

Analysis of Socio-Economic Conditions of the Kondh Tribe

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INTRODUCTION



India has the second largest concentration of tribal population in the world next to Africa. According to Article 432 of the Constitution of India, the Scheduled Tribes (ST) refers to specific indigenous peoples whose status is acknowledged to some formal degree by appropriate national and state legislation. As per 2001 census, ST population was 84.3 million representing 8.2% of Indian population. A total of 461 ST groups have been identified, who are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country (Singh 1994). There are 6 predominantly tribal states where more than 50% population is ST (Mizoram 94.8%, Nagaland 87.7%, Meghalaya 85.5%, Arunachal Pradesh 63.7%, Union Territories of Lakshadweep 93.2% and Dadra & Nagar Haveli 79.0%). More than half of ST population in the country is concentrated in the states of Madhya Pradesh (23.3%), Orissa (22.2%), Gujarat (14.9%), Assam (12.8%), Rajasthan (12.4%), Maharashtra (9.3%), Bihar (7.7%), Andhra Pradesh (6.3%) and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (5.5%). Of the 461 scheduled tribes in India, Orissa has declared 62 tribal communities and 13 as primitive tribal groups (PTG). Dongrias, a major sect of the great Kondh tribe, mostly stay on high hills known as Dongar. The Dongria Kondh is one of the officially designated PTG in Orissa. They are the original inhabitants of Niyamgiri hilly region which extends to Rayagada, Koraput and Kalahandi districts of south Orissa. The Dongria population is confined to three community development blocks namely Bissam Cuttack and Munuguda of Gunpur sub-division and alyansinghpur Block of Rayagada sub-division. Dongria Kondhs have an estimated population of about 10,000 and are distributed in around 120 settlements, all at an altitude up to 5,000 feet above the sea-level.

India is a country of immense cultural diversity, where numerous ethnic and tribal communities coexist with their own distinct traditions, customs, languages, and social systems. Tribal communities form an integral part of Indian society and contribute significantly to the country's cultural heritage. According to the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 8.6 percent of the total population of the country.

They speak a language, called the kuvi, which is of Dravidian linguistic ancestry that has no script. They are patrilineal and patriarchal; they have nuclear families, extended families, lineage and clans. Unlike other tribal groups of India, Dongria Kondhs are known for their deep knowledge and skill in horticulture. They largely rely on hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation in the Niyamgiri hills for survival. However, due to development interventions in education, medical facilities, irrigation, plantation and so on and so forth, they have started adapting to the great tradition or modern civilization standards in many ways. Their traditional life style, customary traits of economy political organization, norms, values and world view have been drastically changed over a long period of time. Their population is around 10000 spreads over 120 villages with a sex ratio of 1352 females/ 1000 males. Literacy rate is less than 10%, particularly female literacy in only 3%. Dongria Kondh is an endogamous group and within them the clans are exogamous divided into several patrilineal clans forming socio-cultural territorial organizations. The health status is poor due to high level of poverty, poor environmental sanitation and hygiene, and increased morbidity from water-borne and vector-borne infections. Poor knowledge on availability and access to public health care facilities resulting in increased severity and duration of illnesses. Moreover, social barriers and taboos preventing utilization of healthcare services increase vulnerability to specific endemic and communicable diseases.

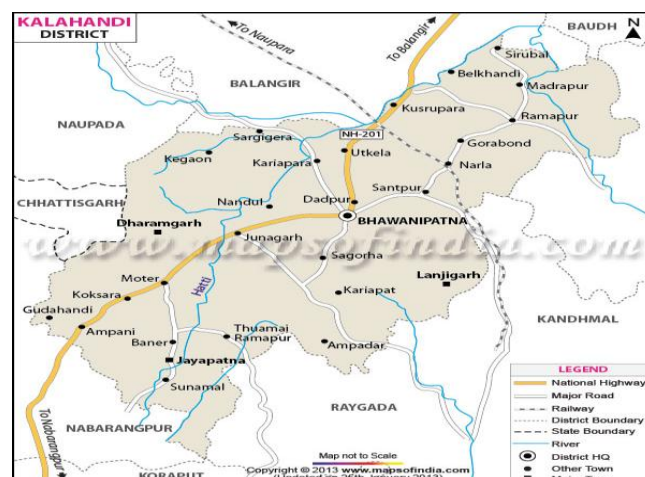
Among the prominent tribal communities of Odisha, the **Kondh** tribe (also known as Kandha or Khond) occupies a significant position. The Kondhs are primarily concentrated in the central and southern districts of Odisha. They have maintained a close relationship with forests and nature for centuries and have preserved their traditional practices despite gradual exposure to modernization.

