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Indigenous and Tribal Women: 
Indian and Filipino Alangan-Mangyan Perspectives on Happiness

By Hazel T. Biana¹ and Melvin Jabar²

Abstract
Research on happiness focuses on urban dwellers, and studies done in rural areas leave much to be desired. Existing scholarship also overlooks how women’s economic and socio-cultural roles contribute to happiness levels in relation to health, education, and safety issues. To address such a gap, this study 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. We argue that while happiness is considered a mental state, it is still a very social concept. In other words, social forces may make or break one’s happiness. The study’s first part is one-on-one interviews with Filipino Alangan-Mangyan women regarding their perspectives on happiness. For these women, happiness is rooted in the absence of individual and family problems, conflicts, fights, misunderstandings, typhoons, disasters, deaths, and illnesses. The second part of the study is a systematic review of Indian tribal women’s perspectives on happiness. We find that the happiness of these women stems from improved standards of living, cultural practices, educational level, age, location, absence of discrimination, marital status, reproductive health status, and political participation. Our study suggests that one common feature of both groups is that their happiness is often achieved when basic needs and rights are met. Therefore, happiness should be treated as a fundamental human right since it presupposes the individuals’ ability to access basic needs like food, education, employment, and healthcare.

Keywords: Happiness, Women, Indigenous peoples, India, Philippines

Introduction
Happiness is a feeling of joy, pleasure, and satisfaction when something good happens to a person or they do something enjoyable. Happiness is an emotion that one gets from success or accomplishment. Since people have various definitions of success and experience happiness differently, there is more than one path toward achieving and describing happiness. Across the globe, people have different views on what causes happiness, be it family, pleasure, social acceptance, or others. Notably, there is a direct correlation between objective evaluation and subjective emotions of happiness (Costanza et al., 2008). These subjective experiences may be affected by an individual’s cultural background and economic and social position. Cultural and traditional backgrounds help underscore happiness’ significance in people’s lives. In the Indian subcontinent, for instance, the dharma concept encompasses individual desire and contentment; it embodies the ultimate truth. In the Filipino Alangan-Mangyan indigenous peoples’ perspective, on the other hand, happiness can be equated to utang nga nagari (debt to one’s community) or kaya (a gift from a god or gods), which brings along feelings of unity, reconciliation, and presence.

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These two approaches to defining happiness offer unique insights into what brings women joy and a sense of worth.

In the past few decades, research on happiness focused on the challenges people face in urban areas (Sandhya, 2009; Kumar et al., 2021; Chatterjee, 2018). These studies on happiness overlook women in rural communities and how women’s economic and socio-cultural roles in society contribute to their happiness levels in relation to health, education, and safety issues (Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010). To expand the current literature, this study addresses oversights by examining how women’s perspectives of happiness contribute to rural community development. We focus on happiness from the viewpoint of tribal women who belong to Indian rural communities and Filipino Alangan-Mangyan indigenous peoples. These groups face similar challenges, experiences, and circumstances concerning access to resources, education, and healthcare. They are both situated in rural areas and are considered to be marginalized as minorities. Furthermore, these groups are both indigenous and tribal, and their communities have similar socio-economic conditions (e.g., poverty and lack of access to service). In addition, these groups reside in similar tropical landscapes (San Juan, 2006).

We conducted ten in-depth interviews with married Filipino Alangan-Mangyan women to uncover these perspectives on happiness. In part one of our study, we aimed to identify their understanding of happiness in three aspects: love, family, and community. The second part of the study is a systematic review of secondary sources regarding Indian tribal women’s perspectives on happiness, compared to those of their Filipino Alangan-Mangyan counterparts.

