

ROLE OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INFORMAL SECTOR AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE NEXUS IN THE CONTEXT OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

During 1970s Keith Hart has coined the term informal sector. The casual laborers in the informal sector lack job security, their workplace is not government-registered, they disregard formal procedures, laws, and regulations, and their working hours are not set. They do not get benefits like provident fund, paid leave, and medical facilities. Indigenous resources are utilized in small-scale, family-owned businesses in the unofficial sector. Tribal women, who are primarily illiterate and among the poorest of the impoverished, enter this industry to make quick money. India is recognized by the International Labour Organization as the homeland of indigenous people. India is home to 705 different tribes, of which 62 are found in Odisha alone. These tribes are primarily involved in the unorganized sector of the economy. The primary informal sectors in which Odisha's indigenous women are employed are in mining and rural development projects as wage laborers, traditional farmers, and gatherers of small forest products. This paper tries to analyse how tribal women in Odisha contribute to the informal economy through age-old practices of environmentally sustainable activities. Furthermore, it tries to explore the issues and concerns they face while working in the informal sectors.

Key Words: Agriculture, Development projects, Environmental sustainability, Forest, Informal Sector, Tribal women

1. Introduction

The majority of working women in the nation are engaged in informal sector, where they endured the most stifling living and working conditions and had no legal protection. Although they make up 60 percent of the labour and create 50 percent of the world's food supply, women

receive just 10 percent of the global economy and most notably, only 1percent of global estate(Tripathy,2003). In India 92 percent labour are in informal sector which mostly encompasses the rural poor. Similarly, in Odisha, only agriculture, forestry, and fishing account for 53% of the state's informal workers, according to the National Sample Survey Report 2011-2012. The majority of tribal women in Odisha are employed in informal sectors such as forest gathering, traditional agriculture farmers and wage labourers in rural development projects. While working they also contribute to maintain environmental sustainability with their traditional skills and knowledge. Environmental sustainability simply means the obligation to conserve natural resources and protect global ecosystems for current and future health and well-being. Tribal Women work between sectors and also perform multiple tasks. That is why skill and knowledge of woman is central to utilization of biodiversity and conservation. Although women contribute much for the sustenance of her family as well as her community, but it is not measured in wages (Shiva 1992). In this paper an effort has been made to analyze the role of tribal women in conserving environment and sustainable use of resources while working in informal sectors such as forest space, tribal women in agriculture, tribal women at rural development works. Their difficulties and concerns have also been highlighted.

2. Methodology

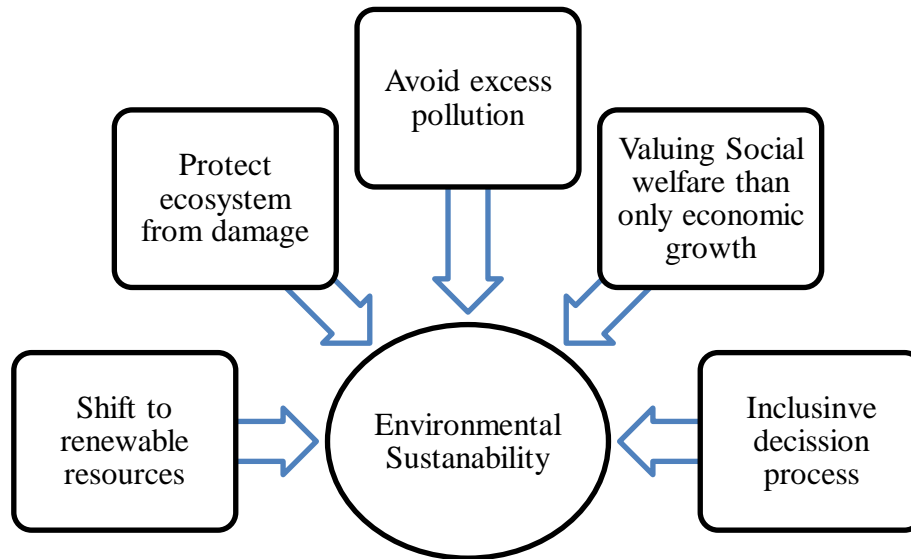
For the current work, the author used academic search engines such as Google Scholar, Google Books, JSTORE, and journal sites such as Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Sage to find various national and international papers. Non-academic sources, such as news websites, are also accessed and utilised for articles.

