

(ARTICLE)

GUARDIANS OF CULTURE, VICTIMS OF NEGLECT: A STUDY OF TRIBAL WOMEN

In the dense forests, hills, and remote villages of India live communities whose traditions are older than recorded history. Among them, tribal women stand as the silent pillars of their families and culture. They preserve language, customs, songs, and rituals. They work in the fields, collect forest products, raise children, and support their households in countless visible and invisible ways. Yet, despite their strength and immense contribution, tribal women continue to face neglect, poverty, and discrimination.

According to the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes constitute about 8.6% of India's total population, and women make up nearly half of this number. Most tribal communities live in forest and rural areas where access to basic facilities remains limited. Tribal women play a crucial role in agriculture, daily wage labor, and the collection of minor forest products. However, despite their high participation in the workforce, they often receive lower wages and lack ownership of land or property. Middlemen frequently exploit them by purchasing forest products at unfair prices, leaving them with minimal earnings.

The Constitution of India provides special protection and recognition to Scheduled Tribes. However, ground reality often tells a different story. Tribal women experience a double layer of marginalization—first as women in a patriarchal society and second as members of socially and economically disadvantaged tribal communities.

Socially, many tribal women struggle with issues such as early marriage, lack of proper education, and limited access to opportunities. In remote villages, schools are often far away, and families prioritize survival over education. As a result, many girls drop out at a young age. Superstitions and traditional practices sometimes restrict their freedom and decision-making power. Although tribal societies are often considered more gender-equal than mainstream society, modern economic pressures have increased their vulnerability.

Health is another major concern. In remote tribal areas, hospitals and medical facilities are limited. Pregnant women often lack access to proper care, leading to serious health risks. Malnutrition and anemia are common problems. Government initiatives such as the National Rural Health Mission aim to improve healthcare access in rural and tribal regions, but many villages continue to struggle due to distance, poverty, and lack of awareness. Despite these challenges, tribal women are not merely victims of circumstance.

They are the true guardians of culture and tradition. They pass down traditional knowledge about forests, medicinal plants, and sustainable living practices to future generations. Their songs and dances preserve community identity and history. In states like Odisha and Jharkhand, tribal women play a vital role in protecting forests and maintaining social harmony. Many have joined self-help groups, started small enterprises, and raised their voices against injustice. The rise of leaders like Droupadi Murmu, who comes from a tribal background and became the President of India, symbolizes hope and possibility for millions of tribal girls.

In conclusion, tribal women embody endurance, dignity, and cultural richness. While they face severe disadvantages due to poverty, illiteracy, health issues, and systemic neglect, they continue to contribute significantly to their families and society. What they need is not sympathy but sustained support in the form of quality education, accessible healthcare, fair economic opportunities, legal awareness, and social respect. If properly empowered, tribal women can transform not only their own communities but also the future of the nation. It is time that the guardians of our cultural heritage are no longer treated as victims of neglect, but as equal partners in progress.

PRIYA KUMARI
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
2023-27
230310