

VOICES FROM THE GROUND: TRIBAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT UNDER THE PRADHAN MANTRI VAN DHAN VIKAS YOJANA

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Abstract: This study explores the role of the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) in empowering tribal women, with reference to the Karbi community under the Lumbajong Development Block in Karbi Anglong District, Assam. PMVDVY, an initiative of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Government of India, that aims to enhance the livelihood opportunities of tribal communities by developing forest-based value chains and promoting skill development and capacity building. The scheme encourages the formation of self-sustaining tribal clusters to process and add value to minor forest produce (MFP), thereby increasing income levels.

A key component of PMVDVY is the establishment of Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs), where tribal women receive training in value-added product creation such as soap making, candle production, incense stick preparation, and jam processing. These training centers also facilitate market linkage opportunities, enabling tribal women to sell their products and generate income. The initiative seeks to foster entrepreneurship among tribal women by equipping them with the necessary skills, tools, and market access to become economically self-reliant. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of PMVDVY in empowering tribal women and contributing to their socio-economic development through sustainable livelihood practices.

Keywords: PMVDVY, women empowerment, tribal women, beneficiaries, public policy

Introduction

The Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) is a flagship programme of Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM), launched by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Government of India, on 14th April 2018. Spearheaded by the Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the scheme aims to strengthen the socio-economic perspectives of tribal communities through the value addition and marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP). In Assam, the programme is being executed by the Assam Plains Tribes Development Corporation (APTDC) as the State Implementing Agency, and the Directorate of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes (DWPTBC) as the Nodal Agency. As per recent data, the scheme has expanded across all 33 districts of the state, with 227 functional Van Dhan Vikas Kendra Clusters (VDVKCs) established out of the 471 sanctioned clusters, each comprising 300 tribal beneficiaries. The total number of registered beneficiaries under these functional VDVKCs stands at 68,100 (Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, 2024).

Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) is a program that has been initiated with a purpose of sustaining and encouraging Minor Forest Produces (MFPs) which are critical to the living standards of tribal populations. The scheme itself has a nomenclature meaning Pradhan Mantri means the Prime Minister, Vana means Forest, Dhan means wealth or products, Vikas means development and Yojana means a scheme. Overall, the name of the scheme shows it is a Government of India program, initiated by the Prime Minister, with the aim of promoting the creation and growth of forest-based products (Srivani *et al.*, 2022). The PMVDVY or the Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (VDVY) seeks to enhance the livelihood condition of the Indians in the tribal population by targeting the creation of value chains and forest products alongside empowering tribal livelihoods through skill training and capacity building. According to this scheme, the tribal groups are grouped into clusters and they are urged to engage in managing and value addition of the forest produce in order to improve the economic values of these resources. The scheme offers these clusters the opportunity to be supported with the necessary infrastructure such as tools, equipments, and entrepreneurship and value additional techniques training.

Also, with the help of PMVDVY, tribal populations are opened to income-generating opportunities as market links are made available to them via several distribution channels like retailer, online and other trade outlets. The scheme has

taken the systematic three-level implementation model with the establishment of Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) in the village level, Van Dhan Vikas Sanrakshan Samitis in the cluster level, and Van Dhan Vikas Samuhs in the district level (GOI) (2021).

This multi-layered structure encourages entrepreneurial practices among tribal communities but also helps in the conservation of forests and preservation of biodiversity makes it significant. The overall objective of the scheme is to make sure that there is fair returns to the forest gatherers and thus their traditional occupation becomes sustainable. The scheme helps tribal groups by empowering them to harvest and primary process MFPs, besides infrastructural and financial assistance, training programs and demonstrative toolkits (TRIFED, 2021). It is important to mention that these tribal gatherers are more concerned with the non-timber forest products that are the central part of MFPs, whereas timber is not the central part as they concentrate on planting trees as the small part of their cultural and ecological value system.

The term empowerment was first coined in the 1920s yet it was still unknown until the 1970s when it started to be applied more widely in international forums. Ideologically, the process of empowerment refers to the improvement of the control of a disadvantaged or less powerful group to a level that is comparable to that of a powerful group. Empowerment, in its turn, is a human interaction process that allows people with the right tools, resources, and environment to empower them by allowing them to build capabilities, competencies, and develop their capacity to accomplish personal goals (Haddad & Toney-Butler, 2024). With the issue of women empowerment, the process has played a major role in empowering women to the extent that they are no longer working in the agricultural sector but participate in knitting and sewing among other livelihood practices. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in this change through provision of training and information regarding savings and credit systems thus leading to economic independence (Mehra, 1997). Conventionally, women have assumed not only the vital roles in the home as childcare and geriatric workers, but also in labor work such as weaving and farming. They also engage in agricultural activities on a large scale. Nonetheless, women are often not provided with modern technology and pertinent training even when they are engaged. This underscores the importance of transferring the agricultural technologies to the women farmers in an attempt to ensure that they become more productive so that they can be able

to sustain themselves economically. However, it is also found that in most third world countries, the existing extension systems do not sufficiently meet the specific needs of rural women, thus it is also important to make women more accessible to agricultural knowledge and skills (Nath, (Singh and Deka, 2024).

