



Strategies and Frameworks for the Socio-economic advancement of Scheduled Tribes in India: A Comprehensive Analysis with Special Reference to Assam

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ABSTRACT

India's indigenous demographic, officially categorized as Scheduled Tribes (STs), comprises approximately 10.45 crore individuals, representing 8.6% of the nation's population. These communities have historically navigated a landscape of systemic marginalization, economic exclusion, and geographic isolation. This paper evaluates the multi-layered strategies employed by the Indian state to foster tribal development, focusing on the evolution of ideological approaches from colonial isolationism to post-independence integration (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). It further examines the constitutional and legislative protections afforded to STs, the role of Five-Year Plans, and the unique administrative mechanisms in Assam, such as the Sixth Schedule and various Statutory Autonomous Councils. The study concludes that while the institutional architecture is robust, implementation challenges persist, necessitating a more participatory and culturally grounded developmental model.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribes, Statutory Autonomous Status Councils, Fifth&Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India

Introduction: Defining the Tribal Identity in the Indian Context

The term “tribe” is a social construct with deep historical and colonial roots. Etymologically, it originates from the Latin *tribus*, which referred to administrative divisions in early Roman society.

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However, its modern academic application emerged during the era of European expansion, where it was often used by colonizers to label non-Western societies as “primitive” or “pre-modern” (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). In the 19th century, scholars such as Lewis Henry Morgan and Emile Durkheim utilized the concept to build evolutionary theories of social organization, focusing on kinship ties and communal governance.

In contemporary India, the definition of a “tribe” remains a subject of academic and legal debate. Dube and other sociologists have noted that the term has been applied to various social categories that do not always share identical characteristics (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). Legally, the Constitution of India identifies these groups as “Scheduled Tribes” (STs) under Article 342. This classification recognizes their distinct cultural heritage, unique religious practices, and historical isolation from the mainstream caste-based social hierarchy. According to the 2011 Census, India is home to over 700 tribal groups, predominantly residing in the central “tribal belt” and the northeastern states. Despite significant constitutional protections, these groups remain among the most vulnerable, facing high rates of poverty, land alienation, and limited access to healthcare and education.

Theoretical and Ideological Approaches to Tribal Governance

Since independence, India’s tribal policy has been shaped by three major philosophical schools of thought. These ideologies represent a transition from paternalistic colonial management to a rights-based democratic framework (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

The Isolation Approach

The isolationist strategy, often associated with the British colonial administration and anthropologist Verrier Elwin, argued for the complete protection of tribal communities from external cultural and economic interference. In his early work, *The Baiga* (1939), Elwin suggested that tribal groups should be allowed to live in “National Parks” where their traditional ways of life could remain undisturbed by “civilization” (Goswami & Phukan, 2026). He categorized tribes based on their level of external contact, arguing that the most “pristine” groups were those shielded by geographic barriers. A modern application of this approach is seen



in the North Sentinel Island of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, where the law strictly prohibits contact with the indigenous Sentinelese to ensure their survival and autonomy.

The Assimilation Approach

In stark contrast, the assimilationist perspective, led by sociologist G.S. Ghurye, posited that tribes were not a separate social entity but were “backward Hindus.” In his 1959 work, *The Scheduled Tribes*, Ghurye argued that the solution to tribal marginalization was their total integration into the Hindu social order (Goswami & Phukan, 2026). He viewed tribal languages and customs as stages in a transition toward mainstream Indo-Aryan culture. This approach has been criticized for potentially erasing indigenous identities and ignoring the unique linguistic and social structures of tribal life.

The Integration Approach: Nehru’s Tribal Panchsheel

The post-independence government, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, sought a “middle path” through the Integration Approach. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru rejected both the “museum specimen” view of isolationism and the “absorptive” view of assimilation (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). He introduced the Tribal Panchsheel (Five Principles): Which were

1. Tribes should develop according to their own genius, without external imposition.
2. Land and forest rights must be respected.
3. Local tribal personnel should be trained for administration.
4. Governance should work through traditional institutions.
5. Success should be measured by human development, not just financial expenditure.

Through these principles Nehru also focuses on containing their identity and development.

The Constitutional Architecture of Protection

The Constitution of India serves as the primary safeguard against the exploitation of STs, combining fundamental rights with special administrative provisions. These are-



Fundamental Rights and Equality

Scheduled Tribes are entitled to all rights under Part III of the Constitution. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, while Article 15(4) empowers the State to make special provisions for the advancement of STs. Furthermore, Article 23 prohibits forced labor (begar) and human trafficking, which have historically plagued tribal regions. Cultural and linguistic rights are specifically protected under Articles 29 and 30, ensuring that tribal communities can preserve their distinct heritage (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

Administrative Schedules: Fifth and Sixth

A critical feature of Indian federalism is the differentiation between Scheduled Areas.

- The Fifth Schedule (Article 244(1)): Operates in ten states (including Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat). It mandates the creation of Tribes Advisory Councils (TACs) and gives the Governor the power to override certain laws that might harm tribal interests.

