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## **Do Resources Create Empowerment?: A Study of Tribal Women Farmers in Madhya Pradesh, India**

By Sudarshan Thakur<sup>1</sup> and Simran Malkan<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

As of late, there has been debate about the importance of recognizing women in agriculture as farmers. The demand to be recognized is backed by women's significant contribution to the household economy. Scholars have attempted to establish a correlation between land ownership and women's empowerment in agriculture. This is an oversimplification of the situation of women farmers and their empowerment, especially in the context of tribal society where women have better access to and control over community and forest resources. We undertook this study to examine if having land and other resources is a prerequisite for the empowerment of tribal women farmers. The study is based on a primary survey conducted by a network of civil society organizations (CSOs) that enhance the livelihoods of tribal women in Madhya Pradesh, India. The analysis is informed by the researchers' decade-long experience of working with tribal women farmers, our visits to the villages during the study period, and the available literature. The survey's findings indicate that having resources is necessary but not sufficient on its own for the empowerment of tribal women. Additionally, the survey points out that having better access to and control over resources has a very weak to weak correlation with decision-making, leadership, and well-being outcomes. Many ethnographic studies and our direct work with tribal communities in Central India show that agency is also exercised through the work tribal women put in and the knowledge they have. Moreover, understanding the agency of tribal women requires a nuanced and close observation of women's assertions and negotiations in their everyday lives. We believe it is crucial to examine how tribal women perceive their immediate environment, as well as their relationships with people, nature, work, and kinship affiliations. Therefore, this paper calls for future ethnographic studies to understand tribal women's agency and an in-depth exploration of sociocultural contexts in which tribal women live.

*Keywords:* Tribal women, Empowerment, Resources, Agency, India, Farming.

### **Introduction**

Over a quarter of all farmers worldwide are women (FAO, 2011). Women's role in India is even more crucial, where 80% of rural women work in agriculture (Patel & Sethi, 2021). However, identifying women as farmers must be seen in a context where agriculture is still a household enterprise (Patra et al., 2018). With marriages largely patrilocal, like in the case of India, women have fewer options for using and cultivating owned property (Jackson, 2003). The recognition of women as farmers as a prerequisite for women's economic empowerment, besides equipping them with information, credit, and technology, has institutional and social barriers. Ownership over land seems to be one of the most significant

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barriers to empowerment, leading to precarious livelihood situations for women. Agarwal (2000) argues that the land is a critical resource for the empowerment of women. A recent study by the University of Manchester in 2020 depicts that in rural landowning households in India, women account for only 14% of landowners, and 11% of women own agricultural land (Agarwal et al., 2021). In their study of Nepal, Mishra and Sam (2016) suggest that policies promoting land rights equity have the potential to boost women's empowerment and the welfare consequences in areas where agriculture is the primary source of income for women. Even in India, accessing government schemes, credit, and other benefits is difficult in the absence of land titles (Mishra & Suhag, 2017), which either leads to women's exclusion or dependence on men.

Nevertheless, focusing on land resources alone deviates our attention from prevalent gender norms. In tribal communities, despite the domination of men in public dealings, women seem relatively free and can express themselves. The work put in by tribal women on farms, common land, and forests in traditional settings exceeds the labor of tribal men (Bhasin, 2007). The tribal women's stake in agriculture in general and their contribution to their household economy in particular, amidst their social and institutional context, cannot be homogenized. Hence, it is important to understand the dynamics of tribal women farmers whose primary occupation depends on agriculture, forest resources, and allied activities (Ajaz-ul-Islam et al., 2013).

This issue was the focus of a state-wide survey in Madhya Pradesh, the Indian state with the largest tribal population (Census of India, 2011). The survey posits the key question of whether or not resources are sufficient conditions for the empowerment of tribal women farmers. In our study, we asked if having access to and control over private land and resources are the only enablers. We also questioned if the tribal women's participation in development programs and external training inputs led to any change in their agency. We found that resources are one of the critical aspects, but not the deciding factor, in women's empowerment. Similarly, participation in development programs and training does not establish any definite impact on tribal women's agency and lifeworld. We reiterate that it is critical to look at tribal women's agency, taking into account their traditional knowledge, the work they put in for the livelihood of their households, and their perspective of coexistence with nature and the community. In the following sections, we discuss the methodology and present the results of the survey, followed by the context of tribal women's livelihoods, which counters the simplistic correlation between resources and agency. Finally, we attempt to conceptualize tribal women's empowerment through our study, the empirical literature, and our experience of living and working in the tribal heartlands.

