

Entrepreneurship among Tribal Communities: Culture, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development

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Abstract—Tribals represent the most neglected group of Indian society even today. Constituting roughly 8% of the total population, a majority of the tribes continue to live in abject poverty, have poor literacy rates, suffer from malnutrition and disease, and are vulnerable to displacement. At the same time, they also hold repositories of indigenous knowledge and reside in areas which are endowed with rich resources; thus presenting great potential for entrepreneurship to play a catalytic role in the economic development of the group.

Highlighting this factor, NITI Aayog had recently organised India's first Global Tribal Entrepreneurship Summit in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, fuelling the entrepreneurial spirit among the tribal community and making tribal entrepreneurship an inseparable component of human entrepreneurship.

This Paper is of the view that tribal entrepreneurship is to be approached from an 'Anthropological Perspective'. Having its origin in tribal studies, Anthropology, with its concepts of holism, cultural relativism, etic and emic ideologies, and its vast experience of fieldwork among simple societies, is better placed to offer sustainable solutions.

The Paper presents a few examples of tribal entrepreneurial ventures, which are using indigenous ways to build social enterprises in the country.

While studying both the features and shortcomings of enabling frameworks like Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation (TRIFED), Tribal Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TICCI), Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act 1996, the Paper also attempts to offer suggestions that could enable tribal entrepreneurship to take firm roots and flourish.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sound economics has realised that for economic growth to be sustainable and meaningful, it has to be widespread, bringing about betterment in the standard of living of the society at large,

especially its weakest sections. Tribal communities constitute the most vulnerable section of India's population, due to centuries of neglect, marginalisation and discrimination; evidenced through various socio-economic indicators. They have lived as isolated entities, largely untouched by the society around them. This seclusion has been majorly responsible for their slower socio-economic development, backwardness and deprivation of many civic facilities.

Entrepreneurship, with its innovation-focus and its tendency to create new business and employment opportunities, is a strong driver of economic growth. This linkage has been highlighted by many an economic scholar – for instance the Porter's National Diamond framework, Wenekers and Thurik Model and the GEM Research Programme. This point has been best expressed in the words of Micheal Porter: "Invention and entrepreneurship are at the heart of national advantage".

It is this context that makes a case for promoting 'Tribal Entrepreneurship', for bringing about tribal development and augmenting the country's growth story.

Recognising this very potential, NITI Aayog had recently organised India's first Global Tribal Entrepreneurship Summit in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, fuelling the entrepreneurial spirit among the tribal community.

This paper intends to discuss the following

- The Tribal way of life
- Entrepreneurship and its application in the tribal context
- Anthropological Approach towards Tribal Entrepreneurship
- Institutional and Policy framework supporting Tribal Entrepreneurship
- Examples of Tribal Entrepreneurial Ventures
- Suggestions

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Tribal way of Life

India has the largest concentration of tribal people in the world, after Africa. Numbering 104.3 million people belonging to various tribes (705) as per 2011 census, the tribals constitute about 9% of the total population. Recognised as Scheduled Tribes (Anusuchit Janjati), constitutionally (Article 342), they are spread all over the country barring States and Union Territories like Chandigarh, Delhi, Haryana, Pondicherry, and Punjab. About 50% of the tribal population is concentrated in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa.

Most tribal populations inhabit underdeveloped areas of the country which are remote, have low density of population, lack critical infrastructure and adequate access to basic amenities, education, employment opportunities and affordable health care services. Due to lack of accessibility and development, and long neglect, the standard of life among tribal groups remains poor. Low literacy, high dropout rates from schools, malnutrition and poverty plague India's tribal population.

The tribals are, however, ‘children of nature’ and their lifestyle is conditioned by the ecosystem, in-tune with nature and natural resource base like the forest, land, water bodies, mineral resource and other flora and fauna. The lifestyle and tradition of each indigenous community is unique and is related to the utilization of particular natural resource and particular type of work. Since tribal communities live in close proximity with biodiversity rich landscapes, they have evolved local specific and novel livelihood strategies based on their indigenous knowledge. This knowledge has been passed on through generations and, along with their socio-religious institutions like clan, totems and taboos, has played an important role in conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. For example, the Gonds of South and Central India consider the teak plant as one of their ancestors, hence cutting a teak plant is a taboo.

