

On the construction of gender and Indigenous knowledge: An ethnographic study among the Savara of West Bengal

Proggya Ghatak

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology
Government General Degree College Singur

ABSTRACT

The Savara, a hunting and gathering Scheduled Tribe, lived in the jungle terrain of West Bengal. The land and forest played an essential role to provide protection and sources of livelihood. The pattern of their general economic life reveals few subsidiary occupations are directly linked with the economy of their surrounding ecology. The change of subsistence strategy has resulted in an incipient disintegration of the fabric of traditional structure of Savara society but women still adhering their traditional livelihood. Forest and women are strongly interconnected with each other because women, particularly living in rural or geographically isolated areas, have a deep relationship with forest ecology because they are responsible for gathering food, fuel, fodder, leaves, and water for the family. Hence, women directly play an important role in the use of forest resources as well as the protection of forests which is very crucial to the success of the conservation policy. The deep knowledge of Savara women about forest and its natural resources has gradually been eroded because of the strong patriarchal domination of the modernization process which is bonded by traditional patriarchal culture of colonialism and Hinduism.

Keywords: Tribe, Gender, Livelihood, Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, Culture

INTRODUCTION

The Savara is a marginalized scheduled tribe distributed in North and South part of West Bengal. The term *Savara* is used for the tribal population living in forest (Risley2005). In ancient medieval literature *Savara* was used as a generic term for the tribal population to mean non-Indo-Aryan population living in forest (*Caryapada* 28 and 50). From the literary evidence of *Caryapada* of 10-11th century, it seems that the Savara have been living in the hilly terrains of Bengal –Bihar borders since 10th century AD. At that time, they had regular contact with the Hindu neighbours as appeared from the ancient and old Bengali texts collected by Sastri (1823) and interpreted by eminent authors namely Bagchi (1956), and Sahidullah (1974), Dasgupta (1950) Dalton (1872) and other early British administrators and ethnographers had considered them as marginalized primitive communities living in jungles as foragers but engaged to supply forest produce to the Hindu neighbours.

The land and forest played an essential role to provide protection and sources of livelihood. The East India Company was attempting to settle them in either in Indigo cultivation or labourers as railways construction work. Another important policy of “permanent settlement and other land-related measures” framed by the East India Company for revenue and other purposes curtailed their erstwhile freedom of living. It was applied to many districts of Bengal as well as in Midnapore district. At that time Midnapore comprised of 57 Parganas, out of which 24 Parganas had been given to the Zamindars. In this way the social mobility process allowed some caste, tribe and other communities of rural Bengal like Sadgops, Bhumij, Tellis or Khatriyas to become dominant groups as landlords in that region. The isolated forest tracts and

other khas lands were permanently leased out to these Zamindars. This unjust land settlement moreover gave non-tribals control over vast areas of isolated jungle tracts. The forest in which the Savara lived had been encroached by a few agricultural communities like Santals, Mahtaos and Sadgops. They cleared it for cultivation and other purposes. Their natural habitat no longer remains for settlement as their natural habitat. The Savara was ignorant of agricultural operations and still interested to follow the same archaic forest economy of collection of forest produce, hunting and trapping of animals. Thus, they were prohibited from free access into the forest and its use for their different existential needs and deprived of their hold and dependence on the forest. The condition of the forest-dependant Savara worsened because of the progressive dwelling of the forest around them. Hardly adequate forest was left for them to collect and to forge. This whole process displaced them from their eco system and forced them to forcefully migrate to the eastern part of Midnapore district which was less forested and had plenty of plain land which was useless for them. The forced migration to other part of ecology totally disrupted their social fabric and network of relations with their own community. They have adapted to the changing situation by accepting some new rituals and discarding some traditional elements of their social cultural life. They are engaged now in fishing, trapping birds, country liquor manufacture, wage labour, selling wood and engaged to supply forest produce to the Hindu neighbours. They are considerably much Hinduized and occupy a very low position in Hindu dominated social hierarchy of the regional social system (Bose 1941, Mitra1953). A shift from subsistence to an accumulative mode of production is a very major transformation in their social organization particularly the men. This has shaped up of Hinduized domination in the ritual and political spheres in conjunction with their ritual devaluation. However, with the passage of time and development of technological medicine and health infrastructure traditional indigenous knowledge is under serious threat. The traditional knowledge about the use of the naturally available plants and their products has been transmitted through oral communication within the society and has passed from generation to generation. Savara women played the key role in dissemination of the traditional knowledge and still adhering their age-old tradition of collecting and selling medicinal herbs. These medicinal plants gain further importance in the region where modern health facilities are either not available or not easily accessible. Therefore, it is an urgent need for documentation of their traditional knowledge. According to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), all the rights and freedoms are equally guaranteed to male and female indigenous individuals. There are also specific rights to traditional knowledge and access to resources that are recognized by the UNDRIP. It is important to remember the role of Indigenous women with regards to the protection of traditional knowledge.

