

Roots of Resilience: Analyzing Tribal Economies and Livelihoods in Contemporary North India

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the evolving dynamics of tribal economies and livelihoods in North India, with a particular focus on communities in Uttar Pradesh. Traditionally dependent on shifting cultivation, forest produce collection, and pastoralism, these communities are undergoing profound changes due to displacement, ecological degradation, and inadequate implementation of protective legislations like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. Drawing from field data, NGO reports, and recent surveys, the study highlights the alarming shift toward wage labor, stone quarrying, and seasonal migration, often at the cost of cultural identity, ecological knowledge, and food security. The paper documents how displacement has led to significant losses in farmland, forest access, and housing among tribal families—forcing over 70% into precarious labor markets. Despite constitutional protections and policy frameworks, FRA implementation in Uttar Pradesh remains dismal, with a rejection rate of 48% and only 22% of claims approved. By integrating anthropological insights with ground-level data, the paper underscores the urgent need for inclusive, rights-based development that acknowledges tribal resilience while addressing structural injustices.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, government data, and case studies from Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, Chandauli, and Pilibhit districts, the paper examines the disjuncture between policy promises and their on-ground implementation. It reveals a pattern of systemic exclusion: land alienation, minimal access to institutional credit, declining access to forest produce, and delayed recognition of tribal status, particularly in the case of the Tharus and Kols. At the same time, the study highlights remarkable cases of grassroots resistance and cultural resilience, where tribal Gram Sabhas are reclaiming governance spaces, asserting land rights, and innovating sustainable livelihoods—ranging from agro-ecological practices to eco-tourism. It calls for participatory governance models, ST status extension to de-notified tribes, community-led forest management, and better integration of indigenous knowledge in economic planning. This paper contributes to the anthropology of development by offering a bottom-up, field-grounded account of how tribal communities in North India continue to adapt, resist, and negotiate their place within a rapidly transforming economy.

Keywords: Tribal Livelihoods, Displacement, Forest Rights, Resilience.

Introduction:

India is home to one of the most diverse tribal populations in the world, with over 705 officially recognized Scheduled Tribes (STs) accounting for approximately 8.6% of the country's population (Census of India, 2011). These communities are not only culturally rich and linguistically varied, but they have historically lived in close association with forests, rivers, and hills, drawing their sustenance from nature in deeply sustainable ways. While considerable attention has been devoted to the tribal populations of central and northeastern India, the tribal communities of North India, especially in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of Uttarakhand, have often remained underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse and policy-making. This paper focuses particularly on tribal livelihoods in North India, with an emphasis on Sonbhadra district in

southeastern Uttar Pradesh — a region rich in natural resources yet deeply marred by ecological exploitation and socio-economic marginalization. The tribal economy, historically grounded in subsistence agriculture, forest gathering, shifting cultivation, hunting, and barter, has undergone significant transformations in the wake of colonial forest policies, post-independence development agendas, and contemporary globalization-driven market integration. The advent of industrialization, mining projects, commercial agriculture, and conservation-led displacement has deeply altered traditional livelihood systems. Despite constitutional safeguards and legal instruments such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996, tribal communities continue to face insecure land tenure, restricted access to forests, and limited representation in governance structures. In areas like Sonbhadra, these structural vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by aggressive resource extraction, often undertaken in the name of national development or environmental protection.

This research seeks to understand how tribal communities in North India, particularly the Gonds, Cheros, Bhuiyas, and Kharwars, are navigating these multi-dimensional challenges by adapting and diversifying their economic strategies. Drawing on political ecology, subaltern studies, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the paper examines both the resilience embedded in tribal economic practices and the systemic constraints that limit their agency.

The significance of this study lies in its regional focus and anthropological depth. While much of the literature (e.g., Guha, 1989; Sundar, 1997; Shah, 2010) has documented tribal resistance and environmental conflict in central India, few works have explored how tribes in the margins of the central Indian belt — such as those in Sonbhadra — negotiate survival and change. Walter Fernandes (2007) has emphasized how tribal land alienation and displacement due to development projects have been the largest contributors to tribal impoverishment post-independence. Alpa Shah (2010) has shown how tribal communities are not passive recipients but often actively contest or creatively adapt to state-led initiatives, through a mix of cooperation, negotiation, and resistance.