Around 90% of the tribal populations in India depend on land, directly or indirectly, for their survival. Their economy is primarily agro-based. Apart from land, the forest is the second most important source of their livelihood. It provides 60% of their income in the form of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) – includes all non-timber forest produce of plant origin including bamboo, brush wood, stumps, cane, tassar, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, tendu leaves, medicinal plants and herbs, roots, tubers and the like.

The most distinguishing feature of the tribal way of life, apart from it being pleasantly simple, is that the tribesman lives not only for himself alone, but is an integral part of the community to which he belongs. This identity bears profoundly on tribal attitudes and makes for the emergence of essentially human like qualities like camaraderie, fellow feeling and social awareness.

Entrepreneurship and its application in the Tribal context

Most research points to the fact that entrepreneurship is a process, dealing with change and not a static phenomenon. Existing definitions of entrepreneurship often relate to the functional role of entrepreneurs and include coordination, innovation, uncertainty bearing, capital supply, decision making, ownership and resource allocation. The most frequently mentioned functional roles of entrepreneurs, associated with the major schools of thought on entrepreneurship include:

- Risk Seeking: the Cantillon entrepreneur, willing to take the risk associated with uncertainty.
- Innovation: the Schumpeterian entrepreneur, accelerating the generation, dissemination and application of innovative ideas.
- Opportunity Seeking: the Kiznerian entrepreneur, perceiving and seizing new profit opportunities.

One operational definition of entrepreneurship that successfully synthesises the functional roles of entrepreneurs is that of Wennekers and Thurik (1999):

“...the manifest ability and willingness of individuals, on their own, in teams within and outside existing organisations, to perceive and create new economic opportunities (new products, new production methods, new organisational schemes and new product-market combinations) and to introduce their ideas in the market, in the face of uncertainty and other obstacles, by making decisions on location, form and the use of resources and institutions.”

Entrepreneurship is, hence, essentially a behavioural characteristic of a person. It is the belief of this paper that tribal communities have always been entrepreneurial, in the sense that they have always been faced with uncertainties and have tried to overcome them with indigenous socio-cultural-economic innovations. However what has been lacking for Tribal entrepreneurship to really take-off, has been the inability to create/tap market opportunities.

Also, many a time, the concept of entrepreneurship has been extended to tribal enterprise without the required treatment that is needed to suit their way of life. For instance, in many entrepreneurship development programmes, the emphasis has been on financial support and individual enterprise – features of the Modernisation Theory. However this doesn't fit in the tribal scheme of things, as they are not in a state to meaningfully absorb funds. Besides, in most tribal communities the notion of economic development is community-based, and not individual centric. Thus, this paper is of the view that an “anthropological approach” needs to be adopted towards tribal entrepreneurship.

Tribal Entrepreneurship: an Anthropological Approach

Having origins in tribal studies, the discipline of Anthropology is considered to be qualified to understand the tribal way of life and play a constructive role in tribal development.

- Emphasis on ‘Holism’, which studies issues from various aspects – social, cultural, political, psychological etc.
- Belief in cross-cultural comparisons without an ethnocentric bias
- Vast fieldwork experience of over 150 years among simple societies
- Presenting the “insider’s view” through various data collection techniques like Participant Observation

And a strong humanitarian tradition place anthropology in a unique position to offer viable strategies to promote tribal entrepreneurship.

It must be noted that the anthropological approach is not ‘a’ particular panacea like approach that offers an omnibus solution. Instead, it includes many approaches and offering possible alternatives, each suiting a particular context. It is generally suggested to have the following features.

- Understanding tribal organisation, values and historical experiences through various tools and techniques like interviews, questionnaires, schedules etc.
- Identifying the integrative forces of tribal life.
- Adopting a bottom-up approach, giving importance to tribal needs and indigenous solutions.
- Emphasis on means as well ends, to ensure acceptance and participation.
- Identifying challenges at different levels of technological, economic and cultural development.
- Carrying out impact assessments (ecological and cultural) from both etic (outsider’s) and emic (insider’s) ideologies.
- Raising awareness and imparting education in local languages.

Tribal Entrepreneurship thus can benefit greatly by utilising the conceptual base and the vast experience of both anthropology and management studies to come up with effective strategies that are both viable and at the same time sustainable.

Institutional and Policy Framework

At this juncture, it would be apt to discuss about some of the major institutions and the policy framework that supports tribal entrepreneurship.

Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation (TRIFED) was setup in 1987 with an aim to improve the livelihood of tribal communities by creating sustainable market and create business opportunities for them based on their cultural knowledge and traditional skills whilst ensuring fair and equitable remuneration. Further, TRIFED provides marketing support to State Tribal Development Cooperative Corporations, State Forest Development Corporations and other State level Agencies engaged in procurement of tribal products.

One of the main activities of TRIFED is to promote “Minor Forest Produce (MFP) Development”. TRIFED performs the MFP operations as a welfare activity and not as a commercial activity. It helps to trade in MFP irrespective of the commercial prudence of purchasing goods at cheaper rates and resorting to purchase and sale only to maximize profit.

TRIFED also organises exhibitions and events Aadishilp, Aadichitra and Octave, in which individual tribal artisans, tribal SHGs and organisations working with tribals are invited to showcase their rich tribal heritage.

Large-sized Adivasi Multipurpose Co-operative Societies, shortly called **LAMPS**, was established in 1979 with the understanding that cooperatives as a form of economic organisation is ideally suited to the tribal life, characterised with features such as communal ownership and consumption, closely knit kinship structures and minimal hierarchies. It had the following broad objectives.

- Promotion of subsidy-cum-loan scheme in the fields of agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, irrigation, forestry and cottage industries.
- Liberating the tribals from the clutches of money lenders through supply of production and consumption credit.
- Supply of essential commodities and agricultural inputs to tribal people

LAMPS also procures the MFP from tribals and mediates with the TRIFED.

More recently, Tribal India Commerce and Industry (**TICCI**) was established in 2017, as a body affiliated to FICCI, with an aim towards development of vendors amongst local tribal entrepreneurs in local and public sector units. It provides a platform to sensitise tribals on the opportunities available to them to be entrepreneurs.

Coming to the policy framework, PESA and FRA are considered to be paradigm shifts that can impact the tribal communities favourably by ensuring access to resources and rights which facilitate self-governance.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act ushered in a framework of decentralisation and local self-government through a 3-tier Panchayat Raj system. While all the provisions in the 73rd amendment were not applicable to the Scheduled Areas, the provisions that suited customs/traditions of tribals and recognised their right to protect and manage their resources and livelihoods were extended to these areas in 1996 through the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, popularly known as **PESA**.

A decade later, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, became operational since 1st January, 2008. **FRA** provides substantive rights on forest land to forest dwelling scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers and created an institutional mechanism for recognition of rights and the power to protect, preserve, conserve and manage community forest resources.

However, despite the enactment of these historic legislations, they have failed to impact the livelihoods of Adivasis - Lack of awareness, among both the tribals and administrative personnel; and ineffective implementation of the provisions, being the main reasons.

Tribal Entrepreneurial Ventures

Following is a list of tribal entrepreneurs and enterprises, which are knowingly or otherwise adopting the anthropological approach and using indigenous ways to build social enterprises in India. The list, by no way is exhaustive, but represents the trends and innovations at large.

1. Tenzing Bodosa: building world's first elephant-friendly tea farms

Started by Tenzing Bodosa, an entrepreneur from Assam, Bodosa Farms exhibit lush green tea estates in Kachibari village in the state's Udalguri district. Bodosa Farms take pride in being the only elephant friendly tea-farms in the world, as more than 70 elephants visit them. There are dedicated areas in the farm where elephants can feed from bamboo trees.

With customers from across the world, Tenzing's farms reaped revenues of Rs 60-70 lakh last year.

2. Mendha Lekha: India's first bamboo economy village

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 gave forest inhabitants the right to manage, conserve, protect and regenerate the forests and its resources. It, however, took 6 years and a long legal battle before Mendha Lekha, a tribal village situated in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, could become the first village to be granted community forest rights.

Today the village has a successful bamboo economy. The entire village, comprising 450 people belonging mainly to the Gond tribe, works together in cultivating bamboo as raw material for the paper industry. The villagers make profits in crores, and are using the money for several development and social welfare activities in the area.

3. Women of Odisha: when 'pattals' trended in Europe

A group of over 3,500 women from 127 tribal hamlets in Kandhamal, Sambalpur, Angul and Deogarh entered into a formal agreement with Leaf Democracy, a German company, to supply one lakh siali leaf plates every month. The plates, commonly known as *pattals*, are in high demand in European countries, and act as a biodegradable alternate to plastic and styrofoam.

