
UNIT 2 POLITICAL ECONOMY AND WOMEN

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

The political-economy of the country influences the position and status of women. Women from developed countries enjoy certain forms of gender equality as compared to women in developing countries. The situation in India is very complex where the relation between women and political economy is not uniformly patterned. For instance, in the Indian context, the specific nature of tribal economy gives relatively better status and position to women compared to the non-tribal society. However, with the displacement induced development process promoted by the State, the structure of gender relations in the tribal society is in a state of change. With this background, in this unit we will discuss the role and status of tribal women in the context of the state-led growth/development model, industrialization and displacement.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Comprehend how the political economy influences the position and status of women in a society;
- Understand the significance of tribal economy in the context of women's economic empowerment;
- Analyse the contemporary process of development and its consequence for tribal women; and
- Discuss and analyse the changing status of tribal women in the context of modern economy and changing occupational pattern.

2.3 TRIBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Political economy describes the relationship between the state, politics and power, on the one hand, and economic relations and the market, on the other. It examines the manner in which power is implicated in economic relationships or structures. As you have read in the first Unit of this block on 'Tribe, Women and Region', women in the tribal society are primarily considered as unit of labour, hence the political economy of the tribal society greatly influences the position of women. The obvious way is by determining their role and status in the society. Gender is one of the central dimensions along which power and politics are structured in capitalist societies which determine women's access to economic resources and outcomes. Across the advanced capitalist world, women in the labour force are paid less than the men, and occupations are heavily gender segregated. Notions of masculinity and femininity, and the biological construction of the body are constitutive of who fills particular jobs, and how those jobs are valued in the society. The political economy influences the gender relations in all societies across time and space. In the contemporary period, the forces of globalization—understood as the combination of economic integration, technological diffusion, and greater access to information—have opened up women's access to market and simultaneously perpetuated other forms of gender discrimination.

In tribal societies sectors like economy, politics, social and cultural systems are closely inter-linked. For example, the economy is largely governed by the geographical and ecological elements, the exploitation of which has negative implications for other sectors of life. Let us understand the context of tribal economy and its relation with the social structure to understand the position of tribal women. It is very difficult to bring uniformity in social and economic structures for the large number of tribes spread over different regions of India. Each tribe has its own distinct culture, social structure and institutions. We will focus on some common features of tribal social structure and their political economy as a changing phenomenon.

The important features of tribal economy and society are ecologically oriented development, an absence of economic specialization, and geographical isolation. Land and forest govern the tribal economy. Communal and subsistence organization of tribal agriculture and forestry are the very essence of the tribal society. Immediate and direct access to land through clan membership is a central feature of most tribes of India. Even today the tribal economy comprises of agriculture, forestry and simple cultivation. Tribes in India are engaged in hunting and fishing, slash and burn agriculture, pastoral activities, craft production and trading.

In spite of the economic and cultural diversity, tribal economy has been self-reliant and based on sustainable use of natural resources for subsistence. Both economic and social practices are intertwined with natural environment and local conditions. The economy is shaped in an egalitarian structure due to a sense of 'mechanical society' prevalent among the tribes. Lineage, clan or household are the structures that carry out economic activities.

Women in the tribal communities are considered to be assets. Therefore, the groom's family recompenses the bride's family by paying the bride-price which you have read in the previous unit. The practice of bride price during marriages is quite common among the tribal societies. This is in sharp contrast to the caste-Hindu society (Roy Burman, 2012). The importance of tribal women is further apparent in the organization of tribal agriculture where the women maintain a high participation rate. Women are involved equally with men in most agricultural operations except ploughing and sowing and take a part in marketing the agricultural and forest products. **S.N. Chaudhary** (2010) observes that in the tribal areas of Betul in Madhya Pradesh, collection and marketing of firewood is generally the domain of tribal women. They sell the products in the niche market to meet the basic requirements of rice, pulse, edible oil, soap, detergent powder, tobacco within the household. This nature of economic engagement of tribal women thus has placed women's role in the centre of their economy.

