

Tribal Development in India: Revisiting the Journey from Isolation to Market Citizenship in a Climate-Constrained Democracy

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Abstract: *This paper examines the evolution of tribal development in India through an integrated anthropological and policy perspective. It traces the trajectory from colonial-era isolation and post-independence welfare approaches to contemporary frameworks centred on rights-based governance and market participation. Drawing on key legislative instruments such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (1996) and the Forest Rights Act (2006), the study highlights the persistent gap between progressive policy intent and uneven implementation, particularly in relation to decentralised governance and community agency. The paper further analyses the emerging phase of “market citizenship,” where tribal communities are increasingly integrated into value chains, digital platforms, and enterprise-led livelihood systems. While these transitions offer new economic opportunities, they also introduce risks related to unequal market access and institutional fragility. A central contribution of the paper lies in examining the intersection of climate change and extractive economies in tribal regions, especially mining-affected areas. It argues that these regions face layered vulnerabilities arising from ecological degradation, climate variability, and livelihood disruption. The paper concludes that the future of tribal development in India depends on strengthening local governance institutions, integrating indigenous knowledge systems, and aligning economic transformation with ecological sustainability.*

Keywords: Tribal Development, Market Citizenship, PESA, Forest Rights Act, Climate Change, Indigenous Knowledge, Mining Regions, Decentralised Governance

1. Introduction: Reframing the Tribal Question

The question of tribal development in India has never been a simple matter of extending state services or correcting economic disadvantage. It is, in a deeper sense, about the encounter between two fundamentally different ways of organising life—one rooted in land, forest, kinship, and community, and the other in the institutional logic of the modern state, with its emphasis on administration, markets, infrastructure, and measurable outcomes. To view tribal communities merely as “beneficiaries” of development is to miss the essence of this encounter. What is at stake is not only economic transformation but the reconfiguration of entire lifeworld.

Scheduled Tribes today constitute over 8.6 percent of India’s population, spread across some of the country’s most ecologically significant yet historically underserved regions. These include forested belts, hilly terrains, mineral-rich districts, and borderland geographies. Many of these regions overlap with what are now identified as aspirational districts or climate-vulnerable zones. The coincidence is not accidental. Tribal marginalisation has historically been tied to both ecological location and political economy.

For decades, the discourse on tribal development has been framed in terms of deficits—low literacy, poor health indicators, weak infrastructure, and limited access to markets. While these realities are undeniable, they tell only part of the story. The marginalisation of tribal communities has been closely tied to the restructuring of their relationship with land

and forests under state control. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to “bring development” to tribal areas but to reconcile development with dignity, ecological sustainability, and cultural continuity.

This paper argues that tribal development in India is best understood not as a linear progression but as a layered transformation across four broad phases: colonial isolation, post-independence integration, rights-based legislative reform, and the emerging phase of market citizenship. Each phase has expanded the scope of engagement between the state and tribal communities, yet each has also introduced new tensions—between protection and extraction, rights and implementation, inclusion and assimilation, and most recently, between market participation and cultural autonomy.

2. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the historical evolution of tribal development in India.
- 2) To analyse the implementation gaps in key legislative frameworks such as PESA and FRA.
- 3) To understand the emerging concept of market citizenship among tribal communities.
- 4) To explore the intersection of climate change, extractive economies, and tribal livelihoods.
- 5) To identify pathways for strengthening community-led and sustainable development.

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3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and case-based interpretations. The analysis integrates anthropological insights with policy evaluation to examine institutional frameworks, implementation dynamics, and emerging development paradigms in tribal regions of India.

4. Colonial Foundations: Isolation, Extraction, and the Administrative Gaze

The colonial period established many of the structural conditions that continue to shape tribal development in India. British administrators often treated tribal areas as exceptional territories- difficult to govern, culturally distinct, and economically valuable. The approach oscillated between isolation and intervention. On the one hand, certain regions were designated as “excluded” or “partially excluded” areas, ostensibly to shield tribal populations from external influence. On the other, these very regions became sites of aggressive resource extraction, particularly timber and minerals.

Legislation such as the Indian Forest Act 1878 fundamentally altered the relationship between tribal communities and forests. By declaring vast tracts of land as state property, it criminalised customary practices and eroded community control over resources. Forests, which had long functioned as socio-ecological systems sustaining livelihoods, culture, and identity, were redefined as economic assets to be managed by the colonial state.

