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Indian Council of
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(ICSSR)

ICSSR Sponsored

National Conference

Tribal Culture

HERITAGE & INDIGENOUS PRACTICES

sankshipta



Organized by

Mount Carmel College Autonomous

58, Palace Road, Bengaluru - 560001

In Association with

Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)

DIRECTOR MESSAGE

I extend my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to the organisers of Janjatiya Gaurav Seminar, an ICSSR Sponsored National Conference on "Tribal Culture, Heritage and Indigenous Practices" for curating this intellectual collaboration, weaving together multiple disciplines and approaches to cull out new horizons of knowledge.

The tribal communities of India have long demonstrated extraordinary resilience to combat social, cultural, and ecological upheavals. Their deep-rooted connection with nature, unique knowledge systems, and community-centred lifestyles offer meaningful insights into sustainable living and resistance against marginalization. In remembering and honouring the legacy of Birsa Munda—a symbol of indigenous assertion, courage, and vision—we reaffirm our collective responsibility to preserve, promote, and learn from tribal heritage.

This conference serves not only as a platform to engage in critical dialogue by becoming voice of the voiceless but also as a support to the enduring spirit of our tribal family. I commend the efforts of the organizing team, scholars, and participants who are contributing to this cause with academic rigour and genuine commitment. May this event spark new perspectives and strengthen our resolve towards inclusive and respectful nation-building.

Rev Sr. Albina CSST
Rev Sr. Albina CSST



ಥಾವರ್‌ಚಂದ್ ಗೆಹ್ಲೋಟ್
थावरचंद गेहलोत
THAAWARCHAND GEHLOT
Governor of Karnataka

No. GOV/KAR/MSG/319/2025

"शुभकामना संदेश"

प्रसन्नता का विषय है कि माउंट कार्मेल कॉलेज, बेंगलुरु, भारतीय सामाजिक विज्ञान अनुसंधान परिषद (ICSSR) के सहयोग से "जनजातीय संस्कृति, विरासत एवं पारंपरिक प्रथाएँ" विषय पर दो दिवसीय राष्ट्रीय संगोष्ठी का आयोजन कर रहा है।

यह विषय अत्यंत प्रासंगिक और सामयिक है। भारत की जनजातियाँ हमारी सांस्कृतिक विविधता, जीवनशैली, पर्यावरणीय संतुलन और पारंपरिक ज्ञान का एक अमूल्य स्रोत हैं। उनके अनुभवों, मान्यताओं और ज्ञान प्रणालियों में न केवल अतीत की गहराई है बल्कि वर्तमान और भविष्य की भी दिशा है।

विशेष रूप से, यह संगोष्ठी महान जननायक धरती आबा बिरसा मुंडा की 150वीं जयंती को समर्पित है, जिन्होंने जनजातीय समाज को सामाजिक न्याय और स्वाधीनता की भावना से ओत–प्रोत किया। यदि हम उनके विचारों और संघर्ष को आज की पीढ़ी के समक्ष पुनः प्रस्तुत करें तो यह उनके प्रति हमारी सच्ची श्रद्धांजलि होगी।

मैं इस राष्ट्रीय संगोष्ठी के सफल आयोजन हेतु आयोजकों, वक्ताओं, शोधकर्ताओं तथा सभी प्रतिभागियों को हार्दिक शुभकामनाएँ देता हूँ। मुझे पूर्ण विश्वास है कि यह संगोष्ठी जनजातीय संस्कृति और ज्ञान परंपराओं के संरक्षण और संवर्धन की दिशा में सार्थक सिद्ध होगी।

शुभकामनाओं सहित ।

आपका

23.7.25

(थावरचंद गेहलोत)

प्रो. धनंजय सिंह
सदस्य सचिव
PROF. DHANANJAY SINGH
MEMBER SECRETARY

Indian Council of Social Science Research
Ministry of Education, New Delhi

Goodwill Message

I am extremely delighted to know that a national seminar on "Tribal Culture, Heritage & Indigenous Practices", under the *Janjatiya Gaurav* (Tribal Pride) Seminar Scheme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), is being organised by Mount Carmel College (Autonomous), Bengaluru. This seminar is part of a series of national seminars that are dedicated to the commemoration of the 150th birth anniversary of the great *Janjatiya* leader of India, Bhagwan Birsa Munda.

Birsa Munda is a key figure in the Indian independence movement and a powerful symbol of tribal identity, cultural pride and self-reliance. In the second half of the 19th century, when the British colonial government was imposing exploitative and culturally-disruptive ideas on the tribal society and depriving the society of its resources, Birsa Munda lit the lamp of revolt and awareness against colonial injustice. His life and ideas have been a source of inspiration for the entire nation.

In the contemporary context, when tribal communities are facing many issues arising from climate change, displacement, encroachment of resources, Birsa Munda's ideas and people-sensitive leadership have become more relevant than ever. His legacy has to be respected, and his ideas have to be incorporated and disseminated in a manner that enriches Bharat`s policy discourse, academic research and social interventions.

ICSSR always encourages research efforts that link social sciences with policy-making, inclusive development and cultural understanding. Through this seminar, researchers, academicians and policy makers will come together to establish a multidimensional dialogue which will act as a strong bridge between our society and its institutions.

This seminar is certainly a praiseworthy effort towards the preservation and re-reading of tribal knowledge traditions, culture and heritage. I extend my heartiest wishes to the organisers, scholars and participants for this academic dialogue. It is hoped that this *Janjatiya Gaurav* Seminar will act as a bridge among scholars and participants and will contribute to the creation of an inclusive Bharat.

Regards,
Prof. Dhananjay Singh
Member Secretary
Indian Council of Social Science Research
New Delhi

MESSAGE FROM DIRECTOR



I extend my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to the organisers of Janjatiya Gaurav Seminar, an ICSSR Sponsored National Conference on "Tribal Culture, Heritage and Indigenous Practices" for curating this intellectual collaboration, weaving together multiple disciplines and approaches to cull out new horizons of knowledge.

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Rev Sr. Albina CSST

MESSAGE FROM PRINCIPAL



'*Honouring the past, Empowering the present & Sustaining the Future*'

We at MCC have always believed in empowerment through education and thus making a difference to thousands of young minds. The College is excited to host the Two-Day National Conference on '*Tribal Culture, Heritage & Indigenous Practices*' sponsored by ICSSR under Janjatiya Gaurav Seminar Series. The Conference which would commemorate the life of Birsa Munda would be a learning platform for our today's younger generation, which will carry forward life's lessons in today's context of climate crisis and environmental degradation.

The College has always worked towards sustainability and every year we have 2 SDG's as our central theme around which our academic, cultural events, workshops etc. revolve to sensitize our youth on the importance and relevance of the same. The deliberations of this conference will ignite thoughts related to preservation of our indigenous knowledge and the need to retain community uniqueness amidst the advent of globalization and tendency to demonstrate western ideology, which is the threat to native identities.

May this conference be an enlightening platform for scholars, academicians, policy makers, students to discuss and discourse on this topic and I wish the organizers the very best for the successful outcome of the Conference.

