



Sustainable Development in Tribal and Marginalized Regions of South Chhotanagpur

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ABSTRACT

South Chhotanagpur, a tribal-dominated region in Jharkhand encompassing districts like Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Simdega, and Lohardaga, presents a unique case for examining sustainable development within a framework that respects indigenous cultures, ecological balance, and socio-economic justice. Home to tribal communities such as the Munda, Oraon, and Kharia, the region has long maintained traditional systems of environmental stewardship, communal land use, and sustainable resource management. However, historical marginalization, land dispossession, mining activities, poverty, and lack of access to health and education have hindered balanced development. This article explores the prospects and barriers to sustainable development in South Chhotanagpur, focusing on how indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, and local institutions can inform and strengthen contemporary development policies. It critically reviews Government interventions like the Forest Rights Act (2006), MGNREGA, and the PESA Act, noting both their potential and the persistent implementation gaps. The analysis also considers the role of NGOs, grassroots movements, and local governance in promoting inclusive and participatory development. The article argues for an integrated model that combines modern technology with traditional wisdom, promotes eco-friendly livelihoods, ensures land and forest rights, and upholds the cultural autonomy of tribal communities. Sustainable development in such regions cannot succeed through uniform, top-down approaches; it must be rooted in regional realities, with the active participation of the communities it seeks to serve. Ultimately, the paper calls for a

rethinking of development paradigms—placing tribal voices at the center of planning, and recognizing sustainability not just as an economic goal but as a lived cultural ethos.

KEY WORDS

Communities, Ecological Sustainability, Participatory Development, Forest Rights.

INTRODUCTION

South Chhotanagpur, located in Jharkhand, includes the districts of Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Simdega, and Lohardaga. Geographically, this region is part of the Chhotanagpur plateau, known for its undulating surface, moderate climate, and rich natural resources. Large parts of the area are still covered with forests that provide timber, fuelwood, and minor forest products. Several rivers, such as the Subarnarekha and South Koel, originate from this plateau and serve as important water sources. The region is also rich in minerals like coal, bauxite, and iron ore, making it one of the most resource-abundant areas of eastern India.

The study of sustainable development in South Chhotanagpur is significant for geography because it highlights the interaction between natural resources and human society. It shows how communities use land, water, and forests, and how unbalanced exploitation can disturb the ecological system. The case of this region also underlines issues of regional development, resource distribution, and the challenges faced by marginalized groups.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the physical and social background of the region, identify key challenges, and assess both Government and community-led efforts towards sustainability. It also aims to suggest an integrated model that connects traditional wisdom with modern planning.

Physical and Environmental Setting of South Chhotanagpur Region

South Chhotanagpur forms part of the larger Chhotanagpur plateau, which is one of the most prominent physical regions of eastern India. The relief of this area is uneven, with rolling uplands, small hills, and valleys. The altitude varies between 500 and 700 meters above sea level, creating a moderate climate with warm summers, pleasant winters, and seasonal monsoon rains. The soil types are mostly red and lateritic, which are not very fertile for intensive agriculture but are suitable for crops like millets, pulses, and oilseeds. Patches of alluvial soil are found along river valleys, supporting paddy cultivation.

The region is rich in forest resources, with sal, kendu, mahua, and bamboo as dominant species. These forests not only supply timber and fuelwood but also provide fruits, leaves, and medicinal plants that support local livelihoods. Equally significant is the mineral wealth of South Chhotanagpur. Districts like Ranchi, Lohardaga, and Gumla contain large deposits of coal, bauxite, and iron ore, while limestone is also available in some pockets. These resources have drawn industries and mining operations to the area.

Biodiversity is another important feature. The forests of this plateau shelter wildlife such as elephants, deer, bears, and various species of birds and reptiles. Several areas have been declared wildlife sanctuaries to protect this ecological wealth. However, rapid mining and deforestation have caused serious stress on the environment. Forest cover has shrunk, soil erosion has increased, and natural water sources have been disturbed. The loss of habitat has also threatened biodiversity, pushing some species towards vulnerability.

Socio-Cultural Landscape of the Region

South Chhotanagpur is one of Jharkhand's most tribal-dominated regions. According to the 2011 Census, Jharkhand's overall Scheduled Tribe (ST) population stood at approximately 26.21 percent of the state's total population. Within this area, tribal concentration is especially high, especially in the districts like Simdega, Khunti, Gumla, and Lohardaga. Ranchi, though more urbanized, still records a substantial tribal presence.

