



Economic Dimension Of Status, Role And Empowerment Of Tribal Women

¹Karri Vennela, ²Dr. D. Ramesh

¹Post Graduate in M.Sc. Anthropology, ²Associate Professor

¹Department of Anthropology,

¹Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

Abstract: This paper investigates the multifaceted economic dimensions influencing the status, roles and empowerment of women, particularly tribal women, in regions such as Chintapalle Mandal, Andhra Pradesh. It aims to explore their diverse economic contributions, the persistent challenges they face and the impact of various governmental and grassroots initiatives designed to promote their economic independence and development. Based on the experiences and contexts described, this research proposes a qualitative methodological approach. This would involve participant observation to understand daily life and power dynamics, in-depth interviews to capture individual perspectives and nuanced narratives and focus group discussions to explore shared experiences and social norms related to gender roles, status and empowerment within tribal communities. Tribal women are central to their economies, actively engaged in agriculture (including shifting cultivation, millet, coffee, turmeric) allied activities (poultry, livestock) and forest-based livelihoods (NTFP collection). They also preserve traditional skills through handicrafts and participate extensively in wage labour, including schemes like MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme). Shandies (local markets) serve as crucial platforms where women act as producers, sellers, and buyers, contributing to household income and decision-making power. However, they face significant challenges including poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, lack of market access, poor infrastructure, limited financial literacy, and gender discrimination. Empowerment initiatives such as DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas), MGNREGS, Prerana and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been instrumental in providing self-employment opportunities, access to credit, skill development and fostering a savings culture, thereby enhancing their financial autonomy and community engagement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for recognizing tribal women's vital contributions to the economies, addressing systemic barriers to their development, and strengthening the effectiveness of empowerment programs. The study highlights how economic independence is crucial for empowering tribal women, enabling them to gain financial autonomy and improve their family's welfare.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Economic Empowerment, Livelihoods, Self-Help Groups, Rural Economy, Gender Roles.

Introduction:

In anthropology, status is the social position or rank an individual holds, while role refers to the dynamic behaviours, rights, and duties associated with that status (Linton, 1936). The two are intrinsically linked, one occupies a status and performs a role. Empowerment, from an anthropological perspective, is a process through which individuals gain the ability to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Kabeer, 1999). The economic dimension of these concepts is particularly crucial for tribal women in India, as it explores how their participation in economic activities such as agriculture, forestry, and wage labour influences their social standing and their capacity for self-determination.

This research addresses the core issue that despite tribal women's significant and indispensable contributions to household and community economies, their social status and empowerment often remain disproportionately low. The existing literature has largely focused on tribal economics or gender roles as separate entities, failing to adequately integrate the complex interplay between women's productive labour and their social position. This study seeks to bridge this gap by moving beyond a mere description of economic activities to an analysis of how economic participation translates into genuine empowerment.

The purpose of this study is to examine the nuanced relationship between the economic roles of tribal women and their subsequent status and empowerment within their communities. By focusing on the Chintapalle Mandal of Alluri Sitarama Raju District in Andhra Pradesh, this research aims to provide a representative study of these dynamics. We posit that while women's economic contributions are vital for family survival, their level of empowerment is not solely determined by income but is also constrained by patriarchal norms, lack of education, and limited access to resources. This research is mostly about to understand to what extent does the economic participation of tribal women in the Chintapalle Mandal influence their social status, decision-making authority, and overall empowerment within the household and community.

Review of Literature:

The economic dimension of the status, role, and empowerment of women is a critical area of study, as it directly influences women's well-being and their contributions to society. A review of existing literature reveals that women's economic participation and control over resources are essential for their empowerment, yet they often face significant barriers. This literature review integrates key findings on these topics, exploring how economic factors shape women's lives and how various interventions aim to foster their empowerment.

