Listening to the Voices of Land: Tribal Entrepreneurs in Contemporary India

Onkar Nath Mishra

Assistant Professor, Bhupendra Narayan Mandal University, Madhepura

ABSTRACT

Though researches in indigenous entrepreneurship are growing, still this field remains terra incognita among researchers. India, housing the largest indigenous population on planet offers tremendous opportunities to demystify various concepts in indigenous entrepreneurship. This study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of indigenous entrepreneurs in India. It tries to capture the experiences of indigenous entrepreneurs from two sides. First, their personal decision to be an entrepreneur. Second, their experience of dealing with the Institutional Support System. A qualitative approach was adopted for the study. Semi structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions were used to collect the data. The findings of the study revealed that indigenous entrepreneurship in India is primarily a result of push theory and necessity oriented. Survival, not success is the focus of indigenous entrepreneurs.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is home to the largest number of indigenous people in the world. They are popularly known as '*Adivasi*' meaning 'initial inhabitants'. They constitute the smallest portion of Indian populace, yet display enormous diversity. They are heterogeneous in respect of language and linguistic traits, ecological settings in which they live, physical features, size of the population, the extent of acculturation, dominant modes of making a livelihood, level of development and social stratification (HLCR, MoTA, 2014). The constitution of India provides certain administrative and political concessions to them. In those areas, where they are in numerical minority, reservations have been provided in educational institutions and government jobs. But they continue to remain a part of the general administrative set up of the country. However, where they are numerically dominant, a distinct administrative arrangement has been provided for them.

Despite a slew of measures taken for their development, they continue to constitute the most marginalized social group in India. State run welfare

programmes have produced sub optimal results in ensuring a better quality of life for them. Recently, entrepreneurship has been viewed as a potent strategy to empower indigenous population across the world, In India; several measures have been taken to promote entrepreneurship among indigenous people. These measures include a wide range of support made available by the state. Some of these supports are specific in nature, meaning thereby, they are exclusively for the indigenous entrepreneurs. However, no remarkable success has been observed in developing indigenous businesses. Indigenous businesses continue to struggle move beyond survival goal.

In this context, this research study made an attempt to address three inter-wined issues. The research questions are:

RQ 1: How indigenous entrepreneurs perceive their experience as an entrepreneur?

RQ 2: To what extent, entrepreneurship is a suitable strategy to engage their youth?

RQ 3: To what extent, the indigenous entrepreneurs find existing institutional support system to be supportive?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follow. Section two presents the context of the study. Section three explains the methodology of the study. Section three presents the results and discussion. Section four provides conclusions.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research context was set in the context of indigenous entrepreneurs belonging to Eastern Central Region (ECR) of India. ECR has several important characteristics, and assumes special significance in India. First, it is the richest region of the country in terms of natural resources. The region is rich in flora and fauna due to extensive forest and water resources It accounts for more than three fourth of the country's metal and mineral production. Hence, it is the hub of large, heavy, and basic industries. Second, it is the home to majority of the indigenous population (about 55%) in India. There are populous tribes, as well as many Primitive Tribal Groups in this region. The tribes of this region also resisted British rule more strongly than any other region. Looking at the darker side of the picture, it is one of the poorest and least developed regions of the country. The region has rampant poverty and unemployment. Infrastructure is rickety. Hunger deaths are common. Hence, indigenous youth in this region are exposed to great risk due to their adversarial life circumstances and relative disadvantage. For example, they are easily lured away by the *naxal* leaders to join

their fight against the state. The abundance of resources (water, forest, minerals etc.) on the one hand, and the widespread misery and poor quality of life on the other, the region is rightly termed as 'Paradox amidst Plenty'. Consequently, keeping in view the context of indigenous population in ECR, the urgency of entrepreneurship development among indigenous population can be well understood.

Indigenous Population in India: Demography and Socio-Economic Status

The indigenous people in India are highly heterogeneous. Their origins and genetic affinities remain largely unknown (Cordaux et. al., 2003). Empirically, they constitute a vastly heterogeneous category belonging to different racial, linguistic and indigenous stock, with different degrees of assimilation with the dominant population. They can be classified in multiple ways—geographic region, size of population, language spoken, individual tribes, mode of livelihood etc. Their total population in 2011 was 104,281,034 (8.60% of the total population) (Census, 2011).

