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Sustainable Tribal Consciousness through Women's Leadership: Motherhood, Gender and a Tribal Resistance Movement in Contemporary Odisha, India

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Abstract

Tribal women are transforming motherhood into a source of political legitimacy and collective action to resist land acquisition and safeguard their ancestral land, forests, cultural identity, and, ultimately, their children's future. This study explores the crucial role of tribal women leaders in sustaining tribal consciousness by articulating their voices and engaging in collective action for the tribal resistance movement. Within the context of tribal women in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, their leadership demonstrates grassroots-level resistance to the dominant political economy, in which resistance is understood as a response to economic marginalisation and social exclusion. This study examines how tribal women utilise Self-Help Groups (SHGs) as a socio-political space to produce political awareness and women's collective action and agency. Furthermore, it argues that tribal women sustain resistance through everyday negotiations within households and kinship networks, influencing domestic and communitarian decision-making processes regarding land ownership and sales. Therefore, this study highlights the role of tribal women's leadership in mobilising communities, maintaining non-violent forms of protest, and sustaining tribal consciousness, which often remains invisible or unrecognised.

Keywords

Tribal women's leadership, Motherhood, SHG, Collective action, Political mobilisation, Protest, Kinship conflict

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Introduction

Tribal women are transforming motherhood from being a site of caregiving into a source of political legitimacy and collective action by situating their maternal roles within broader tribal struggles over land and identity. In this context, collective tribal consciousness and tribal identity in India emerge not merely from claims of original inhabitation but from the ongoing experiences of dispossession and displacement from control and ownership over *jal, jungle* and *jameen* (water, forest and land). This consciousness is strongly articulated in tribal regions where the degree of marginalisation and powerlessness is higher (Xaxa, 1999). *Jal, jungle, and jameen* are not merely natural resources for tribal communities in India; over time, they have emerged as central issues in tribal discourse. Since questions of development are closely intertwined with land ownership and forests, the interest in protecting these natural resources brands the tribal communities as ecological warriors (Singh, 2024). The expansion of the mining and timber industries naturally leads to deforestation and the destruction of the economic base of tribal life (Bardhan, 1984). Most tribal resistance movements emerged in response to state-led land acquisition for industrial development (Xaxa, 2008).

This study contributes to the broader debates on social exclusion and structural inequalities. During the colonial period, tribal communities experienced what Xaxa (2019) describes as a form of dual colonialism: one from British rule and administration and the other from the non-tribal population. As tribal communities were integrated into the mainstream political and economic system under colonial rule, this integration was intertwined with exclusion, as tribal people lost access to and control over their livelihoods, land, forests, and other natural resources, as well as decision-making over their own lives. They were pushed to the margins of the new political and economic system. The concept of social exclusion was first developed by Lenoir in the mid-1970s. He categorised the 'excluded' as mentally and physically challenged, delinquents, single parents, multiple-problem households, marginal, and other 'misfits' (Sen, 2000, p. 1; Thorat, 2008). Later in social science literature, the excluded group is categorised as those denied "a livelihood, permanent employment, property, credit or land, housing, consumption level, education and cultural capital, the welfare state, citizenship and legal equality, democratic participation, humanity, fulfilment and understanding" (Sen, 2000; Thorat, 2008).

For Sen (2000), social exclusion can take the form of either 'unfavourable exclusion' or 'unfavourable inclusion'. The former is the situation where some people are kept out, and the latter is the situation where people are included but on unfavourable terms. This distinction is particularly relevant to the context of tribal land acquisition in Sundargarh district, where tribal communities participate in the decision-making process through Gram Sabha, yet their decisions and objections do

not influence the outcome of state-led land acquisition processes. Thus, participation may exist at the procedural level, while the meaningful stake in the decisions affecting tribal land and livelihood remains limited. This form of unfavourable inclusion provides an important context to analyse the role of tribal women's[1] leadership in sustaining the tribal consciousness.

Furthermore, Harvey's (2004, pp. 73-74) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" further locates the process of social exclusion within the political economy of capitalist development. Extending on Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, Harvey argues that dispossession remains a continuing process under contemporary capitalism, through the commodification and privatisation of land. He further argues that the state, through its monopoly of violence and "definitions of legality", plays an important role in supporting and fostering the processes of dispossession. In the context of tribal land acquisition in Sundargarh district, the state's authority to acquire land brings competing understandings of statutory ownership and customary laws into conflict, rendering the idea of land ownership contested with multiple legal entanglements. This highlights the gap between the traditional tribal land ownership through customary laws and the modern legal system that state machinery follows.

