



Empowerment of Tribal Women in West Bengal and Mental Well-being: Role of Administration and Public Policy

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ABSTRACT

Empowering rural tribal women in West Bengal is a multi-dimensional task that is impacted by both psychological, socio-economic, cultural, and administrative aspects. Tribal women, particularly those from the Santal tribes, although contribute significantly to agriculture, household economies, and social structures, continue to experience significant marginalisation in education, economic participation, access to institutions and access to mental health services. This paper explores psychological empowerment in West Bengal through public policy using an integrative review of empirical studies, policy documents, and theoretical models. Psychological empowerment has been defined as expanding one's agency, self-efficacy, ability to make decisions, and overall sense of well-being, and does not focus solely on increasing economic status. Research findings indicate that unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and self-help groups (SHGs) increase psychological empowerment via increased financial security, enhanced collective efficacy and increased engagement with government institutions. However, limiting factors such as traditional gender roles, customary laws restricting women's rights, women's experiences of multiple forms of marginalization, and inadequate mental health service infrastructure have limited the long-term impact of these initiatives. The author recommend that future policies and initiatives must be developed to



address all four dimensions of empowerment by providing economic support, mental health services, education, and gender-sensitive community-based implementation strategies.

Introduction.

Empowering rural tribal women in West Bengal is an intricate and multi-dimensional issue influenced by numerous psychological, socio-economic, cultural and administrative elements. Women who belong to Santal tribes in districts like Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum and Paschim Medinipur are amongst the poorest and most marginalized groups in Indian society (Government of India Census, 2011) and despite making significant contributions to agriculture, forest based livelihoods, family welfare and community cohesion. They are still lack of full access to education, financial resources, institutional power and mental health services. The limitations facing by tribal women are not just physical but are also deeply psychological, influencing how women perceive themselves, their capacity for agency and the extent to which they believe they can impact on their own lives. As such, empowerment in this context cannot be solely defined in terms of increased income; it must also incorporate psychological freedom, confidence in decision making and emotional well-being.

Objectives of the study:

- To study the educational status and its obstacles (cultural & intersectional marginalization, poverty, language) of Santal women empowerment in West Bengal.
- To study the economic status of Santal women in West Bengal.
- To study the status of mental health of Santal women and the measures to cure or treat them.
- To study the impact of financial programmes of the government to increase their decision-making ability and the impact of community development programme, like Lakshmir Bhandar, SHGs etc.

Methodology:

The author to make this study has used only the secondary data. The author gathers her knowledge to write the paper from several books, research articles, census reports etc.

**Literature review:**

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (1999) emphasized on capability approach to women empowerment. Naila Kabeer (1999) in his research paper ‘Resources, agency, achievement: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment’ discussed about the indicators of the choice to women’s empowerment and framework and resources are interconnected. Those aspects are subsidiary to understand women empowerment. Uma Chakravarty (2018) in her book *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* expressed that caste, class and gender are inextricably linked and interact to shape the social position and experiences marginalisation of an individual. Guru (2000) and Crenshaw (1989) also represented about the intersectional marginalisation of indigenous people.

Desai and Joshi (2012) expressed their version on financial sphere and the position of tribal women. They opined that Self-Help Groups are weapon to make Tribal women financially independent. Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) expressed that this financial position of women gave them a mental instability and insecurity. The boundedness of Tribal women in their unpaid household work makes a distance between them and financially protective work. Singh and Dewan (2018); and Ranjeetham (2022) expressed their opinion on mental instability of women based on their social isolation and domestic inequality or gender biasness.

S. Das (2023) in his research article analysed that how the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme of West Bengal Government enhance the social security and it effects their psychological issues. The scheme empowers women psychologically and financially.

Archita Pal and Dr. Priya Mitra (2024) in their paper ‘Overcoming Barriers to Education: A Study on Tribal Women’s Empowerment in Birbhum District’ stated about the status of education of Scheduled Tribe women in this area and several barriers to the path of their literacy or education. Dr. K.B. Nayak (2025) also presents the gender inequality in education in Tribal society.

Over the last few decades there has been a considerable shift in theoretical perspectives on women's empowerment. Early development perspectives focused primarily on women's economic participation and income generating activities, with the presumption that as women gained financially they would naturally gain in terms of empowerment. However, many researchers have challenged this presumption by indicating that women's empowerment is a dynamic process that involves expanding agency and capabilities (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 1999). Sen's capability approach emphasizes the importance of actual freedoms and opportunities to engage in valued ways of living, while Kabeer's



framework illustrates how resources, agency and achievement are all interconnected. Ultimately, psychological empowerment is central to both of these frameworks, encompassing self-efficacy, confidence, critical consciousness and the ability to envision alternative ways of living (Christiana et al., 2015). Without these psychological dimensions, financial gains will typically result in little to no sustained changes in women's behaviours, relationships or social positions.

