

Entreprise Sustainability in Marginalized Communities: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Tribal Entrepreneurs in Kerala

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Abstract: *This study examines the influence of the demographic factors on the sustainability of the NWFP based enterprises by the tribal entrepreneurs in Kerala with the role of start-ups and other capacity development programmes. The study uses quantitative research design using the primary data collection through questionnaire from 300 tribal entrepreneurs across 3 regions in Kerala. The data were evaluated by using Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) software version 4 for finding the relationship of demographic factors on the sustainability. Demographic factors include Gender, Marital Status, Experience, Community and Line of business. The study findings reveals that entrepreneurial experience is the main factor that influences the sustainability. Other demographic factors show weak direct relationship on sustainability. Marital status does not exhibit on the sustainability of the tribal enterprises. The findings suggest that demographic factors themselves are insufficient for the sustainability unless there are a proper entrepreneurial experience and institutional support. The policymakers and agencies should prioritize capacity building, skill development special training programs to the tribal entrepreneurs. Continuous training, mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities can significantly enhance enterprise sustainability, particularly in NWFP-based livelihoods that are highly sensitive to ecological and market uncertainties.*

Keywords: Tribal Entrepreneurship, Sustainability, Demographic Factors, NWFP, Small Enterprises, Economic Growth

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Introduction

Throughout ancient times, the tribal people have primarily resided in forested areas, maintaining a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship with nature while being separated from society. Most of the people in the surrounding area, especially the tribal community, depend on the forests for their livelihood, and their entire lifestyle is centered around the forests. The Non-Wood Forest Products (NWFPs) economy is essential and the sole source of revenue for the tribal community that lives in the forest (**Lalremruata, J. 2012 & Sulfi, P. 2022**). NWFPs play a significant role in the livelihoods of tribes and contribute to local economies. NWFPs have several benefits for tribal communities, including development and livelihood (**Ghanbari, S et al 2019**). They support rural economic growth, reduce poverty, and conserve biodiversity. NWFPs meet the various needs of subsistence communities and improve their livelihoods. They also create employment and income and support NWFP-based enterprises.

NWFP-related Entrepreneurial activities help to promote sustainable forest management and financial obligations. These enterprises will support NWFPs in value addition, processing, and marketing activities leading to increased income and employment opportunities for tribal communities by involving in entrepreneurial activities (**Harbi, J et al 2023**). For the NWFP enterprises to succeed the entrepreneurs need to upgrade their skills and awareness of the policies, similarly, the government should also lend a hand to uplift these enterprises. To reap the benefits to their fullest it is vital to know the policies and schemes provided by the government (**Pereyra, M., Aboal, D., & Rovira, F. 2021**).

Furthermore, policy implications like start-up India initiatives and other entrepreneurial development programmes seek to foster the entrepreneurial capabilities of the indigenous communities through proper mentoring, training, and institutional support. Yet, only limited studies have done how such programmes have explored the demographic characteristics and its influence on the NWFP based tribal enterprises. Recent studies have shown that even though the demographic factors may influence the entrepreneurial success of the enterprise, but this effect may be inconsistent and be more context specific particularly in the study the population is the tribal people.

In a nutshell, the specific purpose behind writing this paper is to investigate the demographic components that influence the achievement of tribal entrepreneurs who are engaged in the NWFP based marketing. Therefore, a primary reason for such the domain which would enhance the assistance to researchers, strategy- manufacturers, and the business community as well academia as for reforming the outcomes of tribal entrepreneurs success in the enterprise in Kerala.

