

## Reclaiming Development: Tribal Co-Authorship in a Decolonial Indian Framework

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### Abstract

India's tribal policy landscape is defined by a stark contradiction: an unprecedented proliferation of targeted missions (PM JANMAN, Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan, PVTG Development Mission) coexists with enduring realities of land dispossession, cultural erasure, and eroded autonomy. This study moves beyond the isolation–assimilation–integration trilogy and advances a fourth, decolonial paradigm—tribal communities as co-authors and knowledge-holders, not beneficiaries, of India's developmental and ecological futures.

Using a mixed-method, four-zone (Central, Western, Southern, North-East) design and two original analytical tools—the Cultural Continuity Index and Autonomy Perception Scale—the study finds that tribal conceptions of “development” centre on secure land relations, linguistic and ritual continuity, and meaningful self-rule, rather than infrastructure and welfare provisioning. Persistent PESA (1996) and FRA (2006) implementation failures, the cultural illiteracy of major missions, and the rapid erosion of indigenous epistemologies expose a deeper epistemic rupture between state developmentalism and community worldviews.

The paper proposes a transformative blueprint: restoration of Gram Sabha sovereignty; integration of indigenous pedagogy, ecological knowledge, and traditional medicine into public systems; tribal-led digital and data ecosystems; and statutory recognition of community intellectual property. A development model that places tribal worldviews at its epistemic core—rather than at its administrative margins—is essential for achieving a future that is culturally just, ecologically grounded, and genuinely decolonial.

**Keywords:** Tribal autonomy, indigenous epistemology, decolonial development, Cultural Continuity Index, PESA–FRA implementation gap, Gram Sabha sovereignty, PM JANMAN, PVTG Mission, cultural continuity.

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### Introduction

Tribal development in India has historically been shaped by competing policy philosophies that seek to balance state-led modernization with the distinctive socio-cultural worlds of indigenous communities. At the heart of these debates lies the status of **Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)**—encompassing ecological wisdom, healing practices, oral traditions, community jurisprudence, and governance models that have sustained tribal societies for generations. Recent national initiatives such as the **PVTG Mission**, **PM JANMAN**, and the **Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DAJGUA)** signal a renewed policy emphasis on tribal inclusion and welfare. Simultaneously, constitutional provisions under the **Fifth and Sixth Schedules**, along with landmark legislations such as the **PESA Act (1996)** and the **Forest Rights Act (2006)**, attempt to institutionalize **tribal autonomy**, strengthen **decentralised governance**, and safeguard **cultural continuity** through legally protected land and decision-making rights. Yet, despite this normative architecture, tribal communities continue to face entrenched structural challenges. **Land alienation**, extractive development projects, and the systematic weakening of indigenous institutions have produced forms of **identity erosion** in which dominant administrative, cultural, and market logics overshadow tribal epistemic traditions. The resulting marginalisation of **tribal epistemology**—often dismissed as non-modern or unscientific—reveals the deeper power asymmetries embedded within mainstream development discourse.

Contemporary welfare policies increasingly advocate for **holistic and community-rooted approaches** that foreground **sustainable livelihoods**, recognizing that tribal communities are not merely vulnerable populations but **stewards of biodiverse landscapes** and practitioners of complex, place-based ecological knowledge. The growing emphasis on **participatory development** reflects an important shift: meaningful tribal development requires tribal leadership at every stage—planning, monitoring, governance, and evaluation. At the same time, India's rapid digital expansion has introduced new imperatives of **digital inclusion** in tribal areas—not only to enable service delivery but also to strengthen community governance, enhance educational access, preserve cultural knowledge, and support entrepreneurship through tribal-led digital ecosystems.

Against this backdrop, the long genealogy of **tribal resistance movements**—from anti-colonial uprisings to contemporary rights-based mobilisations—remains central to the discourse on justice and autonomy. These movements reaffirm that tribal struggles are fundamentally about **land security, cultural survival, epistemic dignity, and political empowerment**, not merely developmental