3. Role of tribal women in informal sectors contributing to environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability seeks to increase the quality of human life while minimising the impact on the earth's sustaining ecosystems. It is all about striking a balance between consumerist human society and the living planet (see *Figure 1*).Tribal women have practical expertise to maintain nature for future generations because they spend the majority of their time and space with it. The role of women in sustainable development was briefly discussed in the World Commission on Environment and Development and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and they formally recognise "women" as one of nine major civil groups whose participation is necessary for effective implementation of sustainable development (Robert, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005). The further section tries to explain the role of tribal women in forest conservation and the types of problems they face in the context of Odisha.

Environmental Sustainability in practice of tribal women:

Figure 1. Developed by Authors



3.1 Tribal women in forest space

Collection of forest resources and marketing it as an act in informal sector which is essential for the life and survival of tribal people in developing economies. About 100 million people live in forests in India. Another 275 million people reside in forest fringe areas and rely heavily on forests for their livelihood (Prasad & Kant, 2003). Tribal women in Odisha like the **Kharias, Dongria Kandhas, Gadaba, bonda, Mankirdia, Birhor and some other tribe** spend more time collecting and gathering Non Timber Forest Produces(NTFP). They collect green leaves, mushrooms, fruits, cocoon and shellac, resins, edible roots, arrowroots, herbs, honey and sell them to gain some money. To protect forest, they practice some strict norms such as individuals are not permitted to touch certain natural resources without performing rituals. It is forbidden to cut forests or burn around fodder and roofing belts. To ensure the sustainability of the resources, people must intentionally leave tender tubers, clumps, seeds, fruits, and leaves when collecting. Sacred groves provide carbon sequestration, nutrient recycling, top soil preservation, and biodiversity conservation (Priyadarshini and Abhilash, 2019). Tribal women’s medical knowledge has developed over forty centuries, a storehouse of expertise. They also protect the forest from smugglers without caring about their own safety. Actuality, nature is not often damaged by the collection of firewood and fodder. The better supply of fodder is improved by the traditional practise of cautious lopping and the collection of firewood, which is primarily made from falling branches that don't harm trees.

Although tribal women contribute so much to protect their ecosystem but they are always blamed that they are destroyers of forest by collecting fuel wood. The tribal people completely lost control over the forests as a result of the state's extensive exploitation on them for agricultural development, river valley projects, mining and stone quarrying, as well as for the provision of building logs, industrial raw materials, and fuel for small-scale and cottage industries. Although various laws and forest institutions have been made by state to protect forest degradation like Forest Right Act 2006, Joint Forest Management (JFM), Van Surakshya Samiti (VSS), community Forest Institutions (CFI) etc. but these have failed miserably to protect the rights of tribal women (Agarwal, 2010). Women are made to walk a long distance to attend the Executive Meetings just for the sake of rule where their opinions are underestimated and ignored. JFM give low wages to women in forest works. Women also sometimes face sexual assaults while guarding the deep forest. Through different programmes, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the state tries to weaken the Gramsabha's authority and stifle community rights to cash allocations and forest resource. This ultimately undermines tribal women's democratic rights and dignity (Ramdas, 2009). Endless examples can be found of tribal women getting exploited in spite of contributing to protect sustainably the ecosystem. Their condition continues to be same in other informal sectors like Agriculture which has been explained in next section.

3.2 Agriculture and tribal women

Agriculture is the informal sector and primary sector which accounts 20.19 percent of GDP in our country. Tribal women do almost every work in agriculture except ploughing. But the technologies used by tribal women to conserve biodiversity is seen as primitive, backward and displaced by progressive technologies which destroy diversity. However, one-dimensional yields and crop uniformity undermines biodiversity (Shiva 1992). Tribes of Odisha practice traditional methods in agriculture and mostly do swidden cultivation. Some of the examples are **LanjiaSaora** are expert terrace farmers, which takes tremendous technical talent. They use mixed cropping, which is healthy for people and the soil. Tribal women do kitchen garden, mixed orchard and look after several seasonal fruit trees in their villages, hills, and meadows, including date palm, tamarind, jackfruit, mango, *mahula*, *ramphal* and *sitaphal*. There are vast stretches of banana and pineapple, turmeric, tobacco plantations amidst jackfruit trees in the hill slopes raised by **DongriaKnodh** in Niyamgiri Hills and **Didayi** in Malkangiri plateau due to favourable environmental factors. Women in **Kandha** community work in all aspects of agriculture, including foraging and timber cutting, shifting cultivation, and settled agriculture (Ota and Mohanty, 2007). **Ho, Santhal, Munda, Oraon** and **Lohra** tribe practise the traditional agriculture which include legume-based cropping systems, the use of locally adapted crop varieties, the heap method of composting, the use of *karanj* oil for weed control, and the

