



Original Article

Tribal Development and Cultural Transformation in Maharashtra: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the tribal development and cultural transformation in the state of Maharashtra, especially on the socio-economic, educational, administrative and cultural aspects of the change. Tribal communities make up a major chunk of the population of Maharashtra and exhibit immense variation in demographic, economic, linguistic, social and developmental traits. It points to the historical influence of colonial and post-colonial processes and how constitutional provisions, government policies and development programmes have positively impacted the welfare of tribes in the country. It also highlights persisting issues on literacy, health, nutrition, poverty, land and resource rights, political participation and social welfare. Special focus is placed on cultural shifts brought about by education, economic diversification, media, technology and growing interaction with mainstream society. Development has brought about new socio-economic opportunities, but has also led to the loss of indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, cultural practices and identity. The study calls for a balanced perspective to consider both socio-economic progress and protection of cultural rights and community involvement as integral parts of sustainable tribal development. CDD, mother-tongue education, cultural preservation, inclusive governance and effective monitoring can play a role in sustainable and culturally sensitive transformation of the Tribal communities in Maharashtra.

Keywords: Tribal Development, Cultural Transformation, Maharashtra, Scheduled Tribes, Socio-Economic Development, Tribal Culture, Indigenous Identity, Education, Livelihoods, Cultural Preservation.

Introduction

8.6 per cent of the total population of Maharashtra is tribal community. Over the years, the direction of the development of a tribal community has shifted. There are nine Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 225 tribal communities in Maharashtra. The entire districts of Gadchiroli, Chandrapur and Nandurbar, along with three talukas in Nasik and Thane districts and western part of Palghar and Akola districts are included in the tribal area of the state. While the settlement of tribes in Maharashtra is a very complex process, it does offer a window into the present, and the highlights of their cultural achievements and the sum of their stolidities tells of the legacy they have left behind (Pillai, 2010). The state has several major tribes like Bhiil, Maanjhi, Kolam, Mavlaan and Warli, which show a remarkable shift in the cultural characters of the tribal population. The trend is investigated because of the concern of tribal peoples' intrinsic right to retain cultural identity while being pushed towards the mainstream development. Openness to cultural change is neither good nor bad, but for many anthropologists, the on-going cultural change is alarming (S Pradeep Kumar, 2017).

Tribal communities in Maharashtra – Historical Background

The tribes of Maharashtra were subjected to a great deal of change due to colonial contact. There were center-oriented systems in pre-colonial Maharashtra with princely courts and political upheavals affecting the lives of marginalised people like tribals. The Maratha Empire impacted upon various classes of society in different ways and independent political units, which sometimes worked together, retained significant autonomy. Even though there were times when tribes and castes got incorporated into pre-colonial Maharashtrian society, it remained diverse (Kumar, 2017). An internal tribal contact through the Sahyadri Hill and the use of communication channels like forest paths and rivers with the adjoining areas like Chhattisgarh and Gujarat continued with minor trading routes between Maharashtra and the rest of the Deccan region.

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Collective backwardness and sense of limited tribal contribution to the situation prior to colonial contact and the broader resilience of such a situation is evident in contacts by British with the Mundas, Korkus and “Hinduization” ethos from Elphinstone (1860s-70s). At independence, ecclesiastical values and practices from 1860 onwards persist among tribals. Tribals had to encounter with three waves of contact, one around 2000 B.C. with migration, a second from 2000 B.C. to 200 B.C. with foreign elements such as Greeks, Parthians, Scythians and another one in 8-9th century A.D. with rise and fall of different Central Asian Rulers (S Pradeep Kumar, 2017).

Demographic and Socioeconomic Profiles

There is a large socio-economic and demographic diversity of the tribal communities in Maharashtra (Pillai, 2010). These are just some of the indicators that further show this complex picture: population growth, literacy rates, employment, income and overall standard of living. The tribal community in Maharashtra has seen significant growth in its numbers recently but it still has a long way to catch up with the average performance of the State in various aspects. There is a systematic stratification among tribal groups, regions, and gender, which results in the ongoing inequality and multiple facets of deprivation, including health deprivation. Tribal development is unique and influenced by factors that make Maharashtra a special State, making it imperative to continuously monitor and make policy interventions (Kumari et al., 2018).

