

Tribalism and Resistance: Exploring Tribal Movements and Socio-Economic Challenges in Odisha

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Abstract

Tribal communities in Odisha constitute approximately 23% of the state's population and remain socio-economically marginalized despite significant developmental efforts. This paper analyses secondary data from the Odisha Economic Survey (2024–25), the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2022), and the Census of India (2011) to examine disparities in literacy and poverty affecting Scheduled Tribes (STs). It further explores how tribal identity and cultural cohesion shape resistance movements against systemic exclusion. Findings reveal a persistent literacy gap of nearly 14 percentage points between tribal communities and the state average, and multidimensional poverty rates in tribal-majority districts exceeding 35–45%, significantly higher than the state average of 15.7%. Cultural identity emerges as both a unifying and mobilizing force, fuelling diverse forms of resistance, including legal action, protests, and alliances with civil society organizations. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and further research into gender dimensions of tribal resistance.

Keywords: Tribal communities, Odisha, literacy, poverty, resistance movements, tribal identity, secondary data analysis

INTRODUCTION

Odisha, situated in eastern India, possesses one of the highest tribal populations in the country, comprising 62 distinct tribal communities that collectively account for approximately 23% of the state's demographic profile. These communities, including the Santhal, Kondh, Bonda, Juang, Saura, and Munda, are characterized by diverse languages, cultural practices, and profound connections to their ancestral lands and natural resources. Despite the implementation of progressive policies and welfare initiatives in the post-independence period, significant socio-economic disparities persist between tribal groups and the broader population. Indicators such as lower literacy rates—approximately 59% among Scheduled Tribes compared to the state average of 72.9%—along with higher poverty levels, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and the persistent issue of land alienation, continue to undermine the socio-economic advancement and overall well-being of these communities (Odisha Economic Survey, 2024–25; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2022).

Beyond the realm of material deprivation, tribal identity operates as a powerful socio-cultural force, fostering a sense of resilience, solidarity, and agency among these communities. This collective identity has historically underpinned diverse forms of resistance against systemic marginalization, often materializing through protests, legal advocacy, and organized movements aimed at safeguarding cultural traditions, resource rights, and territorial integrity, exemplified by the Dongria Kondh's opposition to mining activities in the Niyamgiri hills. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship has rarely combined updated socio-economic data with nuanced analyses of identity-driven resistance, particularly in the context of the post-pandemic period, which has introduced new challenges such as heightened health vulnerabilities, economic disruptions, and accelerated resource extraction efforts. This lacuna highlights a significant research gap that the present study seeks to address, with the objective of integrating empirical socio-economic insights and a critical understanding of evolving tribal resistance and identity assertion within the contemporary socio-political landscape of Odisha.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. Analyse the extent of socio-economic disparities particularly literacy gaps and poverty levels affecting tribal communities in Odisha based on 2024–25 secondary data. (Look at how tribal communities in Odisha face differences in education and poverty, using data from 2024–25.)

2. Examine how tribal identity and cultural cohesion shape resistance movements in response to these persistent socio-economic challenges in Odisha. (**Explore how tribal identity and strong community bonds lead tribal people in Odisha to fight against ongoing social and economic problems.**)

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a secondary data analysis drawing from multiple reputable sources, including the Odisha Economic Survey 2024–25, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes (2022), and the Census of India (2011). In addition, scholarly works on tribal resistance, such as those by Singh (1982), Fernandes (2007), and Pattanaik (2005), were consulted to provide historical and socio-political context. Descriptive statistical analysis and graphical representations were employed to illustrate disparities in literacy and poverty indicators among tribal communities, enabling a clearer understanding of socio-economic inequalities and patterns of resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on tribal communities in Odisha reflects two interrelated concerns: socio-economic marginalization and identity-driven resistance. Earlier scholarship (Singh, 1982; Fernandes, 2007) emphasizes the long history of tribal disenfranchisement linked to both colonial and post-independence policies, which led to persistent poverty, displacement, and social exclusion.

