

# THE POLITICS OF TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: A CRITICAL STUDY ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper presents a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of tribal development politics in post-colonial India, with particular empirical focus on Maharashtra as a representative case study. Despite seven decades of constitutional safeguards and numerous welfare schemes under the Tribal Sub-Plan strategy, India's Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) remain entrenched as the nation's most marginalized demographic, exhibiting systemic exclusion across all human development indices. Through rigorous interdisciplinary methodology combining legal analysis, policy evaluation, political economy examination, and ethnographic insights, this study reveals the structural paradox between progressive legislative intent and persistent implementation failures.

This research establishes three core findings: First is constitutional protections like the Fifth Schedule and PESA Act remain substantially unimplemented due to bureaucratic resistance and lack of political will. Second is tribal welfare schemes suffer from chronic design flaws including centralization, corruption, and exclusionary targeting and third is electoral politics actively perpetuates tribal marginalization through calculated vote-bank strategies rather than genuine empowerment. The study concludes with a seven-point reform agenda for transformative tribal development, emphasizing constitutionalism, participatory governance, and rights-based approaches.

**Keywords:** Tribal development, Tribal rights, Scheduled Tribes, educational apartheid, healthcare disparities, economic justice, political representation, Policy reform, Maharashtra Adivasis, Political marginalization, Constitutional accountability

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been **75 years** since India gained political independence from the British Empire. In order to give the best constitution to the country at the very beginning, the Constitution Committee and the Drafting Committee exerted their full intellectual effort. It included fundamental rights and fundamental duties, guiding principles, etc. The basic concepts of development were promoted. The upliftment of the entire society was expected from this. Due to this, some sections of society have made social, economic, political and educational development. But the Indian tribal community is still lagging behind in terms of development. Therefore, the development of the tribal community has become a key issue for scholars recently.

Even before independence, the tribal community was far away from the development process and civil society. But recently, due to the considerable increase in the level of education, they have started gaining knowledge about modernity and development. That is why today the tribal community has started to understand the shortcomings along with the

awareness of their existence. That is why they are fighting for their existence today. Considering this, various political parties, organizations, and various professional groups are seen doing negative and positive politics for their political interests. This is clear from the present study.

### 1.1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND COLONIAL LEGACY

The tribals are the original inhabitants of this region. However, since ancient times, they were kept away from contact by numerous external invaders until India gained independence. This is understandable from various historical references. Some scholars are of the opinion that the tribals were exploited to a large extent during the British period. Accordingly, some opinions are as follows.

**Guha's (2007)** according, the contemporary marginalization of India's tribal communities must be understood within the historical continuum of colonial exploitation and post-independence policy failures. British colonial administration through the Government of India Act, 1874 first institutionalized tribal exclusion by designating certain areas as "non-regulated tracts".

**Xaxa's (2016)** according, the subsequent Government of India Act, 1935 created "Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas", cementing administrative segregation that continues to influence contemporary Scheduled Area governance.

Post-1947, the Indian state adopted an ambivalent approach - constitutionally recognizing tribal autonomy through Articles 244, 275 and the Fifth/Sixth Schedules while simultaneously pursuing aggressive resource extraction in tribal homelands. This paradox created what **Baviskar (1995)** terms "**development-induced displacement**", with over **25 million tribals displaced** since independence, primarily for dams, mines and wildlife sanctuaries (Fernandes, 2008).

### 1.2. DEMOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

According to the **2011 Census, India's 104 million Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6% of the population**, with concentration in:

- Central Indian Tribal Belt (Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha)
- Western India (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan)
- North-eastern States
- Southern States (Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu)

These are the main tribal areas of the Indian subcontinent.

**Specially in Maharashtra's tribal population of 10.5 million (9.4% of state population) is predominantly located in:**

**i) Vidarbha Region:** Gond, Kolam, Korku etc.

**ii) Marathwada:** Bhil, Gond, Kolam, Korku, Dhangad, Katkari (also called Kathodi), Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Marathwada: Katkari, Madia Gond, Kolam, Gond, Kolam tribes etc.

