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CHANGING STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN BASTAR DISTRICT OF CHHATTISGARH

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ABSTRACT

The tribal women, constitute like any other social group, about half of the total population. Tribal societies generally view gender as complimentary and egalitarian, where each role is defined but complimentary to the other. Men focus on cultivation and women plant and gather the foods, thus both roles are necessary and complimentary in the holistic relationship of the family/community. Traditionally, tribal women and men had equal access to lands, animals and resources, and this was beneficial to the collective. However, as a result of the integration and assimilation efforts of dominant culture, capitalistic systems and the ideal of individual ownership, tribal women in particular experience fewer opportunities to access their natural resource and lands. As a consequence Gender relations within tribal society have been changing. The present paper is based on empirical study carried out in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh that highlights the plight of tribal women in present scenario.

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INTRODUCTION

The gender relations in a tribal society seem to be relatively egalitarian with women enjoying quite a high social status and economic value compared to their non-tribal counterparts. Role of women is not only of importance in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. The tribal women work very hard, in some cases even more than the men. The tribal women have a freedom, and a self-expression. With the onset of development programmes economic changes are taking place, which affect men and women differently. This inequality arising from the development process calls for a detailed scrutiny because it has resulted in not only inequality between tribals and non-tribals but also among tribals on gender basis. Majority of the tribal societies are patriarchal. Women are not equal to men as such, but had higher status vis-a-vis non-tribal women. Both their relatively high status and children's upbringing depended on abundant resources and partial control that they exercised over them. In other words, tribal women owed their relatively high status both to the abundance of resources and a clear division in their societies between the family and the social sphere. The man represented the family in the society and woman as the main decision maker in the family economy,

production, and social relations. Tribal women enjoy a greater social status with regard to control over resources. This ensures their active participation and decision-making with regard to land utilization, agriculture and powers over cash flow in a tribal economy. The fact that the woman controlled the family economy was the main reason why her status depended on abundant resources. As such, she had a bigger vested interest in treating them renewable, that is, in their sustainable use. The vested interests, her control over the family economy and her consequent relatively high status depended on the resources remaining as common property resources (Pathy, 1988). Much of this has changed during the decades of planned development. Modernization tends to be more and more individual land ownership oriented, and as a result destructive of the woman's status (Fernandez and Barbora, 2002). These tribal women who sustained themselves on the natural resources had to face economic impoverishment, followed by loss of social status.

Changing scenario

There are a large number of processes through which tribals have lost access to land and forests essential for their survival and livelihoods. These don't only include alienation of land which is legally owned by the tribals through debt mortgaging and sale, but also loss of access to land through reservation of forests, loss of traditional shifting cultivation land through Survey and Settlement, displacement, unsuitable and

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unimplemented land reform laws etc. Over a period of time, all these processes have led to loss of control and access to livelihood support systems vital to their existence, marginalizing and destitution of tribal communities. Influx of non-tribals since the last two centuries, many of whom are more capable of negotiating state enforced legal and tenure systems, have pushed tribal communities to the bottom of the local power hierarchies, even in areas where they are in majorities. In areas where tribals are in minorities, their conditions, along with that of dalits, are even more miserable and powerless. Lack of ownership and claim over land and other factors of production is one of the fundamental reasons behind the current situation. Another important cause of displacement in schedule V areas is large-scale mining and industrial projects. Given the liberalization of mining and industrial policies which allows for direct foreign investments, large number of mining and industrial projects is in the pipeline, mostly to be located in scheduled areas.

The situation in these scheduled areas are already extremely disturbing, with large scale mining leading to displacement of tribal, destruction of their livelihood support system including forests and water sources, large scale air and water pollution, and influx of outsiders. For over a decade-and-a-half the government has been pushing the agenda of the corporate sector, resulting in unprecedented trauma to the tribal people depending on land and natural resources for survival. Projects varying from multi-purpose dams, reservoirs, power plants or any other industries have led to large-scale displacement, destruction of livelihood, cultures and also the physical environment. While local communities were adversely affected, the issue of women in such situations has never been considered. In the forest areas the pattern of industrialization is restructuring social relations. Labour roles are changing with the transition from traditional land- and forest- based livelihoods to mining based. With this shift in labour roles and traditional livelihoods, gender roles are shifting as well. Where men and women had previously worked together in agricultural activities, now men are working daily in the mines to earn cash income, whereas they would have previously worked to support their families through agricultural production.

