

Remapping Tribal Identity in Odisha: Contestation, Resilience and Prospects

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Abstract:

Odisha's socio-cultural landscape, marked by rich diversity and enduring traditions of its tribal communities, reflects a significant demographic presence, with tribal population constituting 22.85 of the state's total population as recorded in the Census Report 2011. These tribal communities are officially 62 in number and live in hilly and forest regions. Historically, they have experienced varying degrees of humiliation, social isolation, and marginalization. Despite this, they remained as significant contributors to Odisha's cultural diversity, traditional knowledge systems, and sustainable ecological balance. Their long historical marginalization were the common concern, and taking cognizance of that the Government of India made special provisions in the constitution, framed rules and regulations to legally protect and safeguard their rights, culture, and interests as part of the heritage and an integral component of Indian civilization. Paradoxically, several critical issues continue to remain unresolved, underscoring the need for a holistic approach within the context of globalization and development paradigms to ensure the effective protection of their overall well-being. Though nearly eighty years have been lapsed after independence, for the resilient tribal communities of Odisha, the real contestation continues for *jal, jungle and jamin* (water, forests, and land), the foundations of life, identity and dignity. Therefore, remapping cultural identity in this challenging globalised world immensely important, because it has a wonderful prospect for Odishan knowledge system.

Keywords: Odisha, Tribal, Culture, Identity, Constitution, PVTG, FRA, PESA, Modernization, Industrialization, Globalization, Gram Sabha, Modernisation, Industrialisation.

1. Introduction

In recorded history, tribal communities are believed to be among the earliest inhabitants of India, known as 'Adivasis'. India has the second-largest tribal population in the world and is next to the South Asian subcontinent. According to the 2001 Census Report, India recorded 8.8 per cent of its total population as tribals, while Odisha, an eastern state of India, constituted 22.2 per cent of its total population.[1] However, the 2011 Census showed some visible demographic changes in the tribal population, accounting for 22.85 per cent of the total population, with 62 distinct tribal communities. Among the total 62 tribal communities, 13 are considered to be the most vulnerable and are officially known as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).[2] These tribal communities in the state of Odisha have their own socio-cultural and collective identity, largely connected to nature and ecology.[3]

The major concentration of tribal communities is in Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Gajapati, Nabarangpur, Kandhamal, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj, Nuapada, Kalahandi, and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. Their social systems are different from those of Hindu society, but they share some common characteristics among themselves and, to some extent, differ from one another.[4]

In Odisha, several major tribal communities inhabit different districts and speak their respective tribal languages. The Santhal tribe is predominantly found in Mayurbhanj, Balasore, and Keonjhar.. The Gond tribe has a significant presence in Nabarangpur (Nowrangpur), Nuapada, Balangir (Bolangir), and Kalahandi districts. along with Odia. The Kondh (Khond) tribe is primarily found in Rayagada, Koraput, Kalahandi, and Kandhamal districts. The Saora (Sora) tribe mainly inhabits the hilly and mountainous areas of southern Odisha, particularly in Ganjam, Gajapati, Rayagada, and Balangir districts. The Munda tribe is found mainly in Keonjhar, Sundargarh, and Sambalpur regions. [5]

The collective cultural identity of Odisha's ethnic communities as elsewhere in India, is characterized by enduring traditions and practices associated with the process of tribalisation. [6] Their folk traditions specifically their unique art, music, dance, spiritual beliefs, and rituals, form their communal cultural identity, becoming an inseparable fragment of the Indian knowledge system that holds deep historical and spiritual significance.[7] Tanuja Mohapatra rightly, observes that, "in common parlance, tribes in India are perceived as 'different' socio-cultural groups living in isolation since the mythical Aryan invasion of the Indian subcontinent".[8].

