The Empowered Women in Kandha Community: The Highest Figured Tribe in Odisha

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Abstract: The hill people Kandha tribe are considered marginalized and backward. They are primitive in their outlook and way of life. Majority of them lack formal education and their economy is forest oriented. They are below the subsistence level. Modernity or modernization has little effect on them; it has not penetrated their unique life style, though some changes are noticed at present. Interestingly, however, on one account, it is found to be ahead of modern society-it exhibits a kind of relative equality between sexes. Nobody has fought for this; no activist has ever launched a movement for this. It may not be a consciously drawn tradition but a fact that despite the existence of a system of division of labour and a system of stratification, oppression of women does not take place by the so-called stronger male members. Therefore researching the status and social role of tribal women in their community vis-à-vis feminist theories is an interesting area of enquiry.

Keywords: Kandha, Koraput, Women, Status, Society, Empowerment.

The focus of this research is on tracing the status of women in a traditional tribal society and particularly in Kandha communities in the light of feminist theories discussed earlier. Koraput, being one of the most tribal dominated districts in Odisha (India) nestles all 62 tribes found in the province. This study is thus worth undertaking.

The position of women in Kandha society can be measured in terms of their opportunities in the social institutions, power of decision making, behaviour of the men towards them and the ideology of religious beliefs prevailing in their society. The position Kandha women are also directly related to their role as a mother and wife in so far as child rearing and sexual life is concerned. Particularly in social life the Kandha women enjoy a high position. They have freedom to select their mates, pre-marital sexual relation, seeking of divorce and so on. Generally the Kandha women are neither ill-treated nor suppressed to enjoy a subservient position. In Kandha community there is no absolute dominance of men; women have a high and honoured place in family as well as in society. The Kandhas believe that growth of the family largely depends on women, so that the Kandha women do not have the feeling that they are inferior to men. In Kandha society the women do not face evils like adultery, rape, beating, bride burning etc., neither they feel insecure in their in-laws house. The Kandha women share the duties and responsibilities of maintaining the daily life of their families on equal terms with the men. Monogamy is the common practice among the Kandha but polygamy is also not unknown. A man is free to take two wives when he feels like doing so. The duties and responsibilities of each member of the family is clearly defined and demarcated. Certain activities, like fetching of firewood and water, keeping the house clean, cooking, and collecting certain roots and tubers are entrusted to women. Men plough the field, cut bamboo and timber and go for hunting etc. The succession and inheritance of property are always made in the male line. If a man dies without a son the property is inherited by his brother. In spite of the fact that Kandhas are patriarchal, the status women are not low. She is considered as the dominant partner. Household management with money or paddy is the responsibility of women. A man cannot hold any post in the traditional Panchayat, such as Naik or Chalan without the consent of his wife. Children are looked after with extreme care and affection by the parents, and when the children grow up they lend helping hands to their parents.

Women in Kandha community are considered as important assets because of their contribution both inside and outside the household and women are on equal footing with the men in constructing a house to cultivation. Women do every type of work for household ranging from fetching water from the distant streams, cooking, serving food to each member of the family to cultivating, harvesting and marketing of agricultural products in the market. Due to this the bride price is paid to her parents when she gets married. Typically in Kandha society of Koraput district it has been observed that there is practically no such distinction as men’s work and women’s work.
The conceptual frame work to analyse the women’s status comprise the seven roles women play in life and work-parental, conjugal, domestic, kin, occupational, community as an individual. In Kandha society girls are not considered as burden because of their economic value. Kandha girls participate in all types of work at home and agricultural activities along with their mothers. The girls are trained to be better housewives and motherhood, together with behavioural pattern that are consistent with obedience, being lady like and as expected passive.

Kandha women in Koraput district contribute positively to the local economy and participate along with men in subsistence activities. They do all agricultural works with men except ploughing. They share major responsibilities in the family life. Kandha women are very brave, strong and courageous in the handling of environmental imperatives as can be demonstrated in village peripheral forest and hilly areas. Contribution of Kandha women both in economic and non-economic activities is equally important and remarkable in Kandha society in Koraput district. The role of Kandha women from childhood, to fairs and festivals is an important part of village life.

