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Chapter

Governance and Sustainable Livelihoods among Tribal Communities in Northeast India

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Abstract

Sustainable development in indigenous regions requires more than policy declarations; it requires meaningful access, equity, participation and recognition of traditional knowledge systems. This study examines the lived realities of tribal youth in Northeast India in relation to access to basic services, socio-economic conditions, environmental awareness, governance participation, and engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on a quantitative cross-sectional survey of 54 tribal respondents aged 18–35 years, the study identifies structural gaps in infrastructure, economic opportunity, youth empowerment, and institutional inclusion. While educational attainment among respondents is relatively high, the findings show that education does not consistently translate into income security, revealing a statistically significant negative correlation between education and income source ($r = -0.362$, $p = .007$). Although access to clean water and electricity is largely available, concerns remain regarding reliability and sanitation quality. Awareness of SDGs is limited, and community engagement in SDG-related activities remains low. Governance trust is moderate to weak, and traditional ecological knowledge is insufficiently integrated into formal planning systems.

Keywords: *Tribal Governance, Sustainable Livelihoods, Capability Approach, Youth Participation, Environmental Governance, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

Introduction

Rooted in place, Indigenous groups across Northeast India nurture enduring ties to soil, woods, and rivers. Because of long-term observation, customs around farming and shared living carry inherited insight about local ecosystems (Beckett & O'Loughlin, 2024; Priyadarshini & Abhilash, 2019). Even so, when it comes to planning by the state, tribal voices remain pushed aside - overlooked again and again (Bansal et al., 2024; Mulindwa, 2020).

Though launched worldwide in 2015, the practical impact of the Sustainable Development Goals varies sharply across communities. While designed to advance fairness, ecological balance, shared prosperity, along with transparent governance - per Arts (2017) - their real-world application often falters. Especially within indigenous territories do these objectives struggle to take root. Local traditions, belief structures, and community norms frequently sit at odds with standardized development models, as noted by Kiran and colleagues (2024) and also observed earlier by Das (2020).

Besides navigating modern life, tribal youth balance inherited customs. Though linked through technology, education shapes their choices. Mobility opens doors - still tradition holds ground. Opportunities appear alongside barriers they face daily. Their engagement with resources, work options, views on nature, plus how they join decision-making reveal inclusion gaps. When it comes to sustainability claims, such insights test real progress (Ali et al., 2021; Kenney & Phibbs, 2021).

Though earlier research highlights indigenous knowledge's role in ecological resilience (Kashif et al., 2023; Mallick et al., 2024), few data exist on how young tribal members perceive development. Instead of viewing them as recipients, this work looks at youth as participants shaping their own paths.

Theoretical Framework

Looking through multiple lenses sharpens understanding here. One approach alone would miss key details. Combining them

reveals patterns otherwise hidden. Each adds weight without repeating the others. Together, they form a more complete picture than any could alone.

Development matters less in terms of inputs, more in how freely people can live out their goals. Meaningful progress shows up not just in schools built or clinics opened, but in what lives people are able to lead because of them. When education levels rise yet financial stability lags, something breaks down in turning knowledge into secure livelihoods - this gap signals a shortfall in converting access into actual power to thrive (Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016; Das, 2024).

Though inclusive development emphasizes participatory governance, marginalization persists when institutions fail to respond. Representation gaps - especially among young people - reflect systemic barriers rather than lack of interest. Evidence from this analysis shows minimal youth involvement alongside weak connections to global goals. Such patterns point to entrenched exclusions within decision-making frameworks. When voices remain absent over time, sustainability efforts lose legitimacy. Structural conditions, not individual choices, shape these outcomes most significantly.

Starting differently each time, governance models show that merging local ecological insight improves climate responses alongside stewardship of resources (Beckett & O'Loughlin, 2024; Kramer et al., 2021; Timko et al., 2018). Without space for ancestral understanding, policy outcomes tend to split apart - losing strength.

Together, these frameworks guide the study's analysis of access, equity, livelihood sustainability and governance inclusion.

Literature Review

Recent scholars have emphasized the role of indigenous communities in advancing sustainability. Bansal et al. (2024) identify six thematic dimensions linking indigenous contributions to economic, ecological, and governance systems. Mallick et al. (2024) demonstrate how tribal home-gardens strengthen biodiversity and climate adaptation. Sahoo et al. (2022) advocate ecosystem-based development models for indigenous populations.

Singh et al. (2020) highlights the resilience embedded in traditional food systems among Adi women. Giribabu et al. (2019) connect social protection schemes like MGNREGA with SDG outcomes. Das (2024) stresses skill development as central to tribal youth livelihood security. Rasul et al. (2016) analyze regional development challenges in aligning policy with SDGs.

Governance-focused studies further strengthen the discourse. Scheyvens et al. (2021) examine indigenous tourism aligned with SDGs. Roy et al. (2023) identifies institutional inefficiencies affecting ethnic minorities. Ramli (2021) critiques fragmented SDG implementation. Ali et al. (2021), Bhushan et al. (2018), Kenney and Phibbs (2021), Kashif et al. (2023), and Madhanagopal and Jacob (2022) highlight indigenous climate adaptation strategies.

Despite this body of work, empirical studies focusing specifically on tribal youth in Northeast India remain limited.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by five interlinked objectives:

1. To assess access to and quality of basic services among tribal youth in relation to SDG targets.
2. To analyze socio-economic conditions, including income sources and the relationship between education and livelihood security.
3. To evaluate environmental awareness and perceptions of climate change.
4. To examine governance participation, youth empowerment, and gender inclusion.
5. To understand awareness and perceived relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. Data were collected from 54 tribal youth aged 18–35 years across six northeastern states. The sample was selected using stratified random and theoretical sampling to ensure diversity across gender, education and tribal affiliation.

The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, access to infrastructure, economic status, environmental awareness, SDG familiarity and governance perceptions. Data were analyzed

using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and cross-tabulations were generated. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ levels.

Findings

Demographic Profile

The average age of respondents was 23.09 years ($SD = 3.16$). Females comprised 57.4% of the sample. Nearly 48.1% held postgraduate degrees, indicating strong educational capital.

Access to Basic Services

Clean water access was generally high ($M = 1.17$, $SD = 0.42$). Electricity access was nearly universal ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 0.23$), though reliability concerns persisted ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.56$). Sanitation quality was weaker ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.76$), reflecting infrastructure gaps (Shrestha, 2021; Mara & Evans, 2018). Housing quality was moderate ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.77$).

Healthcare and Education

Healthcare access was moderate (Median = 1.80, $SD = 0.53$). Educational attainment was high; however, economic returns were inconsistent (Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016).

Economic Conditions

Economic distress was evident (Median = 3.19, $SD = 2.07$). A statistically significant negative correlation between education and income ($r = -0.362$, $p = .007$) suggests that higher education does not guarantee improved earnings (Das, 2024). This indicates structural employment limitations.

From time to time, higher income links to better understanding of environmental goals ($r = 0.280$, $p = .041$), hinting that financial security may support learning about sustainable practices (Giribabu et al., 2019).

Environmental Awareness

Fear around climate shifts came through clearly in responses (Median = 3.30, $SD = 1.67$); still, knowledge of precise ecological effects stayed somewhat limited. That gap suggests recognition exists - just not embedded into systems.

Governance and Inclusion

Leadership trust stayed weak - median at 1.69, standard deviation 0.64. A deeper issue emerged with youth influence: median just