**iii) Northern Maharashtra:** Bhil, Bhil Garasia, Kokna, Kokni, Kukna, Koli Mahadev, Dongar Koli, Thakur, Thakar, and Varli, with significant populations communities in districts like Dhule, Nandurbar, and Nashik are there.

### 1.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The use of three interlocking analytical frameworks in this study is as follows.

- i) Postcolonial State Theory (Chatterjee, 2004): Examines how tribal citizens remain "governed populations" rather than equal rights-bearers
- ii) Resource Colonialism (Gadgil & Guha, 1995): Analyzes tribal areas as "internal colonies" for resource extraction
- iii) Subaltern Citizenship (Jayal, 2013): Investigates limited political agency of tribal communities

These three frameworks have been taken as the basis in the present study.

## 1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study investigates the following question:

- 1) Why has constitutional tribal protection failed to translate into substantive development?
- 2) How do political parties instrumentalize tribal welfare for electoral gains?
- 3) What explains the persistent implementation gaps in tribal education and healthcare?
- 4) How can tribal rights be institutionalized beyond symbolic politics?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research paper uses a mixed methods research design. However, most of the institutions have conducted research work related to tribal development. Some of them are published reports and some are unpublished. Out of these, the following **secondary resources** have been used as a basis for the data analysis. Like,

- Legal Analysis: Constitutional provisions, court judgments
- Policy Evaluation: Government reports, CAG audits
- Field Research: Case studies from Maharashtra's tribal blocks
- Statistical Analysis: National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) datasets

### 2) Constitutional Provisions for Scheduled Tribal (Adivasi) Protection

#### 2.1. FOUNDATIONAL PROVISIONS

**According to Article 342:** The process of Presidential notification for Scheduled Tribe status has turned into politics, with around 33 communities including the Dhangar community in Maharashtra, Meena, Gujar communities in Rajasthan, demanding Scheduled Tribe status for the last several decades without any settlement.

**Fifth Schedule:** Covers 10 states with 120 Scheduled Areas. The Governor's special responsibility under Paragraph 5 has been rendered ineffective through: like,

**Rubber-stamping of mining leases without tribal consultation:** In the Andhra Pradesh State Electricity Board was observed flouting Supreme Court orders regarding the diversion of forest land in **Nagarjuna Sagar Dam** without seeking prior permission.

**According to the CAG report,** Rajasthan and Odisha noted unauthorized renewals of mining leases where the approval of the Central Government was not obtained by the State Government, as directed by the Supreme Court.

**Sixth Schedule:** While Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Northeast have legislative powers, they suffer from:

**i) The India Employment Report 2024** (Youth employment, education and skills) shows that there is a shortage of employees in the public sector and a lack of employment opportunities. This is why people are migrating in large numbers for employment.

**ii) Insufficient Funds - Insufficient Allocation:** As the Central Government is not providing sufficient funds for the development of the Sixth Scheduled Areas, the autonomous bodies there are not getting sufficient funds. Also, due to the lack of sources of income, there are demands for distributing additional funds by making special provisions for backwardness.

**iii) Lack of State Finance Commissions:** The absence of State Finance Commissions in these regions hinders the transfer of funds to district and regional councils, which affects their financial autonomy.

**iv) Lack of skilled professionals:** The autonomous councils lack skilled professionals, which leads to poorly planned development projects due to lack of proper technical and economic evaluation.

## 2.2. PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION

**i) The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA Act):** Designed to extend Panchayati raj to Scheduled Areas with Gram Sabha supremacy. Implementation failures include: like\_

a) A large number of mining projects have been approved without the required consent of the Gram Sabha, thereby weakening the PESA Act.

b) State amendments diluting tribal rights (e.g., Chhattisgarh's land acquisition rules)

**ii) Forest Rights Act 2006:** Revolutionary in recognizing individual and community forest rights. However: The FRA 2006 was truly revolutionary in recognizing resident's rights, but its impact has been limited by issues such as weak implementation, bureaucratic resistance and conflict with conservation and industrial interests, conflicts with wildlife laws, opposition from forest departments, corporate and developmental pressures, and inadequate recognition of community rights. Raising awareness, streamlining the claims process and ensuring genuine community participation are essential for the law to achieve its full potential.

