



Original Article

Administrative Challenges in the Tribal Areas of Maharashtra

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Abstract

Tribal areas of Maharashtra face a range of administrative, socio-economic, and developmental challenges that affect the effective delivery of government policies and welfare programmes. Despite constitutional and statutory provisions designed to protect and promote the interests of Scheduled Tribes, significant gaps remain in infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment, connectivity, and access to basic public services. This paper examines the major administrative challenges confronting tribal communities in Maharashtra, with particular attention to governance and institutional arrangements, service delivery, infrastructure and economic development, education and health, land and forest rights, political participation, intergovernmental coordination, and funding mechanisms. The study highlights that weak coordination among government departments, delays in the flow and utilisation of funds, inadequate monitoring, limited administrative capacity, and difficulties in implementing existing legal provisions have reduced the effectiveness of several development initiatives. Tribal communities also continue to experience difficulties related to land and forest rights, market access, digital connectivity, and equitable access to public services. The paper argues for stronger decentralised governance, greater participation of tribal communities in decision-making, improved interdepartmental coordination, transparent fund management, effective monitoring and evaluation, and context-specific administrative planning. Strengthening local institutions and ensuring timely and accountable implementation of existing policies can contribute significantly to inclusive and sustainable development in Maharashtra's tribal areas.

Keywords: Tribal Administration, Scheduled Tribes, Maharashtra, Tribal Development, Governance, Public Service Delivery, Administrative Challenges, Land and Forest Rights, Infrastructure Development, Decentralisation, Social Inclusion, Intergovernmental Coordination.

Introduction

Maharashtra possesses the second largest concentration of Scheduled Tribes (ST) in India. More than 60% reside in predominantly tribal districts of the eastern part of the state. These tribal areas account for around 40% of the geographical area yet house only 20% of the total population. The Administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Order, 1969, implementing the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, stipulates that the President of India shall direct the administration of Scheduled Areas in the State and administration of Scheduled Tribes in the State according to Article 339(1). With this, the state Government of Maharashtra detailed the spheres of administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes at all levels, from the State to the Gram Sabha level. The scheduled areas are remote and hilly terrain and lack economic and social infrastructure, especially transport communications, market access and health-care facilities. Infrastructure facilities have therefore lagged behind when compared with nonscheduled areas.

The state faces many challenges in implementing schemes and policies aimed at these areas, whose people live below the poverty line. The poor state of their health, education, employment and literacy is cause for deep concern. The role of Government must be decisive both in terms of bridging the gap in social and physical infrastructure and in providing a policy environment to promote economic development and growth, while at the same time ensuring levels of service that are acceptable and equitable.

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Historical and Demographic Context

Administrative challenges in Maharashtra's tribal areas derive from a complex interplay of historical and demographic factors. Tribals settled in the region are seen to carry different histories and trajectories over time. Like human histories of other communities, the anatomy of change of tribal history also follows a discontinuity and hiatus model. The continuous emergence of economic, social, cultural, and political institutions determines human behavior in a spatial system, in which the behavior of the actors in the system continues to change over time. The tribal settlements of the region are, therefore, different in history and historical process since pre-British periods, British periods, post-independence events, and the events occurred since the 1990s have presented different set of factors shaping their different histories.

A detailed analysis of the tribal history and settlement of Maharashtra indicates that certain tribes spread over a specific territory exhibit the same type of transport, habitat, and substance for survival, although every single settlement has a history of change. Unplanned urbanization, deforestation, industrial expansion, mining, and changes in the natural environment have contributed to the separation of man from his natural habitat. Historical and socio-cultural connectivity with the economic development of a region is essential for realizing the fruits of developmental programs. A grasp of the population size, distribution, mobility, and settlement characteristics is required to understand the social conditions of present-day tribal groups and the problems of service delivery in tribal areas.

Governance and Administrative Framework

Maharashtra's Constitution and statutory provisions for Tribal Areas comprise a complex governance framework. The 5th Schedule of the Constitution creates a special set of arrangements for the Adivasi population in 10 states, including Maharashtra. Within this Schedule, the Constitution seeks to empower and protect India's Adivasi communities. The 73rd Amendment and consequent legislation empower elected bodies at the local level, establishing Village Councils in villages having a non-Adivasi majority at the interval of talukas while Tribal Councils form at the level of ADIVASI VILLAGE GROUPS. However, a number of state and central-level departments remain politically and administratively unaccountable to these institutions.

