



# Tribal Women's Political Empowerment: Imperatives and Challenges

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## Abstract

Tribal women's involvement in local government has become a critical issue, receiving increased attention in recent years. Historically, these women have encountered various forms of discrimination and marginalization that have hindered their full participation in decision-making processes. However, the growing emphasis on women's rights and gender equality has led to efforts aimed at enhancing the role of tribal women in local governance. Their engagement ensures that their voices are heard and their perspectives are integrated into policy-making and implementation. Additionally, tribal women's participation fosters greater accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of marginalized communities. Despite progress, tribal women often face significant social, cultural, and economic barriers that limit their participation in local government. These barriers include inadequate education, limited resource access, restrictive cultural norms, and gender and ethnic discrimination. Consequently, tribal women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, resulting in their perspectives being underrepresented in policy outcomes. Recent initiatives have aimed to increase the participation of tribal women in local governance. Nonetheless, achieving equal representation for tribal women remains a challenging goal, which this paper seeks to address.

**Keywords:** Tribal women, participation, marginalised group, local government, democracy, empowerment

## Introduction

To ensure that every community's voice is not only heard but actively involved in shaping its future, governance must embrace diversity at every level. Tribal women, resilient and deeply rooted in their cultures, are a vital part of this narrative. Their role in local governance underscores a commitment to gender equality and highlights their essential contributions to socio-economic and cultural life. This exploration examines their journey through stories of triumph, resilience, and emerging leadership that extends beyond their communities. It acknowledges historical struggles while celebrating milestones that pave the way for a more inclusive future.

The historical context reveals the challenges tribal women have faced, positioning them as agents of change. This study delves into the legal frameworks that govern their participation, analyzing constitutional rights and affirmative action policies to identify areas for enhancement. Statistical data offers a broad view of their representation, spotlighting success stories as examples of transformative leadership. By addressing socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers, this article aims to foster informed dialogue and drive targeted interventions to enhance the active participation of tribal women in local governance. These barriers

can be categorized as follows:

**Socio-cultural Barriers:** These include traditional norms, cultural practices, gender roles, and societal expectations that may restrict women's participation in public life. For instance, some communities may hold beliefs that discourage women from taking on leadership roles or speaking out in public forums.

**Economic Barriers:** Economic challenges such as poverty, lack of access to resources, and limited educational opportunities can hinder women's ability to participate in local government. Economic dependence on male family members may also limit their decision-making power and freedom.

**Political Barriers:** These can include a lack of representation, discrimination within political structures, and limited access to political networks or knowledge about the political process. Institutional biases and systemic inequalities may also prevent women from entering or succeeding in the political arena.

**Gender Equality and Social Justice:** Empowerment promotes gender equality within tribal communities. It challenges traditional gender norms and roles, fostering a more just and equitable society where women have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and access resources.

**Improved Health and Education Outcomes:** Empowerment initiatives contribute to improved health and education outcomes within tribal communities. Access to healthcare services, coupled with awareness programs, can lead to better health practices, while educational empowerment ensures a brighter future for the younger.

In essence, empowerment of tribal communities in Telangana is not only a means of addressing immediate challenges but a pathway to sustainable and holistic development. By recognizing and supporting the unique strengths and needs of these communities, empowerment contributes to building a more inclusive, resilient, and self-sufficient society.

## Background of the Study

The historical context of tribal empowerment in Telangana is marked by a legacy of marginalization, socio-economic disparities, and struggles for self-determination. Tribal communities in Telangana have long grappled with challenges stemming from colonial policies, land alienation, and cultural erosion. Both British colonial rule and post-independence governance frequently overlooked the specific needs of these communities, leading to a pervasive sense of alienation and deprivation. Efforts toward tribal empowerment gained momentum with increased recognition of their unique cultural identities and their rights to traditional lands. Key legislation, such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 (PESA), aimed to decentralize power and involve tribal communities more actively in local governance. Additionally, affirmative action measures, including reservations in educational institutions and government jobs, were introduced to address historical injustices and improve opportunities for tribal individuals. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial for developing effective empowerment strategies that address the specific challenges faced by tribal communities in Telangana.