Dr. George Lekha
Principal

FOREWORD
पूर्वकथन

भारतीय समाज के सांस्कृतिक वैविध्य और ऐतिहासिक चेतना में जनजातीय समुदायों की भूमिका अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण रही है। उनकी जीवनशैली, मूल्यपरक दृष्टिकोण, पारंपरिक ज्ञान और प्रकृति से तादात्म्य की भावना आज के समय में न केवल शोध का विषय हैं बल्कि एक वैकल्पिक विकास की संकल्पना का आधार भी बनते जा रहे हैं।

माउंट कार्मेल कॉलेज, बेंगलुरु को यह गौरव प्राप्त है कि वह भारतीय सामाजिक विज्ञान अनुसंधान परिषद (ICSSR) द्वारा 'जनजातीय गौरव संगोष्ठी योजना' के अंतर्गत देश के उन चुनिंदा संस्थानों में शामिल है जिन्हें जनजातीय संस्कृति, विरासत और पारंपरिक ज्ञान पर विमर्श हेतु यह राष्ट्रीय संगोष्ठी आयोजित करने का अवसर मिला है। यह आयोजन लोकनायक बिरसा मुंडा की 150वीं जयंती को समर्पित है, जिन्होंने न केवल औपनिवेशिक शासन के विरुद्ध संघर्ष किया बल्कि जनजातीय आत्मनिर्णय, भूमि अधिकार और सांस्कृतिक अस्मिता की रक्षा के लिए अपनी जीवन यात्रा को समर्पित कर दिया।

यह संगोष्ठी इस विश्वास को पुष्ट करती है कि जनजातीय ज्ञान केवल अतीत की स्मृति नहीं बल्कि वर्तमान और भविष्य की दिशा में एक सशक्त हस्तक्षेप है। जलवायु परिवर्तन, संधारणीय विकास, सामाजिक न्याय और सांस्कृतिक विविधता जैसे विषयों पर आज जब पुनरावलोकन की आवश्यकता है, तब जनजातीय दृष्टिकोण हमें पुनर्रचना का एक नवीन मार्ग प्रदान करता है।

इस संगोष्ठी का आयोजन व्यापक उद्देश्य को केंद्र में रखते हुए किया जा रहा है। बिरसा मुंडा के ऐतिहासिक योगदान और उनकी वर्तमान प्रासंगिकता के प्रति व्यापक जन-जागरूकता का प्रसार करना। जनजातीय ज्ञान परंपराओं और उनके समृद्ध ऐतिहासिक संदर्भों का दस्तावेज़ीकरण करना। युवाओं को जनजातीय संस्कृति, परंपराओं और पारंपरिक ज्ञान से परिचित कराना, ताकि वे अपने समाज के विविध आयामों को समझ सकें और आत्मसात कर सकें। नीतिगत संवाद और रणनीतियों पर विमर्श करना जो जनजातीय संस्कृति और विरासत के संरक्षण में सहायक हो सकें। लुप्तप्राय जनजातीय भाषाओं की पुनरुत्थान प्रक्रिया पर विचार करना और उनके संरक्षण हेतु दीर्घकालिक योजनाओं का निर्माण करना आदि व्यापक उद्देश्य हैं।

इस संगोष्ठी में देशभर के विद्वानों, शोधकर्ताओं, नीति-निर्माताओं और समुदाय प्रतिनिधियों ने अपने विचार प्रस्तुत किए हैं। यह शोध-सार पुस्तक उन्हीं विचारों, प्रस्तावनाओं और गवेषणाओं का एक संकलन है, जो न केवल अकादमिक विमर्श को समृद्ध करती है बल्कि एक जीवंत सामाजिक संवाद की नींव भी रखती है।

मुझे विश्वास है कि इस पुस्तक में समाहित शोध सारांश न केवल पाठकों के लिए प्रेरणास्रोत बनेंगे बल्कि आगामी अनुसंधानों और नीतिगत चर्चाओं को भी दिशा प्रदान करेंगे। यह पूर्वकथन लिखते समय मैं उन सभी प्रतिभागियों, लेखकों और सह-आयोजकों के प्रति आभार प्रकट करता हूँ, जिन्होंने इस संगोष्ठी को विचार और संवाद का एक महत्त्वपूर्ण मंच बनाया।

डॉ. कोयल बिस्वास
सह- संयोजक

डॉ. राठोड पुंडलिक
संयोजक

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EDITORIAL MESSAGE

Many people have contributed towards making this Conference a successful initiative and we personally thank each and every one of them for their constant support & encouragement.

Our sincere gratitude to our respected Director, Sr. Albina and our Principal, Dr. George Lekha for giving us an opportunity to conduct the Conference on *Tribal Culture, Heritage & Indigenous Practices*' sponsored by ICSSR under *Janjatiya Gaurav Seminar Series*.

Our special thanks to our Registrar of Academics, Dr Suma Singh & other members on the Advisory Committee and Deanery for their valuable guidance, suggestions and inputs all the way. Our heartfelt thanks to all the authors and contributors in terms of research papers, review papers and articles for the Conference in both Hindi and English, without whose enthusiasm and co-operation this publication would not have been possible.

The Paper sub-themes spanned from Literary work, Entrepreneurs, Indigenous medicinal practices, Policy with respect to Tribal rights, Socio-economic perspectives, Constitutional rights, Environment to Indian Knowledge System related themes pertaining to Tribal community and Indigenous practices.

We would register our gratitude to all our colleagues who helped us to organize the contents of the book and to come out with this publication – *Sankshipta.*

Special thanks to our Student Co-ordinator Ms. Rozalia Jacquleen and Ms. Shobha B to help us in the compilation work. Thanks to our Research Centre for the constant support in all our academic endeavours.

Dr. Kavitha G Singh
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Impact of Development Projects on Tribal Communities: An analysis on Tradition and Modernity

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ABSTRACT

Development projects, particularly large-scale infrastructure, are often regarded as mechanisms for the development of economy and modernization. Essentially, these initiatives benefit tribal communities by enhancing connectivity, improving access to resources, and creating employment opportunities. However, at the same time, they also face challenges, such as displacement from ancestral lands, loss of traditional livelihoods, and cultural erosion. The present study implements a sociological lens to explain the impact of large-scale development projects on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of tribal communities. By analysing primary and secondary data, the study tries to highlight the opportunities as well as challenges faced by the tribal communities through development projects. In short, the present research tries to analyse sociologically about the impact of development projects on tribal communities, highlighting their livelihood practices and adaptive strategies. The results show the importance of such a model that focuses on balancing economic development and social justice.

Keywords: *Tribal communities, Development Projects, Tradition, Modernity, Livelihood*

INTRODUCTION

Hydropower is becoming a key economic force in Northeast India. A major plan is underway to dam the rivers in this area for hydropower generation. Both the central and state governments are pushing for a big boost in hydroelectricity to meet India's energy demands. The attention on hydropower is clear in the increasing number of dam constructions each year. Right now, dam construction has outpaced all other development activities in the region (Vagholikar and Das 2010).

The total hydropower potential of the Northeast region is 50,382 MW (CEA). Arunachal Pradesh has a potential of 50,328 MW, Assam has 674 MW, Mizoram has 2,196 MW, and Manipur has 1,784 MW. Nagaland has a potential of 1,574 MW, while Meghalaya's total hydropower potential is 2,394 MW. Tripura has 21 MW, and Sikkim has 4,286 MW. These figures may change with updates from state governments. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh is now estimated to have a potential of 57,000 MW. The updated estimates for the entire Northeast region suggest about 35 to 170 hydropower projects, which could generate a total capacity of 70,000 MW (ibid.).

Large hydropower projects (over 25 MW) already operating in the Northeast include Rangit III and Teesta V in Sikkim. In Assam, the operational dams are Kopili, Khangdong, and Lower Borpani (Karbi Langpi). Manipur has the Loktak hydropower project. Meghalaya includes Umiam Umtru IV,

Kyrdamkulai, and Umiam Stage I. In Arunachal Pradesh, Ranganadi Stage I is in operation, while Nagaland has the Doyang dam. There are 11 projects with a total installed capacity of 1,686 MW currently under construction in Northeast India. These projects include Chujachen, Teesta III, Teesta VI, Rangit IV, and Jorethang Loop in Sikkim, as well as Kameng, Lower Subansiri, and Pare in Arunachal Pradesh. Meghalaya is working on the Myndtu and New Umtru projects. Additionally, 10 projects with a total installed capacity of 4,891 MW are at various stages of clearance.

