



Reframing democratic inclusion: rights, welfare foundation, and participation of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha

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Abstract

Democratic decentralization is a greater mechanism for addressing the issues of historically marginalized groups, yet PVTG-inhabited regions often confront structural limitations in Odisha. This article investigates the relationship between rights recognition, welfare foundation, and participatory governance among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha. Although institutions such as Gram Sabha under PESA and community-based governance under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) are celebrated as instruments of democratic deepening, their functioning in contexts of extreme marginality remains insufficiently theorized. Drawing on participatory governance theory, differentiated citizenship, and the capability approach, the study proposes a sequencing framework in which substantive participation emerges from prior rights recognition and effective welfare delivery. Using a mixed-method design across selected PVTG-dominated districts, the research analyses gaps in forest and land rights, identity documentation, food security, healthcare, education, housing, and livelihood entitlements. The findings show that where tenure security, welfare access, and institutional accountability are weak, participation tends to be procedural rather than transformative. By distinguishing PVTGs from the broader Scheduled Tribe category, the article advances a context-sensitive, rights- and welfare-first model of democratic inclusion.

Keywords: Democratic decentralization, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Participatory governance, Forest Rights Act (FRA), Rights recognition, Welfare inclusion

1. Introduction

India's constitutional framework envisions social justice, equality, and inclusive development, particularly for historically marginalized communities. Within this normative commitment, Scheduled Tribes have been accorded special safeguards through affirmative action, decentralization reforms, and targeted welfare schemes. However, within the broader Scheduled Tribe category, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) represent the most socio-economically precarious segment. Odisha is home to the largest number of PVTGs in India (13 recognized groups), including the Bonda, Dongria Kondh, Juang, Saora, and others. Identified on the basis of pre-agricultural subsistence, geographic isolation, declining or stagnant population, extremely low literacy, and persistent socio-economic deprivation (Xaxa, 2008; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014), PVTGs in Odisha inhabit remote forested and hilly regions such as Malkangiri, Rayagada, Koraput, Mayurbhanj, and Kandhamal districts. Despite targeted interventions under tribal sub-plans, Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs), and special PVTG micro-projects, structural exclusion persists. Legislative reforms such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (1996) were intended to

institutionalize indigenous self-governance and secure community control over land and forest resources. However, implementation gaps in Odisha, particularly in PVTG-dominated regions, raise questions about the relationship between rights recognition, welfare access, and participatory governance. This study addresses a critical gap whether participation can be meaningful in contexts where foundational rights and welfare entitlements remain fragile. It situates Odisha's PVTG regions at the centre of debates on democratic deepening, differentiated citizenship, and governance at the margins.

2. Statement of the problem

Participatory governance literature often assumes that political inclusion generates empowerment and democratic deepening (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In Odisha, Gram Sabhas under PESA and community-based forest rights committees under FRA are normatively celebrated as instruments of grassroots democracy. However, this assumption becomes problematic in PVTG-dominated regions of Odisha, such as Malkangiri, Rayagada, and Kandhamal, where foundational conditions, secure land tenure, food security, healthcare access, education, and administrative

presence remain unstable. Many PVTG hamlets experience irregular welfare delivery, infrastructural deficits, and bureaucratic distance. Forest rights claims remain pending or partially recognized; individual and community titles are often constrained in scope. Unlike other Scheduled Tribes, PVTGs face compounded structural vulnerabilities due to geographic remoteness, dependence on forest subsistence, limited literacy, and minimal market integration (Xaxa, 2008). These structural conditions constrain both their capacity to participate and the responsiveness of institutions designed to include them. The existing literature tends to homogenize Scheduled Tribes, insufficiently distinguishing the heightened governance challenges faced by PVTGs in Odisha. There remains limited theoretical clarity regarding how the sequencing of rights recognition, welfare delivery, and participatory inclusion operates under conditions of extreme marginality. This study therefore examines how weak access to foundational rights and welfare entitlements shapes the functioning and effectiveness of participatory governance institutions in PVTG-dominated regions of Odisha.