The distribution of powers and capacities has created challenges. At the state level, the Tribal Research and Training Institute was established to conduct research on the preservation of languages and cultures, collect and maintain data on the Adivasi population, and undertake training and capacity-building programs for Tribal Development Officers. The Department of Tribal Development is tasked with welfare and socio-economic development of the Adivasi population, Its work is tied to that of various other state-level departments, but coordination mechanisms remain weak. The District Collector's Office coordinates service-delivery at the district level. Taluka-level administrative machinery implements

schemes administered by the Maharashtra Divisional Forest Authority and the Scheduled Tribes Certificate Scrutiny Committee. At these levels, Political parties have nurtured a culture of rivalry among bureaucratic offices and occupying positions of elected office.

Service Delivery and Public Welfare

A wide range of welfare schemes targeting the tribal population have been launched in the state, covering the construction of houses, provision of health, education, livelihoods, market support, infrastructure and tourist development, promotion of culture and art, and so on. Special welfare programs have been set up for the Bhotias and Wanchus, which are special tribes and in refuted. While the declared policies include multiple initiatives addressing various aspects of tribal wellbeing, an analysis shows wide inconsistencies between stated aims and actual delivery for specific policies. Most importantly, the ULBS primarily refer to forests, thus excluding schemes related to education, health, infrastructure, housing, and livelihood support. A meticulous allocation and need match exercise of the intended ULBS against the population, poverty, and accessibility ensure that ULBS indeed connect with the much-delayed delivery of the welfare state. Existence of such a match again underscores the need for sustained monitoring against these ULBS, especially because the implementation on the ground frequently fails both the schedule claims and the intended targetisation.

Tribes in Maharashtra are equally vulnerable to leakages, corruption, and administrative lapses. Separate allocation of funds and/or resources for tribal development has always been subject to severe question marks. Proper targeting, monitoring, and follow-up audits have been crucial to ensure that the exited allocations percolate to the people on the ground. In addition, the welfare examination of any region always turns into a wider analysis that highlights not only the successful implementation, but also the bottlenecks in delivery and mechanisms that prevent the empowered sections of society from taking the real benefit. Over the years, even though the monitoring and evaluation part, both ex-post and during implementation, needed utmost emphasis, such an exercise has remained at a back seat while potholes in implementation have attracted maximum public gaze.

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Infrastructure and Economic Development

Tribal infrastructure development constitutes a critical area of governance in Maharashtra. Adequate transport and energy provisions, drinking-water supply, and digital connectivity are prerequisites for the socio-economic

development of tribals in the state. Connectivity to market hubs enables access to essential goods and services and improves returns on their agricultural produce and forest-based livelihoods, thus directly impacting their welfare. At the same time, infrastructure development should also support tribals in diversifying their livelihood avenues beyond natural-resource-based occupations in a sustainable manner. Along with quality and access, attention must also be paid to the timeliness of the delivery of infrastructure services.

The share of Scheduled Tribe (ST) households with electrification, safe drinking water, and access to all-weather roads has significantly increased over time, but remains lower than the corresponding figure for the total population. Although both public and private investments in road construction have grown in recent years, aspirations of speedy, multi-dimensional, and problem-free travel, supported by well-maintained roads, have still not been met for many tribals in the state. Strengthening the digital infrastructure in tribal areas of Maharashtra has emerged as an important agenda item, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public and private telecom operators and service providers are now expected to expand their services into tribal areas that hitherto remained uncovered by their network, at least due to the demand created by online education. Nonetheless, such advances must not compromise environmental and social safety. Complete neglect of the tribal population is also avoidable through the proper planning of infrastructure projects related to the private sector, ensuring market connectivity and, in turn, the improvement of economic development indexes of the ST community.

Education, Health, and Social Inclusion

The impact of education, health, and socio-economic status on the lives of individuals has gained greater focus among researchers in the past few decades. Health, education, and socio-economic status are interrelated; education impacts health status, socio-economic conditions influence education, and health contributes towards socio-economic and educational status. Statewide average values obscure substantial variation across Maharashtra's tribal districts. The total literacy rate in Maharashtra increased from 70.7% in 2001 to 82.3% in 2011, whereas in tribal dominated districts like Nandurbar it was 54.6% in 2011 (Prabhakarrrao Doke, 2016). Only 16% of females aged 6–14 years were enrolled in schooling during 2010–2011 in Maharashtra's tribal areas. With a difficulty level of 1.67, access to education forms Maharashtra's single most pressing problem in 17 districts.