However, socio-economic backwardness continues to affect large sections of the community. Issues such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, unemployment, and inadequate healthcare facilities remain major concerns. This project aims to analyze the socio-economic conditions of the Kondh tribe and understand the changes occurring due to government interventions and modernization.

A tribe is a group of families bound together by kinship, usually descending from common mythical or legendary ancestors, living in a common region, speaking a common dialect having a common historical background. These groups are the distinct biological isolates with characteristic cultural and socioeconomic background. They inhabit widely varying ecological and geo-climatic setting having at different stages of development. These are considered to be the oldest ethnic segments of population and hence, the term 'Adivasi' has been fairly popular in India. In the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-79), Government of India (1984) classified 75 ST communities as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) on the basis of four-point criteria; i) smallness and diminishing population, ii) backwardness and isolation, iii) preagricultural technology for their subsistence, and iv) very low level of literacy. They spread over 15 States/ Union Territories with a total population of 1.32 million (1.95%). Their distribution in different states .

Each group is small, differentially developed with respect to one another of remote habitat with poor administrative and infrastructure back up. Due to isolation, they are untouched by modern civilization and thus their traditions have been left intact through the ages. Their problems and needs are quite different from other ST, hence, priority accorded for protection and development. Though they have put into one category, yet each of PTG is at a different level of development and socio-culturally distinct facing survival problems (Pandey, 2002). PTG like Shompens, Jarawas, Sentinelese of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Bondos of Orissa, Cholanaiakans of Kerala, Abujhmarias of Chhattisgarh, and Birhors of Jharkhand are under the threat of getting of extinction. As they live in more interior inaccessible pockets with declining sources of sustenance and become vulnerable to hunger, starvation and ill-health. For the welfare of PTG, 100% subsidy is being provided for individual family benefit and income generation oriented schemes, out of special central assistance by Government of India.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION



The Kondh tribe is mainly found in the following districts of Odisha:

- Kandhamal District
- Kalahandi District
- Rayagada District
- Koraput District
- Ganjam District
- Gajapati District

The Kondh tribe mainly inhabits the central and southern regions of Odisha. These areas are characterized by hilly terrain, dense forests, rivers, and valleys. The geographical isolation of these regions has influenced their lifestyle significantly. Agriculture in these areas depends largely on rainfall. Irrigation facilities are limited, and farmers rely on monsoon for crop production. Poor road connectivity restricts access to markets, hospitals, and schools. Many villages are located deep inside forests, making transportation difficult. Geographical isolation has helped preserve their culture but has also contributed to economic backwardness and lack of infrastructure development.

These areas are mostly hilly and forest-covered regions. The terrain is uneven, with dense forests and valleys. Agriculture is largely dependent on rainfall, and transportation facilities in interior villages remain limited. Poor road connectivity and remoteness often restrict access to education, healthcare, and markets.

HISTORY AND ORIGIN

The Kondhs are considered one of the ancient tribal communities of Odisha. Anthropological studies suggest that they belong to the Dravidian ethnic group. Historically, they practiced shifting cultivation, locally known as Podu cultivation. In this system, a patch of forest land is cleared and cultivated for a few years, after which the cultivators move to another area.

During British colonial rule, the Kondhs resisted administrative interference in their traditional customs. They were particularly known for their strong attachment to their land and forest resources. Over time, changes in forest policies and land regulations affected their traditional rights.

Despite these changes, the Kondhs have maintained a strong cultural identity. Their customs, rituals, and belief systems reflect a deep respect for nature and ancestral traditions.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

➤ **Family Structure**

The Kondh society is predominantly patriarchal. The father acts as the head of the family, and property is generally inherited through the male line. Most families are nuclear in nature. Marriage is usually arranged within the community, and the bride price system is prevalent.

