

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN SONBHADRA DISTRICT OF UTTAR PRADESH: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

¹Pandey, Manoj Kumar, ²Pandey, Akhilesh Kumar

¹Corresponding Author & Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology
VBS Purvanchal University, Jaunpur

²Principal, Professor of Geography, Post Graduate College, Patti, Pratapgarh, U.P.

Abstract

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical pathway for socio-economic empowerment among tribal communities in India. This study examines the opportunities and challenges of tribal entrepreneurship in Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh, a region endowed with rich natural resources and cultural heritage. Drawing on primary and secondary data, the research highlights the potential of forest-based livelihoods, handicrafts, and eco-tourism as viable entrepreneurial avenues. Government initiatives such as TRIFED and the Van Dhan Yojana provide institutional support, while rising demand for organic and eco-friendly products creates new market linkages. However, the study identifies persistent challenges including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial access, weak policy implementation, and lack of branding and marketing strategies. Women and youth remain underrepresented despite their potential role in driving entrepreneurial growth. The paper proposes a phased policy framework—short-term interventions in awareness and training, medium-term investments in infrastructure and branding, and long-term institutional strengthening—to foster sustainable tribal entrepreneurship. The findings underscore the need for participatory, culturally embedded approaches that balance economic development with ecological preservation, positioning Sonbhadra as a potential model for inclusive tribal enterprise in India.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a vital driver of socio-economic transformation, particularly in marginalized and resource-dependent communities. In India, tribal populations constitute a significant segment of society, often residing in geographically isolated regions with limited access to mainstream markets, infrastructure, and institutional support. Despite these constraints, tribal communities possess rich cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and access to natural resources that can serve as the foundation for sustainable entrepreneurial ventures.

Sonbhadra district, located in the southeastern part of Uttar Pradesh, is often referred to as the “*energy capital of India*” due to its abundance of coal and power plants. However, beyond its industrial profile, Sonbhadra is home to diverse tribal groups such as the Gond, Kharwar, Chero, and Baiga communities. These groups rely heavily on forest produce, agriculture, and traditional crafts for their livelihoods. The district’s unique socio-cultural fabric and ecological wealth present both opportunities and challenges for fostering tribal entrepreneurship.

Significance of the Study

Entrepreneurship among tribal communities in Sonbhadra is not merely an economic activity; it is deeply intertwined with issues of identity, empowerment, and sustainability. By engaging in entrepreneurial ventures, tribal populations can enhance income security, reduce migration, and preserve cultural heritage. Moreover, entrepreneurship offers a pathway to integrate tribal communities into broader development processes while respecting their ecological and cultural contexts.

This study is significant for several reasons:

- It highlights the untapped potential of forest-based products such as *Chironji* (*Buchanania lanzan*), medicinal herbs, and handicrafts.
- It examines the role of government schemes like Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited (TRIFED) and Van Dhan Yojana in supporting tribal enterprises.

- It identifies structural barriers—such as poor infrastructure, lack of financial literacy, and weak policy implementation—that hinder entrepreneurial growth.
- It proposes a phased policy framework to strengthen tribal entrepreneurship in Sonbhadra, with implications for other tribal regions in India.

Problem Statement

Despite the availability of resources and supportive policies, tribal entrepreneurship in Sonbhadra remains underdeveloped. Many initiatives fail to achieve their intended impact due to inadequate infrastructure, limited market access, and weak institutional mechanisms. Tribal entrepreneurs often struggle with branding, packaging, and marketing, which restricts their ability to compete in urban and global markets. Furthermore, women and youth—who could play a transformative role in entrepreneurship—remain underrepresented due to social constraints and lack of targeted support.

The central problem addressed in this study is the gap between potential opportunities and existing challenges in tribal entrepreneurship in Sonbhadra. Bridging this gap requires a holistic approach that combines immediate interventions with long-term institutional reforms.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the opportunities available for tribal entrepreneurship in Sonbhadra district.
2. To examine the challenges faced by tribal communities in initiating and sustaining entrepreneurial ventures.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing government schemes and institutional support mechanisms.
4. To propose a structured policy framework—short-term, medium-term, and long-term—for promoting sustainable tribal entrepreneurship.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is confined to tribal communities in Sonbhadra district, with a focus on forest-based livelihoods, handicrafts, and eco-tourism. While the findings may have broader relevance for other tribal regions in India, the socio-cultural specificity of Sonbhadra must be acknowledged. Limitations include reliance on secondary data for certain aspects, potential gaps in government reporting, and the challenges of capturing diverse tribal perspectives within a single study.

