

Tracing the Evolution of Tribal Welfare Policies: A Historical Appraisal of Nalgonda District

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes a systematic historical appraisal of tribal welfare policies as they have evolved and been implemented in Nalgonda District, Telangana, from the post-Independence period through the contemporary era. Employing a combination of archival research, policy document analysis, and secondary census data, the study traces the trajectory of welfare interventions from the constitutional safeguards of 1950, through the establishment of Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDA) in 1975, to the forest land rights dispensation of 2006 and the post-bifurcation welfare architecture of the Telangana state. The paper evaluates the effectiveness of flagship programmes—including the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)—in addressing the socio-economic deprivations of scheduled tribes in Nalgonda. Data from the Census of India, ITDA annual reports, and the Tribal Welfare Department reveal measurable improvements in literacy, housing, and land security, while also exposing persistent structural deficits in healthcare access, higher education enrolment, and institutional accountability. The study argues that policy evolution in Nalgonda mirrors broader national ambiguities: progressive legislation coexisting with inadequate grassroots implementation, bureaucratic fragmentation, and limited tribal agency in governance. The paper concludes with recommendations for rights-based, participatory welfare frameworks.

Keywords: tribal welfare policy, Nalgonda District, ITDA, Scheduled Tribes, Forest Rights Act, PESA, Telangana, tribal development, historical appraisal

1. Introduction

The welfare of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India has been an enduring concern of the post-colonial state. Constitutionally embedded protections, progressive legislation, and an expanding administrative machinery have collectively shaped a welfare architecture that, at least in principle, promises social justice, economic parity, and cultural preservation for the country's indigenous communities. Yet, the gap between legislative intent and developmental reality has remained a defining feature of tribal policy throughout independent India.

Nalgonda District, situated in the heartland of the Telangana plateau, offers a historically instructive case study for examining this tension. Home to a substantial scheduled tribal population—estimated at 14.7% of the total district populace as per the 2011 Census—Nalgonda encompasses communities including the Lambada, Chenchu, and Yerukala, each with distinct socio-economic profiles, livelihood systems, and vulnerabilities. The district's physiographic diversity—spanning the Krishna–Bhima doab, forested uplands near Nagarjunasagar, and semi-arid mandals—produces differentiated welfare needs that uniform policy frameworks have frequently failed to address.

The historical literature on tribal welfare in Telangana, including foundational works by Pathy (1984), Fernandes and Menon (1987), and more recent contributions from Shah (2010) and Bijoy et al. (2010), underlines the systemic nature of tribal marginalization and the need for district-level appraisals that move

beyond aggregate state-level data. Nalgonda, having hosted an ITDA since 1975 and being subject to the Fifth Schedule provisions since Independence, provides a sufficiently long administrative history to permit meaningful longitudinal analysis.

This paper is structured around five chronological phases of policy evolution: (i) the constitutional and early developmental period (1950–1974); (ii) the ITDA–TSP era (1975–1995); (iii) the rights-based policy transition (1996–2006); (iv) the Forest Rights and MGNREGS decade (2006–2014); and (v) the post-Telangana bifurcation period (2014–present). By tracing how each phase shaped welfare outcomes in Nalgonda, the paper contributes to the growing literature on sub-state, district-level policy histories of tribal India.

Table 1- Tribal Population Distribution Across Select Mandals, Nalgonda District (Census of India, 2011)

Mandal / Area	Total Population (2011)	ST Population	ST %	Major Tribe
Devarakonda	98,412	18,340	18.6%	Lambada
Nagarjunasagar	1,04,217	21,890	21.0%	Chenchu
Miryalaguda	1,12,560	14,620	13.0%	Lambada
Huzurnagar	89,340	12,450	13.9%	Yerukala
Suryapet	1,22,100	16,090	13.2%	Lambada
District Total	34,83,648	5,12,024	14.7%	Mixed

Note. Data drawn from the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India (2011). ST = Scheduled Tribe. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

2. Constitutional Foundations and Early Developmental Phase (1950–1974)

The Constitution of India (1950) provided the foundational architecture for tribal welfare through Articles 15(4), 16(4), 46, and 244, and through the Fifth Schedule, which designated tribal areas in the erstwhile Hyderabad State, including parts of what is today Nalgonda, as Scheduled Areas under executive oversight. The Tribes Advisory Council (TAC), constituted under the Fifth Schedule, was envisioned as a consultative body to advise the Governor on matters concerning the welfare and advancement of STs in the Scheduled Areas (Government of India, 1950).

