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Subjugation of Adivasi Women and the Role of NGO PRADAN in Holistic Development

By Mohosin Mandal¹ and Sahina Khatun²

Abstract

Adivasis are the original inhabitants of India, and their history has been plagued by suffering and deprivation. From the Aryan invasion of 1400 B.C. to the British colonial period, Adivasis have been subjected to domination, displacement, organized loot of resources, and suppression. They are still experiencing forced displacement and other forms of injustice and inequalities in the name of capitalist development. The Indian government took many positive steps to change the condition of Scheduled Tribes (the constitutional term for Adivasi), but despite these governmental actions, no significant changes have been witnessed in their livelihood. A vast majority of the Adivasi population cannot use governmental facilities. The condition of Adivasi women is even worse than that of Adivasi men. PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), a nonprofit, non-government organization started in the 1980s with the vision of bringing positive changes to the lives of less privileged people, primarily works on problems of severe poverty, illiteracy, high infant mortality, and social evils like dowry, slavery, and wife burning. The present work presents a brief history of the Adivasi and the constitutional debate over the term Adivasi, a highlight of the measures taken by the government, and a discussion of the difficult life circumstances faced by Adivasi women. This paper critically explores the pattern of crime against Adivasi women. It further focuses on the innovative and effective strategies and community-based approaches that PRADAN embraced in helping to improve the lives of Adivasi women. Specifically, this paper will discuss how Adivasi women are becoming united through PRADAN's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and other women's organizations formed by PRADAN, such as Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS), Damodar Mahila Mandal (DMM), and Nari Adalat (Women's Court) that provide justice and hope to Adivasi women.

Keywords: Adivasi, Inequality, Indian constitution, Crime, PRADAN, Women's development, Self-help groups

Introduction

There are more than 300 million Indigenous populations across the globe according to the United Nations, and 104 million of them reside in India, equaling 8.6% of the country's population (Census of India). In India, the Adivasi are the largest Indigenous population. The Adivasi are not a homogenous community; there are 700 tribal groups living across the country within states like Mizoram and Jharkhand. The Adivasi have a long history of enduring hardship, oppression, and ill-treatment which started with the advent of Aryans up until the present, even after 75 years of

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independence. Though the government of India assumed various steps for the progress of the community, the Adivasi still experience discrimination, displacement, social ostracism, and negative impacts of developments. Following the rise of industrialization, encroachment upon and restriction of forest areas in the name of national parks and wildlife reserves, intrusion of non-Adivasi population, and the nationalization of the forest, the Adivasi lost access to forest lands and faced forced displacement. In India, from independence to the year 2000, around 60 to 65 million people have been displaced as reported by Human Rights Watch (2013), which is the highest number in the world of dislocated populations due to development. A report released by the Working Group on Human Rights in India (WGHR) states that one million people are displaced every year since independence and of the displaced, over 40% are tribals, though the tribal population is just 8.6% of the nation.

Moreover, displacement affects women disproportionately. The loss of access to grazing land, forest land, rivers, and other natural resources changes their livelihood. Tribal women face deteriorating health conditions, the breakdown of community support systems, and the loss of food, security, and a sense of belonging. They also experience difficulty in accessing sanitation facilities. Tribal women find it difficult to get jobs in newly located places and if the government offers jobs to tribals, men usually obtain them. Women witness the rise of alcohol-induced crimes and forced prostitution in the worst of cases. Women and children become more vulnerable to displacement-related trauma. Lyla Mehta and Bina Srinivasan observe that there is a clear gender disparity in the context of rehabilitation, as men are considered the guardians of households, leading to compensations being primarily awarded to them in the form of cash or land.

Therefore, Adivasis experience marginalized positions in almost every sector of Indian life. Minority Rights Group International defines the Adivasi to be the “marginalized, indigenous, ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, often without power, whose rights must be a concern of all communities, both in India and internationally” (Bhengra et al. 3). Therefore, this paper seeks to address the history and histogenesis of Adivasi terminology and their constitutional safeguard, the nature of their subjugation over time, their representation in higher education and government job sectors, and the history of crimes against them. Further, this paper appraises the role of NGOs, especially PRADAN, in sensitization and awareness, skill development, and overall development of the Adivasi people in India.

Methodology

In this paper, both qualitative and quantitative (i.e. mixed methodological) approaches have been adopted to analyze the subjugation of the Adivasi and the role of NGOs in their holistic development with special reference to NGO PRADAN. The Adivasi nomenclature, identity, status, and constitutional safeguard have been illuminated by fact findings and scholarly theorization and reports. These theoretical views have been strengthened by quantitative data regarding the presentation of Adivasi in different fields like higher education and government work, collected from the Ministry of Education. Data has also been collected on violence against Schedule Tribe (ST) populations collected from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Crime against STs is plotted in a line graph to visualize the trend over 30 years (1991-2021), and a correlation of the literacy of STs and crimes against STs has been computed following Pearson's product moment correlation method to determine the relationship between increasing crime against STs and their increasing education. Lastly, the role of NGO PRADAN in Adivasi development, gender sensitization efforts, awareness programs, and skill development programs for Adivasi people have been reviewed and presented in the paper.

Debate on the Term Adivasi

The term Adivasi is derived from the Sanskrit language. The word Adivasi is a combination of two words *Adi* and *Vasi*; *Adi* stands for original and *Vasi* means inhabitants. Thus, the term Adivasi can also be understood as Indigenous people or original inhabitants. Recent Indigenous movements prefer to use the term Adivasi over the terms tribe or tribal, as it reflects the country's colonial past and carries a political connotation. The term is used to convey the exclusion of tribes from the discourse and to recognize their marginalized position. The term also alludes to tribal rights and their resistance. According to Bhengra et al., the term Adivasi denotes the 67.7 million individuals in India who belong to the Scheduled Tribe category. The phrase Scheduled Tribe is utilized in an administrative context to describe the implementation of constitutional safeguards, benefits, and advantages for a specific group of individuals who have historically faced marginalization and social disadvantage. In the Indian Constitution, the term Adivasi is not employed, and instead, the Scheduled Tribes are referred to as *Anusuchit Jana Jati*. Traditionally, *Jana* was the commonly used term to denote tribes in the Hindi-speaking regions.

