



TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN INDIA – GEOGRAPHY

NEWS: From the ancient wall paintings of the Bhimbetka caves to their unique customs, mythology and craftsmanship, India's tribes have left an indelible mark on the country's rich culture.

Historical Independence and Resistance

- Tribal communities have always valued their **independence**, resisting efforts to integrate into villages, kingdoms, and empires.
- Their self-sufficient lifestyles often led to them being labeled as **'savage' and 'primitive'** by outsiders.
- They primarily lived in **forests**, relying on **foraging, hunting, subsistence agriculture, and herding** to meet their needs, occasionally engaging in trade with neighboring communities.
- Tribal groups frequently came into conflict with kings, especially when rulers tried to convert forestlands into agricultural lands or establish trade routes.
- Notable examples of tribal resistance include:
 - **Bhils defeating the Mughal army**, showcasing their military strength.
 - Leaders like **Birsa Munda**, who spearheaded revolutionary movements against British rule.
- Tribes typically refused to pay taxes imposed by rulers but instead preferred to trade with communities or offer **military services** when needed.

Terminology and Representation in Indian Epics

- Different terms have been used to describe tribes, reflecting their unique identities:
 - **Adivasi** (earliest inhabitants).
 - **Vanavasi** (forest dwellers).
 - **Atavika** (forest folk).
 - **Girijan** (mountain folk).
- Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana reference tribes with terms like **Nishadha** and **Kirata**.
 - **Ekalavya**, a Nishadha, is portrayed in the Mahabharata as a tribal archer.
 - **Shiva**, in the Mahabharata, assumes the form of a Kirata to battle Arjuna.
- Tribes in epics, such as the **Vanaras in the Ramayana** and the **Asuras in the Mahabharata**, are often seen as metaphors for forest and hill-dwelling communities.



- Mythological connections include stories like **Krishna's wife Jambavati**, who was the daughter of a 'bear,' symbolizing tribal alliances with mainstream cultures.

Geographical Distribution and Tribal Diversity

- Nearly **10% of India's population** belongs to approximately **700 tribal communities**, with their settlements scattered across the country.
- Tribal communities inhabit diverse terrains, such as:
 - **Hills:** Aravalli, Sahyadri, Nilgiri, Purvanchal, Himachal, and the Northeast.
 - **Forests:** Tarai region and Central India plateaus.
- Prominent tribal groups include:
 - **Bhils and Gonds:** Found in Central India.
 - **Banjara:** Nomadic tribes with a history of transporting goods.
 - **Kinnaurs:** Inhabitants of Himachal Pradesh.
 - **Khasi and Garo:** Tribes of Northeast India.
- **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs):** Constituting **10% of tribal communities**, these groups live in extreme isolation, often facing threats to their cultural survival.

Genetic and Cultural Legacy

- Tribes represent the **oldest genetic pools** in India, with distinct influences based on their geographical locations:
 - **Southern tribes:** Predominantly carry the **Harappan gene**.
 - **Northern tribes:** Combine **Harappan and Aryan genetic traits**.
 - **Central tribes:** Show **Austro-Asian influences**, linked to Southeast Asia.
 - **Northeastern tribes:** Exhibit **Tibeto-Burmese genetic markers**.
 - **Andaman tribes:** Unique in having no genetic mixture with later immigrant groups.
- Historical evidence of tribes can be found in:
 - **Bhimbetka cave paintings** (12,000 years old).
 - **Harappan seals** depicting headgear similar to those of present-day Maria tribes in Central India.
 - Words of Munda origin in the **Rig Veda**, indicating ancient interactions between tribes and mainstream cultures.



Distinctive Tribal Mythology

- Tribal communities have their own **unique myths**, which often differ significantly from mainstream Indian interpretations.
- For instance, the **Krittika constellation** (Pleiades) is perceived differently:
 - **Banjara**: A cluster of jewels.
 - **Warli**: Drummers and lamps in a wedding procession.
 - **Gonds**: Stones thrown at birds.
 - **Nicobarese**: Ancestors.
- These diverse perspectives highlight the **independence of tribal cosmologies**.

Cultural Integration through Temples and Traditions

- Tribal communities have historically interacted with kings, particularly through temple cultures:
 - The **Jagannath Temple** in Odisha originated with tribal guardians of the Nila Madhav statue.
 - In Andhra Pradesh, **Chenchu tribe's daughters** are mythologically linked to Narasimha.
 - Tamil Nadu's **Murugan deity** married the tribal girl Valli, symbolizing tribal and cultural integration.

Marriage Practices and Craftsmanship

- Tribes maintain **unique marriage traditions** that differ from mainstream norms:
 - **Bonda women (Odisha)** marry younger men who care for them in old age.
 - **Toda and Kinnaur tribes** practice polyandry to prevent property division.
 - **Bhils** require grooms to pay a bride price.
 - **Baiga tribes** house grooms with the bride's family until the bride price is paid.
 - **Garo tribes** abduct grooms, with escapees allowed to remarry.
- Tribes are also known for their **exceptional craftsmanship**:
 - **Central India**: Pioneers of iron tool-making.
 - **Rajasthan tribes**: Create exquisite silver and copper jewelry.
 - **Warli and Gond tribes**: Famous for their distinctive paintings.



- **Naga tribes:** Renowned for intricate tattoos symbolizing clan identity.
- **Northeastern tribes:** Produce unique textiles from cotton, wool, and silk.

Role in Forest Conservation

- Tribal communities are deeply tied to nature and play a critical role in:
 - **Forest conservation.**
 - Protection of **wildlife and flora.**
 - Sustainable use of natural resources.

