



Tribal Welfare in India: Policy Frameworks, Implementation Challenges, and Future Prospects

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Abstract: This research article critically examines the policy frameworks governing tribal welfare in India, evaluates the challenges in their implementation, and explores future prospects for inclusive development. Despite constitutional safeguards and targeted schemes like the Forest Rights Act (FRA), Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), India's tribal communities continue to face systemic marginalization, underdevelopment, and socio-economic exclusion. The study highlights persistent issues such as inadequate policy execution, bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource diversion, and lack of community participation. By analysing central and state-level initiatives, the paper underscores the gaps between policy intent and ground-level realities. It also emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive governance, decentralized planning, and greater accountability mechanisms. The article concludes with actionable recommendations for strengthening tribal welfare through participatory governance, effective monitoring, and sustainable development practices. This study contributes to the discourse on tribal empowerment and policy reforms essential for achieving equitable growth in India's diverse socio-cultural landscape.

Key words: Tribal Welfare, Policy Implementation, Scheduled Tribes, Forest Rights Act (FRA), Inclusive Development, Governance Challenges

Introduction

India is home to one of the largest tribal populations in the world, comprising over 8.6% of its total population as per the 2011 Census. Spread across remote forests, hills, and mountainous terrains, the Scheduled Tribes (STs) represent diverse socio-cultural identities with distinct languages, customs, and traditional knowledge systems. Historically marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged, tribal communities have remained at the periphery of mainstream development processes. Recognizing this, successive governments have formulated a wide range of welfare policies and constitutional safeguards aimed at their upliftment, including affirmative action under Articles 15(4), 16(4), and 46, and legal instruments such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006.

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Despite a robust policy framework, implementation challenges persist ranging from inadequate institutional capacity and lack of community participation to displacement due to development projects and weak enforcement of rights. Moreover, welfare schemes often suffer from poor targeting, corruption, and a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to account for regional diversities and cultural sensitivities. As India moves towards inclusive and sustainable development, there is a pressing need to critically assess the effectiveness of existing tribal welfare policies and explore innovative, participatory models that empower tribal communities.

This paper aims to analyse the evolution of tribal welfare policies in India, examine key implementation challenges, and offer forward-looking recommendations for a more equitable and culturally sensitive policy framework.

Review of Literature

Tribal welfare has been a crucial component of India's development agenda, especially given the socio-economic marginalization of Scheduled Tribes (STs). Scholars like Xaxa (2005) argue that colonial and post-colonial policies treated tribes as backward communities needing assimilation, often overlooking their distinct socio-cultural identity. The Constitution of India provided a framework for protective discrimination through Scheduled Areas, reservations, and the Fifth and Sixth Schedules (Singh, 2010).

Government initiatives, such as the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), and the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana (VKY), aimed at targeted welfare delivery. However, several studies highlight implementation gaps. Shah and Shah (2012) emphasize poor fund allocation and leakage in tribal schemes, while Thorat and Newman (2010) point to systemic exclusion due to geographical isolation, lack of political will, and cultural disconnect in policy formulation.

The Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, have been landmark policies in recognizing tribal rights over forest and governance. However, Roy (2018) underscores the slow implementation of FRA, where land claims are often rejected without due process. Similarly, PESA's goal of empowering Gram Sabhas remains largely unrealized due to administrative resistance (Behar, 2013).

Recent literature also discusses the tension between development and displacement, particularly in resource-rich tribal areas. Fernandes (2007) shows how development projects often lead to the dispossession of tribal communities, questioning the inclusiveness of welfare policy. Contemporary



analyses (e.g., Ministry of Tribal Affairs Reports, 2020–2022) also highlight positive trends in education, health, and livelihoods, yet reveal that outcomes vary widely across states due to differences in governance, political commitment, and civil society engagement.

Objectives

- Examine the evolution of tribal welfare policies in India.
- Analyse the effectiveness and limitations of key legislative framework.
- Investigate the challenges in implementation of the administrative inefficiencies.
- Evaluate the role of central and state governments and local governance institutions.
- Identify regional disparities in tribal welfare outcomes.
- Assess the potential of current and emerging policy interventions.

Data Collection and Methodology

This study primarily relies on secondary data to examine tribal welfare in India, focusing on policy frameworks, implementation challenges, and future prospects. Data is sourced from government reports such as the *Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Reports*, *NITI Aayog policy evaluations*, *Census of India*, and *National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)* rounds. Additional data includes findings from the *Scheduled Tribes Component (STC)*, *Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)*, and state-level tribal welfare departments. Academic publications, policy briefs, and research articles from journals like *EPW*, *IJSS*, and *Social Change* are also reviewed.

