

Livelihood, Cultural Identity And Market Transformation: A Study Of Weekly Tribal Haat In Jharkhand

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Abstract

Background: Weekly tribal markets, commonly known as haats, play an important role in sustaining rural livelihoods and supporting local economic activities in tribal regions of India. These markets function not only as spaces for economic exchange but also as institutions historically associated with social interaction and cultural practices within indigenous communities. However, increasing commercialisation and the entry of external traders are gradually transforming the structure and functions of tribal markets.

Materials and Methods: This study examines livelihood patterns, cultural identity, and market transformation in a weekly tribal haat located in Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand. The research adopted a qualitative field-based design. Primary data were collected from 40 female tribal vendors, mainly from the Munda, Manjhi, Oraon, Santhal, and Mahto communities, through semi-structured interviews and field observations conducted between February and March 2026.

Results: The findings indicate that the weekly haat primarily serves as a livelihood platform, where women sell traditional products such as Mahua liquor and rice beer (Handia) to support household income. However, sellers face economic challenges, including low profit margins and competition from non-tribal traders.

Conclusion: The study also reveals a gradual shift of the haat from a socially embedded cultural space toward a more commercial marketplace. Despite these transformations, tribal haats remain important informal institutions supporting rural livelihoods and women's economic participation.

Keywords: Tribal markets; Weekly haats; Tribal women vendors; Livelihood strategies; Market transformation.

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I. Introduction

Tribal haats have historically served as vital economic and social institutions within indigenous communities, facilitating not only the exchange of goods but also the reinforcement of cultural identities and social networks. These weekly markets have been foundational to sustaining local economies and ensuring livelihood security among tribal populations by enabling the circulation of locally produced commodities alongside goods sourced from broader regional and national markets (Barman & Bhattacharjee, 2024). The integration of tribal economies through these haats underscores their role as dynamic marketplaces where economic diversification and resource redistribution occur, often mediated by market agents and intermediaries that facilitate price discovery and credit provision (Barman & Bhattacharjee, 2024; Kenye & Faishal, 2025).

Existing research highlights the multifaceted nature of tribal haats, encompassing economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Studies such as Panigrahy et al. (2022) have documented the critical role of these markets in providing liquidity and income, particularly under conditions of infrastructural and resource constraints. Moreover, the social and cultural functions of tribal weekly markets have been emphasised by scholars like Barman and Bhattacharjee (2024), Animesh (2022), and Pandey (1999), who illustrate how these spaces nurture community bonds, facilitate cultural expression, and sustain indigenous knowledge systems. The embeddedness of traditional barter practices and resilience mechanisms within these markets further attests to their adaptive capacities in the face of socio-economic disruptions (Bhattacharjee, 2022).

However, the landscape of tribal markets is undergoing a significant transformation driven by modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation. Research by Hansda and Biswal (2025) and Ghosh and Bhattacharya (2022) reveals a shift from subsistence-based activities to market-oriented livelihoods, accompanied by challenges such as environmental degradation, commercialisation, and erosion of cultural functions. The commodification of indigenous crafts and the increasing presence of non-tribal traders signify a complex tension between preserving traditional roles and adapting to contemporary economic realities (Ghosh, 2022). Gender

dynamics further complicate these processes, with tribal women playing pivotal roles in market participation and household economies, as documented by Dagar and Upadhyay (2022) and Kenye and Faishal (2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on tribal haats, there remains a research gap in understanding the localised experiences of tribal women vendors within these markets, particularly in Jharkhand, where socio-cultural and economic transformations are rapidly evolving. Existing studies often focus on broader regional analyses or emphasise either economic or cultural aspects without integrating these perspectives in a comprehensive manner. Additionally, the impact of non-tribal market actors and commercialisation on the traditional functions and livelihoods within tribal haats requires further empirical investigation.

This study aims to address these gaps by employing a qualitative field-based approach to examine livelihood patterns, cultural identity, and market transformation within a weekly tribal haat in Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand. By focusing on female tribal vendors from multiple communities, the research seeks to elucidate the economic significance of the haat as a livelihood platform, explore shifts in cultural and social roles, and analyse the effects of external influences and commercialisation on the market structure. The scope of this study encompasses an in-depth exploration of the interplay between tradition and modernity in tribal market systems, contributing to a nuanced understanding of indigenous economic adaptations and informing policy interventions to support sustainable tribal livelihoods.