**Women and Happiness**

Women’s happiness is a question of international concern. Although happiness can be regarded as an achievement or an ideal in Western societies, studies often focus on positive outcomes in urban areas but overlook the challenges and obstacles faced by poor women, particularly those who face oppression from the larger community. Keith Cox claims that there is “little in-depth research” on happiness and unhappiness in the developing world, “especially among the poor and extremely poor” (2012, p. 103). In a study on impoverished people in Peru, for instance, it was found that happiness scores are negatively correlated with “very poor Peru” (Mateu et al., 2020, p. 1075). Mateu and associates (2020) did not significantly discuss women’s circumstances and experiences, and Cox (2012, p. 104) claims that “rural peasants” have been relatively ignored in studies on happiness. Galinha and associates (2020), a study of happiness in the multi-ethnic society of Mozambique, did address those living in extreme poverty, but they focused on urban dwellers in Maputo, the country’s commercial capital. Cox recommends “extending” happiness studies to include rural communities and to address their corresponding social support systems (2012, p. 104).

Some studies that do analyze urban and rural women’s happiness include Laura Camfield and associates (2009) in Bangladesh and Simon Feeny and associates (2014) in Melanesia. But there simply has not been enough research on either rural women or tribal or indigenous peoples. We must continuously explore various paradigms and replicate other research to address gaps in happiness studies (Cox, 2012). We should further probe various happiness perspectives not only in urban areas but in rural communities as well. At the same time, women’s happiness should also be investigated, since gender affects one’s subjective experiences and emotions (Ali & ul Haq 2006, p. 121).

Women’s happiness is an essential indicator of gender differences in subjective well-being (SWB) because men and women often have different life experiences. These fundamental issues
include the lack of resources and access to education, health care, and income opportunities. Furthermore, in many cultures, a woman’s value is mainly measured by how she raises her children and looks after her spouse. When making decisions about improving their lives, women may not have the power or self-confidence to seize opportunities or overcome challenges. For example, men experience differing happiness levels from women across social contexts (Costanza et al., 2008). Women in management, for instance, tend to be less happy than men due to receiving less income (Brockmann et al., 2018). Women have higher levels of SWB than men in countries where traditional marriages predominate (Costanza et al., 2008). In contrast, men enjoy higher SWB in countries that provide more economic opportunities for them. Women with more autonomy and access to family assets are more likely to be happy compared to women who have limited autonomy in more patriarchal households (Ali & ul Haq, 2006). The cause of this disparity has been attributed to the sex role expectations for men and women, which shape their happiness levels (Matteucci & Lima, 2016). One study found that women’s happiness stems from meaningful experiences, whereas men find more happiness from pleasurable experiences (Brakus et al., 2022).

**Approach and Methodology**

The research study of the perspectives of Filipino Alangan-Mangyan women on happiness was based on one-on-one interviews. Each interview with the Mangyan women was between 60 and 90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allowed the Mangyan women to explain their perceptions and experiences deeply. The study included topics like family, relationships with others, expectations for the future, religious backgrounds, and health care. The interviews were conducted in a community of Alangan-Mangyan situated at the foot of Mt. Halcon in the Municipality of Baco in Oriental Mindoro, Philippines. The research study of Indian tribal women’s perspectives on happiness, on the other hand, included a systematic review of secondary sources. Second-hand information is based on observations from individuals who have worked with other tribes.

**Results**

*Filipino Alangan-Mangyan Women*

In one-on-one interviews with Mangyan women, it became evident that happiness is rooted in the absence of individual and family problems, conflicts, fights, misunderstandings, typhoons, disasters, deaths, and illnesses. Some of their sources of happiness include a harmonious married and family life; a strong, supportive, cooperative, and trustworthy relationship with their spouse contributes to happiness. One informant reasoned, “I experienced extreme happiness when I gave birth to my two sons and two daughters. I feel happy when I do not have disagreements with my husband. I am also very happy because my husband is responsible for providing support for my children.” While harmony and support in the family is a source of happiness, marital squabbles or discord make them unhappy. This also underscores the idea that happiness is socially determined; relationships with significant others can make or break happiness.