➤ **Social Organization**

The village administration is governed by traditional leaders such as:

- Naik – Village Headman
- Jani – Priest
- Behera – Assistant Head

These leaders play a crucial role in resolving disputes, organizing festivals, and maintaining social order.

➤ **Language**

The Kondhs primarily speak the Kui language. However, Odia is also used for communication, especially in official matters. Due to low literacy rates, preservation and development of the tribal language remain limited.

➤ **Religion and Festivals**



The Kondhs follow animism and nature worship. Their chief deity is Dharni Penu, the Earth Goddess. Festivals play an important role in their cultural life. Major festivals include:

- Kedu Festival
- Nuakhai
- Chaitra Festival

These festivals strengthen social unity and preserve traditional customs.

➤ **Education**

The level of education among the Kondh tribe remains low due to poverty, lack of schools in remote areas, early marriage, and child labor. Though the government has established residential schools and Ashram schools, dropout rates remain high.

➤ **Status of Women**

Women participate actively in agriculture, forest activities, and household responsibilities. Although early marriage is common and access to higher education is limited, women generally enjoy participation in social and religious activities.

The social structure of the Kondh tribe is primarily patriarchal. The father or the eldest male member of the family is considered the head of the household. He is responsible for decision-making regarding property, marriage, and social matters. However, women also contribute significantly to family welfare through agricultural and domestic work.

Most families are nuclear in nature, consisting of parents and their children. Joint families exist but are less common. Marriage is generally arranged within the tribe, and inter-tribal marriages are rare. The bride price system is practiced, where the groom's family gives gifts or money to the bride's family as a symbol of respect.

Divorce and remarriage are socially accepted in certain circumstances, which reflects a relatively flexible social structure. Community relationships are based on cooperation and collective participation in agricultural and social activities.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE KONDH TRIBE

➤ Occupation



Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Kondh tribe. Major crops include millet, maize, rice, and pulses. Shifting cultivation (Podu) is widely practiced. Many families also depend on forest products such as honey, fruits, bamboo, and medicinal plants. Daily wage labor is another important source of income.

➤ 5.2 Income and Poverty

Income levels are generally low due to small landholdings, dependence on monsoon rainfall, lack of modern agricultural tools, and exploitation by middlemen. A large number of families live below the poverty line.

➤ 5.3 Housing

Most houses are made of mud walls with thatched roofs. Sanitation facilities are poor, and access to clean drinking water is limited. Government housing schemes have improved conditions in some villages.

➤ 5.4 Health Conditions

Major health issues include malnutrition, malaria, tuberculosis, and anemia. Causes include lack of hospitals, poor transportation, and low awareness. Government health camps and Anganwadi centers provide some assistance, but coverage remains inadequate in remote areas.

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES FOR TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

Several government schemes aim to improve the socio-economic condition of tribal communities:

- Integrated Tribal Development Programme
- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
- Tribal Sub-Plan
- Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana
- Eklavya Model Residential Schools

These schemes focus on education, employment generation, housing, healthcare, and infrastructure development.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Despite various developmental programs, the Kondh tribe continues to face several problems:

- Poverty
- Illiteracy
- Unemployment
- Poor healthcare facilities
- Land alienation
- Exploitation by moneylenders
- Lack of awareness about government schemes

Modernization has improved communication and connectivity but has also led to cultural erosion and migration.

CULTURE, RELIGION, AND BELIEFS OF THE KONDH TRIBE

The cultural and religious life of the Kondh tribe is deeply rooted in their close relationship with nature. Their worldview is shaped by the belief that human beings, natural elements, and spiritual forces are interconnected. Religion among the Kondhs is not organized through written scriptures or formal institutions but is preserved through oral traditions, rituals, myths, and community practices. Their belief system reflects a harmonious balance between ecological sustainability and social unity.

➤ Animistic Worldview and Spiritual Universe

The Kondhs practice animism, a belief system that attributes spiritual essence to natural elements. They believe that every natural object—whether it is a mountain, river, tree, forest, or animal—possesses a spirit. These spirits can be benevolent or malevolent, and human well-being depends on maintaining harmony with them.

