



## CHANGING FOREST POLICIES AND THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT ON TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF ODISHA

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### Abstract

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*This study explores the dynamic relationship between changing forest policies and their socio-cultural impact on tribal communities in Odisha, a state known for its rich forest cover and significant tribal population. Traditionally, forest-dwelling tribes such as the Kondh, Santal, and Juang have maintained a symbiotic relationship with forests, relying on them not only for economic sustenance but also for cultural and spiritual practices. The primary objective of the study is to assess how these evolving policies have affected tribal livelihoods and socio-cultural structures. Using a qualitative and secondary data-based methodology, the research draws from government reports, census data, NGO publications, and academic studies spanning the last two decades. The findings reveal a decline in forest-dependent livelihoods due to restricted access, bureaucratic hurdles in rights recognition, and commercialization of forest resources. This economic marginalization is accompanied by the erosion of indigenous cultural practices, rituals, and community cohesion tied to forest spaces. Women and elders, in particular, face heightened exclusion from decision-making processes and resource access. The study recommends a policy shift towards participatory forest governance, with stronger implementation of community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act. It advocates for culturally sensitive conservation models that integrate traditional ecological knowledge. Strengthening tribal institutions, ensuring gender inclusion, and enabling capacity-building initiatives are essential for restoring both the economic autonomy and cultural dignity of Odisha's tribal communities.*

**Keywords:** Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006, Tribal livelihoods, Community forest governance, Socio-economic marginalization, Policy implementation gap

## 1. Introduction

Forests have always been a crucial part of human civilization, especially for the indigenous and tribal communities who reside in or around forested areas. The relationship between forests and tribal communities is deep-rooted, characterized by a symbiotic coexistence. Tribals consider forests not just a source of livelihood but also a part of their cultural and spiritual identity. This socio-cultural bond is complex and multifaceted; encompassing economic, spiritual, ecological, and social dimensions (K Kumar et al., 2005). As globalization, deforestation, and modern development encroach upon these traditional spaces, it becomes essential to understand and analyze the socio-cultural dynamics of forest-tribal relationships.

Forests have long played a pivotal role in shaping the lives, cultures, and identities of Indigenous and tribal communities across India. In Odisha—a state rich in forest resources and home to one of the largest tribal populations in the country—forests are more than just ecological spaces; they are integral to the spiritual, social, and economic fabric of tribal life. For generations, tribal communities such as the Kondh, Juang, Bonda, and Saora have developed symbiotic relationships with forest ecosystems, relying on them for food, medicine, shelter, and cultural practices (Satyaban Garada 2012). The evolving landscape of forest governance and policy in India, particularly since colonial times and into the post-independence era, has significantly altered the dynamics of these traditional relationships.

The introduction of formal forest management systems, beginning with the Indian Forest Act of 1878, marked the onset of state control over forests, effectively curtailing customary rights and access of tribal communities (K Kumar et al., 2005). In Odisha, as in many other regions, this shift disrupted age-old practices of forest usage, conservation, and social organization. Successive forest policies, while occasionally recognizing the role of tribal communities, have largely focused on conservation through centralized control, marginalizing Indigenous knowledge systems and limiting local autonomy. The result has been a gradual alienation of tribal communities from their ancestral lands and resources, leading to socio-economic vulnerabilities, cultural disintegration, and loss of traditional ecological knowledge (Vijay Oraon 2012).

In recent decades, the policy frameworks have begun to incorporate more inclusive and participatory approaches. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, for instance, aimed to correct historical injustices by recognizing the individual and community rights of forest dwellers

(Acharya - 2015). While the Act holds promise, its implementation in Odisha has been fraught with bureaucratic hurdles, conflicting interests, and uneven outcomes. Moreover, emerging environmental concerns, commercialization of forest resources, and the pressure of development projects continue to pose threats to tribal autonomy and cultural sustainability. This study seeks to examine how shifts in forest policies over time have impacted the socio-cultural lives of tribal communities in Odisha. It aims to explore the nuanced ways in which these communities have adapted to, resisted, or negotiated with policy changes, and what implications these changes have had on their identity, traditions, livelihoods, and relationship with the forest. By contextualizing policy transformations within the lived experiences of tribal populations, the research highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive, ecologically informed, and socially just forest governance that recognizes and reinforces the rights and roles of Indigenous communities as stewards of biodiversity and culture. This paper explores the intricate relationship between tribal communities and forests through a socio-cultural lens, using secondary data sources. It aims to understand the historical context, contemporary challenges, and the policy implications of preserving these relationships in a rapidly modernizing world.

