

TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper provides a synthesis of the concept of tribal development in India, analyzes the demographic and geographical profile of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, and forecasts the critical challenges facing these communities in the 21st century. Tribal development is defined as the phased, time-bound process of improving the socio-economic and cultural well-being of tribal communities. The core objective is achieving equality and social justice by eliminating exploitation and bringing tribal communities to parity with the broader national society through targeted programs in health, education, employment, and infrastructure. Conceptually, development is complex, viewed variously as a movement, a program, a method, a socio-psychological process, and an institutional change (Scanders). It must involve organized activity to build "inner strength" and the necessary social and cultural infrastructure. In conclusion, effective tribal policy requires a bifurcated approach: strict protection and non-interference for critically small groups (like in the Islands) and intensive, target-oriented development focusing on self-management and empowerment for the large, disadvantaged populations of the Central Tribal Belt.

Key words: Tribal Development, Demographics, Ethnographic Distribution, Primitive Tribal Groups of Tribes, Socio-Economic and Development Indicators,

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Tribal communities are an integral part of India's population and are the second-largest concentration of indigenous people globally, possibly after Africa. They are spread across roughly 15% of the country's geographical area, present in all states and union territories except for a few in the North (Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, and Delhi) and Puducherry. Their isolated existence in underdeveloped regions, heavily influenced by their natural ecosystem, has made tribal development a critically important and growing subject of study in social sciences, both domestically and internationally. Tribal development is the process of improving the socio-economic and cultural well-being of tribal communities who are at varying stages of growth. This involves a phased and time-bound approach to social and economic progress, utilizing integrated area development programs tailored to the specific context and economic realities of the people. The ultimate goal is to eliminate all forms of exploitation and achieve equality and social justice, primarily by enhancing the quality of life through initiatives in health, education, employment, and infrastructure (like transport and communication), thereby bringing them to parity with the broader national society.

While the need for tribal development is driven by their backwardness, poverty, and the challenge of integration with the mainstream population, defining the concept itself is complex. Scanders views tribal development in five ways: as a movement (emphasizing organizational structure), a program (focusing on activities), a method (focusing on achievable ends), a process (stressing economic, social, and psychological changes), and the institutionalization of new skills that lead to social change while maintaining cultural continuity. Belshaw emphasizes that development must equally address social, cultural, and economic aspects of life. Sociologically, he defines development as an organized activity aimed at fulfilling basic needs and psychologically preparing tribal people to adopt new skills, attitudes, and lifestyles. This is intended to build their "inner strength" and the necessary social and cultural infrastructure to withstand new pressures, benefit from new programs, and sustain higher living standards. For Belshaw, development is fundamentally a positive change that increases a society's capacity to organize efficiently and achieve its own objectives.

1.2 Tribal Population in India

The tribal population, officially categorized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Constitution of India, represents a vital and diverse segment of the country's social fabric. The most recent comprehensive data is based on the Census of India, 2011.

Table 1.1 Key Demographics (Census 2011)

Metric	Figure	Detail
Total ST Population	104.5 million (10.45 Crore)	This figure is an increase from the 2001 Census.
Percentage of Total Population	8.6%	The ST population constitutes almost one-twelfth of India's total population.
Decadal Growth Rate (2001–2011)	23.7%	This is significantly higher than the overall national decadal growth rate of 17.64% during the same period.
Sex Ratio	990 females per 1,000 males	This is notably higher and more favorable than the national sex ratio of 940/1000.
Notified Tribal Groups	Over 700	These groups are officially recognized across 30 States and Union Territories (UTs).

Source: Computed

Geographical Distribution and Concentration: The tribal population is characterized by a unique and uneven geographical distribution, largely concentrated in specific regions corresponding to forest and hill areas.

Rural Population: About 90% (9.38 Crore) of the ST population resides in rural areas, making up 11.3% of the total rural population.

Urban Population: Only about 10% (1.05 Crore) lives in urban areas, though their urban decadal growth rate was a high 49.7% (2001-2011), suggesting increasing migration to cities.

