



OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

Tribal women constitute an important component of India's rural and informal workforce and contribute substantially to agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, livestock rearing, household production, wage labour and emerging non-farm activities. Their occupational pattern, however, is shaped by land ownership, access to natural resources, education, social institutions, market connectivity, seasonality and the availability of local employment. The present paper reviews the existing literature on the occupational pattern of tribal women in India, with particular emphasis on agriculture, agricultural wage labour, forest-based activities, non-farm employment, migration, occupational diversification and changing forms of women's work. The review draws upon Census of India data, Periodic Labour Force Survey reports, government publications and empirical studies published in academic journals. The literature indicates that agriculture and agricultural labour continue to dominate tribal women's employment, while minor forest produce, livestock and other natural-resource-based activities remain important supplementary occupations. Recent studies indicate an increase in own-account work and unpaid family work among Adivasi women, while landlessness and limited productive assets continue to constrain access to better-paid occupations. The literature also demonstrates that occupational diversification is increasingly becoming a livelihood-security strategy, although much of the emerging employment remains informal, seasonal and low-paid. A major gap in existing research is the limited integration of principal and subsidiary occupations in understanding tribal women's complete livelihood portfolios. The paper argues that future research should move beyond labour-force participation rates and examine the quality, continuity, returns and security of tribal women's work. Strengthening land and resource rights, skill development, value addition to forest products, women's collective enterprises, institutional credit, market access and social protection are essential for improving occupational outcomes.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Adivasi Women, Occupational Pattern, Agriculture, Agricultural Labour, Forest Livelihoods, Non-Farm Employment, Occupational Diversification, India.

1. Introduction

The occupational structure of tribal women in India has historically been closely associated with agriculture, forests, livestock and other natural-resource-based activities. Tribal women contribute to both market-oriented and subsistence production and frequently combine several activities in response to seasonal changes in employment and household requirements. Their work includes cultivation, agricultural labour, collection of minor forest produce, livestock management, food processing, handicrafts, construction, petty trade and other informal services.

The importance of women's work in rural India is nevertheless difficult to capture through conventional employment statistics. Women's economic activities are often combined with domestic responsibilities and may be unpaid or undertaken within the household. A review of Indian women's work has consequently noted that a substantial part of women's economic contribution remains invisible, unrecorded and unrewarded because subsistence production is closely integrated with household work. (Heidelberg University HASP)

For tribal women, this problem of measurement is particularly important. A woman may cultivate a small plot, work as an agricultural labourer, collect forest produce, rear livestock and participate in household production during the same year. Consequently, classification according to a single principal occupation may not adequately represent her actual economic contribution.



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The Census of India provides a particularly important basis for understanding this occupational structure. Scheduled Tribe tables classify workers according to main and marginal status, industrial category, sex, education and other characteristics. These classifications permit analysis of cultivators, agricultural labourers and other occupational groups within the Scheduled Tribe population.

Recent evidence also indicates that women's role in Indian agriculture remains substantial. A 2026 systematic review reports that women constituted approximately 65 per cent of the female workforce in agriculture according to the 2011 Census-based analysis, although their roles remain disproportionately concentrated in labour rather than land ownership. (DOI)

2. Objectives of the Review

The paper has the following objectives:

1. To review the existing literature on the occupational pattern of tribal women in India.
2. To examine the role of agriculture and agricultural labour in tribal women's employment.
3. To review evidence concerning forest-based occupations and minor forest produce.
4. To examine the emergence of non-farm and service-sector employment.
5. To analyse the relationship between land ownership and occupational choice.
6. To examine occupational diversification and migration among tribal women.
7. To identify major constraints affecting tribal women's occupational mobility.
8. To identify gaps in existing research and suggest directions for future research.

3. Methodology of the Literature Review

The study adopts a narrative and thematic literature-review approach. Published research articles, review papers, official statistical reports and government documents concerning tribal women's employment and occupations in India were examined.

The review particularly considered literature dealing with:

- tribal women and agriculture;
- agricultural wage labour;
- forest and non-timber forest products;
- livestock and allied activities;
- non-farm employment;
- migration;
- land ownership;
- occupational diversification;
- unpaid family work;



- women's self-help groups; and
- occupational health and working conditions.

4. Evolution of Research on Tribal Women's Occupations

The literature can broadly be divided into four phases.

Table 1

Major Phases in the Study of Tribal Women's Occupations in India

Period	Major research emphasis	Dominant perspective
Early studies	Subsistence, tribal economy and traditional occupations	Agriculture and forests
1980s–1990s	Women's economic participation and poverty	Agricultural labour and household survival
2000s–2010s	Livelihood diversification and development programmes	Agriculture, MFP, SHGs and wage employment
2020s onwards	Occupational quality, land, unpaid work and livelihood transitions	Diversification, informality, land rights and employment quality

Source: Compiled from reviewed literature.

