
DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION OF TRIBALS IN INDIA AFTER INDEPENDENCE: LOSS OF LAND, LIVELIHOOD, AND RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The history of tribal communities in post-Independence India is deeply connected with displacement, migration, land alienation, livelihood insecurity and resistance. Although the Indian Constitution provides special safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, the development trajectory adopted after 1947- particularly large dams, mining, industrialisation, infrastructure projects, conservation programmes and commercial exploitation of natural resources- has frequently transformed tribal habitats. This paper examines how displacement has transformed tribal livelihoods, social structures, and cultural identity. Loss of land has pushed many tribal communities towards insecure wage labour and migration to urban centres, resulting in economic vulnerability, weakening of community networks, and decline of traditional languages and knowledge systems. However, tribal communities have continuously resisted displacement and asserted their rights. For tribal communities, land is not merely an economic asset; it is connected with livelihood, cultural identity, social organisation, spirituality and collective memory. Consequently, displacement produces consequences extending beyond physical relocation. It may lead to loss of agricultural and forest-based livelihoods, migration toward urban and industrial centers, cultural dislocation and weakening of community institutions. At the same time, tribal communities have continuously resisted dispossession through political movements, environmental struggles, legal mobilisation and assertion of customary rights. This paper examines the relationship between displacement, migration and livelihood transformation and analyses major resistance movements as expressions of tribal agency and struggles for justice.

Keywords: Tribal Communities, Displacement, Migration, Land Alienation, Livelihood.

INTRODUCTION

The Displacement and migration of tribal communities in India after Independence constitute one of the major socio-economic and cultural issue of development, industrialisation, mining, conservation policies, environmental degradation, and land alienation [1]. Since Independence, India has pursued economic development through planned industrialisation, infrastructure expansion, irrigation, mining and exploitation of natural resources. These processes have contributed substantially to economic transformation, but they have also had profound consequences for tribal populations inhabiting resource-rich regions [2]. A considerable part of India's mineral, forest and water resources is located in areas with significant tribal populations, particularly in central and eastern India [3]. Displacement in these regions should not be understood simply as the physical movement of people. For tribal communities, ancestral territory represents a combination of land, forests, rivers, sacred spaces, social relations and collective memories [4]. The loss of territory therefore affects economic security as well as cultural and social continuity [5]. This makes tribal displacement an important question of social justice, environmental justice and historical rights [6]. These struggles represent efforts to protect land, forests, cultural autonomy, and ecological relationships [7].

Consequently, the loss of ancestral territory often produces a much deeper crisis than the loss of physical property. After 1947, the Indian state adopted development planning based on large-scale industrialisation, infrastructure development, irrigation, mining and energy production. Large dams, steel plants, coal mines, power projects, railways, roads and other infrastructure projects were established in many regions inhabited predominantly by tribal communities. Central and eastern India, including parts of Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh/Telangana, became particularly important sites of mineral extraction and industrial development. These areas also contain substantial forest resources and have historically been inhabited by tribal communities. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 represented an important legislative attempt to recognised historical forest rights of forest-dwelling tribal and other traditional communities [8]. The paradox is that many regions rich in natural resources have also been regions where tribal communities have experienced poverty, land alienation and displacement [9].

(I). Development and Displacement after Independence:

