

OPINION

# Adivasis to Vanvasis: State's assault on tribal land, language, identity

Displaced from their lands, livelihoods destroyed, and forests handed over to corporations, India's tribals face an ever darker future



Representative image

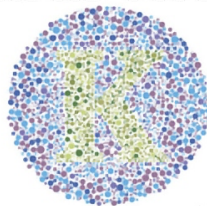


Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka  
Published: 12 Mar 2025 at 3:26 PM

In a nation that prides itself on democracy, justice, and equality, the very communities that have nurtured this land for centuries remain at the periphery — ignored, exploited, and displaced.

The tribals of India, who constitute over 8.6 per cent of the population, are facing an **unprecedented assault** on their rights, resources, and identity under the present Union government. While the ruling BJP claims to protect tribal interests by keeping them out of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), its deeper agenda of cultural homogenisation and economic exploitation reveals a far darker truth.

**THE LETTER YOU SEE  
REVEALS YOUR  
ADHD TYPE** 



K

Tribals

ADVERTISEMENT

## Editors' Picks



'Sorry Ankita': Open letter by lawyer Colin Gonsalves reopens old wounds



Air India blames passengers, evades accountability for clogged toilets

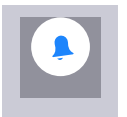


Buch leaves behind a battered SEBI



Tamil Nadu: Sword of delimitation hangs over the South

ADVERTISEMENT



it serves the larger Hindutva project. They are used as political tokens, but when it comes to addressing real issues — land rights, education, livelihood security, and cultural autonomy — they are systematically ignored.

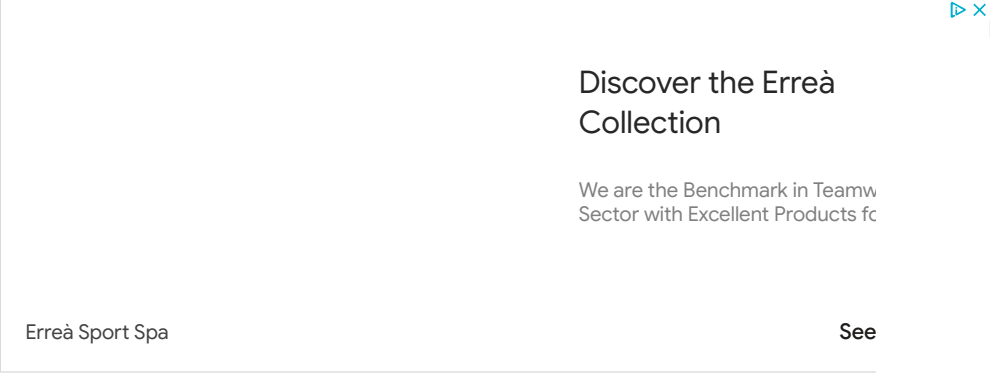
### **Symbolism vs action: Tribals still left behind**

The appointment of India's first tribal woman as President was framed as a historic moment, a sign of long-overdue representation for marginalised communities. However, while the symbolism was celebrated, it has not translated into real change for tribal communities on the ground. Tribals continue to be [displaced from their lands](#), their livelihoods destroyed, and their forests handed over to corporations, yet the government remains silent on these betrayals.

The recent starvation death of tribal women in Kandhamal, Odisha, forced to consume mango kernels owing to lack of rice, is not an isolated incident — it is a damning indictment of governance failure. Meanwhile, in Odisha, the President's own home state, tribal women were brutally beaten by Hindutva mobs for resisting cultural impositions. These incidents underscore a painful truth: despite political rhetoric, the government has abandoned its commitment to tribal welfare, choosing token representation over real empowerment.

While individual representation matters, it cannot be a substitute for structural justice. The BJP government, despite its claims, has systematically failed to implement laws meant to protect tribals, leaving millions vulnerable to exploitation, land grabs, and cultural erasure.

