

Contribution of Tribal Women towards the Preservation of Cultural Heritage: A Comparative Study of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

This comparative study delves into the invaluable contributions of tribal women towards the preservation of cultural heritage, focusing on the states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in India. By examining the multifaceted roles played by tribal women from various tribes, alongside the significant context of the Chipko Movement, the study highlights the intricate interplay between cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and gender dynamics.

Through an exploration of traditional knowledge and practices, the study underscores how tribal women act as custodians of ancestral agricultural techniques, herbal medicine, and crafts. Their pivotal roles in sustaining oral traditions, rituals, and art forms illuminate their significance in the intergenerational transfer of cultural values. The study delves into the remarkable participation of tribal women in the Chipko Movement, showcasing their leadership and resilience in advocating for forest preservation.

Analyzing the challenges faced by these women, including the impact of globalization and evolving gender roles, provides insights into their unwavering determination and adaptability. Education and awareness emerge as powerful tools in sustaining cultural practices, with tribal women actively engaging in initiatives to educate younger generations. The study unveils the profound impact of these endeavors on preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of empowerment among tribal women.

Keywords: Tribal women, traditional knowledge, Chipko movement, educational schemes.

INTRODUCTION:

Tribal Communities of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand

Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand are two states in northern India with a rich diversity of tribal communities, each with its distinct culture, traditions, and way of life. Here is an overview of some prominent tribal communities in these states:

Tharu: The Tharu community is one of the largest tribal groups in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The Tharu tribe is widely dispersed across the Terai region of the states. Agriculture is a significant part of their livelihood and they have a deep connection to the forest and natural resources. They are skilled in traditional farming methods and are known for practices such as beekeeping. ⁽⁴⁾ The Tharu community has a vibrant cultural heritage with distinctive dance forms, music, and art that celebrate their connection with nature. The Tharu women are known for their skill in creating intricate handicrafts, including weaving and pottery.

Bhotiya: Primarily residing in the hilly regions of both Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, the Bhotiya community is known for transhumance, a practice of seasonal migration with their livestock. They have a distinct culture influenced by Tibetan traditions. They have a unique blend of Tibetan and Indian cultural elements. ⁽²⁾ The Bhotiya women are known for their intricate weaving and traditional attire. They celebrate various festivals like Losar (Tibetan New Year) and Fagu Purnima with traditional dances and rituals.

Jaunsari: The Jaunsari tribe primarily inhabits the Jaunsar-Bawar region in the Dehradun district of Uttarakhand. They are skilled farmers, cultivating crops like millets, lentils, and potatoes. Their culture is rich in folk songs, dances like the "Chauphula," and traditional art forms. The Jaunsaris celebrate festivals like Holi, Diwali, and Bat Savitri with great enthusiasm. ⁽¹⁾

Buxa: The Buxa tribe, also known as "Rajis," is concentrated in the hilly areas of Uttarakhand, particularly in the Pithoragarh district. They have a unique social structure with a rich oral tradition

of folk songs, stories, and legends. The Rajis practice subsistence farming, and their agricultural practices are guided by traditional knowledge.

Rajbansis: The Rajbansis, mainly found in the Champawat district of Uttarakhand, have a rich oral tradition, including folk songs and stories that reflect their cultural heritage. They have a distinctive dialect and cultural practices. Rajbansis are skilled in arts and crafts, including traditional woodwork and bamboo craft. They celebrate festivals like Phooldeyi, Bhaitauli, and Harela with traditional songs and dances.

These are just a few examples of the tribal communities present in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Each community contributes to the cultural mosaic of the region with its languages, art, music, dances, rituals, and traditional knowledge. These communities often have a close relationship with their environment and play a vital role in the preservation of local ecosystems and biodiversity. It's important to note that these communities may face challenges related to socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and land rights, and efforts are being made to ensure their well-being and the continuity of their cultural heritage.

Traditional knowledge and practices

Traditional knowledge and practices are the collective wisdom, skills, and insights passed down through generations within a particular community or culture. These practices encompass various aspects of life, including agriculture, medicine, crafts, rituals, storytelling, and more. They are often deeply intertwined with a community's cultural, spiritual, and ecological values. Tribal women are often the custodians of traditional knowledge and practices within their communities in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. They play a vital role in transmitting cultural wisdom, preserving ancestral heritage, and contributing to the overall well-being of their tribes.

Medicinal and Herbal Knowledge

Tribal women possess extensive knowledge of local herbs, plants, and their medicinal properties. They are often the primary caregivers and healers, using traditional remedies to treat common

ailments and maintain the health of their families. The Bhotiya tribe, for instance, is known for its expertise in herbal medicine, which is deeply rooted in their Tibetan cultural influences.

