition, and poor reproductive health outcomes.

- **Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR):** Jharkhand's MMR stands at 165 per 100,000 live births, higher than the national average of 113. The Jharkhand Economic Survey attributes this to the limited availability of healthcare facilities in tribal areas.

- **Antenatal Care:** Only 55 per cent of tribal women received the recommended four antenatal checkups, significantly below the state's average of 64 per cent.
- **Child Malnutrition:** NFHS-5 reports that 63.6 per cent of tribal children under five are stunted, and 47.2 per cent of tribal women suffer from chronic malnutrition.

According to research from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), the deep-rooted distrust of modern healthcare practices in tribal communities exacerbates these problems. Traditional healers (ojhas) continue to play a dominant role in tribal healthcare, often leading to delays in seeking professional medical care.

SDG 4: Quality Education

Educational attainment among tribal women in Jharkhand remains one of the most significant challenges to achieving gender equality and economic empowerment. Tribal women continue to face barriers to accessing formal education, contributing to poor literacy rates and limited employment opportunities.

Table 1: Distribution of Literacy Rate of STs in Jharkhand

Literacy (per cent)	AllSTs (Jharkhand)	Oraon	Kharia	Munda	Bhumij	Ho	Lohra	Santhal	Kharwar
Male	40.7	52.5	51	47.9	41.5	39.2	38.9	33.4	29.6
Female	27.2	40.8	51	34.9	24	23.9	25	19.5	13.9

Female Literacy Rate: As per Census 2011, the literacy rate for tribal women in Jharkhand is 41.9 per cent, compared to the state’s overall female literacy rate of 56.21 per cent. NFHS-5 shows slight improvement, but the gap remains large, with tribal women's literacy at only 46 per cent.

- **School Dropout Rates:** Jharkhand Economic Survey (2023) reveals that dropout rates for tribal girls between ages 6 and 14 are alarmingly high, with 31 per cent leaving school early due to economic pressures, lack of infrastructure, or early marriages.
- **Higher Education:** Only 5.3 per cent of tribal women pursue higher education, as per NSS data, compared to 9.7 per cent for non-tribal women in Jharkhand.

Challenges and Solutions:

- Cultural norms around early marriage and domestic responsibilities further limit girls' ability to pursue education.
- The Jharkhand government has introduced residential schools for tribal girls (such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya) to address educational inequity, but there are still gaps in infrastructure and quality of education.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

Gender inequality remains deeply entrenched in Jharkhand’s tribal society. Although tribal women have a certain degree of autonomy compared to women in non-tribal patriarchal societies, they still face systemic barriers in terms of economic participation, political representation, and freedom from violence.

- **Child Marriage:** 32.2 per cent of tribal women in Jharkhand marry before the age of 18 (NFHS-5), which is higher than the national average of 23.3 per cent.
- **Gender-Based Violence:** NCRB (2023) reported a sharp rise in cases of domestic violence and sexual assault against tribal women. Jharkhand recorded a 12 per cent increase in reported cases of gender-based violence involving tribal women from 2020 to 2023.
- **Political Participation:** Despite constitutional reservations, only 8 per cent of elected Panchayat representatives are tribal women (Jharkhand Economic Survey, 2023), indicating that patriarchal norms still hinder their full participation in governance.

Studies from the Institute of Human Development (IHD) indicate that patriarchal practices, compounded by economic vulnerability, prevent tribal women from asserting their legal rights. Programs aimed at gender sensitization, like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, have had limited impact on deeply ingrained social norms.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Economic empowerment remains a significant challenge for tribal women in Jharkhand, who are largely employed in informal and low-paying jobs with minimal social protection. Their labor often goes unrecognized and undervalued, both within the household and in the broader economy.

- **Labor Force Participation:** According to NSS 78th Round, only 33 per cent of tribal women are part of the formal labor force, with the majority engaged in low-paying agricultural labor. Tribal women earn 37 per cent less than their male counterparts for the same work, as highlighted in the Jharkhand Economic Survey (2023).
- **Skill Development:** The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) reports that only 15 per cent of tribal women in Jharkhand have access to vocational training, limiting their ability to participate in non-agricultural employment.
- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** SHGs have emerged as a critical tool for empowering tribal women economically. As per data from the Ministry of Rural Development, over 60,000 tribal women in Jharkhand are part of SHGs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). However, market linkages remain weak, limiting the financial impact of these groups.

Challenges: Economic displacement due to industrialization and deforestation further exacerbates the economic insecurity of tribal women. Displacement from land leads to a loss of traditional livelihoods and weakens the informal social safety nets that have historically sustained tribal communities.

CONCLUSION

The status of tribal women in Jharkhand, as depicted through the lens of various socio-economic indicators, highlights the urgent need for more focused and culturally sensitive interventions to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. While several schemes and initiatives exist, they have not been fully effective in reaching tribal women due to gaps in implementation, infrastructure, and awareness. To achieve the SDGs in Jharkhand, a coordinated effort between the government, civil society, and international organizations is essential. Empowering tribal women will require addressing structural inequalities through improved access to healthcare, education, land rights, and employment, supported by culturally relevant, data-driven policies.

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