3. Literature review

- a) Virginius Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India* (2008, Pearson Education India) examines the socio-economic and political conditions of tribal communities in India. Xaxa argues that tribal marginalization is deeply rooted in colonial land policies, forest administration, and post-colonial development strategies. His work highlights the structural exclusion faced by tribal communities and emphasizes the need for institutional reforms to protect tribal rights and promote inclusive governance.
- b) Nupur Tiwari (ed.), *Tribal Self-Governance: PESA and Its Implementation* (2016, Rawat Publications) analyses the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and its role in empowering tribal communities through decentralized governance. The book explains that PESA was designed to grant significant decision-making powers to Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas, enabling tribal communities to manage local resources and development planning. However, the book also notes that implementation across states has been uneven and often constrained by administrative limitations.
- c) Shashank Misra, *Forest Laws and Tribal Rights* (2022, Walnut Publication), examines the evolution of forest legislation in India and its impact on forest-dwelling communities. The book analyses colonial forest policies as well as post-independence forest laws, highlighting how legal frameworks have historically restricted tribal access to forests and natural resources while shaping contemporary debates on forest rights.
- d) A. Kishan, *Forest Rights Act, 2006: The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act* (2022, Asia Law House) provides a detailed legal commentary on the Forest Rights Act (FRA). The book explains the procedures for recognition

of individual and community forest rights and discusses the role of Gram Sabha in the claims process. It also highlights judicial interpretations and policy challenges related to the implementation of FRA.

- e) V. Srinivasa Rao (ed.), *Tribal Livelihood and Governance: Regional Concerns* (2021, Rawat Publications) examines the relationship between tribal livelihoods, governance structures, and development policies in India. The book discusses how legislative frameworks and governance institutions influence livelihood opportunities and resource management among tribal communities.
- f) Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1992, Oxford University Press) explore the historical relationship between ecological systems and human societies in India. The authors demonstrate how state control over forests during colonial and post-colonial periods transformed traditional resource management practices among indigenous communities and contributed to conflicts over forest rights.
- g) Gladson Dungdung, *Adivasis and Their Forest* (2019, Adivaani Publications) focuses on the struggles of indigenous communities for forest rights and environmental justice in India. The book highlights the displacement, exploitation, and socio-economic marginalization faced by Adivasi communities due to mining, industrial expansion, and forest policies.
- h) Manjula S. R., *Tribal Communities in India with Reference to the Forest Rights Act of 2006* (2021, Notion Press) examines the legal provisions of the Forest Rights Act and their implications for tribal communities. The study explains how FRA seeks to correct historical injustices faced by forest-dwelling communities and restore their traditional rights over land and forest resources.

4. Research gap

Existing literature has extensively examined tribal development, forest rights, and decentralized governance in India. Scholars have discussed legislative frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act as important mechanisms for protecting tribal rights and promoting local self-governance. However, most studies focus on Scheduled Tribes in general and do not sufficiently distinguish Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), who experience deeper levels of marginalization due to geographic isolation, low literacy, and limited access to welfare services. Moreover, limited empirical research examines how the implementation of these rights-based frameworks affects participatory governance and welfare access in PVTG-dominated regions, particularly in states like Odisha. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analysing the relationship between rights recognition, welfare delivery, and participatory governance among PVTGs in Odisha.

4.1 Welfare, state capacity, and governance at the margins

Development literature emphasizes the role of state capacity and welfare delivery in shaping citizen engagement. The capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) underscores that political agency depends on access to basic capabilities such as health, education, and livelihood security. Participation without foundational capabilities risks reinforcing inequality. In fragile or remote governance contexts, weak state presence often results in fragmented welfare delivery (Migdal, 2001). For communities living at the margins, the absence of reliable welfare provision undermines trust in institutions and reduces the capacity to engage meaningfully in governance processes. In Odisha, S. K. Mishra and B. B. Pradhan (2017) highlight persistent gaps in nutrition, healthcare access, and educational attainment among PVTGs despite targeted micro-project interventions. Similarly, Government of Odisha Tribal Welfare Department evaluations (various reports) show uneven delivery of housing schemes, identity documentation, and livelihood programs in remote PVTG settlements. However, much of this work remains descriptive and policy-oriented. There is limited theorization of how welfare deficits directly affect the quality of participation in Gram Sabha and local governance institutions. Thus, while rights recognition and welfare access are acknowledged as important, the literature does not sufficiently examine how the sequencing between welfare provision and participation shapes democratic outcomes in Odisha's PVTG regions.

