

September 2024

FROM NEGLECT TO REVERENCE

# THE EVOLVING TRIBAL NARRATIVE





## Author Note

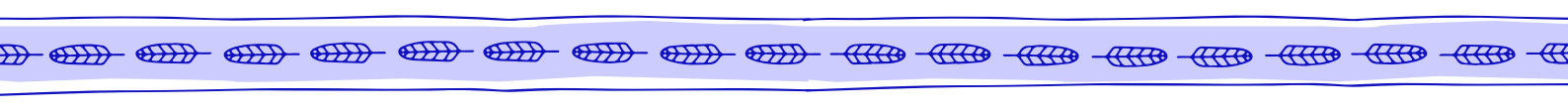
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Correspondence concerning this  
article should be addressed to

### **BlueKraft Digital Foundation**

9, Hanuman Rd, Hanuman Road Area,  
Connaught Place, New Delhi, India, 110085.  
Email: [contact@bluekraft.in](mailto:contact@bluekraft.in)





## Abstract

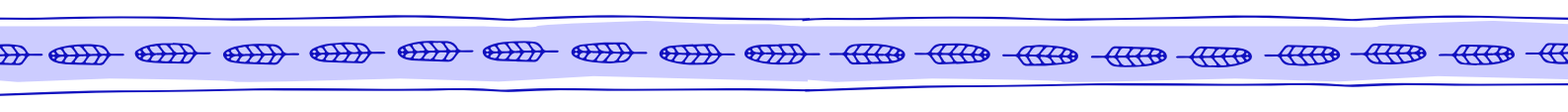
India's Scheduled Tribes, integral to its cultural diversity, have long faced governmental neglect, resulting in social and economic hardships.

This research paper explores the historical marginalization of India's Scheduled Tribes, focusing on the governmental neglect that led to severe socio-economic challenges. It further goes on to highlight the transformative initiatives introduced by the current government, particularly since 2014, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

The study discusses key challenges, such as displacement, land alienation, poverty, debt bondage, and the impact of religious conversions. It further explores the significant socio-economic upliftment driven by policy reforms and government schemes, from infrastructure development to health, education, and cultural preservation.

Through case studies, the paper illustrates how focused efforts, such as the implementation of MGNREGS for the Chenchu tribe and the branding of rural products through the Palash initiative, have positively impacted tribal livelihoods.

The study concludes by acknowledging the evolving narrative of India's tribal communities from neglect to reverence, underpinned by enhanced governmental support aimed at promoting tribal heritage, socio-economic development, and social justice.





## Introduction

Scheduled Tribes in India with their wide demographic and cultural characteristics are an integral community for a nation as diverse as India. Despite this the tribal community since independence existed in a state of apathy. They faced negligence and got subsided when it came to receiving the government assistance.

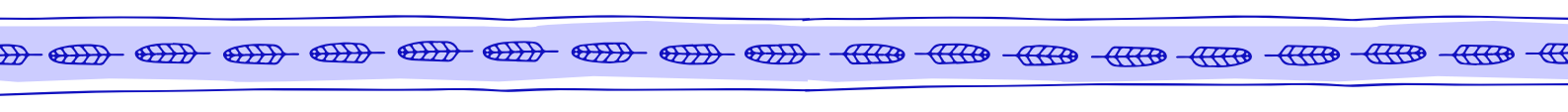
How can one forget one of the most harrowing tales of how the state of tribal apathy gained no buyers when it comes to the likes of Congress government!

It is one of those incidents which made enough headlines yet failed to make an impactful change in the lives of the people involved. **In 1985, when upon hearing the news of a tribal woman who sold her 12-year-old sister-in-law, Bonita, to a blind man for Rs. 40 and a sari to feed her family**, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, along with his wife, Sonia Gandhi, visited her house, it made huge waves in the world of media.

Though the whole world took note of this meeting then, despite the assurances "something would be done to help her" by Rajiv Gandhi, nothing changed for Phanus Punji. Despite being provided with a little house under Indira Awas Yojana, it did not help improve her financial position at all as her family got back to their own shed after sometime due to the shoddy built of the government dwelling.

Fast forward to 37 years, today 70 year old Phanu Punji is financially independent as she earns a salary of Rs 3,500 per month by cooking midday meals in her village school. She has her own house under MO Kudia scheme and even receives 5kg free rice per month by the government.

The above incident is a clear example of why it becomes imperative for the government to formulate and therefore implement those strategic policies and initiatives so that these communities stay aware of their welfare rights and aligned to the idea of government sponsorships and assistance.