Objective of the study

The present research was carried out to understand the importance of indigenous knowledge of Savara Women in their society as well as outside. The study also explores the traditional concepts of health and healing. An attempt was also made to find a meaningful collaboration between indigenous knowledge and belief system. Thus, the focus of the study was to identify and examine the changes in conservation of indigenous knowledge to the Savara women within the overall socio-economic dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was empirical, descriptive and analytical in nature. The interview schedule method was used to collect the primary data. In this context, attempt was made to take the response of the people through unstructured interview schedule, alongside focused group discussion. The methods of data collection were mainly based on preliminary surveys, observations, interviews and inquiries in order to obtain the required data. Participant observation method was followed during field- work based on the operation of economic and educational rehabilitation schemes. Hence, random sample survey of stratified type was adopted. In depth focused group interviews and discussion were done only among the Savara women about indigenous practices to cure and heal diseases. Apart from a general survey, unstructured and in-depth interviews were conducted with village elders, scholars and officials who had some knowledge of the community. Secondary data were comprised of both published and unpublished documents, various books, articles, seminar papers, journals, memorandums, newspapers and Internet sources. Data collection was carried out during October to- February academic year of 2022-23. The field study was conducted on a sample of 100 traditional healers including both men and Savra women from Pachim Medicinupur and Nirth 24 parganas, so as to represent different socio-economic status, demographic composition and ecological condition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was basically done among the Savara tribe in West Bengal Only. The sample survey comprises five villages belonging to two sub-divisions of the two districts of south Bengal namely North 24 Parganas and Paschim Medinipur. The Savara, is one of the smallest tribal communities distributed in the South Bengal. The concentration of the selected tribe is not spatially clustered and not found in a particular geographical region or locality. They are spatially diffused and live in tribal areas interspread among the tribal and non-tribal communities without having well defined territorial distribution pattern. The sample size of the population are as follows on table 1:

Table 1: Sample Size of the Savara Population

District	Subdivision	Village	Tribe	Population	
				Number	Percent
North 24 Parganas	Bongaon	Sundarpur	Savara	141	19.7
		Amdhop	Savara	323	44.9
Pachim Medinipur	Jhargram	Nathpur	Savara	161	22.5
		Khayarsuli	Savara	48	6.6
		Lalbazar	Savara	46	6.3
Total	2	5	1	719	100

The villages were homogenously inhabited by Savara population and they are surrounded by villages inhabited by lower caste Hindu community like Mahato, Paroi, Namasudra, Sadgop as well as Muslim community.

The Savara women

Savara society is basically a traditional hunting-gatherer-collection society and has been given tribal status for the purpose of development. The gradual expansion of the Hindu society, has directly or indirectly contributed towards the decline as well as transformation in their belief system. With the changing livelihood, they are still able to retain large number of distinctive social customs and cultural values to a large extent in spite of migration and acculturation. They adapted to the changing situation by accepting some new rituals and discarding some traditional elements of their social cultural life. Historical and Anthropological records (Mitra 1953, Bose 1971) shows that it was hardened among the indigenous community after the fall of the egalitarian social institutions during colonial and post-colonial times. The forced migration has shifted the community into different ecological setting and that lost altogether their closeness to nature. The problems have been largely attributed to the sweeping colonial conquests, religious expansions, emergence of statehood and economic crisis. Their ritual structure and practices also showed an irreparable destruction in the community identity. A shift from subsistence to an accumulative mode of production is a very major transformation of their social structure. This has shaped up of Hinduized domination in the ritual and political spheres in conjunction with their ritual devaluation. Savara Society is strictly based on the patriarchal system of institution where women do not have any substantial say practically in all the main decision-making matters whether at home or outside. In spite of this, it is the women who have shouldered most of the family's burden of work.