Population density also highlights regional settlement patterns. For instance, Simdega has one of the lowest densities in the state, about 160 persons per square kilometre. Villages in South Chhotanagpur tend to be compact yet spread across uplands, valleys, and forest edges. Houses are simple, often made with mud walls and tiled or thatched roofs, with adjacent plots used for kitchen gardens or small-scale farming—reflecting a close tie between households and their surrounding land.

Three tribes primarily shape the cultural and livelihood fabric here: the Munda, Oraon, and Kharia. The Munda community follows the traditional khuntkatti system in which land is communally held and passed down through generations highlighting collective resource use and strong forest ties. The Oraon people are adept at settled agriculture, especially wet-rice cultivation, while many also engage in seasonal migration or wage labor. The Kharias, though smaller in number, largely depend on shifting cultivation and the gathering of forest products such as wild fruits, honey, or medicinal plants.

Traditional land-use practices play a critical role in both culture and ecology. Many villages maintain sacred groves, locally known as Sarna, which remain untouched due to religious significance and act as pockets of conservation. Water harvesting is another example of traditional wisdom in practice villagers maintain ponds, wells, and small check dams that serve agricultural needs and reflect shared stewardship over common resources.

Cultural festivals further strengthen environmental stewardship. Sarhul, among the most important tribal festivals, involves worship of the Sal tree and marks the start of spring and the new year. It includes rituals like planting Sal saplings symbols of renewal and environmental care and is celebrated extensively across districts like Ranchi, Gumla, Khunti, Simdega, and Lohardaga. Karma festival, observed in August–September, is celebrated around the Karam tree and symbolizes community harmony, fertility, and connection to the land. Sohrai, a post-harvest festival tied with Diwali, is also significant. Its associated mural art created by women using natural pigments illustrates rural life, cattle, and nature. Recently, Gumla’s collectorate has been adorned with these traditional Sohrai paintings to celebrate tribal heritage.

Customary laws and village councils regulate resource use guaranteeing that no individual or household exploits common resources alone. These informal mechanisms reflect strong community-based environmental management, where culture, ritual, and governance blend to sustain both people and nature.

Developmental Challenges in a Geographical Context

South Chhotanagpur, despite its rich natural and cultural resources, faces several developmental challenges that directly affect its geography and people. These challenges are rooted in land use patterns, industrial activities, environmental degradation, and socio-economic conditions, and together they shape the uneven development of the region.

One of the most pressing issues is land alienation caused by mining and industrial projects. The plateau is rich in coal, bauxite, and iron ore, and this has attracted large-scale extraction activities in districts like Lohardaga, Gumla, and Ranchi. However, mining often leads to the acquisition of agricultural and forest land, resulting in displacement of tribal communities. Studies have shown that thousands of families in Jharkhand have been displaced over decades due to mining and related industries, and only a fraction of them have received proper rehabilitation. The geographical impact of such displacement is visible in the scattered settlements, growing slums around mining towns, and the weakening of traditional village-based economies.

Forests once covered large parts of South Chhotanagpur, but continuous mining, industrial expansion, and population growth have reduced this cover. Deforestation is especially severe in Ranchi and Lohardaga, where industrial demand for land and timber is high. Forest loss not only threatens biodiversity but also reduces the availability of fuelwood, fruits, and medicinal plants that are central to local livelihoods. Similarly, water resources are under stress. Rivers like the Subarnarekha and South Koel have experienced reduced

flow and pollution due to mining effluents and siltation. Traditional water harvesting structures are not adequately maintained, leading to seasonal scarcity of drinking water in villages. Soil erosion on plateau slopes further worsens the situation, decreasing agricultural productivity and damaging water quality.

Another major challenge is the persistence of poverty and low human development. Census 2011 and related surveys show that literacy rates in tribal-dominated districts like Gumla (66 percent) and Simdega (67 percent) are below the state average, with female literacy even lower. Access to healthcare facilities is limited, and malnutrition is a continuing problem. Per capita income levels in these districts are significantly lower than those in more urbanized divisions such as Kolhan (with Jamshedpur) or Santhal Pargana (with better trade links). The Human Development Index values for tribal-majority districts remain among the lowest in Jharkhand, revealing wide disparities in education, health, and income. These disparities are mapped clearly within the state, with Ranchi showing relatively better figures due to urban opportunities, while Khunti, Simdega, and Gumla lag behind.

The uneven development between South Chhotanagpur and other divisions of Jharkhand also points to regional imbalance. While this region is resource-rich, the benefits of mining and industry often flow to urban centers or outside the state. Kolhan division, with Jamshedpur as an industrial hub, and parts of North Chhotanagpur, with coal-based industries, have stronger economic growth. In contrast, South Chhotanagpur remains marginalized, with inadequate infrastructure, poor road connectivity in rural areas, and limited investment in social development. This imbalance is not just economic but also spatial, as the rural tribal areas remain excluded from mainstream growth corridors.