The community also contributes to happiness through activities like performing Mangyan rituals and tribal marriage rites, singing Mangyan songs, telling stories, laughing, helping neighbors, and gathering vegetables. One informant described a cultural practice that makes her happy; *Pansula*, as defined by one informant, is a ritual involving the slaughtering of a pig, the purpose of which is to ask for divine intervention to avoid problems related to their livelihood, health, and relationships in the community. The term used was *pakikipag kapwa* or connecting with others and sharing experiences with one’s circle. One informant shared, “I think it’s the good
relationship in the community and in the family. I think relating with one another (pakikipag kapwa) is a source of happiness.” One informant shared that she is unhappy when people in the community gossip about her: “Sometimes you hear people gossiping and they talk about you. I am not happy when I hear people saying something about me which is not true and when there is jealousy amongst members of the community.”

Since some of them have not yet completed their education, being allowed to study at a later age is also a source of their happiness and that of their family. Specific achievements, such as being chosen as a choir member, graduating from high school, and making money from a small business, are also sources of satisfaction. They describe happiness as smiling, a light feeling, beauty, health, energy, vitality, and having a full heart. In the Alangan Mangyan language, both joy and happiness are referred to as kanggay. Other terms associated with happiness include malon, which means beautiful, and maalun pagrumrom which means positive feeling or disposition. The Alangan community uses the term galak to refer to gladness.

Abundance also defines their happiness, such as having food on the table, getting relief goods, and winning contests and raffles. Having leisure time, freedom to do what they want, and traveling to the city also brings the Mangyan women joy. Safety in the community also plays an important role, such as public spaces free of vagrancy and drunken behavior. Some informants referred to their community as the very source of happiness. Leaving their community for education or economic activities makes them feel lonely. As one informant shared, she decided to stop attending school because she deeply missed her community. According to her, uprooting someone from one’s community causes alienation and identity confusion as one must change one’s behavior to fit into another community. Close family and community ties mend the miseries they endure due to their impoverished conditions. For them, it does not matter if life is difficult so long as their family members are intact. However, they do recognize that an impoverished condition can disrupt happiness. For instance, one informant said, “In our case, many of the members of our indigenous group are not happy. This is because they do not have a source of income. Life is difficult for them. If there is a typhoon, there is no source of income. This is a source of loneliness for the Mangyan because they do not have income to buy food.” For the Alangan Mangyan women, happiness is a matter of agency. This means an individual has control over their feelings and emotions, including the state of happiness.

Are the sources of happiness of the Alangan-Mangyan women the same as women from other cultures? According to Ye and associates (2015), culture is essential to happiness. It is important to look into cross-country differences in happiness and how culture indices vary in their impact on happiness. To achieve this, we also examined the experiences of happiness among Indian tribal women. The premise is that happiness and its sources in the context of the Alangan-Mangyan women may differ from that of the Indian tribal women because of cultural differences. But is this really the case?

**Indian Tribal Women**

The happiness of Indian tribal women has been the subject of much discussion. According to Bhasin (2007), the problems facing tribal women are not limited to their status but result from other factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and oppression. Compared to their non-tribal counterparts, tribal women experience more frequent negative emotions such as anger and sadness. They also tend to have lower levels of life satisfaction than those who identify as non-tribal members. Bhasin claims that the status of tribal women in India shows that their happiness is directly related to their education level. The more educated a tribal woman is, the happier she is (Bhasin, 2007).
Furthermore, the increased happiness of Indian women can also be attributed to a change in their living standards; as women gain access to more money, they spend it on things like homes and cars rather than on clothes and jewelry (Bhasin, 2007). This claim, however, needs further research and study. After all, other factors should be considered when it comes to happiness. For instance, cultural practices also contribute to women’s happiness in society. For example, some tribes define marriage as a relationship between two families rather than an agreement between two individuals. This means that women who marry into another tribe lose their original family ties and may be unable to return if they wish to divorce their spouses. Another practice is that some tribes do not allow women access to education or jobs outside their immediate family due to fear of losing control over them. This fear stems from traditional beliefs about what constitutes “womanhood” within each tribe’s belief system (Bhasin, 2007).