The economic status and empowerment of tribal women are complex and multifaceted issues, as highlighted by several studies. Research indicates that while tribal women play an important role in their communities social, cultural, and economic life, they often face significant challenges, including poverty, low wages, and a lack of access to essential resources like healthcare, education, and training (Dutta, 2021; Leoni & Gunasekaran, 2020). These economic hardships are a major barrier to development and decision-making within their households.

Despite these challenges, various efforts and activities are aimed at improving their economic standing. A study on tribal women in West Bengal's Dooars region found that microfinance initiatives have a significant positive impact on their economic status (Roy, 2017). The study concluded that microfinance led to higher family incomes, improved living standards, and increased financial independence, enabling women to contribute to family decisions. Similarly, the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance is recognized in India for providing livelihood support and helping women gain better control over their cash flow (Dutta, 2021).

The issue of discrimination, particularly in economic activities, is also a notable finding. A report on indigenous women's realities revealed that they often receive significantly lower pay and less value for goods they trade compared to non-indigenous women (Indigenous Navigator Initiative, 2020). However, the report also notes that indigenous women are actively engaged in entrepreneurial activities such as handicrafts and tourism, which contribute to both their empowerment and environmental sustainability (Indigenous Navigator Initiative, 2020).

A specific study in the Dindigul and Nilgiri Districts of Tamil Nadu found that a majority of tribal women surveyed had a moderate to high level of economic empowerment, defined as having an income, job security, and assets (Leoni & Gunasekaran, 2020). This suggests that while challenges exist, targeted interventions can lead to positive outcomes. The authors emphasize the need for proper guidance and government support to address the unique problems faced by these women and to encourage traditional livelihood methods.

Research Methodology:

The data for this research was primarily collected from Chinthapalle Mandal in the Alluri Sitarama Raju (ASR) District of Andhra Pradesh, a region identified for its significant tribal population. The survey was carried out from 27/02/2025 to 12/03/2025. The collection methodology was integrated participant observation, qualitative inquiries like interviews that included open ended and closed ended questions, and analysis of existing reports. Primary data was gathered directly from the tribal women through face-to-face interviews and focused group discussions. Random sampling method and observations were conducted in local weekly markets (shandies) at Lothugedda, Chinthapalle, and Lammasingi, where tribal women's activities as sellers and buyers of various goods were recorded. The secondary data, mostly the information on empowerment initiatives was sourced from the Velugu office in Chintapalle, analysing the functioning of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and their loaning patterns. The approach aimed to capture a holistic view of tribal women's economic lives within their communities through direct engagement and documented data.

The study population comprised tribal women aged 18-60 residing in Chinthapalle Mandal, Alluri Sitarama Raju (ASR) District, Andhra Pradesh. The specific communities included in the study were the Kondh, Gadaba, Poraja and Maali tribes. These women are vital to their local economies, primarily engaged in agriculture, forest-based activities, and manual labour. The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability method to select tribal women relevant to the research objectives. Interviews were conducted with approximately 120 women across villages of Chinthapalle mandal. This approach allowed for the collection of in-depth qualitative insights into their economic role, status, and empowerment.

The research investigated outcomes related to the economic dimension of tribal women's status, role, and empowerment. Status and role were assessed through their active involvement in diverse economic activities such as agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, handicrafts, and wage labour (e.g., MGNREGS). Their engagement as sellers and entrepreneurs in local weekly markets (shandies) was also a key measure. Economic empowerment indicators included economic independence through employment and entrepreneurship, access to credit and subsidies via Self-Help Groups (SHG), and involvement in income-generating activities. Further measures involved capacity building, skill development, and savings promotion through SHGs. Crucially, enhanced financial autonomy and increased household decision-making power served as vital empowerment indicators.

The analysis primarily involved a descriptive approach to characterize the economic activities, status, role, and empowerment of tribal women. Quantitative data, such as the number of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and their membership (1262 groups with 10,477 members in Chintapalle Mandal), as well as the distribution of profit-making SHGs across various income brackets, were utilized. These numerical data points provided a foundational understanding of the scope and scale of women's economic involvement. Given the qualitative nature of observations in shandies and reported challenges, the analysis also integrated contextual descriptions to provide comprehensive insights.

