

Public Policy Interventions for the Empowerment of Tribal Women: An Analytical Study

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Abstract: Tribal women in India occupy a critical yet marginalised position at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic exclusion, making them a key focus of public policy interventions. Despite a comprehensive constitutional and policy framework encompassing education, health, livelihood, and political participation, disparities in human development outcomes between tribal and non-tribal women persist. This study examines the effectiveness of public policy interventions aimed at empowering tribal women, with particular reference to selected tribal communities in Karnataka.

The primary objective of the study is to analyse the level of awareness, access, and perceived impact of major welfare schemes on the economic, social, educational, health, and political empowerment of tribal women, and to identify implementation challenges that limit policy outcomes. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study is based on primary data collected from 200 tribal women respondents comprising 100 Jenu Kuruba and 100 Koraga women through a structured questionnaire and focused discussions, supplemented by secondary data from government reports and policy documents.

The findings reveal that while educational and health-related interventions demonstrate relatively higher reach and acceptance, economic and political empowerment outcomes remain limited. Low awareness of livelihood schemes, procedural complexity, socio-cultural barriers, and geographic isolation significantly constrain effective participation, particularly among Koraga women. The study also finds that formal political reservations have not consistently translated into substantive leadership or decision-making power.

The paper offers policy-relevant insights by emphasising the need for gender-responsive, community-specific, and implementation-focused reforms. The originality of the study lies in its comparative, micro-level analysis of two tribal communities, linking policy design, delivery mechanisms, and empowerment outcomes within a state-specific context.

Key Words: Tribal Women; Public Policy Interventions; Empowerment; Welfare Schemes; Governance; Social Inclusion; Karnataka.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Indigenous (Scheduled Tribes) communities constitute a distinct social category within India's plural polity, with specific historical vulnerabilities that shape women's life chances. According to the Census of India (2011), the Scheduled Tribe population exceeded 104 million, accounting for roughly 8.6% of the national population concentrated in geographically diverse and often remote districts. This demographic weight, combined with structural marginalization, makes tribal women a priority group for targeted public policy.



Despite policy intent, indicators of human development for tribal women continue to lag behind national averages. Empirical analyses drawn from large surveys and secondary studies show persistent disadvantages in maternal and child health, nutritional status, institutional delivery, and knowledge of reproductive health among Scheduled Tribe women; these deficits contribute to relatively higher under-five mortality and maternal health risks in many tribal districts. Such evidence underscores why tailored, gender-sensitive policy interventions are necessary rather than one-size-fits-all schemes.

Since the early 2000s, central and state governments have expanded a mix of targeted interventions ranging from residential education, livelihood promotion and market access, to nutrition and health programmes explicitly aimed at improving outcomes for tribal populations and tribal women in particular. Notable recent initiatives include the rapid scaling of Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) to improve educational access in Scheduled Areas, and the Van Dhan/Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) under the Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission to bolster tribal livelihoods through aggregation, value-addition and market linkages. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports large increases in EMRS approvals and functional schools over the last decade, while TRIFED and the Ministry report thousands of sanctioned VDKs linking over one million tribal beneficiaries to collective enterprise structures.

These supply-side expansions are important but not decisive. Implementation studies and official monitoring documents repeatedly point to gaps in awareness, accessibility, scheme convergence, and gender-responsive design factors that blunt the potential of well-intentioned schemes to deliver empowerment outcomes for tribal women. Issues such as limited female participation in producer collectives, constraints on mobility, socio-cultural norms, service-delivery bottlenecks, and weak local governance mechanisms often mediate the effectiveness of programmes on the ground.

Against this background, this analytical study interrogates the extent to which public policy interventions translate into measurable empowerment for tribal women. The paper adopts a multi-dimensional conception of empowerment (economic, social, political and agency-based), triangulating policy documents, scheme statistics, and secondary empirical studies to (a) map the principal policy instruments targeted at tribal women, (b) evaluate their outcomes and institutional constraints, and (c) propose pragmatic, evidence-based reforms to strengthen gender-responsive implementation. By combining policy analysis with indicator-level evidence, the study aims to move beyond descriptive inventories of schemes to an evaluative framework that is actionable for policymakers, programme managers, and scholars engaged in tribal gender justice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Scholarly research on tribal women in India has extensively documented the structural disadvantages arising from the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and spatial marginalisation. Early studies by Bose (1975) and Xaxa (1999) emphasised low educational attainment, subsistence-level livelihoods, and limited access to state institutions as defining features of tribal women's socio-economic status. These foundational works established the need for targeted public policy interventions rather than general welfare approaches.

