

Occupations and Tribal Livelihood: A Case Study of Trans Himalayan Region of Ladakh, India

Dr Tsering Yangzom

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Jammu

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, agriculture and animal husbandry have been the primary sources of livelihood for tribal communities, particularly in rural and remote regions. However, over the years, there has been a noticeable shift in the occupational structure of tribal households. The study aims to examine the patterns of occupations among tribal households of present Ladakh. The study was part of the research project funded by University of Jammu under the Seed and Research grant. The sample size of the study is 500 scheduled tribe household heads, that is 414 from rural areas and 86 from urban areas of Ladakh. The study reveals that 88.4 percent of the sampled households obtained livelihood from non-traditional based economic activities and it further reveals that most of the heads are self-employed, primarily as own-account workers. A sector-wise analysis indicates that rural tribal heads predominantly rely their livelihood from rent, pensions, or remittances, while those in urban areas are mainly engaged in regular salaried employment. At the same time, a huge chunk of heads is into casual labour work as well. Thus, the policy suggestion is, introduce targeted employment guarantee schemes and rural infrastructure projects to provide stable and year-round work opportunities for casual labourers for remote areas like Durbuk and Nyoma.

Keywords: Livelihood, Tribal, Household, Main Occupation, Trans Himalaya

INTRODUCTION

Occupational status serves as a key indicator of the socio-economic standing and developmental trajectory of any community. For tribal populations, it reflects a complex interplay of tradition, environment, access to resources, and exposure to mainstream economic systems. The occupational choices of household heads, who often act as primary earners and decision-makers, directly impact household income, social mobility, and intergenerational opportunities. Historically, tribal communities have been primarily engaged in traditional occupations such as agriculture, animal husbandry, forest-based activities, and artisanal crafts. These livelihoods were closely linked to their ecological surroundings and cultural practices. However, over the past few decades, there has been a marked transition from these traditional forms of employment toward more modern and diversified occupations. This shift has been driven by factors such as urbanization, educational advancement, state-led development programs, and integration with broader markets.

The present paper investigates primarily the descriptive aspects of the occupational status of tribal household heads, focusing on both the current distribution of employment types and the ongoing transition from traditional to modern livelihoods. It analyses sector-wise participation, differences across rural and urban settings, and the role of policy interventions in facilitating or hindering occupational mobility. By examining this transition, the study aims to shed light on how tribal communities are adapting to changing economic landscapes and what challenges and opportunities this transformation presents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tribal communities represent significant part of a society and a majority of these people reside in rural regions with primitive pattern of livelihood. Tribals are marginalised class (Roy, 1989) and relatively deprived compared with non-tribal people in many aspects (Srivastava, 2000%), The livelihoods of indigenous

communities are increasingly becoming unsustainable as their ancestral lands no longer provide sufficient support for their families. The availability and variety of natural resources have traditionally shaped the livelihood patterns of tribal populations. However, empirical studies suggest that since the early 1990s, rural tribal groups have begun diversifying their livelihood strategies as a response to the uncertainties brought about by changing agro-climatic conditions, socio-political shifts, and economic challenges.

Islam (2014) in his study observed that the tribal people in Jharkhand diversify their livelihood towards forestry resources and derive a significant employment and income through forestry interventions.

Suryanarayana (1983) found that the tribal people are engaged in agricultural activities hardly for 4 months in a year, and during off season, they are living through collection of forest products, fishing and hunting.

In their study on livelihood options among tribal communities in West Bengal, Satpati and Sharma (2021) noted that enhanced educational access for the younger generation has the potential to create new employment avenues and promote economic diversification, ultimately improving the economic well-being of tribal populations. They also highlighted that seasonal migration, particularly among young men and women, is a common strategy for livelihood diversification in the western regions of West Bengal.

Oraon (2012), in his study on the shifting livelihood patterns of tribal communities in Sundargarh district, Odisha, concluded that economically disadvantaged tribal households facing uncertain environments often resort to livelihood diversification as a means of securing their subsistence. A common strategy adopted involves engaging in non-farm activities and undertaking seasonal migration to other regions.

