

The Role of PVTG's (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) in India's Inclusive Development: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract:

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are among India's most marginalized indigenous communities, living with pre-agricultural level of technology, low literacy, and subsistence-based livelihoods. Their inclusion in India's development is crucial to address historical inequalities while preserving their cultural identity and ecological knowledge. Despite policy measures such as the Tribal Sub-Plan, the Forest Rights Act, and special PVTG programmes, these communities continue to face challenges like land alienation, limited access to education and healthcare, displacement, and erosion of traditional practices. Gender-based vulnerabilities and minimal participation in decision-making further hinder their progress. This study highlights the structural barriers shaping their socio-economic conditions and argues for a rights-based, community-led, and culturally sensitive approach to development. Strengthening education, healthcare, livelihoods, and participatory governance in line with constitutional commitments and Sustainable Development Goals can empower PVTGs to become active contributors to India's development rather than passive recipients.

Keywords: PVTGs, Inclusive Development, Tribal Development, Marginalization, SDGs.

Introduction

India's democratic and constitutional framework envisions a society rooted in equity, social justice, and participation of all its citizens in the development process. The ideals enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution—justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity—find concrete

meaning only when the most marginalized sections are ensured opportunities to participate in and benefit from the nation's progress. Despite various policy interventions, several communities in India remain on the fringes of development due to historical

Please cite this article as: Divya, M.B. (2026). The Role of PVTG's (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) in India's Inclusive Development: Issues and Challenges. *SRUJANI: Indian Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 4(6), 53–65

marginalization, geographical isolation, and social exclusion, making the discourse on inclusive development both relevant and urgent.

India is home to remarkable socio-cultural diversity, including 705 Scheduled Tribes constituting 8.6% of the national population (Census 2011). Within these, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) represent the most marginalized communities, recognized for their distinctive vulnerability due to historical isolation, low literacy, dependence on primitive technology, and a subsistence economy. As of now, 75 communities have been identified as PVTGs in India across 18 states and one Union Territory. These groups were initially termed as Primitive Tribal Groups in 1975 following the recommendations of the Dhebar Commission (1960-61), which highlighted the need to prioritize their development within tribal welfare policies due to their fragile demographic and socio-economic conditions.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) and respective state tribal welfare departments oversee the development and welfare of PVTGs, implementing special strategies under the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and Conservation-cum-Development Plans (CCDP). Additionally, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), constituted under Article 338A of the Constitution, monitors the implementation of constitutional safeguards and welfare schemes for these groups.

Demographic and Socio-Economic Status of PVTGs

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) represent some of India's most marginalized yet culturally rich communities, embodying diverse indigenous knowledge systems and forest-based livelihoods sustained over generations. The Government of India initially identified and classified these groups as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) in 1975 based on the recommendations of the Dhebar Commission (1960-61), which highlighted their fragile socio-economic and demographic conditions within the broader Scheduled Tribes category. In 2006, the nomenclature was officially changed to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) to better reflect their unique vulnerabilities and the need for targeted interventions. By definition, PVTGs are characterized by: Pre-agricultural level of technology, Stagnant or declining populations, Extremely low literacy rates, and Subsistence economy.

These characteristics place PVTGs at the highest risk of exclusion even within tribal-focused welfare strategies, necessitating focused, culturally sensitive policies to protect their rights while supporting their participation in India's inclusive development journey.

Some notable PVTGs include

India's PVTGs represent some of the oldest, most culturally rich communities that have preserved indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable forest-based

lifestyles across generations. Recognized for their unique vulnerabilities due to historical isolation, low literacy, and dependence on fragile ecological systems, these communities form a crucial part of India's socio-cultural and environmental fabric.

Some notable PVTGs include Dongria Kondh, Bonda (Odisha), Baiga (Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh), Sahariya (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh), Cholanaikkan, Kattunayakan (Kerala), and Jenu Kuruba, Koraga (Karnataka). These groups often inhabit remote forested areas, with limited access to health, education, and livelihood opportunities, making them susceptible to exploitation, displacement, and cultural erosion. They predominantly inhabit remote and ecologically sensitive regions, relying heavily on forests for their livelihood, and have limited access to healthcare, education, and modern infrastructure. For instance, the literacy rate among PVTGs is significantly lower than the general ST literacy rate of 59% (Census 2011), and health indicators such as Infant Mortality Rate and Maternal Mortality Rate remain alarmingly high.

Link with Inclusive Development

Inclusive development involves ensuring that all individuals, particularly the most marginalized, participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic growth and social progress. For PVTGs, this means not only economic upliftment but also the protection of cultural identity, traditional knowledge systems, ecological

livelihoods, and rights over land and forests under frameworks like the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and participation in local governance under PESA, 1996.