II. Materials And Methods

Market Mechanism and Economic Functioning of Tribal Haats

Tribal haats serve as foundational economic institutions that sustain local economies and contribute significantly to the livelihood security of tribal populations. The study by Barman and Bhattacharjee (2024) on the Garo Hills region reveals that these haats operate as multifaceted marketplaces where a diverse range of commodities are exchanged, including both locally produced goods and items sourced from outside the region. This dual commodity flow underscores the integration of tribal economies with broader regional and national markets, facilitating access to a wider variety of goods and enabling economic diversification. Market agents and middlemen emerge as pivotal intermediaries who not only facilitate transactions but also help in price discovery, credit provision, and the smoothing of supply and demand fluctuations, thereby ensuring the effective functioning of these markets.

Panigrahy et al. (2022) provide an in-depth examination of livestock trading practices in tribal haats of Gujarat, highlighting that immediate cash needs often compel producers to sell livestock despite challenges such as limited feed and fodder availability and inadequate market infrastructure, including seating arrangements. This reflects the precarious economic conditions of tribal producers and the critical role haats play in providing liquidity and income opportunities. The study also emphasises the reliance on physical accessibility, with most buyers and sellers travelling on foot, pointing to infrastructural and connectivity constraints that limit market participation.

Kenye and Faishal's (2025) quantitative study in Kohima further elaborates on the economic significance of tribal haats, demonstrating that many vendors depend on these markets as either their primary or supplementary sources of income. Their analysis, employing descriptive statistics and ordinal logistic regression, identifies significant correlations between income levels and factors such as product type, gender, and market participation frequency. This nuanced understanding reveals that tribal markets are not homogeneous but vary according to participants' socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Despite their economic importance, these markets face persistent challenges, including insufficient infrastructure, limited access to formal financial services, and a lack of formal policy recognition, which collectively hinder their potential for growth and sustainability.

Together, these studies portray tribal haats as dynamic and adaptive economic hubs central to income generation, livelihood diversification, and resource redistribution within tribal communities. They highlight the complexity of market mechanisms in tribal contexts, where economic activities are intertwined with social relations, local knowledge, and structural constraints.

Social and Cultural Dimensions of Tribal Weekly Markets

Tribal weekly markets extend well beyond their economic functions to serve as crucial social and cultural institutions that nurture community bonds, facilitate cultural expression, and sustain indigenous knowledge systems. Barman and Bhattacharjee (2024) emphasise the role of Garo Hills haats as social arenas where individuals reconnect with distant relatives and acquaintances, thereby reinforcing social networks that transcend immediate geographic boundaries. This social function is particularly important in tribal settings, where kinship ties and communal relationships form the backbone of social organisation.

Animesh's (2022) study of the Paudi Bhuyans of Odisha highlights the cultural significance of weekly markets as venues for displaying and exchanging unique artistic products that embody the community's cultural heritage. These markets not only enable economic transactions but also act as spaces for cultural transmission,

where traditional crafts and artistic expressions are preserved and promoted. This dual role enhances community identity and pride, contributing to the social sustainability of tribal groups.

Pandey's (1999) anthropological research on Jharkhand tribal markets further underscores their enduring importance as centres of social and political activity. Despite socio-economic changes and external influences, these markets continue to function as sites where social norms are negotiated, political discussions occur, and collective decisions are made, reflecting their embeddedness within tribal social systems.

Bhattacharjee's (2022) investigation into Karbi Anglong's weekly markets adds another dimension by documenting the integration of traditional barter systems and indigenous knowledge within these market spaces. Particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these embedded practices have provided resilience by enabling the continued exchange of goods and services despite disruptions to formal economic systems. This resilience underscores the adaptive capacity of tribal markets and their role in sustaining livelihoods under adverse conditions.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that tribal weekly markets are culturally rich institutions that serve as both economic marketplaces and social-cultural hubs. They facilitate the transmission of traditions, reinforce social cohesion, and enable the negotiation of community identities, thereby playing an indispensable role in maintaining the social fabric of tribal societies.

Transformation and Challenges in Tribal Market Systems

The landscape of tribal markets is undergoing profound transformations driven by modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, creating both opportunities and challenges for tribal communities. Hansda and Biswal (2025) document a significant shift among the Dongria Kandha community in Odisha from traditional subsistence activities such as shifting cultivation and forest gathering towards market-based livelihoods. This transition reflects broader socio-economic changes and aspirations for improved financial stability. However, it also brings environmental pressures, including resource depletion and ecological degradation, as well as cultural challenges such as the erosion of traditional knowledge systems and weakening of community cohesion.