This study is based on qualitative research with a descriptive research design to analyse the relation between people of Northeast India and hydroelectric projects. The main purpose is to understand how these communities experience and adopt development by adjusting their livelihoods, traditional practices, and culture. The present study includes both primary and secondary data for analysis. Primary data are collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. Secondary data are collected from reports, research articles, and other documents.

Also, the study uses Ecological Modernisation Theory (EMT) to analyse how tribal communities of NE India adapt to the changes brought by large-scale infrastructural projects, particularly large dams. I will also use cultural ecology theory, proposed by Julian Steward in 1955, to explore how culture changes as a result of environmental transformations. This theory is important for the study to examine how ecological changes caused by large dams, such as flooding, changes in river flow, and deforestation, impact the livelihoods, traditional practices, and rituals of tribal communities in NE India. This theory will help to investigate how these tribal communities adjust socially and culturally to the environmental problems caused by large dams.

This theory helps to analyse how the tribal communities are negotiating and changing their livelihood, culture, and tradition due to infrastructural development like large dams. The objective of the present study is to explore the interconnection between modern development and the cultural practices, as well as social structure of tribal communities in North-East India. The study focuses on how large dams shape the structure of tribal institutions, practices, beliefs, rituals, and livelihoods. The study also tried to explore the strategies initiated by the tribal people to cope with the changing environment caused by the modern developmental projects, particularly large dams. It aims to analyse how tradition and modern life interact due to the changes led by large dams to the tribal people in NE India.

The Region

Northeast India refers to a set of eight states, often known as the seven sisters and one brother, that are located in the country's northeast. The states in the region are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. It comprises 262,185 square kilometres and is located between latitudes 21.57°N and 29.30°N and longitudes 88°E and 97.30°E.

According to the 2011 census, Northeast India has a total population of 45,587,982, which is 3.77 per cent of India's total population. The 2011 census also found that about 82 per cent of the region's population lives in rural areas.

Tribes make up over one-fourth of the Northeast's population. This region is home to around 145 tribal groups, making it one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the world. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, and Sikkim are mainly tribal states.

Half of these tribal groups have fewer than 5,000 members. The Government of India has officially recognised 121 tribal groups as Scheduled Tribes (SC), distributed as 17 in Meghalaya, 5 in Nagaland, 14 in Mizoram, 12 in Arunachal Pradesh, 23 in Assam, 29 in Manipur, 19 in Tripura, and 2 in Sikkim. The main tribal groups in this region include the Naga, Mizo, Lushai, Hmar, Kuki, Chin, Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, Kachari, Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Garo, Jaintia, Adi, Aka, Apatani, Nyishi, Monpa, and Paite (Fernandes et al. 2008). Anthropologists have identified about 64 ethnic groups in the region as major tribes. In terms of population, the Nagas, who live in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Assam, are the largest tribal group. They are followed by the Bodos, Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Mizo, Karbi, Kachari, Kuki, Chakma, etc.

This region acts as an ethnological transition zone between India and its neighboring countries, including China (Tibet), Burma, and Bangladesh. Notably, around 220 languages are spoken here, belonging to three language families: Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan, and Austric. The native populations primarily speak languages from the Sino-Tibetan family, except for the Khasi group, which speaks a dialect of the Mon-Khmer family, a part of the Austro-Asiatic languages. The NE Region plays a significant role in both the Indo-Burma and the Eastern Himalaya biodiversity hotspot, one of the 35 biodiversity hotspots worldwide. Geographically, this region forms part of the Eastern Himalayas, acknowledge for its numerous water resources, rich ethnic and cultural diversity, and biodiversity. The North East India covers around 164,000 square

kilometers of dense forest, making up about 60 percent of its total land area and representing roughly one-fourth of India's forest cover.

Settled agriculture mainly takes place in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. In contrast, shifting cultivation is more common in the hilly areas. About 443,300 households depend on shifting cultivation for their livelihoods. The land used for this type of farming covers around 22,480 square kilometres, accounting for about 10 per cent of the region's total area. Two major river systems run through the region: the Brahmaputra and the Barak (Meghna). These rivers flow into neighbouring countries. This area is one of the wettest in India, providing ample water resources and significant hydropower potential.

Discussions

Dams were built in ancient times to supply water for drinking and irrigation. As civilisation progressed, the demand for water rose. This led to a greater need for irrigation, flood control, sediment management, and energy. So, dams are constructed for specific goals like flood control, irrigation, and hydropower. Multipurpose dams are vital for a country because they provide both domestic and economic advantages (ICOLD).

Water is the most important resource after land and air, and demand for it has soared in today's world. Over the past three centuries, the amount of water drawn from freshwater sources has increased thirty-five times, while the world population has grown eightfold. With the current global population of 5.6 billion continuing to rise by about 90 million each year and with heightened expectations for better living standards, global water demand is expected to grow by 2 to 3 per cent annually in the coming decades (ibid.).

In wealthier countries, high consumption levels can often be balanced by different methods of conservation and recycling, which might control further supply growth. In other areas, water availability is critical for development. These regions face a demand that exceeds supply due to population growth. In such places, the importance of dams and reservoirs is clear.

Seasonal and climate variations hinder the efficient use of river runoff, leading to floods and droughts. Dams help reduce and prevent floods while storing water during times of surplus and releasing it during times of scarcity. McCully (2001) writes, "As dam building was seen as linked to nation building, it became more than just a machine to generate power and store water. It became a clear symbol of the main ideas of the technological era, an icon of economic growth and scientific progress" (2001: 2). Henry C. Hart (1956), a US scholar and commentator on India, enthusiastically stated in a book from the late 1950s that large dams with their multipurpose reservoirs symbolised the engineering of the nation-building era. The development of rivers appeared as a significant effort to turn water resources into national assets such as hydroelectricity, navigation, irrigation, and flood control.

Therefore, in modern times, large dams are considered an important tool for the economic and social development in numerous nations. As already discussed, large dams provide irrigation and drinking water, create hydropower, manage floods, and encourage industrial growth and urban development. The Bhakra-Nangal Dam in India helps to boost food production by supplying irrigation. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the USA signifies how collaborative dam construction can improve regional development, flood control, and decrease poverty. Also, the Aswan High Dam of Egypt illustrates national pride and development, as it generates hydroelectricity, irrigation, and manages floods. In Southern Africa, the Kariba Dam, shared by Zambia and Zimbabwe, encouraged energy cooperation and economic integration through hydropower. In Brazil, constructing dams has addressed the rising water and energy needs of large urban centres like Sao Paulo. These examples show that when large dams are planned and managed well, they can support development by meeting crucial needs such as water, energy, food security, etc. (Khagram, 2004).

However, rivers play a vital role in the beliefs, livelihoods, rituals, festivals, and oral traditions of communities in NE India, including the Adi, Hmar, Lepcha, and Mishmi (Arora & Kipgen, 2012). Communities are recording their ancestral river songs, oral histories, and rituals. This is passed down from generation to generation and strengthens their traditional knowledge and identity (Joy et al., 2013). Rivers like the Brahmaputra, Barak, Kopili, Subansiri, and Dibang are deeply connected to the cultural and social practices of indigenous people. Traditional ecological knowledge includes sustainable river management, flood forecasting, and protecting biodiversity. However, it has been seen that hydroelectric projects change water flow, displace communities, and destroy sacred landscapes (Arora & Kipgen, 2012). These changes have an impact on the cultural systems of a society. For example, in the Tipaimukh dam case, the Hmar tribes worry about losing ancestral lands and sacred confluences (ibid).

