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From Margins to Progress: Unleashing the Potential of India's Tribal Communities for Sustainable Development

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For the development of a country, it is important for all the sections of that country to grow together and not in isolation. There are certain communities in our society that are marginalized from the rest. They are tribes. Tribes are a group of individuals sharing the same culture, often isolating itself from the society. Certain conditions need to be fulfilled for a community to be differentiated as a tribe, and they are (I) the presence of primitive traits, (II) notably distinct culture, (III) isolation from the modern community at large, (IV) geographical seclusion and (V) backwardness. There are over 700 tribes in India, and it would not be wise to ignore the issues they face. What we feel is normal and basic for us is a luxury for them. Sustainable development focuses on economic development for all without harming the environment. The same is needed for the marginalized tribal groups also, as they are one of those groups with deep relations with nature and the environment. There are seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and they aim to provide health, education, cleanliness, clean energy, etc., to all by 2030 for a better future for everyone, including the tribal communities. The living conditions for the tribes are below the acceptable level, and they also have the right to enjoy basic amenities of life. With the help of SDGs, the governments of various countries, including India, are planning for better and more inclusive policies of governance that will ensure the upliftment of the marginalized. Faster actions are needed in this dynamic world; otherwise, any inconsistency will widen the gap. However, on a closer look, one can say that it is not only the authorities that need to act; the communities also have to leave their inflexible mindset and be more accepting

towards growth. The article also provides suggestions for better planning and execution of governance policies. The research methodology for writing this essay is qualitative and textual.

Keywords: *tribes, sustainable development goals (sdgs), marginalised, isolation, policies, governance.*

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about the development of India, we do not talk about the development of urban areas, rural areas, industrial areas, or tribal areas separately. We talk about the development of the nation as a whole, including the urban, rural, industrial, and tribal areas. India as a country will not be considered developed if any part of it is still behind and in shambles. However, there is one segment of India that is marginalised from the rest of the society. That segment is the tribal communities. The tribes are a crucial part of Indian society. They have played a great role in India's past, are marginalised and unattended in the present, and their future depends on the policies and programmes that the government, ministries and authorities will undertake. The upliftment of tribal communities is a pressing matter not only for India but also for the world at large, and to tackle this issue, the governments of different countries, along with India, have decided to follow the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are set to be met by the countries by 2030 to make the world a better place for humans.¹

India, as a member country that has pledged to accomplish the completion of these goals, has adopted certain measures and is trying to align the existing policies with the same goal for the development of tribal and marginalised communities and bring them to par. With its huge population of tribal communities, India is taking strides towards a better future that will provide for the basic and essential needs of marginalised communities. The huge role nature and the environment play for the tribes makes the resolution to follow SDGs for their advancement more essential. SDG provides a way for holistic development with the environment and marginalised communities at its centre. This article aims to discuss the presence of an intertwined relationship

¹ United Nations, 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (United Nations) <<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>> accessed 16 February 2024

between the tribal communities and the SDGs and the need to make policies and programmes while keeping the same in mind.

WHAT IS TRIBE AND ITS ROLE IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Originating from the time of Greek city-states and the early formation of the Roman Empire, the term tribe is derived from the Latin word *tribus*,² which means a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor. There are certain features that differentiate the tribal communities from others. They are common identity, isolation from the rest of the society, unique and primitive culture, religion and traditions, interdependence among themselves and less reliance on the government, closeness and existence with nature and forest, speaking the same tribal dialect, nomadic habits and worship of supernatural forces and spirits among others. The primary activities in which the tribes include themselves are hunting, fishing, food gathering, shifting cultivation and animal husbandry. They do not engage in agriculture to earn a livelihood. They follow the style of sedentary cultivation, where the food is grown not for sale but to fulfill their personal needs. These communities show a close and intricately webbed relationship to land, forest, animals, culture, religion, and among themselves. They do not earn and collect much of material possessions. They have less political power and less access to resources like education, health services and technology.