Adivasi Identity and Resistance

In the colonial period, Adivasis were described as a social group with primitive criminal instincts and savage characteristics. This colonial discourse about the Adivasi communities justified all types of domination and brutality committed against them. Adivasi intellectuals and social leaders try to resist this biased oppressive discourse. Parijat Ghosh, a development practitioner, presents her opinion in her co-authored article, "Women's Self-help Groups and Adivasi Movements in India," that the Adivasi identity carries two distinct political identities:

The first one is that the Adivasis are original inhabitants of the places where they now live, so they are not only dependent on the resources but have a historical right to their original homeland. This claim of originality may not be based on historical or anthropological evidence but comes from a strong sense of resistance against the oppression they have faced over the last 2000 years which is intensified during and after the colonial period. The second form of the Adivasi political identity is based on the idea that tribal culture is superior because it is more egalitarian and ecologically sustainable as compared to modernity or capitalism. (Ghosh et al. 3)

Status of Adivasis over the Ages

The Vedic Aryans came to India around 1400 B.C. They migrated from Eranve (Modern Day Turkestan) via Iran and Afghanistan and settled in the undivided Punjab province. Before the Aryan invasion, India was tenanted by various Indigenous Adivasi clans. As Aryans had a strong and well-equipped army, they drove the original inhabitants from the mainland, seized their properties, and made them *dasa/dasyu* (slave/s). They treated the local inhabitants "as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean" (Michael 17). Aryans found it impossible to thrash the entire Adivasi population, so they started enslaving them. Aryans could not reach the Northeast regions of India, so several Adivasi groups took shelter in the dense forests or mountains and managed to uphold their cultural heritage.

Max Müller is widely regarded as the chief architect of this racial migration theory that combined race, religion, and linguistics. Banerjee says of Müller's influence: "It is argued that migration theory has acted as the precursor and most significant theoretical force behind Aryan

invasion theory AIT” (Banerjee 10). Max Müller referred to Central Asia as the original native land of the Aryans. They spoke in a primordial language that was neither Sanskrit nor Greek. The Aryans later, over the span of several centuries, branched off to Europe and the western part of India. The group which reached Europe is described as active and warrior-like, and the other branch which came to the northwestern part of India is described as more spiritual and philosophical. The fair-skinned, well-equipped Aryans “conquered the dark skinned dasas of India” (Thapar 5).

The British Brigadier Mortimer Wheeler, who oversaw the Archaeological Survey of India at the time of excavation of the Harappan site in 1946, expressed a similar view and supported the Aryan invention theory. He asserted that Aryans invaded the region, caused huge destruction, and massacred Indigenous people: “Here we have a highly evolved civilization of essentially non-Aryan type...It may be no mere chance that at a late period of Mohenjo-daro men, women and children appear to have been massacred there” (Wheeler 82).

The Aryans developed and accepted Vedic Sanskrit as their linguistic medium. The Turanian communities of Scythian origin were the Indigenous communities of that land. A structure of social division, known as the caste, was formed which segregated Aryans from non-Aryans. The Brahmins were of Aryan lineage while the lower caste and tribes were believed to be descendants from *dasas*. Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer who fought for the abolition of the discriminating caste system, analyzed Aryan invasion theory from the Dalit/Adivasi perspectives, treated Aryans as savage invaders, and mentioned lower castes/tribes as the original owners of the land. However, the Aryan invasion theory is not without contestations. Although Ambedkar accepted this theory in his 1947 book, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?*, he later posed doubts about this theory and considered this as a way of legitimizing Brahmin dominance over other castes. Ambedkar proposed an alternative Indigenous theory and regarded the caste system itself as the origin of social inequality.

Indian history, as well as literature, provides very few accounts of Adivasi life during the Buddhist, Jain, Hindu Rajas, and Muslim reigns over the next two thousand years, yet the Adivasis during these times likely enjoyed self-governing status and firmly repelled any intrusion upon their sovereign lands (Bhengra et al.). Adivasis in India experienced major challenges during the British colonial period. The rich source of Adivasi lands lured the British rulers, and they made multiple attempts to loot the raw materials from their territories and export them to Britain; this exploitation of resources is said to have contributed significantly to the rise of the industrial revolution (Bhengra et al.). The Forest Act of 1864 “empowered the British government to declare any land covered with trees, brush wood or jungle as governmental forest by notification” (Fernandes and Chaudhary 9). Also, during the British regime, the Adivasi’s persistent resistance forced the colonial government to provide them self-governance provisions.

Positive Discrimination and Constitutional Safeguards for Adivasis

After independence, the Indian constitution embraced several provisions to embolden positive discrimination towards ST communities to protect their rights, affirm elevation in the fields of education, health, jobs, and put an end to all kinds of negative discrimination committed against them. Some remarkable provisions are:

- Article 15, which forbids discrimination based on racial, ethnic, social class, and gender.
- Article 16, regarding equality of opportunity relating to employment in public sectors.

- Article 46, which promotes the interests of backward and disadvantaged sections including ST and SC in the fields of education and the economy.
- NCST (*The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes*) has been setup in accordance with Article 338-A of the Indian Constitution to investigate and monitor the applications of the constitutional safeguards for the Scheduled Tribes.