## Methodology

Defining tribal society in India is a contested undertaking, and terminologies like tribal, Scheduled Tribes, Indigenous, and Adivasi are sometimes used interchangeably (Kumari, 2021). The Indian Constitution recognizes Scheduled Tribes (ST) as a category of different groups of dispossessed and deprived people of a region, and there is an acceptance among tribal groups of this definition (Xaxa, 1999). The term *Adivasi*, literally meaning Indigenous, is a political term. The term is not a claim that tribal people are original inhabitants, but rather it asserts tribal people's consciousness and resistance to the dispossession of resources, be it land, forest, or minerals (Xaxa, 2008; Moodie, 2015). However, tribal people of North-East India do not see themselves as Adivasis. Consequently, in this article, we are using the terms tribal and tribal women.

Although the fundamental relationship between agency and empowerment is well-established, the causal effect of resources upon agency and empowerment is still up for debate (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). Here, the intersectional identity of being tribal can be used to

examine the empowerment process (Crenshaw, 1991). However, identities do not operate in silos (Collins, 2015). Further, “women’s vocabulary may be limited by male meanings and concepts” (Jackson, 2012b, p. 1015). This calls for participant observation as an ethnographic process (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Limited by time and budget constraints, this study aims to understand the phenomena through quantitative surveys, complemented by our field experiences and qualitative analysis of secondary literature and reports. As Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, “All research ultimately has a qualitative grounding” (p. 40). The quantitative survey also allows qualitative interpretation, as “the larger paradigm in which research is pursued will never be value-free” (Capra & Luisi, 2014, p. 3).

The primary survey was conducted from October 2 to October 12, 2022, covering 2,331 women farmers from tribal and other communities of 43 out of the 52 districts of Madhya Pradesh. Minimum coverage of 25 women farmers, including five tribal women farmers from each district, was set as a qualifier for the inclusion of survey data for analysis. Finally, 1,834 women farmers from 29 districts, including 1,014 tribal women farmers, were included in the analysis. The survey questionnaire was designed to cover access and control over resources, services, and knowledge, including agency-level indicators like membership in self-help groups (SHGs), leadership, decision-making, and well-being outcomes. Data were collected for women disaggregated by different communities such as Scheduled Tribe (ST), scheduled caste (SC), other backward caste (OBC), and others. This research adopts a cross-sectional design for accurate descriptions and systematic comparisons among different variables and population categories (De Vaus, 2001; Walliman, 2010). The purposive sampling method was used to include participants, as it can be used for quantitative surveys to understand phenomena in a particular cultural domain (Tongco, 2007).

140 data collectors were recruited and trained, and they carried out the survey in Hindi. All the participants were asked for their consent, and the data after the collection were translated into English and were made anonymous to maintain confidentiality. The data analysis utilized the descriptive statistics method as the study focused on finding correlations among different variables (Holcomb, 2016).

### **Survey Findings**

The survey looked critically at three major components: (a) ownership over assets and resources, (b) access and claims to schemes and services, and (c) access to information and training provided through development programs. We found a weak correlation between these components and empowerment indicators of decision-making and leadership.

The sample consisted of 55% tribal women farmers, followed by 24%t women participants from other backward castes (OBC), 14% from scheduled castes (SC), and seven percent from others. 11% of tribal women farmers are single women. Illiteracy is highest amongst the tribal women farmers at 43%. The percentage of tribal women farmers who received formal education is only 47%, the lowest among all categories. Even the attainment of higher education is one of the lowest among tribal women farmers.