Theoretical Underpinning and Conceptual Development

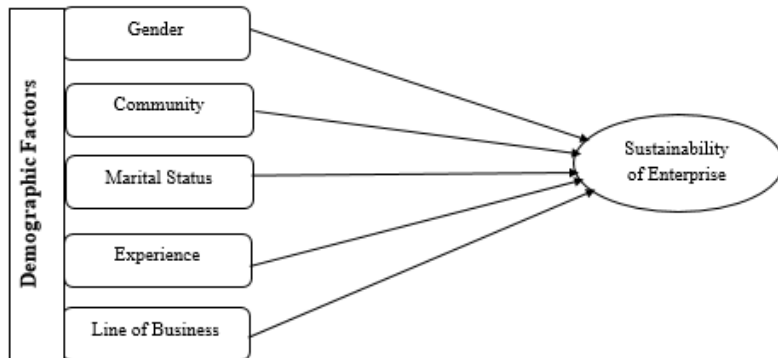
Existing literatures shows that among the indigenous communities in India Non-Wood Forests Products (NWFP) plays a significant role in their income generation, livelihood security and socio-economic development. Studies have shown that NWFP collection and marketing is the major source of income for the tribal population during the agricultural and seasonal periods (**Appasamy, 1993; Frey et al., 2021**). In Kerala, NWFPs such as medicinal plants, honey, spices, and forest produce are deeply embedded in the traditional occupation and cultural practices of tribal groups, making them a viable base for entrepreneurial activities (**Arangodan & Anilkumar, 2022**). The studies on tribal entrepreneurship shows that even though tribal communities possess a strong indigenous knowledge and resource access they still face the

significant barriers in setting up a sustainable enterprise. Limited education, lack of market awareness, inadequate access to finance, weak institutional support, and exploitation by intermediaries have been consistently identified as major constraints (Das et al., 2020; Anusree, 2021). (Frey et al., 2021) in their study explains that entrepreneurial skills, technical capability, group cohesiveness, and market conditions are required for a proper survival and growth of the tribal enterprises.

Several studies have examined the entrepreneur’s success through the influence of the demographic factors particularly in the context of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME’s). (Singh & Singhal 2015) in their study identifies that demographic factors like gender, age, marital status and experience as the important determinants of the entrepreneur’s success as they influence the access to resource, decision-making ability and managerial competence. They examined the core association of demographic variables with entrepreneurial intention among the professional students of Uttarakhand, India. (Boonchoo et al., 2013) in their study stated that demographic characteristics like age, size, location, experience, and gender significantly reveal the sets of entrepreneurial marketing variables. The study reveals that which kinds of hotels and which types of managers were concerned with entrepreneurial marketing features. (Harris & Gibson 2008) mentioned that both student characteristics and entrepreneurial experience were observed to attain specific entrepreneurial intentions. Mainly, male students acquired high scores of innovations and personal control than females. The students, who have sufficient family business experience, are more advanced entrepreneurial intentions.

Arshad, Farooq, and Afzal (2018) explored the influence of the demographic factors on the entrepreneur’s success in the SMEs in Pakistan. The study provides how does the factors like Gender, Age, Marital status and experience influences the success of the entrepreneur. The findings reveal that the entrepreneurial experience and education remain the stronger influence on the entrepreneurial success. (Saeed et al, 2015) explained that the experience remains the most relevant factor in predicting the entrepreneur success, while other demographical factors show inconsistent results. The findings suggested that demographic factors are insufficient to ensure business success unless they translate into relevant skills, competencies, and practical knowledge.

Figure1: Conceptual framework of the study



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Furthermore, demographically, age, gender, education, and experience of the task are being stated to have influence business achievement. Highly literate individuals are productive, creative and innovative as they look for bringing out new brands in human society as per fulfilment of needs or demands as well human wants in a civil society (Ndubisi et al., 2003). (Kavita et al., 2008) in the study denotes that seasonable female are more effective in becoming entrepreneurs when compares to illiterate and inexperienced females. Although these studies have contributed to the sustainability of the enterprise they are mostly concentrated on SME's and urban business environment. Only limited studies have conducted studies on the tribal entrepreneurship and forests-based enterprises. Also, no studies have been conducted on the NWFP based enterprises and their sustainability, which are embedded with institutional and community-based constraints. The role of government led start-up programmes and various training interventions as mechanisms for enhancing the sustainability in tribal entrepreneurship remains unexplored.

Thus, the present study focuses on the influence of the demographic factors on the sustainability of the NWFP based tribal enterprises. From the above literatures it is clear that there is a relevant gap in the field of the sustainability of the tribal enterprises on the community based and NWFP based firms. So, the following hypothesis were formed for the further investigation in the study.

H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between Gender and Sustainability of enterprise.

H2: There is a positive and significant relationship between Marital Status and Sustainability of enterprise.

H3: There is a positive and significant relationship between Experience and Sustainability of enterprise.

H4: There is a positive and significant relationship between Community and Sustainability of enterprise.

H5: There is a positive and significant relationship between Line of business and Sustainability of enterprise.

