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# Vocational education and training for indigenous women in India: toward a participatory planning approach

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## ABSTRACT

Indigenous women in India struggle to maintain their traditional knowledge, education and livelihoods in the face of colonization, neoliberalism and development. The paper analyzes the vocational education and skills training programmes implemented for indigenous women in India by the national government and local agencies. It considers the experiences of indigenous women from two different geographical locations and two distinct communities. The qualitative findings from the study indicate a mismatch between the requirements and desires of indigenous women and the policy objectives. By integrating self-determination into a subaltern framework, the paper suggests taking a participatory planning approach to VET for indigenous women. It brings attention to and draws practical suggestions for representation and inclusion of indigenous women in skills development.

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Indigenous women; skills policy; vocational education; self-determination; subaltern theory; India

## Introduction

Indigenous women in India have the highest levels of adult illiteracy, unemployment and poverty amongst Indian population (UN DESA, 2009; Government of India [GOI], 2011a). As a result of colonization, neoliberalism and development policy, indigenous women in India (and indeed globally) are struggling to preserve their traditional knowledge, education, livelihoods, and culture (Brain, 2017; D. De, 2018; Kuokkanen, 2008; Nash, 2001). The widespread loss of land and control of natural resources in indigenous areas have pushed these women away from previously productive activities (Gupta & Basu, 2012). Adult education policies for indigenous women increasingly focus on vocational education and training (VET) to equip them with market-oriented skills to generate alternative livelihoods and increase their economic contribution.

VET and skills development are considered an important tool for poverty reduction, supporting decent work, enhancing employability, and maximizing opportunities for disadvantaged groups across societies (ILO, 2008; UNESCO, 2016; World Bank, 1993). The Indian government (GOI) launched the National Skills Development Mission in 2015 with the aim of skilling, upskilling or reskilling 300 million people by 2022. The GOI's 2015 *National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship* (NPSDE, 2015) seeks to enhance the employability of disadvantaged groups, including women, scheduled tribes,

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scheduled castes, and people with disability. Under this policy, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private institutions receive government funding for training programs in rural and indigenous areas.

However, there is limited research on indigenous women's experiences with VET programs in India. To fill this gap, my study analyzes the VET programs implemented for indigenous women and explores: what are the experiences of indigenous women with VET and skills development courses? How, if at all, the implemented training corresponds to the requirement and aspirations of indigenous women? Drawing on qualitative methodology, these research questions are addressed through the perspective of 25 indigenous women residing in two states of India, Jharkhand and West Bengal, and who belong to two different indigenous communities, Oraon and Santhal.

This paper argues that a skills policy intended for the general population must take into account the socio-historical context, livelihoods, traditional knowledge, and lives of indigenous women. Exploring the engagement of indigenous women with VET and the alignment of such programs with these women's practical requirements and aspirations is critical. There is a danger of viewing indigenous women as vulnerable adults with little agency for self-determination in their education and training. The paper promotes the integration of indigenous women into the planning, monitoring and implementation of VET and contributes to the broader theoretical discourse of self-determination for indigenous people (Corntassel, 2008; Kosko, 2013; Kuokkanen, 2012, 2019; Smith, 1999; Xanthaki, 2007). In addition, the paper provides practical suggestions for VET for indigenous women and communities.

The following section presents a brief background before moving on to the literature review that situates indigenous women within the global indigenous education discourse. The next section details the theoretical framework, integrating the subalternity and self-determination approaches. The subsequent sections are dedicated to the findings of the research. Finally, I discuss the results in light of previous literature and theoretical frameworks to draw suggestions for further research and practical implications.

## **Indigenous people in India: at a crossroads of development, neoliberalism and skills training**

There are an estimated 84 million indigenous people in India, 8.6% of the country's population (World Bank, 2016). India has the world's second-largest indigenous population, made up of more than 400 different indigenous groups (Ghosh, 2006). These groups have many differences in culture, customs, history, language and way of living (Pati & Dash, 2002). Indigenous people are either *adivasi* (original dwellers) or *mulo nivasi* (root people). Although the Indian government officially uses the terms 'tribal' or 'scheduled tribes' to refer to indigenous people in policy documents, the concept of 'tribe' was a colonial invention and represented an ideology intended to categorize conquered people and integrate them into the imperial system (Gupta & Basu, 2012). This paper therefore uses the term indigenous rather than tribal.

