

Tribals in India:

India has the second largest tribal population in the world after Africa. Also, as per census 2011, India is home to around 700 tribal groups with a population of 104 million. They have developed a symbiotic relation with their local environment, around which they have developed their cultural traditions, economy and social life. For them their land is not merely a source of livelihood rather a representation of their cultural identity and existence.

How Tribal Communities are characterized and classified in India?

- **Vedic Period:** Before introduction of caste system, people used to live separately into various tribes. For instance, Banar tribe, Munda tribe etc.
- **Ancient & Medieval Period:** Tribal populations interacted with other populations. For instance, Akbar protracted guerrilla warfare for effective resistance of British entry into tribal areas of Chotanagpur by people from Santhal, Ho tribes etc.
- **British era:** The main classifications of tribes under the British rule in India were:
 - **Excluded Areas:** These were regions predominantly inhabited by tribal communities and were considered exempt from direct British rule. The British adopted a **policy of non-interference** in these areas, allowing the tribal communities to govern themselves according to their traditional customs and practices. These areas were referred to as "excluded" or "partially excluded" areas. Examples include present-day states like Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, and parts of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.
 - **Scheduled Tribes:** This classification was introduced through the **Government of India Act, 1935**. The British identified certain tribes as "Scheduled Tribes" based on criteria such as their primitive traits, distinct culture, economic and educational backwardness, and their geographical isolation. The tribes included in the Scheduled Tribes list were entitled to certain protective measures and affirmative action policies. This classification continues to be in use even after Indian independence, with periodic revisions and updates.
 - **Criminal Tribes:** During the British colonial era, certain tribal groups were labelled as "**Criminal Tribes**" based on the assumption that they were prone to criminal activities. The British administration imposed strict surveillance and control measures on these communities, treating them as inherently criminal. **The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871** was enacted to monitor and control these communities. After independence, the Act was repealed, and the stigmatizing label of "Criminal Tribes" was abolished.
- **Post-Independence:** After independence, Nehru formulated the following five principles for the policy to be pursued vis-a-vis the tribals also known as **Tribal Panchsheel**:
 - People should develop along the lines of their own genius, and the imposition of alien values should be avoided.
 - Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected.
 - Teams of tribals should be trained in the work of administration and development.
 - Tribal areas should not be over-administered or overwhelmed with a multiplicity of schemes.
 - Results should be judged not by statistics, or the amount of money spent, but by the human character that has evolved.

Government Policy towards tribals:

The Indian government's approach towards tribal communities has evolved over time, with different phases that include elements of isolation, integration, and assimilation as given below:

- **Isolation (Pre-Independence):** During the British colonial rule, tribal areas were often considered "excluded" or "partially excluded" areas, where the British administration adopted a policy of non-interference, allowing tribal communities to govern themselves according to their traditional customs and practices.
- **Integration (Post-Independence):** After India gained independence in 1947; the government pursued a **policy of integration**, seeking to bring tribal communities into the mainstream of national life while ensuring their welfare and protection. Efforts were made to extend education, healthcare, and infrastructure development to tribal areas, and tribal communities were encouraged to participate in the democratic process and governance.
- **Assimilation:** During the 1950s and 1960s, the Indian government pursued a policy of assimilation, influenced by the prevailing perception that tribal communities needed to be "mainstreamed". This period witnessed attempts to assimilate tribals into the dominant society by encouraging adoption of mainstream languages, religions, and ways of life.

Classification of tribals in India:

Given their evolution through time, tribal population in India is widely dispersed. There can be multiple ways to classify them.

- **Geographically**, they are divided into three main zones, namely North and North- Eastern Zone, Central Zone and Southern Zone.
- **Linguistically**, Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman broad groups have been identified amongst tribes of India.
- **Racially**, Tribes of India are broadly classified into Mongoloid, Proto-Austroloid, and Negrito.
- **Constitutional:** The Constitution of India does not provide the definition of tribes but has a section on Scheduled Tribes under Article 342.
 - Scheduled Tribes (STs): People who have been listed in the Constitution and mentioned in successive presidential orders are called STs.
 - The President considers characteristics like tribes' primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness with public at large, geographical isolation and social and economic backwardness before notifying them as a Scheduled Tribe.
- **Other Administrative Classifications:**
 - **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)** are more vulnerable among the tribal groups. Because of which PVTGs need more funds directed for their development. These include Asurs, Birhor, Bodo Gadaba, Bondo Poroja etc.
 - **De-notified Tribes:** Due to specific administrative as well as law and order reasons, these are communities or tribes that were 'notified' as being 'born criminal' during British regime under Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. This Act was repealed in 1952, and communities were 'de-notified', hence the name. These include Chhara, Devipujak, Sansi, Sandhi, Dafer tribes etc.
 - **Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Communities:** They are defined as those communities who move from one place to another rather than living at one place all the time.

