

Trends and patterns of crime against scheduled tribes in India

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Abstract

Scheduled tribes in India constitute about 8.6 percent of the national population which is geographically dispersed and culturally diverse. They are among India's most vulnerable social groups, having a long history of oppression and discrimination. Crime against them is a significant cause of concern as the historical causes working against them have never been eliminated despite many constitutional provisions to protect them. This study analyses the incidence of crime against them since the beginning of the 21st century. The trends of crime against them are analysed with the help of three primary indicators; temporal changes in the number of incidents, crime rate, and share of such crimes in the total crime. It is observed that almost every indicator of crime against the scheduled tribes has declined in the 21st century. Recently published crime data for 2020 however reveals that the crimes against them are spatially uneven as the interstate comparisons reveal. The Hindi-speaking states are most vulnerable for the tribes.

Keywords: *Scheduled tribes, crime, crime rate, total crime*

Introduction

In India, all crimes are divided into two broad categories: cognisable and non-cognisable. Cognisable crimes demand prompt action and active police involvement, while the police cannot take any action without the prior permission of the magistrate in the case of non-cognisable crimes. Cognisable crimes are sub-divided into two sub-categories: crime under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and a crime under State and Local Laws (SLL) (NCRB, 2016). This paper relies on the analysis of IPC data in the 21st century. SLL data has not been considered in the analysis due to two reasons; first, the definition of crime under SLL varies considerably across the states. Second, the data of SLL has abruptly changed during the second decade of the 21st century, making them largely

unreliable for comparing long-term trends. Further all crimes can be divided into two types: crime against a person and crime against property. This study analyses both types of crime against scheduled tribes (STs).

Scheduled tribes include 705 ethnically distinct communities spread across the country (MoTA, 2013). With more than 104 million people, the scheduled tribes, belonging to the most deprived and marginalized sections of the population of India constitute about 8.6 percent of the country's population who are geographically dispersed and culturally extremely diverse (Census of India, 2011). They are probably the most vulnerable social group having a long history of oppression and discrimination. The route of caste-based discrimination against scheduled castes and

scheduled tribes can be traced to the Hindu philosophy, and colonial rule in India has strengthened it in many ways (Kumar, 2004). Despite legal protection, they are often discriminated and oppressed by the more privileged so-called upper caste groups in everyday life. They are still victimized due to historical prejudice against them (Abraham, 1999; Weiner, 2001).

Article 17 of the Indian constitution abolished all forms of untouchability and made its practice illegal. The Indian parliament enacted the Untouchability (Offences) Act in 1955 to punish the practice of untouchability, amended as the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976 and then to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The enactment of the SC and ST (Protection of Atrocity) Act 1989 is widely acknowledged as landmark legislation in the journey to end injustice, violence and atrocities and strengthen them significantly. In a judgment on 20th March 2018, the Supreme Court of India toned down the Atrocity Act of 1989 (Nawsagaray, 2018); however, after a series of massive protests and mass mobilization across the country, the Indian parliament overturned the Supreme Court decision and restored the original act where many safeguards have been provided against the atrocity committed based on caste or ethnicity (Economic Times, 2018). In the context of these protests and subsequent maintenance of the status quo, analyzing the extent and spread of such crimes becomes more relevant.

This paper analyses the trend and inter-state variation in the crime perpetrated against the tribes by non-scheduled component of the population (violation of Atrocity Act 1989) and does not consider those crimes where the

victim and offender belong to the same caste/ethnic groups (SC/ST). The crime against them by upper caste, non-tribal groups is a serious and sensitive issue in India. The atrocities by upper castes, non-tribal sections against SCs and STs in India can be compared with hate crimes in other parts of the world (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) is the nodal agency responsible for the publication of crime statistics. It is found that concrete data-based studies on crime against tribes are less in quantity and partial in coverage. The recent data on crime against them are under-utilized. Henceforth, this study is an opportunity to analyse the long-term data of the 21st century in trend analysis and recent patterns of the inter-state distribution of these crimes.