Results

A survey of 120 tribal women revealed significant patterns in their economic engagement. A commanding 91.67% of the respondents reported active involvement in agriculture and allied activities. This finding strongly corroborates the foundational role of agriculture within tribal economies, where women are key participants in cultivation (sowing, weeding, harvesting), forest-based activities, manual labour, sustaining family welfare and cultural preservation. Furthermore, 70.83% of the women participated in wage labour, notably through schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). A substantial minority, 25%, were involved in shandies (local weekly markets) and also having small Kirana shops, underscoring their role as sellers and entrepreneurs. Only a small proportion, 3.33%, engaged in

handicrafts like basket making and pot painting suggesting a less widespread involvement in this specific traditional skill compared to other economic activities.

The most striking finding is the overwhelming and statistically dominant participation of tribal women in agriculture and allied activities, with 91.67% of those interviewed confirming their involvement. This highlights the enduring significance of primary sector engagement as the basis of their livelihoods and economic existence. This deep engagement in agriculture, including shifting cultivation, millet farming, and managing kitchen gardens is crucial for both subsistence and supplementary income. It also reflects the collective nature of tribal economies, where production is largely for consumption and technology use is minimal.

Beyond the primary agricultural involvement, tribal women demonstrated diverse economic engagements. Wage labour, including participation in MGNREGS, was prevalent, involving 70.83% of respondents, indicating a critical dependence on employment schemes for livelihood security and economic independence. Shandies serve as vital socio-economic hubs, with 25% of women actively participating as sellers of forest produce, agricultural goods acquiring direct cash income and fostering economic agency. Despite these engagements, challenges persist, including market exploitation by middlemen, lack of storage facilities, poor transportation, and low financial literacy. The involvement of women in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), including DWCRA groups, is also significant, providing access to credit, skill development, and promoting savings, with 941 SHGs reporting profits below ₹10,000.

The high percentages of women engaged in agriculture and allied activities underscore their innate connection to the land and traditional livelihoods. While MGNREGS provides essential wage labour, the active presence in shandies, though smaller in scale, represents critical entrepreneurial avenues and cultural preservation efforts. The data further illuminates the ongoing struggle for financial stability, despite the availability of government programs and the women's proactive engagement in various economic sectors.

Discussions

Summary of Findings:

The study reveals that tribal women in Chintapalle Mandal play a central role in sustaining both household and community economies through their multifaceted engagement in agriculture, allied activities, forest produce collection, wage labor, handicrafts, and weekly markets (shandies). Their participation in shifting cultivation, millet and turmeric processing, poultry and cattle rearing, and non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection underscores their indispensable role in ensuring family nutrition and income stability. Importantly, women's contributions extend beyond the household into community markets where they not only sell products but also exercise agency in bargaining, financial management, and cultural exchange. Their participation in such activities contributes to gradual transformations in traditional gender roles, moving them towards greater empowerment.

Employment schemes such as MGNREGS, DWCRA/SHG initiatives, Prerana further highlight institutional interventions that expand opportunities for tribal women. MGNREGS, for example, not only provides consistent wages but also facilitates skill development and increased community engagement, thereby strengthening women's influence in village decision-making and also made them realise, they do deserve equal pay in wage labour. Similarly, DWCRA and SHG networks have enabled access to microcredit, fostered entrepreneurship, and encouraged collective action in health, education, and social awareness campaigns. These interventions show a clear link between economic activities and the enhancement of status and role of women, as financial contributions improve their decision-making power within households and communities. The study also shows that shandies function as hubs of empowerment, offering women an avenue to participate in trade, maintain cultural practices, and interact socially. Income earned here directly enhances their agency, while skills in pricing, negotiation, and small-scale entrepreneurship improve self-reliance. However, the persistence of challenges such as exploitation by middlemen, poor infrastructure, lack of credit, and patriarchal norms shows the fragile nature of these gains. The findings thus suggest that while tribal women remain vital to economic survival, their empowerment is uneven and constrained by structural barriers. Overall, the study

confirms that economic activity is inseparable from empowerment, as women's visible labour not only sustains tribal economies but also redefines their roles, status, and sense of identity in the present context.

