



# ALTERNATIVE SCHEMES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND NGOs' ROLE AMONG THE TRIBALS IN TAMIL NADU

1<sup>st</sup> R. Narmatha Devi, 2<sup>nd</sup> S.Ravichandran,  
1<sup>st</sup> Research Scholar, 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Professor,  
Department of History, Periyar University, Salem-11  
Email: sravichandran@periyaruniversity.ac.in

**Abstract:** Many Sustainable developmental strategies have been adopted by NGOs for combating poverty, promoting human health and protecting the atmosphere. NGOs, the people's organisations, took up this daunting task. They laboured towards a Utopian life and society through sustainable development. Their goals such as bettering people's health, providing equal educational opportunities to all, giving everyone a chance to participate in public life, helping to ensure a clean environment, promoting intergenerational equity are manifested among the lives of Tribals in Tamil Nadu. Adivasis have been gradually alienated from forests, their traditional rights have been undermined and they have been forced into pauperisation or have been forced to migrate to urban centres as daily wage or bonded labourers. Human rights are the Civil Rights promised by the State for each and every citizen of the nation. Their rights are often limited by the Government in Tamil Nadu.

**Keywords -** Sustainable development, empowerment, economic growth, Dalits and Adivasis, tribals and social life.

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as a central paradigm in the discourse on social justice, environmental conservation, and economic equity, especially in regions inhabited by indigenous and tribal communities. In Tamil Nadu, the tribal population though relatively small in proportion represents a culturally rich and ecologically significant segment of society. The tribes of the Nilgiris, Dharmapuri, Salem, Villupuram, and Tiruvannamalai districts, among others, have historically depended on forest-based livelihoods, traditional agriculture, and community oriented systems of resource management. However, the pressures of modernization, industrial expansion, deforestation, and socio-economic marginalization have profoundly disrupted their traditional ways of life, leading to poverty, displacement, and ecological degradation.

In response to these challenges, alternative development schemes emphasizing sustainability, participatory governance, and indigenous knowledge have gained prominence. These schemes seek to balance economic advancement with ecological preservation and cultural continuity. Concepts such as community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), organic and millets-based agriculture, eco-tourism, social forestry, and decentralized micro-enterprise development have been integrated into the broader framework of sustainable tribal development. Such approaches not only promote economic self-reliance but also ensure that tribal communities become active participants in the development process rather than passive recipients of external aid.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a pivotal role in operationalizing these alternative models. In Tamil Nadu, a wide spectrum of NGOs ranging from local grassroots organizations to larger advocacy networks have engaged with tribal communities through interventions in education, health care, women's empowerment, livelihood generation, and environmental protection. Their efforts often bridge the gap between governmental policies and ground realities, facilitating the effective implementation of welfare schemes, mobilizing community participation, and preserving indigenous knowledge systems. Moreover, NGOs have been instrumental in fostering awareness of rights, environmental stewardship, and democratic participation among tribal populations.

Despite the numerous interventions, the sustainability and inclusivity of such development efforts remain subjects of scholarly debate. Issues such as dependence on external funding, policy incoherence, lack of institutional support, and the commodification of tribal culture pose challenges to genuine empowerment. Therefore, a critical analysis of alternative development schemes and the evolving role of NGOs among the tribals in Tamil Nadu are essential to understand both the potentials and limitations of current approaches.

This study aims to examine the conceptual and practical dimensions of sustainable development among Tamil Nadu's tribal communities, with particular emphasis on the role of NGOs in shaping, implementing, and sustaining alternative developmental

models. By situating these initiatives within the broader socio-economic and cultural context, the research seeks to contribute to policy discourse and propose viable frameworks for inclusive and ecologically sensitive tribal development.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Tribal communities in Tamil Nadu, though distinct in their cultural heritage and ecological settings, continue to remain among the most socio-economically marginalized groups. Despite numerous government welfare schemes, the benefits often fail to reach the grassroots level due to bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of participatory mechanisms, and inadequate consideration of the tribals' traditional knowledge systems. The conventional top-down models of development have frequently resulted in alienation from ancestral lands, loss of livelihood, and erosion of indigenous identity.

In this context, alternative schemes that emphasize sustainability, self-reliance, and local participation have been introduced both by governmental and non-governmental actors. While such initiatives ranging from eco-friendly livelihood programs and community-based resource management to skill development and women's empowerment projects have shown potential, their long-term impact and replicability remain uncertain.

