

# The Social Status and Health of Bhil Women

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The Bhil tribe plays a significant role in the social, cultural, and economic structure of their community. Anthropologists, medical scientists, and sociologists have conducted several studies regarding the position and health of women within the tribal society, considering various factors that influence their status. However, in the age of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, the status and health of tribal women are either comparable to or diverge from those of women in other societies. The question of the social and economic status of women—half the population—still remains unresolved. Although, compared to other communities, women in tribal societies have generally enjoyed a better social status, the impact of new social and cultural interactions, along with development processes, is now making their condition deplorable. The stringent laws and controls imposed by the forest department have left women unemployed. The allure of mass media and advertisements has led to a decline in women's traditional attire and jewelry. Family relocations, inheritance traditions, marital rules, religious beliefs, and leadership models have slowly transformed the social standing of women. They have begun to take on new roles and tasks, resulting in changes within the social structure of the Bhil community.

Doshi (1971) conducted an in-depth study of the Bhil community and noted the status of unmarried girls. He mentioned that the Bhils believe unmarried girls to be as pure as the flames of fire, symbolizing fertility, which gives them a higher status. When the crops ripen, the first portion of the rice is given to the girl. During wedding ceremonies, the girl welcomes the groom, holding a clay pot on her head, and unties the knot in the couple's clothes. The unmarried girl's presence is considered auspicious, and her status is higher compared to that of married women. However, after marriage, her status changes.

Dube (1955) wrote that most efforts to improve the status and health of tribal women have been political or sentimental, and little attention has been given to developing a systematic approach that balances regional and national interests. Organizations working in tribal areas often failed to relate to the social values and problems of tribal women.

Singh (1991) studied the role of women in tribal societies and clarified that, compared to ancient and medieval times, the position of women in tribal societies is undergoing significant changes. With increasing exposure to modern society and government services, their social and cultural customs and institutions are rapidly transforming, particularly in urban and suburban areas.

Mehta (1993) linked the status and health of Bhil tribal women to their dependence on nature and explained that due to strict forest regulations, women have become unemployed instead of self-sufficient. Their reliance on other resources has exposed them to exploitation and oppression. The depletion of forests and government control over resources has negatively impacted the tribal economy. As a result, women have turned to cities for work, but the unhealthy working conditions have deteriorated their health. Poverty has also led to an increase in sexual exploitation and prostitution.

Shastri (1990) noted that Bhil tribal women in India carry a heavy burden. In addition to domestic work, they assist in agriculture, collect forest products, and play an active role in earning for their families. Due to excessive work pressure, they suffer from malnutrition, leading to reduced fertility and shorter life expectancy.

Maan (1984) studied the continuity and stability of Bhil women, examining the factors—both planned and unplanned—that affect their socio-economic conditions. He observed that, influenced by Hindu social norms and cultural processes, Bhil women have adopted customs and values they consider positive, though these have impacted their social status and traditional practices. This has led to a promotion of inequality in male-female relations, and contradictions and complexities are now apparent within the tribal community.

Patriarchal structures have significantly influenced the social status and health of women in tribal societies. The male-dominated system has weakened women's position, portraying them as helpless. While tribal women live on par with men during childhood and adolescence, their status becomes inferior after marriage. In tribal societies, issues such as poverty, superstition, insufficient and poor-quality food, lack of healthcare, unhealthy working conditions, and high birth and death

rates have contributed to a poor health status for women. For balanced social development and prosperity, both men and women are essential parts of society. Exploitation of either gender is detrimental to a healthy and prosperous society. Women bear and nurture children, raising future members of society. If the mother's health, education, and moral values are not well taken care of, how can she contribute to creating good citizens for society and the nation?

Several social reform movements and feminist liberation organizations have been initiated to secure equality and freedom for women. The International Women's Day, International Women's Year, conferences on women's upliftment, seminars, and research are some of the results of these efforts. The Constitution has granted women legal rights related to marriage, divorce, dowry, rape, widow remarriage, property rights, and social security. However, in practice, women have not been able to fully benefit from these rights. Men have had better access to education, employment, health security, and medical services.

The studies on the status and health of Bhil women indicate a continuous decline in their condition due to the impact of the modern economy. Relationships based on equality and fraternity have been affected, and urbanization has altered their lifestyle, beliefs, and practices. In the Bhil tribe, which developed in harmony with nature and where there was minimal discrimination, gender inequalities have gradually increased due to the influence of the new social order, with women bearing the brunt of these changes. A detailed analysis is underway regarding the factors influencing the social status and health of women.

### **EDUCATION AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

Education is a key factor in determining the status of Bhil women. Tribal women face a significant lack of formal education, which leads to exploitation by non-tribal communities due to ignorance and lack of awareness. One major reason for the lack of interest in education among tribal communities is that the existing education system does not align with their needs and values. In Rajasthan, the literacy level of women is significantly lower compared to other tribal groups in India. According to the 2011 Census, the average literacy rate for tribal women in India is 18.9%, whereas in Rajasthan it is only 4.42%. In contrast, the literacy rate for women across India is 39.42%, while for women in Rajasthan, it stands at 20.84%.