A visible outcome of these challenges is large-scale out-migration. Tribal youth and working-age adults from Gumla, Simdega, and Khunti migrate seasonally or permanently to cities like Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Delhi, and even to distant states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Migration is often driven by lack of employment opportunities and poverty at home. The geographical impact of this migration is twofold: villages lose a large part of their productive labor force, while cities experience growing migrant settlements with limited access to basic services. Migration also causes social changes, as families are left behind in rural areas, often headed by women or elderly members. The cultural gap between urban migrants and traditional village life widens over time, influencing settlement patterns and social cohesion.

Sustainable Development Discourse and Tribal Regions

The discourse on sustainable development has gained significant momentum since the Brundtland Commission's report of 1987, which defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition laid the foundation for linking economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection within a single framework. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offering a more detailed global agenda that emphasizes poverty eradication, gender equality, climate action, and the conservation of ecosystems. While these goals are articulated at a universal level, their translation into the regional and local contexts, particularly in tribal areas such as South Chhotanagpur, reveals both opportunities and challenges.

Applying the concept of sustainable development to tribal regions requires sensitivity to the specific spatial, ecological, and cultural realities of these communities. For the tribal societies of Jharkhand, development cannot be understood merely as industrial growth or infrastructure expansion. Instead, it must address spatial justice—ensuring that communities who historically occupied and managed land retain access to it and ecological balance, where forests, rivers, and soils are preserved as part of both livelihood systems and cultural traditions.

Livelihood security is central in this discourse. Agriculture, forest produce, and small-scale pastoralism remain the backbone of tribal economies. However, external pressures such as mining, land acquisition, and deforestation threaten these systems. In this setting, sustainable development must protect the rights of

communities over land and resources, while enabling them to adapt to modern opportunities without eroding their ecological foundations.

The notion of spatial justice is particularly relevant for tribal geographies. Land alienation due to industrial projects has disrupted settlement patterns and marginalized local populations. A sustainable approach calls for land reforms that recognize community ownership, as codified in protective legislations like the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act. Ecological balance is equally significant. The forests of South Chhotanagpur are not only biodiversity hotspots but also integral to the hydrological system of rivers like the Subarnarekha and South Koel. Sustainable development in this region therefore implies curbing indiscriminate deforestation, regulating mining activities, and promoting afforestation with native species that support both ecosystems and local economies.

The UN SDGs offer a useful lens to interpret the development challenges of tribal regions. Goals such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) directly relate to the lived realities of South Chhotanagpur's communities. Yet, achieving these requires region-specific strategies. For example, ensuring food security is not only about distributing rations but also about promoting millet and maize cultivation suited to upland soils, restoring traditional irrigation systems, and supporting non-timber forest produce like lac and mahua. Similarly, clean water targets must involve protecting watershed areas from mining pollution and strengthening local water harvesting practices.

An often-overlooked dimension of sustainable development is the role of indigenous ecological knowledge. Tribal communities in Jharkhand have long maintained systems of sacred groves (sarna), which are protected patches of forest associated with rituals and community beliefs. These groves serve as reservoirs of biodiversity and play a role in soil and water conservation. Similarly, traditional water harvesting structures—such as ahars and pynes in plateau landscapes—demonstrate an intimate understanding of local hydrology. Community ownership of common resources ensured sustainable use, preventing overexploitation.

Festivals and rituals further reinforce ecological ethics. For instance, Sarhul, the spring festival of the Munda and Oraon tribes, is linked to the flowering of the sal tree, symbolizing respect for nature's cycles. Customary laws, often enforced by village councils, regulate hunting, grazing, and forest use, reflecting a collective responsibility towards the environment. Integrating such practices into formal land-use planning can strengthen sustainability by combining modern policy frameworks with time-tested traditional wisdom.

In conclusion, sustainable development in tribal regions like South Chhotanagpur requires a nuanced understanding that goes beyond the generic application of global frameworks. The Brundtland definition and the SDGs provide guiding principles, but their success depends on aligning them with indigenous values, local ecological systems, and the imperative of spatial justice. By respecting tribal knowledge systems, safeguarding land and resource rights, and ensuring livelihood security, it is possible to construct a development pathway that is both equitable and ecologically sound. For geographers and policymakers alike, the region illustrates how sustainability must be grounded in place-based realities rather than imposed as abstract universal goals.

