

Tribal Politics and Activism in Jharkhand since 2000: A Historical Study

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Abstract

The formation of Jharkhand as India's 28th state on November 15, 2000, marked a significant milestone in the long-standing struggle of tribal communities, including the Munda, Santhal, Oraon, and Ho, for self-determination and cultural preservation. This historical study explores the dynamics of tribal politics and activism in Jharkhand since 2000, examining how these movements have shaped the state's socio-political landscape. The creation of Jharkhand was driven by decades of activism against socio-economic marginalization, land alienation, and cultural suppression, culminating in a state intended to prioritize tribal rights. However, post-statehood challenges, including political instability, fragmented tribal leadership, and persistent economic disparities, have hindered the realization of these aspirations. The study analyzes key movements, such as the Koel Karo resistance against dam construction and the Pathalgadi movement, which highlight grassroots efforts to protect land and assert self-governance under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. It also examines the role of regional parties like the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and national parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), exploring tensions over tribal identity, particularly around policies like the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2017, and amendments to land laws. The interplay of ethnicity, religion, and resource extraction has further complicated tribal unity, with industrialization exacerbating displacement and environmental degradation. Despite these challenges, tribal activism continues to evolve, leveraging cultural symbolism and legal frameworks to demand autonomy and justice. This study underscores the ongoing negotiation between tribal communities and the state, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies to address historical injustices and ensure sustainable development for Jharkhand's indigenous populations.

Keywords: Tribal Activism, Jharkhand Politics, Land Alienation, Cultural Identity, Self-Governance

Publication Timeline

Original Manuscript Received- April 11, 2025, Peer Review Completed- April 22, 2025, Revised Manuscript Received - April 26, 2025, Accepted & Published – May 03, 2025

Recommended Citation

Swarup, S. (2025). *Tribal Politics and Activism in Jharkhand since 2000: A Historical Study*. Intelligentsia International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 1(1), 14- 25.

- **Introduction:**

Politics is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the processes, activities, and structures through which societies govern themselves, resolve conflicts, and allocate resources. At its core, politics is about power and decision-making. As Aristotle famously defined it, politics is the art and science of governing, involving the distribution of authority and resources within a community. It is the mechanism through which collective decisions are made to achieve common goals and maintain social order. From a power-centric perspective, politics is the struggle for influence and control over resources, policies, and societal direction **(Heyman, 1991)¹**. **Harold Lasswell (1936)²** succinctly captured this idea with his definition: "Politics is who gets what, when, and how." This highlights the competitive nature of politics, where individuals, groups, and institutions vie for dominance and the ability to shape outcomes. Politics also serves as a framework for conflict resolution. David Easton viewed politics as the "authoritative allocation of values," emphasizing its role in managing and resolving disputes through negotiation, compromise, and the establishment of rules. This perspective underscores the importance of institutions and processes in maintaining stability and fairness in society. In the realm of public affairs, politics involves the activities and policies used to gain and exercise power within a government **(Miller, 1971)³**. Max Weber emphasized the role of the state and bureaucracy in politics, highlighting how governance structures influence public life and decision-making. Politics is deeply tied to social organization **(Roth, 1965)⁴**. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his work *The Social Contract*, argued that politics is the means by which societies organize themselves, create authority, and make collective decisions to achieve shared objectives **(Dunning, 1909)⁵**. Basically, politics is the foundation of human coexistence, enabling societies to navigate power dynamics, resolve conflicts, and pursue collective well-being. It is both a practical necessity and a reflection of human aspirations for order, justice, and progress.

