

A Comparative Study of the Rhetoric of Inclusion in Electoral Campaigns and Governance: Case Study of Tribal Inclusion in Odisha

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i06.028 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i06.028>

Received: 6 June 2025 / Accepted: 24 June 2025 / Published: 7 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the politics of tribal inclusion in Odisha through a comparative study of electoral campaigns, narratives, and governance outcomes. By analyzing the competing narratives of two dominant political parties in the state, it explores how both parties deploy inclusive rhetoric through welfare promises, historical commemorations, and symbolic gestures while often failing to deliver meaningful structural reform. The study focuses on the disconnect between political promises and implementation in key areas such as forest rights, food security, agrarian policy, and tribal women's welfare. Drawing on various sources of data, the paper reveals how issues like delayed implementation of the Forest Rights Act, failures in welfare schemes, and the persistent weakening of agrarian systems among tribal groups reflect deeper dissonance between rhetoric and reality. The paper argues that inclusion is often reduced to a floating signifier, mobilized as electoral capital that does not lead to transformative structural change. Ultimately, it calls for a relational, structural understanding of inclusion that addresses intersecting exclusions in land, gender, and tribal livelihoods.

Keywords: Tribal inclusion, Odisha, Inclusive rhetoric, Electoral campaigns, Governance

INTRODUCTION

Among Indian states, Odisha occupies a unique position owing to the presence of various tribal groups. Recognized under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 8.6% of the national population, but make up 22.85% of the population in Odisha, the third highest concentration among all states (Census of India, 2011). Officially, 60 different tribal communities and 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) reside in the state and face varying levels of geographical, cultural, economic, and political exclusions (Ota et al., 2015).

Following the adverse effects of colonial rule, tribal welfare was considered integral to planned development in the post-independence period (Nayak & Jena, 2022). At the time, this much-needed shift seemed to recognize the necessity of targeted efforts for inclusive national progress. Yet, ever since the first Five-Year Plan was implemented, several multi-purpose development projects have treated forests as revenue-generating assets rather than life-supporting systems for tribal communities (Vyawahare, 2023). This further undermined the subsistence-oriented tribal economy and pushed indigenous communities to the margins of society. Studies on this decades-long trajectory reveal how development-included displacement has led to high levels of landlessness, unemployment, food insecurity, and a lack of access to common property resources such as water, forest, as well as ancestral land among tribal populations (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1989; Fernandes & Raj, 1992; Nayak & Jena, 2022). Affirmative action policies and constitutional safeguards have not been as effective as intended either, resulting in the continued economic exclusion and political disenfranchisement of tribal groups.

In response, widespread tribal movements have emerged over the years, asserting their rights to land and forest resources, as well as advocating for meaningful inclusion in Odisha's development agenda. As uneven development intensifies, Kumar (2014) and Raj (2017) assert that such grassroots movements increasingly converge human rights, natural resources, and subsistence in the state's tribal and rural regions. It is also this very locus that is amplified and contested during election cycles, where tribal voters, constituting over one-fifth of Odisha's electorate, become a crucial demographic for competing parties.

One key pattern that becomes immediately evident is the rhetoric of inclusion employed by various political actors. This rhetoric often encompasses pledges related to better rights, improved welfare systems, and increased self-governance for tribal communities. As this discourse is intricately connected to the rise of identity politics, it becomes essential to examine the discrepancies between the promises made by political leaders and the actual material outcomes experienced by these groups. The gap between political communication and praxis is especially relevant given Odisha's recent electoral shift, wherein competition among its major players, Biju Janata Dal (BJD), the state party led by Naveen Patnaik, and the two all-India parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, have undergone notable shifts (Ray & Mohanty, 2017; Swain & Attri, 2024). Both BJD and BJP have wielded inclusive language in their political campaigns for the 2024 Odisha Legislative Assembly election, with tribal inclusion being a recurring theme across their manifestos (Biju Janata Dal, 2024; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2024). This encompasses commitments to land rights, women's empowerment, agricultural promises, and educational inclusion. With both contenders invoking the rhetoric of democratic inclusion, the question this paper explores is whether these narratives translate into substantive governance practices, or are they simply electoral tools.