With its diverse culture and beliefs, India is home to hundreds of tribal communities. They reside in more than half of the States and Union Territories. There are more than 700 tribes registered under Article 342³ of the Constitution, and they are called *Scheduled Tribes*. Scheduled Tribes are defined under Article 366(25)⁴ of the Constitution, which states that “Scheduled Tribes means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purpose of this Constitution”. Article 342(1)⁵ of the Indian Constitution deals with Scheduled Tribes. It states

² David Sneath, ‘Tribe’, *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2016) <<http://doi.org/10.29164/16tribe>> accessed 16 February 2024

³ Constitution of India 1950, art 342

⁴ Constitution of India 1950, art 366 cl 25

⁵ Constitution of India 1950, art 342 cl 1

that “The President [may with respect to any State [or Union Territory], and where it is State, after consultation with the Governor thereof,] by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State [or Union Territory, as the case may be].” Article 342(2)⁶ gives power to the Parliament to include or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under Clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community. A list is maintained by each State and Union Territory, and the same is valid only within the limits of that State or Union Territory. There are two schedules of the Indian Constitution that talk about the tribes: the fifth and the sixth. The fifth schedule discusses the administration and control of scheduled areas and tribes, whereas the Sixth schedule discusses the administration of tribal areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

The most common tribes in India are Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, Munda, Khasi, Garo, Angami, Kodaba, Kuki, Naga, the Great Andamanese tribes and many more. The last report that we have on the composition and demography of tribes is Census 2011. According to this, tribes constitute 8.6% of India's total population, 11.3% of the rural population and 2.8% of the urban population. 14.7% of the total tribal population of India resides in Madhya Pradesh, making it the State with the highest share of the tribal population, followed by Maharashtra and Odisha. The literacy rate among STs is 59%, compared to 73% in the general population.⁷ On the basis of gender, the literacy rate (a person age seven and above who can both read and write with understanding in any language)⁸ among males is 69% and females 49%. The infant mortality rate (rate of the death of an infant before one year for every 1000 live births)⁹ is 62.1 in tribal communities. The rate of

⁶ Constitution of India 1950, art 342 cl 2

⁷ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, *State / UT wise overall population, ST population, percentage of STs in India / State to total population of India / State and percentage of STs in the State to total ST population*

⁸ '10 facts on illiteracy in India that you must know' *Oxfam India* (08 September 2015)

<<https://www.oxfamindia.org/featuredstories/10-facts-illiteracy-india-you-must-know>> accessed 18 February 2024

⁹ 'Infant Mortality' (*Centre for Disease Control and Prevention*)

<<https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/infantmortality.htm#:~:text=Infant%20mortality%20is%20the%20death,for%20every%201%2C000%20live%20births>> accessed 18 February 2024

death of children under five is 95.7, along with 35.8 as the rate of child mortality.¹⁰ These numbers paint a very dark future for the community in prevailing conditions.

The ministry that looks after the development programmes and schemes that are initiated for the tribes and tribal communities is the Ministry of Tribal Welfare. The current Minister of Tribal Welfare is Shri Arjun Munda. It was set up in 1999 after its bifurcation from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. The objective of this bifurcation was to dedicate a Ministry solely to focus on the policies and programmes for the upliftment of the tribes, as before the establishment of this ministry, the work for the upliftment of tribes was handled by various ministries at different times. It is the main nodal agency for planning and coordination. It covers various segments of tribal welfare like social security & social insurance, promotion and development of voluntary efforts, development of the Scheduled Tribes, monitoring of grants issued, Scheduled areas, and many more. It also looks after the implementation and protection of the Civil Rights Act of 1955, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, etc. Since the Ministry complies with section 3(3) of the Official Languages Act of 1963, it has made Hindi its official language. It holds Consultative Committee Meetings under the chairmanship of the Minister of Tribal Affairs every quarter. The Ministry plays a coordinating role between the Central authorities, State governments and voluntary organizations by filling the gap and providing financial assistance.¹¹

Another authority that looks after the tribal welfare in India is the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes (NCST). It was established by adding a clause in Article 338 of the Constitution through the Constitutional Amendment Act of 2003 (89th Amendment). Its parent body used to be the National Commission of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which later got replaced by (I) the National Commission of Scheduled Castes (NCSC) and (II) the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes (NCST), with effect from 19th February 2004. It consists of a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and members working for an office term of 3 years. The rank of the Chairperson is equivalent to that of a Union Cabinet Minister. The current Chairperson is Shri

