

Manuscript ID:
TIJCMBLIR-2026-030173

Volume: 3

Issue: 1

Month: February

Year: 2026

E-ISSN: 3065-9191

Submitted: 28 Jan 2026

Revised: 31 Jan 2026

Accepted: 25 Feb 2026

Published: 28 Feb 2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19967930](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19967930)

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19967930>



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Tribal Women: Socio-Economic Realities, Structural Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment

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Abstract

Tribal women represent one of the most historically marginalized and socio-economically vulnerable populations in developing societies. Situated at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, poverty, and geographical isolation, their lived experiences are shaped by structural inequalities and limited access to resources. In India, tribal communities constitute a significant segment of the population, and women within these communities contribute extensively to household sustenance, agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and cultural preservation. Despite their central role, tribal women continue to face systemic disadvantages in education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and political participation. This paper critically examines the socio-economic status of tribal women, identifies the major structural and developmental challenges affecting them, and proposes multidimensional strategies for sustainable empowerment. The study argues that inclusive governance, gender-sensitive policies, and community-based development frameworks are essential for ensuring equity and social justice.

Keywords: Tribal women, marginalization, gender inequality, empowerment, indigenous communities, development.

Introduction

Tribal or indigenous communities are among the earliest inhabitants of many regions and possess distinct cultural identities, languages, and social systems. Tribal women occupy a vital position within these communities as economic contributors, custodians of traditional knowledge, and preservers of ecological balance. However, modernization, market integration, and state-led development processes have altered traditional social structures, often intensifying gender-based inequalities. While certain tribal societies historically exhibited relatively flexible gender roles, external socio-economic pressures and patriarchal influences have contributed to the gradual marginalization of women. Tribal women today experience layered discrimination—not only as women but also as members of economically disadvantaged and socially excluded communities. Understanding their status requires an intersectional perspective that integrates gender, class, ethnicity, and geography.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the socio-economic condition of tribal women.
2. To identify structural and developmental challenges affecting their well-being.
3. To evaluate the role of education, governance, and economic participation in empowerment.
4. To suggest sustainable and inclusive measures for long-term development.

Socio-Economic Status of Tribal Women

Economic Participation

Tribal women actively engage in agriculture, shifting cultivation, forest produce collection, livestock management, and informal labor. In many households, they are primary contributors to subsistence economies. However, their labor often remains undervalued and unrecognized in formal economic statistics.

Limited access to land ownership, credit facilities, and market networks restricts their economic independence. Wage disparities and informal employment further reinforce financial vulnerability. Although their workload is extensive, decision-making power regarding financial matters often remains limited.

Education and Literacy

Educational attainment among tribal women remains comparatively low due to poverty, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and inadequate infrastructure in remote areas. Distance from schools, language barriers, and lack of female teachers further discourage enrollment and retention.

How to Cite this Article:

Kokare, S. H. (2026). Tribal Women: Socio-Economic Realities, Structural Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment. *The International Journal of Commerce Management and Business Law in International Research*, 3(1), 339–340. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19967930>

Education plays a transformative role in enhancing self-confidence, awareness of rights, and access to employment opportunities. However, structural gaps in educational access continue to perpetuate cycles of marginalization.

Health and Nutrition

Health indicators among tribal women frequently reflect high levels of malnutrition, anemia, and maternal health risks. Limited access to healthcare facilities, lack of transportation, and traditional health practices sometimes delay medical intervention.

Maternal mortality, infant mortality, and chronic illnesses remain pressing concerns. Inadequate sanitation, unsafe drinking water, and food insecurity compound health vulnerabilities. Strengthening primary healthcare services and culturally sensitive outreach programs is essential for improving health outcomes.

Major Challenges Faced by Tribal Women

Poverty and Economic Exploitation

Persistent poverty is one of the central challenges affecting tribal women. Many work as daily wage laborers under insecure conditions. Migration in search of employment often exposes them to unsafe work environments and exploitation.

Displacement and Loss of Livelihood

Development projects such as mining, dams, and industrial expansion have led to displacement of tribal communities. For tribal women, displacement disrupts traditional livelihood systems, community networks, and access to natural resources. Loss of forest access particularly affects women who depend on minor forest produce for income and sustenance.

Gender-Based Violence and Social Inequality

Although tribal societies differ widely, increasing socio-economic pressures have contributed to domestic violence, trafficking risks, and social exclusion in certain contexts. Limited awareness of legal protections and restricted institutional access further weaken their capacity to seek justice.

Political Underrepresentation

While policy frameworks often provide reserved representation for tribal populations, effective participation of women remains constrained by illiteracy, limited mobility, and socio-cultural barriers. Genuine empowerment requires not only representation but also meaningful participation in governance and decision-making.

Government Policies and Development Initiatives

Various welfare schemes aim to improve the living conditions of tribal communities through scholarships, livelihood missions, self-help groups, and rural employment programs. Women-centered initiatives focusing on microfinance, entrepreneurship development, and maternal health have shown positive outcomes in certain regions.

However, implementation gaps, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of awareness often reduce the effectiveness of these programs. Bridging the gap between policy formulation and grassroots execution is critical.

Pathways to Empowerment

Empowerment of tribal women must adopt a holistic and community-sensitive approach:

Educational Inclusion

- Establishing residential schools in remote areas
- Promoting adult literacy programs
- Providing scholarships and digital access

Economic Strengthening

- Expanding access to credit and banking
- Promoting self-help groups and cooperatives
- Ensuring fair wages and skill training programs

Healthcare Accessibility

- Strengthening primary health centers
- Maternal and reproductive health awareness
- Nutrition-focused community programs

Legal and Political Awareness

- Conducting awareness campaigns on rights and protections
- Encouraging leadership training
- Enhancing representation in local governance

Empowerment must move beyond welfare to capacity-building, ensuring that tribal women become active agents of development rather than passive beneficiaries.

Conclusion

Tribal women occupy a crucial yet undervalued position within indigenous communities. Their contributions to economic production, ecological preservation, and cultural continuity are significant. However, structural inequalities, poverty, displacement, and gender discrimination continue to restrict their opportunities.

Sustainable empowerment requires integrated policy measures, grassroots participation, and recognition of tribal women's agency. Development initiatives must be inclusive, culturally sensitive, and gender-responsive to ensure long-term equity and social transformation.

Empowering tribal women is not merely a matter of social justice; it is essential for achieving inclusive growth and sustainable community development.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have supported and guided me in the successful completion of this research study titled "Tribal Women: Socio-Economic Realities, Structural Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment." I am deeply thankful to my institution for providing the necessary academic environment, resources, and encouragement to undertake this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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- Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Annual Reports.
- Scholarly articles on Indigenous Women and Development Studies.
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