

From Welfare to Empowerment: Evaluating State Interventions among the Birhor Community for Viksit Bharat 2047

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Abstract

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) constitute the most socio-economically marginalized segment within India's Scheduled Tribe population and continue to face persistent developmental exclusion despite decades of targeted welfare interventions. The Birhor community of Jharkhand represents one of the most vulnerable indigenous populations characterized by fragile livelihoods, low literacy levels, ecological displacement, and limited institutional integration. In the context of India's developmental vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, the transition from welfare-oriented governance toward empowerment-driven development assumes critical significance. The present study evaluates the effectiveness of state interventions among the Birhor community using primary data collected from households through an ICSSR-standard structured questionnaire. The research examines education, food security, livelihood conditions, institutional access, and capability enhancement to assess whether existing schemes promote sustainable empowerment or merely ensure subsistence survival. The findings indicate that welfare interventions have improved basic survival indicators; however, structural gaps in education, skill development, and livelihood diversification continue to limit empowerment outcomes. The study argues that sustainable tribal development requires culturally responsive, participatory, and capability-enhancing governance frameworks aligned with inclusive nation-building under *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

Keywords: Birhor Community, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Tribal Empowerment, State Interventions, Viksit Bharat 2047

Introduction

India's development trajectory has consistently been guided by the constitutional vision of social justice, equality, and inclusive growth. Since independence, tribal development policies have undergone significant transformation, evolving from protective isolation and administrative safeguarding to welfare-oriented interventions and participatory governance approaches. Despite sustained policy attention and targeted developmental programs, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) continue to remain at the margins of economic progress and institutional inclusion. Their marginalization extends beyond income poverty and is deeply rooted in historical exclusion, geographical isolation, ecological dependence, and limited engagement with formal governance structures. These structural disadvantages have constrained their access to education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and decision-making processes, thereby reinforcing cycles of vulnerability.

Among India's PVTGs, the Birhor community of Jharkhand represents one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged indigenous groups. Traditionally, the Birhor practiced a semi-nomadic lifestyle sustained through forest-based occupations such as hunting, gathering, and rope-making using natural fibers. Their livelihood systems were closely integrated with forest ecosystems, enabling ecological adaptation and community self-reliance. However, progressive restrictions on forest access, environmental degradation, and settlement-oriented development initiatives significantly disrupted these traditional economic practices. While permanent settlement policies aimed to integrate the community into mainstream society, they often failed to provide viable livelihood alternatives, resulting in continued economic insecurity despite improved habitation stability.

In the context of India's developmental aspiration of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, there is an urgent need to reassess whether existing interventions among marginalized communities promote genuine empowerment or merely sustain welfare dependency.

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The present study therefore undertakes an empirical evaluation of state interventions among the Birhor community to examine the extent to which developmental initiatives have facilitated a transition from welfare provision toward capability enhancement, self-reliance, and inclusive participation in the broader process of national development.

Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed-method research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine the impact of state interventions on the socio-economic conditions of the Birhor community. The use of mixed methods enables a holistic understanding of developmental outcomes by integrating statistical evidence with field-based experiential insights. The study is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature and is based on primary data collected from Birhor settlements located in Ramgarh district and Ranchi (Tamar block) of Jharkhand.

Quantitative data were gathered through a structured household questionnaire developed in accordance with ICSSR field research standards. The questionnaire was administered among 164 Birhor households selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of families directly interacting with government welfare schemes. The survey instrument covered multiple dimensions including demographic characteristics, educational attainment, livelihood patterns, food security, access to public welfare schemes, school participation of children, availability of infrastructure, and exposure to skill development and vocational training programs. The quantitative component helped in assessing patterns of accessibility, utilization, and distribution of developmental benefits within the community.

In addition to survey data, qualitative insights were generated through field observations and informal interactions with community members during the data collection process. These interactions provided contextual understanding regarding cultural practices, livelihood transitions, perceptions toward government interventions, and challenges faced in accessing institutional services. Such qualitative inputs helped interpret statistical findings within the socio-cultural realities of the Birhor community.

The collected data were analyzed using frequency distribution and percentage analysis to identify major developmental trends, while interpretative socio-developmental analysis was employed to examine the relationship between welfare delivery and empowerment outcomes. The mixed-method approach thus enabled the study to move beyond numerical assessment and critically evaluate whether existing interventions contribute to sustainable capability enhancement among the Birhor population.