The environmental impacts are significant. Without systematic and proper initiatives, such hydropower development causes loss of biodiversity, deforestation, riverbank erosion, and destruction of wetlands, which are crucial for the livelihoods of indigenous communities. Literature also shows that due to the lack of proper dam management, it adversely impacts the communities in terms of water scarcity or high flood risks that affect the structure of a society, resulting in migration, unemployment, loss of traditional livelihoods and knowledge systems, community fragmentation, displacement, etc. In this present study, cultural ecology theory highlights the dependence of tribal people on the natural environment and the changes in that relation due to modern development. When dams are built, they disrupt river landscapes, impacting the traditional cultural patterns that developed in connection with these areas. As the environment changes, cultural practices such as rituals, resource use, settlement patterns, and knowledge systems start to change, often resulting in cultural disintegration and identity crises (Steward, 1955). Due to dam-induced displacement, community fragmentation, migration, and environmental injustice lead to alienation, cultural displacement, and identity crises among populations (Mahanta, 2010).

However, ecological modernisation theory argues that economic development and environmental sustainability can be possible through the process of institutional reforms, stakeholders' involvement, and technological innovation. It argues that the development of ecological protection and environmental sustainability are not opposed. Modernisation through proper scientific methods, responsive institutions, and public involvement can provide technological solutions that can be both economically viable and environmentally sustainable (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000). EMT argued that environmental reforms can be possible and necessary in capitalist and industrial systems through cleaner production, innovation, regulatory changes, and more democratic governance.

The reflexive modernisation refers to the societies' ability to learn from environmental and ecological risks and adjust their societal institutions accordingly (Buttel, 2000). Ecological modernisation theory also emphasises the involvement of local people in planning, social and cultural sustainability and economic and ecological aims.

In terms of hydropower development in NE India, EMT helps to analyse the gradual move from a top-down, technocratic approach to a more inclusive and sustainable approach. The NER is home to many significant communities, as already mentioned. Also, this region is rich in terms of biodiversity. The construction of mega dams in the NER of India serves not only for the utilisation of energy resources, but such ventures may be taken as instruments for the development of a region (Earth Journalism Network, 2022). Official reports of dam construction authorities like Lower Subansiri Dam, Kopili Dam, etc., show important initiatives for sustainable development. They have taken initiatives for seismic safety, environmental protection measures, biodiversity protection policies, CSR projects, and so on (NEEPCO, NHPC). Such initiatives reflect the growing commitment to environmentally responsible development of a region and help to harmonise between tradition and modernity.

Also, construction of large dams provides employment opportunities to local people. Also leads to infrastructure development such as roads, health facilities, and schools. These projects help in expanding access to electricity and irrigation in remote regions. The CSR for these dam projects does help local businesses and training programmes. These efforts culminate in the overall development of a region (Gupta & Ojha, 2022).

Also, proper scientific development always gives importance to traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and community relations with rivers, forests, and land (Earth Journalism Network, 2022). This reflects the idea of ecological modernisation theory that modernisation can include and respect indigenous tradition and culture instead of alienating people from the roots of societal structure. Though many challenges are there, Northeast India is gradually mobilising towards a development model. Literature related to large infrastructural projects like dams shows that if proper measures are taken, then cultural resilience, socio-economic well-being, and environmental sustainability are no longer viewed as conflicting goals in such a development model. Thus, EMT provides a useful framework to understand how hydropower development in Northeast India can become a socially inclusive and ecologically adaptive process.

Conclusions & Way Forward

Energy is crucial for development and meeting basic human needs. Without energy services, people cannot meet these needs. The Government of India sees hydropower as a key energy source. They consider it a way to reach goals and achieve success. Hydropower is viewed as the most practical option for ensuring sustainable energy security. Dams have been seen as symbols of progress and modernity, as well as necessary for economic growth and reducing poverty.

The development of large dams in Northeast India asserts an important relation between of tradition and modernity. Large dams aim to improve water management, energy, and regional development. Although lack of proper planning and technologies sometimes development projects significantly impact indigenous people whose livelihoods, lives, and identities are closely related to their traditional environments.

Using Ecological Modernization Theory, this study shows that environmental sustainability can go hand in hand with technological progress and economic growth, as long as there are strong institutions, inclusive governance, and a focus on ecological responsibility. Dams, when planned and build with care, can reflect modernity while also protecting the environment and promoting social justice.

Looking through the lens of Cultural Ecology reveals how tribal communities adapt to their natural surroundings. The traditions, cultural practices, and local ecological knowledge of these communities provide sustainable ways to live in harmony with nature. These traditions are not stagnant; they are evolving systems that can adjust if given the space and respect during modernization.

The conflict between traditional lifestyles and modern development can be managed not by replacing one with the other but by bringing them together. Development that overlooks local culture and ecology can lead to long-lasting social and environmental problems. However, when modern projects like dams are developed in conversation with local communities, paying close attention to their knowledge, values, and goals, a fairer and more balanced outcome is possible.

Various literatures and primary data emphasize a path that is not against development; it calls for a model that is respectful for culture and sustainable for the environment. Connecting tradition with modernity and local wisdom with modern planning is essential to ensure that development benefits everyone without damaging the very foundations of tribal culture and the environment that support their lives.

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Endangered Tribal Languages: Causes and Revival

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ABSTRACT

Objectives:
The study aims to explore the underlying causes of the endangerment of tribal languages in India and across the globe, and to propose practical strategies for their revival and sustainable preservation.
Methodology:
This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining secondary analysis of linguistic surveys, UNESCO language endangerment reports, and case studies of tribal communities.
Findings:
The key causes which were identified includes- dominance of mainstream languages, lack of intergenerational transmission, migration, socioeconomic marginalisation, and insufficient policy support. The erosion of oral traditions and the absence of tribal language in formal education system have further accelerated language loss. However, successful revival efforts—such as community-led documentation, bilingual education models, and digital archiving—demonstrate that language revitalisation is possible when culturally sensitive and participatory approaches are adopted.
Originality:
This study integrates perspectives from the common practitioners with academic research, offering a holistic view of both the problem and its solutions. It also highlights undervalued tribal voices and community-driven innovations in language preservation.
Implications:
The findings bring out on the urgent need for a global language policy, active participation of the tribal communities in planning revival programs and increased fundings for indigenous education. This research also contributes to the broader discussion on linguistic diversity, cultural identity and social justice.

Keywords: *Tribal languages, language endangerment, language revival, indigenous education, linguistic diversity.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not just a means of communication, it's the soul of society, a storehouse of history, and a passage from one generation to another. Tribal languages, based on oral cultures, collective memory, and local knowledge systems, face an unmatched threat of erasure. As globalization and modernization quicken, these languages are being crowded out by dominant national and international languages. India, with its vast linguistic diversity, is a prime example. Even after being a home to hundreds of tribal languages, majority of them have become critically endangered or gone extinct in recent decades.

With every disappearing language, the world loses one particular worldview, one specific sense of nature, ancestry, and a human relationship with the

environment. This study delves into the complex reasons why tribal languages have declined and suggests creative, sustainable strategies for their revival and conservation. This research also illustrates why preservation of these languages is a matter of cultural and moral urgency.

OBJECTIVE

The overall goal of this research is to examine the reasons why tribal languages are endangered and to suggest effective, community-based solutions for their revival. It aims to look beyond simply noting the issues—it plans to examine the social, political, and educational environments that impact the survival of language. The research also aims to:

- Emphasize community-driven and culture-sensitive revival techniques
- Consider the relationshi
- Advocate for inclusive policies that synthesize tribal voices and knowledge systems
- Investigate the role of digital tools and modern platforms in preserving indigenous languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Endangerment of tribal languages has been a topic of discussion across linguistic and anthropological literature. UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger points out that there is a loss of a language every two weeks, and the majority of these are indigenous or tribal languages.

In India, G.N. Devy's People's Linguistic Survey of India highlights the vast linguistic diversity of the nation and the dangerous position of many tribal languages. He claims that these are not just devices for communication but also the flag bearers of oral systems of knowledge, identity, and ecological insights. Anvita Abbi (2006) reflects this in her work on the Great Andamanese languages, demonstrating how policy indifferences lead to language decline.

