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## **Tribal Development in Tamil Nadu Challenges and Prospects**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents a comparative analysis of the aims to explore the tribal development aspects of Tamil Nadu through a comparison of its various districts. The Scheduled Tribe population of Tamil Nadu is significantly distributed across districts such as Salem, Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai, Villupuram, Erode, Namakkal and the Nilgiris. The Scheduled Tribe population constitutes a relatively small proportion of the state's total population, yet they show considerable regional diversity in terms of settlement patterns, livelihood practices, and socio-economic conditions. In general, the tribal population is distributed across hill regions, forest borders, and some plain areas, which results in varied development experiences across districts. Each region is characterised by a very different ecological and administrative context. In that the Nilgiris district occupies a distinctive position not due to its proportion of tribal population, but also because of its unique ecological setting, focused and intensive implementation of tribal development programmes, and the effectiveness of non-governmental organizations for tribal development followed by Dharmapuri district with substantial population and smaller population in districts like Dindigul, Krishnagiri and Vellore where the tribes reside in notable tribal pockets.*

*The present study comparatively reviews the existing literature on tribal development across seven districts in Tamil Nadu. The study provides a broader outline of the importance of tribal development in major tribal-populated regions of the state of Tamil Nadu.*

**Keywords:** Tribal development, Government initiatives, Developmental programs

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### **Introduction:**

In the context of India, these Scheduled Tribes are mainly located in the locations of central India, including Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and the Northeastern states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura in India. They also occur in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andaman and Nicobar Islands pockets. These tribes form and make up a numerically huge tribal population in our country. The Indian tribal communities are an important component of the rich culture of the nation with their own cultures, traditions, languages, and lifestyle,

and their economic activity consists in traditional farming, hunting, honeycomb, pottery, weaving, jewellery making, handicrafts and this is different in each tribe and also depending on the regions they inhabit. In spite of this cultural richness and ecological expertise, the tribal communities have in the past been socially, economically, and politically marginalised which also led to lack of access to education, healthcare among other livelihood related issues, displacement by projects and construction especially the dams and other ecological disturbances. Through understanding the unique predicaments of the tribal communities, and as they have always been disadvantaged, the Government of India has given special constitutional and policy appeal to the protection and development of Scheduled Tribes. At the institutional level, the creation of the ministry of tribal affairs in 1999 was a major developmental point in the path of the development of tribal development in India. The Ministry works as the focal point towards the creation of welfare and development policies, the coordination of programmes, and the tracking of the development interventions of Scheduled Tribes in the country. Other national schemes, like the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), Forest Rights Act (2006), Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, and others of the livelihood-based schemes provided under TRIFED, indicate a multi-sectoral dynamic in meeting education, health, livelihoods, housing, and forest-based rights. To the same end, the new tribal development policies tend increasingly to be region-based, institutionally aligned and place-based planning in the view that not all the homogenous models of policymaking can be applied to address the heterogeneous nature of tribal regions in India. National experiences in a state level are critical in realisation of policies in the grassroots level. Famous is the example of Tamil Nadu where there are numerous tribes that are located on a hill, forest, and plain territory which makes it informative to analyze the situation of tribal development strategies and their outcome.

The Nilgiris also takes a vantage position among the districts of Tamil Nadu where tribal population is clustered owing to its ecological richness, cluster of different tribal communities, presence of specialised institutions and programmes that are being followed, this makes it the centre of interests in the context of the practice of tribal development in the state. The total population of Tamil Nadu is 7.94 lakh on census 2011, 1.10 percent of the overall population of Tamil Nadu which is constituted of 36 different tribal groups such as Malayali, Toda, Kurumba, Paniyan, Irular, Kattunayakan, Kanikkar, Palliyan, and Kadar that are widely distributed in different regions like Salem and Kallakurichi, Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai, Erode, and The Indian It is these which are initiated and implemented at State level and carried out basically by the Adi Dravidar and tribal Welfare Department which acts as the nodal agency in planning coordinating and implementing the tribal welfare programmes through the local bodies. In the comparatively diffuse distribution of tribal population within the state of Tamil Nadu, it has followed a specific and location-oriented practice by targeting districts like Salem, Dharmapuri, Villupuram, Tiruvannamalai, the Nilgiris and a portion of the Western Ghats where the tribal concentration is comparatively greater. Education is one of the main elements of tribal development strategy of the state. The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) system, Government Tribal Residential (GTR) schools and hostels are set to deal with the endemic problems of low literacy and high dropout rates and insufficient access to high-quality schooling in remote tribal areas. On the other hand, the infrastructure development projects aim at upgrading the basic facilities in tribal settlements and villages by constructing link roads to the hamlets, drinking water facilities, residential units and community infrastructure, to enhance physical accessibility

