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LABOUR MARKET DYNAMICS OF SCHEDULED TRIBE POPULATION IN INDIA: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

The study explores the labour market dynamics among the schedule tribe population in India to better understand trends and gender gaps in labour force participation. It analyses the various employment indicators such as Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), and Unemployment Rate (UR) among the ST population in India by using secondary data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). The findings of the study highlight although scheduled tribes exhibit relatively higher labour force participation compared to the national average, the significant gender disparities persist among schedule tribe population. Tribal women remain concentrated in informal and low-income employment. Along with the gender disparity is wider in urban region as compared to rural regions. The paper highlights the need for a gender-inclusive policy approach that improves access to education, skilling, and formal employment opportunities for tribal women. Enhancing their economic participation is critical to advancing women-led development and achieving inclusive growth in India.

Keywords: Schedule Tribe, LFPR, Gender gap, Unemployment, PLFS.

Introduction

Historically, Scheduled Tribes are one of the most underprivileged and impoverished groups in India. According to the Census of India 2011, scheduled tribes account for 104 million people, representing 8.6 percent of India's total population from various regions, cultures, and ecology (**Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2013**). Tribal communities continue to have barriers to education, health, accessing livelihoods, and participating in the labour force, despite constitutional protections and specifically targeted programs that provide welfare benefits to them (**Deb Roy et al., 2023**). The labour market plays a key role in providing socio-economic mobility and providing empowerment to the people. When it comes to marginalised communities such as Scheduled Tribes labour force participation often reflects not only economic opportunity but also economic compulsion. According to the exiting literatures, tribal populations generally have a higher level of labour force participation compared with other groups (**Chinde & Ratre, 2025**). However, they mostly engaged in informal, low-paying and precariously employed such as subsistence agriculture, casual labour, forest-based work and informal urban employment (**Yangzom, 2025**). Therefore, a higher level of labour force participation does not lead to improved economic outcomes or secure work for these communities (**Singh & Kapoor, 2023**).

In addition, gender disparities further complicate the dynamics of the labour market for Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations. When compared to women in other social groups, tribal women are perceived to have greater levels of participation in the labour force (**Kundu, 2591**), particularly in rural areas. However, much of this labour is mainly provided through unpaid family work or marginal agricultural work or low-productivity informal work (**Dutta, n.d.**). The nature of female labour force participation for tribal populations continues to shift as rural-to-urban migration and integration into market-oriented economies become increasingly common. Although there are many different types of jobs available in urban labour markets, there are also many challenges with respect to education, skills, social networks, and mobility that hinder access (**Naresh,**



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2014). Therefore, it is likely that gender gaps will widen in urban labour markets due to structural barriers rather than voluntary choice not to work.

Reliable and updated data is essential for understanding these dynamics. The National Statistical Office conducts the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) as part of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation to provide detailed data regarding employment indicators across social groups, gender, and rural-urban sectors. Additionally, the PLFS provides a means of assessing longer term engagement with the labour market through its usual principal and subsidiary status (UPSS) approach, as well as providing a consistent basis for analysing labour market trends over time. The PLFS's most recent data shows that there is still substantial gender disparity amongst males and females within the Scheduled Tribes despite the Scheduled Tribes' labour force participation rates being higher than the national average. Female labour force participation among STs is considerably lower than that of ST males, and the rural-urban divide is striking. In rural areas, tribal women often engage in agriculture and allied activities, contributing to relatively higher participation rates. However, in urban areas, female participation drops sharply, accompanied by relatively higher unemployment rates. This pattern suggests structural barriers such as skill mismatch, limited access to formal employment, household care responsibilities, and gender-based labour market discrimination.

This present study examines the labour market situation of Scheduled Tribe populations in India from a gender perspective using PLFS data from 2019-20 to 2022-23. It analyzes key employment indicators for both rural and urban areas. The findings aim to highlight distinct vulnerabilities and emerging shifts within the tribal workforce. Gender-sensitive examination of labour market participation is crucial not only for academic understanding but also for designing targeted policy interventions that promote equitable access to education, skill development, and formal employment opportunities for tribal women. Strengthening their economic agency is crucial for advancing social justice and achieving sustainable and inclusive development in India.

Objectives of the Study

The present study examines the labour market dynamics of the Scheduled Tribe population in India. The main objectives are:

1. To analyze trends in key labour market indicators such as Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), and Unemployment Rate (UR) for the Scheduled Tribe population during.
2. To examine the gender gaps in labour market participation within the ST population.
3. To compare rural and urban labour market outcomes among Scheduled Tribe population.