Data base and methodology

The crime trends are analyzed from the beginning of the 21st century to the most recent published data (2020). The data of 2020 are also used to analyse the inter-state distribution of crime against STs.

The crime trends concerning STs in the 21st century is discussed under three heads; incidents of crime, crime rate and share of crime against STs in the total crime. It is worth mentioning that NCRB changed the methodology of calculating the crime rate against STs in 2013. Before, 2013 total population is used in the denominator for calculating the crime rate. After that, the denominator is replaced by the ST population. This study adopted the modified scheme for calculating the crime rate for all years.

One more significant limitation of crime rate data needs to be highlighted. For the calculation of the rate of the total IPC crimes

the extrapolated population of India for each year is considered, while for calculating the rate of crime against STs, the 2011 Census data is utilized. Year-wise extrapolation of the ST population is not made in the calculation of the crime rate against them. Henceforth, it can be inferred that whenever the new census data is published, a sharp fall in the rate of crime against STs is expected due to the methodology adopted for calculation. As it happened in 2011.

The trends

The crime trends concerning STs are discussed under three heads; incidents of crime, crime rate and share of crime against STs in total crime. Incidents of crime refer to violations of the Atrocity Act against STs only. Crime rate is the number of incidents per lakh population. Until 2012, NCRB used the total population as a denominator to calculate the crime rate against STs, while after that, the denominator was replaced by the total ST population of India. The modified scheme (ST population in the denominator) is used for all years.

Crime incidents

IPC crimes have been increasing rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century (Fig. 1). Since the beginning of the 21st century, total IPC crimes have increased by 140 percent, from 1.76 million in 2001 to 4.25 million in 2020. In the case of IPC crimes, the data for 2020 needs special mention as more than one million crimes have increased within a year. The phenomenal growth of more than 30 percent in a year is surprising. In 2020, The country remained under complete lockdown from 25th March to 31st May 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic (First wave). During this time, public mobility was restricted.

After that, the nature of lockdown was changed; however, public spaces remained under strict surveillance to enforce lockdown. It is expected that crime should have declined during the period of lockdown, which is indeed the case. Many crimes such as Crimes against women, children and senior citizens, theft, burglary, robbery and dacoity (violent robbery) declined considerably. In contrast, cases related to disobedience to order duly promulgated by a public servant (violation of Sec. 188 IPC) increased from 29,469 in 2019 to 6,12,179 in 2020. Similarly, other IPC/SLL crimes (not specified by NCRB) related to violation of lockdown have increased considerably, which was responsible for the growth of overall crime in 2020 (NCRB, 2020).

The trends in crime against Scheduled tribes (STs) need careful analysis. Figure 1 shows 6217 cases of violation of the Atrocity Act were registered in 2001, which remained almost consistent till 2012. Incidence of crimes against the STs witnessed an upward trend after 2012 which appears to be due more to the modified scheme of categorizing crimes under various heads. A considerable decline in subsequent years strengthens the fact that the sudden upsurge was more statistical than real- arising due to the change in the classification scheme. Once the classification errors have been rectified, the crime incidents have declined considerably. However, it is impossible to identify the exact extent/heads of error from NCRB's published data without access to raw data.

