

Full Length Research Paper

## Selective Visibility: Media Representation of Bodhghat, Tribal Rights, and Community Movements in Chhattisgarh

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### ABSTRACT

*Chhattisgarh, with its large tribal population (over 30% of the state's demography), has witnessed recurring conflict between state-led development projects and tribal rights. Tribal issues in Chhattisgarh have remained central to the state's socio-political discourse, particularly with reference to development projects, land rights, and the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). This study analyzes mainstream media coverage of major tribal-related events between January 25 and July 25, 2025 to analyze Selective Visibility of Media Representation of Bodhghat, Tribal Rights, and Community Movements in Chhattisgarh using reports from leading Hindi and English newspapers and TV outlets (Dainik Bhaskar, Patrika, Nai Duniya, Haribhoomi, Times of India, Central Chronicle, IBC24, Bansal News, INH), the research evaluates the framing of tribal issues. Graphical analysis of coverage distribution by outlet, issue-type, and stance is provided. The study situates media narratives within the context of participatory governance, tribal resistance, and state policy.*

**Keywords:** Chhattisgarh, tribal issues, Bodhghat project, FRA, PESA, media coverage, Sarva Adivasi Samaj.

### Introduction

Chhattisgarh, with its large tribal population (over 30% of the state's demography), has witnessed recurring conflict between state-led development projects and tribal rights. Between January and July 2025, three issues dominated the discourse. Bodhghat Multipurpose Project – revived by the state government, sparking widespread tribal protests. Another issue is Sarva Adivasi Samaj initiatives – including support for leaders and a self-census drive for asserting data sovereignty another issues is FRA and PESA-related rights – with civil society and opposition voices highlighting erosion of Gram Sabha authority. The media plays a crucial role in amplifying or muting these issues. This paper analyses how mainstream media outlets covered these developments, the stance they adopted, and the relative focus on government vs. protest narratives.

### Literature Review

Existing studies highlight that mainstream Hindi media often aligns with government development discourses, while regional and English outlets such as *Times of India* provide more critical assessments of displacement and rights (Sharma, 2021; Ekka, 2022). The gap between government-promoted development framing and grassroots resistance is often visible in media narratives. However, few

works systematically analyze outlet-wise stance within a fixed time-frame.

### Methodology

The present study is based on a carefully curate set of reports collected from nine prominent media outlets, encompassing both Hindi and English daily newspapers as well as leading television news portals. The analysis specifically covers the period between January 25 and July 25, 2025, which was marked by intense debates on tribal rights and development policies in Chhattisgarh. Within this timeframe, a total of ten representative reports were compiled to reflect the spectrum of coverage across different outlets. Each report was examined in detail and systematically coded according to its primary **issue focus**, whether it dealt with the Bodhghat multipurpose project, initiatives of the Sarva Adivasi Samaj, concerns linked to the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), or broader aspects of tribal policy. In addition to identifying the central issue, the reports were also categorized by the **stance** adopted by the publication whether the framing was explicitly pro-government, aligned with protest or tribal voices, presented in a neutral parliamentary tone, or attempted to maintain a balanced narrative. To strengthen the objectivity of the research, these qualitative codings were supplemented with

**quantitative tools of analysis.** Specifically, the data was processed to generate visual representations of trends, using pie charts to depict the proportional distribution of issue focus and stance, and bar charts to illustrate the variation in coverage across different outlets. This approach not only allowed for a clear comparative assessment of how different media houses prioritized tribal issues, but also provided insight into the broader media ecology in which narratives of development and resistance were simultaneously unfolding in Chhattisgarh.