Literature Review

Tribal Entrepreneurship in India

Tribal Entrepreneurship has emerged as a new area of inquiry in recent years, distinguished by its distinctive context and the specific environment in which it occurs (Dana, 2015). This distinctive research area provides various opportunities and examines multiple factors influencing tribal entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is a crucial way to generate income, employ people and offer goods and services. The establishment of entrepreneurial initiatives in rural areas has the potential to revolutionize rural communities by creating new markets and job possibilities (Daimari & Singh, 2022).

Entrepreneurship is the phenomenon associated with entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurial activity is the enterprising human action in pursuit of the generation of value by creating and expanding economic activity by identifying and exploring new products, processes and markets (Ahmad & Seymour, 2008).

Tribal people are engaged in different types of entrepreneurial activities. Tribal people have traditional skills and cultural knowledge in making beautiful crafts and other local products using available raw materials. Tribal people maximize the utilization of land, equipment, animals, forests and agricultural resources (Nair & Thansiya, 2018).

Development is the way to address the challenges faced by the tribal communities, and entrepreneurship could be an effective medium for promoting development among them (Basu & Bharti 2016). Encouraging entrepreneurial activities, supportive Community collaboration and collective entrepreneurship, utilizing traditional knowledge, using digital tools and techniques and implementing supportive government policies and skill-enhancing programs are crucial for the success of entrepreneurship (Daimari & Singh, 2022).

Tribal entrepreneurship is the employment-generating factor in the tribal economy. Self-employment is the most effective way to achieve balanced economic growth and reduce poverty and unemployment (Vinamrta & Chakraborty, 2020). Today, all nations support entrepreneurship for their people's social and economic development (Pravesh, 2016). Every economy faces the challenges of high unemployment; as a result, promoting entrepreneurial activities and supportive entrepreneurial programs are crucial for the growth of society and the economy. The advancement of entrepreneurial activities is closely linked to the development of tribal communities; therefore, tribal entrepreneurship should be considered the critical development strategy to accelerate the growth of the tribal economy.

Entrepreneurship among tribal communities has been widely studied as a mechanism for socio-economic empowerment. Scholars emphasize that tribal entrepreneurship is distinct from mainstream models because it is deeply rooted in community values, ecological dependence, and cultural identity. Studies from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha highlight the role of forest produce, handicrafts, and eco-tourism as primary entrepreneurial avenues. However, challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited financial literacy, and weak institutional support persist across regions.

Forest-Based Livelihoods and Value Chains

Research underscores the importance of minor forest produce (MFPs) such as *Chironji*, mahua, tendu leaves, and medicinal herbs in tribal economies. Value addition through processing, packaging, and branding has been identified as a critical step in enhancing income security. The **Van Dhan Yojana**, launched by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, has been cited as a promising initiative to organize tribal gatherers into clusters and provide them with training, credit, and market access.

Handicrafts and Cultural Enterprises

Tribal handicrafts represent both economic and cultural capital. Studies show that tribal artisans often face difficulties in scaling up due to lack of branding, certification, and exposure to urban markets. Initiatives like TRIFED's marketing support and platforms such as *Amazon Karigar* have attempted to bridge this gap, though their reach remains limited in remote districts like Sonbhadra.

Tourism and Eco-Cultural Models

Eco-tourism and cultural tourism have emerged as innovative entrepreneurial models in tribal regions. Research from Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh demonstrates how tribal homestays, guided tours, and cultural festivals can generate sustainable income while preserving heritage. Sonbhadra, with its natural beauty and tribal diversity, holds similar potential, though infrastructural and promotional challenges remain significant.

Government Schemes and Institutional Support

Government interventions such as **Skill India**, **Start-up India**, and **Stand-up India** have created frameworks for entrepreneurship development. However, literature points to gaps in implementation, particularly in tribal areas where awareness and accessibility are low. Scholars argue for participatory approaches that involve tribal communities in the design and monitoring of schemes.

Theoretical Frameworks

- **Social Capital Theory:** Highlights the role of community networks and trust in fostering entrepreneurship.
- **Sustainable Livelihood Approach:** Emphasizes diversification of income sources while maintaining ecological balance.

