



Securing Tribal Futures in India: Addressing Challenges, Recognizing Contributions, and Reimagining Policy

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Abstract

India's tribal communities are navigating one of the most consequential periods in their collective history, defined by the convergence of long-standing marginalization and new pressures from development-led displacement, ecological degradation, and administrative uncertainty. While recent national initiatives—including the Forest Rights Act (FRA 2006), PESA (1996), PM-JANMAN, EMRS modernization, and Van Dhan—signal renewed attention to tribal welfare, their on-ground impact remains uneven and often disconnected from the lived realities of Adivasi communities. This urgency becomes especially evident in cases such as the continued neglect of nearly 50,000 Gond tribals displaced under the 2005 Strategic Hamlet initiative, which exposes persistent governance failures, weak rehabilitation structures, and the fragility of land and cultural rights even after two decades. The urgency becomes especially evident in cases such as the continued neglect of nearly 50,000 Gond tribals displaced under the 2005 Strategic Hamlet initiative, and the ongoing Hasdeo Arand mining crisis (2022-2025), which exposes persistent governance failures, weak rehabilitation structures, and the fragility of land and cultural rights even after two decades. India's Adivasi communities face deepening marginalisation from development-induced displacement, ecological degradation, and persistent governance failures. Despite progressive laws like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and PESA 1996, and recent initiatives (PM-JANMAN, VanDhan, EMRS), implementation remains highly uneven. The unresolved displacement of nearly 50,000 Gond tribals in 2005 and the ongoing Hasdeo Arand mining crisis (2022–2025) illustrate the continued fragility of tribal land and cultural rights.

This study offers a comprehensive inquiry into the socio-cultural, ecological, and economic contributions of tribal communities while critically analyzing the deep-rooted challenges they face across land governance, displacement, forest dependence, healthcare, education, and cultural autonomy. By integrating literature review, secondary data, and policy analysis, the research maps the persistent gaps between legislative intent and implementation reality. It examines how resource governance failures, administrative delay, weak Gram Sabha empowerment, declining forest access, and livelihood vulnerability continue to shape tribal marginalization. The study further highlights how fragile food systems, anaemia prevalence, disrupted schooling, and market exploitation deepen socio-economic inequalities. A major contribution of this research lies in its cross-sectoral and rights-based approach, linking governance challenges with cultural identity, ecological stewardship, and development planning. Unlike existing studies that examine these themes in isolation, this paper synthesizes them into a unified analytical framework that foregrounds the collective rights, historical injustices, and community-led pathways necessary for transformative change. By aligning its recommendations with SDGs 1, 4, 10, and 15, the study offers a robust, justice-oriented roadmap for policymakers, scholars, and development practitioners committed to sustainable, culturally rooted, and rights-driven tribal empowerment. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in contemporary scholarship by connecting structural vulnerabilities with policy pathways that honor tribal autonomy, ecological wisdom, and the constitutional promise of dignity for India's indigenous peoples.

Keywords

Tribal Communities, Adivasi, Indigenous Rights, FRA 2006, PESA 1996, Tribal Displacement, Land Alienation, Self-Rule, Tribal Governance, EMRS, PM-JANMAN, Minor Forest Produce, Van Dhan, Tribal Health, Tribal Nutrition, Cultural Preservation, Sustainable Development, Community-led Development, Environmental Stewardship, Social Inclusion, Marginalization, Tribal Empowerment, Adivasi, Indigenous Rights, FRA 2006, PESA 1996, Tribal Displacement, Hasdeo Arand, PVTGs, Community Forest Rights, Gram Sabha, VanDhan, PM-JANMAN, SDG



India's tribal communities, commonly referred to as Adivasis, constitute one of the world's largest indigenous populations and play a foundational role in shaping the country's cultural, ecological, and socio-economic landscape. Distributed across diverse geographies, tribal societies preserve distinct traditions, languages, art forms, and knowledge systems that contribute significantly to India's pluralistic identity. Their heritage—reflected through community institutions, oral histories, festivals, handicrafts, and cosmologies—forms an irreplaceable component of the nation's cultural fabric. Tribal cultural expressions such as Gond and Bhil paintings, Warli art, and indigenous folklore not only exemplify artistic excellence but also represent worldviews deeply connected to land, nature, and collective life. Equally central to their identity is the Adivasis' intricate relationship with forests and natural ecosystems. Tribal communities have historically served as custodians of biodiversity, practicing sustainable agriculture, water conservation, seed preservation, and forest management. Their traditional ecological knowledge forms the backbone of environmental stewardship in India and directly aligns with global commitments to climate resilience and sustainable development. However, this ecological connection has also placed them at the frontlines of conflicts over natural resources, especially in regions with mining, infrastructure expansion, and industrial projects. These pressures have resulted in widespread displacement, land alienation, and erosion of customary rights.