Craftsmanship and Artistry

Many traditional crafts, such as weaving, pottery, beadwork, basketry and woodwork, is an integral part of tribal cultures and are passed down through generations of tribal women. These crafts hold cultural, utilitarian, and economic value. ⁽⁷⁾ The Rajbansis' skill in woodwork and bamboo craft and the Tharu women's expertise in weaving are examples of how these practices are passed down through generations, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage.

Agricultural Wisdom

Traditional farming methods, which are adapted to local climates and ecosystems, play a crucial role in tribal communities' sustenance. Practices such as mixed cropping, crop rotation, and the use of organic fertilizers reflect a deep understanding of the land and its resources. Tribal women are often responsible for traditional farming practices, such as seed saving, crop rotation, organic cultivation and sustainable agricultural practices. They hold valuable knowledge about indigenous crops, planting seasons, and soil fertility, traditional farming techniques. They are often responsible for food cultivation, seed preservation, and food processing. Tribes like the Tharu and Buxa have retained such agricultural wisdom, contributing to food security and preserving biodiversity. ⁽⁴⁾

Rituals and Festivals

Tribal rituals and festivals are infused with traditional knowledge, reflecting a deep connection to nature, ancestors, and spirituality. Women play essential roles in tribal rituals, ceremonies, and cultural events. They often hold crucial roles as singers, dancers, and keepers of ceremonial knowledge, preserving ancient practices that connect the community to spirituality and the natural world. ⁽¹⁾

Tharu Dance Rituals: The Tharu tribe performs traditional dances during festivals and ceremonies. These dances incorporate rhythmic movements and music, reflecting their connection to nature and agrarian practices. ⁽⁷⁾

Bhotiya Festivals: The Bhotiya community celebrates festivals like Losar and Fagu Purnima with elaborate rituals involving prayers, dances, and offerings. These rituals hold spiritual significance and mark important moments in their cultural calendar.

Jaunsari Rituals: The Jaunsari tribe has unique rituals like "Chhela," where they celebrate the growth of barley seeds. This ritual is accompanied by traditional songs and dances.

Oral Traditions and Storytelling

Oral traditions are a primary means of transmitting knowledge, history, and cultural values. Tribal women, often the custodians of these traditions, play a pivotal role in storytelling. They are the primary keepers of oral traditions, myths, legends, and folktales. Through storytelling and song, they pass down cultural narratives, historical accounts, and moral values to younger generations. Folktales, myths, and legends convey cultural wisdom and provide insights into the community's worldview. This is evident in the Tharu and Buxa communities' oral traditions.

Art and Craftsmanship

Tribal women in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand have made significant contributions to the rich tapestry of art and craftsmanship within their communities. Their skills, creativity, and cultural expressions are manifested in various forms of traditional art and craft, reflecting their deep connection to nature, history, and identity.

Weaving and Textiles

Tribal women are often skilled weavers, creating intricate textiles using traditional techniques. They use locally sourced materials to produce fabrics, garments, and decorative items adorned with symbolic patterns and motifs. The Tharu women, for example, are adept at weaving vibrant

textiles with distinct patterns that hold cultural significance. The Bhotiya tribe's weaving tradition, influenced by Tibetan styles, produces distinctive garments and accessories.

Pottery and Ceramics

Pottery is another prominent craft among tribal communities. Women shape and decorate clay vessels using traditional methods, incorporating regional styles and symbols. The Rajbansis, for instance, are skilled potters, creating both utilitarian and decorative ceramics. These pottery traditions often incorporate symbolic motifs and designs that reflect the tribe's cultural heritage. ⁽⁷⁾

Basketry and Woodwork

Basketry and woodwork are vital crafts that have practical and artistic applications. Tribal women use locally available materials such as grasses, reeds, bamboo, and fibers from plants to create a wide variety of baskets, mats, containers, and other woven items. They employ intricate weaving techniques, often using a combination of plaiting, coiling, twining, and knotting to achieve different patterns and structures. The Buxa tribe's craftsmanship is evident in their basketry, creating durable containers for various purposes. Similarly, the Rajbansis' woodwork showcases intricate carvings and functional items, reflecting their connection to the natural environment. ⁽⁷⁾

Traditional Paintings and Art

Traditional paintings and art are significant visual expressions of cultural narratives. The tribes often create murals, wall paintings, and other forms of visual art that depict myths, stories, and daily life. Tribal women use a variety of techniques for painting and embellishment, including natural dyes, pigments, and decorative elements such as beads, shells, and feathers. Through painting and embellishment, tribal women depict myths, legends, and historical events that are central to their cultural identity. These visual narratives serve as a means of passing down stories to future generations. They often use painting and embellishment to enhance traditional clothing, creating unique and vibrant designs that reflect their identity and celebrate cultural heritage. ⁽⁷⁾