The Earth Goddess, Dharni Penu, occupies the highest position in their religious hierarchy. She represents fertility, motherhood, and agricultural prosperity. Since agriculture forms the backbone of their economy, rituals related to land and harvest are central to their religious life. They believe that disrespect toward the land or nature may result in drought, disease, or crop failure.

Apart from Dharni Penu, they worship several village deities and clan spirits. These local deities are believed to protect specific villages or families. The concept of ancestral spirits is also important; the Kondhs believe that the souls of their ancestors continue to watch over and guide the living members of the community.

➤ **Ritual Practices and Ceremonial Life**

Rituals play a crucial role in maintaining social and spiritual balance. These rituals are usually conducted by the village priest, known as the Jani. The Jani is respected not only as a religious leader but also as a custodian of traditional knowledge.

Agricultural rituals are among the most significant ceremonies. Before clearing land for cultivation, prayers are offered to seek permission from forest spirits. Similarly, before sowing seeds, offerings of grains, flowers, and sometimes animals are made to Dharni Penu. After the harvest, thanksgiving rituals are performed to express gratitude for a successful crop.

Rituals often include music, dance, and communal feasting. Animal sacrifice, although declining in modern times, was traditionally practiced during certain ceremonies as a symbolic offering to deities. These rituals are not merely religious acts but serve as mechanisms for strengthening social cohesion and reinforcing shared beliefs.

➤ **Marriage Ceremonies and Social Significance**

Marriage among the Kondhs is both a social and religious institution. It is considered essential for continuing the lineage and maintaining clan relationships. Most marriages are arranged within the tribe, and clan exogamy is often practiced, meaning individuals cannot marry within the same clan.

The marriage ceremony is elaborate and involves several stages. Initially, negotiations take place between the families of the bride and groom. The bride price system is followed, where the groom's family provides gifts or money to the bride's family. This practice symbolizes appreciation for the bride's role in family and agricultural life.

The wedding ceremony includes rituals invoking ancestral blessings. Traditional songs and dances are performed, and the entire village participates in the celebration. Feasting is an important component of the ceremony, symbolizing unity and collective joy.

Marriage rituals emphasize not only the union of two individuals but also the alliance between two families. Social approval and community participation are crucial elements, reflecting the collective nature of tribal society.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND FAMILY SYSTEM OF THE KONDH TRIBE

The social structure of the Kondh tribe forms the foundation of their community life and reflects their traditional values, cultural identity, and economic organization. Social structure refers to the organized pattern of relationships and institutions that shape the functioning of society. In the case of the Kondhs, their social structure is closely linked with kinship ties, clan organization, traditional leadership, and customary laws. It is deeply rooted in collective living and mutual cooperation, which are essential for survival in forest and hilly environments.

➤ **Patriarchal Nature of Society**

The Kondh society is predominantly patriarchal in nature. This means that authority within the family and community is generally vested in male members. The father or the eldest male member of the household is considered the head of the family. He is responsible for making important decisions regarding property, agriculture, marriage arrangements, and participation in community affairs. Inheritance of property usually follows the male line, and sons are considered the primary heirs.

However, while the society is patriarchal in structure, it does not necessarily mean that women are completely marginalized. Women contribute significantly to family income and agricultural labor, and their role in maintaining household stability is highly valued. Though decision-making power is mainly male-dominated, women's opinions are often informally considered within the household.

➤ **Family Composition and Types**

The basic unit of Kondh society is the family. Most Kondh families are nuclear in structure, consisting of husband, wife, and their unmarried children. This nuclear pattern is more common due to economic constraints and agricultural lifestyle, which require mobility and independent household management.

However, in some villages, extended or joint families are also found. In such cases, brothers may live together with their parents and share agricultural land. Joint families are usually seen when land ownership is collective or when family cooperation is necessary for agricultural activities.

Family relations are characterized by strong emotional bonds and mutual responsibilities. Children are considered blessings, and large families are often preferred as they provide additional labor for agricultural work. The family acts as the primary institution for socialization, where children learn cultural values, traditions, and community norms.

➤ **Kinship System and Clan Organization**

Kinship plays a crucial role in organizing social relationships among the Kondhs. The tribe is divided into several clans, and clan identity determines social interactions, marriage rules, and ritual responsibilities. Each clan is believed to have a common ancestor, and members of the same clan consider themselves related by blood.