Empowerment in India occurs within very hierarchical societal structures that are deeply rooted in patriarchy, caste, ethnic identity and class. Tribal women experience multiple forms of intersectional marginalization stemming from their gender and their membership in historically excluded indigenous communities (Guru, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). In West Bengal, tribal populations comprise roughly 5.8 percent of the state's total population, with Santals representing the largest tribe (Government of India Census, 2011). Many of these tribal communities are largely rural and dependent upon the forests where they reside in areas characterised by low levels of infrastructure, low institutional presence, and environmental vulnerability. For tribal women, marginalization exists on both the objective level (at the individual, household, and community levels), as well as the subjective psychological level.

One of the primary obstacles to empowerment for tribal women is the high rate of educational deprivation. Due to a variety of structural and cultural impediments, including linguistic isolation, poverty induced school dropout, lack of accessible educational facilities, and culturally specific gendered roles related to domestic work and childrearing (Paul et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023), tribal women's literacy rates tend to be significantly lower than those of the general state and national populations. The fact that much instruction is delivered in Bengali and/or Hindi, when these women's native language is Santali, further hinders their initial literacy and academic engagement. Limited education restricts tribal women's access to knowledge about their rights, government programs designed to benefit them and psychologically limits their marginalization. On the other hand, education plays a crucial role to increase self-efficacy, institutional engagement, enhance health literacy and increase aspirations for themselves and their children (Narayan, 2005). Therefore, education acts not only as a form of human capital, but also as a critical psychological resource.

Most women's economical participation in tribal areas is informal and insecure. Tribal women usually participate in informal economic activities like agricultural wage labour, forest products gatherers, and/or small-scale self-employment, and often earn irregularly low wages that may include wage discrimination and have little or no social security (Desai & Joshi, 2012; Ghoosh, 2013). Tribal



customary norms commonly limit women's control over income and property/means of production and limit women's authority in managing economic resources, giving men greater control over household finances (Desai & Joshi, 2012). As a result of this economic dependency, many tribal women suffer from low self-esteem and poor mental health, which limits their ability to act independently (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001), and also limits their ability to take advantage of other empowerment opportunities. Additionally, because much of the work done by tribal women is considered unpaid family obligation and not-paid labour, tribal women are frequently excluded from recognition as being economically active participants (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001).

In addition to the aforementioned factors limiting women's empowerment, tribal women experience high levels of mental health challenges for these. Studies conducted on the mental health status of tribal women have identified higher rates of depression, anxiety, and chronic stress among tribal women compared to nontribal women due to the various forms of poverty, food insecurity, domestic violence, social isolation or exclusion, and environmental uncertainty experienced by tribal women (Singh & Dewan, 2018; Ranjeetham et al., 2022). Unfortunately, there is a severe lack of mental health service availability in tribal areas; therefore, few tribal women receive formal treatment for their psychological distress (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017). The psychological distress experienced by tribal women limits their ability to be productive in engaging with empowerment programmes, maintain a stable livelihood, and make decisions about their lives. On the other hand, tribal women exhibit considerable resilience based on their collective identities, cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and kinship networks, and therefore, it is essential to design community-based and culturally-sensitive mental health support.

In West Bengal, recent policies have established numerous new initiatives with potential to support women's empowerment through economic support. One of the most important of these was the introduction of the Lakshmir Bhandar Scheme in 2021, a large unconditional cash transfer program that provides direct financial assistance to women, including tribal women (Das, 2023). While the monetary value of the monthly stipend provided to tribal women under the Lakshmir Bhandar Scheme is modest, the psychological effect of receiving an independent, regular source of income is enormous. Receiving an independent, regular source of income increases tribal women's perceptions of security, reduces their dependence on male household members for financial support, and recognizes the contribution tribal women make to the well-being of their households. Tribal women who are able to independently manage their own income and expenses develop greater confidence in making decisions, and develop a greater sense of pride and entitlement rather than



simply being recipients of charity (Rakshit, 2023). It is this shift in perception that is so critical as it enables tribal women to transform their economic resources into meaningful autonomy.

Beneficiaries of the Lakshmir Bhandar Scheme report increased control over household decision-making regarding food consumption, healthcare utilization, and children's education at the household level. However, the degree of this increase in control varies significantly across different households and regions, and is influenced by the preexisting gender norms within each household and region, as well as the degree of institutional capacity building required to implement the cash transfer scheme effectively (Raj & Silverman, 2002). Despite the variability of these results, the Lakshmir Bhandar Scheme illustrates that limited amounts of financial resources, when given directly to women, can generate significant psychological empowerment.

