

Role of SHG in Empowering Tribal Women: A success story from Gujarat

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ABSTRACT:

Women play an important role in the overall development of any community irrespective of caste, class, religion, creed or country. In India, women constitute approximately 50% in terms of the population. But, when we look into their representation in economic activities it is quite low compared to their male counterpart. Many efforts have been made to empower women and especially tribal communities through different schemes implemented by Government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The present study explores the transformative impact on the livelihoods of tribal women in the South Gujarat region, India by SHGs activity. More than 2.50 lakhs SHGs are in function in Gujarat and among them, more than sixty thousands are in the South Gujarat region. Many interventions have been carried out through various strategies and models. In this paper, an attempt is made to explore the role of SHG in tribal women empowerment through Nahri centre located in South Gujarat region. Nahri, a traditional meal of the Adivasis, has evolved into a sustainable source of income and empowerment for women in the region. A qualitative analysis of interviews, observations, and data from Nahri centres elucidates the socio-economic dynamics, community development initiatives, and the role of NGOs in supporting these enterprises. Additionally, it explores the innovative solutions implemented, such as Nahri on Wheels, to overcome geographic constraints and ensure accessibility. The study underscores the significance of preserving indigenous culinary practices while fostering economic resilience and gender equality in marginalized communities.

Keywords: Nahri Centres, Tribal Women, Livelihoods, Culinary Heritage, Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Gujarat, India.

Introduction:

The tribal population in India, constituting 8.6% of the total population according to the 2011 census, faces significant problems such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, health issues, geographic diversification, and lagging behind in getting access to services. In Gujarat, tribes are mainly spread across 48 talukas in 14 districts, which accounts for 8.1% of the tribal population of the country. The tribal population of Gujarat, numbering 89.17 lakh, constitute 14.8% of the state's population. They are concentrated with significant populations in North Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, Dohad, Godhra, Vadodara, Bharuch, Narmada, Surat, Tapi, Navsari, Valsad, and The Dangs. There are also tribal populations in other districts, including the forest areas of Junagadh, Kutch, Jamnagar, and Nalsarovar. There are 11 major tribes in Gujarat and among them Bhil tribe is the largest tribe constituting 47.89% of the state's tribal population. (Census 2011).

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Tribal women, who make up 49% of Gujarat's tribal population, perform crucial roles within their communities, possessing a deep understanding of their ecosystem and often influencing behavioural change on the ground. They also possess traditional knowledge, including insights on issues like climate change, forests, and sustainability.

The different studies on tribal communities noted that women play a significant role in the tribal economy. For the fulfilment of their basic need tribal women along with their male counterparts participate in the collection of minor forest produce, medicinal herbs, fodder, grass, bark, charcoal, fuel wood, tubers, etc and after selling these items they purchase basic requirements like matchboxes, kerosene, salt, sugar, sweet oil, clothes, etc.. The status of women in tribal communities is considered equal in all aspects of social life including the economic aspect with their partners and also they play a significant role in the decision-making process. Women work hard in tribal society performing dual roles in the domestic and productive activities.

Concept of Women Empowerment:

The Concept of women empowerment was introduced at the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. The term empowerment was defined as “a distribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women”. Empowerment is not something that could be made available in the form of an object to those whom we think require it. It is not just a concept that could be defined with the help of universally accepted parameters. It is considered as a process that includes some components like equal access to opportunities for using society's resources, prohibition of gender discrimination in thoughts and practices, economic independence, freedom from violence, participation in all decision-making bodies; and freedom of choice in matters relating to one's life.

Empowerment is a process that addresses all sources and structures of power. The process has to work on an individual as well as at a collective level. The very purpose of empowering women is to provide equal opportunities to women as that of men so that an egalitarian Indian society could be established in the true sense of the term.

Tribal Women Empowerment Efforts in India

In India, tribal communities are facing unique challenges in terms of their cultural and socio-economic background compared to non-tribal communities. For the inclusion of tribals into the mainstream of social life, there have been considerable efforts made by GOs and NGOs to empower them.

