

Understanding Tribal Challenges in India: Issues of Identity, Development and Exclusion

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Abstract

Scheduled Tribes constitute one of the most marginalized and socio-economically vulnerable sections of Indian society. India is home to a large number of tribal communities possessing distinct cultures, traditions, languages, and social practices. According to the Census of India (2011), the tribal population comprises 10.43 crore people, accounting for 8.6 percent of the total population of the country. A significant proportion of the tribal population resides in rural areas and continues to experience deprivation in terms of education, healthcare, livelihood, and social development. Despite various constitutional safeguards, welfare policies, and developmental programmes initiated by the Government of India, the overall progress of tribal communities remains inadequate. Issues such as land alienation, poverty, illiteracy, displacement, malnutrition, unemployment, and cultural disintegration continue to affect their socio-economic conditions. The present paper attempts to examine the major challenges faced by tribal communities in India from a sociological perspective. The study is based on secondary sources including books, journal articles, government reports, and census data. The paper emphasizes the need for inclusive and participatory development strategies to ensure social justice, empowerment, and sustainable development of tribal populations in India.

Introduction

India is home to a large and diverse tribal population with distinct cultural traditions, languages, customs, and social practices. Tribal communities, commonly referred to as Adivasis, Girijans, Aborigines, Vanya Jatis, and Scheduled Tribes, constitute an integral part of Indian society. According to the Census of India (2011), the tribal population of the country is approximately 10.43 crore, accounting for 8.6 percent of the total population. India possesses one of the largest concentrations of tribal populations in the world. A majority of tribal people reside in rural and forested regions and continue to depend primarily on agriculture, forest resources, hunting, fishing, and other traditional occupations for their livelihood (Xaxa, 2008; Census of India, 2011).

The tribal communities of India are widely distributed across different geographical regions and include major groups such as the Gonds, Santhals, Bhils, Khasis, Angamis, Bhutias, and Great Andamanese. These communities possess unique socio-cultural identities reflected through their language, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and lifestyle. Sociologist G. S. Ghurye referred to tribal communities as “Backward Hindus” in the context of their historical isolation and socio-economic backwardness (Ghurye, 1963). The Constitution of India recognizes these communities as “Scheduled Tribes” under Article 342 and provides several constitutional safeguards for their protection and development (Government of India, 1950).

Despite numerous welfare programmes, developmental policies, and affirmative measures introduced by the Government of India, tribal communities continue to remain among the most marginalized and deprived sections of society. Problems such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, land alienation, displacement, unemployment, poor healthcare, and cultural disintegration continue to affect their overall development (Hasnain, 2019). In the contemporary era of modernization and globalization, tribal societies are undergoing rapid socio-economic and cultural transformations, which have significantly influenced their traditional way of life. Therefore, the study of tribal issues has become increasingly important from a sociological perspective to understand their challenges, identity, and developmental concerns in modern India.

Sociological Connotation of Scheduled Tribe

The concept of tribe has been interpreted differently by sociologists, anthropologists, and international organizations across the world. Tribal societies are generally identified on the basis of certain distinctive social, cultural, economic, and geographical characteristics. However, these characteristics are not completely uniform in all tribal communities. Despite variations, tribal societies share certain common features such as common territory, cultural homogeneity, kinship ties, and relative isolation from mainstream society (Majumdar, 1961; Linton, 1936).

According to the International Labour Organization Convention No. 169, indigenous and tribal peoples are those “whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs, traditions, or special laws and regulations” (ILO, 1989). This definition highlights the distinct socio-cultural identity and traditional institutions of tribal communities.

Anthropologist D. N. Majumdar defined a tribe as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, occupying the same territory, speaking the same language, and observing certain restrictions regarding marriage, profession, or occupation” (Majumdar, 1961). This definition emphasizes common identity, territory, and social organization.

The Imperial Gazetteer of India described a tribe as a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory, and generally maintaining social and cultural unity (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908).

According to sociologists John Lewis Gillin and John Philip Gillin, a tribe is a local group that occupies a common territory, speaks a common language, and practices a common culture (Gillin & Gillin, 1948). Their definition highlights the importance of cultural homogeneity in tribal life.

Anthropologist Ralph Linton viewed tribe as a group of bands occupying contiguous territories and possessing a sense of unity based on cultural similarities, frequent interaction, and common interests (Linton, 1936).

Similarly, anthropologist I. M. Lewis observed that tribal societies are generally small in scale and characterized by limited social, political, and legal relations. According to him,

tribal communities possess a strong sense of self-sufficiency, close social bonds, and a worldview deeply connected with tradition and nature (Lewis, 1968).