The role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in mediating between policy frameworks and tribal realities is both complex and crucial. NGOs have introduced innovative models of sustainable development, yet their efforts are sometimes constrained by limited funding, lack of institutional collaboration, and challenges in aligning with government programs. There is also the issue of accountability, where the effectiveness of NGO-led interventions varies widely depending on local contexts and administrative support.

Thus, the problem under investigation lies in understanding how effectively alternative schemes for sustainable development are conceptualized and implemented among tribal communities in Tamil Nadu, and to what extent NGOs contribute to or hinder these processes. The research seeks to assess the sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity of these interventions while identifying gaps that impede genuine tribal empowerment and ecological balance.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Analyze the socio-economic and ecological conditions of the tribal communities in Tamil Nadu in relation to sustainable development paradigms.
2. Examine the nature, scope, and implementation of alternative development schemes introduced for tribal welfare in Tamil Nadu.
3. Evaluate the role and effectiveness of NGOs in promoting sustainable development among tribal populations.
4. To assess the degree of participation of tribal communities in NGO-led and government-supported developmental activities.
5. To identify the major challenges and limitations faced by NGOs in implementing sustainable development initiatives in tribal regions.
6. To suggest policy measures and strategic frameworks for enhancing the sustainability and inclusivity of tribal development programs in Tamil Nadu.

## Review of Literature

1. The idea of sustainable development gained prominence after the publication of the Brundtland Report (**World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987**), which defined it as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.
2. The introduction of the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and later the Panchayats (**Extension to Scheduled Areas**) Act, 1996 (PESA) sought to decentralize development administration and empower local governance systems. Yet, gaps between policy design and field-level implementation persist, especially in states like Tamil Nadu with dispersed tribal populations.
3. Furthermore, participatory models such as **Joint Forest Management (JFM)** have provided a platform for tribal communities to co-manage forest resources, blending modern environmental policies with indigenous conservation practices.
4. Non-Governmental Organizations have become vital actors in bridging the gap between the state and marginalized communities. Their role in promoting literacy, healthcare, micro-enterprises, women's empowerment, and environmental awareness has been widely acknowledged (Korten, 1990; Tandon, 2002).

Sustainable development means the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>1</sup> The awareness for sustainable development became a worldwide movement after the Earth Summit, which was held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992.<sup>2</sup> The Agenda 21, an agreement adopted in the Earth Summit, identified a few areas for global action for sustainable development. The important areas are combating poverty; promoting human health and human settlement development; poverty utilization of land resources; protection of atmosphere, combating desertification and drought; conservation of biological diversity; sustainable agriculture; protection of ocean, mountains and water resources; prevention of illegal international traffic in toxic; dangerous products and hazardous wastes; sound management of solid wastes; sewage-related issues and radioactive wastes; utilization of science to reduce global warming; global action for women towards sustainable development; involving the Indigenous people, youth, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and trade union in sustainable development; and promoting the public awareness to attain sustainable development.

NGOs are independent, flexible, democratic, secular, and nonprofit people's organization working for assisting in the empowerment of economically and socially, marginalized groups. NGOs in Tamil Nadu express and foster a search for alternatives in practically all sectors of life. Looking for culturally viable alternative forms of development is an imperative from the unsustainable nature of the present conceptions and models of ordering and governing the tribal society.<sup>3</sup> To begin with, the NGOs look at the fields of economic and development models. The grass-roots movements emerging from marginalized or weaker sections of the society such as dalits, tribals and backward castes mainly and increasingly demand the implementation of the Indian Constitution, which they more and more interpret in terms of rights, and the correction of distribution imbalances in wealth and income, status and prestige as well as power and privilege.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the women, environment, and peace movements mainly, but not exclusively, struggle for sustainable, egalitarian, and participatory development. According to NGOs indeed, development must be by and for the people, and especially by and for the poor, and by and for women.<sup>5</sup> Such NGOs moreover promote a relevant search for alternatives with regard to health care, education, technology usage, etc. All this involves

a new kind of class struggle.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the new NGOs increasingly embody a deep rethinking of industrial civilization, science and technology, modernization and Westernization, today's lifestyles and behaviour patterns, and the very high values and attitudes that support the contemporary society. Ultimately, these NGOs spread a new vision of life and society for sustainable development.