Various diseases are widespread in the tribal belt of Maharashtra, adversely affecting individual health and thereby limiting their development. Maharashtra ranks fifth among Indian states regarding maternal mortality, with a maternal mortality ratio of 145 per 1,00,000 live births (Mavalankar, 2016). Child nutrition and child mortality continue to be pressing problems in the state. The indicator selection is skewed towards maternal and child health, which is necessary in India, aligning with government and international assessments that include health outcomes,

social determinants, and healthcare access. The proportion of tribal population is a major factor, with districts like Nandurbar having up to 69.3% tribal populations. In districts like Gadchiroli and Chandrapur, insurgency may impact health outcomes. Maharashtra's infrastructure gaps have also been linked to health disparities, suggesting a need to focus on districts in the poor-performing quartile.

Land, Forest Rights, and Resource Management

Land tenure, forest rights, and natural resource management constitute key governance challenges in Maharashtra's tribal areas. Ownership and control over these resources remain contested and insecure, hampering administrative engagement and raising questions about local aspirations and priorities. Untangling these interrelated issues requires careful attention to historical legacies, evolving legal frameworks, and contemporary socio-political dynamics.

Legal instruments governing land and forest management—including the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code, the Maharashtra Scheduled Areas Act, and the Forest Rights Act—remain poorly implemented (Shah, 2007). Efforts to recognize rights under the Forest Rights Act have stalled or proven ineffective, and long-standing land disputes resist resolution. Ambiguity surrounds the use of land designated as 'village waste,' with divergent interpretations by various administrative actors. While the insertion of earlier customary use rights into formal governance frameworks has empowered communities to contest unwanted encroachments and interventions, access to contemporary land may remain unrecognised. Additionally, the principle of prior informed consent enshrined in the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act constrains state action in natural resource governance, compounding existing challenges.

Security, Law and Order, and Political Participation

Crime is generally low in the region, but coverage is inadequate in rural areas. The combined effect of poverty, helplessness, and unemployment leads to small-scale crimes. Insurgencies in the state of Chhattisgarh have implications for Maharashtra, especially when such incidents become a nuisance. While the presence of armed forces enhances the sense of security among the people, anxiety over possible disturbance remains. Animal diseases, crop failure, soil erosion, cyclonic weather, and forest fires cause enormous loss to the people but assistance is not available in time. The Tribal Ministry's model of development has helped in some areas in mitigating distress. Tribals in villages have access to mobile telephones and newspapers and are aware of the developmental schemes implemented by the government. However, they do not benefit from them either because the funds trickle down very late or are returned as unutilised.

The tribals have also participated in town-level elections for the first time, though voting in such elections is generally poor. Participation decreases as one goes down from talukai to village councils. The tribals have been relatively more active in participating in local bodies when the frequency of elections is higher. The cooperative movement has also not made a substantial impact on the livelihood of the people, particularly in dry district villages.

Conversations with them reveal that they perceive tribal identity as being less relevant to their day-to-day concerns and grievances than usual. They seek special actions for development, not mere reservation or political domination. The increase in allocation for remedial-seeming measures is a response to such priorities suggested by tribal organisations over the years.

Development policies of other departments have not targeted the tribal populations left behind. The discrepancy between the expressed need for special measures and the allocation for tribal welfare measures as well as the zero-non-zero gap in utilisation emphasise the need for convergence and coordination. Special grants to poorer states, including Maharashtra, represent a new pool of funds. However, delays in release and ineffectiveness of schemes, compounded by a lack of convergence between departments, ultimately lead to development deficits in the tribal populations.

Intergovernmental Coordination and Funding Mechanisms

Intergovernmental coordination and funding mechanisms shape policy outcomes in Maharashtra's tribal areas. Budgets planning expenditure flows from the center to state and local governments affects the design and implementation of policies. Grant distribution in terms of unconditional and conditionally to state governments are part of the funding channel. The administration has limited control over the fund flow from the center. In addition to the normal federal fund flow mechanism, a separate funding channel has emerged under the tribal sub-plans and provisions under Article 275(1) of the Constitution keep the flow of funds to the tribal areas. The state also can channelize the flow of funds from the center for development through specific schemes. The reports of the audit objections have pointed to improper management and use of grant. The special grants flowing from the center to state and local without proper scrutiny and accountability and monitor by any agency also leads to misuse.