## Challenges faced by tribal women in political participation

Tribal women have historically faced numerous challenges in participating in political processes. These challenges are often rooted in a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. Some of the key historical challenges include:

**Patriarchal Structures:** Many tribal societies, like other societies, have patriarchal structures that traditionally limit women's roles to domestic spheres, making political participation uncommon or socially unacceptable.

**Gender Roles:** Strict gender roles often relegated women to household duties, limiting their involvement in public and political life.

**Lack of Representation:** Traditional leadership positions and decision-making roles were often reserved for men, with women excluded from these spaces.

**Poverty:** Economic hardship has been a significant barrier, as limited financial resources restrict women's ability to participate in politics, which often requires time and money.

**Lack of Access to Education:** Lower levels of education among tribal women have historically limited their understanding of political processes and their ability to engage effectively in political discourse.

**Discrimination and Marginalization:** Tribal women have faced double marginalization due to their gender and tribal status, resulting in limited political representation and voice.

**Limited Legal Protections:** In many regions, there has historically been a lack of legal frameworks to protect the rights of tribal women, making it difficult for them to assert their rights and participate in governance.

**Remoteness:** Many tribal communities live in geographically isolated areas, which limits their access to political platforms and participation in larger political processes.

**Infrastructure and Communication:** Poor infrastructure and limited communication channels have historically hindered the flow of information, preventing tribal women from staying informed and engaged in political matters.

**Colonial Impact:** Colonial powers often disrupted traditional governance systems and imposed new political structures that marginalized tribal populations, including women.

**Post-Colonial State Policies:** In some countries, post-colonial state policies have continued to marginalize tribal communities, including women, from political processes.

**Violence and Intimidation:** Tribal women who sought to participate in politics have sometimes faced violence, threats, and intimidation, deterring them from engaging in political activities.

These historical challenges have contributed to the underrepresentation and limited participation of tribal women in political processes. Efforts to address these issues are ongoing, with a focus on creating more inclusive and equitable political systems.

### **Evolution of policies and initiatives supporting tribal women's empowerment**

The evolution of policies and initiatives supporting the empowerment of tribal women has been a dynamic process, influenced by changing societal norms, international movements, and growing recognition of the need for inclusivity and equity. The key developments in policies and initiatives can be broadly categorized into legislative measures, affirmative action, education and economic programs, and international influence.

**Constitutional Provisions:** Many countries have enshrined the rights of tribal communities and women in their constitutions, guaranteeing equality and non-discrimination. For example, India's Constitution provides special protections for Scheduled Tribes, including tribal women.

**Reservation Policies:** Several nations have implemented reservation or quota systems to ensure political representation for tribal women in local and national government bodies. In India, the Panchayati Raj Act (1992) mandates reservations for women, including tribal women, in local governance.

**Legal Protection Against Discrimination:** Anti-discrimination laws have been enacted to protect tribal women from exploitation and violence, including laws specifically addressing issues like domestic violence and sexual harassment.

**Targeted Welfare Schemes:** Governments and non-governmental organizations have introduced schemes aimed at improving the socio-economic status of tribal women. These include financial aid, healthcare programs, and livelihood initiatives.

**Skills Development and Entrepreneurship:** Programs have been designed to provide vocational training and promote entrepreneurship among tribal women, enabling them to become economically self-sufficient.

**Land Rights and Property Ownership:** Some policies have focused on granting land rights and property ownership to tribal women, empowering them economically and ensuring security.

**Access to Education:** There has been a concerted effort to improve access to education for tribal women and girls, including the establishment of schools in tribal areas and scholarships for higher education.

**Healthcare Programs:** Special healthcare programs, including maternal and child health initiatives, have been implemented to address the specific needs of tribal women, who often face limited access to healthcare services.

**United Nations and International Conventions:** International organizations like the United Nations have played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of indigenous and tribal women. Conventions such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have set global standards for protecting and promoting the rights of tribal women.

**Global Funding and Partnerships:** International funding and partnerships have supported projects focused on tribal women's empowerment, including initiatives in education, healthcare, and political participation.

**Cultural Initiatives:** Efforts have been made to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of tribal communities, with a focus on empowering women as custodians of cultural knowledge.

**Language Preservation:** Programs aimed at preserving indigenous languages have also contributed to the empowerment of tribal women, enabling them to maintain their cultural identity.