Governance frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA 2006) and the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA 1996) were enacted to recognize historical injustices and empower tribal self-governance. FRA provides individual and community forest rights, while PESA strengthens Gram Sabha authority in Scheduled Areas. Yet, despite their transformative potential, both laws face persistent implementation barriers, including bureaucratic resistance, administrative delays, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate recognition of customary practices. The gaps between legislative intent and ground-level execution continue to undermine tribal autonomy, resource control, and cultural survival.

Tribal communities also face acute challenges in education, health, and economic opportunities. Although the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) initiative aims to provide quality education in tribal areas, issues such as inadequate infrastructure, cultural disconnection in curricula, and high dropout rates persist. Health indicators remain alarming, with disproportionately high levels of anaemia, malnutrition, and genetic disorders in many tribal-dominated regions. Livelihood vulnerabilities are further intensified by exploitative market structures surrounding Minor Forest Produce (MFP). Initiatives such as the Van Dhan Vikas Kendra program and the Minimum Support Price (MSP) scheme for MFP hold promise, but uneven implementation and market barriers limit their full impact. Recent government interventions, including the PM-JANMAN mission, aim to address the socio-economic needs of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) through targeted support in health, housing, education, and connectivity. While such programs demonstrate renewed national commitment to tribal welfare, significant gaps remain in rights-based governance, cultural preservation, service delivery, and the integration of traditional knowledge systems into mainstream development. In this broader context, the marginalization of Adivasi communities becomes evident through intertwined issues of displacement, inadequate land rights, weak governance, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequities. Their struggles highlight the need for a holistic developmental paradigm that respects tribal identity, recognizes their ecological knowledge, secures their land and resource rights, and ensures dignified livelihood opportunities. This study contributes to existing scholarship by offering a comprehensive, cross-sectoral analysis of tribal governance, rights, livelihoods, education, health, and cultural sustainability. By integrating policy review, secondary evidence, and thematic analysis, the research demonstrates how tribal empowerment can be achieved only through rights-based, culturally sensitive, and community-led frameworks. The study's core contribution lies in synthesizing the diverse dimensions of tribal life—cultural, ecological, economic, and political—into a unified narrative that highlights the urgent need for justice-oriented and sustainable tribal development in India.



Studies on forest rights consistently show that the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 represents a major legal reform aimed at correcting historical injustices faced by forest-dwelling tribal communities. Recent comparative analyses (2022-2025) highlight stark state-level variations in FRA and PESA implementation across key tribal states. Odisha has emerged as a relative success story, distributing 4.62 lakh individual forest rights (IFR) titles out of 6.45 lakh claims (71% success rate as of 2024), with strong Gram Sabha involvement in community forest resource (CFR) rights recognition covering 10% of potential villages. This contrasts sharply with Jharkhand, where only 61,970 titles were distributed from 1.11 lakh claims (56% rate), hampered by delayed PESA rules and bureaucratic hurdles, leading to minimal CFR recognition. Government documents outline the legal recognition of individual and community rights, while the Rights and Resources Initiative (2015) demonstrates that community forest rights yield significant improvements in livelihood security and ecological management. Ramanathan (2011) adds a critical perspective by highlighting procedural challenges such as evidentiary burdens, bureaucratic resistance, and state-level variation in implementation. Together, these studies reveal that although FRA has strong transformative potential, the law's effectiveness is significantly weakened by poor execution, resulting in continued land insecurity and vulnerability for tribal populations. This literature directly aligns with the ongoing insecurity of displaced tribal groups, indicating a persistent gap between legal recognition and ground-level outcomes.