and living standards even the very rural tribal hamlets in the hilly area of Nilgiris and Jawadu hills, as well as the foothills of Kolli hills. Thus, another significant and vital aspect of the policy of the development of Tamil Nadu tribals is Livelihood enhancement. Programmes promote customized and regional jobs such as farming, gathering as well as value adding of minor forest products and herbs. The development of skills that are either vocational training in tailoring and digital skills or the diversification of livelihoods of tribal youth and women were also offered and are encouraged to mitigate seasonal migration and economic susceptibility. Some organizations like the Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Housing and Development Corporation (TAHDCO) and TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India) support the economic support, entrepreneurship, and market connection of tribal products of the own produce of these communities to the marketplace. Integrated Tribal development projects (ITDPs) is a programme that is undertaken in a few locations to make sure that its role and functions are felt in various sectors including health, education, livelihoods, and housing. This research, documentation, and cultural preservation is institutionalised as a result of the Tribal Research Centre (TRC) that conducts ethnographic research, socio-economic evaluations, as well as training development personnel, and the preservation of the tribal heritage by the way of museums. All these state-level programs are aimed at the unceasing struggles of tribal society in Tamil Nadu, such as poverty, health and malnutrition, lack of education, and unreliable livelihood structures.

### **Methodology:**

The current research paper seeks to analyse using systematic comparative review of the different facets of tribal development in Tamil Nadu with special emphasis on development outcomes of the different tribal development programs currently being carried out as well as the challenges of tribal community. The research is descriptive and examines current literature, policy reports, government publications and statistical reports obtained and gathered as original and official documents like the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India; the Department of Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu; Tribal Research Centre (TRC), Tamil Nadu; Census of India; District Administration of Nilgiris; TRIFED publications and the Hill Area Development Programme documents. Also, books and peer-reviewed journals pertaining to tribal development were examined. The literature collected was analysed under the comparison analytical framework with some of the most important development aspects maintained including education, health, livelihood, forest rights, housing, cultural preservation and the impact of local governance and decentralisation. It made comparative observations between the Nilgiri district and the other district of Tamil Nadu with tribal concentration to determine the best practice, effectiveness of the policies and development models that were replicable.

### **Review of literature:**

The literature review section reveals the success and the maturity of the tribal development programs that are undertaken by the government via state-led development programs as well as the difficulties, inefficiency, and disadvantages of the current programs. The reports of the government, the scholarly articles, the news reports and the research reports are all incorporated in this review. One study by Prasanth and Balasubramaniam (2021) reviewed how tribal communities perceive tribal welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu and established that awareness of the tribal communities and positive attitude towards the tribal welfare

