



# Exploring the Livelihood Strategies of the Women of Ghasi Community in Mayurbhanj District of Odisha

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**Abstract:** The present paper explores livelihood strategies of the women of Ghasi community in Rairangpur of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha an underrepresented Scheduled Caste (hereafter SC) group historically relegated to stigmatized occupations such as scavenging, sweeping, and labourer. The objective of the paper is to **examine the traditional and contemporary livelihood practices** adopted by women of the Ghasi community and to **analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and caste-based constraints** that shape and limit their access to sustainable employment and social mobility. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and case studies data was collected the multifaceted roles played by Ghasi women, particularly as traditional midwives, sweepers, and maidservants, in sustaining household economies and preserving cultural knowledge under conditions of caste-based exclusion. Despite constitutional safeguards and targeted welfare schemes, Ghasi women continue to face occupational immobility, wage exploitation, and social ostracization, all exacerbated by gendered norms and informal labour arrangements.

**Keywords:** Ghasi Women, Occupation, Livelihood, Discrimination, Inequality, Poverty

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## **Introduction**

Now- a- days women play a prominent role in the economy. Traditionally classified as a Dalit community and long associated with stigmatized occupations such as scavenging, sweeping, and manual labour, Ghasi women have been at the intersection of caste and gender-based oppression. Despite limited access to education, land ownership, or formal employment opportunities, these women have developed diverse and often informal livelihood strategies ranging from domestic work and agricultural labour to participation in self-help groups. Their work, largely invisible in mainstream narratives

and unrecognized by institutional frameworks, reflects both the persistence of caste-based occupational inheritance and the innovative survival tactics adopted in response to poverty, exclusion, and shifting economic landscapes.

### Review of Literature

Existing scholarship illuminates how caste and gender intersect to shape the livelihoods of marginalized women in India, providing a strong foundation for exploring Ghasi women in Odisha.

Bag and Jagadala's anthropocentric study of Ghasi women in western Odisha highlights their historic role in sanitation work as manual scavengers and sweepers and underscores the ongoing social exclusion they endure despite legislative protections such as the Manual Scavengers (Prohibition) Act, 2013. Their work reveals how occupational stigma limits mobility and access to resources.

Tribal women's livelihood practices illustrates how subsistence-led strategies such as minor forest produces collection buffer communities against food insecurity (Patra, 2025).

In urban centres such as Angul, sweepers are predominantly from Ghasi and Hadi SC communities, employed in deplorable conditions under municipal contractors, reinforcing caste hierarchy even rationalized as "professional skill" rather than discrimination (Mohanty and Dwivedi, 2018).

Atreyee (2022) stated that SHGs in Kotha Indlu village in Chitoor district have provided the Dalit and backward women an alternative to earn their livelihood from practising sericulture with local resources, indigenous knowledge and training. In India Dalit communities residing in the rural areas, reeling under poverty unemployment, Land-lessness and exclusion are the most vulnerable communities in terms of social, economic and political development. SHGs have helped the women from Dalit and backward communities to use sericulture as an alternative means of livelihood and which have further helped there to continue their active participation in the SHGs movement. Dalit and backward communities of the village became inspirational to the women of other social groups.

### Objectives

The major objectives of the present are:

1. **To examine the traditional and contemporary livelihood practices** adopted by women of the Ghasi community.

2. **To analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and caste-based constraints** that shape and limit their access to sustainable employment and social mobility.
3. **To understand the role of gender and caste in structuring labour hierarchies**, particularly in occupations such as scavenging, domestic work, agriculture, and informal labour.
4. **To assess the coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies** employed by Ghasi women in response to poverty, exclusion, and changing socio-economic landscapes.
5. **To provide policy recommendations and suggest inclusive development strategies** that recognize the agency, dignity, and labour rights of Ghasi women while addressing structural inequalities.