Aram (1972), in his study on the Naga tribes of the North Eastern Region, observed a transition within Naga society from traditional systems to more modern agro-industrial sectors. He noted that while some segments of the Naga population experienced increased wealth, a significant portion continued to live under traditional standards of living.

Choudhary (2013) explored the impact of microfinance on tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, focusing on Hoshangabad, Sehore, and Raisen districts. The study found that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) helped reduce poverty by improving access to credit, promoting livelihood diversification, empowering women, and lowering reliance on informal moneylenders. While microfinance shows promise, its broader success requires increased awareness, better coordination between financial sectors, and a shift in banking attitudes toward the poor.

Mehta et al. (2022) examined the determinants of livelihood diversification among tribal households in Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh, using data from 120 households. The study found that diversification was highest among salaried and agriculture-plus-services groups. Education, irrigation access, organizational membership, and training had a positive impact, while a higher land-man ratio negatively affected diversification. The authors recommend that regional policies focus on education, skill development, institutional participation, and irrigation improvement to strengthen tribal livelihoods.

Marchang (2019), in a working paper published by the Institute for Social and Economic Change, examined the changing occupational patterns of Scheduled Tribes in North East India. Using secondary data and field surveys from Manipur, the study highlights a shift from traditional agriculture—especially shifting cultivation—towards non-agricultural and market-oriented employment. This transition is largely influenced by education and overall economic development.

Sreekutty and Joseph (2021) examined livelihood diversification among tribal communities in India, focusing on their gradual shift from traditional agriculture due to low income and high risk. The study distinguishes between "push" factors like climate variability and "pull" factors such as better income opportunities, analyzing the socio-demographic influences behind this shift. It highlights the importance of non-agricultural strategies and stresses that access to education and skills is essential for reducing vulnerability and achieving sustainable livelihoods.

Kundu (2024) explores the vital yet underrecognized role of tribal women in rural and marginalized economies across India. Despite their active participation in agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and informal labor, their

contributions remain undervalued, leading to systemic marginalization. Using a mixed-method approach, the study highlights the challenges posed by gender bias and limited institutional support, and recommends policies aimed at improving access to markets, skill development, and government programs to enhance their economic and social empowerment.

Collectively, these studies explore the evolving economic and livelihood patterns among tribal communities in India, revealing a marked transition from traditional, agriculture-based subsistence to diversified, non-agricultural livelihoods. Several works underscore the growing importance of microfinance in fostering financial inclusion and entrepreneurship, while others highlight the contribution of tribal art to tourism and small-scale industries as viable sources of sustainable income. Key determinants of this shift include education, access to irrigation, and institutional support, which enhance the capacity of tribal households to pursue varied income-generating activities. Overall, the literature reflects a complex yet significant transformation, wherein increased access to resources and opportunities is gradually integrating tribal populations into modern, market-driven economies, contributing to improved socio-economic well-being.

Despite extensive studies on tribal livelihoods across India, limited research focuses on the tribal communities of Ladakh UT. The region's unique ecological, cultural, and administrative context remains underexplored, particularly in terms of livelihood diversification and economic transitions. There is a pressing need for region-specific studies to understand how tribal households in Ladakh are adapting to changing socio-economic conditions and to inform context-appropriate policy interventions.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The present paper investigates the patterns of occupational structure of tribal household heads and the extent to which the households are shifting from traditional to modern income generating activities (non-farm based income generating activities). It analyzes sector-wise participation, differences across blocks. By examining the extent to which household obtain source of livelihood from non-traditional sources, the study aims to shed light on how tribal communities are adapting to changing economic landscapes and opportunities at present.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sampled Tribal Households

Household Characteristics	Frequencies	Percentage
FARM /NON FARM	58	11.6
Farm Based (Household Livelihood)	442	88.4
Non -Farm Based (Household Livelihood)	500	100.0
BLOCKS	171	34.2
Leh	20	4.0
Chushot	22	4.4
Thiksey	22	4.4
Kharu	22	4.4
Nimoo	14	2.8
Saspol	20	4.0
Skurbuchan	33	6.6
Khaltsi	30	6.0
Durbuk	21	4.2
Nyoma	33	6.6
Rong	8	1.6
Rupsho	40	8.0
Disket	24	4.8
Panamik	20	4.0
Turtuk	500	100.0
RELIGIONS (HH)	446	89.2
Buddhism	54	10.8
Muslim	500	100.0