## Methodology

The methodology incorporated in this research paper involves comparing the socio-economic status of tribal communities across different historical periods, particularly pre- and post-2014.

Archival records, historical documents, and government reports have been reviewed to trace the evolution of tribal policies. The paper has compared previous and current governmental approaches, focusing on the impact of key initiatives introduced after 2014.

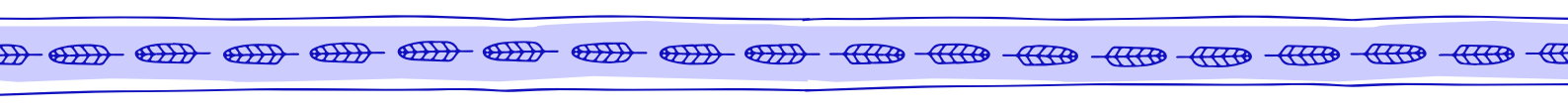
A series of case studies have been included in the paper to provide detailed insight into specific government initiatives aimed at tribal upliftment. Examples such as Livelihood Diversification and Capacity Building of Tribal Communities in Aspirational Districts and Academic and Holistic Development through Eklavya Model Residential School in Tapi district of Gujarat have been included.

These cases highlight the transformation in tribal livelihoods, providing evidence of policy effectiveness through qualitative interviews with beneficiaries.

## Research Findings and Discussion

This part discusses various issues that have been affecting tribal communities since independence and the inability of the previous government towards tackling them which led towards overall deterioration of their overall well-being. Since independence till the last decade, the tribals have been facing innumerable issues which have hindered their socio-economic growth.

Let us shed some light on few of these and see how negligence and no action by various government leads to the state of tribal apathy.



## Issues Plaguing Tribals

### Displacement from their original habitat

One of the pertinent issues which has plagued the tribal community since independence.

- Tribals for the first time, were displaced in Koraput during 1963 for the establishment of HAL and again between the year 1984-87 for Upper Kolab.
- It happened again in the year in 1997 when tribals were displaced for Harabhangi hydro-power project in Gajapati.

### Debt bondage

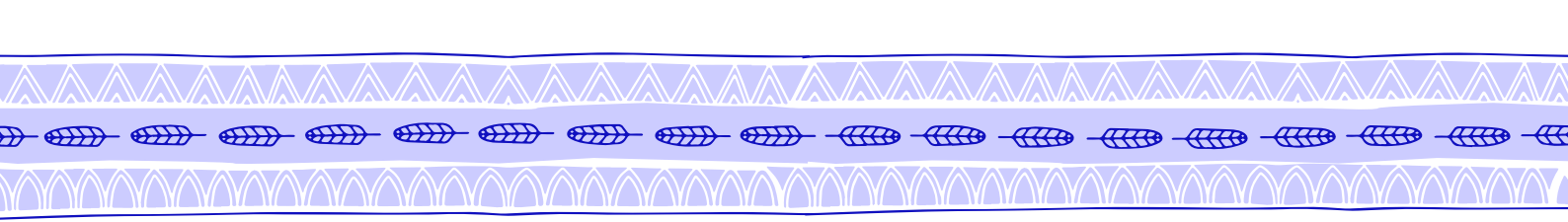
- Out of 1,196 households surveyed in both the scheduled and the plains areas, 749 were indebted accounting for 62.62 percent of the total households surveyed.
- The percentage of indebted households to the total number of surveyed households in scheduled area (806) was 61.42.

### Educational Backwardness among Scheduled Tribes of Andhra Pradesh

- The Indebtedness Survey among Scheduled Tribes in Andhra Pradesh, conducted in 1971-72, included a sample population of 5,909 individuals, of which 636 (10.76%) were literate. However, literacy rates varied significantly between the Scheduled and Plains areas. In the Scheduled area, the literacy rate was 7.39%, while in the Plains area it was 16.58%, likely due to the greater availability of educational facilities in the Plains region.

### Tribal Conversions

- According to Sanjay Kumar's 1990 article, "**Christianisation among the Oraons of Chotanagpur**," the Oraons of Chotanagpur were oppressed by landlords and moneylenders in the middle of the



19th century. The Oraons saw that their ancient gods and spirits were powerless to shield them from their numerous financial hardships and searched for a Savior who could put an end to their issues. The foreign missionaries offered protection which in turn resulted into mass conversion to Christianity among the Oraons.