And the state-authorised acquisition procedures can enable the transfer of tribal land into the hands of private corporations in the field of mining. In these debates on tribal land ownership, privatization of tribal lands and resistance movements, often the role of tribal women is left unexplored. Therefore, it becomes crucial to understand the leadership of tribal women and their collective resistance to examine how tribal communities respond to the dispossession of their ancestral land and the associated threats to their livelihoods, identity and children's future. A significant amount of literature examines tribal resistance to land acquisition and displacement. However, less attention has been given to the gendered dimensions of such tribal struggles, specifically the role of tribal women's leadership within these movements.

Indigenous[2] women leaders occupy a unique yet invisible position within contemporary social structures, serving as a bridge between ancestral knowledge systems and modern institutional frameworks (Johncilla, 2006; Nayak, 2025). Indigenous epistemologies of leadership are rooted in reciprocity, communal responsibility, and social accountability. In this context, tribal women's leadership extends beyond the mainstream 'women in leadership' framework, shaped by competitive or hierarchical logics (Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Instead, it is grounded in

[1]The term "Tribal women" is not used as a homogeneous entity. In this context, "tribal women" refers specifically to women in the Sundargarh district.

[2]The term indigenous, also known as "Adivasi" in Hindi, refers to the tribal people since the turn of the present century (Xaxa, 1999). Many scholars also use the term indigenous and tribal interchangeably; accordingly, this paper uses these terms synonymously.

cultural stewardship,[3] relational accountability, and intergenerational care, reflecting women's responsibilities toward their community, culture, and future generations (Nayak, 2025). However, tribal women leaders also face interconnected oppressions, including cultural norms, colonial patriarchy, and systemic invisibility (Lavallee, 2022; Ryan, 2020). At the same time, tribal women are viewed as cultural guardians, community activists, and knowledge keepers, drawing on their ecological belonging and family networks for leadership (Chamberlain et al., 2016; Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Tribal women's leadership is not accidental; it articulates a decolonial modernity that restructures what counts as legitimate knowledge, competence, and leadership in postcolonial India and reclaims the condition of collective life (Nayak, 2025).

This essay argues that the tribal women's leadership in the Sundargarh district plays a crucial role in sustaining tribal consciousness through collective action and resistance to land acquisition. In this context, tribal consciousness is understood as a shared sense of identity, belonging, and moral responsibility rooted in land, kinship, and sustainable community life (Xaxa, 2008). We have explored how tribal women are utilising Self-Help Groups (SHGs)[4] not merely as financial institutions but as important socio-political spaces where women transmit knowledge of constitutional rights, sustainability, and strategies for land resistance. It further examines how tribal women use their maternal identity as a form of political legitimacy, thereby transforming motherhood from a site of caregiving into a resource of collective action. We further analysed how resistance is sustained through everyday negotiations within households and kinship networks, where women influence domestic decision-making procedures related to land ownership and sales. Finally, it analyses the tribal women's leadership in mobilising communities and sustaining non-violent forms of protest. When women are at the forefront of the protest and in the leading position, this mode of leadership is different from the context when women are not at the forefront, where protests often risk diversion from the main issues and encounter a different set of challenges.[5] Thus, this essay contributes to broader debates in feminist theory and tribal studies by arguing that leadership is not merely an individual aspect but a collective, relational, and culturally ingrained practice. It redefines the argument that tribal women are not merely participants in the land resistance movement against land acquisitions but key agents in sustaining tribal consciousness, resisting land acquisition, and articulating ideas of tribal development and empowerment.

[3]Cultural stewardship is the active, responsible management and preservation of cultural heritage, traditions, and community assets for future generations.

[4]A Self-Help Group (SHG) is a small, voluntary association of 10–20 individuals often from similar socio-economic backgrounds who come together to improve their living conditions through regular savings, internal lending, and mutual support.

[5]Challenges refers to some common charge protestors are likely to face, such as trespassing, disorderly conduct and also serious criminal charges like assaulting Police officers, and attempted murder, etc.

Research Methodology

This study is based on data collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions during one month of ethnographic field research conducted in November 2025, in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, India. The tribal women in Sundargarh district are resisting the ongoing land acquisition process by the Government of Odisha and a private company. The Land Resistance Movement began in 2020 and continues to date in 2026. For this study, we have focused on the Rajgangpur block of Sundargarh district. The Government of Odisha issued notices in February 2020 and February 2021 to acquire 990.67 acres of private agricultural land in seven revenue villages across five Gram Panchayats under Kutra and Rajgangpur Tehsils. We use purposive sampling to select participants by choosing tribal women in leadership positions within the resistance movement who actively resist the land acquisition process. Having previously built a rapport with the tribal women during our visits in 2024, it was easy for us to conduct in-depth interviews with them.