Moreover, there are several legislations and parts of the Constitution that guarantee the prevention of discrimination against the STs:

- To prevent atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis, “Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act” was passed in 1989 to provide Special Court Trials for the fast judgment and arrangement of rehabilitation for victims.
- “Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act” was enacted in 2006 to recognize the constitutional rights of STs to jungle lands and other natural sources.
- Article 330 and 332 of the Indian Constitution reserves specific seats in the Indian Parliament in proportion to the ST population, so that STs get the opportunity to present their voice and concerns through their elected members.
- Article 15 (4) provides reservation to the STs in the field of education.
- Article 16 (4) extends reservation in government job sectors.

The Promises vs. the Reality

Adivasi communities are generally dependent on agriculture and forest resources. After the post-independence era, with the advent of the capitalist mode of development, tribal communities have been displaced from their lands and deprived of their forest resources. According to Bhengra et al., 90% of India’s coal mine reserves, 80% of minerals, 72% of forest and natural resources, and more than 3000 hydroelectric dams are situated in the Adivasi territories, but ironically 85% of the Adivasi families come under the official poverty line. The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes observed that Scheduled Tribes form 83% of the total bonded labor force (Bhengra et al.)

Despite all the inclusive policies and practices adopted by the constitution, Adivasi representation in the fields of higher education and government work is relatively low, and the participation of Adivasi women is even more negligible. According to the data released by the Ministry of Education, in the Upper House of the Indian Parliament in the year 2021, the representation of Adivasi students in PhD programs in the premier institutions is poor, and it clearly indicates that reservation rules have not been strictly followed in Indian universities (Sahoo). The percentage of Adivasi students enrolled in research programs at 17 IITs (Indian Institute of Information Technology) is 1.7%, and at the Indian Institution of Science (IISc) Bangalore, it is only 2.1%. We find a similar trend of under-representation in IITs (Indian Institution of Technology) and Central Universities. In many instances, seats remained vacant even after a good number of Scheduled Tribe students applied for admission. It is also alarming that the dropout rate is highest among ST students. In ISER Bangalore, the dropout percentage of Adivasi PhD scholars is 13.3% (Sahoo).

We witness the same picture of inequality prevailing in job sectors. Most of the teaching posts reserved under the ST category remain vacant. Even in some cases after conducting interviews, NFS (not found suitable) is declared. There are several ways in which ST

students/candidates are being deprived. Mainstream media/newspapers never cover the stories of such deprivation because there is no Adivasi leadership in the mainstream media. In every aspect of Indian social, political, and economic life, Adivasis are in the peripheral position, far away from the center. In private sectors, Adivasi representation is almost invisible. While CEOs of Indian origin can be found running international companies around the globe, there is not a single large-scale private company headed by an Adivasi CEO or MD. This sector is highly controlled by upper-caste elites. Another remarkable point is that in the working sectors, Adivasis are “over-represented in low-paying occupations and severely under-represented in high-paying occupations, especially among professionals and managers” (Chakravarty et al. 7). According to the report of All India Survey on Higher Education, “At All-India level, teachers belonging to General group are more than half, i.e. 56.5% of the total number of teachers in India; OBC follows with 32.1%; while SC and ST with 9.0% and 2.4% respectively” (Government of India 26). In a written statement in Lok Sabha (House of Commons), Subhash Sarkar, Union Minister of State for Education, stated that up until April 1, 2022, only 568 out of 12,373 teachers in Indian central universities are STs, and there is only one Vice Chancellor and five registrars out of 45 central universities in India (“One VC Each”). The report itself speaks of the negligible representation of Scheduled Tribes in university jobs and administrative posts. The 1985 National Seminar on the Reservation Policy in India, held at Indian Social Institute, concluded with this critical observation of educational institutions:

The matter of admissions, appointments and promotions of SCs and STs, both the prejudices of the officials and the reservation rules themselves come in the way. Over the years, a number of discrepancies and deliberate distortions have crept into the Rules and Procedures. As a result, there are many offices and departments where reservation rules have been followed meticulously on paper, but yet the representation of SCs and STs remain poor. Many posts have been formally de-reserved, allowed to lapse or moved out of the purview of reservation. Hence, there is a need to take a hard look at the reservation rules, revise them, simplify them and make them more purposeful and really effective. (Indian Social Institute)

Feminist Movements and Status of Women in Adivasi Societies

The feminist movement in India was not begun as an all-inclusive movement. The voices and struggles of the Adivasi and other minority women were not incorporated in the mainstream feminist discourse. Undeniably, Adivasi women belong to the most underprivileged group in India. Because of their gender and caste identity, Adivasi women are forced to face multiple forms of atrocities. Their cry is rarely heard and addressed by mainstream feminist organizations because of the absence of Adivasi women representation in the organizations. Mainstream feminism occupies privileged spaces and prioritizes different concerns than those of Adivasi women.

