



Research Paper

Engineered Identity: Political Manipulation and Cultural Fragmentation in Tribal Narmada

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Abstract

The Narmada district in Gujarat, home to several tribal communities, has undergone significant socio-cultural transformations over the past few decades. This paper explores the causes and consequences of separatism and identity shifts among these communities, with a special focus on the roles played by political activism and external influence. Central to the analysis is the involvement of Medha Patkar and the Narmada BachaoAndolan (NBA), alongside regional Congress Party leaders, in shaping the perceptions and responses of tribal populations toward development initiatives like the Sardar Sarovar Project. Although activism has historically served to amplify marginalized voices, this research identifies a complex relationship between such interventions and the fragmentation of tribal harmony. Through field surveys, interviews, and secondary data analysis, it is evident that sustained campaigns against development have led to disillusionment, erosion of trust in institutions, and socio-political polarization. The findings suggest that while there were legitimate concerns regarding displacement and rehabilitation, the communication strategies and ideological framing employed by activist groups often amplified fears and fueled mistrust. Moreover, political leaders capitalized on these tensions for electoral gains, further undermining community cohesion. Quantitative data indicates a significant shift in cultural practices, a decline in participation in traditional events, and an increase in intra-tribal conflict and migration. These changes correlate with intensified activist presence and politicization of tribal identity. The research argues that this cultural dislocation, often portrayed as empowerment, has contributed to a crisis of identity and belonging. In conclusion, the paper underscores the importance of a balanced approach that honors tribal rights and culture without undermining development and national integration. It calls for greater accountability among activist groups and political leaders, emphasizing the need for genuine community-led engagement and transparent governance.

Keywords: Narmada District, tribal identity, separatism, cultural shifts, Medha Patkar, Congress, tribal manipulation, social harmony, development conflict, Sardar Sarovar Project

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I. Introduction

The Narmada district in southern Gujarat has long been home to diverse Adivasi (tribal) communities, such as the Bhils, Vasavas, and Tadvis. These groups have preserved unique cultural and social systems, often centered around forest-based economies, local governance, and deeply embedded spiritual traditions. In recent decades, however, this relatively stable tribal landscape has been subjected to intense external pressures arising from both development policies and socio-political activism. This paper critically examines the emergence of separatist sentiment and cultural fragmentation in Narmada, focusing particularly on how movements led by Medha Patkar and regional Congress Party leaders have contributed to identity-based mobilization.

The Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), one of India's largest and most ambitious hydroelectric and irrigation endeavors, brought national attention to the Narmada Valley. While the project promised significant benefits such as water supply, electricity, and agricultural development, it also sparked major resistance due to concerns over displacement and environmental impact. Leading this resistance was the Narmada BachaoAndolan (NBA), spearheaded by Medha Patkar. Although the NBA raised valid issues about rehabilitation and transparency, scholars argue that the movement's narrative was strategically constructed to generate global sympathy and local resistance (Baviskar, 1995; Dwivedi, 1999).

This resistance was not solely about land and displacement. It evolved into a broader ideological campaign against the perceived exploitation of tribal lands by the state. Political parties, especially the Indian National Congress, found in this discontent an opportunity to build electoral capital. Local Congress leaders often aligned with the NBA, organizing tribal protests, promoting narratives of victimization, and undermining state interventions aimed at integration and development (Sharma, 2016).

Such politicization led to cultural shifts. Tribal youth were increasingly drawn into oppositional politics, sometimes at the cost of traditional knowledge systems and leadership structures. This ideological reorientation resulted in a growing disconnect between elders and younger generations, further weakening community bonds. According to a 2021 ethnographic study (Patel & Desai, 2021), ritual observance, customary dispute resolution, and inter-tribal solidarity declined markedly during peak years of NBA and Congress-led agitation.

Moreover, the information asymmetry created by activist groups often resulted in exaggerated fears. Fieldwork conducted in 2023 revealed that several communities feared displacement even in areas not directly affected by the dam's catchment area. Activists' portrayal of state efforts as uniformly destructive led to mass resistance, which in many cases hindered access to benefits such as compensation, housing, and employment opportunities (Government of Gujarat, 2018).

This paper contends that the intervention of Medha Patkar and Congress leaders, while ostensibly aimed at empowerment, resulted in a paradoxical weakening of tribal agency. Instead of fostering local leadership and constructive dialogue, these interventions often manipulated tribal sentiment, causing long-term damage to cultural cohesion and institutional trust.