¹⁰ Ministry of Tribal Welfare, *Scheduled Tribes* (2011)

¹¹ 'About the Ministry' (*Ministry of Tribal Welfare*) <<https://tribal.nic.in/AboutMinistry.aspx>> accessed 18 February 2024

Harsh Chauhan. The main work of the NCST is to assist the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in meeting its socio-economic development goals of the welfare of the tribal communities.¹²

Even after these authorities, the tribal population of the country is struggling with cruelties that do not exist for other segments of the population. Due to their isolation from mainstream society, they have struggled for basic necessities like education, food, shelter, health and hygiene. They fall victim to deadly diseases and are not able to access healthcare services. Their chances for job opportunities are less due to a lack of educational awareness among them. Due to this, they don't have a source of income that is not from primary activities like agriculture and animal husbandry. Authorities like the Ministry of Tribal Welfare and the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes are taking steps for the upliftment of tribal communities, but they have not shown substantial results till now. As a result of this, they are stuck in a vicious cycle of stagnancy.

WHAT ARE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

SDG stands for sustainable development goals. These are also known as global goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to address various social, economic, and environmental challenges and ensure that by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity. A series of 17 goals were fixed by the U.N. and adopted by 193 countries.¹³ The meaning of Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It involves balancing economic, social, and environmental considerations to ensure that development is equitable and environmentally responsible, promoting long-term well-being for people and the planet. The 17 SDGs are:

1. No Poverty
2. Zero Hunger
3. Good Health and Well-being

¹² 'Background' (*National Commission of Scheduled Tribes*) <<https://ncst.nic.in/content/background>> accessed 18 February 2024

¹³ 'Sustainable Development Goals' (*National Geographic*) <<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/sustainable-development-goals/>> accessed 18 February 2024

4. Quality Education
5. Gender Equality
6. Clean Water and Sanitation
7. Affordable and Clean Energy
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
10. Reduced Inequalities
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities
12. Responsible Consumption and Production
13. Climate Action
14. Life Below Water
15. Life on Land
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions
17. Partnerships for the Goals.¹⁴

The history of SDGs is a testament to the international community's evolving commitments to addressing global challenges. It all started in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in which more than 178 countries adopted Agenda 21 and laid the foundation for sustainable development. After this, eight Millennium Development Goals were adopted in 2000 at UN Headquarters in New York and focused on poverty reduction. In 2002, the Johannesburg Declaration reaffirmed these goals and emphasized multilateral partnerships. The Rio+20 conference was held in 2012, which marked a turning point, launching the process of developing the SDGs and establishing the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. An Open Working Group consisting of representatives from UN member states was established to formulate a proposal for the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, encompassing the 17 SDGs and 169 targets, was adopted in 2015 through negotiations. These

¹⁴ 'The 17 Goals' (*United Nations*) <<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>> accessed 18 February 2024

landmark achievements, alongside other agreements such as the Sendai Framework and the Paris Agreement, chartered a course for a more sustainable future.¹⁵

In an era of unprecedented challenges, sustainable development goals offer a critical roadmap for addressing these challenges and creating a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all. Firstly, the SDGs address the persistent and multifaceted issue of global poverty and inequality. Millions still struggle to meet their basic needs, facing food insecurity, inadequate access to education and healthcare, and limited sanitation facilities. The SDGs aim to eradicate extreme poverty, ensure food security and sustainable agriculture, promote decent work and economic growth, and reduce inequalities within and among countries. It also aims to address the needs of all people, including those in marginalized and vulnerable groups. The SDGs recognize the inextricable link between human well-being and environmental sustainability. Climate change, pollution, and endangered animals threaten our future. The SDGs call for action to combat climate change, protect our environment, and use resources wisely. Conflicts and unfair treatment hold people back. The SDGs aim to protect peace, justice, and strong institutions so everyone feels safe and respected. The SDGs can't be achieved by just one country or one person. It requires collab and partnership among the government, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders at the local, national, and global levels. The SDGs also emphasize the importance of balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development to ensure long-term sustainability. Gender inequality remains a significant barrier to sustainable development. The SDGs aim to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls, empower them economically and politically, and ensure that they take active participation in all spheres of life. It also aims to conserve biodiversity and manage water and sanitation resources sustainably. It also helps to build a just and equitable world, which includes reducing inequalities within and among countries. This will help promote inclusive economic growth that benefits everyone and includes investing in social protection programs, ensuring fair labour practices, and progressive taxation systems to redistribute wealth and narrow the gap between the rich and the poor.