Educational Status of the Birhor Community

Education plays a central role in determining long-term socio-economic empowerment and serves as a critical pathway for breaking cycles of poverty and marginalization. For Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups such as the Birhor community, access to education is closely linked with improved livelihood opportunities, social mobility, and institutional participation. However, the findings of the present study reveal that educational attainment among the Birhor population in Tamar Block of Ranchi district remains significantly low, reflecting persistent structural and intergenerational disadvantages.

Table 1: Educational Status of Respondents

Education Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Uneducated	79	48.17
Below Tenth	78	47.56
Tenth Pass	5	3.05
Twelfth Pass	1	0.61
Graduate	1	0.61
Total	164	100

The data clearly indicate that nearly ninety-six percent of respondents possess education below the secondary level, while attainment of higher secondary and graduate education remains almost negligible. A substantial proportion of the adult population continues to remain illiterate, demonstrating the persistence of educational exclusion across generations. Although government schools and welfare schemes such as free education and mid-day meals have improved enrollment among children, sustained educational progression remains limited.

Multiple structural factors contribute to this condition. Economic hardship often compels children to participate in wage labour or household responsibilities at an early age, leading to irregular attendance and dropout. Linguistic barriers between tribal dialects and the formal medium of instruction further reduce comprehension and learning outcomes. Additionally, limited parental literacy restricts educational support within households, weakening motivation for continued schooling. Geographic distance from schools and inadequate transport facilities also discourage regular participation.

These findings suggest that education among the Birhor community largely remains access-oriented, focusing on enrollment rather than learning achievement or skill formation. Consequently, education has yet to function as an effective instrument of empowerment capable of enhancing livelihood diversification and socio-economic independence among the Birhor population.

Food Security and Welfare Outreach

Food security remains one of the most critical dimensions of welfare intervention among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, particularly for communities such as the Birhor whose traditional subsistence systems have undergone significant disruption. In the absence of stable livelihood opportunities, access to subsidized food grains through government welfare programs plays a vital role in ensuring minimum nutritional security and preventing extreme hunger. The Public Distribution System (PDS) therefore represents the most visible and frequently accessed form of state support within Birhor settlements located in Tamar Block of Ranchi district.

The findings of the household survey provide important insights into the accessibility and effectiveness of ration distribution mechanisms among Birhor families, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Access to Ration Facility

Mode of Access	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Full ration received at home on time	15	9.15
Ration available but irregular	2	1.22
Must visit ration shop	22	13.41
Irregular / unclear access	125	76.22
Total	164	100

The data indicate that only a small proportion of households receive ration supplies regularly at their doorstep, while a considerable number of respondents are required to travel to ration shops to access subsidized food grains. A significant majority reported irregular or uncertain access, suggesting gaps in last-mile service delivery. Geographic remoteness, transportation difficulties, and administrative inefficiencies appear to influence the timely distribution of food supplies.

Although the availability of subsidized food grains has substantially contributed to reducing food insecurity and stabilizing household consumption patterns, accessibility challenges continue to limit the overall effectiveness of welfare outreach. Dependence on external distribution systems also reinforces vulnerability during supply disruptions. The findings therefore suggest that while food security schemes have successfully addressed survival needs, improvements in delivery mechanisms and community-based distribution models are essential to ensure reliable and equitable access for marginalized Birhor households.

School Participation among Birhor Children

School participation among children serves as an important indicator of future empowerment and social mobility within marginalized communities. Educational inclusion at an early stage contributes significantly to breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion. The present study examines school attendance patterns among Birhor households to understand the extent to which educational welfare initiatives have influenced child participation in formal schooling.

Table 3: School Attendance Status

Attendance Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
All children attend school	55	33.54
No child attends	9	5.49
Only some attend	6	3.66
Dropped out	1	0.61
No school-age child	93	56.70
Total	164	100

The data reveal that among households with school-age children, a considerable proportion reported regular attendance, indicating gradual improvement in educational outreach through government initiatives such as free schooling and mid-day meal programs. However, instances of non-attendance and partial participation continue to exist, reflecting persistent socio-economic and infrastructural challenges. Economic constraints often compel children to assist in household work or wage labour, thereby affecting regular school attendance. Additionally, long distances between settlements and schools, inadequate transportation facilities, and low levels of parental literacy influence educational continuity.