The objectives of this study are fourfold:

1. To map the historical and contemporary livelihood patterns of tribal communities in North India, with a focus on Sonbhadra.
2. To analyze the role of state policies, such as the FRA, PESA, and welfare schemes like MGNREGA, in supporting or undermining tribal economies.
3. To investigate the intersection of culture, identity, and economy, especially how traditional beliefs, rituals, and ecological knowledge continue to shape livelihood decisions.
4. To document case studies that reflect both the struggles and innovations within tribal livelihood systems amid the pressures of displacement, environmental change, and market penetration. In doing so, the paper attempts to bridge policy debates, ethnographic observations, and grassroots narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of how marginalized communities resist, adapt, and persist in the face of socio-economic transformations. It foregrounds the agency of tribal actors, challenges the developmentalism often imposed from above, and calls for inclusive, participatory, and ecologically sensitive models of development that uphold the rights, dignity, and knowledge systems of India's tribal populations.

Area of Study:

The Tribal Communities in Sonbhadra District, Uttar Pradesh is located in the southeastern part of Uttar Pradesh, the Sonbhadra district is often referred to as the "energy capital of India" due to its rich mineral resources and concentration of power plants, coal mines, and industries. Bordered by Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, it forms a critical ecological and cultural corridor of the Vindhyan and Kaimur Hills, where tribal communities such as the Gonds, Kharwars,

Cheros, Bhuiyas, and Panikas have lived for centuries. According to the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Tribes account for about 20% of Sonbhadra's population, much higher than the state average. These tribes traditionally depend on subsistence agriculture, forest produce collection, seasonal migration, and wage labor. Villages located in forested areas, particularly in tehsils like Dudhi, Myorpur, Babhni, and Robertsganj, are hubs of tribal settlement and culture.

Despite its natural wealth, Sonbhadra has one of the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) scores in Uttar Pradesh. The paradox of resource richness and community impoverishment is starkly evident. While mining, dams, and energy production have brought wealth to the region, they have also led to massive displacement, ecological degradation, and social marginalization — especially of tribal people.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in anthropological fieldwork and supplemented by secondary data analysis. Given the complex socio-economic fabric of tribal communities, particularly the Gonds of Sonbhadra in Uttar Pradesh, the methodology focuses on understanding both lived experiences and institutional frameworks influencing tribal livelihoods. The fieldwork was conducted in selected villages of Sonbhadra district, including Myorpur, Dudhi, and Chopan blocks, which are home to a substantial Gond population. These areas were selected due to ongoing land rights conflicts, high dependence on forest resources, and exposure to industrial and mining interventions.

The Primary Data Collection was done through Participant Observation: Immersive observation of everyday economic activities such as forest gathering, agriculture, and wage labor, Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with Gond farmers, community elders, women, local leaders, and forest department officials to gather diverse perspectives, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized with men, women, and youth groups to explore generational and gendered insights. Case Studies: Detailed case narratives of families affected by land dispossession, forest rights claims, and displacement due to development projects. The Secondary Data Collection was done through the analysis of Census of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports, National Sample Survey (NSSO), and Forest Rights Act implementation reports. Review of academic literature, government policies, NGO reports, and media coverage.

Key development projects that have affected the region include:

Kanhar Dam Project, which led to protests over land acquisition and displacement without proper rehabilitation. Obra Thermal Power Plant and Singrauli Coalfields, which have caused environmental pollution, loss of agricultural land, and forest fragmentation.

In areas like Dudhi and Renukoot, tribal communities have faced challenges in filing and getting recognition of forest land claims under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. As per reports by NGOs and local activists, rejection rates of claims often exceed 60%, and there is evidence of non-transparent decision-making by Forest Department officials.

