



A study on the emerging entrepreneur in indigenous start-ups among Tai-Khamti women of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Women's entrepreneurship in tribal societies represents both an economic necessity and a transformative force for social change. This study examines the entrepreneurial initiatives of Tai-Khamti women in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh, India, situating their participation within the broader discourse on indigenous economies and gendered labour. Drawing on mixed-methods research, including field observations and case studies, the findings reveal that women are increasingly asserting agency through hut-based marketing, handicrafts, and agro-linked enterprises. These ventures supplement household income, preserve cultural heritage, and strengthen community resilience despite patriarchal norms, financial constraints, and limited access to institutional credit. Younger generations demonstrate greater confidence in assuming leadership roles, reflecting a generational shift in entrepreneurial aspirations. Government schemes such as the Deen Dayal Swavalamban Yojana and the New Industrial Policy of Arunachal Pradesh 2020 provide crucial support, yet gaps remain in awareness and accessibility. The study underscores the intersection of tradition and modernity, showing how women balance domestic responsibilities with entrepreneurial ambitions. It concludes that culturally sensitive policy interventions are essential to recognise women as pivotal stakeholders in tribal entrepreneurship and inclusive development.

Keywords: Gendered labour, indigenous entrepreneurship, local market participation, tai-khamti women, tribal economy

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical driver of socio-economic development worldwide, contributing significantly to innovation, employment generation, and poverty reduction. Despite persistent barriers, including limited access to finance, gendered social norms, and institutional constraints, women entrepreneurs are increasingly recognised as agents of sustainable development. Evidence suggests that women-led enterprises not only enhance economic growth but also promote inclusive and resilient communities in emerging economies (Hossain *et al.*, 2025) [26]. Nevertheless, women's entrepreneurship remains underrepresented in global economic discourse, despite its measurable impact on human development and globalisation indices (Sajjad *et al.*, 2020) [13].

In the Indian context, women entrepreneurs are increasingly acknowledged as key contributors to sustainable growth and gender equality, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings. Their enterprises intersect with social transformation, community resilience, and intergenerational well-being, moving beyond mere income generation (Bina & Muthiah, 2025) [24]. Women's entrepreneurship in rural India has also been shown to advance economic independence and strengthen gender equality, aligning closely with national development goals (Thilagavathi & Iyna, 2025) [29]. Complementing these scholarly insights, government initiatives such as Startup India and Stand-Up India have sought to institutionalise support for women-led enterprises, embedding gender inclusivity within the broader framework of national economic planning.

Within this national narrative, the Northeast region of India presents a distinctive socio-cultural landscape in which tribal women play a crucial role in agrarian economies and local markets. Although often overlooked in mainstream studies, emerging scholarship highlights the resilience and

innovation of women entrepreneurs in this region. Women in Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, are overcoming socio-cultural and financial barriers to establish businesses in handicrafts, tourism, and agro-based industries (Noshi, 2023) [19]. Similarly, women entrepreneurs in districts such as Papumpare and East Siang are motivated by financial independence but constrained by limited access to credit and inadequate awareness of government schemes (Zirido & Thappa, 2025) [30]. These findings underscore both the opportunities and challenges faced by women in the region, pointing to the need for localised, culturally sensitive interventions.

Extending this discussion to the state level, Arunachal Pradesh often referred to as the Land of the Rising Sun represents a critical case for examining the intersection of ethnolinguistic diversity, geography, and socio-economic participation. Spanning approximately 83,743 square kilometres, the state had a population of around 1.3 million according to the 2011 Census. Renowned for its ethnolinguistic diversity, Arunachal Pradesh is home to numerous tribes and sub-tribes whose distinct cultural identities have evolved through centuries of geographical isolation and varied topography. The state shares international borders with Bhutan, China, and Myanmar, and interstate boundaries with Assam and Nagaland.