Through a comprehensive comparative analysis, this study delves into the intricate ways in which tribal inclusion is rhetorically constructed within electoral campaigns, assessing the relationship between such constructions and real policy changes. In an era where political narratives are critical for mobilizing support and shaping public perception, understanding the rhetoric surrounding tribal inclusion offers several critical insights. Hence, this analysis carefully examines three critical areas that significantly impact tribal communities: forest rights, which govern access and ownership of essential natural resources; agrarian systems, which affect the livelihoods and economic stability of tribal populations; and sectoral welfare delivery, which addresses the provision of essential services and benefits.

By utilizing a diverse range of sources, including party manifestos, performance metrics, and publicly available data, this study seeks to explore the link between inclusive rhetoric and actual policy outcomes. Ultimately, it aims to critically engage with and contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding representation, identity politics, and the fundamental rights of indigenous communities. By closely examining the mechanisms that often contribute to systemic exclusion, this study challenges dominant rhetorical narratives that tend to oversimplify complex socio-political realities. It emphasizes the pressing need to move beyond superficial metrics and opaque systems, advocating for a governance framework that is genuinely inclusive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of tribal populations.

BACKGROUND

Inclusion and exclusion are central themes across political theory, development studies, and public policy. Current theoretical frameworks on inclusion have evolved from two distinct lenses: redistributive justice, which centers on the equitable allocation of material resources, and recognition-based approaches, which focus on the symbolic legitimacy and cultural status of marginalized identities (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Fraser significantly advanced this discourse by proposing an integrated theory of justice, arguing that neither recognition or redistribution is sufficient in isolation (Fraser, 2023). In fact, when recognition becomes detached from material realities, she warns that identity politics can be co-opted in ways that reproduce rather than dismantle existing hierarchies.

This warning is particularly relevant during election cycles, where inclusion can easily be reduced to mere rhetorical capital, mobilized to secure votes rather than shape governance outcomes. Similarly, scholars such as Kabeer (2010) and Bennett (2006) argue that social exclusions are not unidimensional but rather co-produced and clustered together. In the case of Odisha, these clustered deprivations manifest acutely among tribal groups, where exclusion from land often reinforces economic marginalization and political invisibility, creating a cumulative cycle of disadvantage.

A growing body of empirical research also supports this claim. In Odisha, development-induced displacement has disproportionately affected tribal communities and forest-dwelling groups. For instance, Scheduled Tribes accounted for 20% of those displaced by seven major multi-purpose dam projects in the state, with tribal displacement reaching as high as 58% in districts like Undivided Koraput (Panda & Dash, 2018). The loss of nearly 400,000 acres of forest, vital for tribal livelihoods, has further deepened this impact. It is not a coincidence then, that Indian tribes constitute more than 70% of the lowest two wealth or income quartiles of the country, report substantially lower literacy compared to the national average, and account for higher maternal mortalities in the nation (NFHS-5, 2021).

More importantly, as Sen (2000) notes, these exclusions cannot be seen as mere conditions. They are social relations, actively shaped by how individuals and groups are positioned within systems of interaction. These relational dynamics do not disappear during elections. Instead, they are recast as tools of political mobilization, where the promise of inclusion is rhetorically instrumentalized. Flexible terms such as “empowerment,” “upliftment,” and “welfare,” are frequently invoked in political campaigns to garner popular support without committing to measurable outcomes. In this way, they become Laclau’s (2005) floating signifiers, available for multiple, often competing, political articulations. The inherent ambiguity of floating signifiers allows them to be attached to divergent ideological imaginations, ranging from themes like equality, empowerment, recognition, rights, and justice, while evading redistributive commitments or structural transformations.

The case study of Odisha exemplifies these theories. Odisha, with a high tribal population and a history of political mobilization, still witnesses the under-implementation of tribal rights legislation. Hence, this research draws on the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks to investigate whether tribal inclusion in Odisha’s electoral discourse impacts systemic changes or merely creates favorable electoral outcomes for political parties.

