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Between Law and Reality: Examining Tribal Self-Governance in Rayagada and Koraput Districts of Odisha

(A Study of Constitutional Safeguards and Indigenous Autonomy)

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Abstract

In 2036, Odisha will complete one hundred years as a linguistic state. As we look toward this milestone and dream of a developed Odisha, it is important to ask, whose voices define development, and who actually benefits from it? At the same time, questions of indigenous autonomy, inclusion and justice became significant. This paper examines tribal self-governance in the districts of Rayagada and Koraput, where strong constitutional safeguards such as the Fifth Schedule, PESA (1996), and the Forest Rights Act (2006) exist in principle; however, their implementation often reveals a gap between law and reality. Through case studies of Niyamgiri, Narayanpatna, and Sijhimali, the paper highlights the limitations of processes such as consent, participation, and rights recognition in practice. Simultaneously, it shows that tribal communities still seek their autonomy by relying on the traditional institutions, collective mobilisation and on the support of the civil society. The study argues that a connection between legal provisions and realities has to be bridged to realize meaningful and inclusive development. It recommends that the tribal communities are not to be seen as an obstacle, but as an active participant whose rights, knowledge, practices, and voices must be central to Odisha's development trajectory.

Keywords: *(Tribal Self-Governance, PESA, Fifth Schedule, Niyamgiri, Narayanpatna, Sijhimali, Gram Sabha, Odisha 2036)*

Introduction

This paper begins with a fundamental question: what does "development" mean in regions where the people most affected by it have limited control over decision-making processes? This concern is not merely theoretical; it reflects the lived experiences of tribal communities, who have raised such questions through generations of struggle and resistance. The framework of tribal self-governance in India is intended to empower indigenous communities by recognising their right to manage their own affairs in accordance with their traditions and customary practices. This principle has been constitutionally acknowledged under the Fifth Schedule, while the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) places the

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Gram Sabha at the centre of local governance in Scheduled Areas.

This paper focuses on Rayagada and Koraput districts, as they clearly reflect these challenges. These are not merely administrative regions they are home to communities such as the Dongria Kondh, Saura, Gadaba, and Bonda. Such communities are in a complex situation because they are well-protected constitutionally, yet in practice they are usually most marginalised, socially, politically and economically. The promise of law is often confronted with practical obstacles on the ground. Although the Fifth Schedule, PESA and the Forest Rights Act are present, Gram Sabhas are not necessarily functioning in anything more than a formal way, community rights are not entirely being realised, and development projects are preceded with what appears to be a form of manufactured consent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), where participation exists in form but not fully in substance.

As Odisha moves toward its centenary in 2036, the question arises: has tribal self-governance provided communities with the autonomy it promised? This paper examines the Gaps between law and practice, using both case studies and legal analysis, demonstrates that this discrepancy indicates greater strains between what the Constitution offers and what state-led development provides.

Rationale

The study of tribal self-governance in districts like Rayagada and Koraput is significant because although legal protections and considerations are well provided under the law, but in practice, they are not always effective. As much as tribal people are supposed to be involved in development processes, they tend to be marginalised. Through the analysis of the practical functioning of laws like PESA and Forest Rights Act, this paper aims to demonstrate the gap between the law and practices. The knowledge of this gap can be critical in the formulation of development policies that are inclusive, fair and considerate of tribal rights.

Methodology

This paper follows an analytical approach, combining both qualitative and limited quantitative insights. It examines constitutional provisions like the Fifth Schedule and laws such as PESA (1996) and the Forest Rights Act (2006), along with some important Supreme Court judgments. To understand how this work in reality, the study uses three case studies Niyamgiri, Narayanpatna, and Sijhimali, selected to show different situations of tribal self-governance in practice. The study is based entirely on secondary sources and does not involve primary fieldwork, including government reports, academic writings, and committee reports. Some basic socio-economic and demographic data are also used to support the discussion. The aim is to understand the gap between legal provisions and their actual implementation on the ground.

Review of Literature

Existing literature on tribal self-governance in India consistently highlights a structural gap between constitutional safeguards and their implementation. Padel and Das (2010) discuss movements such as Niyamgiri and Kashipur in Odisha, where tribal people fight against the threats of losing their land, resources, and identity. The Indian Peoples Tribunal report about

Kashipur (Padel & Das, 2010) also raises attention to the issue of displacement, human rights issues, and the suppression of the local voices in the mining-affected areas.

