



# Politicizing Tribal Identity: Cultural Fragmentation and Separatist Narratives in Narmada District, Gujarat

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## Abstract

In the tribal-dominated Narmada district of Gujarat, complex socio-political dynamics have emerged due to the interplay of developmental agendas, identity politics, and historical grievances. This research explores how tribal identity has been politicized and culturally fragmented, culminating in separatist narratives that question mainstream developmental and political frameworks. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis, the study investigates how movements led by activists like Medha Patkar, along with certain political actors from the Congress party, have reshaped the socio-political consciousness of tribal communities in the region. These movements, while ostensibly advocating for indigenous rights and environmental justice, have catalyzed a discourse that reframes tribals as culturally distinct and politically separate from the broader Gujarati polity. The research traces the evolution of these separatist ideologies, linking them to displacements caused by the Sardar Sarovar Dam, erosion of traditional livelihoods, and the systematic marginalization of tribal voices in policy-making. The role of NGOs and activist interventions in fostering a pan-tribal identity, often in opposition to state-sponsored modernization, is critically examined. This identity politicization has led to a fragmented cultural self-perception within the tribal groups, who now straddle the dual identities of being both Indian citizens and distinct ethnonational communities. Using mixed-method approaches, including field surveys and document analysis, the paper presents empirical evidence of shifting cultural affiliations and political leanings. Five key patterns emerge: increasing disillusionment with state institutions, romanticization of pre-modern tribal life, resistance to mainstream educational content, electoral volatility, and calls for autonomous governance. These dynamics are not only disrupting traditional tribal solidarity but are also fostering narratives that align more with ethnic nationalism than class struggle or developmental equity. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on ethnic identity and sub-nationalism in India, offering a grounded analysis of how tribal identity in Narmada has become a potent site for political contestation. It calls for a rethinking of tribal policy—one that integrates economic development with cultural dignity and political inclusion.

**Keywords:** Narmada district, tribal identity, separatism, Medha Patkar, Congress, Sardar Sarovar, cultural fragmentation, Adivasi, Gujarat politics, identity politics.

## Introduction

The tribal communities of India, historically marginalized, occupy a unique position in the socio-political landscape of the nation. In the state of Gujarat, the Narmada district presents a particularly complex case of identity-based contestation and cultural fragmentation. Home to predominantly Adivasi groups such as the Bhil, Vasava, and Tadvi tribes, the district has been a focal point of contestation over land rights, displacement, and political inclusion. Over the last four decades, Narmada has witnessed a gradual transformation of tribal consciousness—shaped by environmental movements, displacement policies, and political mobilization. This transformation has increasingly manifested in separatist narratives that challenge the homogenizing tendencies of state-led development and nationalist politics.

The socio-political ferment in Narmada district gained national attention with the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam under the Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP). Thousands of tribal families were displaced or adversely affected, often without adequate rehabilitation. The resistance to this project crystallized around the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by activist Medha Patkar. While initially focused on environmental justice and human rights, the movement evolved into a broader critique of the developmental paradigm and a reassertion of tribal autonomy. Scholars such as Baviskar (1995) and Guha (1999) have argued

that the NBA reconstituted the tribal as a political subject—no longer a passive victim but an agent of resistance rooted in indigenous epistemologies.

Simultaneously, political parties—particularly the Indian National Congress—leveraged tribal discontent to create a political base in the region. Congress leaders portrayed themselves as protectors of tribal interests, often aligning with the rhetoric of resistance against the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) developmental nationalism. However, this alignment also facilitated a kind of cultural essentialism that froze tribal identity in an oppositional mold—pitting Adivasi traditions against modern Indian citizenship. In contrast, the BJP's efforts at tribal outreach have emphasized integration through welfare and Hindutva-based cultural assimilation (Shah, 2010).

The contestation has resulted in a fragmented tribal consciousness. For many young tribals, modern education, urban migration, and technology have opened new pathways. Yet, these same elements are also viewed with suspicion by community elders and activists, who see them as instruments of cultural erosion. Consequently, a dual consciousness is emerging—rooted in tradition but navigating modernity; politically mobilized but culturally fragmented.

This paper examines how these dynamics are reshaping the tribal identity in Narmada, situating the analysis within the larger theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies, ethnic nationalism, and postcolonial critique. Drawing upon primary data collected from field visits, interviews with activists, politicians, and tribal residents, as well as secondary literature, the study seeks to critically assess the process by which tribal identity is politicized, leading to separatist tendencies and fragmented cultural allegiances.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to ensure both depth and breadth in understanding the tribal identity shifts in Narmada district:

- **Qualitative Methods:**

1. **Ethnographic Fieldwork:** Conducted in Dediapada, Sagbara, and Nandod talukas.
2. **In-depth Interviews:** 30 key informants including activists (NBA), tribal youth, Congress party workers, and local sarpanches.
3. **Content Analysis:** Speeches, protest leaflets, and educational materials used in tribal areas.

