

Empowering the Margins: Evaluating the Contributions of NGOs and Self-Help Groups in Advancing Tribal Socio-Economic Development in Rajasthan

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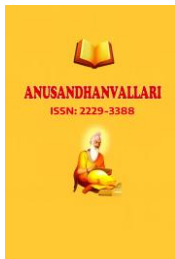
Abstract

India is home to a large and diverse indigenous population, officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes, who have historically experienced various forms of socio-economic marginalization. This paper focuses on examining the important role played by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in supporting the development of these communities in the tribal regions of Rajasthan. It analyses the different approaches and strategies adopted by NGOs to respond to the specific challenges faced by tribal populations, while also assessing the outcomes of their interventions. This article examines the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in shaping socio-economic development in the tribal regions of Rajasthan. These areas have long remained at the periphery of mainstream development and continue to face multiple, overlapping challenges. Widespread poverty, limited access to education and healthcare services, inadequate infrastructure, and a continued reliance on traditional agriculture and forest-based livelihoods have constrained opportunities for growth. Such structural limitations have made it difficult for tribal communities to fully participate in broader socio-economic processes, thereby reinforcing cycles of marginalisation over time. Evidence from various initiatives across Rajasthan suggests that such interventions have had tangible outcomes. Programmes related to education, health awareness, and capacity-building have not only improved basic living conditions but have also expanded the range of opportunities available to tribal populations. A particularly significant aspect of this process has been the involvement of women through Self-Help Groups. By bringing women together into collective platforms, SHGs have encouraged savings and fostered mutual support. More importantly, these groups have created spaces where women can actively participate in decision-making processes, both within the household and in the wider community. In light of these observations, the article emphasizes the need for stronger institutional support, improved coordination between government agencies and civil society organizations, and a continued focus on sustainable and inclusive development strategies. With consistent support and a more enabling policy environment, NGOs and SHGs can further strengthen their role as catalysts of change, contributing meaningfully to the long-term development of Rajasthan's tribal communities.

Keywords: institutional, agencies, government, opportunities

Introduction:

India's tribal population, accounting for roughly 8.6% of the country's total population, reflects a remarkable diversity of cultures, languages, and traditions that form an integral part of the nation's heritage. Despite this cultural richness, tribal communities have historically remained on the margins of development and continue to face multiple socio-economic challenges, including poverty, low literacy levels, limited access to healthcare, and forms of social exclusion. Although successive government policies and development programmes have sought to address these issues, many of these challenges continue to persist, particularly in remote and underserved regions.



The social and economic development of tribal regions in Rajasthan has historically been constrained by a combination of geographical isolation, limited access to essential resources, and persistent socio-economic marginalization. Tribal communities, which constitute a significant proportion of the state's population, reflect a rich cultural diversity, yet continue to face structural disadvantages that restrict their development prospects. For generations, livelihoods in these areas have largely depended on agriculture, forest produce, and traditional crafts. However, inadequate infrastructure, low levels of education, and poor connectivity to markets have limited the growth potential of these activities, often resulting in continued social and economic vulnerability and cycles of poverty.

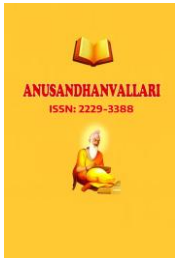
In recent years, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have begun to play a more visible and constructive role in addressing these challenges. Their interventions tend to focus on practical, community-oriented solutions that respond to local needs. Through programmes related to healthcare, education, skill development, and women's empowerment, NGOs have contributed to building a stronger foundation for sustainable development. Their grassroots approach allows for flexibility and encourages participation from within the community itself, which often leads to more context-specific and accepted outcomes. In several instances, NGOs have promoted alternative livelihood options such as handicrafts, small-scale enterprises, and eco-tourism, while also supporting improvements in agricultural practices by introducing better techniques, tools, and inputs. Such efforts gradually enhance both the capabilities of individuals and the collective strength of communities, moving them closer to self-reliance.

Alongside NGOs, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as an equally important mechanism for promoting financial inclusion and collective action within tribal societies. Typically formed by women, these small, community-based groups function as platforms for savings, credit access, and mutual support. In areas where formal banking systems remain distant or inaccessible, SHGs provide an alternative means for managing finances and supporting local entrepreneurship. By encouraging regular savings and facilitating small loans, these groups help members invest in income-generating activities and reduce their dependence on informal sources of credit. Over time, participation in SHGs has also contributed to improved financial awareness and decision-making capacity among members.

The influence of SHGs extends beyond economic benefits. Their presence has had a noticeable impact on the social position of women within tribal communities. Women associated with SHGs often gain greater confidence, participate more actively in household and community decisions, and begin to take on leadership roles. In many cases, SHGs also serve as entry points for skill development initiatives, with members engaging in training programmes supported by NGOs or government agencies. This combination of financial and social empowerment has made SHGs a significant force for change at the grassroots level.