It has often been observed that most parents in the Bhil community still do not understand the importance of educating their daughters. Many girls are involved in domestic chores, livestock care, agricultural labor, and work as manual laborers, along with their education. Even in the present era of development, there is little enthusiasm for educating girls in the Bhil community.

#### **Parda System and Women's Status**

One of the practices that affect the status of women is the parda system. However, this practice is negligible among tribal women compared to Hindu women. Only newly married women observe parda for a short period, and once they integrate into the family, they generally abandon the practice. Tribal women are not forced to observe parda. In ancient societies, there was a system of segregation, but the parda practice was never imposed as a legal obligation on women in tribal communities. It is not a problem specific to tribal societies but can be observed in Hindu and Muslim communities as well. In tribal societies, women may adopt parda to honor traditional male thinking, but the practice is not as rigid as in Hindu communities. Based on observations of the Bhil tribe, it can be said that only newly married women adopt parda for a short time, and once they are well integrated into their family and relatives, they discontinue it. In the Bhil community, women are not compelled to follow purdah.

#### **Inheritance Rights and Women's Status**

A key indicator of women's lower status is their exclusion from inheritance rights in family matters. In the traditional social structure, inheritance of family property is typically the exclusive right of sons. Daughters are rarely given a share of ancestral property. The prevailing belief is that if property is divided among daughters, it passes into another family's hands. Daughters are considered "someone else's wealth," and this notion leads to daughters not having equal rights as sons in the Bhil community, much like in Hindu society. Due to the patriarchal structure of tribal society, women never claim their right or share in their father's property. They gladly accept whatever gifts or resources their father offers with family consent.

#### **Bride Price and Women's Status**

The practice of bride price, known as "Dapa" in the Bhil community, is prevalent during marriages. This amount is agreed upon by both parties before the wedding. The bride's family receives this amount from the groom's father as part of the marriage arrangement. The payment of this bride price is a requirement for the marriage to take place. If either the husband or wife seeks a divorce, the bride price must be settled, whether it is the first or subsequent marriage. This practice assigns a

commodity-like value to women. Polygamy is also practiced in some tribal communities, where a man marrying multiple women is considered a symbol of prestige. Economically well-off men often take additional wives to raise their status. The Bhil tribe's societal structure is patriarchal, where men have authority, and the practice of bride price indicates a hierarchical, tiered social system.

Even though in many regions there may be equality between men and women, there are still areas where tribal women's status is subordinate, especially in matters like bride price, polygamy, inheritance, and property rights. However, women in tribal societies generally live on equal terms with men from childhood to young adulthood. Both men and women have equal rights to divorce, but practices like bride price and polygamy show a disparity in the status of women compared to men, particularly concerning inheritance rights and control over family property.

#### **Marriage Partner Selection Freedom and Women's Status**

In Bhil society, marriage is seen as a social and economic contract rather than a religious rite, unlike in Hindu society. Tribal people select their marriage partners based on social and cultural norms. Boys and girls have the freedom to choose their marriage partners, but this freedom is often balanced by the involvement of parents. Marriages are generally based on the mutual preferences of both parties involved. Additionally, there is a practice of "co-residential" marriages, where individuals might live together before formalizing the marriage. This does not mean that marriage decisions are entirely free, but it reflects the importance of mutual consent.

Bhil women are free to express their preferences regarding a marriage partner in front of their parents and family. If the parents do not approve, some women may enter into a love marriage or elope. Over time, their families and society may come to accept the union.

#### **Divorce Freedom and Women's Status**

One of the significant factors influencing women's status is their freedom to divorce and their rights to children and property after divorce. In tribal societies, both men and women generally have the right to seek a divorce. According to Murdok, in 250 tribes, both husbands and wives have equal divorce rights. Only in six tribes do men have special rights regarding divorce, and in four tribes, women are granted special rights in this regard. In matriarchal societies, women often have more privileges compared to men, but in patriarchal societies, women's rights are limited. Divorce may occur due to reasons such as infidelity, infertility, impotence, neglect of household duties, or quarrelsome behavior. While divorce rights can weaken the stability of a marriage, it also creates challenges related to child-rearing and socialization.

In Bhil society, women have the right to divorce but often face greater difficulties than men after divorce. In such cases, women may return to their father's or maternal uncle's home and later may be remarried. The rights of women to children, husband's property, or alimony are often difficult to claim, and they generally experience more hardship than men in divorce situations.

#### **Discrimination in Wages and the Status of Women:**

In tribal societies, both men and women contribute to the family economy through their labor. In addition to agriculture, they earn wages in various industries and construction work. Due to the growing impact of industrialization and the changing demands in the employment sector, both men and women have increasingly shifted towards urban occupations. Most women contribute to the family income through daily wages in construction work. However, discrimination in wages between men and women exists across all sectors, particularly in unhealthy working conditions, poor living areas, and settlements.

