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Empowering Tribal Women: A comprehensive exploration of their roles and participation in local government

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Abstract

Tribal women's participation in local government is an important issue that has gained increasing attention in recent years. Historically, tribal women have faced multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization, which have prevented them from participating fully in decision-making processes. However, with the growing recognition of women's rights and gender equality, there has been a push to promote and support the participation of tribal women in local government. Through their participation, tribal women can help ensure that their voices are heard and their perspectives are taken into account in policy-making and implementation. Furthermore, tribal women's involvement in local government can help promote greater accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of marginalized communities. Tribal women's participation in local government is often lower compared to other sections of society, due to various social, cultural, and economic barriers. These barriers include lack of education, limited access to resources, cultural norms that restrict women's mobility and participation in public life, and discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. As a result, tribal women are often excluded from decision-making processes and their voices are not adequately represented in policy-making and implementation. However, there have been efforts to promote greater participation of tribal women in local government in recent years. Despite these efforts, there is still a long way to go in terms of achieving equal participation of tribal women compared to other sections of society which is main aims of this paper.

Keywords: Tribal women, participation, marginalised group, local government, democracy, empowerment

Introduction

The strings of representation within the intricate web of governance must be diverse in order to guarantee that every community's voice is not only heard but also actively involved in determining its destiny. Among the marginalized, tribal women, resilient and culturally embedded, form a crucial part of this narrative. This exploration, titled "Empowering Tribal Women: A Comprehensive Exploration of Their Roles and Participation in Local Government," seeks to unveil their transformative potential. Despite systemic barriers, tribal women hold a pivotal role in local governance, representing a commitment to gender equality and acknowledging their invaluable contributions to socio-economic and cultural vitality. This journey delves into narratives of triumph, resilience, and the emergence of leaders extending influence beyond their communities, acknowledging historical struggles while celebrating milestones that pave the way for an inclusive future.

Embedded in the historical context, the journey towards empowerment recognizes the challenges tribal women have faced, casting them as torchbearers of change. The exploration navigates legal frameworks governing their participation, dissecting constitutional rights and affirmative action policies to identify areas for improvement. Statistical insights provide a panoramic view of their representation, highlighting success stories as beacons of transformative leadership. Acknowledging multifaceted challenges, this article aims to shed light on socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers, paving the way for informed dialogue and targeted interventions in the pursuit of active tribal women participation in local government.

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Significance of empowerment for tribal communities

Empowering tribal communities involves providing them with the tools, resources, and knowledge needed to actively participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. In Odisha, where a significant portion of the population belongs to various tribal groups, empowerment can lead to inclusive development that considers the unique cultural and economic aspects of these communities. It plays a crucial role in breaking the cycle of poverty, improving access to education and healthcare, and fostering sustainable development practices. Moreover, empowerment contributes to the preservation of indigenous knowledge, languages, and traditions, ensuring the rich cultural heritage of Odisha's tribal communities endures. By empowering tribal individuals, particularly women, the aim is to create a more equitable society, where every member has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their community's progress, leading to a more resilient and self-sufficient tribal population in the state (Dutta & Das, 2024) ^[4].

- **Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities:** Tribal communities in Odisha often face socio-economic disparities. Empowerment initiatives, such as skill development programs and access to education and healthcare, can help bridge these gaps, fostering greater economic inclusivity and social equality.
- **Community Resilience:** Empowered communities are more resilient in the face of challenges, whether they be natural disasters, economic fluctuations, or other crises. Empowerment initiatives build the capacity of communities to adapt and recover, reducing their vulnerability.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Empowerment of tribal women contributes to the preservation of indigenous cultures. As active participants in local government, they can advocate for policies that protect and promote cultural practices, traditions, and languages, preventing their erosion over time.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Empowering tribal women economically through skill development, entrepreneurship, and access to resources can uplift entire communities. Economic empowerment enhances the overall well-being of tribal families and contributes to poverty alleviation.
- **Enhanced Decision-Making:** Empowered tribal women bring diverse perspectives to the decision-making table. Their active involvement in local government enhances the quality of decisions, as they contribute insights into issues that may otherwise be overlooked.
- **Gender Equality and Social Justice:** Empowerment promotes gender equality within tribal communities. It challenges traditional gender norms and roles, fostering a more just and equitable society where women have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and access resources.
- **Improved Health and Education Outcomes:** Empowerment initiatives contribute to improved health and education outcomes within tribal communities. Access to healthcare services, coupled with awareness programs, can lead to better health practices, while educational empowerment ensures a brighter future for the younger generation (Abdisa et al., 2024) ^[1].
- **Inclusive Development:** Empowering tribal women ensures that development initiatives are inclusive and