9. Challenges of Modernization

- Increasing exposure to modern education and employment opportunities is causing tribes to:
 - Distance themselves from their traditional languages, cultures, and practices.
 - Migrate to cities for jobs in industries, government, or the army.
- Many are converting to **Christianity or Islam**, which often discourages traditional tribal rituals and gods.

Debate on Tribal Identity

- There is ongoing debate about the integration of tribes into **Sanatana Dharma** versus recognizing their unique traditions.
 - Some argue that **Sarnaism**, based on the worship of forest groves and sacred ponds, should be recognized as a **separate religion** to preserve their cultural identity.
- If tribes abandon their **rituals, marriage customs, food habits, and beliefs**, it could lead to the loss of their distinct culture and heritage.

Key Government Schemes for Tribal Empowerment

1. Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarship Schemes

These scholarships aim to reduce dropout rates and promote the education of tribal students:

- **Pre-Matric Scholarship:** Provides financial support to ST students in classes IX and X, encouraging them to transition to secondary education.
- **Post-Matric Scholarship:** Offers financial aid to ST students pursuing higher education from Class XI up to post-graduate courses.

2. National Overseas Scholarship for ST Students



This scheme provides opportunities for meritorious ST students to pursue post-graduate, doctoral, and post-doctoral studies at universities abroad. With a focus on excellence and international exposure, the government allocates 20 awards annually, reserving 30% for female candidates.

3. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) Development Program

The PVTG program targets the most vulnerable tribal communities, focusing on improving access to healthcare, education, clean water, and electricity. **Around 7 lakh PVTG families across 22,000 habitations in 200 districts benefit from comprehensive development plans under this initiative.**

4. Support to Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs)

TRIs play a crucial role in preserving tribal culture and addressing their socio-economic challenges. The Support to TRIs scheme promotes research and documentation on tribal welfare, languages, traditions, and medicinal practices, while also organizing cultural festivals and exchange programs.

5. Development Action Plan for Scheduled Tribes (DAPST)

The DAPST scheme ensures that all central ministries implement schemes for tribal welfare, with 41 ministries working in coordination. The plan focuses on filling critical gaps in education, healthcare, and infrastructure in tribal regions, backed by significant budget allocations.

6. National Fellowship for ST Students

This fellowship scheme supports tribal students pursuing higher education through a fully digital process, ensuring timely financial assistance and grievance redressal via **DigiLocker integration.**

7. National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC)

NSTFDC provides financial assistance to ST beneficiaries at concessional interest rates, focusing on income-generating activities.

8. Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED)

TRIFED promotes tribal products through its TRIBES India outlets and e-commerce platforms, providing sustainable livelihood opportunities to tribal artisans. By promoting handicrafts, textiles, and other tribal products, TRIFED creates market linkages for these communities.

9. Aadi Mahotsav and Cultural Festivals

These festivals are platforms for showcasing tribal heritage, with the Aadi Mahotsav being a notable event. They are part of the **Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM)**, focusing on tribal skill development, heritage promotion, and economic empowerment. Other impactful schemes highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his address on **Janjatiya Gaurav Divas 2022** include the **Swachh Bharat Mission**, the **Gobardhan Scheme for organic waste management**, and the **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana**, which supports maternal and child health. These initiatives reflect the government's commitment to improving the quality of life for tribal communities.



Initiatives for Better Health Outcomes

1. focus on sickle cell disease (scd) care

- Aims to provide **affordable and accessible care** to all SCD patients.
- Focuses on improving **treatment quality** and reducing disease prevalence through:
 - **Awareness campaigns.**
 - **Universal screening.**
 - **Counseling services.**
- Promotes **collaboration** between central ministries and state governments to benefit vulnerable tribal populations.

2. Mission Indradhanush

- Ensures **full immunization** for:
 - Children up to **two years of age.**
 - **Pregnant women**, with a special focus on Adivasi communities.
- Expanded to include **free COVID-19 vaccines**, ensuring better healthcare access for tribal populations.

3. Nikshay Mitra Initiative

- Provides support for **tuberculosis (TB) patients**, many of whom belong to tribal communities, through:
 - **Diagnostic services.**
 - **Nutritional support.**
 - **Vocational aid.**
- Aims to improve health outcomes for vulnerable populations.

4. Support to Tribal Research Institutes (TRI)

- Empowers TRIs to undertake activities like:
 - **Research and documentation.**
 - **Training and capacity-building.**
- TRIs serve as **knowledge hubs**, contributing to:
 - **Preservation of cultural heritage.**



- Addressing **socio-economic challenges** for tribal development.

Honouring and Celebrating India's Tribal Communities

10 Tribal Freedom Fighters' Museums have been sanctioned in States where tribals lived, struggled against the British and refused to bow down. On **November 01, 2022**, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for preparing a roadmap to develop **Mangarh Dham** in Rajasthan's **Banswara district**. **Mangarh Dham, situated near the Rajasthan-Gujarat border**, is the site where over **1500 Bhil freedom fighters lost their lives in 1913 in a mass shooting by the British**. The Mangarh Dham will be developed as a joint project of the governments of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, as a **national memorial showcasing tribal legacy and their rich cultural heritage**.

All these initiatives, along with other steps taken by the government, have paved the path of bringing the tribal communities into the mainstream while honouring their cultures, legacies and ways of life.

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/upsc-current-affairs/upsc-essentials/devdutt-pattanaik-the-contribution-of-tribes-to-indian-culture-9784404/>

