

## **From Forest to Future: Scaling Digital Ecofeminism in India's Tribal Economies**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the rising tide of tribal entrepreneurship in India, driven by digital innovation, youth leadership, and social investment. Generational poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited opportunities have long pushed the tribal youth to migrate in search of livelihoods. However, the COVID-19 pandemic first created situational poverty and then reversed this trend, prompting a large-scale return to villages. This return sparked a new wave of rural innovation, as youth brought back ideas, digital tools, and fresh perspectives. Across India, tribal entrepreneurs are now connecting forest produce and agriculture to markets.

Across India, tribal entrepreneurs are now connecting forest produce and agriculture through technology, forming self-help groups, empowering women, and building self-sustaining enterprises.<sup>i</sup> This article proposes a scope to find investors for social innovation for tribal entrepreneurs called Forest Post. Recognized with the 2011 outlook Responsible Tourism Award (Gold), WRI India's Land Accelerator Champion title, the Buddha Fellowship, and support from Kerala Startup Mission, Forest Post represents a replicable model of ecological and economic resilience. The article concludes with the hope of increased digital access as a lever for inclusive growth and ecological resilience.

### **Generational and Situational Poverty in Tribal India**

India has over 100 million Indigenous (tribal) families living in and around the forests of central, South, and North-East areas. Their unique knowledge systems, oral traditions, and ecological worldviews have preserved biodiversity and forest wealth for generations.<sup>ii</sup> These communities have always shared a unique relationship with nature and follow sustainable practices of livelihood. With religious practices of worshipping nature and land laws that give collective rights to communities, the tribal way of life is unique. However, these communities remain excluded from the benefits of formal development. According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate among tribal populations is just 59%, compared to the national average of 73%.<sup>iii</sup> This generational poverty, clubbed with ecological degradation, poor health infrastructure, and lack of employment, led tribal youth to migrate to cities. Many of them were trained at Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) for technical trades like masonry and mechanics. This form of wage migration, however, proved fragile. The onset of COVID-19 disrupted income

streams and intensified what can be termed *situational poverty*, prompting a mass return to villages.

### **Tribe-preneurship: A Grassroots Response**

When the youth returned to their villages, they brought along new foods, ways of dressing up, and music. They also brought a new wave of local entrepreneurship. Tribe-preneurship—grassroots tribal entrepreneurship rooted in indigenous identity—emerged as a response.<sup>iv</sup> These young entrepreneurs began leveraging their skills and exposure to build local enterprises using forest and agricultural produce. Tribal entrepreneurship aligns with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably No Poverty (1), Gender Equality (5), Decent Work (8), and Life on Land (15).<sup>v</sup>

Despite the promise, tribe-preneurship faces structural barriers: digital exclusion, market inaccessibility, platform bias, and lack of early-stage capital. An enabling ecosystem is needed to support this wave.

### **The Digital Shift: Enablers and Ecosystems**

Community, Government, and Market are the three pillars of building the wave of digital entrepreneurs in India.

Community-owned enterprises in handicrafts, forest produce, eco-tourism, and homestays are growing. WhatsApp orders, UPI payments, Instagram marketing, and app-based solutions are becoming common among tribal entrepreneurs. These efforts are formalized through LLPs, producer companies, and cooperatives.

At the national level, the Government of India's TRIFED<sup>vi</sup> (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India) has been promoting products of tribal artisans and expanding the market for tribal products globally. TRIFED provides a wide range of services like capacity building, total quality assurance, product enhancement, new product development, and adoption of advanced processing technologies. Certifications, packaging, branding, marketing, expanding the distribution channel, and information technology enablement are also part of the services provided. This is a leading way for decreasing dependencies on subsidies and towards a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem. Government programs like Digital India, Van Dhan Yojana,<sup>vii</sup> and Startup India are helping to reduce the digital divide.

Giridhan Mahila Producer Company, a tribal women-led farmers' and producers' collective, has emerged as a pioneer in digitally-enabled agricultural entrepreneurship. Through a partnership with Mahindra & Mahindra's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiative, the collective utilizes the MyOJApp—a mobile-based platform that facilitates tractor rentals, mirroring the Uber model for farm machinery. By leveraging this digital tool, Giridhan's women members have transformed into micro-entrepreneurs, renting out tractors to local farmers and generating income within their communities. This innovation exemplifies how

indigenous women's leadership and technology can converge to create scalable models of digital ecofeminism in rural India.