**Table 1: Basic Profile of the Survey Participants**

Sl. No.	Respondent Profile	Percentage of Women Participants				
		ST Tribal	SC	OBC	Others	Total
1	Women farmers included in the survey	1,014 (55%)	251 (14%)	436 (24%)	133 (7%)	1,834 (100%)
2	Age group					
	a. 18-29 years	16.3%	15.9%	13.8%	16%	15.6%
	b. 30-45 years	62.1%	57.0%	64.9%	66%	62.4%
	c. 46-60 years	19.4%	25.1%	19.7%	16%	20.0%
	d. Above 60 years	2.2%	2.0%	1.6%	2%	2.0%
3	Marital status					
	a. Married living with the spouse	89%	87%	91%	89.4%	89%
	b. Divorced	0.3%	0.4%	0.5%	0%	0.3%
	c. Deserted	0.7%	1.2%	1%	2.3%	1%
	d. Unmarried	1%	3%	2%	2.3%	1.7%
	e. Widow	9%	8.4%	5.5%	6%	8%
4	Educational status					
	a. Illiterate	43%	30%	29%	13.5%	36%
	b. Never attended school, but can read and write	10%	6%	6%	4.5%	8%
	c. Attended school until standard 5	14%	15%	16%	9%	14%
	d. Attended school 10-12 standard	31%	47%	46%	63%	39%
	e. Graduation and above	2%	2%	3%	10%	3%

*Source: Researchers' Field Work 2022-23*

The survey results show that 14% of tribal women farmers have houses in their names, and 17% of tribal women own land, which is higher than the average (see Table 2). The percentage of tribal women who own vehicles in their names is 4%, which corresponds with the average. 39% of tribal women farmers own mobile phones, the lowest among women of all categories. Overall, 14% of tribal women farmers own smartphones, the second lowest among all categories of women. This may also be attributed to the lower level of education among tribal women. Data on ownership over resources reflect that tribal women farmers are in a better position; however, this does not necessarily translate into other well-being indicators like education (see Table 1). This does not corroborate the notion that resources have a definite impact on well-being outcomes. Likewise, ownership over material resources cannot fully

account for empowerment. In one of the interactions in the Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh, one of the women from the Baiga<sup>3</sup> community said, “My family has a marginal landholding and I do not have land in my name. I contribute immensely by collecting *mahua*<sup>4</sup> and *tendu*<sup>5</sup> leaves and selling them to local traders, apart from managing my household chores. My husband respects me and always supports my decision” (Baiga woman, personal communication). This anecdote, though, cannot be generalized. In our fieldwork, we saw a positive correlation between the work put in by women and their agency. However, poverty may obscure inequality at times (Jackson, 2012a).

**Table 2: Share of Women Farmers in Household Assets and Resources**

Sl. No.	Particular	Percentage of Women Participants				
		ST Tribal	SC	OBC	Others	Total
1	House in their names	14%	13%	10%	12%	12%
2	Land in their names	17%	18%	16%	11%	16%
3	Having vehicles in their names	4%	6%	2%	2%	4%
4	Owning a mobile phone	39%	40%	41%	58%	41%
5	Owning a smartphone	14%	12%	17%	26%	16%

Source: Researchers' Field Work 2022–23

The percentage of tribal women farmers that have bank accounts in their names is the highest at 89% (see Table 3). Similarly, 28% of tribal women have taken some credit (formal or informal loan) in their names, the highest among all categories of women. 14% of women farmers have *Kisan*<sup>6</sup> credit cards (farmer credit cards) in their names as well, second to women from OBC categories. Furthermore, four percent of tribal women farmers received *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana*<sup>7</sup> in their names, second to women from the SC category. It is difficult to ascribe these benefits and access to financial institutions to tribal women's access and control over resources. This is because the government, through its flagship programs in Madhya Pradesh, puts special emphasis on the inclusion of tribal women (Sikdar, 2023). Among all communities, tribal women in general are the largest contributors to the households' income and labor. They also participate in various forums for the economic benefit of the households, which may again be attributed to their better social mobility, fewer restrictions from the community, and subsequent better participation in financial intermediation programs.

<sup>3</sup> Baiga is an ethnic tribal group recognized as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG).

<sup>4</sup> *Mahua* is a fruit of an Indian tropical tree called *Madhuca Longifolia*.