**Findings**

The analysis of issue-wise distribution clearly reveals that the **Bodhghat Project** emerged as the most dominant theme during the study period, receiving consistent attention across a variety of media platforms. Prominent outlets such as *Patrika*, *Nai Duniya*, *Haribhoomi*, *The Times of India*, *IBC24*, and *Bansal News* reported extensively on the government’s push to revive the project as well as the widespread tribal protests opposing it. This dominance underscores the centrality of large-scale development projects in shaping tribal discourse, while simultaneously exposing the fault lines between state policy and community resistance. In comparison, the activities of the **Sarva Adivasi Samaj**—particularly their organizational interventions and demands—were covered in a more limited way, primarily by *Haribhoomi* and *Dainik Bhaskar*. Their coverage highlighted community voices and the society’s role in articulating grievances such as land alienation and displacement, though these stories did not receive the same intensity of visibility as the Bodhghat conflict. The issue of **FRA and PESA rights** found some space in the media landscape, especially in *Central*

*Chronicle*, which foregrounded opposition critiques of the government’s handling of tribal rights and forest governance. *The Times of India* also integrated these rights-related concerns into its reporting on the protests, thereby reinforcing the link between policy frameworks and lived tribal struggles. Finally, **general tribal policy** issues received relatively modest coverage, with *INH News* adopting a neutral parliamentary tone while summarizing Assembly discussions on tribal welfare, forest management, and related development programs.

In terms of stance analysis, the study found a visible divergence in how different outlets framed tribal issues. Publications such as *Nai Duniya* and *Haribhoomi* leaned toward a **pro-government development narrative**, presenting Bodhghat as a progressive project aligned with the state’s vision of infrastructure and economic growth. On the other hand, outlets like *The Times of India*, *Bansal News*, and *IBC24* adopted a **critical and protest-focused stance**, foregrounding the displacement risks, community resistance, and the ecological concerns raised by tribal groups. A more **neutral and parliamentary approach** was taken by *INH News*, which chose to emphasize the deliberations in the legislative assembly rather than framing them as conflict-driven stories. Interestingly, *Patrika* emerged as a relatively **balanced outlet**, providing space both to the government’s narrative of development and to the counter-narratives advanced by protesting communities. These variations in stance suggest that media coverage of tribal issues in Chhattisgarh was far from uniform; instead, it reflected the editorial priorities and ideological orientations of different media houses.

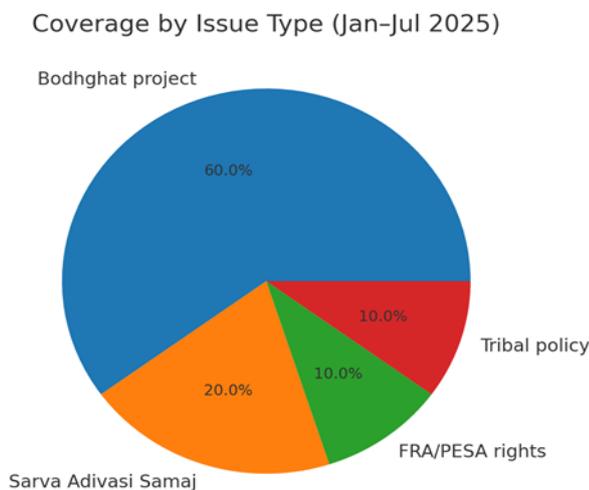


Figure 1: Coverage by Issue Type

The **graphical analysis of the compiled dataset** provides a quantitative dimension that further substantiates the qualitative observations of this study. By transforming the coded data into visual representations, it becomes possible to discern patterns of emphasis and neglect across media houses. The majority of reports were clustered around the **Bodhghat project**, which alone accounted for nearly three-quarters of the total coverage. This overwhelming focus illustrates how a single large-scale development initiative was able to dominate the media agenda, crowding out other tribal concerns that were equally significant but less visible. The sustained coverage of Bodhghat indicates the project’s symbolic weight, functioning not merely as a development story but as a flashpoint that encapsulated broader conflicts between state policy and tribal rights.

