

Tribal Entrepreneurship in Odisha

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Odisha, located on the eastern coast of India, is known for its vast tribal population, rich biodiversity, rich minerals and unique cultural heritage. More than 23% of its population belongs to Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Odisha is one of the most tribal-dominated states in India. Tribal communities such as the Kondh, Saura, Juang, Bonda, and Dongria Kondh have preserved their customs, knowledge systems, and traditional skills for generations. In recent times, there has been a growing focus on tribal entrepreneurship to promote self-reliance, economic development, and cultural preservation. With abundant natural resources, growing market access, and supportive government policies, the scope for tribal entrepreneurship in Odisha is both vast and promising.

Saura Paintings and the Artist Cooperatives of Gajapati and Rayagada

Tribal communities are skilled in handicrafts, handlooms, bamboo work, and natural medicine. These skills can be turned into successful businesses when supported with modern tools, design innovation, and market access. Saura paintings, created by the Saura tribe of Gajapati and Rayagada districts, have gained national and international appreciation. Traditionally used to decorate walls during rituals, these artworks have found their way onto canvas, apparel, and home décor.

Tribal cooperatives like Saura Tribal Art Promotion Society have helped artists earn a sustainable income by connecting them with buyers and exhibitions across India. Government and NGO support has helped promote these artworks online, expanding market reach globally.



Van Dhan Vikas Kendras in Kandhamal and Malkangiri

Tribal regions of Odisha are endowed with Minor Forest Produce (MFP) such as sal leaves, tamarind, honey, mahua, and medicinal plants. These products are traditionally harvested by tribes but often sold without value addition. Under the Van Dhan Yojana, the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) has established Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) in various tribal districts of Odisha. For instance, in Kandhamal, tribal women collect tamarind, sal seeds, and turmeric, which are processed into ready-to-sell products like powder, oil, and dried spices. These units are managed by tribal SHGs, ensuring profit-sharing and community empowerment. In Malkangiri, tribal groups collect mahua flowers and process them into health drinks and sweeteners. With support in packaging and branding, their products are now sold under tribal brand labels, both online and through TRIFED outlets.



Millets Mission and Tribal Startups of Koraput and Rayagada

Koraput, Kandhamal, and Rayagada are known for cultivating millets such as ragi, kodo, foxtail, and barnyard millet. Once considered a subsistence crop, millets have now been rebranded as superfoods. Under the Odisha Millets Mission (OMM), tribal farmers are trained in organic millet farming, post-harvest processing, and entrepreneurship. In Rayagada, the tribal farmers' collective "Shakti Farmers Producer Company" has launched millet-based ready-to-cook products like cookies, ladoos, and energy bars. The cooperative is run by tribal women and has partnered with local bakeries and nutrition startups. Their products are sold in local urban markets, online, and through government canteens, offering a source of stable income and improved nutrition.

Daringbadi Eco-Tourism Opportunities

Tribal-dominated areas in Odisha like Similipal, Daringbadi, Koraput, and Niyamgiri, offer beautiful landscapes, forests, and unique cultural experiences. Tribal communities can earn income by offering homestays, guided cultural tours, and eco-tourism services. Daringbadi in Kandhamal, often called the "Kashmir of Odisha," has emerged as a tribal tourism destination. Eco-tourism projects managed by tribal youth offer guided forest treks, birdwatching, local food experiences, and homestays. Supported by the Forest Department and local panchayats, these camps generate income for tribal households while promoting sustainable tourism. Local tribal women cook traditional meals, guide tourists through spice gardens, and perform tribal dances during festivals. These models not only boost income but also preserve tribal culture and connect it with urban audiences.

Mayurbhanj Handloom Cluster (Santhal)

Many tribal women are skilled in handloom weaving using natural dyes and traditional patterns. In areas like Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar, weaving has become an economic activity with strong demand in niche markets. Santhal tribal women in Mayurbhanj have revived traditional weaving techniques with the help of NGOs and government support. Under the Cluster Development Programme, they have formed producer groups and created new textile designs that blend tradition with modern fashion. Their products—scarves, sarees, cushion covers—are sold in handicraft exhibitions, Fabindia outlets, and e-commerce platforms. The weavers have received training in color matching, loom upgrades, and quality control, resulting in higher incomes and recognition.

Online Sal Leaf Plate Enterprise in Sundargarh

Access to digital platforms and e-commerce has opened new doors for tribal entrepreneurs, especially youth. Platforms like TRIFED's online portal, Amazon Karigar, and Flipkart Samarth allow tribal products to reach national and global markets. In Sundargarh district, a group of tribal youth set up a small sal leaf plate-making unit, which began selling biodegradable plates through e-commerce platforms. Initially supported by a tribal development NGO and Start-up Odisha, the group received training in digital marketing and logistics.



Within two years, their brand attracted eco-conscious customers in Bengaluru and Delhi, creating jobs for over 40 tribal youth and women. The enterprise also contributed to environmental sustainability and inspired similar ventures in nearby villages.

Challenges and way forward for tribal entrepreneurship in Odisha

The main challenges are that access to credit is limited, and tribal areas lack basic infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and internet. Education and skill development are needed to help tribal youth compete in the modern market. There is also a risk of exploitation and cultural commodification if tribal knowledge is misused without proper safeguards. The scope for tribal entrepreneurship in Odisha is vast and transformative. With access to natural resources, traditional knowledge, government schemes, and digital platforms, tribal communities can evolve from passive recipients of welfare to active economic contributors. The success of millet cooperatives in Rayagada, forest-product ventures in Kandhamal, and eco-tourism in Daringbadi demonstrates that tribal entrepreneurship is not only possible—it is thriving. By investing in skill development, providing market access, and respecting tribal identities, Odisha can become a model for inclusive, sustainable, and culturally respectful entrepreneurship. Tribal entrepreneurs have the potential to lead the way toward a self-reliant and equitable future, rooted in tradition but equipped for modern challenges. Strengthening tribal cooperatives and SHGs with technical, financial, and marketing support, providing interest-free micro-credit and startup capital through tribal banks and NABARD, and developing entrepreneurship hubs in tribal districts for incubation, design, and packaging. Protecting tribal intellectual property rights through legal frameworks and involving local communities in planning and decision-making will ensure inclusive growth.

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