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Role Of Women In Tripura's Cultural Development Through TRLM: An Analysis From Grassroots To Leadership

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing."

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Introduction

Northeastern India's Tripura is a small but culturally active state known for its distinctive fusion of local traditions, tribal customs, and outside influences. Tripura has seen significant socioeconomic change over the years, with targeted interventions meant to promote inclusive development, lessen gender inequality, and alleviate poverty. The Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM), one of the many programs implemented, is a crucial grassroots endeavor aimed at empowering rural communities, especially women, by providing training, resources, and opportunities for sustainable livelihood. With multiple ethnic groups, each with their own languages, festivals, and traditional arts, Tripura boasts a multi-layered cultural landscape.

The state's cultural heritage is rich and varied, ranging from crafts made of bamboo and cane to tribal dances like Hojagiri and Lebang Boomani. But contemporary forces like globalization, urbanization, and economic inequality have made these cultural manifestations more and more vulnerable (Dsa, 2023). As a result, TRLM has taken a multipronged approach that combines community-driven development with cultural preservation, with a particular emphasis on the contribution of women to the preservation and advancement of Tripura's legacy. TRLM's emphasis on women's empowerment via Self-Help Groups (SHGs) is among its most revolutionary features. Rural women can improve their economic independence,

take part in community decision-making, and preserve their culture by joining these Self-Help Groups (SHGs) (Singh, 2013; Lokhande, 2010).

In Tripura, women are increasingly taking on leadership roles in their Self-Help Groups (SHGs), planning cultural events, and generating income for their households through microbusinesses in pottery, food processing, and weaving. Longkumer (2014) asserts that women's financial literacy, self-esteem, and leadership abilities are greatly enhanced by SHG membership, empowering them to actively contribute to community development. The beneficial effects of SHGs are supported by numerous studies conducted throughout India. SHGs, for example, greatly increase women's income, savings, and general economic participation, according to Reena Dhaiya (2014). Similarly, Harikishan (2017) highlighted how SHGs in Telangana, through collective problem-solving and knowledge sharing, assisted marginalized women in achieving financial stability and community engagement.

These results are supported in the context of Tripura, where women who have been empowered by TRLM are preserving tribal art forms and planning community festivals in addition to becoming earners and cultural ambassadors. By fusing indigenous knowledge with contemporary technology, TRLM fosters innovation while also maintaining traditional practices. In Tripura, women are creating eco-friendly, commercially successful, and culturally relevant hybrid cultural products, such as digitally promoted folk performances and contemporary home decor made of bamboo (Mishra, 2015; P. Vinayagamurthy, 2019). These programs make culture a viable development avenue by preserving customs while also generating income.

Digital platforms and social media have emerged as crucial instruments in this shift. The audience for Tripura's traditional arts is growing as more people share and sell their cultural goods online through e-commerce, virtual exhibitions, and digital storytelling (Mansor, 2015). These initiatives show how culture can be a long-term force for socioeconomic change when combined with technology and entrepreneurship. In order to ensure that marginalized communities—particularly tribal women—have fair access to resources and representation in both cultural and economic spheres, TRLM employs an inclusive framework. In order to promote a cohesive cultural identity for Tripura and close gaps between various ethnic groups, this inclusivity has been essential (Dhirendra Nath Das, 2017).

In order to promote greater intercultural understanding and appreciation, TRLM has assisted in showcasing lesser-known tribal customs and stories by providing platforms for underrepresented voices. This inclusive impact is supported by empirical research. Kappa (2014), for example, showed how SHGs in Andhra Pradesh greatly increased the roles of women in cultural decision-making and local governance. Similarly, by increasing women's public participation and decreasing their reliance on male family members, micro-enterprise programs play a significant role in their social and economic inclusion (Mishra, 2014). Building local leadership is a key element of TRLM's approach. TRLM gives women the tools they need to spearhead community projects and promote cultural preservation through training and mentorship programs (Baily, 2014).

These grassroots leaders are now actively managing cooperatives, planning events, guiding the upcoming generation of cultural practitioners, and influencing cultural policy at the village and block levels. Similar