In the case of crime against ST, a high possibility of underreporting cannot be ruled out (Madhok, 2013). In recent years, the Supreme Court decision on the atrocity Act and subsequent protest may have raised

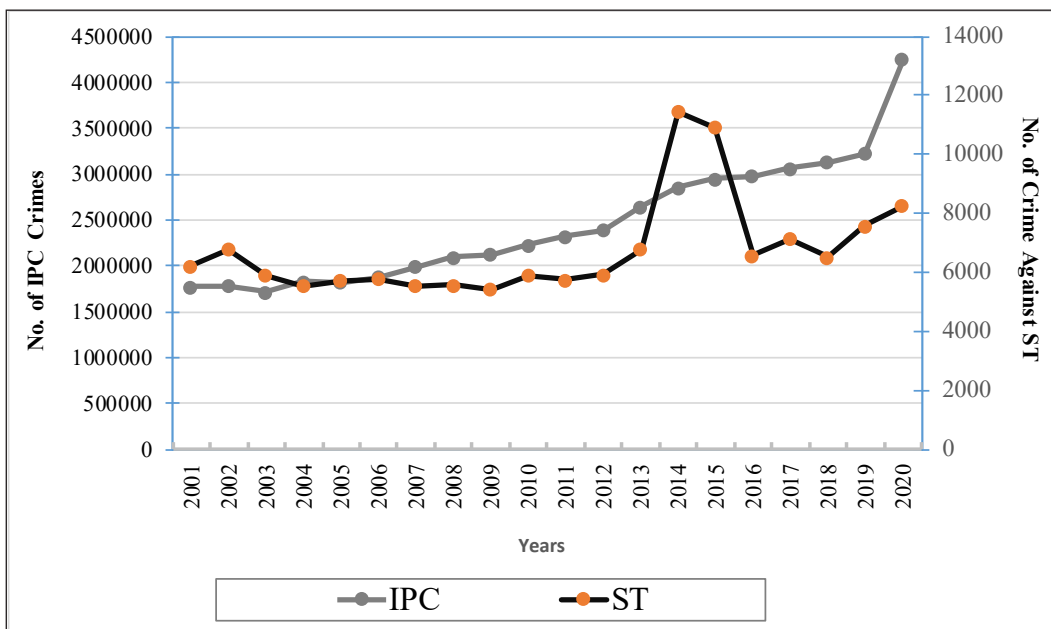


Fig. 1: Incidents of total IPC crime and crime against the tribes

Source: Compiled from NCRB, Crime in India (2001-2020)

awareness level, resulting in increased reporting and registration of such crimes. It is worth mentioning that in 2020 when crime under many heads has declined due largely to the Covid-19 pandemic, the crime against STs has increased by more than nine percent.

Crime rate

Crime rate here refers to the number of incidents per lakh population, while the rate of crime against tribes refers to the number of incidents of violation of the Atrocity Act per lakh tribal population. Table 1 reveals the trends of crime against STs from 2001 to 2020.

The crime rate for total IPC crime has increased from 172 per lakh to about 314 per lakh of population during the two decades preceding 2020. On the other hand, the crime rate against STs remained almost unchanged over these years. It is significant that the

total IPC crimes increased faster than the crime against STs and that overall crime rate increased faster than the population growth. While the incidents of crime against STs have increased very slowly, the rate of crime against them remained almost unchanged in the reference period (2001-20). The constant growth rate despite the increasing number of crimes indicates that the number of incidents has matched the pace of their population growth.

Share in the total crime

Crime rate measures the increase or decrease in crime in reference to population and is undoubtedly influenced by population growth. The share of crime against STs in the total IPC crime on the other hand remains unaffected by the population growth. Table 1 reveals that the share of crimes against IPC

Table 1: Trends of crime and crime against STs (2001-2020)

Year	No. of crimes		Share of Crime Against STs in Total IPC Crime (%)	Crime Rate	
	Total IPC Crimes	Crime against STs		Total IPC Crimes	Crime against STs
2001	1769308	6217	0.35	172.3	7.4
2002	1780330	6774	0.38	169.5	8.0
2003	1716120	5889	0.34	160.7	7.0
2004	1832015	5535	0.30	168.8	6.6
2005	1822602	5713	0.31	165.3	6.8
2006	1878293	5791	0.31	167.7	6.9
2007	1989673	5532	0.28	175.1	6.6
2008	2093379	5582	0.27	181.5	6.6
2009	2121345	5425	0.26	181.4	6.4
2010	2224831	5885	0.26	187.6	7.0
2011	2325575	5756	0.25	192.2	5.5
2012	2387188	5922	0.25	196.7	5.7
2013	2647722	6793	0.26	215.5	6.5
2014	2851563	11451	0.40	229.2	11.0
2015	2949400	10914	0.37	234.2	10.5
2016	2975711	6568	0.22	233.6	6.3
2017	3062579	7125	0.23	237.7	6.8
2018	3132954	6524	0.21	236.7	6.3
2019	3225701	7570	0.23	241.2	7.3
2020	4254356	8272	0.19	314.3	7.9

