

Negotiating Identity in the Context of Development: A Sociological Study of the Baiga Tribe in Sonbhadra

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Abstract: *This study examines how the Baiga tribe of Sonbhadra district negotiates its socio-cultural identity in the context of state-led development processes. Tribal communities in India have historically maintained distinct ways of life closely connected with forests, land, and collective social institutions; however, contemporary development interventions have significantly altered these foundations. This study aims to understand the impact of development policies and changing livelihood patterns on Baiga community identity. The study adopts a descriptive and qualitative research design, drawing on primary data collected through interviews, participant observations, and selected case studies from Baiga-inhabited villages of Sonbhadra, supplemented by relevant secondary sources. The findings reveal that development initiatives related to education, health, forest governance, and welfare schemes produce contradictory outcomes. While they have created limited opportunities for social mobility, they have simultaneously weakened traditional economic practices, cultural institutions and community autonomy. The Baiga identity is neither entirely eroded nor rigidly preserved; instead, it is continuously negotiated through everyday interactions with the state, market forces, and dominant social groups. The study highlights that identity among the Baiga tribe is shaped by adaptation and resistance with selective acceptance of change rather than complete assimilation into the mainstream. The study concludes that development policies must be sensitive to tribal social realities and cultural values, as exclusionary or top-down approaches risk deepening marginalisation rather than promoting inclusive growth.*

Keywords: Baiga Tribe, Identity, Development, Sonbhadra, Tribal Marginalisation

INTRODUCTION

Tribal identity in India is shaped by motion, not stillness. It grows out of daily life, shared memory, and long-standing ties with land and forests, but it is also pushed and pulled by new forces that arrive through roads, schools, welfare offices, and development projects. For many tribal communities, identity is not inherited and quietly preserved. It is something that is lived with effort. This sometimes leads to confusion. Sometimes with resolve. This matters a lot. Identity is not just about culture; it is about survival, dignity, and how people place themselves in a rapidly changing social order (Giddens, 1991; Shah, 2010). Development encompasses more than just economic growth. It changes how people relate to each other, how power works, and how everyday decisions are made. New rules appear. Old practices are being questioned. Forests are regulated. Work shifts from collective activities to wage labour. Some doors open, especially through education and welfare schemes, but others quietly close. Development often promises inclusion; however, the way it is planned and delivered can make the gap wider instead of smaller (Xaxa, 2005). This tension lies at the heart of many tribal experiences. It does not resolve. The Baiga tribe offers a sharp view of this tension, as they are dependent on the forest for their livelihood. Classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, the Baiga live mainly in the forest regions of central India, with a smaller but significant presence in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Sonbhadra district is one such area. The region is rich in minerals and forests, yet it remains socially and economically fragile. Mining, industrial expansion, and forest regulation have reshaped the landscape over time. These changes are neither distant nor abstract. They enter homes, work routines, and social relationships (Government of Uttar Pradesh, 2020). Life adjusts. Traditionally, Baiga life rested on forest-based livelihoods, shared labour, and knowledge passed through practice rather than text, and the Baiga have been reluctant to abandon their traditional way of life. These patterns were under steady pressure. Restrictions on forest use, displacement linked to development projects, and dependence on short-term wage work have altered how people live and think about their futures. In this setting, identity does not disappear. It has not remained untouched. It bends. It is argued over. It is reworked through everyday choices, small compromises and occasional resistance (Elwin, 1992; Xaxa, 2008). This negotiation is quiet but constant, and this study takes it seriously. The research problem is not whether development is good or bad. This question is too simple. The concern here is how the Baiga

