

**ROLE OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN FOREST CONSERVATION & MANAGEMENT****Khushbu and \*Dr. Virender Singh**

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**Abstract**

Women provide mainstay to the family, community and ecosystem by their prudent decision and management of natural resources. Women are consumers, producers, educators and caretakers of their families. Women are playing a vital role for forest conservation and management. This paper focuses on the role of Tribal Women in the Forest Conservation and Management.

**Keywords:** Forest Conservation, Forest Management, Tribal Women, Society, Migration.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of women in general and tribal in particular is under increasing scrutiny. The tribal population is an integral part of India's social fabric and has the second largest concentration after the African Continent. The population of tribal communities scheduled in the Constitution of India, known as Scheduled Tribes was 10.42 crores as per 2011 census and accounts for 8.6 percent of total population – 5.3 crores are men and 5.2 crores are women, accounting for 8.01 percent and 8.40 percent respectively. They are scattered all over the States/UT's (except Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Puducherry and Chandigarh). Tribals have lived in near about 15 percent of Geographical areas of our country. They lived mainly forests, hills and plateau areas, which is rich in natural resources. In every society, including Tribal societies, women play critical roles; in rural areas for example, they perform the bulk of household subsistence work and carry major household responsibilities for farming, food provision, healthcare and acquisition and stewardship of natural resources. In brief, women profound and pervasive effect on the well-being of their families, communities and local ecosystems. Yet for the most part women including tribal women still do not have equal access to land, credit, technology, education, employment and political powers.

**Objective of the study:**

- To study the role of Tribal women in forest management and conservation.
- To suggest some recommendations for improvement in functioning of forest conservation and management.

**METHODOLOGY**

The present study is based on secondary data sources. The data is collected mainly from 2011 census published so far by Registrar General & census Commissioner, India, New Delhi. Various research journals and standard books pertaining to forest conservation & management and websites were also reviewed.

**Tribal women in forest conservation and management:**

Most of the tribal settlements known as forest villages were created during and after Reservation by the forest officers of the colonial period, to provide required labour for forest conservation and management. Tribal women from such settlements worked as labour in addition to their male members. Survey maps of forest then prepared by the then Survey of India organisation are by far the best in the World. Reservation lines were cut and area of each block with compartments computed and declared as Reserved Forests. Forest villages within these blocks were engaged as labourers for all works such as regeneration, tending and harvesting timber and other forest produce. Working plans were prepared either for a river catchment consisting of compact blocks with compartments of forests reserved or for any District for the blocks coming within the District. Men and women continued over almost a century and more, to maintain the compartment lines, Block and fire lines, coupes and roads etc. demarcating the well administered Reserved Forests. Outside these blocks there were villages with or without forests, where tribals lived. They ploughed their agricultural lands and also worked as labourers for maintenance of the Reserved Forests. The then forest administration treated the in-forest villagers as labour and they were provided small forest lands belonging to the State for cultivation of small millets for their own consumption. These Forest Tribals never bothered then for any permanent settlements as Revenue villages since both tribal men and women got enough money as workers in the Reserved Forests. During idle season, which was then very rare, tribal women in addition to working as forest labour, farmed on a land to the extent of which they could manage. With the end of colonial period the local leaders mostly non-tribals infused in the tribals the idea of permanent tenancy for the forest villages.

The Tribal population was limited during the earlier British administration due to absence of medical facility. Influenza took a heavy toll and plague and other diseases checked the population. It then became a problem to find labourers for forest works. Many times the works were in arrears. With modern medicines and awakening amongst tribals who were trying to join the main stream of non-tribal population around, started agitation for settled villages with pattas for each family. Tribal population exploded, so also their cattle. They found the conventional area under their cultivation too very small. There were tribals practising shifting cultivation mostly outside

Reserved Forests since legally shifting cultivation was forbidden within the Reserved Forests. The old discipline within the tribals became totally extinct and they spread over Reserved Forests after the country became independent. The so called statesmen, legislators and others showed sympathy towards these encroachments by Tribals so much so that deforestation, resulting in desertification mostly in western Madhya Pradesh, became evident. Thus contribution in so far as forest land administration is considered Tribals both men and women disassociated with the Government. They encroached and became permanent settlers and the Government regularised their forest encroachments by giving them pattas from time to time.

A stage is almost reached when no more forest land is available for further encroachments. The tribals started finding the deforested land unproductive and sterile due to wrong cultivation methods. They again tried to lay their hands for more and more distant forest lands. Presently during their off season tribal women bring firewood for themselves and also for sale in the nearby markets. The main contribution of tribal women towards forest administration is that they are primarily a permanent source of labour, particularly women in collection of Tendu leaves and other non-timber forest produce. This brings a lot of Revenue to the State Government. Looking to present state of tribal women, it is necessary to channel them towards crafts they are capable to carry out.

First and foremost need of the hour is universal education particularly of women. Family planning seems to be most desired activity. There are a large number of development works like providing drinking water, sanitary facilities, approach roads, medical facilities etc. Once these are provided and their quality of life improved they will be weaned from making further encroachments. With Gram Panchayat Raj now established, tribal women should be given their proper rights within the rules and regulations. Their income other than agriculture, should be increased by making suitable organisation for production and processing viz. collection of medicinal herbs, hides or skins of dead animals, and many more items of commercial value. Unless the Government organises free education, generation of additional income, and creative living conditions to improve their quality of life, they will continue to encroach and clear the forests. They also migrate to towns nearby to work as labourers.

The Government desires that there should be no more encroachments and no further migration to towns. For this, the above narrated developments have to be undertaken. Sooner the better. Tribal women should be given preference. They should be made to open savings accounts in the nearby Banks to deposit their small amounts so that they will stabilize and continue to stay wherever they are and migration will thus automatically stop.

Joint management of forests has come to stay and care should be taken to involve TRIBAL WOMEN.

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