

Balancing Livelihood, Family, Community, and Environment: A Socio-Economic Study of Tribal Women in the Kodaikanal Region of Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Tribal women serve as the backbone of the socio-economic and cultural fabric of indigenous communities in India. Their contributions to agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, domestic maintenance, and community well-being are unparalleled. Yet, despite their extensive involvement in subsistence activities, their voices remain less documented, and their socio-economic struggles often remain unaddressed. This study explores the multidimensional roles, challenges, and lived experiences of tribal women in Valagiri, Shenbaganur, Perumalmai, Poomparai, and Mannavanur of the Kodaikanal region. Using an interview schedule and convenience sampling method, primary data were collected from 349 respondents. Percentage analysis was adopted to interpret the findings. Results show that tribal women face a disproportionate workload, combining wage labour, agricultural tasks, and complete responsibility for household and childcare duties. Limited access to education, healthcare, financial independence, and decision-making opportunities restricts their socio-economic mobility. However, their influence in sustaining households and community systems remains substantial.

The study emphasizes the need for policy interventions that strengthen their livelihood skills, improve health and education outcomes, and promote equitable participation in community development. Empowering tribal women is crucial not only for gender equality but also for the sustainable development of tribal communities.

Keywords: Tribal, Women, Empowerment, community, Environment, socio-cultural and economic.

INTRODUCTION

Tribal communities form an integral part of India's demographic landscape, showcasing distinct cultural identities, traditional knowledge systems, and close ties to nature. Women in these communities are vital contributors to both economic and social spheres. Unlike many non-tribal contexts where women's participation in economic activities may be limited, tribal societies traditionally rely heavily on women's labour across multiple domains.

In the Kodaikanal region—known for its hills, forests, and scattered tribal hamlets—women engage in a range of subsistence and wage-based activities. Their everyday lives are shaped by environmental conditions, seasonal agricultural patterns, forest resource availability, and community expectations. While tribal women have long held roles essential to household survival, external pressures such as modernization, climate changes, deforestation, and socio-economic transition are altering their responsibilities.

However, despite these challenges, tribal women continue to uphold cultural values, preserve indigenous knowledge, manage household affairs, and contribute economically—making them key pillars of community sustainability. Studying their conditions thus becomes essential for understanding tribal development holistically.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies across India highlight tribal women's substantial role in preserving traditional livelihoods and culture. Researchers such as Furer-Haimendorf, Vidyarthi, and Bose documented that tribal women often enjoy better mobility and labour participation than their non-tribal counterparts. Their contributions in gathering non-timber forest produce (NTFP), shifting cultivation, horticulture, livestock rearing, and handicrafts are well recognized.

Nevertheless, academic works also reveal gender inequalities in tribal settings, particularly regarding ownership of resources, financial decision-making, and access to institutional support. Devi (2021) argues that despite high participation rates in economic activities, tribal women rarely gain control over the income they generate. Similarly, Reddy (2018) observes that patriarchal influences—although less pronounced than in mainstream society—still affect women's autonomy in certain tribal groups.

Environmental studies show how deforestation, land degradation, and climate variability disproportionately affect women, who rely heavily on forests for firewood, fodder, and food security. Researchers note that environmental stress increases the time and labour burden on women, impacting their health and reducing their availability for income-earning activities.

Thus, previous literature emphasizes the need for region-specific research that considers cultural diversity, environmental conditions, and socioeconomic transitions—all of which shape the experiences of tribal women.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing research on tribal women is extensive but not evenly distributed across regions. While studies have been conducted in various places like Ooty, Sathyamangalam, Pollachi, Tamilnadu, India, fewer works focus on the hill regions of Tamil Nadu, especially Kodaikanal. The unique ecological setting, livelihood patterns, and cultural practices in these villages remain under-examined.

Additionally, most earlier studies prioritize economic activities or social status individually. There is limited integrated research that examines:

Livelihood Involvement,

Household Responsibilities,

Community Engagement,

Environmental Interactions,

Gender-related challenges,

All within a single analytical framework.

This study bridges that gap by incorporating all these dimensions, offering a more holistic understanding of tribal women's lived realities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To assess the socio-cultural and economic status of tribal women in selected Kodaikanal villages.