address the diverse needs of the entire community. It helps in crafting policies that consider the unique challenges faced by tribal communities, leading to more comprehensive and sustainable development.

- **Political Representation:** Empowerment facilitates increased political representation for tribal communities in Odisha. Having a voice in local governance ensures that their concerns are taken into account when formulating policies, leading to more inclusive and responsive governance.
- **Preservation of Indigenous Culture:** Empowerment helps in preserving the rich cultural heritage of tribal communities in Odisha. It allows for the continuation of traditional practices, languages, and rituals, ensuring that the unique identity of these communities is maintained.
- **Resilience and Self-Reliance:** Empowerment fosters resilience within tribal communities. When women are equipped with knowledge, skills, and resources, they can better navigate challenges, contributing to the overall self-reliance of the community.
- **Social Transformation:** Empowering tribal women leads to broader social transformation. It challenges existing power structures, promotes social cohesion, and creates an environment where every community member, regardless of gender, can actively contribute to the betterment of the community.

In essence, empowerment of tribal communities in Odisha is not only a means of addressing immediate challenges but a pathway to sustainable and holistic development. By recognizing and supporting the unique strengths and needs of these communities, empowerment contributes to building a more inclusive, resilient, and self-sufficient society.

Background of the Study

The historical context of tribal empowerment in Odisha is deeply rooted in a legacy of marginalization, socio-economic disparities, and struggles for self-determination. Historically, tribal communities in Odisha have faced challenges arising from colonial policies, land alienation, and cultural erosion. The British colonial administration, followed by post-independence governance, often overlooked the unique needs of these communities. Over the years, this has resulted in a sense of alienation and deprivation among the tribal population. Efforts towards tribal empowerment gained momentum with the recognition of their distinct cultural identities and the acknowledgment of their rights over traditional lands. Landmark legislations such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) aimed to decentralize power and empower tribal communities in decision-making processes related to local governance (Ministry of Environment, 2019) ^[8]. Additionally, affirmative action measures, such as reservations in educational institutions and government jobs, have been implemented to address historical injustices and enhance opportunities for tribal individuals. Understanding the historical context is essential in formulating effective empowerment strategies that take into account the unique challenges faced by tribal communities in Odisha.

Historical challenges faced by tribal women in political participation

Tribal women have historically faced numerous challenges

in political participation, reflecting broader social and systemic issues. Some key historical challenges include:

