



JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC LETTERS
www.jslsci.com

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING TRIBAL WOMEN'S
PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

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ABSTRACT

Tribal women play a crucial role in sustaining their communities through economic activities, cultural practices, and social responsibilities, yet their participation in local governance remains limited and uneven. Local self-government institutions provide an important platform for inclusive democracy and grassroots leadership; however, several socio-economic barriers restrict tribal women from active political engagement. This study explores the key socio-economic factors that influence tribal women's participation in local governance, focusing on education, economic status, social structure, and cultural norms. It highlights how poverty, illiteracy, limited access to resources, patriarchal attitudes, and lack of political awareness intersect to constrain their involvement in decision-making processes. At the same time, the study also recognizes emerging opportunities such as reservation policies, self-help groups, and capacity-building initiatives that have encouraged greater political participation among tribal women. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective policies and programs that promote empowerment, equality, and inclusive governance. Strengthening tribal women's participation in local governance not only enhances democratic representation but also contributes to sustainable development and social justice in tribal regions.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Political Participation, Educational Awareness, Economic Dependency, Social and Cultural Barrier.

I. INTRODUCTION

Local governance is considered the foundation of democratic participation, as it brings decisionmaking closer to the people and allows marginalized groups to voice their concerns directly. In many developing societies, particularly in tribal and rural regions, women have historically remained excluded from formal political institutions despite their significant contribution to household and community life. Tribal women occupy a unique position within society, as they experience both gender-based and community-based marginalization. Their participation in local governance is therefore not merely a matter of political representation but also an indicator of social empowerment and equality.

Tribal societies are often characterized by close-knit social structures, distinct cultural traditions, and dependence on natural resources for livelihood. Women in these communities contribute substantially through agriculture, forest-based activities, and family care. However, their roles remain largely confined to the private sphere, while public and political domains are dominated by men. Even when constitutional provisions and reservation policies aim to increase women's representation in local governance institutions, tribal women frequently face obstacles in exercising their authority independently. Their participation may be symbolic rather than substantive, with male relatives or community leaders influencing decisions on their behalf.

Education is a critical determinant of political awareness and participation. Tribal women generally have lower literacy rates compared to both tribal men and non-tribal women. Limited access to formal education restricts their understanding of administrative procedures, legal rights, and governance mechanisms. As a result, many tribal women lack confidence to speak in meetings or challenge decisions made by dominant groups. Illiteracy also limits their exposure to information through media and communication channels, further reducing political engagement.

Economic dependency is another significant factor influencing participation. Most tribal women belong to economically weaker sections and depend on daily wage labor, subsistence farming, or forest produce for survival. Their financial vulnerability forces them to prioritize household

income over political activities. The cost of contesting elections, attending meetings, and traveling to administrative centers often becomes a barrier. Economic insecurity also increases dependence on male family members, weakening women's ability to act autonomously in governance roles.

Social and cultural norms further shape tribal women's political participation. Patriarchal values, though varying across tribal communities, continue to influence leadership patterns and decisionmaking authority. In many regions, women are discouraged from speaking in public forums or assuming leadership positions due to traditional beliefs regarding gender roles. Domestic responsibilities such as childcare, cooking, and water collection consume much of their time and energy, leaving little scope for public engagement. Fear of social criticism and lack of family support also discourage women from participating actively in governance.

Despite these challenges, recent decades have witnessed gradual changes. Reservation policies in local self-government institutions have created opportunities for tribal women to enter political spaces. Non-governmental organizations and government programs have provided training in leadership skills, legal awareness, and financial management. Self-help groups and women's collectives have emerged as important platforms for building confidence and solidarity. These developments have helped some tribal women to challenge traditional norms and assert their rights in decision-making processes.

The participation of tribal women in local governance is not only a matter of representation but also of development outcomes. Women leaders tend to prioritize issues such as health, education, water supply, and social welfare. Their involvement leads to more inclusive policies that reflect community needs. Therefore, understanding the socio-economic factors that influence their participation is essential for promoting democratic governance and sustainable development in tribal regions.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sheeba Pakkan, et al. (2022) examined the impact the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on university research by analysing over 200,000 research papers from India. Their study revealed both positive and negative connections between SDGs and suggested that universities should involve all stakeholders and make strategic changes to focus on SDGs to

improve performance and societal benefits. The findings were valuable for academics, governments, and policymakers in developing strategies to achieve these goals. Minbi Kaye (2021) observed that the introduction of the Panchayati Raj Institution in 1969 in the then North East Frontier Agency, now Arunachal Pradesh, marked a transformative shift in tribal society, particularly for women. It granted tribal women legal authority to engage in grassroots decision making. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 further advanced this by reserving one-third of Panchayat seats for women, enabling their formal entry into local governance. Despite these gains, rural tribal women continue to face barriers in asserting influence across social, economic, political, and familial spheres, often remaining subordinate to their male counterparts.

