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Developmental Gaps and Community Realities: A Ground-Level Inquiry into Transformative Change among Tribal Communities in Koraput, Odisha

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Abstract:

India's development journey remains incomplete without addressing the persistent disparities experienced by its tribal communities. Despite constitutional guarantees and targeted welfare schemes, Scheduled Tribes continue to face marginalization in many regions. Odisha, where 22.85% of the population belongs to tribal groups, illustrates this developmental paradox. The Koraput district, with a tribal population of 49.62%, stands out as a key site for investigating grassroots-level challenges.

This study presents an in-depth field-based analysis of development gaps affecting the tribal populations in four blocks—Koraput, Jeypore, Semiliguda, and Borigumma. It focuses on eight core sectors: health, education, road and transport, rural housing, irrigation, digital communication, infrastructure, and livelihoods. Using a mixed-methods approach, primary data were gathered from 320 tribal respondents through surveys, interviews, and observations, supported by secondary government sources. Findings reveal serious disparities across service sectors. Health facilities are limited and unevenly distributed. Educational access remains poor, with high dropout rates among girls. Irrigation and rural housing are inadequate. Internet and road connectivity are inconsistent, affecting mobility and access to markets. Agricultural dependency remains high, with limited income alternatives. Government schemes exist, but low awareness and weak institutional coordination hinder their impact.

The study hypothesizes that development gaps stem not only from administrative failures but also from systemic neglect of cultural, geographical, and participatory dimensions. It concludes by recommending an integrated development model centered on education, skill development, rural infrastructure, and governance reforms. The research offers a grassroots-informed blueprint for sustainable tribal development in India's Scheduled Areas.

Keywords: Tribal Marginalization, Livelihood Resilience, Grassroots Realities, Developmental Disparities, Community-Centric Planning, Transformative Governance.

Introduction:

India's development narrative is incomplete without addressing the socio-economic disparities endured by its tribal communities. Although the Constitution of India guarantees equality and special provisions for Scheduled Tribes (STs), these communities—comprising 8.6% of the national population—continue to remain at the margins of economic progress. National development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), stress inclusive growth, yet tribal-dominated areas consistently reflect poor performance in human development indicators such as health, education, housing, and livelihoods. Government initiatives like the Tribal Sub-Plan, Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), and Article 275(1) grants have made incremental contributions but have often failed to close the deep infrastructural and service delivery gaps on the ground.

Odisha, with a Scheduled Tribe population of over 22.85%, presents a concentrated example of this paradox. While the state has seen moderate economic growth, its southern and western districts—especially the KBK region (Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput)—remain underdeveloped. Koraput district, one of Odisha's most tribal-dense and geographically challenging regions, is home to several tribal groups including the Paraja, Gadaba, Bhumia, and Kondh. Despite ecological richness and cultural heritage, the region suffers from poor connectivity, low literacy (particularly among women), inadequate access to healthcare, and seasonal distress migration. According to the district profile, nearly 83% of the population lives in rural areas, with around 50% being Scheduled Tribes and 13% Scheduled Castes—highlighting the region's social vulnerability.

Historically part of the undivided Jeypore estate and categorized as a "Scheduled Area" under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, Koraput has a unique political and historical context. Post-independence restructuring of land and administrative systems, along with the introduction of Ryotwari systems and land reforms, did not fully translate into equitable access to resources. The district continues to face a dual burden: ecological fragility and administrative neglect. While state-led infrastructure development—through schemes like MGNREGA, PMGSY, PMAY, and NRHM—has led to improved road connectivity and electrification, gaps persist in quality service delivery, equitable access, and institutional responsiveness.

In this context, the present study investigates the **developmental gaps and community realities** across four key blocks of Koraput district—Koraput, Jeypore, Semiliguda, and Borigumma—covering diverse agro-climatic and socio-cultural zones. It interrogates whether state interventions have achieved transformative impact in sectors such as education, health, irrigation, transport, housing, digital access, and livelihoods. By combining qualitative insights with quantitative trends, the study aims to build a granular, community-based understanding of the conditions shaping tribal lives. It also explores how participatory governance, convergence among

schemes, and capacity building can serve as pathways to tribal empowerment.

This inquiry is not only a district-specific diagnostic but also a contribution to the national discourse on **inclusive development and tribal justice**. Through a grounded and data-driven approach, the study aspires to offer actionable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars working toward bridging the persistent socio-infrastructural divide in India's Scheduled Areas.

Objectives of the Study:

This study is designed to uncover the real-world dimensions of development in Koraput district by assessing both tangible infrastructural gaps and intangible socio-economic disparities among tribal communities. The specific objectives include:

1. To assess the availability, quality, and accessibility of core public services and infrastructure in tribal-dominated blocks—particularly in **healthcare, education, road connectivity, housing, irrigation, digital access, and livelihoods**.
2. To analyze socio-economic conditions, landholding patterns, and occupational structures of tribal households.
3. To evaluate the **awareness, participation, and effectiveness of government development schemes** at the village level.
4. To identify block-specific disparities using field data from **Koraput, Semiliguda, Jeypore, and Borigumma**, and correlate them with environmental, demographic, and governance variables.
5. To recommend a **participatory, education-led, and convergence-driven development model** that is both region-specific and scalable.

