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Editorial Introduction: Tribal and Indigenous Women in India

By Parijat Ghosh¹ and Dibyendu Chaudhuri²

The idea of “Indigeneity” is context-specific. In Europe, social groups such as the Sami people in Scandinavia and the Basques in Spain and France are identified as Indigenous owing to their long association with particular territories. On the other hand, in the Americas and Australia, the group of people residing there before European colonization are called Indigenous. Despite these differences, Indigenous Peoples across the world face common challenges due to historical injustices, discriminatory practices, displacement and dispossession from land, and cultural erosion.³ However, the impact of these dynamics on the lives of women within Indigenous societies has not been explored in great detail. The purpose of this special issue is to understand the position of women within various Indigenous societies in the context of changes in larger social dynamics, with a specific emphasis on India, to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the intersections between Indigeneity and gender dynamics.

Adivasi Communities in India

The idea of “Indigeneity” in the context of the Americas, Australia or Europe differs from the idea of “Adivasi,” the original inhabitants of India. The history and evolution of the Adivasi identity in India are also different from the rest of the world.

The terms tribe, Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Adivasi are often used interchangeably in India, although they do not always refer to the same groups of people. Niharman Ray, an Indian historian, while distinguishing between Jana and Jati in ancient India, equated Jana with modern tribes and Jati with the caste-based society. However, later research has shown that the claim that Jana directly represents the ancestors of modern tribal groups is problematic. This is mainly because, within the social context of ancient India, the clear distinctions among groups classified as Jana were not strictly maintained, resulting in a greater chance of

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³ To establish a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of the Indigenous Peoples of the world, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007. UNDRIP also elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of Indigenous Peoples. Article 44 of UNDRIP mentions that all the rights and freedoms recognized herein are equally guaranteed to male and female Indigenous individuals. While the government of India endorsed UNDRIP, however, it defined all Indian citizens as “Indigenous” due to the history of colonization under British rule. As described in this paper, most tribal groups in India claim that they are the original inhabitants of the region, i.e. Adivasi.
intermixing among them, whereas modern tribes in India are considered as distinct groups (Singh, 1993).

The term “tribe” was introduced by British colonizers, who viewed these communities as primitive and in an early stage of societal evolution, similar to their perceptions of Indigenous communities in Africa and the Americas (Prasad, 2016). Many of these tribal groups were labeled as “criminal tribes” during the colonial era, a categorization that was revoked in 1952, five years after India gained independence (Abraham, 1999).

The process of recognizing a group or individuals as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India needs official approval from the President of India, in consultation with state governments (D’Souza, 2002). Once a community is identified as an ST, it becomes eligible for various constitutional provisions and social welfare programs aimed at the socio-economic development of the community and individuals within the community.

Although the constitution of India does not outline any precise criteria for recognizing a group as ST, generally the following characteristics are considered: indications of “primitive” traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, limited interaction with the wider community, and socio-economic backwardness. These criteria have been drawn from the census, works of various committees and reports on the status of ST such as the 1931 census, reports from the first Backward Classes Commission (Kalelkar) in 1955, recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Revision of SC/ST lists (Lokur Committee) in 1965, and findings from the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Bill in 1967, as well as the Chanda Committee in 1969 (Bijoy et al., 2010).

Since the recognition of a group as ST is done in consultation with the state, one tribal group may be classified as ST in one state and not in others. For instance, communities like the Santhals, Oraons, or Mundas are not considered ST in Assam but are recognized as ST in Jharkhand, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh. Similarly, Gonds are designated as ST in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh but were categorized as a Scheduled Caste (SC) in Uttar Pradesh until the year 2002 (Dikshit, 2017).

Adivasis’ homeland, especially the central Indian belt, is rich in minerals and forest resources and the region is headstream for numerous rivers. As a result, Adivasis have been displaced and dispossessed from their land in order to establish mines and queries, wildlife sanctuaries, and large dams. Despite constituting only 8.6% of India’s population according to the 2011 census, STs account for a disproportionate 55% of the displaced population in India (Bhatia et al., 2017).

As resistance to these oppressive discourses and practices, some tribal communities have asserted that they are the “Adivasi”—the original inhabitants of their regions. While this claim may not be backed by historical or archaeological evidence, it arises from the historical injustices they have experienced, making Adivasi more of a political identity rather than solely an ethnic one.