Indigenous people in India have suffered land alienation, the denial of forest rights, livelihood disruption, and large-scale displacement in both colonial and post-colonial eras (D. De, 2018; Gupta & Basu, 2012). In recent times, neoliberal land policies and national capitalist 'development' policies have promoted the construction of dams, roads, industries, agribusiness plantations, and the mining of ores. These projects have displaced over 10 million indigenous people, depriving them of land and livelihood (D'Souza, 2003;

Fernandes, 2001). Due to this systematic opening up of indigenous territories through development activities, the indigenous peoples of India have lost their customary rights over natural resources such as water, land, and forests, compelling them to move to cities to find new livelihoods (Guha, 2007). All over the world, the struggle of indigenous peoples for their rights is recognized as a 'long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power' (Smith, 1999, p. 98).

Government agencies such as the National Skills Development Cooperation and the Ministry of Rural Development have supported several job-linked private training programs in indigenous areas (Ruthven, 2016). Indigenous peoples possess unique skills, developed to help them survive in their natural habitats, but these skills are not recognized as labor market skills by neoliberal society (MacKinnon, 2015). Bijoy (2003) argues that people who are most skilled in sustainable living are now termed 'unskilled' in the neoliberal Indian economy.

The VET programs offered to indigenous communities are the results of an effort by the government to make them skilled so they can become part of labor market (Ruthven, 2016). In India, VET operates through two organizational structures: formal and informal. The formal institutional structure includes technical skills education in colleges and specific institutions (Industrial Training Institutes and polytechnics), VET in higher secondary schools, and apprenticeship training (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, 2015). Informal skills training is managed by other government agencies and states' skills development missions (Maitra & Maitra, 2018). The new skills policy, NPSDE 2015, placed specific focus on public-private partnerships (PPP). After the launch of the new policy, many public-private training programs started up as part of PPP (Tara & Kumar, 2016). These public-private training programmes are linked to NPSDE 2015 and concentrate on 'employability' and 'placement of trainees' (p. 18).

### **Indian indigenous women within the global terrain of indigenous education**

Literature on indigenous women, both in India and globally, highlights the challenges they face in accessing basic necessities of life such as education, health and socio-economic resources (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW], 2014; M. K. Rao, 2005; UNHRC, 2015). In India, destruction of indigenous lands forces these women to move to cities to find new ways of making a living (Gupta & Basu, 2012). Indigenous women in rural areas are at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. With low skills, little education and few resources at their disposal, they are primarily employed in non-organized sectors such as brick kilns, construction sites, coal mines, and stone quarries, and also as domestic or sex workers (CEFDW, 2014; D. De, 2018; Xaxa, 2004).

Previous research has established the disadvantaged position of indigenous Indian women compared to non-indigenous women. Most studies concentrate on indigenous women's socio-economic position (Agrawal & Agrawal, 2010; Ellena & Nongkynrih, 2017), health (Barnett et al., 2008; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2016), and livelihoods (U. K. De, 2013; Ramdas, 2009). Studies in the field of education have investigated classroom experiences, enrolment rates and gender parity among indigenous students (Joshi, 2010; Sinha, 2017). Aikman and Robinson-Pant (2019) examine education policy for indigenous women. Drawing on their experiences in countries including India, they identify an educational model that focuses on drawing indigenous women into formal learning systems, ignoring the knowledge systems of indigenous people.

The effect of colonization and neoliberalism on the education of indigenous groups is well documented. Indigenous people face many barriers to accessing learning services. These barriers include westernized curricula, the use of dominant teaching methodologies and languages, the attitude of teachers, and assessment strategies (Barnhardt & Oscar Kawagley, 2005; May & Aikman, 2003; Schmelkes, 2011). Considering the low education level among indigenous populations and the difficulties these populations face in accessing education, the Education Goal (SDG 4) categorizes them as 'vulnerable', alongside persons with disabilities and children in vulnerable situations.

The relationship between indigenous education and formal and informal learning structures is viewed as devastating for indigenous culture by privileging mainstream values, practices and knowledge (Warkineh & Gizaw, 2019). The curricula and methodologies of national education systems fail to meet the needs of indigenous societies (Breidlid, 2013; May & Aikman, 2003). Many (St. Denis, 2011; Wongbusarakum, 2009) argue that dominant, non-indigenous systems of knowledge have a lasting negative impact on indigenous culture, language, heritage, and knowledge.

In India, research has shown that indigenous knowledge and practices are on the verge of extinction (Farooquee et al., 2004; Vijayan et al., 2021) because of development policy and the country's transition to a neoliberal market economy. Priyadarshini and Abhilash (2019) propose indigenous knowledge as a potential basis for sustainable development in the country. Some studies (E. P. Rao, 2007; Singh et al., 2010) offer evidence for the applicability of indigenous knowledge in areas such as health and agriculture.

