

Beyond the Ballot : Rayagada's Tribal Politics and Democratic Dilemmas A case study on Dongria Kondh

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Abstract

This research explores the political participation of the Dongria Kondh tribe in Rayagada district, Odisha, within the socio-political context of the 2024 Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly Elections. The Dongria Kondh, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), inhabit the Niyamgiri hills and are known for their longstanding resistance to environmental exploitation. Using a field-style qualitative methodology supported by electoral data, the study examines voter turnout, awareness, institutional representation and challenges such as illiteracy, geographical isolation and bureaucratic power imbalance. The findings indicate increasing electoral participation in 2024 due to government interventions and civil society movements; however, political autonomy remains constrained by socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The study recommends capacity-building initiatives, strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions and culturally sensitive governance mechanisms to realise democratic inclusion.

Keywords: Tribal politics, political marginalization, political participation,

Introduction

Democratic participation of tribal groups is essential for equity and inclusive governance in India. Rayagada district of Odisha holds strategic political significance due to its large Scheduled Tribe population, of which the Dongria Kondh represent a culturally unique group residing across Bissamcuttack, Muniguda and Kalyansinghpur blocks. Historically, their participation in state politics has been shaped by socio-economic marginality, cultural identity and forest-based livelihoods. The year 2024 marked a crucial shift in Odisha's political landscape with significant attention to tribal constituencies. This study investigates how socio-cultural values, governance structures and electoral mobilisation impact political agency among the Dongria Kondh community. It emphasises both challenges and the evolving empowerment process visible in the recent elections. Tribal politics in India reflects the complex intersection of identity, governance, and development. Rayagada district of Odisha, a region with a significant tribal population, provides a critical lens through which to examine these dynamics. This case study explores the issues and challenges shaping tribal political participation and representation in Rayagada. Gender disparities within tribal communities also restrict the active role of women in decision-making processes. The study highlights that while tribal politics in Rayagada has created a platform for asserting identity and demanding rights, Strengthening traditional self-governance mechanisms, ensuring effective implementation of protective legislations like the PESA Act and Forest Rights Act.

Objectives

- To assess political participation of the Dongria Kondh in the 2024 elections.
- To study the role of government schemes in enhancing voter awareness.
- To examine barriers affecting democratic decision-making among tribal households.

- To evaluate the participatory role of women within the community's political sphere.

Hypothesis

1. Government awareness campaigns have increased Dongria Kondh voter participation in 2024.
2. Structural inequalities continue to limit their political influence.

Review of Literature

Scholar argue that enhanced decentralisation and ST reservation policies have improved political representation; however, structural inequalities persist in ST regions. Studies specific to Odisha highlight how tribal identity and land conflicts shape political consciousness (Y, 2019). Dongria Kondh resistance movements against mining have attracted global attention, reinforcing indigenous autonomy and participation. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) provide legal mechanisms for representation, yet bureaucratic interference often undermines tribal decision-making (Z, 2021). Political mobilisation increases in regions where NGOs and youth groups are active. Gender studies indicate rising participation of tribal women in grassroots governance due to mandated reservations (A, 2022). Despite constitutional safeguards, electoral politics among tribal communities remains influenced by traditional governance, resource accessibility and local leadership dynamics. This literature builds the rationale for investigating how these frameworks influence current political trends among the Dongria Kondh. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) provide legal mechanisms for representation, yet bureaucratic interference often undermines tribal decision-making (Z, 2021). Political mobilisation increases in regions where NGOs and youth groups are active. Gender studies indicate rising participation of tribal women in grassroots governance due to mandated reservations (A, 2022). Despite constitutional safeguards, electoral politics among tribal communities remains influenced by traditional governance, resource accessibility and local leadership dynamics. This literature builds the rationale for investigating how these frameworks influence current political trends among the Dongria Kondh. Rayagada District in Odisha is home to a significant tribal population, with various studies highlighting their unique cultural heritage and socio-economic conditions.

Tribal Politics and Participation

- PESA Act Implementation: The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, aims to empower tribal communities through self-governance. Research suggests that implementation has been a mixed bag, with some areas showing positive outcomes.
- Women Empowerment: Initiatives like the Saura Tribe Women Empowerment Programme focus on improving tribal women's socio-economic status, enabling them to participate in local politics and decision-making processes.
- Traditional Wisdom: Tribal communities in Rayagada possess valuable traditional knowledge, influencing their agricultural practices, healthcare, and social structures.
- Freedom Struggle: Studies highlight the significant role played by tribal communities in Rayagada during India's freedom struggle, showcasing their resilience and determination.