Data and Research Methodology

The study is based entirely on secondary data. The primary source is the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO), and publications of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The analysis focuses on three standard employment indicators Labour Force Participation Rate (Percentage of persons in the labour force (employed + unemployed) to total population, Worker Population Ratio (Percentage of employed persons to total population), and Unemployment Rate (Percentage of unemployed persons to total labour force). The study adopts a descriptive and comparative methodology. The gender gap is calculated to measure the gender disparity in labour force among the tribal population.



Data Analysis and Findings

This section examines key employment indicators for the scheduled tribe population using data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office. The analysis focuses on Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), and Unemployment Rate (UR), with emphasis on gender gaps and rural–urban differences.

Table 1: LFPR (in %) according to Usual Status (PS+SS) for Scheduled Tribes and All Social Groups in India

Year	Scheduled Tribes			Overall		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2019–20	57.2	36.5	47.1	56.8	22.8	40.1
2020–21	58.6	39.6	49.3	57.5	25.1	41.6
2021–22	59	39.3	49.2	57.3	24.8	41.3
2022–23	59.6	43.5	51.6	56.2	27.8	42.4
2023–24	59.5	46.7	53	58.2	31.7	45.1

Source: PLFS 2023-24, NSO, MoSPI

Table 1 shows the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of scheduled tribes and all social groups in India from year 2019-20 to 2023-24. The LFPR of scheduled tribes has consistently been higher than the national average during the study period. In 2019-20, the LFPR among scheduled tribes was 47.1 percent, compared to 40.1 percent for the entire population. In 2023-24, it reached 53 percent for STs, while the overall LFPR increased to 45.1 percent.

There is a clear gender disparity in labour force participation. Among scheduled tribes, the LFPR for men is significantly higher than that for women, although women’s participation has increased significantly over time. The LFPR for women among scheduled tribes increased from 36.5 percent in 2019-20 to 46.7 percent in 2023-24, demonstrating a significant increase in women’s participation in the labour force. In comparison, the LFPR for women for all social groups increased from 22.8 percent to 31.7 percent during the same period. This clearly indicates that tribal women participate in the labour market at a higher rate than women in the overall population. This may be due to the economic structure of tribal communities, where women often contribute significantly to agriculture, forest-related activities, and informal employment.

Table 2: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among Scheduled Tribes by Gender in India, in 2023–24 (in %)

Area	Total	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Rural	54.1	60	48.5	11.5
Urban	43.4	55.2	30.7	24.5
Rural + Urban	53	59.5	46.7	12.8

Source: PLFS 2023-24, NSO, MoSPI



The table 2 shows the Rural-Urban difference as well as the gender disparity in the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of scheduled tribes in India for the year 2023-24. Data shows that labour force participation among ST populations is significantly higher in rural areas than in urban areas. In rural areas, the overall LFPR is 54.1 percent, while in urban areas it is significantly lower at 43.4 percent. This difference reflects the greater dependence of tribal communities on agriculture, forest-related activities, and informal rural employment opportunities.

A clear gender gap is also evident in labour force participation. In rural areas, the LFPR for ST men is 60 percent, while for ST women it is 48.5 percent, resulting in a gender gap of 11.5 percentage points. In contrast, the gender gap is much higher in the urban sector. The LFPR for urban ST men is 55.2 percent, while for urban ST women it drops sharply to 30.7 percent, resulting in a gender gap of 24.5 percentage points. This suggests that tribal women face greater barriers to entering the labour market in urban areas, possibly due to education, skills, formal employment opportunities, and social barriers.

Clearly, although scheduled tribes demonstrate strong participation in economic activity, gender disparities remain evident, especially in the urban labour market. The findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive employment policies and skill development efforts aimed at improving labour market access for tribal women.

Table 3: Gender Gap in Labour Force participation Rate among scheduled tribes in India

Year	Male LFPR	Female LFPR	Gender Gap
2019–20	57.2	36.5	20.7
2020–21	58.6	39.6	19
2021–22	59	39.3	19.7
2022–23	59.6	43.5	16.1
2023-24	59.5	46.7	12.8

Source: PLFS 2023-24, NSO, MoSPI

Table 3 shows that the LFPR among ST male remained fairly stable during the study period from 2019-20 to 2023-24. It increased slightly from 57.2 percent in 2019-20 to 59.5 percent in 2023-24, reflecting the continued participation of tribal men in economic activities. On the other hand, the female LFPR has increased significantly over the past few years. It increased from 36.5 percent in 2019-20 to 46.7 percent in 2023-24, reflecting a gradual improvement in labour market participation among tribal women.