Adivasi women’s activism started in 1970 and claimed a voice and space within feminist discourse. The Adivasi women’s movement in India has distinctive Indigenous traits. To Adivasi women, liberation is community-based. They seek forest and land rights, autonomy, and emancipation within communities. Their movements address intersecting vectors of oppression. There are two contradictory beliefs regarding the status of women within the Adivasi society. One group of scholars, mainly Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and feminist scholars, believe that like other societies in India, Adivasi women are placed in a subordinate position compared to Adivasi men; on the other hand, Adivasi scholars and activists reject this idea and claim that

women enjoy a better status in their community and social framework, where inheritance follows the matrilineal line (Ghosh, “Adivasis”). The actual status of Adivasi women most likely falls into the gray area between these positions. Parijat Ghosh mentioned in *Gaon Connection*:

All the Adivasi communities in Central India are patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal and patronymic, however, women seem to be enjoying better status in terms of power and respect as compared to the non-Adivasi societies. There are challenges related to giving land rights to women, witch-hunting and other forms of gender-based violence. (Ghosh, “Adivasis”)

Trends of Crime against Adivasi

One striking point to note is the rising crime rate against STs, which might be a response to the rise of Adivasi activism and resistance. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), crime against STs has been on the rise, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. The report has unveiled the fact that the crimes against ST have increased by 111.18% during 1991-2021, with another increase of 6.4% between 2020 (8272 crimes against STs) and 2021. The crimes against STs have more than doubled in 30 years (4168 crimes in 1991 and 8802 in 2021). The report has also revealed that crimes against women, particularly rape, are also increasing for STs (See Table 1 and Figure 2). Reported instances of rape (including rape of minors under 18) against ST women and girls were 334 in 1991, amounting to 8.01% of the total reported crime against STs. Rape has increased to 1,324 in 2021, accounting for 4.18% of the total reported rape crimes in India (Table 1). In 2021, cases of rape of minors, attempt to rape, assault on women to outrage their modesty, and kidnapping of women and children cumulatively are 26.8% of the total crime against STs (2359 out of 8802 crimes against STs) (National Crime Record Bureau). It is an alarming fact that most of the cases of atrocities against ST have not been reported or settled outside the court due to fear or political pressure. Out of the reported cases, the majority are neither investigated nor prosecuted. The 2021 report revealed that a total of 12,159 cases remain pending (under investigation), including the previous year’s cases. Conviction under the SCs (Schedule Castes) and STs Act (POA) in conjunction with the Indian Penal Code (IPC) remained at 28%, and those that were pending trial amounted to 95.4% for STs.

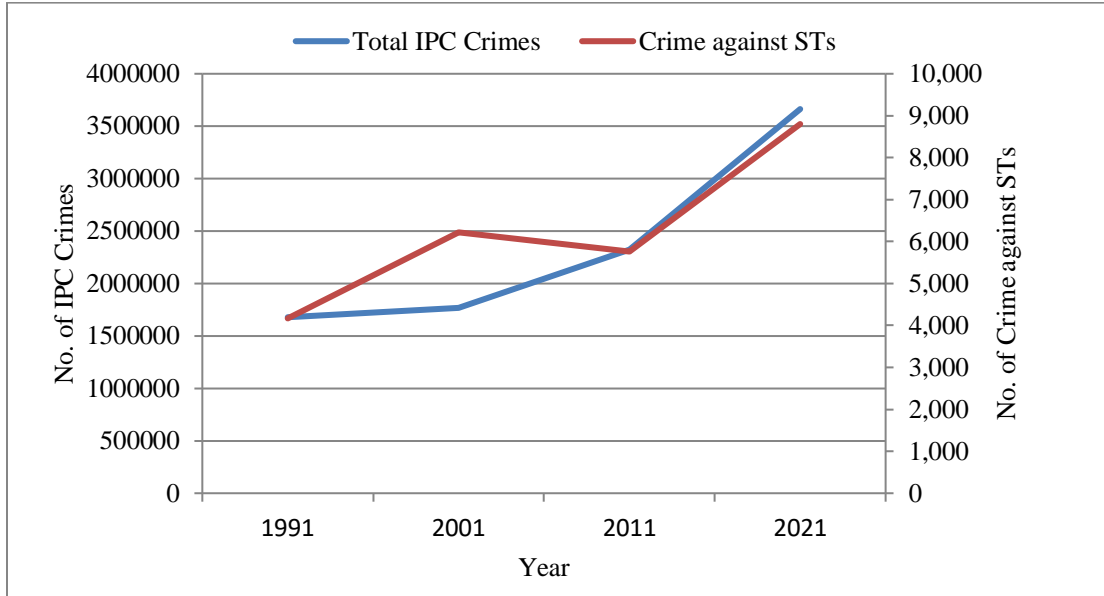
Table 1: Crime and Rape Crime against STs in Relation to Total IPC Crimes and Total Rape Crimes in India (1991-2021)

Year	Total IPC* Crimes	Crimes against STs	Share of Crime against STs in Total IPC Crimes (%)	Total Rape Crimes	Rape Crime against STs	Share of Rape Crime against STs in Total Rape Crimes (%)
1991	1678375	4,168	0.25	10410	334	3.21
2001	1769308	6,217	0.35	16075	573	3.56
2011	2325575	5,756	0.25	24206	772	3.19
2021	3663360	8,802	0.24	31677	1,324	4.18

*IPC= Indian Penal Code

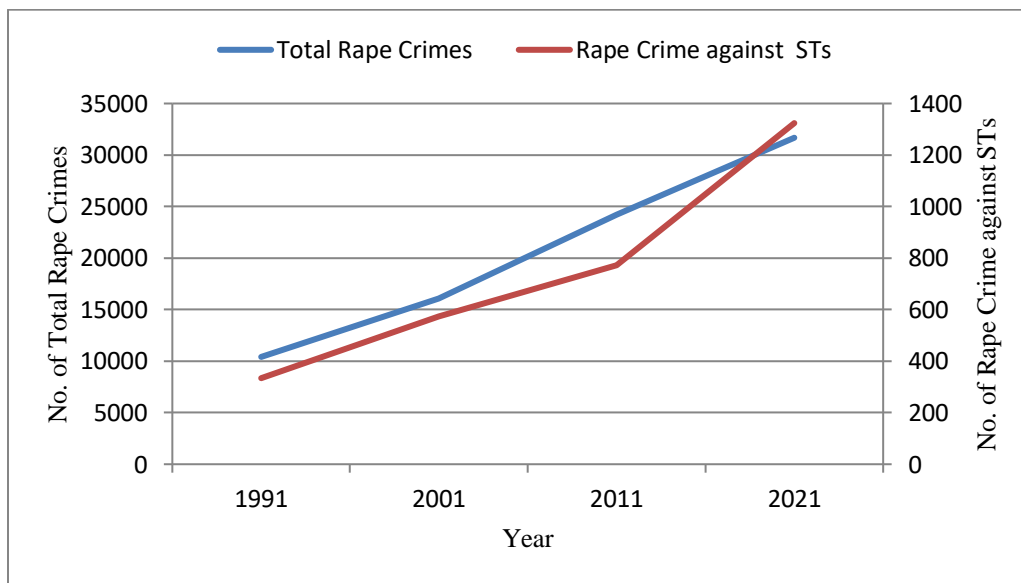
Sources: NCRB, *Crime in India (1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021)*