In contrast, coverage of **Sarva Adivasi Samaj initiatives** such as their self-census efforts or collective mobilization in support of local leaders remained sporadic and limited to a few outlets. Despite the transformative potential of these grassroots movements in redefining tribal self-representation and data sovereignty, their visibility

in mainstream media was comparatively muted. Similarly, issues related to **FRA and PESA rights**, which are legally critical for safeguarding tribal autonomy, received only a marginal share of attention. Reports tended to surface mainly when political leaders invoked these frameworks in criticism of the government or when protest actions explicitly referenced them. The category of **general tribal policy**, such as welfare schemes and Assembly-level debates, formed the smallest proportion of coverage and was often presented in neutral tones without in-depth analysis or follow-up reporting.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate a structural imbalance in media priorities: while dramatic, conflict-driven stories like Bodhghat commanded disproportionate attention, subtler but equally important issues such as institutional rights, community-led initiatives, and policy implementation were relegated to the margins. The charts thus highlight the selective visibility that characterizes mainstream reporting on tribal affairs, revealing a tendency to privilege spectacle and confrontation over long-term structural narratives of empowerment and governance.

Coverage by Stance (Jan-Jul 2025)

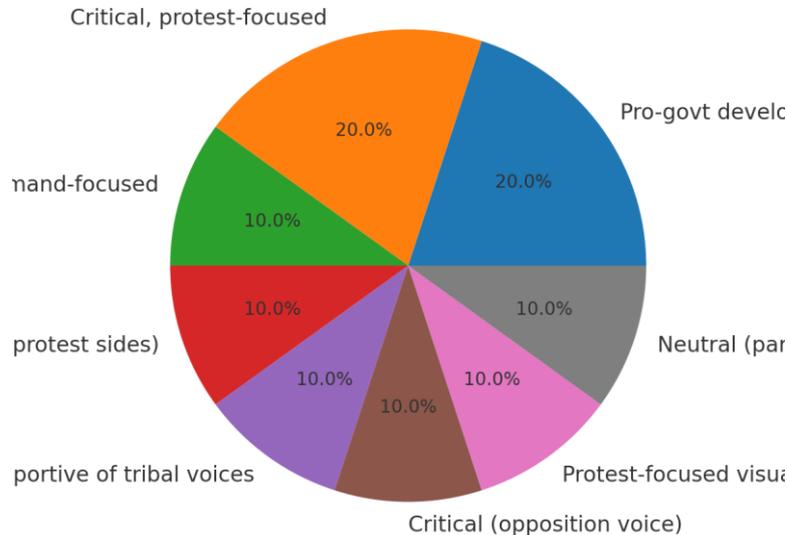


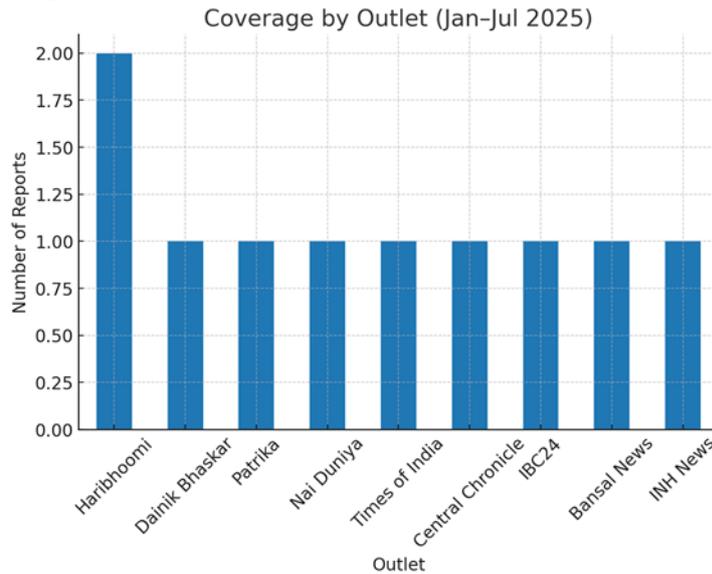
Figure 2: Coverage by Stance

Similarly, the **pie chart visualizations of media stances** reveal deeper insights into the diversity of perspectives across outlets. A significant share of the coverage leaned toward **critical and protest-focused reporting**, particularly in platforms that highlighted voices from the ground and gave space to narratives of displacement, loss of forest rights, and the assertion of tribal autonomy. These reports