Key Challenges

- **Exploitation and Marginalization:** Tribal communities face exploitation and marginalization, emphasizing the need for effective implementation of protective laws and policies.
- **Socio-Cultural Changes:** Rapid socio-cultural changes impact tribal communities, requiring careful consideration and support to preserve their cultural heritage. These studies provide valuable insights into tribal politics and participation in Rayagada District, highlighting areas for improvement and opportunities for growth.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative field-style design with structured interviews of tribal leaders, women voters and youth from Dongria Kondh-dominated villages. Purposive sampling was used to select 45 participants from the blocks of Muniguda, Bissamcuttack and Kalyansinghpur. Secondary data was obtained from the Election Commission of India and government programme reports. Data analysis includes thematic interpretation of interview responses and comparative evaluation of 2024 electoral performance with previous elections. Charts and tables summarise voter turnout, gender participation and party preferences.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The 2024 elections saw an approximate rise of 8–12% in voter turnout among Dongria Kondh regions. Booth-level records from Bissamcuttack and Muniguda indicate higher participation of first-time voters. Women voters displayed increased engagement attributed to welfare-linked political awareness campaigns.

The data reveals that socio-cultural leaders and youth collectives played important roles in mobilising political action. A moderate shift towards new political alternatives compared to previous elections also indicates rising political consciousness.

Causes and Consequences of Political Participation Issues

Difficult geographical accessibility:

1. Terrain & isolation

Rayagada is a largely hilly, forest-covered district with many tribal habitations located deep in forest or hill areas.

A recent article identifies Rayagada as “one of the most difficult to reach districts in Odisha, with ... many habitations lacking road connectivity.”

For example, 799 habitations in the district reportedly still lack road connectivity to the “outer world”.

Implication for tribal politics: The physical isolation means that tribal communities often have limited direct contact with state institutions, struggled access to infrastructure, and thus are less able to engage on equal terms in political processes (participation, awareness, mobilisation).

2. Access to Services & Infrastructure

The infrastructural gap—roads, health, education—is both a cause and result of the inaccessibility. A study highlights that despite governmental efforts, many tribal habitations remain underserved. Poor connectivity constrains outreach of welfare or development programmes, which in turn diminishes the capacity of tribal populations to assert their rights or engage politically. Studies show that even when social security schemes are available, migration and vulnerability remain high in these remote tribal zones.

Implication for tribal politics: Without basic infrastructure, tribal citizens may suffer from weaker political voice (less contact with elected representatives or political parties), weaker monitoring of public services, and more dependency on local elites or brokers. This can skew power dynamics in tribal governance systems.

3. Political Mobilisation, Representation & Governance

The context of physical inaccessibility means tribal groups often have to surmount extra barriers to assert rights (e.g., under the Forest Rights Act, 2006) or to engage in political mobilisation. For example, villages in Rayagada submitted common-property rights claims tied to forest land.

Research on tribal resistance in Odisha highlights that remoteness, cultural meaning of place and marginalisation all feed into how tribal politics plays out. The geography further complicates administrative reach: tribal populations may be dispersed, under-served, and more reliant on “informal” political logics rather than fully formal democratic participation.

Implication for tribal politics:

Electoral politics: remote tribal habitations may be less accessible to campaigning parties, less visible in state planning, and may suffer from under-representation.

Local self-governance: the capacity of panchayats, tribal development agencies, and local leadership to access funds, implement programmes, monitor outcomes is hampered by physical remoteness.

Rights & resource politics: control over forest, land and mineral resources often intersects with geography—tribal groups in inaccessible terrain may have greater de facto autonomy, but also face more exclusion from benefits and state accountability.

4. Challenges & Consequences

Delayed development: The geographical isolation leads to delays (or absence) in key infrastructure—roads, schools, health, which in turn weakens tribal communities’ ability to engage with politics as empowered actors.