The methodology involves qualitative content analysis and comparative policy evaluation. Key government initiatives such as the *Forest Rights Act (2006)*, *PESA Act (1996)*, and *Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana* are critically assessed. Implementation outcomes are analysed across regions using a thematic approach to identify policy gaps and regional disparities. The study concludes with forward-looking policy suggestions based on this comprehensive review.

Data analysis and Interpretation

India is home to 705 officially recognized Scheduled Tribes (STs), representing 8.6% of the population (Census 2011). Tribal communities predominantly inhabit forested, hilly, and remote regions across states like Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and the North-Eastern states. Historically marginalized and economically underdeveloped, these communities face systemic barriers to accessing education, healthcare, land rights, and modern livelihoods.



In response, the Government of India has implemented a series of welfare policies and legislative measures aimed at promoting tribal development. Yet, the lived reality of many tribal communities continues to reflect disparities, policy implementation challenges, and limited outcomes.

1. Policy Frameworks for Tribal Welfare in India

1.1 Constitutional Provisions

India's Constitution ensures protective and developmental safeguards for Scheduled Tribes;

- **Article 15(4) & 46:** Special provisions for social and educational advancement.
- **Article 244:** Fifth and Sixth Schedules for administration of tribal areas.
- **Article 275(1):** Grants-in-aid for tribal welfare from the Consolidated Fund.
- **Article 330 & 332:** Reservation in legislatures for STs.

These provisions enable the legal and institutional foundation for exclusive policy-making toward tribal welfare.

1.2 Key Government Programs & Legislations

Policy/Act	Objective	Year
Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)	Earmark funds in state/central plans for ST welfare	1974
PESA Act	Empower tribal Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas	1996
Forest Rights Act (FRA)	Legal recognition of forest rights	2006
Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana	Holistic tribal development (education, health, livelihood)	2014
Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)	Provide quality education in tribal areas	Ongoing
STC Funds	Mandatory proportion of funds for STs under centrally sponsored schemes	Ongoing

Despite strong policy architecture, the implementation deficit undermines the transformative potential of these interventions.



1.3 Budgetary Trends

Year	MoTA Budget Allocation (₹ Cr)	STC Component (₹ Cr)	Utilization (%)
2019-20	6,995	49,000	82%
2020-21	7,411	54,210	78%
2021-22	7,845	78,256	69%
2022-23	8,451	87,584	~70%

While STC allocations have increased significantly, under-utilization of funds remains a critical issue due to administrative bottlenecks and weak monitoring at the state and district levels.

2. Sectoral Based Analysis

2.1 Education

Indicator	STs	National Avg.	Source
Literacy Rate	59%	73%	Census 2011
Dropout Rate (Class I–X)	62%	36%	UDISE+ 2020-21
GER (Higher Education, 2019-20)	18%	27.1%	AISHE
EMRS Operational	378 schools (2023)	NA	MoTA

- A significant literacy gap of 14% highlights the systemic exclusion of tribal children.
- High dropout rates are often due to language barriers, economic constraints, lack of hostels, and cultural disconnect between tribal lifestyle and school environments.
- Although EMRS aims to bridge the quality gap, they cover only a fraction of tribal children and are concentrated in select regions.
- Ashram schools, though numerous, suffer from poor infrastructure and staffing.

Policy Recommendation

- Expand EMRS and ensure culturally inclusive pedagogy.
- Increase recruitment of tribal teachers and mother tongue instruction at the primary level.
- Strengthen digital literacy and bridge the digital divide in tribal areas.



2.2 Health and Nutrition

Indicator	STs	National Avg.	Source
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	44	30	NFHS-5
Underweight Children (U5)	45.6%	32.1%	NFHS-5
Anemia in Tribal Women	59%	53%	NFHS-5
Tribal PHCs Shortfall	27%	NA	Rural Health Statistics 2022

- The health outcomes among tribals remain substantially poorer than the national average.
- **Access issues:** long distances to health centers, absence of doctors in tribal PHCs, and poor ambulance services reduce care-seeking behaviour.
- **Cultural gaps:** Tribal medicine is often ignored, leading to resistance or mistrust toward allopathic systems.
- Nutrition programs like ICDS have limited impact in remote areas due to logistical issues and staff absenteeism.

Policy Recommendation

- Deploy mobile health units and telemedicine services in forested areas.
- Train tribal youth as community health workers.
- Localize health interventions using tribal food habits and traditional knowledge.