Anthropology, as it developed in this period, was closely aligned with administrative needs. Tribal communities were often studied as “primitive” or “isolated” societies, objects of classification rather than participants in history. The debate between Verrier Elwin and G. S. Ghurye captured a broader intellectual divide- whether tribes should be protected from external influence or assimilated into mainstream society. While Elwin advocated a degree of cultural protection, Ghurye argued for integration, viewing tribes as “backward Hindus.” Both positions, in different ways, reflected the tension between autonomy and incorporation that continues to animate tribal policy.

The colonial state’s most coercive interventions were not limited to land and forests. Laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act institutionalised stigma by designating entire communities as hereditary criminals. The long shadow of such policies continues to affect denotified tribes even today.

Thus, colonial governance produced a dual legacy: administrative isolation combined with economic extraction, and anthropological curiosity intertwined with political control. This legacy did not disappear after Independence; it was reconfigured.

5. Post-Independence India: Integration, Welfare, and the Limits of Paternalism

At Independence, India’s leadership was acutely aware of the need to depart from colonial approaches. Jawaharlal Nehru articulated a vision for tribal development that sought to balance integration with respect for cultural autonomy. His Tribal Panchsheel emphasised development along the lines of tribal genius, protection of land and forest rights, minimal administrative interference, and a qualitative rather than purely quantitative understanding of progress.

Yet, as India embarked on its path of nation-building, the realities of state-led development often diverged from these principles. The period from the 1950s to the 1980s saw the expansion of welfare programmes- schools, hostels, health centres, and targeted schemes for tribal populations. The Tribal Sub-Plan, introduced in the Fifth Five-Year Plan, sought to ensure that public expenditure reached tribal areas in proportion to their population.

While these interventions improved access to basic services, they were embedded within a paternalistic framework. The state functioned as a provider, but rarely as a facilitator of community agency. Development was delivered, not negotiated.

More significantly, this period witnessed large-scale development-induced displacement. Major dams, mining projects, and industrial corridors were often located in tribal regions. Scholars such as Walter Fernandes have documented how millions of tribal people were displaced in the name of development, frequently without adequate rehabilitation. Displacement in these contexts is not merely physical relocation; it disrupts entire social and ecological systems, severing ties between communities and their land, forests, and cultural practices.

Thus, the post-independence period produced a paradox. Tribal communities gained visibility in policy and access to certain services yet remained marginal in decision-making. Integration brought both inclusion and dispossession.

6. Rights-Based Transformation and the Long Arc of Implementation

The transition from welfare to rights-based tribal development in India is often narrated through landmark legislation. Yet, an anthropological and institutional reading suggests that the passage of laws is only the beginning of a much longer and uneven journey. In practice, the distance between enactment and meaningful operationalisation has often stretched across decades, shaped by administrative capacity, political will, institutional resistance, and the complexities of federal governance.

This pattern is visible across major constitutional and legislative interventions.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which sought to institutionalise Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), is a useful starting point. While the Amendment formally came into effect in 1993, its implementation across states was

far from immediate or uniform. Several states took years to align their Panchayati Raj laws with the constitutional mandate, and even where elections were conducted, the deeper elements of decentralisation—particularly fiscal devolution and administrative autonomy—remained partial. In Scheduled Areas, the situation was even more complex, as the standard PRI framework was not considered fully appropriate to tribal socio-political contexts.

It is in this context that the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA) was enacted. The Act represented a significant conceptual advance by recognising the Gram Sabha as the foundational unit of self-governance in tribal areas and by attempting to align statutory governance with customary practices. However, the gap between intent and implementation became immediately evident.

The persistence of this gap between legislative intent and field-level outcomes has been widely noted in the literature, particularly in relation to community forest rights, where recognition has progressed more slowly than individual claims. (Sahu 2021).

Although PESA was enacted in 1996, state-level rules—the critical instruments required for operationalisation—were delayed for years, and in some cases, decades. Many states either adopted diluted provisions or postponed rulemaking altogether. Even where rules existed, their translation into administrative practice remained limited.