## Methodology

The present study is mostly based on primary data. The methodology is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork, enabling an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, occupational patterns, and adaptive strategies employed by the Ghasi women across various informal sectors such as midwifery, sweeper, sanitation work, and domestic labour. The present study is conducted in Rairangpur block of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Data were collected from the Ghasi women of three villages Ichinda, Purunaghaty and Halada through methods such as observations, semi structured interviews, focus group discussion (FGD), key informant interviews (KII) and case studies. The researcher interacted with the women at their work places and tried to collect first-hand information.

## Result and Discussion

### *Women of Ghasi Community as Mid Wife*

After an insightful conversation with the *dhaai maa* (traditional midwife), it became evident that, in earlier times, midwifery was rooted and the indigenous practices passed down through generations. The *dhaai*, through tactile examination and abdominal massage, could determine the expected time of delivery and assess whether childbirth could safely occur at home. In instances where the fetus was malpositioned such as a breech presentation the *dhaai* would attempt to reposition the baby through careful, rhythmic massage to ensure both maternal and foetal comfort. This intricate knowledge was traditionally inherited matrilineally, as each *dhaai* was trained by her mother.

Moreover, in cases where a woman remained childless for three to four years, the *dhaai* would examine her abdomen and prescribe herbal remedies believed to enhance fertility. These remedies often included powdered formulations derived from the bark of forest trees or herbs sourced from local markets. It was also believed that specific preparations, known as *palta osodh* (literally “gender-changing medicine”), could influence the sex of the unborn child, administered only upon specific request. Beyond physiological care, spiritual and ritualistic dimensions were deeply interwoven into the *dhaai*’s practices. The *dhaai* also spoke about the transformations brought by modernity. With the advent of hospitals and increasing awareness of biomedical practices, most childbirths now occur under medical supervision. Nevertheless, traditional midwives often continue to assist within hospital settings, undertaking tasks such as cleaning the mother’s garments and tending to the new born.

### *Women of Ghasi Community Working as Scavenger*

In the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, the women of the Ghasi community, historically relegated to the margins of the caste and occupational hierarchy continue to work as scavengers, a role Traditionally regarded as “untouchables” within the rigid social stratification, Ghasi women have long been engaged in manual scavenging, waste collection, and the disposal of animal carcasses, tasks considered ritually impure by the dominant caste groups. The Ghasi women, often barefoot and without gloves or masks, are seen sweeping public spaces, collecting human and animal waste, and cleaning dry latrines in households or institutions that continue to rely on such manual systems, especially in less regulated rural areas. They are typically paid paltry sums or compensated in kind often receiving leftover food, old clothes, or seasonal grain instead of fair wages highlighting the informal and exploitative nature of their work. Their children, too, are often discriminated against in schools, which perpetuates the cycle of exclusion and poverty. These women bear the double burden of caste-based discrimination and gendered subjugation carrying out the most degrading forms of labour while also managing household responsibilities. Despite this, the agency and resilience of Ghasi women are gradually emerging in subtle yet significant ways. Some have begun to resist this inherited occupation by seeking alternative livelihoods through government schemes, local NGOs, or self-help groups that offer training in tailoring, food processing, or livestock rearing. However, the transition is fraught with challenges lack of sustained financial support, social resistance, and internalized stigma often hinder their rehabilitation.

### *Women of Ghasi Community as Working as Sweeper*

In the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, women of the Ghasi community are predominantly engaged in sanitation work, particularly as sweepers a profession deeply rooted in caste-based occupational hierarchies that continue to shape the social and economic lives of marginalized communities. Historically classified under the “untouchable” castes, the Ghasi community has been systematically relegated to stigmatized labour, with women bearing the brunt of this legacy through their involvement in manual street sweeping, waste collection, and public sanitation. These women often begin their work at the crack of dawn, sweeping roads, cleaning drains, and collecting garbage from marketplaces, streets, and public toilets typically without proper protective equipment such as gloves, boots, or masks. Despite the critical importance of their labour in maintaining public hygiene and preventing disease, they are poorly compensated, often working under informal arrangements without contracts, job security, or access to basic rights like maternity leave, healthcare, or retirement benefits. Many are employed as daily wage laborers or under municipal contractors who exploit their vulnerable status by delaying payments, denying fair wages, or offering only part-time or casual employment.