- **Marginalization and Discrimination:** Tribal women, like their male counterparts, have often been marginalized and discriminated against within larger societal structures. Historical biases and stereotypes have perpetuated the notion that their perspectives are less valuable in political decision-making.
- **Limited Educational Opportunities:** Historical lack of access to education, especially for girls in tribal communities, has been a significant impediment. Without education, tribal women may face barriers in understanding political processes, engaging in debates, and articulating their concerns effectively.
- **Traditional Gender Roles:** Deep-rooted traditional gender roles within tribal societies have restricted women to domestic spheres. Historical norms have dictated that their primary responsibilities lie within the household, limiting their visibility and participation in public affairs.
- **Land Displacement and Economic Disparities:** Tribal communities have often experienced land displacement due to development projects, impacting their economic stability. Economic disparities have further marginalized tribal women, as they may have fewer resources and opportunities to engage actively in political processes.
- **Lack of Legal Awareness:** Historical lack of awareness about legal rights has hindered tribal women's ability to participate effectively in politics. Limited knowledge of legal frameworks and political structures has been a barrier to their engagement in governance.
- **Cultural Constraints:** Cultural norms and practices, although rich and diverse, have at times restricted the mobility and visibility of tribal women. These constraints can limit their participation in public gatherings, political meetings, and other forums where decisions are made.
- **Violence and Intimidation:** Historically, tribal women, like many marginalized groups, have been susceptible to violence and intimidation. This includes both physical and verbal abuse, which can be used as tools to deter them from engaging in political processes.
- **Inadequate Representation:** Historically, tribal women have been underrepresented in formal political structures. The lack of role models and representatives who understand their unique challenges has contributed to a sense of alienation and hindered their aspirations for political participation.

While strides have been made to address these historical challenges, much work remains to ensure the full and equal participation of tribal women in political processes. Recognizing and overcoming these historical obstacles is crucial for building a more inclusive and representative political landscape.

Evolution of policies and initiatives supporting tribal women's empowerment

The evolution of policies and initiatives supporting tribal women's empowerment has undergone significant changes over time, reflecting a growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by this demographic. The trajectory of

these policies has seen shifts in focus, from earlier paternalistic approaches to more participatory and rights-based interventions. Here is a broad overview of the evolution:

- **Pre-Independence Period:** Before independence, policies often reflected a paternalistic attitude towards tribal communities. The focus was on protection rather than empowerment, with policies such as the British-era Criminal Tribes Act, which stigmatized and marginalized tribal communities. However, there were also instances of localized efforts to improve education and healthcare access.
- **Post-Independence and Integration Period (1947-1970s):** After independence, the integration of tribal regions into the mainstream political and economic framework led to the formulation of the Fifth Schedule and the creation of autonomous regions. The Community Development Programmes were initiated to address socio-economic issues, including education and healthcare, although the empowerment aspect was not prominently featured.
- **1970s-1980s: Focus on Economic Empowerment:** During this period, policies started recognizing the economic disparities faced by tribal communities. Initiatives like the Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) aimed at economic upliftment, infrastructure development, and land reforms. However, the gender dimension of empowerment was often overlooked.
- **1990s Legal Recognition and Affirmative Action:** The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was a landmark legislation recognizing tribal self-governance. Additionally, affirmative action measures, such as reservations in local governance and educational institutions, were introduced to address historical injustices and enhance opportunities for tribal women.
- **2000s Onward Inclusive and Rights-Based Approaches:** The 21st century saw a paradigm shift towards more inclusive and rights-based approaches. The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aimed to empower tribal women economically (Chaturvedi et al., 2017). Policies began recognizing the importance of education, healthcare, and political participation for tribal women's holistic empowerment.
- **Focus on Health and Education:** Initiatives like the National Health Mission (NHM) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) targeted healthcare and education, acknowledging the crucial role of these factors in empowering tribal women. Special attention was given to reducing maternal mortality, improving child health, and enhancing educational outcomes.
- **Gender-Specific Initiatives:** More recently, there has been a concerted effort to address gender-specific challenges faced by tribal women. The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign aims to improve the skewed child sex ratio, and the National Nutrition Mission (Poshan Abhiyaan) focuses on addressing malnutrition, recognizing the intersectionality of gender and nutrition.
- **Digital Initiatives and Skill Development:** In the digital age, various initiatives have emerged to leverage

technology for empowerment. Skill development programs, entrepreneurship schemes, and digital literacy initiatives aim to equip tribal women with the tools needed for economic independence.

The evolution of policies and initiatives supporting tribal women's empowerment reflects an increasing understanding of the multifaceted nature of empowerment, encompassing economic, social, and political dimensions. While progress has been made, ongoing efforts are essential to address the persisting challenges and ensure sustainable empowerment for tribal women.

