

Digital Voices: Rural and Tribal Women Using Social Media for Cultural Expression and Entrepreneurship in India

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Abstract

The rise of social media, especially after COVID-19, has transformed communication, interaction, and business practices, reaching rural and tribal communities in India. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp provide women entrepreneurs with powerful tools to promote products, connect with customers, and grow their businesses beyond traditional boundaries. Women in rural and tribal areas are increasingly using these platforms to sell authentic handicrafts, traditional products, and locally made goods, often leveraging strategies such as hashtags to improve visibility. Social media also influences consumer behavior, as trends and peer choices encourage broader adoption of products.

However, a significant digital divide persists, limiting access to digital tools and reducing the full potential of social media for economic growth. This article explores how digital platforms help rural and tribal women overcome challenges like limited market access, financial struggles, and social barriers. It demonstrates how digital entrepreneurship fosters financial independence, confidence, skill development, and social recognition. Government programs and policies supporting female entrepreneurship are also discussed.

By examining opportunities, challenges, and strategies for rural and tribal women using social media, this article highlights how digital tools can empower marginalized communities, promote inclusive growth, and narrow the digital divide in rural India.

Keywords: social media, rural women, tribal women, digital entrepreneurship, India, women empowerment

Introduction

Digital entrepreneurship is reshaping India, especially for rural and tribal women who have faced social, cultural, and economic challenges. The post-COVID rise of social media has provided new opportunities to transform traditional skills into thriving businesses and gain financial independence. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp allow women to showcase authentic handicrafts, cultural products, and locally made goods to audiences both locally and globally. This not only helps preserve cultural heritage but also allows them to compete with mass-produced, artificial products.

Women-led businesses currently account for 13.76% of all entrepreneurs in India, managing approximately 20.37% of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), around 8.05 million businesses, with 65% in rural areas. About 83–87% operate independently without hired help, primarily in manufacturing (42%), trade (25%), education (8%), and food services (5%). McKinsey reports that integrating 68 million more women into the workforce by 2025 could add USD 0.7 trillion to India's GDP, highlighting the economic importance of female entrepreneurship.

For tribal women, challenges are more acute. Literacy is 67.4% and digital literacy 60.7%, often limited to basic smartphone use. Only 26.4% have received formal computer training,

and fewer than 10% use digital tools for business or banking. Alarming, 91.7% of surveyed tribal women have never benefited from government digital literacy programs, though 88–94% believe digital skills could empower them economically. Women in India are 11% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 40% less likely to use mobile internet (GSMA, 2023).

In addition to literacy gaps and affordability, poor infrastructure—unreliable electricity, weak internet connectivity, and few digital service centers—further restricts entrepreneurial potential. Deeply rooted gender biases also underestimate women’s economic contributions, discouraging business activity.

Targeted digital literacy programs, improved infrastructure, affordable devices, community initiatives, and government support can help women overcome these challenges, making digital entrepreneurship a sustainable and inclusive pathway for empowerment.

Role of Social Media

Social media platforms allow global connectivity, enabling people to share ideas, information, images, and videos while engaging virtually. Widely used platforms include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat. Unlike traditional media like newspapers or radio—which had limited reach and accessibility—social media spreads quickly, bridging gaps across geography and society.

Affordable smartphones and mobile internet after 2012, and the expansion of low-cost internet by Jio in 2016, accelerated adoption in rural and tribal areas. As of March 2024, India had 954 million internet subscribers, with 398 million rural users and 95.15% of villages having 3G/4G connectivity (PIB, 2024). Rural India now accounts for 488 million active internet users, surpassing urban usage (IAMAI, 2024). Rural users represent 53% of the country’s internet consumption (Fortune India, 2023).

Social media has become more than a communication tool; it is a medium for digital entrepreneurship. Women in rural and tribal regions are using platforms to promote authentic, handmade, and culturally significant products, reaching buyers who value natural, traditional goods. This combines economic empowerment with cultural preservation.