of Sonbhadra experience development and how they make sense of who they are while dealing with state institutions, welfare schemes, and the nontribal society. The significance of this study lies in its focus on lived experiences rather than abstract policy claims. It keeps the talk focused, yet relaxed. By placing empirical observations within a sociological frame, this study aims to show that tribal identity is neither frozen in tradition nor fully absorbed into the mainstream. It remains in between. Uneasy, adaptive, and ongoing processes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies on tribal identity in India have largely focused on marginalisation as a historical and ongoing process rather than a temporary condition. Early sociological-anthropological writings treated tribal communities as culturally distinct and socially isolated, often located outside the mainstream social order. However, this view has been questioned over time. Scholars have shown that marginalisation is not the result of cultural differences alone but is produced through unequal power relations, land alienation, and state control over resources (Xaxa, 2005). In this sense, identity emerged not simply from tradition but from long exposure to exclusion and uneven development. This shift in perspective is important. Later studies have paid closer attention to how tribal identity is shaped under modern state systems. Rather than assuming a steady loss of culture, researchers have pointed out that identity is actively reworked in response to schools, welfare schemes, political categories, and legal definitions. Giddens' idea of identity as an ongoing project helps explain this process, as identity is constantly shaped through reflection and social interaction, especially under conditions of rapid change (Giddens 1991). In tribal contexts, this change is often uneven and tense in nature. Old practices continue alongside new expectations. The result is not clarion-tribal adjustment. A large body of literature has also examined development-induced change in tribal regions. These studies show that developmental interventions frequently create mixed outcomes. On one hand, they introduce roads, education, health services, and new income options. However, they disrupt local economies, weaken collective institutions, and reduce control over land and forests. Escobar (1995) argues that development operates as a form of power that shapes how communities are seen and governed, rather than simply improving material conditions. This insight is especially relevant for tribal societies, where development often arrives with little space for local voices. Promises are made. Costs are absorbed quietly, and Indian scholars have built on this critique by focusing on the lived effects of development policies. Xaxa (2008) shows how state-led development has redefined tribal societies through administrative labels, welfare dependence, and political management, often without addressing structural inequality. Shah (2010) adds that tribal responses to these processes are not passive; they include negotiations, resistance, and selective engagement. These responses keep the identity fluid. Sometimes fragile. Sometimes strategic, studies on specific communities, including the Baiga, highlight how forest laws, displacement, and restrictions on traditional livelihoods have reshaped everyday life. Elwin's work, though written earlier, remains useful for understanding the cultural foundations of Baiga society and the depth of their relationship with forests (Elwin 1992). Later research shows that these foundations have not disappeared but have been

strained by modern governance and market pressures. Despite this growing body of work, a clear gap remains in the literature. Much of the existing literature either focuses broadly on tribal development or treats identity as a cultural category, detached from everyday experience. There is limited empirical work examining identity as a process of negotiation shaped by development at the local level, especially in regions like Sonbhadra. This study addresses this gap by linking development-induced change with lived experiences of identity among the Baiga, moving the discussion from abstract policy to social reality.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a descriptive and qualitative research design deliberately chosen to capture lived experiences rather than numerical patterns alone. The aim was not to measure development outcomes in a narrow sense but to understand how people interpret and respond to changes in their everyday lives. A qualitative approach allows for space for voices, pauses, and contradictions. This study was conducted in the Sonbhadra district of eastern Uttar Pradesh, a region marked by dense forests, mineral-rich land, and a long history of tribal settlement. Sonbhadra also carries the weight of development projects such as mining, industrial expansion, and forest regulation which directly shape the social conditions of tribal communities. Baiga-inhabited villages within the selected blocks of the district formed the primary field area. The choice of Sonbhadra was guided by its social vulnerability next to its economic importance. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Primary data were collected through fieldwork involving direct interactions with Baiga community members. A total of 300 respondents were included in the broader survey component of the study. This helped us understand the general patterns related to education, health, livelihood, and access to welfare schemes. Qualitative depth was achieved through selected case studies that focused on individual and household experiences. These cases allowed the study to move beyond surface-level responses and examine how identity is negotiated in practice. The main tools of data collection included an interview schedule and in-depth case studies. The interview schedule was semi-structured which helped keep the conversation focused yet relaxed while still allowing respondents to speak in their own terms. Case studies were used to explore experiences related to displacement, livelihood changes, education, health practices, and interactions with state institutions. Observation during field visits also informed the analysis, especially in understanding everyday social relations. Ethical considerations were taken seriously throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study in simple terms. Confidentiality was ensured, and personal identifiers were avoided in the documentation. However, this study has some limitations. Language barriers, reliance on self-reported information, and time constraints during the fieldwork may have shaped the responses. These limitations are acknowledged. They do not weaken the study, but they do set its boundaries.