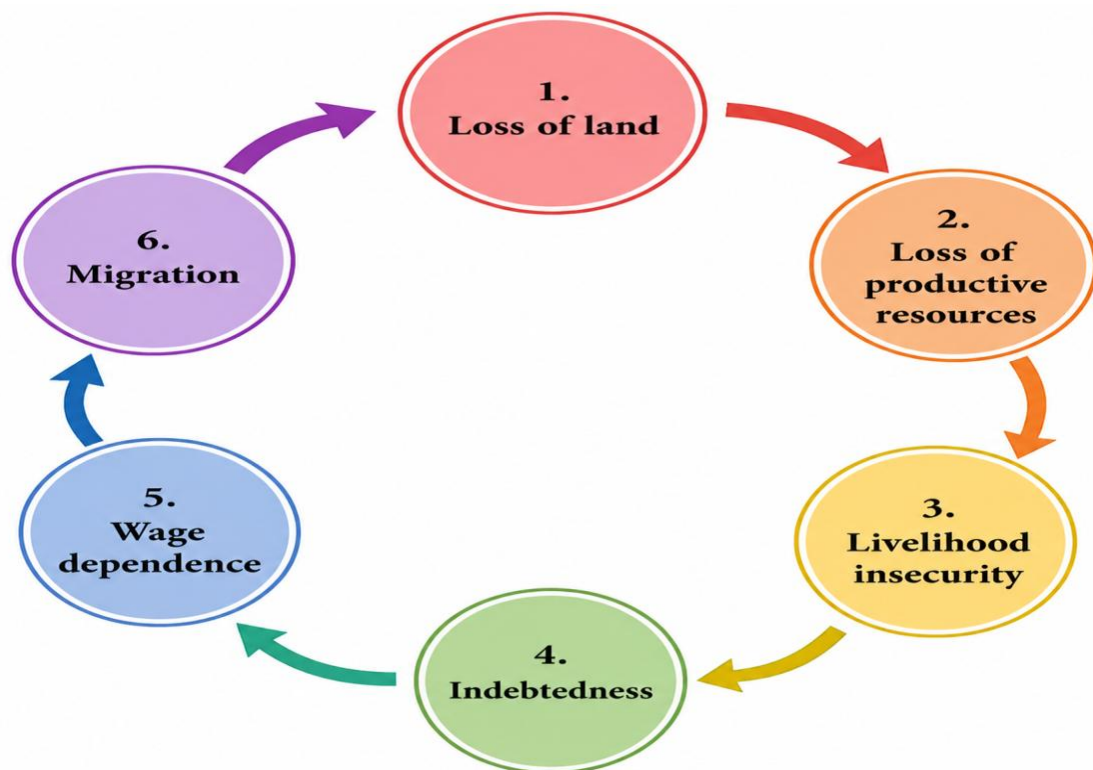
The post-Independence state regarded large-scale development projects as instruments of nation-building. The multipurpose river-valley projects, dams, steel plants, mines, factories, roads, railways and power projects were considered essential for modernising the Indian economy. However, many such projects required the acquisition

of extensive areas of land. The Tribal villages were frequently located in these areas because forests, river valleys and mineral-rich territories had historically supported tribal settlements [10]. Consequently, development-induced displacement became a recurring feature of postcolonial transformation. The submergence of villages associated with river-valley projects displaced communities from agricultural and forest landscapes. The Narmada Valley became especially significant because questions of displacement and rehabilitation generated a major public movement in the form of the Narmada Bachao Andolan[11]. The central issue was therefore not whether development was necessary, but who paid the social and environmental cost of development and who received its benefits. The tribal communities in India have experienced intensive displacement and migration due to large-scale development projects, industrialisation, mining activities, forest conservation policies, land alienation, and environmental degradation. This displacement represents not only the physical relocation of populations, but it also entails the loss of ancestral lands, ecosystems, livelihoods, relationships, cultural landscapes, and collective memories that underpin tribal identity and social existence. Therefore, the loss of land creates deep economic, cultural, and ecological disruptions [12]. The Displacement affects women and men differently. Women often depend heavily on forests and common resources for fuel, food, water, forest products, and household needs. When access to these resources disappears, women's unpaid labour may increase. Migration can also alter household structures and traditional gender relations. Women migrants may enter insecure and poorly protected forms of employment. Therefore, a gender-sensitive analysis is essential for understanding the consequences of tribal displacement [13]. The post-independence development model in India prioritised dams, industries, mines, and infrastructure projects as symbols of national progress. However, many of these projects were established in tribal-dominated regions rich in forests and minerals, resulting in the large-scale displacement of indigenous populations. Projects such as the Hirakud Dam and the Narmada Valley Development Project displaced numerous tribal communities by submerging villages, agricultural lands, forests, and sacred landscapes [14]. These experiences generated debates and resistance around rehabilitation, environmental justice, human rights, and the unequal distribution of development benefits and costs. Movements often emerged as significant struggles against forced displacement and questioned development approaches that ignored the rights of affected communities. The tribals' displacement in India after Independence must be understood as a complex process involving ecological destruction, economic marginalisation, cultural disruption, and struggles for identity. Ensuring tribal rights requires recognition of community ownership without uprooting their indigeneity. Participatory governance and appropriate development practices that respect the tribal community's concerns as a community [15].

(II). Loss of Land, Livelihood and Alienation:

The Land is the primary foundation of many tribal economies. The land performs multiple functions for tribal communities. It provides agricultural production, housing, access to forests, food and medicinal resources, grazing, cultural and religious spaces, social security, and ancestral identity. One of the most important consequences of displacement is its impact on tribal identity. It is constructed through relationships with land, community, language, culture, memory, rituals, and environment. When people are separated from their ancestral landscape, these relationships can become fragmented [16]. Consequently, cash compensation cannot always replace the full value of land and community resources. The acquisition or alienation of land therefore has consequences extending far beyond the market value of property. Tribal land has been lost through several processes, including state acquisition, development projects, mining, indebtedness, fraudulent transfers and encroachment. In some areas, customary systems of ownership were poorly represented in formal land records, making communities vulnerable to dispossession [17].

Land alienation creates a chain of consequences:



Loss of land → loss of productive resources → livelihood insecurity → indebtedness → wage dependence → migration.