Embroidery and Appliqué

Embroidery and appliqué are intricate and culturally significant forms of artistic expression practiced by tribal women in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. These crafts involve intricate needlework, decorative stitching, and the application of fabric pieces to create vibrant and visually appealing designs. Tribal women use a range of embroidery stitches, including satin stitch, chain stitch, and running stitch, to create intricate patterns and designs on textiles. These items are worn during special occasions, rituals, and ceremonies, symbolizing cultural pride and identity. ⁽⁷⁾

Chipko Movement- Environmental Conservation

Tribal women played a pivotal and transformative role in the Chipko Movement, an iconic environmental conservation movement that originated in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, India, in the 1970s. ⁽²⁸⁾ The movement was a powerful demonstration of grassroots activism, with tribal women at the forefront, advocating for the protection of forests and natural resources from commercial exploitation. The term "Chipko" translates to "hug" or "embrace" in Hindi, symbolizing the act of women physically hugging trees to prevent their felling.

Leadership and Participation

Tribal women, often from marginalized communities, were the driving force of the movement. They brought to the forefront their traditional knowledge and deep connection to the forests and land. Women from villages like Mandal, Reni, and Gopeshwar actively participated in the movement, often leading protests, organizing gatherings, and voicing their concerns. ⁽²⁵⁾

Symbolic Act of Hugging Trees

The movement gained international attention when tribal women, under the leadership of figures like Gaura Devi, Suraksha Devi, and Sudesha Devi, hugged trees to prevent loggers from cutting them down. This act of embracing trees was not only a symbolic gesture but also a powerful protest that highlighted the integral link between the environment, livelihoods, and cultural identity. ⁽²⁵⁾

Defending Livelihoods and Communities

Tribal women recognized that their survival and sustenance were intricately tied to the forests. They understood the importance of maintaining a balance between environmental conservation and their traditional way of life. The Chipko Movement was a response to the government's decision to auction off forest land to commercial loggers, which threatened the communities' access to resources like firewood, fodder, and water. ⁽²⁵⁾

Socio-Economic Empowerment

The movement empowered tribal women by giving them a platform to assert their rights, challenge oppressive policies, and demand a say in decision-making processes. Women's active participation in protests and demonstrations led to increased recognition of their role in the community and a shift in traditional gender norms. ⁽²⁵⁾

Challenges

Tribal women in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand face a myriad of challenges that are rooted in social, economic, and cultural factors. These challenges not only hinder their personal growth and development but also impact the overall well-being of their communities. Despite these challenges, these women demonstrate remarkable resilience by finding ways to navigate adversity, preserve their cultural heritage, and empower themselves.

Lack of Decision-Making Power

Tribal women often have limited participation in decision-making processes at both household and community levels. Traditional gender norms relegate them to subordinate roles, resulting in their exclusion from matters that affect their lives and well-being. This lack of agency can perpetuate cycles of marginalization and inhibit their ability to contribute to community development and social change. ⁽²²⁾

Limited Access to Education and Infrastructure

Tribal areas often lack proper educational facilities, making it difficult for tribal girls to access quality education. This contributes to low literacy rates and limited opportunities for skill development. Inadequate infrastructure such as schools, transportation, and basic amenities further exacerbate the challenges of accessing education and participating in economic activities. ⁽²²⁾

Lack of Family Support for Working Women

Tribal women who seek employment outside their homes may face resistance from their families due to traditional gender roles and expectations. Balancing work responsibilities with domestic duties becomes particularly challenging, limiting their ability to access economic opportunities and achieve financial independence. ⁽²²⁾

Poor Medical Facilities

Tribal communities often have limited access to healthcare services, resulting in inadequate maternal and child healthcare. High maternal mortality rates and lack of proper healthcare facilities can endanger the lives of tribal women and their children. Cultural barriers and inadequate awareness about healthcare worsen the problem. ⁽²²⁾

Unemployment and Underemployment

A lack of formal employment opportunities in tribal areas leaves many women unemployed or engaged in low-paying and precarious jobs. This perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits their economic empowerment. Barriers such as lack of skills, access to credit, and market opportunities contribute to their underemployment. ⁽²²⁾

Resilience and solutions

The Indian government has implemented various schemes and programs aimed at uplifting the situation of tribal women in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, addressing their socio-economic challenges and promoting their overall well-being. These schemes encompass a range of areas, including education, healthcare, livelihoods, empowerment, and social development.

Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana

This scheme aims to promote livelihood generation and value addition in tribal areas by establishing Van Dhan Kendras (forest-based livelihood groups). Tribal women are encouraged to form self-help groups (SHGs) to gather, process, and market forest produce, thereby enhancing their income and economic empowerment.