<sup>5</sup> Tendu leaves are from a tree in the family Ebenaceae. The leaves are used for wrapping smoking tobacco.

<sup>6</sup> *Kisan* is a Hindi term for farmers.

<sup>7</sup> A scheme by the government of India to provide housing for rural poor.

**Table 3: Status of Women Farmers' Access and Claims to Schemes and Services**

Sl. No.	Particular	Percentage of Women Participants				
		ST Tribal	SC	OBC	Others	Total
1	Having bank accounts in their names	89%	78%	84%	74%	85%
2	Taken credit in their names	28%	12%	18%	10%	22%
3	Having <i>Kisan Credit Card</i> (KCC) in their names	14%	10%	16%	10%	14%
4	Received <i>Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana</i> in their names	4%	5%	4%	1%	4%

*Source: Researchers' Field Work 2022–23*

For tribal women farmers, a major source of information on agriculture and allied activities is informal sources (relatives, friends, and villagers) at 36%. This is followed by private entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at 23% and 18% respectively (see Table 4). 43% of tribal women farmers, the highest among all categories, have received at least one training on either agriculture, livestock, or an allied activity. The percentage of tribal women farmers receiving training on gender equality is among the highest at 11%. However, only 16% of tribal women have access to government societies for selling commodities as compared to women from the others and OBC categories at 20% and 33% respectively. This may mean that the training and access to government programs have not translated into tribal women's access to village-level institutions. Despite getting more training and access to government programs, only 13% of tribal women could name at least one government scheme. 45% of tribal women farmers use organic compost or pest control methods in farming, which is the highest amongst all categories. Attributing it to training and government programs would be short-sighted, as tribal communities generally follow traditional methods of farming, and their dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides is still at its lowest, which we also experienced during our fieldwork in Dindori, Mandla, and Shahdol districts of Madhya Pradesh.

**Table 4: Status of Women Farmers' Access to Knowledge and Information**

Sl. No.	Particular	Percentage of Women Participants				
		ST Tribal	SC	OBC	Others	Total
1	Sources for information on agriculture and allied activities					
	a. From non-governmental organizations (NGO)	18%	21%	17%	4%	17%
	b. From government departments	4%	3%	3%	2%	3%
	c. From MPSRLM <sup>8</sup>	5%	5%	8%	8%	6%
	d. Private entrepreneurs (shops, traders, etc.)	23%	12%	18%	20%	20%
	e. Other sources (relatives, villagers, etc.)	36%	40%	26%	26%	34%
2	Received training on any livelihood program	43%	37%	41%	29%	41%
3	Using organic compost or pest control methods in farming	45%	28%	24%	9%	35%
4	Selling produce in society at government rates	16%	13%	33%	20%	20%
5	Reported a reduction in drudgery with the introduction of agricultural tools in households	51%	52%	60%	65%	55%
6	Received training on gender equality	11%	8%	8%	6%	10%
7	Could name at least one government scheme	13%	20%	14%	5%	13%

*Source: Researchers' Field Work 2022–23*

Membership in community-based organizations (CBOs) is highest among tribal women farmers (see Table 5). 84% and 17% of tribal women farmers are members of SHGs and farmer producer companies (FPCs) respectively, which is the highest among women from all categories. Additionally, the percentage of tribal women farmers holding a leadership position is 10%, the highest in all categories. 74% of tribal women farmers reported that they can do bank transactions independently, which is also the highest across all categories. 47% of tribal women farmers (highest among all categories) keep their earned income to themselves. 51% of tribal women farmers also reported that they are the decision-makers when it comes to household expenses, which is better across all categories. However, only 7% of tribal women farmers said they are confident and could withdraw cash from automated teller machines, second to women from the SC category. This may be attributed to lower education among tribal women farmers. Despite tribal women seemingly holding leadership positions in community-based institutions and the freedom to keep income to themselves, only 49% of tribal women farmers stated that they could support their natal homes without asking men in their households. This percentage is 50% and 6% among women from the SC and others. Therefore, a direct

<sup>8</sup> Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission



connection between leadership positions held and control over income with the freedom to spend money cannot be established.