By analyzing the historical trajectory of activism, political strategy, and tribal response, this research provides insight into the deeper consequences of identity-based mobilization in tribal India. In doing so, it calls attention to the need for more nuanced, community-driven approaches to both development and dissent.

II. Research Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to examine the dynamics of separatism and cultural shifts in Narmada district. The methodology is designed to triangulate various forms of evidence, ensuring a holistic understanding of the issues at hand.

1. Data Collection

Primary Data:

1. **Field Surveys:** Conducted across 18 villages in Nandod, Dediapada, and Sagbara talukas. A total of 312 tribal respondents were selected using stratified random sampling.
2. **Key Informant Interviews:** Included tribal elders, local government officials, NGO workers, school teachers, and youth leaders.
3. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Held in 9 locations, organized by age and gender groups, to assess generational and gender-based perspectives.

Secondary Data:

1. Government documents (e.g., rehabilitation plans, census data).
2. Reports and publications from the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA).
3. Academic studies (e.g., Baviskar, 1995; Sharma, 2016; Patel & Desai, 2021).

2. Analytical Framework

Thematic Analysis: Used to identify key themes such as identity, resistance, dislocation, and leadership.

Descriptive Statistics: Used to quantify trends in cultural participation, perceptions of activists/politicians, and access to development schemes.

Comparative Analysis: Cross-referenced responses across age, gender, and geographical variables to identify patterns of divergence.

3. Validity and Ethical Considerations

- Participants were assured anonymity, and informed consent was obtained.
- Data was reviewed independently by two regional academic advisors.
- The questionnaire and interview schedule were translated into Gujarati and validated through a pilot test in two villages.

III. Results

The analysis of field data reveals significant socio-cultural shifts and emerging patterns of identity fragmentation across tribal communities in Narmada district. The following tables present key statistical trends.

Table 1: Perceptions of Activist and Political Influence (N=312)

Stakeholder Influence	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	No Opinion (%)
Medha Patkar/NBA	21.8	64.1	14.1
Local Congress Leaders	17.3	69.9	12.8
State Government Officials	36.5	45.2	18.3

A majority of respondents expressed negative views regarding the influence of both the NBA and Congress leaders, indicating a perception of manipulation and political interference in tribal matters.

Table 2: Cultural Practice Retention by Age Group

Age Group	Participates in Traditional Festivals (%)	Follows Tribal Rituals (%)	Uses Tribal Language Daily (%)
15–25 years	38.7	25.1	41.9
26–45 years	57.4	44.8	63.5
46+ years	78.6	71.3	81.2

Cultural erosion is most pronounced among younger generations, suggesting that political mobilization and external narratives have disrupted traditional continuity.

Table 3: Access to Government Benefits (2019–2024)

Scheme	Benefited Households (%)	Cited Activist Interference (%)
Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana	62.1	18.7
PDS (Public Distribution)	84.3	4.6
Tribal Welfare Grants	45.7	31.2

Programs like the Tribal Welfare Grants show a high correlation between activist interference and limited access, indicating political gatekeeping may obstruct welfare dissemination. These findings form the empirical base for the ensuing discussion and are contextualized with reference to existing literature and ethnographic observations.

IV. Discussion

The data from Narmada district paints a compelling picture of socio-cultural disintegration triggered by politicized activism and external interference. This discussion synthesizes field observations with scholarly insights to unpack the deeper consequences of activist-driven identity politics.

First, the overwhelmingly negative perception of Medha Patkar and local Congress leaders (Table 1) reflects growing disillusionment within tribal communities. While Patkar’s movement originally emphasized environmental and human rights issues (Baviskar, 1995), its evolution into an oppositional front against development alienated many beneficiaries of state-led schemes (Dwivedi, 1999). The ideological rigidity of the NBA not only rejected state narratives but also delegitimized internal tribal voices that supported pragmatic engagement with development (Deshpande, 2013).

Local Congress leaders exacerbated this tension. According to Sharma (2016), Congress cadres often invoked “Adivasi asmita” (tribal pride) to mobilize votes, framing state initiatives as assaults on tribal sovereignty. However, these leaders rarely contributed to sustainable governance or long-term welfare. The manipulation of grievances for political gain, as reported by over 69% of respondents in Table 1, created a vacuum of trust. This erosion of confidence in leadership structures deepened community fragmentation and hindered effective participation in state programs.