Source: Compiled from NCRB, *Crime in India (2001-2020)*

crime against scheduled tribes in total crimes has indeed decreased over time. For example, the crime against STs constituted 0.35 percent of the total IPC crime at the turn of the present century which declined to 0.19 percent in 2018. Considerable decrease in the share of crimes against the STs cannot be explained by underreporting only. As mentioned earlier, the only logical explanation for a declining share of such crimes is that the IPC crimes have grown much faster than the crime against STs. The data for 2020 explain this phenomenon more clearly. In 2020, the crime against

tribes increased by 9 percent, but their share in total crime reduced from 0.23 percent in 2019 to 0.19 percent in 2020. This happened due to the relatively faster growth of total IPC crime in 2020. From 2019 to 2020, total IPC crime has increased by 31 percent, while IPC crime against ST has increased by 9%, so their relative share in total crime has declined considerably (Table 1).

Long-term analysis of total crime and crime against STs leads to the conclusion that India is turning into a more crime-prone society as the number and rate of crimes

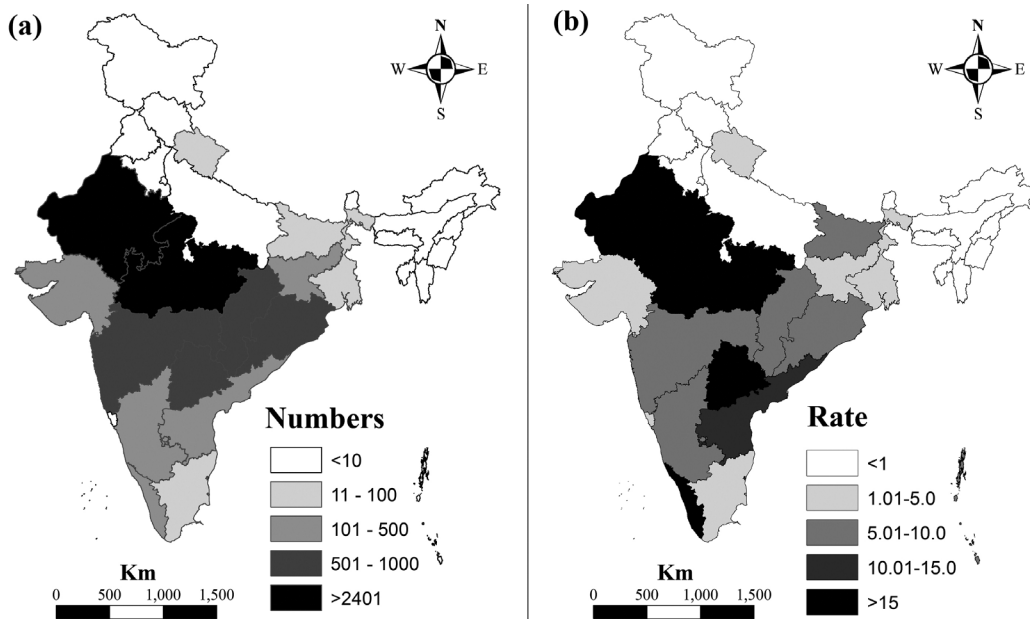


Fig. 2: Incidents (a) and Rate (b) of crime against schedule tribes in India-2020

Source: NCRB, *Crime in India-2020*

increase rapidly. At the same time, the targeted crime against STs has not increased at the same pace, which is evident in the unchanged crime rate and declining share of crime against STs in total crime during the reference period. These trends are certainly welcome as ethnic or caste-based crimes are a blot on a modern society and is against harmonious living.

