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*Social Vision*, Volume: 10 Issue: 3  
October-December, 2023, Pages: 21-33  
ISSN 2349-0519  
RNI: APENG/2014/56403  
General Impact Factor (2017): 2.3222  
Cosmos Impact Factor (2018): 3.631

## Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India: Issues of Survival and Development

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### ABSTRACT

*Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are a sub-classification from the broader class called scheduled tribes. Among the 750 aboriginal tribes 10%, i.e. 75 are identified as PVTGs who are primitives among the primitives, backward among the backward, most neglected, and disadvantaged groups. High concentrations of PVTGs are found in Odisha (13) followed by 12 in Andhra Pradesh and 09 in Bihar including Jharkhand. Although the criteria-based identification process is criticized by some scholars as inadequate it helps the Government to launch specific programmes like the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Modified Area Development Agency (MADA), Micro projects, and Dispersed Tribal Development Programme (DTDP) for their welfare. Like the tribals, they face numerous challenges. The need of the time is to relocate them and to launch tribe and area-wise on-the-spot programs. They need at the same time to preserve their separate identity and cultures. The present paper is an attempt to study the method of identification of the PVTGs across the country, their ongoing conditions, and their vulnerability. The author has taken into consideration some of the selected case studies to emphasize tribal discontent across the country. A major part of the information for this present paper is collected from secondary sources.*

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, ITDP, MADA, PVTGs, Vulnerability

**Cite this Article:** Kadambini, D. & Asima, S. (2024). Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India: Issues of Survival and Development, *Social Vision*, 10 (3), pp: 21-33

**Introduction**

India is one of the most ancient civilizations in the world and is a chosen habitat for innumerable aboriginal groups either by birth or migration. Some of the groups who tried hard to change with time using brains and sharp observation of natural change secured a better life for themselves. Later they built settlements with social and cultural practices known to the world as advanced and civilised. But the people who remained content with what they had and what they were in the forest environment, loving nature and enjoying absolute liberty became static and could not move forward earning an inferior identity for themselves. Later we the awakened began to name them tribes, a word deliberately coined by the colonialists to provide them a sub-ordinate status. They were treated as a race without any civic sense, culture, education or scientific temperaments. Later research in the late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved the conventional theory wrong and the concept of a welfare state made the government take a serious relook at uplifting them with certain reservations.

Considering the uneven socio-economic developmental plurality inside the country, the Government of India as a welfare state selected and categorized certain communities as tribes to work out its constitutional obligations. These communities are called scheduled tribes and the government initiated some economic and infrastructural programs for their welfare, development, and social security.

Despite these provisions and developmental investments, certain groups are found to be unaffected and the common programs did not provide any desired result. It was found that their population was either stagnant or showed a downward trend due to a high mortality rate. To ensure development and upgrade their socio-economic status the government felt the need to identify these poorest tribal groups among the Scheduled tribe communities based on certain fixed criteria. Thus, 75 groups among the Scheduled tribe communities have been identified in 17 States and one Union Territory (census, 2011) those tribes were called as PVTGs in 2006.

**Defining the PVTGs**

PVTGs stand for particularly vulnerable tribal groups. The word 'Primitive Tribal Groups' was renamed as 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups' in 2006 by The Government of India (Abraham, 2023). Tribals in general are

vulnerable to life, liberty, and property but those who are the most insecure, and permeable, are called the PVTGs. Among the numerous primitive communities living in India, some of them are more antique, archaic, isolated, backward, disadvantaged, underprivileged, and insecure (Ota & Mohanty, 2018). They are the most disadvantaged and placed at the lowest ladder of development. Being most backward they are subject to all sorts of exploitation and harassment by their civilized neighbours. They are immune to death, diseases, starvation, and natural calamities.

They live in inaccessible areas amidst impenetrable hostile terrain without everything except pure oxygen. The enactment of forest acts and environmental protection legislations further accelerated their woes resulting in the loss of liberty and property.