An increasing rate of female participation has resulted in a continuous decrease in the gender gap between males and females within the workforce over time. In 2019-20, the difference between male and female labour force participation rate (LFPR) was 20.7 percentage points. This gap narrowed slightly to 19 percentage points in 2020-21 and 19.7 percentage points in 2021-22. Further declines are expected in subsequent years, with the gap narrowing to 16.1 percentage points in 2022-23 and further to 12.8 percentage points in 2023-24. The downward trend of the gender gap indicates that there has been a steady increase in tribal women’s participation in the labour market. The increasing opportunity for tribal women to find new types of work is likely due to increasing economic necessity, greater participation in rural economic activities, and better access to employment opportunities. However, despite this improvement, significant gender inequality persists,



reflecting the structural barriers that tribal women continue to face, such as limited education, skills gaps, and limited access to formal employment.

Table 4: Worker Population Ratio (in %) of Scheduled Tribes in India

Year	ST Male	ST Female	ST Total
2019–20	54.9	35.7	45.5
2020–21	56.5	39.1	47.9
2021–22	57.3	38.6	48
2022–23	58.4	42.8	50.7
2023-24	58.2	46	52

Source: PLFS 2023-24, NSO, MoSPI

Table 4 shows the Worker Population Ratio (WPR) for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in India from 2019-20 to 2023-24. The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) represents the percentage of the population that is working and is an important indicator for understanding the level of employment.

In the study period, the WPR for tribal men has generally remained stable and at a relatively high rate. The WPR for tribal men increased from 54.9 percent in 2019-20 to 58.2 percent by 2023-24, demonstrating that more tribal men are involved in economic activities. WPR for tribal women has increased even more dramatically over the same time period. ST female’s WPR increased has from 35.7 percent in 2019-20 to 46 percent in 2023-24. The increase in women’s employment may be linked to greater participation in agriculture, allied activities, and other informal sector jobs, especially in rural areas. The overall WPR for the scheduled tribe population also increased steadily. It increased from 45.5 percent in 2019-20 to 52 percent in 2023-24, indicating an overall improvement in employment participation among tribal communities.

Table 5: Unemployment Rate (in %) among Scheduled Tribes in India

Year	ST Male	ST Female	ST Total
2019–20	4.1	2.3	3.4
2020–21	3.7	1.3	2.7
2021–22	2.9	1.7	2.4
2022–23	2	1.5	1.8
2023-24	2.2	1.5	1.9

Source: PLFS 2023-24, NSO, MoSPI



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Table 5 shows the unemployment rate (UR) among the scheduled tribe population in India from 2019-20 to 2023-24. The unemployment rate represents the percentage of people in the labour force who are willing to work but unable to find a job. The overall unemployment rate among scheduled tribes has gradually declined. In 2019–20, the overall unemployment rate among STs was 3.4 percent, which decreased to 2.7 percent in 2020–21, 2.4 percent in 2021–22, and further to 1.8 percent in 2022–23. In 2023–24, the unemployment rate increased slightly to 1.9 percent, but it remained significantly lower than in previous years.

The unemployment rate among ST men declined from 4.1 percent in 2019-20 to 2.2 percent in 2023-24, reflecting improved job availability or greater engagement in economic activity. For ST women, the unemployment rate has remained consistently lower than that of men throughout the study period. Female unemployment declined from 2.3 percent in 2019-20 to 1.3 percent in 2020-21, and then fluctuated slightly between 1.5 to 1.7 percent in the following years. The comparatively lower unemployment among women can be explained by the fact that many tribal women are engaged in informal or subsistence work such as farming, forest work, and domestic work, which reduces their chances of being counted as unemployed.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of labour market indicators for the scheduled tribe population reveals a complex pattern of participation, gender gaps, and rural-urban differences. While overall data suggests significantly higher labour force participation among scheduled tribes compared to the national average, a deeper examination reveals that this participation is more driven by structural necessity than equal access to productive employment opportunities. Therefore, these results must be understood within the broader theoretical framework of labour market segmentation, gender division of labour, and structural marginalization.

