

Women in Tribal Movements: Agency, Resistance, and Transformation in India's Indigenous Struggles

Debashis Debnath

Senior Fellow, ICSSR, New Delhi
Former Dean and Chair Professor,
BRAUSS, Indore, Madhya Pradesh

Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted role of women in tribal movements across India, highlighting their contributions as activists, leaders, and custodians of cultural and ecological knowledge. While tribal movements have historically centered on land rights, displacement, and autonomy, women's participation has been instrumental yet often marginalized in mainstream narratives. The present paper adopts a review-based approach, drawing upon secondary sources to analyze and contextualize women's roles in tribal movements. Through an analysis of both large-scale political mobilizations and localized grassroots initiatives, this study reveals how tribal women navigate intersecting challenges of gender discrimination, economic marginalization, and cultural erosion while simultaneously driving transformative change within their communities. The paper argues that understanding women's agency in tribal movements is essential for developing inclusive policies and sustainable development frameworks that honor indigenous rights and gender equity.

Key Words: Tribal Women, Tribal Movements, Gender Roles, Indigenous Rights, Women's Agency, Grassroots Activism, Cultural Preservation, Ecological Knowledge, Social Justice, Gender Equity, Economic Marginalization, Sustainable Development.

1. Introduction

Tribal movements in India represent sustained struggles for justice, identity, and survival in the face of systematic marginalization (Xaxa, 1999). From early colonial resistance to contemporary battles against displacement and resource extraction, these movements have shaped the political landscape of tribal regions. However, the gender dimension of these struggles remains inadequately documented and analyzed (Sharma, 2010).

Women constitute nearly half of India's tribal population and have been active participants in resistance movements since pre-colonial times. Their involvement spans multiple domains—from armed resistance and mass mobilizations to ecological conservation and community governance—yet their contributions are frequently rendered invisible in historical accounts that privilege male leadership and formal political structures (Sharma, 2010).

This paper seeks to center women's experiences and agency within tribal movements, examining how they have shaped and been shaped by collective struggles for rights and recognition. By analyzing their roles across different types of movements—from large-scale political mobilizations to localized development initiatives—this study illuminates the complex interplay between gender, indigeneity, and social transformation.

2. Historical Context: Women in Early Tribal Resistance

The history of tribal resistance in India extends back centuries, with women playing crucial roles from the earliest uprisings. The resistance led by figures like Tilka Manjhi in 1789 against British colonialism marked the beginning of sustained tribal mobilization. While male leaders often receive greater historical attention, women participated actively in these early movements as fighters, strategists, and community organizers (Xaxa, 1999).

Throughout the colonial period, tribal women resisted the dual oppression of imperial exploitation and the imposition of patriarchal norms that were foreign to many tribal societies (Sharma, 2010). Traditional tribal social structures in various communities exhibited relatively egalitarian gender relations, with women holding decision-making power and social autonomy. Colonial interventions, however, introduced legal and administrative systems that systematically undermined women's traditional authority (Xaxa, 1999).

The formation of organizations like the Adivasi Maha Sabha in 1936 represented a significant moment in organized tribal resistance. Women's participation in such movements was vital, though understated in official records. They served as cultural preservers, maintaining indigenous knowledge systems and ritual practices that formed the ideological foundation for asserting tribal identity against assimilationist pressures (Roy, 2018).

3. Women in Major Tribal Political Movements

3.1 The Jharkhand Movement

The Jharkhand Movement sought to create a separate state for tribal communities in eastern India. Women played multifaceted roles throughout this decades-long struggle, participating in protests, organizing community meetings, and maintaining the movement's momentum during state repression (Sharma, 2010).

They challenged both external exploitation by mining and industrial interests and internal gender hierarchies that limited their political participation. Their involvement broadened the movement's agenda to include issues of domestic violence, women's land rights, and representation in tribal governance structures (Xaxa, 1999).

3.2 The Bodo and Naga Movements

In Northeast India, movements for autonomy among the Bodo and Naga communities have witnessed significant women's participation. The Naga Mothers' Association, for instance,

emerged as a powerful force for peace and reconciliation—demonstrating how women’s organizing can reshape armed conflicts (Sharma, 2010).