### **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India: Their Evolution**

The imperial and colonial schools of writers have coined the word 'Tribe' which carries a different meaning that was referred to in the history of Greek administration. Tribes in its language refer to a group of self-administered groups having the power to vote or elect their administrator for self-governance. The imperial school of writers misused the word for a class of people who were dark in skin, backward, primitive, and living in isolation without any growth or development. In Indian culture, these types of people are called Adivasis/Janajatis, etc. In Sanskrit, their kingdoms were referred to as Atabik states (Border States). They ruled independently over their states accepting the suzerainty of the Indian emperors.

After independence, our Constitution accepted the word 'Tribe' and fixed certain criteria to identify them. Clause (1) of Article 342 of our Constitution deals with the provision of selecting the tribes through notification by the president of India. Some of the characteristics of identification and demarcation are as follows<sup>2</sup>:

- Primitive traits
- Distinctive culture
- Geographical isolation
- Shyness in contact with outsiders and backwardness

PVTGs are referred to as the most unsecured people or clans who still follow extremely old means of practices in every sphere of life. From

agriculture to health and from education to faith age-old traditions are followed. Some of the practices like child marriage, faith in village quacks for treatment, and cultivating only paddy as a means of life sustenance are some of the factors chiefly responsible for the high mortality rate among them. The child mortality rate amongst them is alarming. It is a matter of great concern to all that if the government does not act smart they may face total extinction from the earth.

After independence two successive census reports revealed the plight of some of the tribal communities. The government response was prompt. It appointed a commission under the chairmanship of U.N Dhebar (1960-61) to study the status of tribals. The commission's report was supported by various studies and research groups. The commission in its study found the prevalence of inequalities among the tribal communities. It suggested recognition and identification of this category of tribes who were most backward, primitive, and whose numbers were declining. Following the report of the commission government created a sub-category of tribal groups within the broad category of who were in the lowest ebb of development. Accordingly, 52 different types of communities were identified as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG).

After the Sixth five-year plan, the Government identified another 20 tribal groups of similar categories and the number rose to 72. The number reached to 74 and 75 in the Seventh and Eighth five-year plans respectively. No PTG has been identified based on figures from 1991 census (Pradhan Krishna Chandra, 2017). In 2006, this category was renamed as PVTG. Before their identification, the Government of India had already run some welfare schemes, programmes like ITDA, MADA, Micro projects, Cluster pockets, etc. Those tribal groups living in scattered villages and sub-urban areas do not find a place in these schemes. They were covered under Dispersed Tribal Development Projects (DTDP) (Tara Dutt, 2015)

### **Features of the PVTGs in India**

PVTGs are the most backward among the tribal communities. They live in isolation away from the mainstream in inaccessible areas in small groups. Culturally they form a homogeneous unit and maintain a very unique and distinct lifestyle. They have inherited a long past cultural heritage, social tradition, and lifestyle. Economically they are very poor and have a simple

subsistence-oriented economy. Their social organization is led by the village head which is hereditary and a non-kinship organization known as a youth dormitory meant for the marriage proposal of the youth and other political and judicial organizations like tribal council, village headsman, and village priest. They are very religious and worship many gods and goddesses in the form of nature. They have the belief that all their sufferings are caused due to the curse of the spirits and go to the village quack for treatment. They communicate with their unwritten languages and scripts. They do not tolerate outside interference or penetration in any form of their land, liberty, and society. Despite abject poverty, they are peace-loving people who do not have a vision for the future. They are very vulnerable to exploitation and prone to death and diseases (Ota & Mohanty, 2022).

### **Status of PVTGs in India**

PVTGs in India come within the broad category of tribals but do not come under Constitutional provisions. They are identified by the central Ministry of Tribal Affairs based on the recommendations fixed by the state governments and Union territories. The criteria to identify the PVTGs are fixed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Following the fixed criteria of identification 75 of the 750 tribal groups are found to be covered under the PVTG category. These more vulnerable groups are scattered over 17 states and a union territory. As per the census report 2011, PVTGs are found all over the six geographical regions of India; out of all 17 states, some of the states have high concentrations of PVTGs. The highest numbers are settled in Odisha which is thirteen.