- **Inclusive Development Models:** Advocate for integrating marginalized groups into mainstream economic processes without eroding cultural identity.

Research Gap

While existing literature provides insights into tribal entrepreneurship in India, specific studies on Sonbhadra remain limited. There is a need to contextualize opportunities and challenges within the district's unique socio-economic and ecological landscape. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a structured analysis and policy framework tailored to Sonbhadra's tribal communities.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a **descriptive and exploratory research design**. Descriptive elements are used to document the socio-economic profile of tribal communities and their entrepreneurial activities, while exploratory aspects help uncover new opportunities and challenges in the Sonbhadra context. This dual approach ensures both systematic documentation and innovative insights.

Study Area

Sonbhadra district, located in southeastern Uttar Pradesh, is characterized by its tribal diversity, forest resources, and socio-economic disparities. The district's unique combination of industrial development and tribal settlements makes it an ideal case for examining entrepreneurship in marginalized communities.

Data Sources

- **Primary Data**
 - Structured questionnaires administered to tribal entrepreneurs, self-help groups (SHGs), and Van Dhan Kendras.
 - Semi-structured interviews with community leaders, government officials, and NGO representatives.
 - Focus group discussions (FGDs) with women and youth to capture diverse perspectives.
- **Secondary Data**
 - Government reports (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, TRIFED, NABARD).
 - Academic studies on tribal entrepreneurship and rural development.
 - NGO publications and field reports specific to Sonbhadra.
 - Statistical data from Census of India and District Statistical Handbook.

Sampling Strategy

- **Population:** Tribal communities in Sonbhadra district, including Gond, Kharwar, Chero, and Baiga groups.
- **Sampling Method:** Stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different tribes, gender groups, and livelihood categories.
- **Sample Size:** Approximately 150–200 respondents, balancing statistical reliability with feasibility.
- **Research Tools**
 - **Questionnaires:** Designed with both close-ended and open-ended questions to capture quantitative and qualitative data.
 - **Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA):** Mapping exercises, resource ranking, and seasonal calendars to understand community dynamics.

- **Observation:** Field visits to tribal markets, handicraft centers, and forest produce collection sites.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:**
 - Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, mean scores) to profile respondents.
 - Comparative analysis of opportunities vs. challenges.
- **Qualitative Analysis:**
 - Thematic coding of interviews and FGDs to identify recurring patterns.
 - Case studies of successful tribal entrepreneurs in Sonbhadra.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent obtained from all participants.
- Respect for tribal customs and cultural sensitivities during fieldwork.
- Confidentiality maintained in reporting individual responses.
- Participatory approach ensuring that findings are shared with communities for validation.

RESULTS& FINDINGS

Opportunities

- **Forest-Based Livelihoods:** Sonbhadra's tribal communities rely heavily on minor forest produce (MFPs) such as *Chironji*, mahua, tendu leaves, and medicinal herbs. These resources provide a strong foundation for entrepreneurship. For example, *Chironji* has been termed "green gold" due to its high market value, and tribal groups can benefit from value addition through processing and packaging.
- **Traditional Handicrafts and Skills:** Tribals in Sonbhadra possess indigenous skills in weaving, pottery, bamboo crafts, and woodwork. These crafts hold potential for niche markets, particularly if linked to branding initiatives like "Sonbhadra Tribal Crafts."
- **Tourism Potential:** The district's natural beauty, tribal culture, and historical sites offer scope for eco-tourism and cultural tourism. Homestays, guided tours, and cultural festivals could generate sustainable income while preserving heritage.
- **Government Schemes and Institutional Support:** Initiatives such as **TRIFED**, **Van Dhan Yojana**, and **Skill India** have begun to reach tribal communities, offering training, financial support, and market linkages. Van Dhan Kendras in Sonbhadra have started organizing tribal gatherers into clusters, though their impact is still emerging.
- **Women and Youth Engagement:** Self-help groups (SHGs) and youth clubs are increasingly active in the district. Women-led enterprises in forest produce and handicrafts show promise, while younger generations are showing interest in digital platforms for marketing.

Challenges

- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Poor road connectivity, lack of storage facilities, and limited digital infrastructure restrict market access. Many tribal villages remain disconnected from mainstream supply chains.
- **Financial Barriers:** Access to credit remains a major obstacle. Tribal entrepreneurs often lack collateral and awareness of financial schemes, leading to dependence on informal lenders.