The concept of sustainable development is of recent origin. The term 'sustainable development' was first used by the World Conservation Strategy presented by the International Union for the conservation of nature and natural resources in 1980. There are many definitions of sustainable development. But the most popular definition is by the Brundtland Report. It defines sustainable development as 'meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations'. Sustainable development means that development should 'keep going'. It emphasizes the creation of sustainable improvements in the quality of the life of all people through increases in real income per capita, improvement in education, health and general quality of the life, and improvements in the quality of natural environment resources.<sup>7</sup>

Sustainable development aims at the creation of sustainable improvements in the quality of life for all people as the principal goal of development policy. Accordingly, sustainable development has many objectives. Besides increasing economic growth and meeting basic needs, the aim of lifting living standards includes a number of more specific goals such as 'bettering people's health and education opportunities, giving everyone the chance to participate in public life, helping to ensure a clean environment and promoting intergenerational equity'.<sup>8</sup>

Sustainable development is maintaining a delicate balance between human needs to improve lifestyle and feeling of the well-being and preserving natural resources and ecosystems, on which future generations depend. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), it describes 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.<sup>9</sup> It further adds 'sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with the future as well as present needs'.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of sustainable development includes well-being of human society and preservation of nature as well. This means the (natural) resources that are available in the world are for every human being. Sustainable development implies economic growth together with the protection of environmental quality, each reinforcing the other. The essence of this form of development among the tribal community is a stable relationship between their activities, which does not diminish the prospects for future generations to enjoy a quality of life. Many observers believe that participatory democracy, undominated by vested interests, is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development with the tribals.<sup>11</sup> The term refers to achieving economic and social development in ways that do not exhaust a country's natural resources.<sup>12</sup> Hence, it is a socio-economic issue and it is called for establishing a more just and equitable society. This means that environmental consideration must be integrated with social and economic policy of countries, especially for the tribal people.

The plight of the poor and the marginalized in all part of the world is in pitiable conditions particularly in India, especially the tribals in Tamil Nadu as the market economy gains ground in which overexploitation is the order of the day. It appears two frightening developments, namely globalization and liberalization. The NGOs are moving towards the amnesia of the poor – the forgetfulness of the poor in Tamil Nadu.<sup>13</sup> The whole atmosphere seems to be charged with the spirit of eugenics and the philosophy of the survival of the fittest. The concrete way of expressing it is to exclude the poor from every sphere. Exclusion is writ large at the very heart of the process of globalization and economic liberation.<sup>14</sup>

The problem becomes more serious when those affected adversely by development projects belong to the weaker sections like the dalits and adivasis, whose livelihood is mostly dependent on natural resources. In fact, they are the sons and daughters and indigenous people of this land. The issue of development-induced displacement and environmental degradation is becoming a serious national concern.<sup>15</sup> The World Bank-funded Chandil Dam has affected a total of 116 villages, of which 38 are fully and 78 are partially submerged, displacing 5600 families, of which 95 per cent belong to dalit and tribal communities. The implementation of resettlement and rehabilitation for the displaced persons was so bad even the World Bank had to suspend the disbursement of funds in 1988 and resumed it only six months later. Hence, acquisition, displacement and resettlement are a story of displaced persons' victimization, dispossession, and marginalization.<sup>16</sup> The policies of the state have made local tribal communities 'outsiders' and 'oustees' in their traditional rights are homeland. Adivasis are alienated from forests, their traditional rights are undermined, and they are forced into pauperization or are forced to migrate to urban centres as casual labourers. When they are deprived of their sustenance, they are forced to destroy the little that is left for survival and turn it into a nonrenewable resource. It impoverishes them further as one can see from the proportion of the below-poverty population. It is the highest among the adivasis who are the most dependent on nature, as such the worst hit by its alienation, as 'around 70 million tribals largely depend on the forest for their livelihood'.<sup>17</sup>

The choice of the pattern of development has resulted in the transfer of the natural resources from the communities that have traditionally kept a balance between human and environmental needs, to the corporate sector to whom land, water sources and forests are a tool of profit or a raw material to produce consumer goods for the middle class. Its resultant consumerism has been institutionalized in the economic liberalization measures.<sup>18</sup> For the communities like tribals, the forest is not only a source of livelihood for the present but also a part and parcel of their very life. Ecological degradation deprives these communities of their livelihood. Moreover, these communities have traditionally kept a balance between human and environmental needs and re-establishing the symbiotic relationship between them. In most of their cultures, the community included the past and the future generations, not merely the present. They treated the environment as a resource that has come down from the ancestors. The present generation has to use it in such a way as to preserve it for posterity, a balance between human and environmental needs, i.e., intragenerational and intergenerational equality.

