



## LEARNING TO SPEAK AND WISDOM TO EARN: VOICES OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN DHARMAPURI DISTRICT OF TAMIL NADU – AN EXPERIENCE SURVEY

### Sociology

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### ABSTRACT

Tribal women in rural India endure to experience socio-economic marginalization due to incomplete access to education, employable skills, and institutional care. In backward districts such as Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu, agricultural distress, informal employment, and restrictive gender rules more intensify women's economic susceptibility. Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs) have arisen as an important intervention to support skill development, self-employment, and economic inclusion for marginalized groups. Though, existing studies mainly focus on economic outcomes, through limited care to women's lived involvements of empowerment. Adopting a descriptive research design by a qualitative approach, the present study explores how tribal women trained under RSETIs experience changes in their skills, livings, confidence and also decision-making roles. Data were collected through a focus group discussion by purposive sampling and analyzed thematically. The results expose developments not only in income-generating activities bring but also in self-confidence, communication, and participation in family and community decisions. The study accomplishes that RSETIs brought foster multidimensional empowerment through enhance both economic capacity and social participation among tribal women.

### KEYWORDS

Tribal Women, RSETIs, Skill Development, Women Empowerment, Livelihoods.

### INTRODUCTION

Tribal women now India continue to experience determined socio-economic marginalization resulting from partial access to education, employable skills, and institutional care systems (Mahapatra et al., 2022). In comparatively backward districts such as Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu, living insecurity has intensified due to decreasing agricultural employment, insufficient irrigation facilities, and limited market access, which in turn affected tribal women's economic steadiness (Borah et al., 2021). These circumstances have forced women to depend on informal and low-paid work, limiting their contribution in family and community decision-making processes. Recent studies emphasizes that skill development interventions are essential for enhancing women's economic contribution and social empowerment in rural settings. Similarly, the involvement of the entrepreneurial activities may postpone the earlier marriage among the women and a study found that the mean age of married respondents was 19.73 years and their husband's mean age at marriage was 28.15 years (Gobalakrishnan and Shanmugapriya, 2014). Studies on vocational training programmes prove that organized skill acquisition improves employability, self-employment predictions, and income levels among rural women, while likewise consolidation their confidence and decision-making ability (Kapoor et al., 2025). Though, researchers note that the consequences of such programmes continue uneven due to strict gender norms, mobility restraints, and limited post-training care (Bag et al., 2025).

In this regard, Rural Self Employment Training Institutes have appeared as a key institutional mechanism for encouraging rural entrepreneurship and economic inclusion. Among women empirical studies suggest that RSETIs enable entrepreneurial development by as long as skill training, entrepreneurial orientation, and access to official banking networks, predominantly for women from marginalized groups (Singh et al., 2024). While these studies authorize positive financial outcomes, methodical reviews specify that existing study on RSETIs largely relies on quantitative indicators such as income and employment group (Kumar et al., 2021). Thus, limited care has been paid to the lived involvements and subjective senses that tribal women ascribe to skill training and empowerment. Addressing this gap, the present study adopt a qualitative focus group discussion method to know how tribal women trained under RSETIs in Dharmapuri District bring changes in their skills, life, confidence, and contribution to participate in social and family decision-making process.

### Research Method

The present study follows a **descriptive research design** to study the experiences of tribal women trained under Rural Self Employment Training Institutes, in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu. A **purposive sampling method** was used to select tribal women who had completed RSETIs training and involved in income-generating activities. Data

were collected through a **focus group discussion method which includes eight participants** that enabled collective likeness and interaction between the respondents. A semi-structured interview guide was used to know themes related to skill growth, life changes, confidence, and participation in family and social decision-making process. The data obtained from the focus group discussion were analyzed with **thematic analysis** to find key patterns related to economic, social, and psychological empowerment.