Mohanty (2008) has criticized the education system of India for keeping tribal languages out, mentioning that students who learn through unlearnt languages tend to leave school early. While the National Education Policy (2020) encourages teaching through regional languages, its application in tribal situations is weak and not systematic.

Recent research also delves into digital preservation tools. Initiatives such as the Endangered Languages Project and work by the Living Tongues Institute encourage mobile dictionaries, apps for storytelling, and online repositories. These tools are only useful when supported by rigorous community engagement and access to technology.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach based on secondary research and case study analysis. Some of the important sources are:

- National language surveys like the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI)
- Research articles from linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies journals
- Policy reports, government reports, and NGO reports
- Documented experiences and revival efforts by tribal groups in India and the rest of the world.

Understanding Language Endangerment: The Tribal Context

A Linguistic Emergency

According to UNESCO, one language goes extinct every two weeks! Most of these are tribal or indigenous languages that are being spoken by small groups with no written form. As many as 197 languages in India alone are endangered, and some are rated as "critically endangered." Some of them are-Birhor, Nihali, and Toto, to name a few. The linguistic endangerment of these languages' marks wider patterns of marginalization and forced assimilation.

Colonial and Postcolonial Disruptions

Linguistic decline was seeded during the colonial period itself. British administrative styles tended to prefer ruling regional languages for administration and education while devaluing tribal languages as "primitive." Post-colonial India inherited most of these hierarchies. Tribal languages were rarely included in formal education, which still focused on state and national languages such as Hindi, Bengali, or English.

Global Patterns

The trend is not limited to India. From the native languages of Australia to the First Nations languages of Canada, indigenous languages have been erased through colonization and state policy of assimilation. In the Amazon, languages disappear as rainforest peoples lose their homes.

CAUSES OF TRIBAL LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

The disruption of tribal languages is influenced by various, intersecting factors:

1. Mainstream Language Dominance

The emergence of national and international

languages like—Hindi, English, Mandarin, Spanish—has been responsible for the replacement of tribal languages, especially among children who believe that dominant languages are a passport to economic opportunity and social status.

2. Intergenerational Transmission Lack
When tribal elders die without passing on the language to the younger population, a crucial linguistic connection is lost. Most parents intentionally do not teach kids tribal languages, as they are scared it will make them socially or academically isolated.

3. Migration and Urbanization
Economic migration from tribal to urban regions creates cultural disturbance. In cities, tribal migrants use the dominant language to blend with others, and hence their children are brought up without any connection to their ancestral languages.

4. Socioeconomic Marginalization
Tribal populations, usually residing in inaccessible and backward areas, suffer from systematic neglect. Lack of infrastructure and literacy efforts promotes endangerment of languages.

5. Education Systems and Language Hierarchies
The majority of school syllabuses do not include tribal languages. Tribal children are first introduced to education in a foreign language, leading to alienation and educational problems. The absence of mother-tongue education is one of the main causes of school dropouts among tribes.

6. Policy Gaps and Poor Implementation
Although India has measures such as the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and programs under the Tribal Affairs Ministry, most tribal languages do not have constitutional status. Lacking official status, funding and conservation efforts are poor and irregular.

THE CULTURAL COST OF LANGUAGE LOSS

The loss of a tribal language creates more than just a breakdown in communication. It means the disappearance of indigenous knowledge systems such as medicinal practices, agricultural knowledge, oral histories, and mythologies. For example, the Kurux language holds subtle knowledge about the ecosystem of the Chotanagpur plateau. When speakers of Kurux disappear, so does this ecological wisdom.

Further, language is strongly associated with identity, belonging, and resistance. For most tribes, reclaiming their language is like reclaiming their history and dignity.

Revival:
Though the picture appears gloomy, there are some heartening tales of resistance and revival. This section discusses some of the community-based and institutional efforts that have yielded positive results.

1. Community-led Documentation and Storytelling
Grassroots movements to record tribal lexicons, songs, and myths are powerful tools for preservation. Programs such as the Adivasi Academy (Gujarat) and Living Tongues Institute collaborate with indigenous speakers to record and archive vanishing dialects.
Folk-storytelling festivals, audio dictionaries, and folk-theatre revivals assist in reconnecting younger generations with their linguistic heritage.

2. Mother-Tongue Education and Bilingual Schools
In Odisha and Jharkhand, for example, bilingual models of Indian schools, where children from tribes' study in their original language as well as a state or national language, have been implemented. Research indicates this improves mental development and emotional self-confidence.
The Multilingual Education (MLE) policy being tested by the Indian government, although under-financed, is in the right direction.

3. Digital Platforms and Mobile Apps
Technology has proved to be an unexpected friend. There are mobile apps like Adivasi Radio, Endangered Languages Project, and the Ojibwe App (for a Canadian tribal language), which show how technology can help fill the intergenerational gap. Podcasts, YouTube channels, and language-learning games also provide convenient language materials for urban tribal youth.

4. Cultural Festivals and Linguistic Celebrations
Honoring tribal languages during cultural festivals, such as poetry recitals and radio programs, enhances pride and exposure. Formal recognition of tribal languages during national ceremonies can assist in normalizing their use in public.

5. Legislative and Policy Acknowledgment
Certain languages have only recently found their way onto official lists and thus become government funded. The Bodo language, for example, was

acknowledged in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which resulted in enhanced educational materials and funding.

Recommendations and the Way Forward

In order to preserve and revive tribal languages meaningfully, the following are a must:

- Recognition and Funding: More tribal languages need constitutional recognition and ongoing financial support.
- Inclusion in Curriculum: Create textbooks that are culturally relevant and educate teachers in tribal languages.
- Community Participation: Create programs with and for the communities, not for them.
- Digital Innovation: Use AI, voice recognition, and mobile learning tools for language maintenance.
- Global Collaborations: Share resources and revival models among indigenous groups worldwide.

CONCLUSION

The disappearance of a tribal language is an invisible tragedy—a gradual wiping away of knowledge that's ancestral, cultural richness, and human creativity. But it is not inevitable. As this study illustrates, tribal languages can be revitalized if revival is grounded in respect, cooperation, and leadership from within the community. The road to the future asks for more than intellectual worry; it asks for political will, pedagogical reform, and a compassionate rethinking of development itself.

Language is a right, not a relic. By saving tribal languages, we're not only saving words, we're saving worlds.

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The Gangte Culture of *Minsak,* or Name-giving

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ABSTRACT

The Gangte are a tribe of the Kuki-Zo community, indigenous to North-East India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The Gangte had a peculiar culture of name-giving or *minsak.* It is how a person, village, locality, place, space, and others are named. The established villages sometimes carries the name of the villages found in the 'myth of origin' of the Gangtes. For instance, *Laitui* is where the Gangte are said to prosper. Its name is given to a village in North Manipur, *K. Laitui*. Then, the *Saknung*, a clan of the Gangte tribe, is said to have attained its name as they settled in the uppermost part of their settlement in the 'past days' of the Gangtes. *Saknung* means 'uppermost'.

Methodology

The privilege of studying from 'within' gives access to the different thoughts and patterns of the 'living culture', often veiled from outsiders. Observations are used in these cases with interviews. Also, oral traditions serve as the basis for this analysis. Both serve as the means through which memories, situational context, and the particularity of the names are understood. Therefore, fieldwork is conducted.