The Naga Mothers' Association, for instance, emerged as a powerful force for peace and reconciliation, demonstrating how women's organizing can reshape the trajectory of armed conflicts. These women utilized their cultural authority and moral standing to challenge both state violence and militant extremism.

3.3 Anti-Displacement Movements

Across India's tribal regions, large-scale development projects—dams, mines, industrial corridors—have triggered intense resistance movements. Women have been at the forefront of these struggles, recognizing that displacement disproportionately affects their ability to sustain livelihoods, access natural resources, and maintain community cohesion (Baviskar, 1995). The resistance against dams in the Narmada Valley and mining projects in Odisha and Chhattisgarh has seen women leading protests, engaging in civil disobedience, and articulating alternative visions of development that prioritize community welfare over corporate profit. Their participation reflects both practical concerns about survival and principled opposition to models of development that destroy ecological and social systems (Baviskar, 1995; Sharma, 2010).

4. Women's Leadership in Ecological Conservation Movements

A distinctive feature of tribal women's activism is its deep connection to ecological conservation. Women act as custodians of ethno-medicinal knowledge, sacred groves, and sustainable resource management practices (Tiwari & Yadav, 2003; Roy, 2018). This ecological consciousness has positioned them as natural leaders in movements resisting environmental degradation.

Among the Gonds and Baigas of Madhya Pradesh, women's participation in conservation practices has reinforced both gender equity and biodiversity preservation. Their intimate knowledge of forest ecosystems—gained through generations of gathering forest produce, practicing traditional agriculture, and maintaining medicinal plant gardens—makes them invaluable guardians of ecological diversity (Tiwari & Yadav, 2003).

Women's roles as healers, farmers, and forest protectors create a powerful synergy between gender empowerment and ecological sustainability. This distinguishes tribal feminism from mainstream feminist discourses, rooting it in collective well-being and environmental stewardship rather than individual emancipation alone.

The symbiosis between gender and ecology in tribal movements reflects indigenous worldviews (Baviskar, 1995) that do not separate human welfare from environmental health. Women's leadership in ecological movements thus represents not merely environmental activism but a holistic vision of social organization that integrates gender equity, cultural preservation, and sustainable development.

5. Micro-Level Mobilizations: Women's Grassroots Initiatives

While large-scale political movements capture public attention, much of tribal women's transformative work occurs through localized, grassroots initiatives. These micro-level movements arise from communities' immediate socio-economic needs, with women playing central roles in sustaining livelihoods, conserving resources, and maintaining social cohesion.

5.1 Self-Help Groups and Economic Empowerment

Organizations like the Sarguja Adivasi Vikas Mandal in Chhattisgarh exemplify micro-level engagement, where women's self-help groups promote financial autonomy (Sharma, 2010). Through training programs, self-help groups (SHGs), and entrepreneurship support, women are reclaiming economic agency and redefining gender roles. These initiatives provide access to credit, enable collective bargaining, and create markets for traditional crafts and forest products.

The Lambadi Adivasi Mahila Sangathan in Telangana demonstrates the power of collective organization in empowering women through literacy programs, financial independence (Xaxa, 1999), and political participation. Such grassroots movements create spaces where women develop leadership skills, challenge patriarchal norms, and advocate for their communities' interests.

5.2 Community Governance and PESA

The enactment of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) created formal mechanisms for tribal self-governance, including provisions for women's representation in Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) (Sharma, 2010). Women's participation in these local governance bodies has gradually expanded their influence in community decision-making processes. Through Gram Sabhas, women address issues ranging from domestic violence and alcoholism to forest rights and development priorities. Their involvement challenges traditional male dominance in public decision-making while remaining rooted in communal values and indigenous governance traditions (Xaxa, 1999).

5.3 Sustaining Livelihoods and Indigenous Knowledge

Across India's tribal belts—from the Santhals of Jharkhand to the Bhils and Gonds of Madhya Pradesh—women are central to local economies (Tiwari & Yadav, 2003). They engage in agriculture, forest produce collection, craftwork, and traditional healing. These activities not only sustain local economies but also preserve indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Women's roles as knowledge keepers extend to ritual traditions, oral histories, and cultural practices that define tribal identity. In this sense, their everyday labor constitutes a form of cultural resistance against assimilationist pressures and mainstream homogenization (Roy, 2018).