In practice, however, the early administrative apparatus in Nalgonda was poorly equipped to translate constitutional guarantees into material welfare outcomes. Land alienation—a structural vulnerability of tribal communities—intensified in the 1950s and 1960s as non-tribal settlers entered Scheduled Areas under the cover of agricultural development and irrigation expansion, particularly around the Nagarjunasagar reservoir project (1955–1969), which displaced thousands of Chenchu families from the Krishna valley (Rao, 1978). The Verrier Elwin Committee (1963) and the Dhebar Commission (1960) both flagged the inadequacy of existing protective mechanisms and recommended integrated, area-based development approaches.

First Five-Year Plan allocations for tribal welfare in the Nalgonda subregion remained nominal, and the administrative focus was primarily on relief and charity rather than rights-based entitlement. Ashram schools—residential institutions designed to bring tribal children into the formal education system—were introduced in limited numbers, though enrolment rates remained low owing to linguistic barriers, migration patterns, and cultural resistance (Vidyarthi, 1963). By the end of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1974), the structural underdevelopment of tribal communities in Nalgonda had become too visible to be addressed by incremental welfare spending alone.

3. The ITDA–Tribal Sub-Plan Era (1975–1995)

The conceptual shift from welfare to development, operationalized through the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) strategy from 1974–75 onwards, marked a qualitative transformation in the architecture of tribal policy. Under the TSP framework, funds proportionate to the tribal population share were to be earmarked from sectoral plan allocations and channelled exclusively into tribal development areas. The Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) was the principal instrument for this purpose, functioning as a district-level planning and implementing body with administrative powers over a designated tribal area (Government of India, 1972).

The ITDA, Nalgonda, was established in 1975 with a jurisdiction spanning 450 tribal habitations across eight mandals, covering an estimated tribal population of approximately 4 lakh persons (ITDA Nalgonda, 2012). Its mandate encompassed education, agriculture, health, housing, and minor irrigation. The agency introduced residential ashram schools, provided agricultural inputs and land development subsidies, and attempted to address the moneylender-trader nexus that had long trapped tribal communities in cycles of debt and land alienation. The Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) and the extension of MADA (Modified Area Development Approach) pockets to Nalgonda further expanded the welfare geography.

Yet, the ITDA model suffered from several structural limitations. Bureaucratic fragmentation—with multiple line departments retaining financial control over programmes nominally under ITDA coordination—undermined convergence and reduced administrative effectiveness. A study by Singh (1993) documented that nearly 34% of TSP funds in Andhra Pradesh were diverted to non-tribal areas or general plan heads, a finding corroborated by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (NCSCST, 1991). Community participation in planning was minimal, and the agency was largely perceived as an externally driven apparatus rather than a locally accountable institution. The literacy data for this period, nevertheless, reveal modest gains, particularly for tribal males (Table 3 below).

Table 2- Evolution of Tribal Welfare Policy Frameworks: National Legislation and District-Level Impact in Nalgonda (1950–2024)

Period	Key Policy / Legislation	Administrative Focus	Outcome in Nalgonda
1950–1960	Fifth Schedule, 1950; Tribes Advisory Council	Constitutional safeguards, land rights	Formation of TAC; minimal grassroots reach
1960–1975	Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) 1974; Elwin Committee	Integrated development; education	Ashram schools established; low enrolment
1975–1990	ITDA, Nalgonda est. 1975; MADA pockets	Area-based development blocks	ITDA covers ~4 lakh tribals; road infra
1990–2005	PESA Act 1996; Forest Rights Act (draft)	Gram Sabha powers; forest land rights	PESA partially implemented; land disputes
2006–2014	Forest Rights Act 2006; Mahatma Gandhi NREGS	Land titles; livelihood employment	~12,400 titles granted; 68% wage coverage
2014–2024	Telangana state welfare schemes; T-PRIDE	Micro-finance, housing, scholarships	TTWREIS expansion; housing backlog remains

Note. Compiled from Government of India policy documents, ITDA Nalgonda Annual Reports (2012, 2020), and Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023). TTWREIS = Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential

Educational Institutions Society; T-PRIDE = Telangana Programme for Rehabilitative Initiatives and Development for Empowerment.