Pobon Kr. Gogoi (2023) discussed the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in empowering rural women in India, offering them opportunities to participate in socio-economic and political fields, thus contributing to their empowerment and the nation's development. Despite legislative support and progress, challenges like illiteracy and economic barriers continued to persist. The paper suggested measures such as education, awareness programs, and support for small industries to further empower women.

B Komow, et al. (2024) examined women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The study highlighted the importance of democratic decentralization and the significant role of women in local governance. It assessed whether women were represented in PRIs as per the reserved seats and compared the extent of their representation in the two districts.

Chow Ananda Chiring and B Komow (2024) explored the awareness and participation of Gram Sabha members in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh. Their study highlighted the significant role of democratic decentralisation through PRIs, rooted in the tradition of village Panchayats. It examined the participation levels and awareness among Gram Sabha members and provided insights into their roles and the factors influencing their engagement in PRI activities. Chow Ananda

Chiring and B Komow (2024) investigated the empowerment of women through their participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh. The study emphasised the significance of democratic decentralisation in promoting women's political participation and

examined the role of women representatives in PRIs. The collective research highlights the transformative impact of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) on women's empowerment in tribal and rural regions of India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh. The introduction of PRIs marked a significant shift by legally enabling women to participate in grassroots decision-making, further strengthened by constitutional provisions reserving seats for women. Despite these structural advancements, many women, especially in rural and tribal communities, continue to face challenges such as illiteracy, economic dependency, and limited influence in family and societal matters. Studies emphasise the importance of democratic decentralisation in enhancing women's roles in governance and highlight the need for increased awareness, education, and support systems to improve participation.

III. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING TRIBAL WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Educational and Awareness Factors

Education and awareness are among the most significant socio-economic determinants influencing tribal women's participation in local governance. Education not only provides basic literacy and numeracy skills but also enhances critical thinking, self-confidence, and the ability to understand political and administrative systems. In tribal regions, however, female literacy rates remain considerably lower than national averages due to geographical isolation, poverty, early marriage, household responsibilities, and limited access to schools. These disadvantages create structural barriers that prevent tribal women from fully engaging in political processes and leadership roles at the grassroots level.

Low levels of education restrict tribal women's ability to comprehend government policies, welfare schemes, and legal provisions related to local self-government institutions. Many women representatives face difficulty in reading official documents, understanding budgets, or interpreting rules and procedures of local bodies. This lack of functional literacy often forces them to depend on male family members, local elites, or officials for guidance, which weakens their autonomy and reduces their effectiveness in decision-making. As a result, their participation becomes nominal rather than substantive, and their voices remain underrepresented in governance processes.

Political awareness is closely linked to education. Tribal women with limited exposure to formal education often lack knowledge about their constitutional rights, reservation policies, and the powers and responsibilities associated with elected positions. They may not be fully aware of the importance of Gram Sabha meetings, development planning, or monitoring public services. This information gap discourages active involvement and reinforces a sense of inferiority or fear of making mistakes in public forums. In many cases, women hesitate to speak in meetings due to lack of confidence and unfamiliarity with political language and procedures.

Another important dimension is the absence of leadership training and capacity-building opportunities. Even when tribal women are elected to local governance bodies through reservation policies, they frequently receive little or no systematic training in governance, financial management, or public administration. Without such training, they struggle to perform their duties effectively and remain dependent on others for decision-making. This situation not only undermines their authority but also perpetuates the perception that women are incapable of handling leadership responsibilities.

Cultural and social factors further compound educational disadvantages. In several tribal communities, girls' education is not prioritized due to traditional beliefs, economic constraints, and expectations that women's primary role is domestic. Long distances to schools, lack of female teachers, and safety concerns also contribute to high dropout rates among tribal girls. Consequently, many women enter adulthood without the educational foundation necessary for political participation and leadership.

Awareness programs and adult education initiatives have shown potential in transforming this scenario. Literacy campaigns, legal awareness workshops, and political education programs conducted by government agencies and non-governmental organizations help tribal women understand their rights and responsibilities. These programs also provide knowledge about development schemes, health services, and community welfare, enabling women to participate more confidently in decision-making processes. Exposure to successful women leaders and role models further inspires tribal women to engage in governance activities.