According to one estimate, nearly 300 lakhs have been deprived of their livelihood since 1951 in India and less than 25 per cent of them are resettled. Its worst victims are the adivasis and other marginalized groups. Even among these communities, women are the worse victims than men. As the UN Development Programme notes, poor people are much more exposed to disasters, and to consequent displacement, than the rich ones. There are poor who are relentlessly pushed into more marginal and dangerous places such as previously unsettled flood plains and areas close to active volcanoes.<sup>19</sup>

Overconsumption of the resources by a small minority is basic to the unjust international economic order that is keeping the countries of the poor South. The regions rich in natural resources were kept under the control of the North in order to ensure the continuation of this lifestyle. They saw environmental degradation as an integral part of an unjust economic order at the global and national levels. Restoration of the environment was thus linked to a change in lifestyles.<sup>20</sup>

While the plight of the marginalized poor is very pathetic on the one side, the reality of the rich exploiters on the other side is deliberate. The richest one per cent of the adults in the world own 40 per cent of the planet's wealth. More than one-third of these individuals live in the USA, Japan accounts 27 per cent of the total, the UK for 6 per cent of the total, and France, 5 per cent. 'It is impossible to justify such vast wealth when 800 million people go to bed hungry every night and a small part of their wealth could transform the lives of millions'.<sup>21</sup>

Global warming fuelled by human activity could lift temperatures by 8 degrees and the ocean's surface by 23 inches by 2100. Nearly 150 million people, the equivalent of about half the US population, live packed in an area the size of Iowa and about as flat, home to where the mighty Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna rivers meet.<sup>22</sup> Assessments based on limited evidence show that one-meter sea level rise can lead to a welfare loss of 1,259 million in India equivalent to 0.36 per cent of GDP.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, the vulnerable sections will be most affected by the global warming too, for the State does not seem to take precautionary measures in such natural disasters. The changing character of the state, market and civil society in India including Tamil Nadu has made the issue of environment very poignant.

The task of the NGO is Herculean in nature. There is a need for a networking of several forces in the task. The combination of civil society groups, higher educational institutions and people's movements will help the process of attaining sustainable development. NGOs are critical actors in the advancement of universal values around human rights, environment, sustainable development, etc. As global market integration has advanced, their role has gained particular importance in aligning economic activities with social and environmental priorities.

If globalization and liberalization benumb social consciousness, it is of utmost importance that we heighten critical consciousness in society for the protection of its victims. For human rights have the following implication too. 'If a person has right, then the community and other persons have a duty to respect and fulfil that right. Because a right confers an obligation on the community'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, educational institutions could create platforms for the social movements in their institutions to discuss and debate the issues concerning people. A nonexploitative and person-oriented praxis will be the result of a deeper value change attitude in persons and institutions. This must be brought into the minds of the youngsters through conscientization programmes against the consumerist culture through their curriculum in the educational institutions.

The power of people's movements in this regard should be publicized. For instance, when the Indian Government has cleared proposals for setting up four new Special Economic Zones (SEZs), including two by India's IT major Infosys Technologies and a one-year extension of in-principle approval to the controversial Maha Mumbai SEZ promoted by Reliance Industries Limited, people's movements all over the country, particularly in Maharashtra, mobilized support among the people against land acquisitions in rural areas. NGOs' action against government acquisition of land in rural areas – the process of 'mega land grab' – is gathering steam across India in the lead-up to the country's Independence Day on August 15, and a state wide protest against these land grabs has kicked off in Rajasthan.<sup>25</sup>

Realizing Mahatma Gandhi's principle *Sarvodaya through antyodaya* (the liberation of all lies in the liberation of the marginalized and the poorest of the poor), the state should act. The government of any welfare state, as the custodian of the public purse, has an obligation to protect all. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed for a more equitable and just balance between societal needs and environmental systems. A holistic approach is necessary for sustainable development in both environment and society. Achieving this end networking among various groups and forces is the imperative. And, it is the need of the hour when one realizes the urgency of the situation. This networking could consist of committed environmentalists who continuously champion the cause of the sustainable development and protection of the environment; people's movements that fight for such rights; organic intellectuals who can articulate issues objectively from the subaltern perspective; higher educational institutions which could work as catalysts of change among the student community; enlightened citizens who are inspired by high ideals like peace, justice and equality; ready to work for the welfare of the marginalized people; and all the democratic forces who are interested in the welfare of the people, particularly the common ordinary masses. These forces can play a proactive role in achieving sustainable development through conscientization.

