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Union Budget must shift from welfare to rights-based public investment for Adivasi communities

Dignified local livelihoods are key to ending distress migration in tribal regions



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Summary

- *India's Union Budget must move beyond welfare schemes to a rights-based, climate-sensitive public investment framework for Adivasi communities*
- *Development in tribal regions should be led by Gram Sabhas, with effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act and PESA*
- *Sustainable local livelihoods are essential to reduce distress migration, strengthen social security and protect community cohesion*
- *Recognising Adivasi women and communities as equal stakeholders is critical to India's constitutional values and climate resilience*

India's tribal communities — over 104.5 million people, or 8.6 per cent of the population — remain among the most marginalised despite decades of welfare schemes and development promises. In states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Rajasthan and Odisha, tribal districts consistently record higher poverty levels than non-tribal areas, even as these regions supply land, forests and minerals for the country's growth. These communities have often been compelled to relinquish their lands for large-scale infrastructure projects, resulting in the erosion of their identity, livelihoods, and future prospects.

It is crucial to recognise the value these communities bring, particularly their eco-friendly lifestyles, which offer important insights into addressing climate-related challenges. For instance, during the 2018 drought in Sundergarh, Odisha, a visit to a remote tribal village revealed thriving vegetation and effective water-harvesting systems. Kiri village in Lahunipara block of Sundergarh district, inhabited by the Paudi Bhuyan community — a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) — has demonstrated remarkable resilience.

This observation underscores the importance of learning from traditional ecological knowledge, especially sustainable farming practices that rely on drought-resistant and indigenous seeds.

Adivasi communities, as stewards of India's cultural heritage and biodiversity, must be central to the nation's development narrative. Their lives are intricately linked to land, forests and water, yet they face growing threats from climate change, livelihood insecurity and displacement. Addressing these challenges requires more than welfare initiatives; it demands robust enforcement of constitutional rights, substantial public investment and the strengthening of Gram Sabha-based governance.

The Indian Constitution provides specific safeguards for Adivasi communities through legal frameworks such as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). These protections must be implemented effectively to secure rights and promote long-term well-being.

Last year, the Government of India increased the budget for tribal welfare by 47.79 per cent, from Rs 10,237.33 crore in 2024-25 to Rs 14,925.81 crore in 2025-26. The government is aggressively driving tribal development through initiatives such as PM-JANMAN for PVTGs and the Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan, aimed at saturating infrastructure. These efforts, highlighted in recent press releases, focus on healthcare (the Sickle Cell Mission), education (Eklavya Model Residential Schools) and digital empowerment. However, a more focused approach, along with tribal leadership, is essential to address the distinct concerns of diverse tribal communities.

The Union Budget is a critical instrument for translating rights into tangible outcomes and must ensure that development initiatives emerge from Gram Sabhas rather than following a top-down approach. Empowering Adivasi women, youth and children to take on leadership roles is vital. Adivasi women are not merely beneficiaries of development but are key contributors to the economy, environmental conservation and community cohesion. Recognising their contributions and incorporating their perspectives into budgetary priorities is imperative.

The budget must shift the development of Adivasi communities from a scheme-based model to a rights-based, inclusive and climate-sensitive public investment framework. This includes strengthening the capacity of Gram Sabhas, supporting local livelihoods, addressing migration-related challenges and recognising Adivasi communities as equal stakeholders in India's sustainable development.

To realise these objectives, it is essential to address persistent implementation gaps in the Forest Rights Act and PESA, both of which were enacted to secure land, forest and resource rights for Adivasi communities. A significant number of individual and community forest rights claims remain unresolved, and Gram Sabhas are often excluded from decision-making processes.

As reported by States and Union Territories, cumulatively up to October 31, 2025, a total of 51,57,332 claims were filed at the Gram Sabha level — comprising 49,44,101 individual claims and 2,13,231 community claims. Of these, 25,14,774 titles (48.76 per cent) have been distributed, including 23,92,545 individual titles and 1,22,229 community titles. A total of 18,73,738 claims (36.33 per cent) have been rejected, while 7,68,820 claims remain pending.

The Union Budget should allocate a dedicated national budget for the effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act, covering claim facilitation, appeals and legal assistance. Financial and technical support must also be extended to Gram Sabhas that have secured Community Forest Resource rights, enabling them to manage forests, collect minor forest produce and undertake conservation and value-addition activities.

PESA empowers Gram Sabhas by providing direct financial resources, allowing them to take independent decisions on land acquisition, mining and development projects. Adivasi communities must be recognised not merely as beneficiaries of these resources, but as rightful owners and primary decision-makers in their management.

In tribal regions, the absence of sustainable and dignified livelihood opportunities forces many families into seasonal and circular migration, resulting in labour exploitation, family separation and adverse impacts on children's education. The budget should prioritise the creation of Adivasi livelihood clusters centred on agriculture, forest produce, animal husbandry, fisheries and handicrafts. Skill development programmes must be aligned with local economies rather than urban-centric models. Employment should be viewed not only as a source of income, but also as a key strategy to reduce distress migration and strengthen social security.

Migration has become a necessity for many Adivasi communities, who frequently encounter unsafe working conditions, wage theft, occupational accidents and lack of social protection at destination sites. The budget should initiate a National Adivasi Migration Support Programme, with support and counselling centres at both source and destination locations. Adequate financial allocations are also required to ensure portability of essential services such as the Public Distribution System, healthcare, maternity benefits and pensions. A special fund should be established to provide accident, death and income-loss insurance for migrant Adivasi workers.

Adivasi women play a central role in forest-based livelihoods, agriculture, animal husbandry and caregiving, yet their work remains largely unrecognised and poorly

compensated, leaving them without adequate income or social security. Addressing these inequities is essential for advancing gender justice and community empowerment.

The budget must mandate gender budgeting within Tribal Sub-Plans, ensuring that women's roles in forest management, agriculture and caregiving are integrated into income-generating initiatives. It should also expand maternity benefits, nutrition support and community-based childcare services. Dedicated funding for leadership development among Adivasi women, self-help groups and community organisations is critical to building resilience and agency.

In the areas of health, nutrition and education, the budget must confront stark disparities in tribal regions, where access to basic services remains limited. Priorities should include mobile health units and community health workers for remote areas, alongside culturally sensitive nutrition programmes to address malnutrition and anaemia. Bridging education initiatives and safe residential facilities for children from migrant Adivasi families are also essential to improving educational outcomes.

Adivasi communities, who have historically protected land, forests and water, are disproportionately affected by climate change. They must be recognised as partners in developing climate solutions rather than as passive victims. The budget should establish a climate-resilient livelihood fund for tribal areas, introduce payments for ecosystem services to incentivise conservation, and support climate adaptation plans led by Gram Sabhas.

Upholding Adivasi justice is essential to reinforcing constitutional values, fostering social harmony and securing a climate-resilient future. The Union Budget must decisively move away from a welfare-oriented approach towards a rights-based public investment strategy, enabling Adivasi communities to exercise control over their resources, livelihoods and futures. The development of tribal communities is not only vital for the nation's progress but also for preserving India's rich cultural diversity and ecological heritage.

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