This is just one example which shows the extent to which Christian missionaries were successful in their agendas of converting the ignorant tribals and how tribals were fooled on the basis of their belief systems.

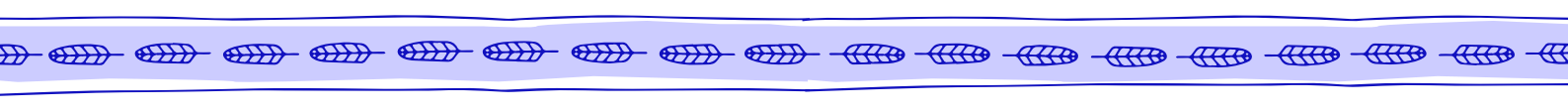
### **Poverty**

According to a Planning Commission, in 1993-94, **51.94% of ST people lived below the poverty level in rural regions and 41.14% in urban areas** respectively.

Even **though the proportion of ST people living in poverty dropped to 34.75% in urban areas and 45.86% in rural areas between 1999 and 2000**, it still painted a very gloomy picture of the tribal communities of India.

The government since last decade has put forth a number of initiatives which has resulted in bringing great shift when it comes to overall development of tribal people across the country.

According to Family Welfare's National Family Health Surveys (NFHS):

- The infant mortality rate for Scheduled Tribes has declined from 62.1 in 2005–06 to 41.6 in 2019–21
  - Under five mortality rate has declined from 95.7 in 2005–06 to 50.3 in 2019–21
  - Institutional delivery has increased from 17.7% in 2005–06 to 82.3% in 2019–21
  - And the immunisation rate for children aged 12-23 months has increased from 31.3% in 2005–06 to 76.8% (2019–21).
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## Impact

The laxness of the previous governments resulted into posing a serious threat to the demography and means of livelihoods and their overall existence. Survival became a continuous challenge for these communities.

## Shift in Government's Policies towards Tribal Empowerment

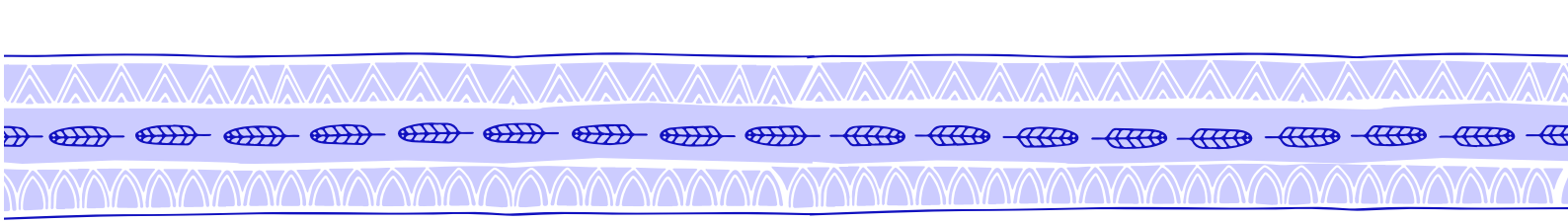
According to the 2011 census, there are around 10.45 crore Scheduled Tribes (ST) in India, making up approximately 8.6% of the total population. 89.97% of them live in rural areas while 10.03% in urban areas which shows how crucial it is for the government to establish a robust last mile delivery mechanism for these communities.

**The idea of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Prayaas,' embodied by PM Modi led government puts emphasis on the holistic development of tribal communities. Through their shift towards inclusive of all approach, the government has been able to bring the necessary reforms for the tribal community.**

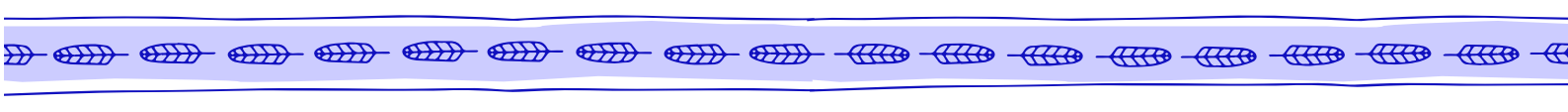
### Prioritising Socio-economic Development