4.2 The homogenization problem in tribal governance studies

A significant limitation in existing literature is the tendency to treat Scheduled Tribes as a unified category. Anthropological and sociological studies document vast internal diversity among tribal communities (Xaxa, 2008). In Odisha alone, tribal groups differ widely in terms of literacy, market integration, demographic stability, and political mobilization. PVTGs identified based on declining population, pre-agricultural subsistence, low literacy, and geographic isolation represent the most socio-economically precarious segment. Yet governance frameworks often do not differentiate policy design or participatory expectations accordingly. Most empirical research in Odisha focuses on broader tribal mobilizations, such as anti-mining movements in Niyamgiri or forest rights campaigns, without adequately examining everyday governance experiences of PVTGs. As a result, theoretical assumptions about participation and empowerment are often extrapolated to contexts where foundational rights and welfare access remain insecure. Existing literature strongly supports participatory governance as a pathway to democratic deepening. However, much of this scholarship is influenced by normative assumptions that participation naturally leads to empowerment. There remains limited focused empirical evidence on how participatory institutions function specifically in PVTG-dominated regions of Odisha. Findings are frequently generalized from broader Scheduled Tribe contexts without adequately examining distinct structural vulnerabilities.

Consequently, the relationship between rights access, welfare delivery, and participation under conditions of extreme marginality remains insufficiently studied. This study argues that in Odisha's PVTG regions, participation under conditions of extreme material precarity risks reproducing procedural inclusion without substantive empowerment.

5. Objectives of the study

- To examine implementation gaps in land, forest, and welfare entitlements in selected PVTG-dominated regions.
- To comparatively analyse of FRA and PESA in PVTG-dominated regions and broader Scheduled Tribe areas.
- To assess how welfare deficits influence participation of PVTG in local governance.
- To examine the institutional and material factors that enabling substantive participation and empowerment among PVTGs.

6. Method of study

This study adopts a mixed-method research design to examine the relationship between rights recognition, welfare access, and participatory governance among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods enables the study to capture both measurable welfare and rights gaps and the lived experiences shaping political participation under conditions of extreme marginality. The research is conducted in selected PVTG-dominated districts of Odisha, including Malkangiri, Rayagada, and Mayurbhanj. These districts are purposively chosen due to their high concentration of PVTGs and documented challenges in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). Villages inhabited predominantly by PVTGs are identified, and households are selected using systematic random sampling. Approximately 200–250 households are surveyed, along with key informants such as Gram Sabha members, traditional leaders, women representatives, local officials, and NGO workers. Primary data are collected through structured surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Secondary data are drawn from Census reports, Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications, and Odisha Tribal Welfare Department records. Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistics and selected inferential tools, while qualitative data are examined through thematic analysis. Ethical standards are strictly followed, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and culturally sensitive research practices.

7. PVTG profile in Odisha: demographic and socioeconomic context

Odisha occupies a central position in India's tribal demography, hosting 13 of the country's 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). This concentration makes the state a critical locus for policy experimentation and rights-based welfare interventions. PVTGs are identified by

characteristics such as small population size, low literacy levels, pre-agricultural technology, economic backwardness, and relative isolation. However, beyond administrative categorization, these communities represent historically marginalized social formations whose vulnerability is rooted in structural exclusion rather than inherent deficiency. Prominent PVTG communities in Odisha include the Juang, Paudi Bhuyan, Birhor, Bonda, and Dongria Kondh. These groups are largely concentrated in districts such as Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Kandhamal, Malkangiri, and Rayagada. Their settlements are typically located in hilly, forested, and ecologically fragile terrains, which both sustain traditional livelihoods and restrict infrastructural connectivity. Demographically, PVTGs in Odisha account for over three lakh individuals distributed across tens of thousands of households. Their population patterns reveal uneven geographic clustering, with districts like Keonjhar hosting a particularly high concentration. Such spatial distribution poses significant governance challenges in ensuring equitable access to healthcare, education, potable water, and livelihood opportunities. Economically, most PVTG households rely on forest-based livelihoods, shifting cultivation, minor forest produce collection, subsistence agriculture, and wage labour. Market integration remains limited and often exploitative, mediated by local intermediaries. Seasonal migration has increased in certain regions, reflecting distress-driven mobility rather than voluntary economic diversification. Social indicators reflect persistent deprivation. Literacy rates remain substantially below state averages, particularly among women. Malnutrition, maternal health vulnerabilities, and limited institutional healthcare access remain pressing concerns. Educational outreach is constrained by language barriers, infrastructural deficits, and irregular teacher availability in remote habitations. These conditions underscore the layered marginalization faced by PVTGs: economic, spatial, cultural, and institutional. Culturally, PVTGs maintain distinct linguistic traditions, customary governance systems, and ecological knowledge practices. Their cosmologies are deeply intertwined with forests, land, and community institutions. However, increasing exposure to market forces, extractive industries, and development projects has created tensions between cultural preservation and economic integration. Thus, the PVTG profile in Odisha reveals not merely a vulnerable population segment but a complex socio-political constituency situated at the

intersection of constitutional protection, developmental intervention, and participatory governance. Understanding this profile is foundational for evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive rights frameworks and welfare-based empowerment strategies.

