

Exploring Livelihood Diversification among Tribal Women in India: A Pathway to Empowerment

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Abstract: This study focuses on the empowerment of tribal women in India through diversifying their livelihoods, as there is marginalization which is caused by socioeconomic and cultural barriers. This study seeks to understand how tribal women economic position and general welfare can be improved by looking at various sources of income other than the traditional subsistence activities. The study employs a two-fold approach that involves the combination of quantitative survey with qualitative interviews in different tribal societies in India. The findings indicate that the diversification of sources of income significantly increases the financial independence, decision making of tribal women, and their social status. However, there are still barriers like limited education, credit and market distribution which remain quite significant. In the study, particular policy actions are highlighted in order to help tribal women in education, skill development and improved market relations to maximise the benefits of diversifying their livelihoods as a form of empowerment. This study contributes to the broader debate around gender equalities and sustainable development in underserved communities.

Key words: Women empowerment, Livelihood diversification, indigenous women, Social Security

I. Introduction:

The process of expanding sources of income has turned into a significant strategy of enhancing the economic stability and empowering less privileged communities across the globe. In India, the rural poor constitute a significant percentage of the indigenous people facing several challenges with regards to poverty, social marginalization, and improper resource accessibility. Tribal women are particularly vulnerable in such societies where they find themselves undergoing financial as well as gender-based discrimination.

Traditionally, the role of tribal women is restricted to the context of survival activities, and it has always concerned farming and survival by the forest. However, the shifting socio-economic context, coupled with externalities such as environmental degradation and market volatility demand a shift toward a broader set of livelihood options. Livelihood diversification is about differentiating the lifestyle of households and individuals by mixing up several activities to improve their living standards and this presents to tribal women a potential pathway of achieving financial stability and social empowerment.

This study explores ways in which the empowerment of tribal women in India can be achieved by diversifying their livelihoods. The theme is the interest in discovering how the socio-economic situation can be elevated, vulnerability reduced, and gender equality enhanced in these communities by raising the amount of income sources. In this work, the researcher aims to discuss the benefits and challenges associated with livelihood diversification of tribal women through study of the various forms of livelihood earnings such as small business and participation in local markets. Overall, this study seeks to contribute to the discussion on sustainable development and gender empowerment due to the significant role of the economic diversification factor in the empowerment process of a disadvantaged population in India.

The situation of Indigenous women in India:

Adivasi women in India, commonly known as tribal women, come from a wide range of native groups located in different areas of the country. Characterized by their unique languages, cultures, and social structures, these communities make up around 8.6% of India's population. Tribal women are crucial members of their communities, making important economic contributions through farming, logging, and various trades. They are frequently the guardians of ancestral knowledge and customs that have been transmitted over time.

In spite of their efforts, tribal women experience various forms of marginalization due to their gender, ethnicity, and isolated location. Their restricted access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities worsens their susceptibility to poverty and exploitation. Additionally, the combination of gender and tribal identity frequently exposes them to patriarchal oppression within their communities and systemic discrimination from the broader society. Tribal women experience lower literacy rates, worse health outcomes, and less political representation due to their marginalized position compared to non-tribal women.

Importance of tribal women Empowerment:

The empowerment of tribal females is a requirement of achieving the gender equality in a socially just Indian society. In the given case, empowerment means strengthening the political, economic, social, and cultural influence of tribal women and enabling them to control their life and influence the decisions of the community.

Giving the tribal women power is not only significant to them personally. By empowering women in the tribe, they also get to make

larger contributions to the economic development of their communities which reduces poverty and improves the general living standard. Education and training would provide women with opportunities of getting new jobs and political empowerment would ensure that they participate in the decision-making processes in different levels.

In addition, empowering the women of the tribes may lead to preservation and development of indigenous cultures and knowledge systems that are mostly at risk due to modernization and globalization. Through supporting such women in their leadership roles, we shall be able to ensure that the communities in the tribes are able to preserve their cultural heritage whilst simultaneously adapting to the changing socio-economic environment.