Earlier studies generally treated tribal communities as predominantly dependent on agriculture and forests. Subsequent research increasingly recognised the importance of women's unpaid and subsidiary work. More recent research has shifted towards occupational quality, landlessness, informality, unpaid family work and the changing nature of Adivasi women's labour-market participation.

4.1. Agriculture as the Principal Occupational Base

The most consistent finding in the literature is the continuing importance of agriculture in tribal women's employment.

Tribal women participate in almost all stages of agricultural production, including sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing and post-harvest processing. Their role extends to seed preservation, livestock care and household food production.

A systematic review published in 2026 concludes that women remain central to Indian agriculture, performing activities ranging from seed selection and biodiversity conservation to soil management and food production. The review also highlights the persistent gap between women's agricultural labour and their ownership or control over productive assets. (DOI)

The literature consequently distinguishes between participation in agriculture and control over agricultural resources. Tribal women may contribute extensively to cultivation while having limited independent ownership of land and other productive assets.



Table 2

Major Agricultural Occupations of Tribal Women

Occupational activity	Major nature of participation	Common characteristics
Cultivation	Own/family farm	Often subsistence-oriented
Agricultural labour	Wage employment	Seasonal and informal
Horticulture	Production and harvesting	Increasing importance in suitable regions
Livestock	Cattle, goats, sheep and poultry	Mainly supplementary
Post-harvest activities	Processing, threshing, storage	Frequently unpaid/family work
Seed and food production	Household production	Often invisible in employment statistics

Source: Synthesis of reviewed literature.

4.2. Agricultural Wage Labour

Agricultural wage labour constitutes one of the most important occupations among tribal women, particularly among land-poor and landless households.

Women generally participate in labour-intensive operations such as transplanting, weeding and harvesting. Employment is strongly influenced by agricultural seasons and rainfall conditions. Consequently, agricultural labour provides income during peak seasons but does not necessarily guarantee employment throughout the year.

A review of Indian agricultural women workers identifies agriculture as a major source of women's employment but also highlights gender discrimination, low education, inadequate awareness of labour rights and wage inequalities as continuing constraints.

Occupational health is another important concern. Research on agricultural women workers in India documents exposure to physical strain, ergonomic risks and other occupational hazards and argues for stronger social-security and welfare measures.

Thus, the literature suggests that the high participation of tribal women in agriculture should not automatically be interpreted as an indicator of economic empowerment.

4.3. Forest-Based Occupations and Non-Timber Forest Products

Forest-based livelihoods constitute a distinctive component of tribal women's occupational structure.

Women participate in collecting, processing and sometimes marketing non-timber forest products (NTFPs), including leaves, fruits, seeds, medicinal plants and other forest products. Such activities are particularly important in areas where agriculture is rain-fed or employment opportunities are limited.

Recent empirical research from Manipur found that 59.14 per cent of surveyed women were engaged in NTFP collection and identified occupation, household income, age, education, household size and distance to market as significant factors influencing women's dependence on NTFPs.



Recent research on forestry employment also finds substantial informality in forest occupations, with female workers experiencing particularly high levels of self-employment and casual employment. It highlights the importance of improving market access for NTFPs and strengthening social protection for informal forest workers.

Table 3

Forest-Based Occupational Activities of Tribal Women

Activity	Economic role	Major limitation
NTFP collection	Cash and supplementary income	Seasonal availability
Collection of fuelwood	Household subsistence	Generally unpaid
Leaf collection	Raw material for products	Low returns
Medicinal plant collection	Traditional livelihood	Market limitations
Food and fruit collection	Food security/income	Seasonal
Processing of forest produce	Value addition	Limited technology
Marketing	Potential for higher income	Dependence on intermediaries

Source: Synthesis of reviewed literature.

The literature increasingly supports a transition from raw collection to value addition. Processing, packaging and collective marketing can potentially improve women's income while reducing dependence on intermediaries.

4.4. Livestock and Allied Activities

Livestock rearing is frequently identified as an important supplementary occupation among tribal women.

Women are involved in feeding, cleaning, milking, collecting fodder and caring for animals. Goat and poultry rearing are particularly relevant for households with limited land because they require comparatively small amounts of fixed agricultural resources.

However, livestock work often remains invisible in conventional employment statistics because it is performed within the household and may not be recognised as a separate occupation.

This suggests that the occupational contribution of tribal women is underestimated when studies focus exclusively on paid employment.

4.5. Non-Farm Employment

The literature shows a gradual expansion of non-farm employment among rural and tribal women. Major activities include construction, petty trade, handicrafts, household industries, food processing and informal services.

However, access to non-farm employment is strongly conditioned by education, skills, transportation, market access and social networks.