6. Legal Framework and Policy Implications

The legal and policy landscape has evolved to recognize tribal rights and women's participation in resource governance, though implementation remains challenging.

6.1 Forest Rights Act, 2006

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, represents a landmark recognition of tribal communities' historical relationship with forests. Significantly, the Act recognizes women as joint stakeholders in community resources, ensuring that land titles include women's names and that forest management committees include women members (Xaxa, 1999; Sharma, 2010).

This legal framework has profound implications for gender equity, potentially strengthening women's economic security and decision-making authority. However, patriarchal attitudes, limited awareness, and bureaucratic hurdles often limit women's actual exercise of these rights. Many women remain unaware of their entitlements, while male-dominated community structures sometimes resist implementing gender-inclusive provisions.

6.2 PESA and Local Governance

PESA enshrines tribal communities' right to self-governance while mandating women's participation in local decision-making (Sharma, 2010). The Act represents recognition that development policies must respect indigenous governance systems rather than imposing external administrative structures. Despite legal provisions, women's substantive participation in PESA institutions remains constrained by multiple factors: limited literacy, time poverty due to household responsibilities, social restrictions on women's public participation, and male relatives acting as proxies. Ensuring meaningful women's participation requires not just legal mandates but sustained efforts to challenge patriarchal norms and build women's capacity for political engagement.

6.3 Gaps Between Policy and Practice

The macro narrative of tribal empowerment remains incomplete without gender-sensitive implementation of legal frameworks. While laws create formal equality, translating these provisions into substantive change requires addressing deep-seated social attitudes, building institutional capacity, and ensuring that women have access to information, education, and support systems (Sharma, 2010)..

7. Intersecting Challenges Facing Tribal Women

Tribal women's participation in movements occurs within contexts of multiple, intersecting oppressions. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing effective support strategies (Xaxa, 1999).

7.1 Economic Marginalization

Economic liberalization and resource extraction have eroded tribal women's control over traditional livelihood resources. Market exploitation, land alienation, and displacement have undermined subsistence economies where women played central productive roles. Forced

integration into market economies often relegates women to low-wage, informal sector work while destroying the resource base that sustained their economic autonomy (Baviskar, 1995).

7.2 Cultural Disintegration and Patriarchalization

The encroachment of mainstream patriarchal norms has weakened traditional gender balance in many tribal societies. Processes of Sanskritization, Christian missionary influence, and exposure to dominant cultural values have introduced hierarchical gender norms that were previously absent or less pronounced. Women's traditional authority in domestic and community spheres has been progressively undermined (Sharma, 2010).

7.3 Educational Barriers

High dropout rates, limited access to quality education, and the irrelevance of mainstream curricula to tribal contexts constrain women's empowerment. Educational institutions often fail to accommodate girls' household responsibilities, lack female teachers who could serve as role models, and impose cultural values that alienate tribal students. Limited access to higher education particularly restricts women's opportunities for economic mobility and leadership development (Sharma, 2010).

7.4 Health and Reproductive Issues

Poor access to healthcare and nutrition disproportionately impacts tribal women's maternal and reproductive health. Geographic isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and insensitive health services that ignore indigenous health practices contribute to high maternal mortality and morbidity rates. Women's reproductive health concerns are often neglected in movement agendas dominated by land and resource issues (Roy, 2018; Tiwari & Yadav, 2003).

7.5 Political Underrepresentation

While laws ensure formal inclusion, actual participation in political movements and institutions remains limited due to socio-political constraints. Women face resistance from male leaders, lack support systems for political engagement, and struggle with the double burden of activism and household responsibilities. Their contributions are often channelled into support roles rather than leadership positions (Xaxa, 1999)..

8. Transformative Strategies and Adaptive Resilience

Despite formidable challenges, tribal women demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity. Their transformative strategies offer lessons for broader struggles for social justice.

8.1 Collective Organization

Women's collectives—whether traditional kinship networks, self-help groups, or formal organizations—provide mutual support, share resources, and amplify individual voices. Collective organizing enables women to challenge patriarchal norms, negotiate better terms with

markets and the state, and sustain prolonged struggles despite resource constraints (Sharma, 2010).