At the same time, tribal Gram Sabhas in parts of Sonbhadra have begun organizing to reclaim community forest rights and resist land alienation. Notable among them are movements led by the All India Union of Forest Working People (AIUFWP) and Vanadhikar Sangharsh Samiti, who are working to empower forest dwellers through legal literacy, mobilization, and advocacy. Thus, Sonbhadra presents a complex terrain of development conflict, cultural resilience, and grassroots resistance — making it an important site for studying the evolving dynamics of tribal economies and livelihoods in contemporary North India.

Results and Discussion

Present Scenario: Tribal Economies and Livelihoods in North India

In contemporary North India, tribal communities—such as the Gonds, Tharus, Bhots, Kharwars, Baigas, and Kols—continue to face deep-rooted socio-economic vulnerabilities despite multiple development interventions and constitutional safeguards. The regions of Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, Chandauli, Lakhimpur Kheri, and Pilibhit remain important tribal belts where the tension between economic survival and cultural continuity is palpable.

Talking about the Land Insecurity and FRA Implementation Gaps the Forest Rights Act (2006) was envisioned to correct historical injustices, its implementation in North India, especially Uttar Pradesh, has been dismal. As per a 2022 report by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Uttar Pradesh has a claim rejection rate of over 70%, primarily due to procedural delays, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic resistance. In Sonbhadra district, thousands of Gond and Kol families continue to live without formal land titles, leaving them vulnerable to evictions and mining-related displacement. The 2019 Supreme Court eviction order (later stayed) created panic in forest villages due to large-scale rejection of claims. Tribal communities in regions like Sonbhadra and Mirzapur are experiencing intense livelihood diversification driven by economic pressure and environmental degradation. Traditionally dependent on shifting cultivation, pastoralism, and the collection of forest produce such as mahua, tendu, and sal, these communities are increasingly turning to wage labor in urban centers, stone quarrying, mining, and seasonal migration to states like Punjab, Delhi, and Haryana for agricultural or construction work. This shift has resulted in the erosion of ecological knowledge, heightened food insecurity, and mounting debt among tribal households. A 2021 survey by Van Adhikar Manch revealed that over 60% of tribal households now depend on daily wage labor, with tribal women disproportionately engaged in informal, hazardous, and unregulated employment sectors.

Tribal women endure a disproportionate burden due to the loss of forest access, which affects their livelihoods and cultural practices. Additionally, they face significant challenges in accessing essential healthcare, particularly maternal and reproductive services, and often lack access to government schemes like MNREGA or the Public Distribution System (PDS) due to the absence of identity documents. Despite these hardships, tribal women have been at the forefront of resistance movements, notably in the anti-mining protests in Dudhi and Renukoot, where they have led efforts demanding forest rights and environmental protection.

Although government schemes such as Van Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin), and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) are available, their implementation in the tribal areas of North India remains inconsistent. In Pilibhit's Tharu villages, for instance, Van Dhan Kendras have been set up but struggle with inadequate infrastructure and weak marketing connections. Additionally, many tribal youths are unable to benefit from skill development opportunities, despite the presence of Kaushal Vikas Kendras. Environmental and developmental projects, such as the Ken-Betwa River Linking Project, forest clearances for highways, and the expansion of wildlife conservation areas, have exacerbated the disconnection between tribal communities and their traditional habitats. In regions like Chandauli and Mirzapur, the rise of eco-tourism and proposals for tiger corridors have resulted in restricted access to forests, significantly impacting the livelihoods of local tribal populations.