In the Indian context, the Constitution of India recognizes tribal communities as “Scheduled Tribes” under Article 342. These communities are identified on the basis of characteristics such as distinctive culture, geographical isolation, primitive traits, shyness of contact, and socio-economic backwardness (Government of India, 1950). Thus, the sociological understanding of Scheduled Tribes reflects their unique cultural identity, traditional social organization, and marginalized position within the broader social structure of Indian society.

Identification of Tribal Groups in India

India is characterized by immense social and cultural diversity, and several communities exhibit certain features commonly associated with tribal societies. However, not all such communities are officially recognized as tribal groups. In the Indian context, the term “tribe” has a constitutional and administrative significance rather than merely a cultural or anthropological meaning (Xaxa, 2008).

The Constitution of India recognizes certain communities as “Scheduled Tribes” under Article 342. According to the constitutional provision, Scheduled Tribes are those tribes, tribal communities, or parts and groups within such communities that are specified by the President of India through a public notification for the purposes of the Constitution (Government of India, 1950). Thus, the identification of tribal groups in India is primarily based on constitutional recognition and administrative considerations.

The constitutional definition does not provide a rigid or universally accepted sociological characterization of tribal communities. Instead, the identification of Scheduled Tribes has historically been guided by certain socio-cultural and economic criteria. These commonly **accepted characteristics include:**

- Distinctive culture
- Geographical isolation
- Primitive traits
- Shyness of contact with the larger community
- Socio-economic backwardness

Although these criteria are not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution, they have become well-established through administrative practices and committee recommendations. The basis for identification evolved from various official reports and commissions, including the Census of 1931, the First Backward Classes Commission (1955), the Lokur Committee Report (1965), and the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Bill, 1967 (Xaxa, 2008).

The identification of tribal communities in India therefore reflects both sociological and administrative dimensions. It recognizes the unique cultural identity and historical marginalization of tribal populations while extending constitutional safeguards and developmental measures for their welfare and upliftment.

According to anthropologist David G. Mandelbaum, Indian tribes possess several distinctive characteristics. These include kinship as an instrument of social bonds, lack of hierarchy among men and groups, absence of strong and complex formal organization, communitarian basis of landholding, segmentary social structure, little emphasis on surplus accumulation or market trading, lack of distinction between the form and substance of religion, and a distinct psychological orientation toward enjoyment of life (Mandelbaum, 1970).

Problems of Tribal Population in India

Tribal communities in India are among the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of society. A majority of the tribal population resides in forest and hilly regions and traditionally maintains a distinct socio-cultural identity. However, the processes of modernization, industrialization, globalization, and state-led development have significantly affected their social, cultural, and economic life. Despite various constitutional safeguards and welfare measures, tribal communities continue to face numerous challenges that hinder their overall development (Hasnain, 2019).

Land Alienation

Land alienation is one of the most serious problems faced by tribal communities in India. The process of land alienation began during the British colonial period when colonial authorities entered tribal regions to exploit forest and mineral resources. Tribal lands were gradually occupied by moneylenders, zamindars, traders, and contractors through fraudulent practices, indebtedness, and unequal economic relations (Bêteille, 1998).

The introduction of commercial forestry and mining activities further displaced tribal communities from their traditional habitats. Colonial forest policies emphasized commercial interests over the welfare of forest dwellers. Large forest areas were declared reserved forests, restricting tribal access to forest resources that traditionally formed the basis of their livelihood.

The expansion of railways during the colonial period also led to extensive deforestation, particularly of teak, sal, and deodar forests used for railway sleepers. Since tribal communities depend heavily on forests for agriculture, hunting, food gathering, and minor forest produce, exploitation of forest resources by outsiders severely disrupted tribal ecology, economy, and traditional life (Hasnain, 2019).

Even after independence, developmental projects such as dams, industries, mining operations, and urban expansion have continued to displace tribal populations from their ancestral lands. Such displacement has resulted in economic insecurity, migration, and social disintegration among tribal communities (Xaxa, 2008).

Poverty and Indebtedness

Poverty remains a persistent problem among tribal populations in India. Most tribal communities depend on subsistence agriculture, hunting, gathering, forest produce collection, and manual labour for survival. The use of primitive technology, low agricultural productivity, lack of irrigation facilities, and limited access to markets contribute to low income levels (Majumdar, 1961).

As a result, a large proportion of tribal households live below the poverty line. Economic vulnerability often forces tribal families to borrow money from local moneylenders and landlords at high rates of interest. In many cases, inability to repay loans leads to indebtedness, bonded labour, and loss of land.

The absence of adequate banking and institutional credit facilities in tribal regions further increases their dependence on exploitative moneylending systems. Thus, poverty and indebtedness continue to perpetuate economic exploitation and social marginalization among tribal communities (Hasnain, 2019).

Low Health Status

The health condition of tribal populations in India remains poor compared to the general population. Tribal communities suffer from various communicable and nutritional diseases due to poverty, malnutrition, lack of sanitation, unsafe drinking water, and inadequate healthcare facilities (Bhasin, 2007).