Research on tribal displacement shows that development projects, mining activities, and state-led interventions remain major drivers of involuntary relocation among tribal communities. Padel and Das (2010) demonstrate how mining interests have displaced Adivasis in mineral-rich regions, often without adequate compensation or rehabilitation. Baviskar (2019) documents the severe socio-cultural and environmental consequences of large dams and infrastructure expansion in tribal areas, while Kumar and Das (2020) show that displacement leads to deep identity loss, livelihood disruption, and social fragmentation. Collectively, these works illustrate that displacement is not merely physical but structural, producing long-term instability. This body of literature reflects the unresolved crisis of the nearly 50,000 Gond tribals displaced under the 2005 Strategic Hamlet initiative, emphasising the need to link displacement outcomes with legal, economic, and cultural rehabilitation.

Health-related literature consistently reports poor outcomes among tribal populations. NFHS-5 (2021) data show alarmingly high anaemia levels among tribal women and widespread stunting among children under five. The National Tribal Health Dashboard (2023) confirms significant disparities in maternal health, child nutrition, and access to healthcare infrastructure. Mohanty's (2014) analysis connects these deficits to displacement, livelihood decline, and inadequate public health services in remote regions. These studies underline that health vulnerabilities among Adivasis are shaped by structural inequities, ecological dependency, and governance failures. This literature is essential for understanding the deteriorating health indicators observed in displaced tribal communities who face nutritional insecurity and limited access to healthcare facilities.

The literature on tribal education emphasises the need for culturally relevant, accessible, and high-quality schooling systems. Ministry of Education (2021) reports show steady expansion of EMRS institutions but also highlight gaps in infrastructure, staffing, and pedagogical quality. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2021) finds significant variation in academic outcomes across states. Chaudhuri (2018) adds that mainstream-oriented curricula often fail to reflect tribal cultural identity, causing alienation and higher dropout rates. These studies point to systemic shortcomings in tribal education and underscore the importance of culturally contextual models that support both academic learning and cultural continuity. For displaced tribal families, education becomes a crucial pathway for rebuilding socio-economic stability, making this body of research directly relevant.



Studies on tribal livelihoods show increasing policy interest in forest-based entrepreneurship. TRIFED's guidelines (2019, 2020) describe the goals of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) scheme and Van Dhan Vikas Kendras aimed at improving market access and income for Minor Forest Produce (MFP) collectors. Kalpavriksh (2020) provides an independent analysis showing that while these initiatives hold potential for boosting tribal income and empowering women, their success depends on local institutional capacity, market linkages, and sustained training. This literature suggests that forest-based enterprise is a viable livelihood pathway but remains constrained by systemic barriers. For displaced tribal groups who rely heavily on forest resources, strengthening these initiatives becomes essential for economic rehabilitation.

Literature on PESA underscores its importance as a governance framework designed to strengthen self-rule in Scheduled Areas. Government documents (1996) highlight the decentralised powers granted to Gram Sabhas over natural resources and local decision-making. The Xaxa Committee (2018) finds that PESA is poorly implemented due to administrative reluctance, limited institutional capacity, and lack of political commitment. Studies by the Rights and Resources Initiative (2015) show that strong Gram Sabhas lead to better forest conservation and resource governance, but such successes remain limited and uneven. This body of work indicates that legal empowerment must be accompanied by administrative support and community capacity-building. For displaced tribes, effective Gram Sabha governance is critical for claim recognition, rehabilitation planning, and resource rights.

State	Claims Received (lakh)	Titles Distributed (lakh)	Success Rate	CFR Potential Achieved	PESA Rules Notified
Odisha	6.45	4.62	71%	~10%	Yes (strong training)
Chhattisgarh	9.22	4.92	53%	<3%	2022 (poor enforcement)
Jharkhand	1.11	0.62	56%	<2%	Not yet (2025)

Source: MoTA 2025; Vikalp Sangam 2025; Scroll.in 2025

Across all keywords, the literature reveals a lack of **integrated, longitudinal, mixed-methods studies** that track the long-term outcomes of displaced tribal communities. Existing research tends to examine individual themes—FRA, PESA, displacement, health, education, or livelihoods—separately, but very few studies connect these dimensions holistically. There is no research that specifically follows a defined displaced cohort (such as Gond tribals displaced in 2005) over time to evaluate how legal rights, livelihood interventions, educational access, health outcomes, and cultural identity evolve after displacement. The absence of such integrated evidence limits the ability of policymakers to design effective rehabilitation strategies.