The fact that women in the Bhil community earn lower wages compared to men reflects the patriarchal mindset of society. Moreover, the fact that women do not protest against such discrimination further perpetuates this system. Several laws have been established to grant women equal rights with men, but these laws are still not effective in practice. The primary reason for this is the lack of awareness among women about equality-related laws, as well as the absence of movements advocating for equality.

#### **Birth of Children and the Status of Women:**

The status of women in society is significantly influenced by their ability to bear children. In most societies, women who are infertile or childless are considered inferior and are often treated with neglect. In traditional societies, the inability to bear children is considered solely the woman's fault, although men can be equally responsible. Despite this, the blame is typically placed on women, and patriarchal societies have even coined derogatory terms for women who are unable to conceive. In the Bhil society, similar to Hindu society, women who cannot bear children are seen as inferior and face

various forms of slander and mistreatment. If a woman is unable to conceive after a prolonged marriage, her husband may marry again.

#### **Awareness of Government Laws and Women's Status:**

Even after 75 years of independence, many women in the country are still unaware of their rights. Women in India have been granted numerous rights and privileges, as stipulated by the Constitution. Articles 14, 15, 15B, 16, 39B, 39C, and 42 ensure equality before the law, protection from discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, and equal opportunities in employment. Laws such as the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986, and Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, along with the Sati Prevention Act, 1986, have been enacted. Despite these laws, women's status has not improved significantly due to their lack of awareness, lack of education, and the persistence of traditional practices.

#### **Health and the Status of Women:**

In the tribal socio-cultural structure, women's health care is provided at varying levels. The health status of individuals is closely tied to lifestyle, gender behavior, social values, and cultural conditions. In tribal societies, beliefs and practices related to health, disease, and treatment are not separate but are an integral part of the overall culture. Through the process of socialization, every society shapes its members' behavior, values, and habits, including knowledge related to health preservation.

The primary basis for human development is health. A healthy person creates a healthy society, and a healthy society interacts with its environment for continuous development. However, obstacles to this interaction, such as diseases, emerge when society faces adverse conditions. Tribal communities believe that economic conditions, health, and well-being can be manipulated through magical practices, often due to ignorance or inability to identify the real causes of disease.

Studies, such as those conducted by Singh in Udaipur city, show that factors like lack of personal hygiene, poor nutrition, absence of education, environmental issues, and the negligence of health workers have all adversely affected the health of tribal communities. Nagda's survey in Dungarpur district found that social and cultural factors significantly contribute to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Tribal youth enjoy greater sexual freedom than other ethnic groups, which leads to higher instances of sexual relationships before marriage and subsequently to STDs.

#### **Housing and the Status of Women:**

The living environment is a crucial factor affecting women's health. Housing is an integral part of a person's overall environment and plays a role in determining their health status. Tribal's build homes using natural resources such as wood, bamboo, mud, and stone. Most of these houses are poorly constructed and lack proper ventilation or windows, leading to poor sanitation and health conditions. Cooking is often done inside the same room where people sleep, and the smoke from burning wood can linger in the house, negatively affecting the health of women and children.

#### **Marital Age and Women's Status:**

Marriage is a social institution that legitimizes sexual relations between men and women, ensuring the continuity of society. In tribal communities, women often marry before reaching the age of full physical maturity. This early marriage leads to early and frequent pregnancies, which in turn disrupts their physical development. Physically weak, mentally burdened, and economically dependent, women are often confined to domestic chores, leading to a lack of education and poverty. These factors hinder their overall development.

#### **Family Planning and Women's Status:**

Family planning is crucial to improving women's health. It is not just about controlling birth but involves proper reproductive health management, regulating birth rates, and ensuring family well-being. The goal of family planning is to secure the life of pregnant women, promote child health, and maintain family balance. In traditional societies, family planning is often neglected, and tribal families have a negative outlook on its practice. They tend to see children as a divine blessing and fail to understand the importance of limiting family size.

#### **Prenatal Care and Women's Health:**

In tribal societies, pregnancy and childbirth are viewed as divine events. However, due to superstitions and traditional practices, maternal and infant mortality rates remain high. Many tribal women still rely on traditional methods of childbirth, often assisted by midwives or elderly women, due to the lower costs compared to modern medical care. Despite the availability of healthcare workers, women in these communities often avoid seeking professional care during childbirth.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of various factors affecting the social and health status of women in the Bhil community reveals that women's status is largely influenced by traditional norms and systems. While some changes have occurred, they are slow, primarily due to the isolation of tribal communities from the mainstream society. To improve the status and health of women in the Bhil society, it is necessary to introduce reforms that align with contemporary developmental needs, along with educational and cultural improvements. Only through such changes can their well-being be ensured.

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