Figure 2.1: Indigenous Population in India
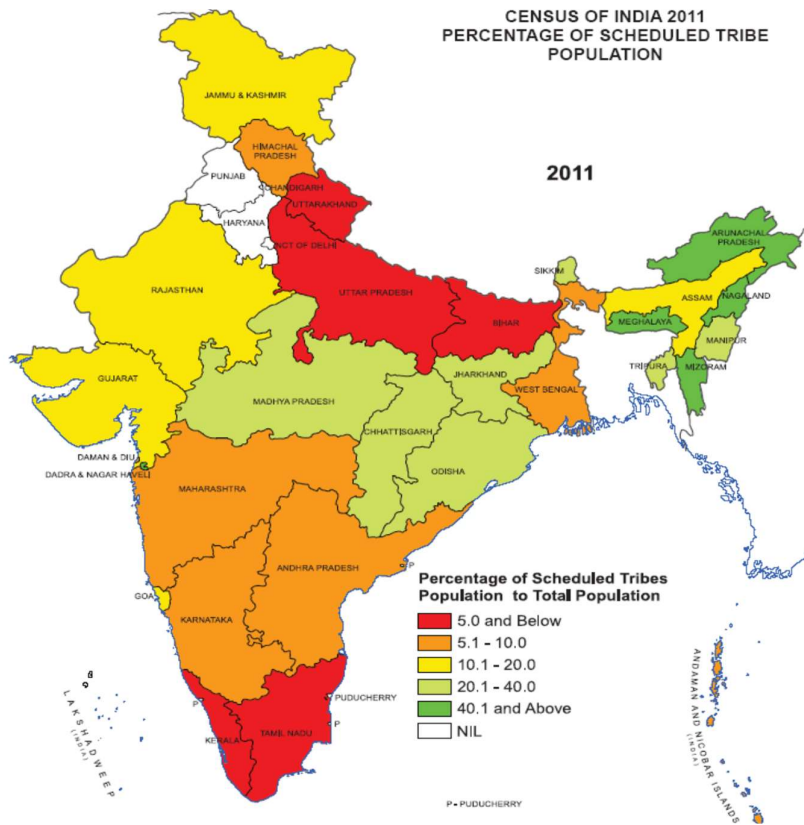
Source: *Tribal Profile at a Glance, May, 2014, MoTA*

Indigenous people constitute the most marginalized social group in India. The areas dominated by them have poor infrastructure, and they are devoid of basic facilities even after close to seven decades of independence. With regards to basic

amenities such as housing, access to potable water and latrine facility etc. the status of Indigenous people is depicted in the table one. About 41 percent of IP have good houses as compared to national average of 53 percent. The national average for availability of permanent houses for IP was only 24.40 percent as per census, 2001. Also, when it comes to having access to potable water and latrine facility, the differences are enormous. Only one fifth of ST Households have drinking water facility in their premises, and still one third of them have to rely on sources of potable water located far away. About 88 percent of them still use smoke emanating fuels for cooking, as compared to 64 percent for all social groups. As per census 2001, only 36.50 percent ST households had electricity connection.

Table 1: Basic Amenities Indicators

Basic Amenities	IP (percent)	All Social Groups (percent)
Good houses	40.60	53.10
Latrine facility within the premises	22.60	46.90
Separate kitchen in homes	53.70	61.30
Bathing facility in homes	17.30	42.0
Drinking water away from the premises	33.60	17.60
Uncovered well/river/pond etc.	26.60	12.92
Connection to drainage	6.10	18.10
Use of smoke emanating fuel	87.50	63.99

Source:*census, 2011*

Next, we look at the asset ownership and education and health related indicators for IP vis-à-vis all social groups (see table 2). The table clearly reveals that in case of all the household assets, the ownership among IP is quite low as compared to the national average.

Table 2: Key Development Indicators for IP

Development Indicators		IP	All Social Groups
Household Assets Ownership	Television	21.90	47.20
	By-cycle	36.40	44.80
	Computer/laptop	4.40	6.30
	Mobile only	31.10	53.20
	Two wheeler	9.0	21
	Four Wheeler	1.60	4.70
	No Assets	37.30	17.80
Households with TV, computer/scooter, car and/ mobile, telephone		1.30	4.60
Availing Banking Services		44.98	58.70
Land Cultivated/1000 Households (Hectares)	0.000	372	454
	0.001-0.004	10	8
	0.005-0.040	186	203
	0.41-1.00	208	155