Historically, the region remained isolated to preserve indigenous cultures, gaining strategic attention following the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. Administrative restructuring began with British incursions after 1826 and was formalised through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, which introduced the Inner Line Permit system. The creation of the North East Frontier Tract in 1914 further delineated tribal hill areas from the plains of Assam, laying the groundwork for the modern territorial framework. Arunachal Pradesh was designated a Union Territory in 1972 and attained full statehood in 1987. Despite these

constitutional developments, traditional governance systems, particularly village councils operating under customary law, continue to play a vital role in managing socio-political and developmental affairs (Chiring, 2024) [22].

Socio-Cultural Profile of the Tai-Khamti Community

The Tai Khamtis represent one of the most culturally and historically significant indigenous communities of Northeast India, primarily concentrated in the Namsai and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, with a smaller demographic presence in parts of Assam. As members of the broader Tai ethnolinguistic family, the Tai Khamtis share deep ancestral and cultural ties with the Shan people of Southeast Asia, also known as Tai Long or Tai Yai, whose origins trace back to early Tai migrations in the 6th century. The term "Khamti" itself is derived from the Tai words *Kham* (gold) and *Ti* (region or place), collectively interpreted as "land of gold," though alternative interpretations suggest meanings such as "to adhere to a place or country." Historical accounts document the migration of the Tai Khamtis from the Irrawaddy valley of Myanmar to India during the 18th century, where they established their first kingdom in Sadiya, Assam. Subsequent settlements emerged in regions such as Narayanpur and Tinsukia, with several villages continuing to preserve the community's linguistic and cultural heritage (Phukan, 2019) [6]. Despite geographical separation from other Tai groups, the Tai Khamtis have maintained strong cultural continuity through language, religious practices, and social customs. Today, they are officially recognised as one of the 25 major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, contributing to the region's ethnocultural diversity (Tripathy *et al.*, 2022) [17].

Theravada Buddhism and Tai-Khamti Community

Theravada Buddhism, often referred to as the "Doctrine of the Elders," represents the oldest surviving school of Buddhist thought, emphasising the preservation of tradition through monastic authority and the Pali Canon. Originating in India during the Buddha's lifetime, it spread across Southeast Asia and became a defining spiritual framework for Tai ethnic groups, including the Tai-Khamti of Arunachal Pradesh (Namchoom & Lalhmingpuii, 2016) [4]. The Tai-Khamti community is among the largest Theravada Buddhist groups in Northeast India, and their religious practices are inseparable from their social and cultural life. Buddhist teachings shape moral conduct, family structures, and community rituals, with the Three Jewels, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, serving as guiding principles for daily living. Festivals such as Sangken (the water festival) and rituals like Poi Kathin reinforce collective identity and social solidarity, while monastic institutions act as centres of education, dispute resolution, and cultural preservation (Mantche, 2019) [7].

Moreover, Theravada Buddhism coexists with elements of animistic traditions, creating a syncretic religious worldview that influences agricultural practices, healing rituals, and seasonal ceremonies. This integration highlights the adaptability of Buddhist values within indigenous contexts, allowing the Tai-Khamti to sustain both spiritual devotion and socio-economic resilience (Namchoom & Lalhmingpuii, 2016) [4].

In social life, Buddhist ethics emphasise compassion, non-violence, and community harmony, which translate into

cooperative labour systems, respect for elders, and gendered roles within household and market participation. Monasteries and monks hold authority not only in spiritual matters but also in guiding social norms, thereby reinforcing the interconnectedness of religion and everyday life.

Women's Participation in the Tai-Khamti Agrarian Economy

Like many tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh, the Tai-Khamti are predominantly an agrarian society, with agriculture serving as the primary source of livelihood. Tea cultivation has also emerged as a supplementary economic activity among several households. Women in Tai-Khamti society contribute equally to the family economy along with their male counterparts, not only through agricultural labour but increasingly through entrepreneurial ventures. In recent years, their economic participation has expanded beyond traditional roles, with many women actively engaged in small-scale businesses such as vegetable vending, hut-based marketing, and the sale of handwoven textiles, homemade pickles, and similar other traditional items. Renowned for their weaving skills, Tai-Khamti women produce intricately crafted cloths that hold both cultural and commercial value. These economic activities are especially prevalent among women from rural villages, reflecting a dynamic shift toward localised market engagement and a growing assertion of economic agency within the community.