**Table: 1**

### **The distribution of PVTGs all across the states and Union Territories in India**

Name of the States/Union Territories	No. of PVTGs residing	Name of the PVTGs
Andhra Pradesh	12	Bodo Gadaba, Bodoporoja, Chenchu, Dongria Khond, Gutob Gadaba, Khond poroja, Kolam, Kondareddis, Konda Savaras, Kutia Khond, Parengi poroja, Thoti
Bihar (including Jharkhand)	09	Asurs, Birhor, Birija, Hillkharia, Korwas, MalPaharia, Parh aiyas, Sauriapaharia, Savar

Gujarat	05	Kathodi, Kotwalia, Padhar, Siddi, Kolgha
Karnataka	02	Jenu Kuruba, Koraga
Kerala	05	Cholanaikayan, Kadar, Kattunayanka, Kurumbas, Koraga
Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh)	07	Abujh Marias, Baigas, Bharias, Hill Korbas, Kamars, Saharias, Birhor
Maharashtra	03	Katkaria, Kolam, Maria Gond
Manipur	01	Marram Nagas
Odisha	13	Birhor, Bonda, Didayi, Juanga, Hillkharia, Kutia Kondha, Lanjiasaura, Loadhas, Mankidia, Paudi Bhuyan, Saura, Chuktia Bhunjia, Kutiakondh
Rajasthan	01	Seharia
Tamilnadu	06	Kattu, Nayakans, Kotas, Kurumbas, Paniyans, Todas
Tripura	01	Reanga
Uttar Pradesh (including Uttarakhand)	02	Buxas, Rajis
West Bengal	03	Birhor, Lodhas, Totos
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	05	Great Andamanese, Jarwas, Onges, Sentinelese, Shom Pens

**Sources:** Ministry of Tribal Affairs, GOI

Among the 75 listed PVTGs, the highest numbers are found in Odisha as shown in the above table. All 04 tribal groups in Andaman and one in the Nicobar Islands are recognized as PVTG. As studies reveal the Saharia people of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are recognised as the largest among the PVTGs. And the Sentinelese and Andamanese are the smallest population size among the PVTGs.

### **Reasons for Identification of PVTGs in India**

After independence, the govt of India opened a separate ministry at the center known as the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to expedite development activities among the tribals. After 20 years it was realized that despite all efforts some of the tribal groups remained outside of the broad initiatives and remained in fragile living conditions without being affected by tribal

development activities. A major part of the tribal developmental funds was being utilized by assertive tribal groups. This forced the govt. of India to identify and categorize the group of tribals who remained outside the previews of all sorts of upliftment programs. This class of tribal groups remained as PVTGs. PVTGs are a sub-stratum within the tribal groups. They are the poorest of the poor who are the most vulnerable to death, hunger, illiteracy, and exploitation at the hands of others. Most of the PVTGs live in small groups in inaccessible and remote regimes prefer isolation and stay sigh in communicating with outsiders. These tribal communities live in about 15% of the country's areas in various ecological and geo-climatic conditions ranging from plains to forests, hills, and inaccessible areas. They are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. While some tribal communities have adopted a mainstream way of life at one end of the spectrum, there are 75 particularly vulnerable tribal groups, who are characterized by (Tara Dutt, 2015)-

- a) A pre-agriculture level of technology, (b) a stagnant or declining population (c)Extremely low literacy, and (d) A subsistence level of economy

It forced the central government to provide them a special treatment by raising funds meant for them only and undertaking developmental projects in the regions where they live. The issue was prioritized and the administration acted smartly to protect them from further reduction in their numbers.

PVTGs stand for particularly vulnerable tribal groups. The causes of their vulnerability are self-imposed as well as civilizational. Their strict adherence to land, lifestyle, culture, and health practices, along with outside interference and encroachment, has made them more susceptible to suffering and death. Once suppressed and oppressed under the colonial government, they imposed many rigorous restrictions to cultivate the land, collect forest produce, and fire woods to sustain their life.

### **Threats and Challenges before the PVTGs in India**

Here are the major challenges and threats before the PVTGs in India.

#### **➤ Constitutional Insecurities and unequal treatment**

It is found that some of the PVTGs are not listed in Schedule 5 of the constitution and do not come under “special protection” purview. Again, it

is seen that a particular group in some blocks in a district receives all the benefits while the same race is deprived of all the benefits in the adjacent block. No micro-project work is launched in that block as they are less in number. A PVTG found in Odisha benefitted under the micro-project while other tribals in that block are deprived of all the facilities and benefits, although they deserve it.