Sonbhadra district's wealth in minerals has made it a hub for mining projects and industrial development. However, these developments have led to significant livelihood challenges for the tribal communities. Displacement due to mining projects by companies like NTPC and Hindalco has uprooted hundreds of families, often with little to no rehabilitation support. The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) remains minimal, with only 10% of over 40,000 individual claims

approved, and fewer than 5% receiving actual land titles, as revealed by a 2021 RTI filed by a local NGO. Furthermore, Gonds have reported a drastic decline in income from minor forest produce, and shifting cultivation practices, which were once a primary source of livelihood, have been largely banned due to restrictive forest regulations. Despite these hardships, resistance and resilience have emerged in the region. In villages like Bilhati and Majhauli, Gond-led Gram Sabhas have asserted their rights under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and FRA, demanding community forest rights. Women in these areas have mobilized through groups like Van Adhikar Samiti to protest land acquisition and advocate for National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) work. Similarly, the Tharu Tribes in Pilibhit Tiger Reserve, who live along the Indo-Nepal border in Uttar Pradesh, primarily in Pilibhit and Lakhimpur Kheri, have faced significant challenges since the establishment of the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve in 2008. Many Tharu villages are situated within or on the fringes of this reserve, restricting their access to forest resources and grazing rights, which were once vital to their livelihoods. Although the Tharus of Uttarakhand have been recognized as Scheduled Tribes (ST), the Tharus in Uttar Pradesh only received ST status in 2021, which delayed the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. As a result, their claims to forest lands have been hindered. In response, the government has promoted Tharu Tourism Initiatives, which focus on homestays and local handicrafts to generate income. However, the revenue from these initiatives has been uneven, and many Tharus continue to depend on subsistence agriculture, manual labor, and seasonal migration to survive. Despite these challenges, several villages, such as Chuka and Mala, have begun filing community forest claims with the help of NGOs like Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, signaling a growing engagement with policy mechanisms to address their rights. The Kol Tribes in Mirzapur-Chandauli Region is one of the most marginalized groups in Uttar Pradesh, is concentrated in the districts of Mirzapur, Chandauli, and Sonbhadra. Despite being an indigenous group, the Kol people are often classified under Other Backward Classes (OBC) rather than Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Uttar Pradesh, which excludes them from many tribal welfare schemes. The tribe's livelihoods primarily depend on stone quarrying, agriculture, and bamboo work, all of which are subject to economic instability. A 2020 survey by Lokmitra Trust revealed that 76% of Kol families were landless, and over 60% suffered from malnutrition and anemia. Access to education is also poor, with only 14% of Kol girls in the study villages completing primary school. To address these issues, activist groups like the Kol Adivasi Mahasangh have been advocating for ST status and land rights. Some Kol Gram Sabhas have also revived traditional forest-based livelihoods, such as medicinal herb collection and bamboo crafts, though these practices still lack formal markets to generate sustainable income. Despite these challenges, these efforts highlight the Kol community's resilience in the face of systemic marginalization.

The analysis of tribal economies and livelihoods in North India reveals a complex interplay of traditional practices, policy interventions, market pressures, and environmental change. Drawing upon field observations, secondary data, and case studies from Sonbhadra, Chandauli, Mirzapur, and Pilibhit in Uttar Pradesh.

1. Traditional Livelihood Systems and Resource Dependence

Tribal communities in North India have historically relied on a mixed subsistence economy based on agriculture, forest produce collection, fishing, and seasonal wage labor. In districts like Sonbhadra, Gonds and Kharwar tribals continue to practice shifting cultivation and collect tendu leaves, mahua flowers, and sal seeds for income. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 aimed to secure access to forest resources, but its uneven implementation has limited economic benefits.

District	Major Tribal Groups	Primary Livelihoods
Sonbhadra	Gond, Kharwar	Mining labor, forest produce collection
Mirzapur	Chero, Baiga	Seasonal migration, agriculture
Chandauli	Kol, Gond	Stone quarrying, NREGA work
Pilibhit	Tharu	Agriculture, dairy, forest produce
Chitrakoot	Kol, Gond	Casual labor, minor forest produce

Table 1: Primary Livelihood Activities among Tribes in Select Districts (2023)

(Source: Field data & NGO reports, 2023)

2. Market Transitions and Livelihood Diversification

Over the last decade, tribal livelihoods have undergone gradual marketization. With declining access to forests and land fragmentation, many tribal households have turned to wage labor in nearby towns, brick kilns, and even urban construction sites. In Chandauli, tribal women sell herbal medicines and local crafts at roadside haats, indicating small-scale entrepreneurship. However, the lack of formal training, capital, and institutional support limits the scalability of these efforts. The Gond Women in Obra, Sonbhadra A women's collective formed in 2018 started selling processed mahua sweets and tamarind chutney in local fairs. With NGO support, the group earned around ₹75,000 during the 2022 festive season, showing how traditional knowledge can be monetized when linked to markets and self-help groups.