Historically, the political dynamics in Odisha have been largely shaped by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), founded in 1997 (Ray & Mohanty, 2017). Under Naveen Patnaik's leadership, the party initially allied with the BJP from 1998 to 2009, during which they jointly contested three Lok Sabha and two assembly elections (Ghosh, 2024). The BJD subsequently emerged as the dominant political force, building broad support across caste and class lines. Patnaik's leadership culminated in his fifth consecutive victory in 2019, with the BJD securing a 44.78% vote share in the state assembly election (Raj, 2022).

However, the political landscape shifted significantly when the BJP won the subsequent 2024 election, ending the 24-year-long rule of BJD. At a victory celebration in Bhubaneswar, BJP's national vice-president even characterized this win as "historic," framing it as the beginning of "a

new Odisha for a new India" centered on "Odia asmita," or Odia pride (The Times of India, 2024, para. 9).

The employment of inclusive rhetoric in Odisha's political discourse has also expanded significantly during this period, as tribal welfare has emerged as a recurring theme across the manifestos of both major political parties. Both parties frequently emphasized their commitments to enhancing tribal livelihoods, improving the status of tribal women, and expanding welfare schemes aimed at students, farmers, and marginalized households. However, the actual impact of these promises remains quite uneven across various communities. In many cases, symbolic rhetoric seems to have outpaced material delivery entirely, raising serious concerns about tokenism and performative politics. The thematic areas of forest and land rights, gender-responsive policies, and welfare provisions serve as the foundation for this paper's comparative analysis, which critically examines the discrepancies between political claims and the tangible outcomes experienced by tribal communities on the ground.

As Edelman (1988) notes, it is imperative to question the surface meanings of political statements and symbols and uncover how language, metaphor, myth, and ritual function in political processes. Skepticism, in this context, becomes a valuable tool as political statements often disguise emotional appeals and hidden agendas as objective truths, especially under the guise of terms like "welfare," "inclusion," and "pride". To examine this misalignment between electoral promises and policy implementation, the paper draws on party documents, governance evaluations, and media reporting in the given period. Using a comparative framework, the study analyses manifestos, speeches, campaign materials, and media messaging, alongside select governance indicators of BJP and BJD during recent election cycles in Odisha. Inclusion as a metric is conceptualized within this study in a broad manner, going beyond singular and isolated positive metrics that can obscure deeper structural inequalities. The aim is to understand the gap between electoral promises and governance outcomes, especially in relation to tribal welfare, and map both the symbolic and policy-level approaches of each party toward tribal communities. Political messaging shapes public discourse and development priorities. Examining how parties construct narratives around tribal inclusion offers insight into the symbolic politics of democracy, and the contradictions that often accompany it.

DISCUSSION

During the 2024 Odisha State Legislative Assembly elections, campaigns of both major parties, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), featured various guarantees, slogans, and welfare promises for tribal communities. The BJD's manifesto framed tribal inclusion as "an important objective of our governance mandate. ...to be carried out on the pillars of quality education, autonomy to communities and livelihood promotion" (Biju Janata

Dal, 2024, p. 12). Symbolic recognition such as language promotion, tribal museums, and heritage protection was coupled with redistributive efforts like welfare schemes and employment guarantees. The manifesto also claimed that the central government had long neglected the issues of tribal groups by citing the BJP's inaction on adding nine recommended tribal communities to the official ST list and three tribal languages to the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, as well as the refusal to waive off their share in the GST collected on Kendu leaves, a crucial income source for tribal communities (Biju Janata Dal, 2024, p. 110).

In turn, the BJP manifesto highlighted its symbolic achievements like appointing India's first tribal woman President, Droupadi Murmu, and its commemoration of Birsa Munda, a tribal freedom fighter, alongside redistributive progress through welfare schemes, livelihood generation, and education policies (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2024, p. 31). By highlighting low literacy levels, high mortality rates, rising crimes, and the neglect of PVTG habitations, it criticized the BJD's decades-long governance failures that have deepened tribal marginalization in the state. Such narratives were also tied into the BJP's larger, national electoral rhetoric, where tribal communities are positioned as inseparable to Indian civilization, and tribal heroes were historicized as those who bravely fought and resisted outside regimes (Lakshman, 2024). Both parties, meanwhile, accused each other of being anti-tribal and claimed to be more in touch with tribal aspirations (Press Trust of India, 2024a; Press Trust of India, 2024b).

