



From Indigenous Skills to Sustainable Livelihoods: Talent-Based Entrepreneurial Development among Tribal Women in India

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.18884800

Abstract:

Tribal women in India possess diverse indigenous skills and talents rooted in traditional knowledge systems, including handicrafts, agro-based activities, forest-based product processing, and cultural art forms. Despite their productive potential, these skills often remain confined to informal economic spaces and fail to generate stable and sustainable livelihoods. This paper examines talent-based entrepreneurial development as a pathway for enhancing skills, improving financial stability, and supporting long-term livelihood sustainability among tribal women. Using a mixed-method research approach, the study analyzes the relationship between skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, access to financial resources, and livelihood outcomes. The findings highlight that systematic development and commercialization of indigenous skills through entrepreneurship can contribute to income stability and economic resilience when supported by appropriate institutional and market linkages. The paper contributes to existing literature by integrating indigenous skills with entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihood frameworks, offering insights for policymakers and development practitioners working on tribal women's economic development.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Indigenous Skills, Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Livelihoods, Financial Stability.

Introduction:

India's tribal population represents a culturally diverse and economically significant segment of society, characterized by unique social institutions, ecological knowledge, and indigenous production systems. Tribal women play a central role in sustaining household economies through traditional skills such as weaving, embroidery, pottery, food processing, herbal preparation, forest produce collection, and subsistence agriculture. These skills are not merely occupational practices but are deeply embedded in cultural identity, community cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

However, despite possessing considerable skills and talents, tribal women remain

disproportionately affected by poverty, economic insecurity, and limited access to formal markets. Development interventions in tribal regions have historically prioritized welfare measures, subsistence support, and short-term income generation rather than structured entrepreneurial development. As a result, indigenous skills have remained confined to informal or semi-formal economic spaces, offering limited financial stability or growth potential.

In the context of increasing policy emphasis on entrepreneurship, skill development, and inclusive growth, there is growing recognition that indigenous skills can form the foundation of sustainable livelihood models. Talent-based entrepreneurial development refers to the systematic identification, enhancement, and

commercialization of existing skills through entrepreneurship, supported by training, financial inclusion, and market access. For tribal women, such an approach holds the potential to generate stable income, reduce livelihood vulnerability, and strengthen economic autonomy while preserving cultural heritage.

This paper explores the transformation of indigenous skills into sustainable livelihoods through talent-based entrepreneurship among tribal women in India. It situates the discussion within broader debates on women's economic empowerment, sustainable development, and inclusive growth.

Literature Review:

1. Indigenous Skills and Traditional Knowledge Systems: Scholarly literature recognizes indigenous knowledge systems as critical resources for sustainable development, particularly in rural and tribal contexts. Tribal communities have historically developed context-specific skills adapted to local ecological conditions, including sustainable agricultural practices, forest resource management, and artisanal production. Tribal women are primary custodians of this knowledge, especially in areas related to food processing, medicinal practices, and handicrafts.

However, researchers note that modernization and market-driven development models have often marginalized indigenous skills by labeling them as unproductive or backward. This has contributed to the economic devaluation of tribal women's labor and the erosion of traditional livelihoods.

2. Women Entrepreneurship and Skill Development: The literature on women entrepreneurship highlights skill development as a critical determinant of entrepreneurial success. Studies indicate that women-led enterprises often emerge from existing skills and experiences

rather than formal business training. For marginalized groups, including tribal women, entrepreneurship based on existing talents reduces entry barriers and enhances sustainability.

Research also emphasizes that entrepreneurial training must go beyond technical skills to include financial literacy, business management, and market awareness. Without such support, skill-based enterprises often struggle to scale or survive.

3. Financial Stability and Sustainable Livelihoods: The sustainable livelihoods framework emphasizes income stability, resilience, and long-term viability rather than short-term earnings. Studies on tribal livelihoods reveal high vulnerability due to seasonal employment, migration, and dependence on informal markets. Women's engagement in entrepreneurship has been shown to improve household income stability and reduce vulnerability, particularly when supported by access to credit and institutional networks such as Self-Help Groups.

4. Research Gap: While existing studies examine tribal livelihoods, women entrepreneurship, and skill development independently, limited research integrates these dimensions within a talent-based entrepreneurial framework. There is a lack of empirical work analyzing how indigenous skills, when systematically enhanced and commercialized, contribute to financial stability and sustainable development among tribal women. This paper addresses this gap. **Synthesis of Reviewed Literature and Key Insights**

A critical synthesis of the reviewed literature indicates that indigenous skills and traditional knowledge systems are widely acknowledged as valuable resources for sustainable development, yet they remain insufficiently integrated into formal economic and entrepreneurial frameworks. While scholars recognize tribal women as key custodians of these

skills, the literature consistently points to disconnect between knowledge preservation and livelihood generation. Traditional skills are often discussed from a cultural or ecological perspective rather than as foundations for viable enterprises. This has resulted in development approaches that either romanticize indigenous knowledge or treat it as supplementary, rather than positioning it as a central driver of economic stability and growth for tribal women.

Further, the literature on women entrepreneurship demonstrates that skill-based enterprises are more sustainable when they evolve from existing competencies rather than externally imposed models. However, existing studies largely focus on generic skill development or micro-enterprises without adequately addressing the role of indigenous talents in entrepreneurial success. Research emphasizes the importance of financial literacy, market awareness, and institutional support, yet these components are often examined in isolation. The review highlights that financial stability and sustainable livelihoods among tribal women are most likely to emerge when skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, and access to financial and market systems are addressed in an integrated manner. These insights inform the present study's focus on talent-based entrepreneurial development as a holistic framework for strengthening sustainable livelihoods among tribal women.