Another critical mechanism for empowering tribal women is through collective organization via Self-Help Groups (SHGs). SHGs provide women with a platform to save money collectively, access credit, gain skills in various livelihood sectors, and obtain emotional support from peers (Horne et al., 2019). Participating in SHGs enhances tribal women's confidence, develops leadership abilities, and increases awareness of women's rights and available government schemes (Desai & Joshi, 2012). For many tribal women, participating in SHGs represents their initial opportunity to engage formally with external systems, including banks, government offices, and other organizations. Participating in SHGs challenges tribal women's internalized subordinate behaviours and contributes to psychological empowerment through shared learning and supportive relationships among SHG members (Morrison et al., 2019).

The psychological mechanisms that underlie the empowerment derived from SHG membership are particularly relevant. Group meetings facilitate social interaction, provide a safe space for expressing concerns, and promote women's participation in collective decision-making processes. Within SHGs, tribal women have opportunities to assume leadership positions that foster self-confidence and provide hands-on experience in governance and negotiation. For a number of tribal women, participating in SHGs facilitates entry into a broader range of civic engagement activities, including participation in local governance bodies. However, the effectiveness of SHGs varies significantly depending upon the quality of facilitation provided, the extent of institutional support received, and the degree of community acceptance of SHGs. Poorly facilitated or inadequately supported SHGs rarely lead to positive outcomes for tribal women, emphasizing the



necessity of ongoing administrative and technical support to ensure the long-term sustainability of SHGs.

Empowerment through education and skill-building provides additional mediation toward empowerment outcomes. Girls' education, vocational training, and livelihood diversification increase the human capital and the perceived possibilities of women's lives. Education improves women's health-seeking behaviours, increases institutional involvement, and empowers them to feel confident about navigating public spaces (Kumar et al., 2023). Culturally responsive education that includes mother-tongue instruction and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems has provided tribal women with greater motivation to engage in education and build self-esteem. However, women who pursue higher levels of education may create identity conflicts as they struggle to reconcile their tribal cultural affiliations with their participation in dominant economic and social systems (George, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative that educational systems provide women with cultural continuity while providing them with new opportunities.

Despite advancements in empowering tribal women through policy innovations, the empowerment of these women continues to be constrained by deep-seated patriarchal norms and customary legal systems. Customary laws regarding inheritance and property rights typically limit tribal women's economic independence and bargaining power (Guha, 2023) (Nongbri, 2000). Empowering women economically without challenging the underlying gender norms may ultimately increase women's burdens by requiring them to take on new responsibilities without granting them new authority. Women's increased participation in the economy has at times led to an increase in domestic control and/or violence against women, especially when men perceive a threat to their traditional authority (Raj & Silverman, 2002).

Intersectional marginalization of tribal women creates even more vulnerabilities and barriers to empowerment. Tribal women are subject to multiple layers of discrimination based upon gender, ethnicity, class, marital status, and, in some cases, internal community hierarchies (Chakravarti, 2018). These intersecting layers of inequality influence access to resources, exposure to violence, and the psychological well-being of tribal women. Widowed, single, or landless tribal women typically face the greatest exclusions and insecurities which limit their ability to benefit from empowerment programmes. Therefore, addressing empowerment among tribal women requires an intersectional perspective that recognizes diversity within tribal communities, rather than assuming that all tribal women share the same experiences and perspectives.



Integrating mental health into empowerment policy is emerging as a critical, yet relatively under-developed area of policy development. Community-based mental health models that operate out of women's collectives and local institutions offer promise in reducing stigma and improving access to mental health services. Training local women as peer facilitators or first responders offers a way to integrate support with local understanding of distress and builds collective resilience. The inclusion of mental health awareness, psychosocial first aid, and referral mechanisms into Self-Help Groups, health programmes, and livelihood initiatives can improve both the well-being and empowerment outcomes of tribal women. This perspective views mental health as an experience that is socially constructed, and influenced by the structural context.

The above analysis emphasizes the need for policy convergence. Interventions implemented in isolation produce limited and variable results when implemented independently. Sustainable empowerment requires coordinated efforts that simultaneously address economic security, psychological well-being, education, gender norms, and institutional responsiveness (NITI Aayog & Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office, 2021). To achieve this convergence of policy efforts, administrative coordination across government departments responsible for women's development, tribal affairs, health, education, and rural development are required. Equally important is community involvement in the development and implementation of empowerment programmes to ensure that the programmes reflect the lived realities and priorities of tribal women.

In summary, the empowerment of rural tribal women in West Bengal is a multi-faceted process that is deeply embedded in psychological, social, and institutional contexts. Although existing policies have created meaningful opportunities for tribal women to develop their economic security and participate collectively in empowerment activities, the transformative potential of these policies remains constrained by unmet mental health needs, unchallenged patriarchal norms, and fragmentation in the administration of empowerment policies. Therefore, recognizing psychological empowerment as both a goal and a mechanism of development is crucial to advancing the autonomy, dignity, and well-being of tribal women in West Bengal. Long-term commitment to integrated, culturally sensitive, and gender-transformational policy approaches is necessary to achieve sustainable empowerment for tribal women in West Bengal.

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