Pati, 1993; Mohanty, 2001 analyze the impact of state-led development projects, noting that mining and dam construction in mineral-rich districts such as Koraput and Sundargarh have disproportionately affected tribal populations. Scholars argue that the contradiction between “national development” and “tribal survival” has remained unresolved, often producing conflict and resistance.

Guha, 1999; Mishra, 2010 focuses on **resistance movements**, examining how tribal communities mobilize around land rights, forest conservation, and cultural preservation. The Dongria Kondh struggle against bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri Hills is frequently cited as a landmark case of indigenous resistance, combining ecological concerns with cultural identity.

Rao, 2015; Xaxa, 2018 extends this discussion to the political realm, exploring how constitutional safeguards, affirmative action, and the Forest Rights Act have provided both opportunities and challenges for tribal empowerment. However, these studies caution that policy measures often fail in implementation, leaving gaps between legislation and lived realities.

Socio-Economic Disparities.

Census data and economic surveys confirm substantial gaps between tribal and non-tribal populations in Odisha. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2022), Odisha's Scheduled Tribes (STs) have a literacy rate of just 59%, compared to the state average of 72.9%. Tribal-majority districts like Malkangiri, Rayagada, and Kandhamal consistently rank among the poorest regions (Odisha Economic Survey, 2024–25). Fernandes (2007) argues that displacement due to mining and industrial projects has further exacerbated poverty among tribals, pushing them into precarious living conditions.

Tribal Identity and Resistance.

Tribal identity is not merely cultural but political. Singh (1982) documents how tribal movements in India have historically mobilized around cultural symbols, sacred territories, and traditional governance structures. Dash (2018) highlights the Niyamgiri movement in Odisha, where the Dongria Kondh tribe resisted mining on sacred hills, using identity-based claims under constitutional and legal frameworks like the Forest Rights Act. Pattanaik (2005) further emphasizes that such resistance is often rooted in a profound sense of belonging to the land, shaping both the strategies and narratives of tribal protests.

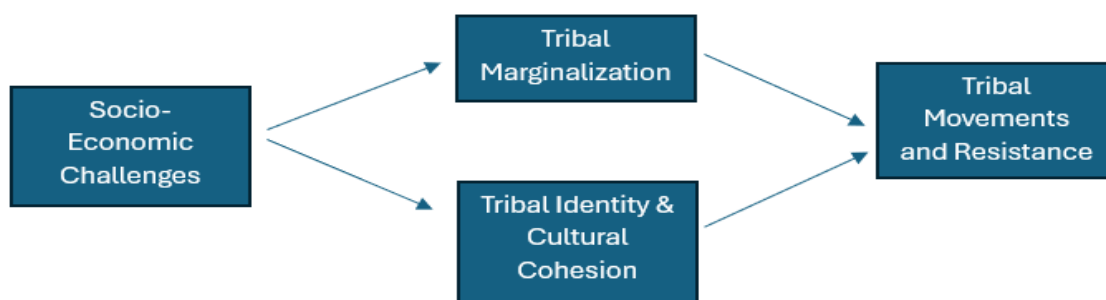
Contemporary Gaps.

Although there is considerable literature on tribal struggles up to the early 2000s, few studies integrate **recent economic data** (2020 onward) with analyses of resistance. Furthermore, gender dynamics within tribal resistance movements remain underexplored, signaling a gap for future research.

This literature underscores that while economic deprivation is a critical issue, cultural identity remains central to how tribal communities perceive and respond to marginalization. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by combining updated socio-economic data with insights into identity-driven resistance.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework posits that socio-economic challenges fuel marginalization, which strengthens tribal identity and leads to resistance movements.