➤ **Usurpation of Land rights**

Tribals since the beginning of their settlement cultivate lands, near their habitat; and collect forest products for their sustenance. This inherited claim over their land was considered their right over the land without pattas or records. But modern-day man-made issues like climate change, global warming, depletion, and shortage of drinking water stood as a great challenge before the entire human civilization that forced the government to declare forests as reserved and protected land. Tribal activities within the forests and outside were forbidden. This conservation act of the government restricted the earning activities of the tribals, especially the PVTGs. They are forced to be alienated from the forest and cultivable lands. Slogans like saving wildlife, trees, tigers, save elephants later became decrees. In 2009, 245 Baiga families were forced out of their land when Achanakmar Tiger Reserve Park was declared. Similarly, Mankidias a PVTG tribe in Odisha were denied habitation inside the Simlipal jungle when the latter was declared as a tiger reserve park. Despite the Forest Rights Act (2006) in action, the habitat right of the PVTGs is jeopardized in many cases.

➤ **The problem of cultural invasion from outside**

Industrialization, mining, and eco-tourism are some of the factors that brought and attracted outsiders to tribal areas. This amalgamation of tribal and non-tribal culture and the outward living style of the non-tribals attracted the attention of the tribals and the strong bond linkage to own cultural values started to decline. The old generation of tribal people could not digest the penetration of globalized mainstream culture upon them and tried further seclusion. The further rapid inflow of non-tribals to the tribal region is also brought with through civilizational hazards like contagious diseases, economic and psychological exploitation, and the softening of traditional values, practices, and beliefs. For instance, syphilis among the Jarawa tribe was affected by COVID-19 and spread over the entire Andaman Nicobar Island. The pressure of foreigners and outsiders and their

contact with foreign pathogens and diseases is a direct threat to their survival. As a result, they can be completely wiped out. The industrial contractors engaged the local tribals in a very low wage than the actual. Money lenders and estate holders introduced the goti-system and bonded labor practices in that region. These practices are very common among the Juangs in Odisha.

➤ **Illiteracy**

The major cause of poverty, backwardness, and high mortality rates among the tribes is the lack of education. Lack of education makes them stay confined within their traditional system of knowledge and belief. They are not aware of the modern system of treatment and a broader approach to the outside world. Despite all governmental efforts illiteracy rate among them is confined to 3-4% and particularly among women folk is very low. This is a great concern among the planners on how to encompass them within the knowledge system so that they will be able to take care of their health, reduce breeding, say no to child marriage, complain against low wages, and get the opportunity to earn.

➤ **Health Issues**

The innocent tribals are more prone and susceptible to life-threatening diseases. The growth rate among the PVTGs is very marginal due to the high infant and maternity mortality rate. Various health indicators like lack of access to nutritious and protein foods, sanitation, cleanliness, pure drinking water, poor social and economic conditions, lack of awareness and consciousness, lack of education, and traditional methods of treatment are some of the reasons for the high mortality rate among the tribals. Due to the absence of these facilities and lack of consciousness, the tribals suffer from respiratory problems, malaria, anemia, gastrointestinal disorders, skin disease, micronutrient deficiency, etc. For example, 06 children among the Juang tribes in the Sukinda region of Odisha died in 2016 and it continues despite all efforts from the government. Similarly, tribals of the Himalayan region suffer from Goitre, a disease caused by poor intake of iodine in food.

➤ **Inadequacy of data**

The method of identifying PVTGs is based on census reports, research articles, and expert opinions only. No baseline survey is made and no ground zero report is collected through spot visits and inquiries. The

absence of a complete baseline survey which does not cover all the families, groups, their status, economic pursuits, and socio-economic planning, it is difficult for the planners to launch area-based developmental programs targeting a group or area. Also, it is apprehended that some groups of tribals might have been excluded or some groups have found double entry in another name at a different area. The limited criteria fixed for identifying the PVTGs are not sufficient enough for inclusion in the list. This criterion-based identification process varies from state to state. As the PVTGs are selected by the Ministry of Home Affairs, it does not fulfill the pre-conditions framed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. So, in the absence of a uniform and unitary system of selection data seems to be inadequate by some experts.