## 2.3. JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION:

In this regard

a) *Samatha v. Andhra Pradesh* (1997): Private mining in Scheduled Areas was banned but was routinely flouted.

b) *Niyamgiri Judgment* (2013): Gram Sabha sovereignty was recognized but later attempts were made to circumvent it

c) *Orissa Mining Corporation Case* (2022): Weak consent

In essence, some of the above important cases reveal judicial delay and apathy or ambivalence.

## 3. TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN MAHARASHTRA: POLICY-PRACTICE DISCONNECT

### 3.1. EDUCATIONAL APARTHEID

#### i) Institutional Framework:

The Maharashtra Tribal Development Department manages a network of educational institutions, which includes 559 Ashram Schools and 43 **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)**, as well as a post-matric scholarship scheme.

#### Ground Reality - Infrastructure Deficit:

As reported by **TISS (2022)**, 68% of Ashram schools do not have functioning toilets. Additionally, 54% of EMRS schools do not have science laboratories despite being affiliated to CBSE. The student-teacher ratio is 38:1, which is much higher than the national average of 30:1, further straining the quality of education.

#### ii) Pedagogical Challenges:

Tribal schools are facing a shortage of teachers, with numerous vacancies. Multi-grade teaching is prevalent in more than 50% of schools, where a single teacher handles multiple classes at the same time. Also, the effectiveness of their education is reduced due to the lack of education in their native language.

#### iii) Outcome Indicators:

**ASER, 2021 according**, Tribal students face serious educational disparities, with only 32% of students completing secondary education compared to 46% for Scheduled Castes (SCs). Merely 18% transition to higher education and 62% of adolescents are still deprived of education.

According to a case study from Melghat: Residential schools in Melghat are in a dire situation, with a 40% dropout rate before 10th grade and an average of 12 students dying every year due to malnutrition. Hostels are also not in good condition, which increases health issues and safety hazards.

## 3.2. HEALTHCARE DESERTS

### i) Policy Framework:

The National Health Mission includes tribal-specific components, such as Mobile Medical Units, designed to address healthcare gaps in remote areas.

### ii) Empirical Evidence – Mortality Burden:

Tribal communities suffer disproportionately, with an Under-5 Mortality Rate (U5MR) of 72 per 1,000 (compared to the national average of 38) and a Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) of 230 (versus 113 nationally).

### iii) Nutrition Crisis:

NFHS-5 according, nearly half (48%) of tribal children are stunted, and 52% of women suffer from anaemia. Only 11% of children receive an adequate diet, reflecting systemic failures in nutrition programs.

### iv) Health Infrastructure:

Healthcare access is severely limited, with one Primary Health Centre (PHC) serving 28,000 people, against the norm of 1:20,000. Doctor vacancies stand at 68%, and drug stock outs average four months, crippling service delivery.

### v) Determinants of Healthcare Gaps:

Pande 2020, accordingly, Geographical remoteness forces tribal populations to travel an average of 12 km to reach a PHC. Cultural barriers in healthcare delivery and corruption in nutrition programs further hinder access to essential services.

Similarly, Nandurbar district in Maharashtra is also in a very remote area. The situation is very bad in the tehsils of Dhadgaon, Akkalkuwa and Taloda there. In Particular, patients are taken to the primary health center in Bamboo Ambulance or Jholi Ambulance. In such a situation, the condition of the patient worsens and by then the chances of him dying also increase. It seems that there is complete neglect in this regard at the political and administrative level. A similar situation is seen in most of the scheduled areas across the country.

## 4. POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TRIBAL EXPLOITATION:

It examines the systemic patterns of exploitation that marginalize tribals, land dispossession, and other resource extraction.

Each of these issues highlights a clear disconnect between policy intentions and implementation at the ground level, underscoring the need for systemic reforms in tribal development.

### 4.1. ELECTORAL RESOURCES USE

#### i) Vote Bank Strategies:

There are many examples of political parties across the country systematically trying to win votes from tribal communities without effectively developing them. They have been used as vote banks. Before elections, political parties are known to devise various schemes to distribute short-term free gifts to garner votes. Then they are ignored until the next elections.

