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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Tribal Tourism — Bridging Livelihood and Cultural Preservation

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SUBJECTS COVERED**SOCIAL ISSUES****ECONOMY****HISTORY & CULTURE****GS PAPERS****GS1****GS2****GS3****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS1

GS2

GS3

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"How can India design tribal tourism programmes that generate genuine economic empowerment for communities without reducing their culture to a commodity for outside consumption?"

WHY IN NEWS

The launch of ITDC's Tribal Homestay Capacity Building Programme on March 18, 2026, alongside the Bharat Tribes Fest 2026 by TRIFED, signals a coordinated government push to position tribal communities as active economic agents in India's tourism sector — raising both the promise and the pitfalls of community-based tourism.

A MOMENT OF CONVERGENCE

Two events on March 18, 2026 pointed in the same direction. The India Tourism Development Corporation, in collaboration with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, launched a capacity building programme for tribal homestay owners. On the same day, TRIFED opened the Bharat Tribes Fest at Sunder Nursery, New Delhi — 200 stalls, 78 Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, 300 artisans, a Business Conclave, and a CSR platform connecting corporates with tribal entrepreneurs.

The convergence is not coincidental. It reflects a maturing government understanding that **tribal welfare cannot be achieved through subsidy alone**. Durable livelihood generation requires market access, skill upgrading, and product development — and tourism, done well, can deliver all three simultaneously.

THE STRUCTURAL CASE FOR TRIBAL TOURISM

India has **705 Scheduled Tribes** — approximately 8.6% of the population — concentrated in areas that are, paradoxically, both economically marginalised and ecologically and culturally extraordinary.

The forests of Jharkhand, the highlands of Arunachal Pradesh, the wetlands of Odisha’s Simlipal, the Gondwana landscapes of Chhattisgarh, the islands of the Andamans — these are places where biodiversity meets living cultural heritage. They are precisely the kind of destinations that a new generation of travellers, fatigued by crowded monument tourism, is seeking.

The market logic is compelling. “**Experience economy**” **tourism** — where visitors pay for immersive, authentic encounters rather than standard hotel-restaurant-monument circuits — commands a premium. A tribal family offering a genuine forest meal, a weaving demonstration, and a night under native stars can earn significantly more per room-night than a budget hotel in a city.

The ITDC programme, training ~1,500 multipliers who can in turn train communities, is an attempt to unlock this value systematically rather than leaving it to chance or exploitation by intermediaries.

THE RISKS: COMMODIFICATION AND EXTRACTION

Community-based tourism has a troubled global history. In many cases, the “tribal experience” is packaged and sold by **outside operators** — tour companies, aggregators, hotel chains — while the community receives a fraction of the value and bears the full cost of hosting.

The risks are real: **Cultural commodification:** When ritual, dress, or dance is performed on demand for tourist consumption, it loses its meaning. Sacred practices become performances; living culture becomes museum exhibit.

Economic leakage: Without community ownership of the value chain — accommodation, food, guiding, craft sales — income leaks to middlemen. The community gets footfall but not profit.

Environmental degradation: Poorly managed tourism in ecologically sensitive tribal areas can damage the very natural assets — forests, rivers, biodiversity — that make the destination valuable.

Loss of consent: Tourism development imposed on communities without meaningful free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) — the standard under the Forest Rights Act and ILO Convention 169 — is not empowerment; it is a new form of extraction.

WHAT GENUINE EMPOWERMENT LOOKS LIKE

The difference between exploitative and empowering tribal tourism lies in **who controls the value chain**.

The Van Dhan Vikas Kendras model — SHG-based enterprise clusters for forest produce value addition — offers a useful template. When applied to tourism, community cooperatives own the accommodation, the food service, the guiding, and the craft sales. The role of TRIFED or ITDC becomes **facilitation and market access**, not ownership.

The RISA initiative featured at Bharat Tribes Fest — connecting designers with tribal weavers (Eri silk, Kotpad cotton, Dongria embroidery) for global markets — is instructive. The designer brings market access and design adaptation; the weaver brings skill and authenticity. The question of **intellectual property and revenue sharing** is where empowerment either succeeds or fails.