At the policy level, such as the Xaxa Committee (2014), the acknowledgment that constitutional protections of tribal communities are still not even in practice is also noted. Simultaneously, research by Sharma (2006) also points to the fact that informal customary institutions still operate at the local level, despite their lack of formalization.

These literatures indicate that the problem is not merely one of poor implementation, but this reflects a deeper conflict between the state-led development priorities and the lived realities of tribal communities. Nevertheless, limited work has focused on these dynamics at the ground level in the districts such as Rayagada and Koraput as this paper tries to fill the gap.

The Land and its People

To understand these issues in context, it is important to look at the socio-economic background of the region.

Demography:

Odisha has one of the largest tribal populations in India, Rayagada and Koraput located in Southern Odisha, are predominantly rural, tribal dominated districts with rich natural resources. According to the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 22.85% of the state's total population. The districts of Rayagada and Koraput have even higher concentrations in Rayagada, Scheduled Tribes constitute 57.52% of the population and in Koraput, and the figure exceeds 50.56%. Both districts are part of the KBK Region, characterized by high tribal population, low literacy rates, rural, agrarian and tribal life is central to both regions and home to communities such as the Dongria Kondh, Saura, Gadaba, and Bonda.

Undivided Koraput:

Undivided Koraput was one of the largest districts in India before its division in 1992, covering about 18,063 sq. km. It is located in the southern part of Odisha and was officially formed on 1 April 1936, along with the creation of the Odisha province (Government of Odisha, 2010). Before 1936, the region was part of the Vizagapatam district under the Madras Presidency during British rule. In 1870, the British established Koraput as an administrative centre mainly because of its relatively cooler and healthier climate compared to the coastal plains (O'Malley, 1907).

The region is known for its rich tribal culture and diversity. It is home to more than 50 tribal communities, including the Paroja, Khond, and Gadaba. These communities have distinct socio-cultural practices and traditional systems of livelihood (Sharma, 2006). Historically, Koraput was part of the Nandapur kingdom, which later shifted its capital to Jeypore in the 17th century (Dash, 2005). Economically undivided Koraput was rich in forest resources and mineral wealth. In the post-independence period, industrial development increased with the establishment of major units such as the National Aluminium Company (NALCO) at

Damanjodi and JK paper mills in Rayagada, contributing to regional economic growth (Government of Odisha, 2015).

Formation of Rayagada District:

The undivided Koraput district was reorganized in 1992, with the formation of odisha as a linguistic state. To improve governance, development and due ue to its vast geographical area and administrative difficulties, Rayagada district was officially separated from undivided koraput on 2 October 1992. On the same day, the former Koraput district was divided into four separate districts: Koraput, Rayagada, Nabarangpur, and Malkangiri (Government of Odisha, 1992).

Although Rayagada became a district in 1992, it has historical significance dating back to earlier periods. It was associated with the Suryavanshi rulers of the Nandapur–Jeypore kingdom. During the 16th century, under the rule of Vishwanath Dev Gajapati, the region functioned as an important political and administrative centre (Dash, 2005). Rayagada continues to have a significant tribal population, particularly communities such as the Khonds and Soras, who play an important role in the socio-cultural landscape of the district (Sharma, 2006).

Livelihoods and Economy:

The livelihoods in Koraput and Rayagada districts are mainly based on agriculture and related activities. In Koraput, a large proportion of the workforce nearly three-fourths depends on agriculture, with crops such as paddy (Rice), Ragi (finger millets), and pulses being widely cultivated (Government of Odisha, 2024). In addition to farming, many rural and tribal households depend on forest-based activities, including the collection of minor forest produce like tamarind, mahua flowers, leaves which play an important role in sustaining everyday life (Sharma, 2006). Koraput is a Global Agricultural Heritage Site (GIAHS) recognized by FAO; in 2024 Koraput Kalajeera Rice was officially awarded a GI tag.