Ultimately, indigenous women empowerment is indeed essential because it can enhance their personal liberties and opportunities as well as the development of their villages and the bigger task of inclusive development in India.

II. Literature Review:

There has already been massive research on the diversification of livelihoods in rural development as well as gender studies. This review explores significant theories, frameworks and empirical studies that can be used to understand the issues of livelihood diversification among tribal women in India. It encompasses, descriptions of livelihood diversification, the relevance of various forms of capital and the distinct barriers and opportunities that tribal women face when pursuing diversified livelihoods.

Definition and Importance of Livelihood Diversification:

Livelihood diversification refers to households developing diverse activities and resources in order to reduce exposure to economic shocks and to improve their livelihoods. Rural populations in developing nations need to ensure that they do not depend on one source of income such as agriculture in order to mitigate the risks of environmental changes, market fluctuations, and social instabilities since the rural population might fall victim to such factors (Ellis, 2000).

Within the context of Indian tribal communities, diversification of livelihood by increasing sources of income may be significant to economic security and providing women with greater opportunities to engage in income-generating activities in addition to their traditional subsistence. This transformation improves the income level of the households and increases the financial independence and decision making of women in the household and in the society (Ellis, 2000).

The Role of Capital in Livelihood Diversification:

Although these benefits may be achieved, tribal women face significant challenges as they attempt to increase their income. According to Chambers and Conway (1992), there are numerous challenges that can inhibit diversification of livelihoods including lack of access to credit, non-existence of market links, and limited socio-cultural access to women engaging in economic pursuits outside the household.

Moreover, lack of formal education and employment training also contributes to such problems as tribal women may lack the skills necessary to participate in different avenues of earning. Inaccessibility of the financial services and credit facilities in remote tribal areas restrict the ability of the women to invest in new money making ventures.

Challenges and Barriers to Livelihood Diversification

Although the potential gains may be achieved by them, tribal women have significant difficulties in pursuing additional sources of income. The decision to diversify livelihoods may be slowed due to a number of challenges that may be presented by constraints to credit, strong market network and cultural barriers that would limit the involvement of women in economic activities. These barriers are particularly pronounced in tribal communities whereby the gender roles that are set often limit the participation of women in other activities outside of the household (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

Also, the lack of formal education and vocational training exacerbates the situation by making tribal women unskilled to participate in different livelihood activities. Inaccessibility to financial services and credit facilities in far-away tribal areas also makes it difficult to encourage women to invest in new income-generating ventures.

Opportunities and Pathways for Empowerment

Despite these challenges, tribal women have numerous opportunities that can be exploited to assist them with the aim of empowering them to participate in different income-generating activities. It is important to empower women to access resources, education and decision making powers to achieve gender equality and empowerment. Their expansion of sources of income can help significantly enhance the degree of control the indigenous women have over the family budget, enhance their bargaining power at home and their status in the community.

The government and non-governmental agencies have established different programs to enable the tribal women to diversify their income. Such efforts include microfinance, vocational training, and improved market entry projects. These initiatives will be meant to help solve the challenges facing the indigenous women and equip them with the capacity and resources to successfully expand their income channels. However, these efforts have varying degrees of success where some programs experience difficulties as far as their capacity to maintain and grow in the long term is concerned (Ellis, 2000).

The future study might focus on exploring the role of government in diversification and empowerment of livelihood, and exploring the effects of cultural and social influences on the success of such programs. In addition, additional research is needed to understand the unique needs and preferences of indigenous women in different regions and the aspects that influenced their participation in different sources of income.