The tribal women who participated in the in-depth interviews were between 30 and 50 years old. Our sampling is thoroughly diverse in terms of different tribal groups, caste and religious backgrounds. The prominent participants in the interview include 12 married women, 1 unmarried woman, and 2 widows. Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted. As part of the participant observations, we attended public rallies, protests, Gram Sabha meetings, training workshops for community members, and women's gatherings throughout our stay in the field.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. For this study, approval was obtained from the Institute Human Ethics Committee (IHEC), IIT Indore (approval no. BSBE/IITI/IHEC-11/2025/11) on September 12, 2025. All interviews were recorded on a phone, with the interviewees' consent taken in advance. The recordings were transcribed manually for all the interviews. The transcribed data were read carefully, and the interview recordings were listened to several times to identify similarities and social patterns. The insights from participant observation and focus group discussions were merged with the interview data and subsequently categorised into conceptual themes, which are used in this research essay.

SHG and Tribal Women's Leadership

SHGs are small, economically homogeneous, affinity groups of poor people who gather to regularly save small amounts and mutually agree to contribute to a common fund to meet their emergency and livelihood needs (Singh, 2008; Nayak & Pattnaik, 2019). These groups aim to empower (at social, economic, and political levels) the

deprived and powerless masses (mostly women). It follows a savings-first approach and touches on the social, political, and health aspects of members, as well as their economic aspects. SHGs have a collective decision-making system to resolve conflict through women's collective leadership (Nayak & Pattnaik, 2019).

In Odisha, SHGs are largely operated and promoted under the Mission Shakti programme of the Government of Odisha. Usually, an SHG consists of 10-15 women members from the village who hold regular meetings to pool savings and provide internal loans for livelihood activities. The SHG-Bank Linkage Programme provides hassle-free services to the SHG members and promotes financial inclusion and sustainable livelihoods. Through the Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM), SHGs in Odisha support women in various income-generating activities, including agriculture, vegetable cultivation, millet farming, livestock rearing, tailoring, and paper/leaf plate making. Membership in SHGs is voluntary, and only one member per family is allowed, ensuring wider participation of the women in the community. SHGs can be broadly credit-oriented or livelihood-oriented (Department of Mission Shakti, Government of Odisha)

In Odisha, specifically in the Sundargarh district, women are taking the lead in safeguarding their ancestral land. Tribal women's leadership is rooted in communal responsibility, social accountability, cultural guardians, community activists and knowledge keepers (Nayak, 2025; Chamberlain et al., 2016; Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Tribal women in Sundargarh district have an active Self-Help Group (SHG) that is primarily credit-oriented. They use this group not merely as a financial group but also as a space where women engage in dialogue, share experiences, and strategise how to effectively negotiate and contest unlawful land acquisition procedures. Non-governmental organisations like Swayam[6] play an important role in grassroots legal and social empowerment within the Fifth Schedule area. The initiative is led by a group of social activists from the tribal community. Their work focuses on educating tribal people, specifically tribal women, about their constitutional rights, entitlements, and land rights under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Article 244(1)).

The core feature of this initiative includes mobilising tribal women as agents of change. The NGO encourages tribal women to use SHG meetings to disseminate knowledge within their households and village communities, thereby promoting a culture of civil rights awareness at the community level. It is enabling tribal women to actively participate in community decision-making processes, take leadership roles in spreading awareness of their legal land rights, and mobilise women.

[6]I am using a pseudonym for this NGO and the names of its members to protect their original identity, privacy and interests.

One of the respondents in the field says:[7]

> *Every year, we celebrate International Women's Day as a big event. An NGO in our area started this celebration. Earlier, it was celebrated across three panchayats, but we realised we should take it to the community level instead of just a few panchayats. All women should be included in this celebration, irrespective of religion and caste. We hold it at a large playground, and all the women of the Rajgangpur block participate. We carry soil in an earthy plate and walk on foot to a certain distance on the road and take an oath to save our land, identity, culture and existence.*

These actions show how tribal women serve as cultural guardians. Their leadership is rooted in social connectivity rather than competitiveness and power. Tribal women are taking the initiative to protect their land, forests, culture, and identity. They are not relying on men; they are taking the initiative to safeguard their land for the betterment of their children's future, their identity, culture, and, most importantly, to secure their sustainable livelihood, which has been largely dependent on forest lands for generations.