**Table 5: Status of Women Farmers' Decision-Making and Leadership**

Sl. No.	Particular	Percentage of Women Participants				
		ST Tribal	SC	OBC	Others	Total
1	Membership in SHGs	84%	69%	64%	52%	75%
2	Membership in farmer producer companies (FPCs)	17%	10%	11%	6%	13%
3	Leadership positions in any community or governance institution	10%	8%	8%	4%	9%
4	Able to do bank transactions on their own	74%	67%	70%	68%	71%
5	Confident to withdraw cash from ATMs	7%	4%	12%	22%	9%
6	Keep income to themselves	47%	37%	39%	38%	43%
7	Control over household expenses	51%	47%	34%	29%	45%
8	Can support natal homes financially without asking	49%	50%	46%	62%	49%

*Source: Researchers' Field Work 2022–23*

### Context of Tribal Women's Livelihoods

Forest resources are an important context in which tribal women's livelihoods must be seen and analyzed. Historically, tribal communities in India settled in forest fringe areas, which has shaped their livelihoods (Meher, 2009), making them dependent on forest produce, agriculture, and livestock. Sarin and associates (2003) note that the "colonial" policy encouraged settled agriculture whilst clamping down on shifting cultivation and initiated large-scale reservation of forests in 1905" (p. 30). In the last few decades, India's land use pattern has undergone a significant shift, especially in tribal cores. Agricultural development, unsustainable aggregation of forest biomass, mining, and infrastructure projects have resulted in forest degradation (Banerjee-Guha, 2013), resulting in the alienation of tribal communities from forests and forest fringe land (Meher, 2009; Sarap & Sarangi, 2010). For instance, many tribal farmers lost their land because of leases for bauxite mining in the Sarguja district of Chhattisgarh (erstwhile Madhya Pradesh). No village council meetings had been convened, even though the entire Sarguja district falls under Fifth Schedule Areas, a law enacted under the constitution of India to protect and secure the resources of the tribal community (Meher, 2009, p. 474). In Madhya Pradesh, Joint Forest Management (JFM) is controlled by government staff and mainly focuses on forestry plantations (Sarin et al., 2003), which takes away the community's ownership. It impacts tribal women the most, as women's biggest contribution to their households comes from forest-based resources. In our fieldwork in the Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh, we found that the collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) by women contributes about 30% of cash income to the Gond<sup>9</sup> households. However, the forest area is shrinking. From 2001 to 2021, Madhya Pradesh lost 0.82% of its area of primary forest (Global Forest Watch, 2021). The decreasing forest cover and keeping villages away from forests are leading to adverse impacts on tribal communities' lives and livelihoods. Tribal communities, particularly women, will benefit from forest development and conservation only if the prohibitive nature of laws is changed (Kulkarni, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Gond is an ethnolinguistic group in India listed as a scheduled tribe (ST).