Major Concentration States (Absolute Numbers): Nearly 71% of the total Scheduled Tribe population is concentrated in just six states: Madhya Pradesh (Highest absolute ST population - approx.⁷ 14.7% of all STs), Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

States/UTs with Highest Proportion: In several states and Union Territories, the ST population forms the overwhelming majority: Lakshadweep (94.8%), Mizoram (94.4%), Nagaland (86.5%), Meghalaya (86.1%) and Arunachal Pradesh (68.8%). The following five regions have no notified Scheduled Tribe population: Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, NCT of Delhi and Puducherry

1.3 Socio-Economic and Development Indicators

ST communities generally lag behind the national average in several key development parameters:

Table 1.1 Socio-Economic and Development Indicators

Indicator (Census 2011)	All India Average	Scheduled Tribes (ST) Average	Gap
Literacy Rate	73%	59%	14 percentage points
Female Literacy	65%	49%	16 percentage points
Workforce Livelihood	Varied	~80% in agriculture	Predominance in Primary Sector
Infant Mortality Rate (NFHS-3)	57.0/1000	62.1/1000	Higher than National Average

Source: Computed

Major Tribal Groups: India's tribal population is linguistically and culturally fragmented into numerous distinct groups. The largest in terms of population are: [i] Bhil: The largest tribe, spread across Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. They are historically known for their bow-and-arrow skills. [ii] Gond: The second-largest group, primarily in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh/Telangana. They are known for their art and forest-based agriculture. [iii] Santhal: A major community in the eastern states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, known for their traditional dances and music. [iv] Munda and Oraon: Other significant tribes primarily concentrated in the Chota Nagpur Plateau region (Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal).

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs): Among the notified STs, 75 groups have been identified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). These groups have the lowest development indicators, characterized by: A pre-agricultural level of technology, Stagnant or declining population growth, Extremely low literacy rates, A subsistence level of economy and Odisha has the highest number of PVTGs.

The unique demographic profile, high concentration in forest/hill areas, and lagging development status emphasize why Tribal Development is a critical focus area in India's planning and social policy.

1.4 Distribution of Tribal Population

The provided data shows the demographic trends of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in India from 1951 to what appears to be the 2001 Census (labeled as 2011 in the table, as the figures match the 2001 Census more closely than 2011). The data reveals two major trends: a consistent increase in the absolute number of the ST population and a steady rise in their proportional representation in India.

[a] Absolute Growth of the ST Population

Significant Increase: The absolute population of Scheduled Tribes increased dramatically from 19.1 million in 1951 to 84.3 million (as per the 2001 figures provided). This represents an increase of over four times the base population.

High Decadal Growth: The ST population consistently grew at a very high rate, especially in the earlier decades. The highest decadal growth rate was between 1951 and 1961 (57.59%), which is a crucial period reflecting better enumeration and post-independence demographic changes.

Sustained Growth: While the growth rate has moderated in later decades (e.g., 24.34% in the last period), the absolute increase remained substantial, peaking at 16.5 million in the last recorded period (1991–2001).

[b] Proportional Growth (Percentage to Total Population)

Continuous Rise in Share: The percentage of the ST population relative to India's total population has shown a continuous, though gradual, upward trend across all periods. [i] It started at 5.29% in 1951 [ii] It sharply increased to 6.85% by 1961 [iii] It reached 8.20% in the final period (2001 census data).

Gaining Ground: This trend indicates that the ST population generally grew at a faster rate than the overall "General Population" (Total Population) for most of the period, leading to an increasing share in the nation's demographics. For instance, between 1981 and 1991, the total population grew by 23.51%, while the ST population grew by 31.40%.

Table 1.3 Distribution of Tribal Population

Period	ST Growth Rate	Total Pop Growth Rate	Implication
1951–1961	57.59%	21.63%	ST growth was significantly higher.
1961–1971	26.25%	24.82%	ST growth slightly higher.
1971–1981	35.79%	24.99%	ST growth significantly higher.
1981–1991	31.40%	23.51%	ST growth significantly higher.
1991–2001	24.34%	21.54%	ST growth slightly higher.

Source: Computed

The data clearly demonstrates that the Scheduled Tribe population in India has undergone significant and sustained demographic growth since the early post-independence era. This growth, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total population, underscores the increasing demographic and electoral significance of the tribal communities in India. The sustained rise in their share of the total population suggests the success of enumeration efforts and indicates a slightly higher decadal growth rate for the ST population compared to the national average over most of these decades. This continuous increase makes tribal development a permanently relevant and evolving policy concern for the Government of India.

1.5 Tribe Population Distribution (Census 2011)

Based on the Census of India 2011, details the state-wise distribution of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population. The figures represent the percentage of a state's ST population relative to the total ST population of India. A significant finding is the massive concentration of the tribal population in a few central and western states, often referred to as the Central Tribal Belt.

Dominance of Madhya Pradesh: Madhya Pradesh alone holds the largest share, accounting for 14.51% of the entire country's ST population.