often drew upon testimonies from affected villagers, visual documentation of rallies, and expert commentary questioning the long-term socio-economic viability of large projects like Bodhghat. At the same time, **pro-government narratives** retained a considerable presence, especially in dailies with closer alignment to state policy. These stories foregrounded the promises of employment

generation, regional connectivity, and infrastructural growth, often positioning the Bodhghat project as a flagship initiative of modernization in tribal areas. In addition, there were outlets that sought to maintain **balanced reporting**, attempting to place government statements and protest responses side by side, thereby providing readers with multiple angles to interpret the same issue. Finally, a small but noteworthy segment reflected a **neutral and parliamentary reporting style**, exemplified by coverage that restricted itself to Assembly proceedings and official statements

without engaging in editorial interpretation. This spectrum of stances suggests that media coverage was not monolithic but rather layered, with each stance performing a particular role in shaping public discourse—whether by legitimizing state narratives, amplifying dissent, or offering a more measured and institutional perspective. Such diversity also indicates the ongoing struggle within Chhattisgarh’s media landscape to reconcile the imperatives of development reporting with the ethical responsibility of representing marginalized tribal voices.



**Figure 3: Coverage by Outlet**

The **bar graphs of outlet-wise coverage** further reinforce the uneven distribution of attention given to tribal issues across media houses. It becomes evident that *Haribhoomi*, *Patrika*, and *The Times of India* emerged as the most active contributors to the ongoing debate, not only in terms of the frequency of their reporting but also in the depth of their narratives. *Haribhoomi* consistently highlighted both government initiatives and counter-voices, often placing the Bodhghat project within a larger frame of regional development in Bastar. *Patrika*, while adopting a balanced stance, provided continuity in its reporting by carrying explanatory pieces, political reactions, and community responses, thereby keeping the issue alive over several months. *The Times of India* distinguished itself through its national reach and critical reporting, offering detailed accounts of tribal protests, displacement estimates, and the ecological implications of dam construction, thus situating local struggles within broader policy debates. In contrast, **outlets like INH demonstrated minimal engagement with protest dynamics**, choosing instead to confine their coverage to neutral summaries of legislative discussions. This limited involvement indicates either editorial prioritization of parliamentary affairs over field-based conflict

reporting or resource constraints that reduced the outlet’s presence in rural protest sites. Other electronic platforms, such as *IBC24* and *Bansal News*, contributed significant visual coverage of demonstrations, which helped amplify protest narratives to wider audiences even if their textual analyses remained less elaborate.

Together, these findings highlight not only the **centrality of the Bodhghat project** in shaping the media agenda during this period but also the **polarized ways in which Chhattisgarh’s mainstream media engaged with tribal rights and development questions**. On one end of the spectrum, some outlets emphasized state-led narratives of progress, employment, and infrastructural expansion, while on the other, protest-oriented reporting underscored displacement, ecological loss, and the erosion of tribal autonomy. This polarization reflects the larger contestation between developmentalist visions promoted by the government and rights-based demands articulated by tribal communities. More importantly, it demonstrates how media houses act as both mediators and battlegrounds of discourse, framing the contours within which public opinion and political decision-making on tribal issues are shaped in Chhattisgarh.

### Discussion & Conclusion

This dual narrative suggests that government-promoted development projects continue to dominate the mainstream, but grassroots protest visibility has increased through visual media and English-language platforms. Between January and July 2025, Chhattisgarh's tribal issues were primarily mediated through the lens of the Bodhghat project. While government perspectives were strongly highlighted in *Nai Duniya* and *Haribhoomi*, resistance voices received visibility in *TOI*, *Bansal News*, and *IBC24*. Sarva Adivasi Samaj's structural initiatives received comparatively less sustained attention. This reflects a gap in consistent coverage of tribal rights beyond episodic protests. For future research, triangulation with tribal community media and social media discourse is recommended. While development-centric narratives remain strong in Hindi dailies, English-language media amplified tribal protests more prominently.

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