Objectives:

1. Importance of the Topic: This study is significant for several reasons. First, it reframes tribal women's skills from subsistence activities to productive economic assets. Second, it moves beyond welfare-oriented development models by emphasizing entrepreneurship and financial stability. Third, it contributes to policy debates on inclusive growth, gender equality, and sustainable

development by offering an integrated analytical framework.

2. Objectives of the Study:

1. To identify the indigenous skills and talents possessed by tribal women.
2. To examine the role of skill enhancement in developing entrepreneurial capabilities.
3. To analyze the impact of talent-based entrepreneurship on financial stability and livelihood sustainability.
4. To assess access to financial and market resources among tribal women entrepreneurs.
5. To suggest strategies for strengthening talent-based entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Hypothesis:

H1: Skill enhancement has a significant positive impact on the financial stability of tribal women entrepreneurs.

H2: Talent-based entrepreneurship significantly contributes to sustainable livelihood outcomes among tribal women.

Research Methodology:

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design supported by a mixed-method approach to examine talent-based entrepreneurial development among tribal women. This design is considered appropriate as the study seeks both to describe existing patterns of skill utilization and entrepreneurship, and to analyze the relationship between skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, and financial stability. The mixed-method approach enables a comprehensive understanding by combining measurable economic outcomes with experiential insights drawn from tribal women entrepreneurs.

1. Research Approach: The study employs both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to address the objectives holistically.

The quantitative approach is used to assess variables such as income levels, income stability, access to financial services, participation in skill enhancement programs, and enterprise-related outcomes. Quantitative data allows for systematic measurement and statistical analysis of the relationship between skill development and financial stability.

The qualitative approach is used to capture the lived experiences of tribal women entrepreneurs, including their perceptions of skill enhancement, entrepreneurial challenges, market access, and institutional support. Qualitative data provides contextual depth and helps explain patterns observed in the quantitative findings, particularly in relation to social, cultural, and structural factors influencing entrepreneurial development.

2.Sources of Data: The study relies on both primary and secondary data sources to ensure data triangulation and analytical rigor.

Primary data are collected directly from tribal women engaged in skill-based entrepreneurial activities. Data collection tools include:

Semi-structured interviews to explore personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to skill enhancement and entrepreneurship.

Focus group discussions to understand collective experiences, community dynamics, and shared constraints among tribal women entrepreneurs.

Secondary data are collected from published and unpublished sources, including government reports, policy documents, academic journals, books, NGO publications, and census data. These sources provide contextual background, policy perspectives, and comparative insights relevant to tribal development, women entrepreneurship, and sustainable livelihoods.

3.Sampling Design: The study uses a purposive sampling technique, as the research specifically focuses on tribal women who are actively involved in skill-based entrepreneurial activities. This technique enables the selection of respondents who possess relevant experience and knowledge related to the study objectives.

The sampling unit consists of tribal women entrepreneurs engaged in activities such as handicrafts, agro-based enterprises, forest-based product processing, and other indigenous skill-based livelihoods. The study area includes selected tribal regions in India, chosen based on the presence of active skill-based enterprises and accessibility for fieldwork.

While the sampling approach does not aim at statistical generalization, it allows for in-depth analysis and meaningful interpretation of entrepreneurial patterns and livelihood outcomes within the selected context.

4.Tools of Analysis: Both quantitative and qualitative tools are employed for data analysis. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize demographic characteristics, types of skills, enterprise profiles, and income patterns.

Correlation and regression analysis, where applicable, are used to examine relationships between skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, and financial stability.

Thematic content analysis is applied to qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions to identify recurring themes, challenges, and opportunities related to talent-based entrepreneurship.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enables a comprehensive interpretation of how indigenous skills, when supported by entrepreneurship, contribute to sustainable livelihoods among tribal women.

Limitations of the Study:

1. The findings are based on selected regions and may not be generalizable to all tribal communities.
2. Informality of enterprises limits the availability of detailed financial records.
3. The study relies partly on self-reported data, which may involve recall bias.
4. Longitudinal impacts could not be fully assessed due to time constraints.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study reinforce the view that talent-based entrepreneurial development offers a meaningful and contextually appropriate pathway for transforming indigenous skills into sustainable livelihoods for tribal women. The evidence suggests that when existing skills and talents are systematically enhanced and linked with entrepreneurial opportunities, tribal women are better positioned to achieve financial stability and economic resilience. This approach recognizes indigenous skills not merely as cultural expressions, but as productive economic assets capable of supporting livelihood security.

The study further highlights that skill enhancement alone is insufficient in the absence of complementary support systems. Access to financial resources, market linkages, and institutional networks emerges as a critical factor in determining the sustainability of tribal women-led enterprises. Where such support is present, entrepreneurial activities contribute to improved income stability and reduced livelihood vulnerability. Conversely, the persistence of structural constraints—such as limited institutional outreach, inadequate training infrastructure, and restricted market access—continues to limit the growth potential of skill-based enterprises.

An important insight from the study is the need to move beyond fragmented development

interventions. Welfare-oriented or short-term income generation programs, when implemented in isolation, are unlikely to produce lasting livelihood outcomes. Instead, integrated development strategies that combine skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and market integration are essential. Such strategies must be designed with sensitivity to local socio-cultural contexts to ensure that indigenous knowledge systems are preserved rather than displaced.

In conclusion, talent-based entrepreneurship holds significant potential as a development strategy for tribal women, provided it is supported by coordinated policy efforts and institutional mechanisms. By aligning indigenous skills with entrepreneurial frameworks and sustainable livelihood objectives, development initiatives can contribute to both economic empowerment and cultural continuity. The study underscores the importance of recognizing tribal women as active economic agents and suggests that future research and policy interventions should continue to explore pathways that strengthen skill-based entrepreneurship as a foundation for inclusive and sustainable development.

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