

Tribal India in Transition: A Critical Review of Development, Health, And Welfare

Dr. L. GEORGIA

M.com, M.Phil, Ph.D, NET, PGDCA, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce,
St.Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

Abstract

Tribal communities in India represent one of the most ancient and culturally distinct sections of society, marked by their close relationship with nature, unique traditions, and social systems. Despite their rich heritage, they continue to face significant socio-economic challenges, particularly in areas of health, education, and livelihoods. This paper aims to critically examine the conditions of tribal life with a specific focus on health and welfare, while also exploring the government interventions introduced for their development. Adopting a review of literature approach, the study draws upon secondary sources including academic writings, policy documents, and government reports. The discussion is structured across key thematic areas: development policies and welfare schemes, land and forest rights, education and human development, health and nutrition, gender and empowerment, and the changing patterns of livelihoods shaped by migration and urbanization.

Keywords: Tribal Communities, Welfare Schemes, Health and Nutrition, Education, Livelihoods, Empowerment.

1. Introduction:

Tribal communities represent one of the most ancient and culturally distinct sections of Indian society. Often referred to as the country's "indigenous population," they have preserved unique traditions, languages, and ways of life that are deeply connected with nature. Most tribal groups are concentrated in forested, hilly, and remote regions, where their livelihoods are closely tied to land, forests, and natural resources. Despite their rich cultural heritage and social knowledge systems, tribal people continue to face multiple challenges in modern India, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. At the same time, government policies and welfare schemes have attempted to bridge these gaps, though their effectiveness remains a subject of debate. Understanding the lives of tribal communities, therefore, requires not only an appreciation of their cultural identity but also a careful examination of the socio-economic issues that affect their survival and development in the present context.

Tribal status in India:

According to the 2011 Census, India's tribal population—categorized as Scheduled Tribes (STs)—was estimated at approximately 104 million, comprising 8.6% of the nation's total population ¹ Over 705

tribal groups are officially recognized under Article 342 of the Constitution². Some of the largest and most significant tribal communities include the Bhils, one of the largest groups found across states like Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, and is known for their expertise in archery and guerrilla warfare. The Santhals, among India's oldest tribes, are spread across Assam, Bihar, and Jharkhand, while the Gond tribe, one of the largest in the world, is prevalent in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In Tamil Nadu, Tribals are classified as Adiyar, Arandan, Eravallan, Irular, Kadar, Kanikar, Kotas, Todas, Kurumans, and Malayali³

Objective of the Paper:

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine tribal life and their health conditions, along with the government schemes implemented for their upliftment, through an extensive review of literature.

Methodology of the Paper:

This paper adopts a review of literature approach, drawing upon secondary sources such as academic articles, government reports, policy documents, and relevant studies. The methodology is structured around key thematic areas that reflect the multidimensional aspects of tribal life and welfare:

1. **Development Policies and Welfare Interventions** – Examining state and central government initiatives aimed at tribal upliftment.
2. **Land, Forest Rights, and Livelihoods** – Analyzing literature on land ownership, access to forest resources, and their implications for sustainable livelihoods.
3. **Education and Human Development** – Reviewing studies on literacy, access to education, and the role of education in social mobility among tribal communities.
4. **Health and Nutrition** – Assessing research on health conditions, healthcare accessibility, and nutrition levels of tribal populations.
5. **Gender and Empowerment** – Exploring literature on the status of tribal women, gender equality, and empowerment initiatives.
6. **Migration and Changing Livelihoods** – Investigating the impact of migration, urbanization, and globalization on traditional tribal occupations and lifestyles.

Development Policies and Welfare Interventions

The development of tribal communities has historically been guided by state policies that aimed to integrate them into the national mainstream. However, scholars have argued that such initiatives often carried an assimilationist bias. One of the research paper pointed out that welfare schemes designed for Scheduled Tribes have generally been top-down in nature excluding tribal voices from decision-making⁴. As a result, instead of empowerment, these programs often contributed to alienation and dependency. Baviskar⁵ in her seminal study of the Narmada Valley project, documented how large-scale development initiatives such as dams and mining led to mass displacement of Tribals, uprooting them from their cultural and ecological settings. Such projects, though justified in the name of national development, have frequently deepened tribal marginalization. More recent analyses⁶ suggest that while several targeted programs exist under the Tribal Sub-Plan framework; weak implementation, bureaucratic leakages, and corruption continue to limit their effectiveness. The Planning Commission⁷ highlighted significant gaps in the implementation of Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) schemes. It noted that