## **2. Review of Literature**

The reviewed literature collectively underscores the intricate and multifaceted relationship between Indigenous Peoples (IP) and forest ecosystems, weaving together themes of ecological interdependence, cultural identity, socio-political marginalization, and sustainable development. Numerous studies have explored the forest-tribal relationship from various disciplinary perspectives. Gadgil and Guha (1992) emphasized the ecological wisdom of tribal communities in their seminal work, *This Fissured Land*. They argued that tribal societies possess intricate knowledge of forest ecology, which plays a crucial role in sustainable forest management.

Xaxa (2005) delved into the socio-political marginalization of tribes and their struggle for rights over forest resources. He highlighted the historical alienation of tribals through colonial and post-colonial forest policies. Similarly, Baviskar (1997) explored how forest policies have impacted tribal livelihoods, often ignoring their traditional knowledge systems.

### **2.1. Indigenous Peoples and Forest Ecosystems: Symbiosis and Stewardship**

Several studies recognize the deep-rooted connection between Indigenous communities and forests, viewing them as interdependent entities co-evolving over millennia. Saha et al.

(2022) emphasize the role of forests in the daily lives and livelihoods of tribal communities in rural India, particularly the Santali people of the Bankura district. Similarly, Rodriguez et al. (2024) argue that Indigenous communities are not just forest dwellers but vital actors in ecosystem conservation. Their “bio-socio-cultural” perspective reveals how Indigenous identity and ecological sustainability are inseparably intertwined. This intrinsic relationship positions Indigenous communities as stewards of biodiversity, a theme echoed across the literature.

## **2.2. Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES)**

The role of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and cultural practices in conserving forest resources is a dominant theme. Honey Bhatt et al. (2024) analyze the perceived cultural ecosystem services in Van Panchayats of the western Himalayas. Their findings indicate that community forests offer not only material resources but also intangible benefits such as spiritual, aesthetic, and cultural value, which vary by forest type and community. The study identifies out-migration and ecological degradation as significant threats, diminishing the CES and weakening socio-ecological harmony.

## **2.3. Livelihood Transitions and Cultural Erosion**

Sasidhara (2017) highlights the impact of forest alienation on tribal livelihoods, using the example of the ‘Kattunaika’ community. The study compares those maintaining traditional forest-based practices with those adopting modern livelihoods, revealing that the shift leads to economic disparities, social fragmentation, and cultural erosion. This transition affects intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge and weakens communal bonds, illustrating the socio-cultural cost of development when not aligned with Indigenous identity and values.

## **2.4. Socio-Ecological Sustainability and Empowerment**

Moyra and Hazra (2025) adopt the SELF (Society, Environment, Livelihood, Food) framework to explore how forest ecosystem services enhance tribal livability. Their research supports the idea that preserving Indigenous lifestyles contributes to overall ecological sustainability. This mutual reinforcement between environmental health and tribal well-being forms a compelling argument for integrating Indigenous perspectives in policy and conservation strategies.

## **2.5. Policy Gaps and Development Challenges**

Rodriguez et al. (2024) identify a critical void in international legal instruments explicitly safeguarding forests and Indigenous rights, despite growing empirical evidence supporting Indigenous stewardship. Nayak (2025) further critiques systemic marginalization and infrastructural neglect, using Koraput district as a case study. While showcasing transformative potential through media outreach and participatory governance, the study stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity and gender equity in development initiatives. Across diverse geographic and disciplinary contexts, the reviewed literature converges on key themes: the foundational role of Indigenous peoples in forest conservation, the cultural and spiritual value of forests, and the socio-economic vulnerabilities exacerbated by poorly aligned development policies. Together, these studies advocate for a more inclusive, pluralistic approach to forest governance—one that centers Indigenous knowledge, respects cultural identity, and fosters sustainable coexistence between people and nature.

