



Tribal Communities and the Sustainable Development Goals in India: A Critical Political Economy and Indigenous Knowledge Perspective

Dr. Vinod Prakashrao Bhoskar¹ & Bhushan Dayanand Biradar²

¹Samaj Bhushan Baburao alias Appasaheb Jedhe Arts, Commerce & Science College, Pune 02

²Research Scholar, Baburaoji Gholap College, Pune

Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune

Corresponding Author – Dr. Vinod Prakashrao Bhoskar

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Abstract:

India is home to one of the largest tribal populations globally, constituting approximately 8.6 per cent of the total population. Despite constitutional protections and a range of targeted welfare programmes, Scheduled Tribes (STs) continue to experience multidimensional deprivation manifested in persistent poverty, poor health outcomes, low educational attainment, insecure livelihoods, and restricted access to productive resources. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 marked a paradigmatic shift towards an inclusive and sustainable development framework, guided by the principle of “leaving no one behind.” This paper critically examines the interface between tribal development and the SDGs in the Indian context through the lenses of political economy and indigenous knowledge systems. Drawing primarily on secondary data and policy analysis, the study assesses the relevance of the SDGs to tribal regions, identifies structural constraints, and evaluates institutional responses. The paper argues that unless SDGs are effectively localised through a rights-based, participatory, and culturally grounded approach, they risk perpetuating historical patterns of marginalisation. It concludes that tribal communities should be recognised not merely as beneficiaries but as indispensable actors in sustainable development, particularly with respect to ecological conservation and climate resilience.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribes, Sustainable Development Goals, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Political Economy, Inclusive Development, India.

Introduction:

India's development experience has been characterized by sustained economic growth alongside enduring social and regional inequalities. Among the most marginalised groups within this development trajectory are tribal communities, commonly referred to as Adivasis, who constitute the indigenous population of the subcontinent. These communities are predominantly concentrated in forested, hilly, and ecologically sensitive regions and have historically sustained livelihoods closely integrated with land, forests, and natural resources.

Despite their central role in environmental stewardship, tribal communities have remained peripheral to mainstream development processes. Colonial forest administration, extractive economic practices, and post-independence industrialisation collectively contributed to large-scale land alienation and social displacement. Development-induced displacement associated with mining, dams, and large infrastructure projects has disproportionately affected tribal regions, resulting in long-term economic insecurity and social dislocation.

Although the Constitution of India provides special safeguards for Scheduled

Tribes—such as political representation, reservations in education and employment, and special administrative provisions—these measures have not been adequate to overcome entrenched structural marginalisation. Consequently, tribal communities continue to lag behind national averages across key human development indicators.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 offers a renewed framework for addressing these disparities through a multidimensional, inclusive, and sustainability-oriented approach. Emphasising equity, social justice, and environmental protection, the SDGs provide a normative basis for re-envisioning tribal development in India. This paper critically interrogates whether the SDG framework has the potential to address historical injustices faced by tribal communities or whether it risks reproducing dominant development paradigms that marginalise indigenous perspectives.

Objectives of the Paper:

1. To examine the socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Tribe communities in India in the context of sustainable development.
2. To analyse the relevance and applicability of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for addressing tribal marginalisation in India.
3. To identify the structural and political-economic factors contributing to persistent deprivation among tribal communities.
4. To assess the extent to which current SDG-oriented policies and institutional frameworks address the specific needs of tribal regions.
5. To examine the role of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive development.

6. To highlight the key challenges in localising SDGs for tribal communities in India.

Theoretical Framework:

1. Political Economy of Tribal Marginalisation:

The political economy perspective situates tribal underdevelopment within broader structures of power, production, and resource control. Tribal regions in India are endowed with substantial mineral, forest, and water resources, making them strategically significant for capitalist accumulation. However, tribal communities themselves derive limited benefits from such resource exploitation.

State-led development strategies have historically prioritised industrial expansion and infrastructure development over indigenous livelihoods. This process has resulted in what is often described as “accumulation by dispossession,” wherein land alienation, erosion of customary rights, and forced integration into precarious labour markets have undermined tribal autonomy and self-reliance.

2. Sustainable Development and Indigenous Perspectives:

Sustainable development is conventionally understood as the integration of economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. For tribal communities, however, sustainability represents a lived practice embedded in collective resource management, customary institutions, and ecological balance. Indigenous worldviews challenge market-centric development models that commodify nature and marginalise community-based governance systems.