construction of rain-water harvesting structures (Priyadarshini and Abhilash, 2019). Tribal women have knowledge of seed conservation, selected tree plantation and contribute in cleaning of bush, thorns and thickets, dibble seeds, reaping, weeding, transplanting, harvesting. They use country boat, hand operated nets and different types of fishing traps and baskets for fishing. All these activities are eco-friendly and never harness environment.

But due to advent of green revolution, intervention of various agricultural policies and land laws, they are now-a-days manipulated to adopt the modern technologies in agriculture which affect their livelihood pattern. A higher workload for women farmers is a result of the introduction of new technical agricultural practises such as creating compost, liquid manure, bio-pesticides, and seed treatments (Altenbuchner, Vogel, & Larcher, 2017). Adopting the High Yield Variety (HYV) package has raised the demand for cash income for many people, which leads women to either expand their efforts in farming operations to avoid paying labourers or force them to work as agricultural labourers to augment the family income. But the wage they get is very low. Much of the area that were used as forest fallows for shifting cultivation by the tribal communities have been declared as reserved forests, thereby disallowing any access to these lands for cultivation (Debashree, 2015). They are also equally exploited in other developmental projects which is analysed in the further section.

3.3 Tribal women at rural developmental works

Land and forest are indispensable assets for the tribal community in India and they always try to protect their resources. In Scheduled Areas of Odisha, an average of 74 percent of the land is categorized as state land, of which 48 percent is forest land and 26 percent is non-forest land. That means the ultimate ownership is with state on the basis of which development projects are taken up and tribal people are displaced mercilessly which further pushes them into the enduring cycle of poverty, deprivation, and impoverishment. Most important causes of tribal displacement in Odisha is large-scale mining and industrial projects. Major mining zones within Scheduled Areas are iron ore and manganese mining in Sundargarh and Keonjhar districts and bauxite in Kalahandi, Koraput and Rayagada districts (Debashree, 2015). The vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) like *Paudi*, *Bhuiyas* and *Juangs* were forcefully evicted from their land, denied their forest right, and eventually faced acute threats to their livelihood. *Kharia* tribal communities were forced to boycott their traditional livelihood practices due to relocation resulted from Similipal Tiger and Biosphere Reserve in Orissa (Negi & Azeez, 2022). According to the World Bank, development projects every year involuntarily displace one million people in the developing countries from their land and homes (World Bank, 1994). This problem has created increasing conflict between tribal people and the elites who are intruding into the territory of these people to exploit the land, forests and minerals in their ecosystems. It is found that the *Hos*,

Kols, Kharias and **Mundas** constitute the main labour force in the mining belt. The tribal women work in gangs in mining and are mainly involved in pit clearing.

More than men, women are seriously affected by displacement. This is mainly because of their dependence on the informal economy. Their support system, which had previously assisted them with caregiving, information access, financial assistance, and many other things, breaks down. They are forced to migrate and look for alternative means of subsistence.

4. Suggestions and conclusion

From the above discussions and reviews it is clear that there is very less little trickle down effects of the economic growth associated with this model of development. Displacement pushed the tribal women and young tribal girls to migrate to the urban slums and being unable to get anything more than the lowest paid jobs. Environmental policies in informal sectors like forestry, agriculture, mining and development related works are not inclusive at ground level. Tribal women are only passive partners and are being latently used because of some forest and developmental laws are made. Although tribal women contribute significantly in environmental sustainability, their condition is measurable, discriminatory in almost every informal sector they work in. Therefore, whenever these kind of development projects are planned, it should thoroughly analyse the situation of the poorest of the poor i.e. tribal women. Policies should be always inclusive, gender sensitive and community ownership of resources should be there without intervention of bureaucrats. Independence and regulatory institutions in tribal villages is important for sustainable development.

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