8. Constitutional and legal architecture in the context of PVTGs

India’s constitutional design recognizes Scheduled Tribes under the Fifth Schedule, ensuring protections related to land, self-governance, and cultural autonomy. Two legislative pillars are particularly significant for PVTGs. The Forest Rights Act seeks to rectify historical injustices by granting individual and community rights over forest land and resources. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act extends self-governance provisions to tribal areas, empowering Gram Sabha to manage local resources and development planning. Together, these frameworks reposition PVTGs as rights-bearing citizens rather than passive recipients of state benevolence. However, implementation gaps often dilute their transformative potential. Rights remain declaratory without effective institutional enforcement and community awareness. The realization of civil, political, social, and cultural rights remains uneven across PVTG settlements. While legal recognition exists, practical access to land titles, forest resources, public services, and institutional representation often remains partial. The disjunction between formal citizenship and substantive entitlement reveals a pattern of differentiated inclusion, where rights exist in principle but are constrained in practice.

9. Welfare interventions and developmental governance

Odisha’s government leads with the first-ever door-to-door PVTG household survey launched in February 2026, using mobile apps for real-time data to saturate schemes like PM-JANMAN, which provides pucca housing, water, and roads without disrupting tribal architecture. The Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihoods Improvement Programme (OPELIP) integrates nutrition-sensitive agriculture, SHG-led financial access, and infrastructure, establishing 61 creches and 119 nutrition centres to combat severe malnutrition. Centrally sponsored schemes by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs fund education, health, and livelihoods tailored to PVTGs, with Odisha prioritizing 20 micro-projects across 14 districts.

Table 1

Initiative	Key Intervention Areas	Outcome
PM-JANMAN	Housing, drinking water access, and educational expansion	Coverage of 68,702 PVTG households while maintaining traditional architectural patterns
OPELIP / OPNIP	Nutrition programmes, livelihood promotion, and SHG mobilization	Strengthened community nutrition systems with 105 village-level support centres
PVTG Development Scheme	Health services, livelihood development, and cultural preservation	Odisha accounts for the highest share of beneficiaries under the scheme

Sources: Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihood Improvement Programme

Welfare provision in PVTG areas reflects the broader question of state capacity at the margins. Despite targeted schemes

addressing food security, health, education, housing, and livelihoods, delivery gaps persist due to remoteness,

infrastructural weakness, and limited monitoring. Material precarity directly affects political agency; where subsistence insecurity dominates everyday life, sustained participation in governance processes becomes structurally constrained. These initiatives reflect a shift from fragmented scheme-based delivery toward convergent governance. However, sociologically, welfare can generate asymmetrical power relations if it does not simultaneously build capabilities and institutional accountability.

10. Participatory governance and community agency

Participatory governance among PVTGs operates through a dual institutional structure: statutory bodies such as Gram Sabha and community-based formations including self-help groups. While constitutional quotas ensure formal representation, substantive participation depends on literacy, material stability, and administrative accessibility. Women-led collectives in certain districts have demonstrated improved nutrition monitoring and community mobilization. Digital monitoring platforms introduced under recent schemes attempt to reduce bureaucratic opacity and enhance transparency. In practice, participatory institutions such as Gram Sabha are designed to deepen democracy in Scheduled Areas. However, in PVTG regions, participation often occurs within asymmetrical power relations and limited administrative responsiveness. Traditional community institutions coexist with statutory bodies, creating layered governance structures. The quality of participation varies from procedural attendance to occasional moments of substantive collective assertion, particularly where rights recognition aligns with community mobilization. Structural inequalities, economic vulnerability, language barriers, and limited bureaucratic literacy restrict consistent engagement. Participation, therefore, must be understood as an outcome of secured rights and material foundations rather than an immediate expectation.