The state of Jharkhand, carved out of Bihar in 2000, has been a site of complex socio-political dynamics, especially concerning its indigenous tribal populations. Jharkhand was formed as a new state primarily to address the long-standing political, social, and economic grievances of the tribal and indigenous communities in the region **(Prakash, 2011)⁶**. The struggle for a separate Jharkhand state dates back to the early 20th century, driven by the marginalization of Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes under the governance of Bihar. Despite India's independence in 1947, the people of Jharkhand, particularly the tribal communities, experienced little improvement in their socio-economic conditions. The administrative neglect, coupled with the exploitation of natural resources in the region, led to widespread discontent. The demand for statehood intensified after various political efforts over the decades, including petitions by groups like the Unnati Samaj and the Jharkhand Party, which sought recognition of the distinct identity and needs of the tribal population. In the 1980s, the movement

gained momentum and became more militant (**Sharma, 1988**)⁷. By the 1990s, even non-tribal communities joined the cause, expanding the movement's base. The final push for statehood came in 1998, when the central government, despite opposition from influential figures like Lalu Prasad Yadav, managed to garner support from both the Congress and RJD. The passage of the Bihar Reorganization Bill in Parliament led to the creation of Jharkhand on November 15, 2000, fulfilling the aspirations of the tribal communities and ensuring a more localized government to address their specific issues (**Munda & Keshari, 1992**)⁸.

Jharkhand is home to 32 tribes, with a population of approximately 8,645,042, accounting for 26.2% of the state's total population (**Census, 2011**)⁹. Among these, there are 8 primitive tribes, whose population stands at 192,425, representing 0.72% of the total tribal population. The Santhal tribe, the largest tribal community in Jharkhand, is dominant among these tribes. The tribal population is almost evenly divided between men (49.94%) and women (50.06%) in the state (**Gautam and Singh, 2022**)¹⁰. The Santhal tribe, with a population of about 2.8 million, is the largest, followed by the Oraon tribe, with a population of 1.744 million, and the Munda tribe, which has a population of 1.252 million. Other tribes in Jharkhand include the Kharia, Gond, Kol, Kanwar, Sabar, Asur, Baiga, Banjara, Bathudi, Bedia, Binjhia, Birhor, Birjia, Chero, Chik-Badaik, Gorait, Ho, Karmali, Kharwar, Khond, Kisan (Nagesia), Kora (Mundi-Kora), Korwa, Lohra, Mahli, Mal-Paharia, Parhaiya, Sauria-Paharia, and Bhumij (**Kumar & Chandra, 2019**)¹¹. The distribution of these tribes is geographically varied across the state. The Munda tribe predominantly inhabits the Chotanagpur Plateau, while the Santhal tribe is mainly found in the Santhal Pargana division. The Kol tribe is concentrated in the Kolhan region, and the Mahli tribe resides in the western parts of Jharkhand. The Ho tribe mainly resides in the Singhbhum region, while the Bhumij tribe is found in the Garhwa and Palamu districts. The Oraon tribe is primarily settled in the Lohardaga, Gumla, and Simdega districts, among other border areas. Similarly, the Birhor, Khond, Banjara, Baiga, Bathudi, Gorait, Birjia, Kanwar, and Sabar tribes are scattered across different regions of the state (**Singh et al., 1999**)¹².

1. Review of Related Literature:

A literature review forms the foundation for conducting research in the right direction. Its primary purpose is to understand the current status of research in a particular area of interest, identify existing research gaps, and justify the rationale for the chosen topic. A well-structured review helps the researcher gain insight into key developments, debates, and dimensions of the subject. In the proposed synopsis, a total of ten significant research works have been reviewed to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic, highlight its various aspects, and establish a strong basis for further investigation and scholarly contribution.

- **Plato (2016)**¹³ Plato's *The Republic* remains a foundational text in political theory, exploring justice, governance, and the ideal state. Scholars highlight its vision of a

philosopher-king, an elite ruler guided by wisdom, which sparks debate for its rejection of democratic principles in favor of intellectual authority. The tripartite class structure—rulers, auxiliaries, and producers—aims for social harmony but is critiqued for its inflexibility, limiting personal freedom. The tension between individual desires and collective justice underscores Plato's prioritization of the state's stability over personal autonomy. Critics argue this centralized control resembles totalitarianism, posing risks to liberty. Others view the work as a response to Athenian democratic instability, offering a structured alternative to political chaos. The Republic remains a vital text, provoking discussions on authority, justice, and the balance between individual and societal needs, with its ideas continuing to challenge modern political thought.