Ghosh and Bhattacharya (2022) analyse the impact of urbanisation on tribal haats in Alipurduar district, noting that the gradual modification of these markets due to urban expansion risks diluting their traditional functions and cultural significance. The encroachment of urban lifestyles and economic practices transforms tribal markets from culturally embedded institutions into more commercialised and impersonal spaces, potentially undermining their role in community identity and social interaction.

Tania Ghosh's (2022) postmodern analysis of the Sonajhuri Haat in West Bengal offers a critical perspective on the commodification of indigenous crafts driven by tourism and global demand. The study reveals how cultural artefacts become hybridised through the blending of local and global design elements, resulting in a simulacrum of authenticity that may mask the economic hardships artisans face. This process challenges conventional notions of cultural purity and raises questions about the sustainability of traditional crafts in a globalised economy.

These studies collectively highlight the complex tensions between preserving traditional market roles and adapting to contemporary socio-economic realities. Persistent challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited financial inclusion, and policy neglect exacerbate these tensions, threatening the sustainability of tribal markets. Addressing these challenges requires development strategies that balance economic growth with the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental sustainability, ensuring that tribal markets continue to serve their multifaceted roles.

Gender and Livelihood Roles within Tribal Market Contexts

Gender dynamics play a crucial role in shaping tribal women's participation in market-related and wage-based livelihood activities, influencing both economic outcomes and social structures within tribal communities. Dagar and Upadhyay (2022) highlight the extensive involvement of tribal women in diverse economic activities in southern Rajasthan, including agriculture, the collection of forest produce, and the sale of goods in local markets. These activities contribute significantly to household incomes and community welfare, underscoring women's economic agency.

The study further reveals that tribal women actively participate in decision-making regarding work schedules, locations, and income utilisation, reflecting their influence within familial and community contexts. This level of autonomy challenges traditional gender norms and indicates evolving social roles for women in tribal societies.

Kenye and Faishal (2025) complement these findings by demonstrating that gender is a significant determinant of market participation and income generation patterns among vendors in Kohima. Their analysis suggests that women's engagement in markets is shaped by socio-cultural factors and access to resources, which in turn affect livelihood strategies and economic empowerment.

Recognising the vital roles of tribal women is essential to designing inclusive development interventions that enhance access to training, financial services, and market opportunities. Empowering women within tribal markets not only improves household welfare but also strengthens community resilience and socio-economic development.

These insights affirm that tribal women are not passive participants but key economic actors whose labour, decision-making, and entrepreneurial activities profoundly influence market dynamics and community sustainability.

III. Methodology

Study Design & Study Location: This study employed a qualitative field-based research design to examine livelihood patterns, cultural identity, and market transformation within weekly tribal haats in Jharkhand. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research aimed to understand the lived experiences, economic practices, and socio-cultural dynamics of tribal market participants. The study was conducted in a weekly tribal haat located in Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, India.