The dominant mainstream discourse that considers STs as backward, primitive, or shy tends to underestimate their way of living and worldviews. The mainstream processes, as a result of this discourse, normalize the displacement of Adivasis and compel them to follow the path of “development” as defined by mainstream society.

However, at the same time, areas predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Tribes (STs) are covered by the constitutional provisions outlined in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution to safeguard tribal land rights and tribal access to resources. The Sixth Schedule applies to some of the northeastern states, providing them with a special status for
establishing autonomous tribal district councils. These enable tribal communities in Northeast India to exercise control over local resources, practice self-governance, and preserve cultural identity. The Fifth Schedule, on the other hand, covering states in central India, focuses on protecting tribal land by prohibiting the sale and transfer of lands owned by tribals to non-tribals. Further, the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) of 1996, complementing the Fifth Schedule, created provision for local governance through traditional village bodies in these areas. However, the concerned state governments have to formulate state-specific rules for implementing PESA in their respective states. There has been a particular lack on behalf of the state governments to execute this act in letter and spirit.

Unlike the Sixth Schedule areas, which of course have their own specific issues, STs in the Fifth Schedule areas continue to face challenges such as access and control over local resources, lack of basic infrastructure, and extreme poverty. They rank among the poorest in terms of various well-being indicators such as per capita income, health, nutrition, and literacy rates (PRADAN, 2022, 2021).

Some scholars and Adivasi activists highlight the cultural superiority of Adivasis, advocating their more egalitarian, nature-based, and collective ethos. Within Adivasi societies, there also exists a perception that women enjoy higher status in Adivasi society compared to their counterparts in non-Adivasi societies. However, some scholars do not support this idea of cultural superiority. They describe the Adivasi issues more from the point of view of working-class Adivasis and their struggle to resist displacement and dispossession from land for development projects (Prasad, 2016).

The limited research on Adivasi gender dynamics has not led to the generation of enough evidence around either of these contrasting viewpoints. There is a significant gap in scholarly work in analyzing the position of women in Adivasi society in relation to their values and worldviews. This scarcity underscores the need for further exploration.

**PRADAN’s Engagement with Key Questions and Issues**

Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), an Indian non-profit, has been working in the central Indian region for over four decades. Nearly 75% of the total tribal population of the country inhabits this region. PRADAN’s work has primarily centered on improving the livelihoods of the communities, and more than 60% of the total individuals PRADAN works with belong to Adivasi communities.

Over the last four decades, PRADAN has changed its community-level engagement strategy, starting from a techno-managerial approach of connecting people to technology and markets to subsequently addressing social issues, especially gender-based inequalities. A significant shift in PRADAN’s grassroots engagement took place in the 1990s when PRADAN started mobilizing women into small groups, known as Self Help Groups (SHGs). SHGs were conceptualized as a platform for women to not only conduct thrift and credit activities but also to discuss issues related to their lives and livelihoods including gender-based discrimination, domestic violence, and gender gaps. SHGs helped their members plan for better livelihoods and mobilized resources to execute those livelihood plans. PRADAN and other non-profit organizations in India played a crucial role in establishing the models of SHG-based livelihoods that helped the national government formulate the nationwide livelihood mission, with SHGs at its core.

However, PRADAN’s approach to working on gender-based issues has predominantly been shaped by its understanding of gender dynamics in mainstream societies. It has generally
ignored the different cultural values and worldviews such as non-exploitative relationships with nature, collectivism, and a lack of interest in wealth accumulation present in Adivasi societies. These values and worldviews are the most likely to influence the relationship among Adivasis including gender dynamics, and their relationship with non-Adivasis and their surroundings. Many scholars indicated that women within Adivasi societies enjoy a higher status as compared to their non-Adivasi counterparts. Nevertheless, PRADAN’s approach to working with gender issues has remained the same for Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities.

Despite being general in its gender approach, PRADAN’s gender-focused interventions have succeeded in raising awareness among a significant number of women, including those from Adivasi communities. The Self-Help Groups (SHGs) played a crucial role in changing women’s perception of gender-based roles and stereotypes, violence, and discrimination. Many of them became role models in dealing with gender-based discrimination in their respective households and in extending support to others to stop domestic violence and discrimination. SHG members, in general, show more confidence in dealing with government officials, bankers, and traders. The mobility of women has increased significantly as a result of the SHG program.

