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THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Gender Inequality among Women of Munda and Santhal Tribes in Forest Governance in Jharkhand



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societies. These are often entrenched in historical, and cultural contexts and also with the social system. The indigenous communities such as the Munda and Santhal tribes can offer an insight through which the complexities of gender inequality within these groups can be determined. Both Munda and Santhal tribes have distant cultures, histories, and identities that often deal with gender inequalities forming the lives of these people. These tribes have rich cultural heritages with meticulous rituals and traditions. However, gender roles often prolong inequalities, putting women in subordinate positions in various factors within these cultural frameworks. Gender roles are entrenched in remote villages, posing a huge obstacle to groundbreaking efforts. These roles' persistent character is mostly determined by longstanding cultural traditions and societal expectations, making them resistant to change. The economic and agricultural institutions of tribal societies reinforce traditional roles, with women mostly engaged in subsistence farming or home activities (Pappal, 2020). This research focuses on indigenous women's lives and the unique difficulties of inequality they encounter. Tribal communities have their customary laws, which distinguishes them from other women.

Customary laws have been an intrinsic part of societies worldwide for centuries, serving as the bedrock of traditions, norms, and practices that govern various aspects of communal

life. These laws, rooted deeply in cultural heritage, have often been upheld with reverence, shaping the social fabric of communities across diverse cultures and regions. However, alongside their significance in preserving cultural identities and fostering social cohesion, customary laws have also been subject to scrutiny, particularly concerning the social stigma that can become attached to them (Singh & Singh, 2021). One of the primary sources of social stigma attached to customary laws is their perceived lack of compatibility with universal human rights standards. In many cases, these laws have been criticized for perpetuating gender inequalities, discrimination against marginalized groups, and limitations on individual freedoms (Williams, 2011).

In an interview with Anna Hans. (2023, November 20). In the Munda culture, if a girl chooses to venture outside her caste for love, she faces the harsh reality of being ostracized from her village. This consequence extends not only to her but also to her family. This isolation is exemplified in the ceremony known as "Haldi katana," which symbolizes the girl's departure from her community. It signifies a clear message: "From today, you are not suitable for this village." The "Haldi katana" ceremony, therefore, becomes a pivotal moment, marking the girl's departure from her home and her village. It serves as a public declaration of her choice to marry outside her caste, which is often considered

a breach of tradition in conservative societies. This ritualistic cutting of ties is a deeply ingrained practice, carrying both emotional weight and societal repercussions.

Moreover, if the girl decides to return to the village and seek readmission into the community, a series of steps must be taken to appease the villagers. The family of the girl must organize a feast, typically involving the sacrifice of chickens and hens. This act of appeasement is aimed at symbolically cleansing the family of the girl's perceived transgressions and seeking forgiveness from the community. The reentry process is not merely about the girl seeking forgiveness but also about her family regaining their standing within the village. By hosting a feast and offering sacrifices, they signal their willingness to adhere to societal norms and seek reconciliation with the community Anna Hans. (2023, November 2023, Personal Interview)

While the division of labor in Munda and Santhal agricultural practices has deep cultural roots, it also raises questions about gender equality within these societies. The exclusion of women from ploughing limits their participation in crucial aspects of agricultural production, denying them opportunities for skill development, economic empowerment, and decision-making. In many cases, women are left with tasks that are equally important but often undervalued in terms of labor and contribution. Weeding, harvesting, and processing crops are vital stages in agricultural production, yet they are often seen as "women's work" and are not given the same recognition or status as ploughing.

This unequal distribution of labor also has economic implications for women in these tribes. Without involvement in ploughing, women may have limited access to land ownership, credit, and other resources essential for agricultural production. This perpetuates a cycle of economic dependency and limits their ability to improve their livelihoods. Furthermore, the exclusion of women from ploughing reinforces gender stereotypes and reinforces the idea that certain tasks are inherently gendered. This can have a lasting impact on the aspirations and self-perception of young girls growing up in these communities, limiting their choices and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

In the interviewee from the women of the Munda and Santhal tribes sheds light on the prevailing belief that women, should

not engage in ploughing activities within the community. This tradition, deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the village, is explained through a historical and mythological perspective. A story associated with King Janak, According to the story, King Janak plowed the field himself, leading to the discovery of Sita, his daughter, during this act. The interviewee recalls this tale to illustrate the reasoning behind the prohibition of women from ploughing. The narrative suggests that because Sita was found while King Janak was ploughing, it is believed that women should not engage in this activity. This mythological tale has become interwoven with the cultural beliefs of the village, influencing the social norms surrounding gender roles in farming in conversation with Regina Soreng. (2023, November 2023, Personal Interview).

"There is a belief if women plough the land will never yield and there will be no water". This reference to the myth they have been carrying from generation to generation highlights the social stigma attached to women. The exclusion of women from plowing perpetuates a cycle of limited access to land ownership, credit, and other resources essential for agricultural production. This, in turn, contributes to economic dependency and restricts women's ability to improve their livelihoods. Moreover, the unequal distribution of labor reinforces gender stereotypes and limits opportunities for skill development and decision-making among women.

Conclusion

The path towards gender equality and empowerment of women in the Munda and Santhal tribes necessitates a multifaceted approach that acknowledges and respects their rich cultural heritage while striving for positive change. Policy interventions focusing on land rights, education, and cultural awareness are crucial steps toward dismantling entrenched gender norms and promoting inclusivity within these traditional agricultural communities. Recognizing the rights of women to land ownership, providing education to challenge stereotypes, offering training for enhanced participation in farming activities, and engaging with local leaders to foster equitable practices, can pave the way for a more just, equal, and prosperous future for all members of these vibrant indigenous societies. Empowering women not only benefits individuals and families but also strengthens the fabric of these communities, enriching their traditions with the diverse perspectives and contributions of all its members.

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The American writer Rita Brown once wrote that the recipe for