deficits. The convergence of persistent barriers and emerging opportunities underscores the need to re-examine how policy frameworks, community knowledge systems, and governance reforms can align to create equitable futures for tribal communities. This study contributes to this evolving field by offering an **integrated, multi-dimensional analysis** that brings together legal frameworks, state missions, indigenous epistemology, and community aspirations within a unified conceptual lens. It addresses significant gaps by synthesizing dispersed scholarship on **tribal autonomy, digital inclusion, livelihood sustainability, and ecosystem stewardship**, while empirically assessing the effectiveness of programmes such as **PM JANMAN, PVTG Mission, and DAJGUA**. By foregrounding **Indigenous Knowledge Systems** and **tribal epistemology**, the study challenges the developmental mainstream and proposes a more culturally grounded framework for understanding tribal well-being. It shows that despite constitutional safeguards, structural barriers—especially land dispossession, weakened decentralised governance, and identity erosion—continue to shape lived realities. Ultimately, the research reframes Tribal Development Approaches not as welfare-driven interventions but as pathways toward **self-determined development, ecological justice, and culturally anchored governance**.

### Conceptual Frame

The classical policymaking triad has long governed India's approach to tribal communities:

- **Isolation (Elwin)** – morally sympathetic yet ultimately unsustainable in a transforming world.
- **Assimilation (Ghurye)** – a civilizational project that erases cultural distinctiveness and amounts to epistemic and cultural violence.
- **Integration (Nehru)** – the dominant paradigm, yet one that raises the fundamental question: *integration into whose culture, on whose terms, and with what losses?*

We propose a fourth, decolonial paradigm: **Co-Authorship**

Co-authorship positions tribal communities not as subjects of state benevolence but as **producers of knowledge, shapers of institutions, and co-designers of development pathways**. In this paradigm, the state's role shifts from **controller** or even **enabler** to **ally and learner**. Co-authorship honours tribal epistemologies, centres community sovereignty, and seeks to rebuild state-tribe relations on principles of reciprocity, cultural dignity, and shared stewardship of ecological futures.

### Literature Review

• **Evolution of Tribal Development Approaches in India:** Scholarly work on tribal development traces a long trajectory shaped by competing philosophical stances. Elwin's isolationist model viewed tribal communities as culturally autonomous societies requiring protection from exploitative external forces. In contrast, Ghurye's assimilation framework conceptualised tribes as backward sections of Hindu society, advocating cultural absorption into mainstream norms. Nehru's integration model, which became the dominant post-independence approach, sought a middle path—modernisation without forced assimilation—but critics note that integration often occurred on terms defined by the state, not by tribal communities. Recent scholarship (Xaxa, 2019; Baviskar, 2021) critiques these paradigms for ignoring tribal agency and for promoting developmentalism that undermines self-governance systems. Emerging literature therefore calls for paradigms rooted in autonomy, cultural dignity, and community rights, signalling a shift toward decolonial approaches.

• **Constitutional and Legal Frameworks for Tribal Autonomy:** Research consistently affirms that the Fifth and Sixth Schedules were designed to institutionalise tribal self-governance through autonomy in land, culture, and customary institutions. Studies on the PESA Act (1996) highlight its radical promise: empowering Gram Sabhas with decision-making authority over natural resources, land alienation, and local governance. Yet, empirical evaluations (Sundar, 2018; Sharma, 2020) underline chronic implementation failures—ranging from bureaucratic resistance to fragmented state notifications that dilute Gram Sabha powers. Similarly, scholarship on the Forest Rights Act (2006) reveals a persistent gap between legal intent and field realities. While FRA sought to correct historical injustices and recognise community forest rights, several authors (Rai, 2022; Kumar & Kashyap, 2017) show that procedural hurdles, uneven state capacity, and political economies of forests restrict its transformative potential. These gaps reflect broader tensions between state-centric development and community-centric autonomy.

• **Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Tribal Epistemology:** Extensive scholarship highlights the richness and sophistication of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, including traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), collective forest management, healing traditions, oral jurisprudence, and community-based dispute resolution. Anthropologists (Gadgil & Guha, 2020; Berkes, 2012) demonstrate that tribal ecological knowledge is not merely cultural heritage but a functional ecological science, essential for biodiversity conservation and climate resilience. However, scholars warn of accelerating epistemic erosion due to dominant schooling systems, market integration, and policy blindness toward non-Western knowledge. Tribal epistemologies are frequently labelled “non-modern,” leading to their marginalisation in education, forest management, and health systems. Recent literature urges the reinsertion of IKS into mainstream governance, positioning tribal knowledge-holders as co-producers of sustainable development models.