Tribal Identity, Contestations and Prospects

Odisha, a homeland of profound presence of tribal populations, whose sustainability is immensely dependent upon indigenous knowledge systems and nature from long past. Their way of life and communal identity formation have been accentuated through various oral and folk traditions, as well as local governance. These tribal communities of Odisha have experienced prolonged and multifaceted contestations; however, in contemporary times, these challenges have intensified due to rapid industrialization pursued in the name of modernization and developmental dynamism. Consequently, processes of large-scale displacement and economic dispossession have gradually alienated tribal communities from their ancestral landscapes, undermining their traditional livelihood systems, socio-cultural institutions, and forms of territorial belonging. Such processes of dispossession and marginalization have generated profound disillusionment and contributed to the intensification of social tensions and conflicts within and beyond tribal communities.

Keeping in view the above facts, in independent India, constitutional provisions were laid down to protect and safeguard their interests. However, the effectiveness of these provisions at the ground level remains limited. There is considerable debate, discussion, and controversy in the developmental discourse of tribal society, which is centered around 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. Their "inclusion" refers to their incorporation into the dominant Hindu religious culture, whereas their "exclusion" reflects the limited development of material conditions, particularly in terms of infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other basic necessities. These circumstances place them in a vulnerable position as they navigate an increasingly globalised world and contribute to a sense of identity crisis. [9]

There are thus tribal and non-tribal jinks of developmental paradigms that are essential to taken into account in order to preserve tribal identity and culture in Odisha.[10] Therefore, the present research paper negotiate the significance of tribal culture and identity and the constitutional provisions intended to protect their interests. Besides, the study explores the major challenges and complexities faced by tribal communities in Odisha in contemporary times, as well as the possible measures that can be undertaken to preserve their distinct identities and cultural traditions while promoting inclusive socio-cultural development in the state.

Tribal Cultural Identity

The cultural identity and distinctiveness of tribal communities in Odisha can be understood through the lenses of their social practices, language, rituals, festivals, spiritual beliefs, social attire, dress, ornaments, art, and crafts.[11] These factors are historically interconnected with the ancient past and have influenced the identity formation of tribal communities. However, each ethnic tribe—for example, the Kondh, Santal, Juang, Saora, Gadaba, or Bonda—has its own distinct socio-cultural identity. The commonalities that bring tribal communities together under one umbrella of common culture and collective identity in Odisha are enumerated as follows:

1. Social Organisation and Community Life

The clan-based social system, local village councils, and customary laws are important aspects of the social and community life of the tribes of Odisha. These socio-cultural practices guide tribal communities in matters relating to marriage, land rights, dispute resolution, and ritual practices. In tribal localities, the Naiks, Bis Majhis, or elderly men in villages have the responsibility of maintaining socio-cultural cohesion within the communities.

2. Language and Oral Traditions

In Odisha, tribal communities generally speak Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, or Indo-Aryan languages. However, as many of these languages were not traditionally written, oral traditions and ritual practices have played a pivotal role in preserving their history, culture, and identity since time immemorial. Generally, the Santhals speak Santali, . Gonds commonly speak Gondi, The Konds speak Kui and Kuvi, which are important tribal languages of southern Odisha The Soara community speaks the Sora language (Sora), and Munda speaks Mundari language. Various forms of folklore, for instance, Dhimsa, Dalkhai, Ghumura, and Sajana, constitute living repositories of communal reminiscence. According to the 2011 Census Report, the tribals of Odisha speak as many as 72 dialects, classified into 38 languages, demonstrating Odisha's rich tribal linguistic heritage.

3. Festivals and Ritual Practices

The traditional festivals and ritual practices of the tribal communities of Odisha are associated with ancestor veneration and the worship of nature and are closely connected to agricultural cycles and seasons. Various festivals, such as Magha Parba, Chaita Parab, and Bhingi Parab, are organised by tribal communities to worship nature and celebrate collective communal identity in Odisha. In the human and spiritual world, there are ritual specialists, including 'shamans', who play a significant role as mediators. In some instances, associations have been formed to organise these festivals. For example, since 1996, the District Council of Culture in Koraput has evolved, and annually it celebrates the 'Parab Festival', which has become a common platform for showcasing tribal cultural heritage.