Raising the voice of women also forms the important element in both human rights and sustainable development targets as is evident in the areas such as Punjab. It serves as key indicator in the realisation of international engagements, including the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development. Issues like employment, experience of cosmopolitanism, accessibility to clean and hygienic living conditions, knowledge of the rights of law, better health care accessibility and involvement in political activities such as voting has been definitely associated with empowerment in this region. Moreover, the fact that the woman consented to marry has been listed among the important signs of empowerment (Batool, Anwar, Asghar, and Rehman, 2020). Skill training and education and especially in regard to agriculture and rural jobs, plays a role in poverty reduction in the case of tribal people. These programs play a major role in enhancing the socio-economic statuses in the rural areas, and more so, by involving the youths in the formal and informal working sectors. Involvement of young people in these sectors can be used to improve the welfare in the rural regions. Nevertheless, to tribal women, education is still a great challenge. Some of them fail to pursue their education and in most cases, they have to leave school in the middle because of the constant financial strains. Moreover, once these women become of a certain age in life, other social and cultural issues also contribute to their inability to access the educational opportunities (Sindhi, 2012).

Significance of the Study

This paper aims to highlight the significance of the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana. (PMVDVY) in enhancing the empowerment of tribal women, and in this case, Karbi community in the Lumbajong Development Block. In the chosen region, the role of the government in PMVDVY is proactively helping the rural poor within tribal communities especially in women. The program will target to empower the economic status of tribal women in a bid to equip them with income generation and skills. The proposed research aims to learn the areas of critical concern where PMVDVY has impacted most, which can, consequently, inform and enhance future policies and development programs. The results can be used in the greater poverty reduction and women empowerment program, particularly in the socio-economic

background of the disadvantaged tribal communities (Chauhan, Srivastava, Sharma and Arya, 2022).

Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) was successfully implemented by the Prime Minister of India in Tripura on 11 th January 2020. According to Directorate of tribal welfare, Government of Tripura, this scheme was oriented to the specific purpose of creating livelihood opportunities to the tribal groups by linking the source of forest, which is called van dhan. The overall objective of PMVDVY is to develop entrepreneurship among Minor Forest Produce (MFP) gatherers and tribal artisans by facilitating the ability of forest-based products owners to process and add value (Pradhan Mantri van dhana yojana (Official Website of Directorate of tribal Welfare, 2023).

A total of 32 Van Dhan Vikas Kendra Clusters (VDVKCs) were approved and operationalized in the procurement and value addition of MFPs which included broom grass, amla, tamarind and gandhaki in Tripura. More 25 VDVKCs were sanctioned in the 20222023 financial year and 27 more were announced in 20232024 specifically on Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups PVTGs, reflecting the increasing scale of the scheme and its inclusiveness (Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024). Another similar study by Srivani *et al.* (2022) is entitled Knowledge of Tribal Farmers about VDVK Activities in Andhra Pradesh since it is about the experience of tribal farmers in Rampachodavaram, Andhra Pradesh, during the implementation of PMVDVY. The study highlights the importance of the Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs) in general development of tribal areas. It points out that despite having high market demand and high post-harvest losses are still common, Scheduled Tribes (STs) traditionally practice the activities of agriculture and forest product gathering. The research praises the fact that the recipients must be provided with knowledge that will allow them to add value, such as appropriate packaging methods and quality enhancement. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of advising tribal participants on the scheme and its workings to keep them informed about technical progress and not be exploited by middlemen and increase their earnings and livelihoods (Srivani *et al.*, 2022).

Within a report by The Van Dhan Yojana: 200 Days Report, March 2020, the first results of the scheme are outlined in detail. It also lays strong stress on the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) component, which is designed in such a manner that it does not exploit tribal gatherers, but rather

pays them to the right amount. The report does not confine to the acquisition of raw MFPs, but it elaborates on how the resources would be transformed into value add products. These value added products are then processed and stored at the Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) where the tribal beneficiaries are trained on the available tools and machinery to improve the quality of their products and the production skills. In addition, products produced in accordance with the scheme are registered by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), which ensures that they agree with state food safety and quality standards. This certification does not only guarantee the safety of the consumers, but also leads to the commercialization of the products thereby playing a huge role in the generation of incomes and financial stability of tribal communities (Van Dhan Yojana: 200 Days Report, 2020).

Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) is a project that will help the tribal communities enter the economic arena by making the utilization of forestry resources justifiable. The scheme was initiated according to the directions of the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) to deliver financial assistance, skill training, and mentorship services to the tribes as specified in the official portal of the Indian Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF) (Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, PMVDVY, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, Development in Forest Villages, Forest Products (Indian Brand Equity Foundation IBEF, 2023). This program is not only expected to improve the entrepreneurial capacities of tribal populations, but will also solve such structural factors as the absence of land and housing rights, the impossibility of collecting Minor Forest Produces (MFPs), exploitation by the middlemen, expulsion of the tribespeople, and the underdevelopment of forest villages in general. The TRIFED principles underline that the Indian tribal communities are in a dire need of forest ecosystems to supply them with their day-to-day sustenance and even their livelihood, especially by gathering the non-timber MFPs such as fruits, nuts, resins, and even the medicinal herbs (TRIFED, 2023.). These MFPs form the backbone of economic stability and food security of the tribal population. PMVDVY trains tribal gatherers and furnishes them with toolkits that boost their value addition and primary processing capacity through Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs). The measures assist in enhancing productivity, sustainable harvesting, and environmental conservation. MFPs are the keystones to tribal forest economies unlike timber which is often secondary. The PMVDVY therefore provides a grave balance between the environmental

stewardship and the economic development as it provides a sustainable livelihood model to the tribal groups (TRIFED, 2023).