In spite of the economic empowerment of tribal women, there is patriarchy and gender based discrimination in the tribal communities. As we have read in the first unit of this block, *Adivasi* women do not have ownership over land and they are not allowed to participate in village level political decision making process, and are excluded from most rituals (Sundar, 2001). The situation of women is worse in the present context when modern political economy is rapidly penetrating the parts of tribal India. In the contemporary context, as the capitalist economy is expanding in the tribal lands, women are slowly being deprived of their traditional roles and positions. For example, the economic value of tribal women is decreasing and the practice of 'bride-price' is giving way to the system of dowry as witnessed in the general society (Burman, 2012).

The economic power of the women within the household is often not translated into other spheres of social life. The tribal women are not ignored at the household level but their participation is curtailed at the clan or village level. Women's status is restricted within the family domain and does not extend to social or political spheres. For example, Sikkim has a tradition of collective decision making by communities through the institution of *Dzumsha*. This traditional institution does not have significant role for women and *Dzumshais* represented by the male members of the community (Bhasin, 1993). In the absence of a male member, a female can represent the family in the *Dzumsha* meetings. This reflects that women

have marginalized status in the public domain and community decision-making process. The economic empowerment of tribal women has not always led to their social empowerment. Nevertheless tribal women enjoy more freedom, economic independence and decision making than their non-tribal counterparts.

Women are actively involved in the organization of family and agricultural production. The role of tribal women in childbirth, health, funerals, fairs and festivals is widely recognized by anthropologists and sociologists. They are the bearers of healing practices and local agricultural knowledge, which you will read in detail in the next Unit: Social Change, Identity and Interest. Women serve as crucial actors in the preservation and dissemination of traditional knowledge (Shiva, 1997). Mechanization of agriculture and industrialization is slowly displacing tribal women from their social locale and knowledge use. The new political economy of the tribal society has failed to recognize women's role and position in the sphere of managing the local knowledge. Due to the expansion of education and political awareness in many tribal societies, women are claiming their rights and entitlements and leading different environmental movements. A study by Majhi shows that many Bhil women want to occupy the position of *Sarpanch* in their village and are fully aware of their voting power (Majhi, 2010). Tribal societies have been by and large characterized as egalitarian in nature, however the status of women is a matter of feminist concern in the process of modernization.

Check Your Progress:

Define political economy with an example.

2.4 DEVELOPMENT, DISPLACEMENT AND TRIBES IN INDIA

According to Jack David Eller (2009), development is a form of directed change proposed to eliminate the inadequacies and failures of the existing economic systems such as: poverty, dependence on primary production, absence of industry, and low standard of living. Gunnar Myrdal (1968) characterized development simply as ‘upward movement of the entire social system’ and not just the economy. Thus, it invariably involves attempting to improve conditions of life of people, raising standards of living, building local capacity, and encouraging local participation and decision making. The impasse of development is evident in forms of displacement, social disorganization, resettlement, loss of land and culture. The suffering is prominent when we deal with the tribal or indigenous population of the world whose habitat and lands are constantly targeted for development projects. The important concern for tribal people stems from the realization that they have not benefited from development projects, while the non tribal societies have prospered at their expense, pushing them deeper into the poverty trap (Mahapatra, 1991).

Because of the vigorous pursuit of development based on mines and mineral industries, tribal communities are under constant threat. They are encountering development when they are unaware or at least unprepared for it. Many tribal communities are displaced from their land and compensation/rehabilitation for displaced community is a grey area.

The process of displacement induced development is directly related to the violation of many fundamental rights of tribal communities. The right to freedom of belief is enshrined in international law and is incorporated into the constitution of many countries. Australian aboriginals maintain a profound connection to their land that forms an essential part of their spiritual and cultural life and material wellbeing. In 1992 the Australian High court gave the landmark *Mabo* decision, which rejected “the discriminatory doctrine of *terra nullius* (vacant land) and held that the common law of Australia recognizes continuing title held by indigenous people to their traditional lands in accordance with their traditional laws and customs” (see Report by Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous peoples, James Anaya on behalf of Human Rights Council, United Nations General Assembly, 2010). Indigenous people and especially women claimed that the loss of their land, which is sacred and relate to their cosmologies, can constitute the violation of this right.