The case of Jharkhand is particularly instructive. Despite being a predominantly tribal state carved out in 2000, Jharkhand took more than two decades to formalise PESA rules, with the legislative process for operationalisation gaining traction only recently. This delay underscores a deeper institutional paradox: even in states where tribal populations are demographically and politically significant, the devolution of real authority to Gram Sabhas has been slow and contested.

Similar patterns can be observed elsewhere:

- In Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, PESA provisions have been relatively more operationalised, yet even there, the extent of Gram Sabha control over resources such as minor forest produce and local markets varies significantly across districts.
- In Odisha and Chhattisgarh, while certain aspects of decentralised governance have progressed, especially where linked to livelihood programmes, full alignment with PESA principles remains uneven.

This unevenness reflects not merely administrative delay but structural resistance within governance systems, where line departments are often reluctant to cede control over resources and decision-making.

A similar trajectory is visible in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA). Enacted in 2006, FRA sought to correct historical injustices by recognising both individual and community rights over forest land and resources. However, the operationalisation of FRA has unfolded in phases, with varying degrees of success.

In the initial years (2006–2012), the focus was largely on Individual Forest Rights (IFR), resulting in the distribution of land titles to households. While this was an important step, it represented only a partial realisation of the Act's intent. The more transformative provision—Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights—received attention much later, particularly after 2013, and continues to lag in many states.

As per government data and independent assessments, while millions of individual claims have been processed, community claims constitute a much smaller proportion, reflecting both administrative challenges and limited awareness. States such as Maharashtra (notably Gadchiroli district) have made significant progress in recognising CFR rights, whereas others continue to struggle with both recognition and post-recognition governance.

The time lag is not merely procedural. It reflects deeper issues:

- Limited capacity at the Gram Sabha level to navigate complex claim processes
- Continued dominance of forest departments in decision-making
- Ambiguities in land records and jurisdiction
- Weak convergence between FRA and other development programmes

The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (2013) further illustrates the pattern of delayed institutionalisation. While the Act introduced progressive provisions such as Social Impact Assessments and consent requirements in Scheduled Areas, its implementation has been uneven, with states adopting varied rules and, in some cases, introducing amendments that dilute its safeguards.

Taken together, these examples suggest that tribal development legislation in India follows a three-stage trajectory:

- 1) Normative Breakthrough (Enactment Phase): Progressive laws are introduced, often recognising rights and correcting historical injustices.
- 2) Administrative Translation (Rule-Making Phase): States frame rules and procedures, frequently with delays and modifications.
- 3) Institutional Negotiation (Operational Phase): Implementation unfolds unevenly, shaped by local politics, bureaucratic behaviour, and community capacity.

The third stage is the most critical and the least predictable. It is here that laws either become transformative or remain symbolic.

From an anthropological perspective, this extended timeline is not surprising. Laws that seek to redistribute power—over land, forests, and local governance—inevitably encounter resistance from entrenched institutional structures. The slow pace of implementation, therefore, reflects not merely inefficiency but the politics of control over resources and authority.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that implementation is not uniformly weak. There are pockets of significant progress- Gadchiroli's CFR governance, Odisha's MFP systems, and emerging experiments in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh- where local leadership, civil society engagement, and administrative support have converged to produce meaningful outcomes.

The lesson, therefore, is not that these laws have failed, but that their success depends on context-specific institutional alignment. The challenge for the future lies in moving from fragmented and uneven implementation toward a more systematic strengthening of local institutions, particularly the Gram Sabha, as the fulcrum of tribal self-governance.

7. Market Citizenship: Reframing Tribal Development in an Expanding Economic Landscape

In recent years, tribal development in India has entered a qualitatively different phase- one that moves beyond the earlier binaries of welfare and protection, and increasingly situates tribal communities within the broader circuits of production, exchange, and market participation. This transition, often implicitly framed within policy discourse, may be more appropriately understood as the emergence of "market citizenship"—a condition in which tribal communities are no longer seen merely as recipients of state support but as active economic actors engaging with local, national, and increasingly global markets.

This shift is closely linked to wider transformations in the Indian economy since the 1990s. Economic liberalisation, the gradual deepening of supply chains, the expansion of agro-processing and forest-based value chains, and more recently, the rapid spread of digital infrastructure have together reshaped the context in which tribal livelihoods are situated. What was once largely a subsistence-oriented or locally mediated economy is now being drawn into a more interconnected and monetised system.