1. Employment and Livelihood Patterns

Agriculture is an important factor in the livelihoods of the Indians in the tribal society and a significant proportion of tribal women is also found in this activity. The reading covers the involvement of the tribal women in the agricultural sector through employment and its way of surviving, giving the references and page numbers.

i. High Engagement in Agriculture:

Primary Occupation: Approximately 70-80 of the native women are engaged in agricultural work, and this is the principal source of income in their villages. This information can be attributed to the high reliance on agriculture to get both basic needs and monetary income in tribal areas (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, Report on Tribal Livelihoods, 2020).

Forms of Agricultural activities: Tribal women engage in various farming activities which include planting, weeding, harvesting and post harvest processing. These activities are manpower-consuming and time and energy consuming.

Gender roles: In many tribal societies there is gender division of some farming responsibilities, and more physically demanding and time consuming tasks are usually given to women.

ii. Income from Agriculture

Low Income Levels: The amount of annual income that the women of the tribe generate through farming activities is on the lower side; the women have an annual income of INR 15,000 to 20,000. The family needs this income to survive, yet it is not enough to change radically their financial status (NSSO, 2019).

Share in Household Income: Despite low wages, agriculture contributes approximately 30-40 percent of total household income in the tribal groups. This input is necessary so as to meet the fundamental needs and ensure food security (Sinha, A., & Kumar, V., 2022).

2. Land Ownership and Access

Poor Land Tenure: In most tribal societies the women in family do not have much control of the land implying that they have minimal access to land. This sexual inequality does not allow them to take any decisions regarding the farming practice in addition to their opportunities to get credit and state programs.

Community Land Use: Some of the tribal areas have a structure of community land ownership which permits community use. But, this system can restrict individual influence to the agricultural operations and to make ameliorations to the land, as well.3. Challenges in Agricultural Livelihoods

Lack of the presence of Modernize inputs: A large number of tribal women still have to use the old process of farming which has led to low productivity as compared to the modern methods of farming and agriculture. This limitation of the widespread use of modern means of production the use of fertilizers, high yield seedlings and irrigation by the economic constraint and the issue of accessibility continues to be a constraint.

Access to the Market: The critical dilemma that tribal women struggle with is how to enter a market because most of them can sell their products in the low prices markets, which are near their houses. They do not have the required infrastructure like roads and transport that will further complicate traveling to larger and more lucrative markets.

Climate Vulnerability: Climate change poses a specific risk to the agriculture among the tribal communities since unpredictable weather change like drought and flood may be a factor in determining the level of crop production. This is another lack that worsens the financial burden that tribal women are going through because they depend on agriculture as one of their livelihoods.5. Government Support and Interventions

Agricultural Schemes: Indian government has also come up with several schemes to promote the tribal agriculture that incorporates subsidized seeds and fertilizers and training on the new farming techniques. Nonetheless, the efficiency and the extent of such programs is highly different.

Mgnrega: Mahatma Gandhi National rural employment guarantee act (MGNREGA) is another source of income through agricultural work especially off-season. The strategy has played a key role in empowering several tribal women financially (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2020).

6. Role of Agriculture in Empowerment:

Economic Impact: Agriculture continues to be a significant source of income and food security to tribal women and forms a major factor in empowering them economically and establishing their households. Despite the challenges, which come with it, the industry

forms a foundation through which the tribal communities sustain their livelihoods.

Cultural Significance: Agriculture is an important culturally oriented practice in the tribal societies besides its economic role. The participation of women in the agricultural activity is critical in preserving the traditional knowledge and practices which are critical in the social and cultural fabric of these communities.

Non-Agricultural Activities among Tribal Women in India

Besides agricultural activity, the women in India are engaged in various non-agricultural activities, which contribute to their livelihoods and domestic finances. It is important that these measures widen revenue sources and make the economy stable. This is a close analysis of the non-farming activities of native women-

1. Handicrafts and Artisanal Work

Traditional Crafts: A huge percentage of tribal women are the ones who engage in the traditional craft that includes weaving, pottery, basket-making and bead work. These are the traditional skills and are normally inculcated in the cultural traditions and are transferred across generations. These activities will not yield huge profits, and the annual profit of such activities will be between INR 5,000 and 12,000 (Sharma, P., and Bhatt, R., 2022).