Several feminist authors have emphasised the importance of women entering the public sphere in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment (Hooks, 1984; Fraser, 1992; Butler, 2006; De Beauvoir, 2015; Arendt, 2018). Another body of scholars highlights that entering a public sphere does not render women's empowerment if the oppressive social structures related to gender, race, class and sexuality are not sufficiently addressed (Collins, 1990; Federici, 2003; Gay, 2014; Ahmed, 2017; Lorde, 2018; Setterquist, A 2024). In this study, tribal women's entry into the public sphere is understood as a form of resistance to the oppressive power imbalance between the state and tribal communities. In contrast to the above scholars, who emphasise structural oppression, these tribal women utilise their maternal identity as a form of political legitimacy to enter public spaces, safeguard their land (their sustainable source of livelihood), and secure the future of their children. In the next section, we discussed how tribal women use motherhood as a form of political legitimacy.

Mothers First: Motherhood as a Source of Political Legitimacy

Mothering refers to women's lived experience of giving birth or taking care of children (Rich, 1986), whereas Motherhood has been defined by a section of scholars as a social construct and patriarchal institution that controls and dictates women's thoughts

[7]Respondent name is Sharmila; she is 36 years old mother of one girl child. She is a member of panchayat Samiti. She is one of the leading members of the tribal resistance movement against land acquisition by Dalmia Cement Bharat Ltd (DCBL) company. This interview was conducted at her house because she is a very active member, and it is difficult to meet her during the daytime, so we visited her in the late evening.

and actions (Rich, 1986; Butler, 1993; O' Reilly, 2021; Setterquist, 2024). By framing motherhood as a cultural and political construct rather than a biological one, Rich (1986) observes its role in sustaining gendered power relations.

Shiva (1988) rightly argues that in rural and tribal contexts, women's role is not merely biological to produce and reproduce life, but also, they have a social role in providing sustenance, food and water. She further argues that rural and tribal women bear the actual cost of the development projects in the name of national interest. Women who depend on nature for the daily sustenance of their households, as they are the primary providers of food, water and fodder. Drawing on Shiva's (1988) works, this study analyses how tribal women redefine motherhood and their role as caretakers of their families within the context of a power struggle between the state and the tribal community, with reference to questions of land acquisition. Rather than experiencing motherhood as a subordination in a patriarchal society (Rich, 1986), tribal women mobilise themselves as a source of political legitimacy. They are positioning themselves as "mothers first" in the resistance movement against the state and Dalmia Cement Bharat Ltd (DCBL), which has a moral responsibility to protect their ancestral land, forest, and ultimately their children's future.

During the fieldwork, while interviewing women about their thoughts on using motherhood as their political identity in this tribal resistance movement,[8] one of the respondents in the field says:[9]

> *We, mothers, are worried about our children's future. We can't see our children's future getting destroyed. We have no other options but to come forward to save our land, as we have given birth to our children, it is our responsibility to understand their pain and secure their future. Without land, without our source of livelihood, we can't think of creating a better future for our children. Fathers are less engaged with their children's futures because they are busy working to put food on the table. We, as mothers, have to think about our children, land, forests, etc. My kids are telling me, "Don't let them take our land away from us." I feel sad when I think about how my kids are also worried about our land instead of focusing on their studies. We have to secure our children's future, and we will fight to save our land.*

Tribal women are taking leadership roles that have emerged from their maternal responsibility, continuously addressing themselves as "we mothers" who are 'fighting

[8]Tribal Resistance Movement in this context refers to the ongoing resistance to the expansion of mining areas for industrial development by the Adivasi people of the Rajgangpur block of Sundargarh district, Odisha.

[9]Respondent's name is Kavita. She is a ward member of her village. A mother of two, who lives with her husband, children and in-laws. This interview was taken in November 2025 at the respondent's house.

to save our land for our children's future, which is the only source of sustainable livelihood.' This suggests that women often perceived themselves as guardians of the family's survival. As Rich (1986) described, motherhood was imposed by patriarchal institutions on women's thought and action. However, for tribal women in Sundargarh district, motherhood has become a source of legitimacy, encouraging them to participate in the public sphere.[10] The gendered role expectations about caregiving are both reproduced and transformed in moments of crisis. Tribal women are making motherhood their identity to lead in protecting the ancestral land from the DCBL company and the state. The land titles are in men's names, and women show a deeper concern for saving their land, as it is intergenerational security. The above interview shows that men are busy earning a living for their families, which reveals that women (mothers) bear the burden of caring for the family, children's futures, and their ancestral land. Land is always the cultural identity, livelihood, and way of life. Tribal women are not merely protecting the land but also working to preserve the future of future generations.

