

Summary

Metaphors of Gender in the Social Organisation of the Khonds in Andhra Pradesh

Summary:

This research attempted to investigate the many interpretations of indigenism and tribe in India and the gender relations in these communities from a critical feminist lens under the framework of:

- i. What is indigenism in an Adivasi context and whether there are gendered spaces of negotiation that constitute egalitarianism and adivasi feminisms.
- ii. Whether nature as a pivot of engagement and knowledge in the production and reproduction discourse influences gender relations and egalitarian spaces within Adivasi society.
- iii. How and what forms of engagement with the dominant state have brought changes in adivasi gender relations.
- iv. What are the indigenous women's demands and voices on indigenous feminisms and indigenism in these transitions into post modern and neo-liberal contexts of development discourse and their linkages to Adivasi women's demands and perspectives.

The research studied the daily lives of Adivasi men and women in their roles over production, reproduction and social relations to understand what customary opportunities provide for egalitarian dialogues and whether gender hierarchies and discrimination exist in overt or covert social structures.

Research Methodology

The research is based on an ethnographic study of an Adivasi community called the Khonds in Andhra Pradesh, India, who are administratively termed as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG). The research studied the social relationships and roles, the economic and political life of production, reproduction and survival, customary resource sharing and property ownership, gender roles in spirituality, culture and religion of the Khonds, the politics and

interventions of the dominant state through a study of the state programmes and interventions.

Testimonial or experimental ethnographic methods were used with the tools of participant observation, interviews, documentation of folk-lore, songs, rituals and social events. Secondary data included documents from government archives and ministries, and from the several non-academic documents of indigenous peoples' networks and political platforms that provide the insider perspectives to indigenism and indigenous feminisms.

Research Sites

The research was conducted over a period of three years in primarily ten Khond villages spread across three mandals of Paderu, Dumbriguda and Hukumpeta in Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, India.

Chapterisation:

The thesis is presented in six chapters in the following order:

Chapter I gives an introduction to the research topic, background of transnational and global discourse on indigenous feminisms, research questions, methodology and limitations of the research.

Chapter II sets the broad theoretical framework of the research and contextualizes indigenous feminisms. It provides a global perspective and definitions of indigenous, indigenism, indigenous identity vis-à-vis the customary and the dominant/settler state politics. It gives the background of the emergence of native feminisms and self-assertion identities.

Chapter III starts with the definitions of indigenism and Adivasi within the context of India, traces the politics of Adivasi identity, the historical, sociological and anthropological references to Adivasi women and gender constructs from the colonial and post-independent state.

Chapter IV gives a detailed understanding of Khonds-their political history, women's engagement with nature connected to production and reproduction and to the changing politics of the state that have influenced gender relations. The chapter gives a narrative analysis of the spaces and position of women within the customary institutions and with the dominant state of India that have undergone several dynamics of dialogue, conflict, co-optation and challenges.

Chapter V tries to understand the unique spiritual institution of the Peijenis (women high priests) in the well-being and culture of the Khonds that presents the different locations of women's authority, knowledge and status of the women themselves and of their tribe in its cosmovisions of life and the other world.

Chapter VI draws from the theoretical framework and the lived experiences of the Khond tribe and its women, an analysis of the gender relations within a tribe and the dynamic changes of assimilation, resistance, co-optation and identity that influence the position, authority, freedom and location of Adivasi women.

Main Findings:

Knowledge linked to nature and engagement with the land and forests where their critical role in foraging, farming, food collection and providing incomes to their families constitutes the largest space for internal negotiation and assertion that locate them in an almost equal status within the family and the community.

Women's resourceful knowledge in negotiating with the forest for tubers and other wild food formed the basis of their superior status and authority within the socio-economic transactions of the tribe. Transitions from being a hunter-gatherer tribe to a farming community reduced men's role in bringing home food from hunting whereas women continued to be the primary actors in engaging with the forest.

Social customs reflecting spaces of freedom and mobility are, for example, payment of bride price, choices of marriage and sexual partners, rights of widows to remarry, lack of

stigma against women consuming alcohol or other substances, women's informal agencies of influencing political and social decisions of the community and particularly, the spiritual authority and spaces of uninhibited celebration.

The rights of financial management of Khond women visibly distinguishes them from women of the plains and even of other local tribes. Their pragmatic wisdom in the management of incomes and markets where Khond men are historically notorious for their inability to manage these spaces prudently, places women with an authority to not only perform these functions but also to decide over these functions and resources. The lack of inheritance and ownership rights to properties does not always disempower women to the extent of abuse and patriarchal violence. A consultative role in all production activities of the tribe due to this indispensability and knowledge over production and incomes is visible. Further, the tribe's shift to slash and burn cultivation as the primary economic activity enhanced women's role both in forestry and farming and in all production roles.

Women occupied a special space in the spiritual authority of the tribe. The female priests, Pejjenis, whose role of interface between earthly beings, the gods and ancestors locates them in a superior position in Khond society. Spirituality has been a binary construction between the male and female gods, yet appears to have emerged more as competitive power struggles than being complementary.

Yet egalitarianism among the Khonds has several conditions. Even where production is primarily dependent on women, their sexuality forms the basis of customary jurisprudence in resource ownership. Women's sexual mobility is accepted but with a deep suspicion, because of which the Khonds restrict women's rights to land and property keeping ownership strictly patrilineal and patrilocal.

Women are restricted in the community's political and judicial spaces where women's participation in the public domain is informal and covert where male behaviour and male decisions are influenced by the social agency of the women rather than the political.

Khond social structures display spaces of complementarity and yet binary role biases. Equality in ecological knowledge, skills and the homogeneity of small groups where political structures are maintained through cultural and informal social agencies allows Khond society to practice both complementarity and patriarchy that support a strong women's agency.

However, these choices and counter balances are affected by external agencies like the state that not only changes the geographical landscape of the Khonds but also their gendered knowledge, skills and social relations imposing external patriarchies and the state politics of dispossession. On the other hand, the dominant state bringing concepts of gender equality in highly corrupted forms that does not disturb the customary patriarchal restrictions on women have brought little visible relief to Adivasi women while alienating them from their spaces of traditional authority and resource rights.

The state has intruded into every arena of Khond life-their food, housing, land, forests, cultures and their spaces of imagination. It has tried to replace nature by providing alternatives to nature under the guise of conserving forests and bringing development. The Khonds' capacity for patience, tolerance and humour as well as the consciousness of the limitations of the state, presents a shift towards a daily negotiation with the state as a realignment of the ideology of survival and that of indigenism.

It is not always that coping strategies of women demonstrate guardianship towards nature –it reflects more their contextual challenges and priorities than their dilution of knowledge or reverence for nature. The dilution of nature-human symbiosis by the state induced development concepts in the daily life of the Khonds are increasingly reducing women to inferior positions within decision making structures internally.

While women seem passive in their acceptance of state and market induced changes, their internal rearrangements with crops and production activities provide glimpses into their coping strategies in balancing the politics of the state with their daily needs and challenges

especially because they see benefits in not rejecting the state while being conscious of their inability to negotiate with it.

Yet there are some opportunities for gender dialogues from the legal entitlements provided to women by the dominant state. These opportunities do not yet challenge customary leadership as state entitlements are more notional than real as customary laws overshadow constitutional rights to women.