Inter-state variation (2018)

The tribal population is highly concentrated in the hilly north-eastern states, where their share in the total population is very high. Majority of population of Mizoram (94%), Nagaland (87%), Meghalaya (86%) and Arunachal (68%) was tribal in 2011 census. while their numerical strength is high in the central Indian states (Mandal *et al.*, 2002) for instance Madhya Pradesh

has a highest tribal population (15 million), followed by Maharashtra (10 million), Odisha (9 million), and Rajasthan (9 million) (Census, 2011). Crimes against STs too are unevenly distributed across the states, and their concentration and dispersal pattern significantly impact the crime against them.

As many as 8,272 crimes against STs were registered in the country in 2020. Only four such incidents were registered in the union territories. Madhya Pradesh (30%) and Rajasthan (23%) are the prime contributors to crimes against the STs among the states, as more than half of the violations of the Atrocity Act against STs are recorded in these two states. Another five states, namely Maharashtra (8.3%), Odisha (7.8%), Telangana (7.2%), Chhattisgarh (6.3%) and Jharkhand (4.3%), accounted for about one-third of the incidents

of crime against the tribes. It is noteworthy that not a single crime against tribes is recorded in as many as seven states, while in the other five states, such crimes are negligible in their occurrence (Fig 2a).

The concentration pattern of tribes and their shared relationship with non-tribal people significantly impact the distribution of crime against tribes. Once again, it is worth mentioning that a crime committed only by a non-SC/ST person against them is qualified to register under Atrocity Act. Henceforth, where they reside exclusively, the cases of violation of the Atrocity Act were not registered at all (Fig. 2a). This explains the absence of crimes against the tribes in most north-eastern states. On the other hand, absence of crimes against tribes in much of the Gangetic plain is due to near absence of tribal segment in the population living in these areas. The largest concentration of tribes is evident in the Central Indian tribal belt, where they share a common territory with non-tribal people. This tribal heartland is characterized as a conflict zone due to deep-rooted history of oppression and deprivation of tribes by non-tribal upper caste people. About 90 percent of the crimes against STs were registered in the central Indian tribal belt. States such as Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are typical examples of this phenomenon.

The national average crime rate against STs was 7.9 per lakh in 2020. Only four states, Kerala (26.8), Rajasthan (20.3), Telangana (17.4), and Madhya Pradesh (15.7), have recorded a crime rate against STs in double-digits (Fig 2a & 2b). In all other states, the crime rate against STs was lower than the national average. Tribal areas (districts) of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana belong to the central Indian tribal belt, which

is characterized by higher incidents of crime against tribes. In Kerala, the tribal people are concentrated only in a few districts like Wayanad where they have a history of conflict with non-tribal people in the rural areas. The crime rate against STs in this conflict zone is very high.

Inter-district variation

Two types of districts can be identified from the NCRB data. Administrative districts are geographical entities, while special purpose districts formed at the state level are aspatial. In 2020, a total of 898 districts were mentioned by NCRB; 740 were administrative districts, while 158 were special purpose districts such as Railway Thana, CID, and Cyber Crime Branch. These are considered as districts during the data compilation by NCRB but may not follow the boundary of the geographical district. Crime against STs is almost absent in these special-purpose districts.

Fig. 3 shows that more than 50 cases of violation of the atrocity act were registered in 2020 in 41 districts. Six districts registered more than 100 cases of crimes against STs. Four (Jaipur, Baran, Alwar and Barmer) are situated in Rajasthan, while another two (Rewa and Jabalpur) are situated in Madhya Pradesh. Forty-one districts where more than 50 cases of violation of the Atrocity Act against STs were recorded collectively contribute more than one-third of the cases of crime against STs occurred in the country.