The integration of PVTGs within inclusive development policies is critical to achieving India's constitutional vision and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those targeting the eradication of poverty, access to quality education and healthcare, gender equality, and climate action.

Need for the Study

Despite targeted interventions, PVTGs continue to face displacement, land alienation, poor health outcomes, and low educational attainment, indicating a gap between policy intent and implementation. Studies including those by Virginius Xaxa (2014) and the NCST Annual Reports 5 have pointed to structural challenges in implementing welfare policies for PVTGs, reflecting a need for focused research on how inclusive development frameworks can be adapted to the realities of PVTGs.

Moreover, there is limited literature that systematically analyses the intersection of PVTGs' rights, their cultural and ecological significance, and inclusive development in the context of India's contemporary policy landscape. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the role of PVTGs in India's inclusive development framework while identifying practical challenges and suggesting policy directions to ensure meaningful inclusion.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the role of PVTGs in inclusive development.
- To identify the challenges faced by PVTGs in inclusive development processes.
- To suggest policy recommendations for effective inclusion.

Methodology

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design to comprehensively understand the issues and challenges faced by PVTGs in inclusive development. It primarily relies on secondary data sources, including reports published by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and information derived from the Census of India. These sources provide quantitative and qualitative insights into demographic patterns, socio-economic conditions, and policy impacts on PVTGs. Additionally, the research may incorporate illustrative case studies drawn from field observations or documented accounts to contextualize findings. The methodological approach involves a thorough literature review and critical analysis of relevant policy documents, enabling a nuanced evaluation of existing welfare schemes, implementation gaps, and institutional responses affecting on them.

What is Inclusive Development?

Inclusive development refers to economic growth and social progress that

ensures equity, participation, and social justice, enabling all individuals, especially marginalized groups, to contribute to and benefit from development processes without discrimination.

According to the World Bank (2009), 'inclusive development is a process that accelerates economic growth while simultaneously reducing poverty and inequality, promotes productive employment opportunities, and ensures equal access to basic services, rights, and social protection for all individuals within society'.

The UNDP Human Development Report (2011) further emphasizes that 'inclusive development involves equitable distribution of the benefits of growth, sustainability in the use of resources, and the active participation of disadvantaged groups in the development process'.

In the Indian policy context, 'inclusive development is closely tied to constitutional commitments ensuring equality and social justice, and to frameworks like the Tribal Sub-Plan, PESA (1996), and Forest Rights Act (2006), which mandate affirmative action and rights-based approaches for marginalized communities'.

Thus, inclusive development extends beyond economic indicators, recognizing social, cultural, and ecological dimensions, aligning with Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which argues that true development expands people's

freedoms, capabilities, and opportunities to live lives they value.

How Inclusive Development Relates to PVTGs

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) require a context-specific and rights-based approach within the inclusive development framework due to the distinct socio-economic, cultural, and ecological challenges they face in India. Historically, these groups have remained marginalized and isolated, often excluded even within tribal-focused welfare policies due to their remote habitats, lack of political voice, and fragile demographic status.

PVTGs exhibit low literacy rates, poor health outcomes, and high levels of poverty, indicating their need for targeted, culturally sensitive interventions. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020), the literacy rate among PVTGs is significantly below the overall Scheduled Tribes literacy rate of 59% (Census 2011), while infant and maternal mortality rates among PVTGs remain disproportionately high compared to national averages. This underscores the necessity of specialized health and education strategies respecting their linguistic, cultural, and spatial contexts.

Their dependence on forests and rich ecological knowledge systems link their well-being closely to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Many PVTGs, such as the Dongria Kondh of Odisha, Baiga of

Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, rely on minor forest produce, traditional agriculture, and community-based forest management, making it essential to align development with conservation efforts.

Furthermore, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) possess distinct cultural identities, social practices, and indigenous knowledge systems that constitute an invaluable component of India's intangible heritage. As these communities are gradually integrated into broader development frameworks, it is essential to ensure that such processes do not result in cultural erosion, marginalisation, or alienation. Inclusive development for PVTGs therefore necessitates the protection of their land and forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, guaranteeing legal access to and control over traditional lands and forest resources that are central to their livelihoods and cultural life. Equally important is their meaningful participation in Gram Sabhas and local governance institutions under the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), which enables self-governance and active involvement in decision-making processes affecting their territories. Access to culturally appropriate education and healthcare services is crucial to overcoming barriers related to language, geographical isolation, and socio-cultural differences, thereby improving human development indicators without compromising cultural identity. In addition, livelihood support

must prioritise sustainable and traditional practices, such as forest-based livelihoods, agro-ecological farming, and community-based enterprises that build upon indigenous skills and ecological knowledge. Protection from displacement caused by development projects is equally vital, requiring strict adherence to legal safeguards, including Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), effective rehabilitation measures, and the preservation of cultural rights. Thus, inclusive development for PVTGs must integrate social justice, cultural rights, ecological sustainability, and economic opportunities to ensure holistic development while safeguarding their unique identity and ecological contributions to the nation.