The tribal population in Maharashtra increased by 19.2 per cent from 8.59 million in 2001 to 10.24 million in 2011. The State's population, on the other hand, increased at a relatively low rate of 15.99 percent during the same period. As a result, the tribal population as a percentage of the total population increased from 8.6% in 2011 to 9.5% in 2016. Since 1971 the Decadal Growth Rate (DGR) has been on a rise and showing highest ever growth for the State in the 2011 Census. When these trends are mapped out, there is a significant difference among tribal groups, districts, between urban and rural areas, and between males and females.

Policy Framework and Governance Mechanisms

The Constitution of India broadened the scope of the 5th Schedule to include culturally distinct tribal communities and castes, and promulgated various protective provisions for such communities and a broadly defined “Scheduled Tribes” category. The socio-economic and political conditions of these communities, unfortunately, differ considerably in respects such as socio-economic conditions, cultural specifics, political status, and overall development. Maharashtra has a relatively lower level of development of tribal areas compared to the national average, but policy initiatives by the Government of India cover measures for the socio-economic development of Scheduled Tribes (Akta, 2009). Following steps have been taken by the Government of Maharashtra with respect to socio-economic development of Scheduled Tribes since 1960, the year in which the state came into existence (Kumar Singh, 2008).

Elucidation of the broad parameters in terms of culture and economy of Maharashtra has raised essential questions about tribal development. It is considered necessary to take account of cultural transformation, such as the loss of indigenous identity and the dilution of ownership of traditional knowledge on one hand, and income and livelihoods on the other.

1. Centrally Sponsored Schemes and State Initiatives

The Government of India and Government of Maharashtra have introduced a number of schemes and initiatives addressing socioeconomic development and welfare of Scheduled Tribes. These are related to the development of education, healthcare, housing, jobs, living, infrastructure and social security in tribal regions. Additional focus also on skill development, agricultural development and sustainable use of natural resources.

The development programmes for tribal communities have been introduced since formation of Maharashtra State in 1960 at the state level. The programmes aim to address disparities across the region, access to basic services, and the socioeconomic empowerment of tribal people. But successful operation of these schemes relies heavily on the implementation, community involvement, institutional capabilities and monitoring.

2. Legal Rights and Constitutional Provisions

The constitution of India offers a number of safeguards for the protection and development of Scheduled Tribes. The Fifth Schedule is a special administrative provision for Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes and the constitution includes several provisions that protect their educational, economic, social and political needs.

Legal and constitutional protections should shield tribal communities from exploitation, maintain the sovereignty over their resources and lands, and guarantee their involvement in governance and development initiatives. These provisions are important in Maharashtra as it is the state where tribal communities are affected by issues of land rights, access to natural resources, education, health services and political participation.

Constitutional safeguards and related laws must be put in place and effective if socioeconomic development is to occur without harming the cultural identity and traditional knowledge and rights of tribal communities.

Cultural Transformation – Drivers and Impacts

Tribal development and transformation is not development just for development, the challenge of development is to remove the persistence of poverty and deprivation amongst the tribal communities, enable them to participate in growth and development using the natural resources in their habitats and be an equal partner in national development without losing their unique identity. Taking the above into consideration, the cultural shift of tribal communities can be studied through the following lens—Education, Languages, Economics, Media, Technology and cultural expression.

Education provides opportunities for tribal communities to become aware of and to discuss issues that are important to them in their language(s). There is considerable evidence that tribal children learn better in their native languages, at least in the early years of school, and that the implementation of bilingual education models promotes the advancement and achievement of tribal children. But tribal literacy rate is far behind than the national average as well as than many of the Scheduled Tribes (STs).

1. Education and Language Preservation.

Education plays a key role in tribes' social and cultural change. The greater access to formal education has led to an improvement in tribal people's literacy, skill and social and economic engagement. In other contexts however, and where school is mainly taught through a dominant or mainstream language, education can also have an impact on traditional cultural practices and linguistic identity.

Educating children in their mother tongue, especially in the early stages of schooling can help them learn more effectively. Bilingual and/or multilingual education, therefore, can play a role in improving learning outcomes, and at the same time, indigenous languages can be maintained. Preservation of tribal languages is essential as language is not only a way of communication but it is also a repository of traditional knowledge, cultural values, oral traditions, songs and community history.