Fidings

It acted as a form of resistance, negotiation, protection or survival strategy, maintaining a reference point, and memory. *Minsak* gives a reference point to navigate or maintain the unity of a people, tribe, clan, village, or family. And the maintenance of names suggests how important they are to the people in forging the relationship between them and the others. For instance, '*Ganggam*', where the Gangte trace their origin, gives them a sense of belonging within the community. It also brings out the undercurrents of that *minsak.*

A family uses it to resist poverty and disparity. While a village may use it to negotiate with the unknown spirits, their neighbour, or even the waves that go against their beliefs. It not only gives identity to the person, village, and place, but also reveals the context and undercurrents of its *minsak.* It is a survival strategy employed by the people against domination.

Implications

This helps in understanding the context of the *minsak,* thereby giving an alternative making of history not written in the colonial and national public sphere. It is a form of resistance, confirmation, and negotiation. It creates and rehearses memories and brings out their relationships with that environment: people, place, locality and others.

Keywords: *minsak,* alternative history, public sphere, resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Gangte are a tribe of the Kuki-Zo community, indigenous to North-East India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The Gangte is listed as a tribe in Manipur: while in Mizoram it comes under Any Kuki Tribe, in Tripura it is listed under Kuki; Meghalaya it is listed under Any Kuki Tribe; In Assam it is listed under Any Kuki Tribe, and According to the Census of 2011, the Gangte in Manipur, had a population of 17,178 while Any Mizo Tribe stood at 8064, out of the total

Scheduled Tribes population of Manipur which stood at 11, 67,422. In the 2001 Census of India, the population of Gangte in Manipur is 9005, while the population of Any Mizo tribe is 15,114.

The Gangtes' culture of *minsak*, in closer analysis, was a form of resisting, though the resistance may not always culminate in the actual fight. It also confirms and recognises. From this perspective, we can make out how the *minsak* of person, village, place, and things represents the 'undercurrent' of a situation.

The indigenous Gangte considers the name-giving or *minloh* as one of the most important rituals in life. The cutting of the umbilical cord, known as *minchuna* or 'contesting for name', is followed by a saying 'I myself cut my child's umbilical cord, or *laitan,* no other forces can touch it', with the giving of a name to the child. (Doungel, 2024, p. 182) As the *laitan* is related to the fate of the child, it is given utmost importance. The 'contesting of name' suggests the struggle against an unknown domination as soon as a child is born. Then, after seven days, it is followed by the real *minlohna* and 'proclamation of name'. It can be performed by the *Pu* of the child, or the child's family. A four-legged animal is slaughtered, and different incantations of blessings, and *hamsie thiekna* is performed, then it is followed by the pronouncement of the name from the first ancestors to the grandfather of the child, '*Thangzawm in, Sounglun in,….(to the grandfather's name) gao in sawm in sut in*', meaning 'Let the *gao* of *Thangzawm, Suonglun, Zasung…(upto grandfather of a child),* wraps and unravels this child'. It is followed by the singing of *minlohnala,*

> '*Minlun cheng zin bang kouh na thimthu, guibang I sut chang bang dam ta lawm ie, Sesum leh sawm siel sikai gou thil thang tieng pat nem chun anglai ta lawm ie*'.
>
> Free translation:
>
> We celebrate, like harvesting healthy paddy, our unravelling of the lineage line, which is the occasion to call together all the distinguished guests. Wealth, mithuns, riches, and fame come as a child goes to his mother's lap, to celebrate. (Lamkholien, 2024)

Methodology

The privilege of studying from 'within' gives access to the different thoughts and patterns of the 'living culture', often veiled from outsiders. Observations are used in these cases with interviews. Also, oral traditions serve as the basis for this analysis. Both serve as the means through which memories, situational context, and the particularity of the names are understood. Therefore, fieldwork is conducted.

Individual Name

The *minsak,* normally, takes the name of the *minlohpa* last syllable. The firstborn, both male and female, mandatorily takes the name of the paternal grandfather or grandmother. The other child can take the name of any other person. *Pi* Kimkhoting, who was a victim of the Paite-Kuki conflict of 1997, named his granddaughter 'Tingzomoi' and 'Tingdeihmuon'. (Gangte H. , 2025) She, with her husband, and her two sons, with her daughter-in-law, the wife of the elder son, went as 'refugees' to Mizoram from Southern Manipur, which is the most affected zone of the conflict. Taking from the current phrase in Mizoram, which is '*zoram mawi*' meaning 'beautiful land of zo', she named her granddaughter, who was born during their stay in Mizoram, as '*Ting zo moi*'. Then on their return, and their resettlement in their village, another granddaughter is born. She named her '*Ting deih muon*', taking the first syllable from her name's last syllable and '*deih muon*': '*deih*' is 'like' and '*muon*' is 'peace and tranquillity'. Except the first grandson and granddaughter, from the sons, other grandchildren could be taken from the name of other person. *Minlohpa* or *minlohnu,* is held in high esteem.

Then her eldest son was named *Hauneihkam,* meaning 'rich, wealthy, mouth'. After her marriage to her husband, who was a bad orator, they were in abject poverty. She often recounts how they used to 'boil corn' for food. Their first child's name resists their actual reality. *Minsak* have the implications of *laitan,* which means 'destined to'. The name of a person 'destined' what a person is to become.

There is a reference to *minpozoulou,* which means not being able to 'carry his name' or 'live up to his name'. Such a saying is attributed to a person who does not live up to his name. For instance, *Lalchungnung,* which means the high God, is taken from *Vanlal,* (God of heaven). But when his life was not in tune with Christian ethics, people often referred to him as *minpozoulou.*

There are exceptional cases where a person is named after their clan progenitor or even a material. *Zawmthianlhing* is given to a girl. This *minsak* is based on two factors. The family had settled in the village of their *Pute,* who were of different tribe. As the tribe's differences are sometimes expressed which was resented by the said family, to exert and assert their tribe, her name was given from the progenitor of their clan, among the Gangtes. *Thangzawm-Zawmthianlhing,* as a name, is given to her. Her *minloh* is *Thangzawm.* Moreover, her two elder sibling died while they were a child. So, to save her from the agent, which might have caused their death, she was given the clan progenitor's name. She is *minsak* as a form of assertion of identity and a survival strategy.

Another interesting case is the name *Ekkhosat. Ek* means dung. He takes the name of a dung. One might wonder how he can take the name of a dung. But the actual context can be seen from the name itself. His father was the establisher of the village *Muolhoih*, which is termed *khosat,* meaning establisher of the village. In their stay in the village, his sons were *damtheilou.* They all perished during their childhood days. When another child is born, they devised a plan of *minsak* as a surviving strategy, naming, him *Ekkhosat.* It is the belief that the death of his elder brothers were caused by the evil spirit. So to make him loathsome to the evil spirit, they name him *Ekkhosat.* Fulfilling his name-giver strategy, he lived to die in a good old age. (Sonminlun, 2024)

Naming of Village

Like a person's name, the name of a village has a different context and strategy employed by the name giver. *Minsak* honour, inherits, and negotiates persons, names, the spirits, and the existing reality. The name of the villages and their context of naming suggest how the undercurrents determine the *minsak. Luihoihmuolcham,* a village situated 12 km from Churachandpur Police Station, is a case of inheritance of name, with *minsak* from the landscape. The village is situated at the foothill, where a river flows on its eastern side. Taking from this river, the first two syllable of the village name are given; *Luihoih* meaning 'beautiful river'. This village was bought from another person, whose family, while their stay was '*pungtheilou*'. They had named the village '*lhangcham*' meaning 'the hill plain'. They requested the new owner to keep their name in honour of them. So the village's last two syllables were taken from it, thereby giving the name *muol/lhang cham*. So, the village name *Luihoihmuolcham* is given. (Hauneihkam, 2025)

Another honour giving village name is *Kim Commissariat.* It is the combination of two people. *Kim* the wife, and *Commissariat,* the husband. Commissariat was an Anglo-Indian who married *Phalkhokim,* who is of *Phalchung phung* of the Gangte. It was said that her husband bought land in memory of her in the present village site. He handed the land to one of her wife's siblings, to establish village, in memory of both of them. After he died, Mr. Lamgin, took over the land and establish a village. (Lamgin, 2025)