3. Impact of Land Dispossession and Development Projects

Development projects—especially mining, road building, and dam construction—have disrupted tribal livelihoods. In Sonbhadra, large-scale coal mining by NTPC and private firms has led to mass displacement. The Kanhar Dam project continues to be a site of protest, especially among tribal cultivators who lack formal land titles and are denied compensation.

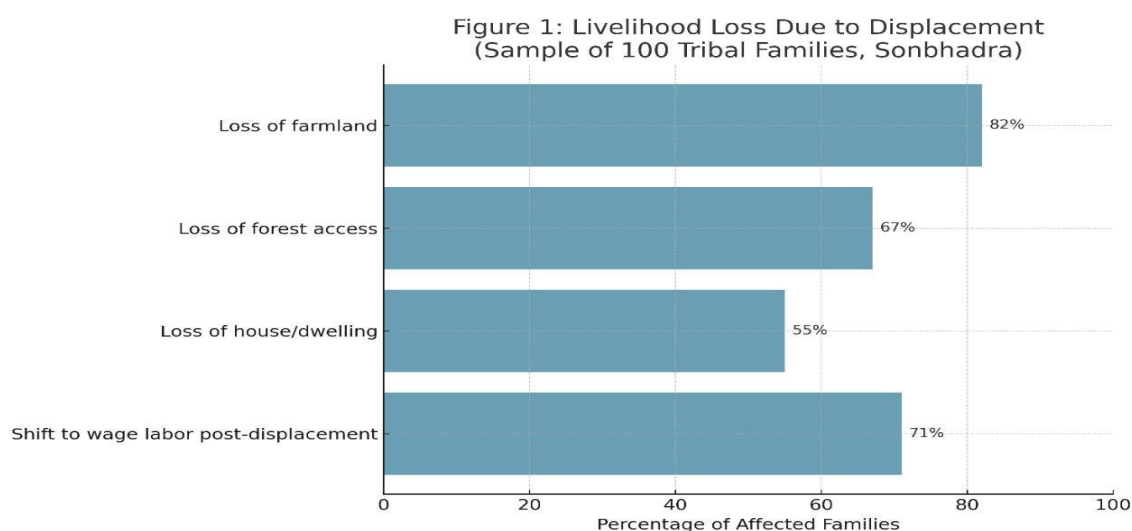


Figure 1: Livelihood Loss Due to Displacement (Sample of 100 Tribal Families, Sonbhadra)

These disruptions increase food insecurity, fuel rural-urban migration, and deepen economic marginalization.

4. Forest Rights Act (FRA) Implementation: Successes and Shortcomings

While the FRA has created a legal basis for land and livelihood security, its execution remains inconsistent. As per Uttar Pradesh Forest Department (2022), over 30,000 individual claims were filed by forest-dwelling tribes, but only 22% were approved, and a mere 5% of community forest resource rights were granted.