• **Land Alienation, Identity Erosion, and Resource Dispossession:** A large body of work documents how land alienation—driven by mining, infrastructure projects, displacement, and extractive economic policies—lies at the heart of tribal marginalisation. Scholars such as Felix Padel, Walter Fernandes, and Amita Baviskar argue that land dispossession is not incidental but systemic, stemming from the state's conception of forests and mineral-rich regions as economic frontiers. Studies also show that land loss triggers cascading effects: cultural dislocation, livelihood collapse, breakdown of clan-based governance, and identity fragmentation. Complementary literature in political ecology emphasises that tribal territories are often resource-rich but governance-poor, with

development-induced displacement as a primary driver of cultural and linguistic erosion. These analyses strengthen the argument that secure land tenure is foundational to tribal well-being.

• **Tribal Livelihoods, Sustainable Development, and Ecosystem Stewardship:** Scholarship on tribal livelihoods highlights their deep interdependence with forests, rivers, and agro-ecological cycles. Researchers argue that tribal subsistence systems—based on shifting cultivation, forest gathering, pastoralism, and small-scale agriculture—are ecologically adaptive and climate-resilient. Studies from Odisha, Jharkhand, and North-East India demonstrate that tribal stewardship of forests often outperforms state-managed conservation models in biodiversity protection. Contemporary literature critiques development models that push tribes into low-wage labour markets, arguing for livelihood approaches centred on non-timber forest products (NTFPs), community forest enterprises, and indigenous value chains. This body of work supports a shift from welfare-driven livelihoods toward rights-based, ecosystem-aligned economic models.

• **Digital Inclusion and Tribal Societies:** Digital inclusion literature highlights two parallel trends: The transformative potential of ICTs in remote tribal areas and The risk of new digital inequities. Studies show that digital connectivity strengthens governance transparency, educational access, and youth entrepreneurship. However, scholars caution against techno-centric inclusion models that ignore linguistic barriers, digital literacy gaps, or content not aligned to tribal cultural contexts. Emerging research emphasises the need for tribal-led digital ecosystems, including digital archiving of oral traditions, e-governance in Gram Sabhas, and digital markets for tribal enterprises.

• **Participatory Development and Governance:** Participatory development has become a central theme in recent scholarship, with strong evidence that community-led planning improves programme outcomes. However, literature reveals that participation often remains procedural rather than substantive, especially in tribal areas. Studies on Gram Sabhas show tokenistic consultations dominated by bureaucratic interests. Participatory frameworks falter when not grounded in customary law, clan-based leadership, and community deliberation structures that tribes recognise as legitimate. This gap foregrounds the need for co-authored governance, where tribal worldviews shape decision-making processes rather than merely being appended to state programmes.

• **Tribal Resistance, Rights Movements, and Epistemic Justice:** Historical and contemporary scholarship on tribal resistance—from the Santhal and Munda uprisings to contemporary movements for forest rights—highlights the longstanding struggle for land security, cultural survival, and political autonomy. Recent literature situates these movements within frameworks of epistemic justice, emphasising that tribes resist not only material dispossession but the devaluation of their knowledge systems. These movements reveal that tribal communities seek development, but on their own epistemic and cultural terms, not through top-down state prescriptions.

**Gaps Identified in the Literature:** Across these domains, scholarship identifies enduring gaps that this study addresses:

- Fragmented analyses that do not connect legal frameworks, digital inclusion, indigenous knowledge, and governance.
- Limited empirical measures of cultural continuity and autonomy perception, despite their centrality to tribal worldviews.
- Insufficient assessments of recent missions such as PM JANMAN, PVTG Mission, and DAJGUA.
- Weak theorisation of tribal development beyond the classical triad of isolation–assimilation–integration.
- Lack of comprehensive frameworks that integrate tribal epistemology with developmental planning.

These gaps create the conceptual space for a new paradigm—co-authorship—that this research advances.

## Literature Review

The literature on tribal development in India reveals a complex interplay of historical, cultural, ecological, and administrative forces that have shaped policy trajectories over time. Foundational anthropological works by Verrier Elwin, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, and B.K. Roy Burman laid the conceptual basis for understanding tribal societies, highlighting the enduring tension among the paradigms of isolation, assimilation, and integration. Subsequent scholars such as Surjit Sinha, Virginius Xaxa, and Rath expanded these debates, demonstrating how these models informed postcolonial governance. Yet, comparative empirical assessments of the socio-economic and cultural outcomes of these paradigms remain limited, signalling an underexplored research gap.

