



Gender And Leadership Adivasi Women's: Adivasi Women In Resistance, Reform And Community Transformation

Manisha, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science,
Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut

Abstract

This research paper explores the multiple aspects of the leadership of Adivasi women in India, particularly looking into ways in which they resist, reform and transform their communities. Using decolonial feminist epistemologies and recent scholarship on the subject, the paper discusses three main domains of the leadership of Adivasi women land rights activism and politics, formal political representation through constitutional quotas and community based economic and environmental governance. The discussion is grounded on the cases of struggles in Muthanga and Chengara in Kerala, emergence of leaders like C.K Janu and Dansari Anasuya Seethakka, and community projects involving the leadership of Kondh women's management of forests, and tribal cooperative initiatives among others. This paper seeks to highlight the fact that leadership of Adivasi women is complex and multidimensional, intersecting the realms of caste, indigeneity, gender and class. It further shows how the leadership of Adivasi women is defined by its distinctive epistemology which is characterized by struggle resistance to state developmentalism and patriarchal practices within their communities.

Keywords: Adivasi women, leadership, resistance, political representation, decolonial feminism, Panchayati Raj, land rights, forest governance

Introduction

The issue of leadership of Adivasi women in India represents a rich area of theorization and empirical research. Adivasis who form part of Scheduled Tribes in the Indian constitution represent around 8.6% of the Indian population but represent the most disenfranchised people in terms of developmental indicators, land rights, and political representation. In an already marginalized ethnic minority group Adivasi women suffer double marginalization resulting from caste-based discrimination, patriarchal social relations, economic deprivation, and cultural assimilation. This paper will attempt to fill an important gap in the current literature about gender issues in relation to leadership by exploring the roles of Adivasi women as agents of social change. Rather than focusing only on the oppression suffered by Adivasi women through the dominant paradigm of structural violence this paper attempts to highlight the leadership role they have played in leading struggles for rights of land ownership and governance of forests. The key research questions addressed in this paper include

1. What are the ways by which Adivasi women resist state-centric developmental policies and structural oppression?
2. What are the challenges and possibilities available for Adivasi women as leaders in the formal institution of Panchayati Raj?
3. What are the modes through which Adivasi women exhibit leadership in community-based institutions, economy, and ecology?

This paper adopts a decolonial feminist approach based on insights from critical scholars that have challenged both the universalist epistemology of mainstream feminism as well as state centric development discourse. In particular, this approach recognizes the specificity of the oppression and resistance that Adivasi women face that cannot be fully captured through concepts developed in the West their struggles are grounded in histories of dispossession post-colonial development induced violence and Indigenous resistance.

From a methodological perspective this essay reviews current academic literature and research done from around India with an emphasis on the Indian States of Kerala, Telangana, Odisha, and Maharashtra. This essay has been divided into four distinct sections. The second section addresses the role played by Adivasi women as leaders in the resistance movement within the context of struggles to claim land ownership and to resist displacement. The third section addresses their role as leaders in political systems through electoral quotas, which is both promising and limited.

Significance of the Study

The present study holds significance in the way that it goes against common tropes where Adivasi women have been presented only as victims rather than being shown in their capacity as active agents leading resistance, politics and even self-governance. By taking an approach that reflects decolonial feminism through indigenous epistemology the study is critical not just of state developmentalism but also patriarchy. In addition, the study will examine the efficacy of provisions such as reservation policies in the 73rd Amendment for bringing about social change. Finally, this study will help understand the crucial role played by Adivasi women in forest governance systems through land rights and environment policies.

Methodology

A methodology based on secondary data is adopted in this research where documentary analysis serves as the main research technique. The review and synthesis of existing literature on Adivasi women's leadership are made systematically by the researchers. Scholarly journals, books, and research papers form part of the literature review process. Archival material like governmental reports, censuses, parliamentary proceedings, gazettes, and police records are analyzed for their historical significance. Media content from both traditional and digital platforms is analyzed examples include news articles and writings by Adivasi women. In addition, thematic analysis is done for themes such as leadership experiences, challenges faced, resistance movements and results of governance. The comparative analysis conducted helps in identifying similarities and differences regarding the leadership trajectory of Adivasi women in different geographical regions and periods. The limitation of lack of historical documentation is acknowledged in this approach together with possible researcher bias.

Theoretical Framework: Gendered Epistemologies and Decolonial Feminism

A theoretical model that transcends traditional notions of political involvement and empowerment needs to be applied to assess the Adivasi women leadership case study. As highlighted by Srividya S. (2025), “gendered epistemologies” understood as the manner through which the leaders of Adivasi women challenge the masculine gender privilege in the development of knowledge frameworks as opposed to experience as they strive for a dignified life become important in understanding the context of leadership of Adivasi women. This is because knowledge is privileged by the State and academic discourses over experience upon which Adivasi women’s leadership rests.