Integration with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Inclusive development for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the period 2015–2030, which are grounded in the principle of “leaving no one behind” in global development processes. Addressing the distinctive socio-economic, health, educational, and ecological challenges faced by PVTGs significantly advances India’s progress towards multiple SDGs. Livelihood security and poverty reduction among PVTGs contribute directly to SDG 1 (No Poverty) through the recognition of land and forest rights under the Forest Rights

Act, 2006, and the promotion of sustainable, forest-based income opportunities. Improvements in maternal and child health, nutrition, and access to healthcare services in remote PVTG habitations support SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), particularly through interventions under the National Health Mission. Efforts to enhance literacy and educational outcomes through culturally sensitive, multilingual, and accessible education—such as those provided by Eklavya Model Residential Schools—advance SDG 4 (Quality Education). The empowerment of PVTG women via health initiatives, education, livelihood programmes like Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, and increased participation in decision-making processes contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Furthermore, addressing structural inequalities and ensuring equitable access to resources and rights in line with constitutional safeguards and targeted PVTG development plans promote SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Recognition and application of PVTGs’ traditional ecological knowledge in biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest management also strengthen SDG 13 (Climate Action) by enhancing climate resilience and mitigation efforts. Thus, aligning PVTG development strategies with the SDGs enables India to fulfil its commitments under the 2030 Agenda while ensuring inclusive growth that preserves the cultural identity and ecological contributions of its most

marginalized communities. Integration with Constitutional Provisions.

The Constitution of India provides a robust legal framework for the protection and advancement of Scheduled Tribes, including Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), forming the foundation of inclusive development. Articles 15(4) and 46 empower the State to adopt special measures for promoting the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes and for protecting them from social injustice and exploitation, thereby addressing historical and structural disadvantages. Article 338A establishes the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) as a constitutional body responsible for monitoring the implementation of safeguards, advising on policy matters, and investigating complaints related to the rights and welfare of tribal communities. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution provide special administrative arrangements for Scheduled and Tribal Areas, ensuring the protection of tribal land, control over natural resources, and preservation of customary governance systems. Further strengthening grassroots democracy, Article 243, operationalised through the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), empowers Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas to play a decisive role in local self-governance, including the management of community resources, approval of development plans, and safeguarding of cultural practices. Complementing these

constitutional provisions, the Forest Rights Act, 2006—though statutory in nature—gives practical effect to constitutional commitments by recognizing individual and community rights over forest land and resources, which are vital for the livelihood security, cultural continuity, and sustainable development of PVTGs.

Issues and Challenges Faced by PVTGs in Inclusive Development

Despite targeted constitutional safeguards and welfare-oriented policy interventions, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) continue to experience multiple, interlinked challenges that limit their effective participation in and benefits from India's inclusive development process. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA, 2020), India is home to 75 PVTG communities spread across 18 states and one Union Territory, with the highest concentration in Odisha (13 groups), followed by Andhra Pradesh (12), and Bihar and Jharkhand (9 each). These communities face context-specific yet structurally similar vulnerabilities. For instance, the Dongria Kondh of Odisha confront serious threats from mining activities in the ecologically sensitive Niyamgiri hills, undermining their forest-based livelihoods and cultural relationship with the landscape. The Baiga communities of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh face displacement due to the creation of tiger reserves, coupled with

persistently low literacy levels. Similarly, the Saharia tribe of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan continues to suffer from acute malnutrition and high infant mortality rates, reflecting deep-rooted health and nutrition insecurities. The Birhor of Jharkhand, traditionally nomadic, experience precarious housing conditions and poor health indicators, while the Cholanaikkan of Kerala—one of the smallest PVTGs with a population of only 176 as per the 2011 Census—remain heavily dependent on forest collection for survival. Although the Census of India does not provide disaggregated data exclusively for PVTGs, empirical studies indicate that literacy rates among PVTGs range between 10 and 30 per cent, significantly lower than the overall Scheduled Tribe literacy rate of 59 per cent. These patterns underscore the persistent marginalisation of PVTGs and highlight the need for context-sensitive, rights-based, and culturally informed development strategies.