With the expansion of tribal welfare programmes after the 1990s, researchers increasingly evaluated policy outcomes using empirical data. Desai and Andrist (2010), analysing national-level datasets, identified persistent gaps between tribal and non-tribal women in health and nutrition indicators, despite improved programme outreach. Similarly, IIPS and ICF (2021), using NFHS-5 data, highlighted higher levels of maternal anaemia and lower institutional delivery rates among tribal women, underscoring implementation and accessibility challenges.

Studies focusing on livelihood and economic empowerment have produced mixed findings. Nayak (2017) observed that self-help groups and skill-development schemes enhanced income stability and decision-making power among tribal women, while Kumar and Pathak (2019) noted that market exclusion and social norms often constrained long-term empowerment. From a governance perspective, Xaxa (2014) argued that decentralisation and legal safeguards such as reservations and forest rights require complementary capacity-building measures to generate substantive empowerment.

Region-specific analyses further reinforce the importance of contextual policy assessment. Srinivas and Reddy (2020) demonstrated significant inter-state variation in the effectiveness of tribal welfare schemes, shaped by administrative capacity and local governance structures. However, the literature reveals a gap in integrated analytical studies linking policy design, implementation processes, and empowerment outcomes for tribal women at the state level.

This study builds on existing scholarship by critically examining public policy interventions through an empowerment lens, with particular reference to state-level experiences and implementation dynamics.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the nature, reach, and effectiveness of public policy interventions for the empowerment of tribal women. This design enables systematic description of socio-economic conditions while allowing analytical interpretation of policy outcomes and implementation challenges.

Study Area: The study was conducted in selected tribal habitations of Karnataka, focusing on districts where Jenu Kuruba and Koraga communities are predominantly concentrated. These regions were selected due to their distinct socio-cultural contexts and differential exposure to government welfare programmes.

Population and Sampling: The study population comprises tribal women beneficiaries of government welfare schemes. A sample of 200 respondents was selected using purposive sampling, consisting of 100 Jenu Kuruba women and 100 Koraga women. The selection ensured representation of different age groups, educational levels, and livelihood backgrounds to capture diverse experiences of policy interventions.

Sources of Data: The study utilised both primary and secondary data sources to ensure robustness and triangulation. Primary data were collected directly from respondents, while secondary data were obtained from government reports, policy documents, Census of India, NFHS, academic journals, and official publications of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Tools of Data Collection: The principal tool for primary data collection was a structured questionnaire, designed in alignment with the objectives of the study. The questionnaire covered socio-demographic details, awareness and utilisation of welfare schemes, livelihood status, health and education access, and indicators of empowerment. Informal discussions were also used to supplement quantitative responses.

Variables of the Study

- **Independent Variable:** Public policy interventions and welfare schemes
- **Dependent Variables:** Economic empowerment, social participation, access to education and health services, and decision-making ability

Data Analysis Techniques: Collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and averages, supported by qualitative interpretation to assess empowerment outcomes and implementation gaps.

Reliability and Validity: Reliability was ensured through pre-testing of the questionnaire, while content validity was maintained by aligning questions with established empowerment indicators.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Limitations of the Methodology : The study is limited by its sample size and regional focus, which may restrict wider generalisation of findings.

4. RESULTS

This section presents and analyses the findings derived from primary data collected from 200 tribal women respondents, comprising 100 Jenu Kuruba and 100 Koraga women from selected tribal regions of Karnataka. The analysis is organised thematically to reflect demographic characteristics, policy awareness, access and participation, empowerment outcomes, and perceived challenges, supported by tabular presentation for clarity.

4.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Understanding the socio-demographic background of respondents is essential for contextualising policy outcomes and empowerment levels.