Hypotheses of the Study:

Grounded in the district's complex socio-ecological context and supported by field interactions, the study tests the following hypotheses:

1. **H1:** The effectiveness of public service delivery (health, education, roads, irrigation) in tribal blocks is significantly influenced by administrative convergence and community participation.
2. **H2:** There exists a strong correlation between educational attainment and diversification of tribal livelihoods.
3. **H3:** Underutilization of government schemes is significantly related to lack of awareness, poor access, and institutional fragmentation.

Methodology:

To capture the multilayered developmental realities of tribal communities in Koraput district, this study adopted a **mixed-methods research design** that integrates both quantitative and

qualitative approaches. This combination enabled a comprehensive understanding of infrastructural gaps, socio-economic conditions, and governance challenges across selected tribal regions.

The study was conducted across four strategically chosen blocks—**Koraput, Semiliguda, Jeypore, and Borigumma**—which were selected based on their high tribal population, agro-climatic diversity, and representative socio-cultural profiles. A sample of **320 tribal households** was selected using **stratified random sampling** to ensure balanced representation across variables such as caste, gender, age, occupational category, and income level. This sampling method ensured the inclusion of diverse tribal voices and realities from interior, semi-urban, and ecologically varied locations within the district.

Primary data collection involved a combination of structured questionnaires aimed at capturing quantitative development indicators, **in-depth interviews** with key stakeholders including community elders, SHG members, and Panchayat leaders, as well as **direct observation** of public institutions such as primary schools, public health centres (PHCs), irrigation projects, and public distribution system (PDS) outlets. These tools provided both numerical data and nuanced insights into how communities perceive and access essential services.

In addition, **secondary data** were sourced from credible institutional records such as the District Statistical Handbook, Census reports, BPL Survey Reports, Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) records, and the Odisha Economic Survey. These data sources helped contextualize field findings and strengthen the validity of comparative analyses.

The analytical framework included both **quantitative techniques**—such as correlation analysis, regression, and ANOVA using SPSS and Excel—and **qualitative thematic analysis** to interpret narratives around scheme effectiveness, livelihood strategies, and gender-based development gaps. Block-level comparisons were made using indicators like literacy rates (e.g., Koraput 44.38%, Semiliguda 24.33%), BPL prevalence (e.g., Koraput 76%, Borigumma 87%), and agricultural yield (e.g., paddy yield in Koraput: 23.63 Q/Ha; Jeypore: 34.79 Q/Ha). These indicators served as proxies to map developmental asymmetries and understand the extent of infrastructural and institutional deficits across the study area.

Excellent. Based on your data from the **four selected blocks (Koraput, Semiliguda, Jeypore, and Borigumma)** and the analytical framework provided in your methodology, here is a professionally written **Results and Discussion** section in refined paragraph style, incorporating quantitative insights, field realities, and development theory:

Results and Discussion:

The findings from the field reveal a pattern of **uneven development across the tribal blocks of Koraput district**, with significant disparities in access to basic services, livelihood opportunities, and institutional support. Despite visible infrastructure investments under various central and state

schemes, the translation into tangible improvements in health, education, and economic well-being remains partial and inconsistent.

Health Infrastructure and Services:

Health remains a critical concern, particularly in remote blocks like **Semiliguda** and **Borigumma**, where Primary Health Centres (PHCs) are under-equipped and understaffed. Field observations noted irregular availability of doctors and essential medicines. In many cases, tribal populations still rely on traditional healers due to cultural preferences and geographic inaccessibility. This is exacerbated by **low health awareness and limited mobility**, especially among women, leading to poor maternal and child health outcomes. In Koraput block, although health infrastructure exists, its functionality remains questionable due to inadequate monitoring and poor service delivery.

Education and Literacy Gaps:

Education indicators show marked inter-block variations. **Koraput block** has the highest literacy rate among the four (44.38%), while **Semiliguda lags behind at just 24.33%**. Tribal girls' education continues to be neglected due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and lack of safe school environments. Though government-run **Sevashram** and **Ashram schools** exist, many face infrastructure issues, insufficient teachers, and irregular attendance. In Borigumma and Jeypore, school dropout rates remain high, especially after upper primary level. This situation reflects not only economic hardship but also a **mismatch between curriculum and tribal realities**.