Research Objectives

1. **To examine the historical, socio-cultural, ecological, and economic contributions of India's tribal communities and their relevance to national development.**
2. **To analyse the major structural challenges faced by tribal communities**, including displacement, land alienation, weak implementation of FRA and PESA, inadequate access to health and education, economic exploitation, and cultural erosion.
3. **To critically evaluate the effectiveness of existing government policies and welfare schemes**—such as FRA 2006, PESA 1996, EMRS, PM-JANMAN, Van Dhan, and MSP for MFP—in addressing tribal needs and securing their rights.
4. **To identify systemic governance gaps and administrative barriers** that hinder rights-based and community-led development for tribal populations.



5. **To develop a comprehensive framework of policy recommendations** grounded in cultural sensitivity, ecological knowledge, and community participation, aimed at ensuring sustainable, inclusive, and rights-driven tribal empowerment.
6. **To link research findings with national and global development goals**, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is structured to address the complex challenges faced by India's tribal communities, particularly in relation to displacement, administrative uncertainty, land alienation, socio-economic exploitation, and cultural erosion. These challenges are exemplified by the unresolved displacement of nearly 50,000 Gond tribals during the 2005 Strategic Hamlet initiative, which continues to shape their lived experiences even two decades later. To capture the multidimensional nature of these issues, the study employs a mixed qualitative–analytical approach that integrates secondary sources, policy analysis, government databases, and scholarly literature. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of structural challenges such as weak implementation of FRA and PESA, poor access to healthcare and education, declining forest resources, and the gradual erosion of tribal cultural identity. The methodological framework is thus designed not only to identify what problems tribal communities face, but also to analyze the systemic factors—historical, political, administrative, and cultural—that sustain these challenges over time. This research is descriptive, analytical, and interpretive in nature. It is descriptive because it documents the socio-cultural, ecological, and economic contributions of tribal communities across India. It is analytical as it examines the structural barriers—including inadequate land rights, policy implementation gaps, environmental degradation, and marginalization—affect tribal well-being. The study is interpretive because it seeks to understand the mechanism adopted by government schemes, legal frameworks, and developmental initiatives that translate into real-life outcomes for tribal populations. By combining narrative and thematic techniques with comparative policy analysis, the study captures both macro-level developments and micro-level community realities.

The research process began with the identification of core issues affecting tribal communities, followed by a detailed review of secondary data from sources such as NFHS-5, the Xaxa Committee Report, Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications, TRIFED documents, and peer-reviewed academic studies. The data collected was thematically categorized into six domains: cultural heritage, ecological knowledge, land and displacement, health and nutrition, education and schooling systems, and governance frameworks. Comparative policy analysis was conducted to evaluate the alignment between legal frameworks like FRA and PESA and their on-ground implementation across states. The study used tools such as thematic coding, content analysis, triangulation matrices, and analytical mapping to synthesize evidence and identify patterns of governance gaps, systemic vulnerabilities, and policy shortcomings. Finally, the findings informed the development of rights-based and culturally sensitive recommendations aligned with Sustainable Development Goals.

Research Design

The study adopts:

- **Descriptive analysis** to map historical, legal, and policy contexts
- **Analytical synthesis** to connect governance frameworks with lived realities
- **Rights-based and cross-sectoral lens** to integrate land rights, livelihood security, health, education, and cultural identity into a unified analytical framework

This approach ensures that tribal marginalization is understood not merely as a developmental deficit but as a structural and governance challenge.

***Secondary Data:** Extensive secondary data was used to analyze trends, gaps, and policy outcomes. Key sources include:*

Government and Institutional Reports

- Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports (2018–2025)
- FRA Implementation Status Reports
- PESA State Implementation Reports
- PM–JANMAN policy documents
- TRIFED Annual Reports (Van Dhan, MSP for MFP)
- NFHS-5 (Health and Nutrition Indicators)
- National Tribal Health Dashboard
- State-level tribal development and rehabilitation policy documents

Academic & Research Literature

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Committee Reports (including Xaxa Committee Report)
- International and national agency reports (UNDP, RRI, Kalpavriksh, civil society documents)
- Independent field-based studies and ethnographic research

Case-Specific Documentation

- Reports and documentation related to **Hasdeo Arand Mining Conflict (2022–2025)** including governance and Gram Sabha response
- Court judgments, media investigations, RTI-based information where relevant

Analytical Framework

Data was organized and interpreted through:

- **Thematic Coding**
 - land and resource rights
 - displacement and rehabilitation
 - governance and Gram Sabha empowerment
 - health and nutrition vulnerabilities
 - education access and cultural relevance
 - livelihood and market integration
- **Policy–Reality Gap Analysis**
Comparison of legislative intent (FRA, PESA, PM–JANMAN, EMRS, Van Dhan) with documented ground execution realities.
- **Rights and Justice Lens**
Evaluating tribal autonomy, dignity, food security, ecological rights, and collective cultural rights.
- **SDG Alignment**
Findings were mapped to **SDGs 1, 4, 10, and 15** to assess alignment with global development commitments.