A key institutional driver of this transition has been TRIFED, which has attempted to reposition tribal livelihoods within structured market frameworks. Through initiatives such as the Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, tribal gatherers of minor forest produce (MFP) are being organised into producer collectives, supported in primary processing, and linked to larger value chains. The emphasis is no longer only on procurement but on value addition, aggregation, branding, and market access. This marks a significant departure from earlier models where tribal producers were often positioned at the lowest end of fragmented and exploitative supply chains.

Minor forest produce itself has emerged as a critical economic anchor in this transition. In several forested regions, MFP contributes between 40 to 60 percent of annual household income. Products such as mahua, tamarind, lac, honey, sal leaves, and medicinal plants are no longer viewed merely as subsistence resources but as commodities with significant market potential. The introduction of Minimum Support Price (MSP) regimes for MFP in some states, along with procurement mechanisms, has partially insulated producers from price volatility and exploitative intermediaries.

However, the real transformation lies in moving beyond procurement toward enterprise development, where tribal communities participate in processing, packaging, and marketing.

Equally transformative has been the role of technology. The rapid penetration of mobile connectivity, digital payments, and e-commerce platforms has altered the architecture of market access. Platforms such as ONDC, private marketplaces, and government-supported portals have enabled tribal producers to reach consumers beyond local haats and mandis. For the first time, a lac producer in Jharkhand or a bamboo artisan in Maharashtra can, at least in principle, access national and even international markets.

Digital technologies have also reshaped the flow of information. Price discovery, weather forecasts, access to schemes, and financial transactions are increasingly mediated through mobile devices. Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) systems have reduced leakages in welfare delivery, while digital identity systems have enabled inclusion in formal financial networks. These changes, taken together, have expanded the economic horizon for tribal communities.

Yet, from an anthropological perspective, the notion of market citizenship must be approached with caution. Markets are not neutral arenas; they are structured by power, information asymmetries, and institutional hierarchies. Entry into markets does not automatically translate into empowerment. Without adequate institutional safeguards—such as strong producer collectives, access to credit, storage infrastructure, and bargaining power- tribal producers risk being integrated into markets on unfavourable terms.

There is also the question of cultural and ecological implications. The commodification of forest produce, if not carefully managed, can lead to over-extraction and ecological stress. Similarly, the shift from subsistence to market-oriented production may alter traditional livelihood patterns and social relations. Anthropological studies have long cautioned that economic transitions, while improving incomes, can simultaneously erode community cohesion and knowledge systems.

Therefore, the challenge is not whether tribal communities should participate in markets, but how they participate, under what institutional arrangements, and with what safeguards. Market citizenship, to be meaningful, must be anchored in strong local institutions- particularly Gram Sabhas under PESA and community rights under FRA- and supported by policies that enhance, rather than undermine, community agency.

8. Case Studies: Grounding the Discourse in Lived Realities

While national policy frameworks provide an overarching direction, the diversity of tribal experiences across India is best understood through grounded examples. These case studies illustrate how similar legal and policy instruments can produce very different outcomes depending on local institutional contexts, administrative engagement, and community mobilisation.

Gadchiroli, Maharashtra: Community Forest Rights as Economic Governance

The experience of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra is often cited as one of the most successful examples of Community Forest Resource (CFR) implementation under the Forest Rights Act. Here, several Gram Sabhas have not only secured legal recognition of their rights but have also translated these rights into functional systems of governance and livelihood generation.

Villages such as Mendha-Lekha have become emblematic of this transformation. The Gram Sabha exercises control over bamboo harvesting, regulates extraction, negotiates prices, and manages revenues collectively. Unlike earlier arrangements where forest departments or contractors dominated the value chain, communities now retain a significant share of the economic value generated from forest resources.

The impact is not limited to income. CFR implementation has strengthened local governance, enhanced ecological stewardship, and reduced conflict between communities and state agencies. Forest conservation outcomes have improved, as communities have a direct stake in sustainable management. This case demonstrates that when rights are meaningfully implemented, they can simultaneously advance livelihoods, governance, and conservation.

However, even within Maharashtra, such outcomes are not uniform. Success depends on a combination of administrative support, civil society engagement, and strong local leadership. This reinforces the broader point that laws create possibilities, but institutions determine outcomes.