Theoretical Foundations of Entrepreneurship

The term entrepreneurship derives from the French word *entreprendre*, meaning "to undertake," and broadly refers to the pursuit of opportunities through innovation and enterprise creation (Burch, 1986) [2]. Richard Cantillon first introduced the concept in economic discourse, defining the entrepreneur as one who generates profit by navigating uncertainty. Schumpeter (1961) [1] later conceptualised the entrepreneur as a transformative agent who mobilises physical, natural, and human resources to create new products and drive economic change. While English classical economists emphasised capital creation, thinkers like Jeremy Bentham viewed entrepreneurs as drivers of economic progress. German scholars such as von Thünen and von Mangoldt highlighted the inherent risks involved in entrepreneurial activity. Expanding on these foundations, Bird (1981) and Gartner & Shane (1995) framed entrepreneurship as a process involving organisational formation, market identification, product development, and the acquisition of essential skills and knowledge.

Tribal Livelihoods and the Shift Toward Entrepreneurship

Tribal communities in India represent a distinct socio-cultural paradigm, characterised by nature-based subsistence economies and decentralised social structures. Their livelihoods are deeply intertwined with ecological systems such as forests, rivers, mountains, and wildlife through which they derive food, fodder, and fuel. These communities maintain largely self-sufficient economies rooted in communal values, oral traditions, and spiritual relationships with the natural world. Traditionally, tribal societies uphold egalitarian principles, with property rights held collectively and economic activities guided by indigenous knowledge systems. Their expertise in forest produce harvesting, land cultivation, fishing, and nature

worship reflects centuries of environmental stewardship and ecological harmony. However, processes of cultural diffusion, assimilation, and acculturation have begun to reshape tribal hinterlands. External pressures such as climate change, declining access to natural resources, and the erosion of customary property rights have disrupted traditional livelihoods. In response, a gradual transition toward entrepreneurship is emerging, as tribal communities adapt to socio-economic transformations by mobilising local knowledge and resources to create sustainable, market-oriented enterprises (Dash *et al.*, 2025) [25].

Entrepreneurship in Arunachal Pradesh

In Arunachal Pradesh, where nearly 79 per cent of the population resides in rural and socio-economically marginalised areas, communities face persistent livelihood challenges due to heavy dependence on natural resources. Rapid socio-economic transitions have disrupted traditional subsistence systems, intensifying concerns around housing, healthcare, and education. Amid these pressures, a gradual rise in grassroots entrepreneurship has emerged across rural sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, food processing, tourism, microfinance, and handicrafts. Despite limited institutional support, local entrepreneurs are mobilising indigenous resources to build sustainable enterprises that generate employment and address community needs (Linggi, 2021) [15]. Start-ups, particularly those integrating innovation with indigenous knowledge, are increasingly recognised as strategic tools for addressing tribal socio-economic disparities. They offer pathways to reduce inequality, enhance livelihoods, and improve overall quality of life (Majhi *et al.*, 2025) [27].

Policy Interventions for Women-Led Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship serves as a dynamic platform for innovation, skill expression, and socio-economic advancement. Recognising its transformative potential, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh has prioritised skill development and introduced targeted interventions to promote entrepreneurial growth, particularly among women. A suite of policy measures and financial schemes has been implemented to enhance inclusivity and stimulate enterprise development across the state. Foremost among these is the New Industrial Policy of Arunachal Pradesh 2020, which aims to cultivate an investment-friendly ecosystem conducive to industrial expansion in private, cooperative, and joint venture sectors. The policy emphasises innovation, promotes enterprises rooted in local resources, and extends dedicated support to the handloom and handicraft sectors. Importantly, it incorporates special incentives for women entrepreneurs, thereby encouraging gender-equitable participation in the industrial landscape. Complementing this is the Chief Minister's Soft Loan Scheme, which provides financial assistance to skilled individuals holding National Council for Vocational Training (NCVT) certification. The scheme offers subsidies of up to ₹5 lakh for individual ventures and ₹10 lakh for joint ventures, thereby facilitating self-employment and enterprise creation among trained youth. Additionally, the Deen Dayal Swavalamban Yojana (DDSY) plays a pivotal role in empowering unemployed youth through access to low-cost capital. The scheme includes a 30% back-ended capital investment subsidy, project loans ranging from ₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore (excluding land and building costs), and an annual

