
Gender and Work Participation among the Asur Tribe: A Comparative Study of Male and Female Main and Marginal Workers

Sachin Bhagat

NET/JRF, Ph.D. Research Scholar, University Department of Anthropology, Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, Ranchi, Email: sachinnnbhagat089@gmail.com

Dr S. M. Abbas

Associate Professor, University Department of Anthropology,
Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, Ranchi

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18611716>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 17-01-2026

Published: 10-02-2026

Keywords:

Gender, PVTGs, Marginal workers, Main workers, Cultural norms

ABSTRACT

Tribal and gender studies have a special place in anthropology. This anthropological research paper examines gender-based work participation among the Asur tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTGs) from Gumla district, Jharkhand. The present paper presents a comparative study of male and female primary workers (engaged in economic activity for 183 days or more per year) and marginal workers (engaged in economic activity for less than 183 days per year). Cultural norms, rules related to inheritance, and various economic prohibitions for women shape gender-based work participation among the Asur tribe. The findings confirm that men are predominantly primary workers engaged in agriculture and mining, while most women are marginal workers engaged in seasonal farming.

INTRODUCTION

Jharkhand is home to 32 tribal groups, eight of which are listed as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). The Asur tribe is one of these eight PVTGs. The Asur tribe primarily resides in the Netarhat Pat area of the Gumla district. Historically, the Asur tribe has been identified as an iron-smelting artisan tribal group. They practised shifting cultivation alongside iron smelting. Over time,



restrictions on tree felling imposed by various forest laws and competition arising from industrialisation led to the extinction of their traditional occupation. Currently, the Asur tribe relies on subsistence agriculture. Agriculture's complete dependence on monsoons, the low fertility and water-holding capacity of the Pat region's soil, and the use of traditional agricultural techniques do not yield sufficient yields. Consequently, they resort to other occupations to earn a living, such as mining, MNREGA wages and unskilled labourers in metropolitan cities, domestic workers, and forest produce collection.

Currently, changes in the modern economy have increased women's participation in the economy, opening up new opportunities, particularly in the fields of production, manufacturing, technology, services, and communications. Despite this, gender-based inequalities remain visible, and the Asur tribe is not immune. In tribal economies, the division of labour is typically based on gender and age. Various socio-cultural parameters of tribal society further reinforce gender-based inequalities and limit women's work participation. In this context, the present paper presents a comparative study of male and female primary and marginal workers. The study examines gender and work participation and its other aspects among the Asur tribe.

EARLIER STUDIES AND THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist and gender-based studies of tribal labour have previously been conducted in anthropology, highlighting various aspects of this issue. Moore (1988), in her study of feminism and tribal labour, highlighted the differences in the perspectives of female and male ethnographers regarding Australian Aboriginal women. She found that while male ethnographers focused on women's perceived impurity, economic insignificance, and exclusion from religious rituals within the local community, female researchers emphasised women's central role in subsistence. This implies that women play a central role in the subsistence economy, but this role is systematically devalued. Rosaldo (1974) acknowledged that, almost universally, domestic work is associated with women, while public spheres are associated with men, and this unequal structure deprives women of power and authority. Massey (1994) identifies the mobility and differentiation of men's and women's work, where men's work (mining, etc.) is mobile, while women's work (domestic work) is not. Thus, the above facts confirm that the systematic undervaluation of women's labour, their exclusion from power- and authority-related tasks, and their involvement in agriculture and domestic work, which results in limited opportunities for women's mobility, further marginalise women. Xaxa (2014) acknowledges the double marginalisation of Tribal Women, being a marginalised group, firstly from a tribe and secondly from being a woman.



It is essential to understand the definitions of main and marginal workers, as per the study's needs. According to the Census of India (2011), workers who engage in economic activity for 183 days or more per year are termed main workers, while workers who engage in economic activity for fewer than 183 days per year are termed marginal workers. Benería (1999) also questions the classification of related work and criticises the exclusion of forest produce collection, a crucial activity in the subsistence economy, from the main worker census, leading to an underestimation of women's participation. Agarwal (1992) criticises state policies that deprive women of ownership of forests from which they collect fuel and food.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the gender-based labour pattern in the Asur tribe.
2. To conduct a comparative study of main and marginal workers, male and female.
3. To study the factors of gender inequality in labour.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the research, two villages of Gumla district, Jobhipat, located in Narma Panchayat of Bishunpur Block and Barangpat village, located in Bimarla Panchayat of Ghaghra Block, were selected by random sampling method, from which 50 families, 25 each from both the villages, were selected for the study by random sampling method.

Data collection for the research was conducted using participant observation, individual and group interviews, and survey techniques. Based on the study's needs, data were also collected from various secondary sources, including published research papers, books, reports, and various websites. After analysing the data, conclusions were reached.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender and Work Participation: Comparative Study

Table 1: - Main Workers: Male vs Female (Total Main Workers 68)

Agriculture	Mining (Bauxite)	Forest Produce/	Govt. Job	Domestic Workers	Business
-------------	---------------------	--------------------	-----------	---------------------	----------



						Firewood Compilation											
Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F
20	14	06	30	30	-	-	-	-	12	08	04	02	-	02	04	02	02
100%	70%	30%	100%	100%	-	-	-	-	100%	66.67%	33.33%	100%	-	100%	100%	50%	50%

(Source: Field Work; March, 2025)

It is clear from the above table that, as the main workers, the number of men is higher in agriculture, mining and government jobs. Two women work as domestic workers in other states. A total of four Asur people run grocery stores as their business.