In case of large-scale projects, planners make cost-benefit analyses in order to legitimize the operation of the project in relation to ‘public interest’. Most tribal societies have been openly critical of the limitations

of such an approach. When we analyse the impact assessment of development projects on affected societies, we tend to overlook many socio-cultural issues due to factors such as inadequate knowledge of the human societies; inadequate approach regarding the combined and integrated effects of the proposed project; poor assessment of the project outcome on gender grounds; and insufficient knowledge of the bio-social environment. Among all these factors, analysis of a project from a gender perspective is often missing. The tribal resistance to various development projects is on rise and women are actively engaging with these environmental movements. Let us look at the nature of resistance in some environmental movements.

Box 2.1: The Tribal Resistance at Kashipur

Kashipur has been witnessing resistance by the Dongria Kondh against the state and private companies in Odisha. In Kashipur, Utkal Alumina India Ltd is planning to mine bauxite in the Baphimali hills and setting up of a factory for processing the bauxite and producing Alumina. The Dongria Kondh began their resistance in the year 1993 when they came to know about this mining venture. Apart from religious and livelihood factors often it is seen that deep ecological and soil-fertility issues are related to certain patches of land, hill or forest. Experts in bauxite have long since limited their expertise to studying how to extract it and measure its properties for the aluminium companies (Padel and Das, 2006). But, it is a well known fact that the bauxite capping on top of mountains preserves soil fertility in a surrounding area. The thick layer of bauxite retains moisture near the mountain in summer season, releasing the monsoon rain throughout the year in numerous streams. The water-retaining capacity of the mountains is under threat in Kashipur. Where bauxite is mined, the surrounding area can lose its fertility-promoting qualities (Padel and Das, 2006). Therefore, for Dongria Kondh, the Aluminium Companies can spell greater poverty and bring destruction of their culture, ecology and livelihood. This reflects how the expansion and infusion of industries are in clear conflict with the interest of many tribes.

In the history of modern India, there has been an orientation towards industrialization related growth model. Since independence, mining based industries have been in focus by the government at various levels. The industrial policy of various governments presupposed that industrialization is the best way to accelerate growth and development in the underdeveloped regions. New economic reforms in 1991 triggered the 'development' process and the new National Mineral Policy of India (1993) opened up the mining sector to private and foreign investors. The outcome of all these developmental projects had multi-pronged effects on tribal society and negatively impacted the women.

Check Your Progress:

Is it possible to have development without displacement? Give an example.

2.5 MODERNITY, DISPLACEMENT AND TRIBAL WOMEN

In India, tribal people constitute 8.6 per cent of India's population, and about 40 per cent of them have been displaced by the development projects (Fernandes, 2008). With the expansion of steel industries and mines in the area, the human-economy-ecology relation in the tribal society has been drastically altered.

Tribal communities who have displaced for development projects are impoverished by the loss of access to natural resources (Cernea, 2006). Communal ownership of land and dependence on common resources for food, shelter and ritual purposes have made the lived experiences of tribal life community-oriented. For many tribal and forest-dwelling communities, grazing lands, forests, ponds, fisheries, wildlife, riverbeds, and other such shared resources are not only a major source of sustenance but are the sources of their cultural life. About 70% to 80% of the non-timber forest produce that forms a major component of many households' income comes from common resources (Beck & Ghosh, 2000). Development projects that involve involuntary resettlement abruptly terminate the community's access to these resources in which women the greatest victims.

Displacement world wide seems to have been overwhelmingly dangerous for the tribal community. Disruption of tribal livelihoods and cultures has placed women in a vulnerable situation both ecologically and socially. Thus, development projects in most cases have impoverished them socio-culturally as well as economically (Cernea, 1998; Mathur, 1999; Mathur and Marsden,

1998). New resettlement colonies developed to relocate tribal people fail to attract them, as the communal character of their culture has not been taken fully into account. People are moved to an environment completely different from what they know. On arrival, they discover to their dismay that forests, pastures and other common property resources that sustained them in their original environment do not exist. Under these circumstances tribal women are at the crossroads. The adverse impact of modern developmental processes on them has been higher as compared to the benefits of the developmental programmes and modernization process. Loss of identity and traditional knowledge have led to the demolition of the basis of economy and social support system of the tribal women. This is reflected in the loss of social status of women in many tribal societies.

