



Assimilation or Acculturation? Divergent Trajectories of Cultural Change, Identity, and Social Inclusion among Scheduled Tribes in Madhya Pradesh and the Sundarbans, West Bengal

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Abstract: This paper offers a comparative analysis of cultural change among Scheduled Tribes in two ecologically and socially distinct Indian regions of the forested heartland of Madhya Pradesh and the deltaic Sundarbans of West Bengal. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, the paper employs the conceptual distinction between 'assimilation' and 'acculturation' to trace divergent trajectories of cultural transformation, identity negotiation, and social inclusion. In Madhya Pradesh, tribal communities, including the Gond, Baiga, Bharia, Kol, and Korku, show patterns closer to acculturation, engaging with dominant social and economic systems without the complete abandonment of indigenous identity, language, or cultural practices. The state also recognises the need to protect and preserve tribal groups like the Baiga by categorising them as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). In the Sundarbans, by contrast, the combined pressures of ecological instability, economic marginalisation, institutional neglect, and the dominance of the Bengali language and culture have produced a trajectory of accelerated assimilation, manifested through language shift, identity dilution, and the internalisation of the surrounding dominant cultural system. The paper argues that this distinction is not merely descriptive but has significant analytical and policy implications. It questions the effectiveness of universal development models and advocates for region-specific frameworks that align with the diverse pace and nature of cultural change. The paper advocates for region-specific frameworks that align with the

varying pace and nature of cultural change. The paper further situates these findings within Indian sociological traditions engaging with Ghurye (1963), Elwin (1939), and Xaxa (1999) and within global debates on indigenous rights, pluriversal development, and structural marginalisation.

Keywords: assimilation, acculturation, Scheduled Tribes, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Sundarbans, India, Gond, Baiga

1. Introduction

How do tribal communities change, and at what cost? This deceptively simple question sits at the heart of India's unresolved debate on mainstreaming, the policy aspiration to integrate Scheduled Tribes into the economic and institutional fabric of the nation. This aspiration has been pursued through constitutional provisions, affirmative action, forest rights legislation, and rural and scheduled area development schemes. Yet the question of what integration means for cultural identity, social autonomy, and epistemic continuity remains deeply contested, especially in the wake of the varied survival trajectories of different tribal groups.

This paper addresses that question through a comparative ethnographic study of tribal communities in two Indian regions that are both going through the phenomenon of mainstreaming but are experiencing those patterns in fundamentally different ways. In the forested districts of Madhya Pradesh, home to Gond, Baiga, Bharia, Kol, and Korku communities, integration is occurring but cultural identity remains significantly intact. In the Sundarbans of West Bengal, home to Oraon, Santal, Mahili, Kol, and related groups, the process has advanced further and more rapidly, producing what can be described as a condition of accelerated assimilation.

The conceptual distinction between assimilation and acculturation provides the analytical backbone of this paper. Assimilation is when smaller communities slowly adopt the culture of the dominant society, often at the cost of their own identity. Acculturation, on the other hand, is a more mutual and selective process of cultural interaction in which groups adapt to outside influences and retain the essential aspects of their identity. The distinction has a long history in sociology and anthropology, but it has rarely been applied systematically to the study of the Scheduled Tribes of India. The paper contributes to the disaggregation of the diverse experiences that are often subsumed under the term mainstreaming.

2. Theorising Cultural Change: Assimilation, Acculturation, and the Debates in India

The distinction between assimilation and acculturation has a complex genealogy in social science. In the American tradition, assimilation was associated with the 'melting pot' ideal of cultural convergence, while acculturation was developed by anthropologists such as Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits to describe more complex, bidirectional processes of cultural contact. In the Indian context, these concepts have been implicit in debates about tribal identity but have rarely been applied with analytical precision to understand the trajectories of change.

The dominant positions in the Indian debate can be organised around three intellectual traditions. Ghurye (1963), representing the assimilationist position, conceptualised tribal communities as 'backward Hindus' who were in the process of integrating into the wider social order. While he acknowledged the distinctiveness of tribal cultures, he regarded this distinctiveness as a transitional phase rather than a permanent or desirable condition. His framework gave intellectual legitimacy to policies that favored integration over cultural protection.

