

# **Rising Queens of the Tribe: Women Empowerment in Telangana's Tribal Communities**

**KinneraParamesh**

*Department of History, Osmania University Hyderabad, Telangana State*

---

## **Abstract:**

*This paper offers a theoretical exploration into the ongoing transformation within the tribal communities of Telangana, India, focusing specifically on the rising agency of women. Utilizing feminist theory, intersectionality, and empowerment theory, the research seeks to deconstruct the intricate process of women's empowerment within these communities. The research discusses the confluence of gender, social class, and tribal identity, dissecting the layered marginalization tribal women face and their responses to these challenges. Building upon the feminist critique of patriarchy, the paper examines the ways in which tribal women confront and negotiate patriarchal norms within their communities. Through the lens of intersectionality, it sheds light on the unique socio-cultural experiences of tribal women, shaped by the interplay of their gender, tribal status, and socio-economic conditions. Empowerment theory is invoked to understand the mechanisms through which these women gain control over various aspects of their personal and societal life. The analysis draws on multiple examples, illuminating the diverse strategies tribal women employ to assert their rights, secure their livelihoods, and effect social change. The study concludes with a discussion on the theoretical and practical implications of this research, underscoring the need to recognize and respect the agency of tribal women in development initiatives. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the broader dialogue on women's empowerment, offering new insights from the unique context of Telangana's tribal communities.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Empowerment, Tribal Communities, Telangana, Intersectionality and Feminist Theory*

---

## **I. Introduction:**

Empowerment of women is a critical and prominent topic in contemporary discourse. The implications of women's empowerment extend far beyond the individuals themselves, influencing broader aspects of society including social dynamics, economic development, and cultural evolution. This is particularly pertinent in the tribal communities where women are the cultural vessels, carrying and transmitting the unique knowledge, traditions, and practices from generation to generation. However, their roles and potentials are often restrained by the socio-cultural norms, economic deprivation, and infrastructural deficiencies. The tribal communities of Telangana, an Indian state home to several tribal groups, encapsulate this complex reality.

Telangana, since its formation in 2014, has attracted considerable attention due to its diverse tribal population. Each tribal group, ranging from Gonds, Lambadas, Yerukulas, to Chenchus and others, holds its distinct socio-cultural characteristics and ways of life. This diversity not only enriches the cultural tapestry of Telangana but also creates a myriad of experiences for the tribal women. These women navigate their lives at the intersection of gender, tribal identity, socio-economic status, and, often, marginalization, shaping a unique trajectory of struggles and empowerment.

This paper aims to delve into these trajectories, providing a theoretical exploration of the empowerment processes among women in Telangana's tribal communities. By leveraging the lenses of Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Empowerment Theory, it seeks to critically examine the social structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms that the tribal women navigate, and how they negotiate with, challenge, or embrace these elements in their quest for empowerment.

Feminist Theory, with its focus on gender equality and critique of patriarchy, helps illuminate the gender dynamics within the tribal communities. It allows for a critical understanding of how patriarchal structures, if they exist, within these communities may shape the lives and experiences of the tribal women. Intersectionality, on the other hand, takes into account the multiple identities that these women embody – as women, as members of a particular tribe, as individuals of a specific socio-economic class, and as inhabitants of a geographic region. It underscores that the experiences and challenges of these women are not singularly influenced by their gender but are at the intersection of various social categories. Empowerment Theory, the third pillar of the theoretical framework, focuses on the process through which individuals gain control and mastery over their lives. In the context of this study, it aids in understanding how tribal women, despite the constraints and challenges, manage to claim agency and shape their lives and societies.

As the discourse on women's empowerment increasingly recognizes the significance of context, cultural sensitivity, and intersectionality, a study like this is both timely and critical. It not only adds to the body of knowledge on women's empowerment in a unique socio-cultural context but also offers insights that can inform policy-making and intervention strategies for tribal development.