Clan exogamy is strictly practiced, meaning marriage within the same clan is prohibited. This rule prevents inbreeding and strengthens alliances between different clans. Marriage between close relatives is generally avoided, as it is considered socially unacceptable.

Kinship ties extend beyond the immediate family and create a network of social support. Relatives assist each other during festivals, agricultural work, marriages, and funerals. These kinship networks ensure social security and strengthen unity within the tribe.

➤ **Role of Women in the Family**

Although Kondh society is patriarchal, women play a central role in family and economic life. They participate actively in agricultural activities such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, and collection of forest produce. In addition, they manage household tasks including cooking, childcare, and maintenance of the home.

Women are also involved in cultural and religious activities. During festivals and rituals, they participate in singing, dancing, and preparing offerings. Their involvement strengthens family unity and social harmony.

However, women face certain limitations, particularly in access to formal education and leadership positions. Early marriage and economic hardship often restrict their opportunities for personal development. Nevertheless, within the family structure, women are respected as caregivers and contributors to economic survival.

EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF THE KONDH TRIBE

Education is one of the most important indicators of socio-economic development. It plays a crucial role in shaping individual opportunities, improving living standards, reducing poverty, and empowering communities. In the context of tribal societies, education serves as a bridge between traditional life and modern development. However, the educational status of the Kondh tribe remains a matter of concern despite various government initiatives and constitutional protections.

The literacy rate among the Kondh tribe is generally lower than the overall literacy rate of Odisha and India. Although improvements have been observed over the past few decades, a significant gap still exists between tribal and non-tribal populations. This gap is particularly visible in remote and interior villages where access to educational facilities is limited. The

geographical isolation of Kondh-inhabited areas has historically restricted the establishment of schools and other educational infrastructure.

One of the primary reasons for low literacy among the Kondhs is poverty. Many families struggle to meet their daily needs, and children are often required to assist in agricultural activities or collection of forest produce. During peak agricultural seasons, school attendance decreases because children contribute to family labor. Economic hardship forces some children to drop out of school at an early age.

Another major factor affecting education is the lack of proper infrastructure. In many interior villages, schools may be located far from residential areas. Poor road connectivity and transportation difficulties discourage regular attendance, especially during the rainy season. Some schools suffer from inadequate classrooms, lack of teaching materials, and shortage of qualified teachers. Multi-grade teaching, where a single teacher handles students of different classes simultaneously, is common in remote areas, reducing the quality of learning.

Language also acts as a barrier in the educational development of the Kondh tribe. The primary language spoken by the Kondhs is Kui, whereas formal education is generally conducted in Odia or sometimes in English. When children enter school, they often face difficulty understanding the language of instruction. This language gap affects comprehension and academic performance, leading to frustration and dropout. Although efforts have been made to introduce mother-tongue-based education in early classes, implementation remains inconsistent.

Gender disparity is another important aspect of educational status. While enrollment rates among boys and girls have improved, dropout rates are still higher among girls. Early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and social expectations limit girls' opportunities for continued education. In many cases, once girls reach adolescence, parents may hesitate to send them to distant schools due to safety concerns. As a result, female literacy remains comparatively lower.

Government initiatives such as residential schools, Ashram schools, scholarships, free textbooks, midday meal schemes, and Eklavya Model Residential Schools have contributed to improving enrollment rates. The midday meal scheme, in particular, has encouraged attendance by addressing nutritional needs. Residential schools provide opportunities for children from remote areas to access education without daily travel difficulties.

HEALTH CONDITIONS OF THE KONDH TRIBE

Health is one of the most important indicators of socio-economic development. The health condition of a community reflects its standard of living, nutritional status, access to medical facilities, environmental sanitation, and overall awareness about hygiene and disease prevention. In the case of the Kondh tribe, health conditions are closely linked with poverty, geographical isolation, traditional beliefs, and limited infrastructure. Although government interventions have brought gradual improvements, significant challenges remain.