Secondary data from governmental reports such as the National Forest Policy (1988), the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (2006), and various reports from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs provide empirical insights into the evolving relationship. The Forest Survey of India (2021) also offers valuable statistical data on forest cover and the presence of tribal populations, helping in correlating demographic patterns with forest usage and dependency.

## **3. Objectives:**

- To examine the evolution of forest policies in Odisha and analyze how these policy shifts have affected the traditional forest-based livelihoods, cultural practices, and socio-economic structures of tribal communities in Odisha.
- To investigate the adaptive responses of tribal communities in Odisha to changing forest governance, focusing on the preservation or transformation of their cultural identity, traditional knowledge systems, and community cohesion in Odisha.

## **4. Data sources and Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology using secondary data analysis. Data has been collected from academic journals, government reports, NGO publications, and books. The secondary analysis focuses on extracting qualitative insights into the cultural, economic, and political dimensions of forest-tribal relations. The present study analyse the

Content analysis of existing literature, thematic categorization of issues affecting forest-tribal relations and Comparative analysis of policies and their impacts.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

### **5.1 Historical Context of Forest-Tribal Relations:**

Historically, tribal communities have been the original custodians of forests. Their lifestyles, economic practices, and religious beliefs are intricately connected to forest ecosystems. The colonial period marked a turning point, as British forest policies criminalized traditional forest usage, thereby alienating tribal communities. Post-independence forest policies continued this legacy, albeit with some reformative approaches. The historical relationship between forest and tribal communities in Odisha has been symbiotic, shaped by indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual beliefs, and traditional forest-based livelihoods. However, this equilibrium has been repeatedly disrupted by successive forest policies, especially during and after colonial rule. Secondary data from anthropological studies, government reports, and policy documents reveal that colonial forest laws, such as the Indian Forest Act of 1865 and 1927, marked a turning point in forest-tribal relations. These laws commodified forests and undermined traditional rights, leading to widespread alienation of tribal people from their ancestral lands.

Post-independence forest policies continued to prioritize conservation and commercial exploitation over tribal welfare. The designation of large forest areas as reserve forests, sanctuaries, and national parks under the Forest Conservation Act (1980) further restricted tribal access. This shift from a livelihood-based to a protectionist model marginalized tribal communities socially and culturally, disrupting their spiritual ties to the forest and weakening customary institutions. Recent policy developments such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) aim to reverse this trend by recognizing community and individual forest rights. Secondary literature indicates mixed outcomes; while some tribes have reclaimed forest rights, others face implementation challenges due to bureaucratic inertia and lack of awareness. The present Study also show that these policy shifts have impacted tribal socio-cultural fabric—traditional occupations have declined, festivals tied to forest cycles are diminishing, and migration for wage labor has increased. The erosion of forest-dependent cultural practices signals a deeper identity crisis among many tribal groups in Odisha. The historical data suggests that forest policies have significantly influenced tribal life in Odisha, often to their detriment. Contemporary efforts at restitution require stronger implementation, participatory

governance, and cultural sensitivity to rebuild the lost harmony between forests and tribal communities.

## **5.2 Socio-Cultural Dimensions:**

Forests serve as more than just a means of livelihood. Tribals have a cosmology centered on nature, where forest elements are personified and worshipped. Sacred groves, totems, and rituals reflect their deep spiritual connection to forests. Marriage rituals, festivals, and community gatherings often take place within forest landscapes. Forest policies in India, particularly post-independence, have undergone significant changes with wide-reaching effects on forest-dependent communities. In Odisha, where over 22% of the population belongs to Scheduled Tribes, shifting forest governance models—from colonial conservation frameworks to contemporary co-management policies like Joint Forest Management (JFM) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006—have deeply influenced tribal socio-cultural systems.

This exclusion disrupted traditional livelihoods, rituals, and customary rights tied to forest spaces. The FRA (2006) attempted to reverse this trend by recognizing individual and community forest rights, yet its implementation has been inconsistent across Odisha. Studies show that tribal communities in districts like Kandhamal and Mayurbhanj have only partially benefitted due to bureaucratic delays, unclear land titles, and inadequate community participation.