4. Aranya: building a tamarind economy in tribal Chhattisgarh

Sukma is the southernmost district of Chhattisgarh. In 2016, the District Collector came up with Aranya, a social enterprise that is now changing the lives of tribals living here. The organisation produces Imli Chaska, a sauce made from tamarind, which grows in abundance in the region. Grown organically, the sauce contains 85 percent fruit pulp as compared to the industry standards of 27 percent.

5. EAGL: using goats to fight poverty in tribal Maharashtra

Dr Nilratan Shende extended his PhD research on poverty elimination and built a social enterprise out of it. The enterprise he started, EAGL, is empowering farmers and tribal groups in Maharashtra's Melghat region using livestock.

Nestled in the dense forests along River Tapti, Melghat is home to many tribal villages, belonging mainly to the Korku community. EAGL supports these families with livestock, mainly goats, and has helped over 200 families break the shackles of poverty.

6. ALC India: empowering 65,000 women by turning them into entrepreneurs

The Hyderabad-based organisation has incubated 54 social enterprises across five Indian states, providing livelihood to over 65,000 women. These women belong to tribal groups, small and marginal farming communities, livestock holders, weavers, internally displaced, and other vulnerable communities.

Through training, skill development, market connects, and other support mechanisms, ALC India helps social enterprises become self-sustainable and profitable. From farmer producer companies to milk cooperatives, most of these enterprises are reaping crores in revenue today.

7. Last Forest: providing livelihood to 6,500 tribals in remote Nilgiris

Last Forest provides livelihoods and training in sustainable harvesting and organic agriculture to tribal groups living in the Kotagiri region of Tamil Nadu. Home to several tribal groups like the Todas, Kotas, Irullas, Kurumbas, Paniyas, Adiyans, Edanadan Chettis and Cholanaickens, Last Forest is providing livelihood to over 6,500 people.

Started as a marketing platform for indigenous communities, self-help groups, social enterprises, and Fair Trade entities, Last Forest today runs stores in Ooty, Coonor and Kotagiri, and supplies in wholesale to over a hundred stores across India. The brand sells beeswax products like lip balms, balms and handmade soaps along with non-timber forest products like gooseberry, pepper, soapnuts, black jamun and nutmeg.

III. SUGGESTIONS

The paper is of the view that any solution towards promoting tribal entrepreneurship should be holistic and seek all round development, as various tribal sub-systems, whether economic or political or social, and all intertwined and part of an integrated whole.

1. Creating more platforms, like the recently organised Global Tribal Entrepreneurship Summit, to help foster public-private partnership and share best practices to empower the tribal community, while at the same time facilitating global outreach of locally made products.

2. Adopting an anthropological orientation towards entrepreneurship development programmes to make them intelligible and suitable to tribal populations. Here emphasis should be on culture specific and need specific solutions in place of paternalistic solutions based on modernisation theory.
3. Encouragement of livelihood generating activities based on locally available resources so that gainful employment opportunities could be created at the doorstep of tribal people.
4. Ensure that there is awareness of the provisions of PESA and FRA along with other related laws such as the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989 and Land Acquisition Act (LARR) 2013, among the concerned administrative and police personnel, besides Adivasis.
5. To enable tribal farmers/FRA beneficiaries gain access to farm inputs, the State should establish Farmers' Facilitation Centres (FFC) for clusters of villages to ensure availability of all the required services at one place. The logistics provided in the FFC should ensure both backward and forward linkages covering financial, technical and marketing support.
6. SHGs of tribals and women should be formed and enabled to take up value addition measures for locally available forest produce. There should be periodic trainings / capacity building initiatives, demonstrations with support of professionals/trainers. Tribal SHG federations should be groomed to be alternative channels for providing efficient marketing services.
7. Strengthen education (both in local dialect as well as in English medium) in tribal areas. Design alternative education models in tune with particular tribal community, and give official recognition to the same.
8. Ensure strict implementation of PESA and FRA provisions. Dilution of the same by whosoever needs to be challenged by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs strongly.

IV. CONCLUSION

Regardless of the form, entrepreneurial activity can be seen as a central element in supporting tribal socio-economic development. It is a powerful strategy for transforming tribal communities into robust, autonomous people's organisations by giving them a strong economic drive and management input to facilitate a scale of operation required for adequate value realisation. But this has to be carried out by causing minimal disturbance to the tribal way of life, which is where an anthropological insight could be of benefit. It is through this endeavour that tribal entrepreneurship can become an inseparable component of human entrepreneurship.