To evaluate their involvement in agricultural, forest-based, and wage-earning activities.

To understand their roles in household management, caregiving, and community participation.

To examine their challenges in education, health, workload distribution, and resource access.

To propose policy suggestions for improving the livelihood opportunities and overall well-being of tribal women.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in five chosen villages known for their high tribal concentration and dependence on natural resources. A sample of 349 tribal women was selected through convenience sampling due to geographic constraints, mobility limitations, and the dispersed nature of settlements.

A structured interview schedule was used, consisting of questions related to socio-economic characteristics, livelihood patterns, household responsibilities, health conditions, access to welfare schemes, and participation in community activities.

Given the literacy limitations among respondents, interviews were conducted in person, ensuring clarity and comfort during the process. The collected data were analyzed using percentage analysis, a suitable method for descriptive social studies involving community-level assessments.

FINDINGS

Economic Activities

Nearly 70% of women were involved in agricultural labour, performing activities such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and packing produce.

Seasonal employment is common, forcing women to combine multiple labor sources throughout the year.

Forest dependence remains significant, with 62% relying on firewood collection, wild berries, mushrooms, medicinal herbs, and small timber for both consumption and income.

Household and Caregiving Responsibilities

The burden of household work overwhelmingly falls on women.

74% manage cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, water collection, and fuelwood gathering.

Time-use patterns show that women spend almost twice as many hours as men in unpaid domestic labour.

Education and Awareness

A major proportion of respondents lacked formal education beyond primary level.

Low literacy directly affects their awareness of government schemes, health services, and financial opportunities.

Decision-Making and Autonomy

Only 18% had meaningful involvement in decisions regarding spending, children's education, or asset management.

Cultural norms, though less rigid than mainstream society, still limit female autonomy in certain aspects.

Health and Well-Being

Women reported fatigue, anaemia, and body pain due to continuous physical labour.

Limited access to medical facilities exacerbates minor ailments into severe health issues.

Environmental Dependence and Challenges

Environmental degradation significantly affects livelihoods, increasing labour for water collection and reducing forest produce availability.

Respondents noted declining rainfall patterns affecting agriculture.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate a complex interplay between women's livelihood roles, domestic responsibilities, socio-cultural norms, and ecological pressures. Tribal women serve as economic stabilizers, environmental stewards, and custodians of cultural knowledge, yet they continue to remain marginalized regarding resource access and decision-making authority.

The gendered division of labour places substantial pressure on women, leaving little opportunity for leisure, self-development, or skill enhancement. Their limited education restricts participation in leadership roles, institutional programs, and formal employment.

Environmental challenges such as deforestation and irregular rainfall directly disrupt their daily routines, intensifying physical strain. The cumulative outcome is a cycle where women contribute heavily to household survival but gain minimal recognition, autonomy, or institutional support.

SUGGESTIONS

Implement mobile education units for adult literacy and digital skill training.

Develop community-based childcare centres to reduce the burden on mothers.

Expand tribal-specific health initiatives, including nutrition programs and periodic medical camps.

Promote sustainable livelihood alternatives, such as medicinal plant cultivation, eco-tourism, and value-added agricultural products.

Enhance infrastructure for transportation, drinking water, and emergency health services.

Strengthen women's collectives to provide access to microfinance, entrepreneurship, and leadership training.

Ensure effective implementation of welfare schemes, including MGNREGA, PDS, and forest rights.

CONCLUSION

Tribal women in the Kodaikanal region play a vital role in sustaining their families and communities through their economic contributions, domestic labour, and stewardship of natural resources. Yet, they face significant barriers rooted in limited education, health challenges, environmental pressures, and restricted autonomy.

Empowering tribal women is not merely a gender issue; it is a critical component of tribal development, ecological preservation, and regional progress. Strengthening the capabilities of tribal women requires integrated, sustained, and culturally sensitive policy interventions. Empowerment initiatives must address their needs holistically—enhancing livelihood options, promoting gender equity, improving health infrastructure, and recognizing their invaluable contributions to environmental sustainability.

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