



## Evolving Tribal Identities in India: Regional Diversity, Caste Relations, Religious Politics, and Digital Resistance

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### Abstract

Tribal communities in India have historically experienced exclusion and marginalization, both socially and politically. However, their identities are not fixed or traditional as often assumed. This research argues that tribal identities are actively evolving and are shaped by the intersection of caste structures, regional government policies, religious affiliations, economic conditions, and modern digital platforms. The objective of this study is to explore how historical oppression and contemporary assertion together form new modes of tribal identity and resistance across different regions of India. Using qualitative analysis of secondary literature, the research examines multiple case studies such as caste-based discrimination against the Paniyans and Koragas in South India, the role of Christianity in Mizo tribal nationalism in the Northeast, the uneven development of hill and plain tribes in Andhra Pradesh, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tribal youth. It also highlights how tribal individuals are now using social media and literature to challenge state narratives and reclaim cultural pride.

The findings show that tribal identities are neither uniform nor static. They change across time and place, shaped by local contexts and global influences. While caste and region continue to be sources of exclusion, religion, digital activism, and cultural expression are becoming powerful tools for resistance and identity assertion. The study concludes that any future policy or academic work must recognize the diversity within tribal communities and support their evolving voices.

**Keywords:** Tribal identity, caste dynamics, digitality, regional diversity, empowerment

### Introduction

The identity of tribal communities in India has historically been shaped by a complex interplay of exclusion, marginalization, and forced integration. Though constitutionally recognized and granted Scheduled Tribe status, these communities continue to be situated at the periphery of the Indian socio-political structure. Despite this historical marginalization, tribal identities are far from static. They are constantly reconstituted through a dynamic interface of caste hierarchies, regional policies, religious affiliations, economic crises, and digital activism. This paper explores how the assertion of tribal identity varies across regions and how contemporary identity politics is shaped by both historical oppression and modern tools of resistance.

India's tribal population, which comprises over 8.6% of the total population, has never been a homogeneous entity. Historically, these groups have occupied diverse positions in relation to the caste system. In some regions, like South India, tribes such as the Paniyans and Koragas have been absorbed into caste hierarchies through practices of untouchability and social exclusion, despite their ST classification (Hebbar and Prakash 422). In contrast, in Central India and the Northeast, many Adivasi groups have resisted caste incorporation, asserting distinct ethno-political and religious identities. For instance, the Christianized tribal identity among the Mizos was mobilized during their nationalist movement, as religion became central to their political imagination (Roluahpuia 191). These variations reveal that tribal identities are not only historically contingent but are also regionally constructed through social and political structures.

State policies have also contributed to shaping tribal identities unevenly. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, the divide between hill tribes and plain tribes is not merely geographical but symbolic of different levels of inclusion and access to state resources (Subramanyam 116). While the plain tribes are more integrated into caste-based rural economies, hill tribes and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) remain isolated and economically disenfranchised. Such spatialized exclusion deepens their marginality and influences how they assert their identities politically and culturally. Religion and economic inequality further intersect with tribal identity formation. Conversions to Christianity among tribes have offered a platform to challenge Hindu caste hegemony and assert an alternative collective identity. However, these shifts often provoke backlash and are interpreted through communal lenses, particularly in North and Central India (Roluahpuia 193). Economic crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have disproportionately impacted tribal youth, revealing stark inequalities in access to education, health, and employment, and pushing them into digital spaces for activism and resistance (Kasi and Saha 3).

This paper aims to examine how tribal identities are regionally and socially reconstituted through these intersections. By analyzing tribal communities from various parts of India, this study seeks to answer: How do caste structures, regional policies, and religion influence the assertion or erasure of tribal identities? What role do contemporary crises and digital platforms play in shaping new tribal resistance strategies? The objective is to challenge the essentialist views of tribal identities and highlight their evolving and political nature in contemporary India.

### **Caste and Religion: Unseen Structures Shaping Tribal Identity**

Tribal communities in India are commonly seen as separate from the caste system. However, in reality, caste continues to shape how they are treated and how they understand their identity. Although Scheduled Tribes are legally outside the caste hierarchy, several tribal groups, especially in South India, still face caste-based discrimination. For instance, the Paniyan and Koraga tribes are treated as untouchables not only by dominant caste Hindus but even by more accepted tribal groups (Hebbar and Prakash 421–422). This clearly shows that caste continues to function as a social force even in the context of tribal life.

In response to such exclusion, many tribes have adopted self-isolation as a way to protect their dignity and maintain cultural purity. This isolation is not just physical but also psychological. It is a way of resisting humiliation and asserting control over their identity. Similarly, religion plays a significant role in shaping tribal self-perception and collective mobilisation. In the Northeast, Christianity has helped unify tribal groups and offer them a platform for political assertion. The example of the Mizo community is important here—Christianity gave them not just spiritual guidance but also political strength during the nationalist movement (Roluahpuia 191–193).