8.2 Reclaiming Traditional Authority

Many tribal women are consciously reclaiming traditional roles and authority that were eroded through colonialism and modernization. By revitalizing indigenous governance practices, ritual responsibilities, and knowledge systems, they assert cultural identity while challenging contemporary gender hierarchies. This strategy distinguishes tribal feminism from approaches that reject all tradition as inherently patriarchal (Xaxa, 1999).

8.3 Building Alliances

Successful women's movements build alliances across tribal communities, with urban activists and NGOs, and with broader social justice movements. These networks provide resources, expertise, and political support while connecting local struggles to national and international advocacy platforms. However, alliances must be navigated carefully to avoid cooptation or imposition of external agendas (Sharma, 2010).

8.4 Integrating Gender into Movement Agendas

Progressive tribal movements increasingly recognize that land rights, autonomy, and cultural preservation cannot be achieved without addressing gender inequality. Women activists work to ensure that movement agendas include issues like domestic violence, women's property rights, reproductive health, and political participation alongside traditional concerns about displacement and resource extraction (Baviskar, 1995; Sharma, 2010).

9. Toward Gender-Inclusive Tribal Development

Achieving gender equity in tribal contexts requires frameworks that respect indigenous cultures while challenging oppressive practices.

9.1 Beyond Welfare Models

Development approaches must move beyond viewing tribal women as mere beneficiaries of welfare programs. Recognizing women's agency, leadership, and indigenous knowledge is essential for sustainable and equitable development. Programs should support women's existing livelihood strategies rather than imposing external economic models (Sharma, 2010).

9.2 Culturally Grounded Feminism

Gender equity initiatives must be grounded in tribal cultural contexts rather than imposing mainstream feminist frameworks. This means respecting communal values, traditional knowledge systems, and indigenous governance structures while working to eliminate discriminatory practices. The goal is transformation, not assimilation (Xaxa, 1999).

9.3 Strengthening Legal Implementation

Robust implementation of existing legal frameworks—particularly the Forest Rights Act and PESA—is crucial. This requires awareness campaigns, capacity building for women and governance institutions, simplified procedures for claiming rights, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance (Sharma, 2010).

9.4 Education and Capacity Building

Culturally appropriate education that values indigenous knowledge while providing skills for engaging with modern institutions is essential. Leadership training, political education, and technical skill development enable women to participate effectively in movements and governance (Roy, 2018).

9.5 Addressing Health and Well-being

Comprehensive healthcare that integrates indigenous health practices with modern medicine, addresses reproductive health needs, and tackles nutrition and sanitation issues must be prioritized. Women's health is fundamental to their ability to participate in economic, political, and social life (Tiwari & Yadav, 2003; Roy, 2018).

10. Conclusion

Women's participation in tribal movements reveals the complex interplay between tradition, change, and resistance in indigenous communities. Far from being passive victims of marginalization, tribal women are active agents shaping their social worlds through both large-scale political mobilizations and everyday acts of resistance and resilience.

Their leadership in ecological conservation movements, grassroots development initiatives, and political struggles challenges simplistic narratives of victimhood or empowerment. Tribal women navigate multiple, intersecting oppressions while drawing on cultural resources, collective organizing, and adaptive strategies to assert their rights and transform gender relations (Baviskar, 1995; Sharma, 2010; Xaxa, 1999).

The distinctive character of tribal women's activism—rooted in communal values, ecological consciousness, and cultural preservation—offers alternative visions of feminism and development that challenge mainstream paradigms. Their struggles demonstrate that gender equity cannot be separated from broader issues of indigenous rights, environmental justice, and cultural autonomy.

For policymakers and activists, the lesson is clear: gender-sensitive approaches to tribal development must recognize women's agency, respect indigenous knowledge systems, and support women's leadership rather than imposing external models. Legal frameworks must be implemented with cultural sensitivity and genuine commitment to transforming power relations.

As India continues to grapple with questions of development, environmental sustainability, and social justice, the experiences and insights of tribal women offer invaluable guidance. Their

movements demonstrate that another world is possible—one that honors diversity, sustains ecological balance, and achieves equity through community solidarity rather than individualistic competition.

The struggle continues, and tribal women remain at its forefront—as they have been throughout history—defending their lands, cultures, and dignity while building more just and sustainable futures for their communities.

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