

Road to infrastructure development of indigenous people in India

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Road to infrastructure development

Photo credit: Dr. Udit Sanga, Tufts University.
Location: Topra block, Khunti District, Jharkhand, India

India is home to the one of largest indigenous population with 104.5 million people belonging to 705 ethnic groups, reflecting the nation's unity in diversity². From the Himalayan highlands in the North to the hills of North-Eastern India, from the dense forest of Central India and rugged terrains of Vindhya-Satpura ranges to the arid stretches of Western India, and further down to the lush Western and Eastern Ghats of Southern India, indigenous communities are spread across the country's most ecologically diverse and culturally-rich landscape.

Despite this vast geographical presence and cultural diversity, many of these regions remain remote with limited access to essential services and opportunities. In this context, infrastructure development plays an important role, as it forms the backbone for enhancing the quality of life, improving education, healthcare, connectivity and economic opportunities of the indigenous people. Yet, the "road to infrastructure development of indigenous people" is

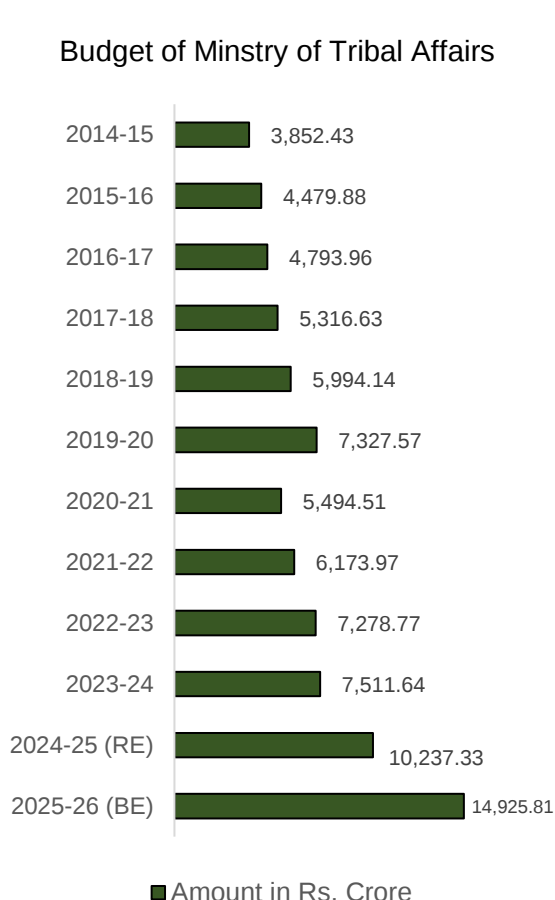
complex, raising important questions about inclusivity, sustainability and preservation of indigenous identity.

Acknowledging these challenges and transformative potential of infrastructure, the Government of India has introduced several initiatives to strengthen infrastructure in indigenous regions. The Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY) focuses on transforming indigenous villages into model villages (*adarsh gram*) through integrated development. The Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) and Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utakarsh Abhiyan (DAJGUA) aim to provide enabling infrastructure in housing, road, electrification, skill-set, education and health. The Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) promotes entrepreneurship among indigenous communities through infrastructural support. Complementing these initiatives, the Eklavya

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² Census of India (2011). <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/>

Model Residential School (EMRS) focused on residential schools focused on integrating academic learning with cultural preservation.



Source: Budget of Ministry of Tribal Affairs, collated from different budget documents (Actual budget, BE- Budget estimates, RE- Revised estimates)

Investment in development initiatives for indigenous communities has increased significantly over the last decade. The actual budget allocation for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, which spearheads the development initiatives for indigenous people has nearly doubled from Rs. 3,852 crores in 2014-15 to Rs. 7,511 crores in 2023-24. In the Union Budget 2025-26, the proposed allocation is Rs. 14,925.81 crores, which is again twice the budget compared to 2023-24. In the 2025-26 budget, infrastructure development projects account for about 20% of the total budget (Rs. 3028.37 crores), while educational initiatives, particularly the EMRS, constitute approximately 48% (Rs. 7088.6 crores)³. The budget also reflects a transformational shift in the policy focus from schemes-specific interventions (housing scheme-PMAAGY) to holistic development missions (PM-JANMAN & DAJGUA) illustrating the government's commitment to comprehensive and inclusive development.

Despite the growing investment and policy attention, infrastructure development initiatives in indigenous regions remains marred by complexities and contestations. Many of these regions falls within ecologically and culturally sensitive landscapes, where even well-intentioned development such as housing, schooling, or healthcare facilities can disturb the

eco-system or traditional way of life if the programmes are not planned with care and community participation.

This brings us to a critical question: who decides what development and who is it really for? Infrastructure development is not just about building road, piped water, schools and hospitals, but also about understanding how, for whom and with what consequence development takes place. When indigenous people are equal partners in planning and execution, infrastructure become more than a physical asset, it becomes a bridge between tradition and transformation. In this sense, infrastructure development of indigenous people in India must strive for inclusive and sustainable development, one that strengthens communities while preserving the deep connection with the land.

³ PIB (2025) Budget Allocation under Tribal Scheme
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2153517>