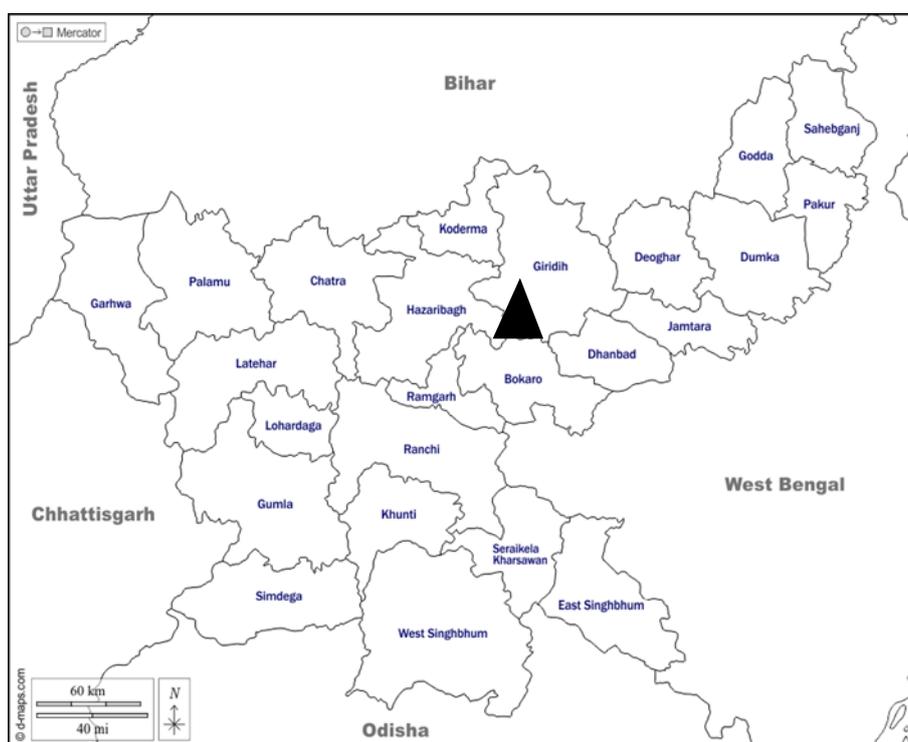


Fig. 1: Map of Jharkhand Published by d-maps.com

The selected haat functions as an important local trading centre where villagers from surrounding settlements exchange agricultural produce, traditional food items, and household goods. The site was chosen for its active participation by tribal vendors, accessibility for field observation, and its representation of typical rural haat structures in Jharkhand, where traditional economic practices interact with emerging commercial influences.

Study Duration: This study was conducted between 25 06 February 2026 and 10 March 2026. During this time, repeated visits were made to the weekly market to observe trading activities and interact with participants.

Sample size: The study included 40 female vendors aged 25-70 years who regularly sold goods at the haat. They belonged mainly to the Munda, Manjhi, Oraon, and Santhal tribes, with a few participants from the OBC Mahto community, and their educational levels ranged from illiterate to 10th standard.

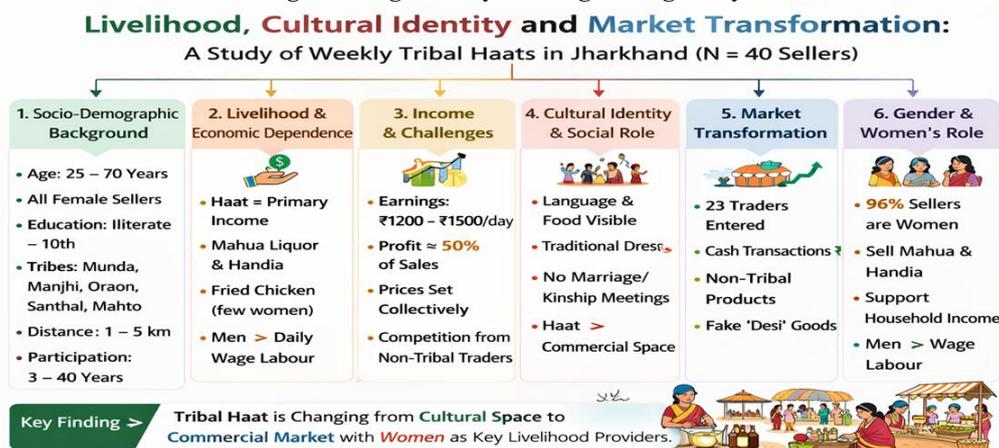
Subject & selection method: Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct experience in market-based livelihood activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observation, allowing detailed insights into income patterns, cultural practices, and ongoing changes within the tribal market system. The data were analysed thematically by organising responses into major themes: The findings presented in this study are based solely on the collected primary data and field observations, without any external data supplementation.

IV. Result

Table No. 1: This table shows Livelihood, Cultural Identity and Market Transformation of tribal sellers