Odisha: Value Chains, Women's Collectives, and Market Integration

Odisha offers a different but equally instructive model, particularly in the domain of Minor Forest Produce. The state has invested significantly in strengthening MFP value chains through procurement systems, minimum support prices, and integration with women's self-help groups under the Odisha Livelihoods Mission.

In many tribal districts, women-led collectives have emerged as key actors in aggregation, primary processing, and local-level enterprise. By organising producers and providing institutional support, the state has reduced dependence on middlemen and improved price realisation. The introduction of storage facilities, drying units, and grading mechanisms has further enhanced value addition.

This model highlights the importance of institutional intermediation. Markets alone do not empower producers; they require enabling structures that reduce transaction costs, provide information, and enhance bargaining power. The Odisha experience also demonstrates how gender can play a transformative role in tribal economies, with women's collectives emerging as anchors of both economic and social change.

At the same time, challenges remain. Market linkages are still uneven, and scaling up value-added products beyond local or regional markets requires sustained investment in branding, logistics, and quality control. Nonetheless, Odisha's experience illustrates how state-led facilitation, when aligned with community institutions, can produce inclusive economic outcomes.

Jharkhand: Traditional Livelihoods in Transition

Jharkhand presents a more complex and evolving picture. The state's tribal economy has long been anchored in activities such as lac cultivation, tasar silk production, and forest-based livelihoods. These activities are deeply embedded in local knowledge systems and ecological conditions.

In recent years, efforts have been made to integrate these traditional livelihoods into broader market frameworks. Civil society organisations, producer companies, and corporate foundations such as Tata Steel Foundation have played a significant role in strengthening value chains, improving productivity, and connecting producers to markets.

For instance, lac cultivation, which was once largely informal and locally traded, is now being linked to organised markets with better price realisation. Similarly, tasar silk has seen improvements in production techniques, processing, and market access.

However, Jharkhand also illustrates the constraints of transition. Institutional fragmentation, limited infrastructure, and uneven implementation of laws such as PESA have constrained the full realisation of potential. Market access, while improving, remains inconsistent, and many producers continue to operate within informal and vulnerable arrangements.

The Jharkhand case thus underscores a critical point: market integration without strong institutional foundations can produce uneven and fragile outcomes. The future of tribal economies in such contexts depends on strengthening local governance, building producer institutions, and ensuring convergence between policy, markets, and community systems.

9. Climate Change and Tribal Futures

Climate change has fundamentally altered the terrain of tribal development in India. What was once understood primarily as a question of access- to land, forests, markets, and state services- must now be reframed within a far more complex reality shaped by ecological stress, extractive economies, and climate vulnerability. Tribal regions are not only ecologically sensitive; they are also disproportionately located in areas of intense natural resource extraction, particularly mining. This dual exposure- to climate change and to extractive industrial activity- places tribal communities at a uniquely precarious intersection.

A significant proportion of India's tribal population resides in what is often referred to as the "mineral belt," stretching across Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, parts of Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. These regions are rich in coal, iron ore, bauxite, and other minerals that underpin

India's industrial and energy systems. However, they are also among the most environmentally stressed landscapes in the country. Open-cast mining, deforestation, land degradation, groundwater depletion, and air pollution have fundamentally altered local ecologies over decades.

In such contexts, climate change does not operate in isolation. It interacts with and amplifies existing environmental degradation. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and extreme weather events exacerbate already fragile ecosystems. In mining-affected districts, this results in a compounded crisis: declining agricultural productivity, reduced availability of forest produce, contamination of water sources, and deteriorating health conditions.

For tribal communities living in and around mining zones, climate change is therefore experienced as a layered vulnerability. Agricultural cycles are disrupted not only by rainfall variability but also by soil degradation and dust deposition. Forest-based livelihoods are affected both by climate-induced changes in species regeneration and by the loss of forest cover due to mining. Water scarcity is intensified by both climatic shifts and industrial extraction of groundwater. The cumulative effect is a steady erosion of livelihood security.

Health impacts are equally significant. Exposure to polluted air and water, combined with rising temperatures, contributes to respiratory illnesses, heat stress, and vector-borne diseases. Nutritional outcomes are affected as traditional food systems weaken. From an anthropological perspective, these are not isolated sectoral issues; they represent a systemic disruption of the socio-ecological fabric of tribal life.