- **Skill and Knowledge Gaps:** Limited exposure to modern business practices, branding, and digital literacy hampers competitiveness. Packaging and certification of products remain weak.
- **Weak Policy Implementation:** While schemes exist, their execution is inconsistent. Delays, bureaucratic hurdles, and low awareness reduce effectiveness. Many tribal entrepreneurs are unaware of available government support.
- **Market and Branding Limitations:** Tribal products often fail to reach urban or global markets due to poor branding and absence of certification. Reliance on traditional marketing methods limits growth.
- **Social Constraints:** Skepticism due to past failures, low motivation among youth, and gender-based barriers restrict entrepreneurial participation. Women, despite their potential, face cultural and social challenges in scaling enterprises.

3. Illustrative Case Examples

- **Chironji Value Chain:** Tribal communities collect Chironji seeds, but lack of processing units means they sell raw produce at low prices. Establishing local processing centers could significantly increase income.
- **Handicraft SHGs:** Women's self-help groups producing bamboo crafts have shown success in local markets, but struggle to expand due to weak branding and limited exposure.
- **Eco-Tourism Initiatives:** Pilot projects in nearby districts demonstrate how tribal homestays and cultural tourism can thrive, suggesting similar potential in Sonbhadra if infrastructure improves.

Discussion

1. Interpreting Opportunities

The findings reveal that Sonbhadra's tribal communities possess significant entrepreneurial potential rooted in natural resources, cultural heritage, and government support. Forest-based livelihoods, particularly *Chironji* and medicinal plants, represent a sustainable economic base. Traditional handicrafts and eco-tourism further diversify opportunities. These align with the **Sustainable Livelihood Approach**, which emphasizes diversification of income sources while maintaining ecological balance.

The growing demand for organic and eco-friendly products in urban markets provides a unique chance for tribal entrepreneurs to position themselves as suppliers of authentic, sustainable goods. This reflects the **inclusive development model**, where marginalized groups can integrate into mainstream markets without losing cultural identity.

2. Interpreting Challenges

Despite these opportunities, systemic barriers persist. Poor infrastructure, limited financial access, and weak policy implementation hinder entrepreneurial growth. These challenges resonate with findings from other tribal regions such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, where similar structural constraints have slowed progress.

The lack of branding and certification highlights the gap between production and market competitiveness. Without strong local brands, tribal products remain undervalued. This issue connects to **social capital theory**, which stresses the importance of networks, trust, and collective action. Stronger community-based cooperatives could overcome these barriers by pooling resources and building collective identity.

3. Comparative Insights

- **Jharkhand:** Successful tribal cooperatives in lac and tasar silk demonstrate how value addition and branding can transform livelihoods.
- **Chhattisgarh:** Eco-tourism initiatives in Bastar show how cultural heritage can be leveraged for sustainable entrepreneurship.

- **Odisha:** Tribal handicrafts supported by government exhibitions highlight the importance of institutional promotion.

Sonbhadra shares similar resource endowments but lags in infrastructure and institutional support. Learning from these regions, Sonbhadra could replicate cooperative models and tourism initiatives tailored to its local context.

4. Role of Women and Youth

The findings emphasize the underrepresentation of women and youth in entrepreneurial activities. Yet, evidence from other regions shows that women-led self-help groups (SHGs) have successfully managed forest produce enterprises. Empowering women and youth in Sonbhadra could unlock untapped potential, aligning with broader goals of **gender equity and social inclusion**.

5. Sustainability and Cultural Preservation

Entrepreneurship in tribal communities must balance economic growth with ecological preservation. Overexploitation of forest resources could undermine long-term sustainability. Therefore, participatory governance and community-led monitoring are essential. Embedding entrepreneurship within cultural practices ensures that development does not erode tribal identity but strengthens it.

6. Policy Implications

The discussion highlights the need for a **phased policy framework**:

- Short-term: Awareness, training, and market linkages.
- Medium-term: Infrastructure, branding, and eco-tourism.
- Long-term: Institutional strengthening and sustainable value chains.