The United Nations and other international organizations have recognized indigenous knowledge as a significant resource that could contribute to the increased efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the development process (UNTT, 2012; World Bank, 2001). Indigenous studies scholars have long maintained that indigenous people and their knowledge offer an alternative to the dominant form of development and can help build lives and livelihoods that are sustainable, and respectful to nature (Smith, 1999).

In the field of VET, most research has focused on the experience of women in training programs (Hilal, 2012; Jabbar & Zaza, 2016; Rommes et al., 2005); studies of VET for indigenous women are few (Lawrence, 2006). In India, the lived realities of indigenous women are different from those of urban, high-caste women (Agrawal & Agrawal, 2010; Dagar, 2019). However, insufficient research attention has been paid to the VET experiences of indigenous women. To close this gap, it is crucial to examine VET from this perspective.

### **Integrating subaltern theory and self-determination approach for indigenous women's VET**

In theoretically situating this paper, I combine subalternity and self-determination frameworks to analyse VET experiences of indigenous women in India. In doing so, I examine complex interaction of indigenous realities with VET courses.

The term subaltern was first used by Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks as a euphemism to refer to the proletariat (Gramsci & Hoare, 1971). Gramsci, a Marxist, applied the concept of subalternity to oppressed groups within the class structure. The subaltern studies group, a collective of scholars, later adopted the term to refer to other marginalized communities (see Guha, 1989, 1999; Guha & Spivak, 1988). Subaltern studies contend that the history of anti-colonial movements in India fails to represent the struggles of socially and

economically disadvantaged groups. Accordingly, in the context of South Asia, the term subaltern means 'the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way' (Guha & Spivak, 1988, p. 35). In this paper, the idea of the subaltern is extended to indigenous women who face multiple forms of oppression, contending that their marginalization with the marginalized group of 'third-world women' (Spivak, 1994, p. 94) is overlooked. Indigenous women in India are becoming subaltern because of their subordinate position, which is caused by the dominance of non-indigenous knowledge systems, the misrepresentation of indigenous culture, and neoliberal government policies (Bandyopadhyay & Yuwanond, 2018; Guha, 1997; Pandey, 2017). As a result, the peripheral position of indigenous women within the categories of 'third world women' leads to further dominance and effacement (Narayan, 2013).

The second framework applied in this paper is the right of self-determination. The United Nations' 1941 Atlantic Charter recognized the right of self-determination as an integral element of fundamental human rights (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR], 1996; United Nations Treaty Series [UNTS], 1966). Self-determination is the right to participate in the democratic process of governance and determine one's own economic, cultural and social development (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2011). All people have the right of self-determination, including indigenous societies. Smith (1999) argued that various steps are involved in the self-determination of indigenous peoples, such as decolonization, transformation, and mobilization. She added that self-determination would be achieved in 'a world in which indigenous peoples become active participants' (p. 124). Irwin (1992) critiqued the homogeneity of theoretical and analytical tools applied to indigenous women and suggested that power lies with those who design these tools. Other scholars have advanced the idea of self-determination of indigenous people (Kosko, 2013; Kuokkanen, 2012, 2019; Omar, 2008; Xanthaki, 2007). These two frameworks complement each other by acknowledging the marginal situation of indigenous women as a result of the nexus between colonization, capitalism and development. They therefore advance an argument for indigenous self-determination and agency in social, political and economic development.

## Research design and procedure

This study adopted a qualitative research approach because this approach offered a means of developing an analytical perspective directly related to the practical circumstances of participants (Fox & Miller, 2004). This research was conducted from the perspective that 'different people and different groups have different perceptions of the world' (Willis, 2007, p. 194). To gain a deeper understanding of indigenous women's perspectives, semi-structured interviews were held with 25 women from two indigenous communities, Oraon and Santhal, in two states (Jharkhand and West Bengal) in Eastern India. These two states were considered appropriate because they have high indigenous populations (GOI, 2011b).