The interplay of the natural environment and manmade civilizations led to various changes in the life of man. All resources are undergoing a comprehensive attack, and the ecosystem is on the brink of disintegration and collapse. Biological and cultural diversity are dwindling at an alarming rate.<sup>26</sup> Hence, ecologists and Economists are devising compromise programmes and coined a new term 'sustainable development'. One of the most striking characteristics of the term sustainable development that it means so many different things to so many different people and organization.<sup>27</sup> The three-pillar approach (emphasizing the social, ecological and economic dimensions of sustainable development), or a more dualistic typology (emphasizing the relationship between humanity and nature), or others.<sup>28</sup> Given these difficulties, it is perhaps not surprising that conceptions of the meanings of sustainable development and sustainability tend rather to reflect the political and philosophical position of those proposing the definition more than any unambiguous scientific view. In other words, the lack of definitional precision of the term sustainable development may present an important political opportunity.

Today, ecological issues are hunting the poor and marginalized. Ecology is the science, which studies animal and plant systems in relation to the environment and their interrelation to different life forms.<sup>29</sup> It is the interconnectedness with human beings which is under threat. Hence, the ecosystem that is comprised of the community of life of animals and plants kept the balance of the social life of human beings and now under harassment and exploitation of the human beings. The Citizen's Report published by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi raised great concerns about the depletion of land forests, water atmospheres and other natural resources. The gravity of waterborne diseases is very severe as per the report of the World Health Organization. It has been estimated that 80 per cent of cancer is caused by pollution. In 1991, air pollution in Mumbai causes 1,91,000 cases of bronchitis in children and 7,541,000 cases of Asthma.<sup>30</sup>

Today, the environment is under severe stress due to the rapid progress of the technology. In 1972, it was estimated that India was losing 6000 million tons of topsoil annually. Formation of one centimetre of topsoil takes centuries.<sup>31</sup> For any country, one-

third of land should be under tree cover, and India is far below the target. Indian peasants have been cultivating thousands of varieties of paddies. But because of the green revolution, we are using fifty varieties only. Multinational companies are striving to establish the genetic resources of the developing countries.<sup>32</sup>

Sustainability may usefully be thought of in two dimensions. The substantive dimension indicated that sustainability requires the simultaneous reconciliation of three imperatives – the ecological, economic and social.

- i) The ecological imperative is to stay within the biophysical carrying capacity of the planet.
- ii) The economic imperative is to provide an adequate material standard of living of all and
- iii) The social imperative is to provide systems of governance that propagates the values that people want to live by.<sup>33</sup> It is suggested that this might be accomplished by a twin strategy of dematerialization and what we call 'resocialization' (increasing human well-being per unit economic activity).<sup>34</sup>

Environment scientists speak of sustainable development or development that does not put pressure on the carrying capacity of the Earth Development should not affect human health and welfare.<sup>35</sup> The World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future generation to meet their own needs'.<sup>36</sup>

India is a country that has more underfed and undernourished. The Earth system is being polluted and destroyed through waste from the modern project-oriented scientific technological culture.<sup>37</sup> The Tata Energy Research Institute estimates economic losses due to soil degradation, disease caused by pollution and forest degradation between Rs. 100,000 to 450,000 crores per annum.<sup>38</sup> The Titanium Factory in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin districts got 16,000 acres of land. It will lead to many environmental hazards. As per the Environmental Protection Act of 1986 to construct a factory, the State Government has to examine the place and intimate the Central Government for permission. With regard to 16,000 acres of land allocation for the Titanium Factory, it is doubtful whether the government has gone as per the act.<sup>39</sup>

To analyse the issue from the point of view of Human Rights and Development, sustainable development very often becomes abstract terms subjects to the interpretation of the human rights and environmental activities among the tribals in Tamil Nadu. Human rights are described as natural rights of man without which a man cannot live as a human being. Some say that human rights are the Civil Rights given by the State Government. In this context, human rights are restricted to right-guaranteed by the Government of Tamil Nadu also. Hence, human rights differs from country to country and some time from place to place.<sup>40</sup>

Coming to sustainable development from the fifth century onwards, there is a problem existing in squaring the circle, until it was proved in 2000 that it was impossible. Similarly, the problem of sustainable development is a contradicting term between the development on the one hand and ecological sustainability on the other. Those who try to attain sustainable development mean trying to square the circle. It is very difficult to reconcile with the terms human rights and sustainable development.<sup>41</sup>