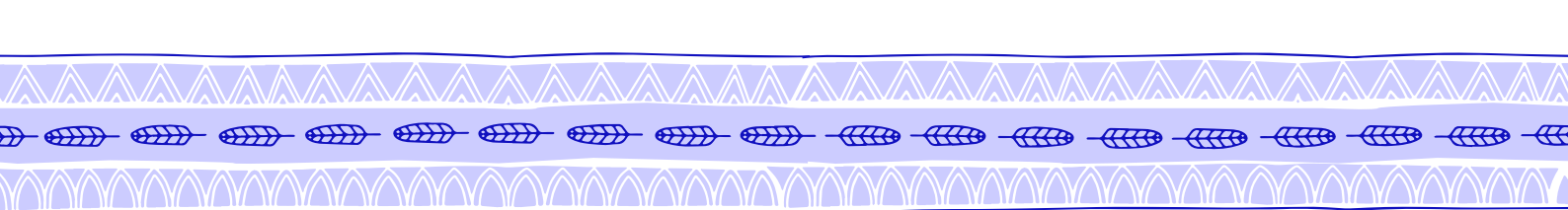
With the goal of prioritising overall welfare of the tribal communities along with promotion and conservation of tribals' heritage and culture, government has been very meticulous in doling out several schemes, initiatives and policy changes.

- Ministry of Tribal Affairs increased the budget allocations substantially **from over Rs.4000 crore in 2013-14 to over Rs.12000 crore in 2023-24 - an increase of around 190 percent.**
- The government has given over **₹1300 crore loans under Stand Up India** to encourage ST entrepreneurs ;
- Financial support has been provided by the government to ST farmers promoting agro-forestry

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- Pradhan Mantri Jan Jatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) is launched with a budget of Rs 1,612 crore and under this scheme, **more than 3,800 Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) comprising of around 59,000 SHGs involving 11.83 lakh beneficiaries**, have been established since 2019.
  - VDKVs **cover over 10 lakh individuals across 28 States/UTs**.
  - To reduce the financial burden the government has also risen the MSP of Minor Forest Produce items from 12 to 87.
  - Up till October 2023, **more than 23 lakh land titles covering more than 1.8 crore acres** have been distributed under the Forest Rights Act.
  - In 2017, the PM Modi-led government de-classified bamboo as a tree. This move allowed the harvesting of bamboo by tribal communities and provided them additional sources of income.
  - PM Modi led government launched the restructured National Bamboo Mission (NBM), as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme, in 2018. So far, **an area of over 46000 hectares bamboo plantation** has been achieved under restructured NBM.
  - Through government's initiation towards empowering the artisans, **since 2014-15 till date, 41 bamboo clusters have been approved with assistance of Rs. 98.64 cr. benefitting 9197 artisans** under this scheme.

### **Bridging the Educational and Skill gap**

- Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) have been established by the government.
  - These schools accommodate ST students from Class VI to XII. Till July 2024, 405 EMRSs are functional with 708 overall been sanctioned.
  - In the year 2023 from April to December alone, **more than 32 lakh tribal students** were provided with scholarships by Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
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- **More than 31000 tribal youth mentored under GOAL** programme, guiding them in personal and professional development
  - Skill development of tribal youth through government's initiatives like Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, Jan Shikshan Sansthan and National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme

### **Prioritising Health and Welfare of tribal communities**

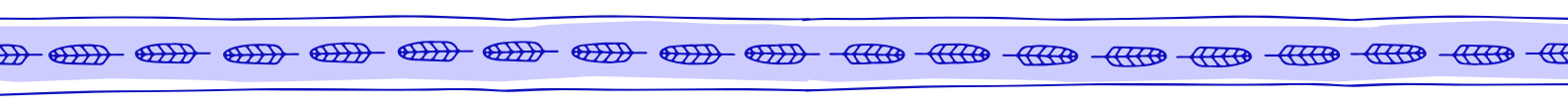
- National Sickle Cell Anaemia (SCA) Elimination Programme has been launched by the government on 1st July 2023.
- With an aim to **screen over 8 crore tribals for SCA in the next 3 years**, the government has set forth the motion for bringing the tribals under the ambit of healthcare security.