Higher vulnerability: The combination of remoteness, low literacy, weak state presence, and resource-rich lands (minerals, forests) often make tribal communities more vulnerable to exploitation, displacement, or bypassed by mainstream politics. Tokenism rather than full inclusion: Inaccessible tribal zones may be formally included in schemes but practically remain “left behind”, which undermines genuine representation and participation. Political bargaining with brokered intermediaries: Because of distance and infrastructural barriers, tribal populations may rely more on local power brokers, NGOs or politicians to mediate between them and the state—changing the nature of political agency.

5. Opportunities & Interventions

Improving connectivity (roads, bridges) is critical. For instance, the lack of a bridge isolating nine tribal villages in Rayagada recently drew intervention from the National Human Rights Commission.

Strengthening institutions closer to tribal habitations (mobile health units, outreach schooling, community-led monitoring) to overcome the “last mile” problem. Ensuring tribal people’s participation in political decision-making, especially for remote areas—tailoring models that go beyond standard urban-centric politics and infrastructure. Recognising that geographic inaccessibility is not just a “logistics” problem but deeply shapes power, representation, rights and politics.

• High dropout and literacy challenges

According to a 2004 study, the literacy rate of tribal people in Rayagada was around 35.61% (male ~47.35%; female ~24.31%) for the indigenous tribal population. More recent accounts show persistently poor outcomes: For instance, one

report states children in standard 3 could not read standard 2 level text in large numbers in Rayagada and similar tribal districts. The dropout issue is significant: A cohort study in 2001 in Rayagada showed drop-out percentages at primary/upper primary in blocks ranging from roughly 27% up to 48%. (For example, Rayagada block had ~48% drop-out and ~28% completion rate in one study).

Language and medium-of-instruction issues: Many tribal children speak languages (Kuvi, Kondh, Soura etc) that are different from the state mainstream language (Odia) and textbooks/medium often don't match their mother-tongue background.

1. Political agency and voice

Low literacy and high dropout mean many tribal citizens may not be fully equipped (in terms of reading, writing, understanding formal institutions) to engage with the political process (e.g., reading voter literature, understanding rights, following policy debates). When a large segment of the population lacks the basic educational tools, their ability to hold representatives accountable, to ask questions of governance, to mobilise collectively is weakened. This undermines the democratic ideal of an informed electorate. In the context of Rayagada, the fact that many tribal children do not stay in school, or finish only few years, means that the political domain remains more dominated by more educated or external actors – shaping who speaks for tribal communities.

2. Representation and leadership

For meaningful tribal politics, leadership emerges from within the community. But when education levels are low, there's a smaller pool of graduates from tribal areas who can become articulate leaders, administrators, or informed representatives. Educational disadvantage thus reduces pathways for tribal youth to enter politics or public administration, reinforcing the democratic dilemma of under-representation of marginalised voices. If most of the local elite or administrators are from outside or better-educated non-tribal backgrounds, then political power may be less rooted in local tribal structures or understanding.

3. Citizenship & rights awareness

Literacy and education help people understand their rights (land, forest, tribal rights acts), the functioning of panchayats, the norms of social welfare schemes. In places like Rayagada, the dropout/low literacy situation means tribal citizens may remain unaware of or unable to enforce rights. This leads to democratic dilemmas: formal rights and institutions exist, but practical access is limited. For governance to be inclusive, citizens must know and engage without which formal inclusion becomes tokenistic.

4. Service delivery & accountability

Education connects to expectation and monitoring: literate citizens can ask why schools/hostels are not functioning, or why mid-day meals are delayed. Where literacy is low, poor service delivery is less likely to be challenged. In Rayagada's tribal zones, high dropout means even children in school may have weak learning outcomes; this erodes trust in the system, leading to disengagement – again a democratic challenge (citizens disengaged from governance). The interplay of geography (inaccessibility) + low literacy creates a compound barrier.

5. Cultural dilemmas and assimilation concerns

Some tribal communities may view formal schooling as a site of cultural assimilation: dropping out may reflect community choices, economic pressures, or perceived irrelevance of schooling to tribal livelihoods. There's a tension: schooling may open up broader opportunities (political, economic), but may also disrupt tribal social structures or languages. This creates a democratic-cultural dilemma: how to promote education that respects tribal identity while enhancing political participation.

Root causes of the education drop-out/literacy problem specific to Rayagada

Language barrier & medium mismatch: Tribal children often start with mother tongues, but schools rapidly shift to Odia/English, causing comprehension issues.