Water-borne diseases, malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, anaemia, and respiratory infections are common among tribal populations. In some Himalayan regions, iodine deficiency disorders such as goitre are prevalent. Maternal and child health indicators among tribal communities are also significantly lower than national averages.

Lack of awareness, geographical isolation, shortage of healthcare infrastructure, and dependence on traditional healing practices further aggravate health problems among tribal populations. Malnutrition among tribal women and children remains a serious concern and adversely affects physical and cognitive development.

The poor health status of tribal communities reflects broader issues of socio-economic deprivation and unequal access to healthcare services in India.

Table no.1 Key health indicators of STs

Indicators	STs in %	Total population in %
Infant mortality	62.1	57
Neo natal mortality	39.9	39
Child mortality	35.8	18.4
% of institutional delivery	17.7	38.7
Childhood vaccination	31.3	43.5
% household health scheme	2.6	31.9
Prevalence of anaemia among women	68.5	55.3

Census report of 2011

The above table representing the health indicators of the tribal population in comparison to the total population of India reflects the poor health status of tribal communities. Indicators such as infant mortality rate and neonatal mortality rate are comparatively higher among tribal populations than the national average. A significant gap also exists between tribal and non-tribal populations with regard to institutional delivery, immunization coverage, and

access to household health schemes. The prevalence of anaemia among tribal women is also considerably high (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2018).

Malnutrition is another major problem affecting tribal communities. Nutritional deficiency among tribal children weakens immunity, increases susceptibility to infections, contributes to chronic illness, and in severe cases may lead to cognitive impairment and poor physical development (Bhasin, 2007). Ecological imbalance caused by deforestation and depletion of forest resources has further intensified tribal hardships. The cutting of trees has increased the distance between villages and forest areas, forcing tribal women to walk longer distances in search of firewood and minor forest produce, thereby affecting their health and livelihood.

Poor Educational Status

Education among tribal communities in India remains uneven and comparatively underdeveloped. Although significant progress has been made through government initiatives, formal education has had limited impact on many tribal groups, particularly those residing in remote and inaccessible regions. In the earlier period, there were very few specific educational programmes aimed at tribal welfare. However, after independence, various constitutional provisions, reservation policies, scholarships, residential schools, and tribal welfare schemes were introduced to improve educational opportunities among Scheduled Tribes (Xaxa, 2008).

Despite these efforts, the literacy rate among tribal populations continues to remain lower than the national average. Several socio-economic and cultural factors are responsible for the low educational attainment among tribal communities. Poverty is one of the major barriers, as many tribal families depend on their children for household work, agriculture, cattle rearing, and collection of forest products. Consequently, education is often considered secondary to economic survival.

Geographical isolation also restricts access to educational institutions. Most tribal settlements are located in forested, hilly, and remote areas where schools, transportation facilities, and educational infrastructure are inadequate. In many cases, teachers from outside communities are unwilling to work in such difficult locations, leading to teacher shortages and irregular academic activities.

Language barriers further create obstacles in tribal education, as the medium of instruction in schools often differs from tribal dialects and mother tongues. Tribal children frequently experience difficulties in understanding classroom teaching, which contributes to poor academic performance and high dropout rates (Mohanty, 2006).

In addition, traditional beliefs, superstitions, and lack of awareness regarding the importance of formal education also influence educational participation among some tribal groups. The curriculum and teaching methods used in formal schools often fail to reflect tribal culture, traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems, making education less attractive and meaningful for tribal children.

Therefore, improving tribal education requires culturally sensitive educational policies, better infrastructure, trained teachers, mother-tongue-based learning, and greater socio-economic support for tribal families.

Loss of Cultural Identity

The process of modernization, globalization, and increasing interaction with non-tribal communities has significantly affected the cultural identity of tribal populations in India. Tribal societies, which were once relatively isolated and deeply rooted in their traditional customs and practices, are now experiencing rapid socio-cultural transformation (Hasnain, 2019).

Contact with dominant cultures, urban lifestyles, modern education, religious influences, and mass media has brought considerable changes in tribal social life. In several tribal regions, the influence of missionary activities and external cultural forces has contributed to the development of bilingualism and gradual decline in the use of tribal languages and dialects. As younger generations increasingly adopt mainstream languages and lifestyles, many indigenous linguistic traditions are becoming endangered.

The growing influence of westernization and modernization has also altered traditional tribal values, beliefs, customs, and social institutions. Many tribal communities are gradually moving away from their indigenous cultural practices and adopting patterns of life associated with urban and non-tribal societies.

As a result, several traditional forms of tribal art and culture, including folk dances, music, rituals, handicrafts, and oral traditions, are declining. The erosion of cultural identity has weakened community solidarity and affected the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems that were historically transmitted across generations (Xaxa, 2008).