Table 2: - Marginal Workers: Male vs Female (Total Marginal Workers 84)

Seasonal Agriculture			MNREGA			Forest Produce/ Firewood Compilation			Unskilled Worker		
Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F
58	19	39	16	05	11	04	-	04	06	04	02
100%	32.76%	67.24%	100%	31.25%	68.75%	100%	-	100%	100%	66.67%	33.33%

(Source: Field Work; March, 2025)

The table above clearly shows that among marginal workers; women are engaged in seasonal agriculture and forest produce collection. It's worth noting that, as marginal workers, women participate fully in seasonal agriculture, as well as in fuel and forest produce collection, and this work is also performed by women. Four women in the table are engaged in year-round work in collecting toothpicks and forest produce. She brings it from there and sells it in the weekly market, but she can only do this work for less than 183 days.



Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Work Participation

- **Patrilineal Inheritance:** The Asur tribe is a patrilineal tribe in which property, such as land and houses, is transferred from one generation to the next from father to son. That is, women do not have ownership of ancestral property, and resources are limited to men only.
- **Gender based division of labour:** In the Asur tribe, the division of labour is traditionally based on gender and age, as in other tribal economies. Socio-cultural parameters determine and control it. In the Asur tribe, agricultural tasks like ploughing and preparing the fields are the work of men, while sowing, weeding, and harvesting are the work of women. Mining work and labour outside the village are done by men, while women do household work, childcare and collection of forest produce.
- **Sociocultural Norms and Social Taboos:** The Asur tribe also has certain social taboos that limit women's labour participation and are strictly followed. For example, ploughing, thatching, or repairing are considered prohibited for women. Women were also prohibited from engaging in the Asur's traditional iron smelting occupation, and it was believed that even a woman's shadow should not fall on the traditional iron smelting plant.
- **Responsibility of household work:** Women spend most of their day in household work, childcare and arranging fuel, due to which they do not get time for paid work.
- **Lack of women's mobility:** Due to women's domestic work, cooperation in agriculture, and collection of forest produce and fuel, they do not have sufficient opportunities for mobility, which prevents them from going out to work.
- **Lack of education and skills:** The research area reveals a discrepancy in the literacy rates of men and women of the Asur tribe. While 56% of men are literate, the female literacy rate is only 49%. Both men and women lack access to skill-related training opportunities.
- **The lack of effective implementation of government policies** has hindered the proper operation of employment-generating policies like MNREGA in the study area. Although women's participation in MNREGA as a paid job exceeds that of men, due to irregular employment, people only go to MNREGA when available, and the number of days is also limited.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study confirm that men are mostly engaged in agriculture and mining as main workers, while most Asur women are engaged in seasonal agriculture as marginal workers. Factors such as patrilineal inheritance, gender division of labour, socio-cultural norms, social taboos, domestic responsibility, low female mobility, lack of education and skills, and ineffective implementation of government policies limit women's work participation in the Asur tribe.



REFERENCES

- Agarwal, B. (1992). The gender and environment debate: Lessons from India. *Feminist Studies*, 18(1), 119–158.
- Benería, L. (1999). The enduring debate over unpaid labour. *International Labour Review*, 138(3), 287–309.
- Census of India. (2011). *Primary census abstract for scheduled tribes*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
- Gupta, S. P. (1976). *The Asur: An ethno-biological profile*. Bihar Government Welfare Department, Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute.
- Jharkhand Tribal Research Institute. (2003). *Primitive tribal groups of Jharkhand: Survey report (2002–03)*. Ministry of Welfare, Government of Jharkhand.
- Lalsota, C., & Oraon, P. C. (1993). *Adim janjatiyan*. Bihar Government Welfare Department, Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute.
- Leuva, K. K. (1963). *The Asur: A study of primitive iron-smelters*. Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place and gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Moore, H. L. (1988). *Feminism and anthropology*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Oraon, P. C. (1994). *Jharkhand ke Asur*. Dr Ramdayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Government of Jharkhand.
- Pandey, G. (2018). Continuity and change in livelihood of Asur in Jharkhand: An anthropological enquiry. *Journal of Dr Ramdayal Munda Tribal Research Institute*, 45, 5–12.
- Rosaldo, M. Z. (1974). Woman, culture, and society: A theoretical overview. In M. Z. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere (Eds.), *Women, culture, and society* (pp. 17–42). Stanford University Press.
- Singh, R. P. (1993). *Asur*. Bihar Government Welfare Department, Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute.
- Verma, U. K. (2009). *Jharkhand ka janjatiya samaj*. Subodh Granthmala.
- Xaxa, V. (2014). *Report of the high-level committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities in India*. Government of India.