In another study, Misra (2019) found that tribal women in India are more likely to be happy than other women in the country. However, it is essential to note that other factors, such as age and location, affect this happiness level. Misra’s (2019) study showed that younger tribal women tend to be happier than older ones. This might be because they have more opportunities for education or employment and less pressure from family members or society about being married young. In addition, younger tribal women are more likely to believe they can achieve their goals without any assistance from others or external factors (Misra, 2019). Higher levels of education were linked with increased happiness among tribal women (Misra, 2019). While there was no correlation between income and happiness among these women, there was an inverse relationship between income and depression.

Thasleema and Rajan (2022) surveyed 476 unmarried mothers living in tribal villages in northern India to examine the relationship between perceived discrimination and happiness among unmarried mothers in tribal communities. Through a survey, the researchers asked about the mothers’ experiences with discrimination and questions about their personal happiness and life satisfaction. Overall, the results indicate a significant relationship between perceived discrimination and happiness among unmarried mothers. Although the group was generally happy, they were more likely to report feeling discriminated against than other groups of people did. Women who believed they were most discriminated against were less happy than those who did not feel discriminated against. However, discrimination was unrelated to women’s education levels or marital status.

In another study, interviews were conducted with 50 married women under 30 years of age from three different villages in West Bengal (Ghosh et al., 2017). The study aimed to examine the effect of marital status on women’s happiness in rural India. The researchers used three questionnaires about happiness, life satisfaction, and mental health. They also conducted focus group interviews with young married women in rural India to gather information about their lives and feelings related to these topics. The researchers found that married women reported higher happiness levels than single or divorced women compared to widows or divorced women who were not remarried (Ghosh et al., 2017). They also discovered that married women reported higher levels of life satisfaction than unmarried or divorced women (Ghosh et al., 2017). These findings suggest that marital status impacts how happy people feel about their lives and how satisfied they are with them.

The study by Sahoo and Pradhan (2021) discusses the reproductive healthcare status of displaced tribal women in India. Sahoo and Pradhan (2021) found that the displaced tribal women had a lower average age of marriage than other Indian women and were also more likely to be married before they turned 18. This disparity suggests that there is a need to address barriers to
accessing reproductive health services to improve maternal and child health outcomes for both tribal and non-tribal populations alike. For tribal women to be happy, they need access to reproductive health care and education (Sahoo & Pradhan, 2021).

Another source of fulfillment for tribal women in India is gaining visibility as political actors through their involvement in protests. Tribal women have begun creating new spaces outside traditional structures such as marriages or households. They have created informal support networks, allowing them to pool resources together when needed and exchange ideas about how best to deal with issues like gender-based violence or poverty (Lund & Panda, 2011). For instance, tribal women have protested against various sectors, such as private companies and local governments, to protect their indigenous rights and natural environments (Lund & Panda, 2011, p. 78). In Odisha, tribal women have sought support from NGO leaders and activists for resistance against industrialization, the liquor trade, and mining to preserve their forest-based livelihoods (Lund & Panda, 2011, p. 86). Like the Alangan-Mangyan women, the tribal women in India recognize the importance of livelihood, source of income, and community support to their overall happiness and fulfillment.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

As can be gleaned from the interviews with the Alangan-Mangyan women, happiness, while an emotional state, is very social. This is also evident in the context of tribal Indian women. One common feature of both groups is that their happiness is often achieved when basic needs and rights are met. Interestingly, these findings are similar to a previous study on Northern Ghanian rural women, who state that their “happiest moment” is when they have “food in stock” (Bull et al., 2010, p. 25). This study, therefore, argues that happiness should be treated as a fundamental human right because it depends on the ability of individuals to access basic needs like food, education, and employment. This implies that social conditions can make or break a person’s happiness. This finding also confirms Veenhoven’s (2015) argument that social conditions could facilitate or inhibit achieving happiness, including but not limited to social status, income, education, minority status (i.e., indigenous peoples), and intimate ties. As in Northern Ghanian agricultural settings (Bull et al., 2010, p. 25), tribal Indian and Alangan-Mangyan women’s happiness improved if they had food security, proper healthcare, adequate sources of income, and affectionate relationships.