Theme	Core Focus	Key Findings (Based Only on Collected Data)	Evidence from Participant Responses
1. Socio-Demographic Background of Sellers	Age, gender, educational background, tribe, distance from haat, participation history	All 40 respondents were female sellers aged 25–70 years. Educational levels ranged from illiterate to 10th standard. Respondents belonged mainly to Munda, Manjhi, Oraon, and Santhal tribes, with a few from the OBC Mahto community. Sellers had been participating in the haat for 3–40 years and had travelled 1–5 km from nearby villages.	Respondents reported coming from the villages of Hatyari, Bocho, Chano, Daldalia, Birhor Colony, Ganeshitand, and Tapin, and all confirmed their participation as sellers only.
2. Livelihood and Economic Dependence on the Haat	Sources of income, types of goods sold, and economic importance of the haat	The weekly haat serves as an important source of livelihood for tribal women. Most respondents reported that the haat is their primary source of income. Tribal sellers mainly sell Mahua liquor and rice beer (Handia), while some also sell fried chicken.	Respondents stated that income from selling Mahua liquor and Handia supports household expenses, while male family members often work as daily wage labourers or agricultural workers.
3. Income Pattern and Economic Challenges	Earnings from the haat, price determination, and competition	Respondents reported selling goods worth approximately ₹1200–₹1500 per haat day, but the actual profit is about half of the total sales. Prices are generally set collectively by sellers. However, respondents face competition from non-tribal traders and cheaper products in the market.	Some respondents mentioned that certain traders sell cheap products, such as eggs labelled as local eggs, at lower prices, creating competition for traditional sellers.
4. Cultural Identity and Social Role of the Haat	Cultural practices, traditions, and social interaction	Respondents indicated that the haat currently functions mainly as a commercial market rather than a cultural space. Tribal languages and food practices remain visible, but traditional dress and cultural activities are less common. Social interactions, such as discussions about marriage or kinship meetings, do not occur in the haat.	Respondents explained that traders mainly focus on selling goods and earning income, and the haat no longer serves as a place for community social activities.
5. Market Transformation and External Influence	Entry of non-tribal traders, commercialisation, and changes in market structure	The findings indicate a transformation of the tribal haat due to the increasing presence of non-tribal traders and market-produced goods. Out of the 40 respondents, 23 confirmed that outside traders have entered the haat in recent years. Cash transactions have also increased.	Respondents and field observation noted that non-tribal traders sell vegetables, clothes, packaged goods, and other market products, changing the traditional market environment.
6. Gender Roles and Women's Economic Contribution	Women's role in the market and household livelihood	Field observations indicate that more than 96% of tribal sellers at the haat are women. These women primarily sell Mahua liquor and rice beer (Handia) and depend on this activity as their primary livelihood. Their earnings contribute significantly to household economic survival.	Respondents reported that income from haat-based selling helps support their families, while male members often depend on irregular daily wage labour.

Fig. 2: Image of Key Finding during study



V. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted nature of weekly tribal haats in Jharkhand, particularly in relation to livelihood generation, cultural identity, and market transformation. The results indicate that the haat primarily functions as a livelihood platform for tribal women, with all 40 respondents in the study being female sellers aged 25-70 years from tribal communities such as Munda, Manjhi, Oraon, and Santhal. Most respondents have been participating in the market for several years and travel short distances from nearby villages, indicating the strong local character of the market system.

The findings further reveal that the weekly haat serves as an important source of household income, with women primarily selling traditional products such as Mahua liquor and Handia (rice beer). Although sellers reported average sales between ₹1200 and ₹1500 per market day, actual profit remains limited due to production costs and market competition. The study also shows that prices are often collectively determined among sellers, suggesting the presence of informal cooperative mechanisms within the market.

At the same time, the results indicate significant changes in the cultural and structural nature of the haat. While tribal languages and food practices remain visible, the haat currently operates largely as a commercial marketplace rather than a social or cultural gathering space. The growing presence of non-tribal traders and the increasing circulation of market-produced goods reflect an ongoing transformation in the traditional structure of tribal markets.

The findings suggest that weekly tribal haats in Jharkhand function primarily as informal livelihood institutions that support household survival and economic participation, particularly for tribal women. The dominance of women sellers in the market indicates that the haat serves as an accessible economic space where women can participate in income-generating activities without requiring formal employment or institutional support.

The sale of traditional products such as Mahua liquor and Handia highlights the continued importance of indigenous food practices as livelihood resources. These products are locally produced, culturally embedded, and require limited financial investment, making them suitable for small-scale vendors. However, the relatively low profit margins reported by sellers indicate the fragile economic conditions within which these livelihood activities operate.

Another important interpretation emerging from the findings is the gradual commercialisation of the tribal haat. The increasing presence of non-tribal traders and market-produced goods suggests that the market is becoming integrated with broader regional economic systems. This transformation appears to shift the focus of the haat from a socially embedded community space toward a more commercially oriented marketplace.

The findings also indicate that the social and cultural functions traditionally associated with tribal markets have weakened over time. Respondents reported that the haat is now primarily focused on economic transactions rather than community interaction or cultural exchange.