The Status of Savara women is basically very low despite high work participate rate, free movement in villages, and one of the major contributors in sustaining daily household. A savara women was fully engaged with household as well as external work but her status was insignificant and subordinate to men. The Savara women busy from early morning to till late night. However, men were not supposed to provide even little help to their wives in performing their household work. This is due to the fact that according to the custom and tradition, it was not manly for man to do a women's work and they were also afraid of being insulted by others as '*meyechele*', which was the most shameful title for men in their society. Therefore, the division of labour was such that the women could not claim leisure at all. The position of Savara women is very low in family because a man can divorce his wife anytime, he wished to. The women did not have any legal claim on the family property. The present social norms follow traditional practices of assigning the role of household duties to women without authority in the family affairs. This situation is also seen in the laws of inheritance. The Savara women played very important role in collection, handling and storage. The intricate knowledge involved in performing this task has been transmitted from mothers to daughters, sisters to sisters, mother -in-laws to daughter-in- law, or from one village sister to another. Though, some of the old men still help women in the collection of Forest produce. But, women, are the prime repositories of this vast area of knowledge and owners of this complex profession of collection and selling of medicinal herbs. They have adhered the practices and knowledge and transmitted to the next generation.

Table 2: Livelihood Pattern of the Savara

Types of Occupation	Savara		
	Total	Male	Female
	percent	percent	Percent
Daily Wage labour	21.3	15.6	5.7
Agricultural Labour	11.5	5.7	5.8
Fishing	18.5	18.5	----
Collection Of Medicinal Herbs	20.5	5.7	14.8
Collection of Fuel Woods	6.5	---	6.5
Liquor Selling	9.6	6.3	3.3
House Maid	9.8	---	9.8
Govt Job/Private job sector	3.3	---	3.3
Total	100	51.8	48.2

The Savara women are the traditional custodians of knowledge preservation about identification of herbs and its medicinal qualities, which has been never recognized by the others or by the women themselves. Being the producers of entire family, it was the duty of women to gather forest products for food, fodder, and other domestic purposes. The Savara women knew exactly the types of products to collect and were very precise about the time that a particular plant or shrub should be plucked, dug or cut etc. The Savara was very careful in the collection of firewood. It was the responsibility of the women to collect firewood for the family. The women could discern between species which were suitable for domestic use and those that were not. Generally, they collected firewood from January to June and October to December and stored it on planks outside the house or above the fireplace in the kitchen and used it accordingly to the requirement of the family. The men help women in chopping the wood.

Savara Women and Ecology

Cultural eco feminist (Devi 1985, Shiva 1988) argues that cross- culturally, women have been associated with or seen to be closer to nature because of their reproductive function, associated roles, and psychic structure and men on the other hand, are associated with culture. Therefore, Savara community themselves believes in superiority of the feminine in relation to nature, which enables an alternative worldview and hence celebrate an era in prehistory when nature was symbolized by female goddess and deities and in which women were held in high esteem as those who bring forth the life. In the context of Savara society, the relationship between women and nature can also be traced back to the earlier belief system and practices. According to them the natural world is animated and created by spirits and gods. They considered forest and animal as the property of God and goddess of the villages. Such deities namely Garam, Sitala and Yugini mediated between nature and human, inspiring rituals and behaviours that helped to regulate environmental use and exploitation. The village goddess has unpredictable temper which falls into two distinct categories; benevolent and malevolent. No single goddess could personify the mother earth who has accordingly been venerated under many forms and norms and her cult has become Universal in India. They offered and does animal sacrifices in order to protect themselves from misfortune and unnatural disease as their belief on multitude of spirits, good as well as bad, who are the cause of all unusual events especially disease and

disasters. The animistic beliefs and practices of Savara essentially derive from outcome of their surroundings and environment. Savara concepts about sickness, the identification and treatment of disease, and the cures they use depend on a number of variables like the age, sex, religious orientation and the place and surroundings. For Savara, nature and ecology lied on Goddess, in her benign character as like an affectionate mother, who sustains all life by and imparting fertility her life-giving energies to them as well as animals.