Therefore, there is a need to ensure a balance between access to mainstream education and preservation of tribal languages and culture through educational policies. Mother-tongue education, culturally relevant curricula, documentation and community involvement can play a vital role in significant cultural sustainable preservation.

2. Agricultural production diversification and livelihoods

The economic transformation has made a significant impact on the lives of the tribal communities in the State of Maharashtra. Many tribal houses have traditionally relied on agriculture, forest resources, livestock, traditional occupations and other activities that involve natural resources for livelihood. The expansion of education, markets, infrastructure and employment opportunities has slowly facilitated diversification of economic activities.

Economic diversification can open new avenues for livelihoods and decrease the reliance on the traditional livelihoods. Development processes can also raise issues if tribal people are deprived of key resources like land, forests, and other natural resources which are essential for their livelihoods. Hence, sustainable livelihood should be promoted in the context of respecting the rights of the communities over traditional resources in the development programme.

Household incomes can be improved by skill development, sustainable agriculture, forest-based enterprises, self-employment, small-scale industries and community based economic activities. Economic development should not lead to loss of local knowledge and culture; the initiatives should be designed with local participation.

3. Media, Technology and Cultural Expression

Today, with the advent of media and digital technologies, it has come to play a significant role in the cultural shift of the tribal communities. New media such as television, mobile phones, Internet and social media have raised awareness of the tribal people with the society. Such technologies offer educational, communicative, information sharing, employment and other cultural opportunities.

But, the traditional lives, values, languages and cultural practices can also be affected by exposure to mainstream media. When younger generations are more exposed to the mainstream cultural forms, the traditional songs, narratives, festivals, artistic practices and indigenous knowledge may be on the decline over time.

Meanwhile, media and technologies can be a positive tool for the preservation of culture. Oral history, tribal songs, traditional art, festivals, and indigenous knowledge can be documented digitally to pass on knowledge to future generations. A high level of production and sharing of tribal cultural content can build cultural identity and provide tribal communities with access to contemporary society. Therefore, technology must also be considered as a tool for cultural preservation and expression as well as for cultural change.

Development Issues and Constraints

The socio-economic development index of tribal areas of Maharashtra reveals that the condition of tribals has not developed at the desired speed vis-à-vis the overall development. According to Development Report of the State Planning Commission, Maharashtra is 19th in the tribal socio-economic development index among all the development indexes. Literacy is one of the important determinants of tribal development (Pillai, 2010). The overall literacy rate in Maharashtra is 83.1% while it is only 65.3% in the Scheduled Tribes. (According to Census 2011) As per a study of the 2001 Census data, the five tribes of Bhilla, Korku, Koli, Madia and Manda are the most backward and six tribes Dhangar, Gond, Koli, Marda, Miri and Nihal are among the second most backward tribes in Maharashtra, which shows that Maharashtra has tribal people in various stages of socio-economic development (S Pradeep Kumar, 2017).

There are several obstacles that hinder the development of Tribes all across the country and this is no exception to the Maharashtra state. Due to the dualistic development policy, good schemes have not succeeded in having a good result. Schemes are implemented in the spirit of "filling up vacuum from above." Development initiatives and tribes are two separate streams, and tribes are sometimes neglected and considered a "catch-all" category of the political progress agenda. Tribes are not directly involved in decisions of mainstream politics and do not have elected representatives. There are barriers to stake because of poor access to health, nutrition and social welfare. There has not been enough progress to improve access to basic healthcare services and sanitation. As a result, health is still high priority for tribal peoples, especially for maternal-child health. Lack of social protection also contributes to exacerbate their vulnerability.

1. Land Rights and Resource Access.

Tribal communities are highly dependent on land and natural resources for their socioeconomic welfare. Tribal households rely on agriculture, forests and other natural resources for their livelihoods. Restrictions on land and its resources, however, and loss of traditional resource rights still leave tribal people vulnerable and economically insecure.

If development interventions are not designed with traditional resource use systems in mind, tribal communities will be further marginalized. Having secure access to land and/or natural resources, safeguarding traditional livelihoods and engaging local communities in decision-making processes on how resources are managed are therefore key ingredients in sustaining tribal

development. There should be a balance achieved between economic objectives and community rights and cultural identity as outlined in development policies.