Table 4.1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=200)

Variable	Category	Jenu Kuruba (%)	Koraga (%)	Total (%)
Age Group	18–25	18	22	20
	26–35	34	31	32.5
	36–45	29	27	28
	46–60	15	16	15.5
	Above 60	4	4	4
Education	No formal education	26	34	30
	Primary	38	36	37
	Secondary	24	21	22.5
	Higher secondary & above	12	9	10.5
Occupation	Agriculture/Labour	54	61	57.5
	Self-employed	26	21	23.5
	Salaried	6	3	4.5
	Unemployed	14	15	14.5
Monthly Income	< ₹10,000	48	56	52
	₹10,001–20,000	37	32	34.5
	> ₹20,000	15	12	13.5

Source: Field work 2025

The majority of respondents belong to the 26–45 age group, indicating that the study captures experiences of women in their economically active and family-responsibility phase. Educational attainment remains low across both communities, with Koraga women showing comparatively higher illiteracy, reflecting historical marginalisation and settlement-based exclusion noted in Karnataka tribal development reports.

Occupational patterns reveal heavy dependence on agriculture, forest-based labour, and informal self-employment, consistent with state-level data on tribal livelihoods. Income distribution confirms economic vulnerability, with over half of households earning below ₹10,000 per month.

4.2 Awareness of Public Policy Interventions

Policy awareness is a prerequisite for access and utilisation of welfare schemes.

Table 4.2: Awareness Level of Selected Welfare Schemes (Mean Score: 1–5)

Welfare Scheme	Jenu Kuruba	Koraga	Overall Mean
Pre/Post-Matric Scholarships	3.9	3.6	3.75
AMSY Loans	2.4	2.1	2.25
Panchayat Raj Reservations	3.1	2.8	2.95
Van Dhan / PM-JANMAN	2.2	1.9	2.05
Overseas Scholarship/Fellowships	1.6	1.4	1.5

Source: Field work 2025

Awareness is highest for educational scholarships, reflecting their long-standing presence and school-level outreach. Awareness of livelihood and financial schemes such as AMSY and Van Dhan remains limited, especially among Koraga women. Knowledge of newer initiatives like PM-JANMAN is minimal, confirming dissemination gaps reported in recent Ministry of Tribal Affairs reviews.

4.3 Access and Participation in Welfare Schemes

Table 4.3: Access to Selected Welfare Interventions (% Respondents)

Intervention	Jenu Kuruba (%)	Koraga (%)	Total (%)
Benefited from scholarships	72	64	68
Accessed loans/skill training	29	21	25
Participated in Panchayat activities	24	18	21
Access to health/education infrastructure	61	54	57.5

Source: Field work 2025

While educational schemes show relatively high reach, participation in credit, skill development, and governance-related interventions remains limited. Despite constitutional reservations, actual political participation is low, reinforcing the argument that formal inclusion does not guarantee substantive empowerment.



4.4 Perceived Accessibility and Administrative Ease

Table 4.4: Perceptions on Accessibility (Likert Mean Score)

Statement	Mean Score
Policies are accessible in remote areas	2.6
Application procedures are simple	2.4
Local institutions facilitate access	3.1

Source: Field work 2025

Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with procedural complexity, particularly documentation requirements and digital barriers. However, areas with active Panchayats or NGOs showed relatively better facilitation, highlighting the importance of local institutional support.

4.5 Impact of Policies on Empowerment Dimensions

Table 4.5: Perceived Impact of Policies (Mean Score: 1–5)

Empowerment Dimension	Jenu Kuruba	Koraga	Overall
Economic empowerment	3.2	2.8	3.0
Educational outcomes	3.6	3.3	3.45
Social decision-making	2.9	2.6	2.75
Health and welfare	3.4	3.1	3.25
Political empowerment	2.3	2.0	2.15

Source: Field work 2025

Educational and health interventions show moderate positive impact, while economic and political empowerment remain weak. Political empowerment scores lowest, reflecting limited leadership exposure despite reservation policies. Jenu Kuruba women report marginally higher benefits, consistent with their comparatively better HDI performance within Karnataka.

