

# CONTRIBUTION OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN THE FIELDS OF EDUCATION AND LITERATURE

**Trisha Ramesh Nanda**

Masters of Arts of History (Part 1)  
K. J. Somaiya College of Arts and Commerce

## Abstract

India is home to many native populations. The Tribal communities of India are an integral part of Indian Society, which cannot be excluded. These people live in the remotest parts of India and the various tribes found in India are Bhil, Naga, Santhal, Gonds, etc. Despite having limited facilities and amenities, their contribution has been immense in various fields. However, people have created a stereotype in their minds about how can tribal people contribute while being illiterate. And the women of the tribal community, as per our thinking, are just limited to the four walls of the house. This research paper is a piece of evidence for the stereotype created by us that despite having limited facilities, the women of tribal communities are brave and hardworking. These women have become a beacon light and are serving as role models for the privileged and all the women of Indian society. In this patriarchal society, women are at par with men. Several women who have contributed to the field of Education and Literature and are unknown to others are Tulsi Munda, Ruby Hembrom, Reva ben Tadvi, etc.

**Keywords:** Tribal women, Education, Literature

## OBJECTIVE

- To learn about the tribal community and tribal women.
- To learn about some of the tribal women who are contributing to the fields of education and literature.

## INTRODUCTION

Unity in Diversity is a spectacular feature of India. India is the first largest country in terms of population. It is rich with diverse cultures and communities. One such community amongst them, which cannot be excluded is the Tribal Community. This community is the oldest in India. As per the 2011 Census, India has the world's second-largest tribal population, with about 8.9% of the country's total population. These tribal people, known as Adivasis, reside in the interior parts of the country and rely on hunting, agriculture, fishing, and other natural resources, etc for living. Some of the significant tribal groups of India are Khasis, Santhals, Gonds, Nagas, Bhils, etc. These tribes have their own culture, traditions, languages, and way of living life. During colonialism, they were known as Lower Castes. India has 705 ethnic groups that are recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the Constitution. India's Constitution has provisions to protect tribal culture and develop Scheduled Tribes. These provisions include:

1. Conserving language, script, and other cultural elements.
2. Ensuring educational interests.

W. J. Perry defines tribes as 'a group speaking a common dialect and inhabiting a common territory.'

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay defines a tribe as 'a social group usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity, and unifying social organization.'

Vidyarthi and Rai (1985) in their book "the tribal culture of India" mentioned that the tribes can be described by their language, race, level of integration with rural folk to which they are connected, their economy, their cultural pattern, and their level of education.

The role of these tribal communities is pivotal in the development and progress of India. Several tribal women who have contributed and are contributing immensely in the fields of education and literature are highlighted in this paper.

**Tribal Women:** नास्यं तुराष्ट्रम् श्रवः

(Women are the future of the nation.)

Men and women both form a significant part of the Indian society. The women in the tribal community are about half of the tribal population. As they reside in the interior parts, they are not in contact with the civilized people of India. However, this ultimately denies them the required, and upgraded amenities. The tribal people live in close contact with nature. For instance, Gaura Devi is remembered as the 'Mother of the Chipko Movement.'

**Current Scenario:**

Nowadays, tribal women have gained greater freedom and self-expression, owing to the sheer hard work done by them. With the onset of various governmental and non governmental initiatives and development programs, several economic changes are being noticed to affect men and women, but on different scales. Concerning control over resources, the tribal women enjoy a greater social status, which leads to their active participation and power of decision-making in the areas of land utilization, and agriculture. The role of tribal women in their society is more important than in any other social group in India because the tribal women, more than women in any other social group, work harder and the family economy is dependent on them.

There have been several women who are not known but have contributed immensely to the field of education and literature.

#### **Education:**

The tribal community all over India has been subjected to various forms of deprivation such as alienation from land and other forest resources since the British rule. Women by nature have a greater ability to organize people, resources, and work. They have greater perseverance and therefore, to utilize their creativity, and organizational ability and to motivate them to participate in education, the development of their group is required. A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic and political fabric of her society.

