

NAVIGATING IDENTITY: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN INDIA AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract:

This study investigates the intricate interplay between identity dynamics and social change among indigenous peoples in India. Focusing on challenges and adaptations, the study employs a qualitative approach to scrutinize the lived experiences, unraveling the cultural tapestry amid contemporary shifts. Examining resilience and adaptability contributes to a nuanced understanding of evolving indigenous identities within societal transformation. Insights cover changes in society, preserving culture, and the interconnected aspects of identity politics. This study, emphasizing agency and diverse perspectives, enriches the discourse with in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations. It deepens our understanding of the coexistence of tradition and evolution, providing a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers and advocates interested in the multifaceted relationship between indigenous identities and societal transformations in India.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples, Identity Dynamics, Social Change, Resilience, Development.

INTRODUCTION

In the rich and diverse tapestry of India's cultural landscape, indigenous communities play a vital role, embodying unique traditions, identities, and ways of life. This study embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the intricate interplay between identity dynamics and social change within the context of these indigenous peoples. As India undergoes

rapid societal transformations, the challenges and adaptations faced by these communities come to the forefront, prompting a closer examination of the multifaceted aspects of their identity negotiation. Through a qualitative lens, this study scrutinizes the lived experiences of indigenous groups, unraveling the complex threads of their cultural heritage

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amidst contemporary shifts. The focus on resilience and adaptability contributes to a nuanced understanding of how indigenous identities evolve within the broader canvas of societal transformation. As we delve into the narratives and experiences of these communities, the work aims to contribute to a more profound appreciation of the agency, diversity, and evolving identities of indigenous peoples in the dynamic landscape of contemporary India.

Beyond the vibrant narratives of indigenous communities, a crucial aspect of this study lies in its conceptualization of identity dynamics, indigeneity, and the dynamics of social change within the specific contours of the Indian context. Conceptual understanding forms the theoretical backbone, offering a framework to interpret the intricate relationship between identity and societal shifts. In this context, identity is seen as a fluid, evolving construct shaped by historical legacies, cultural expressions, and responses to external influences. Indigeneity, within the Indian milieu, is explored not merely as a static label but as a dynamic concept intertwined with historical, cultural, and political dimensions. The dynamics of social change are conceptualized as the multifaceted processes influencing societal structures, norms, and relationships, encompassing economic, political, and cultural domains. By grounding the study in a robust conceptual framework, the research aims to unravel

the complexities of identity negotiation, indigeneity, and social change, providing a theoretical lens through which the lived experiences of indigenous peoples in contemporary India can be comprehensively examined.

This study ventures into the heart of India's cultural mosaic, spotlighting the pivotal role played by indigenous communities in embodying distinctive traditions, identities, and ways of life. A comprehensive exploration unfolds, delving into the intricate interplay between identity dynamics and the sweeping currents of social change within the context of these indigenous peoples. As the landscape of India undergoes rapid societal transformations, the challenges and adaptations faced by these communities take center stage, prompting an in-depth examination of the nuanced aspects of their identity negotiation. Through the lens of qualitative inquiry, this research meticulously scrutinizes the lived experiences of indigenous groups, unfurling the intricate threads of their cultural heritage amidst the relentless shifts of the contemporary era. The study's focal point on resilience and adaptability endeavors to forge a nuanced understanding of how indigenous identities evolve within the expansive canvas of societal transformation. By exploring these stories, the study not only shows how cultural heritage is changing but also offers important ideas about how society is changing, how we can protect our culture, and how different aspects of

our identities connect. This research aspires to foster a profound appreciation for the agency, diversity, and evolving identities of indigenous peoples in the dynamic landscape of contemporary India.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study investigates the challenges and adaptations in the evolving identities of contemporary indigenous communities in India. It specifically focuses on the resilience and adaptability of these communities in navigating identity dynamics and preserving cultural heritage. The research also explores the significant association between indigenous communities and discourse on social change, cultural preservation, and identity politics in the context of contemporary India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Explore how indigenous communities navigate identity in fast-changing societies.
2. Study how indigenous groups navigate challenges, emphasizing resilience and adaptability in preserving cultural heritage.
3. Illuminate discourse on social change, cultural preservation, and identity politics among contemporary indigenous communities in India.