RESULTS

The results of this study point to a social world shaped by constraint and adjustment rather than clear improvement or decline. The socio-economic profile of the Baiga respondents reflects long-standing vulnerability, but

it also shows signs of uneven change. Most respondents belonged to households dependent on forest-linked activities, daily wage labour, or seasonal migration. Land ownership is limited and often insecure which keeps livelihoods unstable. Income levels remain low, but what stands out more clearly is uncertainty. People plan their lives from week to week. Education is a key development indicator, although its impact is mixed. School enrolment among children has increased in recent years, largely due to government schemes and residential schools. However, continuation beyond the primary level remains weak. Many respondents reported that children drop out due to distance from schools, lack of support at home, or the need to contribute to household income. Education is seen as valuable, but also risky. Families are unsure whether schooling will lead to stable employment. Consequently, education is often treated as an experiment rather than a secure path forward. This uncertainty shapes how identity is imagined across generations, and health-related findings reveal a sharper pattern of exclusion. Access to formal healthcare remains limited in most Baiga settlements. Table 1 summarises the respondents' access to nearby health facilities.

Table 1: Availability of Health Facilities near Place of Residence (n = 300)

| Availability | Percentage |
|---------------|------------|
| Available | 26.7% |
| Not available | 71.6% |
| No response | 1.7% |

The table highlights a significant gap. A large majority of respondents reported the absence of accessible healthcare facilities in or near their villages. Where services exist, they are often irregular and poorly staffed. This situation pushes families toward traditional healing practices or local faith healers, not always out of belief alone, but out of necessity. In this sense, health becomes a site where development promises fall short, and traditional knowledge continues to hold relevance. This pattern is not resistant to modern medicine. It is a constrained choice, and livelihood patterns further underline the pressures of development. Restrictions on forest use, declining availability of forest produce, and displacement linked to mining and industrial projects have reduced the viability of traditional economic activities in the region. Consequently, many Baiga households rely on wage labour, often outside their villages. Seasonal migration to nearby towns and industrial areas is common, especially among younger men. This shift affects the family structure and social life. Elderly members and women are left behind, carrying increased responsibility without corresponding authority or support. Therefore, livelihood changes are not just economic. It reshapes social relationships. Another important finding concerns access to welfare schemes. Most respondents were aware of schemes related to housing, employment, or food security, but the actual benefits reached them unevenly. Delays, lack of documentation, and dependence on intermediaries were frequently cited. Welfare support exists on paper and sometimes in practice, but it rarely provides long-term security. Instead, it reinforces the sense of dependence on external systems. This affects how people perceive the state. Trust is cautious. Expectations are low, and a common pattern emerges across education, health, and livelihood. Development interventions introduce new possibilities and

new forms of uncertainty. Identity is negotiated in this space. Many respondents expressed pride in being Baiga, especially in relation to their forest knowledge, rituals, and collective life. Simultaneously, they recognised that survival increasingly requires engagement with nontribal institutions. This creates a tension. Cultural practices are maintained selectively and adjusted to fit new schedules and economic demands. Identity becomes practical rather than symbolic, and the results also show generational differences. Younger respondents were more likely to see education and migration as necessary, even if imperfect, while older respondents expressed a stronger attachment to forest-based life. However, this difference should not be interpreted as a simple divide between tradition and change. Both groups navigated the same limits. Overall, the findings suggest that development among the Baiga in Sonbhadra has produced partial inclusion without structural security. Socio - cultural identity has not disappeared nor has it remained untouched. It is shaped daily by work choices, health decisions, schooling, and interactions with the state. The results point to negotiation as the central feature of Baiga life. Not resolution.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that development, as experienced by the Baiga community in Sonbhadra, does not follow a straight line. It moves in fragments. Some gains appear. Some losses deepen. Sociologically, what matters is not whether development arrives, but how it settles into everyday life. The results show that identity among the Baiga is neither abandoned under development pressure nor preserved in its earlier form. It is worked on constantly. This supports the idea that identity is best understood as a process rather than a fixed cultural trait, shaped through daily interactions with changing social conditions (Giddens, 1991). Changes in education, health, and livelihood illustrate this process clearly. Increased school enrolment, for instance, signals a shift in aspirations, especially among younger Baiga. Education is seen as a possible way out of this insecurity. However non-tribal dropout rates and uncertainty surrounding employment reveal a deeper problem. Education does not easily translate into social mobility. Instead, it places families in a waiting position, caught between hope and doubt. This mirrors the findings of other tribal studies which show that development creates expectations that it cannot always fulfil, leaving communities suspended between old livelihoods and uncertain futures (Xaxa, 2005). Under such conditions, identity becomes forward-looking but fragile, and health practices further highlight negotiation rather than replacement. The continued reliance on traditional healing, alongside the limited use of formal healthcare, does not reflect cultural resistance alone. This reflects uneven access and a weak institutional presence. Modern health systems exist but are not reliable. Consequently, people move between systems based on their needs and availability. This pattern supports Escobar's (1995) argument that development often functions as a partial and uneven intervention that reshapes choices without fully enabling them. The Baiga response is thus pragmatic. Survival comes first, and livelihood change represents perhaps the strongest pressure point. The decline of forest-based work and the rise of wage labour and migration have altered social relations within households and villages. Collective work patterns are weakened, Family roles shift. Elders lose