Leadership training programs play a crucial role in building communication skills, negotiation abilities, and self-esteem among tribal women representatives. Such training helps them overcome

hesitation, articulate community issues, and assert their position in meetings dominated by male members. When women are equipped with knowledge and skills, they can challenge discriminatory practices and contribute effectively to policy discussions and development planning.

In educational and awareness factors significantly shape tribal women's participation in local governance. Low literacy, limited political knowledge, and lack of leadership training hinder their meaningful involvement and reinforce dependency on male counterparts. However, targeted interventions such as adult education, political awareness campaigns, and capacity-building programs can empower tribal women to participate actively and independently in governance institutions. Strengthening education and awareness is therefore a fundamental step toward ensuring inclusive democracy and sustainable development in tribal regions.

IV. ECONOMIC STATUS AND LIVELIHOOD CONSTRAINTS

Economic status and livelihood conditions play a decisive role in shaping tribal women's participation in local governance. Most tribal communities depend on subsistence agriculture, forest-based activities, and daily wage labor for survival. Tribal women contribute significantly to household income through farming, collection of minor forest produce, and informal work. However, their economic contribution often remains undervalued and unrecognized. Persistent poverty and unstable sources of income force women to prioritize basic survival over political participation, leaving little time or energy for involvement in governance activities.

Financial insecurity limits tribal women's ability to contest elections and participate actively in local government institutions. Election campaigns require resources for transportation, communication, and basic publicity, which many tribal women cannot afford. Even after being elected, attending meetings or traveling to administrative offices involves costs that are difficult to bear for women from economically marginalized households. As a result, many women depend on male relatives or local power holders for financial support, which reduces their independence and weakens their authority in decision-making processes.

Economic dependency on male family members further restricts women's political autonomy. In many tribal households, men control land ownership, income, and access to credit, while women

remain economically dependent despite their labor contribution. This imbalance of power affects women's confidence and bargaining capacity within both the family and the community. When women representatives rely on husbands or male relatives for financial assistance, their decisions may be influenced or controlled by them, leading to proxy representation and limiting genuine participation in governance.

Livelihood responsibilities also act as a major constraint on political involvement. Tribal women shoulder multiple roles as caregivers, agricultural workers, and household managers. Daily tasks such as fetching water and firewood, cooking, childcare, and wage labor consume most of their time. These responsibilities leave little scope for attending Gram Sabha meetings, training programs, or development planning sessions. Seasonal agricultural work and migration for employment further disrupt regular participation in governance activities.

Limited access to credit, markets, and economic opportunities compounds these challenges. Tribal women often lack ownership of productive assets such as land and livestock and face difficulties in obtaining loans from formal financial institutions. Without economic empowerment, women struggle to assert their leadership roles effectively. Poverty also makes them vulnerable to exploitation by contractors, middlemen, and local elites, which discourages independent political engagement.

However, recent initiatives such as self-help groups (SHGs), microfinance programs, and livelihood development schemes have created new opportunities for tribal women's economic empowerment. Participation in SHGs has helped women save money, access credit, and gain collective strength. Economic independence through small enterprises, handicrafts, and agricultural activities has increased their confidence and social recognition. These economic improvements often translate into greater willingness and ability to participate in local governance and decision-making processes.

In economic status and livelihood constraints significantly influence tribal women's participation in local governance. Poverty, financial dependency, and heavy work burdens restrict their political engagement and limit their autonomy as representatives. Strengthening women's economic position through livelihood programs, access to credit, and asset ownership is essential for enhancing their participation in governance. Economic empowerment not only improves their

living conditions but also enables them to emerge as confident leaders capable of contributing meaningfully to inclusive and democratic local governance.

V. CONCLUSION

Tribal women's participation in local governance is shaped by a complex interaction of educational, economic, social, and cultural factors. While constitutional provisions and reservation policies have opened doors for political inclusion, genuine empowerment remains limited due to persistent socio-economic constraints. Illiteracy, poverty, patriarchal norms, and lack of awareness continue to hinder active involvement. However, initiatives such as capacity-building programs, self-help groups, and leadership training have demonstrated the potential to transform tribal women into effective agents of change. Strengthening their participation requires an integrated approach that combines education, economic empowerment, and social reform. Ensuring meaningful representation of tribal women in local governance is essential not only for gender equality but also for building inclusive, responsive, and sustainable democratic institutions.

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