Elwin (1939) provided a contrary vision, arguing that tribal communities possessed unique and valuable ways of life that were being destroyed by contact with dominant society. His advocacy for the creation of 'national parks' where tribal communities could live undisturbed reflected a form of cultural preservationism but it has been criticised for romanticising tribal life and underestimating the material dimensions of marginalisation (Xaxa, 1999; Bêteille, 1998).

Xaxa (1999) highlights reframing tribal identity in terms of political economy. For Xaxa, the key question is not whether tribal communities are culturally assimilating but under what structural conditions and through what mechanisms. His emphasis on land alienation, labour exploitation, and exclusion from development processes provides a framework for understanding cultural change not as a natural process of modernisation but as a politically produced outcome of unequal power relations.

The ILO's shift from the integrationist Convention 107 of 1957 to the rights-based Convention 169 of 1989 reflects a broader shift in international thought away from assimilationist models and toward recognition of cultural distinctiveness and self-determination (ILO, 1957, 1989). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2007) further codifies these rights, emphasising the importance of cultural continuity, language preservation, and free, prior, and informed consent in development processes.

This paper draws on these traditions to propose that the assimilation–acculturation distinction offers a productive analytical lens for disaggregating tribal experiences in India and for evaluating the differential effects of development policy across ecologically and socially varied contexts.

3. Methodology

The empirical basis of this paper is a multi-sited ethnographic study conducted in Madhya Pradesh and the Sundarbans. In Madhya Pradesh, fieldwork was conducted across tribal areas in Dindori, Mandla, Seoni, Chhindwara, and Anuppur districts, covering communities of Gond, Baiga, Kol, Bharia, and Korku groups. In the Sundarbans, fieldwork focused on the Gosaba and Sandeshkhali blocks of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

The methodological framework included ethnography, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) with women, youth and mixed groups and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods such as social mapping and resource mapping. The approach was informed by Geertz's (1973) idea of ethnography as 'thick description', the reading of social life in its full contextual density. Bernard (2017) and Chambers (1994) explicated specific techniques of interview and participatory research respectively.

The respondents included community elders, women's groups, migrant workers, traditional healers, artists, ASHA workers, teachers and local administrators. The comparative design was not just geographical but analytical. It sought to acknowledge the combination of ecological conditions, economic structures, governance arrangements and cultural dynamics that produce different pathways of cultural change. Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with particular attention to the categories of language use, identity expression, cultural practice, and institutional engagement.

4. Acculturation in Madhya Pradesh: Engaging the Mainstream Without Losing the Self

4.1. Cultural Identity: Persistence Amid Transformation

In Madhya Pradesh, tribal communities project a pattern of cultural engagement that best characterises as acculturation (Gupta, 2016, 40). They participate in formal schooling, government housing schemes, and market economies to an extent without fully surrendering the cultural frameworks through which they understand and

organise their lives. This is not to suggest that their cultures are static or unchanged. Gond art has been influenced by market demand; Baiga body and forehead tattoo practices are becoming less visible, and young Baiga girls are getting nose piercings, which was not a part of their cultural system. Younger generations are less fluent in traditional oral traditions than the previous generations. But the fundamental components of identity—language, ritual, ecological knowledge, artistic traditions—are still very much in place, and in meaningful ways.

The persistence of Gond art is illustrative. Communities in Patangarh continue to produce elaborate paintings that serve not only as aesthetic expressions but also as repositories of cosmological and ecological knowledge. The traditional wall paintings with elevated surface designs are fewer in number, but they do exist on the exterior walls of a few houses. These communities have also developed collective norms around pricing, reflecting an organised response to market commodification that seeks to manage the terms of cultural exchange rather than simply submit to them. This agency is a defining feature of acculturation as distinct from assimilation.