Challenges faced by PVTG's

1. Education

a. Extremely low literacy rates among PVTGs

PVTGs exhibit significantly lower literacy rates compared to the general Scheduled Tribes population. According to the 2011 Census, literacy rates among PVTGs range between 10% and 30%, far below the overall ST literacy rate of 59%. This low literacy is largely due to the remoteness of their habitats, which limits

school accessibility. Moreover, language barriers arise as instruction is often provided in non-native languages, making comprehension difficult. Seasonal livelihood activities further disrupt regular attendance, as children are required to assist families during agricultural or forest-related work.

b. Cultural and infrastructural barriers to education

In many cases, PVTG children face discrimination or alienation in formal schooling environments. Cultural differences and a lack of culturally relevant curriculum reduce motivation and school retention. For example, the Saharia community of Madhya Pradesh reports literacy as low as 18% per NFHS data. Despite government schemes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan aiming to improve tribal education, these structural challenges persist.

2. Health and Nutrition

a. High infant and maternal mortality rates

PVTGs experience disproportionately high infant mortality rates (IMR) and maternal mortality rates (MMR). The NFHS-5 (2019-21) shows tribal IMR at 44 per 1000 live births, well above the national average of 35. Malnutrition, especially among children under five, is a critical concern, with some PVTGs exhibiting rates exceeding 60%. The Baiga and Saharia communities of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan exemplify

these challenges, suffering from widespread anemia and chronic malnutrition.

b. Limited healthcare access and traditional beliefs

Geographical isolation restricts access to formal health services, while deep-rooted traditional beliefs influence healthcare-seeking behaviors, sometimes delaying or preventing the use of modern medical care. Government schemes such as the National Health Mission (NHM) have attempted to reach tribal populations, but infrastructural deficits and cultural barriers hinder effective coverage.

3. Livelihood and Economic Vulnerability

a. Dependence on forest resources and subsistence agriculture

PVTGs primarily rely on forest produce, shifting cultivation, and subsistence farming for their livelihoods. This dependence makes them vulnerable to environmental changes and restrictive forest policies. For instance, the Dongria Kondh of Odisha depend on shifting cultivation and minor forest produce, but mining operations in the Niyamgiri hills threaten their traditional economic base.

b. Lack of skill development and market access

Skill-building initiatives tailored to PVTGs are limited, reducing their ability to engage with broader markets or alternative livelihoods. Seasonal migration is a common coping strategy but

contributes to economic instability. Despite programs like the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana aiming to enhance tribal livelihoods, challenges remain in ensuring sustained economic security.

4. Land and Forest Rights

a. Land alienation and delayed Forest Rights Act implementation

Although the Forest Rights Act (2006) legally recognizes community forest rights, many PVTGs face land alienation due to delayed recognition processes and lack of awareness. Displacement due to mining, dams, and wildlife sanctuaries continues to erode their land base. For example, the Baiga tribe has been displaced from tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, disrupting their traditional livelihoods.

b. Impact of development projects

The failure to effectively implement land rights provisions undermines constitutional protections and exacerbates poverty and marginalization among PVTGs. Government efforts to address these issues through the Ministry of Tribal Affairs have made progress but face persistent bureaucratic and social challenges.

5. Governance and Participation

a. Limited awareness and capacity to participate in Gram Sabhas under PESA (1996)

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 mandates

Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas to approve development plans and manage community resources. However, many PVTG communities lack awareness of these rights and insufficient capacity-building inhibits effective participation. Consequently, they are excluded from important decisions affecting land use, forest management, and welfare schemes intended for their benefit.

b. Bureaucratic hurdles in accessing welfare schemes

PVTGs face procedural barriers including documentation challenges due to low literacy and absence of Aadhaar linkage. The frequent requirement for physical presence at distant block or district headquarters discourages participation, resulting in underutilization of food security, health, education, and livelihood support schemes.

c. Lack of effective representation in local governance structures

Despite constitutional provisions reserving seats for Scheduled Tribes, PVTGs often remain underrepresented in Gram Panchayats. Small population sizes, geographical isolation, and social barriers limit their political voice, leading to governance decisions that do not adequately reflect their socio-cultural and livelihood needs.

6. Gender Issues

a. Higher maternal mortality and health vulnerabilities

Women in PVTGs suffer disproportionately from high maternal

mortality rates due to limited access to healthcare. Traditional practices and lack of institutional delivery options contribute to poor health outcomes.

b. Gendered division of labor and limited decision-making roles

Women bear a heavy workload due to gendered labor divisions but have limited participation in community decision-making. Nonetheless, many PVTG societies recognize women's critical roles in forest management and food security, roles that need formal recognition and support.

c. Need for targeted empowerment

Addressing these gender-specific vulnerabilities through policies and programs is crucial for enhancing women's health, status, and empowerment within PVTGs.