programmes influence their participation in governance considerably and development as well. It is an explicit indication of how much they are interested in development in the fundamentals and an improved livelihood in the future. The research also establishes that the level of knowledge on the purpose of tribal welfare schemes varies among tribal communities in various districts of the Tamil Nadu state. There are also certain differences in the degree of satisfaction and application to the tribal welfare schemes because of inaccessible administrative procedures, local implementation systems, etc. This paper points out the importance of the beneficiary-based policies in the development policy of the tribes. Subramanyam (2020) has explored the tribal development in the context of social exclusion, inclusion, and integration in a wider context that is peculiar to both theoretical and anthropological approaches. It highlights the significance of inclusion in the light of the concept of social exclusion and the effects of non-inclusion of a group of people into mainstream of the society. Concept of integration strengthened the concept of inclusion and the role such a process has in terms of development. Integration does not only involve coming together of the community, but also their values, culture and significance as they are handled at the mainstream society. Lal (2014) provided the groundwork of the tribal development in India and discovered that the nation is faced by the problem of land alienation, poverty, and inequality in education and health accessibility. Although the research presupposes a national approach, its results can be applied to Tamil Nadu, and regarding the ability to perceive the extent to which the policies of the macro-level are inconsistently reflected in the targeted community at the regional or ground level, the study resonates and the role of the comparative background of the tribal development programmes in evaluating the state-specific ones is highlighted. The study by Akila and Kubendran (2016) is also specialized because the authors explored a review of tribal development programmes implemented by the state government, and the study shows that sector-specific interventions are important, both in terms of education, housing, health, and livelihood promotion. It shows us how the impact can be formed and need the bottom-up strategy, in which the growth and development can be attained in the specified community or group. Even though these authors point out that the system of welfare in Tamil Nadu is rather well-developed, its weaknesses are mentioned by the authors that encompass absence of monitoring, coordination, and contextualization of schemes which, according to them, should be resolved through the more decentralized and context-oriented planning. In his work, Hariharan (2024) discussed and solved a major issue that the socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu has improved due to the government efforts, but the aspects that remained problematic are income security, employment quality, and possession of assets. It is also determined that there are inter-district differences in the development results of tribal development with some districts highlighting in the educational sector and the other in the healthcare facilities and the other way round. It demonstrates the necessity of the urgent attention to the sphere of job creation, asset development via certain developmental projects. This supports the necessity of comparative evaluations which take into account regional differences of socio-economic status. Research on tribal development has also touched on the new aspects of tribal development including the tribal entrepreneurship and financial inclusion. Alexander and Amarjothi (2025) conducted an investigation to determine the impact of the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) on the tribal start-ups in the Tamil Nadu southern parts. This research reveals that tribal entrepreneurs have been in a position to initiate small scale businesses owing to the presence

of microfinance. It also enables them to reach them by such undertakings by identifying markets to their products. However, we understood that such initiatives are not yet able to transform sufficiently due to financial literacy, barriers to entry into the market, and businesses sustainability and need further skill development and improvement of the financial support of such groups. economic indicators and address structural marginalization, cultural alienation, and social identity. It is a valuable holistic opinion that leads to understanding the tribal development in Tamil Nadu whereby modernization and integration could be followed by the risk of cultural erosion. The other area of concern is on the livelihood security where the support mechanisms are institutional. Kannamudaiyar and Chellasamy (2023) assess the impact of TRIFED on tribal households in the district of Nilgiris and determine that the intervention of TRIFED positively contributed to stabilizing the income and reducing the role of exploitative intermediaries and make tribals self-reliant in the environment of entrepreneurship enterprises. However, the level of awareness and market penetration is also defined as a limitation on the study which can be improved. It also concludes the paper by finding that the Hill Area Development Programme (HADP) has played a significant role in the development of the tribal in the Nilgiris district through the application of region-specific welfare and livelihood programmes and the Tribal Development Council (TDC) reinforced such efforts by ensuring organized interventions at the district level. The other active role in the study is the NGOs and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the continuous existence of traditional occupations and stimulation of new income-generating activities among the tribal communities. The emphasis has been imputed on the tribal women empowerment where SHGs have resulted in economic involvement, economic self-sufficiency and social density. However, the findings also suggest that there is a need to develop more awareness of welfare-programmes and to increase educative stimulation, in particular, to the tribal girls, in order to gain sustainable and inclusive growth in the Nilgiris (Ravi & Raja, 2016). Gopu and Velusamy (2019) investigate livelihood and cultural impacts of forest management on the Paliyar communities of the Palani Hills that are defined by the substitution of the original subsistence practice with commercial agriculture and dependence on NTFP (Non-Timber Forest Product). The study has pointed out Forest Rights Act as a legal step into a progressive legislation which officially acknowledges the forest and land rights of the Paliyar tribes. These identified rights however are not realised as to its full potential due to poor implementation, administrative bottleneck and regular conflicts with forest and revenue authorities hence they limit its intended livelihood and cultural benefits. Other than the economic and livelihood factors, cultural sustainability has been academically discussed over the past few years. Balamani (2025) addressed the issue of the language extinction among tribes inhabiting Tamil Nadu and he mentioned the role of the formal education systems, migration, and socio-economic integration in the loss of native languages. As noted in the paper, the issue of cultural and linguistic conservation should be incorporated in the development of the tribes as it will enable them to experience holistic and sustainable outcomes. In 2014, the Government of Tamil Nadu introduced 70 research fellowships through the Tholkudi scheme, which is an indication that the state was keen on the preservation, representation, and documentation of the indigenous community of the state of Tamil Nadu (The New Indian Express, 2024). According to the pattern of literacy in Tamil Nadu between 2001 and 2011, it is observed that in the given case, there is a net positive change in the same aspect which reflects the impact of the government programs and development of the socio-economic directions of the state. However, some disparities