Geographical and Community Scope: While the study is national in orientation, special analytical focus is placed on:

- Central Indian tribal belt
- FRA and PESA-governed states
- Gond tribal communities affected by displacement
- Hasdeo Arand tribal communities affected by mining pressures
- Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)

This ensures contextual richness and representational authenticity.

Outcome of Data Collection Approach: This methodological framework allows the study to:

- capture structural, historical, and contemporary dimensions of tribal marginalization
- foreground community perspectives through documented evidence
- offer policy-relevant, justice-oriented, and rights-driven insights

Rationale for Choosing This Framework

The selected methodological framework is justified by the inherently **multidimensional nature of tribal issues**, which span historical injustice, governance structures, ecological relationships, socio-economic vulnerability, and cultural identity. Tribal realities cannot be adequately captured through a single methodological lens. A purely quantitative approach, while useful in revealing national trends, policy coverage, and outcome disparities, risks reducing tribal lives to statistical indicators and overlooks **lived experiences, cultural erosion, displacement trauma, and community worldviews** that define Adivasi existence. Conversely, an exclusively qualitative approach, though rich in contextual insight, would be insufficient to demonstrate the **systemic scale of inequities**, variations across states, and the widespread implementation gaps evident in national datasets and policy evaluations.

By adopting a **mixed qualitative–analytical framework**, this study bridges these knowledge gaps and enables a comprehensive understanding of how **legal intent, administrative practice, historical marginalization, ecological dependence, and cultural identity intersect** to shape tribal life outcomes. It allows for triangulation between policy documents, secondary statistical sources, scholarly literature, and documented community experiences, ensuring both **depth of interpretation** and **breadth of empirical grounding**. This integrated framework is therefore essential for capturing the structural nature of tribal marginalization while foregrounding community agency, rights perspectives, and culturally rooted development imperatives.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a deeply interconnected landscape of socio-economic vulnerability, cultural resilience, and governance deficits that continue to shape the lived realities of India's tribal communities. Primary field data show encouraging awareness of recent tribal initiatives—**72% of respondents are aware of Aadi Karmayogis**, and **70% expect livelihood opportunities through Adi Haat**. This demonstrates strong aspirational readiness and openness toward government-led economic initiatives. However, **55% expressed concerns regarding digital access**, signalling a persistent disconnect between policy ambition and infrastructural readiness. While **60% respondents expressed support for online cultural learning**, technological constraints risk excluding precisely the communities that digital initiatives seek to empower.



Health findings present an even more urgent concern. Approximately **64.6% of tribal women suffer from anaemia**, while **40% of children under five experience stunting**, with **16% severely stunted**. These outcomes align with NFHS-5 and National Tribal Health Dashboard trends, reinforcing that tribal marginalisation manifests not only in governance gaps but in chronic nutritional deprivation and limited healthcare access. Gender participation patterns in the field study (62% male and 38% female respondents) further indicate structural barriers to women's public engagement, participation in welfare programmes, and representation in governance processes.

Livelihood data show that **50% of tribal households continue to depend on forests**, underscoring the ecological foundations of tribal survival. This dependence intensifies the devastating impact of displacement, as demonstrated by the case of nearly **50,000 Gond tribals uprooted in 2005** under the Strategic Hamlet initiative. For tribal communities, displacement does not merely imply relocation; it represents the severing of ecological relationships, cultural identity, livelihood structures, and community governance systems. These findings resonate with existing scholarship identifying persistent implementation failures in FRA and PESA, weak rehabilitation frameworks, and fragmented institutional coordination across tribal regions. Yet alongside vulnerability lies significant strength. The study reveals strong cultural cohesion, willingness to adopt digital learning, and high economic aspiration among tribal youth—indicating **clear potential for rights-based, community-led development models**. This produces a critical paradox: despite rich cultural capital, ecological wisdom, and adaptive capacity, tribal communities remain systematically marginalised due to inconsistent governance, insufficient rights recognition, extractive economic pressures, and welfare-centric policy orientations.