### *The Ghasi Women Working as Labourer in Construction Site*

In the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, an often overlooked yet indispensable segment of the labour force comprises women laborers who work tirelessly on construction sites, contributing significantly to the region’s infrastructural development. These women, many hailing from marginalized scheduled caste and tribal communities who shoulder the physical burden of construction work mixing cement, hauling bricks, carrying sand and stones, frequently under the oppressive glare of the sun, monsoon rains, or biting winter cold. Their wages, negotiated daily or weekly, are meagre often amounting to little more than subsistence income and are significantly lower than those paid to their male counterparts, even when performing identical tasks. This wage disparity is compounded by exploitative labour practices: payment delays, wage deductions for trivial reasons, and absence of any formal contracts or written agreements, which leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and economic insecurity.

Their contributions to the regional economy are undeniable: their labour supports the construction of homes, public buildings, roads, and other critical infrastructure that benefits entire communities. However, such contributions remain undervalued and undercompensated.

### *The Ghasi Women working as Labourer in Agricultural Field*

In the verdant landscapes of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, the women of the Ghasi community constitute a resilient backbone of the agrarian economy, toiling with unwavering dedication in the agricultural fields that sustain their families and uphold local traditions. From the crack of dawn, their silhouettes emerge among the verdant paddy swamps and undulating maize terraces, engaged in a spectrum of labour sowing seeds with meticulous care, transplanting rice saplings in waterlogged paddies, weeding and tending to crops in the scorching heat, and ultimately harvesting grains with deft hands that have been shaped by generations of toil. Each season enacts a ritual of labour, an interwoven choreography of sowing, nurturing, harvesting, and processing, collectively ensuring food security in their communities and contributing to agrarian productivity across Mayurbhanj's rural expanse. Consequently, these women often bear the double burden of productive wage labour in the fields and reproductive labour at home caring for children, preparing meals, managing household chores, and sustaining their extended families leaving little time for rest, skill development, or collective action. Yet, within this adversity, the women of the Ghasi community demonstrate remarkable agency, resilience, and solidarity.

### *Women of Ghasi Community Maid Servant*

In the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, women of the Ghasi community often find employment as maid servants in households across urban and semi-urban areas. Traditionally associated with menial and stigmatized labour, Ghasi women have long been confined to roles that are seen as extensions of their “polluted” caste identity, and domestic work represents a modern continuation of this legacy in private spaces. These women are employed primarily for cleaning, washing dishes, sweeping, mopping floors, washing clothes, and sometimes caring for children or elderly family members. Despite the physically demanding and time-consuming nature of their work, they are typically paid very low wages, often below the minimum wage standards, and are frequently denied benefits such as weekly offs, sick leave, or medical assistance. The work environment is often marked by subtle yet deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination. Ghasi women are frequently restricted from using the same utensils or toilets as the employing family and may be made to enter through back doors or serve from a distance, especially in upper-caste households. This treatment reinforces their status as socially inferior, despite their indispensable labour in maintaining the smooth functioning of the household. Many Ghasi women are also primary breadwinners

for their families, particularly in cases of widowhood, alcoholism among male family members, or absent husbands.

### Conclusion

Exploring the livelihood of the females of the Ghasi community in Odisha unveils a nuanced portrait of resilience, adaptability, and systemic marginalization shaped by historical caste hierarchies and socio-economic exclusion. The diverse experiences of Ghasi women in Mayurbhanj reveal a complex tapestry of endurance, exclusion, and quiet resistance shaped by intersecting forces of caste, gender, and class. Whether as traditional midwives preserving indigenous knowledge systems, agricultural laborers sustaining food security, construction workers building the district's infrastructure, or sanitation and domestic workers navigating the intimate spaces of public hygiene and private homes, these women represent the invisible yet indispensable labour force driving rural and semi-urban life. They are facing systemic inequalities ranging from exploitative working conditions and health hazards to wage disparity, social stigma. The study highlights the urgent need for policy interventions that promote dignity, equity, and sustainable livelihoods for Ghasi women in Odisha.

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