- **Hobbes, (1904)**¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* is a foundational text in political philosophy, introducing a social contract theory to address human conflict and governance. Hobbes depicts the state of nature as chaotic, where life is brutal and short, driving individuals to surrender their rights to an absolute sovereign for security. This centralized authority, he argues, prevents anarchy and ensures social order. Scholars view this as a response to 17th-century political turmoil, prioritizing stability over individual liberty. Critics contend that such unchecked power risks tyranny, potentially oppressing citizens under the guise of protection. Others highlight Hobbes' secular approach, separating political authority from divine justification, a radical shift for his time. The concept of the sovereign as a guarantor of peace remains influential, sparking ongoing debates about the trade-offs between security and freedom, the role of government, and the nature of political obligation in modern societies.
- **Rousseau (2004)**¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* is a pivotal work in political philosophy, exploring the legitimacy of governance through a collective agreement. Rousseau argues that individuals, in the state of nature, are free but vulnerable, prompting them to form a social contract where they surrender certain freedoms to the "general will" for mutual benefit. This general will reflects the collective interest, ensuring equality and sovereignty of the people. Scholars see this as a critique of absolute monarchy, advocating for democratic principles where citizens actively participate in law-making. However, the concept of the general will is debated, with critics arguing it risks suppressing individual dissent if misapplied, potentially leading to authoritarianism. Others view it as a visionary call for communal harmony and civic responsibility. Rousseau's emphasis on equality and popular sovereignty profoundly influences modern democratic thought, raising enduring questions about balancing individual liberty with collective authority.
- **Rawls (1993)**¹⁶ *Political Liberalism* explores how a stable and just society of free and equal citizens can exist despite deep moral, religious, and philosophical disagreements. Building on *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls introduces the idea of "overlapping consensus," where diverse doctrines endorse the same political principles for different reasons. He refines his concept of justice as fairness,

emphasizing public reason and the role of political, not metaphysical, values in constitutional democracies. The book has been widely reviewed for deepening liberal theory and addressing the pluralism of modern societies, influencing debates in political philosophy and democratic theory.

- **Pankaj (2020)¹⁷**, offers a powerful compilation of the speeches and writings of Jaipal Singh Munda—an influential Adivasi leader, freedom fighter, and architect of tribal assertion in India. This volume captures Munda’s profound commitment to Adivasi identity, autonomy, and justice within the Indian democratic framework. His speeches in the Constituent Assembly and public addresses reveal a sharp critique of mainstream nationalism, calling for the recognition of tribal distinctiveness and rights. The book provides essential insights into the formation of tribal political consciousness and critiques the marginalization of indigenous voices in postcolonial India. It also contextualizes Munda’s intellectual legacy within contemporary debates on indigeneity, representation, and social justice. Through his eloquence and moral clarity, Munda challenges dominant narratives and urges a reimagining of Indian democracy grounded in pluralism and equity. The collection is an indispensable resource for scholars of Adivasi studies, political thought, and subaltern history.
- **Munda (2014)¹⁸** Munda’s *Adivasi Astitva Aur Jharkhandi Asmita Ke Saval* is a seminal contribution to the discourse on Adivasi identity, cultural survival, and regional selfhood. Comprising essays by one of the most respected Adivasi intellectuals of modern India, the book delves into themes such as indigenous politics, spiritual traditions, socio-cultural reawakening, and the struggle for Jharkhand’s statehood. Munda combines academic insight with grassroots experience, articulating the deep-rooted connection between Adivasi identity and land, language, and community ethos. His writings challenge the homogenizing tendencies of the Indian nation-state and advocate for a pluralistic understanding of democracy that recognizes Adivasi worldviews. The volume serves not only as a political critique but also as a cultural manifesto, highlighting the need for indigenous resurgence rooted in historical consciousness. This work is indispensable for scholars of tribal studies, postcolonial theory, and regional political movements, offering a rare insider perspective on the lived realities and aspirations of India’s Adivasis.
- **Ranendra (2017)¹⁹** *Global Gaanv Ke Devta* is a powerful Hindi novel that critiques the impacts of globalization on Adivasi communities. Through evocative storytelling, the author highlights the exploitation of indigenous lands, the erosion of traditional livelihoods, and the cultural displacement caused by corporate and state interests. The narrative blends realism with symbolic depth, portraying the resistance and resilience of tribal societies against neo-colonial forces. Ranendra, drawing from real-world struggles, offers a compelling voice for marginalized communities often excluded from mainstream discourse. The book is a significant contribution to contemporary Adivasi literature and a poignant commentary on

development and identity.