For tribal homestays, success means:

The family owns the property, sets the price, and keeps the margin

Training builds **management and hospitality skills** without erasing cultural identity

A digital booking platform ensures direct-to-consumer access without agent dependency

Cluster-level quality standards protect reputation without homogenising experience

THE POLICY ARCHITECTURE NEEDED

Several gaps remain in India's tribal tourism policy:

Legal clarity on Forest Rights. Many tribal homestays are in or near forests. Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 must be formally settled before commercial tourism activity can proceed on a secure legal footing. Unsettled rights create vulnerability.

Integrated district planning. Tourism, TRIFED, tribal welfare, and forest departments operate in silos. A tribal tourism circuit needs all four coordinated at the district level — a convergence mechanism that currently does not exist in most states.

Digital inclusion. Reaching the premium traveller — who books online, reads reviews, and pays by card — requires digital infrastructure. Many tribal areas lack reliable internet connectivity. The Bharat Net programme's reach into tribal habitations must be accelerated.

Sui generis IP protection. Tribal art styles and weaving patterns can be registered as **Geographical Indications (GI)** — Kondapalli toys, Warli painting, Pattachitra are existing examples. Expanding GI coverage for tribal products nationally is a low-cost, high-impact policy intervention.

CONCLUSION

The promise of tribal tourism is not just economic. Done well, it generates a new kind of **cultural pride** — when the world pays to experience your heritage, that heritage is affirmed, not diminished. Young tribal members, instead of migrating to cities for unskilled wage labour, can find dignified livelihoods at home.

The ITDC capacity building programme and Bharat Tribes Fest are beginnings — well-intentioned, appropriately scaled. The harder work is building the community ownership structures, the legal frameworks, and the digital infrastructure that convert good intentions into lasting economic empowerment. That work is

both more important and less photogenic than a festival inauguration. It is the work that will determine whether tribal tourism becomes a genuine development story or another chapter in the long history of well-meant policies that extracted value from tribal communities without returning it.

UPSC RELEVANCE

ITDC, TRIFED, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, RISA initiative, Forest Rights Act 2006, GI tags.

MAINS GS-1:

Tribal culture; heritage preservation.

GS-2:

Tribal welfare schemes; community governance; FPIC.

GS-3:

Sustainable tourism; rural livelihood; experience economy.

INTERVIEW:

Cultural commodification vs. empowerment in tribal tourism.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

TRIBAL DEMOGRAPHICS:

Scheduled Tribes in India: **705** (Census 2011)

Tribal population: ~**8.6%** of India's total (104.3 million)

Major tribal states: Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh

KEY INSTITUTIONS:

ITDC: India Tourism Development Corporation; established 1966; runs IHM Ashok

TRIFED: Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (1987); under Ministry of Tribal Affairs

Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVK): SHG-based tribal enterprise clusters for forest produce value addition

FOREST RIGHTS ACT 2006:

Recognises Community Forest Rights (CFR) and Individual Forest Rights (IFR)

FPIC (Free, Prior, Informed Consent): Required before any development activity on tribal land

Gram Sabha is the key decision-making body for forest rights

GI TAGS (TRIBAL PRODUCTS — EXAMPLES):

Kondapalli Toys (Andhra Pradesh), Warli Painting (Maharashtra), Pattachitra (Odisha), Channapatna Toys (Karnataka)

Dongria embroidery, Eri silk, Kotpad cotton — featured in RISA initiative

TOURISM POLICY:

National Tourism Policy 2022 (draft): Emphasises community-based tourism, rural tourism circuits

Experience Economy: Economic value from immersive, authentic experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

Bharat Tribes Fest 2026: TRIFED, Sunder Nursery, New Delhi, March 18–30, 2026

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

ILO Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples): Establishes FPIC as standard for development decisions; India has not ratified but principles reflected in Forest Rights Act

Digital Booking Revolution: ~70% of travellers globally book accommodation online; tribal homestays need OTA (Online Travel Agency) access

Bharat Net: National optical fibre network targeting all gram panchayats — critical for digital inclusion of tribal areas

Tourism contributes ~6.8% of India's GDP (pre-COVID); domestic tourism fully recovered by 2024

Sources: Hindustan Times, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, TRIFED

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