In the forthcoming sections, the paper will delve into a detailed theoretical discussion, application of the theories, and provide a thorough analysis of women's empowerment within the tribal communities of Telangana. The goal is to unravel the dynamics of empowerment among the 'Rising Queens' of these tribes and to contribute to the broader discourse on gender, development, and cultural preservation.

### **Importance of the study**

The study 'Rising Queens of the Tribe: Women Empowerment in Telangana's Tribal Communities' holds immense importance in both academic and practical realms for several reasons:

**1. Advancement of Academic Knowledge:** This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on women's empowerment, especially within the context of tribal communities. By applying a theoretical lens - Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Empowerment Theory - to the specific cultural context of Telangana's tribal communities, it brings forth nuanced insights into the empowerment processes of tribal women, thereby enriching academic discourse on the subject.

**2. Contextual Understanding of Women's Empowerment:** The study is vital for understanding the specific dynamics of women's empowerment within the tribal communities of Telangana. It recognizes that the process of empowerment is not universal but shaped by particular cultural, social, and economic contexts. It thus helps in developing a context-specific understanding of women's empowerment that acknowledges and respects the cultural uniqueness of the tribal communities.

**3. Intersectional Approach:** By using the lens of intersectionality, the study underscores the importance of considering the multiple identities (gender, tribal identity, socio-economic class) of tribal women in understanding their empowerment process. This intersectional perspective brings out the complexity and diversity within the empowerment experiences of tribal women, which is often overlooked in mainstream discourses on women's empowerment.

**4. Policy Implications:** The study has significant implications for policies and interventions aimed at promoting women's empowerment in tribal communities. The insights gained from this study can help policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders design and implement strategies that are sensitive to the unique cultural contexts and intersectional identities of tribal women, and that effectively leverage their strengths and capacities for their empowerment.

**5. Empowering the 'Rising Queens':** Finally, by emphasizing the agency and resilience of tribal women - the 'Rising Queens of the Tribe' - the study helps challenge the often stereotypical representation of tribal women as passive victims. It thus contributes to empowering these women not just in their communities, but also in the broader social narratives about them.

In sum, the importance of this study lies in its contribution to advancing our theoretical understanding of women's empowerment, its context-specific insights, its intersectional perspective, its policy implications, and its role in empowering the narratives about tribal women in Telangana.

## **II. Literature Review:**

1. **Gender and Power Dynamics in Tribal Societies<sup>1</sup>:** A significant body of literature has examined gender roles and power dynamics in tribal societies. Early ethnographic studies often depicted tribal societies as egalitarian (Boserup, 1970). However, subsequent studies have challenged this view, showing that women often experience marginalization and limited decision-making power (Agarwal, 1994). These studies underline the importance of analyzing power dynamics and gender relations in tribal communities.

2. **Intersectionality and Tribal Women's Experiences:** Intersectionality, as a theoretical perspective, has been extensively used in recent years to explore the experiences of marginalized groups, including tribal women. Scholars like Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2000)<sup>2</sup> have argued that the intersection of various social identities like gender, class, and ethnicity influences individuals' experiences of discrimination and opportunities for empowerment. This perspective provides a valuable lens to understand the unique experiences of tribal women in Telangana.

3. **Economic Disadvantages and Women's Empowerment:** Socio-economic factors play a crucial role in women's empowerment. The literature highlights that poverty and lack of access to resources can

---

<sup>1</sup>Agarwal, B. (1994). *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

significantly hinder women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999)<sup>3</sup>. This is especially relevant for tribal women in Telangana, who often face economic disadvantages.

4. **Tribal Women and Resistance:** Despite the challenges, tribal women have been known to resist and challenge oppressive norms. Roy (2010)<sup>4</sup> provides several instances of tribal women in India participating in social movements and fighting against exploitation. These examples indicate that even in the face of adversity, tribal women are not merely victims but active agents of change.

5. **Cultural Practices and Women's Status:** Cultural practices significantly influence the status and role of women in society. Studies have found that some tribal cultures have matriarchal structures or matrilineal descent systems that may provide women with greater status and decision-making power (Dube, 2001). Understanding these cultural practices can provide important insights into the process of women's empowerment in tribal communities.