Similarly, Baiga communities retain knowledge of forest medicinal plants, traditional agricultural practices, and the spiritual dimensions of cultural life, including ritual practices associated with the land and the forest. The decline of Baiga tattoo traditions, which were once central to female identity and spiritual belonging, is now perceived by younger school-going women as markers of ‘backwardness’. It illustrates the pressures of assimilation, but it also points towards acculturation, as some other communities are trying to learn the Baiga body-tattoo art on paper instead of its original practice on bodies. The original purpose and context might be lost, but the art form could stay alive much better if the philosophies behind body tattoo art were learned and understood in their original context. The practice is declining but has not disappeared.

4.2. Language and Identity: Diversity in Danger

Madhya Pradesh tribal languages are actively spoken in communities and are highly diverse. The Gond communities speak a number of linguistic forms such as Gondi dialects in Mandla, Parsi in Seoni and Chhindwara, and Pardhani in Dindori. These languages are not merely communication tools but encode specific cultural knowledge systems. While younger generations show declining fluency, they have not abandoned these languages entirely, and community-level awareness of the importance of linguistic preservation needs stimulus.

The situation of Pardhani is more precarious. It is a bardic language associated with the Pardhan subgroup, spoken by a dwindling number of performers and lacking contemporary documentation. The ‘Parsi’ language spoken among Gonds also needs revised documentation beyond the ageing editions of missionary-compiled dictionaries (Falbus, 2012). Yet the two Bana performers encountered in Patangarh during fieldwork represent living, if fragile, continuities. The existence of these performers, along with their communities’ awareness of their significance, indicates that the conditions for cultural revitalisation are still present.

4.3. Economic Marginalisation and Structural Pressures

The pressures of assimilation, rather than acculturation in some aspects of Madhya Pradesh, are not just a cultural process but are deeply shaped by economic structures. Baiga communities, categorised as one of India’s 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), report that the land allocated to them is disproportionately less fertile, limiting agricultural productivity and reinforcing their dependence on wage labour and seasonal migration. This is consistent with Xaxa’s (1999) contention that tribal cultural change cannot be understood outside the processes of land alienation and unequal economic integration.

Migration among the Kol and Korku is a reaction to distress, brought about by economic insufficiency and not an indication of economic aspiration. Households move seasonally in search of wage work, breaking the transmission of culture and the continuity of education for children. This is what Bernstein (2010) describes as ‘semi-proletarianisation’, a condition in which households remain partially tied to traditional livelihoods while becoming increasingly dependent on wage labour, without achieving economic security in either domain.

Despite these pressures, the communities of Madhya Pradesh retain a degree of economic and cultural autonomy that still keeps it within the realm of acculturation rather than complete assimilation as the dominant trajectory. The interest expressed by Baiga women in developing local craft and brewing industries based on traditional knowledge reflects this agency in a desire not to be absorbed into the mainstream economy on its terms but to participate in it in their own way.

4.4. Governance and Symbolic Participation

The PESA Act (1996) provides the formal framework for tribal self-governance in Scheduled Areas. Fieldwork in Madhya Pradesh confirmed that some institutional

structures like conflict resolution committees, forest management bodies and gram sabhas are functional, but their effectiveness is limited. Women's involvement in these is largely symbolic, despite formal requirements for inclusion. Representation exists in form but not in practice, reflecting what may be called governance without substance.

This pattern of symbolic participation in a mechanism specifically devised for tribes in India, which is implemented in Madhya Pradesh, is characteristic of the acculturation context through external efforts in the form of public policies. The communities are nominally included in dominant institutional frames, but with limited ability to influence them. For example, the Raj Gond of Punda Tola expressed qualified confidence in their forest governance rights: while they recognised the formal consultation mechanisms, they questioned their efficacy in practice. This ambivalence, neither full exclusion nor genuine empowerment, defines the acculturation moment in governance terms.