According to the national vision, i.e. Vocal for Local and Go Tribal i.e. Mera Van Mera Dhan Mera Udyam, the PMVDVY is helping tribal entrepreneurship, particularly in the North-Eastern states of India where the forest-tribe relationship is so ingrained. A study on tribal entrepreneurship in North-East India has revealed that the scheme has played a significant role in the generation of income and its sustainability, which is mostly attributed to the partnership between communities and the government (Promoting and Backing Tribal Entrepreneurship in North-East India by the Virtue of Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojna - ProQuest, 2000). The institutionalization of support systems to the MFP-based economic activities, especially in MFP-rich districts has been encouraged by the formation of VDVKS by ten Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The scheme enjoys wide reach and scalability as evidenced by the implementation that covers 27 states. This would specifically apply to a nation such as India where 21.67 percent of the entire land is forested and the tribal masses live in the ecosystems (TRIFED. 2000).

The usefulness of the PMVDVY initiative is also backed by empirical research. The paper investigated the access of 110 women members of VDVKS to information about farm-related matters and their involvement in agricultural activities through PMVDY in the districts of Churachandpur, Thoubal, Imphal East, and Kangpokpi in Manipur. The results showed that women used mainly interpersonal sources of information including village leaders, members of Panchayat, and peers unlike the sources of information like banks and formal institutions. It is important to note that government extension agents and NGOs/SHGs were considered to be the valuable channels of information distribution as well (Nath *et al.*, n.d.). With such important contribution of women during agriculture, child care and elder care and household work, there are still many cases of women being denied entry into contemporary agriculture training and technological advances. The research has highlighted how provision of capacity-building and agricultural training programs in institutions such as Central Agricultural University, Imphal, PMVDY can go a long way in achieving economic productivity and gender empowerment in the tribal regions (Nath *et al.*, 2021).

These were supported by complementary results of a study conducted in East and South Sikkim. Among 110 members of VDVK, 70% of tribal women were informed about farm related matters through friends and more than 60 percent by

Panchayat leaders as compared to none of the tribal women who depended on the family members to pass information to them. These women, despite their critical role in the food security and agricultural labour, are being underrepresented in the extension services. The paper has observed the insatiable demand of improved access to agricultural knowledge to improve productivity and sustainable agriculture. Moreover, it established that tribal women are not only the sources of labor but also quality and efficiency in the agricultural sector, which makes them essential actors in attaining sustainable rural development (Nath *et al.*, 2022). Putting these results together, the literature is categorical on the fact that the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana is not a tribal welfare scheme, but a comprehensive development plan. It incorporates the livelihood production, environmental conservation, gender empowerment and decentralized rule, thus allowing tribal people to develop as self-sufficient economic participants. Nonetheless, there are still loopholes in the area of equal access to knowledge systems, technological assistance, and institutional frameworks. These will have to be addressed in order to achieve the full transformative potential of PMVDVY in various tribal geographies in India.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a concept that entails the independence of women in making their own decisions, accessing resources and also being given the opportunity to engage fruitfully in social, economic and political life. Völker and Doneys (2021) in their comparative study dwell on the differences between the understandings of women empowerment in Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam and how the cultural, economic, and social context influences the ways women understand empowerment. The paper highlights that although collective efforts are undertaken to empower women, most of them are not sustainable because they take a limited institutional stand. These organizations tend to perceive themselves as outside actors, thereby limiting their involvement at the local level and community ownership and thus their effects. The low agency of women, however, is not always because of the insufficient agency but rather the outcome of the institutional distance between women and local realities (Völker & Doneys, 2021).

It is in line with this that the article titled Women Empowerment (Sharma, 2020) explores how educational training and skill development programs can be used to improve the livelihoods of tribal women in India. The study describes activities that offer training on farm forestry, papad production, sewing, cooking, and sanitary

pad creation, which create self-employment and financial self-sufficiency. But the research mentions that tribal women experience a lot of obstacles such as domestic violence, physical and mental abuse and social resistance all of which are further exacerbated by the gendered family roles and entrenched societal prejudice. Although both governmental and non-governmental institutions promote the establishment of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in order to amend these problems, the lack of formal business education inhibits women to receive a stable job and be economically independent. It is important to note that one of the current trends is the increasing number of rural women who take part in household income with the help of micro-enterprises and homestead farming, which is the evidence of the change in the traditional gender roles and the rise of female involvement in the economy (Sharma, 2020).