Therefore, the protection and preservation of tribal culture have become essential for maintaining cultural diversity and safeguarding the unique heritage of tribal communities in India. Efforts should be made to promote tribal languages, arts, traditions, and indigenous practices through inclusive cultural and educational policies.

Concept of Private Property

The introduction of the concept of private property in land significantly affected tribal communities in India. Traditionally, many tribal societies practiced collective ownership and community-based management of land and forest resources. Land was regarded as a common resource closely associated with community life, culture, and livelihood rather than an individual economic asset (Mandelbaum, 1970).

However, the emergence of private land ownership under colonial and post-colonial administrative systems disrupted traditional tribal patterns of resource utilization. Tribal communities, lacking legal awareness and economic power, were often unable to protect their customary land rights within the new legal framework. Consequently, many tribal people lost control over their ancestral lands to non-tribal settlers, landlords, moneylenders, and commercial interests.

To address this issue, the Government of India enacted the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. The Act aimed to restore forest rights and recognize the traditional ownership and livelihood rights of tribal communities over forest land and

resources (Government of India, 2006). However, despite its progressive objectives, the implementation of the Act has remained inadequate in several regions due to administrative inefficiency, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic obstacles.

In-Migration and Demographic Changes

Several tribal-dominated regions in India have experienced large-scale in-migration of non-tribal populations due to industrialization, mining, urbanization, and developmental projects. Economic opportunities created by industries, infrastructure projects, and commercial activities have attracted non-tribal populations into tribal areas.

As a result, tribal communities in many regions have gradually become minorities within their own traditional habitats. For instance, industrial regions of Jharkhand have witnessed a decline in the proportional share of tribal populations due to continuous migration of non-tribal groups (Xaxa, 2008).

The process intensified after the economic liberalization policies of the 1990s, which accelerated industrial expansion and exploitation of natural resources in tribal regions. Such developments often resulted in displacement, loss of livelihood, environmental degradation, and socio-cultural disruption among tribal communities.

In response to these processes, several tribal movements and protests emerged across India. Movements against the Jaitapur Nuclear Power Project in Maharashtra and the Vedanta mining project in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha reflect resistance against displacement, exploitation, and alienation of tribal populations from their land and resources.

Problem of Separatism and Alienation

The colonial policies of the British government had a long-lasting impact on tribal communities in India. The British adopted a policy of administrative isolation and indirect control over tribal regions, which weakened the traditional social and political institutions of tribal societies (Majumdar, 1961).

Colonial authorities imposed new administrative structures and legal systems without adequately understanding tribal culture and customary practices. The enactment of laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act created negative stereotypes and stigmatized several tribal communities by portraying them as criminal or anti-social groups.

Many tribal groups, including the Kolis, Mundas, Khasis, and Santals, actively resisted British exploitation and colonial domination. However, their resistance movements were often suppressed, and tribal leaders were labelled as rebels, dacoits, or criminals.

The British administration also encouraged missionary activities, particularly in Central India and the North-Eastern regions, which contributed to socio-cultural transformation and further alienation of tribal communities from mainstream society.

The legacy of colonial exploitation, displacement, economic deprivation, and cultural marginalization continued even after independence, contributing to feelings of alienation and separatist tendencies among some tribal groups. Therefore, ensuring inclusive development,

cultural recognition, and political participation remains essential for strengthening national integration and tribal empowerment in India.

Conclusion

Inclusive growth, which is one of the major objectives of modern India, can be achieved only through the socio-economic upliftment of marginalized and disadvantaged communities, particularly the tribal population. Inclusive development ensures equal opportunities and equitable distribution of the benefits of economic progress among all sections of society.

Tribal communities constitute one of the most vulnerable and underprivileged sections of Indian society. Despite constitutional safeguards, welfare programmes, and various developmental initiatives undertaken by the Government of India, tribal populations continue to face numerous challenges such as land alienation, displacement, poverty, indebtedness, illiteracy, unemployment, poor health conditions, malnutrition, migration, and erosion of cultural identity (Hasnain, 2019).

The present study attempts to highlight the major socio-economic and cultural problems faced by tribal communities in India from a sociological perspective. The study emphasizes the need for greater attention from administrators, policymakers, social scientists, and civil society towards the protection and development of tribal populations.

Tribal communities are an inseparable part of the Indian social structure and possess rich cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge, and ecological wisdom. Therefore, their development should not merely focus on economic growth but also on preservation of their cultural identity, traditional rights, and social dignity.

Sustainable and participatory development policies, effective implementation of welfare schemes, educational empowerment, healthcare accessibility, protection of land rights, and promotion of tribal culture are essential for ensuring social justice and inclusive growth in India.

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