The *Report of the Working Group on Tribal Development (1980)* suggests: "Education is the key to tribal development." The report states that the tribal segment of the society is disadvantaged compared to the non-tribal sections because they have limited access to education and modern affairs. Tribal women who have worked in the field of education are:

#### **1. Tulasi Munda:**

Tulasi Munda, a self-made educationist was born in 1947 in the Keonjarh District of Odisha. She hails from the Munda ethnic tribe. This Adivasi girl comes from one of the most backward regions of Odisha and grew up with her notions of freedom and slavery – notions that were strikingly different from the beliefs held by the people in her milieu.

Tulasi Munda wanted to educate herself and learn and speak new languages at a very young age. She yearned to study but there was no school in her village which deprived her of education. Nobody in their area educated their girls. At the age of 12, she went to live with her sister in Serenda and started learning alphabets. In 1961, her passion for learning catapulted her into the orbit of women like Malti Chaudhury, Roma Devi, and Nirmala Deshpande, well

known women who were committed to social work, especially educating women. She joined them and participated in their village forays and struggles in different parts of the country. She was inspired by Vinobha Bhave's vision and commitment to donate land (Bhoodan) and improve the lives of poor villagers.

As a victim of illiteracy, Tulasi Munda decided to dedicate her life to eradicating this obstacle. She resolved "**As long as I have breath in my body, I will fight illiteracy.**" She made a statement that – '**Illiteracy was the worst form of enslavement.**'

Tulasi believed illiteracy was the root cause of the evils – poverty, unemployment, superstition, fear, etc whereas education was the tool to free people's minds from the darkness of ignorance. But, executing her mission proved to be tougher than she anticipated. She had 30 students at the start in Odisha's iron ore mining area.

She decided that the only gift she could give to her people would be education. Hence, she started an informal school in the year 1964. Tulasi Munda, who was awarded Padma Shri in 2001, over the span of 40 years established 17 schools and succeeded in educating and transforming the lives of 20,000 children. Her organization, named 'Adivasi Vikas Samithi' runs the school in Serenda and has 16 outreach centers in the villages of Keonjarh District in Odisha and helps primary education possible to the poor. She is known by the name of 'Tulasi Apa' and the first Odia Biopic named 'Tulasi Apa' is made by Amiya Patnaik Productions.

#### **Views of Tulasi Munda on Education:**

A self-made educationist, Tulasi has some strong views on education. She feels the government and the public have a different attitude to education. She explains: "People get education for the sole purpose of getting a job. But jobs enslave. You are beholden to your boss, to the tyranny of routine."

"The goal of education is to improve life, to make things better around us, to do things better. All of life's important issues – whether it is the rights of women, children or Adivasis – can be tackled better if people have a higher level of education."

॥ज्ञानदेव तु कैवल्यमा ॥

(Knowledge alone liberates)

Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy states that there is a 'Provision for early childhood care and education to children below the age of six years.' The Constitution (86<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act, 2002) inserted Article 21-A in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right.

Development through literacy and education in a small community depends on – (1) Universal provision of schools (2) Universal retention of pupils till they complete the prescribed course, and universal enrolment of pupils.

As a result of this, now there is at least a primary school in every remote corner of the tribal belts within their easy approach.

Further, the disparity in educational attainments has roots in structural constraints. Instead of the concept of traditional literacy<sup>1</sup>, the concept of functional literacy<sup>2</sup> would be a valuable educational exercise in the context of tribal development. Functional Literacy helps the tribal to face the exogenous factors of modernization in a bold manner by equipping various skills. It is a valuable educational exercise that helps to nurture a positive attitude.

<sup>1</sup> The term Traditional literacy means the ability to read and write or the ability to use language to read, write, listen, and speak.

<sup>2</sup> Functional Literacy is the ability to read and write and to use these skills to contribute to the development of oneself and one's community toward the problems. Functional literacy for tribal women aims at giving them better knowledge of tribal development, thereby enabling them to raise their standard of living.

Mahatma Gandhi has said, 'Education is a key to social change.' Hence, education is closely associated with the socio-economic development of the community and the country.

### Literature:

India is diverse in its culture and tradition with many ethnic groups and their distinct language and religion. Four different language families of the world are spoken in India namely, Indo-European, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic. Indian Literature is one of the earliest literature and has numerous folklore and mythologies that are filled with moral teachings that are relevant even in today's world.