Koraput has also witnessed some industrial development with the establishment of units like NALCO (National Aluminium Company) at Damanjodi which is one of Asia's largest bauxite mines and alumina refinery and HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) at Sunabeda, a defence enterprise manufacturing aircrafts engines. However, the employment benefits from these industries are limited and do not reach a majority of the local population (Government of Odisha, 2015). In Rayagada, agriculture continues to be the primary livelihood, but the district also has a stronger presence of mining and industrial activities. Bauxite based industries and units such as JK Paper Ltd, one of India's major pulp and paper manufacturers. IMFA (Indian Metals and Ferro Alloys Limited) and currently new investment that is a largest 2 MTPA Alumni Refinery by Hindalco is developed at Kankasiriguda, Rayagada which contribute to the district's economy (Planning & Convergence Department, 2024). Despite this, most rural households remain dependent on traditional sources of income, and also both the districts are emerging in Eco-Tourism creating new source of income. Another important issue in both districts is limited

infrastructure and connectivity in rural interior areas, which affects access to headquarters, healthcare services, markets and economic opportunities.

Table 1. Comparative Socio-Economic Profile of Rayagada and Koraput Disrict *(Based on Census 2011 & Recent Estimates)*

Indicator	Rayagada	Koraput
Geographical Area	7,073 sq. km	8,807 sq. km
Population (Approx...Est 2024)	Approx. 10–11 lakh	Approx. 15 lakh
Scheduled Tribe (%)	About 57%	About 50%
Literacy Rate	Around 49.76%	Around 49.21%
Female Literacy	Around 39.19%	Around 38.55%
Urban Population	Approx. 15%	Approx. 16–17%
Main Occupation	Agriculture + mining	Agriculture dominant
Industries (Existing/Under development)	JK Paper Mills, IMFA, 2 MTPA Alumina Refinery (Kansariguda)	NALCO, HAL
Connectivity Issues	Limited connectivity in remote areas	Limited connectivity in remote areas

(Source: Census of India 2011; Odisha Economic Survey 2023-24; District Factbooks (Indiastate)

Tribal Self-Governance Model in Rayagada and Koraput:

A combination of traditional and modern law systems is evident in the tribal self-government system in Rayagada and Koraput districts of Odisha. Governance in these Scheduled Areas is performed with the help of both customary and formal laws like the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) and Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) which acknowledge the central role of the Gram Sabha in local decision-making (Government of India, 1996; Government of India, 2006). On the village level, the Gram Sabha is instrumental in the management of natural resources, development activities and community interest. Communities in Rayagada have used the provisions of FRA to obtain Community Forest Rights (CFR) and Individual Forest Rights (IFR), enhancing their control of forests and livelihoods (SCSTRTI, 2017).

The traditional institutions still influence governance by the norms of local leadership and Traditional practices. These systems have a strong connection with the ecological values and the sustainable use of resources. Though they tend to be used together with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), some cases of co-operation and power struggles are experienced (NIRDPR, 2010). The system has not changed much and is still largely livelihood-based with reliance on agriculture, forest produce and wage labour (Sharma, 2006). Participation and

planning have been facilitated by programmes such as (OTELP) yet issues such as low awareness, administrative delays, and partial implementation are still challenges. Tribal self-governance in these areas is generally a hybrid and participatory model, the effectiveness of which is determined by more effective implementation and awareness of community members.

Table 2. Key Tribal Communities and Governance Structures in Rayagada and Koraput

Community	Primary District	Traditional Institution	Key Customary Domain
Dongria Kondh	Rayagada	Majhi-Mutha system	Forest, land, ritual
Lanjia Saura	Rayagada / Koraput	Birinda council	Dispute resolution, marriage
Gadaba	Koraput	Village council (Mutha)	Land, forest, social order
Bondo (Bondas)	Koraput	Elders' assembly	Conflict management, forest access
Koya	Koraput	Patel-Patwari council	Land, forest, marriage
Kondh	Rayagada	Majhi system	Land and social dispute

(Source: Sharma, B.D. (2006); Padel, F. & Das, S. (2010); SCSTRTI, Odisha (2017))

Constitutional Safeguards in Protection of Tribal Rights

The rights, land and identity of Scheduled Tribes are given protection by the Constitution of India especially in the Fifth Schedule regions, such as Rayagada and Koraput. Article 244(1) under the Fifth Schedule provides the Governor with special powers to control laws and avoid exploitation. Article 46 promotes the educational and economic interests of tribal communities and Articles 164(1) and 275(1) provide institutional and financial assistance. Article 330, 332, 243D ensures political representation, and Article 338A creates the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes. These are supported by the laws like the PESA Act, 1996, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 that reinforce the local governance and legal safeguards.