7. Policy and Implementation Gaps

a. Inadequate culturally appropriate approaches

Many welfare policies fail to address the unique cultural contexts of PVTGs, reducing their effectiveness.

b. Lack of disaggregated data

National statistics often do not disaggregate data specifically for PVTGs, hindering targeted planning and monitoring.

c. Fragmented administrative responsibility

Responsibilities divided among forest, tribal welfare, and revenue departments cause delays and overlaps in policy implementation.

d. Weak monitoring and evaluation

The absence of robust mechanisms to track scheme impacts limits accountability and adaptive learning. Addressing these gaps is essential for improving the inclusion and welfare of PVTGs in India's development framework.

Recommendations

Strengthening the inclusion and development of PVTGs in India requires a multi-pronged, rights-based approach supported by existing constitutional safeguards, specialized schemes, and community participation mechanisms.

Firstly, strengthening the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA, 2006) is critical. Despite legal provisions for individual and community forest rights, many PVTGs remain unaware of these entitlements due to low literacy and administrative hurdles. Targeted awareness campaigns, facilitated by the Tribal Affairs Ministry and NCST, should be conducted in PVTG settlements using local languages, with the support of trained local tribal youth as animators. For instance, the Odisha government's initiative in simplifying the FRA claim process for Dongria Kondh could be adapted in other states to secure tenure rights, directly linking them to Minor Forest Produce-based livelihoods under schemes like the Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through MSP.

Secondly, culturally sensitive education and health interventions must

be designed to overcome PVTG-specific barriers. Under the Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), special learning modules in local dialects can be developed for Jenu Kuruba and Yerava children in Karnataka, while traditional healers could be integrated into the National Health Mission (NHM) outreach in Cholanaikkan areas of Kerala to build trust and ensure immunization and maternal health care uptake.

Thirdly, encouraging community participation in planning under PESA (1996) is essential. Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas should be empowered through training and simplified guidelines to facilitate PVTG participation in decision-making. Successful examples such as the Mendha Lekha village model in Maharashtra, where the Gram Sabha manages forest resources and revenue, can be used as case studies to inspire community-led resource governance among PVTGs.

Fourthly, gender-sensitive inclusion measures are necessary, recognizing the vital roles PVTG women play in forest management and household economies. Under the Van Dhan Yojana, the formation of women-led Self Help Groups (SHGs) for value addition of forest produce can be prioritized in PVTG colonies, enhancing incomes while promoting gender empowerment. Health programs should integrate nutrition supplementation for pregnant women, and targeted skilling initiatives can provide

economic alternatives for young PVTG women.

Fifth, better monitoring and targeted interventions must be ensured under the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and PVTG-specific plans. Although 100% central assistance schemes exist under PVTG development plans (such as the Scheme of Development of PVTGs under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs), delays in fund release, fragmented implementation, and lack of disaggregated data hinder effectiveness. State governments should set up dedicated PVTG monitoring cells under the Tribal Welfare Departments to track scheme progress, fund utilization, and output impacts. The NCST's periodic monitoring should be made actionable by issuing directives to states on addressing bottlenecks.

Additionally, inter-departmental convergence should be promoted to address PVTG issues holistically. For example, the National Livelihood Mission (NRLM), FRA implementation, and healthcare outreach under NHM can be integrated with PVTG-specific plans to ensure land security, livelihood generation, and health outcomes simultaneously. Partnerships with local universities for participatory research can aid in documenting PVTG traditional ecological knowledge, facilitating sustainable practices aligned with climate goals while enhancing community pride and identity.

In summary, these targeted, example-backed recommendations, if effectively implemented, will bridge the gaps between constitutional commitments and the lived realities of PVTGs, ensuring their rightful place in India's inclusive development journey.

Conclusion

The study highlights that the inclusion of PVTGs in India's development process must go beyond welfare delivery to embrace approaches that respect their cultural identity, ecological knowledge, and lived realities. Meaningful inclusive development is possible only when it safeguards dignity, expands freedoms, and values PVTGs as active partners rather than passive beneficiaries. Rooted in constitutional principles, a rights-based and community-driven framework—ensuring land and forest rights, social justice, education, health, and sustainable livelihoods—can enable PVTGs to participate in development without losing their identity. Such an approach affirms that true progress lies in empowering these communities to coexist with development, not be displaced by it.

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