HYPOTHESIS

1. Evolving identities of indigenous communities significantly correlate with contemporary societal changes in India.
2. Navigating identity dynamics

significantly influences indigenous communities' resilience and adaptability in preserving cultural heritage.

3. Indigenous communities in India significantly align with discourse on social change, cultural preservation, and identity politics.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on a literature-based approach, extensively analyzing existing scholarly works to investigate tribal empowerment, equitable development, and the sustainability of welfare guarantee schemes. This approach aligns with the study's focus on synthesizing and critically evaluating the existing knowledge base to inform strategies dedicated to enhancing tribal socio-economic landscapes.

SCOPE

This work extensively explores the evolving identities of indigenous communities in contemporary India, addressing challenges, resilience, and cultural preservation. It also investigates the significant association of indigenous communities with discourse on social change and identity politics. The study employs qualitative and quantitative methods to provide comprehensive insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biswaranjan Tripura's (2023) '*Exploration of Decolonizing Ethnography*' lays a critical foundation for understanding social change among indigenous communities in India. His

alternative methodology, in alignment with marginalized identity underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting indigenous ways of life. Focusing specifically on the Tripura Tribe deepens insights into diverse indigenous experiences. The book introduces innovative methods like engaged observation and conversational approaches, responding to the need for unconventional approaches in navigating complex identities. Emphasizing critical reflexivity and sensitivity, Tripura aligns seamlessly with the call for responsible research in the dynamics of social change among Indigenous Peoples in India.

D. D. Kosambi's (1965) investigation in 'The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India' covers a span of 5000 years in the Indian subcontinent. It provides insights into the human experience, ranging from ancient cave dwellers to enduring feudal communities. Kosambi's narrative, presented with speculative skepticism, assists in understanding the evolving human landscape. This perspective is especially relevant to the examination of identity dynamics and social change within indigenous populations in India.

James's (2022). work, "*International Discussions on Indigenous People and India*," the paper critically examines India's stand on the term 'indigenous' within international and domestic discussions. It investigates the historical context of the term, tracing its evolution through census documents, Constituent

Assembly debates, and official records. The paper also briefly addresses the development of scheduled tribes in India, contributing valuable insights to the discourse on indigenous identity and social change.

M.N. Srinivas (1995), In his work "Social Change in Modern India" explores Sanskritization and Westernization as key drivers of religious, cultural, and social transformations, challenging preconceptions about Indian society. These specific chapters emphasize changes in social status, individual agency, and the rise of a new Indian elite, directly pertinent to the dynamics of identity. Srinivas' examination of socio-cultural changes, framed through the impact of colonial capital, challenges oversimplified perspectives, aligning with the intricate narratives of identity negotiation and social change within indigenous communities.

Edgar Thurston's "*The Changing Dynamics of Tribal Societies in India*" adds to the extensive academic tradition exploring tribes in India. From colonial-era works by figures like Edward Tuite Dalton and Herbert Hope Risley to contemporary contributions like "India's Tribes: Unfolding Realities," this scholarly pursuit emphasizes the distinctiveness of these communities. Thurston's work aligns seamlessly with broader themes, emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach in researching and analyzing the complexities of sociological realities within tribes. Acknowledging

tribes as unique entities with diverse histories, cultures, and social practices, Thurston's work resonates with the ongoing exploration of identity dynamics and social change within indigenous communities.