**Grassroots Movements:** Local and national grassroots movements have emerged, advocating for the rights and empowerment of tribal women. These movements often address issues such as land rights, environmental protection, and social justice.

**NGO and Civil Society Involvement:** Non-governmental organizations and civil society groups have played a significant role in advocating for tribal women's rights and providing support services, including legal aid and education.

The evolution of these policies and initiatives reflects a growing recognition of the importance of empowering tribal women as key contributors to their communities and societies. While significant progress has been made, ongoing efforts are needed to address persistent challenges and ensure the full participation and empowerment of tribal women.

## Examination of legal provisions and constitutional rights for tribal women

Examining the legal provisions and constitutional rights for tribal women involves understanding how various legal frameworks and constitutional guarantees aim to protect and empower this group. These provisions vary by country, but they generally focus on ensuring equality, preventing discrimination, and addressing the unique challenges faced by tribal women. Here's a closer look at some key aspects:

**Equality and Non-Discrimination:** Many constitutions include broad guarantees of equality and non-discrimination that apply to all citizens, including tribal women. For instance, India's Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Article 15).

**Special Provisions for Tribal Communities:** Some constitutions specifically address the rights of tribal communities, recognizing their distinct identity and providing for special protections. For example, the Indian Constitution provides for special provisions for Scheduled Tribes (STs) under Articles 15(4) and 46, aimed at promoting their educational and economic interests.

**Reservation Policies:** Legal provisions often include reservation policies that ensure tribal women have access to political representation and public sector employment. For example, in India, the Panchayati Raj system mandates a reservation of seats for women, including tribal women, in local governance.

**Land Rights:** Legal frameworks may include provisions to protect land rights and property ownership for tribal women. In many countries, laws are enacted to secure land rights for tribal communities, with specific provisions for women's rights to own and inherit land.

**Anti-Discrimination and Protection Laws:** Legal protections against discrimination and violence are critical. Laws addressing domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence often include provisions to protect tribal women. For example, India's Protection of Human Rights Act includes safeguards against various forms of discrimination and abuse.

**Economic and Educational Schemes:** Many countries have introduced affirmative action policies and special schemes aimed at improving the socio-economic status of tribal women. These include scholarships, financial aid, vocational training programs, and entrepreneurial support.

**Global Frameworks for Indigenous Rights:** International bodies and frameworks advocate for the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, including women, influencing national laws and policies to better align with global standards.

**Government and NGO Initiatives:** Government agencies and non-governmental organizations work to ensure the effective implementation of legal provisions and support tribal women in accessing their rights. This includes advocacy, legal aid, and awareness-raising activities.

**Cultural and Structural Barriers:** Cultural norms and structural barriers can undermine the effectiveness of legal provisions. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach, including community engagement and education.

Overall, legal provisions and constitutional rights for tribal women aim to address historical injustices and promote their empowerment. While there have been significant advancements, ongoing efforts are needed to address challenges and ensure that legal protections translate into tangible improvements in the lives of tribal women.

## Statistics on tribal women's representation

In the Indian context, the representation of tribal women in various fields, including politics, has been a subject of concern. While affirmative action policies, such as reservations in local governance (Panchayati Raj institutions) and legislative bodies, have been implemented to enhance the participation of marginalized communities, including tribal women, challenges persist. The representation of tribal women in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Parliament) has shown a gradual increase over the years, but it remains below the desired levels. In Telangana, with a significant tribal population, has implemented various measures to promote the political representation of tribal communities, including women. Reservations in local bodies and the state legislative assembly have been crucial in providing opportunities for tribal women to participate in decision-making processes. The effectiveness of these measures may vary, and factors such as socio-economic disparities, education, and awareness levels can impact the extent of representation.