4. Art, Craft and Material Culture

Globally, Odisha's tribal culture is known for its vibrant traditional dance practices, complex carvings, fine art, terracotta work, bead-making, and weaving. For centuries, their artistic traditions, particularly through performing arts, have been shaped by environmental knowledge, spiritual symbolism, and social importance. Consequently, Lanjia Saura painting, which is popularly known as Idital, has received the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Other important art and craft forms, such as Dhokra metal craft and paintings of the Saura tribes, have been revived through the 'Adikala' project in recent times to protect tribal identity and cultural heritage.

5. Relationship with Nature

Ecological consciousness is a defining feature of tribal identity and is significantly connected to everyday life in Odisha. Various natural forces, such as hills, forests, rivers, and sacred groves, form an inherent element of social and spiritual life and contribute to India's traditional knowledge system. In recent times, the use of herbal medicine, shifting cultivation, and forest management has demonstrated a durable and sustainable model of coexistence with nature and development. Among the Santhal tribe, the concept of 'Jaheera' represents a sacred bond within the community, with strict restraints against harming vegetation and an emphasis on ritual purity.

The Constitutional Provisions for Tribal Protection

Since these tribal communities have faced many challenges throughout their long historical past, independent India, considering tribal culture and identity as part of the national heritage, prepared constitutional provisions to protect them. These provisions are comprehensive in nature and aim to protect and safeguard indigenous communities. Accordingly, several provisions have been enunciated that are directly and indirectly responsible for safeguarding the interests of tribal communities not only in Odisha but also throughout India.

1. Protective Provisions

Accord to Article 15(4) and Article 46 of Indian Constitution, the state's has the accountability to uphold the educational and economic interests of Tribal communities in India. The Fifth and Sixth Scheduled of Article 244 of Indian however, demarcates the tribal areas. Odisha falls under the Fifth Schedule, which provides:

- Autonomous administrative mechanisms for tribal governance
- Restrictions on the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals
- Powers granted to the Governor and Tribal Advisory Councils (TAC)[12]

The Fifth Schedule, under Article 244(1), introduce the provisions for the governance and manage of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes. Paragraph 4 mandates the establishment of a Tribes Advisory Council in each state having Scheduled Areas, comprising of not more than 20 members, with three-fourths members from Tribal communities in the Legislative Assembly.[13] Besides the paragraph 5 empowers the Governor of the state's to make regulations for the peace and good government of Scheduled Areas, including ruling out or restricting the transfer of land among Scheduled Tribe members and regulating money-lending businesses.[14]

2. Reservation and Equality Guarantees

Articles 330 and 332 ensure political reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies to politically empower the tribal communities. Article 16(4) provides reservation in government employment. These measures seek to integrate tribal communities into political processes and public institutions.

3. Special Legislation

Besides the above provisions for additional safeguards, certain laws have been enacted for the tribals of Odisha. For example, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), offers ownership and managerial rights to tribal communities over forest land.[15] The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), empowers Gram Sabhas to make decisions relating to land, forest produce, and development.[16] Odisha is currently in the final stages of implementing PESA provisions, with consultations completed across 41 government departments and a proposal expected before the State Cabinet. The SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, protects tribal populations from violence and exploitation. Together, these constitutional and legislative safeguards aim to protect tribal autonomy, culture, and dignity while ensuring equitable access to resources.

Major Issues and Challenges of Tribals

In post-independent India, despite various constitutional provisions for the protection of tribal rights, tribal communities continue to face insurmountable challenges, and there is a significant threat to their socio-economic welfare and cultural survival. The major challenges are as follows:

1. Land Alienation and Displacement

In post-independent India, due to rapid modernization, industrialization dichotomy, heavy mining projects, infrastructure development projects, and dam projects, there has been widespread land acquisition, resulting in the displacement of tribal communities from their traditional homelands. Particularly in the western Odisha districts of Koraput, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, and Malkangiri, tribal communities have lost their rights over lands and forests. Industrialisation has thus tremendously impacted cultural landscapes and contributed to the breakdown of the socio-economic and cultural structures of tribal communities, forcing them to migrate to other places in search of employment for survival.