Indian folk and tribal arts have always attracted people around the globe. The simplicity, authenticity, and story behind their art have gained momentum worldwide. There is a mention of tribal people even in Indian epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, who were referred to as Jana.

Folklore is the reflection of one's culture that brings to light the traditional beliefs, myths, folktales, and practices of the people passed through the generations by word of mouth. Its studies can be used to compare societies on their folk knowledge and culture that may further help in creating theories on origin, migration, diffusion, etc. *The term "folklore" was first coined by William John Thomas, a British writer, in the year 1846.* It means "people's customs." Folklore is an oral tradition that expresses human culture and their living style through the local narratives and linguistic conventions.

The women who have contributed to the fields of literature are as follows:

### Ruby Hembrom:

Ms. Ruby Hembrom hails from the Santhal tribe. She is the founder and director of adivaani, an archiving and publishing outfit of and by Adivasi (the indigenous peoples of India). Adi means first and Vaani means voice. After realizing that the tribals were excluded in the writings and documentation, she therefore started a publishing unit named 'adivaani<sup>3</sup>' in the year 2012. She said, *'We never needed to write because we were living documents ourselves. But now, armed with literacy, we need to record, document, express and challenge what has incorrectly gone down as history, set records straight, and even defend ourselves.'* Since 2012, aadvani, based in Kolkata, has published 19 volumes — including the award-winning picture book *Disaibon Hul* on the 1855 Santhal Rebellion and *Sylvan Tales: Stories from the Munda Country*.

Hembrom is working to spread awareness about the need to preserve the oral tradition of storytelling because as per her, 'We don't know what we don't know.' She knew that 'there is a gap to be filled.'

The Adivasi literature is oral, written, graphic, animated, sung, and performed in this unit. The earliest research and recordings by non-Adivasi scholars, anthropologists, and researchers, possibly in the late 1800s and early 1900s, lie in places that are not known. Hembrom said, 'Whatever we do will never be enough, because documenting in terms of fixing it, in a tangible form such as books or audio or video recordings, has just started. That means a lot of traditional wisdom and knowledge has been lost due to ancestors passing on, displacement, and dominant cultures and languages taking over.' All aadvani authors are Adivasis. One of the recurring challenges for adivaani has been fighting the stereotypes and prejudices about Adivasi.

### Revaben Tadvi:

Revaben Tadvi is the first female tribal folklorist of Gujarat and researcher-editor and carrier of oral traditional literature. She was born on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1929 in Bhadrali village of Vadodara district. She got married to folklorist Shankarbhai Tadvi (Tadvi tribe) in the year 1948, after doing her primary education. The couple made it their life's goal 'to edit and publish oral <sup>3</sup>adivaani was chosen to be written in lowercase because as per Hembrom's words, "We are small, ordinary people, trying to find the most relevant ways to exist and survive."

The Santhals are believed to have descended from the geese Has and Hasil, and to honor the ancestors, from whom the first Santhal humans Pilchu Budhi and Pilchu Haram evolved, Hembrom and her team chose the geese as adivaani's logo. One of the geese looks to the past and the other to the future, and that is what adivaani stands for folklore.' Books on tribal literature written by Revaben with her husband Shankarbhai Tadvi have been awarded by Gujarat Sahitya Academy.

She was fond of singing since childhood, and therefore participated in various socio religious festivals and events and memorized the oral tradition of singing in the society. She has researched and edited about 20 books on tribal culture, society, and literature with her husband, and independently. A book on the background of tribal culture and society, '*Adivasi Sankruti no Swadhyaya*' documents the Rathwa-Koli social life from prehistoric times to the present day in the background of folklore.

Her book '*Char Bhaibandh*' is an adaptation of the folklore of the Mewas region. She has published six books and two co-editors on the research and editing of folk songs. Social songs are included among these, etc. '*Tadvi: Lagna Geeto ane Vidhio*' is a compilation of the marriage rituals and their associated songs of the Tadvi caste of central Gujarat.