[Children are banned from wearing traditional ornaments, discouraged from speaking their tribal languages, and indoctrinated into Hindutva narratives. In Jharkhand, tribals protest that these schools are making their children "aliens in their own homes"](#)



Discover the Erreà  
Collection

We are the Benchmark in Teamw  
Sector with Excellent Products fc

Erreà Sport Spa

See

**Also Read:** [The big fat tribal land grab](#)

### **Education as erasure: How government is betraying tribal children**

The government proudly claims to be uplifting tribal education through Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, but beyond the glossy reports, the reality tells a far darker story — one that is not just about education but about the very survival of tribal identity.

On the surface, these initiatives appear ambitious, but dropout rates among Scheduled Tribe (ST) students have increased in states like Madhya Pradesh and Odisha due to economic hardship, cultural alienation, and poor infrastructure. The NEP's promise of mother-tongue education remains largely unfulfilled, forcing students to study in unfamiliar languages, pushing them further into disengagement.

In tribal-majority districts, students consistently perform worse in mathematics and English, exposing the systemic failures in educational delivery. The digital divide has only deepened — in a survey of 50 tribal families, only 37 had smartphones, and just seven students could access online learning.

The EMRS model itself is crumbling. As of 2018, 284 schools were sanctioned, yet only 226 are functional — many of them lacking teachers, proper infrastructure, or cultural integration. Instead of empowering Adivasi children, these schools separate them from their roots, stripping them of their language and identity.

And then comes something even more insidious — Factory Schools. Modelled after the residential schools of Canada and the US, which sought to "kill the Indian" in indigenous children, these state-backed institutions are forcibly removing tribal children from their homelands, placing them in faraway urban centres. The world's largest Factory School in India has the explicit goal of "turning liabilities into assets."

Children are banned from wearing traditional ornaments, discouraged from speaking their tribal languages, and indoctrinated into Hindutva narratives. In Jharkhand, tribals protest that these schools are making their children "aliens in their own homes".

This is not education. This is a political project of cultural domination — and it is happening in plain sight. The question is not just how many tribal children will be left uneducated. The question is how many will be left [without an identity](#) at all. And as education severs them from their identity, economic policies continue to crush their ability to survive with dignity.

**Also Read: [Dalits, tribals, poor will recognise their true strength after caste census: Rahul](#)**

ADVERTISEMENT

### **The great land grab: Forests for corporates, not for tribals**

The biggest betrayal of tribals has been [the systematic snatching](#) of their ancestral lands, justified under the pretext of "development" and "conservation". In the name of wildlife conservation, entire communities are evicted from tiger reserves, yet luxury resorts and tourism projects emerge in the same areas, exposing the hypocrisy of conservation policies.

In Lakshadweep, tribal land has been wrongfully claimed as "government property", handed over to industrialists for high-end tourism infrastructure, while traditional fishing communities lose their livelihood to corporate-backed private resorts.

The Gandhamardhan Hills, sacred to tribal communities in Odisha, are under threat from mining corporations, despite years of resistance from local tribes. The government is pushing ahead with mining projects that will destroy sacred lands, pollute water sources, and force tribals off their land, all in the name of economic development that only benefits corporations.

The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was meant to empower tribals by giving them control over their own resources, but its implementation has been deliberately delayed and diluted in many states, rendering it ineffective. At the same time, funds allocated under the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), meant exclusively for tribal welfare, are [regularly diverted](#) to non-tribal projects, leaving crucial schemes underfunded and tribals further marginalised.

Meanwhile, in mining-heavy tribal regions, funds from the District Mineral

Foundation (DMF), meant for tribal welfare, have mysteriously disappeared or been grossly misused, with little transparency on how much of it has actually reached the communities it was designed to serve.

And as tribals fight to protect their land, they face another battle — the fight for their cultural survival.