Part 1: Status of FRA Claims in Uttar Pradesh (2008–20

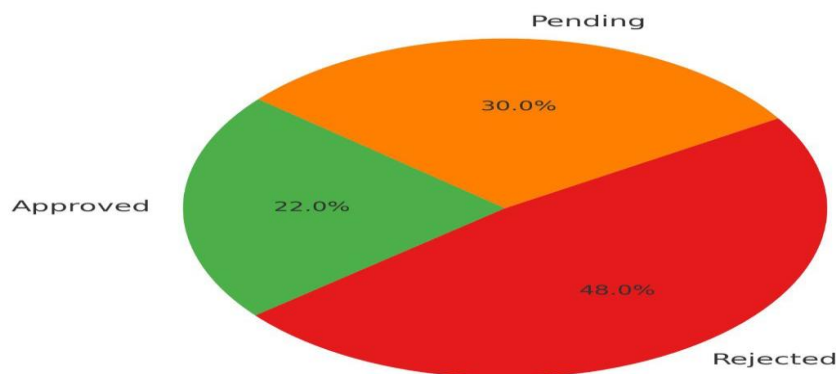


Chart 1: Status of FRA Claims in Uttar Pradesh (2008–2022)

The high rate of rejection is attributed to poor documentation, bureaucratic apathy, and limited legal awareness among tribal claimants.

5. Climate Stress and Adaptive Responses

Erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and declining groundwater have made rain-fed agriculture more vulnerable. In Mirzapur, tribal farmers have begun experimenting with drought-resistant millets and intercropping with pulses. NGOs like Gram Swaraj Sansthan are promoting sustainable agriculture, but coverage remains limited.

6. Education, Skill Gaps, and Youth Aspirations

A new generation of tribal youth is gradually distancing from traditional livelihoods. However, lack of access to quality education and vocational training constrains upward mobility. In interviews conducted in Pilibhit, many Tharu youth expressed interest in government jobs and small businesses, but complained of systemic barriers like caste-based discrimination, low awareness about schemes, and corruption.

Conclusion

The tribal communities of North India—particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh—occupy a critical space in India's socio-economic and ecological landscape. Despite their historical relationship with forests, land, and natural resources, tribal populations remain among the most marginalized in the country. This research highlights that tribal livelihoods, rooted in agro-forestry, non-timber forest

products, and traditional knowledge, are under growing threat from resource dispossession, climate variability, and uneven policy implementation.

The Gonds, Tharus, Kharwars, Kols, Panika, bhuiya, chero and other tribal groups in districts like Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, Chandauli, and Pilibhit show remarkable resilience in adapting to these pressures. However, the transition from forest-based to market-linked economies has often been involuntary and marked by precarity. While grassroots innovations, women-led collectives, and localized agro-ecological practices are emerging as signs of hope, their potential remains limited by inadequate institutional support, bureaucratic barriers, and lack of secure land rights.

This study reinforces the need for a more nuanced and rights-based approach to tribal development—one that moves beyond token welfare to genuine empowerment through land reform, community governance, and livelihood diversification.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Forest Rights Act Implementation: Expedite the processing of both individual and community claims. Increase awareness among tribal communities through legal literacy campaigns in local dialects. Decentralize the process and empower Gram Sabhas to oversee implementation transparently.

Recognize and Support Community-Based Livelihoods: Promote minor forest produce-based enterprises (e.g., mahua, tendu, lac) by providing processing units, cold storage, and marketing linkages. Enable women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to scale traditional crafts and herbal medicines through skill training and micro-credit.

Promote Climate-Resilient Agriculture: Introduce drought-resistant crops, organic farming techniques, and seed banks tailored to tribal regions. Encourage community seed sovereignty and water conservation methods like contour bunding and check dams.

Ensure Rehabilitation and Compensation for Displaced Tribes: All development-induced displacements (e.g., mining, dams) must follow a rights-based framework under the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. Prioritize land-for-land compensation, resettlement within traditional territory, and culturally sensitive rehabilitation.

Education and Skill Development: Improve access to quality education in tribal belts with local teachers and culturally relevant curriculum. Launch region-specific vocational programs focused on agro-processing, eco-tourism, and forest management.

Participatory Planning and Tribal Autonomy: Institutionalize participatory governance mechanisms where tribal voices guide resource management and development planning. Recognize traditional councils and tribal knowledge systems in state policy-making.

Research and Data Gaps: Establish regional tribal research centers for continuous documentation, monitoring, and evaluation of tribal economies and wellbeing. Make disaggregated data on tribal health, employment, and land rights publicly available to inform policy.

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