However, such claims operate largely at the level of narrative, not structural reform. Comparing both parties' rhetorical promises to on-ground realities reveals various disjunctures and implementation gaps that undermine genuine tribal inclusion. Take, for instance, the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Passed in 2006, this emancipatory law holds transformative potential for the livelihoods of tribes and forest-dwelling communities. However, a decade later, and after two terms of the BJD government, most districts in Odisha had not even started implementing it. Substantial progress was only made in the districts of Mayurbhanj and Kandhmal, and on a very small scale in Nowrangpur, Rayagada, Keonjhar, and Sambalpur. All this accounted for the realization of a mere 11% of the potential of FRA (CFRLA, 2017). While 16% of households in Keonjhar benefited from FRA, it drops to as low as 3.72% in places like Sundargarh, the latter even being the Union Tribal Minister's own constituency (Kukreti, 2019). Such outcomes are especially relevant considering the key contributing factors, which included the state's continued retention of control over high-value forest produce and institutional weaknesses that delayed Gram Sabha decisions, led to minimal issuances of land titles, and the exclusion of numerous rightful beneficiaries (CFRLA, 2017; Deshpande, 2024). Moreover, amid the COVID-19 crisis, nearly 80,000 forest dwellers' land claims were rejected, many on questionable grounds. Despite these contradictions, it was noted that an earlier BJD manifesto claimed Odisha was leading in FRA implementation in the country, when in reality, the Campaign for Survival and Dignity

argued the ruling party reduced the Act to a land distribution scheme, “spoiling the very spirit of the legislation” (The New Indian Express, 2014, para. 4).

As a consequence, political mobilization around the FRA issue gained significant momentum in Odisha during the 2019 election cycle (Kukreti, 2019). Manifestos focussed on tribal land rights were sent to political parties across multiple districts, who felt the increasing pressure to take the issue seriously. This growing discontent and campaign efforts by the BJP may explain the parties’ success in winning most of the tribal-dominated, forest rights-sensitive constituencies in 2019, despite not securing a majority overall that cycle (Deshpande, 2024). In the 2024 elections, which it eventually won, the party continued to advance a pro-tribal narrative. During rallies in Mayurbhanj, Balasore, and Kendrapara, the BJP repeatedly emphasized its commitment to tribal welfare, highlighting the inclusion of the Santali language in the Eighth Schedule and its declaration of National Tribal Pride Day. On the other hand, the opposition was accused and criticized for encroaching on tribal land and resources during its prior terms (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2024). However, these symbolic narratives of inclusion do not erase the BJP’s broader track record over FRA in the country. Except for Tripura, none of the BJP-ruled states even crossed the national average of 50.4% claims converted to titles, while in Gujarat, where the BJP has ruled continuously for nearly 30 consecutive years, it has just reached the average (The Leaflet, 2022). This is particularly relevant for Odisha since land remains the most critical productive asset, closely tied to the socioeconomic and political inclusion of tribal communities. While the FRA aimed to correct this, the gap between the political rhetoric of both parties and on-ground implementation efforts paints a bleak picture of tribal rights and their inclusion in mainstream political agendas.

Land rights are a crucial area of conflict, but it is also worth noting that the socio-economic exclusions faced by tribal communities are often complex and multi-faceted. Tribal women, in particular, experience a dual form of exclusion across various geographic, cultural, social, and economic axes. Despite some progress over the years, they continue to contend with disproportionately high Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR), lower literacy levels, heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, and limited access to education and healthcare, among others (Madankar et al., 2024).

However, during the 2024 election, electoral support among women, including tribal women, has undergone a significant shift in Odisha, going against their historical alignment with BJD. This change, as noted by Mohanty (2024), can be understood alongside the BJP’s strategic campaigning to address the needs of these voters through promises of financial security, livelihood assistance, and robust welfare programs. The act of a tribal woman handing over ₹100 to a political leader as a gesture of gratitude for the Prime Minister’s leadership further illustrates the emotional appeal employed in such campaigns (Economic Times, 2024). This act, framed as

a symbol of grassroots transformation, serves to personalize the political narrative while broader systemic issues remain partly or wholly unaddressed.