4.6 Key Challenges Faced by Respondents

Table 4.6: Barriers to Effective Utilisation (Mean Score)

Barrier	Mean Score
Socio-cultural norms	3.8
Geographical isolation	4.1
Documentation complexity	3.9
Language barriers	3.5

Source: Field work 2025

Geographical isolation and administrative complexity emerge as major constraints, followed by socio-cultural norms such as early marriage and restricted mobility. These findings strongly align with state and national evaluations of tribal welfare delivery.

4.7 Priority Areas for Policy Improvement

Table 4.7: Ranked Policy Priorities (% Respondents)

Priority Area	Rank 1 (%)	Rank 2 (%)
Education	41	29
Economic support	34	38
Health infrastructure	17	22
Political training	8	11

Source: Field work 2025

Education and livelihood support are perceived as **most critical for empowerment**, while political training receives lower priority, possibly due to limited exposure and confidence among respondents.

Overall, the results reveal that public policy interventions have expanded outreach but yielded uneven empowerment outcomes. Educational and health schemes demonstrate relatively stronger impact, whereas economic self-reliance and political empowerment remain constrained by structural, administrative, and socio-cultural barriers. The comparative disadvantage of Koraga women highlights the need for community-specific, gender-responsive policy design and implementation.



5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study highlight the complex relationship between public policy interventions and the empowerment of tribal women, demonstrating that while policy coverage has expanded considerably, outcomes remain uneven across communities and empowerment dimensions. Drawing on primary evidence from Jenu Kuruba and Koraga women in Karnataka, the discussion situates these results within broader policy debates and existing empirical literature.

First, the relatively higher impact of educational and health-related interventions reflects the long-standing prioritisation of these sectors in tribal welfare planning. Scholarship schemes, residential schools, and basic health programmes appear to have achieved wider penetration, largely due to institutional linkages with schools, anganwadis, and primary health centres. This supports national-level evidence that education-focused interventions are often the most visible and accessible entry points for tribal households. However, the persistence of low higher-education attainment among respondents indicates that such interventions have not yet translated into sustained educational mobility, especially for women from particularly vulnerable tribal groups.

Second, the study reveals limited economic empowerment outcomes, despite the presence of livelihood and credit-oriented schemes. Low awareness and participation in programmes such as AMYS and Van Dhan initiatives suggest that policy intent has not been matched by effective grassroots mobilisation and handholding. Economic empowerment requires not only access to credit or training but also market integration, mobility, and decision-making power areas where tribal women continue to face structural and socio-cultural constraints. The weaker outcomes among Koraga women underline the role of historical exclusion and settlement-based disadvantages, reinforcing the need for community-specific strategies rather than uniform programme design.

Third, the findings on political empowerment reveal a significant gap between constitutional provisions and lived experience. Although reservations under the Panchayat Raj system have increased formal representation, respondents reported low participation and minimal influence in decision-making processes. This aligns with existing scholarship that emphasises the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. Without sustained capacity-building, leadership training, and institutional support, political reservations alone appear insufficient to empower tribal women meaningfully.

The study also underscores the importance of implementation dynamics. Procedural complexity, documentation requirements, digital barriers, and geographical isolation were consistently identified as major obstacles. These challenges reflect systemic governance issues rather than policy absence. Notably, areas with active Panchayats or NGO engagement showed relatively better access and satisfaction, highlighting the critical role of local institutions in mediating state interventions.

From a comparative perspective, the marginally better outcomes reported by Jenu Kuruba women correspond with broader human development patterns observed among tribal groups in Karnataka. This suggests that policy effectiveness is shaped not only by scheme design but also by pre-existing social capital, settlement patterns, and administrative reach.

Overall, the discussion points to a central insight: public policy interventions for tribal women have produced incremental improvements but have fallen short of transformative empowerment. To move beyond welfare delivery towards genuine empowerment, policies must adopt a gender-responsive, participatory, and context-sensitive approach. Strengthening awareness mechanisms, simplifying procedures, investing in capacity-building, and ensuring convergence between education, livelihood, health, and governance interventions are essential. The findings reaffirm that empowerment is not an automatic outcome of policy provision but a cumulative process shaped by institutions, social norms, and implementation quality.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined public policy interventions for the empowerment of tribal women through an analytical assessment of awareness, access, participation, and perceived outcomes among Jenu Kuruba and Koraga women in Karnataka. The findings demonstrate that while the policy framework for tribal welfare in India is extensive and constitutionally grounded, its empowerment outcomes remain partial and uneven, particularly for women belonging to historically marginalised tribal communities.