➤ **Issues related to sustenance of life and earning opportunities**

In India forest is the home for most of the tribes. Forests provide sustenance to the tribals and support life to grow in the form of minor forest produce, whether grazing grounds or land for cultivation. This mutual relationship between tribals and forests is symbiotic and beneficial to both. The food basket of the tribal provides amla, imli, gum, cane, bamboo, firewood, neem oil, jhuna, honey, Sala Patra (for Khali/thali making), fruits and berries, etc. Mainly they are a community that does not save for the future. They live in the present day and collect the amount for their daily sustenance. During harvest season they collect more and sell to the middle man at a very low price. They cultivate the small patches of land in the foothills of the mountains and reap paddy.

However, with the enactment of forest laws and conservation policies, the tribals were forbidden to enter into the forest to collect the NTFP and to cultivate the hereditary acquired agricultural lands. Their earning opportunities were forcefully stopped by law. The MGNREGA program does not operate in these belts. To live life, they are heavily dependent on the rice given under the PDs system. So, their life is in danger and they live in depression without work and earning opportunities. The forest birds are now caged.

**Selected Case studies on PVTGs**

The author has identified some of the case studies on the PVTGs from secondary data sources.

Forest Conservation Act, forest life conservation acts, and environment protection acts made by the government stood as a challenge before the forest dwellers and developed several tribal issues that remained unsolved. Lack of coordination among various ministries at the center and the passing of contradictory laws without considering the lives and safety of the tribals further precipitated the issues. Coupled with national aspiration for economic growth by establishing heavy industries after globalization increased the tribals' woes more. Some of the issues developed in India after the enactment of the above three types of acts are as follows.

- Vedanta Alumina Company got clearance from all quarters to establish its aluminum industry at Lanjigarh and permission was granted to do mining activities in Niyamgiri -Gandhamardan hills. The Dongoria Kandha the largest tribes of Odisha protested against the Government's decision. The case went to the apex court. After decades long fighting the apex court in its verdict passed the right to the Dongoria kandha to decide in its Pall Sabha. It was a mountainous decision. People have the right to decide for themselves. The project was stopped. The Kandha got everything they desired. Gandhamardan Mountain was declared a “protected and preserved” hill.
- The Mankidias, a PVTG of Odisha lived inside the Simlipal forest for a long past. Simlipal Forest was declared a tiger reserve forest and the Mankidias were driven out of their habitat despite the scheduled tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwelling and recognition of the Forest Rights Act of 2006.
- The declining population growth rate among the PVTGs is high. To save them and to increase their population government of India forbade them to use contraceptives till 2018. A PIL was filed in the high court of Chhattisgarh against this decision. The court ordered in favor of the PIL and the PVTG Baigas were conferred with their right to privacy and the use of contraceptives.
- The great Andamanese tribe, Onge caught COVID-19, a contagious disease using outside contact although the tribes have their right to be left undisturbed still outsiders trespassed into that region and some of the poor tribals left their lives.

- Juangas, a PVTG tribe are only found in Odisha in the districts of Kendujhar, Jajpur, and Dhenkanal district. Some of the Juang families lived in an inaccessible region in the Sukinda block. In 2016 six children were reported to be dead due to malnutrition and ill-health, and it became a national issue. Central and state government administration made all efforts to connect the area with all available facilities, but still, the Juang live in hunger, malnutrition, and child death a repeated occurrence there.

### **Conclusion**

Despite all developmental policy initiatives, the PVTGs lag far behind from other non-PVTG tribes. It demands introspection and a relook at the running of developmental programs. The state needs to launch tribe-wise upliftment schemes that must ensure their right to land and habitat. It must be a top priority not to displace and destabilize their seclusion. In this regard, Pandit Nehru's policy regarding tribal development respecting their status, identity, occupation, and culture should and must be followed in letter and spirit while formulating PVTG welfare schemes at the center or state levels. There should be no imposition rather allow them to grow and develop on their own to march at the same pace as the national mainstream. The role of the administration is to create an atmosphere of confidence where the PVTGs will grow and change themselves out of their effort to make choices for their life, livelihoods, and paths for growth and sustenance. Policies should be made to bring back their confidence in the Government. Otherwise, some of them will face extinction and be a part of history.

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