A key aspect of the decolonial feminist approach adopted for the analysis of this case is the research carried out among Indigenous women’s leaders in Ecuador. Studies show that Indigenous women tend to criticize “white feminism” for its detachment from their realities and forms of collective organization. Similarly, Adivasi women in India have developed their own gender justice that transcends liberal feminism’s preoccupation with the rights of autonomous individuals. Rather, the struggles for gender justice pursued by Adivasi women incorporate issues related to communal rights to natural resources and self-determination.

Moreover, the intersectionality’s of caste, class, and gender also have been taken into account by the model in determining the political experience of the Adivasi women (Bhukya Sunitha, 2024). The concept of intersectionality although developed within the context of black feminism is an extremely important concept to be considered for analyzing the discrimination faced by the Adivasi women which cannot be regarded as simply additive that is “woman” plus “Adivasi” but something far more complicated. As Sunitha states these two forms of social exclusion and systematic discrimination interact with each other to exclude Adivasi women from political processes.

Another key element that has to be considered as far as the proposed framework is concerned is the ambivalent relationship that exists between indigenous movement and gender justice. This point has been proven by research on the CONAIE of Ecuador. In particular despite the fact that “the vast majority of the interviewees did not consider themselves to be feminists they were nonetheless engaged in the struggle for gender justice in their local settings. Interestingly, this point echoes the situation in India where Adivasi women leaders often prioritize community rights over gender-based ones.

Land Struggles & Displacement of Adivasi Women

Historical Dispossession

The dispossession of Adivasi people in India is one that runs through the entire timeline of their experience. Colonial forest policy developmental projects post independence as well as the current trends in corporatization have been responsible for dispossessing Adivasis of their lands. Sutapa Chattopadhyay’s (2022) account of the struggle against dispossession in the Narmada valley area highlights how Adivasi women are facing the consequences of this in form of reduced autonomy and economic sufficiency since appropriation, dispossession, and accumulation is historical and contemporary.

The construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam one of the biggest dams in India led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Adivasis in three Indian states Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The account by Sutapa Chattopadhyay shows that although decades of resistance, protests, counter-struggles, marches, direct action did not overturn bureaucratic regressions or structural and direct violence these movements enabled networks of solidarity arguing their rights and access. Adivasi women played an instrumental role in such networks.

Muthanga & Chengara Struggles – A Paradigm Shift

Struggles for land like Muthanga and Chengara are important milestones for political mobilization of Adivasi women in Kerala. As described by Srividya S (2025) such struggles mark an unprecedented effort against the highly acclaimed Kerala Model of Development. In these struggles, there was paradigm shift in the strategy of Dalits and Adivasis in claiming self-respect through rejection of welfare scheme oriented to government and just demand for considerable amount of cultivable land in order to provide means of survival for each and every Adivasi.

Two women leaders of Muthanga and Chengara land struggles are C.K. Janu and Selena Prakkanam. Emergence of these women in the political scenario denotes a shift from docile bodies controlled by some political forces as noted by Srividya to those women who have dared to question and change male monopoly in the process of constructing knowledge system. Janu, who headed Muthanga struggle of 2003 had managed to organize thousands of Adivasi families to occupy government land with a claim for legal recognition of rights over it. Violent action by the government including police firings which led to several deaths created a sensation across the country

The most important aspect of these leaders lies in their determination to develop a knowledge foundation based on their actual Dalit and Adivasi history. This epistemological approach not only combats the erasure of the Adivasi experience in the mainstream narrative but also rejects the idea that state-led development is always beneficial for marginalized peoples.

Dynamics of Gender in Relation to Movements of Resistance

Although Adivasi women have played a prominent role in resisting their dominance in the movement has come with its own problems. A patriarchal system among the Adivasis coupled with formal recognition of the role of men in their traditional society by the government has denied women an influential position in decision making despite being leaders of mobilizations. Indigenous women play a merely symbolic role here.

A similar pattern has been observed in India as well. Women who spearhead mass movements are often side lined from the negotiation process between the movement and the government wherein male leaders of communities or members of political parties negotiate. However just the act of mobilizing women and having them speak out against the government changes gender relations within such societies. According to Srividya the very fact that women like Janu and Prakkanam appear periodically as a mote in the eyes of the governmental regimes which suppress the uprising with an iron hand in the political visual field of Kerala.