2. Health, Nutrition and Social Welfare.

Health and nutrition issues continue to be a problem in tribal areas of Maharashtra. The already huge gaps in access to health, sanitation, nutrition and social welfare services also drive the ongoing socioeconomic disadvantage. The reach of basic health care services and social protection programmes may be problematic for some tribal communities, especially for vulnerable groups.

Maternal and child health has to be given special consideration as poor health and nutrition can have long-term effects on the health of the community. To tackle these challenges, it is necessary to enhance healthcare infrastructure, improve outreach services, be aware and effective in delivering welfare programmes.

Any social welfare measures that are employed should be accessible and responsive to the needs of tribal communities. The capacity of health, nutrition and social protection programmes to reach and impact local communities can benefit from effective coordination between government institutions and local communities.

3. Leadership, Inclusion and Management

The key to sustainable development is effective governance and meaningful involvement of tribal communities. The paper emphasises that tribal communities have been under-represented in mainstream political decision making and development programmes have sometimes been promoted from top to bottom. This can result in loss of community ownership and reduced effectiveness of development interventions.

Enhancing the capacity of administrations at the grassroots can enhance the implementation of tribal development programmes. Increasing the role of tribal communities in planning, implementation and monitoring can facilitate community-driven development that is based on local needs and priorities. Community-based solutions also have a potential to augment social capital, community decision making and local institutions.

Thus, effective governance will include community participation and effective administration. More responsive governance and socioeconomic development can support the protection of tribal cultural identity if there is greater tribal involvement, transparency and monitoring, and evaluation.

Case Studies of Successful Interventions

The goal of a successful intervention is to make the changes permanent by involving local participants, integrating rights and establishing an appropriate governance. Community-based projects foster ownership and collective decision-making in Satpuda chapparia and other areas, fostering social capital, strengthening institutions and decreasing the reliance on external agents. Language revitalization efforts in Pune, Dhule, Thane, and Nashik bring forth language and promote traditional stories and songs, while also helping to document the heritage. Importantly, tribal language promotion is not interpreted as separatism and respect is given to linguistic diversity, with a view towards building wider discourse frameworks (S Pradeep Kumar 2017).

1. Community-Driven Development Projects

Community-driven development is an important approach to achieving sustainable transformation in tribal areas. Community involvement in planning, implementing and decision making can increase community ownership and enhance the effectiveness of development programmes.

Community-oriented projects in tribal areas can be a means of social empowerment, collective decision-making and development of local institutions in Maharashtra. These can foster social capital and minimise over-dependency on external bodies. The involvement of tribal communities in activities is also conducive to the harmonisation of activities with local needs, traditions and available resources.

Therefore community involvement should be integrated in all phases of development in order to achieve sustainable development. In the development of livelihoods, education, natural-resource management and social-welfare programmes, local knowledge and traditional practices should be taken into account.

2. Cultural Preservation Initiatives

The preservation of cultural heritage is a critical aspect of safeguarding the identity and heritage of tribal communities. Indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, folk songs, narratives, artistic traditions, festivals, customs, and other expressions of community are all parts of tribal culture. These cultural practices may be under pressure as a result of rapid socioeconomic change and integration with the main stream society.

Efforts have been made to preserve the culture of tribal communities in Pune, Dhule, Thane and Nashik with activities like promoting tribal languages, documenting tribal narratives and songs and promoting cultural heritage. Initiatives such as these show that the promotion of tribal languages and cultural practices does not have to be interpreted as separatism but is an approach to enhance linguistic diversity and create a more inclusive social environment.

Hence, cultural preservation needs to be included within tribal development policies. Indigenous knowledge documentation, mother-tongue education, traditional arts/crafts promotion and community involvement will help to preserve cultural heritage, while also allowing communities to adapt to their changing socioeconomic contexts.

Prospects for Sustainable Transformation

Transformative measures tend to neglect cultural formation and planning processes. This partial approach may raise concerns among tribes about procedures and processes, thereby affecting socio-economic development. The tribal agenda in Maharashtra therefore, needs to be addressed on the basis of socio-economic aspirations as well as cultural rights and concerns, and in conjunction. Such integration may pose apparent trade-offs for resource allocation and other aspects. However, it also fosters socio-economic opportunities that are conducive to cultural change that is sustainable and desired by numerous tribal communities (Pillai, 2010).