At the same time, these regions are also sites of significant public investment through mechanisms such as the District Mineral Foundation (DMF). Established under amendments to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, DMFs are intended to channel a portion of mining revenues toward the development of affected areas, with a particular focus on tribal communities. In principle, DMFs represent a powerful instrument for addressing the very vulnerabilities created by mining.

In practice, however, the utilisation of DMF funds has been uneven. While some districts have invested in infrastructure, health, and water supply, there remains a substantial gap in strategic, climate-sensitive planning. DMF expenditures often prioritise visible infrastructure- roads, buildings, and equipment- over long-term ecological restoration, livelihood regeneration, and community-based adaptation. The absence of strong Gram Sabha involvement in planning and monitoring further limits the effectiveness of these interventions.

This raises a critical question: can extractive economies finance sustainable and climate-resilient futures for the communities they disrupt? The answer depends not only on financial allocations but on governance structures, community participation, and the alignment of investments with ecological realities.

Beyond mining regions, tribal areas more broadly continue to face significant climate risks. Rainfed agriculture remains the primary livelihood for many households, making them highly sensitive to rainfall variability. Forest-based livelihoods, which contribute substantially to household incomes, are affected by changes in biodiversity and seasonal cycles. Water stress is emerging as a major concern across several tribal belts, with springs, streams, and traditional water bodies becoming increasingly unreliable.

Yet, as noted earlier, tribal communities possess deep reservoirs of ecological knowledge. Their practices- mixed cropping, use of indigenous seeds, community forest management, and protection of sacred landscapes- are inherently adaptive. In many ways, these systems represent time-tested models of resilience, developed in response to environmental variability long before climate change became a global concern.

Anthropological research in recent years has similarly highlighted the role of indigenous knowledge systems in sustaining livelihoods and enhancing adaptive capacity, particularly in ecologically fragile regions (Debnath 2024).

The challenge lies in integrating this knowledge into contemporary policy frameworks. While there is growing recognition of indigenous knowledge in global climate discourse, its incorporation into national and state-level programmes remains limited. Climate interventions in India continue to be largely technocratic, often privileging standardised solutions over context-specific approaches.

Here, the legal frameworks provided by the Forest Rights Act 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 acquire renewed significance. FRA enables community control over forest resources, which are central to both livelihoods and climate mitigation. PESA provides a platform for decentralised decision-making, which is essential for designing locally appropriate adaptation strategies. However, as discussed earlier, the transformative potential of these laws remains constrained by uneven implementation.

Government programmes have begun to address aspects of climate vulnerability, though often indirectly. MGNREGA has supported water conservation, afforestation, and soil moisture retention, contributing to local adaptation. The National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture and watershed development programmes have promoted climate-resilient practices. Recent convergence-based initiatives, such as PM-JANMAN and PM-JUGA, aim to improve infrastructure and basic services in tribal areas, which can enhance resilience by reducing vulnerability.

However, these efforts are yet to be fully integrated into a coherent climate strategy for tribal regions. There remains a tendency to treat climate resilience as an add-on, rather than as a central organising principle of development.

Non-state actors- civil society organisations, research institutions, and corporate foundations- have played an important role in bridging this gap. In mining-affected areas of Jharkhand and Odisha, for instance, initiatives focused on lac cultivation, tasar silk, agroforestry, and watershed

management have demonstrated how livelihoods can be diversified and made more resilient. These efforts often combine traditional knowledge with modern techniques, creating hybrid models of adaptation.

Nevertheless, the scale of these interventions remains limited relative to the magnitude of the challenge. What is required is a systemic shift toward community-centred, climate-informed development planning, particularly in mining and forested regions.

Such a shift would involve:

- Integrating DMF planning with climate resilience and ecological restoration
- Strengthening Gram Sabha-led governance of natural resources under FRA and PESA
- Prioritising water security, soil regeneration, and biodiversity conservation
- Promoting diversified, low-risk livelihood systems
- Leveraging digital technologies for climate information, early warning, and market access

Ultimately, the future of tribal regions will depend on whether development pathways can reconcile economic imperatives with ecological sustainability. In mining geographies, this challenge is especially acute. Extractive industries are likely to remain central to India's growth trajectory, but their environmental and social costs cannot continue to be externalised onto already vulnerable communities.