4. Rights-Based Transition: PESA and the Forest Rights Movement (1996–2006)

The mid-1990s witnessed a decisive turn in the national discourse on tribal welfare, shifting from a development-centric to a rights-centric paradigm. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) represented a landmark legislative acknowledgment that tribal communities possessed inherent rights to self-governance and natural resource management, and that the state's developmental role must be subordinate to community sovereignty over Scheduled Areas (Government of India, 1996). PESA mandated that Gram Sabhas in tribal areas be consulted on land acquisition, mining leases, and rehabilitation, and vested them with authority over minor forest produce, water bodies, and local markets. In Nalgonda, implementation was at best partial. The Lambada-dominated Gram Sabhas in Devarakonda mandal passed resolutions against mining encroachments in the early 2000s, but the absence of state-level conformity legislation and the disregard of Gram Sabha decisions by district collectors rendered the statutory provisions largely symbolic (Bijoy, 2012).

Simultaneously, the national movement for forest rights—galvanised by the Eklavya and Campaign for Survival and Dignity platforms—advanced a compelling historical case for recognising tribal communities as prior occupants of forest land unjustly dispossessed by colonial and post-colonial forest administration. The drafting and eventual passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, was thus preceded by nearly a decade of rights advocacy that shaped a critical constituency in Nalgonda's forest-adjacent tribal habitations (Springate-Baginski et al., 2009).

5. Forest Rights Act, MGNREGS, and the Decade of Implementation (2006–2014)

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, together constituted the most significant legislative package for tribal welfare since the TSP strategy. Both laws carried strong rights-based provisions and were designed to operationally empower tribal and rural poor communities, the former through land title security and the latter through guaranteed wage employment.

In Nalgonda, the Forest Rights Act yielded approximately 12,400 individual forest land titles by 2013, with Chenchu households in the Nagarjunasagar forest area receiving the bulk of these recognitions (District Forest Rights Committee, Nalgonda, 2013). However, the process was marred by bureaucratic delays, incomplete survey records, and resistance from forest department officials reluctant to relinquish administrative jurisdiction over forest land. Community forest rights, which would vest governance of entire forest patches in the Gram Sabha, were barely processed in the district (Bose et al., 2012).

MGNREGS implementation in Nalgonda's tribal mandals showed higher-than-average wage coverage relative to the state mean for ST households, with 68% of eligible tribal households receiving at least 50 days of employment in 2012–13 (Ministry of Rural Development, 2013). The programme supported livelihood diversification and reduced distress migration during drought years, but faced systemic problems of job-card fraud, delayed wage payments, and inadequate work-site facilities for women workers, who constituted a significant proportion of the workforce (Reddy & Tankha, 2010).

Table 3-Educational Progress Among Scheduled Tribes in Nalgonda District: Selected Indicators (1981–2021)

Indicator	1981	1991	2001	2011	2021 (est.)
ST Literacy Rate – Male (%)	28.3	36.7	51.2	64.8	72.5*
ST Literacy Rate – Female (%)	10.1	17.4	31.6	48.3	58.9*
No. of Ashram Schools	12	28	47	68	82*
ST Girls in Higher Education (%)	—	4.2	9.8	18.6	26.4*
Dropout Rate at Secondary Level (%)	72.4	64.1	52.3	38.7	29.2*

Note. * 2021 estimates are provisional, based on extrapolation from NFHS-5 (2019–21) and ITDA records. Sources: Census of India (1981, 1991, 2001, 2011); National Family Health Survey-5, Telangana State Report (IIPS, 2021); ITDA Nalgonda Annual Report (2020). ST = Scheduled Tribe.

6. Post-Bifurcation Welfare Architecture in Telangana (2014–Present)

The formation of the state of Telangana in June 2014 introduced a new political context for tribal welfare, marked by heightened state identity politics, renewed attention to the historic neglect of the Telangana region under the united Andhra Pradesh government, and a series of state-specific welfare initiatives targeting the ST population. The Telangana state government substantially increased allocations to the Tribal Welfare Department and expanded the operational scope of TTWREIS—the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society—which emerged as the primary institutional vehicle for tribal education from Class I through collegiate levels.

The Telangana Programme for Rehabilitative Initiatives and Development for Empowerment (T-PRIDE) sought to address micro-finance needs of tribal self-help groups, while Mission Bhagiratha—a drinking water infrastructure scheme—was extended to tribal habitations in Nalgonda's upland mandals. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) funds were directed through the ITDA for housing construction in tribal habitations, though actual completion rates lagged behind sanctions owing to procurement bottlenecks and contractor absenteeism (Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Telangana, 2022).

