

Triple Marginalisation: An Intersectional Study of Caste, Class, and Gender Among Tribal Women in Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

This research paper explores the idea of triple marginalisation through an intersectional framework of caste, class and gender for tribal women in Madhya Pradesh. Tribal women in India are situated at a point of intersection where class, caste, and gender intersect to affect outcomes. Tribal communities are often considered socially apart from the caste system, yet are marginalised within socioeconomic structures. This study demonstrates the multidimensional inequalities faced by tribal women - economic disadvantage (class), social exclusion (caste-like discrimination) and patriarchal constraints (gender).

Using intersectionality as a conceptual framework, the research examines how these intersecting identities compound vulnerabilities in education, health, work and politics. It suggests that development initiatives often overlook the intersecting nature of these forms of disadvantage and tend to homogenise tribal women. Using qualitative methods such as case studies and secondary data, this paper shows how institutional oversight, cultural constraints, and resource constraints perpetuate marginalisation. The research paper also highlights the capabilities of tribal women, who cope and contest these limitations in multiple ways. It raises their voices and experiences and suggests the need for more responsive, contextual policy approaches. It finds that to tackle triple marginalisation, a multi-faceted approach is needed that combines social justice, gender justice and economic empowerment for inclusive development of tribal women.

Keywords: Triple marginalisation, Intersectional, Multidimensional inequalities, Homogenise tribal women.

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Introduction

Triple marginalisation describes the multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation individuals face based on multiple social identities. The concept of intersectionality offers a useful way to examine the interplay among caste, class, and gender in the Indian context. One of the most marginalised groups impacted by triple forms of marginalisation is tribal women in the state of Madhya Pradesh. While tribals are constitutionally recognised as Scheduled Tribes and enjoy some legal protections, their everyday experiences often portray their marginalisation, exclusion and invisibility in the mainstream socioeconomic and political spheres:

“Adivasi women face multiple layers of discrimination—economic, social and gender-based.” (Radhakrishna, Meena, 2005, p. 23)

Unlike the caste system, tribal communities are often viewed as "beyond the caste system". Yet, they also face caste-like oppression and discrimination, especially in their relationship with other social groups. This social exclusion is compounded by poverty. Many tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh live in rural, forested areas with limited access to education, health care, jobs, and amenities. This situation is compounded by poverty and resource constraints, restricting their ability to transcend class boundaries and reinforcing dependence and marginalisation:

“Tribal communities... remain among the most deprived and marginalised sections.” (Hasnain, Nadeem, 2011, p. 12.)

This situation is also compounded by gender. Tribal women are subject to patriarchal restrictions within and outside their communities. Though some tribal societies are regarded as relatively progressive, issues such as powerlessness, resource inequality, and vulnerability to exploitation and violence still confront tribal women. Their productive and reproductive labour is often devalued. As a result, tribal women face a "triple burden" of oppression - based on gender discrimination, poverty and social exclusion:

“Gender is constructed through the powerful lens of caste.” (Chakravarti, Uma, 2003, p. 05.)

This research paper aims to understand the intersection of caste, class, and gender among tribal women in Madhya Pradesh. Through an intersectional lens, it seeks to go beyond mono-dimensional approaches and emphasise the complexity of their marginalisation. It also hopes to highlight the shortcomings of development policies, which often fail to account for these multidimensional inequalities. Recognising triple marginalisation is crucial to developing inclusive, effective strategies that empower tribal women and advance social justice.

Conceptual Framework of Triple Marginalisation and Intersectionality

Triple marginalisation offers a powerful lens to analyse the multiple sources of social exclusion faced by tribal women, especially in states such as Madhya Pradesh. It describes the simultaneous effects of three dominant forms of social inequality, namely caste, class and gender, which intersect to inform the social experience of marginalised groups. To understand this concept, it is important to explore the theoretical framework of intersectionality, which draws attention to how different forms of social stratification are not independent but interconnected and co-dependent.

“Tribal women occupy a unique and often precarious space, navigating a labyrinth of intersecting vulnerabilities due to their gender, tribal identity, and often, lower socioeconomic status.” (Balot, Vini & Sharma, Pragya, 2024, p. 789)

Intersectionality goes beyond the conventional method of studying social inequalities in isolation. Rather than focusing on caste, class or gender as discrete forms of oppression, it highlights the interactions of identities leading to multiple forms of oppression. This intersection is especially important for tribal women, as a single identity category cannot capture their social location. As women, they experience gender discrimination; as economic actors, they often belong to the poor class; and as tribal people, they face social exclusion and marginal inclusion in the larger social structure.