influence as knowledge tied to forests becomes less central to survival in the community. However, this does not imply that forest-based identities have vanished. Instead, it is selectively retained through rituals, memories, and symbolic attachments. Elwin's early observations of Baiga life help explain why this attachment persists, even when economic conditions change (Elwin, 1992). Here, culture is not simply functional. The findings also reveal how development redefined the relationship between the Baiga and the state. Welfare schemes introduce new forms of recognition, but they also produce dependence and bureaucratic control. Identity is tied to documents, categories, and eligibility criteria. Xaxa (2008) notes that administrative inclusion often masks deeper inequality. This study supports this view. While some benefits reach the community, they rarely address the structural vulnerability. Consequently, trust in state institutions remains cautious. Engagement happens, Enthusiasm does not always follow, and the tradition versus development debate appears inadequate in light of these findings. The Baiga do not simply choose between the two. They live with both. Traditions are adjusted to fit changing work patterns and reduced access to forests. Development is engaged selectively, often without full confidence. This creates a middle space where identity is neither fully traditional nor assimilated. Shah (2010) argues that marginalised groups often respond to change through negotiation rather than rejection of the change. The Baiga experience closely fits this pattern, and generational differences further complicate this picture. Younger Baiga are more open to education, migration, and engagement with non-tribal society. Older members expressed a stronger attachment to forest life and collective practices. However, both generations operate within the same constraints. The difference lies in the strategy, not the values. This challenges the simplistic assumption that change equals cultural loss. Instead, it points to adaptation shaped by uneven opportunity, showing that development among the Baiga produces partial inclusion without stability. Identity survives but in an altered form. It is shaped by adjustments, compromises, and ongoing efforts. The sociological significance of this lies in recognising identity as a lived process formed not in opposition to development but within its limits. This understanding is essential if development policies are to move beyond symbolic inclusion and engage seriously with the social realities of tribal communities.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how the Baiga tribe in Sonbhadra negotiates its social and cultural identity in the context of development. The findings show that development has neither fully integrated the community into the mainstream nor left their traditional lives untouched. Instead, it has created a space for ongoing adjustment. Changes in education, health access, and livelihood have introduced new possibilities, but they have also deepened uncertainty. Forest-based life has weakened as an economic base, while wage labour and migration have grown without providing lasting security. In this situation, identity does not collapse. It is reshaped through daily decisions and practical compromises. From a sociological perspective, this study highlights identity as a process rather than a stable cultural marker. Among the Baiga, identity is continuously negotiated in response to development policies, state institutions and market pressures. Tradition and development do not exist as opposing forces; rather,

they interact unevenly in daily life. Cultural practices are selectively adjusted to fit new conditions and are sometimes reinterpreted to maintain meaning and continuity. This challenges the narrow view that treats tribal development as a linear movement from tradition to modernity. The Baiga experience suggests a more complex and unsettled path, and the policy relevance of these findings lies in their implications for development planning in tribal regions. While important, welfare schemes and infrastructure projects remain insufficient when they fail to address structural insecurity and cultural context. Development approaches that rely on top-down implementation risk reproducing dependence, rather than empowerment. Policies must engage more seriously with local knowledge systems, livelihood practices, and community priorities. Greater attention to health access, education quality, and secure livelihood options is essential if inclusion is to move beyond formal recognition. Further work could explore generational differences in greater depth, particularly how young tribal populations navigate education, migration, and identity over time. Comparative studies across different tribal regions would help clarify whether similar negotiation patterns emerge elsewhere. Long-term ethnographic research could also deepen our understanding of how identity evolves under sustained development pressure. Such research is necessary if development is to be aligned with social justice, rather than symbolic inclusion.

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