The other source of happiness relates to issues in marriage. For the Alangan-Mangyan women, having a harmonious relationship with their husbands contributes to their happiness. Meanwhile, in the context of tribal Indian women, marriage detaches women from their families of birth to which they can no longer return even if marital dissolution happens. Such a practice connotes a state of unhappiness when a marriage fails. This may be linked to Indian tribal society’s pronatalist bias that dictates women must marry and bear offspring. Cranney (2017) found that religious persons who support pronatalist norms tend to be happier when they have more children than those who do not have religious inclinations. Married Indian women are also happier when they are in nuclear families as opposed to extended or joint ones (Patel & Dhar 2020, p. 120). This finding is attributed to the level of independence that women have in running their households. For the Alangan-Mangyan women, however, it is taken for granted that they live as part of an extended family up to the third generation (Aclan et al., 2021, p. 1497). Age also plays a role in attaining happiness since younger rural Indian women are happier than their older counterparts. For instance, Indian women who are above 35 would have experienced more trials and negative experiences in life; they would also be more exhausted with the daily grind (Singh et al., 2014).
When it comes to their marriages, Patel and Dhar (2020, p. 120) explain that younger married individuals are more motivated to devote more time to developing the positive aspects of their relationships. Incidentally, however, single Indian women are not necessarily happier than married ones. Married women were still said to be happier than single ones (Rao et al., 2017). For the Alangan-Mangyan women, however, being married would only be a happy circumstance if there is a harmonious relationship with the spouse and the family (Jabar & Regadio, 2019).

Formal and informal community participation also surfaced as possible sources of happiness. The Alangan-Mangyan women pointed out that their close family ties, strong ties with the neighborhood, and social interactions contribute to their happiness. This is especially the case if community harmony is present. Their relationships and interactions with others are sources of happiness. Among tribal women in India, participating in activities, including protests and forging informal networks, further serves as a happiness trigger as these allow them to address poverty and other social issues. The results are consistent with the findings of the classic work of Phillips (1967), which maintains that more social participation and interaction leads to higher happiness levels. Conversely, social isolation leads to lesser happiness. The results of our study showed that stability of marital and familial relationships plays a role in happiness, which underscores the social nature of happiness.

Women who feel a sense of power, stability, and strength are happier than those who do not. The level of power and control a woman holds over her family and community has much to do with her happiness. We see this both in the cases of the Alangan-Mangyan and Indian women. When their families are harmonious and at peace, and their relationships with their spouses, children, in-laws, and parents are not in conflict, they are happier. Both groups of women also affirmed the effect of a good livelihood and cooperative community on their happiness. A good income provides women with more autonomy, a significant role within the family hierarchy, and a voice in family matters (Singh et al., 2014). Furthermore, their stability by fulfilling domestic and economic needs plays a role in rural women’s subjective well-being.

The happiness of both the Indian and Alangan-Mangyan women seems to be found in similar values and characteristics. We can see that women are happier when they have more control over their lives. This is evident in the Indian tribal and Alangan-Mangyan groups of women, because they depend on their access to various resources such as education and health care. When access to essential services is denied, women in disadvantaged positions may be unable to experience happiness. The intersectionality of women’s lives (i.e., being poor, indigenous, and marginalized) could hinder them from experiencing an emotional state of happiness. As such, the notion of happiness is very much related to fundamental human rights. It is an emotional outcome that could result from enjoying basic services. Women from affluent backgrounds, for instance, may experience different levels or sources of happiness since they have ready access to education and food, among other resources. Furthermore, their sources of happiness could be located beyond economic concerns. For example, the study of Melton and Zabriskie (2016) discussed family leisure as a source of happiness for people in the United Kingdom. Unlike other women, poor women in rural areas may struggle to survive on a daily basis, and leisure activity is less of a priority; for them, economic well-being presupposes happiness. Therefore, aside from providing support and opportunities to women from tribal and indigenous communities, policies and research should explore how these women may become happier. We find that the notion of happiness is a basic human right, and further policies should be based on a woman’s right to live a happy life.
References