Market challenges: The most problematic issue that tribal women face in the handicraft sector is to locate profitable markets. They are also unlikely to make more money as in most cases, their products are sold cheaper in the local markets or to agents. This is worsened by the absence of branding, marketing skills and close contact with consumers.

2. Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) Collection

Resource-Based Livelihoods: The collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as honey, medicinal species, fruits, and berries are often the activities of tribal women. These tasks play a vital role in sustenance, as well as in terms of income generation including INR 10,000-15,000 to the household income each year (Kumar, V., & Das, A., 2021).

Sustainability and Seasonality: The extraction of non-timber forest products is carried out in a manner that is not harmful to the environment but is in accordance with the local knowledge of the local ecosystem. However, the income of these activities is seasonal and depends on the availability of forest resources, which can be affected by the environmental factors and access restrictions (Mishra, R., & Patel, S., 2020).

Wage Labor:

Local Wage Labour: A large number of indigenous women engage in community wage labour like construction, road building or community infrastructure work. The incomes of working on a wage basis may depend on the employment opportunities and the salary rates, ranging between INR 12,000 and 18,000 annually (NSSO, 2019).

Temporary Migration to Work: Some native women travel to urban areas on a seasonal basis to find jobs in factories, construction, or even as house help. The migration usually spans a series of months and has higher wages compared to the local jobs, as the annual wages lie between INR 20,000 and 30,000 (Singh, A., 2020).

Petty Trading and Small Businesses: There is a growing number of indigenous women starting to venture into small business ventures, small store management, sewing businesses or providing services to the communities they live in. The incomes on such activities vary widely, ranging between INR 8,000 to 15,000 annually (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2021).

Restraints to Development: Despite the tribal women being able to financially empower themselves through entrepreneurship, they are often faced with barriers such as limited access to funds, markets and business education. These challenges hinder growth and prosperity of their businesses.

5. Impact of Non-Agricultural Activities

Diversification of the Economy: Non- agricultural activities are necessary to the tribal women because they help to diversify their immediate income and reduce the economic risks associated with relying on agriculture only. These chores contribute significantly to the earnings of the family often 20-30 percent of the total earnings (Sinha, A., & Kumar, V., 2022).

Empowerment and Independence: Involvement in non-farming activities allows indigenous women to have some economic independence and more significant part in household decision-making. Such a participation may also enhance their reputation in the society.

Migration for Work Among Tribal Women in India

Migration to work is also a common trend that many tribal women in India rely on to support their families because there are few employment opportunities in their own communities in addition to the necessity of boosting household income.

1. Patterns of Migration

Seasonal Migration: Numerous native women engage in seasonal migration in which they migrate to urban or industrial areas at

specific times of the year in search of jobs in the construction, agricultural, brick kilns, and household chores industries. The movement normally occurs within several months, and the timing is often associated with the period when agricultural activities are not as intensive in their place of origin (Singh, A.,2020).

Short vs. Long Migration: There are those tribal women who make short-term migration, returning home within a short period of time and those who make long-term migration, spending many years in cities. The long-term migration often results in the people living in slum or informal settlements whilst participating in low paying jobs.

Destinations: Some of the popular destinations where tribal women migrants head to include big cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and industrial areas in states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. These places offer more employment opportunities and also expose the migrants to various dangers.² Reasons for Migration

Economic Necessity: Economic necessity is the principle cause of migration of tribal women. The lack of jobs locally and insufficient income earned in the agricultural industry makes women seek jobs in the urban areas to support their families.

Debt and Financial Pressure: Many tribal families are in debt, and in many cases the debt was incurred to meet basic needs, pay medical bills, or meet culture-related demands such as weddings. Migration offers a way to earn the required sum of money to settle these debts.