Table 4

Emerging Non-Farm Occupations among Tribal Women

Occupation	Potential	Major constraint
Construction labour	High employment potential	Physically demanding, casual
Handicrafts	Traditional skill base	Weak market linkage



Food processing	High local potential	Technology and capital
Petty trade	Flexible employment	Limited working capital
Tailoring	Moderate	Skill and market constraints
Small livestock enterprises	High	Credit and veterinary services
Leaf-plate making	Seasonal	Low piece-rate returns
Local services	Emerging	Limited market size

4.6. Land Ownership and Occupational Mobility

Land ownership is increasingly recognised as an important determinant of occupational outcomes among tribal women.

A major recent study of Adivasi women examined changes in occupational patterns in relation to land alienation. Using employment surveys, PLFS 2022–23 and the Time Use Survey 2019, the study found that Adivasi women's labour-force participation declined more sharply than that of other social groups between 1993–94 and 2011–12. It also found that the subsequent increase in participation was substantially associated with unpaid family labour and own-account work.

Importantly, the study concludes that larger landholdings increase the probability of entering better-paid occupations, whereas smaller landholdings and landlessness increase the risk of precarious occupations or withdrawal into domestic work.

This finding represents an important development in the literature because it connects occupational choice with productive asset ownership, rather than treating labour-force participation as an isolated outcome.

4.7. Occupational Diversification

A major theme emerging from recent research is occupational diversification.

Tribal women frequently combine:

- agriculture;
- agricultural wage labour;
- forest-product collection;
- livestock;
- MGNREGS employment;
- construction;
- petty trade;
- household industries; and
- seasonal migration.

Diversification allows households to distribute employment across different seasons and reduce dependence on a single livelihood source.



Table 5

Occupational Diversification among Tribal Women: Conceptual Pattern

Primary livelihood	Subsidiary livelihood	Purpose
Cultivation	Agricultural labour	Supplement farm income
Agricultural labour	MFP collection	Manage seasonal unemployment
MFP collection	Agriculture	Generate cash income
Livestock	Wage labour	Regular supplementary income
Construction	Agriculture	Diversify seasonal employment
Petty trade	Agriculture	Increase household cash flow
Migration	Local wage work	Compensate for lack of local employment

4.8. Migration and Occupational Change

Seasonal migration is another important component of tribal livelihood strategies.

Women and households may migrate because of:

- inadequate local employment;
- agricultural seasonality;
- low local wages;
- indebtedness;
- crop failure;
- lack of productive assets; and
- better employment opportunities elsewhere.

Migration can increase cash income, but informal migrant employment often exposes women to insecure working conditions and weak social protection.

The literature therefore distinguishes between migration as an economic opportunity and migration as a response to livelihood distress.

4.9. Women's Work and the Problem of Measurement

One of the strongest themes across the literature concerns the underestimation of women's work.

Women may simultaneously perform:

- productive work;
- household work;
- care work;



- subsistence production;
- livestock management;
- fuel and water collection; and
- unpaid family labour.

Consequently, labour-force statistics based on a single principal activity can understate women's actual economic contribution.

The literature on rural labour markets argues that women's reported labour-force participation can appear low even when time-use data reveal extensive economic activity and strong seasonal variation. Women are also more dependent on agriculture than men, partly because employment near home is more compatible with household responsibilities.

This issue is particularly significant for tribal women because subsistence and market activities are frequently intertwined.

4.10. Occupational Health and Working Conditions

Occupational pattern must also be analysed in relation to working conditions.

Agricultural women workers are exposed to:

- repetitive manual operations;
- bending and squatting;
- carrying heavy loads;
- exposure to heat and weather;
- agricultural chemicals;
- inadequate sanitation; and
- limited occupational safety measures.

Research on occupational health among agricultural women workers in India identifies occupational hazards as a significant concern and calls for stronger welfare and social-security provisions.

For tribal women, these concerns may be compounded by limited healthcare access and the physically demanding nature of forest collection and agricultural labour.

5. Regional Differences

The occupational pattern of tribal women varies considerably across India because tribal communities inhabit diverse ecological and economic environments.



Table 6

Regional Dimensions of Tribal Women's Occupations

Region/ecological setting	Common occupational emphasis
Central Indian tribal belt	Agriculture, agricultural labour, forest produce
Eastern India	Agriculture, forest collection, wage labour
North-Eastern India	Shifting cultivation, agriculture, horticulture and allied activities
Western tribal areas	Agriculture, livestock, forest produce and wage labour
Himalayan tribal areas	Horticulture, livestock, agriculture and forest activities
Southern tribal areas	Agriculture, plantation work, forest produce and wage labour
Tribal areas near urban centres	Increasing non-farm work, construction and services

The variation demonstrates that there is no single occupational model applicable to all tribal women in India. Occupational structure is shaped by ecology, land availability, market access, infrastructure and local institutions.