Tribal Self-Governance: Legal Framework

The legal framework of Tribal self-governance in Rayagada and Koraput is determined by the constitutional provisions and special acts that govern the Scheduled Areas. These are meant to safeguard the rights of tribes and also allow communities to engage in governance via their institutions.

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) places the Gram Sabha at the centre of village governance and has authority over the natural resources, development planning and resolving of disputes (Government of India, 1996). The PESA Rules, 2010 in Odisha further continue these powers in other areas, including minor forest produce, local markets, and money lending.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) acknowledges the Individual and Community Forest Rights (IFR and CFR) that enhance the community ownership of forest resources (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2006).

The Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964 supports the local governance structures by giving the Panchayati Raj Institutions a reservation status of Scheduled Tribes (Government of Odisha, 1964). Addionally, the Orissa Minor Forest Produce Administration Rules, 2002 also acknowledge the importance of the local institutions in the management of forest produces.

Two Important Court Decisions:

Supreme Court decisions have also influenced the legal structure of tribal self-governance. In the case of Samatha and the State of Andhra Pradesh (1997), the Court ruled that award of mining leases to the private companies in Scheduled Areas constitutes land alienation and is not allowed under the Fifth Schedule. It pointed out that their land should be preserved and that they should get economic justice, dignity and status of the tribe. Later In the Niyamgiri case (2013), however, the Court made a major move by acknowledging the importance of Gram Sabhas. It made a decision that the decision on whether mining would impact the religious and cultural rights of the Dongria Kondh should be made by the local Gram Sabhas. This enhanced the roles of Gram Sabhas as central decision making institutions on issues concerning tribal rights and development.

Tribal Self-Governance in Practice: Gaps between Law and Reality:

Although the legal provisions are very strong, including the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) and the Fifth Schedule, the tribal self-governance in Rayagada and Koraput indicate a difference between the intent and practice of the law.

Gram Sabhas are central to the legal structure, but in most cases function more as procedural bodies than independent institutions. The administrative control of the processes in the meetings and the decisions reduces their effectiveness especially when it comes to the issues of land acquisition and mining where the consent of the community is often restricted or manipulated. In most cases, meetings are held without proper notice, attendance is not inclusive and official documents do not capture the deliberations of the communities.

Language barrier is a serious obstacle to successful participation. Official activities are carried out either in Odia or Hindi, and the natural language of local communities is Kui, Sora, Gadaba, and Bonda. This restricts any meaningful interaction since the community members can often cannot fully understand or verify decisions that are captured on their behalf.

The Forest Rights Act has been executed in an uneven manner. Although there have been some Individual and Community Forest Rights, many claims have been pending or denied without proper reason. According to Xaxa Committee (2014), these rejections are often made without reasonable justification or communication and undermine the rights of claimants.

The gap between the law and practice is also demonstrated by the process of manufactured consent. Consultations in development projects by Gram Sabha are characterized by a lack of transparency, insufficient information sharing, and indirect influences, and this creates a concern on the genuine nature of the consent that has been obtained. Meanwhile, the high value resources like land and minerals are still dominated by bureaucratic control in decision making. The ancient institutions of governance are still socially important but their influence has been redefined by contact with the administrative systems and local hierarchies of power. This has caused scenarios where power is not distributed equally and sometimes it strengthens internal disparities in societies. The other issues faced by Panchayati Raj Institutions and Gram Sabhas include interference by the elite, lack of transparency and participation.

All these processes undermine the efficacy of constitutional protections, which leads to the further loss of lands, eviction, and access to forest-based livelihoods. Meanwhile, local resistance and community mobilisation including Kashipur movements and women groups' participation in forest management proves that self-government has not lost its possibilities when accompanied by real participation and institutional autonomy. This raises an important question: what is achieved by simply recognizing the difference between law and reality? Justice, equality and meaningful development will not come because of recognition. With Odisha heading to the vision of Viksit Odisha 2036, it is necessary to consider how these voids influence the daily life of tribal populations. No less important is the issue of responsibility. The fact that these gaps persist cannot be blamed on one actor but is indicative of a systemic condition. These structural inequalities are sustained by limited accountability, selective application of the law and an overall deficiency of continued involvement.