Parallel literature on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)—notably by Fikret Berkes, P.S. Ramakrishnan, Gadgil, and Guha—foregrounds the ecological rationality, biodiversity stewardship, and oral epistemologies embedded within tribal cultures. Despite UNESCO's global recognition of IKS as a knowledge heritage, its systematic integration into India's environmental governance, education systems, and public health institutions remains fragmented. Recent work argues that Indigenous epistemologies are often marginalised as “non-modern,” despite their coherence, sophistication, and ecological relevance.

Research on Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) by Chaudhuri (2020), Reddy (2017), and N.C. Saxena (2019), supported by UNICEF and MoTA datasets, highlights entrenched multidimensional deprivation encompassing nutrition, livelihoods, and cultural marginalisation. However, longitudinal and comparative evaluations of PVTG interventions are scarce. Policy reviews of programmes such as PM JANMAN, Van Dhan Yojana, and Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DAJGUA) (Rajagopalan, 2023; Singh & Rao, 2022; Thomas, 2024) note administrative innovations but reveal persistent structural challenges, especially weak policy convergence, limited cultural appropriateness, and insufficient community ownership.

Legal scholarship on the Fifth and Sixth Schedules (Sharma, 2008; Datta, 2015; Baruah, 2004) demonstrates that constitutional guarantees of autonomy do not necessarily translate into substantive control. The functioning of Autonomous Councils and Gram Sabhas varies widely across states, often constrained by bureaucratic dominance. Similarly, research on PESA (1996) by Kumar (2010), George & Shah (2015), and Baviskar (2021) reveals major deviations between legislative intent and implementation, driven by state-level rulemaking that dilutes Gram Sabha authority and entrenched extractive interests in resource-rich regions.

The literature on the Forest Rights Act (2006)—including work by Sarin, Kothari, Ghosh, and Bose—demonstrates that ecological conservation can coexist with community rights, but the political economy of forest governance, dominated by forest departments, continues to undermine FRA's transformative potential. Research on cultural preservation by Debi (2018), Kindo (2022), Sharma (2020), and linguist Anvita Abbi highlights the rapid erosion of tribal languages, rituals, and oral traditions. Yet, scholarly tools to systematically measure cultural continuity remain inadequate.

Studies on decentralised governance (Mathew, 2003; Oommen, 2010; TISS, 2018) illustrate the potential of Gram Sabha-centric administration, but also expose constraints including state interference, weak local capacity, and administrative asymmetries. Theoretical contributions to tribal epistemology by Kothari (2016), Punalekar (2019), Dhar (2021), and global anthropologists such as Descola and Viveiros de Castro affirm that Indigenous cosmologies represent coherent knowledge systems. However, their translation into policy, planning, and institutional design remains limited.

Land alienation scholarship (Fernandes, 2007; Rao, 2013; Sundar, 2019) shows displacement creates not only economic disruption but also deep cultural, ecological, and psychological fractures. Research on identity erosion (Mishra, 2017; Sahana, 2020; Kullu, 2022) examines how formal schooling, market migration, and religious transformations reshape tribal self-perception. Evaluations of welfare policy (Xaxa Committee, 2014; Rath, 2018; MoTA reports) underscore policy congestion, weak coordination mechanisms, and persistent implementation gaps.

Analyses of sustainable tribal livelihoods (Kothari & Pathak, 2004; Bhatt & Mehta, 2019; Tewari, 2020; Poffenberger) highlight the resilience of forest-based livelihoods but point to their vulnerability in market-driven development contexts. Research on digital inclusion in tribal regions (SPRF, 2021; Jain & Singh, 2022; Mishra, 2023) identifies infrastructure gaps, linguistic barriers, and cultural misalignment as barriers to meaningful digital participation.

Studies on ecosystem stewardship (Berkas, 2009; Singh, 2017; Chakraborty, 2020; Ostrom) document the effectiveness of community-based resource governance but lack comparative ecological outcome studies across regions with and without formal rights. Meanwhile, literature on tribal resistance movements (Padel, Sundar, Paadhi, Rai) highlights the historical continuity of Indigenous mobilisations but rarely examines how these struggles shape contemporary public policy discourse.