Kandha women are carriers of traditional information in absence of written records and scripts. They play very crucial and preservation and dissemination of such knowledge. They are not only competent food producers and house makers but are also the transmitters of rich local oral traditions, which exhibit the high status of women contributed by Kandha society to them. Kandha women enjoy lot of freedom before and after marriage. The wife may divorce her husband on the ground of cruelty, impotency, incompatibility, poverty or negligence. A Kandha woman may just walkout of her husband’s house with/without intimation to her husband. Though she enjoys full liberty to choose her life partner and also to break marital bond and marry with another person, for the Kandha men it is not possible to cause harm to the modesty of a married women. Thus as a result of which the women enjoy an almost equal status with men in Kandha society. She has great freedom of movement like other members of family.

The Kandha women are very fond of cloth and ornaments. Generally the Kandha women wear two pieces of clothing, one around the waist up to the knees and other for the upper portion of the body; they also wear saris (mostly the Desia Kandha). In ornament Kandha women prefer hair-pins, ear-rings, nose-rings and neck laces to beautify themselves. In Kandha family both men and women dine together and liquor is not socially prohibited and is taken irrespective of age and sex. Due to love for children in Kandha family, when a Kandha is barren her husband may marry a second wife or adopt a child. The Kandha women generally do their duties as usual up to the time of delivery. When she feels pain she is attended by an experienced Kandha midwife. She rubs the pregnant women’s abdomen with caster-oil. The umbilical cord is cut by the mother with the help of a sharp edged arrow. The mother warms her hand on fire and applies to the body of the child for a week.

Kandha society generally patriarchal in nature, their various types of role able to get an important position and they enjoy very honourable status as the source of vital energy for interaction of all social activities. In Kandha family a daughter is generally brought up by the parents with love and affection and is protected by them from all troubles and sufferings from time to time. She also helps her mother in all household works as well as in outside activities. After marriage a girl plays the most important role in her family as wife that is why in Kandha society a house without a wife is useless. As wife a Kandha woman helps her husband in forest as well as in agricultural field including all household activities. As a mother a Kandha woman is very fond of love and affection towards all her children and always tries to take good care of them. As a mother-in-law, she teaches her family traditions, customs and norms to the daughter-in-law and look after her at the time of childbirth. When a Kandha girl enters into married life, she becomes conscious of her own new assignments and responsibilities. Her way of behave and conduct is naturally regulated by this new consciousness.

The Kandha women are expert in food gathering and collection of different roots, herbs, flowers etc. In addition to their household duties, women also work very actively in fields and in the agricultural process. Weekly markets and biweekly markets in Koraput district are generally crowded by Kandha women, where they are sellers as well as buyers. Purchasing of various articles for household needs and selling of surplus materials is done by women in Koraput district.

In Kandha society though the women enjoys equal right with the men in several spheres of life, they are not given equal right in religious activities. Kandha women are not allowed to be present at sacrifices except when they are offered in the house to the ancestors and family gods. A lot of prohibitions are to be observed by the women, violation of which is a social offence. Even they are not allowed to touch the sacrificial food and participate in some community level religious activities. But as a whole the status of women in Kandha society at family and social level has been found to be fairly high in the traditional setup. Traditionally, in Kandha society, a family is an economic unit with each family member contributing according to his or her capacity and receiving consequent or due recognition. If a woman is capable of contributing or earning more it is welcomed and the ego of a husband is not hurt. Though Kandha women take equal responsibilities with men but the tribal customary laws deny them equal rights to property. As a result of which Kandha women’s access to land is restrained by the taboo which forbids them the use of plough. Women also seldom have any role in the allocation and management of common property rights. As the management of community resources is carried
out by the village council, women’s marginal position in public affairs adversely affects their involvement in these matters. The custom bride-price which was originally intended to compensate the girl’s family for the loss of and economically active member provided men with the justification to treat the wife as a disposal commodity. Bride-price also encourages polygamous system because wealthy men can take on a number of wives simply by paying an agreed sum to the girl’s parents.