Figure 1: Total IPC Crimes compared to Crimes against STs in India (1991-2021)



Source: NCRB, *Crime in India (1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021)*

Figure 2: Total Rape Crimes compared to Rape Crimes against STs in India (1991-2021)

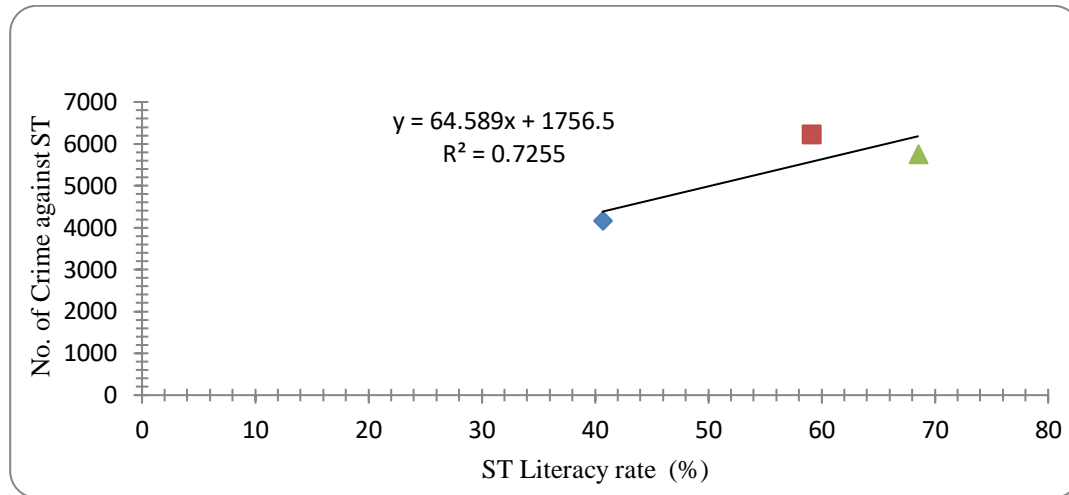


Source: NCRB, *Crime in India (1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021)*

There exists a positive relationship between the growing literacy rate of ST and the rising number of crimes against them (Fig. 3). A positive correlation between increased crime and rising education of STs has been observed. It has also been noted that the correlation coefficient value of the relationship of the literacy of ST people and crime against them is 0.85 which is significant at a level of 0.5. It carries two probable implications: one is upper caste society's attitude of

vengeance towards the educational development of the Scheduled Tribes, and the other is that the Adivasi people are now more conscious about their legal rights, are accessing law, and are having more cases registered.

Figure 3: Relationship between ST Literacy and Crime against STs



Source: NCRB and Census of India (1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021)

The equation of the rise of Adivasi confrontation and the increased number of rapes of Adivasi women is very crucial as it suggests multiple interpretations. Violence against Adivasi women can be identified as attempts by upper-castes to keep the Adivasi community in their prescribed place and suppress their voice. Moreover, there is a possibility that the progress of tribal peoples has caused those in power (upper caste and higher class) to become insecure about their status and use violence as a way to secure the status hierarchy. When tribals seek to achieve status (higher education and jobs), they become more exposed to violence. Smriti Sharma conducted a similar type of research demonstrating a direct relationship between the rise in violent hate crimes and the diminishing disparity in living standards between Dalits and dominant castes. He found that these crimes frequently aim to obliterate symbols of Dalit advancement, such as residences, businesses, possessions, and vehicles, often through acts of arson (Sharma). However, these efforts at control also manifest in methods intended to inflict maximum emotional anguish and degradation, such as sexual assault, public humiliation through stripping, coerced consumption of feces, and the dissemination of degrading attacks on social media platforms (Sharma).

NGOs and Activism

The 1990s witnessed a drastic increase of overall Dalit and Adivasi activism in the social, political, and cultural spheres in India. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes reservation in government jobs and higher education, a growing awareness rooted in the philosophy of Ambedkar led to changes in Indian political, social, and literary discourse. Educated and dedicated people from all sections of society came to the forefront to lead Adivasi activism. Adivasi political parties, schoolteachers, doctors, lawyers, railway employees, and Adivasi representatives of mainstream political parties started participating and advocating in the political space.

In the initial phase, Christian missionaries who were active in the Adivasi-dominated areas played significant roles in sensitizing, educating, and motivating newly joined NGO workers. These NGOs started gaining international attention in the last years of the 20th century. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), an international body of 18 independent experts, was established to administer the implementation of the International Conventions on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). It was formed on December 21, 1965, and started functioning in 1969 based on state reports, individual complaints, and inter-state complaints. For 20 years, India continued reporting about the status of its SC and ST population, but in 1996, it stopped reporting. Martin Aranguren writes, “In this context, India submitted a report that denied the occurrence of racial discrimination in its territory and discontinued a 20-year-long tradition of reporting on the Scheduled Castes. The omission did not go unnoticed, and the Committee received in parallel a formally sound alternate report on atrocities and untouchability” (37). During the 1980s and 1990s, a lot of NGOs emerged “partly as a result of the failure of official aid and welfare programmes to reach down to the poor” (Dabhi 395). They started working to uplift less privileged people, especially the Dalit and Adivasi. The main motives of these non-government actors are supporting and aiding development and social safety.