Rathod *et al.* (2018) explore Self-Help Groups (SHGs) role in empowering women in Gujarat and specifically in Dahod district where SHGs have played important roles in promoting economic independence and social inclusion. It concludes that in spite of the many advantages of SHG membership such as access to better financial services and elimination of harassment in banks where women continue to have various challenges. These involve education, motivation, technical training and marketing opportunities, which do not favour the complete implementation of SHG model. However, SHGs have become widely known in Asia as a powerful tool of poverty alleviation and women mobilization, especially in the rural areas. SHGs help women to become micro-entrepreneurs by promoting income-generating activities, a fact that is favourable to the national development goal in general (Rathod *et al.*, 2018).

In the regional outlooks of Batool, Anwar, Asghar, and Rehman (2020), the aspect is transformed to Punjab wherein the empowerment of women is addressed in relation to the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development. The study establishes a few factors that have a positive relationship with the empowerment of women and they include employment, cosmopolitan views, sanitary living conditions, legal knowledge, access to healthcare, political activities such as voting and marrying of choice. However, the research report portrays that joint family structures and patriarchal practices are a great setback to women empowerment in the northern part of Punjab. Social norms that are male-dominated still restrict the way women are involved in paid labor and inheritance of property that uphold the economic reliance and marginalization of women. The research supports the notion that the

empowerment of women is the key to lasting personal well-being as well as ensuring the sustainable economic growth and the advancement of human rights (Batoool *et al.*, 2020).

Together, these works reveal the multi-dimensionality and ambiguousness of the issue of women empowerment due to cultural, institutional, and structural influence. Although such efforts as SHGs, skills development, and institutional support are promising, it has been found in the literature that empowerment needs to be context, community, and holistic in its design. Moreover, it is important to deal with interpersonal, systemic, and societal obstacles to achieve maximum potential of women in rural as well as tribal areas. Empowerment is not only about the economic upliftment but also about appreciation, agency and long-term participation in every sphere of life.

Women and Empowerment of tribal women

The empowerment of tribal women in India is a complex problem that is based on socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. In the article *Prospects and Challenges in Empowerment of Tribal Women*, Sindhi (2012) explains that the main approaches of empowering tribal women in Gujarat are based on education and skill development. The paper claims that the two spheres were critical in alleviating poverty among the tribal groups. Empowerment programs can also improve the socioeconomic status of tribal women by providing them with agricultural and vocational skills. The study however also focuses on structural challenges particularly the financial constraints and the social conventions that result in a large number of tribal girls dropping out of school at an early age. This is an indicator that there is a pressing necessity of regulatory framework that are more than comprehensive; they are complex to the extraordinary cultural and socio-economic realities of tribal women. Specialized programs, such as financial assistance and adaptable educational frameworks, are necessary in obtaining the continuity of education and empowerment in the long run (Sindhi, 2012).

Likewise, in the article *Promoting Tribal Entrepreneurship: Towards a Holistic Strategy*, Sahu, (2021) points at the economic marginalization of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India. Tribal groups are usually facing structural exclusion on basic facilities like education, health, housing, and jobs, contributing to intergenerational poverty. The article suggests tribal entrepreneurship as a transformational system of empowerment. It also promotes multi-stakeholder relationships with the

participation of the private sector, NGOs, and the local governance institutions to form an enabling environment. Notably, the authors of the study also state that it is crucial to tailor training programs that would not just equip the people of the tribes with vocational skills, but also entrepreneurial skills. These programs can transform tribal people into independent entrepreneurs, who can develop the community and earn their own income in the long term, using the available resources and support (Sahu, 2021).

Pramila (2014) in *A Critical Analysis of the Socio-Economic Status of Tribal Women in Tamil Nadu* provides a regional study to investigate the type of migration of the tribal people in the forests and hilly areas to urban regions due to a desire to acquire education and jobs. The paper provides detailed analysis of the differences in literacy by quoting statistics of the census of 2001, which indicates that the literacy rate of tribal women living in rural Tamil Nadu was 29.48 and in the urban community it was 50.68. The research also provides the occupational tendencies, according to which a big percentage of tribal women were involved in agriculture and agricultural work, with the minor involvement in the formal sector. Such absence of diversity in employment, as well as education, puts tribal women in a unique disadvantage. According to the findings, the state policies should tackle the issue of literacy shortage and provide tribal women with diversified sources of livelihoods to enhance their social-economic status (Pramila, 2014).

In the article *Socioeconomic Empowerment of Tribal Women in High Altitude and Tribal Zone in Andhra Pradesh (Socioeconomic-Empowerment-of-Tribal-Women-*, n.d.), the same issue is discussed and the authors focus on the necessity to pay tribute to the role of tribal women in forest economies. Most of the times, these women along with their children are primarily responsible of harvesting and handling Minor Forest Produce (MFPs). They also engage in ploughing, sowing, storing of grains, and other farming tasks. Although tribal women contribute greatly in the management of natural resources and farming, illiteracy, decision making structures that are dominated by men as well as social and cultural barriers are some of the factors that restrain them. The investigation proposes the need to make them more visible and as such, the policy of empowerment should be context-specific and gender-sensitive in order to deal with the imbalance which still exists in tribal areas.