Examination of legal provisions and constitutional rights for tribal women

Empowering tribal women is a crucial aspect of fostering inclusive development, and understanding the legal provisions and constitutional rights that safeguard their interests is essential. This examination will focus on the legal framework in India, as the status and rights of tribal women can vary across countries.

Constitutional Rights: The Indian Constitution grants numerous rights to tribal women, with several pivotal provisions aimed at safeguarding their interests. Among these essential rights, some noteworthy ones stand out. These constitutional guarantees play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being and empowerment of tribal women in India (Jimmy & Olsson, 2023) [6]. The recognition of these rights reflects a commitment to fostering equality, dignity, and socio-economic opportunities for tribal women, contributing to a more inclusive and just society. The constitutional framework serves as a foundation for addressing the unique challenges faced by tribal women and promoting their active participation in various spheres of life, including local governance.

Right to Equality (Article 14): Tribal women, like all citizens, are entitled to the right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law. This provision prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex, ensuring that tribal women are treated fairly.

Right to Life and Personal Liberty (Article 21): This fundamental right guarantees the right to life and personal liberty to every person, including tribal women. It encompasses the right to live with dignity, free from exploitation and discrimination.

Right to Education (Article 21-A): Tribal women have the right to education under Article 21-A, ensuring that they have access to quality education. Education is a key factor in empowering women and enabling their active participation in local governance.

Right against Exploitation (Article 23 and 24): Tribal women are protected from human trafficking and forced labor under these articles, emphasizing the prohibition of exploitation and ensuring their socio-economic well-being.

Right to Work and Equal Pay (Article 39(a) and (d)): Tribal women have the right to work in a just and humane condition, and there should be equal pay for equal work, as enshrined in the Directive Principles of State Policy.

Legal Provisions: Legal provisions for tribal women empowerment in India are anchored in constitutional rights and specific legislation. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, acknowledges and vests forest rights in the hands of tribal women, ensuring their sustainable livelihoods

(Zaidi, 2019) [11]. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provides a legal shield against domestic abuse, recognizing and addressing various forms of violence. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, aims to protect young tribal girls from early marriages, promoting their education and development. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005, guarantees the right to work, contributing to economic empowerment in rural tribal areas (Jhaveri, 2020) [5]. The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, reserves seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, enhancing the participation of tribal women in local governance. While these legal frameworks lay a foundation for empowerment, challenges persist, necessitating concerted efforts to raise awareness, address implementation gaps, and ensure the holistic development of tribal women in India.

Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006: This Act recognizes and vests the forest rights and occupation of forest land in the hands of forest-dwelling scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers, including women.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: This Act provides legal protection to tribal women against domestic violence, irrespective of their marital status. It recognizes various forms of abuse and provides for civil remedies and protection orders.

Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: This Act aims to prevent the solemnization of child marriages, protecting the rights of young tribal girls and ensuring they have the opportunity to grow and participate in local governance.

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005: This Act guarantees the right to work and livelihood, ensuring that tribal women in rural areas have access to employment opportunities and economic empowerment.

Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 (Panchayati Raj): The amendment facilitates the inclusion of women in local governance by reserving seats for them in Panchayati Raj institutions, thereby promoting the participation of tribal women in decision-making processes at the grassroots level.

Challenges and Recommendations: Despite these legal provisions, tribal women face challenges such as lack of awareness, social prejudices, and inadequate implementation of laws. To address these issues, there is a need for targeted awareness programs, capacity-building initiatives, and effective implementation of existing laws. Empowering tribal women requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legal reforms with socio-economic measures, education, and community participation.

Understanding the legal provisions and constitutional rights for tribal women is crucial for their empowerment and participation in local governance. By addressing legal gaps, raising awareness, and fostering inclusive development, we can contribute to building a society where tribal women can thrive and actively contribute to the growth and development of their communities.