6. **Women's Empowerment in Telangana:** Research specifically focused on Telangana's tribal women is limited but growing. Existing studies show that while these women face several challenges, they are also taking active steps towards empowerment (Reddy, 2016)<sup>5</sup>. This research calls for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of tribal women in Telangana.

In light of this literature, our paper aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical understanding of women's empowerment in Telangana's tribal communities, shedding light on the factors that enable or constrain their empowerment.

### **Application of Theories:**

Applying the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Empowerment Theory to the context of women's empowerment in Telangana's tribal communities allows for a multi-layered understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Feminist Theory and Patriarchal Structures:**

In applying Feminist Theory, the patriarchal structures within tribal societies are critically examined. Feminist Theory seeks to illuminate systems of gender inequality and the social constructs that uphold them. In many tribal communities of Telangana, as is the case globally, these patriarchal systems might be subtly woven into the fabric of customs and traditions, institutionalizing gender disparities.

For instance, while women might be integral to the functioning of the tribal community, they might also be excluded from decision-making processes or confined to roles that limit their autonomy. Several tribal societies might have customary laws and practices that disadvantage women in matters of property rights, marriage, and divorce. Here, the application of Feminist Theory helps critique such patriarchal norms and highlights the need for gender equity to empower women truly.

### **Intersectionality and Unique Challenges:**

Applying Intersectionality to the experiences of tribal women in Telangana allows for an understanding of the multiple social, cultural, and economic factors shaping their empowerment narratives. Intersectionality, as posited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, argues that various social categorizations such as race, social class, and gender do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven together. For tribal women in Telangana, their experiences and struggles are colored not only by their gender but also their tribal identity, socio-economic class, and, in many cases, their marginalized status.

They experience gender-based discrimination, but they also grapple with issues stemming from their tribal identity, such as marginalization and a lack of access to resources. Their socio-economic class further compounds these issues. For example, a lack of educational and economic opportunities often restricts their ability to claim agency over their lives. This intersectionality of identities creates unique challenges that require culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches to women's empowerment.

### **Empowerment Theory and the Process of Gaining Control:**

Empowerment Theory focuses on the processes by which individuals increase their personal power, enabling them to take action to improve their life situations. In the context of tribal women in Telangana, this

---

<sup>3</sup>Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), 435-464.

<sup>4</sup> Roy, A. (2010). Women, Citizenship and the Politics of Development. In M. Cornwall, E. Harrison & A. Whitehead (Eds.), *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*, 23-38. Zed Books.

<sup>5</sup>Reddy, D. S. (2016). *Tribes in Telangana*. Discovery Publishing House.

theory helps to understand how women, despite the constraints they face, are carving out spaces for themselves and influencing their personal and community lives.

For instance, women are increasingly taking up leadership roles in community-based organizations, self-help groups, and local governance. The Constitution of India's 73rd Amendment Act has provided tribal women with opportunities to participate in local self-governance through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This has enabled many tribal women to break free from the shackles of traditional gender roles and assert their decision-making authority in public forums.

Furthermore, many tribal women are leveraging traditional and innovative livelihood strategies to improve their economic status, thereby increasing their socio-economic power within their households and communities. They are also instrumental in preserving and promoting their rich cultural heritage, asserting their cultural identity in the process.

While the journey towards empowerment is fraught with challenges and complexities, tribal women in Telangana are increasingly demonstrating agency, resilience, and the ability to negotiate power structures. This is where the application of Empowerment Theory shines a light on the tribal women's capacities and their empowerment journeys, offering valuable insights for policies and interventions aimed at empowering them.

Through these theoretical perspectives, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the empowerment processes of tribal women in Telangana. It recognizes the interplay of societal norms, identities, and individual agency in shaping these processes and acknowledges the tribal women as active agents navigating and negotiating their empowerment paths amidst these dynamics.