Together, NGOs and SHGs help address gaps that formal state mechanisms sometimes struggle to fill, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Administrative limitations and logistical challenges have often reduced the effectiveness of government interventions in such regions. In this context, collaboration between civil society organizations and public institutions becomes crucial, as it enhances the delivery and accessibility of welfare programmes. By creating opportunities for income generation and strengthening community capacities, these organizations contribute not only to immediate socio-economic improvement but also to long-term resilience against poverty and exploitation.

The combined efforts of NGOs and SHGs highlight the importance of locally grounded, participatory approaches to development. Their work demonstrates that sustainable progress is more likely when communities are actively involved in shaping their own pathways. As their reach continues to expand, these institutions hold considerable potential to influence the broader development trajectory of tribal regions in Rajasthan. With consistent support



and a conducive policy environment, they can play an even more meaningful role in fostering inclusive growth and strengthening the socio-economic fabric of these communities.

An Overview of tribal areas in Rajasthan:

Tribal communities constitute about 13.5% of Rajasthan's population (2011 Census), with a high concentration in southern districts like Banswara, Dungarpur, Pratapgarh, and Udaipur. The main tribes, including Bhils and Minas, primarily reside in these districts under Schedule V areas. These regions are known for distinct cultural traditions, agricultural livelihoods, and significant history of resistance, often facing development challenges despite government interventions.

Key Tribal Regions and Distribution

Southern Rajasthan: The core tribal belt includes Banswara, Dungarpur, Pratapgarh, and parts of Udaipur, Sirohi, Pali, and Chittorgarh.

Concentration: Nearly two-thirds of the total tribal population is concentrated in Udaipur, Banswara, Dungarpur, Jaipur, and Sawai Madhopur districts.

Scheduled Areas: Under Schedule V of the Indian Constitution, specific regions (Banswara, Dungarpur, Pratapgarh as whole, and parts of other districts) are designated for focused development.

Major Tribes in Rajasthan

Major ST communities according to the census 2011

1. Mina

2. Bhil, Bhil Garasia, Dholi Bhil, Dungri Bhil, Dungri Garasia, Mewasi Bhil, Rawal Bhil, Tadvi Bhil, Bhagalia, Bhilala, Pawra, Vasava, Vasave. (*source – Ministry of tribal affairs*)

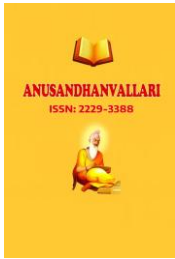
Bhils: The largest and oldest tribe, primarily in the Banswara area, known for their archery skills and historical significance.

Minas (Meena): The second largest tribe, dominating eastern parts of Rajasthan and the Shekhawati region.

Garasias: Inhabiting hilly areas, particularly in Sirohi and Pali districts.

Sahariyas: A "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group" (PVTG) found mostly in the Baran district.

Others: Gadiya Lohars (nomadic blacksmiths), Damor, and Meo.



The Socio-Economic Landscape of Tribal Areas in Rajasthan and the role of NGOs and SHGs in Economic development

Demographic and socio-economic indicators of Tribal areas in Rajasthan(Source – Ministry of Tribal affairs)

State	Population (ST)	Literacy Rate	
		Male	Female
Rajasthan	13.5%	67.6%	37.3%

Tribal communities in Rajasthan, including the Bhil, Meena, Sahariya, and Gharasia, primarily reside in the southern districts such as Dungarpur, Banswara, and Udaipur. While recent data shows the tribal literacy rate has improved to approximately 71.6%, significant gaps remain in infrastructure and stable income sources.

Socio-Economic Landscape

Income Dependence: Minor Forest Produce (MFP) accounts for 40–60% of annual income for many tribal households. Agriculture remains the primary occupation for nearly 90% of the tribal population in districts like Dungarpur, but it typically only fulfills consumption needs for about three months per year.

Marginalisation: Backward tribal groups like the Sahariya face high rates of malnutrition and poverty, with many households earning less than ₹10,000 per month.

Issues: Challenges include low literacy rates, economic disparity, and geographical isolation, which are targeted through specific TSP (Tribal Sub-Plan) areas, particularly in southern districts like Banswara and Dungarpur.

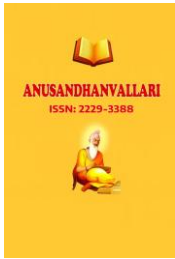
Infrastructure & Housing: Approximately 66% of certain nomadic tribal households live in temporary huts, and only about 34% reside in pucca (permanent) houses.