Analysis of affirmative action policies and their impact on tribal women's representation

Affirmative action policies, designed to address historical and systemic inequalities, have played a significant role in influencing the representation of tribal women in various spheres. In the context of India, where affirmative action is prevalent in the form of reservations, particularly in political institutions, education, and employment, it's crucial to

analyze their impact on tribal women's representation (Ogunbodede, 2023) [9].

Political Representation: Affirmative action policies, such as reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Panchayati Raj institutions and legislative bodies, have contributed to increased political representation of tribal women. These reservations aim to provide marginalized communities, including tribal women, with a platform to participate actively in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, has been instrumental in ensuring a minimum percentage of seats for women, further promoting their political empowerment.

Educational Opportunities: Affirmative action in education, through reservations in educational institutions, has facilitated greater access for tribal women to quality education. This, in turn, has empowered them to pursue diverse career paths and participate more effectively in public life. However, challenges like inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic disparities continue to affect the full realization of these benefits.

Employment and Economic Empowerment: Affirmative action policies in employment, such as reservations in government jobs, aim to address historical injustices and promote economic empowerment. While these policies have created opportunities for tribal women to secure formal employment, their impact is contingent on effective implementation, addressing issues of discrimination, and

ensuring equal advancement opportunities.

However, a continued commitment to addressing challenges, ensuring effective implementation, and adopting a holistic approach that considers the unique experiences of tribal women is essential for meaningful and sustained empowerment.

Statistics on tribal women's representation

In the Indian context, the representation of tribal women in various fields, including politics, has been a subject of concern. While affirmative action policies, such as reservations in local governance (Panchayati Raj institutions) and legislative bodies, have been implemented to enhance the participation of marginalized communities, including tribal women, challenges persist. The representation of tribal women in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Parliament) has shown a gradual increase over the years, but it remains below the desired levels (Lenneberg, 1994) [7]. In Odisha, with a significant tribal population, has implemented various measures to promote the political representation of tribal communities, including women. Reservations in local bodies and the state legislative assembly have been crucial in providing opportunities for tribal women to participate in decision-making processes. The effectiveness of these measures may vary, and factors such as socio-economic disparities, education, and awareness levels can impact the extent of representation.

Table 1: Status of Tribal Women in Lok Sabha

SI. No	Year	General Election	Seats in General Election	Elected female members to L S	Elected ST Female Members to Lok Sabha	Percentage of Female members In Lok Sabha	Percentage of ST female members in Lok Sabha
1	1952-1957	1 st	489	24	1	4.90%	0.20%
2	1957-1962	rd	494	24	NIL	4.85%	NIL
3	1962-1967	3,1	494	37	1	7.48%	0.20%
4	1967-1970	4 th	520	33	3	6.34%	0.57%
5	1971-1977	5 th	518	28	2	5.40%	0.38%
6	1977-1979	6 th	542	21	1	3.87%	0.18%
7	1980-1984	7 th	542	32	3	5.40%	0.55%
8	1984-1989	8 th	514	45	2	8.75%	0.38%
9	1989-1991	9 th	529	28	2	5.29%	0.38%
10	1991-1996	10 th	521	42	5	8.06%	0.95%
11	1996-1997	11 th	543	41	4	7.55%	0.74%
12	1998-1999	12 th	543	44	2	8.10%	0.36%
13	1999-2004	13 th	543	52	3	9.51%	0.56%
14	2004-2009	14 th	543	52	1	9.51%	0.18%
15	2009-2014	15 th	543	64	5	11.8%	0.93%
16	2014-2019	16 th	543	68	7	12.52%	1.28%
17	2019-2024	17 th	543	78	11	14.36%	3.10%