	2.01-4.0	76	61
	4.01 & above	20	25
Literacy Rate	Total	59.0	73.0
	Male	68.50	80.90
	Female	49.40	64.60
Education Status for age 15 and above (Report no 543 of NSS 66th round, 2009-10)	Not literate (rural)	47	37.80
	Primary (rural)	24.20	23.70
	Secondary (rural)	8.40	11.50
	Higher Secondary (rural)	4.20	6.20
	Diploma/certificate (urban)	1.80	2.10
	Graduate & above (urban)	12.60	17.30
Educational Indicators (2010-11)	GER (class 1-12)	94.80	86.40
	Drop-out rates (1-10)	70.95	49.15
	Gender Parity Index	0.96	0.96
Health Indicators (NFHS, 2005-06)	IMR	62.10	57.00
	Under 5 mortality	95.70	74.30
	% Institutional Deliveries	17.70	38.70
	% households covered by health scheme/insurance	2.60	31.90

Source: *Researcher's own compilation from several sources*

The analysis of poverty and employment status among IP revealed that poverty is a malady. The rural poverty among IP is exceptionally high at 47.30 percent. Similarly, as compared to all social groups, the percentage of IP Households reporting to be self-employed and earning regular wage and salary is less.

3. INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN INDIA

Statistics related to entrepreneurship show a poor picture of IP. IP have the least share of 3.5 percent in case of the Own Account Enterprises (OAEs) located in rural areas. In urban areas, their share is even less at 1.4 percent. In the combined (R and U) areas, the scenario is same as in the rural areas, as the number of OAEs in rural areas is about 2/3rd of the total OAEs. In case of enterprises classified as Establishments in rural, urban and combined areas, the share of IP is meagre. In rural areas, they account for only 2.4 percent, while in urban areas their share is only 1 percent of the enterprises. For the combined category (OAEs and establishment) in rural and urban areas, the share is just 3.4 and 1.3 percent respectively (HLC Report, MoTA, 2014).

As per the National Sample Survey 61st round survey of employment in social groups (2004-05), the proportion of IP Households in rural and urban areas reporting self-employed was 46 percent and 26 percent respectively. Non-agricultural self-employment was the lowest among IP (7 percent). At the aggregate level, 44 percent of IP were self-employed, compared to 47.4 percent at all India average (NSSO survey, 2012, Report No. 543, 66th round, 2009-10). As

per the MSME annual report 2014-15, IP owned only 5.76 percent of the total unregistered enterprises, which was the lowest among all social groups. In case of registered enterprises, the figure is even smaller at 2.87 percent. Thus, no good progress on the front of entrepreneurship development in IP has taken place.

The various reports reveal that the IP owned enterprises are mostly smaller, single employee units and rural. Except for the north eastern states, the share of IP in enterprises is less than their corresponding share in state population. To conclude, ST enterprises are more survivalist than entrepreneurial.

There are a number of institutions engaged in entrepreneurship development at both, all India and state level. They implement schemes with special focus on IP such as stipend to IP undergoing skill training etc. National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation is solely set up to provide finance to IP for education, self-employment etc. Similar institutions have been set up at state level. Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited along with Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation provides marketing support to tribal produce. The BJP led central government launched three schemes named 'MUDRA' 'Start up India' and 'Stand up India' to promote entrepreneurship with a special emphasis on small entrepreneurs. The Prime minister launched the 'MUDRA' scheme from Dumka in Jharkhand, an IP dominated district. The scheme envisages removing the financial hurdles of small entrepreneurs. The scheme identified entrepreneurship development among IP as a thrust area.

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) define qualitative data analysis as "working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns". Qualitative approach was preferred because quantitative approach is often limited in capturing the holistic experiences of entrepreneurs. Many significant pieces of information cannot be expressed in terms of numbers. Further, indigenous entrepreneurs are still little educated. Hence paper and pencil test was not found to be appropriate. This approach provides the much needed flexibility even during the data collection period as per the requirement. Much detailed information can be extracted using qualitative approach if the research goals are limited and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon is required (Kovach, 2010). Further, in indigenous entrepreneurship researches, qualitative approach is very popular among researchers (Mrabure, 2019).

Hence, a phenomenological inquiry as methodology was adopted. The motivation behind the selection of phenomenological approach in this study can be best summed up in the words of Denzin and Lincoln (1994)— '*Subjects, or individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why. No single method can grasp the subtle variations in ongoing human experience*'.