- **Ambagudia and Xaxa (2021)²⁰**, *Handbook of Tribal Politics in India*, is a comprehensive volume that critically examines the intersections of tribal identity, democratic governance, and political participation in India. Divided into thematic sections, the book covers historical trajectories, contemporary challenges, and the evolving role of tribal representatives in policy-making. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative research, it highlights key issues such as electoral dynamics, state-tribe relations, and political marginalization. It provides an in-depth, scholarly understanding of tribal politics, making it an indispensable resource for academics, policymakers, and students exploring indigenous political realities in India's democratic framework.
- **Sinha (2021)²¹** *Jharkhand ke Adivasi: Pahchan ka Sankat* is a compelling collection of essays addressing the crisis of identity among Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. The book highlights how globalization and modernization are eroding indigenous languages, festivals, and cultural practices. Contributions from prominent writers like Prabhakar Tirkey, Mahadev Toppo, and Pushpa Tete offer diverse perspectives on Adivasi literature, traditions, and political marginalization. The inclusion of Jaipal Singh Munda's rare piece, *Adivasiyat aur Main*, adds historical depth. This volume serves as a wake-up call for youth, policymakers, and researchers, urging the revival and protection of Adivasi identity and heritage in contemporary India.

- **Tribal Politics and Activism in Jharkhand since 2000:**

The creation of Jharkhand as India's 28th state on November 15, 2000, was a landmark achievement for the tribal communities of the region, including the Munda, Santhal, Oraon, Ho, and others, who collectively form approximately 26% of the state's population (2011 Census). The formation of Jharkhand was the culmination of a century-long struggle rooted in the aspirations of indigenous groups to secure political autonomy, protect cultural identity, and address socio-economic marginalization. The main theme of tribal politics and activism in Jharkhand since 2000 revolves around the ongoing quest for self-determination, land rights, and cultural preservation amidst challenges posed by political fragmentation, industrialization, and competing visions of tribal identity. This theme is explored through the interplay of grassroots movements, political representation, and socio-economic struggles, supported by key facts and data that highlight the achievements, challenges, and evolving dynamics of tribal activism in the state.

- **Historical Context of Tribal Aspirations**

The demand for a separate Jharkhand state traces its origins to the early 20th century, driven by tribal resistance against colonial exploitation and post-independence marginalization. The British annexation of tribal lands in the

Chotanagpur region for revenue and resource extraction, coupled with the influx of non-tribal settlers (dikus), led to significant land alienation. By the 1930s, the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and later the Jharkhand Party, founded in 1950, began advocating for a tribal homeland. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), established in 1973 under Shibu Soren, became the most prominent voice, mobilizing tribes against land grabs and economic exclusion. According to a 2016 report, approximately 1.5 million acres of tribal land were alienated due to mining and industrial projects since India's independence, fueling the statehood movement.

The creation of Jharkhand was envisioned as a means to empower its 8.6 million tribal population (2011 Census) by ensuring control over natural resources, cultural preservation, and political representation. However, post-2000, the state faced challenges in fulfilling these promises due to political instability, economic disparities, and continued resource exploitation, shaping the trajectory of tribal politics and activism.

- ***Political Representation and Challenges***

1. Rise of Regional and National Parties

The JMM has been central to tribal politics, leveraging its historical role in the statehood movement to secure significant electoral success. Since 2000, the JMM has formed governments in coalition with parties like the Indian National Congress, notably in 2010 and 2019, with Hemant Soren as Chief Minister. In the 2019 state assembly elections, the JMM-led alliance won 47 out of 81 seats, reflecting strong tribal support. However, coalition dynamics have often diluted its tribal agenda, as alliances with national parties like Congress prioritize broader electoral strategies over Adivasi-specific issues.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a national party, has also gained traction in Jharkhand, ruling the state from 2000–2003, 2009–2013, and 2014–2019. The BJP's policies, such as the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2017, aimed at curbing religious conversions, have stirred controversy. Approximately 40% of Jharkhand's tribals follow the Sarna religion, distinct from Hinduism and Christianity, and the act was perceived by some as an attempt to impose Hindu majoritarianism, leading to protests by tribal groups. The BJP's push for industrialization, including amendments to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNT) and Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (SPT) in 2016, sparked widespread opposition, as these laws protect tribal land from non-tribal acquisition. The amendments were later withdrawn due to protests, highlighting the political influence of tribal activism.