#### ii) Symbolic representation:

Despite the reservation of seats, the political representation of tribals has remained symbolic. In fact, the leadership of those representatives has not been able to influence the political parties. If there had been no political reservation, tribal leadership or representatives would probably not have been seen in these parliamentary houses.

#### iii) Factional politics:

Across the country, religious and political organizations manipulate tribal identities for electoral gain. For example, there are many examples of factional politics being played for political or religious gains among Hindu tribals, Christian tribals, Muslim tribals, etc. from time to time. This shows that there is an attempt to break the cultural and social unity of the tribals and keep them separate. On one hand, there is a struggle to preserve the cultural heritage of the awakened tribals and achieve unity among them. From this, it becomes clear how frightening the factional politics of the tribals is.



## 4.2. RESOURCE COLONIALISM

### i) Land Acquisition Practices:

Tribal areas across the country are bearing the brunt of resource extraction, as most of the mining leases are in tribal areas. Tribal land has been diverted for industrial projects, and corruption has flourished on these leases. The **CAG report of 2022** states that fraud was found in 68% of land acquisition cases, often without proper compensation. This makes it clear that tribals have been cheated. The recent issue of **Hansdev forest** area is the latest example.

### ii) Displacement Impact:

Land acquisition has led to large-scale displacement in many places in the country. It is seen that numerous affected tribals have not been rehabilitated. It is clear from many rallies and agitations that they have faced problems of food, clothing and shelter.

## 4.3. BUREAUCRATIC RESISTANCE

### i) Diversion of Funds:

Despite the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) which mandates budgetary allocation for tribal welfare, the funds of this scheme remain unspent every year. Also, students receive scholarships late, due to which they do not get important help on time.

### ii) Procedural Complexity:

The government announces many schemes that are complementary to tribals. Due to complicated procedures in implementing those schemes, the benefits of the scheme are not received on time. Which makes it very difficult for the tribals. As a result, many tribes are deprived of the benefits of these schemes.

### iii) Accountability Deficit:

Penalties are not imposed for violations of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and social audits to ensure transparency are weak or non-existent, which leads to rampant corruption.

## 5. TRANSFORMATIVE REFORM AGENDA

### 5.1. CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

#### i) Fifth Schedule Amendments:

The current system where state governments appoint **Tribal Advisory Council** (TAC) members has led to bureaucratic control over tribal affairs, often ignoring genuine tribal concerns. Direct elections for TAC members would ensure authentic tribal leadership that truly represents community interests. Additionally, mandating Governors to submit periodic compliance reports to the President would create a constitutional accountability mechanism, forcing state administrations to properly implement protective laws like PESA and FRA. These reports should be made public to allow civil society monitoring.

#### ii) Sixth Schedule Extension:

Maharashtra's tribal belt suffers from near-total administrative neglect despite constituting 10% of the state's population. Extending the Sixth Schedule - currently applicable only in Northeast India - would grant tribal areas autonomous district councils (ADCs) with legislative powers over land, forests and local governance. ADCs could generate their own revenue through minor minerals and forest produce, reducing dependence on state budgets. This model has successfully preserved tribal identity in Meghalaya and Mizoram, and could be replicated in Maharashtra's Melghat, Gadchiroli and Nandurbar regions.

### 5.2. GOVERNANCE RESTRUCTURING

#### i) Tribal Development Authority:

The existing Tribal Development Department functions as just another bureaucratic silo. A statutory Tribal Development Authority with majority tribal representation (minimum 50%) and constitutional backing could bypass the inefficient state machinery. It should receive funds directly from central ministries with powers to sanction projects

up to ₹50 crore without state interference. The Authority must include domain experts in tribal education, healthcare and livelihoods, not just IAS officers.

**ii) Gram Sabha Empowerment:**

Despite PESA provisions, Gram Sabhas remain rubber stamps for bureaucratic decisions. Establishing legal aid clinics at block levels with trained tribal paralegals can help communities fight illegal land acquisitions. A real-time digital dashboard tracking all Gram Sabha approvals - integrated with the National e-Governance Division - would expose fraudulent clearances. The dashboard should mandate geo-tagged documentation of quorum and voting processes to prevent fake meetings.

