

Livelihood and Entrepreneurship for Scheduled Tribes: Pathways to Inclusive Growth

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India's Scheduled Tribes (STs), which account for 8.6% of the total population, are one of the most diverse and culturally rich communities. Nonetheless, they remain among the most socio-economically marginalized groups. Strengthening livelihoods and entrepreneurship opportunities among ST populations is about more than just economic development; it is also about equity, dignity, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.

Agriculture, forest products, animal husbandry, and crafts have provided a foundation for tribal communities for centuries. Shifting cultivation in the Northeast, collection of non-timber forest produce such as honey, bamboo, and tendu leaves, and artisanal crafts in states such as Odisha and Chhattisgarh are all integral to their way of life. These practices are inextricably linked to the natural environment and cultural heritage. However, a variety of challenges have weakened their economic security. Land alienation and insecure tenure, despite the existence of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), deforestation and ecological degradation, a lack of adequate infrastructure, and climate vulnerability are some of the key factors threatening agriculture and forest-based activities. In addition, skill and financial gaps limit their ability to pursue new opportunities. To truly enable tribal enterprise, support systems must go beyond subsidies and create ecosystems of mentorship, finance, and connectivity.

Entrepreneurship offers a transformative opportunity for ST communities, particularly young people and women. Tribal entrepreneurs can create long-term businesses based on their local strengths by moving beyond subsistence to value addition. The combination of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and entrepreneurial thinking is altering the narrative, transforming cultural practice into community enterprise. SHGs' strength comes from their collective spirit. Members collaborate on resource allocation, risk sharing, and decision-making. Running a SHG enterprise provides individuals who previously had no say in household finances with dignity, income, and a voice. Over time, these groups transformed farming into a business producing value-added products. In Chhattisgarh, *Van Dhan Vikas Kendras* train SHGs to package forest honey and tamarind. In Odisha, turmeric cooperatives have helped tribal farmers secure better prices. In addition, in Jharkhand, women's SHGs revived the hardy millet ragi, creating value-added products under the Ragi Mission.

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Alongside SHGs, a new wave of tribal start-ups is emerging. Unlike urban tech ventures, these start-ups stem from local knowledge and cultural identity. They frequently combine traditional knowledge with modern design and technology. For example, *Bastar Se Bazaar Tak* in Chhattisgarh connects tribal artisans directly with online buyers. Tribal Gourmet (Odisha) sells forest foods, honey, and millet snacks to urban customers. Kalinga Organics (Sundargarh) enables tribal farmers to sell certified organic produce via e-commerce. These ventures bring innovation and visibility to rural businesses. They combine traditional knowledge with digital tools, allowing local producers to access larger markets. Startups such as Farmizen, AgroStar, and DeHaat show how digital platforms can improve farmers' access to markets, advisory services, and inputs.

The most powerful stories emerge when SHGs and start-ups collaborate. SHGs provide production strength by bringing together women who can cultivate, collect, or craft. Start-ups bring design, packaging, and marketing expertise. Gumla's Ragi Mission, now a Harvard Business School case study, exemplifies how this partnership works. Women-led SHGs oversee cultivation and processing, while local FPOs and start-ups handle branding and distribution. The end result is not only a source of income, but also ownership. When tribal women lead a business, the benefits spread throughout the community, including improved nutrition, education, and confidence.

What is currently happening in tribal India is a social awakening, not just an economic shift. Start-ups are the branches, while SHGs are the roots. They are working together to build a future in which development grows from within.

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