The forests are not just economic assets but sacred spaces integral to tribal identity, belief systems, and oral traditions. Changing forest policies have gradually eroded indigenous knowledge systems and communal resource management practices. For instance, restrictions on shifting cultivation and forest produce collection have led to declining use of traditional agricultural and medicinal knowledge, affecting intergenerational knowledge transmission. The present study highlights gendered impacts—tribal women, traditionally central to forest-based economies and spiritual practices, have seen a reduced role due to institutionalized forest governance structures dominated by male actors and external agencies. While recent policy shifts aim to empower tribal communities, socio-cultural disruptions persist due to policy-practice gaps. A nuanced, culturally sensitive approach to forest governance is essential to genuinely safeguard tribal identities and ensure sustainable development in Odisha's forest regions.

### 5.3 Economic Dependency and Livelihoods:

Forests provide tribals with food, fuel, fodder, and medicinal plants. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) form the backbone of tribal economies. However, deforestation and restrictive forest policies have endangered these livelihood sources. Despite legal safeguards, exploitation by middlemen and lack of market access hinder their economic autonomy.

**Table No. 1: Economic Dependency and Livelihoods**

District	% of Tribal Households Dependent on Forests	Main Livelihood Source	Impact of Forest Policy Changes
Mayurbhanj	72%	Sal leaf collection, honey	Reduced access due to commercial plantations
Koraput	65%	Tendu leaf, forest wood	Displacement from traditional forest areas
Kandhamal	68%	Medicinal herbs, NTFP	Shrinking MFP zones, poor FRA implementation
Sundargarh	60%	Bamboo, fuelwood	Restrictions on community forest rights
Malkangiri	55%	Fishing, forest-based farming	Shift to wage labor due to access limitations

Sources: Forest Survey of India (2021), Ministry of Tribal Affairs

From reports by the Forest Survey of India (2021), Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and academic studies indicates a significant decline in forest-based livelihoods due to evolving forest governance. While 60–72% of tribal households in Odisha’s forested districts depend on forest resources, recent policies—such as increased commercial forestry and weak implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006)—have limited their access to traditional livelihood sources.

The data shows that forest policy changes have indirectly forced communities to migrate or take up irregular wage labor, weakening their traditional economic practices. The erosion of rights over Minor Forest Produce (MFP) has especially impacted women, who form the bulk of NTFP collectors. Although the FRA was intended to safeguard tribal rights, inconsistent application across districts, as seen in Kandhamal and Sundargarh, has led to uneven socio-economic outcomes. In essence, forest policy changes have altered the economic fabric of tribal life, disrupting not only livelihoods but also cultural practices tied to forest use and conservation.



#### 5.4 Impact of Modernization and Development Projects:

Infrastructure development, mining, and logging have led to large-scale displacement of tribal populations. Such projects often overlook the socio-cultural costs, leading to erosion of identity, loss of traditional knowledge, and socio-economic instability. The displacement also results in increased poverty, health issues, and cultural disintegration. Modernization and development initiatives such as mining, dam construction, and industrialization in Odisha have significantly disrupted the socio-cultural fabric of tribal communities. Secondary data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Census reports, and various academic studies highlight how these projects, often implemented under changing forest policies, have led to mass displacement, loss of livelihood, and cultural erosion.

**Table No. 2: Impact of Development Projects on Tribal Communities in Odisha (2000–2020)**

Project Type	No. of Projects	Districts Affected	Tribals Displaced	Forest Area Diverted (ha)
Mining (Bauxite, Coal)	48	Koraput, Kalahandi, Sundargarh	52,000+	1,25,000+
Dams & Irrigation	12	Malkangiri, Rayagada	18,000+	32,000+
Industrial Corridors	6	Angul, Jharsuguda	9,000+	15,000+

(Source: MoEFCC, MoTA, and academic studies from TISS & NIRDPR)

These large-scale projects have led to the alienation of tribal land and the weakening of traditional forest governance systems. Displacement often results in relocation to non-forest areas where tribal populations struggle to integrate economically and socially. Loss of sacred groves, traditional practices, and oral histories—closely linked to forest landscapes—further accelerates cultural disintegration. The table No.2 underscores how development, under the guise of modernization, frequently bypasses the participatory rights of tribal communities, reinforcing marginalization and weakening socio-cultural resilience.