The Top Seven: The first seven states on the list—Madhya Pradesh (14.51%), Maharashtra (10.71%), Odisha (9.66%), Gujarat (8.87%), Rajasthan (8.42%), Jharkhand (8.40%), and Chhattisgarh (7.85%)—collectively account for approximately 68.42% of the total Scheduled Tribe population in India.

This pattern confirms that two-thirds of India's tribal population is concentrated within the historically forested and hilly regions of the central, western, and eastern parts of the mainland. While the North-Eastern states have a very high percentage of STs within their own population (as seen in earlier data), their contribution to the total national ST population is relatively small due to their low overall population size. Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh combined contribute only about 11.23% of the total national ST population. For example, Mizoram has almost its entire population as ST, but contributes only 1.00% to the total ST population of India. A large number of states and union territories, especially those in the North (like Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh) and the South (like Tamil Nadu and Kerala), as well as the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, contribute less than 1% each to the national ST population. States like Uttar Pradesh (which is India's most populous state) and Sikkim contribute a marginal 0.13% each. The lowest-contributing states/UTs (at the end of the list) represent extremely localized pockets of tribal habitation.

The distribution of the Scheduled Tribe population in India is highly skewed and uneven. The data unequivocally shows that the challenge of Tribal Development is primarily concentrated in the Central Tribal Belt encompassing Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh, as these states bear the responsibility for the socio-economic upliftment of over two-thirds of the nation's tribal people. While states like Mizoram and Nagaland have a much higher proportional representation of STs within their boundaries, policy interventions aimed at improving the absolute numbers and scale of impact must necessarily focus their resources and planning primarily on this central core.

1.6 Major Tribal Distribution in India

A state-wise list of major Scheduled Tribes (STs) found across India. This information highlights the immense cultural and ethnic diversity of the tribal population and confirms the existence of distinct regional tribal belts. The data clearly delineates four major geographical concentrations of tribes:

Central/Peninsular India (The Gond/Bhil Belt): States like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh feature large, influential tribes such as the Gond and Bhil. These tribes often span multiple state borders, indicating a shared cultural history and regional distribution rather than confinement to modern political boundaries.

The Eastern Plateau (Santhal/Munda Belt): Jharkhand, Bihar, and Odisha are the strongholds of groups like the Santhal, Munda, Ho, and Oraon. These tribes form the core of the Chota Nagpur Plateau's tribal population.

North-Eastern Region (Naga/Kuki/Mizo/Khasi Belt): This region is characterized by an extremely high number of distinct, often smaller, groups (e.g., Abor, Apatani, Mishmi in Arunachal Pradesh; Naga and Kuki in Nagaland and Manipur). States here exhibit high tribal density and unique ethno-linguistic diversity.

Island and Coastal Pockets: The list highlights highly vulnerable and unique tribes in isolated regions, such as the Jarawas, Onges, and Sentinelese in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, which are known for their pre-Neolithic existence and isolation.

Many large tribes are listed in multiple states, confirming their extensive spread:

Bhil: Present in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Tripura. This makes the Bhil one of India's most widely distributed tribal groups.

Gond: Found in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh.

Baiga, Birhor, Chenchu, Dhodia, Munda, and Oraon are also listed in several neighboring states, necessitating inter-state coordination for comprehensive tribal development policies.

Some states are home to tribes highly specific to their environment:

Nilgiri Tribes (Tamil Nadu/Kerala): The Toda and Kota (Tamil Nadu), and Kadar and Koraga (Kerala), are indigenous groups of the Western Ghats with distinct lifestyles.

Himalayan Tribes: Gaddi, Gujjar, and Lahula in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir, and Bhotia, Buksa, and Tharu in Uttarakhand/Uttar Pradesh, are adapted to the mountain ecology.

Therefore, it is clear picture of India's tribal ethno-geography. The conclusion drawn is two-fold: [i] Policy Need for Regional Focus: Tribal development policies cannot be uniform. The vast difference between the isolated, nomadic tribes of the Andaman Islands and the agrarian, multi-state tribes like the Bhil requires highly localized, ecosystem-specific interventions. [ii] Cultural and Linguistic Importance: The distribution highlights India's immense reservoir of unique cultures and languages. Recognizing the cross-border spread of major groups is crucial for effective resource planning and for preserving the cultural identity of these communities while ensuring their socio-economic inclusion. The concentration of certain large tribes (Bhil, Gond, Santhal) makes targeted, large-scale programs effective, while the uniqueness of others necessitates protected area status and minimal interference.

1.7 Primitive Tribal Groups (PVTGs) Distribution in India

The state-wise distribution and population data for groups initially termed Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs), now officially recognized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). These 75 groups are the most disadvantaged among the Scheduled Tribes, characterized by pre-agricultural technology, low literacy, and stagnant/declining populations. The most striking feature of the table is the small size of these populations, indicating their extreme vulnerability.