**Table 1: Status of Tribal Women in Lok Sabha**

General Election	Year	Seats in General Election	Elected female members to L S	Elected ST Female Members to Lok Sabha	Percentage of Female members In Lok Sabha	Percentage of ST female members in Lok Sabha
1	1952-1957	489	24	1	4.90%	0.20%
2	1957-1962	494	24	NIL	4.85%	NIL
3	1962-1967	494	37	1	7.48%	0.20%
4	1967-1970	520	33	3	6.34%	0.57%
5	1971-1977	518	28	2	5.40%	0.38%
6	1977-1979	542	21	1	3.87%	0.18%
7	1980-1984	542	32	3	5.40%	0.55%
8	1984-1989	514	45	2	8.75%	0.38%
9	1989-1991	529	28	2	5.29%	0.38%
10	1991-1996	521	42	5	8.06%	0.95%
11	1996-1997	543	41	4	7.55%	0.74%
12	1998-1999	543	44	2	8.10%	0.36%
13	1999-2004	543	52	3	9.51%	0.56%
14	2004-2009	543	52	1	9.51%	0.18%
15	2009-2014	543	64	5	11.8%	0.93%
16	2014-2019	543	68	7	12.52%	1.28%
17	2019-2024	543	78	11	14.36%	3.10%

**Source:** Parliament of India

The table offers a detailed overview of tribal women's participation in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament) from 1952 to 2024, illustrating evolving trends in both overall and tribal female representation. The data reveals a steady increase in the percentage of female members in the Lok Sabha, with the current 17th term (2019-2024) showing 14.36% female representation. Among these, tribal women's representation has varied over time, reaching 3.10% in the current term. Despite progress in improving female representation generally and among tribal communities specifically, challenges remain, particularly in achieving equitable representation for tribal women. These figures highlight the ongoing need for targeted efforts to overcome barriers, promote inclusivity, and enhance the role of tribal women in India's

parliamentary system. Continuous monitoring and advocacy are crucial to maintaining and advancing the upward trend in women's representation, ensuring that tribal communities are adequately represented in discussions on political empowerment and gender equality.

**Table 2: Status of Tribal Women in Vidhan Sabha**

SL. No	Year	Total Member	Women Member	Percentage of Women Member in Vidhan Sabha	ST Women	Percentage of ST Women Member in Vidhan Sabha
1	1952	140	3	2.14	0	0
2	1957	140	5	3.57	0	0
3	1691	140	5	3.57	0	0
4	1967	140	5	3.57	0	0
5	1971	140	1	0.71	0	0
6	1974	147	4	2.72	0	0
7	1977	147	4	2.72	0	0
8	1980	147	5	3.40	4	2.72
9	1985	147	8	5.44	5	3.40
10	1990	147	9	6.12	0	0
11	1995	147	10	6.80	2	1.36
12	2000	147	14	9.52	3	2.04
13	2004	147	12	8.16	4	2.72
14	2009	147	7	4.76	2	1.36
15	2014	147	12	8.16	1	0.68
16	2019	147	15	10.20	3	2.04

**Source:** Vidhan Sabha

The data reveals fluctuations in tribal women's representation in the Vidhan Sabha (state legislative assemblies) over the years. Until 1971, tribal women's presence was minimal or non-existent. However, from 1980 onward, there has been a noticeable increase in both the number and percentage of tribal women members. This representation has varied over time, with some years showing substantial numbers of ST (Scheduled Tribe) women members, while others have seen limited or no representation.

The year 1985 is particularly noteworthy for its significant increase in tribal women's representation. Subsequent years have displayed varying levels of participation, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to ensure consistent representation. This data emphasizes the importance of implementing policies and initiatives that promote the political inclusion of tribal women in state legislatures. It also underscores the need to understand and address factors influencing these fluctuations, including the social, economic, and political dynamics within tribal communities.

### Barriers and Challenges

The active participation of tribal women in various spheres, including local governance, is often hindered by a range of obstacles, reflecting the complex challenges they face. Here are some key obstacles:

- Many tribal women face barriers in accessing quality education, which hampers their ability to engage effectively in governance and decision-making processes.
- Economic challenges, such as limited access to resources and job opportunities, can impede tribal women from actively participating in public life.