Thus, migration is often not an isolated phenomenon but the outcome of a longer process of economic marginalisation [18]. For tribal communities, displacement is not simply the movement of people from one geographical location to another. Land, forest and water are closely connected with livelihood, social organisation, cultural identity, collective memory and spiritual traditions. Traditional tribal livelihoods are generally diverse rather than dependent on a single economic activity. Agriculture may be combined with forest collection, livestock, fishing, hunting, gathering and local exchange. Displacement disrupts this integrated livelihood system [19]. A family that loses agricultural land may simultaneously lose access to forests, grazing grounds, rivers and community resources. Compensation in cash cannot always recreate these interconnected sources of livelihood. As a result, displaced households may become increasingly dependent upon wage labour. Some enter construction, mining, factories, brick kilns, domestic work or agricultural labour. This represents a transition from relatively resource-based livelihoods to forms of precarious labour. Therefore, the impact of displacement should be evaluated not only in terms of the number of households relocated but also in terms of livelihoods lost and economic relationships transformed [20].

(III). Transformation, Migration and Tribal Identity:

It is important to distinguish between displacement and migration. Displacement generally refers to the involuntary relocation of people from their established homes or territories because of external forces such as development projects, mining, conflict or environmental transformation. Migration, on the other hand, may be voluntary, semi-voluntary or forced. Tribal people may migrate seasonally or permanently in search of employment, agricultural opportunities, construction work, industrial labour, education, better access to health and other services. However, displacement often produces subsequent migration [21]. A family displaced from its ancestral land may receive compensation but still lose its traditional livelihood. It may then migrate to a nearby town or distant city in search of employment. The relationship between displacement and memory is particularly important for understanding tribal experiences. Communities preserve memories through oral histories, songs, myths, folklore, festivals, rituals, storytelling, commemorations, and collective performances. When people migrate, memories of the ancestral village may become central to their understanding of the past. The displaced landscape can become a memory cape- a remembered social and cultural space that continues to influence community identity even after physical relocation. Forest conservation and protected-area policies

have also affected tribal communities. National parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and other protected areas have sometimes restricted traditional access to forests or led to relocation. Forests also contain culturally significant spaces, including sacred groves and sites associated with community traditions. Colonial and postcolonial forest policies often restricted customary access to forests. Later conservation policies, including the creation of protected areas, sometimes generated additional restrictions and relocations [22]. The expansion of mining industries in tribal regions of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and other mineral-rich areas further intensified land alienation and ecological destruction. Mining activities have contributed to deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of traditional forest-based livelihoods. Similarly, forest conservation policies and the creation of protected areas have sometimes restricted tribal access to forests, affecting their customary rights and ecological practices [23]. The history of tribal displacement in India after Independence reveals a continuing conflict between development priorities and indigenous rights. Mining has become an especially important source of displacement in tribal regions. States such as Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra contain significant mineral deposits. Coal, iron ore, bauxite and other minerals have attracted large-scale mining and industrial projects. Mining can result in land acquisition, deforestation, pollution, alteration of water systems and loss of access to common resources. The consequences may therefore extend beyond the boundaries of the acquired land. Even communities that are not physically relocated may experience environmental displacement when pollution or ecological degradation makes traditional livelihoods increasingly difficult. This demonstrates that displacement should be understood both as a physical process and as a broader transformation of the ecological conditions necessary for community survival. Displacement and migration are closely interconnected. While some migration is voluntary and undertaken in search of education or employment, distress migration can arise from landlessness, environmental degradation and inadequate livelihood opportunities. Tribal migrants frequently move towards towns, cities, industrial centres and agricultural labour markets. Seasonal migration is particularly important because households may migrate temporarily and return to their villages after employment opportunities decline. Urban migration, however, does not automatically produce economic advancement. Migrants may encounter insecure employment, inadequate housing, low wages, social discrimination and weak access to welfare services. Migration can also transform social relations. Separation from the village and extended family may weaken traditional institutions, but migrants frequently reconstruct community identity through festivals, cultural organisations, oral traditions, music and collective associations [24]. The relationship between territory and identity is central to understanding tribal displacement. Tribal identity is often expressed through relationships with ancestral land, forests, rivers, sacred sites, language, kinship and community traditions. When a community is relocated, it may lose access to culturally significant landscapes. A resettlement site may provide housing but cannot necessarily reproduce the cultural geography of the original settlement. Displacement can therefore produce cultural dislocation. It affects not only present livelihoods but also the transmission of memories and traditions between generations. This is particularly important for historical research because tribal oral traditions, songs, folklore and performances can preserve memories of lost territories and experiences of displacement [25].