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to investigate the influence of the various demographic factors on the sustainability of the tribal enterprises. For this purpose, the study was empirically achieved by applying well-structured questionnaire and the analysis of the data was done by using PLS-SEM version 4. This study focuses on tribal entrepreneurs related to the NWFP and the data was collected from 300 tribal entrepreneurs across 3 regions in Kerala. Data from tribal entrepreneurs connected to NWFP is gathered through a multi-stage random sampling method. The study's sample design is divided into two phases. Every stage's sample is chosen using the random sampling technique. For the first stage, out of 36 forest divisions, 20 were randomly selected to study. These are located in 3 regions of Kerala, and they are divided into 8 forest circles. Secondly, the 300 tribal entrepreneurs are selected on the basis of the proportion of the number of EDC/ VSS, society outlets, and vanashree outlets from these three regions by random sampling. 162 tribal entrepreneurs from the south region, 97 tribal entrepreneurs from the central region, and 41 tribal entrepreneurs from the north region were selected.

By using a questionnaire schedule, data were collected from 300 tribal entrepreneurs who are engaged in NWFP collection/marketing in Kerala, which are much enough for running structural equation modelling (Hoyle,2015; Hair et.al.,2019; Bentler and Chou,1987). For assessing the demographic factors, the initial section includes questions on gender, age, marital status, educational level, duration of experience, type of family and line of business they are

engaged. The final section includes the questions related to survival of the enterprise. In this study, the measurement items were adapted from the literature and the pilot study. The construct sustainability of the enterprises was measured by 4 items which was adapted from (Bahuguna,2022), the 4 items were: My firm does not face a threat to its sustainability although many challenges are present (SE1), My company can survive to become successful as it is efficiently solving the problem of customers (SE2), I do not intend to close my business in the upcoming years (SE3), I believe that the business's favourable balance of total revenues guarantees its sustainability (SE4). Five-point Likert scale put into use like strongly disagrees and strongly agrees been applied to judge the perceived and expected success that included four items and confined into one variable. Demographic factors were independent variables for the research study. As part of gaining demographic knowledge of the respondents, we have focused only four demographic features: gender, Marital status, line of business, and experience.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Demographics	Number of Respondents (N=300)	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	244	81.3
Female	56	18.7
<i>Age (Years)</i>		
Up to 30 Years	42	14
30 Years -40 Years	90	30
40 Years-50 Years	92	30.7
Above 50 Years	76	25.3
<i>Community</i>		
PVTG	141	47
Non-PVTG	159	53
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Married	244	81.3
Unmarried	56	18.7
<i>Type of Family</i>		
Joint	212	70.7
Nuclear	88	29.3
<i>Experience of Tribal Entrepreneurs in Entrepreneurial Activity:</i>		
Up to 1 year	75	25
1 to 5 years	59	19.7
More than 5 years	166	55.3
<i>Line of Business</i>		
NWFP Collection and processing	35	11.7
Marketing / Trading	8	2.7
Both	257	85.7

Source: authors' own work

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The demographic details of the respondents are explained in Table 1 above. The table clearly demonstrates that most of the respondents are male (81.3%), females are (18.7%). With regards to the age of tribal entrepreneurs, 30.7 percent belong to the age group 40–50, followed by the age group 30–40, which constitutes of 30 percent. The age group above 50 constitutes 25.3 percent, and the age group up to 30 consists of 14 percent. On the basis of community, 53 percent belong to Non PVTG community, and the remaining 47 percent belong to the PVTG community. When we examine the marital status of the tribal entrepreneurs, it is seen that 81.7 percent are married and 18.3 percent are unmarried. Based on the type of family, 70.7 percent of tribal entrepreneurs are from joint families, and the remaining 29.3 percent are from nuclear families. 55.3 percent tribal entrepreneurs have more than 5 years of entrepreneurial activity. 25 percent have up to 1 year of experience in entrepreneurial activity and 19.7 percent have between 1 to 5 years of entrepreneurial experience. 85.7 percent of tribal entrepreneurs are engaged in NWFP collection and marketing. 11.7 percent of tribal entrepreneurs are engaged in NWFP collection and processing. 2.7 percent of tribal entrepreneurs are only engaged in marketing or trading of NWFPs.