The sample size was 25. An attempt was made to select a representative sample of indigenous entrepreneurs by including male and female, old and young, and from various fields of businesses. This study used face to face semi structured interviews. A total of 12 semi structured interviews were conducted. In order to be consistent, a set of pre-planned core questions for guidance such that the same areas were covered with each interviewee was prepared. The questions were framed in Hindi and Santhali. Two focus group discussions were also conducted.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to gauze the outlook of indigenous entrepreneurs towards the position of indigenous communities in the current socio-economic milieu, and the role entrepreneurship can play in their empowerment, an attempt was made to catalogue their experiences as an entrepreneur. The experience of the entrepreneur greatly influences his motivation level in the business. Secondly, they have an impact on the attitude and perception of current generation towards entrepreneurship. Hence, in this section we present the findings, discussion points and comments related to the experiences of indigenous entrepreneurs gleaned from focus group and semi structured interviews.

A very significant finding was that most of the indigenous entrepreneurs (about 91%) stated that their decision to become an entrepreneur was right. This finding becomes important in the sense that none of them had large business. They had not created huge wealth. Instead, many have struggled for years to achieve a decent living, and many are still in troubled waters. While reflecting back upon their career as an entrepreneur, most of them were of the opinion that it gave them freedom to do things in their own way. The achievements are in terms of feelings of independence, wellbeing, and self-sufficiency, over and above the income gains.

Regarding the main motivations behind the decision to become an entrepreneur, three themes were identified:

- Lack of enough skill and education

- Poverty
- To remain with the family

One particular respondent **(RP11)** summed it up like this:

I was ferried into this business due to lack of education. One cannot find doctors, engineers and (district) collectors from our community. We belong to agricultural background (........pause.....). To earn a living, I had to do something.

The stresses and strains of the daily life in poverty prompted participants to start their own business. As **RP18** spoke;

My husband had a large family. The earnings were not sufficient. There was no support from any side. So I started the business. There was no other option, as to become a government officer one needs to study a lot. If we will study then who will look after the family.

RP6 narrated the experience as such:

I attended a training programmer on pisciculture. I thought it was a good idea, as I can earn a livelihood while staying with my family. So I started with the help of my family members, and now I own two ponds.

Thus, it can be interpreted that failure to get a paid employment motivated indigenous entrepreneurs to become self-employed. They did not prefer to work as daily wage earners. Hence, they viewed their decision as appropriate. This hints towards the fact that mainly push factors were at work.

They also expressed their views regarding their position relative to other social groups in starting and operating a business. Some important narratives were that according to indigenous entrepreneurs 'other entrepreneurs' (from mainstream society) have link in the government offices so they get the benefits easily. Also, they are in a better position to bribe them to get their works done. When countered that they are better educated and have skills that is why they get support (like loans etc.) easily, they recognized the argument, but also hit back by saying that they know several 'other entrepreneurs' who were also not educated but got loans and other benefits.

One indigenous entrepreneur (**RP25**) expressed his desperation about the non-fulfillment of their expectations even after the creation of new state.

We were happy to have a separate state. We thought now we will have opportunities, resources and development in our state. But things have hardly improved. We continue to remain marginalized, while people from other places

(read states) continue to flourish. They are in all offices and we, nowhere. Hence, we do not get benefits easily.

When asked about whether they would like their children or other young family members to join their business (including any other business), almost three fourth of them said that it depends on their choice. They will not compel them to join their business, but if they decide to join, they will help them in the best possible way. However, they pointed out that if they do not get salaried job, then where they will go? What they will do? They have to do something for earning a livelihood. However, the indigenous communities also seem to have developed a strong preference for government job, and consider it as of great prestige. One entrepreneur (**RP4**) candidly stated:

I tell youth from my communities that study hard and get good government job. Starting and running a business is very difficult, and also no assured earnings. You need to run from pillar to post. You should consider this option if you fail to get a government job.

From these views shared by the indigenous entrepreneurs, there was no doubt that they too want their youth to receive good education and join prestigious salaried job.

RP22 strongly vouched for education and special provisions for their community:

Good education is needed for not only government job, but also, if one wants own business. If they will not study, then they will face the same problems, which we face. They cannot talk to bank officers. Also they cannot fill forms and understand schemes. Government should have special schemes for people like us.