Digital tools are now central to tribal entrepreneurship.<sup>viii</sup> With increased mobile penetration, rural youth are adopting e-commerce (Amazon, Flipkart), social commerce (WhatsApp, Instagram), and fintech tools (UPI, QR codes).

### **Ecofeminism and Enterprise: The Case of Forest Post<sup>ix</sup>**

Forest Post, a women-led tribal enterprise in Kerala, exemplifies a pioneering ecofeminist model that blends indigenous knowledge, sustainability, and local governance. Forest Post was founded in 2021. Working with the Kadar, Muthuvar, and Malayar tribes, the initiative promotes livelihood generation through the value addition of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) such as wild lime, amla, honey, and Cycas.

Established in 2016 with support from GAGGA's People for Nature Fund, Forest Post has empowered tribal women through training in bamboo craft, tailoring, macramé, and food processing. It further strengthened its model by collaborating with Aadhimalai Pazhangudiyinar Producer Company, where women learned to produce natural skincare products using beeswax.

This community-led model—anchored in women's leadership, environmental stewardship, and decentralized enterprise—has gained national recognition. Forest Post was awarded the Outlook Responsible Tourism Award (Gold) in 2021, recognized as a WRI Land Accelerator Champion, and selected for the Buddha Fellowship. It has also received institutional support from UNDP India, the Kudumbasree Mission, and TRIFED.

Now formally registered as Dharaa Livelihood Initiative LLP, Forest Post markets its products through its own website as well as curated platforms like My Pahadi Dukaan and Host Store. However, despite growing visibility, scaling operations remains a challenge due to limited seed capital, inadequate logistics infrastructure, and weak linkages with larger, ethical markets.

### **Barriers to Scale: What Holds Tribepreneurs Back**

Despite the promise and visibility of initiatives like Forest Post, tribal entrepreneurs continue to face entrenched structural challenges. Digital exclusion persists among elders and non-literate artisans, limiting full participation on online platforms. Moreover, low-volume sellers often suffer from algorithmic bias on mainstream e-commerce sites, making it harder to gain traction or visibility.

The ecosystem is also hindered by a lack of investor readiness and the absence of incubation models specifically tailored to tribal socio-economic contexts. Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems—which serve as the foundation of many tribal enterprises—remain largely unprotected, making them vulnerable to exploitation or misappropriation.

To overcome these constraints, it is crucial to mainstream tribe-preneurship into national frameworks such as MSME development, ESG guidelines, and Startup India policies. Digital platforms must commit to algorithmic fairness, ensure culturally appropriate onboarding experiences in regional languages, and uphold the principle of community ownership of data to build trust and resilience in the tribal enterprise ecosystem.

### **Recommendations and Way Forward**

To foster scale, sustainability, and equity in tribal entrepreneurship, several strategies must be prioritized. First, the creation of flexible seed funding mechanisms tailored for tribal women and youth innovators is essential to kickstart and sustain early-stage enterprises. Second, regional enterprise hubs led by and for women should be developed to serve as centres for mentorship, digital training, and peer support.

Third, efforts to ensure platform equity must include fair pricing models, inclusive marketing, and transparency in algorithmic decision-making. Fourth, public-private partnerships, particularly leveraging CSR initiatives like Mahindra's MyOJApp, should be expanded to connect rural innovation with tech-enabled distribution systems. Finally, investment in digital commons infrastructure—including community-owned e-commerce platforms and frameworks for indigenous data sovereignty—can safeguard autonomy and reinforce the cultural and ecological values underpinning these enterprises.

### **Future of Tribal Innovation**

Digital tribal entrepreneurship is not simply a response to adversity—it is a transformative movement redefining what rural innovation can look like in India. Models like Forest Post demonstrate that indigenous knowledge, ecological justice, and women's leadership can be woven into regenerative economic frameworks.

To truly support tribal futures, stakeholders must transition from extractive models of engagement to collaborative, regenerative ecosystems. This includes not only funding and mentoring tribal products but investing in the platforms, capacities, and protections that enable those products to thrive.

Now is the time to co-create futures that are not only equitable and digital but deeply rooted in the forests, wisdom, and resilience of India's tribal communities.

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