Land is a critical resource impacting tribal women's livelihoods and lifeworld. However, due to the alienation of tribal communities from forest fringe areas, only 31.95% of rural tribal households in Madhya Pradesh reported agriculture on their land as their primary source of income (SECC, 2011). Forest Rights Act (FRA) strives to recognize individual and communal tribal rights over the forest and its resources, and the Panchayat<sup>10</sup> Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act emphasizes community rights over natural resources (Bahadur, 2016; Ananth & Kalaivanan, 2017). Both these acts are seen as empowering mechanisms for access to land for women. However, it would be a fallacy to imagine tribal societies as egalitarian. Tribal communities in India are largely patrilineal, and land is controlled and owned by men of the families. Even in matrilineal tribal societies, the rank of the youngest daughter is equivalent to that of the eldest son in patrilineal tribes when it comes to inheritance (Bahadur, 2016). The most well-known matrilineal and matrilocal tribes in North-East India are the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia, which comprise about 90% of Meghalaya's population. Even though women may own the property in these societies, men who manage the land (husbands and maternal relatives) exercise actual control over it (Von Ehrenfels, 1971). Tribal communities are guided by customary practices, and women do not hold any legal rights over inherited land, except being custodians in the case of matrilineal societies (Roy & Tisdell, 2002). Furthermore, women are looked at as keepers of kinship affiliations, and demanding or claiming land rights is frowned upon (Rao, 2008). This has a direct implication for the allocation of resources and intended economic outcomes for tribal women. According to the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 (39 of 2005), a daughter of a coparcener<sup>11</sup> shall, like a boy, become a coparcener by birth in her own right (MoL&J, 2005). Despite amendments to the law, women seek property rights in their marital homes rather than in their natal homes (Rao, 2011). In her ethnographic study of the Santhal Tribe, Rao (2008) found that there is an "articulation of the image of a good woman, as one who accepts the diktats of the father, husband, brother, or son," (p. 300) and that good women shall not inherit the land. Another point to consider is whether land can be deemed as a definite measure of tribal women's empowerment. In our survey, the number of tribal women who own land and the number of tribal women's access to farmer credit cards were found to be weakly correlated,  $r(1012) = .26$ . This is no different for women across all categories,  $r(1832) = .25$ . A similar trend emerged from the survey measuring women's control over household expenses and income. The number of tribal women who own land and the number of tribal women with control over household expenses is found to be weakly correlated,  $r(1012) = .10$ . This correlation is at a similar level for women from all categories,  $r(1832) = .13$ . Correspondingly, the number of tribal women who own land and the number of tribal women who keep income to themselves are weakly correlated as well,  $r(1012) = .11$ . Thus, land alone cannot be the only measure of agency. We need an analysis of the tribal women's control over work and economic contribution to the household to understand the processes of tribal women's empowerment.

The amount of work tribal women put in for livelihoods is not only critical but also essential to sustaining tribal households. Traditionally, tribal women in India are the primary economic actors; however, there has been an underestimation of tribal women's contribution to the rural economy (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2012). Their work and contribution widely depend on the collection and subsistence level of agriculture, which generally goes hidden. A typical gender division of labor among tribal communities assigns tasks to women, such as the collection of forest produce and firewood, giving them an assured source of income. Tribal women are the main collectors of a variety of NTFPs, such as *sal*,<sup>12</sup> *mahua*, *tendu*, and wild

<sup>10</sup> Statutory council of elected representatives from one or more revenue villages.

<sup>11</sup> A joint heir who shares legal rights for inheriting property.

<sup>12</sup> Sal or Shorea Robusta is a tree species generally used for timber.

fruits, for both subsistence and income in India's forest belts (Sarin, 1995). Guleria and associates (2021) highlight that women comprise 80% of *tendu* leaves collectors, providing almost 10 million workdays annually to forest fringe tribal areas. Madhya Pradesh is the top aggregating state of *tendu* leaves, with a compound annual growth rate of 36.99% between 2013 and 2017 (Guleria et al., 2021). Though women are involved primarily in the collection, they are rarely in charge of any part of the small business or trade that arises out of that (Bahadur, 2016). The government guidelines do mention women's participation in the JFM committees, yet the interference of the state further reduces the control of women over their forest resources, since men take center stage in major decisions (Sarin, 1995). Hence, the work tribal women put in may enhance their agency and decision-making. However, it would be inadvisable to jump to a conclusion, as agency is not only an effect of work contributions. Negotiation for choice-making is an important element in advancing women's agency, which may depend on other factors like age, conjugality, and relationships (Kabeer, 1999).

Kabeer (1999) argues that a qualifying choice must be seen in reference to three aspects of choice-making: conditions, content, and consequences. One of the conditions is membership in local institutions, which is the fourth context to examine. Tribal women, unlike non-tribal women, seem to enjoy more freedom in expressing their opinions and are included in decision-making at the community level. Yet participation in local governance bodies is found to be low (Xaxa, 2008). For instance, while doing fieldwork with Gond tribes in Madhya Pradesh, we observed that *aam sabha*<sup>13</sup> traditionally did not have women's representation, especially in resolving conflicts or making major decisions for the community. Kabeer and associates (2019) observe that Gond's customs have strict gender norms of what women can or cannot do or how women should behave in public life. This is reflected not only in their customary *aam sabha* but in elected Panchayat bodies as well. Nevertheless, SHG is one institution for women whose membership is specifically found to facilitate better livelihood outcomes, especially access to credit and income (Brody et al., 2015). In our survey, we found that 84% of tribal women are SHG members, and 28% of tribal women have loans in their names, the highest across all categories of women. However, the number of tribal women serving as SHG members and the number of tribal women with credit in their names are weakly correlated,  $r(1012) = .10$ . Besides, the number of tribal women who serve as SHG members and the number of tribal women with control over household expenses is found to be weakly correlated,  $r(1012) = .12$ . Likewise, the number of tribal women who serve as SHG members and the number of tribal women who keep income to themselves are weakly correlated as well,  $r(1012) = .12$ . Even SHG membership is weakly correlated to tribal women's leadership position in local governance forums,  $r(1012) = .12$ . This is similar across women from all categories,  $r(1832) = .13$ .