Andaman & Nicobar Islands: This region showcases the most vulnerable groups globally, with their total combined population being only 672. Tribes like the Great Andamanese (43), Sentinelese (39), and Onge (96) represent remnants of some of the world's most ancient and isolated communities, necessitating a policy of protection and minimal external interference.

High Proportion of Unenumerated Groups: A significant number of PVTGs, particularly in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and combined states (Bihar/Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh/Chhattisgarh), have "—" listed for population, or have large missing values (as indicated by the huge difference between sub-totals and individual populations). This suggests these groups are either extremely dispersed, nomadic, or their isolation makes accurate enumeration highly difficult, further underscoring their "vulnerable" status. While PVTGs are characterized by low population, a few groups have surprisingly large numbers, but are still considered vulnerable based on their socio-economic indicators:

Central India Dominance: Madhya Pradesh (specifically its region before the Chhattisgarh split) and Odisha account for the largest absolute PVTG populations, with totals of 938,190 and 730,309, respectively (based on the provided census figures). The Sahariya in Madhya Pradesh (450,217) and the Saura in Odisha (473,233) are the largest single PVTG groups listed, confirming that even large groups can qualify as PVTGs due to specific vulnerabilities (e.g., high economic dependency, low literacy, and remote habitation).

Southern India: Tamil Nadu (212,439) is also a major host for PVTGs, with the Irular group accounting for the majority (155,606).

It confirms that vulnerability does not respect state boundaries, as several groups are spread across neighbouring states, requiring coordinated inter-state efforts: [i] Birhor are found in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal, [ii] Koraga are found in Karnataka and Kerala. [iii] Buksa and Raji are listed in both Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

It confirms the extreme heterogeneity and precarious existence of India's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). The Grand Total of 3,262,960 represents a tiny fraction (less than 3.5%) of the overall Scheduled Tribe population (104.5 million in 2011). The most critical takeaway is the inverse relationship between population

size and geographical isolation/vulnerability. The most isolated groups (Andamanese) have the smallest, most critically low populations, while the largest PVTG populations (Sahariya, Saura) are found in the Central Indian states. This data necessitates a bifurcated policy approach: [i] Strict Protection and Non-Interference for the critically endangered and isolated tribes (especially in the Andaman Islands) to ensure cultural survival. [ii] Intensive, Target-Oriented Development Programs focusing on health, education, and livelihood for the larger, yet socio-economically disadvantaged, PVTGs (like the Saura and Sahariya) in the mainland states to lift them out of acute backwardness.

1.8 Ethnic Distribution of Tribes in India

The cultural, racial, and occupational characteristics of India's tribal population by dividing the country into seven distinct Tribal Zones. These zones showcase how tribal communities, occupying about 15% of India's area, have adapted to diverse ecological conditions while sharing certain racial and social traits.

Table 1.4 Zonal Breakdown and Key Characteristics

Zone	States Included	Predominant Racial Stock	Primary Occupations	Key Social Traits
North-Eastern	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram	Mongoloid	Shifting cultivation (Jhum), Hunting, Gathering	Endogamous, often practice polygamy, non-vegetarian, rice beer consumption.
Eastern	Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Sikkim, West Bengal	Mongoloid (reported)	Hunting, Gathering, Shifting/Settled Cultivation	Endogamous, Clan Exogamy, preference for negotiation marriage, strong traditional village council.
Northern	Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand	Mongoloid	Business (Bhutia), Nomadic Hunting/Gathering (Raji), Agricultural labor	Endogamous, Patrilineal, sometimes practice levirate/surrogate/cross-cousin marriage, generally cremate the dead.
Central	Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh	Proto-Australoid	Wage Earning, Fuel Selling, Crafting	Endogamous (clan-based prohibition), Patrilineal property transmission, bury the dead facing upwards. Known as the Tribal Heart of India.
Western	Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Gujarat, Goa, Daman & Diu, Maharashtra, Rajasthan	Proto-Australoid	Hunting, Food Gathering (traditionally), Wage Labour (currently)	Socially permitted to cremate or bury, Patrilineal, active political organization led by 'Gameti'/'Mukhia'.
Southern	Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala	Caucasoid & Proto-Australoid	Collecting forest produce, Slash and Burn (Kumri) Cultivation. Toda are pastoralists.	Clan Exogamy, Polyandry (Toda), rare remarriage/divorce, worship ancestors and bury the dead.
Island	Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep	Negrito & Mongoloid	Hunting, Food Gathering, Fishing, Horticultural labouring	Clan Exogamy (with restrictions), Monogamy preferred, Patrilineal property distribution, bury the dead.