11. Empirical insights from Odisha

Field evidence from Odisha's PVTG-dominated districts like Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, and Kandhamal reveals stark contrasts in welfare outcomes, shaped by local governance dynamics. In areas like Nabarangpur, robust Gram Sabha mobilization under PESA has accelerated Forest Rights Act claims, with communities securing habitat rights and integrating PM-JANMAN housing without cultural disruption. Supportive district administrations in Mayurbhanj have coordinated OPELIP nutrition centres effectively, reducing stunting through SHG-led monitoring and real-time survey data from the 2026 household enumeration. These cases show participatory governance yielding tangible gains, such as 20% improved immunization rates via community health workers. Conversely, in remote Keonjhar pockets, delayed baseline surveys and fragmented anganwadi coverage leave PVTGs like Juangs underserved, with malnutrition persisting at 50% despite scheme allocations. Procedural hurdles, including rejected habitat claims in Similipal due to tiger reserve priorities, highlight how bureaucratic inertia undermines material security. Service delivery fractures, exemplified by

erratic water supply in Kandhamal, expose reliance on top-down targets over adaptive, context-specific support. These disparities emphasize that institutional responsiveness, via empowered local bodies and flexible administration, is pivotal for PVTG empowerment beyond nominal inclusion.

12. Challenges faced by PVTGs in Odisha

Despite constitutional guarantees and protective legislation, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha continue to confront layered and structural forms of marginalization. Their challenges are not isolated developmental deficits but manifestations of deeper political-economic and social inequalities embedded within state-society relations.

a) Land alienation

Land remains central to the identity, livelihood, and cosmology of PVTGs. However, expansion of mining, industrial corridors, and infrastructure projects in districts such as Keonjhar and Rayagada has intensified pressures on ancestral territories. Legal safeguards often fail in implementation, leading to dispossession, informal encroachment, and insecure tenure. Land alienation undermines not only economic stability but also cultural continuity and ecological knowledge systems.

b) Forced displacement

Developmental and conservation initiatives, including projects near the Similipal Tiger Reserve, have resulted in relocation pressures on forest-dwelling communities. Displacement disrupts traditional livelihoods, erodes community networks, and weakens customary governance institutions. Compensation mechanisms frequently inadequately address long-term livelihood reconstruction, resulting in precarious resettlement conditions.

c) Limited access to education

Educational deprivation remains acute. Remote habitation, language barriers, irregular teacher presence, and inadequate infrastructure restrict consistent schooling. For many PVTG children, formal education systems remain culturally distant and administratively inaccessible. This educational exclusion perpetuates intergenerational marginality and limits political and economic mobility.

d) Poor health care and nutritional insecurity

PVTGs continue to experience high levels of malnutrition, infectious diseases, anaemia, and maternal health vulnerability. Geographic isolation and limited access to trained medical personnel constrain healthcare delivery. Although nutrition and maternal health schemes exist, infrastructural deficits and weak monitoring often dilute their effectiveness, especially in remote habitations.

e) Economic vulnerability

Livelihood dependence on forest produce, subsistence agriculture, and seasonal wage labor exposes PVTGs to market volatility and environmental shocks. Exploitative middlemen,

lack of market access, and limited skill diversification exacerbate poverty. Economic precarity reduces bargaining power and deepens dependency on external actors.

f) Social exclusion and stigma

Beyond material deprivation, PVTGs experience symbolic marginalization. Social stigma, stereotyping, and cultural misunderstanding contribute to their exclusion from mainstream social and economic networks. Such exclusion restricts access to institutional spaces, financial systems, and broader civic engagement.

g) Denial of effective political participation

While constitutional reservations ensure formal representation, substantive political voice remains limited. Administrative complexity, literacy gaps, and bureaucratic distance often prevent meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Gram Sabha and local institutions do not always function as inclusive deliberative spaces, resulting in procedural rather than transformative participation. Collectively, these challenges reveal that vulnerability among PVTGs in Odisha is structurally produced and institutionally reproduced. Addressing them requires not only welfare expansion but also deeper reforms in land governance, participatory institutions, accountability mechanisms, and culturally sensitive development planning.

13. Rights-Based intervention approach

A rights-based intervention approach to PVTG inclusion in Odisha shifts the policy lens from welfare as charity to entitlement as justice. It recognizes Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups not as passive beneficiaries but as constitutional rights-holders whose claims derive from legal guarantees, democratic citizenship, and international human rights principles. This approach integrates recognition, redistribution, participation, and accountability into a coherent governance framework.