In a bigger scope of women empowerment in rural India, Mehra (1997) gives an account of how tribal women have historically been restricted to working on the farms, with little chances of economic diversification. Since 1950s, development

agencies have implemented programs, which provide temporary and part-time jobs like knitting and sewing. NGOs have played a major role in training women on savings and credit which has helped them to gain some financial independence. The empowerment pathway as proposed by Mehra shows that despite the efforts, there are still more detailed and holistic interventions that are needed to bring about long-term change in the economic roles of tribal women (Mehra, 1997).

On a more national scale, in *Social and Economic Status of Tribal Women in India and the challenges and the road ahead*, Chatterjee (2014) gives a very graphic picture of the various roles of tribal women in household and agricultural productivity. The study observes that tribal women are seen to be industrious than their male counterparts, since they are involved in domestic labor, child care and hard labor in the fields. Yet, in spite of their efforts, they still face the endemic inequality in the form of low wages, poor access to healthcare, poor education, and poor livelihoods. These structural deficits support marginalization and bar socio-economic mobility. Chatterjee proposes an immediate policy action increasing access to education, health services, and livelihood opportunities that would address the specifics of tribal women. These are efforts that are necessary in the name of equity, but also national development, since tribal women form an equally large but not fully exploited workforce (Chatterjee, 2014).

When interpreting these results, one can make a conclusion that the process of empowerment of tribal women in India is a complicated and dynamic phenomenon. The reviewed literature reveals that despite all the efforts of various programs including skill development and entrepreneurship, SHGs and educational programmes most of them have not been effective enough in dealing with structural and cultural load that tribal women encounter. Tribal women empowerment should be seen as a multi-faceted approach, which includes education, livelihood diversification, political inclusion, availability of health services, and awareness of indigenous knowledge regimes. The objective of true empowerment will not be achieved without an intersectional, holistic, and culturally sensitive approach.

Research Gap

The discussion of the existing literature has speculatively helped in building up an insight into the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) and what it entails in the socio-economic empowerment of the tribal women in India. Many studies have enumerated the role of PMVDVY in influencing the livelihood path

of tribal communities with a point to the fact that women have many-sided roles in these interventions, which are socially, economically, and culturally diverse (Srivani *et al.*, 2022; Batool *et al.*, 2020). The literature review also suggests that tribal women are also included in the category of financial contributors in their families, especially by participating in the collection and value addition of Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) (Nath *et al.*, 2022; TRIFED, n.d.). According to a number of studies, tribal women tend to be homemakers or collectors of forest products, and they are not mobile and do not have access to larger market potentials (Völker & Doneys, 2021, Chatterjee, 2014).

Although this is an increasing body of work, there are still certain gaps that have not been filled. The effectiveness of market linkages that are implemented under PMVDVY is one of the major aspects that still need to be explored. Although the scheme facilitates commercial access to tribal products, little evidence exists about the effectiveness of tribal producers to these markets, and structural bottlenecks to access the markets to get profitable returns (Singh, 2021). There is a gap in research that is critical as it is necessary to investigate these linkages in terms of their sustainability, inclusiveness, and equity, particularly in geographies that are remote and tribal. Also, the lack of investigations into the implementation of modern technologies and innovative practices into the traditional MFP collection and processing schemes exists. This is an under-researched area yet it has the potential of enhancing productivity, quality and market preparedness of tribal goods in a great way. The urgent situation is to examine how such machineries can be brought to the context of tribal realities without sacrificing ecological sustainability or disturbing the cultural ethos of the people involved (Singh, 2021).

Moreover, the socio-cultural implications of the implementation of PMVDVY have a significant gap in understanding. Although the scheme is a motivator towards commercialization of forest resources, little research exists on the effect that this transition would have on the traditional livelihoods, indigenous value systems and tribal identity. As an example, the promotion of the economic results based on the market mechanism might change the nature of the community, gender roles, and common practices that have been held alive since the times of tribal traditions (Völker & Doneys, 2021; Chatterjee, 2014). With this, there arises the need to determine the cultural changes occasioned by such interventions and if they culminate in empowerment or cultural displacement.

Thus, although present research has determined the potential of PMVDVY in encouraging the economic life of tribal women, there still exists a lot of vacuum in exploring the breadth, inclusiveness, and sustainability of the same. In order to address these gaps, the research aims at studying these socio-economic circumstances of tribal women who have been beneficiaries of the PMVDY and their degree of involvement in the plan. To gain understanding towards the measurement of the scheme impact and policy amendments and lived experiences of tribal women in Lumbajong Development Block (LDB) at Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India, a qualitative inquiry has been made.

Methodology

In the study, a research plan will be formulated to provide responses to the broad objectives, which revolves around the issue of examining how the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) has contributed to empowering tribal women. In particular, the research paper examines the role played by PMVDY in enhancing socio-economic state and technical knowledge among tribal women. In order to achieve this, the research comes with the analysis of secondary data, and the qualitative research using the primary method. The government reports, academic publications, and programme evaluations are categorized under secondary data that have been utilized to comprehend the larger policy framework and objectives of PMVDVY (TRIFED, n.d.; Srivani *et al.*, 2022). Also, selected tribal women beneficiaries were interviewed using an interview guide to understand what they went through and how they perceived the initiative. The purpose of these interviews was to express qualitative aspects of how PMVDVY affected their lives, source of livelihood, and income earnings and social empowerment.