Schirmer (1993) introduces the theory of political motherhood to encompass and reflect the lived experience of mothers actively using motherhood identities to engage in political resistance against oppressive regimes. In this study, we see that tribal women's maternal identity is not merely confined to the private sphere but becomes a strategic resource for collective resistance. Tribal women do not merely participate in the resistance movement for land acquisition, but transform the motherhood into a legitimate source of political action.

In the following section, we examine how tribal women engage in collective action to safeguard their ancestral land and their negotiation of internal conflict within the household and kinship members.

Tribal Women's Collective Action and Household-level Negotiation

In this section, we focus on how tribal women utilise the SHG meetings to discuss strategies to prevent land acquisition and land sales to the government. Tribal women's access to SHGs is usually associated with economic activities. However, during the interviews, tribal women leaders revealed that these groups are also used as spaces for political awareness. SHG provides a space for collective action and processes of change in how tribal women who hold positions in SHGs perceive and experience their personal power within households and village communities. They also contribute to a sense of women's agency in articulating their community's future and visions

[10]Pilcher and Whelehan (2016) defined the public sphere as a space where activities that are related to politics, law, labour and government take place. Men have historically been able to engage in both the public and private spheres, whereas women have been confined to the private sphere (Setterquist, 2024).

(Finnis, 2017). It is argued that collective action refers to mobilising people around shared concerns (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Evans & Nambiar, 2013). Among tribal women in Sundargarh district, collective action is routine, taking place through SHGs and Gram Sabhas (Village Councils). Women use these spaces to discuss community issues, educate each other about tribal constitutional rights and the protection of their land and forests.

Tribal women's collective actions expand a set of opportunities and enhance women's decision-making power within the household and community. For instance, the tribal women in Sundargarh actively participate through SHGs and Gram Sabha meetings and have taken leading roles in the resistance movement against land acquisition for the expansion of a private company's mining project. The actions also explicitly challenge the social norms and behaviours that continue to constrain female agency within the family context, particularly evident in tribal women's engagement in land-related decisions. Tribal women question their husbands regarding land sales, persuade their male family members not to sell land, discuss land issues in SHGs meetings, and warn relatives not to sign consent forms when *dalals* (brokers) approach them. These actions seek to significantly shift the balance of local norms, thereby creating new space for women to articulate their agency (Pandolfelli et al., 2008; Contreras-Arias et al., 2013; Meier Zu Selhausen, 2012; Evans & Nambiar, 2013).

One of the respondents from the field says:[11]

> *In our SHG group, we always discuss how we can protect our land, and every month I share my views. We think about how we keep our husbands under control. Through our husbands, the land is being sold,[12] with the influence of alcohol and other intoxicating substances, and greed for money. So, how can we make our husbands, our family's men, understand and persuade them not to be influenced by outsiders? I encourage other women in my group to talk to their husbands and other male family members about this so they know what's on their minds. If we don't know, then they might quietly sell their land. And we should also tell our married daughters or sisters not to sign any form when a Dalal (broker) comes to them and offers money. We should make them aware and ask them to inform us if [a] Dalal approaches them to sign the consent form.*

The interview demonstrates how SHGs serve as spaces for women's collective agency and collective action. The resistance to land acquisition is not solely confined to political spaces or public protests. However, it is ingrained in household negotiation and

[11]Respondent's name is Sunita, a 36-year-old woman. She is the President of an SHG group and also an active member in the tribal resistance movement.

[12]Two landowners in the village sold their land by going to the collector's office without informing the villagers. As the land titles are in the male members of the family, hence the respondent is specifically mentioning that through the husbands, the land is being sold.

everyday life. Women's collective agency emphasises regulating the decision-making process within the household, as men hold formal land ownership and authority over land transactions. Women recognised that land is being sold through husbands, often under the influence of alcohol, neighbours and monetary temptations. Before 2020, SHGs functioned solely as sites for financial activities aimed at promoting women's social, economic, and political empowerment through various government programs. However, after the government's proposal to acquire land in the gram panchayat for mining expansion in 2020, the tribal community in Sundargarh district began to organise collectively to resist the land acquisition process and decided not to give consent.