- a) Awareness and empowerment:** PVTGs must be informed about their constitutional protections and legal entitlements under frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act. Legal literacy and community-level awareness transform them from passive beneficiaries into active rights-holders.
- b) Participation and inclusion:** Meaningful involvement in Gram Sabha and local decision-making processes ensures that development interventions reflect community needs and cultural contexts rather than top-down priorities.
- c) Accountability and transparency:** State authorities and implementing agencies must be answerable for delivering entitlements. Social audits, grievance redress mechanisms, and transparent monitoring systems strengthen institutional accountability.
- d) Non-discrimination and equality:** Addressing structural exclusion requires equitable access to land, education, healthcare, and livelihoods, recognizing the differentiated vulnerabilities of PVTGs.

- e) Legal empowerment:** Accessible legal aid and effective remedies are essential to protect PVTGs from land alienation, displacement, and denial of services, ensuring that constitutional rights are enforceable in practice.

14. Brief case studies of rights-based interventions for PVTGs in India

The following case studies illustrate the potential of right-based interventions to address the structural discrimination, land alienation, livelihood insecurity, and socio-cultural marginalization faced by Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

- (a) Dongria kondh resistance (Niyamgiri Hills):** Dongria Kondh PVTGs successfully resisted bauxite mining via FRA and PESA, leveraging Gram Sabha consent to protect sacred lands, showcasing legal empowerment against corporate encroachment. Community awareness campaigns and advocacy halted Vedanta's project, preserving habitat and livelihoods while affirming constitutional rights.
- (b) Mendha-lekha community forest rights:** Under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, Mendha-Lekha village successfully secured community forest resource rights in 2009. The Gram Sabha gained control over forest governance, improved livelihoods through sustainable bamboo harvesting, and strengthened biodiversity conservation. This case highlights grassroots empowerment through legal recognition.
- (c) OPNIP nutrition model:** Odisha's PVTG Nutrition Improvement Programme (OPNIP) established 61 creches and 119 nutrition centres via SHG-led drives, improving child weight metrics and earning NITI Aayog praise for participatory rights enforcement. Women-led monitoring ensured welfare entitlements, combating malnutrition without cultural disruption.

Sahariya tribe Livelihood security through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Targeted implementation of MGNREGA in Sahariya-dominated areas improved food security and reduced distress migration. By treating employment as a legal entitlement, the intervention strengthened economic rights and community resilience. These brief cases demonstrate how legal recognition, participatory governance, and accountability mechanisms make the right-based approach effective for PVTGs.

15. Challenges and constraints in implementing a rights-based approach

- **Lack of awareness:** Many PVTGs remain unaware of their constitutional rights and legal entitlements due to low literacy, geographic isolation, and inadequate outreach.
- **Weak policy implementation:** Existing laws such as the Forest Rights Act and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act often suffer from administrative delays and weak enforcement.
- **Capacity limitations:** Government institutions and civil society organizations often lack the specialized skills and

resources required for effective rights-based intervention in remote tribal areas.

- **Social discrimination:** Deep-rooted social stigma and historical marginalization continue to restrict the social and economic mobility of PVTGs.
- **Development–conservation conflict:** Development projects and ecological protection zones such as the Similipal Tiger Reserve sometimes create tensions with PVTG habitat and livelihood rights.

16. Recommendations for effective implementation of a rights-based approach

These recommendations build on Odisha's PVTG challenges like discrimination, deprivation, and uneven welfare by shifting from charity to enforceable rights, drawing from field insights in districts such as Keonjhar and Kandhamal.

- **Enhance awareness campaigns:** Culturally tailored campaigns in local dialects, led by tribal youth and facilitators, can demystify FRA and PESA entitlements, countering unawareness that perpetuates dependency and exploitation.
- **Strengthen legal aid services:** Mobile clinics and paralegal networks in remote areas would expedite claims against land grabs, ensuring PVTGs access justice without intermediaries who often exploit their isolation.
- **Promote participatory governance:** Mandating Gram Sabha consent for habitat and welfare plans fosters ownership, as seen in Nabarangpur successes, transforming passive recipients into active decision-makers.
- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation:** Disaggregated data, social audits, and third-party reviews would track real outcomes, exposing gaps like Keonjhar's malnutrition despite OPELIP funding.
- **Strengthen institutional capabilities:** Training for officials and PVTG representatives on cultural sensitivity reduces bureaucratic delays, aligning administration with local contexts for faster rights realization.
- **Address social discrimination:** Anti-stigma dialogues and inclusive services challenge witch-hunting and exclusion, promoting cohesion between PVTGs and other groups while dismantling gender inequities.
- **Enforce compliance and accountability:** Grievance portals with timelines and oversight bodies hold agencies accountable, preventing procedural rejections of habitat rights in reserves like Similipal.
- **Implement PESA and FRA effectively:** Streamlined claim processes and Gram Sabha empowerment secure forest resources, directly tackling deprivation from conservation conflicts.
- **Invest in education and healthcare:** Residential schools, telemedicine, and nutrition hubs in habitations boost literacy and health, addressing stunting and maternal mortality rooted in access barriers.
- **Promote sustainable livelihoods:** SHG-led forest enterprises preserve traditions while building economic resilience, reducing poverty cycles evident in Odisha's PVTG data.