Model Estimation and Hypotheses Confirmation

The relationship between the constructs and its items are assessed by the evaluation of the measurement model. In the study at the first stage the lower order constructs were assessed to know whether they fit the model in the study. The assessment of lower order constructs consists of evaluating the reliability and validity of the lower order constructs and also the indicators in the study were reflective model (Chin, 2010; Chua et al., 2016). The reliability and validity are tested in the PLS-SEM using many tests like factor loadings and composite reliability, Convergent validity and AVE (Average Variance Extracted) (Hair et al., 2014).

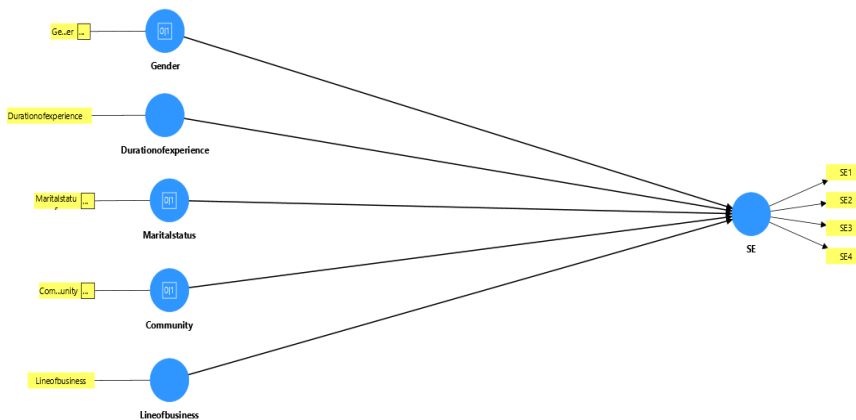


Figure 1: Assessment of model (Author's own work)

Table 2: Validity and Reliability of Construct

Constructs/ Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	AVE
SE		0.754	0.787	0.532
SE1	0.725			
SE2	0.865			
SE3	0.741			
SE4	0.706			

Source: Authors' Own work

The table 2 demonstrates the reliability and validity measures for the lower order constructs. The factor loadings in the study were in the range of the threshold limit which is greater than 0.7 (Hair et al.,2014). In the study all the items were having better loadings also composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha was also determined for assessing the reliability. All the items in the study have exceeded the recommended value of (0.7) for both the measures (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The validity was assessed by checking the AVE (Average Variance Extracted). In this study all the items have achieved the convergent validity by assessing the AVE which exceeds the recommended value which is greater than 0.5 (Gefen et al.,2000).

The assessment of the structural model in this study is done on the basis of values of path coefficients (β), t value and p values as prescribed by (Hair et al.,2014). The significance level of the path coefficients was ascertained by the procedure of bootstrapping with the resample of 10000 samples as done in the past studies by (Henseler et al.,2015).

Table 3: Assessment of structural model:

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	t-values	p-values	decision
H1	Gender-SE	0.266	0.042	2.530	0.000	Supported
H2	Marital Status-SE	0.168	0.037	0.383	0.325	Not Supported
H3	Experience-SE	0.487	0.012	14.318	0.024	Supported
H4	Community-SE	0.354	0.014	8.589	0.000	Supported
H5	Line of business-SE	0.145	0.053	7.669	0.001	Supported

Source: Authors' Own work

As shown in table 3 the relationship of Gender on SE is positive and significant ($\beta=0.266, P<0.05$), Hence, H1 was supported. Also, the experience of the entrepreneurs has a positive and significant effect on SE ($\beta=0.487, P<0.05$) hence H3 was supported. Marital status does not influence on the SE ($\beta=0.168, P=0.325$) so, H2 was not supported. Community has a positive and significant influence on the SE with ($\beta=0.354, P<0.05$) so H4 was supported. The line of business also influences SE positively and is also significant ($\beta= 0.145, P<0.05$). In the above table it is very clear that all the demographic factors except marital status influences the sustainability of the enterprises.

Discussions

The present study was undertaken to explore the relationship of the demographic factors on the sustainability of the tribal enterprises engaged in NWFP in Kerala. PLS-SEM analysis was done on the collected from 300 tribal entrepreneurs across 3 regions in Kerala mainly North, Central and South. the study provides empirical evidence on how individual-level demographic characteristics shape enterprise sustainability in a community-based and resource-dependent entrepreneurial context.