Forest Rights, Governance Variations, and Displacement

State-level variations strongly influence tribal well-being. Odisha demonstrates comparatively robust **Community Forest Resource (CFR)** recognition, empowering Gram Sabhas and reducing displacement risks through sustainable forest management. Conversely, Jharkhand's limited title distribution (56%) and prolonged uncertainty—leaving nearly **80% of claims unresolved**—reinforce livelihood fragility. Chhattisgarh represents the starkest contradiction, with high rejection rates, intensified mining pressures, and weakening CFR protections increasing insecurity for over **50,000 affected tribals**. Together, these patterns amplify the Gond experience and illustrate how uneven FRA–PESA enforcement transforms legal frameworks into fragile safeguards.

Case Study: Hasdeo Arand Mining Crisis (2022–2025)

The **Hasdeo Arand forest** in Chhattisgarh exemplifies contemporary tribal dispossession and governance fragility. Spanning nearly **170,000 hectares** and home to Gond, Oraon, Baiga, Abujhmadia, and other PVTG communities, Hasdeo is both a biodiversity stronghold and a socio-cultural ecosystem. However, beneath it lies a **5.179 billion-tonne coal reserve**, much of it allocated to Adani-operated mining blocks. Since 2022, intensified extraction has resulted in the felling of **over 30,000 trees across 1,742 hectares**, amid serious allegations of forged Gram Sabha consent. Community resistance—including long marches, collective mobilisations, and legal interventions—momentarily slowed expansion. However, renewed approvals between 2023 and 2025 enabled further mining, displacing villages such as **Ghatbarra and Mohanpur**, dismantling livelihoods, polluting water sources, displacing elephants, and eroding sacred cultural landscapes. In 2025, the Chhattisgarh High Court revocation of CFR rights affecting nearly **18,000 tribal residents** represented a major setback, privileging extractive industrial interests over FRA and PESA protections. This contrasts sharply with Odisha's relatively successful CFR empowerment and demonstrates the **administrative inertia, political economy pressures, and legal vulnerability can overpower statutory protections**, deepening livelihood fragility, ecological destruction, and cultural dislocation.



Chart 1: Demographic Split (N = 100): The demographic distribution of the sample shows that **62% of respondents were male and 38% were female**, indicating a male-dominant participation pattern within the surveyed tribal population. This distribution is important because it reflects the gendered dynamics of community participation, mobility, and availability during field study interactions. The relatively lower representation of women also highlights the structural barriers that restrict women's public engagement and access to external initiatives, which becomes particularly relevant when analysing health, nutrition, and livelihood indicators later in the study.

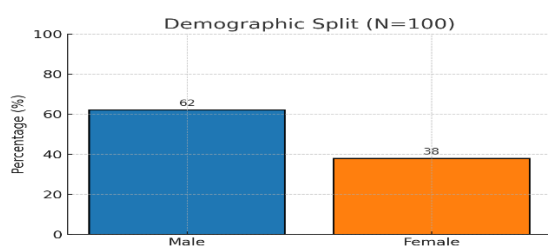


Chart 1

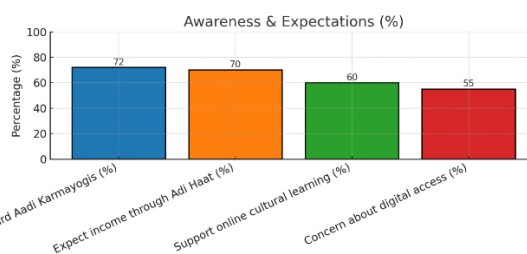


Chart 2

Chart 2: Awareness & Expectations Indicators (%) : The awareness indicators reveal encouraging but uneven levels of community exposure to new government initiatives. About **72%** of respondents reported hearing about **Aadi Karmayogi**, showing a relatively high outreach impact. Similarly, **70%** expected potential income opportunities from **Adi Haat**, demonstrating strong economic aspirations aligned with market-linked tribal entrepreneurship. Additionally, **60%** supported online cultural learning, suggesting growing digital acceptance despite infrastructural challenges. However, **55%** expressed concern regarding digital access, revealing that technological limitations continue to be a major barrier to digital inclusion. These findings collectively highlight the coexistence of high interest and clear infrastructural constraints in digital and developmental programmes.