Tribal women leaders actively participated and shared leadership roles in the gram sabha meetings alongside male leaders. Over time, tribal women shifted the discussion around resistance also into SHGs, as these groups provide a regular and accessible platform for women's interaction. The shift of SHGs from a site of financial activity to a site of active politics plays a crucial role in mobilising women to protect their land and tribal identity, and to secure the future of their children. In this way, resistance to land acquisition is not only confined to public protest or legal actions but also in everyday household negotiations, illustrating how women exercise collective agency within the constraints of patriarchal land ownership structures.

Tribal Women's Ways of Negotiating Intra-Household and Kinship Conflicts

From the above section, it is evident that resistance to land acquisition is not confined to the political sphere but also embedded in household negotiation and everyday domestic life. This section focuses on how women negotiate with the internal conflicts within their families and kinship networks. Feminist scholars have highlighted that intra-household interaction is characterised by both cooperation and conflict (Agarwal, 1997). While household members cooperate to sustain livelihoods and maintain the social structure, there is also an underlying conflict over decision-making regarding their ancestral land. In this context, the tribal women's bargaining power (Agarwal, 1997) is shaped by their maternal responsibility to safeguard their children's future, land, forest, and their tribal identity. Thus, the outcome of the negotiations with their family and kin regarding the ancestral land largely depends on tribal women's relative bargaining power within the household. One of the respondents narrates her conversations at home,[13]

> *When we learned that two people from our village had sold their land, my husband and I had a fight over saving the land. He said you are regularly conducting meetings, leaving the house, but people are still selling their*

[13]ibid.

> *land, so what is the benefit of conducting meetings? Don't conduct meetings anymore. If people want to sell their land, let them sell it. Most people don't come to the village meetings and sell their land, so why will you fight for them? Leave this. But I said, only two people have sold their land. If the men do not go to the collector's office and sign, the land will not be sold. The land is yours, and for you people, we women are fighting to save it. Men are the ones selling the land out of greed for money. There are 136 families in this village, and of those, only 2 have sold their land. But others have not sold the land, 80% of us will not give consent, so our land can't be acquired.*

This narrative illustrates that resistance to land acquisition is negotiated not merely in the public spaces but also in the private spaces of the household. The negotiation over land acquisitions starts in the domestic and private spaces. The conflict between the respondent and her husband reflects competing rationalities regarding land ownership and livelihood. The husband's rationality is based on an individualised, short-term cost-benefit approach. For instance, the husband argues that those who have sold their land are better off, while those resisting land acquisition incur financial costs and psychological strain. In contrast, the respondent articulates an alternative rationality that is collective well-being and moral responsibility. By emphasising that only 2 of 136 families have sold their land and that the majority have not given their consent, she redefines the situation as a collective strength rather than a failure. She further argues that sustained collective resistance can secure long-term benefits rather than the immediate gains prioritised by her husband. These differences in rationality between the respondents and her husband do not represent fixed gender differences; rather, they reveal a gendered dynamic in which men hold formal ownership of land, while women actively participate in meetings, negotiations, and protests, etc., to save the land as a source of livelihood.

During interviews, women expressed their frustrations over the ongoing resistance to land acquisitions, and sometimes asked the women leaders how long they had to resist, especially when some members of the village community sold their land to the government for personal gain. They believe these actions are gradually breaking women's confidence. Tribal women leaders have to make an extra effort to educate their fellow community and family members.

One of the respondents in the field narrated:[14]

> *One day, I made all the male members of my family sit down and asked for their opinions. I told them, "You have 1 acre of land, and you are getting Rs. 36,000 per dismil from the company." If you divide among yourselves, then think about how much each one of you gets, and how many sons you have.*

[14]Respondent's name is Sangeeta, she is 40 years old, mother of two children. She is also an active member in the resistance against land acquisition.

> *Keep that also in mind. They said we will not sell our land. We don't need money from the company. Just as our ancestors worked and lived off the land, we will also live that way.*

The above narrative reflects the emotional labour and extra effort women have to put in to sustain tribal consciousness and resistance to land acquisition. The expression of fatigue and frustration among women shows, in part, the fragility of collective action. Despite this, tribal women leaders continue to play a vital role in the tribal resistance movement by taking the responsibility of mobilising the community and persuading their own families. The way the respondent discussed with their male family members indicates that support from family and kinship is vital to sustaining the resistance movement over a longer period. By situating the discussion within kinship structures and intergenerational considerations, women effectively help them understand land as a long-term livelihood resource rather than a short-term monetary benefit. The family's eventual decision not to sell their land reflects their moral and social values regarding land that prioritise collective identity, livelihood, and way of life. Thus, the narrative highlights the central role of tribal women in sustaining collective tribal consciousness and resistance through everyday household-level negotiations.