Fig. 4 reveals that the majority of the high crime districts are located in the tribal belts of Madhya Pradesh (21) and Rajasthan (15). The distribution of these districts in the central tribal belt shows amazing consistency. The case of the Wayanad district needs special mention where one-third of the tribal population of the state is concentrated in the

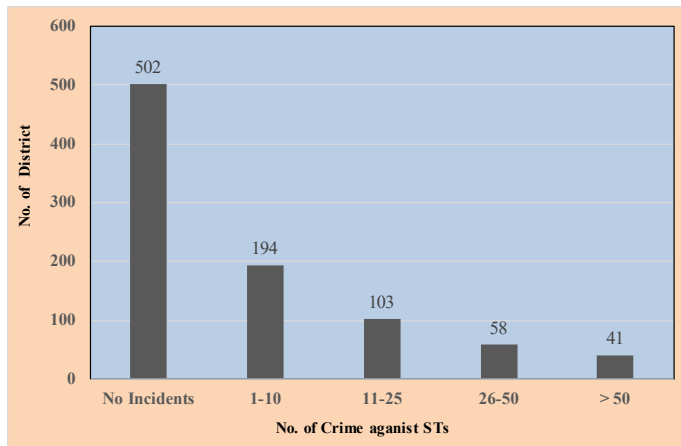


Fig. 3: District-wise distribution of crime against STs

Source: NCRB, *Crime in India-2020*

Wayanad district, and the highest number of crimes against them in Kerala were also registered in the same district. Few districts of Kerala are among the notable exception located outside the central Indian tribal belt with higher crime rates against STs.

More than 500 districts have not registered any incidents of crimes against STs. This includes 150 'special purpose districts' such as the economic offence unit and anti-terrorist squad districts due to obvious reasons. A second category of districts included in these 500 districts of no crime against the STs are the ones with an exclusive concentration of STs such as most districts of northeast India and from Himalayan states (Fig. 4). Districts with a negligible ST population have also not recorded any crime against STs. Many such districts are concentrated in Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nādu. Crime against STs is negligible in exclusive urban districts also.

Correlates of crime against scheduled tribes

Crime against tribe is a crucial subset of the total crimes. As indicated earlier, the

concentration pattern of the tribal population is a significant determinant of crime against them. Therefore, the total ST population of the state and their percentage share in the state's population is used as a determinant of crime. The literacy rate is expected to work in two different ways. It may reduce crime as people become more aware of their rights. However, it may also enhance the reporting of crime. It is worth seeing how the total literacy rate and the literacy rate of the tribes have affected the crime against them. Urbanization in India is likely to significantly influence increase the vulnerability of people to crimes (Tiwari, 2022). Besides, the subculture of crime significantly impacts all kinds of crime, including crime against STs (Kabiraj, 2022). This subculture of crime is expressed through the total IPC crime. Identifying the factors that determine the crime against tribes is complex, though necessary in studying these crimes. Table 2 lists the factors determining the crime against tribes. The correlation matrix is based on the state-wise data of various parameters. Crime data for 2020 are utilized for the calculation of the correlation matrix.