Case Studies: From Legal Provisions to Ground Realities

The gap between legal provisions and ground reality in Rayagada and Koraput districts becomes clearer when examined through specific cases. While laws such as the PESA Act (1996) and the Forest Rights Act (2006) emphasise tribal self-governance and community consent, their implementation often reveals tensions between legal ideals and administrative practices.

1. Niyamgiri Movement: Legal Empowerment with Limits

The Niyamgiri case is a historic example of a tribal assertion through legal means. The Dongria Kondh people, who are approximately 8,000 in number, consider the hills as the residence of their god Niyam Raja. In the case of a bauxite mining project by Vedanta, the community initiated long-term opposition. In 2013, the affected villages were given the authority to make a decision on whether mining would infringe their religious and cultural rights as directed by the Supreme Court. Twelve Gram Sabhas voted unanimously against the project, in a historic vote. This case illustrates the fact that self-governance provisions in the

law may work but only after a long struggle and intervention by the courts. It draws our attention to the fact that as much as the law enables tribal autonomy, its actualisation is usually accompanied by outside assistance and protracted legal struggles.

2. Narayanpatna (Koraput): Limits of Legal Protection

Koraput district has had a strong tribal rights movement in Narayanpatna block of the district, which is spearheaded by the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh. The leader of the movement, Nachika Linga, was himself freed as a result of bonded labour after five generations of his family had fall into bondage. His leadership saw the organization hold tribals against land grabbing, the liquor trade and the exploitation of the moneylenders. The Narayanpatna movement is based on the decades of systematic dispossession of the tribal communities. Poverty has led to the sale and mortgage of land, the exploitation of illiteracy, the development of industry, and the displacement of people through mining and dam developments. This was aggravated by bonded labour in Narayanpatna- whereby tribals were coerced into servitude of landlords to repay loans which were never to be repaid.

The methodology of the organization was a combination of conventional mobilization and law advocacy. They resorted to traditional dispute resolution methods to repossess the land that had been alienated and also to liberate bonded labourers. They also increased awareness on the laws rights on the Scheduled Tribes and on the laws against bonded labour. The reaction of the state was severe. When hundreds of activists staged protests outside the Narayanpatna police station on November 20, 2009, police opened fire killing two of the major leaders of the movement. Others were detained and imprisoned. According to the report of the Xaxa Committee, 104 people including tribal children were arrested in Narayanpatna. The Committee noted that "there are around 15 children below the age of 14 confined in Koraput District Jail. The children do not know the language (Odia) which the jail authorities speak and are unaware about why they are in jail." The Narayanpatna story exposes the discrepancy between the legal and the practical aspect of the state. Although the rights of tribes are safeguarded by law, the state has been involved in the infringement of tribal rights--in some cases, actively colluding with landlords and moneylenders, in some cases, by ignoring them and remaining apathetic.

3. Sijhimali (Rayagada): Contemporary Governance in Practice

The Sijhimali case is an ongoing conflict over a proposed bauxite mining project by Vedanta Limited in the Sijhimali Hills, spread across Kalahandi and Rayagada districts of Odisha, where local Adivasi and Dalit communities are resisting due to fears of displacement, ecological damage, and loss of livelihoods. Ongoing developments in Sijhimali show a current example of gap between law and reality Laws emphasize prior informed consent & community participation, in practice, administrative actions create tensions in implementation

In June 2025, the district administration imposed restrictions on the entry of several activists into Rayagada, citing concerns of law and order. Notably, Medha Patkar was detained at Rayagada Railway Station and prevented from participating in a public meeting. Restrictions were also placed on activists such as Prafulla Samantara and Lingaraj Azad. Administrative measures such as prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the BNSS were used to regulate

public gatherings. Local organisations like the Maa Mati Mali Surakhya Mancha have played a central role in mobilising resistance, although there is a focus of the law on prior informed consent, the recent practices demonstrate the application of administrative procedures to control dissent and seclude the tribal communities against outside assistance. In comparison with Niyamgiri, where legal procedures allowed the community to make decisions, Sijhimali represents a more restrictive and regulated model of governance, in which procedural compliance is combined with adversarial participation. Although a study of these cases indicates that the difference between law and reality in tribal governance is situational. Whereas Niyamgiri shows what legal empowerment can achieve, Narayanpatna reveals the constraints of the law, and Sijhimali represents the modern problems with the realization of tribal self-governance. This implies that the quality of legal frameworks ultimately relies on administrative practices, political goodwill and the room to be provided to the communities to participate.

