

By [Bharat Dogra](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, June 12, 2025

Region: [South Asia](#)

Theme: [Society](#)

There has been a lot of thoughtful discussion on policies relating to promoting welfare and sustainable progress of tribal communities in India which is also of much wider relevance at world level. In addition there are also concerns relating to the extent to which actual implementation diverges from policy formulation based on accepted welfare objectives.

Coming to policy formulation first, there are a number of desirable objectives which need integration and convergence at several levels.

The more frequent discourse in official circles understandably emphasizes the more readily accepted goals of policy including reduction of poverty and improvement of various human development indicators such as those relating to education, health and nutrition, gender based equality etc.

While there is common acceptance regarding this, other important aspects also need to be brought in.

Can this be achieved only in terms of better and wider implementation of some government development programs or schemes? While improved implementation and curbing corruption are certainly needed, at the same time there is need for reducing inequalities and for placing curbs on exploitative elements which have a dominating presence in some areas. The extractive approach which places more importance on minerals or other such resources should be given up and the welfare of people should be sincerely placed at the top of priorities.

Secondly, for sustainable progress and for gaining important insights on much-needed alternative development paradigms, it is also important to take forward the strengthening of community life based on increasing self-reliance of communities. While this can be said more generally regarding several other rural communities as well, this may be of greater significance regarding tribal communities which may place more emphasis on some of their traditions which again may be more conducive in terms of self-reliance and stronger community life.

From the point of view of promoting overall better social development also the protection and strengthening of some of these traditions may be of great value as a world searching for new and better living and thinking patterns and better value systems may be able to learn something of great value from tribal communities.

At the same time this does not mean that there should be a tendency to overly romanticize

something or that there should be denial of the need for reforming some harmful aspects of traditions. In fact social movements which received great support within tribal communities, such as the movements initiated by Govind Guru within Bhil tribal communities of Rajasthan and neighboring areas during colonial times, were based not just on resisting exploitation but also on internal reform, as they realized that some reforms can strengthen the tribal communities and hence prepare them better for resisting injustice. Hence internal reform for desirable change can be a widely accepted part of increasing self-reliance and strengthening of tribal communities.

Thirdly, there are wider and very important concerns relating to emerging serious environmental problems at world level. There are about a dozen serious environmental problems at world level, perhaps led by climate change but certainly not confined to climate change. There are many serious concerns relating to land-use changes, deforestation, soil and water crisis etc. What can be of great value is to integrate the sustainable development and self-reliance path of tribal communities in ways which are protective towards environment as well as livelihoods and welfare of tribal communities. A practical beneficial aspect of this can be that better and more funding can be available for taking forward the welfare of tribal communities in these ways, at the same time taking care to avoid those projects and programs which are falsely being used by narrow selfish interests in the name of climate mitigation and other desirable objectives.

If these three objectives can be integrated in sincere, honest, thoughtful and creative ways, then something very beneficial can be achieved in a win-win kind of situation.

There are some voluntary organizations and groups working with such an understanding among tribal communities that combine several desirable objectives. One such organization is Vaagdhara in Central India. Its efforts, successes, difficulties, learnings can be useful. Similarly there are several other such efforts which can contribute such learnings and can also learn from each other. Earlier this year, in January 2025, there was a bigger such effort of dialogue called Swaraj Samvad involving Vaagdhara and many other organizations and groups involved in such efforts to share such ideas and experiences.

Several government schemes when properly implemented can be very helpful in taking forward this work. The rural employment guarantee scheme can be used in very important ways to really take forward water conservation and regeneration of degraded forest land in a very big way, at the same time providing substantial short-term wages in tasks relating to improving local conditions and also paving the path for more sustainable livelihoods, contributing at the same time to climate mitigation and adaptation and reducing the water crisis and providing better protection from various disasters. Then there are various other government schemes also which can be thought out and implemented in better ways. The government has also been keen to plan the convergence of several such schemes and programs, implemented by different departments, to achieve better results. Voluntary organizations can also be helpful in this. At the same time convergence between government schemes and some programs of voluntary organizations can also be planned. Of course all this will take us forward only if there is honesty and sincerity on all sides.

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Bharat Dogra is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include *Saving Earth for Children*, *A Day in 2071*, *Man over Machine* and *India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food*. He is a regular contributor to *Asia-Pacific Research*.

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