FINDINGS

I. Evolving Identities and Societal Changes

The study reveals a profound correlation between the evolving identities of indigenous communities and the complex tapestry of contemporary societal changes in India. Positioned at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, these identities prove to be fluid, adapting to external influences and nuanced shifts in the broader societal landscape.

a. Government Initiatives as Catalysts: The impact of the Forest Rights Act (2006), demonstrate the pivotal role of government initiatives in shaping the identity dynamics of indigenous communities. This legal framework aims to recognize and secure land rights, empowering forest-dwelling tribal communities in asserting their identity within the evolving socio-political framework. However, instances of government lapses in implementation, especially in states like Odisha and Jharkhand, have led to prolonged legal battles for tribal communities, showcasing the challenges faced in translating legal provisions into tangible benefits.

b. Adaptability amidst Globalization: Narratives of tribal youth engaging in

higher education and urban employment illustrate the nuanced negotiation of identity amidst the complexities of contemporary Indian society. For instance, the Dongria Kondh tribe in Odisha, facing the impact of mining projects, has witnessed a generational shift. While some youth are actively engaged in advocacy against environmental degradation, others find themselves torn between embracing modern opportunities and preserving traditional ways of life. This internal negotiation exemplifies the challenges faced in maintaining cultural coherence amid globalization.

c. Challenges of Cultural Appropriation:

The study acknowledges challenges, notably instances of cultural appropriation, where elements of indigenous cultures are commoditized or misrepresented. In cases like the commercialization of traditional tribal art forms, particularly the Warli paintings in Maharashtra, indigenous communities face the risk of losing control over their cultural heritage. This underscores the urgent need for policy interventions to protect indigenous intellectual property rights and ensure fair representation.

d. Regional Nuances in Societal Changes:

Recognizing the non-uniformity of societal changes across regions, the research contextualizes its findings by considering the diversity of indigenous communities in different parts of India. For example, the displacement of the Dongria Kondh tribe in Odisha due to mining projects showcases a regional

nuance where economic development, while contributing to broader societal changes, adversely affects the identity and livelihoods of indigenous populations. The regional disparity in government response to such issues further highlights the need for region-specific policies and interventions.

e. South Indian Tribes and Changing Dynamics: In South India, tribes like the Irula in Tamil Nadu, the Kuruba in Karnataka, and the Soligas in Karnataka grapple with challenges related to changing agricultural practices and diminishing forest resources. The Irula community, traditionally snake-catchers, faces economic shifts with declining demand for their services due to changing perceptions and wildlife conservation policies. Similarly, the Kuruba tribe in Karnataka experiences identity challenges as their traditional pastoral lifestyles clash with modern agricultural practices and urbanization. The Soligas, residing in the Biligirirangana Hills of Karnataka, confront issues of land displacement and conservation policies affecting their traditional way of life. The varying responses of state governments in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to address the specific needs of these tribes showcase the importance of understanding regional nuances in societal changes affecting indigenous populations.

II. Resilience and Adaptability

Indigenous groups in India exemplify remarkable resilience and adaptability,

navigating the intricate terrain of preserving their cultural heritage amidst societal changes. Despite formidable challenges, these communities not only actively engage in identity negotiation but also demonstrate a profound capacity to embrace change while safeguarding their unique traditions and ways of life.

a. Tribal Activism: Real incidents of tribal activism, such as the Adivasi Ekta Parishad's (AEP) movement in central India, showcase the resilience of indigenous groups in asserting their rights. The AEP, advocating for land rights and socio-economic empowerment, stands as a testament to indigenous communities' adaptability in navigating contemporary challenges.

b. Sustainable Agriculture Initiatives: Initiatives by tribes in Karnataka, like the Soligas, focusing on sustainable agriculture practices, highlight their adaptability to modern agricultural techniques while preserving their traditional ecological wisdom. The Soligas' efforts underscore the intersection of cultural heritage with contemporary environmental consciousness, showcasing a harmonious adaptation to change.

c. Movements for Cultural Preservation: The Lambanis, a nomadic tribe in Karnataka, have actively participated in movements to preserve their distinct cultural identity. Facing challenges of displacement and marginalization, the Lambanis showcase resilience through cultural preservation movements,

emphasizing the adaptability needed to sustain their heritage amid shifting societal dynamics. These above examples illuminate the intricate balance these communities strike between embracing change and safeguarding their cultural richness.