As a researcher, I cannot entirely separate my own experiences and worldview from the study. Acknowledging the role of reflexivity in research (see Clegg & Stevenson, 2013), I am aware that my socio-cultural positioning might have affected my research methodology and data analysis. I am not from an indigenous community myself, and I recognize that my experiences as an urban Indian woman are quite different from those of a rural indigenous woman. However, I was interested in exploring the experiences of indigenous women with

VET programs. I agree with Spivak (1990, p. 50) that 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' Furthermore, although the research is about indigenous women, a Western way of knowing was applied. This limitation arose from the restricted time available to conduct the project. However, each indigenous village was approached respectfully according to local customs, and I revealed my identity, background and research purpose to each group and woman separately. As a woman of color, who could communicate in the local language (Hindi) with most of the women, I was able to put interviewees at ease in order to allow them to reflect on their experiences of attending training.

All participants were women from indigenous communities (or scheduled tribes as defined by the GOI) who had participated in some form of VET in the last three years or were currently enrolled in such a program. Of the 25 women involved in this research, 15 were from Jharkhand and 10 from West Bengal. All participants were aged over 18, and 21 of them were married. In both villages, similar skills and vocational courses had been organized by NGOs. The participants in my study were recruited through snowball sampling. I contacted local organizations working with indigenous people through my academic and professional networks. The staff and volunteers of these organizations connected me to indigenous women leaders, who helped me recruit participants for this research. Although I was able to communicate with most participants in Hindi, I was assisted by an indigenous woman in Jharkhand to translate from Santali to Hindi. The fieldwork was conducted in 2018 after getting ethics approval from the university research ethics board, and the project adhered to these guidelines.

The interviews were transcribed and coded with the assistance of NVivo software. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and generate themes related to research questions from the bottom up (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At first I created codes that reflected the voices of respondents without imposing my own understanding. These voices are reflected through direct quotes from participants. As the second step of coding, I tried to identify similar ('interest in agriculture') and dissimilar ('gender barriers in Jharkhand village') themes, subthemes ('no income generation' and 'marketing of materials') and intersecting factors ('age' and 'marital status') among the two groups of indigenous women. Data saturation was reached at this stage, as similar themes were emerging from the dataset. Finally, I condensed the codes and divided them among three conceptual themes: indigenous knowledge, preference for livelihoods in indigenous areas, and inclination toward agricultural skills.

## Findings

### ***What about indigenous knowledge? The focus on external skills instead of preserving extant indigenous knowledge and skills***

The training programs offered to indigenous women covered skills such as dupatta coloring, sewing and tailoring, and making saris, candles, incense, poppads, soap, face wash, and detergent.

Most participants mentioned skills they possessed as part of their culture, tradition, and heritage. Twenty-one women stated that they had traditional skills in handicrafts, food preparation, agriculture, cultivation, and decoration that they used in their daily lives. One participant, Suryamukhi, from the Santhal community, who attended a sari-making course in her village, commented:

The women in my village can make Paitkar paintings. We also do paintings on our mud houses; we have a lot of agriculture as well, but women do not do these things for a business. They just do it for their homes. We have a lot of *sattu* [similar to rice flour] in our area, so we use that to decorate our houses. We can do bamboo designing. These items don't sell for much.

These findings corresponded with one of the training providers associated with an NGO based in a city. Tarulata, an indigenous woman from Jharkhand, had attended VET sessions in the city for ten days. After returning to her village, she started working (as a teacher) with an NGO that organizes different training programs in her area. Tarulata revealed that her attendees appealed for help with their traditional skills:

Women tell me that we can make so much from our village, but please go and tell other people about it. Tell us how to do the marketing of our products in the city, so we can make and sell stuff. I taught them some new things like making poppadoms, incense, and candles. They have great demand in the market now.

These external skills taught to indigenous women were considered profitable by local NGOs organizing training programs. Women from both villages had their own specific arts, such as painting or decorative skills from their ancestral area, and agriculture-related knowledge was part of all these participants' lives; but many participants were unsure how useful these traditional skills would be for creating a livelihood. Suryamukhi and some other respondents stated that these skills were not passed on to the next generation because they were not seen as employment generators. In her words:

Nowadays, people don't teach these traditional skills to their daughters because there is no way of earning through them. The teacher comes and tells us if we can make saris, then we can earn money by selling them, but even if we learn it, we do not earn money living in the village.

Nevertheless, some women stated that they were interested in getting together and starting a small enterprise in their village through which they could turn their skills into employment. However, almost all these women identified several challenges that they would encounter in such an endeavor: obtaining raw materials, marketing their products, and avoiding exploitation by middlemen.

While training camps were organized for women in indigenous areas to teach them new market-based skills thought to generate more income, they already had their own arts, crafts, knowledge, and culture. This focus on neoliberal market skills could result in a new form of cultural colonialism. Furthermore, the focus on new skills from outside could lead to the systematic erosion of traditional cultural skills.