Taken together, this diverse scholarship reveals significant knowledge yet persistent gaps:

- paucity of longitudinal and comparative studies across tribal regions
- limited integration of tribal epistemologies into governance frameworks
- inadequate tools to measure cultural continuity
- weak empirical evaluation of PESA/FRA implementation
- insufficient assessment of new missions (JANMAN, PVTG Mission, DAJGUA)
- fragmented understanding of digital transformation and livelihood transitions

This study directly addresses these gaps by offering an integrated, multi-dimensional framework that brings together legal analysis, Indigenous epistemologies, ecological governance, cultural continuity metrics, and community perceptions of autonomy across four tribal regions in India.

## Methodology

○ **Research Design:** The study adopts a **convergent mixed-methods design** integrating qualitative ethnography with quantitative assessment tools to capture the multidimensional nature of tribal development. This design supports the paper's theoretical stance that tribal development must be analysed through both **lived experience** and **structural indicators**, and helps overcome the limitations of single-method studies prevalent in existing literature.

○ **Sampling Framework:** To represent India's tribal diversity, the study employs a **four-zone stratified sampling approach**, covering **Central India – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Western India – Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Southern India – Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, North-East India – Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh**

**Sample Composition: 12 tribal communities**, selected based on:

- ecological context (forest, hill, island, plains)



- socio-political status (PVTG / non-PVTG)
- autonomy frameworks (Fifth Schedule, Sixth Schedule, non-Schedule areas)

**Participants:** A total of **640 respondents**:

- 400 tribal community members (random sampling within villages)
- 80 tribal leaders/Gram Sabha members
- 60 frontline administrators (forest, revenue, tribal welfare)
- 40 practitioners (IKS scholars, healers, artisans)
- 60 NGO/CSO representatives

**Data Collection Instruments**

- **Cultural Continuity Index (CCI)** : A new 25-item index developed to measure the degree of cultural retention and erosion across dimensions such as:
  - language use
  - rituals and festivals
  - ecological knowledge
  - customary governance
  - household transmission of traditions
  - food and medicinal practices
  - relationship with land and sacred spaces

Responses use a **5-point Likert scale**, producing a composite score indicating cultural continuity.

- **Autonomy Perception Scale (APS)**: A 20-item scale measuring perceptions of:
  - control over land and resources
  - effectiveness of Gram Sabha
  - trust in state institutions
  - experience with PESA/FRA
  - ability to resist extractive interventions
  - cultural decision-making power

Both instruments were validated through:

- **Expert review** (IKS researchers, anthropologists)
- **Pilot test** (n = 60, Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.82$ )
- **Qualitative Data**: Data were collected through:
  - **32 ethnographic interviews** (narratives, life histories)
  - **8 village immersion visits**
  - **Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)** tools
  - **Focus group discussions** (n = 16 groups)
  - **Field observation diaries**
  - **Review of community charters, customary codes, and sacred landscape maps**

**Data Analysis**

- **Quantitative Analysis**: Performed using SPSS and R:
  - **Descriptive Statistics** (mean, SD, frequency of CCI & APS items)
  - **Zone-wise comparative analysis** (ANOVA)
  - **Correlation analysis** between CCI, APS, and development indicators
  - **Regression modelling** to identify predictors of cultural continuity
  - **Cluster analysis** to categorise communities by autonomy level
- **Qualitative Analysis**: A **constructivist grounded theory** approach was adopted:
  - open coding of transcripts
  - generation of axial categories (e.g., state-control, ecological belonging, ritual erosion)
  - selective coding to develop explanatory models

Themes were validated through:

- member-checking in communities
- triangulation with quantitative findings

- cross-zone comparison of narrative patterns
- **Conceptual Anchors:** The methodology is informed by:
  - **Decolonial research ethics** (Tuhiwai Smith)
  - **Indigenous Research Paradigms** (Chilisa, Kovach)
  - **IKS participatory approaches** (Berkes, Ostrom)
  - **Community-based governance frameworks** (PESA, FRA)

This ensures the study does not treat tribal people as data subjects but as **knowledge partners**.

### Data Findings

This section presents the integrated quantitative and qualitative findings derived from household surveys (n = 400), CCI and APS scores, ethnographic interviews, FGDs, PRA exercises, and key informant inputs across the four zones. The findings reveal deep continuity in tribal worldviews but persistent gaps between state-led development priorities and community-defined well-being.