The knowledge of women is also claimed to be an empowering mechanism as knowledge is generally highlighted as a fundamental resource (Pattanaik, 2005). From our survey, we see some contrasting observations. For example, 43% of tribal women and 41% of women from the OBC category are trained in livelihood activities. However, the access to government societies to sell produce at government rates for tribal women is just 16%, almost half of the access of women from the OBC category at 33%. Additionally, we found that training on gender equality does have a positive but weak correlation to decision-making in expenses and income. The number of tribal women who received training on gender equality and the number of tribal women with control over household expenses is found to be very weakly correlated,  $r(1012) = .05$ . In similar lines, the number of tribal women who received training on gender equality and the number of tribal women who keep income to themselves are very weakly correlated,  $r(1012) = .02$ . Moreover, we need to see beyond the imparted

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<sup>13</sup> *Aam sabha* means a common assembly of ethnic groups in their natural habitation as a part of their custom.

training and knowledge through development programs. It is therefore essential to make sense of the traditional knowledge tribal women have and how they use it in their contexts for negotiations and assertions.

As a closing observation in contextualizing tribal women's livelihoods, we must say that tribal women's access to forest and land, the work they put in, and access and control over institutions and knowledge are significant factors. However, the Indian government's new road map for livelihoods and poverty reduction is focused on increasing productivity and doubling farm income with interventions on commercialization, energy sufficiency, and infrastructure development (Singh, 2019). The lack of autonomy for tribal households to conduct their operations is due to the unclear demarcation between subsistence and commercial activities, which has detrimental effects on the lives of tribal women (Prasad, 2016). It is evident in studies, in Africa for example, that patriarchal norms become more entrenched because of extensive commercialization, individual ownership, deforestation, and mass eviction (Wegerif & Guereña, 2020). There is a paucity of evidence-based literature on the effects of the modernization of agriculture on the gender norms of the Indian tribal population. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the dispossession of forests and the changing nature of agriculture reduce tribal women's livelihood choices and increase stringent gender norms, even among matrilineal societies of North-East India (Bahadur, 2016). Owing to this, semi-proletarianization and proletarianization<sup>14</sup> of tribal women have rapidly increased in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, even though such a process is impacted by regional trends and landholding patterns (Prasad, 2016). With low control over resources and an increasing debt trap, tribal people's livelihood is shifting from low-level migration to nearby areas for commercial farming to migration to cities as brokered labor (Mosse et al., 2002). This further puts pressure on tribal women to manage households in the absence of men. There are even trends of poorer households migrating along with women, as in the case of the Bhil Tribes of the Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh (Mosse et al., 2002). Therefore, the contexts in which tribal women's well-being and their economic empowerment processes occur must be taken into consideration.

### **Conceptualizing Empowerment of Tribal Women Farmers**

A general theory of gender stratification proposed by Blumberg (2000) hypothesizes that women's economic empowerment rests on the relative control over the means of production and distribution of surplus. This theory propagates that women's economic power is determined by the "strategic indispensability" of the work they do (Blumberg, 2000, p. 315). In simpler words, women gain agency by the amount of work they put in without which sustenance and maintenance of a household is implausible. Blumberg (2000) suggests that kinship systems and social relationships deeply impact women's agency, but women's access to and use of economic opportunities is a major component.