### **Ensuring Social Justice**

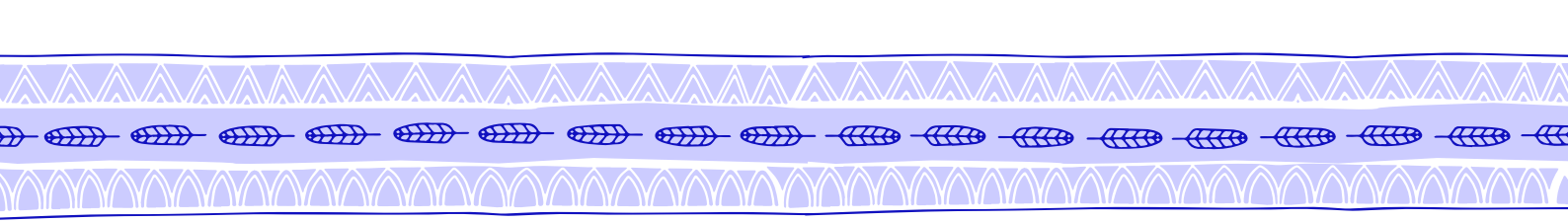
- With missions like PM-JANMAN, launched with a massive budget of **more than Rs 24000 crore**, the basic needs and critical infrastructure of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) across 18 States and a Union Territory are aimed to be addressed.
- The campaign of PM-JANMAN is designed **to cover 16,500 villages and 15,000 Gram Panchayats** across the country. It's aim to **reach around 44.6 lakh individuals in around 29 thousand PVTG habitations** proves this to be an expansive outreach program.
- **PM VIKAS** (Pradhan Mantri Virasat Ka Samvardhan) and Pradhan Mantri Jan Jatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) are launched **to support tribal and minority development**.
- The target of PM VIKAS is **benefiting approximately 9 lakh candidates between 2021 to 2026**, which in itself is an applaudable milestone.

### **Promoting Tribal Culture and preserving Indigenous Art**

To bring artisans and the tribal art on the global marketing platform is one way to ensure sustained income for the vulnerable community.





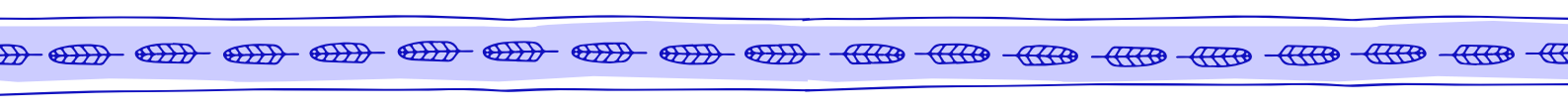
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- Under this initiative, Zonal Cultural Centers have been established by the government which mostly focus on the preservation and documentation of different vanishing arts along with organising various cultural activities across the nation.

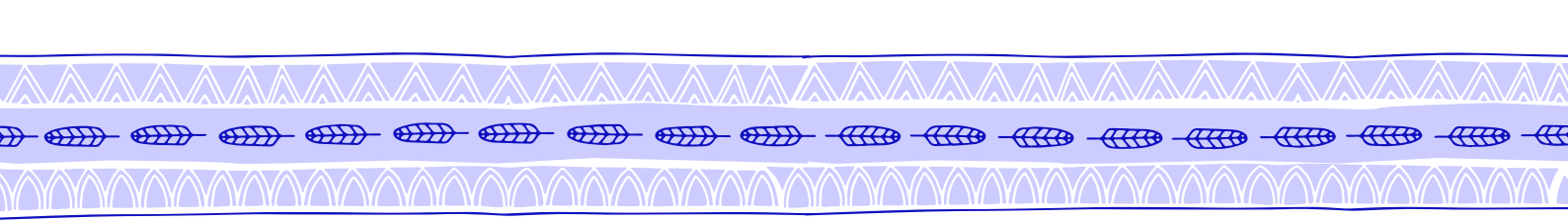
The government recognises the importance of tribal traditions, and customs and has launched multiple initiatives towards preservation and promotion of tribal languages and literature.

- Grants to State Tribal Research Institutes, ADIGRAMS Portal, establishing a comprehensive repository of codified texts translated into multiple languages through a collaboration of CSIR and Ministry of Ayush, are some of the initiatives which in itself can be touted as praiseworthy efforts by the government.
- Under the Tribal Cultural Heritage Revival Programme, **tribal heritage conservation centres** have been established in the country so as to further achieve the goal of conservation of tribal heritage.

### **Bestowing due share of Recognition, Respect and Dignity in the Contemporary Society**

Empowering tribal communities by building an inclusive nation is the idea which governs all the policies and initiatives of the government.