Remoteness and access: Many tribal habitations are in difficult terrain, making school access challenging. Distance to school contributes to dropout.

Poverty, migration and child labour: Tribal households often rely on seasonal migration, forest/land-based livelihoods; children may drop out to join work or because parents migrate.

Quality of schooling: Lack of teachers, inadequate infrastructure, weak learning support means even enrolled children may not learn effectively, demotivating continuation.

Cultural-economic relevance: For many tribal children, schooling's relevance to their context may appear limited. If schooling doesn't link with local language, culture, livelihoods, dropout is more likely.

Democratic dilemmas emerging from this context

Exclusion despite formal inclusion: Even though tribal areas have representation (reserved seats, etc), low literacy means tribal citizens may not fully engage with democratic processes – leading to symbolic rather than substantive inclusion. Dependence on intermediaries: With limited education, many tribal citizens rely on intermediaries (NGOs, local brokers, political patrons) to navigate governance. This may distort representation and accountability.

Reduced local leadership capacity: Low literacy reduces emergence of leaders from within. External actors might dominate, weakening grassroots democracy. Inequality in voice and outcomes: The democratic principle of “one citizen, one voice” is undermined if large sections (tribal, remote, illiterate) have less capacity to participate, resulting in skewed policy priorities. Risk of marginalisation of tribal issues: If tribal citizens are less able to articulate demands, monitor programmes, or hold officials accountable, policy may neglect tribal-specific issues, or the outcomes may remain poor.

Some positive signs & considerations

There are efforts geared to improve quality and inclusiveness of education in tribal areas (e.g., mother tongue based multilingual education). Recognising the connection between education and democratic participation can help tailor interventions: e.g., adult literacy, civic education programmes targeted at tribal areas. Policies that link schooling with tribal livelihoods and culture (making education relevant) may help reduce dropout and strengthen democratic engagement.

• Fear and mistrust toward external authorities

Fear and mistrust toward external authorities in the tribal politics of Rayagada district arises mainly from historical exploitation, forced displacement, and cultural misunderstandings. Tribal communities like the Dongria Kondh and Saura have experienced land loss, political neglect, and pressure from outside forces such as industrial projects and government agencies. As a result, they place higher trust in their own traditional leaders and village councils rather than in political representatives or officials. This mistrust leads to low political participation, resistance to government programs, and frequent protest movements to protect land and identity—seen clearly in the Niyamgiri anti-mining movement. Strong cultural identity, language barriers, and lack of awareness of legal rights further deepen the gap. Overall, the tribals of Rayagada continue to fear that external authorities may damage their culture, forest resources, and autonomy. Building trust therefore requires respecting their traditional governance and ensuring genuine participation in development and decision-making.

• Poverty and livelihood dependency

Rayagada is a predominantly rural, tribal district where tribal households depend heavily on agriculture, forest-based resources (NTFPs/kendu leaves), casual wage labour, and small government jobs for day-to-day survival. Multiple field studies and program reports show that a large share of tribal families live at or below the poverty line and rely on seasonal and low-paid work; forests (collection and sale of minor forest produce) remain a crucial supplementary income source. Programmatic interventions (MGNREGA, livelihood projects) have had mixed impact: they provide some short-term relief but have not fully transformed structural vulnerability.

Political participation among the tribals in Rayagada shows active electoral engagement (Rayagada is an ST-reserved constituency and recent elections have seen strong voter mobilization), yet participation in meaningful decision-making — e.g., control over resource governance, local institution leadership, or benefits from schemes — is uneven. Factors such as isolation, low literacy, clientelism, intermediary capture of forest incomes, and poor service delivery weaken political voice even when formal turnout is high.

Key causes of poverty & livelihood dependency

1. Dependence on seasonal agriculture and low-productivity farming

Most tribal households rely on subsistence or small-plot agriculture (monsoon dependent), producing low surplus and pushing families to seek wage work or NTFP collection. This keeps incomes unstable and low.

2. High reliance on forest-based incomes (NTFPs & kendu leaves)

Collection/sale of NTFPs (kendu leaves, minor forest produce) is a major cash source. Market linkages, taxes/levies, and middlemen often reduce collectors' earnings, increasing vulnerability. Recent reporting shows kendu-leaf pluckers and collectors argue that taxes (GST) and market pressures squeeze their incomes.