**The nation must recognise that tribals are not obstacles to progress — they are its key. Their deep-rooted wisdom, sustainable way of life, and symbiotic relationship with nature offer solutions to the crises of modernity, and it is time the country learns from the tribals rather than forcing them to abandon their ways of life**

### **The Hindutva-fiction of tribals: A cultural invasion**

The BJP's claim that tribals are being kept out of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is nothing more than a carefully crafted deception. While the government publicly assures tribals that their customs and traditions will be protected, it is simultaneously pushing an aggressive Hindutva agenda aimed at erasing indigenous tribal cultures.

This is being done through cultural appropriation, where tribal deities are rebranded as Hindu gods, and tribal festivals are reinterpreted to fit Brahminical traditions, diluting their distinct religious and cultural identities.

The government's conversion politics adds another layer to this assault — tribals who follow Sarna or animist faiths are under immense pressure to identify as Hindus, while those who embrace Christianity or Islam are labelled as 'converts' and targeted through draconian anti-conversion laws.

At the same time, political tokenism is used as a smokescreen — while the BJP projects tribal leaders into positions of power for optics, it undermines tribal autonomy at the grassroots level, leaving real decision-making in the hands of those who seek to assimilate tribals into the Hindutva fold. This is not protection; this is a systematic erasure of tribal identity under the guise of cultural nationalism.

Ekal Vidyalayas, run by RSS-affiliated organisations, play a crucial role in the 'Hindutvisation' of tribals, using education as a tool to reshape tribal identity and assimilate them into the Hindutva fold. These single-teacher schools, largely funded by corporate donations, operate in remote tribal areas under the guise of "national integration", but their real agenda is to replace indigenous knowledge systems with a Hindu nationalist narrative. Tribal customs and beliefs are systematically erased, and children are indoctrinated with Hindu religious teachings, alienating them from their traditional culture.

The denial of tribal status to several deserving communities while granting it selectively for vote-bank politics further exposes the government's hypocrisy. Many Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) continue to suffer extreme poverty and exclusion, while others are denied recognition for purely political reasons.

Tribal languages are also under attack — several indigenous languages are still waiting for inclusion in the eighth schedule, effectively denying tribals the right to education in their mother tongue and accelerating linguistic genocide.

## The need for a tribal-led future

The challenges of modern development — climate change, resource depletion, and ecological destruction — cannot be solved by the same exploitative models that created them. Tribals, who have lived in harmony with nature for centuries, offer an alternative vision — one where economic progress does not come at the cost of forests, water, and land. Instead of being forcibly assimilated into a broken system, tribals should be leading the way toward a more sustainable and just future.

For this to happen, tribals must be respected — not seen as backward, their culture and language dismissed as archaic, or their communities reduced to stereotypes of savagery. It is time the government focuses on the advancement of tribals, ensuring their rightful share in development without destroying their identity, language, culture, habitat, or livelihood.

The nation must recognise that tribals are not obstacles to progress — they are its key. Their deep-rooted wisdom, sustainable way of life, and symbiotic relationship with nature offer solutions to the crises of modernity, and it is time the country learns from the tribals rather than forcing them to abandon their ways of life.

The time has come for tribals to assert their rights — not just as voters, but as a formidable political force. Symbolism is not enough. The BJP and the government must do justice to tribals — mere tokenism will not work. Tribals do not need just representation, they need empowerment — both political and social. Their participation in governance must go beyond ceremonial positions; they must have a say in policy-making, land rights, education, and economic security.

The government must answer for its betrayals, and tribals must demand accountability. We are Adivasis (the original custodians of this land) not *vanvasis* (forest dwellers) as projected by the BJP, and our voices will no longer be ignored.

*The author is Congress MP from Koraput and chairperson, standing committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj*

Follow us on: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Google News](#), [Instagram](#)

Join our official telegram channel ([@nationalherald](#)) and stay updated with the latest headlines

Hindutva Adivasi tribal rights land rights

[Comment\(s\)](#)

Investing €200 in CFDs could result in a very high potential profit.  
Discover the opportunity to start your financial journey!