Landlessness and Lack of Resources: At times, the tribal women are relocated because they do not have land or agricultural resources. Migration is required as a survival mechanism in cases where land or resources to do agricultural work is inadequate.

3. Types of Work:

Construction labour: Several migrating tribal women are hired to work in the construction industry as unskilled labourers. This type of work is physically demanding and normally done in harsh conditions, and there is not much safety measure provided.

Household Labor: The tribal women are employed in large numbers to act as domestic workers in the urban houses. Such jobs are commonly characterized by cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children and are often low-paid and undefined and unsecured.

Factory and industrial labor: there are a small number of tribal women in factories (particularly textile, garment and food processing industries). In the majority of cases, they have low wages, and these jobs are characterized by long hours of work and poor working conditions.

Challenges and Vulnerabilities:

Exploitation and Abuse: Women migrants who are tribal run a big risk of being exploited and abused in the city areas. In most cases, they are faced with discrimination, low wages and poor working conditions. Furthermore, they might even be physically and sexually harassed particularly in the unregulated industry like domestic workers.

Inadequate Social Security: The migrant workers particularly in informal sectors do not have the chance to utilize social protection services such as healthcare, pensions, and legal services. The lack of support makes their weaknesses more prominent, as they fail to improve their living and working conditions.

Health and Well-being impacts: The poor living conditions and the heavy physical labor in the city slums adversely impact on the health and well being of the tribal women migrants. They often get exposed to occupational hazards and do not have adequate health care.

5. Impact on Families and Communities

Economic Assistance via Remittances: It is true that the families of tribal women can get a lot of economic support due to migration, notwithstanding the challenges. Remittances often constitute a large part of the family income, and they help to meet basic needs, including education and health care.

Social upheaval: Migration may lead to social disruption where women are separated long time, both from their families and community. This division can emphasize the family relations and break the social pattern of the tribal groups.

Skill Development and Empowerment: In some cases, migration can lead to skill development as well as economic empowerment of tribal women. Exposure to new environments and job duties may assist in enhancing the abilities, self-confidence, and involvement in domestic decision making.

Table: 1 Income Sources and Economic Contribution:

Income Source	Details	Average Annual Income (INR)	Contribution to Household Income	Source
Agriculture	Primary source of income; includes crop cultivation (subsistence	15,000 - 20,000	30-40%	Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, Report on Tribal Livelihoods, 2020, pp. 45-

	and cash crops).			47.
Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP)	Collection and sale of forest products like honey, medicinal plants, berries, etc.	10,000 - 15,000	15-20%	Research Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2021, "Livelihood Diversification in Tribal Areas of India," pp. 102-104.
Handicrafts and Artisanal Work	Weaving, pottery, basket-making, and other traditional crafts.	5,000 - 12,000	10-15%	International Journal of Rural Development, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2022, "Empowering Tribal Women through Livelihood Diversification," pp. 211-213.
Animal Husbandry	Raising livestock such as goats, cows, and poultry.	5,000 - 10,000	10-15%	Agricultural Economics Research Review, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2020, "The Role of Livestock in Tribal Livelihoods," pp. 89-91.
Wage Labor (Local)	Daily wage labor within the local area, often in agriculture or construction.	12,000 - 18,000	15-25%	National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), 75th Round, 2018-19, Report No. 586, "Employment and Unemployment Situation," pp. 67-69.
Seasonal Migration	Temporary migration for work in urban areas; includes construction, factory jobs, domestic work.	20,000 - 30,000	20-30%	National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), 75th Round, 2018-19, Report No. 586, "Employment and Unemployment Situation," pp. 72-74.
Small-Scale Entrepreneurship	Small businesses such as petty shops, tailoring, or other services.	8,000 - 15,000	10-20%	Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, India, Annual Report, 2021, pp. 23-25.

Finally, even though tribal women in India are engaged in different livelihood activities which significantly contribute to their household, they still fail to earn income to attain financial stability and empowerment. Holistic approach requires policy support, capacity building and increased accessibility to resources and markets to deal with these obstacles.