Modernisation has also failed to retain the central role of tribal women in the economy of the household through traditional occupation and subsistence agriculture. Under the rehabilitation programmes for the tribal people, opportunity as wage labour, higher paying jobs and training for skilled supervisory occupations are mostly availed by the men. The women are relegated to the status of marginal/contractual labour both within the agriculture and outside of it.

Many studies have shown the changing position of tribal women due to factors such as: state developmental programmes, reactions of the community towards development and growth of NGOs. While traditionally the status of women was high in tribal communities, colonial policy, sanskritisation, modernisation and development have brought conspicuous change in their lives. For instance, tribal communities opted for settled cultivation in place of forest-based economy. They prefer to raise cash crops and exotic high-breed crops; as a result, women are slowly getting displaced from their work (Roy, 2012). New developmental programmes in the rehabilitated area are male-oriented and rarely addressed the needs of women. Modernisation tends to be more oriented towards individual land ownership and becomes detrimental to woman's status (Fernandes and Barbora, 2002, pp.128-130).

The gender dimension of the displacement issue is neither addressed at the level of policy nor action. The burden of displacement may affect women differently because of the fact that gender disparities exist in many aspects of our society. There are intra-household inequalities between male and female in terms of literacy, health, nutrition, access to and control over resources and income, ownership of assets etc. The links between gender and development-induced displacement are slowly being made in bit and pieces (Pandey, 1998a, 1998b; Parasuraman, 1993; Thukral, 1996; Ray, 1998; Agnihotri, 1998).

Developmental projects usually cut the link between the local resources and the people. Tribal women's access to work and resources declines when

a project alienates them from the land, forest and other natural resources that the community uses. While the access of the whole family declines, that of women declines more than that of men. If a project gives jobs, they go almost exclusively to men, who are considered heads of families. If they are rehabilitated, land is allotted to men. So, domestic power passes fully to the man and from him to his son (Thekkekara, 1993, p. 92). As a result, after displacement joblessness is higher among women than among men. Except a few cases women who want to work have to be satisfied with unskilled daily wage labour.

Displacement leads to growing economic dependence of tribal women on men. It also deprives women of the resource that met the family's food, water and other needs that are traditionally their responsibility. Their role does not change but they have fewer resources to attend to it (Thukral and Singh, 1995). In addition, the loss of access to forest impacts negatively on their livelihood. **Indira Munshi** (2001) argues that changes in the forest management system have affected women and men of Warli community in different ways. Loss of access to forest and land has aggravated the tension between two genders and revived the practice of hunting in the community. She argues that the transformation of Warli community from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture has excavated gender inequality and the position of women in the community. Imposing restrictions on *adivasi* use and control of forest resources has resulted in the loss of subsistence knowledge base in medicine and agriculture. Women face additional problem of collecting firewood, fruits, roots, vegetables, herbal medicine and soon. To quote the lived experiences of Warli women:

We don't get wood for cooking. One has to cut wood out of sight of the forester. One is always afraid. If any khaki uniformed person comes, we run for our lives. If anyone cuts a tree for a plough, and a forester comes, he has to leave his axe and run. The forester takes it away. There are so many restrictions that it has become difficult to get wood for fuel. When adivasi women go to the forest, they are threatened and chased by the forester (Munshi, 2001, p. 192).

The traditional roles of women have not changed with the commercialization of resources but added multiple burden on the women.

Displacement affects status of women in the following way too. Forced displacement is a traumatic experience and to cope with this most men take alcohol. This results in a rise in domestic violence. Though drinking and domestic violence are observed before displacement they increase enormously after displacement. It becomes a coping mechanism even of many women. Since they have no work, many of them spend their time gossiping or drinking (Fernandes and Raj, 1992, p.153-154).