Impact on Rural and Tribal Women Entrepreneurs

Social media enables women to:

1. Earn Financial Independence

By directly connecting with buyers, women bypass middlemen and local limitations.

Income Bracket

<INR 5,000	78%	22%
INR 5,000–10,000	—	30%
INR 10,000–20,000	—	28%
>INR 20,000	—	20%

2. Overcome Geographic and Social Barriers

Women can run businesses from their homes while reaching urban and global markets.

3. Develop Skills and Confidence

Managing social media builds skills in marketing, content creation, and customer interaction, boosting confidence.

4. Preserve Culture

Women share stories of traditional crafts and practices online, keeping heritage alive while earning income.

5. Enhance Visibility and Connections

Social media enables personal branding, networking with peers and mentors, and access to supportive communities.

6. Engage Customers and Scale Businesses

Direct interaction with buyers improves products, increases market reach, and supports sustainable growth.

Example: Him Ira in Himachal Pradesh promotes Himachali craftsmanship, while Minakshi Khati in Uttarakhand revives Aipan folk art, reaching global audiences.

Challenges

Despite opportunities, women face hurdles:

- **Limited Digital Literacy:** 61% of women lack sufficient skills for online business.
- **Poor Internet and Infrastructure:** 47% struggle with connectivity; 34% lack devices.
- **Gender and Social Norms:** Patriarchal attitudes limit mobility, decision-making, and professional networks.
- **Low Marketing Knowledge:** 43% cannot effectively promote products.
- **Cultural Hesitation:** Initial reluctance due to unfamiliarity with technology and low literacy.

Addressing these challenges requires digital training, infrastructure development, affordable access, gender-sensitive programs, and community support.

Recommendations and Solutions

- **Digital Literacy Programs:** Localized training for smartphone use, social media management, and online sales.
 - **Affordable Devices and Internet:** Subsidies for smartphones and low-cost data plans.
 - **Gender-Sensitive Initiatives:** Community programs to encourage women-led businesses.
 - **Mentorship & Networking:** Connecting women to mentors, peers, and professional networks.
 - **Financial Support & Market Access:** Microloans, grants, and marketing platforms for scaling.
 - **Highlighting Success Stories:** Sharing inspiring examples to encourage more women entrepreneurs.
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Government and NGO Initiatives

Government Programs:

- **Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana:** Collateral-free loans for small businesses.
- **Stand Up India Scheme:** Loans for women from marginalized communities.

- Mahila Coir Yojana & Subhadra Yojana: Financial aid for women artisans.
- Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP): Single-window access to mentorship, funding, and networks.

NGO Programs:

- SEWA Bharat: Training, financial services, and market access for women artisans.
- Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP): Skill-building and leadership training.
- AROH Foundation & India Vision Foundation: Mentorship and job creation.
- Mahila Money: Micro-loans and financial education.
- Seva Bharati: Vocational training in handicrafts and tailoring.

These initiatives are crucial to bridging financial, digital, and infrastructure gaps, enabling active participation in digital entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Social media and digital entrepreneurship have created unprecedented opportunities for rural and tribal women in India. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp allow them to promote authentic handicrafts, cultural products, and locally made goods, achieving financial independence and wider recognition. Success stories such as Him Ira in Himachal Pradesh and Minakshi Khatri in Uttarakhand demonstrate how digital tools preserve culture while generating income.

Challenges persist: limited digital literacy, infrastructure gaps, affordability, and gender norms restrict many women from fully accessing these opportunities. Government schemes like Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana, Stand Up India, and WEP, along with NGO programs like SEWA Bharat and SSP, are pivotal in bridging these gaps through financial support, training, mentorship, and market access.

In essence, social media is more than a business tool—it is a platform for empowerment. With continued support and interventions, rural and tribal women can expand their businesses, assert economic independence, preserve cultural heritage, and inspire future generations, making digital entrepreneurship a sustainable pathway for inclusive growth in India.

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