LEVEL OF EDUCATION (Head)	119	23.8
Illiterate	73	14.6
Under-metric	43	8.6
Metric	27	5.4
12 th Passed	18	3.6
Under Graduate	1	.2
Post Graduate	1	.2
MPhil/PhD	218	43.6
Post Doctorate	500	100.0
MAIN OCCUPATION (Head)	126	25.2
Own Account Worker (HH Ent.)	12	2.4
Employer (HH Ent.)	2	.4
Helper (HH Ent.)	94	18.8
Regular Salaried Worker	47	9.4
Casual Labour in Public Works	24	4.8
Casual Labour in Other Types of Work	1	.2
Did Not Work but Seeking	51	10.2
Attended Domestic Duties	132	26.4
Rentiers/Pensioners	11	2.2
Not Able to Work due to Disability	500	100.0
AGE CATEGORY (Head)	4	.8
Category 1 (20-29 years)	271	54.2
Category 2 (30-59 years)	225	45.0
Category 3 (60 and Above)	500	100.0
GENDER (Head)	396	79.2
Male	104	20.8
Female	500	100.0

Source: Author's computations

Occupational Status of the Heads of the Tribal Households: The study uses Usual Principal Status (UPS) method to measure the incidence and variation of employment and unemployment among the sampled households. The table 2 shows that, out of the 500 sampled households, the majority of the heads of the sampled households that is 61.2 percent are engaged in Labour force and only 38.8 percent are outside of the labour force. This means that 61.2 percent of the sample households heads are either employed or did not work but looking for work. In order to see the share of employed and unemployed, it is that 99.7 percent are employed and only 0.3 percent are unemployed.

Table 2: Occupations of the Heads of Tribal Households in Leh District

Main Occupation (Heads)	Frequency	Percentage
OwnAccountWorker (HH Ent)	126	25.2
Employer (HH Ent)	12	2.4
Helper (HH Ent) (Unpaid HH Worker)	2	.4
Regular Salaried	94	18.8
Casual Labour in Public work	47	9.4
Casual labour in Other Types of Work	24	4.8
Did not work but seeking and available for work	1	.2
Attended Domestic Duties and free collection of goods	51	10.2
Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittances	132	26.4
Not able to work due to disability	11	2.2
Total	500	100.0

Source: Authors' Computations

However, among the employed heads of the sampled households, the majority of them are engaged in Self-Employment i.e., they work as own account worker in household enterprises and the share is 41.2 percent. Then, second largest share goes to Regular salaried workers and the share is 30.7 percent. then 15.4 of the total shares at third place with Casual labour in public work which is followed by Casual labour in other work that is 7.8 percent. then 3.9 percent of the total share for Employer in household enterprise. Then 0.7 percent of the heads are engaged in household enterprises as helper and they account for unpaid labour force. Lastly, with the share of only 0.3 percent with the heads who are did not work but seeking employment. In order to look into the matter from gender lens, it has been found that out of the total labour force, 82.4 percent of the heads are males and 17.6 percent are females.

Sector wise Occupational status of the Heads of the Tribal Households: The results have been shown in Table 3. A sector wise comparison can be observed from the tables, it has been observed that most of the rural heads are rentiers, pensioners, remittances recipients etc that is around 26.3 percent of them and that shows that biggest share of them are outside labour force, whereas, among the urban heads, majority of them that is 27.1 percent of them are Regular salaried employee, followed by Rentiers, pensioners, remittance recipients, etc that is around 25.9 percent and then at third place own account workers with a share of 24.7 percent. A huge chunk of them that is 8.2 percent are Employer. Therefore, it has been interpreted that urban heads are relatively more into self-employment than the rural heads, whereas, rural heads are relatively more into casual work than urban heads.