### ***Preference for livelihoods in indigenous areas***

More than half of the participants in the study did not want formal employment in cities away from their villages. Putul, one of the women interviewed in the Jharkhand village, turned the question back on me, asking: 'But why would I want to do a job?' Indigenous women from both communities mentioned that they did not intend to go to cities to find work. In comparison to older women, the four younger unmarried women in this study were more open to employment in cities. Nonetheless, all of them specifically mentioned that they did not want to travel far from their homelands. The women were not interested in leaving their ancestral lands to

work as wage laborers or participate in the capitalist labor market. Shivani, one of the participants from Jharkhand, stated:

Our indigenous peoples do not do jobs. People think we are poor, but we have our land. Why would we go to the city? Leave our land and work in the factories of other people? They don't treat us well; they think we are inferior.

Like Shivani, Jayanti, a participant from West Bengal, adopted a critical perspective to taking a job. She commented:

[a] job is not so important. Everyone can eat in the village area, and we have fields. It is important to be literate, and to protect yourself.

She added:

Now that you are sitting here, the whole village will gather to see you. They are afraid of why someone has come. Even if an electricity bill reaches someone's house, they have to go and ask an educated person to read it. They are scared of such things. So we need such education, but not this [training], we don't want to live in cities.

In Jayanti's last comment, her fear of outsiders was evident. I observed a similar fear during data collection, when most of the women asked me if I was really a government official. They also wanted to know what I would do with their responses. I answered all their queries before starting my data collection and followed all possible steps to ensure that they felt comfortable with me. I introduced myself to the groups and to every participant separately and tried to build social, cultural and geographical connections.

Compared with this strong attachment to ancestral land and culture, which was why most women looked for employment opportunities in their village, a small number of women mentioned that gender-based barriers stopped them seeking jobs far away. These barriers included family responsibilities, such as taking care of in-laws and children, and being required to obtain permission from the patriarch of the household. More women in Jharkhand village mentioned such gendered limitations than those in West Bengal. Soni noted:

I want to work from here, why would I go far? We have to look after family as well; they will not send us.

### ***Inclination toward agricultural training***

While most of the women were not interested in pursuing livelihoods in cities, many were engaged in agriculture in their villages. Agriculture is the primary livelihood for these women, and they therefore showed a keen interest in learning agriculture-related skills. Most expressed a preference for agriculture-based training over any other training. When I asked what skills she would like to learn, Maya passionately exclaimed:

I want them to teach [us] about agriculture in our area. How to make homemade fertilizers. If they teach us, we will learn. My family has some land, and my husband and I do farming.

She continued:

I do not always get time to come to *panchayat* [community hall] when the trainers come, but if they teach us something about farming, I will come.

In the same vein, Kavita from West Bengal said that agricultural programs would be more beneficial for her, because she supports herself and her family from agriculture. Most of the women talked about the importance of agriculture in their lives and stated that they would attend courses to learn new agricultural skills if they were offered. Kavita declared:

People from indigenous backgrounds should be given more opportunity; not everyone wants to be an engineer or doctor. Here, people don't respect farmers like us; all food comes from agriculture. The government should do something to make people aware that agriculture is important for all of us.

These findings reveal that agricultural training was better connected to the needs of indigenous women. However, this research has not recorded any agriculture-related programs being offered to them. Additionally, the skills programs organized in these indigenous villages (and many other areas) specifically targeted women; no such skills programs were available for men at the time of data collection. The findings reveal a mismatch between the organized training programs and the training that indigenous women actually needed and hoped for.

### **Moving toward a participatory planning approach to VET for indigenous women**

The findings reveal that most indigenous women who participated in the study possessed traditional skills in agriculture, handicrafts, and decoration, skills that they used in daily life. However, training providers focused on teaching new or external skills linked to employment in urban spaces. Tarulats's comments showed that such skills are thought to have great demand in the market by the skills providers. However, these market-oriented skills development courses risk devaluing the existing knowledge and skills of indigenous women. Many multilateral agencies (UNTT, 2012; World Bank, 2001) support indigenous knowledge as a useful resource for sustainable development. Additionally, there are several examples of successful implementation and transfer of indigenous knowledge in different fields, especially in agriculture and health (E. P. Rao, 2007; Singh et al., 2010; Sumner, 2008). Accordingly, indigenous skills must be recognized and applied to generate sustainable livelihood opportunities for women in or near their homelands. To support their traditional skills, indigenous women could be provided with entrepreneurship training. These women might need further assistance with navigating the market and starting a business, such as applying for bank loans, obtaining raw materials, arranging for transport, and marketing their products.

