

From Welfare to Rights: Evolution of Tribal Development Policies in West Bengal

Ms. Arumita Singha¹, Dr. Susmita Mohapatra²

¹Research Scholar, History, YBN University

²Associate Professor, History, YBN University

Abstract

This paper critically examines the transformation of tribal development policies in West Bengal, India, from a welfare-oriented approach to a rights-based paradigm. Drawing on archival materials, government documents, and field research, the study traces the historical trajectory of policy formulation and implementation, exploring the interplay between state objectives, tribal agency, and socio-political movements. The analysis foregrounds the shift in state discourse, the role of constitutional amendments, and the influence of grassroots mobilizations in redefining the contours of tribal development. The paper argues that despite significant policy advancements, persistent challenges remain in ensuring effective realization of rights and meaningful participation of tribal communities in development processes.

1. Introduction

The tribal populations of India, officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes (STs), have long been subject to marginalization, dispossession, and socio-economic exclusion. West Bengal, home to over five million tribal people, presents a complex landscape where state interventions have oscillated between paternalistic welfare schemes and more recent rights-based frameworks. This paper investigates the evolution of tribal development policies in West Bengal, examining the implications of this transition for tribal agency, social justice, and sustainable development. The study situates these shifts within broader national and global discourses on indigenous rights, aiming to contribute to the literature on policy transformation and tribal empowerment.

2. Historical Context: Colonial Legacies and Early Postcolonial Policies

The roots of tribal policy in West Bengal can be traced to the colonial era, when British administrators classified forest-dwelling and agrarian communities as "backward," instituting measures aimed at control and resource extraction rather than development. The Permanent Settlement of 1793, forest laws, and criminal tribe notifications institutionalized tribal exclusion. Post-independence, the Indian state inherited these legacies, enshrining special provisions for STs in the Constitution (notably Articles 15, 46, and 244) and launching the Community Development Programme (1952) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) (1974). These initiatives, while expanding state outreach, largely framed tribals as passive recipients of welfare, reinforcing top-down models of development.

3. Welfare-Oriented Approaches: Expansion and Limitations (1950s–1980s)

The initial decades after independence saw a proliferation of targeted welfare schemes in West Bengal, including reserved quotas in education and employment, subsidized housing, and health initiatives. The

establishment of the West Bengal Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Development and Finance Corporation (1976) reflected the state's commitment to upliftment. However, these interventions suffered from bureaucratic inertia, underfunding, and paternalism. Land alienation, displacement due to industrial and infrastructural projects, and inadequate political representation remained unresolved. The welfare approach, while alleviating some hardships, failed to address structural inequities or empower tribal communities as active stakeholders in their development.

4. Shifting Paradigms: Emergence of Rights-Based Discourse (1990s–Present)

The 1990s marked a significant turning point, influenced by national constitutional amendments (notably the 73rd and 74th Amendments), international conventions (ILO 169, UNDRIP), and the rise of indigenous movements. In West Bengal, tribal mobilizations—such as the Santhal and Kheria Sabar struggles—pressed for recognition of customary rights, land restitution, and self-governance. The introduction of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996 and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 signaled a paradigm shift, recognizing collective rights over land and forests, and mandating tribal participation in local governance. State policies increasingly adopted the language of rights and entitlements, moving beyond charity to justice.

5. Implementation and Outcomes: Progress and Persistent Challenges

Despite progressive legal frameworks, the implementation of rights-based policies in West Bengal has been uneven. Land titles under FRA have been distributed selectively, with bureaucratic hurdles and lack of awareness impeding wider realization. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in tribal areas often lack autonomy and resources, with traditional leaders sidelined. While literacy and health indicators have improved, gaps persist in access to quality education, healthcare, and employment. Encroachments, resource conflicts, and displacement due to mining and infrastructure continue to threaten tribal livelihoods. The coexistence of welfare schemes and rights-based initiatives sometimes leads to policy incoherence and fragmentation, undermining long-term empowerment.

6. The Role of Civil Society and Tribal Agency

Civil society organizations, activists, and tribal leaders have played a pivotal role in shaping the rights-based agenda in West Bengal. Through advocacy, legal interventions, and grassroots mobilization, they have challenged state neglect and asserted community rights. The role of women in these movements has been particularly significant, foregrounding issues of gender justice and intersectionality. However, divisions within tribal communities, political co-option, and limited access to legal resources remain obstacles to sustained collective action.

7. Comparative Perspectives and Lessons Learned

West Bengal's experience resonates with broader trends in India and the Global South, where the transition from welfare to rights reflects changing conceptions of citizenship and development. Comparative analysis with states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh highlights the importance of political will, administrative capacity, and community participation in effective rights realization. The West Bengal model underscores the need for context-specific strategies, robust monitoring mechanisms, and continuous dialogue between state and tribal actors.

8. Conclusion: Towards Transformative Justice

The evolution of tribal development policies in West Bengal from welfare to rights represents a significant, if incomplete, reorientation of state-tribal relations. While legal recognition of rights marks progress, meaningful empowerment requires addressing persistent structural barriers, enhancing participatory governance, and fostering a culture of accountability. Future policy must prioritize genuine consultation, capacity building, and holistic development, ensuring that tribal communities are not mere beneficiaries, but active architects of their destinies.

References

1. Government of West Bengal. (Various Years). Annual Reports of the Backward Classes Welfare Department.
2. Xaxa, V. (1999). Tribes as Indigenous People of India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(51), 3589-3595.
3. Baviskar, A. (2005). *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*. Oxford University Press.
4. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. (2007). *The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act: Implementation Status Report*.
5. Roy, S. (2010). The Politics of Tribal Development in West Bengal. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 56(3), 459-474.
6. Sen, A. (2019). Rights, Recognition and Representation: The Tribal Question in West Bengal. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 21(2), 235-253.
7. United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*.