In 2024, NGOs and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) continue to serve as the primary drivers of socio-economic transformation in Rajasthan's tribal regions, specifically in the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) areas like Udaipur, Dungarpur, and Banswara. They act as vital intermediaries, bridging the gap between remote tribal communities and formal government systems.

Contributions of NGOs and Self-Help Groups in Tribal Socio-Economic Development in Rajasthan

1. Educational Interventions and Capacity Building

Education in tribal regions of Rajasthan continues to face structural challenges such as low enrolment, high dropout rates, and limited institutional reach. NGOs have attempted to address these gaps through localized and flexible approaches. Organizations such as Seva Mandir have established non-formal education centres like *Shiksha Kendras*, particularly in remote tribal hamlets. These centres not only provide basic literacy and numeracy but also encourage community engagement in education. At the same time, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), especially those led by women, contribute by promoting school attendance, supporting learning environments, and spreading awareness about the value of education. Skill-based training initiatives led by organizations such as Aajeevika Bureau further enhance employability among tribal youth, bridging the gap between education and livelihood opportunities.



2. Healthcare Access and Community Well-being

Healthcare access remains uneven in tribal Rajasthan due to geographical remoteness and infrastructural limitations. NGOs have responded by creating alternative service delivery mechanisms, including mobile health clinics, village health workers, and periodic health camps. These interventions have improved outreach and helped address issues such as maternal and child health. SHGs complement these efforts by acting as local networks for spreading awareness about nutrition, sanitation, and preventive healthcare. Women in SHGs often play an active role in mobilizing participation in health programmes and ensuring that essential information reaches households. Additionally, organizations like Jan Chetna Sansthan have combined healthcare initiatives with educational and rights-based advocacy, thereby strengthening overall community well-being.

3. Livelihood Diversification and Economic Empowerment

Livelihood insecurity remains a key concern in tribal areas, where dependence on agriculture and forest resources often leads to unstable incomes. In this context, SHGs have emerged as important grassroots institutions promoting livelihood diversification. Beyond traditional agriculture, SHG members are increasingly engaging in activities such as poultry farming, dairy production, goat rearing, and handicrafts.

A notable example is the Manaksar SHG in Hanumangarh district, where women have transitioned from household-based roles to commercial stitching activities, earning approximately ₹5,000–₹6,000 per month per member.

NGOs support such transitions by providing training, technical inputs, and market access. Organizations like BAIF Development Research Foundation have introduced integrated farming systems and natural resource management practices that enhance agricultural productivity and sustainability.

Similarly, NGOs such as VAAGDHARA and Rajasthan Bal Kalyan Samiti focus on capacity building through the training of community-based resource persons like *Krishi Sakhis* (agriculture facilitators) and *Pashu Sakhis* (livestock facilitators). These locally trained cadres ensure that technical knowledge is available within the community itself, reducing dependency on external agencies.

Breakdown of primary income sources in tribal communities, illustrating the proportion from agriculture, forestry, labour, and SHG/NGO-supported activities.

Agriculture: 40%

Forestry: 20%

Labor/Migration: 30%

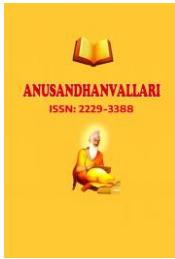
SHG/NGO-supported Activities: 10%

Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, PRADAN Annual Report, NABARD Data Economic Impact of SHG and NGO.

4. Financial Inclusion and Market Linkages

Access to financial resources has been significantly improved through SHG-based models of savings and credit. SHGs provide a platform for regular savings, internal lending, and microfinance, thereby reducing reliance on informal moneylenders. This financial inclusion has enabled tribal households to invest in small enterprises and stabilize their incomes. NGOs play a complementary role by facilitating market linkages and promoting value addition.

For instance, through initiatives like Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs), tribal communities are encouraged to move beyond primary collection of forest produce towards processing and value addition. These centres have



enabled the development of a wide range of products, improving income potential and reducing seasonal migration. Rajasthan, in recent years, has seen the establishment of hundreds of such centres, creating localized employment opportunities and strengthening the rural economy.

PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) and Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), along with grassroots Self-Help Groups (SHGs), have played a transformative role in improving socio-economic conditions in tribal districts such as Udaipur, Banswara, and Dungarpur. Their combined approach emphasizes institution-building, women's empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods, rooted in local participation and community ownership.

Both PRADAN and SEWA have actively promoted SHG formation as a foundation for financial inclusion. Through regular savings, internal lending, and bank linkages under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, SHGs enable tribal women to access formal financial systems. PRADAN-supported SHGs in Udaipur and Dungarpur have used credit for goat rearing and small enterprises, while SEWA has facilitated access to microfinance and financial services through its cooperative model.

5. Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development

The participation of women in SHGs has brought about significant changes in social dynamics within tribal communities. SHGs provide a collective platform where women can engage in financial activities, share experiences, and support one another. Over time, this participation has translated into increased confidence, greater decision-making power within households, and enhanced visibility in public spaces.

Many women associated with SHGs have moved into leadership roles, including positions within Gram Panchayats such as Sarpanch. In several cases, SHGs have also functioned as pressure groups that advocate for transparency and accountability in local governance. NGOs support this process by conducting training programmes focused on leadership development, rights awareness, and gender equality. This combined effort has contributed to a gradual but meaningful shift in gender relations within tribal societies.

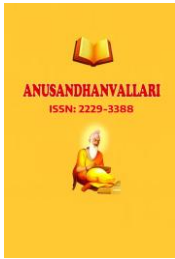
6. Strengthening Community Institutions and Service Delivery

NGOs and SHGs together play a vital role in strengthening community institutions and improving access to essential services. NGOs often act as facilitators, helping communities navigate government schemes and advocating for their rights, particularly in areas such as land and forest entitlements. SHGs, on the other hand, ensure that information and benefits reach the grassroots level through regular interaction and collective action.

In regions where formal infrastructure is limited, NGOs operate community learning centres and mobile service units that bridge gaps in education and healthcare. Their ability to adapt to local conditions and engage directly with communities enhances the effectiveness of development interventions. This partnership between NGOs and SHGs helps create a more inclusive and participatory development framework.

Key Challenges and Policy Imperatives

Despite their contributions, NGOs and SHGs face several operational challenges, including limited financial resources, administrative constraints, and socio-cultural resistance in certain areas. Variations in institutional capacity and sustainability also affect outcomes. However, their role in promoting resilience, self-reliance, and community participation remains significant. Strengthening institutional support, improving coordination with government programmes, and investing in capacity building can further enhance their impact.



Supportive policies are essential to amplify the impact of NGOs and SHGs in tribal areas. Government policies that streamline funding processes and reduce bureaucratic barriers can make it easier for NGOs and SHGs to receive timely resources.

Furthermore, policies that promote tribal welfare, such as reserved economic zones for forest-based products or subsidies for small-scale tribal enterprises, could encourage economic growth rooted in local skills and resources. A specific focus on forest rights and natural resource management policies could empower communities to use and conserve their resources sustainably, creating long-term livelihoods.

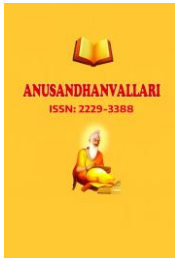
Enhanced digital infrastructure is another area where policy support could transform tribal development. Digital literacy programs and rural internet access initiatives would allow NGOs and SHGs to leverage digital tools for training, market access, and financial digital inclusion, the government can enable services. By creating policies that promote tribal communities to connect with broader economic networks and build resilience against market uncertainties.

Moving Toward a Development Model Community-Driven To ensure that development initiatives government, NGOs, and SHGs should promote are sustainable and community-centered, the participatory planning, where tribal community affecting their economic and social well-being. members actively contribute to decisions Encouraging tribal representation in local governance, such as Panchayati Raj Institutions, can enhance accountability and alignment with community priorities. NGOs can also play a role in building capacity within these governance structures, creating a foundation for self-sustained development.

Conclusion:

The role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the socio-economic development of tribal areas in Rajasthan is both transformative and essential. In regions marked by geographical isolation, social and economic marginalization, and limited access to resources, these organizations serve as critical agents of change. Through focused interventions in areas such as financial inclusion, skill development, healthcare, and education, NGOs and SHGs empower tribal communities to overcome socio-economic barriers and achieve sustainable progress. NGOs have pioneered community-centered development programs, bringing healthcare, literacy, and vocational training to remote tribal villages. By facilitating access to government scheme and service delivery and ensure tribal communities benefit from, welfare programs, SHGs, on the other hand, have particularly empowered women, fostering economic independence and decision-making skills. Through microloans and small savings, SHGs enable tribal members to invest in local businesses, farming, and other income-generating activities, reducing dependency on low-wage labor and seasonal migration. The combined efforts of NGOs and SHGs have significantly improved the socio-economic conditions in Rajasthan 's tribal areas.

However, to maximize and sustain these gains, enhanced collaboration with government bodies and supportive policy frameworks are essential. Government support in the form of digital infrastructure, funding, and policy adjustments can provide a more enabling environment for these organizations to operate effectively. In conclusion, the synergy between NGOs, SHGs, and government initiatives holds the potential to unlock lasting development in Rajasthan's tribal regions. By creating pathways to financial inclusion, skills, and market access, these efforts are paving the way for self-reliant, resilient communities. Through sustained commitment and collaborative action, tribal areas in Rajasthan can experience a transformative journey toward economic empowerment and social upliftment.



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