inconsistent fund allocation and poor monitoring mechanisms limited their effectiveness. The report called for greater tribal involvement and region-specific strategies. Minz⁸ in a study conducted in Jharkhand, assessed the outcomes of welfare schemes such as MGNREGA and Indira Awas Yojana. The findings revealed limited success due to low awareness, bureaucratic delays, and lack of local language integration in program delivery. The National Institute of Rural Development⁹ reviewed skill development initiatives like the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana. While these programs showed potential in livelihood improvement, gaps remained in aligning training with market demands and in ensuring post-training support. The Department of Tribal Welfare, Tamil Nadu¹⁰ detailed progress in expanding access to education through residential schools and special hostels for tribal students. Still, it recognized persistent issues such as student dropouts, lack of tribal language instruction, and inadequate infrastructure in certain institutions.

The Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission¹¹ reported that thousands of tribal families had benefited from targeted initiatives like the Pudhu Vaazhvu Project and various livelihood support schemes. However, the report acknowledged that infrastructure shortfalls in remote areas significantly hindered service delivery. Balasubramanian¹² evaluated health-related schemes across tribal regions in Salem and Erode. Programs like the Janani Suraksha Yojana and deployment of Village Health Nurses contributed to improve maternal and child health outcomes. However, geographic isolation and communication barriers limited program effectiveness in some areas. Sundar¹³ analyzed housing and employment schemes in Dharmapuri district. Their findings showed that while schemes such as Indira Awas Yojana and MGNREGA offered economic relief, administrative inefficiencies and irregular wage disbursement created roadblocks for beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the availability of government-issued job cards and housing grants improved household stability. Focusing on tribal women, Muthulakshmi¹⁴ found that Self-Help Groups (SHGs), supported by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women, played a major role in enhancing women's financial independence and social standing, especially in districts such as Tiruvannamalai and Villupuram.

Overall, the literature suggests that tribal development cannot be viewed merely as an administrative task; rather, it requires participatory planning, respect for indigenous knowledge systems, and accountability in governance.

Land, Forest Rights and Livelihoods

Land and forests form the backbone of tribal life. For centuries, tribal communities have depended on forests for subsistence, culture, and livelihood. However, colonial land revenue systems and post-colonial development projects disrupted these traditional systems of resource use. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), was seen as landmark legislation to correct historical injustices. Sundar¹⁵ observed that while the FRA sought to restore community and individual rights over forest land, its implementation has been fraught with challenges. Vague definitions, resistance from the forest bureaucracy, and complicated procedures often prevent Tribal's from securing their entitlements. Saravanan¹⁶ further highlighted that conflicting objectives of forest conservation and livelihood protection have created legal ambiguities, leading to continued dispossession. The literature also highlights the commodification of natural resources, emphasizing how these resources are increasingly treated as marketable goods rather than communal assets. With the entry of corporate actors into mining, forestry, and land acquisition, tribal livelihoods are increasingly under threat. Scholars such as Padel and

Das¹⁷ argue that the struggle over land and forests is not merely about economic survival but also about cultural identity and ecological sustainability. George and Mathew¹⁸ compared tribal development across Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, finding that stronger local governance and administrative efficiency led to more successful scheme implementation in Kerala. They emphasized the importance of contextualizing welfare delivery. The Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission¹⁹ reported that thousands of tribal families had benefited from targeted initiatives like the Pudhu Vaazhvu Project and various livelihood support schemes.

However, the reports acknowledged that infrastructure shortfalls in remote areas significantly hindered service delivery.

Education and Human Development

Education has long been seen as a crucial tool for tribal empowerment. Yet, tribal communities continue to lag behind in literacy and school completion rates. The Department of Tribal Welfare, Tamil Nadu²⁰ detailed progress in expanding access to education through residential schools and special hostels for tribal students. Still, it recognized persistent issues such as student dropouts, lack of tribal language instruction, and inadequate infrastructure in certain institutions. Govinda²¹ explained that mainstream schooling often fails tribal children because it ignores their cultural context and language. This cultural disconnect, coupled with poverty and geographical isolation, results in low attendance and high dropout rates. Recent studies confirm that although targeted schemes such as Eklavya Model Residential Schools and scholarships have been introduced, structural barriers persist. Rao²² analyzed the impact of educational and employment-based schemes, including Eklavya Model Residential Schools. While access to education for tribal children has improved, he emphasized the need for culturally relevant curriculum and quality teaching to ensure meaningful inclusion. Velusamy²³ argued that infrastructural gaps, shortage of trained teachers, and lack of culturally sensitive pedagogy undermine progress.

The broader literature thus emphasizes that tribal education should not merely be about access to schools but also about creating an inclusive curriculum that values indigenous knowledge and local languages.