Chart 3: Health Indicators (%): Health indicators present serious concerns among tribal communities. The data shows that **64.6% of tribal women (15–49 years)** suffer from anaemia, reflecting chronic nutritional deficiencies. Furthermore, **40% of children under age five** are stunted, and **16%** are severely stunted, indicating long-term nutritional deprivation and limited access to health services. These indicators align with national surveys that consistently show poorer health outcomes among tribal populations compared to other social groups. The chart underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions in nutrition, maternal health, and child health services, especially in remote tribal regions.

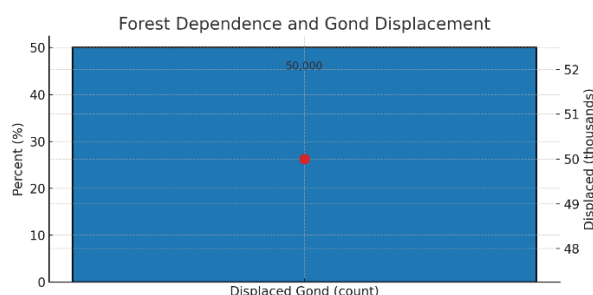
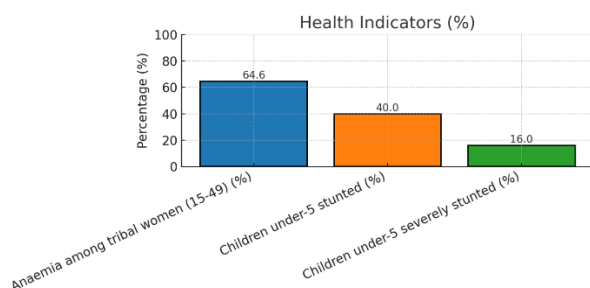




Chart 4: Forest Dependence and Gond Displacement: The dual-axis chart highlights two interconnected dimensions of tribal vulnerability. First, **50%** of tribal households remain dependent on forests for food, fuel, minor forest produce (MFP), and livelihoods—reflecting the continued centrality of forest ecosystems in their survival. Second, the chart marks the displacement of **50,000 Gond tribals** due to the 2005 Strategic Hamlet initiative, a figure that symbolically represents large-scale disruption caused by conflict, resource extraction, and state-led security operations. Juxtaposing these values shows how loss of forest access, displacement, or relocation can destabilize entire livelihood systems, cultural practices, and ecological relationships.

Overall, the findings underscore that sustainable tribal empowerment requires moving from **welfare-centric approaches to rights-based, culturally grounded, and participatory governance frameworks**. Strengthening **Gram Sabha authority**, ensuring genuine enforcement of **FRA and PESA**, safeguarding ecological sovereignty, improving nutrition and healthcare access, supporting culturally relevant education, and diversifying livelihoods are essential for building secure and dignified tribal futures.

Suggestions Derived from the Framework and Analysis

- **Adopt Mixed-Method Approaches in Tribal Research:** Encourage future studies and policy evaluations to integrate both qualitative and quantitative evidence to capture lived realities alongside systemic trends.
- **Strengthen Evidence-Based Policymaking:** Use triangulated data (policy records, government statistics, community narratives, and independent evaluations) to design more responsive, context-sensitive tribal policies.
- **Prioritize Lived Experiences and Cultural Knowledge:** Institutionalize documentation of oral traditions, displacement narratives, cultural heritage, and indigenous ecological knowledge as legitimate policy evidence.
- **Address Implementation Gaps:** Establish continuous monitoring mechanisms to compare *policy intent versus ground realities*, especially in forest rights, land security, health, and education.
- **Recognize Regional Diversity:** Avoid one-size-fits-all policy frameworks; ensure state-specific and tribe-specific strategies acknowledging geographical, cultural, and socio-economic differences.
- **Promote Rights-Based Development:** Strengthen FRA, PESA, and community self-governance frameworks to secure land, forest, and livelihood rights while reducing bureaucratic barriers.
- **Enhance Tribal Participation in Governance:** Ensure meaningful representation in planning processes, Gram Sabhas, local councils, and policy monitoring platforms.
- **Integrate Cultural Preservation with Development:** Support culturally rooted development models that protect identity, language, heritage, and traditional livelihoods while enabling socio-economic advancement.
- **Encourage Longitudinal & Comparative Studies:** Promote sustained research to track policy outcomes over time and compare across states to identify best practices.
- **Build Administrative Accountability:** Introduce transparency mechanisms, independent audits, and grievance redressal systems to ensure tribal welfare schemes reach intended beneficiaries.