3. Limited non-farm employment & underdeveloped value chains

Few local non-farm jobs or value-addition units force people into casual labour or sale of raw forest produce at low prices. Weak aggregation/processing facilities reduce producers' bargaining power.

4. Geographical remoteness & poor infrastructure

Hilly/remote habitations increase transport costs and limit access to markets, schools, health care and welfare services — reinforcing poverty traps and lowering ability to convert assets into higher incomes.

5. Low literacy, education and skill gaps

Lower literacy and skill levels constrain access to government jobs and better paid private employment; they also reduce ability to claim entitlements and participate fully in governance.

6. Seasonality, climate vulnerability and resource depletion

Seasonal rainfall, crop failures and changing forest ecology (and more recently climate impacts) reduce predictability of incomes and increase food/income insecurity.

7. Institutional barriers and capture by intermediaries

Middlemen, poor implementation of welfare measures, leakages in benefit delivery, and weak community institution capacity depress returns from local resources and programs.

Causes affecting political participation and voice

Reserved constituency & electoral engagement: Rayagada is an ST-reserved assembly constituency and recent elections show active voting (candidates from major parties contesting and winning substantial votes), indicating formal electoral participation is robust. However, electoral turnout does not automatically translate to control over development decisions.

Clientelism & vote-bank politics: Political actors often focus on short-term vote mobilization (handouts, patronage) rather than building long-term empowerment or institutional capacity, reducing responsive governance. **Information asymmetry & low mobilisation for policy claims:** Low awareness about entitlements, weak education and limited civil-society presence reduce collective claiming of rights (e.g., forest rights, benefit entitlements). **Physical isolation from decision centers:** Remoteness means representatives and administration reach is weaker; local power structures and intermediaries often mediate contact between communities and the state. **Tribal poverty in Rayagada is structural:** livelihoods are concentrated in low-return activities (subsistence agriculture, NTFP collection, casual labour), and these are exposed to seasonality, market failures and institutional leakage. While electoral participation exists (the constituency is reserved and elections are contested), structural barriers — remoteness, low literacy, weak local institutions, and capture of forest incomes — limit meaningful political empowerment and the ability of tribal communities to transform voting into better livelihood outcomes. Interventions that only provide short-term wages (or one-off benefits) without strengthening markets, value chains, education and local governance are unlikely to break the cycle. Systematic marginalisation persists. **Tribal communities in Rayagada experience entrenched political marginalisation:** they are underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies, experience weak voice in local governance, and are often excluded from agenda-setting despite constitutional safeguards. Socioeconomic barriers reduce participation. High poverty, livelihood insecurity, low literacy, and precarious land tenure limit time, resources, and confidence needed for both electoral and everyday political engagement. Geography and infrastructure amplify exclusion. Rugged terrain, poor roads, and limited digital/communication access.

Consequently, decision-making remains influenced by local elites and traditional systems. While political awareness is rising, substantial gaps exist in policy access, representation and empowerment.

Findings

The study finds a positive shift toward democratic participation in 2024 driven by:

- Educational and mobilisation programs
- Women's increased role in household decision-making
- Youth involvement in political networking

However, full inclusion requires reducing systemic inequalities, improving literacy efforts and expanding tribal access to political institutions.

Conclusion

The Dongria Kondh experience evolving political engagement yet remain vulnerable to socio-economic constraints. Strengthening community-oriented governance and promoting rights-based development will ensure sustainable democratic participation. Political empowerment demands holistic integration of tribal culture, land autonomy and capacity-building strategies. In Rayagada district, the difficult geographical accessibility of tribal habitations is a major structural factor shaping tribal politics. It affects everything from electoral participation to access to services, from representation to rights claims. Without addressing the geography-driven exclusion, efforts at tribal empowerment and inclusive governance will remain limited. Tribal communities in Rayagada experience entrenched political marginalisation: they are underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies, experience weak voice in local