5. Assimilation in the Sundarbans: When Adaptation Becomes Erasure

5.1. Identity Dilution and the Dissolution of Tribal Categories

In the Sundarbans, the dynamic is strikingly different. Most tribal residents across Gosaba and Sandeshkhali now identify themselves collectively as 'Shoddar' or 'Sardar' rather than by specific tribal affiliation. These are umbrella terms that obscure the diversity of the Oraon, Santal, Mahili, Kol, and Bhumij groups that historically populated the region (Mukhopadhyay, 1976). This categorical dissolution reflects a deeper process in which the social and cultural specificity of tribal identity in the Sundarban region has been eroded through decades of economic migration, administrative homogenisation, and cultural pressure from the dominant Bengali society.

The contrast with Madhya Pradesh is stark. Where tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh can name their language, describe their ritual practices, and locate themselves within specific cultural traditions, many Sundarban inhabitants expressed uncertainty about their linguistic heritage, their tribal practices, and even their specific community affiliations. This situation is erosion, not ignorance, because the knowledge that was once there has been transmitted unclearly and unintentionally. Systematic undermining occurs in the social conditions necessary for transmission, including community coherence, cultural prestige, and institutional recognition.

5.2. Language Shift and Internalised Assimilation

The most analytically significant dimension of cultural change in the Sundarbans is language shift. Bengali has become not only the dominant but often the exclusive language of daily life among tribal communities. Respondents across fieldwork sites expressed a clear preference for Bengali, not simply out of practical necessity but reflecting a deeper discomfort with, or estrangement from, their tribe's linguistic identity. Many individuals expressed visible hesitation when asked about their tribal languages, and some were unable to demonstrate fluency even when prompted.

This language shift cannot be reduced to pragmatic bilingualism. It represents internalised assimilation, a process, theorised through the lens of Gramsci's (1971) concept of cultural hegemony, in which dominant cultural norms become so deeply embedded that they are experienced as natural, desirable, or inevitable. When indigenous identity is experienced as a source of embarrassment rather than pride, the conditions for cultural reproduction are destroyed not only by external coercion but also by the internalisation of external judgements and the social environment.

The educational system plays a central role in this process. Schools across the Sundarbans operate exclusively in Bengali, making no provision for indigenous languages in either the curriculum or the medium of instruction. As a policy suggestion, if a few people from the tribes are employed for translation work in classes or on special occasions, the dignity of the tribal identity and language could be revived and maintained. In most cases the tribal women are employed in the kitchen or as cleaners, which further relegates them to the periphery. Educational institutions' failure to dignify their tribal identity and existence as essential contributors to the ecosystem is not a neutral administrative decision but a structurally significant act of epistemic injustice that communicates, systematically and repeatedly, that these languages and the knowledge systems they encode are of no value (UNESCO, 2003).

5.3. Ecological Instability and the Disruption of Cultural Life

The Sundarbans presents a uniquely challenging ecological context. Cyclones, flooding, salinity intrusion and sea-level rise create conditions of chronic instability that compound social and cultural vulnerability. The frequency and strength of cyclonic events such as the destruction wrought by Amphan in 2020 and subsequent storms have not only disrupted livelihoods but also the material and symbolic infrastructure of cultural life—places of worship, spaces of gathering, trees and

plants that figure in cultural and habitation practices, and the physical stability of communities themselves.

This ecological disruption accelerates assimilation in specific ways. When the mangrove forest that has been the cultural and spiritual referent of tribal identity, embodied in the worship of Bonbibí, is degraded, the ecological basis of that identity is undermined (Jalais, 2010). When the vegetation used for mat-making, house construction, and cultural practices disappears, the material basis for transmitting associated knowledge disappears with it, as explained by the inhabitants of the region. The relationship between ecology and culture, which is particularly intimate in forest and river-dependent communities, means that ecological disruption is simultaneously cultural disruption.

The concept of “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011) is particularly apt here. The gradual, not immediately visible, degradation of the ecological and cultural environment produces damage that accumulates over time and is devastating in its cumulative effects, invisible to those who are not attending to it.

5.4. Migration, Labour Precarity, and Gendered Vulnerability

Migration from the Sundarbans is not seasonal and cyclical, as in Madhya Pradesh, but is often long-term and externally mediated. Young women in particular migrate to Kolkata and Delhi for domestic work, facilitated by local agents whose practices range from the legitimate to the exploitative. Field narratives recorded instances of restricted mobility, withheld wages, denied leave, and in some cases the need to escape from employers. These experiences reflect a condition of “feminised labour precarity” (Breman, 1996), which is characteristic of informal labour markets and disproportionately affects women from marginalised communities.