Policy Interventions and Spatial Implications

Policy frameworks have played an important role in shaping development trajectories in South Chhotanagpur, though their impact has varied across districts. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 sought to recognize the traditional rights of forest-dwelling communities by mapping and granting land titles. While thousands of claims have been filed in Ranchi, Gumla, and Simdega, the pace of recognition has been uneven, with many families still awaiting individual or community forest rights. In Lohardaga and Khunti, conflicts between forest departments and Gram Sabhas over land demarcation have slowed progress, showing how geographical and administrative factors affect outcomes.

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996 gives Gram Sabhas significant authority over land, forests, and resources in Scheduled Areas. In theory, this ensures local decision-making, but in practice, implementation remains weak. Mining leases and industrial projects are often sanctioned without meaningful Gram Sabha consultation, undermining the spatial autonomy envisioned in the Act.

The MGNREGA programme has provided wage employment opportunities, especially in drought-prone areas of Gumla and Simdega. However, the geographical distribution of work is uneven: better performance is seen in villages with active NGOs and local leadership, while in other areas delays in wage payments and limited asset creation reduce its effectiveness.

State-specific schemes such as Birsa Awas Yojana and the work of NGOs like PRADAN and NBJK have attempted to fill these gaps by promoting watershed management, women's self-help groups, and livelihood diversification. Still, spatial disparities remain, with Ranchi benefitting more due to better connectivity and administrative reach, while remote blocks in Khunti and Simdega lag behind.

Overall, these interventions highlight the importance of geography in policy implementation, where terrain, accessibility, and local governance capacity strongly shape outcomes.

Grassroots Movements and Local Governance

Grassroots mobilizations in South Chhotanagpur highlight the centrality of local agency in shaping development and governance. One of the most debated examples is the Pathalgadi movement in Khunti, where stone slabs were erected in villages to assert constitutional rights under the Fifth Schedule and the PESA Act. While the movement drew national attention for its confrontational stance, it also revealed the deep dissatisfaction with land alienation and the limited autonomy of Gram Sabhas. It became a reminder that sustainable development requires trust-building between the state and local communities.

In Gumla, forest protection initiatives have emerged as community-driven efforts to regulate timber use and prevent encroachment. Villagers often revive traditional practices of patrolling forests and imposing community sanctions on unsustainable exploitation. Such local stewardship reflects how ecological governance is embedded in social norms. Similarly, in Simdega, agricultural cooperatives have supported farmers in collective marketing of lac, tasar silk, and other non-timber forest produce, showing how local economies can be strengthened through cooperative models.

Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) provide a framework for decentralized governance in the region, though their effectiveness varies. Where Gram Sabhas are active, especially in Khunti and Gumla, decision-making on land and water projects reflects geographical decentralization. Yet in other areas, weak institutional capacity limits their reach.

Women's self-help groups (SHGs) have made notable contributions by promoting savings, small enterprises, and nutritional security. Mapping their activities reveals clusters of livelihood initiatives, particularly in Simdega and Ranchi districts.

The role of NGOs and civil society organizations has been crucial in bridging gaps—through watershed development projects, capacity-building workshops, and advocacy for land rights. Together, these grassroots efforts indicate that sustainable development in South Chhotanagpur must grow from below, rooted in community-led governance and spatially grounded practices.

Prospects for an Integrated Development Model

The future of sustainable development in South Chhotanagpur lies in creating an integrated framework that respects indigenous traditions while adopting modern tools of planning. One key avenue is the use of geographic technologies like GIS and remote sensing. These tools can map forest cover, monitor watershed conditions, and assess land-use changes with accuracy. When combined with traditional ecological knowledge,

such as community mapping of sacred groves or customary grazing zones, they can guide resource management in ways that are both culturally sensitive and scientifically sound.

Promoting eco-friendly livelihoods is another vital step. The region already has strong traditions in tasar silk rearing, bamboo crafts, medicinal plant collection, and lac cultivation. These activities not only align with ecological sustainability but also strengthen household economies. With proper training, credit access, and market linkages, these livelihoods can reduce dependence on mining and wage migration.

The plateau's unique geography also offers scope for eco-tourism and cultural tourism. Festivals such as Sarhul, and landscapes of sal forests and waterfalls, can attract visitors if managed responsibly. Tourism can generate income while creating awareness of tribal culture and ecological values.

At the same time, resource geography demands attention to industries. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, if properly monitored, can ensure that mining companies invest in afforestation, water conservation, and community development. Sustainable mining models—based on strict environmental safeguards and local participation—could reduce the ecological stress currently associated with extraction.