These includes hunters and food-gatherers (Konda Reddis, Chenchus etc.), Nomadic Pastoral and Non-Pastoralists (Pardis, Banjaras, Bhils etc.).

What are the prominent impediments faced by Tribal Communities in their Developmental Path?

First during the colonial rule, and subsequently, in independent India, tribal communities have a long history of marginalization, neglect and oppression. Despite numerous steps, a huge gap exists between the tribal people and other section of society. This can be attributed to the following:

- **Socio-Cultural issues:**

- **Erosion of identity:** The traditional institutions and laws of tribals have come into conflict with modern institutions; inflow of non-tribals in scheduled areas, along with decreasing tribal population has led to degradation of tribal identity. Example, Bo language has gone extinct.
- **Education:** Early participation of children into work, poverty, inadequacy of educational institutions, lack of administrative policy regarding the educational institutions in tribal areas have contributed to the high incidence of illiteracy and early dropout.
- **Health and Nutrition:** Unhygienic and primitive practices, lack of nutritious diet, poor healthcare infrastructure, inadequate vaccination and immunization of infants and children leading to chronic infections, malnutrition and water borne diseases.
 - **Tribals face triple burden of diseases:** communicable diseases (malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy etc.), non-communicable diseases (diabetes, cardiovascular and cancers) and mental health problems like stress, substance abuse and so on.
 - For instance, as per UNICEF, 40 percent of under- five tribal children are stunted and 16 per cent of them are severely stunted.
- **Gender gap:** Women in indigenous communities (patriarchal tribes) do not enjoy equal rights and opportunities such as reproductive health, education, access to political power, social status etc. Women remain underrepresented in decision-making bodies like the assembly or parliament and community leadership roles.
 - For instance, in political representation in 2022, tribal state of Arunachal Pradesh has only four women MLAs in the current assembly of 60 members, and it has never had a woman MP since the attainment of statehood in 1987.

- **Economic issues**

- **Land Alienation:** Historically, the Forest policy of the British Government was more inclined towards commercial considerations.
 - Later, tribal lands were occupied by moneylenders, zamindars and traders by advancing loans etc. And with opening of mines, diversion of forest lands for railway construction etc. tribal were displaced from their own lands.
- **Poverty and unemployment:** Tribals followed primary occupations such as hunting, gathering, and agriculture. The technology used was primitive, thus there was no surplus production leading to meagre or no profit. Hence their per capita income was much lesser than the Indian average.

- Lack of skill, illiteracy and lack of higher education, low wages besides malnutrition etc. continue to be the major problems leading to poor employment opportunities and high unemployment ratio.
- **Environment issues**
 - **Man-Animal conflicts:** In recent times, man-animal conflict has gone up due to the increase in human population, land-use transformations for developmental activities, habitat fragmentation and increasing wildlife population as a result of conservation strategies.
 - **Natural resources:** With the advent of industrialisation in India, discovery of mineral and other resources in tribal inhabited areas, these pockets were opened to outsiders and state control replacing tribal control to boost growth.

Government measures for tribals:

Here are some key aspects of the Indian government's policies towards tribals:

- **Constitutional Safeguards:** The Constitution of India recognizes the rights and special status of tribal communities. Article 244 provides for the administration and governance of scheduled areas and tribal areas through the **Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution**, respectively. These provisions ensure the protection of tribal rights over land, forests, and natural resources and allow for self-governance and autonomy in tribal regions.
- **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006:** This legislation, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), grants legal recognition and protection to the rights of forest-dwelling tribal communities over land, forests, and other resources. It aims to correct historical injustices and prevent the displacement of tribal communities from their traditional habitats.
- **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and Scheduled Tribes Component (STC):** The Tribal Sub-Plan (now known as Scheduled Tribes Component) is a planning mechanism aimed at ensuring the allocation of funds and resources specifically for the development of tribal areas and welfare of tribal communities. It mandates that a proportionate amount of the budget should be allocated for tribal development in proportion to their population.
- **Reservation and Affirmative Action:** The Indian government provides reservations in education, employment, and political representation for tribal communities. A certain percentage of seats in educational institutions, government jobs, and legislative bodies are reserved for Scheduled Tribes. This affirmative action policy aims to address historical disadvantages and promote tribal representation and empowerment.
- **Special Development Programs:** The government has launched various targeted development programs for tribal communities. For example, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs implements schemes like the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, Ashram Schools, scholarships, and skill development programs to enhance educational opportunities and skill development among tribal youth.
- **Healthcare and Social Welfare:** The government has implemented healthcare programs targeting tribal communities, such as the National Rural Health Mission and the National Health Mission, to improve access to quality healthcare services in tribal areas. Social welfare schemes like the Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), Integrated Child Development Services

(ICDS), and Mid-Day Meal Scheme also aim to address the social and nutritional needs of tribal communities.