6. Government Programmes and Occupational Transformation

Government employment and livelihood programmes have increasingly attempted to address tribal women's employment and income.

Major interventions include:

- MGNREGS;
- Self-Help Groups;
- tribal livelihood programmes;
- Van Dhan initiatives;
- skill-development programmes;
- livestock development;
- financial-inclusion programmes; and
- market-development initiatives.

These programmes can contribute to occupational diversification by providing wage employment, credit, skills and opportunities for collective enterprise.

However, the literature suggests that programme effectiveness depends on local implementation, access to markets, institutional capacity and women's control over productive resources.



7. Current Labour-Market Evidence

Recent PLFS evidence provides useful national context for understanding women's occupational structure.

Table 7

Employment Status of Rural Female Workers in India, 2023–24

Industry	Self-employed	Regular wage/salary
Agriculture	80.9	0.7
Manufacturing	83.9	10.8
Construction	0.7	0.7
Trade	86.2	13.4
Other services	12.0	85.9
All rural female workers	73.5	7.8

Source: PLFS Annual Report 2023–24, Government of India.

The table demonstrates substantial differences in employment status across industries. Agriculture is strongly associated with self-employment and casual labour, while construction is overwhelmingly casual. In contrast, other services have a much greater share of regular wage/salary employment.

Although these figures refer to rural women generally rather than exclusively to tribal women, they provide an important framework for understanding the employment environment in which tribal women participate.

8. Major Research Gaps

The review identifies several important gaps in the existing literature.

First, inadequate attention to subsidiary occupations

Most studies classify women according to their principal occupation. This approach fails to capture the multiple activities undertaken by tribal women during different seasons.

Second, insufficient attention to occupational quality

Labour-force participation is frequently treated as a positive development, but participation in low-paid casual work does not necessarily represent economic empowerment. Future studies should examine wages, employment duration, job security and social protection.

Third, inadequate integration of land and occupation

Recent research has demonstrated that landholding size affects occupational choice and the probability of entering better-paid employment. More village-level research is required to examine this relationship across tribal regions.

Fourth, limited attention to unpaid work

Household production, livestock care, collection of fuelwood and water, food processing and unpaid family work remain inadequately captured.



Fifth, limited comparative village research

There is insufficient research comparing relatively interior tribal villages with villages having better roads, market access and proximity to urban centres.

Sixth, inadequate assessment of value-chain participation

More research is needed on whether tribal women actually benefit from value addition and market-oriented interventions involving forest products, handicrafts and agricultural products.

Seventh, limited longitudinal evidence

There is a need for studies examining occupational changes over time, particularly in relation to land alienation, migration, climate change, mechanisation and rural infrastructure.

9. Conceptual Understanding Emerging from the Review

The literature suggests that tribal women's occupational pattern is influenced by five interconnected factors:

Natural resources → Productive assets → Household characteristics → Market and infrastructure → Institutional support

These factors influence:

Principal occupation + Subsidiary occupations → Occupational diversification → Employment security → Household income → Women's economic empowerment

Thus, occupational diversification should be viewed as an intermediate mechanism between access to resources and livelihood security.

10. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper establishes that tribal women's occupations in India are undergoing gradual transformation, but agriculture and natural-resource-based activities continue to provide the foundation of livelihoods. Agricultural labour, cultivation, forest-product collection and livestock remain particularly important. At the same time, construction, petty trade, household industries, services and migration have become increasingly relevant sources of supplementary income.

An important finding from the literature is that high work participation does not necessarily mean high economic empowerment. Tribal women often remain concentrated in informal, seasonal, low-paid and physically demanding occupations. Their contribution is further underestimated because unpaid family work and household-based economic activities are inadequately reflected in conventional labour statistics.

Recent research has strengthened the understanding of the relationship between land ownership and occupational outcomes. Evidence indicates that larger landholdings can improve women's access to better-paid occupations, whereas landlessness and small holdings can increase dependence on precarious employment or unpaid domestic work.

The literature also demonstrates that occupational diversification has become a central livelihood strategy. Women combine agriculture, wage labour, forest-product collection, livestock, small enterprises and migration to manage seasonal fluctuations and income risks.



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Future research should therefore move beyond a narrow analysis of the principal occupation and examine the complete occupational portfolio of tribal women, including principal and subsidiary activities, paid and unpaid work, employment duration, wages, control over income, access to productive assets and social protection.

The policy implication is clear: tribal women's occupational development should not mean simply moving women away from agriculture. Instead, policy should improve the productivity and returns from existing occupations while creating sustainable alternatives. Strengthening land and resource rights, agricultural productivity, minor forest produce value chains, livestock enterprises, women's collective organisations, skill development, institutional credit, market connectivity and social protection can transform occupational diversification from a survival strategy into a pathway towards sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment.

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