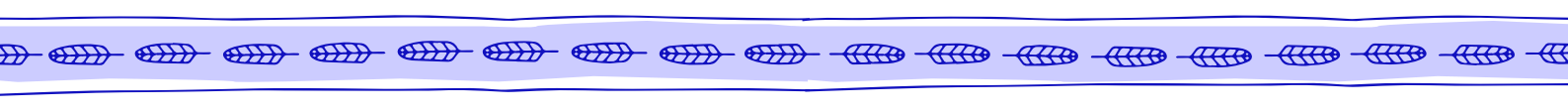
- Appointing Draupadi Murmu as the **first female tribal President of India** is one of the many praiseworthy examples set by the current government.
  - Minnu Mani, a 23-year-old from the Kurichiya tribe in Kerala, securing her position as a team member in Women's Premier League auction demonstrates another feat which testifies the success of diligent efforts and steps taken up by PM Modi led government.
  - Bhagwan Birsa Munda, a tribal freedom fighter, whose name itself had vanished from the memories of the people of the nation, has been revived again.
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- On November 15, 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Prime Minister to visit Ulihatu Village, the birthplace of Bhagwan Birsa. And to honour him, his birth anniversary on 15th November is now celebrated every year as Janjatiya Gaurav Divas along with building a Bhagwan Birsa Munda Memorial Park cum Freedom Fighter Museum at Ranchi.
  - Similarly, other tribal leaders have been revered by the government as well. In 2022, on his 400th birth anniversary, Bir Lachit Borphukan was paid tribute by the government.
  - Rani Gaidinliu, is another freedom fighter and a tribal hero who received her long due share of tribute. In her honour, Kaimei Railway Station in Manipur was renamed as Rani Gaidinliu Railway Station.
  - Several other great tribal personalities like Alluri Sitarama Raju of Andhra Pradesh, Saheed Laxman Nayak of Odisha, Tantia Bhil and Bhima Nayak of Madhya Pradesh, along with many revolutionary warriors of Madhya Pradesh including Kishore Singh, Khajya Nayak, Rani Phool Kunwar, Raghunath Shah have been honored by PM Modi led government.

### Impact

The tribals who were once unacknowledged, have been receiving their due share of recognition, respect and dignified place in the contemporary society. The government through their policy changes has brought **the communities into mainstream** and brought an **overall socio-economic development** for the tribal communities.

Along with the **increased budget allocation for infrastructural change**, PM Modi led government has focused immensely on **ensuring social justice** for the tribal community. The government through their praiseworthy initiatives have **empowered the tribal community**.





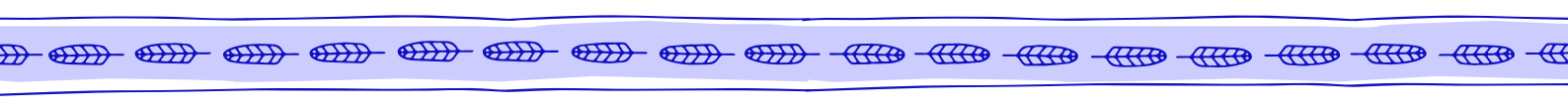
## Changing Perspective on Tribals

Tribal communities have played a significant role in conserving the rich cultural traditional values and heritage in India. The government today through its varied initiatives and policy changes acknowledges the crucial role the tribals play in the contemporary society and therefore believes in giving them their due share of respect and dignity.

This is the much-anticipated change that was required to alleviate the pathetic status of the tribal community suffering under government regimes before 2014. The government democratically elected in 2014 and led by PM Modi brought sea of a change in the overall status of tribal communities.

Adhering to the idea of decentralisation and participatory governance, PM Modi has spearheaded policy initiatives and reforms, bringing these communities in the mainstream and providing them with dignified livelihood attuning to secured lives.

Not only this, over the course of 10 years of government, PM Modi has worked diligently to eliminate the existing disparity and to bring landmark changes towards tribal welfare. The tribals who were left to survive on their own during previous governments, without any assistance or policy initiatives, are now given fair share of support through government policies.





## **Case Studies showing the positive impact on Tribals through Government Reformative initiatives**

### **Project – Transforming lives of Primitive Tribe Chenchu through MGNREGS-Panchayat Raj & Rural Development Department, Government of Andhra Pradesh**

#### **Issue**

Isolated Settlements, inaccessible MGNREGS and Socio-economic Challenges – limited the tribes from availing the benefits of government programs

#### **Solution**

To improve the overall socio-economic conditions of Chenchu tribe, the proposed budget for tribal development was over Rs 20000 crore in the year 2018-19. Localised infrastructure and focused employment approach are other steps which the government has initiated to counter the vulnerability among the community.

