

Of Childbearing Age; Lived Experiences of Tribal Women Amidst a Worsening Climate Crisis in Madhya Pradesh

A qualitative study conducted in **Chhindwara** and **Patalkot** - with the *Korku, Bharia* and *Gond* tribes



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in Madhya Pradesh



Introduction

When a climate crisis hits, marginalised women are disproportionately affected. Biological essentialism (New, 1996) tends to associate women with nature, largely due to their traditional gendered roles of caring and nurturing.

However, in the tribal hamlets of southern *Madhya Pradesh*, the work of pregnant and lactating women revolves heavily around natural resources. For these women, their insufficient access to proper education, lack of appropriate vocational skills, and early marriages further make them dependent on agrarian work and the collection of **NTFP** for a living.

The current climate crisis makes working with natural resources more precarious, impacting households economically, physically and emotionally. The growing deterioration and exploitation of natural resources have considerably reduced the quality and quantity available to tribal families dependent on them for sustenance. **The Gender Snapshot 2024 Report** indicates that by **2030**, **158** million more women and girls will be pushed into poverty and food insecurity because of climate change.

The prolonged dry spells, heightened heat waves, and erratic weather patterns wreak havoc on livelihoods. With the surface water drying up due to high temperatures, villagers cannot dig the ground any further to build borewells. The nearby wells, too, can no longer be recharged because of the erratic rainfall patterns.

With only rain-fed irrigation prevalent in these belts, households face a higher risk of food insecurity. No longer able to grow green leafy vegetables or crops, which would otherwise provide them with sufficient vitamins and nutrients. It is in such times that the



household hierarchy of food comes into question. Women sacrifice for their families by eating smaller portions or skipping meals. The nutrients that their bodies require, especially at the time of pregnancy, are then lost.

Unable to cope with the stress of pregnancy, coupled with climate despair, the rates of maternal and child mortality reach an all-time high. Heat, in a way, ignites violence, leading to higher incidences of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.



Often referred to as a 'threat multiplier' (Ferris 2020), the climate crisis exacerbates internal displacement and instability. The left-behind women tend to the infertile fields, increasing the feminisation of *agrarian distress* (Pattnaik, 2018).

We draw linkages between the increased workload women face due to climate despair and its impacts on their sexual and reproductive health. Engaged in the field all day, women toil in the heat and face dehydration and anaemia while traversing through rocky terrains in the undulating area. In *Madhya Pradesh*, around **80%** of women in tribal pockets have been diagnosed with anaemia. This condition worsens post-childbirth due to the loss of blood during delivery. This lack of blood, adequate minerals and iron makes it difficult for them to lactate.

The climate crisis is not gender neutral and further exacerbates existing inequalities. Women have faced disparities in accessing resources, knowledge, mobility and decision-making autonomy. Due to their social position, women are less able to access facilities and services when a crisis hits. This further limits their access to healthcare facilities, particularly for indigenous women living in remote, inaccessible terrains.

Methodology

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the gendered implications of a climate crisis on tribal populations in Chhindwara, Madhya Pradesh?
- How do issues pertinent to climate change interact with access to, and availability of, sexual and reproductive health facilities?
- Is there any correlation between indigenous health systems and public health facilities?



Methods

This study was carried out solely by using qualitative tools. We developed semi-structured questionnaires and interview guides for Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across all three tribal communities – *Gond, Korku and Bharia in Chhindwara (Mokhed block) and Patalkot Valley.*

Using a more ethnographic approach, we conducted observatory visits to understand women's time use, tribal culture, and livelihoods by making village maps.

Study Area

One of the largest districts of the state of *Madhya Pradesh*, our study is based in *Chhindwara*. It lies in the southwestern part of the *Satpura range* and is known for its biodiversity, agricultural economy, and tribal population. The district is home to 36% of the tribal population.

We focused our study on three tribal groups—the *Gonds, Korkus, and Bharias.*

While the *Gonds* and *Korkus* reside in villages in *Chhindwara*, in the *Mokhed block*, the *Bharias*, categorized as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) by the Government of India, live in the *Patalkot Valley in Tamia.*

Results and Findings

CLIMATE CHANGES OVER THE YEARS

These days, the temperatures range from 45 to 50 (113 to 122 degrees Fahrenheit) degrees Celsius during the summers. Erratic rainfall patterns, water scarcity, drying up of surface water, and heatwaves were some of the climatic changes individuals complained of



The erratic rainfall, untimely rains and consequent dry spells during the critical stages of crop harvesting have impacted the agricultural yields adversely. Their allied livelihood activities, livestock, and NTFP (non-timber forest product)-based livelihoods are also increasingly compromised. Soil erosion is increasing at an alarming rate due to deforestation and untimely rains, leading to the loss of topsoil, degradation of soil health, and ecological damage.

