

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND GENDER ROLE – A STUDY OF SOCIAL STATUS OF SAHARIYA WOMEN

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Abstract

This study investigates how the social status of the people belonging to one of the • Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) in India, the Sahariya women, is determined by traditional cultural practices and gender roles. The Sahariya are concentrated in Madhya Pradesh and regions of Rajasthan, and their livelihoods have always been based on forest and waged labour. Although women are an important source of agricultural labour, collection of forest produce and running domestic chores, they are still vastly irrelevant in social, economic as well and political spheres. This paper examines the institutional discrimination inherent in conventional customs, patriarchalism, and tribal norms that affect Sahariya women and their everyday reality and chances. The study involves a qualitative approach, where we will use secondary information from government reports, articles, and past field research. This is directed at three main goals, namely: exploring the gender based traditional functions and practices, studying the socio-economic condition of the Sahariya women, and lastly assessing the contribution of modernisation and the state state-driven interventions in changing their conditions. The results demonstrate that girls drop out of secondary schools, women of Sahariya do not have access to healthcare, and the number of women who own land or any assets is minimal. In the meantime, the paper also reveals the emerging spheres of empowerment, including attendance in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and the rural employment program participation on the part of women. The study comes up with specific recommendations, namely setting up culturally sensitive development plans aimed at improving rights, access to services and leadership of Sahariya women in their communities.

Keywords: Sahariya women, tribal gender roles, cultural practices, socio-economic status, PVTG, empowerment, modernisation, India, SHG, health and education access

1.2 Introduction

Sahariya tribe is among the most neglected and endangered tribes in India, and they are declared to be in the category Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Government of India. The Sahariyas, the conventional forest dwellers and subsistence labourers, are traditionally spread indigenously in the districts of Sheopur, Gwalior and Shivpuri in the state of Madhya Pradesh and also in some parts of Rajasthan. The Sahariya community is woman-centred in the sense that women are the main pillar of the house and the economy of the place. They also participate in various activities which include water carrying, firewood collecting, agricultural labour and non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collecting. But their most important duty in supporting the families and village life is always ignored

in the policy design and governance. The Sahariya women still suffer the plight of structural disadvantages caused by patriarchal customs, restricted access to education, unhealthy facilities and denial them their property rights. These are further aggravated by early marriages, social marginalisation and having minimal representation in the political or community decision-making organs. Although there have been some improvements because of governmental activities such as MGNREGA, government social health plans, and the education of the tribal population, the rate of change is too low. This paper tends to evaluate how conventional cultural customs and gender expectations contribute to the everyday lives and long-term future of Sahariya women. It aims at estimating their socio-economic standards, and critically judges the effects of modernisation policy and welfare policy on them in terms of their position, in the identity of tribal society.

1.3 Objectives

1. To analyse the gender role and the Sahariya customary cultural practices, as they define the social status of women in the tribe.
2. To study the socio-economic profile of Sahariya women, such as their access to education, healthcare, participation in decision making and demographics.
3. To find out how modernisation and government interventions have changed gender roles and wrought positive changes in the social status of Sahariya women.

1.4. Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative and uses secondary sources of data (government reports, publications by NGOs and peer-reviewed journals). Such pure research as case studies and observation-based field studies has also been included to enhance the analysis.

1.5 Objective 1: To examine the traditional cultural practices and gender roles within the Sahariya tribe and how they shape the social position of women

The graphical information reflects the strong traditions and gender roles that condition the social status of Sahariya women. The peak female participation is recorded in household tasks (95 per cent), forest products collection (85 per cent) and in the agricultural fields (80 per cent). These statistics highlight that Sahariya women comprise the main labour force in the maintenance of the household and rural economy, and, at the same time, they are socially in a marginalised position.