However, religious identity can also divide. Tribes with both Christian and non-Christian members often face internal conflicts over political attention and social resources. Thus, both caste and religion operate as double-edged swords—they provide identity and resistance, but also lead to exclusion and division. In the end, caste and religion continue to deeply influence how tribal identities are constructed, negotiated, and transformed in modern India.

### **Uneven Development and Regional Disparities in Tribal Experiences**

India's tribal population lives across very different regions, and this regional diversity leads to very unequal development outcomes. The state's attention and resources often fail to reach hill tribes or those in forested areas. Subramanyam's study in Andhra Pradesh shows that tribes living in remote hill areas are largely left out of government schemes due to their difficult geography, poor infrastructure, and limited political visibility (Subramanyam 116–117). As a result, they lack access to basic amenities such as schools, healthcare, and roads. This creates a cycle of marginalization that shapes how they view the state and their own identity. The other side of this is plain-dwelling tribes who live near mainstream caste villages are relatively better integrated into rural economies. They have better access to public services and more opportunities to interact with government systems. This results in different kinds of political attitudes. While isolated tribes may resist through cultural preservation and silence, more integrated tribes often engage with the state to demand their rights and participate in political processes.

These differences even influence how tribal groups relate to caste society. Tribes with less political power and visibility often face more caste-based exclusion and violence. In contrast, tribes with better access to education and state support may form competitive or collaborative relationships with nearby non-tribal communities. Therefore, it is not enough to treat "tribals" as one homogenous group. Their

experiences and forms of resistance are shaped by specific regional, geographical, and developmental contexts. Understanding this variation is essential for making policies that are inclusive and effective. Regional diversity within tribal India must be recognized as a key factor in identity formation and resistance.

### **Digital Media and Culture as Emerging Tools of Tribal Assertion**

Tribal identity in India is no longer shaped only by physical protest or traditional customs. In recent years, digital media has emerged as a powerful tool for expression, especially among tribal youth. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp allow young people from tribal communities to share their stories, raise awareness, and connect with others across regions. Kasi and Saha observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many tribal youths used digital spaces to talk about their struggles related to online education, unemployment, and poor healthcare access (Kasi and Saha 4). This shift to digital activism marks a new form of resistance that is more visible and far-reaching.

These online platforms help tribal communities control their narratives. Instead of being spoken for by outsiders, they now speak for themselves. They post videos, write blogs, and organise campaigns to share their cultural practices, languages, and political concerns. This self-representation helps challenge stereotypes and gives tribal voices a place in the national conversation. It is a form of modern resistance that combines pride with purpose. Along with digital tools, literature and oral traditions remain important in preserving tribal identity. Books like Kocharethi present life from a tribal perspective and serve as a form of protest against mainstream misrepresentation. Through songs, folktales, and storytelling, tribal communities express their lived realities and assert their identity.

In conclusion, digital media and cultural expression together create a dynamic space for resistance. It is not just about opposing injustice but also about building pride, community, and visibility. This evolution shows that tribal identity is active and modern, shaped by both heritage and new technologies.

### **Multiple Forces Intersecting: Caste, Religion, and Regional Politics**

Tribal identity in India cannot be understood by looking at caste, religion, or politics in isolation. Instead, these forces work together in shaping how different tribal communities are treated and how they see themselves. Hebbar and Prakash's research shows that caste continues to play a role in the lives of tribes like the Paniyan and Koraga in South India, who face untouchability even from fellow tribes (Hebbar and Prakash 421–422). This proves that caste-based discrimination is not limited to mainstream society but exists within tribal networks too.

Religion, especially Christianity, has played a critical role in shaping political identity in Northeast India. As seen in the case of the Mizos, Christianity helped unify the community during their nationalist struggle, giving them strength to assert their rights and resist Hindu nationalism (Roluahpuia 191–193). At the same time, religious conversion has caused rifts within tribes where Christian and non-Christian members live together, affecting group unity. Regional politics adds another layer of complexity. Subramanyam's study of Andhra Pradesh points out that hill tribes remain

underdeveloped due to their remote location, while plain tribes are better integrated and more politically active (Subramanyam 116–117). This means geography also decides how much a tribe can access state services and shape its own identity.

These overlapping forces show that tribal identity is shaped through a complex interaction of caste, religion, and politics. The assumption that tribal communities are disconnected from social systems is outdated. Instead, their identity is formed in constant negotiation with the mainstream society around them. Any serious study or policy must consider these intersections to fully understand tribal realities.

### **Economic Inequality and New Forms of Resistance Through Media and Literature**

Tribal identities in India are also strongly influenced by economic conditions. Many tribal communities suffer from poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to healthcare and education. These issues became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Kasi and Saha, tribal youth were among the worst affected, especially due to the digital divide and weak public healthcare (Kasi and Saha 4). But the crisis also created opportunities for new resistance. Many tribal youths used digital platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to raise awareness and express their frustrations. They shared videos, wrote posts, and supported online movements. This was a major shift from traditional protest methods to digital activism.