Ultimately, an integrated model must balance economic growth, cultural autonomy, and environmental security. Development cannot simply mean industrial expansion; it must empower local communities, safeguard forests and rivers, and respect the cultural ethos of tribal life. Only by blending indigenous wisdom with modern planning can South Chhotanagpur move toward a genuinely sustainable future.

Rethinking Development Paradigms in Regional Geography

Development in tribal geographies such as South Chhotanagpur has long been shaped by top-down planning models that prioritize industrial expansion, mining, and infrastructure over local needs. Such approaches often assume that economic growth will automatically translate into welfare, but the lived realities of the region prove otherwise. Projects driven by external agencies frequently ignore customary rights, local ecological practices, and the socio-cultural fabric of tribal life. The result has been repeated cycles of land alienation, displacement, and environmental stress, with limited long-term benefits for the local population.

A critical rethinking is therefore necessary. Geography as a discipline emphasizes the importance of place-based approaches, which recognize that development must be rooted in the specific ecological, cultural, and historical context of a region. In South Chhotanagpur, this means placing tribal voices at the center of planning and valuing their indigenous knowledge of forests, soils, and water systems. Community-centered approaches through active Gram Sabhas, cooperatives, and women's collectives—allow decisions to reflect local priorities, rather than externally imposed agendas.

The paradox of South Chhotanagpur lies in being a resource-rich yet poor region. Rich deposits of coal, bauxite, and iron ore coexist with some of the lowest human development indicators in Jharkhand. This reflects the "resource curse" where resource exploitation generates wealth for external actors but leaves local communities marginalized. The uneven geography of mining benefits has deepened inequalities, with urban centers like Ranchi gaining infrastructure and employment, while rural blocks in Khunti, Gumla, and Simdega face ecological degradation and poverty.

Sustainability in this region must be understood not only as an economic objective but as a spatial-cultural ethos. Tribal traditions already embody practices of ecological stewardship—such as sacred groves, regulated forest use, and seasonal rituals tied to agricultural cycles. These practices show that sustainability is embedded in everyday life and cultural values, rather than being an abstract policy goal. Recognizing this ethos can transform development thinking: instead of treating culture and environment as constraints, they must be seen as foundations for long-term well-being.

Thus, rethinking development paradigms in regional geography requires moving from a growth-centric to a people-centric model. South Chhotanagpur illustrates how sustainable futures can only emerge when planning is participatory, justice-oriented, and firmly grounded in the spatial realities of marginalized communities.

CONCLUSION

South Chhotanagpur's geographical identity is marked by its plateau topography, dense forests, mineral wealth, and vibrant tribal cultures. These features make the region both resource-rich and ecologically sensitive. The interplay of land, water, and forest resources with indigenous systems of management has historically sustained livelihoods and cultural practices. Yet, modern interventions—particularly mining, industrial projects, and top-down planning—have disturbed this balance, resulting in displacement, ecological degradation, and widening inequalities. This dual reality makes South Chhotanagpur an important case for understanding the complexities of sustainable development in tribal and marginalized regions.

The analysis of this region offers several key takeaways for regional planning and policy. First, development must account for geographical diversity, recognizing the uneven spread of resources and the vulnerability of plateau ecosystems. Second, social justice must be embedded into planning, ensuring that marginalized communities have secure rights over land and forests. Third, indigenous knowledge systems—such as sacred groves, water-harvesting traditions, and communal ownership—should not be sidelined but integrated with modern technologies like GIS and remote sensing for effective resource management.

Looking ahead, three broad recommendations emerge. One, strengthening participatory governance through Gram Sabhas and Panchayati Raj institutions can make planning more accountable and place-based. Two, adopting ecological zoning will help regulate mining and industrial activity while protecting forests and watersheds critical to the region's survival. Three, promoting livelihood diversification through eco-friendly activities such as tasar silk, bamboo crafts, lac cultivation, and eco-tourism can reduce dependence on extractive industries and migration, while sustaining cultural and ecological values.

For geography as a discipline, the case of South Chhotanagpur underscores the importance of embedding cultural voices in spatial planning and sustainability discourse. Development must be understood not only in economic or infrastructural terms but also as a cultural and ecological process. By integrating tribal perspectives and local knowledge into regional planning, geography can contribute to more inclusive and equitable futures.

In conclusion, South Chhotanagpur reminds us that sustainable development is not a one-size-fits-all model. It must emerge from the land, culture, and people themselves, ensuring that growth respects both ecological limits and the dignity of communities who call the region home.

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