Across the globe, engaging youth from indigenous communities in entrepreneurship is being regarded as the best strategy to empower them. In this context, this study tried to assess the views of existing indigenous entrepreneurs regarding the suitability of self-employment promotion among youth of their community. Keeping in view the current societal and economic position, most of indigenous entrepreneurs strongly supported the idea. **RP17** expressed his views as:

We frequently hear youth (from all sections of society) complaining that even after having good education we are not getting jobs. Everyone wants a government job. I don't know, whether government can provide jobs to all educated youth or not, but surely they need money to run family. Hence, starting a business is a good idea. All help should be provided by the government.

Overall group participants were vocal about their rights. Respondent **14th** cautioned;

> *Today's youth are very different. They want many things and if they do not get, they will not sit quiet like we did. They are ready to start a fight with the government. Look at the agitations started by our youth regarding the demand to treat only those as residents of Jharkhand who had land rights recognized under the land records of 1932.*

Another participant (RP24) was heard to support this notion, by saying:

> *The governments fooled us, but it is difficult to fool our youth. The rising unrest among the 'adivasi' society is a clear signal to the government to provide genuine help to our youth.*

However, simultaneously they were skeptical about the success of this strategy as highlighted in a number of statements, such as:

> *Our youth are also going to college, using internet and know what is happening. It is not easy to ignore their voices. Government will have to look into their demand. They are ready to regain their right over resources. They are very hard working; if support is given they will do good business. If they can earn money in their own business, why one would work for wages for someone else or hundreds of km away from home. But I doubt this will happen easily.* **(RP5)**

Concurring with these views, **RP29** remarked:

> *The idea is very good, but it is very difficult. We have no facilities like roads, corruption is increasing. How this will happen?*

Another participant (**RP17**), echoing a similar tone maintained:

> *You tell me how we can trust the government. We frequently hear the news that so much crores have been spent; so much crores have been disbursed and approved for the development of tribals. But I am a tribal, and have never received any benefits.*

Another respondent (**RP1**) specified why he doubts its success:

> *I hear that there are government schemes, but I do not have any knowledge. Why? You know the government: they say one thing and do another; poor people like me don't trust them or their policies. Also officers will not provide help if you do not have any connection. They are corrupt also. The problem is no news what we need to do. And if you need peace of mind, it is better you manage with the little you have.* (RP14).

One indigenous entrepreneur who was also an expert of tribal studies, cautioned about the serious repercussions of failure of tribal enterprises.

The closure or forfeiture shall serve as a severe setback for the indigenous communities that are learning to embark on the road of market based entrepreneurship development. **(RP9).**

In their narratives, the indigenous entrepreneurs felt as if something has circumscribed their potential. It was also clear that this 'something' to which they referred was none other than the notorious ISS and faulty economic model of development. Similarly, they know that youth from their communities are no longer like them; they are not going to be content with what they have. But how they will achieve they want, only time will tell.

It was important to inquire how indigenous entrepreneurs perceive the current ISS, and the experience they had while dealing with it. It is important to note that in order to facilitate the discussion, the researcher tried to give only a broad framework within which the indigenous entrepreneurs could respond, tell about their points of view and experiences, and freely allowed them to digress from these.

The findings indicated that though some success stories exist, yet to a great extent the current set up severely lacks credibility among the indigenous entrepreneurs. The interviews revealed a tale of frustration and anguish with the current ISS. Table three summarizes the description of ISS as evident from the interviews with indigenous entrepreneurs. Majority of the entrepreneurs opined that in their time (when they started the business), very few facilities were available. Hence, they had to rely on their own resources. Also, low education level was a major challenge, as they faced difficulties while dealing with the ISS.

Table 3: Indigenous Entrepreneurs' Description of ISS

Respondents	Description of Current ISS
RP1	No information, very far, complex
RP2	Time taking, favouritism
RP3	Not of much use, frequent visits required, inadequate information
RP4	Very complex, time consuming, bribery
RP5	Good for those knowing English, too much formalities
RP6	Complex, bribery

Source*: Researchers compilation from survey data*

Many of the indigenous entrepreneurs in the focus group discussion uttered their unhappiness and disapproval with the current state of affairs. There was a broad agreement amongst group contributors that they were unsatisfied with the current

system. It was clear that they felt reluctant to approach the banks or financing agencies or govt. offices. The main reason was that they do not have enough courage and self-confidence because of their low social status and illiteracy.

One strongly held view by the FGPs was that dealing with the ISS is a bad experience. The following statements provide an insight into the wider group position.