17. Findings of the study

- The study finds that participation among PVTGs in Odisha is strongly conditioned by the prior realization of foundational rights. Where land tenure security, habitat recognition, and welfare access are weak, governance participation tends to remain procedural rather than substantive.
- Significant implementation gaps exist in the operationalization of forest and land rights under statutory frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act and decentralization provisions for Scheduled Areas. Many PVTG households continue to face delays in individual and community forest rights recognition, particularly in remote districts.
- Welfare interventions have contributed to measurable improvements in housing, nutrition, and livelihood security; however, the impact remains spatially uneven across PVTG settlements. Districts with stronger administrative coordination and community mobilization show better health and development outcomes.
- The study reveals that material deprivation directly constrains political agency. Households experiencing food insecurity, irregular healthcare access, and educational exclusion demonstrate lower levels of consistent engagement in Gram Sabha meetings and local governance processes.
- Participatory institutions such as Gram Sabha function more effectively where awareness of statutory rights is higher and where local administrative responsiveness is stronger. In several PVTG habitations, participation is largely limited to attendance rather than deliberative decision-making.
- Women-led community collectives and self-help groups have emerged as important mediating institutions for welfare monitoring, nutrition governance, and local mobilization, indicating the importance of gender-inclusive governance structures.
- Bureaucratic distance, geographic isolation, and administrative fragmentation remain major barriers to effective service delivery in PVTG-dominated regions of Odisha.
- The sequencing relationship between rights recognition, welfare delivery, and participation is a central empirical outcome of the study. The findings support a rights- and welfare-first governance model for achieving meaningful democratic inclusion.
- Conservation policies and development projects sometimes generate tension with PVTG habitat security, particularly in ecologically protected zones, highlighting the need for adaptive governance balancing ecological protection and indigenous rights.
- Overall, the study concludes that inclusive governance among PVTGs cannot be achieved through participation-centric policy alone; rather, democratic empowerment requires integrated strategies combining legal recognition, welfare saturation, institutional accountability, and culturally sensitive development planning.

18. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that meaningful participatory governance among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha depends fundamentally on prior rights recognition and effective welfare delivery. While constitutional safeguards and legislative frameworks such as FRA and PESA provide formal avenues for inclusion, implementation gaps in land rights, habitat recognition, healthcare, education, and livelihood security limit substantive participation. The findings show that where foundational entitlements remain fragile, participation often becomes procedural rather than transformative. Conversely, districts with stronger administrative responsiveness, welfare convergence, and community awareness display more effective Gram Sabha functioning and collective agency. Theoretically, the study advances a sequencing framework rights and welfare stabilization must precede meaningful participation. By distinguishing PVTGs from the broader Scheduled Tribe category, it underscores the need for rights and welfare-first governance model to achieve substantive democratic inclusion in contexts of extreme marginality. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the need to prioritize rights recognition and welfare saturation before expecting transformative participation. Targeted interventions must include expedited forest rights settlement, habitat mapping for PVTGs, last-mile delivery of health and nutrition services, culturally responsive education models, and strengthened grievance redress mechanisms. Administrative capacity-building in remote scheduled areas and systematic monitoring of scheme implementation are equally critical. The broader implication is clear that participation alone does not produce empowerment. In contexts of extreme marginality, inclusive development requires a sequenced governance strategy in which secure rights, material capability, and institutional accountability form the foundation for democratic deepening. For PVTGs in Odisha and similarly situated communities elsewhere, substantive empowerment depends not merely on institutional design but on the state's capacity to translate constitutional guarantees into lived realities.

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