Livelihood and Agricultural Challenges:

Agriculture continues to be the **primary source of livelihood**, with over **42% of main workers identified as cultivators**, followed by **22% as agricultural laborers**. However, the landholding pattern remains skewed—**76% of ST operational holders are marginal or small farmers**, cultivating less than two hectares of land. Limited irrigation facilities, declining soil fertility (especially in Jeypore and Semiliguda), and erratic rainfall patterns have adversely affected productivity. For example, paddy yield varies from **23.63 Q/Ha in Koraput** to **34.79 Q/Ha in Jeypore**, with low mechanization and dependency on traditional practices. **Non-farm livelihoods** are negligible, and forest-based incomes have declined due to regulatory restrictions and reduced forest cover.

Infrastructure and Basic Services:

While all four blocks have seen road development under **PMGSY**, interior villages still suffer from poor connectivity, especially during the monsoon. **Digital communication** is another emerging gap. Mobile connectivity is improving but remains unreliable in high-altitude areas like Semiliguda. Access to clean drinking water varies; several villages depend solely on tube wells, many of which are non-functional. In Borigumma, only 32 out of 148 villages had working sanitary wells. Similarly, piped water projects are either non-existent or limited in coverage.

Governance, Schemes, and Participation:

Despite the presence of major schemes like **MGNREGA, PMAY, NRLM, and BSKY**, the utilization levels remain low due to poor awareness, cumbersome procedures, and lack of frontline staff. Many beneficiaries are unaware of their entitlements or lack the documents to claim them. Participation in **Gram Sabhas and planning processes** is often symbolic, with decisions largely taken by external actors. However, areas with active Self Help Groups (SHGs) and NGO presence—especially in parts of Jeypore—showed **better awareness, female engagement, and scheme uptake**.

Composite Development Insights:

The comparison across blocks highlights the need for **block-specific strategies**. For instance, **Koraput block**, despite lower irrigation coverage, showed relatively better literacy and health indicators. In contrast, **Semiliguda** requires urgent attention on education and health fronts, while **Borigumma**, with 87% BPL families, demands livelihood diversification. These findings validate the hypothesis that **developmental outcomes are influenced not just by infrastructure availability but by convergence, community agency, and governance quality**.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

This study reveals that **development among tribal communities in Koraput remains fragmented and uneven**, shaped by the intersections of geographical isolation, cultural marginality, and administrative inefficiency. While government interventions have led to the expansion of physical infrastructure—such as roads, schools, and public health facilities—their quality, accessibility, and utilization vary considerably across blocks. Tribal communities, particularly in **Semiliguda and Borigumma**, face persistent challenges in education, healthcare, irrigation, and income generation. The situation is worsened by **low scheme awareness, limited community participation, and weak institutional convergence**.

The research confirms that **developmental gaps are not solely infrastructural** but are deeply embedded in **socio-cultural, governance, and policy disconnects**. Despite the presence of welfare schemes, many tribal households remain unaware of their rights or are unable to access benefits due to procedural complexity, lack of identification documents, or passive bureaucratic systems. The study reaffirms that **education stands as the most critical pathway to long-term empowerment**, especially for tribal girls, whose literacy and retention rates remain alarmingly low.

Livelihood resilience is another major concern. The overwhelming dependence on marginal farming and wage labor, along with limited non-farm opportunities and market access, restricts economic mobility. Skill development initiatives have either not reached the target population or lack contextual relevance to tribal settings. The analysis also underscores that **blocks with stronger community institutions and active SHGs demonstrated better outcomes** in terms of scheme

utilization and women's empowerment.

In light of these insights, the study proposes a **multi-pronged, integrated development model** with the following key recommendations:

1. **Education First:** Strengthen tribal girl education through residential schools, female teachers, and culturally inclusive curriculum. Introduce digital learning and bridge programs for dropouts.
2. **Integrated Health Systems:** Deploy mobile health units in remote villages; upgrade sub-centres into functional PHCs with trained staff and essential medicines. Focus on maternal and child health.
3. **Livelihood Diversification:** Promote agro-based industries, forest product value chains, and eco-tourism. Integrate tribal youth in skill development programs with forward linkages.
4. **Irrigation and Land Reform:** Revive traditional water systems, expand micro-irrigation, and address landholding disparities through targeted land reforms and tenancy regulation.
5. **Digital & Physical Connectivity:** Expand rural digital infrastructure and telecom networks in high-altitude areas. Improve road maintenance for last-mile connectivity.
6. **Community-Led Governance:** Strengthen Gram Sabhas, ensure real-time social audits, and empower SHGs and local institutions in planning and monitoring schemes.
7. **Scheme Convergence & Tribal Cadres:** Create block-level tribal convergence teams for education, health, livelihoods, and infrastructure, staffed by trained tribal youth.

In conclusion, this study offers not just a diagnosis of regional developmental asymmetries but a **blueprint for participatory, education-driven, and community-rooted tribal development**. When designed with local voices at the centre and executed with coordinated accountability, development in Scheduled Areas like Koraput can shift from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation.

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