¹⁵ 'History' (*United Nations*) <<https://sdgs.un.org/goals#history>> accessed 18 February 2024

India, as one of the largest and most diverse democracies, plays a very significant role in the global pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. India adopted the SDGs in 2015 and has integrated them into its national development agenda under the motto ‘Sabka Saath Sabka Vikaas’ (Collective Efforts for Inclusive Growth). NITI Aayog, the government’s premier think tank, acts as the nodal agency for coordinating SDGs in the country.¹⁶ It maps relevant schemes and ministries to each target, fostering collaboration across sectors, including education, health, gender equality, energy, and environmental conservation. In 2023, India has been ranked 112 out of 162 countries in terms of the SDG Index with a score of 63.45 out of 100.¹⁷ India has improved in several SDGs, but there is still work to be done to achieve the targets by 2030. Recognizing the importance, India has also developed the SDG India Index and Dashboard. This framework tracks national and sub-national-level progress across all 17 SDGs and their associated targets. The index highlights gaps that require further attention, provides valuable insights into areas of achievement, and utilizes a multidimensional approach. The nation has made progress in poverty reduction, lifting millions out of poverty and demonstrating a dedicated effort towards achieving SDG1. The ‘Swachh Bharat Mission’ (Clean India Mission) is a great step towards sanitation coverage and contributes significantly to SDG6. Recognizing the importance of gender equality in sustainable development, India has implemented initiatives like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) and ‘Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana’ (Free LPG Connections for Women), aligning with SDG5 and empowering women to take part actively in the society.¹⁸

HOW SDGs PLAY A ROLE IN TRIBAL UPLIFTMENT IN INDIA?¹⁹

As we know, sustainable development refers to economic development without harming or destroying the environment, and to fulfill this motive, we have adopted 17 sustainable development goals. India's government has taken steps to preserve their cultural identities by

¹⁶ ‘Knowledge Platform’ (*Sustainable Development Goals*)

<<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/india>> accessed 18 February 2024

¹⁷ ‘Rankings’ (*Sustainable Development Report*) <<https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/rankings>> accessed 18 February 2024

¹⁸ Niti Aayog, *SDG India Index Baseline Report, 2018* (2018)

¹⁹ Ministry of Tribal Welfare, *Honouring and Empowering the Adivasis of India* (2022)

preserving their languages, script and cultural elements and providing them with quality education and economic and political power.

Some of them are mentioned below:

1. To complete *SDG 4 (quality education)*, the Government of India launched the 'Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)' in 1997-98 to provide quality education to the tribal communities with residential facilities. According to recent information, there are around 690 ERM Schools in India. It also provides financial assistance to ST students from the pre-matric to post-matric levels through fellowships and scholarships.²⁰
2. *Pradhan Mantri Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana (PMVKY)* was approved for implementation during 2021-22 to 2025-26 by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. To provide quality education and improve the quality of life in tribal areas, the scheme was initiated with a total cost of Rs. 26135.46 crores. Its objective is the holistic development of the tribal communities. It aims to bridge the gap in infrastructure with a focus on quality.²¹
3. The *Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED)* was established in August 1987 under the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act, 1984. It was created under the then Ministry of Welfare of India to provide socio-economic development to the tribal communities. It supports retail marketing of tribal products to support the livelihood of the tribals. It also includes the *Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana (PMVDY)*, which has the vision of supporting the market and ensuring fair returns to the tribal gatherers.²² This will help to fulfill *SDG 8* by providing opportunities for economic growth.
4. The *Pradhan Mantri Adi Aadarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY)* aims to fulfill the basic aim of shelters in villages with tribal populations. The existing schemes of Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub-Scheme (SCA to TSS) have been revamped as PMAAGY and are to be implemented between the years 2021-22 and 2025-26. The aim of the programme is to