The Kondh tribe mainly resides in remote, hilly, and forested regions where access to healthcare services is limited. Many villages are located far from primary health centers or hospitals. Poor road connectivity and lack of transportation facilities make it difficult for patients to reach medical institutions, especially during emergencies. During the rainy season, some villages become almost inaccessible, further restricting access to timely medical treatment.

One of the major health problems faced by the Kondh community is malnutrition. Due to poverty and subsistence agriculture, many families depend on limited food varieties, mainly millets and rice. Although traditional diets once included forest fruits and nutritious grains, declining forest resources and economic hardship have reduced dietary diversity. Malnutrition is particularly common among children and pregnant women. Underweight children, stunted growth, and anemia are frequently observed in tribal areas. Malnutrition weakens the immune system and increases vulnerability to infectious diseases.

Infectious diseases are another major concern. Malaria is widespread in many tribal regions due to forested surroundings and stagnant water during the monsoon season. Mosquito-borne diseases remain common because preventive measures such as mosquito nets and insecticide spraying are not consistently available. Tuberculosis is also reported in some areas, often linked with poor nutrition and weak immunity. Water-borne diseases such as diarrhea and dysentery occur due to unsafe drinking water and lack of proper sanitation facilities.

Anemia, particularly among women and adolescent girls, is a significant health issue. Poor dietary intake of iron-rich foods, frequent pregnancies, and heavy physical labor contribute to this problem. Anemia reduces physical strength, affects maternal health, and increases risks during childbirth.

Maternal and child health is another critical aspect of the Kondh tribe's health condition. Many women still prefer home deliveries due to lack of nearby health centers or traditional beliefs. Although government schemes promote institutional deliveries, transportation difficulties and cultural practices sometimes discourage women from seeking hospital care. Inadequate prenatal and postnatal care increases the risk of maternal and infant mortality.

CONCLUSION

The socio-economic analysis of the Kondh tribe presents a comprehensive understanding of a community that stands at the intersection of tradition and modern transformation. The Kondhs, one of the major Scheduled Tribes of Odisha, have preserved a distinct cultural identity shaped by nature worship, kinship bonds, clan organization, and community-based living. Their social structure, family system, religious beliefs, and cultural practices reflect a harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment.

From an economic perspective, the Kondh tribe continues to rely primarily on agriculture, forest resources, and wage labor. Subsistence farming, shifting cultivation, and collection of minor forest produce form the backbone of their livelihood. However, economic vulnerability remains a persistent challenge due to limited irrigation facilities, poor infrastructure, market exploitation, and seasonal unemployment. Poverty continues to influence multiple aspects of their lives, including education, health, and access to development opportunities.

The educational status of the Kondh tribe shows gradual improvement but still reflects disparities when compared to mainstream society. Barriers such as poverty, language differences, remote location, and gender inequality restrict full participation in education. Nevertheless, growing awareness and government initiatives have opened new possibilities for younger generations.

Health conditions reveal another critical dimension of socio-economic development. Malnutrition, malaria, anemia, inadequate sanitation, and limited healthcare access remain significant concerns. Although government health programs have contributed to progress, sustained efforts are required to ensure long-term health security and improved quality of life.

Modernization has brought both positive and negative changes to the Kondh community. On one hand, improved road connectivity, education, political awareness, and employment opportunities have expanded their horizons. On the other hand, cultural erosion, environmental degradation, and economic displacement pose serious challenges. The gradual transformation of social structure and lifestyle indicates that the community is adapting to change while attempting to preserve its traditional identity.

The overall study highlights that development among the Kondhs must not be viewed merely in terms of economic growth but as a holistic process that includes cultural preservation, social dignity, environmental sustainability, and equitable access to resources. Policies aimed at tribal development must be sensitive to their unique socio-cultural context. Strengthening education, healthcare infrastructure, women empowerment, sustainable agriculture, and forest rights protection can create a balanced pathway for progress.

The Kondh tribe represents resilience, cultural richness, and ecological wisdom. Their traditional knowledge systems offer valuable lessons about sustainable living and community cooperation. True development will be achieved not when their traditions disappear, but when their heritage is respected while their living standards improve.

In conclusion, the future of the Kondh tribe lies in achieving a balance between preservation and progress where development empowers the community without erasing its identity, and where modernization strengthens rather than replaces their cultural roots.

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