**Status of Kandha Women in Koraput**

The status of women can be divided into two broad domains: (1) the domestic domain, and (2) the public domain. The former includes activities performed within the localised family unit, whereas the latter includes political and economic activities.

The status of women in the Kandha communities is comparatively better than that of the women in general society apparently so.

The status of a person quite often depends on the system of authority he/she enjoys in the community. When the authority is held through the male line, it is called ‘patriarchy’ and when it is held through the female line; it is called ‘matriarchy’.

The position of a woman to a large extent depends on the kind of family one is placed in. In a joint family system the eldest woman usually enjoys a prerogative in the decision-making process. The type of family differs to a large extent with the type of marriage prevalent in the community. The nuclear family formed through monogamy is the most common type of family prevalent in the Kandha communities. The extended type of family is also quite a common norm wherein the daughters leave the natal home after marriage to distant places. The older sons too leave the parents after marriage to set up new homes in the near vicinity. It is common to find the youngest son residing with the parents even after marriage. Some of the tribes in India enter into polygamy. When one man marries more than one wife, Since women in the Kandha communities toil hard, they are considered to be assets. Not surprisingly, the practice of bride price during marriages is quite common among them. This is in sharp contrast to the general caste-Hindu population. Sometimes when the prospective groom is not in a position to pay the bride price, he has to render physical labour and service at the wife’s house.

The status of the Kandha women usually depends on the economic roles they play. The Kandha in the past were usually forest dwellers and their livelihood to a great extent depended on the food-gathering economy. More than the men, the women walked long distances to fetch wood and fodder. Besides, they also collected fruits, roots and tubers, laces, gums and leaves for self-consumption and sale. The men also complemented them by collecting timber and logs.

It may be stated once again that though the women in the tribal society in India enjoy a greater freedom to mix and move around, their social organisations and institutions are still discriminatory particularly with regard to the customary laws that guide the ownership of property and inheritance or also with regard to exercising authority both in the domestic and public spheres.

Therefore, we talk about issues like women’s liberation/emancipation and women empowerment. Feminist movements, the world over, are reflective of such a reaction against the dichotomy between sexes inherent in modern society. However, the status of women in the Kandha communities of Koraput stands in contrast with the mainstream experience. The society there is a happy blend of both patriarchy and matriarchy leaving none as the oppressor or oppressed. It is a society that exhibits a kind of relative equality between males and females that deserves to be lauded.

However, taking into consideration the responses of 300 Kandha women (as a primary source) and the literature available on them (as secondary source) the tribes studied are found to have internalized and followed some feminist principles and at the same time some deviations have also been found. The following are the findings and observations:

The Kandha tribe encourages widow remarriage. A widow can remarry the younger brother of her deceased husband—a practice called levitation. The entire tribal society, especially the Kandha tribe, regards and respects women as clever and intelligent and thus they consider them as decision makers. Women therefore interfere when they find their partners doing anything wrong.

Among Kandha communities of Koraput, no discrimination is known to be made on the grounds of sex. They accept and welcome the birth of both a male and female child equally. No preference is attached to either of the sexes, as nontribal do in India. This is reflected in the sex ratio exhibited in the census data. According to the 2001 census, out of 8,145,081, i.e., total number of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in Koraput, female population (4,078,298) outnumbers the male population (4,066,783). In Koraput, therefore, the sex ratio (female per 100 males) in the age group of 0-6 too outnumbers the state statistics. While it is 953 in case of Orissa, it is 983 in case of Koraput (Saran, 2001). This shows the attitude of Kandha tribe toward the female child.

In Kandha communities, both male and female members are economically self-dependent. Both of them go for work; both of them earn for their family. Therefore, male members’ domination over women folk for their dependence is not found as both enjoy approximate economic equality here.
Both males and females dance together during their community festivals. Dhemsa is the most popular form of dance among Kandha tribe where both males and females’ dance together keeping hand on each other while singing in a chorus. Even if today female members are given some political offices through the Panchayati Raj Act, it does not make any difference in the status and position of the women. They prefer to work and live in cooperation with their male members. Gradually Kandha women are increasingly enrolled as members of the SHGs. This has been a means to enhance the economic condition of tribal women. However, the benefits and responsibilities of the SHGs are also regarded as a partnership between males and females in tribal community. This has been found while interacting with them during interview.