Interestingly, the name of the village of the eldest *Phung*, among the Gangte, *Thanglun* village, is called '*Pangen*', meaning 'to ask for father'. It is said that within their village land, they often move about in their land before they settle in their present settlement. Men were *damtheilou.* So, the children are often left fatherless. From this tragic occurrence, their village was named 'to ask for father'. In a different version, when they moved out from the old site to form new village, within their village territory, a bird sing *Pangen, pangen,* so it continues to bear its name, when they settled there. (Nekkhomang, 2025)

Another village called *Phaikholum,* a village where the *Suonglun Phung* is a chief, has earned this name derived from the landscape where the people lived. The landscape, where they settled, appears as though it was 'round' covered with 'clouds'. *Phaikholum* means 'a village on a round landscape covered with clouds'. A person named was given from the village name *Phaikholum: Lumtinthang,* who was the child of a chief. (Jangpu, 2025) The village of *Galkapkot,* earns its name from the First World War, when Mr. Vompu, go for the Labor Corps in the name of certain village, with the promise that, after his return, he will be given a land where he could establish a village of his own. Mr. Vompu, returned safe and sound, and he was given land by the Chief of the former village, as a *khopel.* Therefore, he named his village *Galkapkot,* which means 'the door of fighting war'. In another version, it was the place where the Poi's and the Lushai had fought in a fierce battle, so the name *Galkapkot* is given. (Tawnga, 2025)

It was during the 1800s that two brothers of the *Thanglun Phung* were recruited as a herder of elephants for the Raja of Manipur. One day, the elder brother was stamped to death by the elephant. The Raja, in return gave them a land to the younger brother and his family to settle. There was a famine occurring during this time. So, his family members went to a place called *Vaichei,* for *puksui.* On returning to occupy the land which the Raja had given, they were called the *Vaichei,* and their village earning the same name. But, the village name was given Laitui, by them, taking from the *Khawchuk* of the Gangte. (Ray A. K., 1990, p. 17) In the *Khawchuk* which is the incantation of the villages in which the Gangtes had settled, *Laitui* is incanted as the middle settlement of each clan. *K. Laitui* is given the name from the past, which is a way of confirming their past settlement. It was in 1911 that *Khaikim*, the great-grandson of the one whom the Raja had given the land, started to pay hill house tax to the government of Manipur. A name once given is not simple to eradicate. The government of Manipur recorded the village name as *Vaichei.* In the 2000's the fifth generations of Mr. Khaikim, applied for change of village name in the official record to K. Laitui. '*K*' is added by them to mean *Khaikim.* The struggle to change and impose name of *Vaichei* to *K. Laitui*, which is self-given name, is still going on. (Letkhohao, 2025)

The village names are tied to history, landscape,

situational context of the people in their settlement, and the invoking of the past. It expresses their hardships, their longing for the prestine past, and their resolve to meet the future. *Min,* in other words, is the contestation against actual reality and domination.

Name of *Phung*

The eponyms of each *Phung* of the Gangte gives an oral history about the deeds of each progenitor. The *phung* traces their origin to the same ancestor, though their lineage does not start in the same generation. Therefore, a *beh* within the *Phung,* after a time, can become *Phung. Tukgek,* the ancestor of *Thanglun, Thangzawm,* and *Hilkhieng,* had their clan eponyms (Shakespear, 1912, p. 42): *Nunhei, Suktung,* and *Teklah.* It is said that the Gangtes settled near a river with strong rapids. One day, *Tukgek*, their father, called them and made them compete by making them slide a large pestle across the river from one bank to the other. The eldest son, *Thanglun,* on sliding the pestle, could not make it to the other bank. It changes its course and follows the currents of the river. Thereby earning the name *Nunhei*, which means 'changing ways'. Then the next son was made to slide the pestle upon the water. But the pestle could not even reach midriver. So, earning the name *Tetlah*, which means 'not winning or unable to compete'. The pronunciation of *Tetlah* changed to *Teklah*. Then their youngest brother *Thangzawm* slides the pestle upon the water. The pestle struck the other bank of the river. Therefore he earns the name *suktung*, which means 'to make it reach'. (Paulalson, 2025)

Different *phung* have different eponyms. It is for different reasons that they earn this name. Veikhawm, one of the phung, earned its name as *Saknung*, as they were the ones who settled in the uppermost part of their settlement at one point in the past. *Saknung* means 'uppermost'. The Suonglun are known as *Tuipi* as they have settled in that village, which is situated near a large water or river. *Tuipi* means 'large water'. In another version, as *Suonglun* are the one who tries to swim the cloud, resulting in a number of deaths, they are called *tuipi*, for they mistake 'clouds' with 'water'. *Sielphaw* a *phung* among the Gangtes earned its name as its ancestor was a great warrior who had a shield made of *mithun's* skin. *Sielphaw* means shield made of mithun's skin. The eponyms suggest the character of their ancestors. (Gangte L. S., 2025)

Then, the youngest *Phung* among the Gangte is *Kimmang,* also known as *Bailong*, and referred to as '*Gangte ak thih na*', which means 'the place where the Gangte hen or cock died'. He is given the name *Bailong,* as it is said that there was a dispensation when the Gangte were 'engulfed with allusions'. The Chieftess of the *Bailong,* in chopping the wood, struck her leg. The man of the village, to show their anger at the axe, all of them lined up and struck the edge of the axe with their leg. As they were all injured in the leg, they all limped, thereby earning the name 'limping', which means *Bailong. (Paulalson, 2025)* In another version, it was times of raid and war. As the village was surrounded by spike traps, also known as *sou,* he accidentally stepped on one, injuring his foot. Without taking much care of it, the injury was left to heal on its own or *sietdam*. This makes him limp. Therefore, he was named *Bailong*. From then his partial disability garnered the favour of the others in foods and drinks. (Gangte D. B., 2014, p. 12) The eponyms of the *Phung* help in understanding the alternative history of the people, not mentioned in the official written history.

Khul/Chinnlung

The Gangte trace their origin to *Khul,* which most of the Kuki-Zo and Mizos tribes ascribe to. (Pachuau, 2014, p. 112) These ascriptions among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo are at times invoked to 'generate a sense of belongingness' within the originators of *Khul.* Their origin theory marks them as different from the others, and creates 'oneness' within those who ascribe it. Every community within the mentioned community starts their origin with it, though there might be some variations in the details.

But, in the *vawkpi dawila,* which is the Gangte indigenous rituals of invoking a link with the ancestors, they incant *Khawchuk,* the villages where they had settled in the past. (Khaijalam S. T., 2002, p. 47) Though each *Phung, Beh,* and family had certain variations, it all starts with *Lekchawng.* It is the *chondan* of the Gangte to incant only those places where they perform *chawng/Sielsun,* which is the ultimate culmination of the different rites of merits. *Lekchawng* is the first place where they had performed the rites of merit as a Gangte. (Jangpu, 2025)

Lekchawng provides for the Gangtes a different identification marker among the multiferous tribes of the Kuki-Zo. Moreover, the place called *Ganggam,* where the Gangtes had and now reside, reverberates strongly among the Gangtes. It gives them a sense of belongingness and ties their identity to their land. For instance *Zogam, Kukiland (Chongloi, 2025),* and *Zalenggam (Service, 2023) (Kipgen, 2019, p. 211)* are all names initiated and ascribed by the Kuki-Zo, though differently, which are not found within the official state apparatus records of names of place. They deemed it the land of their ancestors. *Ganggam,* for the Gangte, was the place of freedom, without any subjugation to alien administration. In the yore, one of the villages in *Ganggam*, called *Anpak,* was so

prosperous, the inhabitants healthy and magnificent, that a resident among them overheard the *lasi nungak* saying,