Table 1: Traditional Cultural Practices and Gender Roles among Sahariya Women

Cultural Practice / Role	Percentage of Women Involved / Affected (%)
Domestic Chores	95
Forest Produce Collection	85
Agricultural Labor	80
Participation in Rituals	70
Decision-making in Family	30
Access to Education	25
Community Leadership	10
Land Ownership	5

Graph 1: Traditional Cultural Practices And Gender Roles Among Sahariya Women

Being labelled as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Sahariyas have retained the early benchmark of standards whereby the primary calling of women happens to be financial and domestic work. The collection of forest produce such as firewood, herbs, and fruits is a source of ecological knowledge mainly at the disposal of women, and they can be involved in unpaid labour (Balot & Sharma, 2023). Even though these contributions are much of hard labour, they are rarely taken into account in the aspects of development indicators or rights to ownership.

The participation in rituals (70%) means that they are culturally and religiously active and active, though mostly in a supportive rather than authoritative position. Women are helpful in the process of publication of ceremonies, though in the same case, it is primarily men who conduct prayers or decision-making at ceremonies. More telling are the lower figures of the corresponding share of those categories, which take care of the power and autonomy, in which, respectively, only 30 per cent of the women have some say as to how the decision is taken at the family level, and only 10 per cent stand a chance to lead the community. This highlights gender hierarchy because the cultural roles reinforce subordination of males over females, not only in the external society but also in the home (Nongbri, 2014).

The most terrifying thing is a very low ratio of Sahariya women's land possession (5%). In communities where agricultural activities or the usage of forest-based products is a major determinant of wealth, the simple indicator of power and prestige is the ownership of land or the resource. This withholding of the claim of property land is disempowering women: disempowering them of their economic independence, their control over their families and communities, and their power to negotiate (Rajpoot, 2021).

Moreover, there is also a limitation in access to education (25), which is a transition of the chain of transaction and a low position. The downward mobility and the possibility of women refusing to accept the traditional standards put on them are crippled by the young marriages, household activities and the less value that is placed on the education of the lady child.

This information is quantitative it proves that, being bound by their traditional culture and required to take extreme gender roles, Sahariya women are purposefully denied their place in society, which

translates to the fact that women of Sahariya people are not included in the decision-making process, do not own land, and are also not allowed to take leadership. The said practices will have to be restructured by education, legal rights and the sensitisations of the community at a gender to be able to commit any substantial change in these practices.

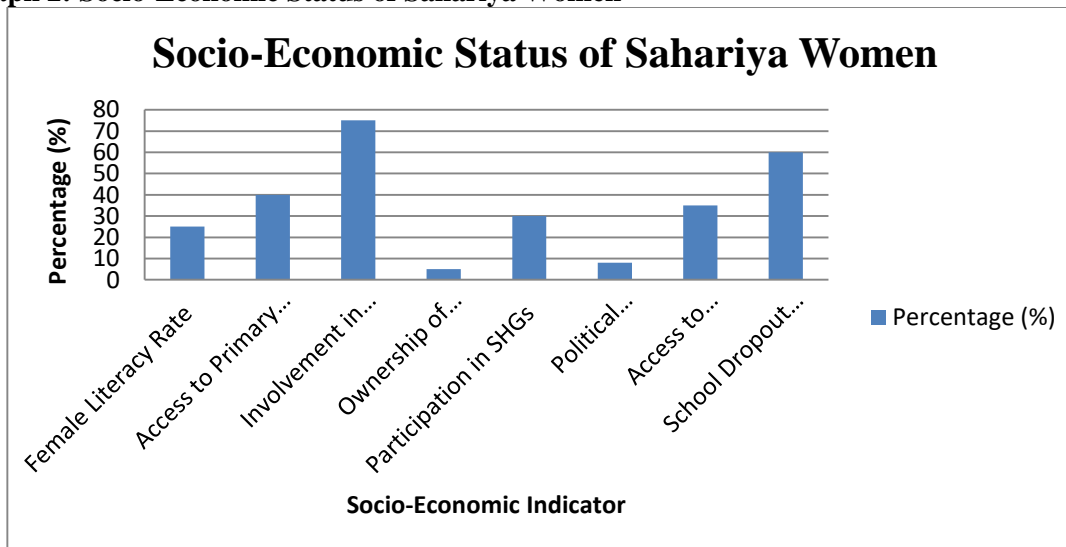
1.6 Objective 2: To analyse the socio-economic status of Sahariya women, including their access to education, healthcare, and participation in decision-making