Only those households with adequate monetary resources can afford to get borewells. The drying up of surface area because of prolonged heatwaves dries up the land, preventing individuals from digging into the surface to build borewells.

While some of them share these resources, many have to get their water from community wells. In a few *Korku and Gond* villages, the wells were closer to their huts, which lessened the distance of walking for water collection. In all situations, however, women were the ones responsible for the collection of water, both for domestic and irrigation purposes

GROWING AGRARIAN DISTRESS

Surrounded by the Satpura ranges, historically, these communities have been collecting products from the forest. Some of these found in the area are - *mahua* (a flower used to make local alcohol), *tendu* (leaves from which hand-rolled cigarettes (*beedi*) are made), *mango*, *amla* (gooseberry), *chironji* (Cudappah almonds), wood for furniture, *mango*, *sitaphal* (custard apple) and *jamun* (blackberry).

They have to walk two to two and a half kilometres to source the same. However, another issue which cropped up, as observed by an elderly lady from the Bharia community, is that the trees do not grow as much anymore in height. *The amla (gooseberry) and mango trees*, in her experience, do not fruit as much as they did earlier. She attributed the same to a lack of proper rainfall and excessive heat, which made it difficult for things to grow.

Due to agrarian distress, the men migrate to urban areas in search of work, while the women are left to tend to the unproductive fields. Women from the Gond villages reported noticing the absence of certain crops which used to grow in abundance in their fields up to ten years ago. They could then grow *jawar* (sorghum) and *bajra* (pearl millet). They attributed the same to the changing weather conditions.

In Gond villages, the women complained about the quality of crops at this time. *"People earlier would never fall sick, and my mother-in-law could work efficiently. Now, even if I walk a small distance, my limbs start hurting,"* mentioned an expectant mother. They believed that in earlier times, deliveries were easier, but now, due to the increased use of chemical fertilisers, they do not get adequate nutrition

"We do not even have enough water to drink; how will we manage to produce a variety of crops?"

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS AND RISING FOOD INSECURITY

Most women suffer from anaemia in these tribal pockets. In some cases, girls as young as fourteen were giving birth. Their bodies, still underdeveloped, were not fit to bear children. In these cases, their milk flow during lactation is also impacted, leading to malnourishment in children. In some households, families had five to six children.

In a few cases in the *Korku tribes*, women spoke of having access to nutritious food but not getting the time to have adequate meals. During lactation, a few mentioned having to eat medicines in order to increase their milk flow due to the lack of dietary diversification in the region.

The heat increases the risk of anaemia and dehydration in farmers. This, in turn, impacts their thermoregulation, which inhibits the body's ability to produce sufficient milk during lactation. During heatwaves, women either suffer from preterm births, stillbirths or miscarriages. In some cases, it leads to foetal distress and impacts children post-delivery too.

ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FACILITIES

In *Gond and Bharia tribal* hamlets, however, the situation differed from that of the *Korku tribes*. They would have to travel to nearby towns, *Chhindwara* (30 km) and *Tamia* (60 km), away from their villages. They mentioned that the absence of convenient, accessible care pushed them more towards at-home deliveries.

Speaking to two women from the *Bharia tribe*, we learnt that they preferred going to the hospital, but the condition of the roads due to the rains did not enable them to go or allow transportation. They would then have to make a palanquin to carry the expectant mother in and walk to the main road, especially during the rains. In certain cases, women from the *Patalkot Valley* have delivered on the roads while walking till the main road from their villages in order to find transportation.



THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

'This is age-old wisdom. However, the knowledge belongs only to the elderly,' several respondents opined. A few mentioned wanting to use the herbs but not knowing how to. *'The jungle has everything,'* an old woman from *Patalkot* retorted. For her, any ailments, however large or small, could be cured by the *jadibuti* (indigenous plants) grown in the forests they lived in.