The analysis shows that education and health-related interventions have achieved relatively greater reach and acceptance among tribal women. Scholarship schemes, residential schooling, and basic health programmes have contributed to improved educational access and welfare security, confirming the effectiveness of institutionalised service delivery mechanisms. However, these gains have not yet translated into sustained socio-economic mobility, as reflected in low



higher education attainment, limited skilled employment, and continued income vulnerability. This indicates that welfare provisioning, though necessary, is insufficient on its own to ensure long-term empowerment.

In contrast, economic and political empowerment outcomes remain weak, despite the existence of targeted livelihood schemes and political reservations. Limited awareness, procedural complexity, inadequate handholding, and socio-cultural constraints have restricted women's participation in credit, skill development, and enterprise-based programmes. Similarly, political reservations under the Panchayat Raj system have increased formal representation but have not consistently enabled substantive decision-making power or leadership development among tribal women. These findings reaffirm the gap between policy intent and lived experience.

The study further highlights the decisive role of implementation quality and local governance structures. Geographic isolation, language barriers, documentation requirements, and digital exclusion continue to undermine effective access to welfare schemes. Where Panchayats and non-governmental actors actively facilitated outreach, policy outcomes were relatively better, underscoring the importance of decentralised and participatory governance in tribal areas. Community-wise differences, with Jenu Kuruba women reporting marginally better outcomes than Koraga women, also point to the need for context-specific and community-sensitive policy design.

In conclusion, the study argues that public policy interventions have contributed to incremental improvements in the well-being of tribal women but have fallen short of achieving transformative empowerment. Moving forward, policy efforts must shift from a predominantly welfare-oriented approach to a rights-based and empowerment-centric framework. This requires strengthening awareness mechanisms, simplifying administrative procedures, investing in capacity-building and leadership training, and ensuring convergence across education, livelihood, health, and governance interventions. Such an integrated and gender-responsive approach is essential for enabling tribal women to exercise agency, participate meaningfully in decision-making, and achieve sustainable empowerment.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry significant policy implications for enhancing the effectiveness of public policy interventions aimed at the empowerment of tribal women. First, the evidence underscores the need to move beyond scheme proliferation towards strengthening implementation quality. While multiple welfare programmes exist, limited awareness, procedural complexity, and weak last-mile delivery reduce their impact. Policymakers should prioritise simplification of application processes, reduction of documentation requirements, and expansion of doorstep service delivery, particularly in remote and forest-based tribal settlements.

Second, the study highlights the importance of community-specific and gender-responsive policy design. The differential outcomes observed between Jenu Kuruba and Koraga women suggest that uniform policy frameworks may not adequately address the distinct historical, cultural, and geographical contexts of tribal communities. Tailored interventions that consider settlement patterns, language, mobility constraints, and livelihood practices are essential for ensuring equitable empowerment outcomes.

Third, economic empowerment must be strengthened through integrated livelihood ecosystems rather than isolated credit or skill programmes. Policies should emphasise convergence between skill development, access to affordable credit, market linkages, and collective enterprise models such as producer groups and cooperatives. Sustained handholding, financial literacy, and market facilitation are critical to transforming income-support schemes into pathways for economic self-reliance.

Fourth, the limited impact of political reservations calls for a shift from symbolic representation to substantive political empowerment. Capacity-building initiatives, leadership training, and mentorship programmes for elected tribal women representatives should be institutionalised to enhance their participation in local governance and decision-making. Strengthening Gram Sabha functioning in Scheduled Areas can further reinforce women's voices in development planning.

Finally, the role of local institutions and intermediaries emerges as central to policy success. Strengthening Panchayats, frontline workers, and partnerships with credible civil society organisations can improve outreach, trust, and accountability. Regular monitoring, gender-disaggregated data collection, and participatory evaluation mechanisms should be embedded within tribal welfare programmes to ensure responsiveness and sustainability. Collectively, these policy directions can help reorient tribal women's empowerment initiatives from welfare delivery to inclusive and transformative development.



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