Health and Nutrition

The health status of tribal populations is another area of persistent concern. Patnaik²⁴ documented that tribal's experience higher levels of malnutrition, maternal mortality, and child mortality compared to national averages. This is partly due to poverty, but also to the remoteness of tribal settlements and the inadequacy of health infrastructure. Rao and Mathur²⁵ noted that mainstream healthcare delivery often fails tribal communities because it is culturally insensitive. For example, the reliance on traditional healers is sometimes dismissed by medical authorities instead of being integrated into community health strategies. Moreover, long distances to health facilities, poor transport and lack of awareness all compound health disparities. Scholars recommend a culturally grounded approach that blends modern medical care with respect for traditional practices, alongside strengthening the role of community health workers drawn from within tribal populations. Das²⁶ examined health schemes such as Janani Suraksha Yojana among tribal populations and found that socio-cultural beliefs, poor infrastructure, and limited access to health workers hindered effectiveness. The study recommended deploying mobile health units and community-based health facilitators. Furthermore Balasubramanian²⁷ evaluated health-related schemes across tribal regions in Salem and Erode. Programs like the Janani Suraksha Yojana and deployment of Village Health Nurses contributed to improve maternal and child health outcomes.

However, geographic isolation and communication barriers limited program effectiveness in some areas.

Gender and Empowerment

Gender dynamics within tribal societies have attracted growing scholarly attention. Padel and Das²⁸ emphasized that tribal women face double marginalization—they are disadvantaged both as members of marginalized communities and as women within patriarchal structures. Yet, literature also highlights positive aspects of tribal gender relations. Unlike in many caste-based societies, tribal women often enjoy greater mobility and participate actively in economic and social activities. Kujur²⁹ provided case studies of women's involvement in self-help groups and grassroots political processes, showing how tribal women contribute significantly to community welfare and family income. Such participation has enhanced their bargaining power within households and increased their visibility in local governance. Focusing on tribal women, Muthulakshmi³⁰ found that Self-Help Groups (SHGs), supported by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women, played a major role in enhancing women's financial independence and social standing, especially in districts such as Tiruvannamalai and Villupuram.

Thus, the literature suggests that while challenges remain, tribal women's agency is a powerful driver of social change and deserves greater policy support.

Migration and Changing Livelihoods

The impact of globalization and economic restructuring on the transformation of tribal livelihoods explained very clearly through some reviews. Traditionally dependent on agriculture, shifting cultivation, and forest produce, many tribal families now engage in seasonal or long-term migration to urban areas. Mosse³¹ observed that migration provides an important source of income, but it also exposes Tribals to new forms of exploitation in the informal economy. Migrant Tribals often lack social protection, face wage discrimination, and live in poor working conditions. Migration also weakens community bonds, erodes traditional cultural practices, and increases vulnerability to urban poverty. Sundar and Natesan³² analyzed housing and employment schemes in Dharmapuri district. Their findings showed that while schemes such as Indira Awas Yojana and MGNREGA offered economic relief, administrative inefficiencies and irregular wage disbursement created roadblocks for beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the availability of government-issued job cards and housing grants improved household stability. Rajendran³³ explored the effects of development programs targeting tribal populations in the Nilgris. The study concluded that although policies under schemes like the Integrated Tribal Development Programme had positive intentions, many tribal families remained underserved due to inadequate dissemination of information and limited administrative reach.

The literature underlines the need for livelihood diversification strategies that combine sustainable use of local resources with access to modern economic opportunities, while ensuring social security for migrants.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although there is a rich body of scholarship, certain gaps remain. Longitudinal studies assessing the impact of welfare schemes are limited. Comparative multi-regional analyses are also needed, given the diversity of tribal communities across India. The intersection of climate change and tribal livelihoods is an underexplored area that deserves attention, particularly in relation to shifting cultivation and forest

dependency. Similarly, the long-term effects of migration on identity and community structures require deeper exploration.

Conclusion

The literature on tribal communities in India reveals a complex picture. On one hand, state policies and legal frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act and the Tribal Sub-Plan indicate recognition of historical marginalization. On the other, implementation gaps, structural inequalities, and socio-cultural barriers continue to limit progress. Education, health, gender empowerment, and livelihood security remain pressing challenges. At the same time, tribal communities demonstrate resilience and agency in asserting their rights and shaping their futures. Future research must move beyond descriptive accounts to produce participatory, comparative, and longitudinal research that can inform more inclusive policies. Most importantly, Tribals should not merely be treated as beneficiaries of welfare but as active stakeholders in shaping India's development trajectory.