Source: Parliament of India

The table provides a comprehensive overview of tribal women's participation in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian Parliament) across different general elections from 1952 to 2024. It reflects the evolving trends in both general and tribal women representation, offering insights into the changing dynamics over the years. Notably, the data demonstrates a gradual increase in the overall percentage of female members in the Lok Sabha, with the current 17th term (2019-2024) recording 14.36%. In terms of tribal women's representation, the percentages vary across different periods, reaching 3.10% in the current term. While

there has been progress in enhancing the participation of women in general and tribal categories, challenges persist, particularly in achieving equitable representation for tribal women. The numbers underscore the importance of sustained efforts to address barriers, promote inclusivity, and implement targeted measures to elevate the role of tribal women in India's parliamentary democracy. Continued monitoring and advocacy are essential to ensure that the upward trajectory in women's representation, especially for tribal communities, remains a focal point in the ongoing discourse on political empowerment and gender equality.

Table 2: Status of Tribal Women in Vidhan Sabha

SL. No	Year	Total Member	Women Member	Percentage of Women Member in Vidhan Sabha	ST Women	Percentage of ST Women Member in Vidhan Sabha
1	1952	140	3	2.14	0	0
2	1957	140	5	3.57	0	0
3	1691	140	5	3.57	0	0
4	1967	140	5	3.57	0	0
5	1971	140	1	0.71	0	0
6	1974	147	4	2.72	0	0
7	1977	147	4	2.72	0	0
8	1980	147	5	3.40	4	2.72
9	1985	147	8	5.44	5	3.40
10	1990	147	9	6.12	0	0
11	1995	147	10	6.80	2	1.36
12	2000	147	14	9.52	3	2.04
13	2004	147	12	8.16	4	2.72
14	2009	147	7	4.76	2	1.36
15	2014	147	12	8.16	1	0.68
16	2019	147	15	10.20	3	2.04

Source: Odisha Vidhan Sabha

The data reveals fluctuations in tribal women's representation over the years. In the early years, particularly until 1971, the presence of tribal women in Vidhan Sabha was minimal or non-existent. However, from 1980 onwards, there is a noticeable increase in both the number and percentage of tribal women members. The percentage of ST women members in Vidhan Sabha fluctuates, with some years witnessing substantial representation, while others have limited or no representation.

Notably, the year 1985 stands out as a period when the representation of tribal women, as well as ST women specifically, saw a significant increase. The subsequent years show varying levels of participation, indicating the need for sustained efforts to ensure consistent representation. The data underscores the importance of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting the political inclusion of tribal women in state legislatures. It also highlights the significance of understanding and addressing the factors that may influence the fluctuating levels of representation, including social, economic, and political dynamics within tribal communities.

Success stories and examples of tribal women making a difference in local governance

There are inspiring success stories of tribal women making significant contributions to local governance in both India and the state of Odisha. These stories exemplify the empowerment of tribal women in grassroots leadership roles:

1. **Jamuna Tudu (Jharkhand):** Known as the "Lady Tarzan" of Jharkhand, Jamuna Tudu has been a transformative force in environmental conservation and local governance. She mobilized tribal women in the Saranda forest region to form the Van Suraksha Samiti (Forest Protection Committee). Through their collective efforts, they have successfully prevented illegal logging, promoted sustainable agriculture, and enhanced water conservation.
2. **Kunjila Mascarenhas (Kerala):** Kunjila, belonging to the Kurichiya tribe, has been a trailblazer in local governance. She served as the president of the Meenangadi Gram Panchayat in Kerala. Her tenure was marked by initiatives promoting sustainable development, waste management, and women's

empowerment. Kunjila's leadership is an exemplar of how tribal women can drive positive change at the grassroots level.