- Cultural Continuity: Patterns Across Zones

**Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) Scores :** The mean CCI across zones shows significant variation:

Zone	Mean CCI Score (0–100)	Interpretation
Central	61.4	Moderate continuity with stress on land & language
Western	55.2	High erosion due to migration, displacement, urban contact
Southern	73.6	Strong continuity supported by ritual traditions and matrilineal structures in some groups
North-East	79.8	Highest continuity due to autonomous councils, linguistic vitality & community governance

Cultural continuity correlates strongly with the **presence of autonomous governance**, linguistic retention, and **secure access to forests**.

➤ **Autonomy and Governance: APS Findings**

- **Autonomy Perception Scale (APS) Scores**

Zone	Mean APS Score (0–100)	Interpretation
Central	48.1	Weak autonomy; strong interference by forest & revenue departments
Western	44.9	Lowest autonomy; high land alienation & mining pressures
Southern	59.3	Moderate autonomy; functional Gram Sabhas in pockets
North-East	72.5	Strong autonomy under Sixth Schedule institutions

Substantive autonomy is strongest where **constitutional protection is backed by administrative compliance**. APS is lowest where extractive economies dominate.

➤ **Land, Livelihood and Resource Relations**

- **Land Security:**

- **62%** of households reported *insecure* land tenure or pending FRA claims.
- **Western zone** had the highest land displacement (mining, industry).
- **North-East** reported minimal displacement due to customary land ownership.

- **Livelihood Patterns**

- **73%** depend on forests for >40% of household income (fuelwood, MFP, grazing).
- Van Dhan Yojana is known to **only 28%** of respondents; uptake remains low.
- Agriculture in Central India is increasingly vulnerable to climate impacts.

Tribal livelihood resilience is directly linked to **forest access + customary land rights**, not welfare schemes.

○ **Effectiveness of PESA & FRA:** PESA Implementation Gaps: Only 21% of respondents reported Gram Sabhas having actual decision-making power. Forest Department dominance persists in 72% of PESA villages. Gram Sabha resolutions were overridden or ignored in 53% of cases analyzed.

○ **FRA Implementation:** Individual forest rights: 58% rejected/pending, Community forest rights: Only 14% fully recognized, Central zone shows highest conflict with Forest Department regarding CFR claims.

FRA and PESA continue to be structurally diluted through bureaucratic resistance and extractive interests.

➤ Identity, Language & Cultural Erosion

• **Language Use:** 41% of tribal youth prefer dominant regional languages. Language erosion highest among migrant groups (Western belt). “Ritual language use” remains strong in North-East and Southern communities.

• **Ritual and Knowledge Systems: Traditional medical knowledge** is actively practiced in only 38% of surveyed households. SHGs and local schools rarely incorporate indigenous pedagogy. Education, migration, and religious transformation are primary drivers of identity erosion.

➤ Digital Inclusion and Exclusion

• **Access & Use: Smartphone access:** 58%, **Internet access:** 36%, **Digital literacy:** Only 28%, Government app usage (JANMAN, health, agriculture): **under 20%**

• **Digital Barriers Identified:** language mismatch, low trust in online systems, poor connectivity in forest interiors, lack of culturally contextual content

• Digital inclusion requires **tribal-led** design of apps, content, and training.

• **Administrative and Policy Convergence:** KIIs show: PM JANMAN is rated “**administratively efficient but culturally narrow.**” DAJGUA shows promise where **Gram Sabhas are empowered**, otherwise remains extractive. PVTG Mission suffers from “mission overload” and weak cultural sensitivity.

• **Community Worldviews and Co-Authorship Insights: Ethnographic narratives reveal that tribal well-being is defined by: relationship with land (not property but kinship), ritual time (not economic time), forest reciprocity (not resource extraction), collective decision-making (not bureaucratic files), ecological balance (not GDP growth)**

Across all zones, the strongest recurring theme was:

“**We do not want welfare; we want our voice.**”

This affirms the core argument that **co-authorship**, not welfare, defines tribal aspirations.

## Interpretations

The empirical patterns emerging from the four-zone dataset reveal that the Indian state and tribal communities operate from **two different ontological premises**: the state interprets development as infrastructure expansion, while tribal citizens interpret it as continuity of land, culture, and autonomy. This epistemic mismatch is the central reason behind the persistent implementation failures of PESA, FRA, and current tribal welfare missions.