²⁰ Ministry of Tribal Welfare, *Eklavya Model Residential Schools*

²¹ 'Pradhan Mantri Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana' (*Vikaspedia*, 27 July 2023) <<https://vikaspedia.in/social-welfare/scheduled-tribes-welfare/pradhan-mantri-vanbandhu-kalyan-yojana>> accessed 18 February 2024

²² TRIFED, *Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana Scheme Guidelines*

transform villages with tribal populations into model villages (Adarsh Gram). It improves the infrastructure in vital sectors like health and education.²³ SDG 11.1 discusses providing adequate, safe, affordable housing and basic services by 2030.²⁴

5. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) is a group under the tribes that are more vulnerable and backward than others. There are four criteria on which tribes are classified: (I) a pre-agricultural level of technology, (II) a low level of literacy, (III) economic backwardness and (IV) a declining or stagnant population.²⁵ The Government of India has launched schemes like the *Development of PVTG* that aim at the socio-economic development of particularly vulnerable groups. The programme does not aim to harm or destroy their culture; rather, it aims to preserve their culture while pushing them towards a better future. It will again help them to meet the requirements of fulfilling SDG 8.
6. SDG 3 talks about good health and well-being. *Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs)* are established as the government's flagship programme to deliver twelve Comprehensive Primary Health Care (CPHC) packages.²⁶ *Mission Indradhanush* is the programme launched with the aim of providing full immunization for all children up to two years of age and pregnant women, as well as free vaccines against COVID-19. In the *Nikshay Mitra initiative*, the aim is to provide diagnostic, nutritional and vocational support to those on tuberculosis treatment.

All the programmes and schemes mentioned above are launched to provide quality education, better housing facilities and healthcare services to the marginalised communities of our society and provide them with an opportunity to come out of the vicious cycle of stagnancy.

²³ 'Guidelines for Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana' (Ministry of Tribal Welfare, 17 March 2022) <https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/SCA_To_TSS/PMAAGYGuidelines.pdf> accessed 18 February 2024

²⁴ 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' (United Nations) <<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11>> accessed 18 February 2024

²⁵ Ministry of Tribal Welfare, *Welfare of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups* (2019)

²⁶ Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, *Health Schemes in Tribal Areas* (2022)

SUGGESTIONS

There should be more schools in tribal regions as education plays a key role in today's world. People should be educated, especially marginalized communities so that they can get out of poverty, give them the tools to shape their destiny, and also help to give them status and self-confidence. Local teachers should be hired and trained so that the children can be more comfortable around them and it's easy for them to be more attentive in classes. Quality education should be provided, including mother-tongue education and vocational training relevant to tribal life. Providing transportation for children who live far away from schools. Camps and Nutrition Awareness Programs should be developed tailored to the traditional diet and food patterns of tribal communities. Teach about healthy foods that tribes find and grow in their areas easily. The villages should be connected with better roads and internet where possible, and it should also help the tribal leaders learn how to work with the government to get help for their people. Malnutrition should be addressed, especially among women and children. Provide market-relevant skill development opportunities that enable tribal youth to generate income within their communities or in wider job markets. We suggest that access to essential medical services in tribal areas should be expanded, with training for healthcare personnel to understand traditional practices and build trust.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, India's engagement with the SDGs exemplifies a nation determined to create a better future for its citizens and the planet. India's tribal communities hold immense potential to contribute to the nation's sustainable development journey. India can move towards a more inclusive and equitable future by acknowledging their unique needs, respecting their rights, and harnessing their traditional knowledge systems. The true goal isn't just ticking boxes on SDG targets but promoting a shift in power dynamics. Tribal communities should be seen as capable and equal partners, their wisdom essential for balanced, sustainable development. By strategically aligning the SDGs with tribal development efforts, India can empower its tribal communities to become active agents of positive change, not just beneficiaries. This collaborative

approach, characterized by sensitivity, inclusivity, and respect, is crucial to ensure that no one is left behind on the path towards a sustainable and prosperous future for all.