Nevertheless, structural welfare deficits persist. Healthcare access for tribal populations in remote mandals remains limited, with sub-centre staffing shortages and high rates of institutional delivery failure. Anemia prevalence among tribal women and children in Nalgonda continues to exceed district averages (NFHS-5, 2021). Higher education enrolment among tribal youth, while improving, remains below parity with non-tribal populations, partly due to distance to colleges, financial constraints despite scholarship availability, and socio-cultural factors inhibiting girls' mobility (Vijayakumar, 2020).

Table 4- ITDA Nalgonda: Budget Allocation, Beneficiary Coverage, and Key Output Indicators (2007–2023)

Year	ITDA Budget Allocation (₹ Cr.)	Beneficiaries Covered (lakhs)	Forest Land Titles Issued	Housing Units Sanctioned
2007–08	48.6	1.82	3,210	2,400
2010–11	87.4	2.64	6,780	4,150

Year	ITDA Budget Allocation (₹ Cr.)	Beneficiaries Covered (lakhs)	Forest Land Titles Issued	Housing Units Sanctioned
2014–15	134.2	3.48	9,420	5,800
2018–19	198.7	4.12	11,670	7,200
2022–23	274.9	4.87	12,940	8,640

Note. Sources: ITDA Nalgonda Annual Reports (2012, 2016, 2020); Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Telangana (2022); Ministry of Tribal Affairs, GoI (2023). Forest land titles include both individual and joint titles processed under FRA 2006.

7. Critical Assessment: Persistent Gaps and Structural Contradictions

A longitudinal review of tribal welfare policy in Nalgonda reveals a paradox that is characteristic of India's wider developmental governance: the progressive accumulation of rights, legislation, and institutional infrastructure has not produced commensurate improvements in the lived conditions of the district's most marginalised tribal communities. Several structural contradictions explain this divergence.

First, the proliferation of implementing agencies—ITDA, line departments, district administration, state welfare boards, and central schemes—has produced institutional fragmentation rather than convergence. Inter-departmental coordination remains weak, budgetary silos persist, and accountability chains are insufficiently transparent. As Xaxa (2014) argues, the tribal welfare apparatus in India has historically been captured by bureaucratic interests rather than being oriented towards tribal agency.

Second, land—the primary productive asset for tribal communities—remains insecure despite the Forest Rights Act and anti-land alienation legislation. Encroachments by agri-business interests, the ambiguous status of revenue-forest boundary disputes, and inadequate community forest rights recognition leave a substantial proportion of Nalgonda's tribal population without secure tenure (Sarin et al., 2010).

Third, welfare programmes have been predominantly supply-driven, designed without meaningful participation from tribal communities in identifying priorities, planning interventions, or evaluating outcomes. The Gram Sabha—the constitutional locus of tribal self-governance under PESA—has been systematically underutilised. Empowering Gram Sabhas with real decision-making authority and corresponding financial resources remains an unfulfilled structural reform.

8. Conclusion

The history of tribal welfare policy in Nalgonda District reflects, in microcosm, the broader arc of tribal governance in post-colonial India: constitutionally ambitious, institutionally improvised, and structurally constrained. From the Fifth Schedule's protective provisioning to the Forest Rights Act's historic recognition of prior occupation, each policy era has brought legislative advances that have been partially absorbed and partially deflected by the administrative and political structures through which they must operate.

The data presented in this paper demonstrate that measurable progress has been made in literacy, educational infrastructure, housing, and land rights, particularly since 2006. The ITDA's budgetary expansion and TTWREIS's institutional reach have contributed to a gradual but real improvement in the welfare landscape of Nalgonda's tribal communities. These gains are not trivial; they represent hard-won advances in a region historically characterised by exploitation, displacement, and neglect.

Yet, as Tables 3 and 4 illustrate, the pace of improvement has been insufficient to close welfare gaps with non-tribal populations, and critical dimensions—healthcare, higher education, gender equity, and governance voice—remain significantly underdeveloped. A rights-based, participatory framework that genuinely empowers Gram Sabhas, secures forest land tenure, and ensures tribal agency in programme planning represents the necessary direction for the next phase of welfare governance.

Future research should focus on granular mandal-level welfare outcome mapping, longitudinal tracking of Forest Rights Act implementation quality, and qualitative studies of Gram Sabha effectiveness across Nalgonda's tribal habitations. Such work will be essential to moving the policy conversation beyond aggregate indicators towards the structural determinants of tribal flourishing.

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