Odisha is home to 62 tribal communities, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), making it one of the most culturally diverse tribal regions in India. Prominent tribes such as the Santhal, Kondh, Bonda, Juang, Saura, Gond, Oraon, and Munda possess distinct languages, customs, and deep connections to the land and forests. These communities have a long history of resistance against oppression and exploitation. Historically, tribal groups played a role in movements like the Paika Rebellion of 1817, which, although broader in scope, gained the support of many tribal groups resisting British colonial rule. The Kondh tribe revolted multiple times in the 19th century to protect their traditions from British interference. The Bonda and Juang tribes, known for their fierce independence, opposed any outside control over their territories. The Santals, though primarily based in Jharkhand, also inspired tribal resistance in Odisha during the Santal Rebellion of 1855–56. In the post-independence period, tribes such as the Dongria Kondh have led protests mining projects, notably resisting the proposed mining in the Niyamgiri hills, a site of spiritual and ecological importance.

Education among Odisha's tribal population has seen gradual improvement but still reflects persistent disparities. According to Census 2011, the tribal literacy rate is approximately 59%, compared to the state average of 72.9%. The situation is more concerning for tribal women, who face additional barriers to education. Language also plays a crucial role in educational challenges, as many tribal children grow up speaking indigenous dialects, which can make schooling in Odia or English more difficult. To address these gaps, the government has established residential institutions such as Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and Ashram Schools. Efforts are also being made to introduce multilingual education at the primary level to enhance comprehension and reduce dropout rates. These initiatives aim to promote inclusive, culturally relevant education that empowers tribal youth and preserves their linguistic heritage. In terms of policy support, tribal communities in Odisha are protected under several constitutional and legal frameworks. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution provides safeguards for tribal areas, while reservations in education and employment help promote social mobility. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 is particularly significant for Odisha's tribes, as it grants them legal rights over forest land and resources, which are central to their livelihoods. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), further empowers Gram Sabhas in tribal regions to manage resources and uphold traditional governance. State-level initiatives such as the Odisha PVTG Empowerment & Livelihoods Improvement Programme (OPELIP) focus on holistic development through sustainable livelihoods, education, health, and infrastructure. Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs) function as key implementation arms for various welfare programs. Additionally, the Development Action Plan for Scheduled Tribes (DAPST) mandates dedicated budget allocations for tribal welfare across departments. Despite these efforts, challenges like land alienation, displacement due to industrial projects, poverty, and cultural erosion remain. Continuous and participatory policy engagement is essential to ensure that development respects tribal identities and secures their rightful place in Odisha's growth story.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Literacy Disparities

Table 1 shows significant differences in literacy rates between Odisha's total population and its Scheduled Tribe communities.

Table 1. Literacy Rates in Odisha (2024–25)

Group	Literacy Rate (%)
Odisha Overall	72.9
Scheduled Tribes (STs)	59.0

Literacy Gap: 13.9 percentage points

Poverty in Tribal Regions

Odisha's **Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)** stands at 15.7%. However, tribal-majority districts show substantially higher MPI figures ranging from 35–45%.

Poverty (MPI) in Odisha (2024–25)

Region	MPI (%)
Odisha Overall	15.7
Tribal-majority Districts	35–45

Among the districts most affected are:

- Malkangiri
- Rayagada
- Kandhamal

Identity and Resistance

Identity plays a pivotal role in shaping tribal resistance. Cultural cohesion manifests in:

- Protection of sacred places (e.g., Niyamgiri Hills)
- Traditional leadership and governance structures
- Spiritual symbols used as rallying points

Resistance movements have evolved from local protests to legal battles under acts like the Forest Rights Act, partnerships with NGOs, and selective use of digital platforms. The Dongria Kondh's resistance against mining projects in Niyamgiri exemplifies identity-driven mobilization (Dash, 2018; Fernandes, 2007).

While tribal women participate actively, gender dimensions remain understudied, suggesting an important direction for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that despite Odisha's overall developmental gains, tribal communities continue to face significant marginalization. Literacy among STs lags the state average by nearly 14 percentage points, and tribal-majority districts exhibit poverty levels more than double the state's MPI average.

Tribal identity emerges as a critical mechanism for resistance. Policymakers must integrate culturally sensitive, gender-inclusive strategies to address literacy gaps, protect tribal lands, and amplify tribal voices in governance.

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