Electoral quotas and the PRIs :The provisions in the constitution and its limitations

Under the provisions of the 73rd amendment to the constitution of India (1992), seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the PRIs in accordance with their proportionate representation in the community while providing that one-third of these would be for women. The purpose of this constitutional provision was to ensure participation by those groups which had historically been excluded from political representation in grassroots governance. As noted by Sunitha (2024) it allowed these groups to participate in political decision-making at the grassroot level. Nevertheless there still exists an enormous gap between formal representation and participation. Despite all constitutional guarantees casteism and patriarchy maintain their stranglehold on PRIs and turn it into a farce of decentralization and democracy. It is even more problematic for Adivasi women who are doubly discriminated against because of belonging to both the Dalit/Adivasi community and gender. There are plenty of instances of discrimination and oppression of the Adivasi women who serve as representatives in their PRIs. Thus, Sunitha mentions some incidents that occurred in the state of Madhya Pradesh when a lady Sarpanch was stripped naked, lady sarpanch was gang-raped, upa-sarpanch was

tortured and a Dalit panchayat member was beaten up . Even in Telangana an elected Adivasi woman sarpanch in Nalgonda District was deprived of the chance to raise the National Flag on the eve of Independence Day. Thus, it is clear how the intersection of Brahminical and patriarchal interests impedes the rise of female political leaders. However the difference between formal representation and active participation continues to be wide. In spite of constitutional provisions casteism and patriarchy continue their stranglehold on Panchayati Raj Institutions making it a farce of decentralization and democracy.

Electoral Quota's Promise: Insights from Maharashtra

Despite all these issues, there seems to be some indication that electoral quotas can bring about good results when implemented alongside capacity building programs. Gopika Solanki's present research project entitled 'Counting on Adivasi women leaders how electoral quotas influence ecological governance in Maharashtra India hopes to provide an understanding of the leadership of Adivasi women. The research is being conducted in association with the Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD) which supports women leaders who have been elected through gender quotas in 1,000 villages in Western India.

There is preliminary evidence indicating that combined with continuous training and institutional support quotas for representation might lead to new governance outcomes and even alter gender norms. Women sarpanches from Adivasi communities are known to carry out anti-alcoholism campaigns to improve facilities in schools and advocate for better health care. However Sunitha's field experience highlights the difficulties faced by women as educated men often trick women representatives making them sign official documents while not being familiar with their content.

Dansari Anasuya Seethakka Case Study

Dansari Anasuya Seethakka famously referred to as Seethakka provides a good case study of how a Adivasi woman can ascend from being an activist to becoming a member of the ministry. An activist who hails from Gutti Koya tribe in Telangana Seethakka is a woman of the soil, a champion for social justice, and a servant of the people. Having grown up in the village of Nellipaka she gained firsthand experience of life in the rural areas and she rose through activism and politics to become what she is today. She holds a PhD in "Tribal Rights and Livelihood" from Osmania University illustrating how academic knowledge is used to enhance political leadership alongside practical knowledge. She has been elected to the Legislative Assembly from the constituency of Mulug a ST reserved constituency thrice – 2009, 2018, and 2023.

At present, she holds the position of Minister of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development, Rural Water Supply and Women and Child Welfare in Telangana. She is a true representation of the style of leadership defined by the epistemology mentioned above, regardless of whether she is sleeping in huts during village visits or struggling for justice. she derives her strength from her people. When there was a total lockdown due to COVID-19 she walked through the jungle to distribute essentials to 400 tribes in the forest. She came to be called the Iron Lady of Telangana. Through Seethakka's example one sees that an Adivasi woman can make it to the highest ranks in politics while still being close to her community although not everyone can.

Community-Based Leadership: Forest Governance and Economic Transformation

Thengapalli Kondh Women's Forest Governance

Adivasi women display their leadership qualities through non-institutional forms of governance such as traditional and community-based governance systems. The findings from the study conducted by Mohanty & Suresh (2025) entitled "Thengapalli" which explores the rotational patrolling governance system practiced by Kondh Adivasi in Odisha give important information about women-led

environmental governance. The study investigates how the local knowledge by Kondh women can be used to inform the forest governance system decision-making process.

The findings suggest that women use the local knowledge of the state of the forest, people's behaviour, and household's needs to make decisions. Since the Kondh women take responsibility for the household food security they use the forest resources and thus gain extensive knowledge regarding the ecosystem of the forest something the male community members might not have

On the other hand, socio-cultural norms constrain the decision-making capabilities of women as well as threaten the knowledge they have. The case of Thengapalli highlights not only the possibility for women-led governance but also constraints posed on it due to patriarchal norms. According to Mohanty and Suresh, socio-cultural stratifications like caste, internal conflicts, ostracism, belief systems, among others, contribute to creating additional complexities in women-led governing structures.