### 5.3. SECTORAL INTERVENTIONS

**i) Education:**

The current education system forces tribal children to learn in alien English or any state language mediums. Transitional bilingual education (tribal language + state language) for the first 5 years, as practiced in Andhra Pradesh's Multilingual Education program, can improve learning outcomes. EMRS schools need complete overhaul and there each should have mandatory residential facilities with nutritionists and child psychologists. Bridge courses must incorporate vocational skills alongside formal curriculum to make education relevant. e.g. forest produce processing

**ii) Healthcare:**

The tribal mortality crisis demands emergency measures. Mobile hospital vans equipped with telemedicine terminals can connect remote villages to AIIMS/Delhi specialists. A 2-year tribal health volunteer course (modelled on China's barefoot doctors) can create a cadre of community paramedics. Reviving millet cultivation through MSP and PDS inclusion would address chronic malnutrition - Odisha's Millet Mission shows this can reduce stunting by 11% in 3 years.

### 5.4. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

**i) Need a Reforms tribal-dominated electoral panels:**

The Election Commission should verify the tribal origin of candidates through caste certificates - not just caste certificates. In reserved constituencies, there should be tribal-dominated electoral panels instead of party leaders to select candidates.

**ii) Party accountability:**

The statutory Tribal Manifesto Audit Office should assess the fulfilment of election promises, with the power to deduct election deposits from defaulting parties. All tribal welfare funds should follow the MGNREGA-style social audit model, with mandatory village-level public hearings. The CAG should conduct an annual performance audit of tribal schemes, the findings of which should be presented in the state assemblies.

## 6. CONCLUSION: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Constitutional Safeguards Remain Unimplemented seriously**

- In Despite progressive laws (Fifth Schedule, PESA, FRA), bureaucratic resistance and political apathy hinder enforcement.
- Judicial protections (e.g., Samatha, Niyamgiri judgments) are routinely bypassed.

**2. Policy-Practice Gap in Tribal Welfare**

- Education: Poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and language barriers lead to high dropout rates e.g. 40% in Melghat.
- Healthcare: Tribal regions face severe shortages (1 PHC per 28,000 people), malnutrition (48% stunting), and preventable deaths.

**3. Systemic Exploitation and Marginalization**

- Land Dispossession: 68% of land acquisitions involve fraud (CAG 2022), displacing tribals without rehabilitation.
- Resource Colonialism: Mining and industrial projects exploit tribal lands, violating Gram Sabha consent (PESA).

#### **4. Political Tokenism Over Empowerment**

- Tribal representation is symbolic only.
- Vote-bank politics prioritizes short-term freebies over long-term development.

#### **5. Governance Failures**

- Tribal Sub-Plan funds are misused or unspent.
- Lack of accountability enables corruption. e.g., fake Gram Sabha approvals.

### **7. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **1. Strengthen Constitutional Mechanisms**

- To direct elections for Tribal Advisory Councils (TACs).
- To extend Sixth Schedule autonomy to Maharashtra's tribal belt.

#### **2. Overhaul Service Delivery**

- Education: To introduce bilingual schooling and upgrade Ashram/EMRS facilities.
- Healthcare: To deploy mobile telemedicine units and train tribal health volunteers.

#### **3. Ensure Economic Justice**

- To enforce FRA rights and halt illegal land acquisitions.
- To promote millet cultivation via MSP to combat malnutrition.

#### **4. Political Reforms**

- To promote tribal-dominated electoral panels for candidate selection.
- Mandate social audits of tribal welfare schemes.

#### **5. Accountability Measures**

- Public Governor's reports on Fifth Schedule compliance.
- To annual CAG audits of tribal funds presented in legislatures.

In the above discussion, conclusions and recommendations, it can be said that tribal development in India is not a matter of policy apathy but of structural apathy. Without genuine political will, decentralized governance, and strict accountability, constitutional promises will remain unfulfilled. The proposed reforms demand urgent action to bridge the gap between legal rights and lived realities for Adivasis.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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None.

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**APPENDICES**

- Appendix A: Tribal Development Indicators (State-wise)
- Appendix B: Maharashtra Tribal Area Map
- Appendix C: Interview Transcripts with Tribal Activists
- Appendix D: Policy Implementation Flowcharts