Table 3. Legal Provisions vs. Ground Realities in Tribal Self-Governance (Rayagada & Koraput)

Law / Provision	Objective / Legal Intent	Observed Ground Reality	Implementation Gap
Fifth Schedule (Article 244, Governor's powers)	Protect tribal land and prevent exploitation, provide special administrative powers	Displacement continues for development projects, administrative priorities often override community needs	Constitutional intent diluted by state-led projects
PESA Act, 1996 (Gram Sabha powers)	Empower Gram Sabhas to manage local resources, approve development plans, and protect community interests	Gram Sabhas often side lined, especially in land acquisition and mining projects, limited technical knowledge and administrative support	Decisions bypassed; low awareness, dependence on officials
Forest Rights Act, 2006 (Individual & Community Forest Rights)	Recognize tribal rights over forest land and resources, secure livelihoods	Many claims pending or rejected, delays and misclassification, Community Forest Rights (CFR) recognized partially	Slow recognition of rights, partial implementation, legal/technical hurdles

Customary / Traditional Institutions (Palli Sabha, village heads)	Collective decision-making, sustainable resource use, ecological governance	Coexist with formal laws but often ignored or overridden, informal leadership still influential	Authority not fully recognized by administration, tension with formal institutions

(Source: Government of India, 1996; Government of India, 2006; NIRDPR, 2010; SCSTRTI, 2017; Field & Case Study Observations (Rayagada & Koraput)

Beyond Formal Law: Forces Sustaining Tribal Autonomy

The tribal autonomy in Rayagada and Koraput is maintained by informal means in day to day social and institutional life despite the constraints of the formal legal mechanisms. Gram Sabhas and traditional institutions such as Palli Sabha still exist as arenas of collective decision making and assertion of community. The Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti and the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh are community-based organisations that have a significant role in organising resistance. These are further reinforced by the civil society organizations such as the Kashipur Surakshya Parishad which takes legal assistance and advocacy and the grassroots' movements such as the Maa Mati Mali Surakhya Mancha which connects the problems of land, livelihood and environment. Together, these efforts show that tribal self-governance is not solely dependent on formal laws, but is actively sustained through collective mobilisation and local practices.

Conclusion

When we speak of a developed Odisha, there is one fundamental question that must be asked, development for whom? In districts like Rayagada and Koraput, tribal groups lack a say in developing them despite the fact that they are the ones who suffer the most. This is the issue, which has been brought up at the start of this paper, and it will continue to be the point of the gap between constitutional intent and lived reality. The data of these areas demonstrates that such a gap is not just a matter of poor implementation. It is indicative of a more profound conflict tribal societies are officially given independence, but in reality they are pulled into the state-driven development that often does not consider their interests. Although their rights and identity are acknowledged in the law, they are often excluded from decision-making.

The Niyamgiri example shows that a significant change can be achieved when the law is followed and Gram Sabhas can be permitted to serve as real decision-making entities. Nonetheless, such results are infrequent and usually require long-term local mobilisation and foreign assistance. Governance is still mostly run through administrative rule instead of community dispensation. Simultaneously, one should break the paradigm of seeing tribal communities as backward or unwilling to move forward. In actual sense, these societies have been long living sustainable lifestyles with a balance with forests, land and natural resources. Their knowledge systems are based on the ecological principles of sustainability that the modern society has only recently started to realise as being of paramount importance.

This contradiction is also emphasized by conflicts over development projects. Development is not the issue as far as tribal communities are concerned, it is the type of development that

ignores their rights, pushes them out of their ancestral territory, or is not even consulted at all. It is not development, then, but the way it is being done and how much of it is based on economic interests rather than justice, participation, and long-term sustainability. With the coming of Odisha to its centenary in 2036, there is need to redefine the concept of development. It is not possible to measure true progress only on the basis of economic growth or infrastructure, but justice, voice, and dignity should be added. The experiences of Rayagada and Koraput demonstrate the weakness of the existing structures, as well as the opportunities that arise when communities are actually empowered. Finally, tribal communities cannot be regarded as hindrances to development, but as an equal partner in creating a more inclusive and sustainable future. The way to a developed Odisha is not just in the reinforcement of the laws, but in the realisation of the law in a manner which honours the rights of the communities, in a manner which honours the local knowledge, in a manner which bridges the gap between the law and the reality.

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