With the exception of the Kandha tribe in case of other tribes it is found that both sexes can propose to marry the candidate/ partner of his or her choice. The same attitude is taken in case of divorce. Although marriages are arranged mostly by negotiation, proposals could be entertained directly from the candidates too.

In most of the Kandha villages, marriage by negotiation is the common practice; however, there is no social discouragement if one chooses one’s life partner.

With regard to their attitude toward divorce, it has been found that both the Kandha male and female can go for it on equal terms. Their society is tolerant enough to permit this practice to be followed by either of the sexes. A Kandha woman does not have the fear of social taboos relating to divorce.

The Kandha woman enjoys the status equal to their male counter parts. The birth of both sexes brings equal happiness in the family. The women of the Kandha are the custodian of culture and tradition and transmitter of the culture from one generation to the next. They are the goddess of the house. The Kandha women are laborious. They do not care for their health and remain busy in cooking food, serving food, caring children and aged and working in the field and the forest. They perform household chores and provide sound management in the family. They know well how to store food materials and how to meet family expenditure.

They are respected in the society. As a daughter their value is not less than son. The birth of both sexes brings equal joy in the family. As a wife, they are the assistant and helper to the husband. As mother, they are breast feeder and protector to the children. Their role as mother is very pious and affectionate. They are the first teacher and play significant role in the socialisation of children. They not only rear and care the children, but also inculcate good habit, social virtues and discipline among the children.

They are the first leaders in the family. They are of more industrious nature than their male counter parts. They are the doctors for the health of the family members. They have knowledge about food medicine and serve to the family members on the occasion of illness. They are the manager of the family expenditure; work hard to maintain the family.

But being woman, they have to observe a number of taboos during menstruation, pregnancy; delivery, death; ceremonial occasions and festive occasions. They are also tabooed in some kind economic activities like ploughing, roof making and climbing on trees for collection of forest produce. Barrenness is not taken good and having only daughters is also not taken good because family and lineage are patriarchal. It brings problem related to transmission of family name, rank, office inheritance, succession etc.

They do not participate in traditional village and inter village Panchayat. But they play vital role in decision making in the family. They advise their husband’s in house hold level decision. They communicate their views in the village Panchayat through their husbands in directly. They also do not take part in sacrificial worship. But observe, sing and dance on the occasion festivals and religion. The Kandha women play significant role in dance and singing on festive and ceremonial occasions. They transmit the art of singing and dancing to the children. They do not enjoy inheritance right, but run the house hold expenditure. The Kandha women are not only house wife but also labour. After performing household chores, they work either in own field or go to earn wages. They struggle hard to maintain their family. The Kandha women work more hours than their male counter parts, but they get fewer wage than them. This in inequality in wage payment is based on sex. They are exploited by the Money lenders, contractors and land lords of the area. To raise the family income, they join the hands of males and go to work as Casual labour. They remain hungry but do not like to see their children hungry. In many cases, they have to feed their drunkard husbands.

The Kandha women work hard to earn wages and run family. They also go to market for selling and buying things. They also avail credit facilities in the local Haat. Now-a-day, they participate in democratic process by costing their votes in different elections.

A Kandha woman has her passion and emotion, love and jealousy, possessiveness and devotion to the husband and children. The Kandha community has accorded to her an elevated position and granted a good freedom. Although men can only inherit ancestral property, women have greater liberty more mobility and enviable role in household decision making process. A woman can choose her husband and can change him at her will. She can go to forest alone, and go to market alone. She plays major role in the management of the household.

Currently, in the changing canvas, the role performance of the Kandha women is worth noting, besides the traditional roles, the emerging roles have resulted in making them more vibrant, dynamic and outward - looking.
References