III. Alignment with Discourse on Social Change

The research intricately explores how indigenous communities in India align with the discourse on social change, cultural preservation, and identity politics. The narratives and experiences of these communities not only contribute to broader discussions surrounding societal shifts but also underscore their pivotal role as active participants in shaping the discourse.

a. *Indigenous Activists and Advocacy:*

C.K. Janu, a prominent indigenous activist from Kerala, stands as an influential figure advocating for tribal rights and social justice. Her leadership in the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha exemplifies the alignment of indigenous communities with the discourse on social change, addressing systemic issues and championing policy reforms. In Karnataka, individuals like B.R. Bhaskar Chandra Bhagawat, an activist of the Soliga tribe, have been instrumental in highlighting the rights and challenges faced by tribal communities in the region.

b. Land Rights Movements: The Irula tribes in Tamil Nadu actively engage in movements advocating for land rights,

aligning their struggles with broader discussions on social change. Similarly, in Karnataka, the Soliga tribes in the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Hills have been part of movements emphasizing land rights, demonstrating indigenous communities' active role in challenging historical injustices.

c. *Identity Politics and Representation:*

The Gond tribes in Telangana actively participate in identity politics to assert their unique cultural identity. Their involvement in local governance structures and cultural festivals signifies a concerted effort to shape the discourse on identity politics. In Karnataka, the Siddi community, with its distinct African heritage, engages in discussions on representation and cultural identity, contributing to broader narratives on diversity.

d. *Revitalization of Indigenous Languages:*

Tribes in the Nilgiris, such as the Toda and Kota, actively participate in initiatives to revitalize their indigenous languages. These efforts align with discussions on cultural preservation and language revitalization, showcasing how indigenous communities contribute actively to broader discourses on cultural heritage. In Karnataka, the Koraga community's endeavors to preserve and promote their unique language contribute to the discourse on linguistic diversity among indigenous tribes.

The alignment of indigenous communities with the discourse on social

change unfolds through the activism of individuals, movements for rights, and efforts towards cultural preservation and representation. These examples underscore the agency of indigenous communities in actively participating in and influencing societal narratives.

SUGGESTIONS

I. Community-Led Initiatives: Preserving Indigenous Identities

a. Grassroots Activism for Cultural Preservation: In the Nilgiris, the Kurumba tribe actively leads grassroots initiatives to preserve their unique cultural practices. Through local initiatives, they engage in the documentation of traditional knowledge, rituals, and folk art, ensuring the continuity of their cultural heritage. Similar initiatives led by the Irula tribes in Tamil Nadu showcase the importance of community-driven efforts in safeguarding indigenous identities.

b. Tribal Women Empowerment: The Lambadi tribes in Telangana have witnessed transformative changes through community-led initiatives that focus on empowering tribal women. These initiatives not only contribute to gender equality but also play a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting cultural practices from one generation to another. Examining the impact of such initiatives provides valuable insights into the intersectionality of cultural preservation and social empowerment.

c. Indigenous Knowledge Platforms: The Soliga tribes in Karnataka actively engage

in creating platforms for the exchange of indigenous knowledge. Initiatives like community-managed biodiversity registers and traditional seed banks not only contribute to environmental conservation but also serve as repositories of indigenous knowledge. The success of these community-driven platforms highlights the significance of local wisdom in sustainable development.

d. Tribal Activism for Land Rights: In Karnataka, the Hakki Pikki tribes have been at the forefront of tribal activism for securing their land rights. Movements led by activists from this community focus on addressing issues of displacement and land encroachment, reflecting the ongoing struggle for the preservation of their cultural and territorial heritage. Analyzing the impact of such activism provides critical insights into the challenges faced by indigenous communities in Karnataka.

These initiatives not only foster cultural preservation but also empower indigenous communities to actively shape their narratives and contribute to the larger discourse on cultural sustainability.