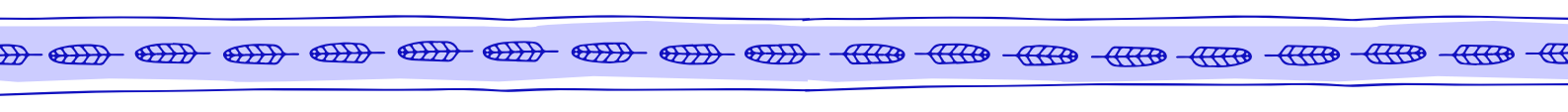
#### **Outcome**

Shift from unemployment to employment security; improved health metrics- lower rates of anaemia and malnutrition and almost 100% mother and child survival in recent years; a notable decline in child marriages; higher school enrolment; and conversion of underutilised land into productive assets.

### **Project – Livelihood Diversification and Capacity Building of Tribal Communities in the Aspirational Districts of Bihar by Bihar Agricultural University, Sabour**

#### **Issue**

The tribal communities in Bihar's Banka, Kishanganj, and Katihar districts faced numerous socio-economic difficulties- relatively low income of Rs 3,699/month, including food insecurity, unfavourable weather, inefficient land use, low productivity in agriculture and livestock, and topographical difficulties.





## **Solution**

Implementation of the 'Enhancement of Livelihood Security of Scheduled Tribe Communities' project, skill enhancement programmes and innovative approaches including Community Animal Health Center and Hydroponic Fodder Production

## **Outcome**

Tribal households' monthly income increased from Rs 3,699 to Rs 5,211, increase in cropping intensity from 139% to 158%, and improved nutritional security.

## **Project – Academic and Holistic Development, Eklavya Model Residential School, Khodada, Tapi, Gujarat**

### **Purpose**

To bridge the educational gap for Scheduled Tribes and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in tribal-dominated areas.

### **Outcome**

EMRS consistently producing district toppers for last five years, with 100% SSC Board results since 2010. Over seventy students actively took part in previous year's National Level Sports Meet. With them securing first rank in the Sport Meet 2022–23, the U-19 Girls' Football Team demonstrated school's dedication to developing female athletes.

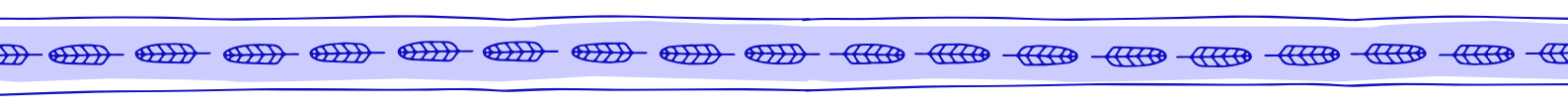
## **Project – PALASH - Branding and Marketing for rural and tribal women entrepreneurs and artisan's products of Jharkhand**

### **Issue**

Absence of a stable market and the requirement for skill development among rural and tribal communities

### **Solution**

"Palash" owned by rural women SHG business owners and craftsmen offers direct market access, thorough training and skill-development programs for female business owners





## **Outcome**

Empowering over 6.75 lakh women from rural and tribal areas to become agripreneurs, entrepreneurs, and craftsmen, Giving consumers access to natural and local products, Palash is able to foster brand loyalty.

## **Project – Innovation for Safe Delivery Among the Pregnant Women in Tribal Villages – District Collectorate Vizianagaram**

### **Issues**

problems in having safe deliveries, malnourishment, and factors impacting mother's and the child's physical and mental health

### **Solution**

Two hostels for Pregnant women have been established; tribal women living in remote areas were identified by Asha workers and measures were implemented for nutrition and safe deliveries

### **Outcomes**

Regular check-ups and immunisations are assured by the government, and home births are largely prevented. Following the effort, there have been no recorded newborn deaths and no indications of congenital defects, neonatal deaths, or birth asphyxia in any of the infants.