In some instances, these industrialization in the pretext of modernization processes have led to social conflicts and unrest. A few years ago, in Kalahandi district, due to the Vedanta Mining Project, there were tensions and unrest among tribal communities because the constitutional provisions laid down to protect the communities under Panchayats Extension of Scheduled Areas (PESA), 1996 were allegedly violated, and the project was undertaken without consulting the Gram Sabha of tribal communities in Kalahandi, even though special provisions of protection exist under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution under Article 244 (1).

There were alleged violations of FRA and PESA rules and regulations, creating significant challenges to the desired protection of tribal forest land and other rights. The 63 tribal families, as the report suggests, had to wage a prolonged battle against the authorities for nearly three decades to receive individual forest land rights.

2. Economic Exploitation

Dependence on middlemen in forest-produce markets, exploitative wage labour, and limited access to banking or credit institutions keep many tribal communities in cycles of poverty. Market-driven pressures threaten traditional livelihoods such as shifting cultivation, foraging, and hunting. [17]

3. Educational Barriers

In tribal areas of Odisha, there is a persistence of low literacy rates due to a lack of mother-tongue education, distance from schools, and cultural mismatches between tribal communities and formal curricula. Consequently, dropout rates among tribal girls are very high. Odisha has implemented Multilingual Education (MLE) in 10 tribal languages across eight districts, covering 544 schools as of 2010, with plans to expand to additional schools. However, experts note that the initiative continues to face a shortage of teachers proficient in tribal languages. As tribal language expert Paramanand Patel observes, short-term training cannot substitute for native speakers or ensure the effective transmission of tribal languages to children.

4. Health and Nutrition Challenges

Malnutrition, anaemia, high infant mortality, and limited access to healthcare strongly affect socio-economic development among tribal populations in Odisha. The PVTGs, such as the Bonda, Didayi, and Dongria Kondh communities, are particularly vulnerable due to geographical isolation and inadequate health services. The 13 PVTGs in Odisha are concentrated in remote mountainous habitats, with their pace of change remaining slower and levels of development lower than those of other tribal communities.[18] The Odisha Tribal Family Health Survey (OTFHS), conducted a survey in July 2022, suggests that "the indigenous tribal communities in Odisha face persistent health disparities driven by socio-economic marginalisation, geographical isolation, and limited healthcare access".[19]

5. Erosion of Cultural Identity

Globalizations, urbanization, religious interventions, and mainstream influences contribute to the gradual dilution of tribal languages, rituals, and governance systems in Odisha. Furthermore, in contemporary times, younger generations are migrating to several places within India and abroad in search of employment, leaving their traditional homelands, resulting in the gradual breakdown of the traditional socio-cultural fabric and identity of tribal communities. Tribal language experts suggest that many languages spoken by PVTGs are now endangered or on the verge of extinction. Among Odisha's 13 PVTGs, the Lodhas, Hill Khadias, and Paudi Bhuyans have mostly shifted to Odia, while the languages of the Mankidias, Kutia Kondhs, Didayis, and Chuktia Bhunjias are considered vulnerable.

6. Governance Gaps

Although PESA provisions significantly empower the Gram Sabhas, actual empowerment remains limited due to politico-bureaucratic indifferences, lack of awareness among tribal communities, limited political decentralization, and conflicts of interest with mining and commercial enterprises. Odisha's delay in the operationalisation of PESA, has been attributed to perceived reluctance to fully empower the Gram Sabha regarding the management of minor forest produce, land acquisition, and natural resources. These governance issues reduce the effectiveness of constitutional safeguards for tribal communities in Odisha.

Opportunities and Future Prospects

The sustainability of Odisha's tribal communities and their identity depends on various developmental trajectories. There are several emerging opportunities, scopes, and prospects that could bring pragmatic change to tribal lives in Odisha. Keeping this in view, the suggested measures include, first, strengthening the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996;[20] protecting tribal languages and literature;[21] promoting sustainable livelihoods and skill development among tribal communities; encouraging digital inclusion and the adoption of best practices; digitally documenting tribal traditions; promoting rights-based and participatory development; and, last but not least, ensuring tribal participation in decision-making processes.