Alternative terminology has been coined now for the linkage between environmental and social issues (a concept developed after 1980), ecological concern and sociopolitical concern.<sup>42</sup> Conserving the natural areas and resources for later human use created concern on pollution, nonremovable resource depletion, and population growth.<sup>43</sup> The techniques such as intercropping, agro forestry green manuring, composting and biological pest control offer fewer prospects of commercial gain to those who have money to invest. The hundreds of millions of people who would gain are the much derided practitioners of the so-called peasant agriculture, who have very little money, but who are the long-term guardians of biodiversity.<sup>44</sup>

India is proud to say that the farmers in Tamil Nadu have achieved very good yield through the organic way of farming by the training of NGOs. They have got a rice yield of four tones per acre, cotton yield of 15 quintals per acre, 30 quintals of turmeric per acre, 40 kg of banana per acre and 70 tones of sugar cane per acre. Still, there are scientists who speak in favour of the green revolution. Organic by-products from the farm such as straw and animals' manure replace purchased chemical fertilizers. Organic manure and compost green manures, microorganisms such as nitrogen-fixing bacteria and earthworms increase soil fertility and hence agricultural production; the organic matter increased in the soil also contributes to soil and water conservations. These gains are real, not just in theory. Biodiversity does not just provide a sustainable source for replenishing the fertility; when diverse crops are grown by farmers, different plants play host to different species, for example, some of these like spider beetles are friendly insects which control pests. Biodiversity creates a pest predator balance: when pesticides are sprayed, predators are killed and pest population's explode.<sup>45</sup>

The first India's modern environmental laws were the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1974, which established the Central and State Water Pollution Control Boards; the Water Cess Act of 1977; the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1981; and the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986. The latter is an umbrella legislation designed to provide a framework for Central Government. The problem envisaged here is not insufficient laws or pollution control boards that can control pollution, but poor enforcement due to political interference.<sup>46</sup> Another point worth mentioning is that the mandate of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) is to set environmental standards for all plants in India, lay down ambient standards, and coordinate the activities of the State Government.<sup>47</sup> NGOs have taken several steps to create awareness to attain sustainable development in Tamil Nadu. At the same time, they have done a great service for alternative sustainable developments in Tamil Nadu.

## CONCLUSION

The study underscores that sustainable development among the tribal communities of Tamil Nadu must be viewed as an evolving process rather than a set of externally imposed programs. The research reveals that while numerous governmental and non-governmental initiatives have been launched to address issues of livelihood, education, health, and environmental conservation, their long-term success depends largely on the extent to which they integrate tribal knowledge systems, local participation, and ecological sensitivity. The findings demonstrate that alternative development schemes such as eco-friendly agriculture, community forestry, micro-enterprise promotion, and participatory natural resource management offer meaningful avenues for achieving economic self-reliance without undermining traditional cultural values.

Non-Governmental Organizations have emerged as crucial intermediaries in facilitating this transformation. Their proximity to the grassroots enables them to bridge the gap between state policy and community needs, promote social mobilization, and

strengthen institutional capacities within tribal settlements. Through participatory planning, capacity-building workshops, and micro-finance initiatives, NGOs have helped to create models of development that are context-specific and culturally appropriate. However, the study also reveals certain structural constraints: dependence on donor funding, uneven coordination with government agencies, and inadequate mechanisms for long-term evaluation. These challenges highlight the need for institutional convergence and policy coherence between NGOs, government departments, and local governance bodies.

A sustainable future for Tamil Nadu's tribal populations requires a paradigm shift from welfare-oriented interventions to rights-based and empowerment-driven development. Strengthening the autonomy of tribal institutions, ensuring equitable access to natural resources, and embedding environmental education in community programs are crucial steps toward this goal. Moreover, systematic documentation of best practices and replication of successful models across tribal regions can amplify the impact of ongoing efforts.

In essence, the study concludes that sustainable development among tribals is achievable only through a synergistic approach one that harmonizes state policy, NGO innovation, and community participation. When development initiatives respect cultural identity, protect natural ecosystems, and promote inclusive growth, they become not merely schemes but pathways to enduring social justice and environmental harmony. The lessons drawn from Tamil Nadu can thus contribute significantly to broader discourses on participatory and sustainable tribal development in India and beyond.

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