2.3 Livelihoods and Economic Empowerment

Indicator	STs	National Avg.	Source
STs below Poverty Line	45.3%	21.9%	NITI Aayog 2021
Unemployment Rate (15–29 age)	10.5%	6.1%	PLFS 2020
Dependence on Forest Produce	>60%	NA	MoTA
Households engaged in shifting cultivation	25% in NE states	NA	TRIFED

- Tribals rely heavily on subsistence agriculture, minor forest produce (MFP), and informal labour, making them vulnerable to seasonal poverty and exploitation.
- Skill development programs like Skill India and Van Dhan Yojana have shown isolated success but face challenges in scaling.
- Digital and market exclusion severely limits tribal entrepreneurship.



Policy Recommendation

- Enhance value-addition infrastructure for MFP through tribal cooperatives.
- Expand market linkages using TRIFED, GI tagging, and e-commerce platforms.
- Promote sustainable agriculture and agroforestry under MGNREGA convergence.

2.4 Forest Rights and Land Tenure

Indicator	Total Claims	Titles Distributed	Community Rights Granted
FRA (till 2023)	4.3 million	1.98 million (-6%)	14%
PESA Operationalization	Fully implemented in 6 states	Partial in 4 states	MoTA

- Despite its potential, the Forest Rights Act faces administrative resistance, especially in mineral-rich states.
- Community Forest Rights (CFRs) are often delayed or denied due to lack of political will.
- In Scheduled Areas, PESA remains unimplemented or diluted, weakening tribal self-governance.

Policy Recommendation

- Conduct social audits of FRA implementation at the district level.
- Empower Gram Sabhas for CFR management and revenue generation.
- Institutionalize PESA through state-level rules and independent tribal councils.

2.5 Infrastructure and Connectivity

Indicator	Value	Source
Tribal habitations without all-weather roads	22%	MoRD 2022
Villages with mobile connectivity	~70% in tribal belts	TRAI
Electrification of tribal hamlets	81% (partial or full)	CEA 2021

- Poor physical infrastructure further isolates tribal regions, limiting access to education, health, and markets.
- Digital gaps widen social inequities and obstruct welfare delivery.



- Solar-based microgrids and mobile towers in remote tribal belts remain underutilized due to policy delays.

Policy Recommendation

- Prioritize road connectivity and telecom expansion in tribal TSP areas.
- Implement digital skilling and smart governance tools for tribal youth.
- Introduce tribal area-specific PPP models for infrastructure development.

3. Implementation Challenges

3.1 Governance and Capacity Constraints

- Weak capacity of Tribal Welfare Departments.
- Lack of trained personnel in tribal dialects.
- Over-centralization and poor district-level convergence.

3.2 Displacement and Resource Alienation

- More than 55% of displaced persons due to dams/mining belong to STs (Xaxa Committee).
- Rehabilitation and compensation often violate consent clauses under PESA/FRA.

3.3 Policy Fragmentation

- Overlapping roles among MoTA, MoRD, MoEFCC, and state bodies cause confusion.
- Absence of a unified tribal welfare dashboard or monitoring framework.

4. Case Studies & Best Practices

Kerala (Wayanad & Attapadi)

- Tribal literacy rate: **75%**
- Integration of tribal midwives and forest produce cooperatives.
- Local dialect education modules and tribal hostels.

Maharashtra

- FRA titles distributed to over 3 lakh tribal families.



- CFR-based community income generation in Gadchiroli.

Jharkhand

- SHGs by tribal women producing lac, tamarind, and forest herbs.
- Implementation of tribal entrepreneurship incubators.

5. Future Prospects and Strategic Recommendations

5.1 Institutional Reforms

- Create Tribal Area Development Authorities (TADAs) for effective planning.
- Strengthen ST Commissions and local tribal councils.

5.2 Cultural and Linguistic Inclusion

- Develop tribal language content under National Education Policy.
- Recognize tribal festivals and knowledge systems in tourism and heritage promotion.

5.3 Evidence-Based Policy Monitoring

- Mandate real-time dashboards for STC and FRA tracking.
- Ensure third-party evaluation of welfare schemes in tribal districts.

Tribal welfare in India is characterized by a strong legal foundation but weak operationalization. The available data highlights persistent gaps in education, health, livelihood, land rights, and governance. While success stories do exist, they remain the exception rather than the norm. Moving forward, India must shift from beneficiary-centric welfare to rights-based empowerment through institutional reforms, better resource allocation, and participatory governance.