The findings suggest that while enrollment levels have improved due to welfare-driven educational incentives, sustained participation and retention remain areas of concern. School attendance among Birhor children therefore reflects progress in welfare access but has not yet translated into consistent learning outcomes or long-term human capital development necessary for community empowerment.

Nutritional Security through Mid-Day Meal Scheme

Nutritional security constitutes a fundamental component of human development, particularly among marginalized communities where poverty and livelihood insecurity directly influence health and educational outcomes. For the Birhor community, whose traditional subsistence systems have weakened over time, government-supported nutritional programs play an essential role in safeguarding child health and promoting school participation. Among various welfare initiatives, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has emerged as one of the most effective interventions addressing both nutritional deprivation and educational inclusion simultaneously.

The availability of mid-day meals among surveyed Birhor households is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Availability of Mid-Day Meal

Availability	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Available	156	95.12
Not Available	8	4.88
Total	164	100

The findings indicate near universal availability of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme within Birhor settlements, reflecting relatively efficient implementation compared to other welfare programs. The provision of cooked meals in schools has significantly contributed to improving nutritional intake among children who otherwise face food insecurity at the household level. The scheme also functions as an important motivational factor encouraging parents to send their children to school, thereby indirectly supporting educational participation.

Despite these positive outcomes, nutritional support alone cannot ensure long-term empowerment. While the program addresses immediate dietary needs and reduces classroom hunger, its impact remains largely welfare-oriented unless complemented by quality education, skill development, and livelihood opportunities for families. Persistent poverty and limited economic diversification continue to influence children’s overall development beyond nutritional improvement. Therefore, although the Mid-Day Meal Scheme represents a successful welfare intervention in enhancing child nutrition and school attendance among the Birhor community, sustainable empowerment requires integrated developmental strategies linking nutrition with education, health awareness, and socio-economic advancement.

Skill Development and Livelihood Capability

Capability enhancement through skill development is a crucial element in enabling Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) to transition from welfare dependency toward sustainable self-reliance. For communities such as the Birhor, access to vocational training can significantly influence livelihood diversification, income stability, and long-term socio-economic empowerment.

Table 5: Access to Vocational Training

Vocational Training	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	8	4.88
No	156	95.12
Total	164	100

The findings indicate an extremely limited exposure to vocational training among Birhor households. Out of the 164 respondents surveyed, only 8 individuals (4.88%) reported having received any form of vocational training, while an overwhelming majority of 156 respondents (95.12%) had no access to such opportunities. This data highlights a significant structural gap in development interventions aimed at improving livelihood capabilities within the community.

The absence of vocational training programs restricts the ability of Birhor households to acquire market-relevant skills that could enable them to participate in diverse economic activities. As a result, most members of the community remain dependent on low-paying casual labour, forest-based subsistence activities, or seasonal employment, which offer limited income security and minimal prospects for upward economic mobility.

This situation underscores the urgent need for targeted skill development initiatives specifically designed for PVTG communities. Training programs must be culturally sensitive, locally relevant, and aligned with regional economic opportunities. Strengthening vocational training access could play a transformative role in enhancing livelihood resilience,

reducing poverty, and enabling the Birhor community to gradually move toward economic self-sufficiency and social inclusion.

Discussion: Welfare Achievement versus Empowerment Deficit

The empirical findings of the study indicate that state-led welfare interventions have achieved measurable progress in securing minimum survival conditions for the Birhor community. Government initiatives related to food security, housing support, and educational outreach have contributed to improving basic living standards. Programs such as subsidized food distribution, housing schemes, and school enrollment drives have played an important role in reducing extreme deprivation and providing a degree of socio-economic stability to households. These welfare measures have ensured that a significant section of the community now has access to essential services that were previously absent or irregular.

However, while these interventions have been successful in addressing immediate survival needs, they have not adequately translated into long-term empowerment. The data reveals that developmental outcomes remain limited due to insufficient emphasis on capability creation, skill development, and sustainable livelihood opportunities. Most welfare schemes continue to operate within a distributive framework that prioritizes the provision of benefits rather than the strengthening of community capacities.