Role of PRADAN in the Development of Adivasi

Founded in 1983 by two visionary young professionals, Deep Joshi and Vijay Mahajan, PRADAN has proved to be one of the most important NGOs working on poverty alleviation and supporting vulnerable communities like Adivasi and Dalit with special emphasis on women of those communities. The Indian central government, various state governments, and local bodies appreciated and adopted PRADAN’s innovative plans to eliminate poverty, fortify women’s safety, and generate small income among the poor households. The wide network of PRADAN reaches out to 10 million people and more than 9,000 villages across 40 districts in seven states, namely West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Orissa. It reached 1,947,979 rural houses, touching 9.7 million individual lives. In 2021 and 2022, PRADAN assisted 659,309 women with their livelihood, 625,250 women in agriculture and horticulture activities, 25,286 women in small and medium enterprises, 232,175 women in livestock rearing, 24,039 self-help groups, and 220,000 women provided with training. Moreover, 32,994 women farmers were taught theories of regenerative farming. PRADAN empowered the Adivasi community to access forest rights, and 81,214 hectares of lands have been gained under community forest rights. For gender equality, 6,874 women leaders and cadres have been trained.

PRADAN focuses on areas with high levels of illiteracy, poverty, poor health, and other forms of injustice and inequality. PRADAN chooses to work in the Adivasi dominated areas of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal because their Adivasi populations are mostly under severe poverty, and the condition of Adivasi women is even worse. Child marriage, high maternal mortality, dowry, and financial crisis are rampant issues in these areas. The scholars associated with the PRADAN research wing report on the wretched conditions of Adivasi women in Hazaribagh District of Jharkhand:

Around 41.8% of girls get married before the age of 18 and around 17.3% become mothers before completing 18 years (DLHS 2007-2008). Six out of ten women are subjected to domestic violence. Dowry is one of the main reasons that a family is in debt (from SHGs or other financial agencies); with no resources to repay the loan, the family gets trapped in a vicious debt cycle. For women, whose husbands have migrated, life becomes all the more

difficult. She has to depend on the irregular remittance from her husband or, at times, even has to give in to the sexual and physical exploitation by her own relatives for survival (Bose and Thakur 13).

PRADAN Self-Help Groups and Adivasi Women's Empowerment

PRADAN has undertaken various programs to unify tribal women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs). It introduced several income-generating activities like poultry, spinning, and farming, and assisted Adivasi women to access microfinance systems to deposit small amounts of money and take out loans in a time of need or emergency. For example, such deposits and loans were used at the time of payment of school fees for their children, daughters' marriages, and emergency medical treatment. PRADAN sought to bring women out of the clutches of money lenders who trap them in a complicated web of debt; when debts cannot be repaid, the lenders take land or other possessions of poor tribal families.

PRADAN has a distinct formal structure in their organization, for example, women unite at Panchayat (village administration) level, the base unit of their structure. These small Self-Help Groups (SHGs) then form the cluster at the block level, and at the end, women federate themselves at the district level. This federation of women is called Damodar Mahila Mandal (DMM). These large groups of united women have immense power to influence administration and political structure. It gives women a strong platform to be united, fight injustice, claim legal aid, and financially benefit their families. The united strength of the Damodar Mahila Mandal often aids Adivasi victim women to find justice in their families or in villages. Sarbani Bose and Sudarshan Thakur in PRADAN's *NewReach: The Livelihoods and Development Monthly* state "There are many instances when these women have solved cases of domestic violence or dowry reported by the members. They have even staged *gheraos* in Block Offices and Banks to claim their rights related to government schemes or SHG financing" (1-2).

The members of the cluster organize several meetings and decide the common minimum agenda to work on for the next five years. Their goals range from financial to social causes. They also organize different cultural programs like skits or street plays to create awareness about social evils and legal rights. PRADAN Self-Help Groups try to make public services accessible to Adivasi women and bring positive changes in their lifestyle. Antara Lahiri, in her article "Need for Legal Interventions to Empower Women," presented that "Traditionally, SHGs have been able to provide the mechanism wherein concerns on gender, institutional development and provision of financial services have converged" (Lahiri 1).

Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS) and Nari Adalat (Women's Court) of PRADAN

PRADAN conducted a similar kind of development drive in the Adivasi-dominated regions of Madhya Pradesh. Domestic violence has been an alarming issue here, and in most cases such incidents are alcohol-induced. The government gives tribal people the right to produce and store alcohol as a part of the conservation of their culture. But it has numerous adverse effects like domestic violence, draining of savings, and poor health, and Adivasi women suffer the worst effects. There are certain villages in which almost 40% of women are widows as their spouses died at a young age due to excessive consumption of alcohol. Adivasi women, however, are not aware of the legal provisions. There is a law that if 50 tribal women file a petition for the cessation of a local liquor store, then it must be shut down, but due to external pressure or a lack of knowledge, no such petition has been reported to the government offices. In Adivasi societies, incidents of domestic violence are accepted as a natural societal reality. Patriarchal beliefs blended with