#### 5.5 Forest Rights Act (2006) and Policy Implications:

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) was a landmark in recognizing tribal rights over forest lands. However, its implementation has been patchy. Bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, and political resistance often delay or deny rightful claims. Nevertheless, the FRA has empowered several communities, leading to increased participation in forest governance. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 was a landmark legislation aimed at recognizing the historical rights of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes (FDSTs) and other traditional forest

dwellers (OTFDs) over forest land and resources. Secondary data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2022) and Odisha state records reveal both progress and persistent challenges in its implementation.

**Table No. 3: Forest Rights Act (2006) and Policy Implications distributions**

District	Individual Claims Filed	Community Claims Filed	Titles Distributed (%)	Land Recognized (in ha)	Area
Mayurbhanj	45,000	620	67%	32,500	
Koraput	35,500	510	59%	28,300	
Kandhamal	28,700	470	63%	25,100	
Sundargarh	41,200	680	71%	36,000	

Sources: Forest Survey of India (2021), Ministry of Tribal Affairs

While the data indicates substantial outreach, it also highlights disparities in title distribution and area recognition. A significant number of claims—especially community claims—remain pending or rejected due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, and weak institutional support. Policy implications are far-reaching. The partial implementation of FRA limits the ability of tribal communities to manage and protect their traditional lands, impacting both their cultural identity and socio-economic stability. Moreover, incomplete recognition of rights often leads to conflicts with forest officials and displacements due to mining or conservation projects. Thus, while FRA holds transformative potential, secondary data reveals that its uneven execution in Odisha dilutes its intended socio-cultural benefits for tribal populations.

### **5.6 Role of Women in Forest Management:**

Tribal women play a critical role in managing forest resources. They are primary collectors of NTFPs and possess deep knowledge of biodiversity. Empowering women in forest management not only supports gender equality but also enhances ecological sustainability.

Tribal women in Odisha have been instrumental in forest conservation and management, especially in response to evolving forest policies. Initiatives like 'Thengapalli' and 'Kutir' meetings exemplify their active participation.

**Table no. 4: Women's Involvement in Forest Management Initiatives in Odisha**

Initiative	Description	Impact	Source
Thengapalli	Women patrol forests in shifts, armed with sticks, to prevent illegal activities.	Rejuvenation of over 500 acres of forest land across 62 villages.	The Better India
Kutir Meetings	Monthly gatherings where women share traditional knowledge and discuss forest protection.	Enhanced community awareness on sustainable practices and forest rights.	Down To Earth
CFRR Acquisition	Women-led efforts to obtain Community Forest Resource Rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006.	Legal recognition of community rights over forest resources, empowering local governance.	IWMF

Sources: The Better India, Down To Earth and IWMF

These initiatives highlight the proactive role of tribal women in forest governance. The 'Thengapalli' system, for instance, has led to the rejuvenation of over 500 acres of forest land across 62 villages, demonstrating the effectiveness of women-led patrols in curbing illegal activities. Similarly, 'Kutir' meetings serve as platforms for intergenerational knowledge transfer and have bolstered community awareness regarding sustainable practices and legal rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. The acquisition of Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) further exemplifies women's leadership in securing legal recognition for their communities, thereby enhancing local governance and ensuring sustainable resource management. The evolving forest policies have catalyzed significant socio-cultural shifts within Odisha's tribal communities, with women emerging as pivotal agents of change in forest management and conservation.

## 6. Policy, Suggestions and Conclusion:

The forest-tribal relationship is a tapestry woven from threads of ecology, culture, economy, and spirituality. It is a living example of sustainable coexistence, which modern society can learn from. This relationship is under threat due to policy failures, development pressures, and socio-economic marginalization. Through effective policy implementation, recognition of rights, and incorporation of traditional knowledge, it is possible to safeguard this relationship for future generations. The need of the hour is not just to conserve forests but also to conserve the communities that have conserved them for centuries.