The Savara understanding of disease causation, its dynamics and its treatments are elements of their culture which are related to their action towards their own society. Self or home treatment is usually the first step in medical care, consisting primarily of concoctions of herbs, barks of trees, flowers, roots, leaves, seeds etc. and change in diet. Traditional medical knowledge is coded in to household cooking practices, home remedies. The tribal traditional medical system is based on personalistic tradition of super natural healers and their ministrations. The theoretical side of traditional medical system, their religious background, particularly the belief in the fear of evil spirits, healing performed according to spiritual rites explains the persistence of indigenous system. The indigenous medical system has sustained in society's social cultural complexes through deeply rooted processes. It is a set of concepts of health and illness that reflect certain values, traditions and beliefs based on people's way of life. Indigenous women possess significant traditional knowledge that actually contribute to the environmental sustainability, integrity and biodiversity. They are not at all interested in sharing their knowledge with outsiders. After developing intimacy with some traditional healers and experienced women, some information on traditional medicine could be collected and presented in this paper. The Savara is a nature worshipping community. Trees surrounding the shrines are like sacred groves. They do not cut these trees for mundane purposes. The information regarding plants was collected from village elders and women. These people treat the plants with great love and strong sentiments. Savara with their subsistence economy, depend on the forest for their needs. They often attribute supernatural qualities to them and have a belief that the materials change its position during night. Extracting information from these people becomes difficult as they wish to guard it. For avoiding conception, they take certain wild leaves. They know exactly which leaf will avoid conception and for how long. No other precaution is taken. For abortion, Qulth Daal is boiled and taken in three doses. In case of fracture, the broken bones are kept in proper position and are firmly held in form by bamboo pieces which are kept around it. A bandage is rolled on this, and this is untied after three days and after examining, it is again tied for seven days. To cure a wound, turmeric powder is sprayed over the wound. Sometimes peppers are ground and are mixed with mustard oil. This paste with the help of cotton is applied to the wounded portion. To stop bleeding, cotton is burnt in fire and a pad is prepared. This burnt pad helps in stopping blood from the wound. The role of Savara women generating 'Knowledge' seldom receives adequate attention despite their deep relationship with forest and their role in conserving biodiversity knowledge. Thus, the destruction of nature as well as the evolution of new mechanism becomes the destruction of women's environmental knowledge. It has been argued that 'the third world women', have a special dependence on nature and a special knowledge on nature. Unfortunately, this knowledge has been systematically marginalized under the impact of modern science, which turns out to be a patriarchal project and has excluded women as experts. (Shiva, 1988). They know about prevention of certain diseases and

fumigation of sick room etc. This knowledge is passed on orally from generation to generation. The list of medicinal herbs, tubers and their use were discussed below in the table 3.