“Tribal women's experiences through an intersectional lens reveal how subalternity, based on their gender and tribal identity, intersects with specific challenges linked to caste or economic disparities.” (Balot, Vini & Sharma, Pragya, 2024, p. 802)

While tribal groups are classified outside the traditional caste system, they often face caste-like discrimination. This encompasses social stigmatisation, limited social mobility, and institutional marginalisation. This exclusion is comparable to caste discrimination, cementing their marginalised status. This, combined with economic marginalisation - characterised by lack of property ownership, limited sources of livelihood, and limited access to education and health - creates a system of inequality.

Gender adds to this marginalisation. Tribal women face inequalities within their communities and in the larger society. Although there is an image of tribal societies being egalitarian, patriarchal traditions still shape decision-making, division of labour and resource allocation. Women are often relegated to low-paid and labour-intensive work, and their work is devalued. They also tend to be excluded from formal political decision-making and leadership positions, hindering their participation in governance. The intersection of caste, class, and gender results in a compounding effect, where each factor's effects are magnified. This intersectional oppression cannot be remedied with policies that target only one facet of inequality.

“Adivasi women are excluded and disempowered at a systemic scale through violence. The inequalities are further enhanced by class, which dictates access to education, employment, healthcare, and politics.” (Kumar & Bakshi, 2022, p. 49-68).

For example, economic development initiatives that overlook gender inequality may not benefit women equally. Likewise, gender-specific programs that don't consider tribal identity might miss the cultural and social barriers that tribal women encounter. Thus, the concept of triple marginalisation, grounded in intersectionality, is essential to understanding the complexities of tribal women's situation. It emphasises the importance of multi-faceted approaches to research, policy and social change. Acknowledging the multidimensional nature of these disparities enables more comprehensive and effective strategies for empowerment, equality and social justice.

Socioeconomic Conditions of Tribal Women in Madhya Pradesh

Tribal women in Madhya Pradesh face a longstanding pattern of socioeconomic disadvantage based on class inequalities. Many tribal people in the state live in remote, forested and rural areas where economic growth is uneven and basic services are meagre. In this milieu, tribal women are especially disadvantaged as they bear the

brunt of poverty, low levels of education, lack of employment opportunities and lack of health facilities.

Poverty is a prominent aspect of tribal life in Madhya Pradesh. Tribal families are largely reliant on subsistence farming, wage labour, forest produce gathering and migration. These livelihoods are often precarious and low-paid, and it is hard for families to make ends meet. Tribal women are actively involved in these livelihoods; they work long hours on farms, gather minor forest products and perform household labour. But while contributing to labour, they are often not given due recognition and control over finances. Their work is invisible to the economy, further entrenching their marginal status in the household and economy.

Education levels add to their socioeconomic disadvantages. Literacy among tribal women in Madhya Pradesh is significantly lower than the national average, largely because of poverty, isolation and socio-cultural factors. Factors such as lack of access to schools, early marriages, and the need for girls to help with domestic work contribute to high dropout rates. This results in fewer opportunities for tribal women to develop their skills and engage in formal paid employment, thereby leading to poverty and dependency:

“Age, literacy... positively... correlated with decision-making pattern.” (Sant, Suman, and M. K. Mandal, 2017, p. 5.)

Tribal women also experience high levels of unemployment and underemployment. They predominantly work in unregulated, unorganised sectors, without employment security, decent wages, or social security. Gender-based labour migration occurs to earn a livelihood, exposing women to harsh working conditions and social vulnerabilities. Limited access to vocational skills and employment opportunities limits their prospects for economic independence and mobility.

Healthcare is also of concern. Tribal regions lack proper medical facilities, trained doctors and nurses, and transportation infrastructure. Consequently, tribal women have limited access to maternal health, nutrition and medical care. Tribal women suffer from malnutrition, anaemia, and high maternal and infant mortality. Moreover, a lack of awareness of health care and government schemes also puts them in a vulnerable position:

“Half of the tribal women... have no idea about... contraceptive [use].” Nair, Pallavi. *The Times of India*, 2014.

The socioeconomic status of tribal women in Madhya Pradesh is a combination of poverty, lack of opportunities and neglect. These class inequalities not only limit their individual growth but also their social status. Inclusive policies and programs that emphasise education, employment generation, health and economic empowerment are needed to address these issues and ensure the inclusion of tribal women in the development process:

"Education and health facility... enable better awareness... and improve socioeconomic conditions." (Soni, V. K. 2020, p. 645)

Caste-Like Exclusion and Social Marginality

Even though tribal communities in India are constitutionally classified as Scheduled Tribes and are supposedly not part of the rigid caste system, their experiences of exclusion are often similar to those experienced by those from caste backgrounds. In Madhya Pradesh, tribal women in particular experience forms of social marginality that

resemble the hierarchical exclusionary dynamics of the caste system. This can be seen as "caste-like exclusion" in which tribal identity is used to signal social inferiority, causing stigma, segregation, and exclusion from mainstream society.