Women are staying at home to carry out only household duties with the degradation and alienation of lands. With the individual Patta becoming the norm of land ownership, power has been transferred to man and from him to his son. The increasing vulnerability of land- and forest- dependent people in rural India has conflated pressure to retain what remaining land and resources they do hold. Now tribal women are prohibited from owning land without the support of their father, husband, son or brother, so that if a woman is married to a non-indigenous person, the land can stay with the male relative and with the tribal community. Livelihoods of forest-dependent peoples, especially women, are adversely affected by forced evictions. Non-timber forest produce forms a major source of income for many tribal communities. Women are almost exclusively involved in collection, storage, processing and marketing of minor forest products such as fodder, thatching, and medicinal herbs. However increased government control of forests and minor forest products are adversely affecting livelihoods choices of Tribal and forest-

dependent women. The woman seizes to be the main decision maker in the family economy and becomes dependent on man (Thekkekara, 1993). Krishna (2005) says that the swift transformation of production systems, land use and livelihoods in recent decades has affected gender relations, leading in many cases to marginalization of women. Further, with the establishment of industries and various development projects by the Government, each member of the family was to be given a job whereby women were never considered. Jobs were normally given to men, considered heads of family which were often temporary or daily wagers. Thus, in comparison to women, the men folk among tribals forged ahead in acquiring the modern privileges.

Review of literature

Gurnug (1998) suggests that the social and economic status of tribal women is low because of social hierarchy and economic deprivation. The difference in land holding, food security, allocation of resources and role in decision making affects and determines their socio economic status. Bhasin (2007) has carried out her study about tribal women in different geographic region i.e. Ladhak, North Eastern Region, Rajasthan and her findings show that the tribal women possess a lot of importance in tribal communities. Awias *et al.* (2009) stated that tribal women have major role in co-management of their natural, social and economic resources. But still they suffer a lot; they are backward due to a traditional outlook, illiteracy, superstition, and submissive role in decision making, social evils and many other cultural factors. Geetha Menon (1992) reveals that the impact and the loss of common property resources are very severe on tribal women. She shows that the hardships of the tribal women have been increasing. Thus tribal women are the major victims of the deprival of the traditional rights of the tribals in common property resources.

Recent research indicates that violence against tribal women is increasing while kinship bonds are decreasing (Panda & Snehadata, 2008). The practice of eliminating widows through "witch hunting" has been condemned throughout the country. Nutritional intake is decreasing due to decreased traditional cultivation and agricultural activities, and as a result peoples' immunity and health is declining as seen in the increasing incidences of diseases like tuberculosis and malaria (Basu and Kshatriya, 1989; Basu *et al.*, 1993; Chopra and Makol, 2004). Awais *et al.* (2009) point out that tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to the environmental degradation and the interference of the outsiders. According to Fernandes *et al.* (2001) in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal, tribal women deprived of natural resources that are their sustenance, complained of not having any work. These were the sources of their high status and of their economic utility. With their disappearance they felt that their community did not have any use for them. They are reduced to being housewives alone with no opportunity to work outside the house and make a contribution to the family economy. The review of literature clearly indicates that various researchers have highlighted the changing status of women in the tribal society.

Profile of Bastar district in Chhattisgarh

Bastar is the largest district in the State of Chhattisgarh and is situated in its southern part. Most of the tribal population (80 percent of total population) stay in forest areas and are engaged in agriculture. Their livelihood depends on forest & other natural resources. Their age old traditional practices are conservation oriented and form a true example of sustainable lifestyle. Bastar is one of the last natural resource frontiers in India – perhaps in the world. The district has rich forests and natural resources and is known for its waterfalls and scenic beauty. Chhattisgarh is among the richest Indian states in terms of mineral wealth, with 28 varieties of major minerals, including diamonds. The main tribes of area are Gond, Halba, Maria and Muria. The Marias and Murias are also regarded as sub-tribes of Gonds. In addition to the above tribes, Bhattra, Parja, Dhruva, Rajmeena, Jhori Amunai, Dorla also inhabit Bastar.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Present study is an in depth exploratory analysis of the lives of tribal women in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh. Purposives ample of 300 tribal women in the age group of 15-55 years residing in Bastar were included. Jagdalpur being the headquarters of the district, it was decided to collect the sample from the villages within the radius of 35 to 40 Km of the town. 85 tribal women from Bhattra tribe, 26 from Parja, 16 from Dorla, 18 from Dhurva, 83 from Gond, 30 from Halba and 42 from Gadba were included in the sample. Informal interviewing with the help of interpreter was used to collect information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The distribution of the respondents according to different age categories clearly indicates that a majority of the respondents belonged to an economically active age group. The majority of tribal women under study were married.