5% interest subvention exclusively for women entrepreneurs, thereby incentivising female-led business initiatives and reducing financial barriers to entry (Noshi, 2023) [19].

These initiatives collectively reflect the state's commitment to inclusive development and underscore the strategic importance of women's entrepreneurship in driving regional economic resilience.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are centred on understanding the economic roles and experiences of women within the Tai-Khamti tribe in Namsai District. It aims to examine the primary livelihood activities these women engage in, shedding light on their contributions to household and community sustenance. The research further seeks to analyse the extent and nature of their involvement in informal and small-scale economic enterprises, such as hut marketing and local trade, which often operate outside formal economic structures. Additionally, it explores the socio-cultural factors that shape and influence women's economic participation, including traditional norms, community expectations, and gender roles. Finally, the study attempts to identify the challenges and opportunities that Tai-Khamti women encounter as they strive to expand their economic roles beyond conventional boundaries, offering insight into pathways for empowerment and inclusive development.

Research problem

Despite the growing recognition of women's roles in tribal economies, the economic contributions of Tai-Khamti women in Namsai District remain underexplored in academic literature and policy discourse. While these women actively participate in agriculture, tea cultivation, traditional weaving, and informal market activities such as hut marketing and local trade, their efforts are often overlooked or undervalued in formal economic assessments. The lack of systematic documentation and analysis of their economic engagement has led to gaps in understanding the gendered dimensions of tribal livelihoods and the potential for women-led development in the region. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the nature, scope, and impact of Tai-Khamti women's economic activities, and by identifying the socio-cultural and structural factors that influence their participation and agency within the local economy.

Significance of the study

This study holds critical significance in understanding the evolving role of women within the Tai-Khamti tribe, particularly in the context of local economic development in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh. By examining the contributions of women to agrarian livelihoods, traditional crafts, and informal market systems, the research highlights the intersection of gender, culture, and economy in a tribal setting. It provides empirical insights into how Tai-Khamti women sustain household economies through agricultural labor, weaving, and small-scale entrepreneurship, including hut marketing and local trade of indigenous goods. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on their economic empowerment and the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems. Furthermore, the study offers valuable inputs for policymakers, development practitioners, and

local governance bodies aiming to design inclusive and culturally sensitive interventions that strengthen women's participation in the regional economy. By documenting these contributions, the research also helps preserve and promote the socio-cultural heritage of the Tai-Khamti community in the face of modernisation and shifting economic landscapes.

Literature Review

This section reviews scholarly contributions across five thematic domains relevant to the entrepreneurial participation of Tai-Khamti women in Namsai District: (1) women entrepreneurship in Arunachal Pradesh, (2) tribal livelihoods and innovation, (3) Tai-Khamti cultural identity, (4) gendered property norms, and (5) indigenous knowledge systems. These themes provide the conceptual and empirical foundation for the present study.

1. Women Entrepreneurship in Arunachal Pradesh

Noshi (2023) ^[19] highlights the emergence of women-led MSMEs in Arunachal Pradesh, despite socio-cultural and financial barriers. Government schemes such as the New Industrial Policy 2020 and Deen Dayal Swavalamban Yojana have facilitated entry into handicrafts, tourism, and agro-based sectors. Zirido and Thappa (2025) ^[30] find that most women entrepreneurs operate in textiles, food services, and beauty, often motivated by financial independence but constrained by limited access to credit and awareness. Linggi (2021) ^[15] emphasises the transformative role of local entrepreneurs in rural economies and calls for institutional support and grassroots training.