### **III. Discussion:**

The theoretical analysis conducted in this paper brings to light the significant complexity and diversity present in the process of women's empowerment within the tribal communities of Telangana, India. While acknowledging the multiple challenges posed by patriarchal norms, socio-economic disadvantages, and marginalization that tribal women often face, it is essential to focus on the resilience, agency, and autonomy exhibited by these women in their unique contexts.

While patriarchal structures may continue to persist in many of these tribal communities, the utilization of Feminist Theory in our analysis has shown that women in these communities are not just passive victims of these structures. Instead, they are actively engaging with, negotiating, and in many instances, resisting these patriarchal norms and practices. For instance, by stepping into leadership roles in local governance and community-based organizations, they challenge and subvert traditional gender roles, asserting their presence and influence in public spaces traditionally dominated by men.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of intersectionality in shaping the experiences of tribal women in Telangana. Their gender, tribal identity, and socio-economic class intersect to create unique challenges and opportunities. Therefore, their strategies for empowerment are not uniform but instead take various forms across different tribes and within the tribes themselves. Intersectionality thus underscores the need for empowerment strategies to be sensitive to the unique contexts and identities of these women.

Empowerment Theory, as applied to this study, further highlights how these women are not merely recipients of change but active participants in the process. They are taking control of their personal and community lives, making decisions, and taking actions that positively impact their social and economic statuses. Whether it is through participation in economic activities, conservation of their cultural heritage, or engagement in social and political spheres, they are claiming and exercising power, thereby fostering their empowerment.

In conclusion, this discussion emphasizes the importance of viewing tribal women's empowerment in Telangana not as a monolithic phenomenon but as a spectrum of experiences influenced by various interplaying factors. Recognizing the diversity in their empowerment processes is crucial to understanding their unique challenges and strengths and to devising effective, context-specific strategies that truly empower them. Through this theoretical lens, the study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on women's empowerment in tribal societies and inform policies and interventions aimed at promoting gender equity and empowerment within these communities.

### **IV. Conclusion**

This research paper, titled 'Rising Queens of the Tribe: Women Empowerment in Telangana's Tribal Communities', provides a theoretical examination of the complex process of women's empowerment within the tribal communities of Telangana. Applying Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Empowerment Theory to this specific context, the study underscores the intricate interplay of patriarchal structures, intersectional identities, and individual agency in shaping the empowerment processes of tribal women.

The conclusions drawn from this research highlight that tribal women in Telangana, despite facing multifaceted challenges, are not merely passive victims of these circumstances. Instead, they are active agents effectuating change in their personal and communal lives. The research also emphasizes that women's

empowerment processes are not homogeneous but varied and multifaceted, influenced by the unique intersectional identities and specific cultural contexts of these women.

The insights gained from this theoretical exploration emphasize that any initiative aiming to foster women's empowerment in tribal communities needs to be sensitive to the cultural nuances and intersectional identities of tribal women. One-size-fits-all approaches might not be effective or might even be counterproductive. Strategies that respect, acknowledge, and leverage the unique strengths, knowledge, and capacities of the tribal women, and are designed with their active involvement and inputs, are more likely to foster meaningful and sustainable empowerment.

By contributing to the broader dialogue on women's empowerment, this study underscores the value of theoretical exploration in understanding complex social phenomena such as women's empowerment. It further underscores the need for continuous research and discourse on the subject, especially in diverse socio-cultural contexts, to keep refining our understanding and strategies for fostering women's empowerment.

It is hoped that this research will inspire further theoretical and empirical exploration in this domain, enriching our understanding of women's empowerment in tribal communities and informing practices and policies that genuinely empower these 'Rising Queens of the Tribe.'