'*Adivasi Sanskruti no Swadhyaya*' and '*Tadvi: Lagna Geeto ane Vidhio*' are the two books that have been awarded by Gujarati Sahitya Academy.

1981 - '*Rathavi Gujarati Shabdavali*'

1984 - '*Rathva Jan Jagran and Padya Vachanamala*'<sup>4</sup>

1987 - '*Moonchome Malo*' is an adaptation of Fatana.

1988 - '*Saheli Re Ambo Mhorio*' is an abridged version of wedding songs of various castes in central Gujarat - Thakardas, Rajputs, Rathwas, Bhils etc.

1993 - In '*Rajal Patali*' the songs sung by the Tadvi community living in Sankheda taluka are edited into action songs of blasphemy. These songs depict Nanand-Bhojai's teasing, women's sexual instincts, jealousy, and other human emotions.

1995 - '*Radha Gorine Kahan Karna*' features songs of Krishna as a child and puberty with Radha and the Gopis.

<sup>4</sup>In the books named, '*Rathavi Gujarati Shabdavali*' and '*Rathva Jan Jagran and Padya Vachanamala*', attempt have been made to establish Rathavi dialect as a language and to make it more familiar. 8

2001 - '*Sagani Soti Sisami Dondi Re*' has been edited with the gist of Rola, Dandiya, and Aleniya dance songs performed in spring and autumn among the Tadvi and Bhil communities of Vadodara district.

Her books on folk art include '*Tribal Folk Dances*' and '*Adivasi no Kalavaraso*'. These books introduce dance, drama, costumes, folklore, <sup>5</sup>Pithora painting, ornamentation, knitting, etc. The Tadvi couple were honored with the Sanskar Award, Vadodara (1987), and Akhil Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad Award (2002).

#### **Relationship between Culture and Education:**

Culture refers to the values and norms shared by a specific group of people. It influences a person on the way he sees the world, the community, etc. Culture influences our learning, remembering, talking, and behaving and our language and communication. In short, it shapes our personality. **Harvard Professor Jerome Bruner notes, "Culture shapes the mind, it provides us with the tool kit by which we construct not only our world but our very construction of ourselves and our powers."**

Education and Culture are integrally connected. Hence, the cultural patterns of a society condition its educational pattern.

## CONCLUSION

**'India will prosper when our tribal communities prosper, welfare of tribal communities is our foremost priority.'** – Prime Minister Narendra Modi

India is rich with a diversity of religions, arts, customs, races, traditions, and languages. Culture and Education together weave the socio-economic fabric of the tribal communities. While the government of India recognizes twenty-two official languages, there are over 880 languages spoken in the country. Until recently, the tribal literature created in non-mainstream languages has not been very recognized or available for an Indian or global audience. One of the primary reasons for this is that tribal discourse, including folktales and songs, is mainly oral. The culture is documented in the head of the tribals, but it is not written. In addition, the communities that produce it tend to be far from developed metropolitan cities, and so their creative works have been largely overlooked.<sup>5</sup> Pithora - Hindu deity of marriage. However, the Indian government has stepped forward to encourage the conservation and translation of these unheard voices and to share their literary gems with the world. Sahitya Akademi (Academy), India's National Academy of Letters, has developed the **Project of Indian Literature in Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions** to preserve and educate people about tribal literature. Hence, these are the few women about whom something is known, but there are so many other women who are unknown to us. These women are contributing extensively in these fields. They are playing a major role in developing their tribes and preserving their culture, heritage, and traditions. Also, they have realized the importance of education to transform the lives of people and transform their lives.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Patel, D. B. (2020-21). *Adivasi Sanskrutik Varso*. Gandhinagar: Maahiti Niyamak. Ruby Hembrom - The Asia Foundation
- [2] <https://www-unsung-in.translate.google.com/tulasi>
- [3] [munda/?x\\_tr\\_sl=en&x\\_tr\\_tl=hi&x\\_tr\\_hl=hi&x\\_tr\\_pto=tc](https://munda.wordpress.com/?x_tr_sl=en&x_tr_tl=hi&x_tr_hl=hi&x_tr_pto=tc)
- [4] <https://sambitdas.wordpress.com/category/tulasi-munda/>