2. Tribal Livelihoods and Innovation

Naik and Panda (2023) ^[20] examine how innovation empowers tribal communities in Odisha, despite infrastructural challenges. Dash *et al.* (2025) ^[25] explore digitalisation as a tool for expanding tribal market access, citing initiatives like TRIFED and TRIBES India, while cautioning against cultural commodification. Yomso (2020) ^[14] reveals how neoliberal reforms have reshaped tribal women's livelihoods, leading to reduced agricultural participation and increased gendered disparities in non-farm employment.

3. Tai-Khamti Cultural Identity and Migration

Tripathy and Raha (2018) ^[5] and Phukan (2019) ^[6] trace the Tai-Khamti migration from Burma to Namsai, emphasising linguistic heritage and Theravada Buddhist traditions. Baruah (2020) ^[9] and Mantche (2020) ^[11] explore the role of Buddhism in shaping identity and social customs, while Tripathy *et al.* (2022) ^[17] link Tai-Khamti practices to Shan communities in Thailand, highlighting transnational cultural continuity.

4. Gender Norms and Property Rights

Gammeng (2022) ^[18] investigates patriarchal inheritance systems in tribal societies, showing that women are largely excluded from ownership of immovable property. Sons inherit land and houses, while daughters receive movable assets during marriage. Though modernity and education are challenging these norms, legal reforms remain essential for gender-equitable property rights.

5. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Social Development

Yamang and Singh (2021) ^[16] document how Apatani tribal women sustain biodiversity and community resilience

through indigenous ecological practices. Paul and Deb (2023) ^[21] examine maternal and child healthcare among Tai-Khamti women, revealing barriers such as early marriage, poor access to antenatal care, and limited exposure to contraception. ASHA workers play a key role in bridging these gaps.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature offers rich insights into tribal entrepreneurship, cultural identity, and gendered development across Northeast India. However, there is a distinct lack of focused research on the economic roles of Tai-Khamti women, particularly their engagement in informal trade, hut marketing, and small-scale enterprises within Namsai District. While broader studies address tribal livelihoods and gender dynamics, they often overlook the intersection of cultural identity and economic agency specific to Tai-Khamti women. This study addresses that gap by critically examining their entrepreneurial initiatives, the socio-cultural factors shaping their market involvement, and the opportunities for expanding their roles in a rapidly modernising economy.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the entrepreneurial initiatives of Tai-Khamti women in Namsai district, Arunachal Pradesh. The qualitative component delves into the lived experiences, cultural influences, and gendered labor roles of these women, while the quantitative aspect provides measurable insights into their socio-economic participation and market engagement. Conducted in a region predominantly inhabited by the Tai-Khamti tribe, the research draws on the district's vibrant local markets and rich cultural identity to examine how indigenous women navigate traditional responsibilities alongside economic activities, offering a nuanced understanding of their evolving roles in local development.

Profile of the study area

For the present study, the local market participation within Namsai district has been taken into consideration, with a specific focus on women from the Tai-Khamti community. Their engagement in small-scale trade, hut-based marketing, weaving, and other entrepreneurial initiatives forms the core of the research, offering insights into how indigenous women contribute to household sustenance and community-level economic development.

Established in 2014 after its separation from Lohit district, Namsai is a key administrative unit in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. The district comprises six administrative circles: Lekang, Namsai, Jaipur, Piyong, Lathao, and Chongkham, with Namsai town serving as the headquarters. It is predominantly inhabited by the Tai-Khamti and Singpho tribes, alongside other communities such as the Adi, Galo, Mishing, Adivasis, Deories, Kacharies, and Morans. The district reflects a rich tapestry of religious practices, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and indigenous faiths.

As per the 2011 Census, Namsai has a population of 95,950, with 14.85 per cent residing in urban areas and 85.15 per cent in rural regions. The district's decadal growth rate of 16.44 per cent is notably lower than the state average of 65.38 per cent. This confluence of ethnicities and traditions contributes to Namsai's vibrant and distinctive cultural identity (District Administration Namsai, n.d.).