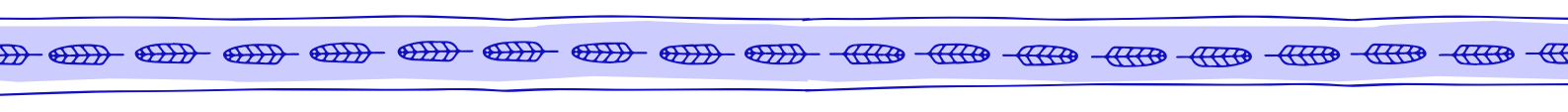
## **What is the need for Tribal Empowerment and Education**

### **Case Study**

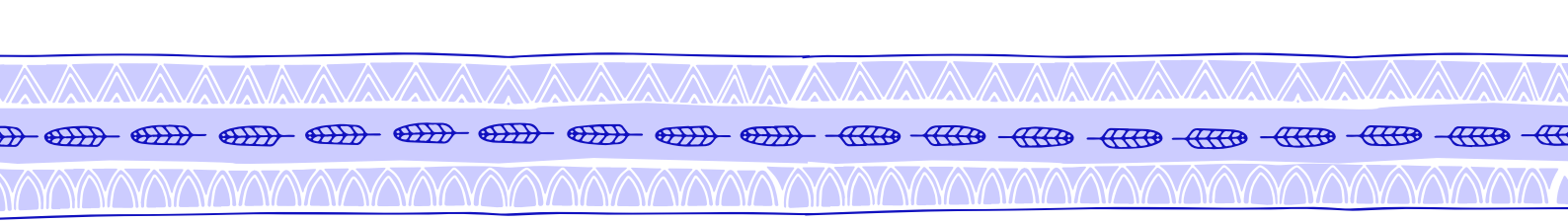
#### **Health-seeking Behaviour Among Birhors in Madhya Pradesh**

According to Pandey et al. (1999), there was a study done on Birhors in Madhya Pradesh during 1993-94 by the Regional Medical Research Centre for Tribals (now National Institute of Research in Tribal Health (NIRTH)) in Jabalpur .

Birhor, which is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group saw their population diminishing overtime. It was found that their demographic status was linked to their overall health, which in turn influenced their health-seeking behavior. This behavior was shaped







by their beliefs, customs, and traditions, as most of the population was illiterate, lived in poverty, and had limited access to modern healthcare services

According to their belief system, the community believed that sickness was caused due to the evil spirit or displeasure of God. Because of which instead of any scientific methods, they relied on gunia, the tribal doctor (Pandey et al.1999).

***Hence it becomes imperative for any government to proactively address the tribal issues. The need for awareness and education becomes non-negotiable when it comes to tribal welfare.***





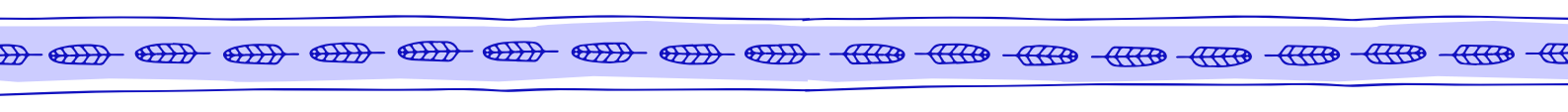
## Conclusion

Over the last decade, Prime minister Narendra Modi led government has boosted and propelled a spirit of unity through their policy-based decisions and landmark initiatives.

With the government embarking on the marvelous journey of restoring the lost glory to once forgotten tribal heroes, heritage and their traditions, the once ignored tribals communities are brought into the mainstream.

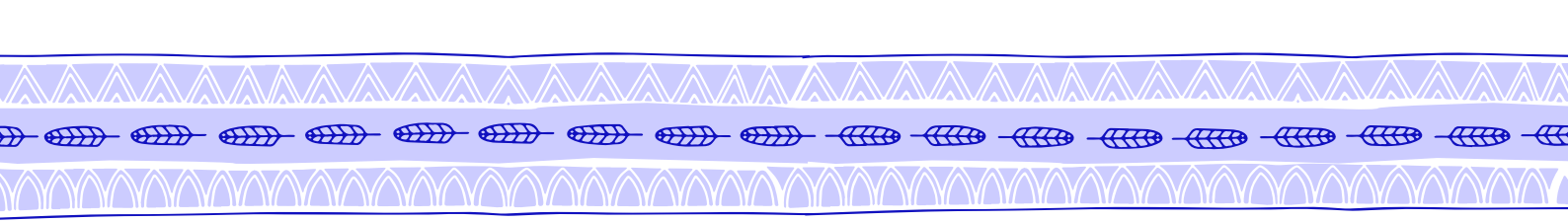
The government has been making positive strides towards enhancing accessibility of their programs and initiatives towards these communities. The government's focus on protecting and advancing the cultural legacy of tribal communities has brought out noteworthy changes.

The visionary policies and grassroots efforts of the government have preserved India's rich tribal heritage while maximising the potential for their socioeconomic development.



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