The earlier initiatives to empower tribal women can be traced back to the pre-independence era when social reform movements started gaining momentum across the country. Gandhiji emphasized the importance of women's participation in socio-political movements, which

enabled them into mainstream of the society and indirectly contributed to the empowerment of tribal women. Additionally, the establishment of organizations such as the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927 provided a platform for discussing women's issues, including those faced by tribal women (Sarkar: 2003: 45).

After independence, the Indian government recognized the need for targeted interventions to uplift tribal communities, including women. The First Five Year Plan (1951-1956) laid the foundation for tribal development by emphasizing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for tribal populations. Subsequent plans introduced specific schemes and programs focusing on women's empowerment within tribal communities. For instance, the Integrated Tribal Development Program (ITDP) launched in 1972 aimed to improve the socio-economic status of tribal women through income-generating activities, education, and healthcare (Nair: 2010: 72).

Furthermore, the establishment of special ministry like the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 1999 underscored the government's commitment to tribal welfare. This ministry formulated policies and implemented programs tailored to address the unique needs of tribal communities, including gender-specific initiatives. In addition, the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana (VKY), which was launched in 2014, focuses on holistic development encompassing education, healthcare, livelihoods, and infrastructure for tribal communities, with special provisions for women empowerment (Ministry of Tribal Affairs: 2015: 18).

Despite concerted efforts, tribal women empowerment initiatives in India have encountered several challenges. Gadgil (2006: 98) noted that limited access to education remains a significant barrier, particularly in remote tribal areas where schools are scarce, and cultural norms may prioritize boys' education over girls'. Moreover, he pointed out that traditional patriarchal structures within tribal societies often restrict women's mobility and decision-making autonomy, hindering their participation in development programs.

Economic constraints also pose challenges to women's empowerment initiatives, as many tribal communities rely on subsistence agriculture or forest-based livelihoods with limited avenues for income generation. Lack of access to credit facilities and markets further exacerbates their economic vulnerability (Mishra: 2018: 125).

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of grassroots-level interventions and community participation in tribal women empowerment efforts. NGOs and civil society groups have played a crucial role in implementing innovative programs that cater the specific needs of tribal women. For example, initiatives like promoting women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been successful in enhancing women's economic independence and decision-making abilities (Sethi: 2019: 204).

Additionally, advancements in technology have opened up new possibilities for empowering tribal women, such as digital literacy programs and mobile-based information dissemination

on healthcare and government schemes. The use of participatory approaches, including community-led development planning and decentralized governance mechanisms, has also gained traction in ensuring the inclusivity and sustainability of empowerment efforts (Tripathi: 2020: 87).

The journey of tribal women empowerment in India has been marked by progress as well as persistent challenges. While significant strides have been made in terms of policy formulation and program implementation, there is still much work to be done to ensure the holistic development and empowerment of tribal women. Moving forward, a multi-dimensional approach that addresses socio-cultural norms, economic disparities, and institutional barriers will be essential in realizing the full potential of tribal women as agents of change and progress in India's development journey.

Efforts for Tribal Women Empowerment in Gujarat:

Tribal communities in Gujarat have long been marginalized and disadvantaged because of their cultural and geographical diversities. For their inclusion in the mainstream of society, efforts have been initiated by both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) over the years towards their empowerment. Some of the important initiatives undertaken by the government and NGOs are given below;

Historically, the Government of Gujarat has recognized the need to uplift tribal communities, including tribal women, through various schemes and programs. One significant initiative is the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana, launched in 2007, which aimed to address the comprehensive development of tribal areas. Under this scheme, specific provisions were made for women's empowerment, including education, skill development, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Government of Gujarat: 2007).

Additionally, the Gujarat government has implemented policies to promote education among tribal girls, such as the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme. Through KGBV schools, efforts have been made to provide quality education to girls from marginalized communities, including tribes, thereby enhancing their empowerment prospects (Government of Gujarat: 2015).