From an anthropological perspective, the question is not only how tribal communities adapt to climate change, but how development itself can be reimagined in these landscapes. If tribal regions are treated merely as resource frontiers, they will remain sites of vulnerability and conflict. If, however, they are recognised as socio-ecological systems with intrinsic value, they can become spaces of innovation in sustainable development.

Climate change, in this sense, forces a fundamental rethinking. It compels us to move beyond sectoral interventions and toward a more integrated understanding of ecology, economy, and community. For tribal India—particularly in mining-affected regions- the path forward lies not in choosing between development and conservation, but in forging a model that aligns the two.

10. Conclusion

The trajectory of tribal development in India is best understood not as a linear movement from marginalisation to inclusion, but as a layered and often contested process shaped by shifting state priorities, economic transitions, and evolving institutional frameworks. From colonial isolation and extraction to post-independence welfare and integration, and more recently to rights-based legislation and market participation, each phase has expanded the scope of engagement between the state and tribal communities- while also introducing new tensions.

At the heart of this trajectory lies the unresolved question of agency. While policy frameworks increasingly recognise tribal communities as rights-bearing citizens and economic actors, the structures within which these roles are exercised remain only partially accountable to them. The persistent gap

between legislative intent and implementation—visible in the uneven operationalisation of PESA, the limited realisation of community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, and the slow translation of decentralisation into effective local governance- points to a deeper institutional constraint. The challenge is not the absence of progressive laws, but the incomplete transfer of authority over resources, decision-making, and knowledge systems.

The emergence of “market citizenship” represents a significant shift in this landscape. Tribal communities are no longer positioned solely at the margins of the economy; they are increasingly participating in value chains, enterprise systems, and digital marketplaces. Initiatives in minor forest produce, lac, tasar, agroforestry, and artisanal sectors, supported by both state and non-state actors, have demonstrated the potential for enhancing incomes and expanding opportunities. Improvements in infrastructure and digital connectivity have further widened this horizon.

Yet market integration is not inherently empowering. Markets are shaped by asymmetries of power, information, and capital. Without strong local institutions, producer collectives, and regulatory safeguards, tribal participation risks reproducing older forms of dependency in new forms. The central question, therefore, is not whether tribal communities should engage with markets, but on what terms and with what institutional support.

This question becomes more complex when viewed through the lens of climate change. Tribal regions- particularly those located in forested and mineral-rich belts—are increasingly exposed to layered vulnerabilities. Climate variability interacts with environmental degradation and extractive activity to erode livelihoods, strain ecological systems, and intensify health risks. In mining-affected regions, these pressures are especially acute, raising critical concerns about sustainability and equity.

At the same time, these regions are also sites of significant public investment, including through mechanisms such as the District Mineral Foundation. Whether such resources are deployed toward long-term ecological restoration and community resilience, or continue to prioritise short-term infrastructural gains, will shape the future of these landscapes.

What emerges is the need for a more integrated approach to development- one that brings together rights, governance, markets, and ecology. Strengthening institutions such as Gram Sabhas, enabling community-based natural resource management, and ensuring convergence across sectors are central to this effort. Equally important is the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, which offer valuable insights into sustainable and adaptive practices.

The role of the state, in this context, must evolve from that of a provider to an enabler- facilitating conditions in which communities can exercise agency, participate in markets on equitable terms, and manage their resources sustainably. Non-state actors also have an important role, particularly in supporting innovation, capacity building, and institutional strengthening.

Ultimately, the future of tribal development in India will depend on how the country navigates the intersection of economic transformation and ecological constraint- not as parallel challenges, but as deeply intertwined realities. Development in these regions cannot be reduced to infrastructure expansion or income gains alone; it must be understood as the expansion of capabilities, choices, and dignity, grounded in ecological balance and cultural continuity.

The real test, therefore, is not whether tribal India is included in the nation's development story, but whether that story is willing to be reshaped by the knowledge, institutions, and priorities of tribal communities themselves. The answer will determine not only the trajectory of tribal regions, but also the credibility of India's broader development model in an era increasingly defined by sustainability, equity, and resilience.

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