(IV). Tribal Resistance and Movements:

Tribal communities have consistently resisted land alienation and displacement. Resistance has taken multiple forms, including protests, political mobilisation, legal struggles, environmental campaigns and demands for autonomy. Tribal displacement has also generated significant forms of resistance. In areas of present-day Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, North-Eastern tribal communities have participated in struggles concerning of mining, industrial projects, land acquisition, forest rights, and environmental degradation [26].

Some important movements and struggles include Narmada Bachao Andolan, Jharkhand movement, Bodo movement. Struggles against mining and industrial projects in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, forest-rights movements, and movements defending customary land and community resources [27]. Jharkhand Movement linked tribal identity with land, resources and political self-determination and eventually contributed to the creation of Jharkhand as a separate state in 2000. Large dams and irrigation projects have been among the major causes of displacement [28]. Projects such as the Narmada Valley project resulted in the displacement of numerous villages, including tribal settlements. The Narmada Bachao Andolan became one of India's most prominent movements against large-scale displacement. The Narmada Bachao Andolan challenged large-scale displacement and demanded adequate rehabilitation while questioning the social and environmental costs of major dam projects. Similarly, industrial projects, highways, railways and power plants have required large areas of land. The benefits of such projects are generally understood at the national or regional level, while their immediate social costs are often borne disproportionately by local communities. They actively negotiate, resist

and challenge policies affecting their land and resources [29]. Tribal resistance to mining projects in Odisha, including struggles over bauxite-rich hills and forest territories, has highlighted the relationship between natural resources and indigenous community rights. In Odisha, the Niyamgiri movement became an important example of resistance to mining and the defence of Dongria Kondh and other local tribal communities led struggles against mining, industrial projects and land acquisition have emerged in several parts of Odisha [30]. Mining is another major source of displacement. Coal, iron ore, bauxite and other minerals are concentrated in several tribal regions. Mining frequently involves the acquisition of agricultural and forest land, the destruction or alteration of local ecosystems, the loss of access to common resources, the relocation of villages, and the disruption of traditional occupations [31]. These movements demonstrate that tribal communities are not passive victims of development. They are political actors who articulate claims over land, environment, culture and democratic participation [32].

The Indian Constitution provides several safeguards for tribal communities, including Article 46, the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) strengthened the role of Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas [33]. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 sought to recognise historical forest rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers [34]. Similarly, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 strengthened provisions relating to compensation and rehabilitation [35]. Nevertheless, the central challenge remains implementation. Legal protection is meaningful only when affected communities can exercise their rights effectively and participate in decisions concerning their land and resources.

CONCLUSION

The Displacement and migration of tribal communities after Independence reveal a major contradiction in India's development experience. Development projects have contributed to national economic growth, but their social and environmental costs have often been disproportionately experienced by tribal populations [36].

The loss of land produces more than economic deprivation. It can lead to the loss of livelihood, ecological insecurity, migration, cultural dislocation, and the disruption of collective memory. At the same time, tribal resistance movements demonstrate resilience, political agency and the continuing assertion of rights. The historical trajectory can therefore be represented as: Development → Land Acquisition → Displacement → Loss of Livelihood → Migration → Cultural Dislocation → Resistance → Rights Assertion. A more just development model must move beyond compensation towards participatory rehabilitation, livelihood restoration, recognition of community rights and meaningful involvement of Gram Sabhas. Tribal land should not be viewed merely as a commodity or resource for extraction. It is simultaneously an economic foundation, cultural landscape, ecological system and repository of collective memory. Thus, the history of tribal India after Independence should be understood not merely as a history of displacement but as a continuing struggle over land, livelihood, identity, dignity, environment and the right to participate in determining the future of one's own community [37]. Rehabilitation should address the broader social and economic consequences of displacement. A significant problem in displacement policy is the assumption that monetary compensation can adequately replace lost land and livelihood. The objective should not merely be to relocate people but to ensure that their standard of living, social networks, and cultural life are not systematically destroyed by displacement. A question arises: who bears the cost of development, and who receives its benefits? A development model that disproportionately transfers environmental and social costs to tribal communities raises serious questions of social justice, distributive justice and democratic participation. This is why tribal displacement must be examined not only as an economic issue but also as a question of rights, citizenship, identity and justice [38]. Tribal movements should not be understood merely as anti-development movements. In many cases, communities have demanded a different form of development, one that respects land rights, Forest Rights, Environmental sustainability, cultural autonomy, democratic participation, and Equitable distribution of resources. From the perspective of Subaltern Studies, displacement must be examined through the question of whose voice becomes visible in official accounts of development [39]. This difference reveals the importance of recovering subaltern voices, oral histories, testimonies and community-generated archives. For a historical study, government records should be read alongside oral testimonies, local newspapers, tribal literature, songs and performances, movement documents, NGO reports, court cases, and rehabilitation records [40].

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