patterns are found in studies conducted in various states, ranging from Odisha to Nagaland. In addition to improving their own socioeconomic circumstances, women who participate in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microbusinesses have also improved the quality of life for their families and communities (Mishra, 2015; Singh, 2013). Das (2023) asserts that this kind of empowerment promotes improved decision-making, greater civic engagement, and more extensive social change. Furthermore, through focused TRLM interventions, issues that SHGs face—like restricted access to capital, poor marketing infrastructure, and a lack of mentorship—have been recognized and resolved (P. Vinayagamurthy, 2019). According to several academics' recommendations, in order to guarantee that SHGs realize their full potential, it is critical to fortify support systems, such as skill development, product quality monitoring, and political backing (Lokhande, 2010; Dsa, 2023). Even though the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) is well known for empowering women, there are still a number of important areas that are not well studied. Interestingly, little scholarly research has been done on the ways in which TRLM affects these groups' ability to make decisions, develop as leaders, and engage in entrepreneurial endeavors. Furthermore, an intersectional viewpoint that takes into account how caste, ethnicity, and class influence participation in cultural roles is absent from the majority of studies (Dsa, 2023; Lokhande, 2010). The long-term viability of TRLM's cultural initiatives is also still up for debate; do they promote sustainable grassroots cultural development or do they continue to rely on outside assistance?

Although TRLM encourages participation, more research is needed to fully understand how women actually participate in formal cultural policymaking and the obstacles they encounter, which range from strong social norms and financial limitations to political marginalization (Dhirendra Nath Das, 2017; Singh, 2013). Furthermore, not enough attention has been paid to how gender roles are changing in Tripura and how this is affecting indigenous cultural practices. In light of this, the current study aims to investigate how women contribute to the preservation and innovation of Tripura's cultural legacy and evaluate how TRLM affects their capacity for leadership and decision-making. There are various reasons why this research is important.

First, it clarifies how TRLM can be a driving force behind cultural change by empowering underrepresented groups and fostering grassroots leadership that can upend established power structures (Harikishan, 2017). It also highlights how women play a dual role in preserving traditions and bringing new cultural expressions to life through digital engagement and entrepreneurship, which ensures their relevance in a contemporary setting (Mansor, 2015; Mishra, 2014). Third, the research emphasizes the economic significance of cultural industries, including tourism, folk music, dance, and handicrafts, as well as how TRLM promotes local entrepreneurship, promotes rural development, and creates jobs (P. Vinayagamurthy, 2019; Reena Dhaiya, 2014).

Fourth, it examines how cultural engagement helps Tripura's multiethnic, diverse society develop social cohesiveness and a common sense of identity (Longkumer, 2014; Baily, 2014). Lastly, by aligning with UN SDGs, specifically SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG

11 (Sustainable Communities), the study adds to the conversation on sustainable development by providing policy recommendations and insights for community-led development and cultural inclusion.

Research Methodology

In order to investigate the transformative effects of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) on women in rural Tripura, this study uses a qualitative case study methodology. Five successful life stories of women who have greatly benefited from their involvement in SHGs and TRLM programs serve as the foundation for this study. The approach seeks to investigate the various facets of empowerment, such as social inclusion, community involvement, leadership development, and financial independence. Understanding how involvement in these grassroots initiatives has affected women's and their families' socioeconomic circumstances is the main goal.

This study explores participant personal narratives to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of their participation, in keeping with earlier research that highlights the beneficial role of SHGs in promoting economic and social change among rural women (Singh, 2013; Lokhande, 2010). The chosen women come from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, illustrating how gender, caste, and class intersect in rural Tripura (Dsa, 2023). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather primary data for the study, enabling the women to describe their experiences both before and after joining SHGs or taking part in TRLM-sponsored events. Key topics covered in these interviews included self-sustainability, credit availability, entrepreneurial endeavors, economic empowerment, and leadership positions in their communities.

In line with larger national-level findings on women's empowerment, the case studies also highlight the women's struggles, which include limited education, patriarchal resistance, access to resources, and social stigma (Mansor, 2015; Mishra, 2014). The study also examines the structure, goals and sustainability of SHG models in Tripura. The ways in which TRLM's support mechanisms—including training for rural entrepreneurship, microfinance schemes, capacity-building workshops, and market linkage programs—can promote individual transformation are critically analyzed (P. Vinayagamurthy, 2019; Harikishan, 2017). Data gathered from TRLM documents, SHG meeting minutes, and community activity observation lends credence to this.

Before and after the women's involvement with SHGs/TRLM, their conditions are compared using a comparative framework. Indicators including income levels, household decision-making authority, social mobility, skill development, and involvement in community governance are examined in this comparative analysis (Reena Dhaiya, 2014; Longkumer, 2014). The results show a dramatic change in identity from reliant housewives to self-assured leaders and business owners, highlighting the potential of community-based organizations as effective instruments for gender-sensitive growth. This methodology's emphasis on lived experiences and contextual realities not only highlights the concrete advantages of SHG and TRLM

interventions, but it also provides a deeper understanding of the structural obstacles that rural women still face.

The study advances our knowledge of grassroots empowerment and offers practical suggestions for implementing similar models in comparable sociocultural settings.