In the next section, we discuss the women's role in mobilising communities for the land resistance movement and analyse how positioning women at the forefront of a protest significantly sustains non-violent forms of resistance.

Tribal Women's Leadership and Homogeneous Political Outlook

Women's Role in Political Mobilisation

It is argued that urbanisation, industrialisation, and education directly resulted in an increase in women's mobilisation (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986; Margolis, 1993). Women's rights to land are an important variable in understanding the nature of women's resistance (Kandiyoti, 1988). Structural arguments that tend to emphasise the forces of capitalism (Gordon, 1995; Robertson, 1996), or long-term processes of modernisation, which are slow to change (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986; Margolis, 1993), at the expense of more immediate political, local and cultural practices (Ray & Korteweg, 1995).

In contrast, this study argues that, for tribal women, mobilisation is shaped by factors such as SHGs, gram sabha meetings, village networks, interpersonal relationships, and everyday domestic communication. Women's mobilisation in these contexts cannot be fully explained by urbanisation, industrialisation and formal education alone, but must be understood in terms of localised social and political dynamics.

A respondent from the field says:[15]

> *We are holding a meeting in our village to inform people about the rally or protest we are planning to hold. Those people who have not attended the meeting, and are not aware of this, don't want to come, so we asked the villagers who had attended the meeting to tell their neighbours, and they tell their neighbours, so everyone informs each other how important it is to participate in the rally/protest. We also collect money to organise a rally/protest by going door to door and telling people the date and time of the rally. We make it compulsory for at least one member from each family to take part in these rallies. Mostly, men don't come forward for this[16] so we women in our villages take responsibility to inform everyone and mobilise people by asking them to come to the rally/protest, to save our land and fight for our rights. Women from all the villages collect money, and each villages make their own arrangements for transportation to reach the protest venue. If anyone falls ill or needs first-aid medication during the protest, that will also be handled by women.*

To mobilise people, tribal women do not need any educational qualification, exposure to urban life or modernisation. At the community level, participation in protests is seen not merely as a voluntary political act but as a moral obligation; one member from each household is expected to participate. This reflects that for tribal people, unity in political outlook is their only source of collective strength and survival to safeguard their lands. Despite the availability of various advanced modes of communication and social media, women rely on face-to-face, door-to-door mobilisation, which generates a sense of ownership, moral obligation, and collective responsibility among tribal community members, encouraging them to participate in the protest. Such practices help sustain tribal consciousness among tribal community members, highlighting how deeply the idea of dissent is rooted in kinship and neighbourhood ties. These forms of mobilisation reflect the importance of social networks in sustaining grassroots collective action and in building a homogeneous political outlook.

Women's Role in Protest

Tribal women are the organisational backbone of the protest and movements. From the above section, we can see that women undertake the labour of mobilisation, collection of financial contributions, and make necessary arrangements for protests. This demonstrates that women play an important role during the protest and that their role in household management extends into the political space. The leadership roles

[15]Respondent's name is Madhuri; she is a secretary in the Self-Help Group. She is a 37-year-old woman, mother of two children. This Interview was conducted in her courtyard outside her house.

[16]Because men are often engaged in work, they are unable to spare time for these activities.

are automatically expected to be taken up by women, with some male leaders also leading the protest. Furthermore, women's leadership results in non-violent protest and indirectly shields the other protestors from potential state violence by the police.

Mhajne and Whetstone (2018) explain that the state's role as protectors of mothers and women can shield protest actions from violence when mothers and women participate. That means as long as women and mothers are leading protests, other protestors can be partially shielded from state violence. They also built the theoretical argument that mothers' participation in social movements can legitimise these and mobilise others to join. Drawing on Mhajne and Whetstone's (2018) theoretical argument, this study argues that within India's democratic framework, the right to protest is formally recognised. However, in practice, women protestors are often subjected to various forms of state violence. In the Sundargarh district, the situation shows a contrasting dynamic. The visible presence of tribal women's leadership roles, combined with the numerical strength of the tribal women in protests, appears to have played a crucial role in preventing the use of state violence during these mobilisations. The tribal women's leadership, alongside male leaders in the protests, has structurally helped maintain non-violent forms of protest.