Social stigma is one of the key forms of caste-like exclusion. Tribal people are often perceived as "backwards", "uncultured", or "traditional". These attitudes are entrenched in mainstream social conditioning and help to keep them marginalised. Such stereotypes especially target tribal women, as they are often characterised as ignorant, economically backward and culturally backward. Such demeaning portrayals not only demean them but also limit their inclusion in social and institutional settings.

Geographical and social segregation also contribute to their marginalisation. Tribal groups in Madhya Pradesh often live in remote areas, such as forests, hills, and villages. Although this is historically and environmentally driven, it also serves to keep them out of social mainstreaming and development. In cities or semi-urban areas, tribal people can face housing, employment, and educational discrimination, often facing unequal opportunities in these areas. This isolation inhibits integration and reinforces a feeling of difference.

Institutional discrimination is another key aspect of caste-like discrimination. Tribal women often face barriers to accessing public services such as education, health, and welfare programs. Red tape, lack of awareness and prejudice among service providers can prevent them from accessing state policies. Even when tribal welfare policies are in place, they often do not target the most excluded, especially women, because of structural weaknesses and exclusion.

Social exclusion also comes in the form of cultural marginalisation. Tribal languages, cultures and knowledge systems are devalued or overlooked in public discourse. This erasure contributes to the erosion of tribal identity and dignity. This is compounded for women by gender norms that limit their role and agency in their community and in wider society.

"Their tribal identity further exposes them to social exclusion and discrimination, often leading to limited political participation and land rights. (Balot, Vini & Sharma, Pragma. 2024, p. 790)

The triangulation of tribal identity and gender compounds the marginalisation. Tribal women are excluded not only from mainstream socio-political institutions but also face barriers within their own communities. They have limited roles in decision-making and are under-represented in political and administrative bodies.

The caste-like social exclusion and marginality of tribal women in Madhya Pradesh reflect the continuity of a hierarchical mindset and inequalities beyond the caste system. Such discrimination perpetuates their social exclusion and denies them access to resources, opportunities and social status. To resolve this problem, it is necessary to expand the concept of social justice beyond the framework of caste to address all forms of exclusion and ensure the inclusion of tribal women in the country's social, economic, and political development.

Gender-Based Inequality and Patriarchal Structures

Gender inequality is a key aspect of the marginalisation of tribal women in Madhya Pradesh. Despite tribal societies being seen as more egalitarian than mainstream patriarchal societies, this masks the complexity of patriarchy in tribal societies. Tribal women continue to struggle with issues of gender roles, limited participation in

decision-making and vulnerability to various forms of violence both within the tribe and in wider society.

While patriarchy in tribal societies may not always take rigid forms, it still influences social norms, roles and power dynamics in ways that are detrimental to women. Women are often expected to fulfil several roles, including household work, motherhood, and subsistence work, such as gathering firewood, drawing water, and doing farm labour. While they make significant contributions to the household and the economy, their work is often devalued and overlooked. This gendered division of labour further reinforces women's economic vulnerability and hampers their ability to develop their own skills and talents.

Tribal households and communities are also predominantly male decision-makers. Key areas such as landholding, management of economic resources and community affairs are generally male-dominated. This leaves tribal women with little say, despite their significant stakeholder status. Such a lack of decision-making power not only disempowers them but also reproduces gender inequality over time. For instance, in many communities, women's representation in local governance structures and political parties is limited, thereby limiting their say in policies that affect them.

Gender inequality is also evident in instances of violence against tribal women. They are prone to internal (within the family) and external (in cases of migrant labour) exploitation and violence. Women's economic vulnerability and limited legal knowledge inhibit their ability to seek recourse. Moreover, social practices like child marriage and low literacy add to their vulnerability and dependence.

Gender, class and tribal identity further compound issues. Lack of resources limits access to education and health care, and social stigma limits institutional support. Consequently, tribal women are caught in a web of multiple forms of discrimination.

“Tribal women also face discrimination, exploitation, violence, and marginalisation by the dominant groups and institutions in society.” (Manna, Animesh. 2024, p. 14).

But it is crucial to recognise tribal women's agency. Many are involved in self-help groups, community-based projects and local women's movements to improve their socioeconomic status. Such initiatives show their ability to challenge patriarchy and claim their rights, despite limited conditions.