Economic Independence: Example of the Utnoor Cooperative

Another area where the transformative role of Adivasi women is evident is economic independence. Bheem Bhai Tribal Women's Cooperative Society in Utnoor, Telangana, is an example of how traditional knowledge may be effectively utilized for sustainable livelihood. The cooperative produces Ipappuvvu laddus nutritious snacks prepared from flowers collected from the forests of the area with a combination of traditional knowledge and natural resources of the region.

The success of this program can be gauged through an annual turnover of Rs. 1.27 Crore. The society earns approximately Rs 3 Lakh income per month. The laddoos produced by the organization are distributed to 77 tribal residential schools of the Utnoor ITDA area in the quantity of 2,300 kilogram per month and the remaining are sold in the open market of Hyderabad. It is important to note that tribal women manage the sale of their product at specialized outlets.

Recently, the organization earned a huge appreciation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi through his 'Mann ki baat' programme for its exemplary performance in establishing women led economic institution among tribal communities. This case study highlights the fact that Adivasi women leadership does not limit itself only to political protests or entering politics but includes creating sustainable economic institutions as well.

Information Rights as Empowerment

Another emerging aspect of leadership among Adivasi women entails the use of transparency and accountability mechanisms. In particular, the RTI Act has been considered an instrument of empowerment among tribes. State Information Commissioner Rehana Begum has encouraged Adivasi women to make use of the RTI Act to seek necessary information concerning government schemes and services meant for them. Due to ignorance of government policies the allocation of the government funds may get misappropriated. With this objective training of enthusiastic tribal women on RTI would promote a sense of awareness among them which could be instrumental in addressing various concerns. Here, it is worth emphasizing that without access to information there is no possibility of participating in governance processes such as panchayats, forestry management, or developmental projects.

Challenges Faced by Adivasi Women Leaders

Structural Barriers

There are many structural barriers to be encountered by Adivasi women leaders. Lack of education is one of the common problems. All the places which I visited as part of my fieldwork lacked good educational facilities and students were required to cover considerable distance even to get admission for basic education. With poor literacy and numeracy skills women leaders will not be able to read through official documents or manage finances of the village councils.

Similarly, dependence on the male members also bars women from participating in governance. Economic dependence of women members on males limits their power to participate in government activities without getting the permission from their families.

Patriarchy and Caste

The level of discrimination against people belonging to castes in rural governance organizations cannot be understated. As per Sunitha's book 'unless caste is killed' it remains a giant and nothing much will happen. The women representatives of Dalits and Adivasis continue to be subjected to insults, intimidation, and physical assaults by the members of the dominant caste community.

The patriarchal structure operates within and outside the Adivasi community. Inside their own community the women leader faces opposition from older males who see political leadership as belonging only to men. As they try to participate in the broader political process and in politics in mainstream organizations they experience racism and sexism which downplay their expertise. The findings by Ecuadorian scholars about the tendency of Indigenous women's political participation being more symbolic than real apply to India as well.

Apathetic Bureaucrats

Even when the Adivasi women manage to successfully maneuver around the political system and assume positions of power, they come up against bureaucracy. Sunitha cites the problems arising due to administrative apathy and the fact that unpaid bills are impeding their ability to pursue an independent agenda for their locality. In fact, the bureaucratic apathy that the Adivasi women sarpanches face is systematic in nature, as evidenced by the way in which resources get diverted from their community.

Conclusion: Moving towards Substantive Transformation

This paper analyzed Adivasi women's leadership within three interrelated spheres resistance struggles, institutional politics, and community-based governance systems. It has been found from the analysis that Adivasi women have played vital roles in land rights struggles, forestry policies and governance, and self-rule struggles while suffering marginalization within all these areas. It should be noted that Adivasi women's leadership has been based on an epistemological foundation based on experience and resistance.

The constitutional measures such as the 73rd Amendment and their provisions for reservations have ensured some room for the political representation of Adivasi women. But mere representation cannot mean empowerment. Caste discrimination, patriarchal attitudes, illiteracy, economic backwardness and administrative red tape constitute formidable barriers to the empowerment of Adivasi women, which need to be tackled on an urgent basis. The following areas can be explored for future research and policy considerations based on this analysis. First, there is the need for longitudinal studies that examine the effects of representative quotas on governance as well as gender dynamics. The work that Solanki is undertaking in Maharashtra is an example of this type of research. Second, capacity building interventions need to incorporate not just technical skills but also issues related to the psychological and sociological aspects of leadership as well as techniques to cope with caste and gender discrimination.

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