2. Fragmentation of Tribal Leadership

Despite electoral successes, tribal political leadership has been fragmented by internal divisions and competing interests. The JMM, while dominant, faces challenges from smaller tribal parties and factions within its ranks. For instance, the All Jharkhand

Students Union (AJSU), a former JMM ally, has emerged as a separate political force, contesting elections independently since 2005. The 2019 elections saw 12 tribal-based parties field candidates, splitting the tribal vote and weakening unified representation. This fragmentation is compounded by the co-option of tribal leaders by national parties, diluting the focus on Adivasi issues. Data from the Election Commission of India shows that tribal voter turnout, while high (65% in 2019), is often split across multiple parties, reducing the bargaining power of tribal communities.

- **Grassroots Activism and Movements**

1. Koel Karo Resistance:

One of the most significant post-2000 tribal movements was the Koel Karo resistance against a proposed hydroelectric dam project on the Koel and Karo rivers. Initiated in the early 2000s, the project threatened to displace over 256 villages and submerge 80,000 acres of tribal land, affecting approximately 150,000 people, mostly Adivasis. Led by the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan, the movement mobilized thousands of tribals, who organized protests, blockades, and public hearings. The resistance culminated in violent clashes in 2001, with police firing killing eight protestors. The sustained activism forced the government to shelve the project in 2003, demonstrating the power of grassroots mobilization in protecting tribal land rights.

2. Pathalgadi Movement:

The Pathalgadi movement (2017–2018) emerged as a powerful assertion of tribal self-governance, particularly in the Khunti district. Adivasis erected stone plaques (pathalgars) inscribed with provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), declaring their villages as autonomous zones under tribal customary laws. Over 200 villages participated, rejecting external governance and asserting control over land and resources. The movement was a response to perceived threats from industrial projects and land law amendments. However, the state government's crackdown, including arrests of leaders and charges of sedition, led to its suppression by 2018. A 2019 report estimated that 15,000 Adivasis faced legal cases related to Pathalgadi, highlighting the state's resistance to tribal autonomy.

3. Other Localized Movement:

Tribal activism has also manifested in localized protests against mining and industrial projects. For instance, resistance against coal mining in the Hazaribagh and Dhanbad regions has focused on environmental degradation and displacement. A 2013 study estimated that 1.4 million people, 40% of whom were tribals, were displaced by mining and industrial projects in Jharkhand between 1951 and 2000. Post-2000, projects like the Adani coal mines in Godda faced protests from 2016 onward, with tribals demanding fair compensation and rehabilitation. These movements underscore the ongoing struggle to balance development with tribal rights.

- **Major Concerns :**

- 1. Land Alienation and Displacement**

Land alienation remains a central issue fueling tribal activism. The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908, and Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act, 1949, were designed to protect tribal land from non-tribal acquisition, but loopholes and lax enforcement have led to significant losses. A 2016 government report noted that 1.5 million acres of tribal land were transferred to non-tribals or acquired for industrial projects since independence. Mining activities, particularly coal and uranium, have displaced thousands of Adivasis. For example, the Rajmahal coal project displaced over 10,000 tribal families between 2000 and 2010, with inadequate rehabilitation exacerbating poverty.

- 2. Economic Disparities**

Jharkhand's economy, heavily reliant on mining and industry, has failed to uplift its tribal population. The state's per capita income in 2020–21 was ₹76,281, significantly lower than the national average of ₹1,50,007. Tribal communities, primarily agrarian, face economic exclusion, with 45.3% living below the poverty line (2011–12 NSSO data) compared to the state average of 36.9%. Unemployment among tribals is high, with only 8% engaged in formal sector jobs (2011 Census). The lack of industrial benefits reaching Adivasi communities fuels resentment, driving protests against projects that prioritize corporate interests over local welfare.