Measures that can be taken:

Socio-Economic Measures:

- **Tribal centred education system:** There is need to provide job-oriented education, set up non-formal and vocational training centres to meet local needs, and setting up of sports training centres to promote tribal children's talents.
 - Teacher training institutions should be opened in the Tribal Sub Plan areas and curriculum should be drawn up taking into account the socio-cultural milieu, tribal ethos, language etc.
- **Awareness:** There is a need to take up massive awareness creation activities among the tribal to make them realize their development potential. Area based approach should be adopted to create infrastructure and road connectivity.
- **Health:** Improving coverage and accessibility of Primary Health Cares and instead of alienating or rejecting traditional healer's option of engaging them in the healthcare system must be explored.
 - Traditional herbal medicines should be protected through community ownership and intellectual property rights of tribal community over their own herbal medicines and practices should be ensured.
- **Identification:** Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) among the tribes need special attention, their customary right to land; forest and sources of livelihood must be respected and protected.
- **Funding:** Autonomous Councils must be covered under State Finance Commission (SFC) and SFC should lay down appropriate principles of resource distribution between State and Autonomous Council. Funding should not be left to arbitrary discretion of State Governments.
- **Employment:** There is a dire need to establish agro-based training institutions and related labour-intensive processing industries in tribal regions by engaging SHGs, cooperative institutions and Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas.

Administrative Measures:

- **Enlarging the Tribal Panchsheel-** Nearly three-quarters of a century after independence, several policies and constitutional safeguards, fortified by statutes and judicial pronouncements, are now in place. This advocates a pragmatic action plan in consonance with tribal Panchsheel.
- **ILO's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989:** Indigenous and tribal peoples shall enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination. The ratification of this convention by India, would assert our choice to assimilate Tribals while respecting their social and cultural autonomy.
- **Representation:** There should be provision for reservation for tribal women (one-third) as well as smaller tribal groups in the Autonomous Development Council (ADCs) and other political institutions.

- Plenary powers could be given to Gram Sabhas to fight cases of tribal land alienation collectively, as tribal cannot afford legal battles, given their socio-economic conditions.

Sociological Viewpoints:

- **Verrier Elwin:** He believed that tribal communities possessed a rich cultural heritage that needed to be preserved and appreciated. He emphasized the need to protect their land rights, promote their traditional practices, and provide them with opportunities for socio-economic development without compromising their cultural integrity.
- **G.S Ghurye:** Ghurye wanted Scheduled Tribes to be assimilated into the Hindu society and polity, just as he wanted Scheduled Castes to also be merged. While he wanted the tribes of Central India to be integrated through Hinduisation, as he felt contact with the Hindus would enhance their status. On the other hand, he wanted the tribes of North-east to be politically integrated through the administrative measures of the Indian state. Ghurye did not advocate Hinduisation of North-east tribes because of the significant presence of Christianity among the Nagas, Mizos and Khasis and also due to the fact that some of these sections of tribes had embraced Hinduism and Buddhism.
- **M. N. Srinivas:** His work emphasized the processes of social change and modernization among tribes. Srinivas coined the term "**Sanskritization**" to describe the process by which tribes adopt the customs, rituals, and beliefs of higher castes as a means of upward mobility and social recognition.
- **Surjit Sinha:** According to Sinha, the tribal society is isolated in ecology, demography, economy, politics and other social relations, from other ethnic groups. This isolation generates, and in turn, is bolstered by a strong in-group sentiment. Internally, the group is characterized by homogeneity on account of lack of social stratification and role specialization other than by age, sex and kinship.

In the era of globalization and the digital divide, it is vital for tribal population as well as the non-tribal population of India to bridge the representation gap in order to ensure appropriate legitimisation of tribal voices, identities, culture, collective human rights and contextual issues. As India is aspiring to be a global super-power, it needs to rethink and redefine its definition of development to incorporate the discourse of inclusive tribal development. This will also be in sync with the **Sustainable Developmental Goals agenda**.