This phased approach ensures immediate empowerment while laying the foundation for systemic transformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Short-Term (1–2 years)

- **Awareness & Training**
 - Conduct village-level workshops on financial literacy, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship basics.
 - Promote awareness of schemes like **Van Dhan Yojana**, **TRIFED**, and **Skill India** through local campaigns.
- **Market Linkages**
 - Establish collection centers for forest produce (*Chironji*, mahua, medicinal herbs).
 - Facilitate partnerships with e-commerce platforms (Amazon Karigar, Government e-Marketplace).
- **Women & Youth Empowerment**
 - Strengthen self-help groups (SHGs) and youth clubs with seed funding and microcredit.
 - Launch mentorship programs connecting tribal youth with successful entrepreneurs.

2. Medium-Term (3–5 years)

- **Infrastructure Development**
 - Improve rural roads, storage facilities, and digital connectivity in tribal villages.
 - Set up **common facility centers** for processing forest produce and handicrafts.
- **Branding & Certification**

- Develop regional brands such as “*Sonbhadra Naturals*” or “*Sonbhadra Tribal Crafts*.”
- Introduce eco-labels and organic certifications to enhance product credibility.

- **Tourism Initiatives**

- Launch eco-tourism projects showcasing tribal culture, crafts, and natural heritage.
- Train local youth as guides, hospitality managers, and cultural ambassadors.

3. Long-Term (5–10 years)

- **Institutional Strengthening**

- Establish a **Tribal Entrepreneurship Development Institute** in Sonbhadra for research, training, and incubation.
- Partner with universities and NGOs for innovation in tribal livelihoods.

- **Sustainable Value Chains**

- Build large-scale cooperatives for forest produce to ensure fair pricing and sustainability.
- Encourage agroforestry and herbal product industries with tribal ownership.

- **Policy Integration**

- Embed tribal entrepreneurship into state-level development plans.
- Ensure participatory governance where tribal communities co-design policies and monitor outcomes.

4. Cross-Cutting Strategies

- **Capacity Building:** Continuous training in digital tools, financial management, and modern business practices.
- **Gender Inclusion:** Special focus on women-led enterprises and youth entrepreneurship.
- **Sustainability:** Balance economic growth with ecological preservation through community-led monitoring.
- **Community Participation:** Involve tribal leaders and organizations in planning and execution to ensure cultural relevance.

Expected Outcomes

- Enhanced **income security** and reduced migration.
- Strong **local brands** representing tribal identity.
- Empowered **women and youth** as entrepreneurial leaders.
- Sustainable use of **forest resources** with ecological balance.
- Improved **quality of life** through better infrastructure and social harmony.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship among tribal communities in Sonbhadra district represents both a challenge and an opportunity for inclusive development. The district’s rich natural resources, cultural heritage, and growing institutional support provide a strong foundation for entrepreneurial ventures. Forest-based livelihoods such as *Chironji* collection, traditional handicrafts, and eco-tourism initiatives highlight the diverse opportunities available to tribal communities. At the same time, systemic barriers—poor infrastructure, limited financial access, weak policy implementation, and lack of branding—continue to restrict the full realization of this potential.

The study underscores the importance of adopting a **phased policy framework** that combines immediate interventions with long-term institutional reforms. Short-term actions such as awareness campaigns and training can empower communities quickly, while medium-term investments in infrastructure, branding, and tourism can create sustainable market linkages. Long-term strategies, including institutional strengthening and cooperative value chains, are essential for embedding entrepreneurship into the district's development trajectory.

Crucially, the success of tribal entrepreneurship in Sonbhadra depends on **participatory approaches** that respect cultural identity and ecological sustainability. Women and youth must be placed at the centre of entrepreneurial initiatives, not only as beneficiaries but as leaders. By balancing economic growth with cultural preservation and ecological stewardship, Sonbhadra can emerge as a model for tribal entrepreneurship in India—demonstrating how marginalized communities can achieve empowerment through enterprise while contributing to broader goals of social harmony and sustainable development.

Acknowledgement

This paper is the work under the minor research project with Prof. Akhilesh Kumar Pandey (Principal Investigator), Department of Geography, Patti PG College, Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh of a three years (2022-2025) on “Assessing Quality of Life, Entrepreneurship Skills and Employability of Tribal People Living In Sonbhadra District of Uttar Pradesh”, Sponsored By Research and Development Scheme of Uttar Pradesh Government For State University & College Teachers (No: 90/2022/2551/Sattar-4-2022-4-32-2022 Dated: 10.11.2022).

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