1. Development is interpreted as cultural continuity, not material provisioning

Across all four zones, the **Cultural Continuity Index (CCI)** shows that tribal participants consistently associate development with:

- Secure land tenure
- Protection of mother tongue
- Continuity of rituals, ecological stewardship, and customary norms
- Control over forests and commons
- Intergenerational knowledge transfer

Even communities receiving significant welfare interventions (housing, rations, schemes) reported **low CCI scores** when cultural practices were disrupted. This indicates that state programmes, even when resource-intensive, do not translate into a feeling of “being developed” unless they protect identity and epistemic selfhood.

## Interpretation

Tribal well-being is rooted in *being able to remain oneself*, not *becoming someone else*. Development indicators must therefore incorporate cultural rights and ecological relationship, not just income and infrastructure.

2. Gram Sabha sovereignty remains symbolic, not substantive

The **Autonomy Perception Scale (APS)** results show a wide autonomy deficit, especially in Central and Western zones where PESA is legally applicable but rarely operationalized. Respondents reported:

- Interference of line departments in Gram Sabha decisions
- Top-down planning structures (e.g., PM JANMAN)
- Absence of control over minor minerals, water sources, or forest produce

- Parallel power exercised by political intermediaries and contractors

Even North-Eastern Autonomous Councils showed mixed autonomy, because developmental spending tends to bypass traditional institutions.

## Interpretation

Legal recognition without administrative restructuring results in “autonomy on paper, dependence in practice.” Tribal governance remains subordinated to bureaucratic mandates, undermining the spirit of self-rule.

### 3. Welfare programmes do not translate into empowerment

Correlations between welfare access and autonomy perception show that **higher welfare intensity does not improve community agency**. In many cases:

- More schemes → more external dependence
- Missions designed without Gram Sabha consultation → lower trust
- Fragmented schemes → higher administrative burden on Gram Sevaks and tribal families
- Emphasis on targets rather than contextual needs → mismatch between what is delivered and what is desired

Schemes like PM JANMAN and PVTG Development Mission are appreciated for visibility and speed but perceived as culturally detached.

## Interpretation:

The welfare model, while important, is structurally incapable of producing empowerment unless accompanied by rights-based, community-led decision-making.

### 4. Land and forest rights determine every other indicator

Zones with stronger FRA implementation (parts of Kerala, Odisha, and Maharashtra) displayed:

- Higher CCI
- Higher APS
- Lower distress migration
- Higher participation in traditional governance

Whereas states with weak FRA delivery showed:

- Low trust in state institutions
- High cultural disruption
- Higher conflicts, displacement, and ecological degradation

## Interpretation:

Land is not an economic asset for tribal societies; it is a cultural, cosmological, and ecological anchor. Development without land justice cannot produce positive outcomes.

### 5. Tribal epistemologies are in decline, and policy frameworks remain epistemically blind

Across zones, respondents reported:

- Diminishing traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)
- Weakening of language transmission to younger generations
- Limited representation of indigenous health, pedagogy, and jurisprudence in public systems

Government programmes rarely incorporate:

- Indigenous worldviews of wellness
- Ecological indicators of forest health
- Elements of tribal jurisprudence
- Community intellectual property rights

## Interpretation

The erosion of indigenous epistemologies is not accidental—it's a systemic outcome of policies that assume tribal knowledge is “traditional” rather than contemporary, dynamic, and valid.

### 6. Digital engagements have potential but are not tribal-led

While digital adoption has increased, especially in South and North-East zones, communities reported:

- Digital services are not in local languages



- Platforms do not capture indigenous knowledge or local governance
- Most digital systems replicate top-down bureaucratic structures

## Interpretation

Digital inclusion without digital sovereignty reinforces dependency instead of empowerment.

7. The aspiration is not assimilation but co-creation

Across samples, tribal citizens expressed a desire *neither to remain isolated nor to be assimilated*. Instead, they want:

- Representation in designing development pathways
- Recognition of their ecological expertise
- Respect for their land-community relationship
- Partnership in policy and governance

## Interpretation

This reflects a demand for **co-authorship** — a paradigm where tribal communities shape the future of development, rather than being passive receivers.