As a result, beneficiaries often remain passive recipients of state support rather than becoming active participants in the development process. Such an approach may alleviate short-term vulnerabilities but does little to alter structural marginalization or promote economic self-reliance. Without opportunities for skill acquisition, entrepreneurship, and institutional participation, communities like the Birhor remain dependent on periodic government assistance and low-income informal labour.

True empowerment requires a shift in policy orientation—from welfare distribution to capability enhancement. Development interventions must therefore focus on creating pathways that enable individuals and communities to actively engage in economic activities, participate in local governance, and build sustainable livelihood systems. This transformation involves strengthening vocational training, promoting community-based enterprises, and integrating traditional knowledge with modern economic opportunities. Only through such a participatory and capability-driven approach can welfare achievements evolve into genuine empowerment and contribute meaningfully to inclusive development.

Policy Implications for Viksit Bharat 2047

The findings of this study underline the importance of reorienting tribal development policies in order to achieve the broader national vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*. While welfare interventions have improved basic living conditions among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), long-term and inclusive development requires a strategic shift from welfare-centric approaches to empowerment-oriented frameworks. Policies must focus on strengthening livelihood capabilities, enhancing human capital, and fostering institutional participation within tribal communities.

One of the key policy priorities should be **livelihood diversification**. Communities such as the Birhor often remain dependent on forest-based subsistence activities and low-income casual labour. Government interventions should therefore promote diversified livelihood opportunities through skill development, micro-enterprises, and value addition to traditional forest products. Linking tribal producers to local and regional markets can significantly enhance income stability and economic independence.

Equally important is the need for **culturally responsive education systems**. Educational programs designed for PVTGs must incorporate local languages, community knowledge, and culturally relevant teaching methods. Such an approach can improve school participation, reduce dropout rates, and ensure that education becomes a meaningful tool for empowerment rather than merely a formal requirement.

Another critical policy direction involves **localized and context-sensitive skill development initiatives**. Training programs must be aligned with the socio-economic environment of tribal regions, focusing on practical skills that correspond to local resources and employment opportunities. This can create sustainable livelihood pathways while preventing migration-driven vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, **community-based governance engagement** is essential for empowering tribal populations. Strengthening the role of local institutions such as Gram Sabhas and customary governance structures can promote participatory decision-making and increase trust between communities and administrative systems. Governance must move beyond bureaucratic delivery mechanisms and emphasize sustained interaction, dialogue, and partnership with tribal communities.

Finally, integrating **indigenous knowledge systems with modern development planning** can ensure ecological sustainability and cultural continuity. Recognizing traditional ecological wisdom alongside contemporary policy frameworks can create development models that are both economically viable and environmentally resilient. Such an approach will be crucial for ensuring that tribal communities actively contribute to and benefit from the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

Conclusion

The developmental trajectory of the Birhor community illustrates a complex interplay between welfare provisioning and the broader goal of empowerment. Over the past decades, state-led welfare interventions have played a significant role in mitigating extreme deprivation within the community. Initiatives related to food security, housing assistance, healthcare access, and educational outreach have contributed to improving basic living conditions and ensuring a minimum standard of survival. These measures have reduced vulnerability to hunger and homelessness while also introducing sections of the community to formal education and institutional support systems.

However, the findings of this study indicate that these welfare achievements have not yet translated into structural empowerment. Despite improved access to basic services, many Birhor households remain economically fragile and dependent on irregular sources of income such as casual labour and forest-based subsistence activities. The limited availability of vocational training, livelihood diversification, and institutional participation continues to restrict opportunities for long-term socio-economic mobility. Consequently, the community often remains positioned as a beneficiary of state support rather than as an active participant in the development process.

The national vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* calls for a transformative shift in development policy—from welfare delivery toward capability expansion and participatory governance. Empowerment-oriented policies must focus on enhancing livelihood skills, strengthening educational outcomes, and promoting community participation in decision-making processes. Such an approach can help transition tribal communities from dependency to self-reliance.

Equally important is the recognition of cultural identity and indigenous knowledge as central components of development. Policies that respect traditional ecological practices and community institutions can create pathways for sustainable and context-sensitive progress. When governance frameworks acknowledge the agency, dignity, and aspirations of communities like the Birhor, they can become active contributors to sustainable development and inclusive nation-building. In this way, empowering PVTG communities will not only address historical marginalization but also strengthen the foundations of an equitable and resilient India.

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