Concluding Remarks

The present study has sought to reinvent tribal identity and culture of Odisha from a historical perspective. Indigenous communities of Odisha have profoundly contributed to the region's cultural diversity, ecological balance for sustainability, and socio-economic developments. Their associations with Hindu religious customs, including the Jagannath cult, as well as their entanglement with the epic traditions of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, profess a long history of cultural discourse, adjustment, and syncretism. Elements of tribal cosmologies, rituals, beliefs, and socio-cultural practices have, at different historical moments, been integrated into or reinterpreted within broader Hindu cultural dimensions. These dichotomy underscore the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between tribal and mainstream urban traditions. Despite these contributions, tribal communities of Odisha very often received inadequate institutional attention for unified development. Moreover, the legal and constitutional safeguards framed and projected to protect their rights have not always been efficiently and holistically implemented. Contemporary processes of modernization and industrialization continue to produce contestations interrelated to displacement, economic marginalization, governance deficits, and cultural erosion. Consequently, tribal development requires an approach that simultaneously addresses material well-being, cultural continuity, autonomy, and dignity. Considering the tribal identity and culture as pride and heritage it has a great civilizational values and wonderful future prospect to foster Odisha's traditional knowledge system.

The effective and efficient implementation of legal provisions such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), alongside initiatives relating to education, healthcare, livelihoods, and community empowerment, remains essential. As Sunil Jena, Editor-in-Chief of *The Politics Odia*, observes, 'the concerns of tribal communities extend beyond environmental protection to the interconnected questions of *jal, jungle, and jamin* (water, forests, and land)', which constitute the material and cultural foundations of their lives. Remapping the resilient tribal communities, and their heritage is therefore not merely a constitutional accountability but also a broader social and cultural imperative. Meaningful inclusion requires moving beyond the symbolic celebration of tribal culture as "pride" or "heritage" and ensuring that tribal communities retain agency over their institutions, resources, cultural practices, and collective identities in a rapidly changing world. Such an approach is essential to ensure that development processes remain equitable, culturally responsive, and aligned with the rights and aspirations of tribal communities.

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- [3] Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs. "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)." Accessed September 13, 2026. <https://tribal.nic.in/>. The Government of India has identified 75 PVTGs nationally, of which 13 are in Odisha. *The Statesman* (May 10, 2025) confirms that 13 of Odisha's 62 tribal groups are classified as PVTGs. They are given protection due to geographical isolation and stagnant or declining population. These communities are Mankidia, Bonda, Chuktia Bhujia, Saora, Didayi, Paudi Bhuyan, Juang, Lanjia Saora, Kharia, Kutia Khond, Dongria, Lodha, and Khond.
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- [13] *Constitution of India*, Fifth Schedule, Article 244(1), Part B, Paragraph 5(2)(a)-(c). <http://www.liiofindia.org/in/legis/cen/const/2004/32.html#1>. This paragraph empowers the Governor to make regulations to "prohibit or restrict the transfer of land by or among members of the Scheduled Tribes in such area," "regulate the allotment of land to members of the Scheduled Tribes in such area," and "regulate the carrying on of business as money-lender by persons who lend money to members of the Scheduled Tribes in such area."
- [14] *The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006*, Act No. 2 of 2007, Chapter II, Section 3, accessed via India Code, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2070/1/200702.pdf>. Section 3 enumerates forest rights including: (a) the right to hold and live in forest land; (b) community rights such as nistar; (c) the right of ownership, access to collect, use, and dispose of minor forest produce; (e) habitat and habitation rights of primitive tribal groups and pre-agricultural communities; and (i) the right to protect, regenerate, conserve, or manage community forest resources.
- [15] *The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006*, Section 2(i). "Minor forest produce" is defined as "all non-timber forest produce of plant origin including bamboo, brush wood, stumps, cane, tussar, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, tendu or kendu leaves, medicinal plants and herbs, roots, tubers and the like."
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