However, these interventions have not resulted in the transformation of gender relations within families, particularly around women’s access and control over assets and the perception of men as the household’s head. Women have predominantly remained landless. Even when they do possess assets, they often lack the agency to sell them without the consent of their husbands or other men in their families.

**Changing Perspectives over Time**

PRADAN’s perspective of gender dynamics, which does not differentiate between gender dynamics in Adivasi and mainstream societies, was further challenged when PRADAN initiated the periodic report on the Status of Adivasi Livelihoods (SAL). For SAL, PRADAN began consulting Adivasi scholars, activists, social workers, and thinkers. A majority of them opined that the position of women in Adivasi society is better than that of their counterparts in non-Adivasi societies and suggested the need for a rethinking of the gender question in their societies in the context of Adivasi values and worldviews. They pointed to examples such as Adivasi languages not segregating based on gender, the acceptance of girls who have been eloped or experienced rape, Adivasi men’s willingness to marry more educated women, the absence of *purdah* (seclusion) for Adivasi women, unrestricted mobility of Adivasi women in the market and other public spaces, the necessity of a girl’s consent in marriage, socially accepted remarriage of widows, and reduced violence against women in comparison to mainstream society. They also referred to the absence of dowry-related violence in Adivasi societies. However, they also acknowledged that Adivasi societies are patriarchal, and women generally did not have ownership of land. Some of them identified Self Help Groups as a significant factor in women’s empowerment within Adivasi areas, while others argued that SHGs depoliticized women and diverted their engagement from discussions and movements related to displacement and rights violations (PRADAN, 2022, 2021).

The SAL studies also involved focus group discussions with various groups such as women, youth, and mixed groups of different genders and ages. During these discussions, participants frequently expressed the view that Adivasi women are the most marginalized within the marginalized Adivasi community. While many of them opined that Adivasi women enjoyed more liberties compared to their non-Adivasi counterparts, the overwhelming
consensus was that women were burdened with unbearable domestic and economic workloads throughout the day.

**Significance of the JIWS Special Issue**

Academia has so far been limited in exploring these issues. However, there are some notable exceptions. These include studies on Adivasi women’s land rights by Kelkar and Dev Nathan (1993, 2001), the work of Sinha (2006, 2007) and Bosu Mallick (2017) on witch hunting and its connections with land rights, Sinha’s and Ghosh et al.’s (2020) work on Adivasi women’s participation in rural governance, Madhu Kishwar’s (1987) work on land rights, and Skaria (1997) and Bosu Mallick’s (2017) contributions on how Adivasi women’s involvement in rural livelihoods has evolved and significantly influenced their societal positions. Nevertheless, as Xaxa (2004) has pointed out, there remains ample room for more in-depth research to unravel and comprehend the dynamic processes underlying evolving gender relations and the status of women within Adivasi society from the perspective of Adivasi values.

The need for a special issue emerged from this scholarly gap in exploring gender dynamics in Adivasi societies. The *Journal of International Women Studies* (JIWS), in collaboration with PRADAN, has initiated this special issue to critically explore women’s positions in various Indigenous societies with a specific focus on India. The articles published in this issue aim to serve as catalysts for deeper exploration of the subject, stimulating more questions and encouraging future research endeavors. We are grateful to Dr. Amit Prakash, Dr. Anup Dhar, Dr. Diana J. Fox, Dr. Gunjal Ikir Munda, Dr. Ritambhara Hebbah, Dr. Rukmini Sen, Dr. Suraj Jacob, and Dr. Virginius Xaxa for helping us put together this special issue.

**Articles in This Issue**

There are eight papers, starting with one written by Shashank Shekhar Sinha who sets the context by analyzing the existing conceptual frames, the evolution of the understanding during colonial and post-colonial times, and the inherent layers and complexities of the subject.

The second paper by Kanchan Thomasina Ekka and Pheiga Amanda Gangeshikanlanduni explores the lived experiences of women in two distinctly different contexts in India. The Adivasis’ lifeworld is entwined with nature and land, and their relationship with the land produces a particular form of lived experience. This lived experience, especially of women, has not gained recognition in mainstream feminism. Their struggles over land rights in India are also a part of the feminist struggle. However, Adivasi/Tribal feminism fails to be encapsulated by the colonial lens of the body/earth dichotomy.