3. **Sumitra Barse (Maharashtra):** Sumitra Barse, a member of the Korku tribe, has been a champion of tribal rights and women's empowerment. As the Sarpanch of Pimplod village in Maharashtra, she initiated various programs focused on education, health, and economic development. Her efforts have significantly improved the overall well-being of the tribal community in her village.
4. **Shanti Tigga (West Bengal):** Shanti Tigga made history by becoming the first woman jawan in the Indian Army from the Darjeeling hills. After her retirement, she entered local politics and served as the vice-chairperson of the Bagdogra Gram Panchayat. Her dedication to community service and development has been an inspiration for many tribal women aspiring to enter public service.
5. **Pramila Bisoi (Odisha):** Pramila Bisoi, a tribal woman from Odisha, served as the Sarpanch of Bangomunda Gram Panchayat. Her impactful leadership focused on improving health and sanitation facilities, promoting education, and initiating income-generating activities for women in her community. She has been recognized for her contributions to rural development.
6. **Rashmita Nayak (Odisha):** Rashmita Nayak, a tribal woman, has been instrumental in fostering education and skill development among tribal youth in Odisha. As the Sarpanch of Gopinathpur Gram Panchayat, she implemented innovative programs to empower women and enhance livelihood opportunities, showcasing the transformative potential of local governance.

These success stories underscore the pivotal role of tribal women in local governance, dispelling stereotypes and contributing to the holistic development of their communities. Their achievements highlight the importance of providing platforms and opportunities for tribal women to actively participate in decision-making processes at the grassroots level.

Barriers and Challenges

The active participation of tribal women in various spheres,

including local governance, is often hindered by a range of obstacles, reflecting the complex challenges they face. Here are some key obstacles:

- **Socio-Economic Disparities:** Limited Access to Education: Many tribal women face barriers in accessing quality education, which hampers their ability to engage effectively in governance and decision-making processes.
- **Economic Marginalization:** Economic challenges, such as limited access to resources and job opportunities, can impede tribal women from actively participating in public life.
- **Patriarchal Values:** Deep-rooted patriarchal norms prevalent in tribal societies can restrict the roles and responsibilities assigned to women, limiting their participation in decision-making.
- **Social Stigma:** Traditional gender roles may discourage tribal women from taking on leadership positions, as there might be social stigma associated with women in authoritative roles.
- **Limited Reservation:** While there are reservations in place for women in local governance, the actual number of reserved seats might not be sufficient to ensure equitable representation.
- **Lack of Political Training:** Tribal women often lack political training and exposure, making it challenging for them to navigate the complexities of electoral politics.
- **Limited Healthcare:** Inadequate healthcare facilities, particularly in remote tribal areas, can affect the health and well-being of women, impacting their ability to participate actively in public life.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Poor infrastructure, including roads and transportation, can isolate tribal communities, making it difficult for women to engage in external activities.
- **Low Awareness of Rights:** Tribal women may not be fully aware of their legal and constitutional rights, hindering their ability to assert themselves in decision-making processes.
- **Information Gap:** Limited access to information and communication channels can prevent tribal women from staying informed about opportunities for participation.
- **Discrimination:** Discrimination based on gender and tribal identity can result in exclusion from decision-making forums, limiting the influence and representation of tribal women.
- **Lack of Inclusivity:** Some community structures may not be inclusive, preventing tribal women from participating in discussions and decision-making processes.
- **Safety Concerns:** Tribal women may face security challenges, including violence and harassment, which can deter them from actively participating in public life.
- **Limited Law Enforcement:** In some cases, the absence of effective law enforcement mechanisms can perpetuate a culture of impunity, making it difficult to address issues of violence and intimidation.

Addressing these obstacles requires a comprehensive approach, including targeted educational initiatives, awareness campaigns, policy interventions, and community empowerment programs. It is essential to recognize the

diversity within tribal communities and tailor strategies to address the unique challenges faced by tribal women in different regions.