religious views are deeply rooted in the psyche of the women dwelling here. They think that it is a sin to accuse one's husband or in-laws because these women believe they are destined to live with the same set of in-laws for their next seven lives as they believe in rebirth. Antara Lahiri records the statement of the Executive Magistrate for Shahpur district, Madhya Pradesh: "it was seen that women, who have been physically abused such that they are nearly dead, even upon their deathbed endeavour to safeguard their in-laws. This is because they believe that they will have to live with the same family when they recover, not taking into consideration that they may not survive" (6). Furthermore, according to the 2005 Domestic Violence Act which aimed to uplift the condition of women and provide legal safety, a Protection Officer or administrative officer must be appointed in every block, but no one has been appointed in this region so far. PRADAN works diligently in organizing women to unite to fight issues collectively. In the Madhya Pradesh state, the Adivasi women formed the women's organization, Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS). In the Kesla block, NMS has the strength of 8,700 women members. This group forms the Nari Adalat (Women's Court) to offer justice to victimized Adivasi women. These types of informal courts prove to be more effective in solving domestic violence cases and providing justice to women than established legal setups, as women of these remote areas cannot travel to the city to approach district or sub-divisional courts, and they cannot afford the costs either.

To understand the overall condition of the poor Adivasi women in tribal areas, PRADAN activists conducted interviews with tribal women, administrative officials, and judicial and police officers of that region. In Lahiri's article in *NewsReach*, she presents the life story of an Adivasi woman, Saiwati Bai. She is a member of Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS) who has undergone several challenges including severe poverty, malnutrition, health issues and domestic violence. Bai stated that like her a lot of tribal women face the same fate. Tribal women do not get the full payment of NREGA Works (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, enacted in 2005), as the *Munshi* (accountant) takes a cut of the money as commission. Some of the tribal women even succumbed to slavery when in debt for a small amount of money to *Seths* and *Sahukans* (money lenders). Saiwati Bai further mentions that the women's unit of PRADAN NMS infused hope into their lives. Women here felt the need for a Mahila Gram Sabha (Women Local Body) because in the state-established local council, "women are either not allowed to speak or are not in a position to speak freely. Women *Sarpanches* tend to echo their husband's wishes only and do not have a voice of their own" (Lahiri 9).

PRADAN's Gender-Sensitizing Efforts

PRADAN organizes several training camps and gender sensitization meetings to create awareness among the Adivasi women. PRADAN professionals found it challenging to convince local Adivasi women that they are not less equal and have the full right to live with equal respect. Gender equality was a completely alien concept to rural Adivasi women. Patriarchal beliefs are so strong and well accepted that they consider it quite natural and normal to be beaten by their husbands and other men of the family. Anam Fatima in her article, "Gender Struggle: Changing Beliefs, Challenging Patriarchy," observes, "Often, women leaders expressed their inability to explain to the others adequately about gender, especially when they were cross-questioned. This was made even more difficult because this 'new concept of equality' was immoral for the women" (Fatima 25). In the existing social structure, they have only one common identity as women. Their individual identity is ignored, and they are expected to follow the common gender-prescribed norms. In the face of these cultural ideas, PRADAN took a different approach. They invited women to share their own experiences as it would enable other women to recognize that they are going

through the same kind of life experiences which will create a sense of sisterhood: “to familiarize the women with the issue of gender, we need to work on the subjective identity of women and not impose upon them a leader-centric approach” (Fatima 25). Then PRADAN implemented small initial steps like making Adivasi women conscious of health and nutrition, the significance of education, the importance of being economically independent, and the evils of child marriage and the dowry system. Women are invited to attend workshops and training sessions which attempt to present them with the complex workings of patriarchy in order to guide them in understanding gender discrimination and fighting discrimination collectively. Pandit Arjun’s *NewsReach* article records how a village woman Shanti became aware of the discrimination and gradually turned out to be an active member to stop violence and other forms of discrimination committed against other women of that locality:

Participating in the trainings and meetings, Shanti realized that the majority of the women she met had undergone some form of physical abuse in their homes but had accepted it as a part of their fate as women. Shanti was disturbed by this and decided to take it up as a critical issue. She organized the women to speak up against incidents of domestic violence and successfully resolved issues that came up, with the support of other women. (Arjun30)

Witch-hunting is another prevalent issue in the Adivasi-dominated area. It is a practice in which the *Ojha* (witch hunter) accuses someone who they observe to have unusual behavior. The accused person is declared evil and is counted as responsible for any ill fate in the village or the community. The victim woman becomes the target of collective torture and wrath which can lead to gang rape and death. In the Jharkhand state alone, nearly 200 women die every year, even after the government banned this ritual. PRADAN research scholar, Antara Lahiri narrates such an incident in her article, “Need for Legal Interventions to Empower Women,” in which a person accused his own sister of being a witch and she was asked “to prove her innocence by digging up a buried idol while she was naked. The sister complied with the same in the presence of the entire village” (Lahiri 9). Nathan and Kelkar in their research article further explored other motivations behind such practices:

The accusation of sorcery or witchcraft, argue feminist scholars, cannot be given religious–social sanctity as this is often a garb to exploit Adivasi women...Accusations are often deployed due to social and gender dynamics, such as by family members wanting to usurp land, particularly of an old, single or widowed Adivasi woman. (Nathan and Kelkar 74–75)

NMS works unwaveringly to prevent such incidents. When victimized women reach out to them, the NMS takes the matter to the Judiciary and provides legal aid to the victim. PRADAN’s research and analytic teams work closely with NMS women members to understand the experiences of Adivasi women and recommend means for the further improvement of their situation.