Furthermore, various programmes such as the Tribal Sub Plan, and Gujarat Pattern Scheme, have been introduced to provide livelihood opportunities to tribal women. These schemes focus on skill development, entrepreneurship training, and financial assistance to promote economic independence among tribal women (Government of Gujarat: 2018).

Along with governmental initiatives, numerous NGOs have been actively involved in empowering tribal women in Gujarat. NGOs like SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) have played a pivotal role in organizing and mobilizing tribal women for collective action. SEWA has focused on building women's capacities through skill

development, access to credit, and market linkages, enabling them to engage in various income-generating activities (Desai: 2002: 45).

Other NGOs, such as Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and Adivasi Ekta Parishad, have implemented community-based projects aimed at enhancing the socio-economic status of tribal women. These projects often include initiatives related to agriculture, livestock rearing, and handicrafts, providing tribal women with sustainable livelihood options (Patel: 2010: 78).

Moreover, NGOs like PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) have facilitated women's collectives and self-help groups (SHGs) among tribal communities. Through these collectives, women have been empowered to access resources, assert their rights, and participate in decision-making processes at the community level (Mishra: 2016: 112).

Impact and Challenges

The combined efforts of the government and NGOs have yielded significant impacts on the empowerment of tribal women in Gujarat. There has been an increase in literacy rates among tribal women, with greater access to education and skill development opportunities. Economic empowerment initiatives have enabled women to generate income and contribute to their household economies, thereby enhancing their status within the family and community (Rathod & Rathod: 2018: 94).

However, several challenges persist in the empowerment efforts for tribal women. Limited access to basic services such as healthcare and education, lack of infrastructure in tribal areas, and entrenched patriarchal norms continue to hinder the holistic development of tribal women. Additionally, issues like land rights, forest rights, and displacement due to development projects pose significant obstacles to the empowerment of tribal women (Shah: 2014: 123).

Role of BAIF in Tribal Empowerment:

Bhartiya Agro Industrial Foundation (BAIF) recognized the traditional entrepreneurial skills of tribal women and introduced some new income-generating activities in tribal pockets of South Gujarat. BAIF was established in 1967 at Urulikanchan near Pune (Maharashtra) by Dr. Manibhai Desai, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhiji. The mission of BAIF is to create opportunities for gainful self-employment for rural families, especially disadvantaged sections, ensuring sustainable livelihoods, enriching the environment, improving the quality of life, and fostering good human values. BAIF promotes integrated rural development through sustainable management of degraded natural resources, land, livestock, water, and vegetation, by implementing multidisciplinary programs. In addition to development, BAIF also focuses on health, literacy, women's empowerment, environmental pollution, etc., for the betterment of rural people. BAIF targets weaker sections of society with an individual or

family-based approach. Presently, BAIF operates in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh, spreading its activities over 15,000 villages in these states.

BAIF identified tribal local food as the most potent intervention activity to involve women and ensure they earn a steady income. BAIF has incorporated income-generation activities to empower tribal women in their area. For that BAIF has made the formation of women's SHGs to develop a savings habit and create an inter-loan facility among tribal women so they can independently proceed towards their socio-economic development. BAIF has formed 4123 Self Help Groups and 9 women led Federations in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Odisha and Bihar. Out of those 11 villages of Navsari and Valsad districts of South Gujarat, all are having significant tribal populations. Each group consists of 10 to 15 members. BAIF has promoted saving and credit habits among tribal women by organizing them into groups and providing income generation activities. Tribal women have now developed skills in record-keeping, purchasing raw materials, dealing with customers, etc.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining personal interviews, observation, and documentary analysis. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including Nahri centre operators, beneficiaries, and representatives from supporting organizations such as BAIF. Participant observation was conducted at Nahri centres to gain insights into daily operations, customer interactions, and socio-cultural dynamics. Secondary data sources include reports, articles, and government documents related to tribal welfare and community development programs.

