

Date	09.08.2022
Domain	Hindustan Times
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[Tribal women have a significant role in India's transformation](#)

As we stand at the threshold of India's 75th Independence day, it is a good time to reflect on how we can accelerate achieving its Sustainable Development Goals and transformation. While our country continues to make rapid progress on many fronts, with the lives of our marginalized populations also being touched, more needs to be done.

The tribal population in India, that constitutes 8.6% of India's total population (per the 2011 census), is amongst one of the most disadvantaged due to a host of factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, health problems, geographic isolation and lack of access to services.

Tribal women, comprising 47% of India's tribal population, are deeply connected to their communities and possess a profound understanding of their ecosystem. Time and again, they have established their ability to effect behavioural change on the ground and proven to be powerful community influencers. Studies have shown that tribal women, as culture keepers and archivists of ancient tribal practices and traditional knowledge, also possess valuable insights on larger issues such as the climate crisis, forests, and sustainability.

The appointment of Droupadi Murmu, an outstanding Santhali woman from Mayurbanj, a tribal district of Odisha as the President of India, provides hope for millions of tribal women. It is also an opportunity to bring tribal health and nutrition issues to the centre of the national discourse. The trajectory of India's growth can be shifted significantly when tribal communities with tribal women are placed at the centre of solutions. With India entering its 'Amrit Kaal' (the 25 years leading up to the centennial of Independence), this will prove to be a game-changer.

There are several examples of individuals and groups of women from within tribal communities who have shown the way for inclusion and development. Young tribal women are helping lower maternal mortality rates in Araku valley, Andhra Pradesh, with no maternal deaths reported for three consecutive years prior to the pandemic. A young woman from the Wangcho tribe in a remote village in Arunachal Pradesh formed an informal group when there was no precedent of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and mobilised local women to act collectively against the opium use prevalent amongst the youth in the community, thereby playing a key role in ensuring the overall well-being of her community.

The success of the recent Aashwasan 100-day campaign (which found over 9,000 new TB patients) by the ministry of tribal affairs, Central TB Division, (ministry of health and family welfare), USAID and Piramal Foundation to raise awareness about Covid-19 vaccine and TB screening, testing and treatment initiation in 174 remote tribal districts can be attributed largely to women frontline workers and SHG members from tribal blocks who played an instrumental role in bringing community members together and persuading them to participate. Even when vehicles were not available, Epil (name changed), a tribal woman from West Singhbhum in Jharkhand, cycled between villages and the block headquarters crossing

conflict-prone areas to ensure that sample collection and transportation for TB detection were not affected.

For tribal women to be heard, and for their invaluable abilities to find wings, it is imperative for the equity lens to be donned. Their voices need amplification on community platforms like Panchayati Raj Institutions and Jan Arogya Samiti. Frontline workers like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and members of various women SHGs are already showing the way. Their stories need to find a much wider space in the mainstream narrative to ensure that they have an adequately high representation at all levels along with opportunities for their voices to emerge during multi-stakeholder dialogues on local development. Additionally, providing them with learning systems would go a long way in building knowledge, capacities and leadership so that they can shine at the forefront.

There is great truth in the adage “When you empower a woman, you empower a generation and the nation”. As India progresses rapidly, the need of the hour is to ensure we develop the collective agency of tribal women to make Sabka Vikas (everyone’s development) a reality. It is indeed time for affirmative action and equitable progress. On this 75th Independence Day, let us turn our attention to this 8.6% of our people as we make strides towards great transformation. Let us re-affirm our commitment to leave no one behind.