Pathways to Empowerment for Tribal Women in India:

The empowerment of the tribal women in India is a complex concept that has to be multi-pronged to cover the different social, economic, political, and health problems that are experienced by the women. These are the pathways that have been found to be critical in creating this empowerment:

1. Education and Skill Development:

Education is a very important tool of empowerment, as it provides individuals with the power to acquire experience, skills, and confidence to improve their socio-economic status. Tribal women have special significance to education, as it is the way to stop the poverty and marginalization cycle that they have to struggle with. However, indigenous women are often faced with significant challenges when accessing education opportunities including inaccessibility, cultural biases, and financial constraints.

Government expenditures on educating girls in tribal zones such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), National Scheme of Incentive to Girls to Secondary Education have aimed at improving educational performances of tribal girls by providing them with free education, scholarships and residential schools (Government of India, 2020). Besides, NGOs play a very significant role in furthering education of tribal women by offering literacy training, offering vocational training, and creating awareness campaigns.

Individualized skill training programs to the tribal women can enhance their employment opportunities and economic independence. These schemes focus on providing technical and vocational training in areas such as agriculture, handicrafts and small-scale industries contributing to the traditional way of life of tribal people. These programs can open up opportunities of earning money and owning businesses by offering tribal women with at least some useful skills.

2. Economic Empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Entrepreneurship:

Economic empowerment is also another important aspect in improving the condition of tribal women. Formation of Self-Help

Groups (SHGs) has turned to be among the most effective strategies in this field. SHGs are women-run local organizations that provide chances of saving money, taking small loans and engaging in collective economic activities. The achievements of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been well documented in studies in India and have shown that it has a positive effect on the income of women, their capacity to make decisions and their status in society.

SHGs are also an initiating factor of business ventures of tribal women. By pooling resources and risk diversification, such communities enable women to start small businesses of their own such as crafting, farm animals, and small-scale agricultural activities (Rao & Mitra, 2018). Entrepreneurship presents an opportunity to tribal women to leave behind their traditional roles and get a closer involvement in the market economy. More support has been offered by government programs like the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), as well as, Start-Up India, which have offered financial assistance, training, and market links to tribal entrepreneurs (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020).

3. Political Empowerment through Reservation Policies:

There is need to make sure that tribal women are empowered politically so that their voices can be heard in the decision making processes that affect them. The quota system of local governance bodies, the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India has been influential in the sense that a set number of seats is reserved to women and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Such initiatives have increased the number of indigenous women in the leadership of communities and they are now in a better position to serve the interests of their people.

Research has revealed that when the tribal women take part in local governance, the decisions made by local governments would be more responsive to gender issues and community needs, particularly in areas such as the educational sector, health sector, and the development of infrastructure. Nevertheless, there are still challenges regarding ensuring that these women have the necessary skills and knowledge in order to take an active part in governance. Through training programs that focus on leadership, legal rights, and governance processes can play a major role in enhancing the political empowerment of indigenous women.

4. Health and Well-Being Programs:

The general empowerment of tribal women depends on their health and well-being. In India, tribal groups often experience limited access to healthcare, which results in poor health outcomes, in particular, in women. Some of the typical challenges that tribal women face include death of mothers, malnutrition, and limited availability of reproductive health care.

To address these challenges, a number of government and NGO initiatives have been put in place to improve the access and outcomes of tribal women in terms of healthcare. Programmes like the National Health Mission (NHM) or Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) are aimed at minimizing the death rates of females and newborns by means of offering healthcare services at no cost or with subsidies particularly in remote tribal areas (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2020). Moreover, ASHAs have a very important role in offering medical services and health and hygiene education to tribal women.

Nutrition programs, such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), contribute to improving the health of tribal women because they provide them with supplementary nutrition and health education. The other important thing in enhancing the well-being of the indigenous women is to ensure that they have access to clean water, sanitation, and safe living conditions.

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