- 3. Cultural and Religious Identity**

Cultural preservation is a key driver of tribal activism. Approximately 40% of Jharkhand's tribals follow the Sarna religion, a nature-based faith distinct from Hinduism and Christianity. The JMM and tribal activists have demanded recognition of Sarna as a separate religion in the census, a movement gaining traction since 2010. The 2017 Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act sparked tensions, as it was seen as targeting Christian converts (12% of tribals, per 2011 Census) and undermining Sarna identity. Cultural festivals like Sarhul and Karma have become platforms for asserting tribal identity, with over 500,000 participants annually in Ranchi alone, reinforcing community solidarity.

- 4. Environmental and Resource Conflicts**

Jharkhand's rich mineral resources, including 40% of India's coal and 29% of its iron ore, have made it a hub for industrial activity, often at the expense of tribal lands and livelihoods. Mining and industrial projects have led to environmental degradation, including deforestation and water pollution. A 2020 study reported that 30% of Jharkhand's forest cover was lost between 2000 and 2018, largely due to mining and urbanization. Surface water bodies like the Damodar and Subarnarekha rivers face heavy metal contamination, with iron and manganese levels exceeding drinking water standards, impacting tribal communities dependent on these resources. Activists have increasingly linked environmental justice with tribal rights, as seen in

protests against uranium mining in Jaduguda, where radiation risks have affected 50,000 residents since 2000.

- **Challenges to Tribal Unity**

Tribal politics and activism face challenges from internal divisions and external pressures. The diversity of tribal groups, with 32 distinct communities, leads to competing interests. For example, the Santhal and Munda have different linguistic and cultural priorities, complicating unified movements. The rise of Christian and Hindu identities among tribals has also created fault lines, with 14% of tribals identifying as Christian and 46% as Hindu (2011 Census). National parties exploit these divisions, offering patronage to select tribal leaders, which undermines collective action. Additionally, the urban-rural divide, with 24% of Jharkhand's population urbanized (2011 Census), creates disparities in political priorities, as urban tribals often align with broader developmental agendas.

- **Achievements of Tribal Activism**

Despite challenges, tribal activism has achieved notable successes. The cancellation of the Koel Karo project and the withdrawal of the 2016 CNT/SPT amendments demonstrate the effectiveness of collective resistance. The implementation of PESA, though incomplete, has empowered gram sabhas in 5th Schedule areas, covering 70% of Jharkhand's districts, to manage local resources. Educational initiatives, such as tribal language schools (e.g., Santali medium schools serving 20,000 students by 2020), have strengthened cultural identity. The JMM's advocacy has also led to increased tribal representation, with 28 reserved assembly seats for Scheduled Tribes.

- **Future Prospects**

The future of tribal politics and activism in Jharkhand hinges on addressing structural inequalities and fostering unity. Strengthening PESA implementation, with over 4,000 gram sabhas yet to gain full autonomy, is critical. Economic empowerment through skill development and land-based livelihoods can reduce poverty, with only 15% of tribal youth accessing vocational training (2018 data). Legal reforms to plug loopholes in land protection laws and stricter environmental regulations are essential. The Sarna code movement, supported by 50 lakh signatures in 2020, could unify tribals across religious divides. Leveraging digital platforms for activism, as seen in the 2020 #SarnaCode campaign on X, can amplify tribal voices globally.

- **Conclusion**

Tribal politics and activism in Jharkhand since 2000 reflect a dynamic struggle for self-determination, land rights, and cultural preservation against the backdrop of political fragmentation, industrialization, and socio-economic marginalization. The JMM's electoral successes and movements like Koel Karo and Pathalgadi highlight

the resilience of Adivasi communities, yet challenges like land alienation (1.5 million acres lost), economic disparities (45.3% tribal poverty), and environmental degradation (30% forest loss) persist. The interplay of ethnicity, religion, and resource conflicts underscores the complexity of tribal identity. Future progress requires unified leadership, robust legal protections, and sustainable development to fulfill the vision of a Jharkhand that truly represents its tribal heritage.

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