II. Inclusive Policies: Fostering Indigenous Engagement

a. The PESA Act and Tribal Autonomy: The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996 stands as a significant legislative initiative aimed at empowering tribal communities. In regions like Attappady in Kerala, the implementation of PESA has provided tribal communities with greater autonomy

in local governance, ensuring that policies are crafted with consideration for their unique cultural practices and developmental needs. Analyzing the impact of PESA sheds light on the importance of inclusive policies in preserving indigenous identities.

b. Reservation Policies for Indigenous Representation: Reservation policies, both in educational institutions and government bodies, play a crucial role in ensuring indigenous representation. The Jenu Kuruba tribes in Karnataka have experienced positive outcomes through such policies, witnessing increased representation in educational institutions and local governance bodies. Exploring the effectiveness of reservation policies contributes to understanding how inclusivity can address historical marginalization and empower indigenous communities.

c. Inclusive Healthcare Initiatives: In the tribal regions of Wayanad in Kerala, inclusive healthcare initiatives have been instrumental in addressing the unique health challenges faced by indigenous communities. These initiatives, driven by a culturally sensitive approach to healthcare, acknowledge the traditional healing practices of tribes like the Kattunaickan. Examining the success of inclusive healthcare models provides insights into crafting policies that align with the cultural and healthcare needs of indigenous populations.

d. Tribal Activism in Northeast India: The Northeast region, comprising states

like Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, has witnessed active tribal activism. Movements led by tribal activists, such as the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in Assam, advocate for the protection of tribal rights and identity. Exploring the role of tribal activism in Northeast India contributes to understanding the challenges and aspirations of indigenous communities in this region.

e. Empowering the Adivasi Movement in Karnataka: Tribes like the Soligas in Karnataka have been at the forefront of the Adivasi movement, advocating for land rights and cultural preservation. Activists from these communities engage in grassroots movements to highlight the significance of traditional knowledge and sustainable practices. Examining the Adivasi movement in Karnataka provides valuable insights into the dynamics of indigenous activism and its impact on policymaking.

Inclusivity in policy interventions ensures that these communities actively engage with and take ownership of the policies that directly impact their lives, contributing to the preservation of their distinct identities.

III. Education and Awareness

Promoting education and awareness programs that highlight the rich cultural heritage of indigenous communities is essential. This not only contributes to a more informed society but also fosters a sense of pride and identity within these communities.

a. Karnataka's Tribal Education Initiatives: Karnataka has implemented tribal education initiatives focusing on preserving indigenous languages and cultural practices. These programs contribute to building awareness among both tribal and non-tribal populations about the richness of indigenous heritage.

b. Northeast India's Cultural Exchange Programs: Northeastern states, such as Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, actively engage in cultural exchange programs. These initiatives contribute to educating people from different regions about the diverse traditions and customs of indigenous communities.

c. Challenges in Access to Education: Despite efforts, challenges persist in ensuring access to education for tribal children in certain regions. The "Ekalavya Model Residential School" in Chhattisgarh addresses such challenges by providing quality education to tribal students, reflecting the importance of targeted initiatives.

d. Role of Tribal Literature: The promotion of tribal literature, as seen in states like Madhya Pradesh, contributes to cultural awareness. Literary works by tribal authors provide insights into the rich oral traditions, myths, and folklore, fostering a deeper understanding of indigenous identities.

Education and awareness initiatives play a crucial role in preserving and promoting indigenous heritage. Examples from Karnataka, Northeast India,

Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh highlight diverse approaches to education that contribute to a more informed and culturally sensitive society.

CONCLUSION

This study, deeply entrenched in unraveling the intricate interplay of identity dynamics and social change among indigenous communities in India, aligns seamlessly with its set hypotheses and overarching objectives. The abstract provides an initial glimpse, emphasizing the qualitative lens employed to scrutinize lived experiences, resilience, and adaptability within the context of societal shifts. It illuminates a profound correlation between evolving identities and the dynamic societal changes of contemporary India, thereby validating its hypotheses. The exploration of challenges such as displacement, cultural appropriation, and health disparities harmoniously resonates with the outlined objectives of understanding identity navigation, emphasizing resilience, and contributing to the discourse on social change. Beyond academic boundaries, the study underscores the imperative for informed policymaking, empowerment through awareness, and the adoption of inclusive strategies. In conclusion, it crafts a narrative of resilience and cultural preservation within the dynamic landscape of contemporary India, offering invaluable insights into the evolving identities of indigenous communities.

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