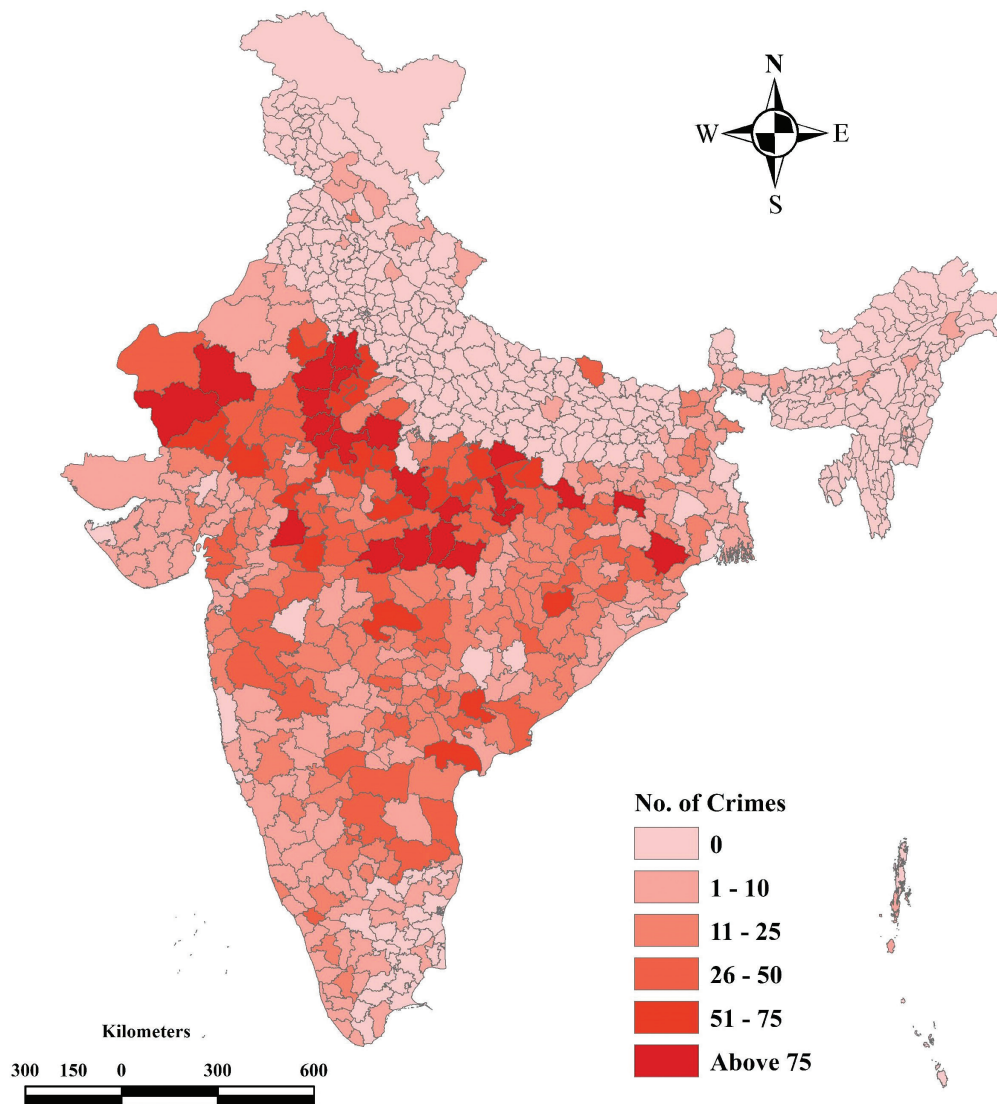


Fig. 4: District-wise distribution of crime against scheduled tribes in India-2020

Source: NCRB, *Crime in India-2020*

It is clear from Table 2 that the total tribal population is positively associated ($r= +0.81$) with the number of crimes against them. As described earlier, most of the crimes against them occurred in the central India tribal belt states where their absolute number is high. The crime rate is positively correlated with

their population ($r= +0.34$) and negatively with their share of the total population (-0.39). Thus, it is evident that their exclusive concentration reduces their vulnerability to atrocity crimes. The number and crime rate against STs are positively correlated ($r= +0.61$).