While most of these training opportunities were related to jobs in the city, the indigenous women were unwilling to leave their homelands to seek employment. For instance, Shivani pointed out that employment opportunities are often available in factories in cities where indigenous people are mistreated. Internationally, some studies have recorded discrimination, risks and violence against indigenous women in urban areas and workplaces (Benoit et al., 2019; Kuokkanen, 2008; Nash, 2001). In India, recent literature (D. De, 2018; Ruthven, 2016) has described the inhumane working conditions of indigenous women in cities and factories. My study also reveals the fear of outsiders in indigenous villages. Consequently, the findings underline that the women were not inclined to seek work in cities but showed keen interest in learning skills related to agriculture, an integral part of their daily lives.

Although the livelihoods of most research participants were grounded in agriculture, the study found that no vocational training in agricultural skills had been offered to them. Traditionally, these women have derived their livelihood from forests and other natural resources (Guha, 2007; Gupta & Basu, 2012). Indigenous women have a high participation rate in agricultural activities such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing (Mitra, 2008; Xaxa, 2004). Regardless of these women's preferences, the training activities that have been organized for them are all in areas that are traditionally considered women's domains. When viewed through the subalternity lens, such programs and policies appear to ignore the distinct and marginal positions of indigenous women within an already marginalized group of 'women'. By prioritizing neoliberal market-oriented skills and directing them toward cities, current skills programs enhance the subalternity of indigenous women within Indian society. Based on the results of this research, the courses that have so far been offered seem to neglect indigenous women's practical requirements and traditional livelihoods.

Spivak (1990) argues that subalterns require self-representation within the dominant structural and systematic realities. Indigenous scholars (Irwin, 1992; Smith, 1999) have advanced the concept of self-determination for indigenous people. Bridging these perspectives for indigenous women in India, I suggest that policymaking and implementation processes should seek participation and representation from indigenous women: the participatory planning approach. When adopting this approach, stakeholders also need to acknowledge that indigenous communities or 'indigenous women' are not homogeneous, an acknowledgement essential to avoiding tokenism in the policy sphere. VET programs are supposed to be based on communities' sociocultural reality, desires and aspirations. For example, as the findings of this research reveal, many indigenous women in the study were more interested in agriculture-based training rather than training that prepared them for industry-based jobs in factories.

This research shows that the neoliberal discourse surrounding VET underpins the skills policies and structures that are implemented for indigenous women in India. The findings reveal an apparent mismatch between the goals and objectives of skills policy and the aims, requirements and expectations of indigenous women. Aikman et al. (2016) point out the skills deficit in vocational policy discourse that focuses on the new skills of the modern economy to help women get a job. Indigenous women require opportunity and space to determine what skills they want to learn and how they want to utilize them without being denied the right of self-determination.

## Conclusion

This article begins to build an empirical understanding of the VET requirements of indigenous women in India by foregrounding their grassroots situation, an aspect that was missing from the previous literature. Equipped with the knowledge of these experiences, I suggest that VET programs for indigenous women require a more explicit focus on what is needed, why it is needed, and how those needs can be met. Moreover, the article brings to the forefront the knowledge, perspectives and voices of indigenous women from the communities of Oraon and Santhal. Further comparative research is required to transverse indigenous women's aspirations and practical requirements from diverse groups to frame VET and skills policy objective according to those. Conceptually, the paper highlights the relevance of self-determination and self-representation for indigenous women in order to

avoid the neo-colonialist approach, in which the politically, socially and economically dominant class and gender form policies for already marginalized indigenous women.

The findings of this paper have four practical implications for the skills development of indigenous women. First, to ensure the sustainability of indigenous communities, educational and skills policies and intervention programs for indigenous women must take into account the socio-historical context and indigenous women's traditional knowledge, skills, livelihoods and ways of living. In addition, the process of transmission of knowledge and skills ought to be two-way: A symbiosis between imported external skills and indigenous knowledge. Second, in India, training programs for indigenous women should include the marketing of traditional art and cultural products. Additionally, government agencies could provide credit and banking facilities to these marginalized communities to support their enterprises. Third, self-determination (in economic, cultural and social development) for indigenous people should be an essential part of skills development policy; this means that programs for indigenous communities must be designed by indigenous peoples. Fourth, skills development for Indigenous women in India should be linked to livelihood generation activities in, or near, their traditional homelands.

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