Hardly bank and government officials care for us. If I go to bank, and say I want to borrow ten thousand rupees, they will say how you will he return this money. They would ask a hundred questions. If I try to be assertive, they will tell me about so many rules and regulations, and instead advise me to go to some different office. The system is rotten. It is better to be contending with what we have, rather than going around and begging officers. **(RP10)**

Those entrepreneurs, who had received bank credit and other assistance, shared similar views.

Once I took taken a loan of five thousand rupees from a bank for setting up my business. It took me more than six months in the process, and I had to spend a good amount of money in visiting the bank. Also every time the officials would come, I had to arrange for his chai nasta. Eventually, the loan amount increased to ten thousand. That loan proved very costly. **(RP15)**

These all narratives reflect the deep distrust that has developed between the indigenous communities and the formal institutions. However, there are some positive experiences as well. One participant recalled the incident;

When I first time applied for a loan to expand my business, I was told to bring many documents and security. I provided whatever, documents I had. Though it took time but I got the loan, and also I did not pay any bribe. My business was successful; I paid the loan on time. After that I took loan on many occasions, there was no problem. **(RP22)**

Similarly, the respondents agreed that the awareness among them has increased. They have more sources of information now, and also, government is reaching to them. Some participants had got government assistance for the first time under the recently launched MUDRA scheme, and that too very smoothly. Further, they stated that though finance was the major problem, other support like know how and marketing is also important, but is almost non-existent as compared to financial support.

The results also indicated that they are becoming more assertive and ready to protest against wrongdoing in the schemes meant for them. They try to contact their local politicians and social workers if faced with problems.

6. CONCLUSION

This study sought to capture the experiences of indigenous entrepreneurs in India. To attain this goal, it addressed three research questions. The findings revealed that indigenous entrepreneurship is almost solely necessity entrepreneurship rather than opportunity oriented. Regarding the motivation to be an entrepreneur, the study found empirical evidence in favour of push theory of entrepreneurship. Indigenous entrepreneurs were pushed into self employment due to either their unsuitability for the modern day paid jobs system, One defining line was that they all considered their decision to be an entrepreneur as correct after evaluating their journey as an entrepreneur till date.

Though indigenous entrepreneurs supported the suitability of entrepreneurship development as a suitable strategy to empower their youth, they were skeptical about the ability of the government to successfully execute this strategy. Due to poor state of the human and financial capital, they are at disadvantaged position as compared to mainstream population. It has far reaching consequences. As for instance, it prevents them from exploiting the opportunities generated from higher economic growth. The absence of level playing field exposes them to the vulnerability of poverty, unemployment and exploitation. Further, the constant encroachment and appropriation of their traditional resources has seriously endangered their livelihood opportunities. It has fanned frustration, and led to the deep distrust between the state institutions and tribal society. Though there are some success stories, yet one common thread was that dealing with the ISS was very frustrating and problematic for indigenous entrepreneurs. They complained of bias in treatment meted out to them and mainstream entrepreneurs.

This study has both theoretical as well as practical significance. The findings of the study have implications for theories and concepts in entrepreneurship. As for instance, it suggests that concepts in mainstream entrepreneurship are often rigid, and hence, have limited relevance in indigenous entrepreneurship. The concepts must be fluid enough to examine them in indigenous setting. The reluctance of indigenous entrepreneurs to move from survival to success entrepreneurship should not be viewed as incompatible with the western notion of entrepreneurship. This study also makes valuable contribution to the scarce

literature on indigenous entrepreneurship in general and in context of India specifically.

The study has some significant practical implications. First, there is need to step up efforts to transform necessity entrepreneurship among IP to opportunity entrepreneurship. Plans and policies should focus on identifying business opportunities and helping indigenous entrepreneurs exploit it. Second, the findings clearly show the deep distrust that has developed among indigenous society and entrepreneurs towards institutional support system. It suggests that *naxal* violence in the areas dominated by IP is not merely a law and order problem. Hence, policy makers and government must introspect and find out the factors responsible for it. Therefore, it contains valuable insights for designing and delivery of Institutional Support System.

Despite making some valuable contribution to the domain of indigenous entrepreneurship, this study suffers from some notable limitations. This study was conducted on a small sample of indigenous entrepreneurs in a defined geographical region. The results might differ if indigenous entrepreneurs from different tribes and different geographical regions are surveyed. Hence, there is need to undertake more studies with large samples.

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