### References

- [1]. Agarwal, B. (2001). Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender: An analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework. *World Development*, 29(10), 1623-1648.
- [2]. Boserup, E. (1970). *Woman's role in economic development*. Earthscan.
- [3]. Brahmananda, P. R. (2002). *Tribal development in India: The contemporary debate*. SAGE Publications India.
- [4]. Chakravarty, S., & Somanathan, R. (2008). Inter-group inequalities and social welfare. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 24(2), 377-394.
- [5]. Chaudhuri, S. (2011). Economic empowerment of tribal women: Evidence from India. *The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 47(1), 122-135.
- [6]. Chowdhry, P. (1997). Enforcing cultural codes: Gender and violence in northern India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1019-1028.
- [7]. Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- [8]. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- [9]. Das, M. B. (2006). Do traditional axes of exclusion affect labor market outcomes in India? *Social Development Papers*, 42, 1-37.
- [10]. Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2002). *India: Development and participation*. Oxford University Press.
- [11]. Geetha, V. (2002). *Gender. Theorizing Feminism Series*. Stree.
- [12]. Government of Telangana. (2016). *Telangana State Tribal Sub Plan 2016-17*.
- [13]. Harriss-White, B., & Janakarajan, S. (2004). *Rural India facing the 21st century: Essays on long term village change and recent development policy*. Anthem Press.
- [14]. Ilaiah, K. (1996). *Why I am not a Hindu*. Samya.
- [15]. Jain, D., & Banerjee, N. (1985). *Tyranny of the Household: Investigative Essays on Women's Work*. Shakti Books.
- [16]. Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13-24.
- [17]. Kothari, U. (2002). *Migration and chronic poverty*. Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper, 16.
- [18]. Krishnaraj, M. (2007). Gender, food security and rural livelihoods. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41-48.
- [19]. Kumar, N., Quisumbing, A. R., & Behrman, J. A. (2011). Does social capital build women's assets? The long-term impacts of group-based and individual dissemination of agricultural technology in Bangladesh. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 3(2), 220-242.
- [20]. Lal, D. (1989). *Cultural conservatism, political liberalism: From criticism to cultural studies*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [21]. Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- [22]. Malhotra, A., Schuler, S. R., & Boender, C. (2002). *Measuring women's empowerment as a variable in international development*. World Bank.
- [23]. Mohanty, C. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- [24]. Nayar, K. R. (2007). Social exclusion, caste & health: A review based on the social determinants framework. *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, 126(4), 355.
- [25]. Nelson, N., & Wright, S. (1995). *Power and participatory development: theory and practice*. Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd.
- [26]. Prasad, C. (2010). Empowerment of tribal women: An exploration of their participation in decision making process. *Social Change*, 40(2), 135-153.
- [27]. Rao, S. (2010). Gender and caste intersectionality in India: An analysis of the Dalit movement. *Politics & Gender*, 6(4), 573-593.
- [28]. Rappaport, J. (1984). *Studies in empowerment: Steps toward understanding and action*. Psychology Press.
- [29]. Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxfam.
- [30]. Sahoo, H. (2006). Tribal movements and political history in India: A case study from Orissa, 1803-1949. *Asian Survey*, 46(4), 653-673.
- [31]. Sen, A. (2001). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- [32]. Sharma, B. D. (1990). *Administration of rural development in India*. Sage Publications.
- [33]. Sharma, U. (2002). *Women's work, class, and the urban household: A study of Shimla, north India*. Tavistock.
- [34]. Swain, A., & Swain, R. (2007). The demand for empowerment of women's agency: Negotiating domestic violence, social change and rights. *Violence against women*, 13(5), 464-483.
- [35]. UN Women. (2015). *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights*.
- [36]. Vepa, S. S. (2005). Feminisation of agriculture and marginalisation of their economic stake. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2563-2568.
- [37]. Vindhya, U. (2000). Women-headed households in rural India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3999-4003.

- [38]. Viswanath, K., & Mehrotra, S. T. (2007). 'Shall we go out?' Women's safety in public spaces in Delhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1542-1548.
- [39]. World Bank. (2001). *Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice*.
- [40]. Xaxa, V. (2001). Protective discrimination: Why scheduled tribes lag behind scheduled castes. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2765-2772.