❖ Labour Market Segmentation and Economic Constraints

One of the most interesting features of scheduled tribe population is that they consistently show higher labour force participation rates and worker population ratios than the overall population. From a neoclassical view, high participation may indicate a positive response of labour supply, although labour market segmentation theory will provide a better understanding of this anomaly. According to labour market segmentation theory, the labour market is composed of primary and secondary segments. The primary segment is characterized by stable employment, higher wages, and social security, while secondary segment is characterised by low rates of pay, informal forms of employment, and insecurity. The majority of STs work in the secondary segment (such as subsistence farming, casual labour, activities related to forestry, and informal employment in urban areas). The low level of unemployment among scheduled tribes does not necessarily mean there are good labour market conditions, but rather this reflects the limited capacity of STs to remain unemployed because of their economic vulnerability.

Therefore, it seems clear that higher labour force participation among STs is driven by economic compulsion rather than improved opportunities for employment. This view is consistent with the structuralist view of employment in marginalised communities, in which a “distress-induced employment” phenomenon exists, where participation in work is driven by the need to meet one's survival needs, regardless of the quality of that work.



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❖ Gender based Division of Labour within Tribal Communities

According to the present study, the continuing existence of a gender gap in labour force participation has been observed over time amongst scheduled tribe population. This has been reducing slightly, but the gender gap still exists and remains larger in urban areas than in rural areas. The gendered division of labour theory helps explain this pattern. In many tribal societies, women have historically engaged in agriculture and forestry with men. Therefore, tribal women often have higher LFPRs than women in other social groups in rural areas. However, most of the tribal women have involved in informal, unpaid, or underpaid jobs. Women are, therefore, frequently undervalued and often unaccounted for in the official statistics of labour in these areas.

The significant decrease in urban female participation suggests that traditional roles in labour do not robustly transfer into formal employment settings in the urban environment. Urban labour markets tend to require educational credentials, technical skills, and social networks that many tribal women lack due to their historical lack of education and limited access to skill development. Therefore, moving to urban areas does not necessarily lead to an overall improvement in employment prospects for women in the labour market, in fact, it may make them even more excluded from the labour market. The widening gender gap in urban areas reflects what feminist economists describe as “structural invisibility” and “labour market exclusion,” where women are constrained by both supply-side limitations (education, skills, mobility) and demand-side discrimination (employer bias, informal hiring networks).

❖ Rural-Urban Disparities and Structural Constraints

The data shows that there is a clear and pronounced rural-urban gap, as well as structural transformation that has clearly affected the labour outcomes of the tribals. For rural women, much of their participation occurs through home-based subsistence farming and supporting enterprises that offer flexible hours. In contrast, many of the job opportunities available in urban areas are formal sector jobs that have set hours and require skills.

According to the Lewis dual-sector model of structural transformation, during development there is a shift of labour from traditional agriculture to modern industry. The results of this study show that the shift is unequal across genders and for the tribals. While it is possible for some males to access informal or semi-formal employment in the city, the barriers for women are much higher since they have lower rates of accumulation of human capital due to substantial gender-based barriers.

Additionally, when looking at the urban unemployment rate for female tribals, it is substantially higher than the rural unemployment rate. This suggests that the urban labour market has the potential for producing “open unemployment” whereby women are willing to work but are not able to find a suitable opportunity. In contrast, in the rural areas, women are finding informal family-based work but this does not result in increased productivity or income, although it does lower the reported level of unemployment.

Conclusion

This study examined the labour market dynamics of the scheduled tribe population in India from a gendered perspective using recent data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office. The analysis focused on trends in Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), and Unemployment Rate (UR) during the period 2019-20 to 2023-24, with emphasis on gender disparities and rural–urban differences. The study demonstrates that while scheduled tribes exhibit high labour force participation, structural gender disparities persist, particularly in urban labour markets. Employment remains concentrated in informal sectors, limiting economic mobility.



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A significant gender gap persists within the tribal population. Although female labour force participation has increased in recent years and the gender gap has narrowed modestly, disparities remain significant specially in urban areas. The rural–urban contrast further highlights uneven structural transformation. While rural tribal women are absorbed into subsistence agriculture and informal activities, urban labour markets present higher entry thresholds that many tribal women are unable to overcome. Consequently, participation rates alone do not fully capture the quality or stability of employment.

There is a need to build a robust gender-sensitive and intersectional policy framework for effective transformation of the labour force participation of the scheduled tribe population into pronounced socio-economic empowerment. Strengthening the economic autonomy of tribal women is not only a matter of equity but also a necessary condition for achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

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