- Deep-rooted patriarchal norms prevalent in tribal societies can restrict the roles and responsibilities assigned to women, limiting their participation in decision-making.
- Traditional gender roles may discourage tribal women from taking on leadership positions, as there might be social stigma associated with women in authoritative roles.
- While there are reservations in place for women in local governance, the actual number of reserved seats might not be sufficient to ensure equitable representation.
- Tribal women often lack political training and exposure, making it challenging for them to navigate the complexities of electoral politics.
- Inadequate healthcare facilities, particularly in remote tribal areas, can affect the health and well-being of women, impacting their ability to participate actively in public life.
- Poor infrastructure, including roads and transportation, can isolate tribal communities, making it difficult for women to engage in external activities.
- Tribal women may not be fully aware of their legal and constitutional rights, hindering their ability to assert themselves in decision-making processes.
- Discrimination based on gender and tribal identity can result in exclusion from decision-making forums, limiting the influence and representation of tribal women.
- Tribal women may face security challenges, including violence and harassment, which can deter them from actively participating in public life.
- In some cases, the absence of effective law enforcement mechanisms can perpetuate a culture of impunity, making it difficult to address issues of violence and intimidation.

## Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for empowering tribal women and enhancing their roles in local governance:

1. Regularly review and update laws and policies to ensure they support and protect tribal women's rights and enhance their participation in local governance.
2. Expand affirmative action policies to ensure greater representation and participation of tribal women in local government roles.
3. Develop targeted educational programs and training workshops to increase political awareness and skills among tribal women.
4. Create leadership development programs tailored for tribal women to prepare them for roles in local governance.
5. Provide financial support and resources to tribal women candidates and leaders to help them run for local offices and participate in governance.
6. Improve access to technology and information resources to help tribal women engage more effectively in governance processes.
7. Foster community engagement and support for tribal women by involving local leaders and elders in promoting their participation in governance.

8. Ensure that local governance structures and practices are culturally sensitive and respectful of tribal traditions and values.
9. Encourage the formation of networks and alliances among tribal women to support each other and share resources and knowledge.
10. Establish mentorship programs to connect experienced female leaders with emerging tribal women leaders.
11. Advocate for policy reforms that address the specific barriers faced by tribal women in accessing and participating in local governance.
12. Regularly monitor and assess the impact of policies and initiatives aimed at empowering tribal women, making adjustments as needed.
13. Highlight and celebrate successful tribal women leaders and their contributions to local governance to inspire and encourage others.
14. Use media and outreach programs to raise awareness about the importance of tribal women's involvement in governance and to challenge stereotypes and biases.

By implementing these recommendations, efforts can be directed toward creating a more inclusive and equitable local governance structure that fully integrates tribal women and values their contributions.

## Conclusion

In a thorough examination of the roles and participation of tribal women in local government, several key findings and insights have emerged, highlighting the various challenges and opportunities within this dynamic context. The historical analysis shows a gradual yet significant increase in the representation of tribal women in local governance, largely due to affirmative action policies and reservations. However, the data indicates that, despite progress, there is still a considerable distance to achieving optimal levels of participation. The review of legal provisions and constitutional rights underscores both the protective measures available and the need for further refinement to address the unique challenges faced by tribal women. Additionally, an analysis of affirmative action policies reveals their impact on representation, with variations over different periods emphasizing the importance of ongoing evaluation and adaptation.

As we imagine a more comprehensive and impartial future, it is central to perceive the significant job tribal women play in nearby administration and local area improvement. The source of inspiration is clear: We should enduringly focus on the proceeded with help and strengthening of tribal women in these basic circles. This involves supported interest in instructive projects customized to their requirements, guaranteeing that obstructions forestalling admittance to quality training are destroyed. Furthermore, extensive ability improvement drives should be executed to furnish tribal women with the apparatuses expected to effectively add to nearby economies and dynamic cycles. We should advocate for expanded political portrayal through upgraded reservations in Panchayati Raj organizations, perceiving that assorted voices at the table lead to additional hearty and comprehensive strategies. Moreover, cultivating wellbeing and prosperity in ancestral networks requires designated medical care drives that focus on the one of a kind difficulties looked by tribal women. Legitimate education programs, advancing attention to their freedoms, are fundamental for destroying foundational boundaries. In equal, the conservation and advancement of native expressions, culture, and conventional information ought to be praised, giving a stage to tribal women to grandstand their rich commitments. Proceeded with help for microfinance and banking administrations, alongside the combination of innovation, will make ready for monetary autonomy. At last, an all

encompassing methodology requests cooperation between states, NGOs, neighborhood networks, and global associations. By regarding this source of inspiration, we set out on an aggregate excursion towards a future where tribal women are engaged as well as perceived as impetuses for positive change, molding the fate of their networks and rousing ages to come.

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