Table 2 highlights an alarming generational divide. The dramatic drop in cultural retention among the 15–25 age group reveals the success of anti-establishment rhetoric in displacing traditional norms. As Patel and Desai (2021) document, tribal youth involved in protest movements were often estranged from cultural mentorship by elders, leading to a breakdown in ritual transmission. Activists, while promoting resistance identities, offered little in terms of cultural continuity, resulting in weakened intergenerational bonds.

The third major finding pertains to access to government benefits. While schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS) maintain high participation (84.3%), targeted programs like Tribal Welfare Grants see disproportionate activist interference (31.2%). This suggests a selective obstruction of schemes that could promote autonomy and integration. As documented by the Government of Gujarat (2018), misinformation

campaigns often led communities to decline or delay registration for benefits, fearing displacement or cultural dilution.

Comparatively, in other tribal areas of India—such as Jharkhand and Odisha—where activism focused on negotiating terms rather than blanket opposition, communities achieved better developmental outcomes without significant identity erosion (Kumar & Singh, 2020). This contrast emphasizes the cost of adversarial activism in Narmada.

Critically, the data underscores that separatism in Narmada is not inherently indigenous but externally induced. The identity struggles do not emerge from a rejection of Indian governance or modernity, but from the confusion sown by overlapping agendas of activism and political opportunism. Rather than fostering empowerment, these influences have left communities vulnerable, isolated, and in some cases, economically stagnant.

In summary, the role of external actors—while cloaked in advocacy—has in practice destabilized traditional social structures, disrupted cultural practices, and weakened tribal self-governance. A sustainable path forward must prioritize grassroots leadership, culturally respectful engagement, and transparent governance. Only through these mechanisms can tribal harmony and identity be restored.

V. Conclusion

The present study sheds light on the complex dynamics of cultural disintegration, separatist tendencies, and identity struggles in the Narmada district of Gujarat. The evidence points toward an externally driven disruption of traditional tribal life, fueled by ideologically motivated activists and politically ambitious leaders. While framed in the rhetoric of rights and resistance, the actual impact of these interventions has been the weakening of social cohesion and cultural continuity. The role of Medha Patkar and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) is particularly damaged. Once lauded and forced for highlighting environmental injustices, the movement's trajectory has led to unintended consequences for the tribal communities it sought to protect. By resisting all forms of development, including those designed to benefit locals, and promoting a singular narrative of victimhood, the NBA alienated the very populations it mobilized. Many tribal individuals, especially the youth, became entangled in resistance politics without a clear understanding of the long-term implications, leading to cultural estrangement and economic stagnation.

Similarly, the involvement of Congress leaders in tribal affairs often lacked genuine commitment to development or empowerment. Instead, these interventions were frequently short-term, geared toward electoral gain. The repeated invocation of tribal pride without concurrent investment in education, healthcare, and employment created a political climate high on symbolism but low on substance. This strategy not only failed to produce durable results but also cultivated skepticism among the tribal populace toward all political engagement.

The study's findings, especially regarding the generational decline in cultural practice and growing distrust in political institutions, are cause for concern. These shifts point to a fractured identity structure wherein younger generations are caught between inherited traditions and externally imposed narratives. If not addressed, this could lead to permanent alienation from both tribal heritage and mainstream integration. The way forward requires a multipronged strategy. First, tribal voices must be centred in policymaking processes rather than appropriated by external actors. Local leadership rooted in cultural knowledge and community trust should be prioritized over outsider advocacy. Second, state welfare interventions must be safeguarded from politicization and misinformation. Ensuring direct access, transparency, and cultural sensitivity in government schemes can restore faith in state institutions.

Lastly, there must be investment in cultural preservation initiatives that engage youth meaningfully. This could include integrating tribal languages and customs into formal education, supporting community-led festivals, and archiving oral histories. By bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary aspirations, such efforts can rebuild a cohesive identity.

In conclusion, the cultural and social fragmentation in Narmada is not a natural outgrowth of tribal evolution but the result of targeted external manipulation. Addressing this crisis requires both political will and community-centred strategies. If executed with care and inclusivity, these measures can restore the harmony, dignity, and resilience of Narmada's tribal communities.

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