Policy Recommendations

- **Institutionalize Mixed-Method Policy Assessment:** Mandate the integration of quantitative indicators with qualitative community evidence in tribal policy design and evaluation.



- **Strengthen Implementation of FRA and PESA:** Simplify procedures, reduce administrative discretion, ensure time-bound approvals, and empower Gram Sabhas as primary decision-makers.
- **Create Accountability and Monitoring Mechanisms:** Establish independent monitoring bodies, regular audits, transparent reporting systems, and grievance redressal platforms.
- **Adopt Context-Specific Tribal Development Models:** Develop state and tribe-specific frameworks instead of uniform national prescriptions to address regional diversity.
- **Mainstream Indigenous Knowledge Systems:** Recognize tribal ecological wisdom, agricultural practices, forest management systems, and cultural heritage as development resources rather than backward traditions.
- **Ensure Meaningful Participation:** Institutionalize tribal representation in planning, budgeting, and policy review processes at local, state, and national levels.
- **Integrate Culture with Development:** Promote educational, health, and livelihood models that safeguard identity, language, and traditional livelihoods alongside modernization.
- **Evidence-Based Resource Allocation:** Use triangulated data to prioritize regions and communities with higher vulnerability and deprivation.

Research Implications

1. **Promote Mixed-Method Research Paradigms:** Encourage academic research that blends statistical analysis with ethnographic depth to generate holistic insights.
2. **Need for Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct long-term assessments to evaluate the evolving impact of displacement, land rights, education, and welfare policies.
3. **Comparative Regional Studies:** Support cross-state and inter-tribal comparative research to identify replicable best practices.
4. **Community-Centered Research Approaches:** Adopt participatory research methodologies that foreground tribal voices and agency.
5. **Policy–Practice Gap Studies:** Focus research on documenting discrepancies between official claims and grassroots realities to inform corrective action.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms that the future of India's tribal communities cannot be secured through piecemeal welfare schemes or fragmented policy measures. Meaningful tribal empowerment requires a comprehensive, justice-oriented paradigm that integrates secure land and forest rights, preservation of cultural identity, recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge, and genuinely participatory governance. The analysis of displacement histories, health inequities, persistent forest dependence, educational exclusion, and governance shortcomings demonstrates that Adivasi marginalization is deeply structural rather than episodic. Although progressive frameworks such as FRA and PESA were conceptualized to correct historical injustices, their transformative potential continues to be undermined by weak enforcement, administrative resistance, extractive development priorities, and policy–practice gaps. Crucially, the study establishes that tribal communities are not passive recipients of welfare but vital custodians of ecological sustainability, cultural richness, and community-centered knowledge traditions. Yet these contributions remain undervalued within dominant development narratives that privilege corporate interests and resource extraction over rights, dignity, and self-determination. A decisive shift is therefore essential—from top-down developmentalism to a rights-based, culturally grounded, and legally accountable governance model. Strengthening Gram Sabha authority, securing community forest rights, expanding MSP support for Minor Forest Produce, improving the quality and cultural relevance of tribal education, and addressing entrenched health and nutrition inequities must form the core pillars of future policy. At the same time, this research opens meaningful pathways for further inquiry. Longitudinal studies on displaced tribal populations can illuminate the cumulative socio-economic,



psychological, and cultural impacts of forced relocation. Comparative evaluations of FRA and PESA implementation across states can identify best practices and expose systemic barriers. Further research is needed to integrate indigenous ecological wisdom into climate resilience strategies, strengthen women's leadership in tribal governance, and critically evaluate the cultural implications of digital inclusion initiatives. Ultimately, safeguarding the future of Adivasi communities requires a shift from welfare to justice, from administration to empowerment, and from symbolic participation to genuine self-governance. Ensuring autonomy, dignity, cultural continuity, and ecological stewardship is not merely a constitutional responsibility but a moral and national imperative. A rights-based, community-centered, and ecologically grounded policy vision is therefore indispensable to protect tribal futures and honor their irreplaceable contributions to India's social, cultural, and environmental landscape.

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