## Policy Recommendations

- **Make Gram Sabha Sovereignty Operational, Not Symbolic:** Amend state-level PESA rules to ensure **Gram Sabha consent overrides departmental approvals**. Transfer control over **minor forest produce, water sources, local minerals, and village-level revenues** to Gram Sabhas. De-bureaucratize planning: mandatory **bottom-up development plans** starting at habitation/hamlet level.
- **Strengthen Land and Forest Rights as the Core of Development:** Fast-track individual and community forest rights under FRA using GIS mapping, mobile tribunals, and independent verification.
- Recognize **unbroken customary territories**, especially in PVTG regions: Create legal protections against: land banks, speculative acquisitions, diversion under CAMPA and mining.
- **Establish Indigenous Knowledge Integration Units in Education & Health:** Embed **tribal ecological knowledge (TEK)**, local farming systems, and artisan knowledge in school curricula.
- Create **Tribal Traditional Medicine Clinics** integrated with public health systems.
- Support transmission of rituals, songs, and mother tongues through community-led cultural centres and digital repositories.
- **Institutionalize Community Intellectual Property Rights (C-IPR):** Develop a national legal framework protecting: medicinal knowledge, seeds and landraces, cultural expressions, sacred landscapes
- Mandate benefit-sharing agreements for research, bioprospecting, or commercialization.
- **Build Tribal-Led Digital Ecosystems:** Create mobile-first digital platforms in local languages for governance (e-Gram Sabha), land records, health advisories, learning, markets for forest produce. Ensure community ownership of servers, data, and content. Train youth as **Digital Community Fellows**.
- **Redesign Welfare Schemes with Cultural Sensitivity:** All missions must begin with **Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA)**, similar to Environmental Impact Assessments. Incorporate local materials, traditional architecture, and climate-sensitive designs in housing. Replace uniform scheme templates with **context-specific tribal livelihood bundles**.
- **Promote Community-Owned Enterprises (COEs):** Support cooperative or producer-company models in MFP processing, handicrafts, and sustainable tourism. Provide working capital, technical training, and market linkage **without private contractor dominance**. Build tribal entrepreneurship hubs within ITDP/ATDP areas.
- **Ensure FPIC (Free, Prior, Informed Consent) as a Non-Negotiable Norm:** Make FPIC mandatory before any land acquisition, mining lease, forest diversion, mega-project. Include independent observers, women's groups, and youth in decision-making.
- **Revitalize Language and Cultural Ecosystems:** Establish Language Resource Centres for every tribe with <1 lakh speakers. Convert folk artists, healers, and ritual specialists into **Community Resource Fellows** with honoraria. Digitize oral histories and heritage using participatory ethnography.
- **Create a National Council for Tribal Knowledge & Decolonial Development:** Advise ministries on tribal autonomy, epistemic justice, and ecological governance. Audit missions for cultural sensitivity and autonomy impact. Serve as a repository of case studies, innovations, and tribal-led solutions.

## Conclusion

- The study demonstrates that India's tribal development trajectory is fundamentally constrained by an epistemic disjuncture between state institutions and indigenous worldviews. While recent initiatives—PM JANMAN, PVTG Development Mission, and targeted livelihood schemes—signal unprecedented political attention, they remain embedded in a welfare-centric and infrastructure-heavy model that inadequately recognizes the cultural, ecological, and self-governance foundations of tribal well-being.
- Empirical findings across the four zones consistently show that tribal communities define development not through material provisioning alone but through **cultural continuity, land security, linguistic vitality, ecological relationship, and autonomy**. The

persistent implementation gaps in PESA and FRA, combined with the fragility of indigenous epistemologies, indicate that the state continues to operate from a top-down developmentalist logic. As a result, autonomy becomes symbolic, and welfare becomes dependency.

➤ This research therefore calls for a paradigmatic shift—from isolation/assimilation/integration models to a **co-authorship framework**, where tribal communities are recognized as equal partners and knowledge-holders in designing India's developmental and ecological future. This includes substantive Gram Sabha sovereignty, recognition of indigenous intellectual property, integration of tribal health and pedagogy systems, and the creation of tribal-led digital ecosystems.

➤ Development can be culturally just only when **tribal worldviews move from the margins to the foundation**. And development can be ecologically sustainable only when **indigenous ecological knowledge is treated as contemporary and authoritative**, not traditional and peripheral.

A decolonial, co-authored approach is therefore not only a moral imperative but a strategic national necessity in an era of climate urgencies, biodiversity loss, and socio-cultural destabilization.

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