3. Socio-Economic Status of Scheduled Tribes in India:

Scheduled Tribes remain among the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups in

India. Poverty incidence among STs is significantly higher than the national average, particularly in rural and forest-dependent areas. Livelihoods are largely dependent on subsistence agriculture, collection of forest produce, and informal wage labour, all of which are highly vulnerable to climate variability and market fluctuations.

Educational attainment among tribal populations, especially among women, remains low despite increased enrolment in recent decades. High dropout rates, linguistic barriers, seasonal migration, and inadequate educational infrastructure continue to constrain learning outcomes.

Health indicators further reveal persistent disparities. Tribal regions report disproportionately high levels of infant and maternal mortality, malnutrition, anaemia, malaria, tuberculosis, and genetic disorders such as sickle-cell anaemia. Geographic isolation and shortages of healthcare infrastructure and personnel exacerbate these challenges.

4. Sustainable Development Goals and Tribal Development:

I) No Poverty: Poverty among tribal communities is multidimensional, encompassing income deprivation, food insecurity, lack of productive assets, and social exclusion. While SDG 1 focuses on poverty eradication and social protection, its effectiveness in tribal areas is contingent upon securing land and forest rights and promoting sustainable livelihood opportunities.

II) Zero Hunger: Traditional tribal food systems—based on millets, tubers, and minor forest produce—are nutritionally rich and climate-resilient. However, displacement and market integration have disrupted these systems, contributing to food insecurity and malnutrition. Revitalising indigenous food practices is therefore central to achieving SDG 2 in tribal regions.

III) Good Health and Well-Being: Realising SDG 3 in tribal areas requires culturally sensitive healthcare delivery models that integrate traditional healing systems with modern medical practices while addressing broader social determinants such as nutrition, sanitation, and livelihood.

IV) Quality Education: Mainstream education systems often marginalise tribal children by disregarding mother tongues and cultural contexts. Achieving SDG 4 necessitates the adoption of multilingual and culturally relevant pedagogical approaches.

V) Gender Equality, Climate Action, and Biodiversity: Tribal women play a pivotal role in agriculture and forest management but remain disproportionately affected by displacement and economic insecurity. Tribal regions also constitute major biodiversity hotspots, where indigenous conservation practices contribute significantly to climate resilience and environmental sustainability.

Research Methodology:

1. Research Design:

The study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. It is descriptive, analytical, and exploratory in nature.

2. Sources of Data:

The analysis is primarily based on secondary data drawn from:

- Census of India reports
- National Sample Survey data
- SDG India Index reports
- Government publications on tribal development
- Peer-reviewed journals, books, and policy documents

3. Unit of Analysis:

- **Primary Unit:** Scheduled Tribe communities in India

- **Secondary Units:** Tribal regions, SDG indicators, and policy frameworks

4. Tools of Analysis:

Descriptive statistics, comparative analysis, thematic content analysis, political economy analysis, and SDG mapping techniques are employed.

Policy and Institutional Framework:

India has established an extensive legal and institutional framework for tribal development, including constitutional safeguards and targeted welfare schemes. However, weak implementation, bureaucratic centralisation, and limited community participation undermine their effectiveness. Although national SDG monitoring mechanisms exist, the inadequate representation of tribal-specific indicators constrains evidence-based policymaking.

Challenges in Achieving SDGs for Tribal Communities:

Key challenges include persistent land alienation and displacement, weak enforcement of protective legislation, cultural homogenisation through development interventions, insufficient disaggregated data, and limited participation of tribal institutions in decision-making processes. Without addressing these constraints, SDG implementation risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

Pathways for Inclusive and Sustainable Tribal Development:

- Adoption of a rights-based development approach
- Strengthening community participation and local self-governance
- Integration of indigenous knowledge systems into development planning
- Promotion of sustainable and forest-based livelihood opportunities

- Implementation of gender-responsive development strategies
- Improvement of data collection and monitoring mechanisms

Conclusion:

The pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals in India cannot be detached from the realities of tribal marginalisation. Tribal communities are not passive recipients of development interventions but active agents of sustainability, particularly in the domains of ecological conservation and climate resilience.

This paper contends that the SDGs can serve as an effective framework for tribal development only if implemented through participatory, rights-based, and culturally respectful approaches. Failure to do so risks reproducing historical injustices under the rhetoric of sustainability. Achieving truly sustainable development in India ultimately requires a fundamental redefinition of development—shifting away from extractive growth models towards social justice, ecological balance, and indigenous self-determination.

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