Tripura's Women Artisans: Preserving Culture through Innovation and Empowerment

Tripura is home to remarkable women who have blended tradition with innovation to preserve cultural heritage, empower communities, and promote sustainable livelihoods.

1. Smriti Rekha Chakma is a master weaver of traditional loin looms who was born in 1964. She devoted her life to eco-friendly weaving methods with natural dyes, inspired by her grandmother. In order to support both economic independence and environmental sustainability, she established Ujeia Jadha, an organization that teaches traditional weaving to tribal and rural women. She received numerous distinguished awards for her work, such as the Master Weaver Award (2000), the Padma Shri (2024), and the Sutrakar Samman (2018). A new generation of weavers has been motivated to embrace sustainable practices by her work.
2. In 2023, 52-year-old Dhalai district weaver Nirmala Sinha received the National Handloom Award for conserving the Manipuri "Inaphi" garment. Under her mother's guidance, Nirmala transformed her passion into a means of subsistence and a cultural endeavor. Government and non-governmental organizations have taken notice of her ability to weave intricate, multicolored designs inspired by nature using high-quality cotton and silk. She promotes natural fibers and environmentally friendly dyes while empowering young weavers through free workshops and mentoring.
3. Anita Tripura is a bamboo craftswoman whose participation in a Self-Help Group (SHG) run by the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) enabled her to achieve success. Anita learned the bamboo craft from the ground up through training programs and trial and error. She grew her business online and blended eco-friendly methods with tribal themes. She has improved local livelihoods by hiring other women, and she plans to start a training center for bamboo artisans, introduce modern design, and form a cooperative.
4. Another TRLM SHG recipient, Rekha Tripura, turned her love of handloom weaving from childhood into a successful business. She overcame early obstacles like limited resources and limited market access by improving her abilities through microfinance and training. Rekha's creative designs create home decor pieces, shawls, and scarves that appeal to urban markets by

fusing traditional Tripuri motifs with contemporary fashion. She currently runs a sustainable weaving business where she empowers other women and plans to establish a cooperative to reach international markets.

5. In order to popularize Tripura's traditional cuisine, Dhalai district culinary entrepreneur Rima Debbarma established Rima's Kitchen in 2016. She developed a business strategy that blends traditional Tripuri flavors with contemporary packaging and marketing, drawing inspiration from her grandmother's cooking. She overcame financial and branding obstacles with the help of government agencies and non-governmental organizations. In addition to empowering women, Rima preserves regional culinary traditions by teaching them food production, packaging, and entrepreneurship skills. By collaborating with regional farmers for sustainable sourcing, she hopes to grow her brand both domestically and internationally.

Major Findings:-

1. **Empowerment via TRLM and SHGs:** The Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM), which provided vital financial support, skill development, and networking opportunities, and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were beneficial to each of these women. They were able to improve their communities and create prosperous businesses thanks to these platforms.
2. **Innovation and Cultural Preservation:** Through the use of creative, contemporary techniques, the women in the case studies have promoted and preserved traditional arts, such as weaving or cooking customs. This strategy not only guarantees these crafts' sustainability but also increases their marketability.
3. **Impact on the Community and Social Change:** These women have influenced other women in their communities by empowering themselves. They have promoted social and economic development in rural areas by offering jobs, training, and chances for financial independence.
4. **Dedication to Sustainability:** A large number of these women place a high value on environmentally friendly procedures, employing sustainable techniques and natural materials in their work. Their dedication to environmental sustainability guarantees that their enterprises and crafts safeguard the environment in addition to cultural heritage.

5. Acknowledgment and Achievement: These women have received national awards and gained more recognition for their crafts as a result of their diligence, commitment, and inventiveness. Their accomplishments demonstrate the wider possibilities for empowering rural women and raising awareness of their contributions on a more extensive basis.

Conclusion

The Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can have a significant impact on empowering rural women, as demonstrated by the case studies of women in Tripura. In addition to becoming financially independent, the women in this study have become leaders in their communities, promoting social and economic advancement, thanks to these platforms. Their dedication to maintaining and developing traditional crafts, like weaving and cooking, has supported cultural heritage while incorporating contemporary and environmentally friendly methods.

By giving other women access to education, jobs, and chances for financial independence, these women have also empowered others. Their commitment to sustainability emphasizes their efforts to preserve the environment while encouraging the development of culture and entrepreneurship. Their accomplishments at the national level, including prestigious awards, show that their efforts are valued and that their contributions are having a long-lasting effect both inside and outside of Tripura. This study concludes by highlighting the transformative potential of TRLM and SHGs in promoting women's empowerment, maintaining cultural identities, and fostering self-sustainability.

These programs serve as a model for rural development, demonstrating the boundless potential for success and growth that arises when traditional skills are bolstered by contemporary resources and training.

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