The development process in Maharashtra has been more towards integration of the society and the economy than preservation of unique cultural identity. However, demographic, economic and environmental change are bringing a renewed focus to cultural change. There are compelling motivational, and institutional, implications of rapid processes of change, especially those related to education. They force tribal groups to protect their individual identities and to make their own, to modernise and adapt to new circumstances. Maharashtra's attempt to balance the development goals with the promotion of distinct identities is congruent with the goals stated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples and Universal Declaration of the United Nations (S Pradeep Kumar, 2017).

The rest of the paper builds on the themes of cultural rights, socioeconomic development, inclusion and policy monitoring that are emphasized in the source text, and discusses sustainable tribal transformation.

1. The incorporation of Cultural Rights and Development

In order to achieve sustainable tribal development, cultural rights need to be included as a part of socio-economic development. The economic development programmes may fail to take into account the cultural identity, traditional knowledge, language and practices of tribal communities. This can raise issues around cultural heritage and process rights.

Incorporating cultural and socioeconomic aspirations of tribes into the tribal development agenda of Maharashtra is therefore of equal importance. Planning must take into account the need for Indigenous identity and the need to offer opportunities to Indigenous communities to be included in decisions made about their lives and resources. Cultural integration in development planning can result in an enabling environment where economic development and cultural preservation go hand-in-hand.

2. Social cohesion and inclusive growth

Tribal and non-tribal population social cohesion and socioeconomic disparities can be mitigated only through inclusive growth. Tribal communities should enjoy fair access to education, healthcare, jobs, infrastructure, social security and livelihoods and maintain their unique cultural identity.

The experience of development in Maharashtra shows that blending social and economic integration with cultural diversity is important. Tribal societies are being impacted by rapid changes that affect education, economic development, technology and environmental transitions. Inclusive development should, therefore, allow tribal community to adjust to these changes without losing their cultural identity. This strategy can help strengthen social cohesion, and ensure that tribal communities are active and equal stakeholders in the development process.

3. With monitoring, evaluation, and policy adaptation.

To achieve the goals of tribal development programmes, it is important that there is effective monitoring and evaluation. There is a need to regularly review the socio-economic impact and community participation as well as access to resource of the development initiatives for cultural identity.

Policy implementation should be flexible to the evolving needs of tribal communities. Evaluation can assist in identifying: gaps in programme implementation; differences between tribal groups and regions; and other areas that need further intervention. It is essential that feedback from tribal communities is a key element of this process.

There is scope for the continuous monitoring, evaluation and adaptation of development policies to increase the effectiveness of development programmes and foster a balanced trajectory of socioeconomic development and cultural preservation. This is key to sustainable and inclusive change among the tribal communities of Maharashtra.

Conclusion

About 9% of Maharashtra's people are tribal including the Central Indian Tribal Region. In order to appreciate the tribal development in Maharashtra, one has to undertake a historical study of the formation of various tribes in the state. The colonial legacy has been the main determinant of the status of tribal people today, besides the long-term problems they had prior to independence. But in the post-independence era, the condition of the tribal community and the tribal culture has undergone a lot of changes from the transformation of the governance system, the laws and policies regarding their upliftment and development, to the popular initiatives.

The continuing economic deprivation of tribal communities and their inability to share the fruits of development and welfare measures has to be viewed in the light of culture and cultural transformations in recent times. Their marginalization and deprivation have been mainly due to the loss of cultural integrity. The so called development of the educational, economic and technological aspects have further exacerbated the situation, forcing the tribal communities to accept the language of mainstream society as their medium of communication, and to embrace the culture under the blanket of the mainstream by embracing large-scale changes. To cope with the general pressure of their own culture, the individual tribal groups have gone ahead and taken the initiative of bringing up a few primary (pre-nursery) schools in their tribal mother-tongues for the purpose of bringing their culture back. This is popularly known as 'mother-tongue school' and is being taken up on a priority basis as a part of the educational and welfare measures for tribal development and the assurance of their cultural rights. Ensuring cultural and artistic development is a requirement, since cultural rights of different groups and communities, including tribes, are guaranteed in the Constitution. But, unless the socio-economic situation is improved, giving only assurances of cultural rights can have counterproductive effects as seen in other communities.

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Conflicts of interest

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