The structural model in the study explains that all the demographic factors like Gender, Community, Experience and Line of business have significant influence on the sustainability of the enterprise, whereas Marital status of the tribes does not have a significant effect. The findings reveals that Gender has a positive and statistically significant effect on enterprise sustainability, supporting H1. This suggests that gender-based differences continue to play an important role in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes among tribal communities. In the context of NWFP-based enterprises, gender may influence access to forest resources, participation in collective institutions such as VSS/EDC, decision-making autonomy, and engagement in value-adding activities.

The study also finds that experience is the strongest predictor of the sustainability of the tribal enterprises. Tribal entrepreneurs with greater experience in NWFP collection, processing, or marketing are better equipped to manage seasonal fluctuations, price volatility, regulatory challenges, and ecological uncertainties. Experience enhances indigenous knowledge, market familiarity, and operational efficiency, all of which are critical for sustaining enterprises dependent on forest resources. Also, the line of business also influences the sustainability of the tribal enterprise, Tribal entrepreneurs engaged in diversified activities such as combined NWFP collection, processing, and marketing exhibit higher sustainability than those confined to a single activity. Contrary to expectations, marital status does not show a significant relationship with enterprise sustainability, leading to the rejection of H2. This finding suggests that marital responsibilities neither enhance nor constrain the sustainability of tribal enterprises in a meaningful way.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to many theoretical contributions to the concept on entrepreneurship, sustainability and tribal livelihoods. Firstly, the study results shows that importance of the entrepreneurship theory by explaining that demographic factors may have limited explanatory power in predicting the enterprise sustainability in the community based and contexts. While earlier studies shows that demographic factors such as gender, marital status or social background as the key determinants of the entrepreneurial success, the present study suggests that such factors may be less relevant when the enterprise are in the form of community based or resource dependent form such as NWFP based livelihoods. Also, the study extends the theory of the Human Capital Theory by providing the empirical insights that experience as one of the major determinants of the enterprise sustainability. In tribal contexts experience consists not only business knowledge but also the sustainable indigenous knowledge, familiarity with forests government institutions and develop strategies that would be adaptive to them.

From the managerial aspect the study offers several insights to the policymakers, development agencies involved in promoting the tribal entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods. The study results shows that experience as the strongest influencer in the sustainability of the enterprise, so policymakers and agencies should prioritize capacity

building, skill development special training programs to the tribal entrepreneurs. Continuous training, mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities can significantly enhance enterprise sustainability, particularly in NWFP-based livelihoods that are highly sensitive to ecological and market uncertainties. The government institutions and the development agencies such as VSS, EDC's, Co-operative Societies should facilitate peer learning, mentorship, and knowledge-sharing platforms where experienced tribal entrepreneurs can guide fresh aspirants. Finally, the results implies that for enhancing the sustainability of the tribal enterprises engaged in NWFP requires long term approach for that support from the institutional livelihood promotion, forests conservation and market linkage development is needed.

Conclusion

The study focused on the influence of the key demographic and experiential factors on the sustainability of the tribal enterprise engaged in the Non-Wood Forests Products in Kerala using PLS-SEM approach. The data collected from 300 tribal entrepreneurs across 3 regions in Kerala was analysed to find the empirical insights in the study to know how the individual characteristics will be enabled in the sustainability of the community based and resource dependent enterprises. The findings reveals that all the demographic factors such as gender, Community, Experience, line of business except marital status influences the sustainability of the tribal enterprises. The study results shows that experience as the strongest influencer in the sustainability of the enterprise, so policymakers and agencies should prioritize capacity building, skill development special training programs to the tribal entrepreneurs. Continuous training, mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities can significantly enhance enterprise sustainability, particularly in NWFP-based livelihoods. Nevertheless, the demographic constructs have a positive and significant role to raise the entrepreneurs in Kerala. Finally, the study may contribute to reinforcement the business by upgrading demographic variables.

The study is not free from certain limitations. The study used cross-sectional data for factors like gender, education, experience, age and survival of entrepreneurs. Due to frequent change in such the variables, the study may not reflect the dynamics of the data, which would have a convinced influence on the conclusions. Another limitation is that the research has only consisted of 300 samples. Such the number may not represent the whole population of the entrepreneurs of Kerala.

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