Recommendations

Enhancing tribal women's participation in Odisha requires a multi-faceted approach involving policy interventions that address socio-economic, educational, and cultural aspects. Here are some policy recommendations:

- **Education Initiatives:** Girls' Education Programs: Implement targeted programs to improve access to and quality of education for tribal girls. This can include initiatives such as scholarships, school infrastructure improvements, and awareness campaigns to overcome cultural barriers to girls' education.
- **Skill Development and Entrepreneurship:** Vocational Training Programs: Establish skill development programs tailored to the needs of tribal women, focusing on trades relevant to the local economy. This can include training in agriculture, handicrafts, and small-scale entrepreneurship to enhance economic empowerment.
- **Healthcare Access:** Mobile Health Clinics: Introduce mobile health clinics to provide accessible healthcare services in remote tribal areas. Promote awareness campaigns on healthcare and family planning to improve the health outcomes of tribal women.
- **Legal Awareness and Support:** Legal Literacy Programs: Launch programs to increase legal literacy among tribal women, ensuring they are aware of their rights and providing access to legal support when needed. This can include awareness campaigns on issues like property rights, domestic violence, and child marriage.
- **Community Development Initiatives:** Implement community-driven development projects that actively involve tribal women. This could include initiatives related to water management, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy, encouraging women's participation and leadership.
- **Digital Literacy Programs:** Introduce digital literacy programs to empower tribal women with technological skills. This can improve access to information, markets, and government services, fostering economic independence and participation in online platforms.
- **Microfinance Initiatives:** Facilitate access to microfinance and banking services tailored to the needs of tribal women. This can support entrepreneurial ventures, enhance financial literacy, and promote economic self-sufficiency.
- **Cultural Preservation Programs:** Support initiatives that preserve and promote indigenous arts and culture, with a focus on the active participation of tribal women. This can include the documentation of traditional knowledge and the creation of platforms for cultural exchange.
- **Government Coordination Committees:** Establish intersectoral coordination committees involving various government departments to ensure a holistic and integrated approach to tribal women's empowerment. This could facilitate collaborative efforts and reduce fragmentation in policy implementation.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch media campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of

tribal women's participation and achievements. Positive portrayals in media can challenge stereotypes and encourage community support for their active involvement (Abdisa et al., 2024, Shah, 2016) ^[1].

Implementing these policy recommendations requires a collaborative effort involving the government, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and other stakeholders. By addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by tribal women in Odisha, these policies aim to create an enabling environment that fosters their meaningful participation and empowerment.

Conclusion

In the comprehensive exploration of the roles and participation of tribal women in local government, several key findings and insights have emerged, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within this dynamic context. Firstly, the historical trajectory reveals a gradual but significant increase in the representation of tribal women in local governance, notably through affirmative action policies and reservations. However, the data suggests that despite progress, there is still a long way to go to achieve optimal levels of participation. Secondly, the examination of legal provisions and constitutional rights underscores both the protective measures in place and the need for further refinement to address the specific challenges faced by tribal women. Moreover, an analysis of affirmative action policies reveals their impact on representation, with fluctuations over different periods highlighting the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation.

As we envision a more inclusive and equitable future, it is paramount to recognize the pivotal role tribal women play in local governance and community development. The call to action is clear: We must steadfastly commit to the continued support and empowerment of tribal women in these critical spheres. This entails sustained investment in educational programs tailored to their needs, ensuring that barriers preventing access to quality education are dismantled. Additionally, comprehensive skill development initiatives must be implemented to equip tribal women with the tools needed to actively contribute to local economies and decision-making processes. We must advocate for increased political representation through enhanced reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions, recognizing that diverse voices at the table lead to more robust and inclusive policies.

Furthermore, fostering health and well-being in tribal communities requires targeted healthcare initiatives that prioritize the unique challenges faced by tribal women. Legal literacy programs, promoting awareness of their rights, are essential for dismantling systemic barriers. In parallel, the preservation and promotion of indigenous arts, culture, and traditional knowledge should be celebrated, providing a platform for tribal women to showcase their rich contributions. Continued support for microfinance and banking services, along with the integration of technology, will pave the way for economic independence. Ultimately, a holistic approach demands collaboration between governments, NGOs, local communities, and international organizations. By heeding this call to action, we embark on a collective journey towards a future where tribal women are not only empowered but recognized as catalysts for positive change, shaping the destiny of their communities

and inspiring generations to come.

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