One of the respondents from the field explained an incident during a protest, how the presence of women at the forefront is a strategy not to divert the protest from its main agenda:[17]

> *We are always at the front of the protests, or during road blockades, because the police do not dare to say or do anything to us. Men are mostly hot-blooded by nature. When police personnel say something, they respond immediately, so the chances of violence (lathi charge) are high, and they can be arrested easily on false charges. One day, while we were collecting money from our people as a contribution toward the protest expenses, a policewoman approached us and asked us to move off the road. We said we are already standing on the side of the road, and our permission is until 4 pm; now it's only 3 pm. The policewoman replied to us, "Why don't you sleep on the road?" We told them that if it's needed, we will also sleep on the road. We have permission to be on the road till 4 pm; that's why we are standing here. Otherwise, we would have cleared the road by now. The police officer left after that. If men had been in our place, they would have got angry, and a heated argument or maybe some conflict would have occurred. That's why men in the front are quite risky. The male leaders who have a calm nature and have patience stand with us at the front.*

Mhajne and Whetstone (2018) believed that the state's role as protector of women can be understood as an extension of the patriarchal family unit, where men are the

[17]Respondent's name is Mary. She is 37 years old and a mother of three children. This interview was taken at her house.

family heads and the protectors of women and children, and women are nurturers of the family (Werbner, 1999, p. 231; Hall, 2023; Setterquist, 2024). In contrast, this study shows that tribal women often act as protectors during protests, standing in large numbers at the forefront and occupying visible leadership positions. This strategy helps minimise confrontation and prevent escalation by shielding other protestors from potential state violence. Women's active participation and leadership encourage disciplined collective action that reduces the likelihood of reactive and aggressive responses, particularly in situations involving police and administrative authorities. This analysis shows that tribal women's role in mobilisation and protest extends beyond the conventional understanding of participation in movements, positioning them as key actors in sustaining collective resistance.

Conclusion

This research study highlights the multifaceted nature of tribal women's leadership in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, demonstrating that women's leadership plays a crucial role in sustaining tribal consciousness within the tribal community. The tribal women's leadership cannot be fully understood through the mainstream framework of women's empowerment through education, economic independence, and legal reforms, but is instead deeply rooted in cultural stewardship, relational accountability, and intergenerational care (Nayak, 2025). In this sense, tribal women's leadership reflects an alternative paradigm that challenges the dominant framework of women's leadership by redefining agency, authority, and resistance within a postcolonial context. Through SHGs and Gram Sabha meetings, tribal women actively participate in the grassroots-level decision-making processes and mobilise collective resistance against land acquisition. These public spaces serve as significant sites for tribal women to share awareness, disseminate knowledge of constitutional rights, and reinforce community-specific cultural and moral values, thereby actively sustaining tribal consciousness.

This study further argues that there is a growing need to view motherhood as a source of political legitimacy for tribal women's participation and leadership in the resistance movement rather than subordination within a patriarchal society (Rich, 1986). Tribal women of Sundargarh district utilise maternal identity as a strategic resource, morally and politically, to save their land, tribal identity and the future of their children. Furthermore, the study explored the importance of collective action and intra-household level negotiation. Tribal women are actively challenging patriarchal norms by influencing decision-making within families, particularly regarding land ownership and sale, demonstrating that resistance is embedded in everyday domestic life as much as in the public sphere.

Therefore, tribal women play a vital role in mobilising communities and sustaining non-violent forms of protest by occupying leadership positions during protests, a unique strategic practice that minimises the potential for state violence and

prevents the derailment of the resistance agenda. Hence, tribal women are key agents in preserving tribal unity, cultural identity, rituals and traditions. Tribal women's leadership in the Sundargarh district redefines the mainstream women's leadership framework by foregrounding care, communal responsibility, and social accountability, thereby helping sustain tribal consciousness within the context of land resistance movements in India.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the broader discussions on Indigenous studies, gender, and social exclusion by illustrating the interconnectedness among these social dimensions of tribal land resistance. First, it broadens an understanding of indigenous leadership by framing it as a communal, relational, and culturally embedded practice rather than an individual form of authority. Second, it contributes to feminist debates on gender and agency by revealing how motherhood, care, and intergenerational responsibility can serve as sources of political legitimacy and collective action rather than being perceived solely as arenas of gendered subordination. Finally, this study contributes to debates on social exclusion by highlighting the relationship between structural vulnerability and political agency. Tribal women are in a particularly vulnerable position within the process of dispossession, experiencing different forms of marginalisation in relation to land, gender, and decision-making. Their vulnerability does not indicate mere political powerlessness. Rather, the experience of tribal women demonstrates how socially marginalised groups can exercise agency through mobilisation, household negotiation and culturally embedded forms of leadership. Through collective action, mobilising communities, and sustaining tribal consciousness, tribal women are increasingly asserting their claims to land, identity, and livelihood to secure the future of generation next.

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