Table: How economic activities influence the net empowerment of the tribal women (Source: Filed data)

Activity	Impact of economic autonomy	Impact of participation	Status	Role	Net Empowerment
Agriculture and allied activities	Decision making power-financial security, bargaining power at home. But there is no land ownership for women.	Daily involvement knowledge, skill retention, collective strength	Respect as contributors to income, not just helpers.	Active farmers, livestock keepers, also decision makers in crop choice.	Improved family decision making. Control over the resources.
Handicrafts, small shops	Direct earnings, independence from male income	Use of traditional skills-cultural legitimacy and recognition.	Seen as income generators and also preservers of heritage.	Entrepreneurs, craft producers.	Financial independence, mobility.
(MGNREGA)	Direct wages in bank accounts-financial independence	Public work participation, visibility, acceptance as equal carriers.	Equal/indispensable earners in household economy.	Wage labourers, asset creators in villages.	Reduced dependence on men, increased bargaining power.
Shandies	Selling directly-exposure to markets, bargaining capacity.	Mobility and public presence, also social visibility.	Viewed as active market participants, not confined to home.	Traders, negotiators, economic actors in community	Builds networks, strengthens confidence and mobility.
DWCRA	Access to micro edit and savings leads to financial literacy, entrepreneurship	Collective participation-solidarity, group bargaining	Respected as organized groups, not isolated individuals	Leaders, decision makers, credit managers	Social and political empowerment, community leadership.

Limitations of the Study:

Despite its comprehensive insights, this study faces several limitations. First, the research was conducted in Chintapalle Mandal, which may not fully represent the diversity of tribal women's experiences across India. Different tribal communities have unique economic structures, cultural practices, and gender norms, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, reliance on self-reported accounts introduces the possibility of bias, as some women may underreport or overstate their contributions due to social expectations or fear of community disapproval. Third, while the study integrates both qualitative narratives and quantitative data,

access to official statistics on women's income, land ownership, and asset control was limited, restricting the depth of economic analysis.

Another limitation lies in the short-term scope of observation, particularly regarding programs like SHGs and Prerana. The long-term sustainability of empowerment through such schemes remains uncertain, as many women expressed that loans are often diverted for festivals or household consumption rather than for productive activities. Moreover, external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted shandy participation and highlighted the fragility of women's market integration. Lastly, entrenched patriarchal norms, which restrict women's mobility and decision-making in some households, were not fully explored in terms of their psychological and cultural dimensions. These constraints suggest that while the study makes important contributions, a broader and longer-term ethnographic engagement would provide a more holistic understanding.

Implications:

The findings have both practical and theoretical implications for anthropology and development studies. Practically, they stress the need for policies that strengthen women's market access, improve storage and transport infrastructure, and provide financial literacy training. Addressing exploitation by middlemen and expanding direct marketing channels through cooperatives or digital platforms could significantly increase women's profits and autonomy. The role of SHGs in fostering savings culture, leadership, and community participation also points to the potential of grassroots institutions as vehicles of empowerment. By linking credit access with training in enterprise management, women can transition from subsistence workers to small-scale entrepreneurs.

Theoretically, this study illustrates the anthropological argument that economic participation is deeply intertwined with social status and role transformation. Women's contributions to agriculture, markets, and self-help groups reshape kinship roles, household power structures, and collective identity. Empowerment here is not merely economic but also cultural, as women preserve traditional crafts, herbal knowledge and food systems while adapting to new opportunities. Importantly, the study demonstrates how tribal women act as agents of change despite systemic marginalization, embodying resilience and negotiation in contexts of structural inequality. Their experiences contribute to broader debates in feminist anthropology about how women in peripheral economies challenge and reshape power relations through everyday labour.