The findings of this study partially support and partially diverge from previous research on tribal markets. Consistent with the findings of Barman and Bhattacharjee (2024), the present study confirms that tribal haats continue to function as important economic spaces where local products are exchanged and livelihoods are sustained. Similarly, the results align with Kenye and Faishal (2025), who emphasise the significance of tribal markets as income sources for local vendors.

However, the findings diverge from earlier studies that emphasise the strong social and cultural functions of tribal markets. For instance, Barman and Bhattacharjee (2024) describe haats as spaces where individuals interact socially and maintain community relationships. In contrast, the respondents in the present study reported that such social interactions are now limited and that the market primarily operates as a commercial environment.

The findings also resonate with the observations of Ghosh and Bhattacharya (2022) and Hansda and Biswal (2025) regarding the transformation of tribal markets under the influence of modernisation and external economic forces. The increasing participation of non-tribal traders and the growing circulation of market-produced goods reflect broader processes of commercialisation and economic integration that are reshaping traditional tribal market systems.

Several socio-economic factors help explain the patterns observed in the findings. First, the dominance of women sellers in the market may be linked to the gendered division of labour within tribal households, where women often engage in small-scale trading and food preparation activities while men participate in wage labour or agricultural work.

Second, the reliance on traditional products such as Mahua liquor and Handia reflects the availability of local natural resources and cultural knowledge that enable women to produce and sell these items with minimal financial investment. These products also carry cultural significance within tribal communities, helping sustain demand in local markets.

Third, the increasing presence of non-tribal traders may be explained by improved market connectivity and expanding regional trade networks. As tribal markets become more accessible and economically active, they attract external traders who introduce new commodities and commercial practices.

The findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions on market transformation and indigenous economic systems. Traditional tribal haats have often been conceptualised as socially embedded markets in which economic activities are closely linked to cultural practices and community relationships. However, the results of this study suggest that these markets are gradually shifting toward commercially oriented economic institutions.

This transformation supports theoretical perspectives that emphasise the hybrid nature of contemporary tribal markets, where traditional practices coexist with modern market influences. The persistence of indigenous products alongside the growing presence of external traders demonstrates how tribal markets adapt to changing economic conditions while retaining certain cultural elements.

The study, therefore, contributes to the understanding of market hybridity and cultural adaptation in indigenous economic systems, highlighting how traditional institutions evolve under the pressures of modernisation and commercialisation.

The findings of this study have important implications for policy and development interventions aimed at strengthening tribal livelihoods. Since the weekly haat serves as a significant source of livelihood for tribal women, policies should focus on improving market infrastructure, expanding access to financial services, and supporting local producers.

Government and development agencies could introduce initiatives such as improved market facilities, improved sanitation, and designated selling spaces to enhance vendors' working conditions. Training programs related to product quality, packaging, and marketing could also help tribal sellers increase their income.

In addition, policies should recognise the importance of protecting the cultural and traditional aspects of tribal markets. Supporting local food products and traditional crafts can help maintain cultural identity while also promoting sustainable economic opportunities.

Future research could expand this study by examining multiple tribal haats across different districts of Jharkhand to develop a more comprehensive understanding of market transformation in tribal regions. Comparative studies involving different tribal communities may reveal variations in market participation, cultural practices, and livelihood strategies.

Further research could also explore the role of buyers, non-tribal traders, and local authorities in shaping the functioning of tribal markets. In addition, quantitative studies examining income patterns, market networks, and supply chains could provide deeper insights into the economic structure of tribal haats.

Longitudinal research examining changes in tribal markets over time would also help scholars better understand the long-term impacts of commercialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation on indigenous market systems.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined the role of weekly tribal haats in Jharkhand, with a particular focus on livelihoods, cultural identity, and market transformation. The findings demonstrate that the haat continues to function as a significant livelihood platform, especially for tribal women who depend on selling traditional products such as Mahua liquor and rice beer (Handia) for household income. Although the market sustains local economic activities, the study also reveals emerging challenges, including limited profit margins, increased competition, and inadequate market infrastructure. Furthermore, the research indicates a gradual transformation of the haat due to the growing presence of non-tribal traders and commercially produced goods, which has shifted the market's role from a culturally embedded social space toward a predominantly commercial environment. Despite these changes, tribal markets remain vital institutions for sustaining rural livelihoods and preserving elements of indigenous economic practices within changing socio-economic contexts.

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