Political Illiteracy of Adivasi Women and PRADAN’s Awareness Programs

Owing to the lack of awareness, Adivasi women cannot avail the benefits of many government acts and schemes. For example, they are often uninformed of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which guarantees a hundred days of employment at the minimum wage rate to every rural household. Adivasi women are unacquainted with political

rights also. For example, the 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution reserved a certain number of seats for SC, ST, and women so that they can get more involved in decision-making processes and assert their voice and power, but Adivasi women are not informed of their rights. Even if they were elected, Adivasi women could enjoy very little of the power. They would become *Sarpanch* (*Pradhan/village administrator*) on paper only, and their husbands or other male guardians would actually run the machinery. We observe a common phenomenon whereby the husband of the administrator enjoys the whole power, although legally he is not the one elected. Significantly, women representatives find themselves in a better position to exert their power when they are well-educated. For instance, Smitha is a young, educated Adivasi woman who participated in the electoral process and became a *Sarpanch* at the young age of 22. She recalled different types of hardships she had to encounter during her five years tenure. Smitha mentioned that her education and awareness invited plenty of difficulties because corrupt people prefer an uneducated *Sarpanch* so that they could be influenced more easily to misuse the fund. She has utilized 70 lacs of the fund in various public works and policies that irked the corrupt people who tried to demote her unsuccessfully, and she maintained transparency throughout (Lahiri 5-6).

Forest Rights Act and Adivasi Women

The Adivasi share a special relationship with nature and their territorial land. It is a part of their consciousness:

Adivasi management of resources is fundamentally different from the mere allocation of land to individual families. Adivasis understand that the individual and the community belong to the land by virtue of their ancestors being seated in a given territory. The territory is an extension of the Adivasis' collective consciousness with a cultural, political and social significance (and it enables the elders to manage the community. (Bijoy 7)

The 2006 Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act identifies the constitutional rights to forest resources for the tribes and other traditional forest inhabitants, who have been living on the forest for generations and are dependent on it. Sanjay Upadhyay, the Tahsildar and Executive Magistrate of Sahapur, explained that the Forest Right Act “is very favourable. It permits tribals to claim rights to the land, which they are in possession of and upon which they are economically dependent” (qtd. in Lahiri 3). It provides some additional advantages to tribal women. But while communicating with the local Adivasi women, the PRADAN research team could not find Adivasi women that received such benefits from the law. The government most likely passed the act but did not create much awareness of these constitutional rights among the people. This sort of casual attitude is evident on the part of the government officials in charge of the Forest Right enactment departments. Tribal women find it difficult to access the forest resources which they directly depend upon. Lahiri observes, “Adivasi women are apparently facing problems in getting access to local forests in order to procure wood and forest produce. There is a discrepancy between the statement of ground reality given by the government official and the woman interviewed” (5).

PRADAN's Initiations of Adaptive Skills in Adivasi Regions

Agriculture and forest resources are chiefly the means of livelihood in Adivasi areas, but the forest can no longer sustain the Adivasi because of factors like restricted access to forest resources, utter reliance on natural rainfall, the steady shrinking of agricultural land with the

influence of modernization. Out of need, they had to migrate to cities and work for cheap wages. Through the years of multi-dimensional efforts, PRADAN brought positive economic changes to the Adivasi villages. They imparted modern skills and technologies to the villagers and made them familiar with advanced agricultural products like hybrid seeds and fertilizers, but by doing so, PRADAN members noticed certain concerning changes. The Adivasi are getting away from their roots and forgetting their traditional knowledge of herbs, the skill of producing seeds, and natural animal-rearing techniques. Their increasing dependence on modern facilities has dulled their knowledge of ancient skills; moreover, the Adivasi became vulnerable to modern fertilizers which are harmful both to their physical health and the overall ecology. To create a better balance, PRADAN introduced adaptive skills through action research with its main purpose to make them conscious of the pros and cons before using any new technology, and at the same time encouraging them to blend new technology with traditional methods to maintain the ecology.

Conclusion

For more than four decades, PRADAN has been engaged in Adivasi regions to promote and affirm economic safety, gender justice, and women's safety, as well as to address problems such as women's illiteracy, forced slavery, domestic violence, and witch-hunting. PRADAN's community-based strategies and sustainable developmental programs to work closely with local Adivasi women have proven to have long lasting effects. PRADAN's initiatives to make Adivasi women economically independent are widely acclaimed. The formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in tribal areas, to avail Adivasi of loans, government schemes, assistance in income-generating practices such as poultry, horticulture, small and medium enterprises, live-stock rearing, and regenerative farming are benefitting Adivasi women and transforming their households in general. PRADAN is not only concerned about economic causes, but it also works for social safety, to eliminate crimes against Adivasi women, domestic violence, witchcraft accusations, maternal mortality, malnourishment, and literal and political illiteracy. PRADAN adopted several gender-sensitizing programs to create gender awareness in Adivasi localities through community meetings, workshops, and cultural events. The federations of self-help groups like Damodar Mahila Mandal, women's organizations like Narmada Mahila Sangh, and Nari Adalat all promote and pledge women's safety, eliminate fear, and make space for women to come together and form a sense of sisterhood. They promptly address gender violence issues, stand by the victims, facilitate the utilization of law, and assure justice. They collectively influence administration and law and policymakers. Sometimes PRADAN acts as a mediator between the government and Adivasi populations; for example, there are several constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, but often Adivasi people are not aware of it. There are strict provisions to prevent violence against Adivasi in general and particularly Adivasi women. In those cases, PRADAN conducts awareness drives to make women cognizant of their constitutional rights and aid them in accessing the law, court, and administration. PRADAN can do this because they work on the grassroots level and have a vast network. Though all their goals have not yet been achieved and thousands of years of wounds cannot be healed overnight, justice and equality prevail in the world of the Adivasi. Since PRADAN's successful work for the socio-economic development of Adivasi women is widely acknowledged, many state governments and local administrative bodies adopt the strategies of PRADAN and in various areas they work with PRADAN in the Adivasi lands.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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