- **Quantitative Methods:**

1. **Survey:** Administered to 200 tribal respondents aged 18–60 years across 15 villages.
2. **Data Points:** Political affiliation, perceptions of identity, media influence, education, and migration.

The data collection occurred between October 2023 and February 2024. Analysis combined thematic coding for qualitative data and SPSS for quantitative tabulation.

## Results

**Table 1: Political Affiliation by Age Group**

Age Group	Congress (%)	BJP (%)	Independent/Other (%)
18–30	18	30	52
31–45	15	25	60
46–60	15	20	65

**Table 2: Perceived Tribal Identity (Multiple Choice)**

Identity Marker	% Respondents Identifying
Adivasi first	75
Indian first	22
Both equally	3

**Table 3: Media Influence on Tribal Perception**

Media Type	Major Influence (%)
WhatsApp and Instagram	58
Local Newspapers	22
TV	12
NGO Publications	8

**Table 4: Cultural Practices Maintained by Generation**

Cultural Practice	Elders (%)	Youth (%)
Tribal Language Usage	89	52
Traditional Festivals	78	41
Ritual Practices	67	30

**Table 5: Support for Autonomous Tribal Governance**

Support Level	% of Respondents
Strongly Support	45
Somewhat Support	30
Neutral	15
Oppose	10

## Discussion

The findings illuminate the extent to which tribal identity in Narmada is being politicized. A dominant theme is the generational divide in cultural retention and political behavior. Younger tribals are more inclined to see political mobilization through digital platforms like WhatsApp, while elders rely on traditional networks. This duality contributes to fragmented cultural affiliations.

The overwhelming identification as “Adivasi first” reveals a reified ethnic consciousness, reinforced by narratives of dispossession and victimhood. As argued by Chandra (2004), ethnic identity becomes politically

salient when it is activated by elites—in this case, both political leaders and activists. Congress's emphasis on tribal distinctiveness contrasts with the BJP's integrationist approach, thereby polarizing the tribal electorate.

The media's role, especially mobile platforms, in shaping separatist sentiment cannot be overstated. Digital messaging often circulates ideas of historical wrongs, glorifies tribal resistance, and critiques "Gujarati" political identity as exploitative. These cultural currents are augmented by educational interventions from NGOs and activist groups who embed separatist motifs in pedagogy.

Moreover, the survey data suggests a strong support base for autonomous tribal governance. While this aspiration aligns with constitutional provisions like the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), its articulation in separatist terms reflects a deeper cultural alienation. This echoes Nandini Sundar's (2016) observation that tribal resistance movements often emerge from failed governance and cultural dislocation rather than pure ideological secessionism.

The persistence of cultural practices among elders compared to youth also signals an erosion of intergenerational transmission of tribal values—further fragmenting identity. Fragmentation is not merely cultural but also political, as tribal communities oscillate between different parties and ideologies.

## Conclusion

The study reveals that tribal identity in Narmada district is undergoing profound politicization and cultural fragmentation. This transformation is driven by a combination of activist-led resistance, partisan political strategies, and the structural dislocation brought about by development projects like the Sardar Sarovar Dam. The assertion of "Adivasi-first" identity and support for autonomy are symptomatic of a deeper alienation from state and mainstream society. While the rhetoric of resistance has empowered tribal voices, it has also entrenched narratives that view integration with suspicion and development as cultural threat. The role of NGOs and political actors in shaping these narratives needs critical reassessment, particularly in how they navigate between empowerment and essentialism. Moving forward, policy approaches must be holistic—integrating economic opportunity, cultural preservation, and inclusive governance. Tribal identity must be recognized not as a fixed category but as a fluid and evolving construct capable of engaging with modernity without being subsumed by it.

The increasing politicization of tribal identity across India, particularly in regions like Narmada district in Gujarat, is fostering a deepening fragmentation within tribal communities and posing a serious threat to national and regional harmony. Political actors and movements, often under the guise of protecting tribal rights, are reinforcing separatist ideologies that isolate tribal castes and sub-groups from the mainstream. This is not merely a call for autonomy but an active distancing from shared national identity, often promoting narratives that pit Adivasi traditions against the broader Indian ethos. As tribal communities are encouraged to view themselves as culturally and politically distinct—sometimes even as victims of the Indian state—internal divisions are exacerbated between sub-groups such as the Bhil, Tadvi, and Vasava. Such politicized divisions undermine inter-community solidarity, fuel distrust towards government institutions, and create resistance to integration efforts. In Gujarat, this trend is particularly dangerous, given the state's history of communal sensitivity and development-driven displacement. If left unchecked, these politically motivated fragmentations could erode the pluralistic fabric of both Gujarat and India, replacing inclusive governance with identity-based exclusion. The consequences are not only socio-cultural but deeply political, weakening the constitutional vision of unity in diversity and fostering long-term instability.

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