A traditional healer we spoke to sounded rather wistful – *'Nowadays people are not learning about the use of jadis (plants).'* For him, it was a waste of the rich indigenous culture and knowledge dying out. A few members of the *Bharia* community reported the growth of the trees becoming more stunted and not flowering as they would earlier. They store and keep the plants with them due to their seasonal nature. In spite of that, extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall and occasional forest fires, it was now increasingly difficult to find the indigenous crops used by their ancestors.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The erratic weather patterns, bad soil health and undulating terrain have created considerable agricultural distress in these areas. The scarce availability of natural resources, water, non-timber forest products, and firewood has increased gender based time poverty. Due to traditional norms of non-ownership over land and productive resources, women's vulnerabilities are widened due to climate despair.

Their limited control over land, water and agriculture further creates disparities within gender in accessing knowledge, mobility, and decision-making. Tribal women, in this way, are further relegated to the margins in times of a climate crisis.

A rise in deforestation and forest fires has led to the loss of indigenous species. Due to this, it is difficult to conserve tribal culture and knowledge. There exists

only a controlled narrative over preserving traditional wisdom now. There is a greater need for gender-disaggregated data in terms of sexual and reproductive health and health-seeking practices. While carrying out a needs-based assessment, households should not be seen as a single unit, but rather, the individual needs and demands of all members should be considered. Nutritional projects and schemes should be revisited to cater to cultural food systems and beliefs.

Additionally, indigenous healthcare knowledge should be incorporated into public health systems to preserve traditional wisdom. We also recommend policies to focus on education, healthcare and sustainable practices. Laws and regulations regarding forest rights and sexual and reproductive health rights and practices should be inclusive of women's specific health needs.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stutilina Pal



Stutilina Pal brings both depth and direction to her role as Program Director at SRIJAN, where she has been influencing systems since 2006. With a foundation in Agriculture from the Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology and a Master’s in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex—where she was awarded the Chevening Fellowship in 2016—her work is rooted in ground realities and theory. Her interests flow through questions of local governance, water security, and gender, converging in her leadership of SRIJAN’s knowledge management, research, and communication efforts.

Prarthana Lumba



Prarthana Lumba works at the intersection of exploration and impact as a Project Executive in the Research Vertical at SRIJAN. Her research pursuits weave through questions of gender, sexual and reproductive health, power and governance, and the many textures of culture. Rooted in a Bachelor’s degree in History from the University of Delhi and deepened by a Master’s in Women’s Studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, her work reflects a commitment to understanding and reimagining the worlds we inhabit.

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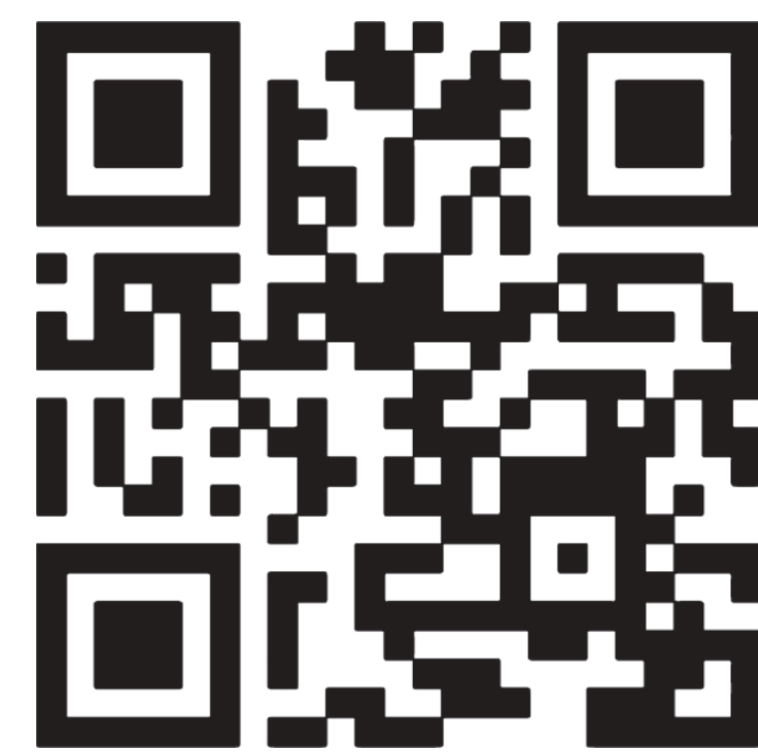


4, Community Shopping Centre, First Floor,
Anupam Apartments, Mehrauli-Badarpur Road,
Saidullajab, New Delhi - 110068

 011-41664521

 8800515992

 delhi@srijanindia.org



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