Endnotes:

1. Narain, J. P. "Health of Tribal Populations in India: How Long Can We Afford to Neglect?" *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, vol. 149, no. 3, 2019, pp. 313–316. PMC, doi:10.4103/ijmr.IJMR_2079_18.
2. *The Indigenous World 2024*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), 2024, <https://iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/5508-the-indigenous-world-2024.html>.
3. "From Bhils to Santhals: State-Wise Breakdown of India's Most Prominent Tribes." *India Today*, 9 Aug. 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/from-bhils-to-santhals-state-wise-breakdown-of-indias-most-prominent-tribes-2579628-2024-08-09>.
4. Xaxa, Virginius. "Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribals in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 13, 2005, pp. 1363–1370.
5. Baviskar, Amita. *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
6. Velusamy, K. "Tribal Welfare Schemes in India: A Critical Appraisal." *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2021, pp. 245
7. *Evaluation Report on Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)*. Planning Commission, Government of India, 2014. <https://niti.gov.in>.
8. Minz, R. "Effectiveness of Tribal Development Programmes: A Study in Jharkhand." *Journal of Rural Development*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2016, pp. 267–284.
9. *Evaluation Study on Skill Development Programmes for Tribal Youth*. National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (NIRDPR), 2018.
10. *Evaluation Report on Tribal Sub-Plan op.cit*
11. *Status Report on Tribal Welfare Schemes and Expenditures in Tamil Nadu*. Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu, 2020. <https://www.tn.gov.in>.
12. Balasubramanian, R. "Impact of Government Health Schemes among Tribal Communities in Tamil Nadu: A Study of Salem and Erode Districts." *Journal of Rural Health and Development*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 102–110.

13. Sundar, R., and R. Natesan. "Effectiveness of Tribal Housing and Employment Schemes: A Study in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu." *Indian Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2018, pp. 78
14. Muthulakshmi, P. "Empowerment of Tribal Women through SHGs: A Case Study of Tamil Nadu." *Indian Journal of Social Development*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2017, pp. 195–202.
15. Sundar, Nandini. "The Rule of Law and the Rule of Property: Law Struggles and the Neo-Liberal State in India." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2011, pp. 73–93.
16. Saravanan, V. "Political Ecology of Common Property Resource Management: Tribal Forest Rights in India." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2019, pp. 50–66.
17. Das, K. "Access to Health Care among Tribal Populations in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 43, 2013, pp. 43
18. George, S., and A. Mathew. "Impact of Tribal Welfare Schemes: A Comparative Study of Kerala and Madhya Pradesh." *Indian Journal of Social Work*, vol. 81, no. 3, 2020, pp. 317–332.
19. *Status Report on Tribal Welfare Schemes and Expenditures in Tamil Nadu*. Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu, 2020. <https://www.tn.gov.in>.
20. *Evaluation Report on Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)*. Planning Commission, Government of India, 2014. <https://niti.gov.in>.
21. Govinda, R. "Education of the Disadvantaged in India." *Journal of Education and Human Development*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2002, pp. 125–143.
22. Rao, M. "Education and Empowerment of Tribal Communities in India: Challenges and Opportunities." *Social Change*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2010, pp. 123–135, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004908571004000202>.
23. Velusamy, K. op.cit pp. 246
24. Patnaik, S. M. *Tribal Health in India: Problems and Prospects*. Serials Publications, 2008. Pp.12
25. Rao, M., and A. Mathur. "Health Inequalities and Tribal Populations in India." *Social Change*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2018, pp. 53–70.
26. Das, K. op.cit , pp. 44
27. Balasubramanian, R. "Impact of Government Health Schemes among Tribal Communities in Tamil Nadu: A Study of Salem and Erode Districts." *Journal of Rural Health and Development*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 102–110.
28. Padel, Felix, and Samarendra Das. *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*. Orient Blackswan, 2010.
29. Kujur, R. "Women Empowerment among Tribal Communities: A Case Study." *Social Action*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2016, pp. 254–268.
30. Muthulakshmi, P. "Empowerment of Tribal Women through SHGs: A Case Study of Tamil Nadu." *Indian Journal of Social Development*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2017, pp. 195–202.
31. Mosse, David. "Caste and Development: Contemporary Perspectives on a Structure of Disadvantage." *World Development*, vol. 110, 2018, pp. 422–436.
32. Sundar, R., and R. Natesan. op.cit pp. 79
33. Rajendran, S. "Developmental Interventions among Tribal Communities in the Nilgiris: A Policy Impact Study." *Social Work Review*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2015, pp. 250–259.