Table 3: Use of Different Plant Species by the Savara

Sl.N	Vernacular Names	Plant species	Parts used	Ethnobotanical claims
1	Ankula	<i>Alangium salvifolium</i>	Leaves	Applied drop by drop twice for a week against conjunctivitis
2	Agora	<i>Argemone mexicana</i>	Seed	Skin against eczema
3	Iswarjata	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i>	Root	Spermatorrhoea
4	Kulthia	<i>Atylosia scarabaeoides</i>	Seed	Indigestion
5	Kachu	<i>Bauhinia variegata</i>	Root bark	Reducing cholesterol of the body
6	Puruni saga	<i>Boerhavia diffusa</i>	Leaves	Kidney problem
7	Arakha	<i>Calotropis procera</i>	Root/Leaves	Used in any other wound
8	Kumbhi	<i>Careya arborea</i>	Root	Against joint pain.
9	Atundi	<i>Combretum decandrum</i>	Leaves/Stem	Against acne.
10	Nirmuli	<i>Cuscuta reflexa</i>	Whole plant	Treatment of Hydrocele
11	Saloporni	<i>Desmodium gangeticum</i>	Leaves	Against typhoid and other fever
12	Rai	<i>Dillenia aurea</i>	Root bark	Stomach disorder
13	Khamba-alu	<i>Dioscorea bulbifera</i>	Tuber	Against rheumatism.
14	Aswatta	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Stem bark	Against rheumatism.
15	Anantamul	<i>Hemidesmus indicus</i>	Root	Against eczema.
16	Basango	<i>Justicia adhatoda</i>	Root	Against piles
17	Putus	<i>Lantana camara</i>	Root bark	Blood dysentery
18	Kamini	<i>Murraya paniculata</i>	Root	Against viral fever.
19	Gangaseoli	<i>Nyctanthes arbortristis</i>	Stem bark	Against cold, cough and fever.
20	Chintamula	<i>Plumbago zeylanica</i>	Root	Against leucorrhoea.
21	Chirarita	<i>Scoparia dulcis</i>	Leaves	Against sore throat
22	Kulathio	<i>Tephrosia purpurea</i>	Seed	Against post natal complications
23	Bichhuati	<i>Tragia involucrata</i>	Leaves	Against asthma.
24	Dhatuki	<i>Woodfordia fruticosa</i>	Leaves	For irregular menstrual

The 'limited right to resources and equally limited say in the political processes' (Barpujari, 2005), is another factor, which has marginalized the role and knowledge of women in forest resources. The Savara society is patrilineal, patrilocal, and patrimonial society, where all the inheritance rights go to the male. However, Indigenous women face limited opportunities and resources to facilitate their participation at most negotiations. Moreover, policies and laws have not been sufficient to ensure that unique traditional knowledge of Indigenous women is included or protected. Although, Savara women contribute a major role in adhering the traditional livelihood that is collection of medicinal herbs and tubers. Hence, the women have limited rights to say anything in household as well as livelihood management. The Savara men represent the family in its external relations with regard to use of the village and nearby natural resources. The management of forest is in the hand of Forest department of local area. The women obediently have to work according to the decision made by men and their perspectives, survival needs and knowledge have been ignored. Under the Scheme of Joint Forest management of India, the department of forest in West Bengal had implemented village forest development committee in 1988. The Governing body includes forest officers, local forest officers followed with Gram Sabha panchayat members were formed a forest council to function properly. The result is that their agenda on Tribal women empowerment cannot reach the grassroot level and failed to solve the problem of rural and village women.

Conclusion

Women are the most probable source of traditional knowledge insofar as it is concerned with forest. Given the process of modernization some aspects of the Savara in relation to the environment had been increasingly changed. One of the major impacts of this environment change is on the Savara women. On the one hand, they are the worst sufferers of deforestation; on the other they have lost their traditional knowledge due to the introduction of new mechanism. The gradual degeneration of women's traditional knowledge is influenced by two factors; one is Hinduism on ethical level and new political systems dominated by both traditional and western patriarchal views, which resulted in lack of gender awareness in environment issues, limited access for women in decision making level etc. In the recent times, Non-Governmental Organization, Government Organization and Gram Sabha began to show their concern towards women; however, in all the attempts empowerment of women is only at the superficial level and these attempts end in discussion while the knowledge of women on environment still remains unrecognized. The need for new alternative to recognize women's traditional knowledge to solve the problems of women due to environment changes through the more active involvement of women in decision making at all levels. There is need to integrate gender perspectives in policies and program for sustainable development. There is need to strengthen or establish mechanism at state level to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women by ensuring that women are not simply added to follow formalities. Only then can there be a new platform in which women, particularly those from the rural and tribal areas would have a voice.

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Corresponding Author: Dr. Progya Ghatak (progyaghatak@gmail.com)