For example, in the context of gender-responsive policies, the BJP's most prominent initiative, the Subhadra Yojana, is a financial assistance program designed to promote financial inclusion. Under this scheme, eligible women receive ₹50,000 spread over five years (Women and Children Development Department, 2024). Financial inclusion is a vital component of socio-economic development, especially for marginalized tribal women. After the elections, the party framed the release of these funds as the successful fulfillment of campaign promises (Barik, 2024). But on-ground realities complicate that claim. For instance, in the tribal hinterland of Malkangiri, over 50% of eligible tribal women remain without assistance due to delays primarily caused by Aadhaar and e-KYC verification issues, excluding approximately 1,522 applicants (Mishra, 2024). Even with flawless implementation, whether such financial assistance schemes achieve true inclusion is debatable. Social cash transfer programs in developing contexts are often promoted as tools that empower women and enhance economic agency. Yet, empirical evidence on their effectiveness remains mixed (Simon, 2019; Heaton et al., 2024). This is particularly important for a country like India, where, as Sen (2000) points out, social relations create entrenched gender roles, power hierarchies, and complex dynamics within households. If issues like social norms, power relations, and low levels of financial literacy remain unaddressed, such interventions risk becoming tokenistic, creating the illusion of progress.

Analyzing inclusion requires a structural lens, and the intersection of tribal and agrarian issues offers another crucial entry point in this context. Especially since the neglect of issues raised by tribal farmers has also been theorized as one factor in Odisha's electoral shift from the BJD to the BJP (Sahu, 2024). Ahead of the 2019 elections, the BJD introduced the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme for small and marginal farmers (Mohanty, 2024). In 2024, the scheme was extended for another three years. However, widespread implementation failures, such as the exclusion of genuine beneficiaries and the inclusion of ineligible ones, severely undermined its credibility (Sahoo, 2024). This disillusionment prompted national parties like the BJP and Congress to respond with state-specific Minimum Support Price (MSP) promises in their 2024 manifestos, with the former pledging an increase in the MSP to ₹3,100 per quintal for paddy. In contrast, the BJD's silence on the MSP issue may have contributed to its electoral setbacks (Sahu, 2024). Aside from the MSP, the newly formed BJP-led government later rolled out various reforms, including an ₹800 input subsidy and the streamlining of the paddy procurement processes (Pani, 2024). However, systemic weaknesses still persist, with poor enforcement, lack of transparency, and accountability, leaving many farmers uninformed about the processes and their entitlements (The New Indian Express, 2025). In Sindurpank, farmers were excluded from beneficiary lists after

their villages were reclassified as urban (Sahu, 2024). In Bargarh, widespread frustration was directed at both the BJD and BJP, with farmers complaining about ongoing neglect and inadequate support for paddy procurement. More importantly, however, these measures do not adequately address the deeper, systemic agrarian distress faced by tribal and marginal farmers.

Agrarian distress extends well beyond price guarantees, particularly for tribal communities, who often bear the brunt of systemic neglect. Recent backlash from tribal farmers over the millet scheme illustrates this tension, and how deeply intertwined agrarian distress and tribal marginalization are. Concerns were raised by tribal farmers over the replacement of indigenous millet varieties with high-yielding hybrid seeds that are poorly suited to local agro-climatic conditions (Pani, 2025; Panda, 2025). This shift, largely state-driven and shaped by corporate seed lobbies, not only undermines crop biodiversity but also erodes deeply embedded tribal knowledge systems. For such communities, millets are more than just staple crops, they are deeply symbolic, representative of cultural identity, and hold the key to food sovereignty and ecological resilience. Replacing them with commercial hybrids risks further marginalizing these communities by displacing livelihoods and weakening food systems.