Study Area

The piece of work was conducted in Diphu, a town situated under the Lumbajong Development Block (LDB) in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India. Lumbajong is a Community Development Block that comprises four constituent areas: Lumbajong, Dhansiri, Singhason, and Borjhar. Diphu, as the district headquarters, acts as a significant role in regional administration and development planning. As per the Census of India (2011), Diphu town has a total population of 61,797, of which 31,898 are males and 29,899 are females. Children aged 0–9 years constitute 11% of the population (6,796 individuals). The Female Sex Ratio of

Diphu stands at 937, which is slightly below the state average of 958. Similarly, the Child Sex Ratio is 925, also lower than the Assam state average of 962. However, the literacy rate in Diphu is significantly higher than the state average i.e. 89.12% compared to Assam's 72.19%. Specifically, male literacy in Diphu is 92.78%, while female literacy is 85.23%. Out of the total population, 19,763 individuals are classified as workers, with 15,597 males and 4,166 females engaged in income-generating or labor activities. According to census definition, a worker includes anyone engaged in business, service, cultivation, or labour related activities. Among these, 84.47% were involved in main work, while 15.53% were engaged in marginal work. This demographic profile is crucial for understanding the socio-economic context in which tribal women participate in the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) (Census of India, 2011). The study includes 12 women beneficiaries who are members of three Self-Help Groups (SHGs) located in Matipung village under Lumbajong Development Block. The respondents were selected based on their active participation in PMVDVY. Women from different villages within the study area were interviewed to capture experiences and perspectives.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was utilized that facilitated the analysis of the data gathered and a qualitative method of analysis that assists in the identification, analysis, and reporting patterns (themes) of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method made it possible to group recurrent ideas, perceptions and experiences expressed by the women who are the beneficiaries of PMVDVY.

The findings have been given thematically to show the social-economic status as well as the level of involvement of tribal women in the scheme.

Socio-Economic Situation of Respondents Availing PMVDVY

The research sample was purposive consisting of 12 tribal women beneficiaries in the Karbi community that all live in the village of Matipung within Diphu subdivision. The respondents belong to Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and are also involved in various activities of the informal economy. Most of them are housewives, and two of the respondents contribute to the family income with small scale street selling of vegetables, fried foods such as pakoras, puris among other edibles. Such women are of low income families, with the male counterparts usually being daily wage

workers. Gender, poverty, and tribal identity put these women in a structurally disadvantaged situation (Chatterjee, 2014 and Sindhi, 2012).

According to the primary interviews, the trend of economic precarity and the lack of livelihood diversification were similar. As an example, such a story as that of Jeli, a 33-year-old homemaker in the village of Rongchingrum, could be discussed; she experienced the problems of affordability and the availability of resources. Even though she has developed new skills with the help of PMVDVY, high input costs are one of the key discouraging factors in transferring skills into sustainable income (Primary Source, 26.05.2024). Equally, Hanri, 37, pointed to the fact that the training on pickle and soap making is useful, but the factual integration into the market is still low because of the informality of their operations and the absence of scale (Primary Source, 26.05.2024). Anu (44 years old, widow, vendor) said that the 10,000-rupee micro-loan disbursed under PMVDVY helped her but was not that sufficient to run the business in the long term, albeit its zero-interest aspect was welcome (Primary Source, 26.05.2024).

In spite of these challenges, the women unanimously said that they enjoyed the skills training and exposure. According to Sema, she now uses the sale of candles and pickles to supplement her vending profits, but it has slightly boosted her earnings (Primary Source, 27.05.2024). Queen responded that PMVDVY made her feel that she had something to do and belonged to the outside world, even though her job was mostly domestic (Primary Source, 27.05.2024). These stories support the fact that Rathod *et al.* (2018) have pointed out: SHGs involvement and rural entrepreneurial programs enhance women agency, despite the fact that financial benefits may not be high. The women participating in the study are mostly homemakers or informal sellers who are living in Matipung village. Their economic situation is still weak and the majority of households are dependent on the income of daily wages. Most of the respondents have been in SHGs earlier than PMVDVY and this has offered them with a rudimentary support system in terms of savings and credit, but the lack of access to formal work opportunities has left them languishing on subsistence level employment.

Narrative Insight

We have never had more than a hand to mouth. My husband is a construction worker and at times he returns home without a job. The SHG assisted in saving some money, but since becoming a member of PMVDVY, Karen, a 37-year-old

homemaker in Rongnongeh, feels she has something of her own to offer now- even though it is small, said Karen (Interview, 27.05.2024).

I sell pakoras in the evening though it was never enough. I made tamarind pickle and soap after being trained by Van Dhan. I sell them to neighbours now. Not a lot, but I am proud of it,” explained Sema, who is 32 and a native of Rongjakve (Interview, 27.05.2024). These stories confirm the results of Sindhi (2012) and Pramila (2014), who also argue that vocational training and skill development has a tremendous positive effect on women regarding the way they feel about themselves and how economically empowered they are, despite the external factors like market access and affordability being limiting.