This form of resistance allowed young tribal people to present their perspectives directly to a wider audience. It helped in connecting with other tribal groups and forming a collective identity rooted in modern technology. It also gave them confidence and agency in a world where they are often ignored. In addition to digital tools, literature continues to be an effective method for tribal communities to assert their identity. The novel *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* gives a powerful account of how forest laws and development policies impact the Malayarayar tribe. Robert and Kuriachan argue that such literature preserves cultural memory while also resisting dominant narratives (Robert and Kuriachan 116). These stories are not just about representation—they are about survival, dignity, and political awareness.

Together, economic inequality, digital activism, and literary expression show how tribal identities are not fixed or passive. Instead, they are constantly being redefined through both hardship and creativity. This new resistance is rooted in both tradition and modern tools, helping tribal communities stand up for themselves in meaningful ways.

### **Fluidity in Tribal Identity: Influence of Social Structures and State Policies**

The idea that tribal identities are fixed and unchanged is no longer valid. Today, we understand that these identities are shaped by many social, political, and regional factors. One of the most influential forces is caste. In South India, tribal groups such as the Paniyans and Koragas still face untouchability and social exclusion, even though they are officially listed as Scheduled Tribes (Hebbar and Prakash 421–422). This shows that government recognition does not automatically lead to social equality. Caste still determines how certain tribes are treated in everyday life.

Religion also plays a complex role. It can help build unity, as seen in the Mizo community where Christianity brought

people together and gave them a strong political identity during the nationalist movement (Roluahpuia 191–193). But religion can also create divisions. In many tribes, internal tensions develop between Christian and non-Christian members, affecting their unity and social standing. Another important factor is regional governance. Subramanyam's work in Andhra Pradesh shows that the physical location of a tribe affects how much development it receives. Hill tribes and PVTGs often remain neglected due to poor infrastructure, while plain tribes enjoy better access to schools, jobs, and political platforms (Subramanyam 116–117). This regional gap leads to different forms of identity and political awareness among tribal groups.

All these factors—caste, religion, and region—show that tribal identity is not a single experience. It is shaped by many outside influences and internal strategies. Understanding this complexity is essential if we want to support tribal communities effectively and respectfully. Their identities are dynamic and continue to evolve with changing social and political conditions.

### **Redefining Resistance: Digital Movements and Cultural Storytelling**

In recent years, tribal resistance has taken new forms that reflect changing realities. Traditionally, protests took place through road blockades or community gatherings. But now, tribal youth are turning to digital platforms to express their concerns. During the COVID-19 lockdown, when unemployment and poor health services hit tribal communities hard, many young people started using social media to speak out. Kasi and Saha note that these platforms became new spaces for sharing stories and building support (Kasi and Saha 4). This shift marks a major change in how tribal identity is defended—through online awareness and collective digital action.

Social media has empowered tribal youth to challenge negative stereotypes and misrepresentation. It offers a platform where they can communicate directly with a broader audience, bypassing traditional media or political structures. It also helps build solidarity across regions, as young tribal individuals find others facing similar challenges. This online engagement is not just resistance—it is also about reclaiming pride and visibility in a digital age. Cultural storytelling, especially literature, also remains a powerful method of resistance. Novels like *Kocharethi* highlight the everyday experiences of tribal people, including the impact of development, displacement, and policy failure. As Robert and Kuriachan suggest, such works give tribes a voice in a society that often ignores or distorts their reality (Robert and Kuriachan 116). These stories help preserve history, assert identity, and challenge mainstream narratives.

Together, digital activism and cultural expression show how tribal resistance is evolving. It now includes technology, creativity, and storytelling. These forms are not only effective but also empowering, allowing tribal communities to shape their futures and identities in a modern world.

### **Conclusion**

This research explores how tribal identities in India are dynamic and continuously shaped by caste, religion, regional policies, economic conditions, and digital media. While tribes have historically faced structural marginalization, the study shows that their identities today

are actively reshaped and asserted based on local contexts and available means of resistance. One key finding is the connection between tribal identity and caste, even though tribes are officially outside the caste system. As seen in the cases of the Paniyan and Koraga tribes in South India, caste-based discrimination persists, not just from dominant castes but also from other tribal groups. This highlights the internal diversity within tribal experiences. In some cases, such communities respond by isolating themselves to preserve their dignity and identity.

Religion also plays a crucial role, especially in Central and Northeast India. Conversion to Christianity has given many tribes a strong political identity, as seen in Mizoram, where religion supported the nationalist movement. However, religious differences have also led to internal divisions among tribal communities. Geography and state policies significantly influence tribal lives. Tribes in remote areas often face exclusion from welfare programs, as shown in Andhra Pradesh. These regional disparities shape how tribes interact with the state—whether through legal rights, activism, or autonomy demands.

The study also highlights how tribal youth use digital platforms to challenge marginalization and express identity. Literature and oral histories, like *Kocharethi*, serve as powerful tools of cultural resistance. Overall, tribal identity in India is complex and evolving, requiring region-specific, inclusive approaches in research and policymaking.

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