Table 1. Socio Demographic Characteristics of Tribal Women

Characteristics	Category	Number (Percentage)
Age	15-25 Yrs	86 (28.7)
	25 to 35 Yrs	87(29)
	35 to 45 Yrs	76(25.3)
	45 to 55 Yrs	56(28)
	45 to 55 Yrs	52(26)
	55 + Yrs	20(10)
Marital Status	Never married	42(14)
	Married	216(72)
	Once married, presently single	42(14)
Number of children	No child	42(14)
	2	86 (23.5)
	2-3	160(53.3)
	3+	12(4.0)
Education	Illiterate	204(68)
	Primary	50(16.7)
	Middle	18(6.0)
	Matric and above	28(9.3)
	Housewife / Not working	56(18.7)
Occupation	labour	191(63.6)
	farmer	53(17.7)
Income	Up to Rs 5000 p.m.	202(67.3)
	Rs 5000 to 10000 p.m.	71(23.7)
	>Rs 10000	27(9)

The incidence of widowhood and divorce, though rare is not uncommon. Taking into account the educational attainment of the respondents under study, it is difficult to find any marked difference in the tribes, since 68 percent of the respondents were illiterate. Results show that more than 60 percent of the respondents worked as laborers. It is necessary to mention here that most of the respondents did not own land and they turned up as daily wagers. The impact of ongoing aggressive growth on women could be broadly divided under two heads:

- (i) sociocultural
- (ii) economic

Socio-cultural Impact

Tribal society of Chhattisgarh is alive on a culturally networked web. Landed property in tribal communities is understood as a sacred inheritance from the ancestors and the sons who inherit them are the custodians of this land. They do work on the land and draw their sustenance, but they also have a responsibility to safely hand over this property to the next generation. When the onslaught of development projects uproots them from their ancestral place, they are socially ruined. They are deprived of the same social and cultural meaning when they start living in another place. As a result, the well-knit social fabric of tribal community gets completely shattered. Their society breaks. They find it difficult and often impossible to begin a new society where they can live with their old values, old relations and old meaning of life and women are the worst hit group due to breakdown of society. The social and cultural web or network gets dismantled after displacement and so does the support system the community. The loss of land negatively contributes in the disruption of family bonds. The support and help the families provide to each other is not available after displacement. Women suffer the most due to breakdown of the social network.

Increase in alcoholism among men

Men start drinking or increase drinking as a 'coping' mechanism. As the man, who has lost his traditional occupation– farming, goes around looking for jobs, frustration builds up in him, which he takes out on the women of the house. Results show that 42.7 percent of the respondents had marital conflict due to alcoholism. The influx of hordes of outsiders in the area affects their cultural and social values. The material culture that the outsiders bring in along with them affects the locals. They start feeling inferior about their own culture. The culture of the group perceived as superior who are now their neighbours, is superimposed on them and here begins a cultural crisis. In other words the local society, which earlier had a distinctive culture, faces a peculiar problem hitherto unheard of – that of cultural identity.

Social dignity of women going down

The disintegration of the community network caused by investment invaders affect the women more severely than men. Wife's disrespectful behaviour pattern towards her husband, her disobedience and being nagging type were the main precipitating factor for spousal quarrel among Gond tribes. Husband's drinking behaviour; money matters and

work shirker were the main precipitating for quarrel among Gonds. Domestic violence has become quite prevalent in recent times. Bhattra men in the present study were found to be more violent as compared to Gond men. Tribal groups who are residing near or in urban areas face the additional burdens of discrimination, menial jobs and higher rates of victimization. A sudden increase in marriages breaking-up is reported because of unemployment and other problems. Tribal women who generally enjoy a better social status in their communities are now treated according to status of women in the host villages. They, in some cases, find themselves pushed, into following the purdah system that did not exist earlier. Dignity of women, though unethically, is often associated with the wealth their family possesses. As the affected or uprooted family is robbed of its land and the wealth it generated from the land, it is usually poor. The dignity of women of the family also goes down in the eyes of the society. The new and dominant society that comes to the region after development expresses utter unwillingness to accord the same old status to the local women, as they deserved in their original society. Dowry is being practiced in a few tribal communities. This exposes them to various threats.

