



A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT AMONG TRIBAL WOMEN IN RAJASTHAN

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ABSTRACT:

Tribal communities in Rajasthan, constituting approximately 13.48% of the state's population, remain among the most marginalized socio-economic groups. This paper examines the intersection of education and empowerment among tribal women, who face a "triple discrimination" based on gender, poverty, and tribal identity. Despite a general upward trend in literacy—reaching 66.11% in Rajasthan by 2011—female literacy lags at 52.12%, with even lower rates within tribal hamlets. Through a sociological lens, this study analyzes government interventions like Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and economic models like Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) to evaluate their impact on tribal women's agency and political awareness.

KEYWORDS:

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE TRIBAL LANDSCAPE OF RAJASTHAN

Rajasthan is home to several distinct tribal groups, with Bhils and Minas forming the majority. The Scheduled Area in the state covers eight districts in the south-eastern part, including Banswara, Dungarpur, and Pratapgarh. While the Minas have traditionally been concentrated around Jaipur and Shekhawati, the Bhils, known as expert archers, are predominantly found in Banswara and Dungarpur. Other groups include the Damors (primarily in Dungarpur), the Sahariyas (the only group classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group or PVTG in the state), and nomadic tribes like the Gadias Lohars.

Sociologically, tribal societies often exhibit more egalitarian gender relations than non-tribal Indian societies, yet tribal women remain excluded from formal power structures due to geographic isolation and low literacy.

2. THE CRISIS OF LITERACY: TRENDS AND DISPARITIES

The status of tribal women's education in India has seen slow but steady progress. In 1961, tribal female literacy was a mere 3.16%, rising to 49.35% by 2011. In Rajasthan, the gap between male (79.19%) and female (52.12%) literacy remains a significant sociological concern. Rural Rajasthan shows even greater disparity, with an average rural literacy rate of 61.44%.

2.1 BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Tribal women face multifaceted challenges in acquiring education:

- **Economic Vulnerability:** Families living below the poverty line often prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational investment.
- **Household Responsibilities:** Girls are frequently withdrawn from school to assist with cattle rearing, sibling care, and fetching water or wood.
- **Early Marriage:** Cultural norms favoring early marriage often force girls to drop out to assume domestic duties.
- **Language and Culture:** The medium of instruction (Hindi or English) is often alien to tribal children who speak local dialects, creating a systemic barrier to comprehension.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Schools are often located far from remote hamlets, and a lack of safe transportation discourages attendance.

3. INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS IN EDUCATION

3.1 EKLAVYA MODEL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS (EMRS)

Established in 1997-98, EMRS is a flagship Government of India scheme to provide quality secondary and higher secondary education (Class VI to XII) to ST children in remote areas. Each school accommodates 480 students, with a focus on holistic development and sports. By 2022, the government aimed to have an EMRS in every block

with over 50% ST population. These schools bridge the gap by providing residential facilities, thus removing the barrier of distance and safety for tribal girls.

3.2 NON-FORMAL EDUCATION: SAKHIYON KI BAADI

The IIFL Foundation's Sakhiyon ki Baadi (SKB) initiative targets districts with high female illiteracy. SKBs are community-based non-formal learning centers. Women from the same village are trained as 'Daksha' (facilitators) to teach girls using a play-way method. As of 2021, the program benefited over 35,964 girls across 1,164 villages in Rajasthan.

4. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: FROM GATHERERS TO ENTREPRENEURS

Empowerment is not limited to literacy; it includes economic agency. The Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (VDVY) has been transformative in Rajasthan.

Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) consists of approximately 300 tribal women organized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These centers train women to process Minor Forest Produce (MFP)—such as honey, amla, and herbal gulal—into market-ready products. In Rajasthan, 461 VDVKs cover over 1.39 lakh households. This shift from primary collection to value addition has vested decision-making power and funds directly in women members.

5. POLITICAL AWARENESS AND AGENCY

Education serves as a catalyst for political empowerment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated 33% reservation (now 50% in Rajasthan) for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

5.1 THE EDUCATION-AWARENESS CORRELATION

Sociological research in Banswara and Udaipur indicates that educated tribal women are significantly more likely to know about reservation policies and identify their rights under the Panchayati Raj framework. While 46% of tribal women surveyed voted, only 10% contested office. However, among those who held office, 62% had at least secondary education. Even when elected, women often face pressure from male relatives to act as figureheads—a phenomenon driven by lack of education and patriarchal norms.

6. SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS: THE PATH FORWARD

Addressing the educational disparities of tribal women requires a multi-dimensional approach that integrates cultural sensitivity with modern infrastructure.

6.1 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult Literacy: Targeting older tribal women with political literacy and basic education can reduce dependency on male family members.

Local Language Instruction: Incorporating tribal dialects into early curricula can improve retention.

Institutional Support: Expanding the number of higher

education institutions in tribal belts is critical, as tribal girls find tertiary education costs prohibitive.

Economic Integration: Strengthening the link between education and livelihood programs like VDVK ensures that education leads to tangible economic gains.

7. CONCLUSION

The sociological study of tribal women in Rajasthan reveals that while constitutional safeguards and government schemes like EMRS and Van Dhan Yojana have provided a platform, the journey toward true empowerment is hindered by deep-seated structural barriers. Education remains the most potent tool for breaking the cycles of poverty and patriarchal control. By moving beyond "symbolic" representation in politics to "substantive" engagement through literacy, tribal women can transition from marginalized gatherers to empowered stakeholders in Rajasthan's growth story.

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