Table 2: Correlation among the determinants of crime against scheduled tribes

Indicator	ST Population	Share of ST Population (%)	No. of Crime against STs	Rate of Crime against STs	Literacy Rate	Literacy Rate (ST)	Urbanization	Total IPC Crime
ST Population	1							
Share of ST Population (%)	-0.06	1						
No. of Crime against ST	0.81	-0.12	1					
Rate of Crime against ST	0.34	-0.39	0.61	1				
Literacy Rate	-0.27	0.17	-0.33	-0.14	1			
Literacy Rate (ST)	-0.22	0.48	-0.27	-0.43	0.52	1		
Urbanization (%)	-0.17	-0.06	-0.08	0.17	0.53	0.14	1	
Total IPC Crime	0.25	-0.41	0.21	0.17	-0.17	-0.31	0.27	1

Source: Based on data of Census of India, 2011 and Crimes in India-2020.

The relation between literacy rate and crime is complex as it is expected that education may bring behavioral changes which keep people away from crimes. However, higher educational attainment, particularly among the tribal segment may increase the reporting of crimes. The total literacy rate is positively correlated with IPC crimes ($r = +0.53$) but negatively with the number of crimes against STs (-0.33). Education has empowered the tribes and they are less affected by the crimes that commonly occurred against illiterate tribal people; hence, the crime (-0.27) and crime rate (-0.43) against them are negatively correlated with their literacy rate.

Urbanization has a complex relationship with the overall crime rate as the registration of all crimes increases considerably in urban areas (Tiwari, 2022). However, tribes are

less concentrated in urban areas. Their share in total urban population was only 2.8% in 2011 and urbanization has no significant relationship with crime against tribes. District-wise distribution of crime indicates that such crimes are less in urbanized districts. Crimes against the STs continue to be largely a rural phenomenon where bulk of them is concentrated. The number of IPC crimes is slightly positively associated with the crime against scheduled tribes.

Concluding remarks

Crimes against the STs are a sensitive issue in Indian society where the perspectives of different social groups are contrasted over the same phenomena. Any distortion or exaggeration of such crimes is not congenial to social harmony, while their understatement

may lead to injustice for the disadvantaged and the marginalized social groups. Therefore, the crime data, particularly those against scheduled tribes, should be handled with great caution.

Due to many institutional reasons, a high possibility of underreporting of the crime can hardly be ruled out. The underreporting of crimes is expected to be higher in the case of scheduled tribes who are less privileged living at the margins of the society. However, some of the declining trends of crime against them cannot be explained only through underreporting. Data indicates that the crime against these social groups has increased slower than the total IPC crimes, and their share in the total crimes has declined gradually in the 21st century.

There is substantial spatial variation in the distribution of such crimes. States like Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are the most vulnerable to STs. Crime against them is also high in all central India tribal belt states. The same pattern is followed in the district-wise distribution of these crimes. Their concentration pattern has a significant impact on the occurrence of crime against them.

India has a long history of oppression, discrimination and exploitation against some social groups, which makes them vulnerable in the present also. An equal and just society for the oppressed groups such as the scheduled tribes is the prime concern of the judicial system. The law must protect them from discrimination and violence. Our judicial system has many provisions that assure them that their rights in society will be protected. With increasing level of education and awareness, these social groups are expected to fight for the protection of their rights more assertively. This assertiveness was amply demonstrated during the recent mobilization after the Supreme

Court decision on the Atrocity act forcing the political representatives to change the law and maintain the status quo on the Atrocity Act.

Crimes against STs should not be taken in isolation. The total IPC crimes highly influence the crime against STs in the respective states. Probably the most important conclusion of the study is that in the states where incidents of violation of IPC are high, the crimes against scheduled tribes are higher. The widespread sub-culture of crime and violence is the main reason behind higher crime in these regions. Primarily, the discourse on the prevention of crime against SCs and STs encourages the adaptation of a focused attitude towards the prevention of crime. A separate police station (*thana*) for them in every district manifests this approach. Without controlling all types of crime, it is difficult to control crimes against STs. Therefore, a more holistic approach to crime prevention and deterrence is required to control crime against them.

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