Conclusion:

"Empowerment of indigenous women is not only matter of justice but a prerequisite for sustainable development, cultural survival, and social equity" (UNDP Report on Indigenous Women in South Asia 2015). Tribal women are not just caretakers of homes but also forests, traditions, and survival economies. Though tribal women are portrayed as liberated than others, their liberation is often restricted by poverty, illiteracy, and systemic neglect. This study examined the intricate link between tribal women's economic roles, status, and empowerment within communities, focusing on Chintapalle Mandal, Andhra Pradesh. We aimed to understand how their vital economic contributions influence social standing and decision-making, considering inherent constraints like patriarchal norms and limited resources

Tribal women are central to the economy, largely engaged in agriculture (91.67%) and wage labour (70.83%). Shandies are crucial hubs where 25% act as sellers, fostering independence, social interaction, and cultural preservation, despite often minimal profit. Their participation, notably through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), enhances decision-making and transforms gender roles. However, middlemen exploitation and patriarchal norms persist, challenging their gains despite women's evident resilience for financial stability.

Practically, findings stress policies improving market access, storage, transport, and financial literacy, countering middlemen via cooperatives. Theoretically, economic participation deeply intertwines with social status and role transformation. Tribal women's labour sustains economies and redefines identity, acting as change agents despite marginalization, preserving culture, and challenging power relations.

Limitations include the study's single-Mandal focus, limiting generalizability, and reliance on self-reported data. Short-term scope also restricted insights into long-term program sustainability.

Future research needs broader, longer-term ethnographic studies across diverse tribal communities for a holistic understanding of empowerment. Investigating psychological and cultural impacts of patriarchal norms on women's agency is also warranted. Additionally, exploring strategies for countering middlemen exploitation and ensuring productive loan utilization would be valuable.

The conversations with the women of Chinthapalle mandal, brought different perspectives about life. Their resilience and the way they strive in their lives are impressive. Every woman here has different life stories and difficulties, some are self-satisfied, some are widowed, some are married, some are unmarried, some are young, some are elderly, some are sick, etc., but the common thing in all of them is their fight for financial stability and independence, the responsibilities that are shown on their faces, their innocent and cheerful smiles, their hope for the better future.

Reference:

1. Dutta, P. (2021). Economic Empowerment of Tribal Women in India: A Study. *International Journal of Scientific Innovations*, 18(2), 1-8. <https://ijsi.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/18.02.003.20210603.pdf>
2. Indigenous Navigator Initiative. (2020). Indigenous women's realities: Insights from the Indigenous Navigator. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. https://iwgia.org/images/publications/newpublications/2020/IndigenousNavigator/Indigenous_Womens_realities_-_Insights_from_the_IN_EN.pdf
3. Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.
4. Leoni, G. S., & Gunasekaran, I. (2020). ECONOMIC STATUS AND EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DINDIGUL AND NILGIRI DISTRICTS. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343306728_ECONOMIC_STATUS_AND_EMPOWERMENT_OF_TRIBAL_WOMEN_IN_TAMIL_NADU_WITH_SPECIAL_REFERENCE_TO_DINDIGUL_AND_NILGIRI_DISTRICTS
5. Linton, R. (1936). *The Study of Man*. D. Appleton-Century Company.
6. Roy, N. C. (2017). A Study on Economic Status and Empowerment of Tribal Women through Microfinance in Dooars Region of West Bengal. *International Journal of Business, Management and Allied Sciences (IJBAMS)*, 4(4), 130-134. <http://www.ijbmas.in/4.4.17/130-134%20Nirmal%20Chandra%20Roy.pdf>
7. UNDP Asia & the Pacific. (2015, June). Indigenous Women and the United Nations System. United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/indigenous-women-and-united-nations-system>