Gender inequality and patriarchy have a profound impact on the lives of tribal women in Madhya Pradesh. To overcome these challenges, it is important to understand the need for economic and educational empowerment, as well as a shift in social perceptions and power dynamics. Promoting the empowerment of tribal women through awareness, representation, and resource allocation is critical for gender justice and inclusive growth.

Agency, Resistance and Policy Interventions

Tribal women in Madhya Pradesh are not just passive recipients of structural injustice; they actively exhibit agency and resilience in coping with and resisting oppressive circumstances despite multiple forms of marginalisation. They find outlets for their resistance in daily practices, collective mobilisations and engagement in community development programs. Such expressions of agency challenge mainstream narratives of tribal women as victims and showcase their capacity to contribute to social and economic change.

At the local level, tribal women often participate in informal networks and self-help groups (SHGs), which are crucial for financial mobility and community support. These provide access to microcredit, savings and livelihood options, allowing women to make a more visible contribution to family livelihoods. This engagement not only empowers them economically but also boosts their self-esteem and assertiveness within the household and community. In some regions, tribal women have also participated in local government bodies, such as Panchayati Raj, to advocate for health, education, and resource allocation.

Resistance also occurs in more covert yet profound ways, including challenging gender roles, investing in their daughters' education, and asserting land and resource rights. While social and cultural norms often constrain these behaviours, they reflect a shift in the expectations of tribal women. Collective action and community organisations have also helped them raise their voice and demand accountability and participation in development.

“Tribal women have a rich and diverse cultural heritage, and they are deeply connected to their communities and ecosystems. They possess valuable knowledge and skills across domains such as agriculture, forestry, medicine, art, and sports. They also play a significant role in preserving and promoting their indigenous languages, traditions, and practices.” (Manna, Animesh, 2024, p. 16).

State policies and development initiatives have been instrumental in tackling the discrimination faced by tribal women, although they have had mixed success. A wide range of policies and programs related to tribal development, women's empowerment, rural livelihoods, and education - including livelihood missions, skill-building programs and health schemes - have aimed to uplift their socioeconomic status. Self-help groups and financial inclusion initiatives have had some impact on women's economic engagement. Likewise, schemes promoting maternal health, nutrition and girl-child education have led to some improvements in well-being.

But implementing policies can be problematic. Red tape, lack of awareness, cultural constraints, and inadequate infrastructure reduce the effectiveness of many initiatives. In addition, policies are generally not holistic in nature and fail to appreciate the intersectional nature of tribal women's marginalisation. This means that the benefits do not trickle down to the most marginalised.

In sum, tribal women in Madhya Pradesh continue to grapple with systemic disadvantage, but their resistance and agency can help to bring about change. Enhancing policy measures through an intersectional framework, facilitating their implementation in practice, and encouraging local agency are crucial for improving empowerment and development.

Conclusion

The study of triple marginalisation of tribal women in Madhya Pradesh highlights the interconnected systems of inequality of caste, class and gender. These categories are not separate but interact to form a complex matrix of disadvantage that affects the lives of tribal women. Their disadvantage is not just economic and social but structural, rooted in historical practices of exclusion, cultural discrimination and neglect.

Although constitutionally recognised as Scheduled Tribes, tribal people continue to experience caste-like discrimination, which restricts their ability to access mainstream society. This, along with their poverty and the absence of basic amenities like

education and health care, accentuates their class oppression. Within the realm of the underclass, tribal women are further disadvantaged by their gender. They face social, economic and political exclusion through patriarchal norms and practices, which limit their autonomy, deny them agency in decision-making and subject them to forms of exploitation and violence.

Yet, the study shows that tribal women are not just passive victims of marginalisation. They are actively engaged in shaping their lives through resilience, solidarity, and involvement in local programs such as self-help groups and tribal organisations. Their actions show that with the right support structures, there is potential for change and empowerment.

At the political level, while many government programs seek to enhance the status of tribal populations and empower women, their effectiveness is limited by implementation deficiencies and a failure to consider intersectionality. Policies that focus on a single facet of inequality do not reflect the lived experiences of tribal women, thus reducing their effectiveness.

As such, overcoming triple marginalisation requires a comprehensive, inclusive approach that incorporates economic, social, and gender equality concerns. We need localised participatory policies that acknowledge the differences among tribal women and involve them in decision-making. Improving access to education, health, livelihood and legal literacy can also help break the vicious cycle of marginalisation.

Finally, to empower tribal women in Madhya Pradesh, we need structural changes and a shift in societal mindsets to ensure dignity, equality, and sustainability for all.

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