PMVDVY as the Catalyst of Socio-Economic Change

PMVDVY has become a development intervention to give tribal women a financial inclusion and capacity building through organized training and SHG participation. According to the main information, the scheme has resulted in changes in the lives of women that are modest yet significant. The researcher noted through interviews that tribal women have acquired technical expertise in candle making, soap manufacturing, pickling with the help of forest based resources of jack fruits, tamarins, and mangoes. But still there are some obstacles especially on time management, infrastructure, and low cost of raw materials. Similar to Seema and Sia, some respondents said that the lack of mobility and involvement in trainings is due to their being primary caregivers, and they usually lack facilities and proper time since they are conducted at inconvenient times in rented spaces (Primary Sources, 26.05.2024). Lack of permanent Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) in Diphu also leads to the fact that the trainings are irregular, which is also reflected in the research regarding program delivery failures in tribal settings (Mehra, 1997; Sahu, 2021).

The Van Dhan Kendras (VDVKs) have been the centers of training where women were trained on candle making, soap making and food processing. A lot of the respondents observed that the acquired knowledge is transformative, but there are still some challenges, including the unavailability of a permanent center, high prices of raw materials, and insufficient time to devote to it because of domestic commitments.

“They taught us how to make candles and pickles. I made jackfruit pickle at home and sold four bottles last month. People like the taste, but buying good-

quality containers and ingredients is costly for me,” explained Queen, 45, from Rongchingrum (Interview, 27.05.2024).

“I have three children. My youngest is just three years old. It’s hard to leave her and attend training, but I go when my sister-in-law helps me. These are opportunities we never had before,” shared Phangchopi, 31, from Rongchingrum (Interview, 27.05.2024).

“We were given ₹10,000 as a loan with no interest. I used it to buy ingredients and a gas stove. Now I make soap at home, and some women from my SHG buy it,” noted Anu, a 44-year-old widow from Rongchingrum (Interview, 26.05.2024). These data aligns with Mehra (1997) and Sahu (2021) who suggest that even minimal financial support, when combined with capacity-building, can activate latent entrepreneurship among marginalized women. However, the need for robust supply chain support and scalable infrastructure remains critical. Nevertheless, the market linkage component of PMVDVY was perceived positively. The scheme has connected the women to local markets and facilitated occasional sales in larger community events, even though broader integration into formal retail channels or e-commerce platforms remains unrealized. Literature suggests that while tribal entrepreneurship policies often generate interest, their impact is diluted without consistent follow-up and holistic support systems (Sahu, 2021).

The study found out that tribal women engage in PMVDVY as registered members of SHGs and VDVVs. They have the responsibilities of attending training sessions, meetings and product development. In terms of interviews, the women had gone through about 15 training and orientation meetings since they were enrolled. According to them, they are actively engaged in the processes of collective decision-making, and the leadership positions are not institutionalized at the moment. This helps justify the research of Völker and Doneys (2021), who claim that although women can be incorporated into organizational frameworks, their leadership functions tend to be nominal, as opposed to being actual.

And one respondent Kareng explained that women are mostly consumers and manufacturers with the officials carrying out the marketing and distribution. Such a functional but limited role is characteristic of a top-down approach in which empowerment is also limited due to the lack of participatory governance models in the structure of the VDVV (Primary Source, 26.05.2024).

We attend meetings when we are called to. They inform us what we must learn and we do. We only propose ideas, but they do the decisions, said Kareng, 39, Rongchingrum (Interview, 26.05.2024).

I would have liked to know more in relation to packaging but they did say they would be taught that during the next training. The trainers are approachable, yet no follow-up, as Engtipi, 37, of Rongchingrum put it (Interview, 26.05.2024). Thus, passive participation in which tribal women are trained but rarely partake in planning or monitoring has been brought about by the top-down delivery format of PMVDVY. This aligns with the arguments by Völker and Doneys (2021) who state that empowerment should also go beyond technical training to address governance, autonomy, and negotiation space to women as part of community schemes.

Skills training and development in VDVKs

The women received the basic skills training which was given under the PMVDVY. Such meetings involved soap and candle making and pickles made out of native produce. Even though these opportunities were valued by many, not a lot of women articulated the fear of limited frequency and depth of training. As an example, Sia admitted that the number of modules that were provided was three because of the infrastructural limitations (Primary Source, 26.05.2024). This was further worsened by the fact that VDVK in Diphu is running in a rented facility, which makes continuity and community interaction difficult. I never made any soap in my life, but now I know. My daughter goes as far as to cut the blocks. It is a joint activity, said Shanti, 35, of Rongchingrum (Interview, 26.05.2024).

Sometimes we fail to train due to lack of an agreement of our husbands or we are engaged in our farms. However, when we are there it is nice to know something new, added Seera, 31, of Rongchingrum (Interview, 26.05.2024). These experiences highlight the points raised by Chatterjee (2014) and Rathod *et al.* (2018), who demand the need to have family support and community sensitization to be able to participate in women led development initiatives in a sustainable manner.