### Focus Group Discussion

A Focus Group Discussion was lead with trained tribal women beneficiaries of the Rural Self Employment Training Institute (RSETIs), Dharmapuri District. The discussion was organized in Dhasampatti, Pennagram taluk nearby the school campus in the evening at three o'clock, a time suitable for the participants after finishing their family and work responsibilities. The group consists of tribal women from nearby villages who had now completed training programmes in tailoring, blouse stitching, dairy activities, honey bee rearing, and millet-based value-added food products. The discussion initiated with self-introductions, where participants mentioned their names, village circumstances, family size, marital status, and number of children. Maximum number of the women belonged to economically marginal families and depended previously on daily wage, agricultural work, or housemaid servant. Some participants stated early marriage and strong devotion to traditional cultural norms, which originally limited their mobility, education, and decision-making power. Participants deliberated how they came to know about the RSETIs programmes. The respondents got awareness about RSETIs through social media stages, bank officials, friends and relatives who had attended training, government pamphlets, and awareness programmes lead by banks. Many women emphasized that the promise of free training, food amenities, and warranty encouraged them to join the programme. Through the discussion, participants shared their pre-training life involvements, noticeable by irregular employment, job insecurity, low wages, and workplace discrimination. Certain women stated being preserved as unpaid workers in their own families, involved only family chores and reproduction roles. Lack of skill training and economic awareness more reinforced their dependence on male family members. Subsequently getting training from RSETIs, participants stated important improvement in their skills, confidence, and economic contribution. Women trained in traditional blouse stitching improve modern techniques by cultural designs, while others started small-scale enterprises in tailoring, milk production, honey bee farming, and millet-based food processing. The training aided them recognize local capitals and improve them its value-added products which are suitable to their village markets. Participants' also deliberated that social discrimination removed through the training. Many women specified that they now actively participate in family decision-making, manage savings, and contribute to family income. Developed communication

skills allowed them to express feelings within their families and speak openly in community meetings. Certain women stated that they are acting as role models in their villages through that they are inspiring other women to join skill training programmes. Though, the discussion also exposed ongoing challenges, participants stated problems in accessing government schemes due to lack of information, documentation problems, and restricted institutional follow-up. Social insight, gender-based limits, and market access problems sustained to affect their entrepreneurial development. Despite these challenges, the women stated strong aspirations to expand their initiatives and attain economic self-reliance. Overall, the Focus Group Discussion emphasized that RSETI training played a vital role in converting tribal women from passive workers to self-assured earners and decision-makers. The discussion obviously raised the appearance of collective voice, social authorization, and living diversification among trained tribal women in Dharmapuri District.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results from the focus group discussion strongly support with earlier studies that highlight the positive role of skill improvement programmes in refining rural and tribal women's livings. Previous research has exposed that organized vocational training improves employability, self-employment, and income constancy among rural and tribal women (Kumar et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2024). Similar to these studies, participants in the current study stated better earning opportunities through tailoring, dairy farming, beekeeping, and value-added millet products after implementation RSETIs training. Though, the present study gives new visions by foregrounding the **voices and lived skills** of tribal women, which frequently exist underrepresented in literature. While previous studies mostly focus on income group and enterprise results (Ranjan et al., 2023; Bag et al., 2025), the FGD exposed that empowerment spreads elsewhere economic gains. Participants frequently emphasized increased self-confidence, better communication skills, and the aptitude to speak in family and community opportunities. Many women stated active participation in family decision-making connected to savings, children's education, and living choices, representative a shift in intra-family power relations. The discussion also highlights how RSETIs entrepreneurial training brings **spaces of social knowledge and collective identity creation**. Unlike previous studies that treat training as a technical interference, this study displays that group-based training allowed women to stunned social isolation, challenge traditional limits, and exchange gendered norms in their families and villages. This result supports empowerment frameworks that conceptualize agency as the capacity to make expressive choices and voice sentiments (Kumar et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2024). Complete, the study extends present literature by representative that RSETIs empower tribal women not only as stipendiaries but also as social performers with improved voice, agency, and leadership in their families and communities. This multidimensional accepting of empowerment reinforces the sociological significance of RSETIs in tribal settings.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights that Rural Self Employment Training Institutes show a transformative role in the lives of tribal women in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu, spreading well outside income generation. Results from the focus group discussion disclose that RSETIs training improves not only vocational skills and living opportunities but also improves also women's self-confidence, communicative skill, and participation in family and community decision-making. The stories of the participants show a clear shift from economic dependency and social hiddenness to increased, voice, and self-recognition. A study found that early married girls faced several problems in their daily life including looking after their family and economically they depend entirely on their husbands and in-laws income (Gobalakrishnan and Shanmugapriya, 2014). Though traditional gender norms, early marriage, and cultural restrictions endure to shape women's lives, organized skill training and institutional care allow tribal women to transfer these constraints more efficiently. Similarly a study concluded that RSETIs' important contribution to empowering women economically within family as well as within society (Gomathi and Gobalakrishnan). By uniting earning capacity with enriched empowerment, RSETIs contribute to a multidimensional process of empowerment. This study consequently underlines the importance of recognizing empowerment as both an economic and socio-cultural development, entrenched in lived skills and everyday alterations and RSETIs act as an institutional device for rural entrepreneurship elevation.

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