**Table no. 5: Implementation and Impact of Forest Policies in Odisha**

Policy/Act	Objective	Implementation Status (Odisha)	Impact on Tribals
Indian Forest Act, 1927	Control over forest resources	Highly implemented	Alienated tribal communities
Forest Conservation Act, 1980	Forest protection and afforestation	Strict enforcement	Restricted access to traditional livelihoods
FRA, 2006	Recognize forest rights of tribes	Partial and uneven implementation	Limited benefit to eligible communities
Joint Forest Management (JFM)	Collaborative forest management	Mixed outcomes	Some participation, but limited decision-making power

Sources: Forest Survey of India (2021), Ministry of Tribal Affairs

Over the years, various forest policies such as the Indian Forest Act (1927), the Forest Conservation Act (1980), and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) have shaped the interaction between tribal communities and forest resources. While the FRA was a landmark in recognizing the rights of tribal communities, secondary data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and independent research bodies like CPR (Centre for Policy Research) reveal that its implementation remains inconsistent in Odisha.

The present study related to forest policies in Odisha reveals a mixed landscape of legal reforms and ground-level challenges. Key policies such as the Forest Conservation Act (1980), National Forest Policy (1988), and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) have aimed to balance conservation with tribal welfare. However, data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020) show that out of the 4.3 million individual and community forest rights claims filed across India, Odisha accounts for over 17%—yet only about 60% have been fully recognized and implemented. This gap between policy and execution has led to significant socio-cultural disruptions, particularly in tribal belts like Rayagada, Kandhamal, and Sundargarh. A recent report by the Tribal Research Institute of Odisha (2021) highlights that communities with recognized land and forest rights reported better socio-economic indicators—higher household income (by 25%) and reduced seasonal migration—compared to those still awaiting rights. Despite such findings, inconsistencies in local governance, forest department resistance, and lack of awareness continue to hinder policy effectiveness. This study To address these issues, the government should ensure faster and more transparent implementation of the FRA, enhance tribal participation in forest governance, and provide

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capacity-building programs for sustainable livelihoods. Awareness campaigns and community legal aid can empower tribal populations to claim their rights more effectively.

The present study reveals that changing forest policies in Odisha have had a profound impact on the socio-cultural and economic fabric of tribal communities. Over the past few decades, policies aimed at forest conservation and commercial exploitation have gradually eroded traditional tribal access to forest resources. Data from the Forest Survey of India (2021) and reports by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs indicate that around 70% of tribal communities in districts such as Kandhamal, Koraput, and Mayurbhanj are forest-dependent, with over 50% of their income sourced from the collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) like tendu leaves, sal seeds, honey, and medicinal herbs. However, post-implementation of the Forest Conservation Act (1980) and subsequent joint forest management programs, the autonomy of tribal communities over forest areas significantly declined.

The enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), was a milestone, offering legal rights to forest dwellers. Yet, secondary data from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC, 2020) shows that only 40% of eligible tribal households in Odisha have received land titles under FRA. This partial implementation has led to uneven benefits and continues to marginalize vulnerable sections, especially women and landless forest gatherers. Cultural practices tied to the forest—such as festivals, spiritual rituals, and oral traditions—are being disrupted as access to sacred groves and ancestral lands is restricted under new conservation zones and protected areas.

A comparative socio-economic data analysis over two decades shows increased migration among tribal youth due to the lack of viable forest-based livelihoods, causing fragmentation of community structures. Traditional knowledge systems are being lost as younger generations move away from forest-based occupations. While forest policies have aimed to protect biodiversity, they have often overlooked the intricate relationship between tribal identity, culture, and ecology. For future policy frameworks to be effective and equitable, a more inclusive, participatory approach is essential—one that empowers tribal communities and recognizes their role as custodians of forest ecosystems, rather than merely as beneficiaries of state-managed resources.

A socio-cultural analysis of forest-tribal relations reveals that the survival of one is intricately linked with the other. Therefore, a holistic approach that respects tribal autonomy and ecological balance is essential for sustainable development and social justice.

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