still exist particularly in the rural and the less advantaged population including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who are yet to grapple with infrastructure, inability to access quality education, and financial problems. Overall, the level of literacy is higher in urban areas, which proves the fact of still existing rural-urban gap and the need to have a certain intervention to ensure equitable access to education (Thaiyaba, Banu, and Vijayakumari, 2025). There must be the transcendence of the development activities.

### **Challenges and Prospects:**

Although there have been much success and advancement in the development of the tribal in Government of Tamil Nadu in terms of laying off the structured government policies and focused programmes, there have been numerous challenges and gaps that have been realized when the review of existing literatures was undertaken. It is a review paper, which paid attention to tribal development progress in Tamil Nadu via the way of policies, institutional mechanism and programme intervention on the inception of the Hill Area Development Programme (HADP) to establishment of specialised institutions such as the Tribal Research Centre and the Tribal Museum. The Government of Tamil Nadu has long over decades planned and realised long term tribal goodwill through organised target planning such as the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), Eklavya model residential schools, livelihood and infrastructure projects, forest right and decentralized administrative provisions. All this has seen the state become one of the most active regions in India in issues that touch on the planning and execution of tribal development. However, comparing the tribal development output in the districts, it is seen that not all outputs are of equal outputs and that there are several important and distinctive elements in tribal development, in the Tamil Nadu. In some districts such as the Nilgiris, Salem, Dharmapuri, Villupuram and Tiruvannamalai, the concentration of tribal has been concentrated significantly but its extent and success will vary greatly depending on the geographical areas. This paper has determined various causes of such inequalities and they encompass variations on ecological situations, accessibility and topography, administrative resources, presence of institutions, the level of the civil society involvement, and the efficiency of the local government institutions. The districts which have had an institutional support, a high degree of convergence among the departments and local participation have depicted a relatively better outcome in education, access to health, livelihood diversification, women empowerment and cultural conservation. Such survey of the Nilgiris district has revealed it to be a model of area-centric and participatory tribal development not just due to the demographic importance but also due to the long-term existence of area-specific programmes, of research and cultural institutions, and due to the interface between the district administration, forest departments and Panchayati Raj Institutions and civil society organisations. Initiatives such as HADP, decentralised form of local government in tribal hamlets as well as fostering the indigenous culture through holding annual festivals and keeping in touch with non-governmental organisations such as the Keystone Foundation, other functioning organisations of the Nilgiris district, have enabled the development approach of balancing the socio-economic development with the ecological sustainability and cultural integrity. It is worth to note that planning schemes and programme change in other tribal parts of the state of Tamil Nadu have been influenced by the experiences and the outcomes that have been observed in the Nilgiris. At the same time, the review also identifies the current problems and gaps in the process of developing Tamil Nadu as a tribe. This

predicament involves unequal infrastructure growth in the rural settlements, inequity in accessing higher education and skill-based training and employment opportunities, limited access to the market of forest-based livelihood, ignorance, administrative fragmentation and other interpretations of the Forest Rights Act. In others, even this day, tribal development remains a scheme based and not a practical community-based development, therefore no local ownership and sustainability. Absence of systematic impact assessment, and district-based planning model are also limiting the refinement of evidence-based policy. Based on the findings of this review, the research article reveals that there is a need to have more district-related planning, enhance the consolidation of state agencies and local self-government, improve record keeping of best practices, and the implementation of successful models (as exemplified in the Nilgiris) in other tribal regions of Tamil Nadu. The involvement in the governance, sustainability of livelihood and resources, enhancing the institution, and the culture in the background of the prevailing issues regarding climate vulnerability and youth migration should be made the priority of the development strategies of the future tribal development. An inclusive, evidence-based, and decentralised strategy can help Tamil Nadu start on the path to a more equal and balanced tribal development in all districts.

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