Case Study

Resilience in Weaving-Based Entrepreneurship

A 45-year-old Tai-Khamti woman from Namsai district exemplifies the challenges and opportunities of indigenous entrepreneurship. Initially constrained by patriarchal norms that discouraged women from business activities, she faced financial hardship while supporting her children's education. Drawing on traditional weaving skills, she established a small enterprise producing and selling handwoven cloths.

Challenges: Limited access to start-up capital, dual burden of household responsibilities, and social criticism from community members.

Interventions: Participation in government training programmes and financial support through schemes such as the Deen Dayal Swavalamban Yojana enabled her to expand production.

Outcomes: The enterprise contributed significantly to household income, enhanced her social recognition, and positioned her as a role model for younger women.

Implications: This case highlights the intersection of cultural heritage and economic empowerment, demonstrating how indigenous women leverage traditional skills to overcome structural barriers.

Results and Discussion

Women's Roles in Agriculture, Craft, Trade, and Cultural Activities

Findings reveal that women are equally contributing in agricultural production, local trade, and cultural activities, while also playing a vital role in sustaining traditional crafts. Their expertise in weaving and handicrafts is not only an economic resource but also a cultural legacy, as women actively pass down craft knowledge to younger generations.

Intersection of Traditional Responsibilities and Economic Participation

Traditionally, tribal society has been patriarchal in nature, with women bound to follow certain societal norms that confined them to domestic and culturally prescribed roles. They were expected to behave in a "crafted manner" and avoid activities outside their comfort zone. However, contemporary field observations show a significant shift: women are now equally engaging in both societal and economic work alongside their male counterparts, without facing overt discrimination. This intersection demonstrates how traditional responsibilities such as household management and ritual participation are increasingly balanced with active involvement in agriculture, trade, and community decision-making.

Intra-Tribal Variations and Generational Shifts

Across different intra-tribal contexts, the pace and extent of women's participation show clear variations. Older generations often recall a time when patriarchal norms were more rigid, limiting women's roles to narrowly defined responsibilities within the household and community rituals. In contrast, younger women today are visibly more confident and assertive, stepping into spaces of economic activity and social leadership that were once reserved for men. This generational shift is striking: women are not only

active in agriculture and trade but are also breaking traditional boundaries by taking up leadership positions in cultural associations and community initiatives.

Enriching Analysis with Field Observations

Field observations show that women are not just working side by side with men in agriculture but are also central to keeping traditional crafts alive. During one weaving session, a mother gently guided her daughter's hands across the loom, explaining the meaning behind each pattern. Moments like this reveal how women's work goes beyond economic contribution, it carries the weight of cultural memory and identity, making them both providers and guardians of heritage.

Conclusion

The study highlights that women in Namsai and among the Tai-Khamti tribe are not only equal contributors in agriculture, trade, and cultural activities but also vital custodians of traditional crafts, ensuring the transmission of weaving and handicraft knowledge to future generations. While patriarchal norms historically confined women to domestic and ritual roles, contemporary observations reveal a significant transformation: women now balance traditional responsibilities with active participation in economic and social spheres, increasingly asserting themselves in leadership positions and community initiatives.

These findings carry important implications for policy and tribal development. Recognizing women's dual role as economic actors and cultural bearers underscores the need for gender-sensitive policies that support women's access to resources, training, and leadership opportunities. Strengthening women's participation in decision-making processes can foster greater equity and enhance the sustainability of tribal development initiatives. Moreover, integrating women's craft and cultural contributions into broader economic planning can help preserve heritage while generating livelihood opportunities.

Future research should explore comparative perspectives across different tribes in Arunachal Pradesh to examine variations in women's roles and the pace of generational change. Longitudinal studies could also track how evolving gender dynamics influence community resilience, cultural continuity, and economic development. Additionally, investigating the intersection of education, entrepreneurship, and cultural preservation may provide deeper insights into how women's empowerment can shape the trajectory of tribal societies in the region.

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