Findings

▪ Comprehensive Policy Framework but Weak Implementation

- Constitutional safeguards (Articles 244, 275), schemes (Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana), and legislations (FRA 2006, PESA 1996) exist.
- Implementation across states remains fragmented due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of coordination.

▪ Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) Lacks Outcome Orientation



- Funds often diverted or poorly planned.
- Weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms limit effectiveness.
- State budgets under TSP often misaligned with local tribal needs.
- **Limited Effectiveness of Health and Education Schemes**
 - Expansion of EMRS and Ashram Schools has improved access, but infrastructure gaps, absenteeism, and cultural alienation persist.
 - Mobile health units and schemes fail to reduce high maternal/child mortality, malnutrition, and disease prevalence due to poor reach and inadequate staff.
- **Continued Land Alienation and Displacement**
 - Mining, infrastructure, and industrial projects displace tribal households despite FRA and PESA safeguards.
 - Strict evidentiary requirements and lack of awareness hinder FRA land rights recognition.
 - Gram Sabha empowerment under PESA remains minimal.
- **Inadequate Cultural Sensitivity and Tribal Autonomy**
 - Top-down program designs ignore socio-cultural contexts.
 - Tribal leaders and councils inadequately consulted in welfare planning.
- **Digital Divide and Poor Connectivity**
 - DBT and e-governance initiatives hampered by poor internet, low digital literacy, and weak banking infrastructure.
- **Positive Outcomes in Select States**
 - Odisha, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh show better results where community-based models, cooperatives, and serious implementation of PESA/FRA are adopted.
 - Such cases remain exceptions rather than the rule.

Suggestions

- **Strengthen Institutional Mechanisms**
 - Develop integrated tribal governance with convergence of departments.



- Create centralized dashboards to track real-time fund utilization and beneficiaries.
- **Revamp Tribal Sub-Plan**
 - Make TSP outcome-oriented with participatory budgeting.
 - Involve Gram Sabhas and tribal councils in planning and fund allocation.
- **Promote Community-Based Health & Education Models**
 - Recruit and train local tribal teachers and health workers.
 - Incorporate tribal languages and traditional knowledge into school curricula.
 - Improve healthcare infrastructure focusing on nutrition and preventive care.
- **Accelerate FRA and PESA Implementation**
 - Simplify procedures for FRA land rights and provide legal aid.
 - Strengthen Gram Sabha powers over land acquisition, forest produce, and natural resources.
- **Encourage Livelihood Diversification**
 - Expand non-farm activities like eco-tourism, crafts, and agro-processing.
 - Scale up Van Dhan Yojana and TRIFED with better marketing/logistics support.
 - Tailor skill development programs for tribal youth in local languages.
- **Enhance Accountability**
 - Conduct regular social audits by local communities.
 - Mandate third-party evaluations and public disclosure of outcomes.
- **Bridge the Digital Divide**
 - Launch digital literacy campaigns for women and youth.
 - Develop mobile apps in tribal languages for welfare delivery.
 - Expand CSCs and strengthen telecom/banking infrastructure.
- **Foster Tribal Leadership & Representation**
 - Ensure more tribal presence in decision-making bodies and planning commissions.



- Launch leadership and political mentoring programs for tribal youth and women.
- **Promote Tribal Cultural Identity**
 - Support preservation of languages, art, festivals, and customary laws.
 - Provide scholarships, cultural grants, and strengthen tribal research institutes.
- **Promote Research & Data-Driven Policy**
 - Create a Tribal Development Index disaggregated by state and community.
 - Encourage universities to conduct longitudinal studies and policy assessments.

Conclusion

The welfare of tribal communities in India has long been a focus of government policy, yet significant gaps remain between policy intent and on-ground outcomes. While constitutional provisions, legislative measures like the Forest Rights Act (2006) and PESA (1996), and numerous centrally sponsored schemes have aimed to safeguard tribal rights and promote inclusive development, implementation challenges ranging from bureaucratic inefficiencies to lack of local participation continue to hinder real progress. Moreover, issues like land alienation, displacement due to development projects, and inadequate access to health, education, and livelihood opportunities persist across many tribal regions. These challenges highlight the urgent need for a more integrated, participatory, and culturally sensitive policy approach. Strengthening grassroots governance through tribal self-rule, enhancing inter-departmental coordination, and ensuring transparency and accountability in welfare delivery systems are critical. As India moves toward inclusive development, the future of tribal welfare depends on empowering communities, respecting indigenous knowledge, and aligning policy with the lived realities of tribal populations transforming welfare into genuine social justice.

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