This pattern of migration, together with the absence of local employment opportunities and ecological disruption that limits traditional livelihoods, accelerates the process of assimilation by breaking the spatial and social links that maintain and transmit cultural identity. The longer one is away from the community, the less opportunity to engage in ritual, cultural practice, and the transfer of knowledge between generations.

With the rise in male out-migration, women left behind are compelled to wade in saline water for long hours to collect prawn seeds, a livelihood strategy that has major health consequences, particularly for reproductive health (Sen, 2023). This combination of ecological vulnerability, labor precarity and gender

inequality creates a specific form of triple marginalisation that requires integrated policy responses.

5.5. Institutional neglect and exclusion by bureaucracy

Access to documentation of tribal identity, such as ST certificates, artiste cards, and other instruments of institutional recognition In the Sundarbans, access to tribal identity documentation such as ST certificates, artiste cards and other forms of institutional recognition is severely constrained. A large number of residents lacked official tribal documentation to prove their identity in the eyes of the state, and to be able to access the benefits they were entitled to. Those who had the certificates didn't realise their importance and use. In some cases, schools have served as intermediaries in the issuance of such certificates, which highlights both the importance of educational institutions in mediating state recognition and the inadequacy of existing administrative mechanisms.

Payment delays of construction workers under government housing schemes in many cases for several years and the failure of infrastructure projects, including newly installed handpumps that didn't function as expected due to improper siting, reflect a pattern of institutional neglect. This erodes trust and reinforces the sense that the state is indifferent to the welfare of tribal communities. As some inhabitants said with quiet resignation, care is shown for tigers, but not for the people who live alongside them. This sentiment of abandonment echoing Jalais's (2010) observation about the 'unsettling silence' in scholarship on the Sundarbans' human inhabitants is both a political diagnosis and an affective indicator of the depth of assimilation pressures given the choice between perishing or assimilating.

6. Comparative Analysis and Policy Implications

6.1. Two Trajectories, One Framework

The comparison between the tribes of Madhya Pradesh and the Sundarbans reveals that the assimilation–acculturation distinction is not simply a descriptive binary but a spectrum of cultural change shaped by the intersection of ecological conditions, economic structures, governance arrangements, and historical processes. In Madhya Pradesh, the combination of relative ecological stability, cultural resilience, and ongoing efforts for institutional engagement creates conditions where acculturation remains the dominant mode. Communities change, adapt, and engage with dominant systems, but do so selectively and on their own terms, for now.

In the Sundarbans, a different constellation of factors, including ecological precarity, long-term migration, linguistic hegemony, institutional neglect, and the internalisation of the surrounding dominant culture, has produced conditions in which assimilation is the dominant trajectory. This process of assimilation At its current stage, this process of assimilation remains reversible, as long as we address the structural conditions that sustain it. At its current stage, this process of assimilation remains reversible, provided that we address the structural conditions that sustain it. At its current stage, we can reverse this process of assimilation by addressing the structural conditions that sustain it.

6.2. Rethinking Mainstreaming: From Integration to Coexistence

The central policy implication of this analysis is the need to disaggregate the concept of ‘mainstreaming’ and to develop region-specific approaches that are sensitive to the differential character and pace of cultural change. A policy designed for the Sundarbans where cultural revitalisation and identity restoration must precede or accompany economic development will look very different from a policy designed for Madhya Pradesh, where cultural systems are more intact and the challenge is to support and strengthen them while addressing structural economic inequalities.

This disaggregation points toward a model of development that Escobar (2012) describes as one that acknowledges and supports multiple trajectories of social change instead of imposing a singular model of ‘progress’. This approach means recognising that different communities will engage with development in various ways: some will view it through acculturation, others through selective adaptation, and still others through creative hybridisation; therefore, policy must respond to this diversity rather than attempt to flatten it.