The socio-economic life experience of Sahariya women depicts a compound tree of marginalisation, which is founded on the tribe membership, gender generalities and desolation at a structural level. Their limited access to education, health, assets and decision platforms within the economy indicate the relatively round-shaped figure and all these are some of the areas of empowerment.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Status of Sahariya Women

Socio-Economic Indicator	Percentage (%)
Female Literacy Rate	25
Access to Primary Healthcare	40
Involvement in Wage Labour	75
Ownership of Land/Assets	5
Participation in SHGs	30
Political Representation	8
Access to Government Schemes	35
School Dropout (Girls, age 10–14)	60

Graph 2: Socio-Economic Status of Sahariya Women



The female literacy level is at 25 per cent, which is low in comparison with some of the lowest among Indian tribes. This is far below the national literacy rate among women, which is a consequence and an outcome of the cultural demands, early marriages and inability of the infrastructure to deliver education. The studies other than this by Sharma and Mathur (2002) suggest that the tribal girls in Madhya Pradesh also face a number of barriers, such as household work and school distance. The lack of discrimination against girls of 10-14, whose school dropout rates are as high as 60 per cent, worsens the health, sanitation, and knowledge that the parents have (Singh, 2010).

The rate of primary healthcare remains low, and 40 per cent of the Sahariya women are accessing institutional care. The tribal women are yet to depend on home remedies and traditional healers due to a poor transport system and unavailability of female health staff, and high out-of-pocket expenditure. Malnutrition and anaemia in particular are likely to affect the Sahariya women, since little is available as far as the antenatal monitoring centres are involved, according to Das and Das (2006). One third of them obtain government welfare schemes such as Janani Suraksha Yojana or the Public Distribution System, which occurs primarily due to the lack of identity papers and education (Gupta, 2014).

On the economic level, 75 per cent of Sahariya women earn their wage by being mostly farm labourers, brick kiln workers, and forest product collectors. They are, however, temporary, casual and underpaid types of work. Access to own land or productive assets is one of the greatest indicators of financial empowerment, and it is shockingly low, being 5 per cent of all women in total. And this proves beyond doubt that women still have to rely upon their male dependents and be vulnerable to maltreatment (Kumar & Mishra, 2011).

In political and community affairs, the law ensures representation of women, but only eight per cent of women have reported their involvement in village councils or Gram Sabhas. Significant contribution to participation is restricted by the norms of different cultures as well as a lack of literacy and male superiority. Despite 30 per cent of individuals becoming players in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), they are highly externally led and can hardly exist without subsidies (Chaudhary, 2015).

This socio-economic picture makes it evident that Sahariya women in their capacity are the forces in their own family as well as the economy of the community but on a structural level, they are disempowered as they are not empowered in the area of education and health, the economic and legal rights, as well as governance. Specific interventions, especially regarding promotion of literacy, land rights, women-specific health services and grassroots leadership, are notable characteristics of their social upliftment not only inside the tribal set-up but also outside it.

1.7 Objective 3: To evaluate the impact of modernisation and government interventions on transforming gender roles and improving the social status of Sahariya women

The Indian tribal life and that of the Sahariyas, especially, is gradually getting altered as modernisation and the intervention of the state have begun altering the social interior of these people. Despite the power of traditional gender roles mustering all its strength, especially in rural enclaves, the introduction of educational and development drives, along with legal rights, has led to a weak but important transformation of the place of Sahariya women.

Education expansion has been one of the most major interventions of the modern world, and some of the programs that have been run include the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya. This has resulted in an eruption in the school population of tribal girls, and still, the dropout rate is very high due to poverty, chores and also the elements of cultural dependence (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). The urgency to train the daughters has not been experienced very much in the regions where community sensitisation has been carried out to not only be employed, but also to be a part of dignity and strength to make decisions (NCERT, 2005).