Table 3: Sector wise Occupational Status of the Heads of Tribal Households

Main Occupational (Heads)	Rural Households		Urban Households	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Own Account Worker (HH Ent)	105	25.4	21	24.7
Employer (HH Ent)	5	1.2	7	8.2
Helper (HH Ent) (Unpaid HH Worker)	2	.5	-	-
Regular Salaried	71	17.1	23	27.1
Casual Labour in Public work	44	10.6	3	3.5
Casual labour in Other Types of Work	19	4.6	5	5.9
Did not work but seeking and available for work	1	2	-	-
Attended Domestic Duties and free collection of goods	48	11.6	3	3.5
Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittances	109	26.3	22	25.9
Not able to work due to disability	10	2.4	1	1.2
Total	414	100.0	85	100.0

Source: Authors' Computations

Gender Wise Occupational Status of the Heads of the Tribal Households: The table 4 shows the occupational status of the heads among the total male heads in labour force, it is seen that majority of the male heads are engaged into employment as Own account workers that is 40.9 percent, followed by 31.7 percent of them engaged in to employment as Regular salaried employee. A total of 21.9 percent of them are into employment as casual workers, whereas, 4.4 percent of them are working as Employer in household enterprises and 0.8 percent of them as unpaid helper in household enterprises.

Out of the total female heads in to labour force, majority of them, that is 42.6 percent of them are working as Own account workers in household enterprises, followed by Regular salaried employee, that 25.9 percent of them engaged in it. Whereas, into the casual work, almost 27 percent of them engaged in it. However, as an employer in the household enterprise, only 1.9 percent of them are involved.

Table 4: Occupational Status of the Heads between Male and Female Headed Tribal Households

Main Occupation (Heads)	Male-Headed Households		Female-Headed Households	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
OwnAccountWorker (HH Ent)	103	26.0	23	22.1

Employer (HH Ent)	11	2.8	1	1.0
Helper (HH Ent) (Unpaid HH Worker)	2	.5	-	-
Regular Salaried	81	20.2	14	13.5
Casual Labour in Public work	37	9.3	10	9.6
Casual labour in Other Types of Work	19	4.8	5	4.8
Did not work but seeking and available for work	-	-	1	1.0
Attended Domestic Duties and free collection of goods	17	4.3	34	32.7
Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittances	122	30.8	10	9.6
Not able to work due to disability	5	1.3	6	5.8
Total	396	100.0	104	100.0

Source: Authors' Computations

The gender wise comparison shows that there is no distinction between the different gender heads. This means that the pattern remains same across the genders. Meaning thereby, the biggest share of the heads is in the Rentier, Pensioners and Remittance Recipients, then followed by Own Account Workers and then Regular Salaried workers irrespective of the genders of the heads. Even Tehsil wise, it has been observed the same pattern of employment distribution majorly.

Block wise Occupational Status of the Heads of the Tribal Households: The study generally found that there are three main categories as per occupation status is concerned and they are Self employment, Regular Salaried Employee and Casual Workers. However, there is another category which does not fall in the labour force category but rather not in labour force category that is Pensioners, Rentiers, Remittance Recipients, etc. Thus, these are four major categories where majority of the heads are engaged in. The study shows in Table 5, that among the blocks, the blocks which have highest share in the Self employment category, are Saspol, Khaltsi, Durbuk, Rong and Turtuk. Where as, the blocks like Rupsho and Nyoma have the highest share in Casual Worker category, and Chushot is the only block which has the highest share in

Table 5: Block-wise Occupational Status of the Heads of Tribal Households

Main Occupations	Leh Block		Chushot Block		Thiksey Block		Kharu Block		Nimoo Block	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Own Account Worker (HH Ent)	28	16.5	3	15	6	27.3	2	9.1	2	9.1
Employer (HH Ent)	8	4.7	1	5.0	-	-	-	-	2	9.1
Helper (HH Ent) (Unpaid HH Worker)	1	.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Regular Salaried	40	23.5	8	40.0	1	4.5	3	13.6	4	18.2
Casual Labour in Public work	4	2.4	-	-	1	4.5	3	13.6	1	4.5

Casual labour in Other Types of Work	11	6.5	2	10.0	2	9.1	1	4.5	-	-
Did not work but seeking and available for work	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4.5	-	-
Attended Domestic Duties and free collection of goods	18	10.6	-	-	3	13.6	9	40.9	4	18.2
Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittances	56	32.9	6	30.0	9	40.9	3	13.6	9	40.9
not able to work due to disability	4	2.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	170	100.0	20	100.0	22	100.0	22	100.0	22	100.0

Source: Authors' Computations

Table 5: Block-wise Occupational Status of the Heads of Tribal Households (Cont....)