On the other hand, this exclusion also manifests starkly in the context of food security. Ironically, tribal communities, often central to food production, are among the most food insecure. The recent Mandipanka incident, where the deaths of two women who were forced to survive on mango kernel, underscores the severity of this crisis (Rout, 2024). While the state government provides a fixed quantity of rice per person through the Public Distribution System (PDS), it is often insufficient for many households, particularly for marginalized and small landholding tribal communities who depend almost entirely on rice, lacking access to other sources of nutrition. Researchers, policymakers, and activists have repeatedly highlighted the structural inadequacies of the PDS, which continue to leave vulnerable families, especially tribal households, in a state of chronic food distress, driving them to consume non-traditional or even potentially harmful substitutes (Rout, 2024). The reliance on unsafe food sources isn't new either, but rather reflects recurring systemic neglect. Despite some progress, food insecurity remains a significant concern in the state, with remote, hilly, and forested regions dominated by tribal populations often receiving an irregular supply of subsidized rice, which in some villages arrives only once every three months (Ghosh, 2024). These ongoing patterns ultimately show how neither party has prioritized food sovereignty and agrarian resilience, which are fundamental to the integration of tribal communities into the market economy.

Minor forest produce is also vital to tribal welfare, yet remains neglected despite repeated promises. Recently, 3,000 tribal and forest-dwelling women in Kalahandi blocked a national highway to protest the Forest Department's seizure of kendu leaf trucks and its refusal to recognize Gram Sabha-issued transit permits, despite clear protections under FRA (Dubey,

2025). Kendu leaves are a key livelihood source and a major contributor to Odisha's economy, and tensions like this highlight how issues like this have, and continue to be sidelined by parties.

A similar pattern arises in the context of education. Despite progress since the 2000s, ST students continue to have far higher dropout rates (Shukla & Tiwari, 2024). Both governments have promised to scale up resources and provide scholarships for ST students. However, genuine inclusion, like in the case of land rights and agriculture, demands taking account of the core determinants of dropout rates, which are deeply rooted in persistent economic hardship and domestic responsibilities. These pressures fall especially heavily on girls, who often shoulder greater caregiving and household burdens. As Santoshini (2019) highlights, tribal girls face significant barriers in voicing grievances or accessing justice mechanisms. Furthermore, substandard residential schools frequently reinforce, rather than disrupt, entrenched caste and class hierarchies, thereby failing to address the structural deficiencies within Odisha's educational landscape. Systemic issues such as teacher quality and academic rigor need to be addressed to avoid a disconnect between policy formulations and on-the-ground realities. Gender-sensitive interventions must move beyond enrolment incentives to confront the underlying drivers of female dropouts in order to ensure meaningful retention and inclusive educational outcomes. However, with gaps like this often being overlooked, inclusion becomes frequently relegated to a short-term communication strategy.

Ultimately, both the BJD and the BJP have manifestos that seemingly include tribal groups on the surface level. They pledge support for critical areas such as land rights, women's empowerment, education, and livelihood schemes. However, the reality of these commitments often falls short of the promises made. So while MSP for paddy may be instituted to ostensibly bolster agricultural incomes, this policy does not necessarily translate to a holistic solution for the broader agrarian challenges faced by tribal communities. Scholarships may be announced to promote educational advancement among tribal children, but without concurrent and substantial efforts to enhance the conditions and quality of educational institutions in tribal areas, these promises remain largely rhetorical. In the wider political landscape, the situation becomes increasingly contentious as parties engage in a game of mutual accusations, each labeling the other as anti-tribal. This dynamic detracts from significant legislative progress, particularly in relation to crucial policies such as the FRA, which has the potential to transform tribal livelihoods significantly. Despite its promise, this act remains consistently overlooked by both political factions, underscoring a troubling lack of sincere engagement with the pressing issues faced by tribal populations. The reluctance to fully embrace and implement the FRA suggests that long-term structural inclusion is not prioritized. Such systemic obstacles hinder the advancement of tribal communities and contribute to their continued marginalization within the socio-political fabric of Odisha.