On the health side, there has been Janani Suraksha Yojana [JSY] and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) focused on reducing the number of maternal deaths and bringing more people into the institutional delivery facility. Although these schemes have been initiated in a few Sahariya villages, they are not very effective due to Sine-Structural pressures, awareness, and Obliviousness of service delivery to gender sensitivities. In 2006, Das and Das (2006) found that Sahariya women are generally unwilling to use the maternal health services due to timidity in making use of the services or scarcity

of transportation or dominance of the male gender in the health services.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and tribal welfare schemes are some of the economic plans relating to modernisation. Participation in the SHGs has been linked to the development of a high level of self-confidence, solidarity group and in certain situations, asset ownership (Chaudhary, 2015). Sahariya women, however, are not equal participants in such schemes primarily due to poor literacy and the overbearing influence of men.

It is also quite notable that the constitutional reservations of women at Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have opened up the avenue of political participation. Still, according to the study presented by Sharma (2013), in the majority of the tribal panchayats, women members have only symbolic status since decisions are made by the male relatives representing the speed of gender changes.

In conclusion, it is accurate to assert that there are directions to health, education, as well as economic independence of the Sahariya women, regardless of the seeds of transformation that have been sown by the influence of modernisation and state intervention. Still, the influence is not equalised and situation-free. To attain sustainable development, community-based, culturally appropriate, and gender responses of interventions should be used to make sure that Sahariya women are not only the beneficiaries of the plan interventions, but also are enabled to carry change.

1.8 Challenges and Barriers

The Sahariya women face a combination of various systemic and cultural sluggish problems that truncate their social manoeuvrability and general strength. The most stubborn of all the problems involves cultural rigidness, gender roles that are promoted through traditional practices like early marriages and patriarchy and the absence of an economic gain and right to property by those engaged in agricultural activities and those engaged in inverted extraction of the forests. The rate of drop-out of girls is high in the educational sector, and it is mainly due to poverty and also because of household work, and lack of proper facilities like girls' hostels and separate toilets. There is also poor health as these women lack access to basic nutrition, maternal and reproductive health amenities in remote villages. Moreover, the involvement in political life is symbolic in the majority of cases. Women cannot participate actively in governance as much as they are constitutionally entitled to the right of representation in the Panchayati Raj Institution because of cultural taboos, illiteracy and male superiority. All these interconnecting challenges are disastrous in terms of the ability of Sahariya women to exert their rights and improve their livelihood and participation in community development.

1.9 Recommendations

The issue would require a multidimensional culture-sensitive approach to handle the condition of Sahariya women. One, gender sensitive policies ought to be developed by the tribal welfare department to break the disjuncture of the tradition and the modern development paradigm. These policies will help to promote gender equity without putting the tribal values on the wrong footing. Priority should be given to girl education by offering incentives like residential hostels and scholarships, and creating awareness among parents as well as the local leaders through the formation of communities. The health services outreach systems should be employed to give the wellbeing services that utilise tribal women as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) to deliver culturally matching delivering of services. In addition, in order to empower the people economically, one can provide skill-based training, nurture the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and empower access to microfinance or livelihoods that suit a local scenario. Finally, the community advocacy program is to be initiated to address prejudiced gender principles and female empowerment within the productive role in government and policymaking. This mass effort will contribute towards the social change in the long run, economic independence, ascribed agency and social freedom of the Sahariya women.

1.10. Conclusion

That leaves Sahariya women in a paradoxical situation within their respective communities: they are the core of household survival and cultural continuation of the respective communities, but are marginalised socially, economically and politically. Their freedom, education, and access to health, as well as leadership, were still limited by custom and gender restrictions. Though there is a positive impact of modernisation and governments' interventions such as educational plans, SHGs and rural jobs programs, yet the programs are being divided and implemented badly. The overall findings of the three goals of this study have revealed that actual gains will have to be founded on a rights-based and dense challenge that carries cultural identity and a vivid promotion of gender equality. It is not only an issue of justice to educate, provide health care facilities, and develop the skills of the Sahariya women and give a political voice to the Sahariya women, but this is also the path and the only way of getting there to sustainable development in the tribal Regions.

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