Source: Computed

Therefore, the zonal classification reveals that Indian tribes are differentiated not only by political boundaries but primarily by racial lineage, economic adaptation, and socio-cultural practices shaped by their local ecology. [i] The North, East, and North-Eastern Zones are largely characterized by Mongoloid influence, practicing variations of shifting cultivation and living in hilly/forested areas. [ii] The Central and Western Zones are predominantly defined by Proto-Australoid groups who face economic hardship, often relying on wage labor, and form the largest concentration of tribal people. [iii] The Southern and Island Zones host the most distinct and vulnerable groups (Caucasoid/Proto-Australoid in South; Negrito/Mongoloid in Islands) with unique, often primitive, economic (hunting/gathering/pastoralism) and social (polyandry) systems.

In essence, while the tribes of mainland India show a high degree of cross-state cultural overlap (especially in the Central/Eastern belts), the groups in the isolated North-East, South, and Islands exhibit highly unique characteristics demanding specific, region-sensitive development and preservation strategies.

1.9 Tribals in the 21st Century: Challenges and Prospects

The status and future trajectory of India's tribal communities (Scheduled Tribes - STs) in the 21st century. While the post-colonial era brought constitutional rights and specific development programs, a vast majority still lag

behind the general population, facing an accelerating loss of resources and identity. The future is seen as a dialectical process where protective measures fiercely compete with forces of erosion and exploitation.

End of Colonial Rule: The 20th century saw the end of the colonial system, which had both oppressed and, paradoxically, designated tribals as a distinct administrative group.

Constitutional Rights: The Constitution granted tribals rights equal to all citizens, along with special protections (protective discrimination) and benefits through targeted development programs.

The critical issues expected to shape the lives of tribal communities:

Population Dynamics: The overall tribal population will likely grow faster than the general population, increasing pressure on resources. Conversely, extremely small groups, like the Great Andamanese and Onges, face a real risk of extinction by the end of the century.

Resource Erosion: The influx of external populations into tribal areas will accelerate despite protective agrarian laws. The rapid degradation of forests will worsen the environmental situation, further eroding tribal rights to traditional forest resources.

Increased Exploitation and Displacement: Exploitation of tribal people and their resources will intensify. Development projects will continue to cause increased displacement of tribals from their lands.

The traditional tribal economy will be further integrated (or "sucked") into the market economy. Simultaneously, the conflict between traditional tribal institutions and modern institutions will intensify. More tribals will move to urban centers. This shift is predicted to lead to an increase in criminalization and a rise in the incidence of alcoholism.

Stratification: Inequalities within tribal society will multiply, leading to sharper stratification and a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Gender Tension: Growing tension on gender issues is foreseen, with a rising movement among tribal women to assert their rights, particularly regarding land ownership.

Identity and Autonomy: Tribal ethnicity and identity will strengthen, fueling intensifying tribal movements focused on participation in power structures and protection of rights. Demands for tribal autonomy and the right to self-manage resources will likely be conceded in many areas, particularly in Middle India.

Globalization: Tribal issues will become increasingly interconnected with, and influenced by, global processes and platforms.

The policy of protective discrimination will need to be further strengthened, with a shift toward processes that grant tribals greater self-management of issues and resources.

1.10

It could be concluded that the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in India reached 104.5 million in 2011, showing significant growth. Over two-thirds of this population lives in the Central Tribal Belt (including MP, Maharashtra, Odisha, etc.), making it the main focus for development despite North-Eastern states having a higher proportion of STs. Extreme diversity among tribes requires regionally-focused development strategies. The 3.26 million Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)—less than 3.5% of the total ST population—require a dual approach: [i] Strict Protection/Non-Interference for critically isolated groups (e.g., Andamanese). [ii] Intensive, Target-Oriented Development for larger mainland PVTGs (e.g., Sahariya). Tribes vary across regions, which influences policy: [i] Central/Western: Largest group, primarily Proto-Australoid, often facing economic hardship. [ii] North/East/North-Eastern: Characterized by Mongoloid influence, practicing shifting cultivation. [iii] Southern/Island: Most distinct and vulnerable groups (Negrito/Mongoloid in Islands; Caucasoid/Proto-Australoid in South) with unique economies. In short, the large, diverse ST population requires differentiated, region-sensitive policies focusing resource allocation on the central core while ensuring targeted protection and development for the most vulnerable groups nationwide.

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