In challenging environments, pro-tribal narratives can often become convenient shields for political actors, allowing them to navigate the complex terrain of tribal issues without having to confront the deep-seated interdependencies, relational dynamics, and entrenched power structures that shape the lives of tribal populations. These narratives can be easily mobilized during electoral campaigns, producing superficial engagement that overrides genuine policy efforts. As a consequence, the discourse surrounding tribal inclusion in Odisha often operates less as a transformative political initiative and more as a contested arena of symbolic politics. This situation necessitates that stakeholders, be it politicians, policymakers, or organizations, critically evaluate their engagement with tribal issues. Achieving meaningful inclusion for tribal communities demands a sustained commitment to understanding and addressing the intricate and often harsh realities of tribal life. This commitment must extend well beyond the confines of the ballot box and electoral timelines. True change requires thoughtful, persistent engagement with the challenges that tribal populations face on a daily basis, as well as a willingness to confront the systemic inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization. Only through such enduring dialogue and action can the narrative surrounding tribal inclusion be reshaped meaningfully, and ultimately lead to fulfillment of promises made.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to critically examine how the idea of inclusion is constructed and deployed in the electoral campaigns of Odisha, and more importantly, whether such rhetorical positioning results in meaningful, lasting changes in governance that materially benefit marginalized populations. Through a detailed analysis of recent electoral cycles and the policy landscape that followed, the research identifies a consistent and disconcerting pattern, wherein political actors frequently employ the language of inclusion, especially in relation to tribal communities, but rarely translate it in ways that substantially improve the lived experiences of those it claims to represent.

Electoral campaigns are rich in symbolism. Political parties craft narratives that signal care, responsiveness, and empowerment, often through the invocation of tribal identity, historical injustice, or developmental aspirations. Yet, this symbolic inclusion seldom extends beyond campaign strategies. Despite the promise of empowerment, the translation of rhetorical commitments into effective, measurable policy outcomes remains elusive. What emerges, then, is a clear disconnect between representation in speech and representation in structure, a dynamic that weakens the legitimacy of democratic promises and dilutes the trust of those communities most in need of state support.

The study reveals that this gap between discursive inclusion and action is rooted in poor policy and systemic neglect. Key welfare mechanisms such as the FRA, which are critical for ensuring

tribal autonomy and justice, remain mired in administrative delays, inconsistent implementation, and structural neglect. Similarly, gender-targeted schemes, although politically foregrounded during elections, often suffer from reductive designs that fail to grapple with the multifaceted realities of tribal women's lives. These interventions, lacking contextual nuance and sustained investment, fall short in both intent and impact. The same holds true for educational policies, which, though vital in rhetoric, rarely resolve the structural barriers that prevent marginalized students from accessing and benefitting from institutional support.

While this study is grounded in an extensive review of policy documents, manifestos, secondary reports, and governance data, its limitations are equally important to acknowledge. The perspectives of tribal communities themselves, their voices, aspirations, disillusionments, and strategies of engagement, are only partially captured here. Without fully understanding how these communities interpret, negotiate, or resist electoral promises, any analysis risks flattening their agency into a passive role. Future research would benefit from a more participatory, ethnographic approach, grounded in lived experience, to better apprehend how inclusion is understood, reimagined, or contested on the ground.

It is also essential to recognize that political messaging is far from uniform. Electoral narratives vary widely across geographies, candidates, and constituencies. What is promised to one group in one context may not be echoed elsewhere, revealing how inclusion itself is selectively constructed. Furthermore, structural challenges, bureaucratic inertia, underfunding, and lack of political will, frequently undermine even those policies that are well-designed. These broader systemic constraints, while beyond the immediate scope of this paper, nevertheless shape the terrain in which inclusion operates. Compounding this complexity is the tendency to frame tribal identity as a singular, homogenous category. Such simplification ignores internal diversities along the lines of gender, class, age, and region, which critically influence the ways in which different sub-groups engage with, benefit from, or are excluded by political processes.

Despite these caveats, the study contributes meaningfully to current debates around symbolic recognition and material redistribution within democratic frameworks. It underscores that inclusion, when used merely as rhetorical currency, risks becoming hollow and serving more as a political performance than a mechanism for development. The persistent failure to translate inclusive language into grounded, context-sensitive, and structurally transformative governance reveals not only a crisis of implementation but a deeper ambivalence toward accountability.

Ultimately, the findings of this study stress the urgency of rethinking how inclusion is conceptualized and enacted in policy, welfare, and institutional responsiveness. As Odisha, and other regions grappling with similar tensions, move forward with their development agendas,

these insights hold significant value in informing more authentic and effective approaches to governance, rooted in the real aspirations and agency of the communities they aim to uplift.

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