Seema, another respondent, who is both a mother and a homemaker, highlighted that peer support in SHGs played a significant role in her first attendance. Nonetheless, she was able to apply the practice of micro-entrepreneurship based on her training (Primary Source, 26.05.2024). This is in line with Mehra (1997) and Nath *et al.* (2022) who opine that peer networks and informal mentoring play a crucial role in sustaining women-led rural entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

The study illustrates that PMVDY has brought a radical, but limited effects on the socio-economic life of the tribal women in Karbi Anglong. Although the program

has had success in the capacity and awareness building, structural issues such as inconsistency in training, infrastructural deficiency and inadequate access to the market derail its full potential. However, these women have been empowered by the presence of loan programs at zero interest, introduction to new skills, and the feeling of identity and belonging in the SHGs both practically and psychologically. These results are consistent with the literature on the broader topic of tribal women empowerment, where it is stated that programs should be multidimensional, including the economic, social, and institutional barriers to effect a long-term change (Chatterjee, 2014; Völker and Doneys, 2021; Rathod *et al.*, 2018). The PMVDVY is a good model which needs to be enhanced by applying contextual adjustments, gender sensitive governance and development of infrastructures to turn it into a transformational model. The Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (PMVDVY) has already recorded a significant potential in empowering tribal women in Karbi Anglong, Assam, by facilitating value addition of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) and enhancing the local livelihoods. The initiative has been successful in equipping women in the underserved tribal groups with the necessary skills in the vocation, financial support, and market connections, thus, playing a significant role in empowering and socially acknowledging them economically (Sindhi, 2012 and Sahu, 2021). Although the program has managed to improve the social-economic status of many beneficiaries, structural issues like inadequate infrastructure, expensive input, and incompatible household responsibility are also still a major challenge to a greater involvement and more prominent influence (Chatterjee, 2014; Mehra, 1997). Additionally, the existing top-down mode of operation of PMVDVY usually restricts the leadership and decisions of women and there is a need to adopt more participatory models that uphold the ideals of inclusive development and gender equity (Völker and Doneys, 2021).

The incorporation of sustainable harvesting techniques into the scheme and the focus on skill development are the indications of the strategic shift toward the economic development that is environmentally friendly but it needs the support of the institutional changes and the capacity building at the community level so that these approaches could become resilient and scalable. The future research must consider comparative evaluation across districts and states in order to determine the optimal contextual practices and bottlenecks. Further subtle researches should also be done concerning the socio-cultural conclusions of commercialization of forest produce over time in traditionally subsistence-based tribal economies. An agency,

autonomy and intra-household dynamics indicator-based gender-sensitive impact evaluation framework would also add to the discussion about empowerment of tribal women in government programs such as PMVDVY. Nevertheless, the project is a potentially sustainable rural development initiative of inclusivity, which will only manifest its full transformative impact in terms of the inclusion of tribal women in Diphu, in the Lumbajong developmental block of Karbi Anglong District, Assam. The scheme has been pivotal in empowering the women of Karbi tribal community whose livelihoods and economic freedom have been increased by popularizing the value addition of Minor Forest Produce (MFPs). Based on the results of the study, it was found that PMVDVY has delivered the necessary vocational training, including soap, candle, and pickle making, and enabled the financial aid and market connections, which in combination with each other led to the increase in the level of income and self-confidence of tribal women (Srivani *et al.*, 2022 and Sahu, 2021). Nevertheless, the absence of adequate infrastructure to conduct the VDVK activities, irregularity of training programs and inability to make a balance between the domestic and productive activities are major limitations. As it was mentioned in the stories of women respondents, time, material costs, and the temporary character of training places were limiting the use of the full potential of the scheme by many of them, which explains the necessity of the infrastructure stabilization and support of logistics urgently (Chatterjee, 2014 and Volker & Doneys, 2021).

What is clearly seen is that as much as the tribal women in Matipung and Rongchingrum villages have had a keen interest in using the scheme, the lack of exposure to online platforms, lack of formal marketing strategies, and lack of access to credit and transport facilities have made it difficult to scale the scheme. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have played a vital role as an intermediary, but their potential has not been exploited because of a lack of leadership training and institutional support (Rathod *et al.*, 2018). The socio-cultural beliefs ingrained in society that women are supposed to be mostly homemakers also influence their ability to be fully involved in income-generating work which implies that the issue of women empowerment under PMVDVY should be viewed both in economic and gender-relational ways (Sindhi, 2012 and Mehra, 1997). The following research questions should focus on the examination of the market connections, value chain development, and the strategies of digital inclusion in tribal belts. Furthermore, the comparison of the performance and the poor performance of VDVK clusters in different districts might indicate the essential areas of operation bottlenecks. Incorporating livelihood mapping through

GIS, gendered impact assessment devices and community participatory practices would contribute to a greater academic insight and to policy significance. The intersectionality between gender, ethnicity, ecology, and economy of tribal areas such as Karbi Anglong is critical in designing locally based interventions that are culturally sensitive and go beyond livelihood assistance to complete empowerment of culture and ecological sustenance.

Authors' Contribution

Nabanita Hazarika (First Author): Conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and drafting of the original manuscript.

Dr. T Luithuiwung Awungshi (Second Author): Critical review and editing of the manuscript, validation of results, and final approval of the manuscript.

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The author declares that there are no competing interests.

AI Usage

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