Sunita Purty examines the Adivasi lifeworld of collectivism and sisterhood among Oraon women in the Netarhat field firing range movement. Their consciousness of state repressive operations challenges the triple oppression as Adivasi, as women, and as activists. Tribal women’s struggle, therefore, is much more than women’s liberation; they demand tribal autonomy and the right to forest resources so that tribal people can live peacefully in their regions. This paper also looks at how a group of women shared their gender-based grievances as well as their everyday struggle under the militarized villages. Until now tribal women’s lived experiences and their narratives and consciousness during the different contemporary movements of Jharkhand have been ignored in mainstream writing. This paper explores how sisterhood and solidarity amongst tribal women, activists, workers, and non-tribal activists helped strengthen the tribal movements. This also led to the formulation of a unique Tribal feminist standpoint.
It is not uncommon for Adivasis to engage in romantic relationships and to engage in love marriages. Deepika Kumari Meena explores the agency among tribal girls attending college in Pratappgarh (Rajasthan), particularly in light of the advent of academic space which impacts how they interpret and perform their agency when it comes to being in a romantic relationship and getting married. It has been noted that the number of girls emigrating for education is increasing. As a result of educational migration, the practices of live-in relationships, romantic relationships, and love marriages have also increased over time. In the tribal communities of Pratappgarh, marriage provides new opportunities for girls in terms of education and employment. The majority of girls are married or engaged during their college years or after graduation in order to support themselves, but they continue to pursue their education.

The paper by K. Katini, Kaikho Hriizhiinio and S Amalanathan reviews the impact of financial literacy among the Scheduled Tribes of India, specifically the Mao-Naga Tribe women of Northeast India. Based on the analysis of existing literature regarding financial literacy among tribals, the findings indicate that financial education intervention, socio-cultural practices, social affinity, and early life financial experience affect individuals’ financial literacy. It has also been observed that a productive pathway to achieve financial literacy and inclusion lies in integrating financial education programs with the socio-cultural practices among tribal women. This paper can help governments, central bank regulators, and researchers know the essential elements of financial literacy and identify the pertinent areas for further empowerment among sub-groups of the population, especially among tribal women of Northeast India.

After independence, the Indian Government took many positive discriminatory approaches to change the condition of Scheduled Tribes, but despite these developmental actions no significant changes could be witnessed in their livelihood. A vast majority of the Adivasi population cannot avail the government facilities, and the condition of Adivasi women is even worse. PRADAN, a nonprofit, non-government organization, started working in the 1980s with the vision of bringing positive changes in the lives of less privileged people, primarily working in areas with severe poverty, illiteracy, high infant mortality rates, and social evils like dowry, slavery, wife burning, and witch hunting. The paper by Mohosin Mandal and Sahina Khatun presents a brief history of the constitutional debate over the term “Adivasi.” It highlights the measures taken by the government and the pattern of crime against Adivasi women and explores how the innovative and effective strategies and community-based approaches of PRADAN imparted substantial changes in the lives of Adivasi women.

Of late, the debate is about recognizing women in agriculture as women farmers. This demand is backed by the women’s significant contribution to the households’ economy. Towards this, there have been efforts to establish a correlation between land ownership and women’s empowerment in agriculture. This is an oversimplification of the context of women farmers and their empowerment, however. For instance, women in tribal societies exercise better access to and control over community and forest resources. Many ethnographic works and our direct work with tribal communities in Central India show that agency is also exercised through the work tribal women put in and the knowledge they have. Therefore, there is a need to build an intersectional understanding of women’s status as farmers. Sudarshan Thakur and Simran Malkan examine whether access to land and other resources is a prerequisite for the empowerment of tribal women farmers in Madhya Pradesh, India. Their findings indicate that having resources is necessary but not sufficient for empowering women. Therefore, understanding women’s agency requires an in-depth exploration of sociocultural contexts.

The last paper by Hazel T. Biana and Melvin Jabar examines and evaluates the perspectives of Indigenous and tribal women on happiness, specifically those who belong to Indian rural communities and Filipino Alangan-Mangyan Indigenous Peoples. The approaches
to defining the happiness of Indian and Mangyan women seem to share core values or characteristics with unique insights. Notably, they highlight perspectives on what brings women joy and self-worth. We can see that women are happier when they have more control over their lives. This is evident among both the Indian tribal and Alangan-Mangyan women, specifically with access to various resources such as education and health care. Furthermore, the stability of marital and familial relationships also plays a role in their happiness. Women who feel more power and stability are happier than those who feel otherwise.

References