In this direction, Agarwal (2000) opines that "the gender gap in the ownership and control of the property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap existing in economic well-being, social status, and empowerment" (p. 845). Social norms of man-preferred inheritance, government transfers of land mostly to men, and administrative bias of considering men as default owners have alienated women from land ownership (Agarwal, 2002). Agarwal (2002) presents three arguments for why land is critical: (a) welfare argument, (b) efficiency argument, and (c) equality and empowerment. Jackson (2003) critiques these arguments and states that the poverty reduction effect of land ownership may not be the same

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<sup>14</sup> The term proletarianization is used in Marxism to define a social process whereby people or groups who were once employers or self-employed become wage laborers. This leads to a gradual increase in the number of people who depend on the sale of their labor to make a living.

for men and women. Moreover, efficiency will only increase if the incentive effects of women owning land offset the disincentive effect of men losing the land, including implications on losing kinship affiliations and bonding (Jackson, 2003). Also, with landlessness increasing over time, land rights may not make much difference in women's empowerment (Jackson, 2003).

Therefore, resources must be analyzed beyond land, including material, human, and social resources (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (1999) proposes women's empowerment as a process by which "those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (p. 435). Kabeer (1999) emphasizes that the ability to make choices is attained through three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. In this study, resources as pre-conditions incorporate not only material resources (land) but also human resources (knowledge) and social resources (SHG as community institutions). Agency as a process may be defined as the "power within" to acquire the ability to make decisions (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Agency includes both tangible aspects like negotiation, deception, and manipulation, as well as intangible aspects like the cognitive ability of reflexive analysis. Resources and agencies put together constitute the achievement of empowerment, which is not limited to absolute attainment alone but rather highlights "achieving valued ways of being and doing" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438).

However, all the attempts to conceptualize tribal women's empowerment are limited. There is a need to acknowledge the lifeworld of tribal communities, where traditionally living in harmony with nature and people is valued over resource accumulation and individual achievement. In the past few years, we as practitioners have observed a shift in tribal communities, where individualization is gradually increasing. Yet, a harmonious way of life is still valued in tribal societies. Based on the study we conducted, it is too early to offer a conceptual framework. Yet we must say that while conceptualizing tribal women's empowerment, both material and non-material aspects need consideration. Hence, we propose reframing our understanding of agency; instead of simply being equated to acquiring an ability, agency should be conceived of as how tribal women perceive their belongingness in their immediate surroundings, their work, their kinship, and their affiliations to people and nature.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

This study attempted to analyze whether resources are a sufficient condition for the empowerment of tribal women farmers. The tribal women's agency and their well-being outcomes are compared with their access to and control over resources (land, SHG as community institutions, and knowledge) to understand their efficacy. Applying Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, the main finding of this study is that there is a positive but weak correlation between tribal women's access to and control over resources and their control over income, decision-making, and leadership.

It is evident in this study that, proportionately, tribal women have better landholding compared to women from other categories but fare poorly in well-being indicators like education and access to better services, like selling produce at government rates. These indicators are seemingly better for women from other categories, except for SC women. The proportion of tribal women in SHG and FPC is the highest, due to special emphasis by the government. Yet the membership does not materialize into well-being outcomes. Similarly, the majority of tribal women have bank accounts in their names and have received training on livelihood and gender equality, but it does not show any effect on access to services or control over income and expenses. Therefore, we need an intersectional understanding of tribal women farmers to question the narrative that resource alienation is the biggest reason for tribal women's poverty.

One of the limitations of this study is our reliance on the quantitative survey for primary information because it does not bring out the nuances of how tribal women are coping, how

bargaining is happening, and how their agency is being exercised, especially in the backdrop of multi-cultural settlements. A major constraint arising out of this is that subjectivities of expressions could not be mapped (Jackson, 2012b). As researchers and practitioners, we compensated for this deficiency by drawing upon our experience of working in tribal heartlands. However, understanding agency requires cognizance of associated expressions and behavior, and the iterative process of participant observation, life stories, and in-depth interviews would have been ideal. Consequently, this study also points out the need for ethnographic studies on the agency of tribal women farmers and how they negotiate in their immediate surroundings.

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