Ujjwala Yojana

The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana provides free LPG connections to below-poverty-line households, a move that significantly benefits tribal women who often face indoor air pollution due to traditional cooking methods.

Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)

This maternity benefit program provides financial assistance and support to pregnant and lactating women, including tribal women, for better maternal and child health.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme

This scheme aims to address the declining child sex ratio and empower the girl child through education. It encourages enrollment, retention, and empowerment of tribal girls in schools.

Kanya Dhan Yojana (Financial Assistance for Marriage of Girls)

"Kanya Dhan Yojana" is a term used in different states to refer to schemes that provide financial assistance or incentives to support the marriage of girls from economically weaker families. These schemes aim to alleviate the financial burden on families and encourage the education and well-being of girls by providing funds for marriage-related expenses. ⁽²²⁾

Ajeevika Mission (National Rural Livelihood Mission)

The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), also known as Ajeevika, is a centrally sponsored scheme launched by the Government of India to alleviate rural poverty and promote sustainable

livelihoods. Ajeevika aims to organize rural poor women into self-help groups (SHGs) and provide them with training, capacity-building, and financial support to enhance their income-generating activities.⁽²²⁾

Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

SHGs are community-based organizations that bring together a small group of individuals, often women, to collectively save money, access credit, and engage in income-generating activities. SHGs empower women by building their financial literacy, leadership skills, and decision-making abilities, while also enabling them to access resources and social support.⁽²²⁾

Educational Initiatives

There are several educational schemes and programs implemented by the government of India to promote education and skill development among various segments of the population, including tribal women in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. These initiatives aim to bridge the educational gap, enhance access to quality education, and empower individuals to lead better lives.

Post-Matric Scholarship for ST Students

The Post-Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Tribe (ST) Students is a government initiative launched in 1944 to provide financial support to ST students pursuing higher education after completing their matriculation (10th grade). The primary objective of the scheme is to encourage ST students to pursue higher education by offering financial support for their educational expenses beyond the matriculation level.⁽³⁰⁾

Ashram schools in tribal sub-plan areas

Ashram schools are an important component of educational initiatives in tribal sub-plan areas in India. Ashram schools are set up as residential schools to provide education and accommodation to tribal children, especially those from remote and marginalized communities. The primary focus

is on enhancing access to education for tribal children who might otherwise face geographical, economic, or social barriers to attending school. ⁽³⁰⁾

National Overseas Scholarship Scheme

National Overseas Scholarship (NOS) Scheme is a prominent initiative introduced by the Government of India to provide financial support to deserving and meritorious students from marginalized sections of society, including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Minority communities. The scheme's primary objective is to enable these students to pursue higher education, research, and specialized training courses abroad. The scholarship enables selected students to pursue postgraduate, doctoral, and post-doctoral studies abroad in renowned universities and institutions to enhance their academic and research capabilities. ⁽³⁰⁾

Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship

The Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF) is a government-sponsored scholarship program, launched in the year 2005-2006 . This scheme aimed at providing financial support to students from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities who wish to pursue higher education at the M.Phil. and Ph.D. levels. The fellowship is named after former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and is administered by the University Grants Commission (UGC). ⁽³⁰⁾

Vocational Training Centers in Tribal Area

Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) was initiated in 1992-93. VTCs in tribal areas are essential institutions that offer skill development and vocational training programs to empower tribal individuals, particularly youth and women, with marketable skills. These centers aim to enhance employability, income generation, and entrepreneurship among tribal communities. VTCs play a crucial role in bridging the gap between education and employment, thereby contributing to the socio-economic development of tribal regions. ⁽³⁰⁾

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a mixed-methods approach to gather and analyze data. Data are collected mainly from available data, reports, surveys, and academic literature related to tribal communities of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Secondary data are collected from various newspapers articles, research articles, research journals, e-journals, Government websites, Ministry of Education, health and family welfare department, etc.

CONCLUSION

In the intricate tapestry of tribal communities in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the contributions of tribal women towards the preservation of cultural heritage are both profound and multifaceted. Through their active participation in various domains, from traditional knowledge and practices to art, craftsmanship, and environmental conservation, tribal women have emerged as key agents of cultural continuity, empowerment, and resilience. In the realm of environmental conservation, tribal women's involvement in the Chipko Movement stands as a testament to their commitment to safeguarding natural resources and their cultural landscapes.

However, challenges persist. Tribal women continue to face barriers, ranging from limited access to education and healthcare to gender-based discrimination. Yet, these challenges are met with resilience. Efforts are underway to revive and promote traditional knowledge, provide education and awareness, and ensure the economic empowerment of tribal women.

In conclusion, the contributions of tribal women in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand are a testament to their unwavering commitment to cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and community well-being. The empowerment of tribal women is not just a step towards gender equality; it is an investment in the preservation of cultural diversity and the sustainable future of these regions.

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