The practice of Tonhi (Witchcraft) which a part of tribal culture has taken a new shape in context of changed economic criteria. A woman is declared Tonhi and is accused of spreading disease and bringing disaster to the village by performing Jadu-Tona (Witch craft). These women are insulted and publicly humiliated. Often it is accompanied by physical torture and they are ostracized from the community. In many cases the torture is so severe that they suffer from the wounds for months. Within the village it is not possible to get treatment. The psychological wounds due to public insult and dishonor stay for life. In some cases the accused women commits suicide. In witch hunting cases, often the village representatives and the government officials do not come forward in opposition on the pretext that this is an indigenous belief that is best left undisturbed. Results show that a significant number of respondents believed in witches. With regard to Parja, Dorla, Dhurwa, Halba and Gadba tribes, the response was 100 percent. With regards to Bhattra tribe 94.1 percent respondents reported that they believed in witches. In Bastar, while belief in witchcraft and sorcery is widespread. Evidence suggests that women are the main targets of suspicion. Many respondents felt that witchcraft accusations are associated with property disputes. By accusing women as witches, people actually try to find out a scapegoat to pull all blame for perplexing situation of life. Since all the tribals under study are patriarchal in nature, women were blamed to be witches and there is no concept of a wizard.

Economic Impact

The aggressive onslaught of investment leads to loss of land, loss of forest, loss of grazing land, loss of water bodies etc. thus brings loss of livelihood. The affected people are pushed to a new economy, with which they are totally unfamiliar. For tribals who depend on land alone for livelihood – sudden change of occupation is just impossible. Thus, the indigenous community is silently going through the process, – silent destruction of traditional occupation. Even if they try to find a way out and get employment in the new economy, jobs are not

adequately available. Those who had no land earlier and were dependent mainly on sharecropping or rendering services to the community and/or solely dependent on common property resources, also lose their market and their access to the common property. Women face a new situation where jobs, if there are any, generally go to the men of the family, the compensation amount goes to men, and they are left with no work. Among Halba tribe women are not allowed to plough the fields. Gadba and Parja tribe women are prohibited from trading. Only Bhattra women work in the houses of non-tribals as domestic help.

Migration of tribal girls due to loss of livelihood

Migration of tribal girls to other states in search of livelihood is probably the severest fallout of aggressive growth and displacement in modern era. Loss of land and resultant loss of work has pushed tribal girls to migrate. Machination of construction works – roads, buildings and others, has robbed them off their livelihood which they earned selling their physical labour. Though a small portion of the labour could still be used in these works along with machines, a big chunk was thrown out of work.

Women forced to produce 'rice beer' and sell for livelihood

All across tribal areas and especially in hamlets that surround developed cities, women can be spotted selling rice beer on road sides, babies slung on their backs. Traditionally, tribal women have produced rice beer not for commercial use but for use during festivals. Now selling it seems to have become a new livelihood option for those women whose families have borne the brunt of aggressive development and loss of livelihood.

Women are turning to construction labour

Construction work in industrial areas is cashing on availability of cheap labour created by the loss of livelihood as a result of aggressive growth through industrialization. Women may find employment at construction sites, but they lose self-esteem in the process and become vulnerable to sexual exploitation by contractors. Instances of sexual exploitation occur more with women. Results show that more than 60 percent of the respondents worked as laborers. It is necessary to mention here that most of the respondents did not own land and they turned up as daily wagers. It has been found that in majority of tribes under study, heads of the household were engaged in menial types of occupations which included labourers in farms or construction workers. Majority of the tribals were poor as their total monthly income was less than Rs. 5000. Majority of the respondents admitted that they are paid less than men. Majority of the respondents belonging to Gadba tribe (92.9 percent) followed by Dorla tribe (87.5 percent) and then Dhurwa tribe (83.3 percent) who reported differentials in wages of men and women. They conferred that it was due to the economic pressure that they were accepting the low wages.

Conclusion

The analysis given in this paper shows that though development projects are important for the progress of the

nation they tend to become a major threat to the traditional livelihood of the people affected by them. It is true more in case of tribal women. One can deduce from the above discussion that tribal women have been severely affected by the development. With the alienation of the natural resources, the tribal woman ceases to be an economic asset to the family. The impact of this is felt not only in the economic field but also in the social arena. She ceases to be autonomous. Tribal women are particularly vulnerable to violence both within their own communities and in the broader society. Tribal women experience many kinds of violence in times of peace and war, including beating and forced labour. They are trafficked for prostitution and forced labour. Globalization and economic liberalization have often destroyed indigenous subsistence economies and displaced tribals from their land. Tribal women have lost their livelihoods. Poverty has contributed to displacement of indigenous communities. There has also been an increase in migration of tribal women, in search of employment, to cities, where they face the danger of exploitation and inhumane treatment. Forced migration has led to destruction of indigenous lifestyles and compounded the problems faced by tribal women.

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