- The Sixth Schedule (Article 244(2)): Specifically applies to the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. It provides for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which possess legislative, judicial, and executive powers over land, forests, and local customs (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

Major Legislative Instruments for Empowerment

To operationalize constitutional guarantees, the Indian Parliament has enacted several landmark laws:

- The Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989): This Act was a direct response to the systemic violence and social exclusion faced by STs. It criminalizes activities such as the forced dispossession of tribal land, social boycotts, and economic exploitation.

- The Forest Rights Act (2006): Formally known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, this legislation sought to correct "historical injustices" by recognizing the



legal right of tribal communities to live on and manage forest lands they have inhabited for generations (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

- The PESA Act (1996): The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act ensures that tribal communities have self-governance via the Gram Sabha. It mandates that no land acquisition or mining can occur in tribal areas without the consent of the village assembly.

The Evolution of Economic Planning: Five-Year Plan Interventions

Tribal development has been a core component of India's economic planning since 1951.

- Early Plans (1st to 3rd): Focused on "Community Development Blocks" and "Special Multi-Purpose Tribal Blocks." These were largely infrastructure-oriented, focusing on roads and irrigation.

- The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) Strategy (5th Plan): Introduced in 1974, the TSP was a revolutionary shift. It required all central and state departments to allocate a percentage of their budget proportional to the tribal population (Goswami & Phukan, 2026). The goal was to bridge the economic gap between STs and the national average.

- Modern Focus (8th Plan onwards): The emphasis shifted toward human capital development education, health, and skill-building. The 9th Plan specifically empowered Panchayati Raj institutions to take control of tribal development at the grassroots level.

Institutional Oversight: The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST)

Established under Article 338-A via the 89th Constitutional Amendment in 2003, the NCST is a high-level body dedicated to monitoring tribal welfare. The Commission has the power of a civil court to investigate complaints regarding the violation of tribal rights (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). It serves as a bridge between the tribal communities and the President of India, submitting annual reports on the state of tribal governance and recommending policy shifts to the Union government.



Tribal Development Strategies in Assam: A Detailed Case Study

Assam presents a unique model of tribal governance characterized by a "multi-tier" autonomous structure.

Protection of Land: Tribal Belts and Blocks

Land alienation has been a primary concern in Assam due to historical migration patterns. Under Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (1886), as amended in 1947, the state created "Protected Belts and Blocks" (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). In these areas, land cannot be sold or transferred to non-tribal individuals, a measure designed to prevent the displacement of indigenous farmers by immigrant populations.

The Sixth Schedule Councils

In the hill areas of Assam, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC) exercise extensive power. Additionally, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) represents a sophisticated form of autonomy, covering four districts and managing a wide range of administrative subjects (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

Statutory Councils for Plains Tribes

Recognizing that many tribes live in the plains and are not covered by the Sixth Schedule, the Assam government has established several Statutory Autonomous Councils through state legislation. These include:

- a) Mishing Autonomous Council: Covering parts of upper Assam.
- b) Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council: Predominantly in Goalpara and Kamrup.
- c) Tiwa Autonomous Council: Focusing on the Morigaon and Nagaon regions.
- d) Sonowal Kachari and Deori Councils: Addressing the specific needs of these upper Assam communities.
- e) Matak Autonomous Council (2020): The newest addition, focusing on the Matak people (Goswami & Phukan, 2026).



Contemporary Initiatives: Dharti Aaba Abhiyan

The Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan is a recent national mission that utilizes a “whole-of-government” convergence model. In Assam, this mission focuses on ensuring that every tribal-majority village has 100% coverage in pucca housing (PMAY-G), piped water (Jal Jeevan), and electricity. It also targets the reduction of IMR/MMR and the promotion of tribal entrepreneurship through Van-Dhan Vikas Kendras (Goswami & Phukan, 2026).

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the existence of a layered governance model, several obstacles impede the progress of tribal communities in Assam and India at large. Encroachment on tribal lands persists despite the “Belt and Block” regulations. Furthermore, there is often a lack of administrative capacity at the local council level, leading to the underutilization of development funds.

To move forward, tribal development must transition from a “top-down” service delivery model to a “bottom-up” participatory model. Strengthening the Gram Sabhas under PESA and ensuring the effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act are critical steps. In Assam, there is a need for better coordination between the various Autonomous Councils and the state government to ensure that developmental benefits reach the most remote “satellite” villages (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

Conclusion

The trajectory of Scheduled Tribe development in India is a testament to the nation’s commitment to pluralism and social justice. From the foundational principles of Nehru’s Panchsheel to the modern digital-driven missions like the Dharti Aaba Abhiyan, the Indian state has continuously evolved its strategies.

In Assam, the unique combination of Sixth Schedule protections and state-level autonomous councils provides a template for managing ethnic diversity and tribal aspirations. However, the ultimate success of these measures depends on protecting tribal land rights, respecting indigenous



knowledge, and ensuring that development does not come at the cost of cultural identity (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

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