Main Occupations	Saspol Block		Skurbuchan Block		Khalsti Block		Durbuk Block		Nyoma Block	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Own Account Worker (HH Ent)	6	42.9	1	5.0	19	57.6	7	23.3	1	4.8
Employer (HH Ent)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4.8
Helper (HH Ent) (Unpaid HH Worker)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3.3	-	-
Regular Salaried	2	14.3	3	15.0	9	27.3	4	13.3	3	14.3
Casual Labour in Public work	-	-	-	-	3	9.1	4	13.3	14	66.7
Casual labour in Other Types of Work	-	-	1	5.0	1	3.0	3	10.0	-	-

Did not work but seeking and available for work	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4.8
Attended Domestic Duties and free collection of goods	-		7	35.0	-	-	4	13.3	-	-
Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittances	6	42.9	8	40.0	1	3.0	7	23.3	-	-
not able to work due to disability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	14	100.0	20	100.0	33	100.0	30	100.0	22	100.0

Source: Authors' Computations

Regular Salaried Category. However, in the category of not in labour force, the Blocks like Leh, Thiksey, Nimoo, Saspol, Durbuk and Panamik have the highest share in the category of Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittance Recipients, etc. The main reason could be the age of the heads. The majority of the heads under this category, are mostly above 60 years.

Table 5: Blockwise Occupational Status of the Heads of Tribal Households (Cont....)

Main Occupations	Rong BlockFreq (%)	Rupsho BlockFreq (%)	Diskit BlockFreq (%)	Panamik BlockFreq (%)	Turtuk BlockFreq (%)
Own Account Worker (HH Ent)	18 (54.5%)	3 (37.5%)	16 (40%)	2 (8.3%)	12 (60%)
Employer (HH Ent)	—	—	—	—	—
Helper (HH Ent) (Unpaid HH Worker)	—	—	—	—	—
Regular Salaried	—	—	11 (27.5%)	1 (4.2%)	5 (25%)
Casual Labour in Public Work	10 (30.3%)	5 (62.5%)	—	—	2 (10%)
Casual Labour in Other Types of Work	—	—	2 (5%)	1 (4.2%)	—
Did not work but seeking and available for work	3 (9.1%)	—	—	—	—
Attended Domestic Duties and free collection of goods	2 (6.1%)	—	—	4 (16.7%)	—
Rentiers, Pensioners, Remittances	—	—	11 (27.5%)	13 (54.2%)	1 (5%)
Not able to work due to disability	—	—	—	3 (12.5%)	—
Total	14 (100%)	20 (100%)	33 (100%)	24 (100%)	20 (100%)

Source: Authors' Computations

Policy Suggestions: Based on the findings, policy interventions must be tailored to address the diverse employment patterns among tribal household heads in the Ladakh region.

Firstly, given the high incidence of self-employment, particularly own-account work, there is a need for targeted skill development programs, access to credit, and market linkages to support sustainable micro-entrepreneurship. In rural areas, where income from pensions, and remittances dominates, social security schemes and pension portability can enhance financial resilience, especially for the elderly and vulnerable groups.

Secondly, for the sizable section of tribal heads engaged in casual labour, formalising informal work through social protection coverage, minimum wage enforcement, and livelihood diversification schemes is crucial.

Thirdly, in urban centres, where regular salaried employment is more prevalent, expanding reservation in public and private sectors for tribal communities and offering upskilling opportunities can improve job quality. Additionally, strengthening rural-urban employment transitions through vocational training and job placement services will ensure better mobility and adaptability.

Lastly, the region-specific policies that factor in Ladakh's geographic remoteness and harsh climatic conditions are essential for inclusive economic planning. Overall, a multidimensional livelihood strategy that combines economic support, capacity building, and institutional backing can promote sustainable employment and reduce livelihood vulnerabilities among tribal heads in the region particularly Leh district.

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