Development projects and resulting displacement leads to the internalisation of the dominant ideology among tribal men and women. For example, influenced by the consumerist values that enter their area with the outsiders coming to the township, men spend much of their income on clothes and entertainment. Higher income does not automatically leads to greater economic self-sufficiency among the tribal women rather the major portion of the income goes to household expenditure to catch up with mainstream ideology. Thus, women have to find economic alternatives in order to deal with the reality of catering to family needs with reduced resources. In the absence of other alternative many of them sell their body since that is the only asset they own. For example, in most mining towns of Jharkhand, a specific locality has emerged called “Azad Basti” (freedom shanties) where men who leave their families behind and work in the mines, come to fulfill their sexual needs (George, 2002, p. 17). Thus, modern political economy changes the position of tribal women and in many cases, to exploitative and abusive practices.

Displacement increases tribal women’s risk to malnutrition. Women who were used to function in a barter economy are now buying food. The combination of landlessness and joblessness, reduces their access to food. Prior to displacement, women had access to land and forests and had control over the resources. Displacement deprives them of this control and adds to malnutrition (Bhanumathi, 2002, pp. 21-22).

Check Your Progress:

Write a case study which will reflect the relationship between displacement and tribal women.

2.6 WOMEN, INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND MODERN POLITICAL ECONOMY

Women are the bearers of traditional knowledge in tribal societies. They have gained precious and vast experience in combating environmental hardships and sustainable livelihoods. Their knowledge is reflected in their water harvesting techniques, irrigation channels, and adaptation to desert life, utilization of forest species like herbs, shrubs for medicinal purposes, meteorological assessment and so on. In many domains it is the tribal women who are the sustainers and protectors of indigenous knowledge.

Over the centuries, the tribal people have developed their own system of medication based on herbs and other items collected from the forest. They also have their own system of etiology, diagnosis, and cure of diseases. Most indigenous medical knowledge takes into account the interaction of natural, social and super natural factors in health and illness. Impact of modern political economy on indigenous knowledge system is complex as the scientific hegemony blurs the authenticity and positive aspects of the former. Women, being the custodians and users of these knowledge forms are the worst sufferers.

Today's political economy is linked to the attitude which sees environment as an object to be exploited rather than its sustainable use. Bio-diversity is the substrate on which indigenous knowledge and health systems grow. The loss of bio-diversity thus threatens the economic and social status of tribal women for the simple reason that the tribal women mostly engage with economic activities involving use of wide varieties of flora and fauna. In case of erosion of biodiversity, it is women, as main food producers and caregivers in most communities, who suffer the most.

Loss of forest and community land can affect the tribal women in another crucial way too. Deforestation may lead to water scarcity which in turn results in women having to walk further for water. In most tribal societies, it is the women who are responsible for providing food and water. Any type of loss of surrounding forest, water sources or community land thus forces women to work harder to meet their needs. The position of women as users and protectors of indigenous knowledge system is at stake in the contemporary political economy.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

Tribal women enjoy higher socio-economic status than their counterparts in caste societies. Tribal women partially controlled the production process and exercised significant control over natural resources. From the above discussion it is clear that modern political economy does not always prove

to be conducive for women's status. Status of *adivasi* women is found to negatively affected by the advance of modern political economy. Women are the worst sufferers when a tribal society undergoes transformation under modernity, industrialization and sanskritisation. Land alienation and displacement in most part of tribal India is linked to loss of biodiversity. This is an attack to the self-sufficiency of the tribal society in so far as food and water is concerned and this is how tribal women suffer as producers and providers of food to their families.

The particular vulnerability of tribal women in the context of today's developmental scenario is mostly overlooked by the policy makers. Displacement and rehabilitation policies rarely analyse matters from a gender perspective. Women, as compared to men, suffer more in the transactions and negotiations between the state and the tribal society. Financial benefits and schemes mostly favour the men and the position of women in the society as caregiver and a major contributor to economy is seriously affected development-induced displacement.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How is women's position in a society linked to the political economy? Answer in the context of tribal India.
- 2) Tribal women are the worst sufferers of the development-induced displacement. Discuss.
- 3) What is political economy? And how does it impact the lives of tribal women? Explain.

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