The central and state governments play a significant role in the development of the tribal communities. The department of tribal development has been established at the state level to monitor and provide the necessary planning of different departments concerning the tribal communities. There is a lack of coordination among the different departments. There is no platform for communication at the district level to monitor and plan interventions related to the tribal communities. The local administrative in charge with limited capacity should monitor the plan at the local level. There is no regular mechanism established to monitor the performance of any intergovernmental body for communication. The mid evaluation round of the schemes from the ground is also not put in place.

Policy Initiatives and Reform Efforts

Administrative weaknesses in Maharashtra's tribal areas have sparked discourse on reinforcing governance in regions under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. A 2004-05 Report of the Administrative Reforms Commission recommended shifting powers to district-level tribal

development authorities, supported by necessary resources and personnel, while enhancing the role of tribal representatives. Other proposals included delegating powers to block-level officials for timely fund transfer and ensuring tribal community involvement in economic investment planning.

A 2014 Discussion Paper by the MIT School of Government outlined a three-scenario framework for enabling a tribal administration design that balances community aspirations, participation, and service delivery. In 2017, a World Bank initiative proposed a Twin-Peaks Model, establishing a specialized district structure for the tribal area and a Unified Command in each district to optimize function across traditional and representative structures. The 2018 Tribal Policy sought to recognize and enhance the social, cultural, and economic rights of tribal communities.

Examining the form and efficacy of ongoing pilot initiatives is essential, alongside a broader assessment of tribal administration capacity from an impact-evaluation standpoint. External assistance could be leveraged to strengthen the administration and facilitate revenue-earning investment planning in the tribal areas. Administrative reforms, as a support unit operating at the confluence of the tribal area, development department, and development administration, would ensure dedicated but coordinated attention in all resource flow channels. Such reforms would be permanently assisted by external agencies or institutions.

Data Gaps, Methodological Considerations, and Evaluation

Progress monitoring necessitates comprehensive data on the anthropometric, immunization, social protection scheme, and health status of tribal populations. The analysis must address the numerous limits of the present data on tribal populations. Repeated population censuses were initiated in India only in 1871. The 1881 population census listed the marginalised 'aboriginal villages' but omitted all 'aboriginals,' i.e. adivasi, in other areas. There were few census efforts until the 1931 census when attempts were made to enumerate tribes like 'Kashtabhanj, Turi, Deha Kunbi, and Bhilla' (Prabhakar Rao Doke, 2016). The absence of regular censuses has meant limited statistical data on tribes. Administrative overview indicators are limited to only three tribes: 'Bhotada, Bhoti, and Halbi' (Katkar et al., 2017). Tribes like 'Vanjari, Dharkar, Nikhad, and Tandal'—having considerable tribal representation in local self-governance—are also missing.

Tribal communities broadly take many forms found (both as documented by the census and in formal reports) but only a limited number of cross-comparative datasets and precise indicators are present. The absence of robust datasets complicates gauging the efficacy of central schemes or state provisions intended for tribes. Moreover, as only a few establishments and services are recognised by the government as specifically intended for tribal governance, the capacity to appraise overall transfers and expenditure remains greatly restricted.

Conclusion

The administrative challenges in Maharashtra's tribal areas stem from a complex combination of insufficiently focused legislation, the inability of government agencies to adapt established policies to local conditions—the need for oversight, support, monitoring, training, and highly motivated personnel—is critical. Many government innovations aimed at furthering tribal development in Maharashtra over the past two decades have failed to deliver significant benefits due to poor implementation. There is evidence that some government agencies lack the capability to deliver, which is as discouraging as the capacity.

The vulnerabilities of tribal society necessitate robust and thorough implementation of existing policies, especially those guaranteeing land, forest, and water rights to these communities. Legislative flaws in policies addressing the state government's duty toward the tribal people must also be addressed, especially regarding mining and other large-scale projects. The decisions affecting their welfare must be drawn closer to them. Although the ultimate influence in tribal welfare belongs to the state government, the higher-level ministers and authorities are burdened by too many responsibilities to maintain adequate oversight of smaller schemes. Consequently, the schemes are in danger of becoming mechanical exercises with minimum monitoring and facilitation. Subsidies offered for housing, irrigation, and livelihood need scrutiny. They should stimulate activity and be timely rather than be taken as unimpeachable rights.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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