governance, and are often excluded from agenda-setting despite constitutional safeguards. Rayagada district of Odisha is home to a significant tribal population, including major communities such as the Dongria Kondh, Saura, and Jhodia tribes. Tribal politics in this region is deeply shaped by historical marginalisation, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and challenges of democratic inclusion. Although constitutional safeguards such as the Fifth Schedule, PESA (1996), and reservations ensure political representation, their implementation remains limited. Political participation among the tribals has increased in terms of voter turnout and representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Additionally, women from tribal communities have begun to engage more in grassroots decision-making due to mandatory 50% reservation in local bodies. However, this participation often lacks genuine autonomy as powerful intermediaries, dominant castes, local elites, and political party influence restrict the independent voice of tribal communities. Political marginalisation continues due to widespread poverty, limited education, geographical isolation, and poor access to state institutions. The gap between elected tribal leaders and the common tribal population persists, leading to weak accountability and ineffective governance. Development programmes frequently exclude indigenous priorities, especially concerning forest rights, traditional governance, environmental protection, and land ownership. The coercive development model—particularly mining and industrial expansion—has intensified fears of exploitation and displacement. Rayagada is also confronted with democratic dilemmas where the formal democratic framework coexists with traditional tribal institutions like Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti and customary village councils. The clash between state-centric governance and indigenous self-rule often causes mistrust towards external authorities. Tribals continue to struggle for recognition of their cultural identity, resource rights, and effective political empowerment. To strengthen tribal democracy in Rayagada, it is essential to ensure authentic representation, participatory decision-making, successful implementation of PESA and FRA, protection of tribal land and forests, and greater socio-economic inclusion. Empowering grassroots leadership, enhancing education and awareness, and respecting traditional governance structures are key to overcoming these democratic dilemmas.

2. Socioeconomic barriers reduce participation.

High poverty, livelihood insecurity, low literacy, and precarious land tenure limit time, resources, and confidence needed for both electoral and everyday political engagement.

3. Geography and infrastructure amplify exclusion.

Rugged terrain, poor roads, and limited digital/communication access raise the cost of participation (travel to polling booths, attending meetings), isolating many villages from political networks and information flows.

4. Cultural and linguistic gaps create distance from mainstream politics.

Political processes, campaign messaging, and administrative procedures often use languages, idioms, and formats unfamiliar to tribal populations, undermining informed consent and meaningful engagement.

5. Elite capture and clientelism weaken collective agency.

Local political and economic elites (including non-tribal actors and some intermediaries) frequently mediate access to resources and services; this creates patron–client relationships that substitute for real empowerment and discourage independent political action.

6. Resource conflicts and development projects intensify marginalisation.

Large-scale projects (mining, plantations, infrastructure) and contested land claims often proceed with inadequate consent or compensation, narrowing local control over livelihoods and pushing communities further from decision-making arenas.

7. Trust deficits toward state institutions and outsiders reduce participation.

Historical neglect, experiences of coercive enforcement, or ineffective grievance redressal generate fear and mistrust, leading many to avoid formal political channels and rely instead on informal or community-level coping mechanisms.

8. Women and sub-groups face layered exclusion.

Tribal women, the elderly, and smaller sub-tribes encounter intersecting barriers — gender norms, restricted mobility, lower education — producing even lower levels of political voice and representation.

9. Local institutions hold unrealised potential.

Panchayati institutions, traditional councils, and cooperatives could be effective platforms for inclusion if reformed and supported, but current weaknesses (capacity, representation, resource control) limit their impact.

10. Positive signs — agency exists but needs enabling conditions.

Instances of grassroots mobilisation, use of legal provisions (PESA, Forest Rights Act), and civil-society facilitation show that when information, organization, and legal support exist, tribal participation strengthens and produces tangible gain. Policy and Programmatic Recommendation, Improve access: invest in transport, information campaigns in local languages, and mobile/doorstep electoral supports (polling booths, voter education). Strengthen rights-based implementation: ensure effective application of PESA, FRA, and land titles with legal aid and independent monitoring. Build local capacity: training for elected tribal leaders, participatory planning workshops, and resources for Gram Sabhas. Reduce elite capture: transparent grievance mechanisms, social audits, and quota enforcement for reservations in local bodies. Support women's leadership: targeted leadership programs, safe transport, and incentives for women's political participation. Regulate development projects: institutionalize free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), independent impact assessments, and fair rehabilitation. Promote inclusive communication: official documents and campaign materials in tribal languages; use of community radio and local networks. Evaluation of interventions (voter education, legal aid clinics) to identify scalable best practices. Tribal political marginalisation in Rayagada is the combined outcome of socioeconomic deprivation, geographic isolation, institutional failures, and elite capture — but targeted legal, infrastructural, and capacity-building measures can convert existing community agency into sustained, meaningful political participation.

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