Success Story of 'Nahri':

The tribals of the South Gujarat region called their lunch as a 'Nahri' in their local language. The establishment of the Nahri centre originated from the problem of lunch (traditional food) faced during commuting from rural areas to urban areas in their daily visits to town places for various purposes. To address this problem BAIF, the NGOs working in the tribal region of south Gujarat, came up with the concept of providing traditional tribal food. They made special SHGs for tribal women for this purpose. At the initial level, BAIF has provided support in terms of financial, and skill development.

The Nahri centres in Gujarat represent a unique convergence of culinary heritage, entrepreneurship, and community development initiatives. Originating from the traditional lunch of the Adivasis, Nahri has transcended its cultural significance to become a catalyst for socio-economic transformation among tribal women. This case study aims to delve into the

evolution of Nahri centers, their operational models, their impact on women's livelihoods, and their implications for sustainable development.

Origin and Evolution of Nahri Centres:

The South Gujarat region is characterized by a rich cultural heritage and a predominantly agrarian economy. Historically marginalized, tribal communities have faced challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The efforts made by GOs and NGOs have impacted significantly on socio-economic empowerment of tribal. The establishment of Nahri centres emerged as a response to meet their needs to attain a better standard of living by preserving indigenous culinary traditions.

The inception of Nahri centres can be traced back to 2007, with the establishment of the first centre near Gangapur village in the Navsari district. Inspired by traditional Adivasi cuisine, Nahri centres have proliferated in the South Gujarat region, providing employment opportunities for tribal women and promoting indigenous food culture. After the initial success of this Nahri centre in this area, this centre became popular among the local tribals as well as the tourists visiting across the region. It was found that significant increase in the socio-economic condition of the tribal women involved in the management of the centre. Looking at the nutritional values of the local traditional tribal food, the state government has decided to promote the Nahri centre by providing financial and other support through different schemes of the various government agencies/departments like forest, DRDA, tribal welfare etc.. As a part of the tribal women empowerment in the south Gujarat region, the Gujarat government intervene to open the Nahri centres in key places and areas of the region. To make this food popular, the state government invites SHGs involved in the operations of Nahri centres in various official programmes and folk fares in the state.

Operational Structure:

Nahri centres operate as community-owned enterprises managed and staffed predominantly by tribal women. Women's collectives, such for example the Jai Ambe Mahila Mandal, such kind of SHGs are playing a pivotal role in the establishment and management of Nahri centers. Operational tasks include meal preparation, customer service, and financial management.

Impact on Livelihoods:

Nahri centers have significantly improved the economic prospects of tribal women, with over 100 women gaining employment across 13 centres. Through regular wages, profit-sharing mechanisms, and additional income from catering orders, women have experienced financial independence and enhanced social status within their communities.

Culinary Heritage and Nutritional Value:

Nahri centres serve authentic Adivasi cuisine, featuring staples such as nagli rotla, urad dal, and green vegetables having high nutritional values. The emphasis on organic, locally sourced ingredients reflects a commitment to nutritional quality and environmental sustainability.

Innovations and Challenges:

To address logistical challenges, initiatives such as ‘Nahri on Wheels’ have been introduced, enabling remote communities like Savarkhadi village to access Nahri meals conveniently. However, infrastructure limitations, seasonal constraints, and market dynamics pose ongoing challenges to sustainability and scalability.

Conclusion:

The case study highlights the transformative potential of Nahri centres as a model for economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and community development among Gujarat’s tribal women. By leveraging indigenous culinary traditions, fostering women’s entrepreneurship, and forging partnerships with supportive organizations, Nahri centers exemplify a holistic approach to sustainable development in marginalized communities. Future research and policy interventions should focus on enhancing market linkages, improving infrastructure, and replicating successful models in other regions to ensure the long-term viability and socio-economic impact of Nahri centres. Nahri is no longer just a meal, but a source of livelihood for tribal women.

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