6.3. Structural Conditions of Cultural Change

A key insight emerging from this analysis is that cultural change is not an autonomous process driven by internal community dynamics but is produced by structural conditions such as land distribution, labour markets, educational systems, ecological stability, and governance arrangements. This means that policy can and must engage with these structural conditions to shape the trajectory of cultural change.

In both regions, land access remains central. Baiga communities in Madhya Pradesh describe receiving less fertile land; Sundarbans communities face ecological

degradation of the land they inhabit. Addressing these land-related inequalities is a prerequisite for the economic autonomy that could prevent forced assimilation.

Education must also be reoriented. Today, in both regions, schools serve as tools of assimilation, privileging dominant languages and cultural norms. A policy framework that could prevent total assimilation consists of multilingual education, culturally inclusive curricula and the integration of verified and falsifiable indigenous knowledge systems into formal schooling (Freire, 1970).

6.4. Gender and Politics of Cultural Reproduction

Both case studies suggest that women are key agents of cultural reproduction and carry a disproportionate burden of cultural disruption. In Madhya Pradesh, women are the primary holders of seed knowledge, cultural songs, ritual practices and household knowledge systems. In the Sundarbans, women sustain households despite male out-migration and ecological stress while also bearing the primary burden of health consequences from saline water exposure and facing male out-migration and ecological stress while also bearing the primary burden of the health consequences of saline water exposure and also the direct or indirect losses due to increasing encounters with non-human inhabitants of the forests.

A gender-responsive approach to cultural policy must recognise this centrality. Supporting women's participation in local governance; providing economic security that reduces the pressure of distress migration; acknowledging the cultural labour of women as a form of social reproduction that deserves institutional recognition as part of a 'practical gender need approach' (Moser, 1989); and providing material support are all necessary components of a policy framework aligned with the insights of Agarwal (1992) and Kabeer (1999).

7. Conclusions: A Policy Framework for Differentiated Inclusion

This paper has argued that the assimilation–acculturation distinction, applied to the comparative study of Scheduled Tribes in Madhya Pradesh and the Sundarbans, reveals divergent trajectories of cultural change that have profound effects on how development policy is conceived and implemented. Madhya Pradesh represents a context of acculturation, where cultural identity persists even as communities engage with dominant systems. The Sundarbans represents a context of accelerated assimilation, where ecological, economic, and institutional factors have combined to erode cultural distinctiveness at its foundations.

These findings challenge the prevailing policy discourse of mainstreaming, which tends to assume that integration into dominant economic and institutional systems is both desirable and sufficient. The evidence from both regions suggests, on the contrary, that integration without cultural recognition leads to assimilation with the erasure of diversity rather than its enrichment. A policy framework that takes the assimilation–acculturation distinction seriously must therefore develop context-specific approaches that acknowledge the differential pace and character of cultural change across regions. What constitutes inclusion in Madhya Pradesh in terms of strengthening existing cultural systems while addressing structural economic inequalities will be different from what constitutes inclusion in the Sundarbans, where cultural revitalisation and identity restoration must be priorities in their own right. Addressing the structural conditions that produce assimilation is imperative. Access to land and clean drinking water, business opportunities, labour security, educational equity, and ecological stability are not peripheral concerns for cultural policy but rather its structural prerequisites.

The new and existing public policies must recognise women as central agents of cultural and economic reproduction and accordingly design policies that support their economic security, institutional participation, and cultural authority.

Another step is to move beyond simple welfare-based models toward what the literature describes as structural justice (Escobar, 2012; Xaxa, 1999) with approaches that address not merely the symptoms of marginalisation but its structural causes.

The experiences of tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh and the Sundarbans, taken together, offer a powerful reminder that development is not a neutral process of modernisation but a political process with winners and losers, along with cultural and economic consequences. For the policies to be effective, they must address the disappearance of tribal distinctiveness into a homogeneous mainstream. Public policies are to be designed in a way that creates conditions in which diverse communities can engage with development on their terms, retaining what they value, adapting what they choose to adapt, and participating in shaping the future rather than merely being shaped by external forces of change.

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