Anpak lamphei zawt ing la,
Niksan thuoh thum cheng ing la,
Tuoi aw Gangte pau leu leu leng ka nuom ie, (Lamkholien E., 2024)
Free translation:
I want to walk the plain roads of Anpak
Wearing three layers of red shawls
Speaking the Gangte language

Ganggam

The heartbeat of the people can be perceived through the songs which they produced. The song *Aw Ganggam (Gangte T. M., 2012)* succinctly shows how the Gangte thought and think about *Ganggam.* It was so popular that a child who is still learning how to speak keeps on humming this song:

Hilthiem suithiem ten deihlou maleu,
Ka ngil ngampoi, Pi Pu lenna gam
Ni leh vak gimlim bang in hung vak kit in,
Ka ngai ngei ie Pi Pu sawl bang hei na vangkhuo
Aw Pi Pu lenna Ganggam tuolpi
Lou bang chul maiding na hitam?
Zatam lai ah pak bang lun lou ding mo?
Anai ka hun phal puoi loubang chul ding in,
Sak minthang sa Ganggam ti zel un,
Ti zel hitiu Gang vonchoi ka hi,
Thil bang hung thou un aw Pi le Pute,
Zatam lai ah sakmin luoi bang thang ding in,

Zatam lai ah thangsa Ganggam laitui chate,
Zeh bang ka zum puoi Gangte ka hi,
Zeh bang ka zum puoi Meizap ka hi,
Sim za tam umlou mo ka chak dou pih ding?
Free Translation:
Even if the researchers and the teachers do not want to utter its name,
I don't dare to forget the land where my ancestors lived,
Shine again like the lovely sun and light,
I longed for the place where my ancestors have survived,
Aw Ganggam where our ancestors lived,
Would you be wasted like a jhum field that has been left?
Would you not blossoms like a flower among thousands?
It pains me to let you wither.
Let us continue to chant Ganggam, which has been famous,
Let us continue to say we are the sons of Ganggam,
Arise, O Ancestors,
To make the Gangte famous among others,

The famous sons of Ganggam Laitui,
I am not ashamed to be a Gangte,
I am not ashamed to be a Meizap,
Is there no one to help me bear the falling pine tree?

Other songs like *Pienna Ganggam nuom (Thahpau, 2020), Zeh bang ka zum puoi Gangte ka hi (Gangte M. J., 2022), Ganggam nuom (Paua, 2022)* reverberate how the Gangte relate their land of *Ganggam* to the past, present and future. It talks about the feats that the Gangte had done during their glorious *Ganggam* and the subsequent *Gangte Ngollai.* It encourages the *Ganggam Chate* or sons of Ganggam, to 'take pride in being a Gangte'. The lyricists of these four songs revealed how they are bothered by the situations of the people, their settlements, and their infrastructure conditions. It invoked the glorious Gangte past, the *Ganggam* days, to encourage the Gangte in improving their settlements and themselves. The *minsak* of *Ganggam* serves and creates an identity, which is unique from the other tribes. It also expresses their sense of belongingness to the land in which they had settled from their forefathers. Though the land with its *minsak* of *Ganggam* by the people strongly expresses the heartbeat of the tribes, it fails to be taken into consideration by the state.

Manipur's Government Regulation on the Naming of Places

The change of name or prohibition of changing names to historical or local names is one of the matters taken seriously by the state apparatus. The public sphere of the tribes negatively impacts the perception of the state agents. The Manipur government has recently issued a directive to govern the naming of place in the state in the form of The Manipur Names of Places Act 2024, (Times, 2025) The Bill was prepared by the Land Resource Department, to prevent 'unauthorised naming of place in Manipur' and to establish and 'institutional mechanism to enforce correct use of name and place', and to lay down 'procedures for giving and altering names of places'. (Times, 2024) It was published in the Extraordinary Gazette on March 15, 2024. (Mohen, 2025) The issue of naming places gained momentum when a group of people allegedly attempted to erase

the names of various villages in Moreh. (Mohen, 2025) Sometimes, the heartbeat and history are hidden in the names given by the local people, which should be respected. Though the names might not necessarily be in official records, the local people have an alternate history which is not understood by the other people or the state.

Conclusion

Minsak acted as a form of resistance, negotiation, protection or survival strategy, maintaining a reference point, and memory. It gives a reference point to navigate or maintain the unity of a people, tribe, clan, village, or family. And the maintenance of names suggests how important they are to the people in forging the relationship between them and the others. For instance, '*Ganggam*', where the Gangte trace their origin, gives them a sense of belonging within the community. It also brings out the undercurrents of that *minsak.* A family uses it to resist poverty and disparity. While a village may use it to negotiate with the unknown spirits, their neighbour, or even the waves that go against their beliefs. It not only gives identity to the person, village, and place, but also reveals the context and undercurrents of its *minsak.* It is a survival strategy employed by the people against domination. For instance, though it might not rebel against the state which is formed by a democratic majority, it seems to resists its domination in the *minsak* of *Ganggam.*

To clear the child of misfortunes.

Difference in spelling due to the difference in dialect of the Kuki-Zo kindred tribes.

The Author's aunty.

In this case, it means who is unhealthy and often dies at a young age.

In this case, *pungtheilou* means cannot increase in population. It suggests an occurrence of a constant death.

All the members in the *Phung* believes that they have a common ancestor.

As this is from oral accounts, the name of the Raja cannot be ascertained.

An act of leaving one's place to search for food due to famine.

It is the name of the village incanted by the *thempu/*priest during the sacrificial ceremony called *vawkpi thah/*sacrificing of pig.

The healing of an injury without any care.

Chondan means the way of doing or living.

Lasi Nungak are believed to be the damsel of the spirit that resides in the forest.

It is a dispensation when the Gangtes were disturbed in their mind after they had angered a spirit.

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Socio-Cultural Practices and Educational Status of the Gond Tribe in Bihar: Insights from Govt. Policies and Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

The development of tribal education in India remains a constant concern despite having numerous policies and constitutional provisions in the form of affirmative actions. As far as Bihar is concerned, it comes bottom in the list of literacy rate (2011, Census of India). This theoretical paper deals with the educational status of the tribes as well as socio-cultural and policy interventions in Bihar. The Gond Tribe is one of the prominent and largest tribal groups continues to face marginalization specially in the states like Bihar where their existence is region specific and sometimes unrecognized. This paper critically examines how Socio-Cultural practices within the Gond Tribe deal with the formal educational structure. Community belief, linguistic diversity, traditional practices and livelihood and general rules etc. All influence the educational status and outcomes of the Gond Tribe. Despite the implementation of the center and state policy regarding the Tribal people such as EMRS, pre and Post Matric scholarships, hostels for Tribal students. The paper argues that there is a disconnect between the policy and practices which leads to limited success of these interventions by the government. It also indicates that one size-fits-all approach to travel education fails to meet the real problem of the Tribals. Through the critical review and policy analysis, the study focuses upon the need for culturally responsive education, recognition of tribal identity and so on.

Keywords: *Gond Tribe, Social-Cultural practices, Education status, Policy lens*

INTRODUCTION

According to *Census 2011*, the overall Schedule Tribe Population in India is 10.43 crore out of 121.06 crore, representing 8.6% of the total population. India has a very diverse population in terms of religion, culture, custom and language etc. Similarly, the Schedule tribe population has been divided into various communities in different parts of the country such as Gond, Bhuria, Bhil, Birjia, Asur, Savar, Chero, Birhor, Santhals, Baiga. Out of various communities of tribes, The Gond Tribe is one of the prominent Tribe which has its own land that is Gondwana land which is present since origin of the Earth. The Gond Tribe's total population is spread across myriad states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat. Out of Total Population of India 13.45 percent constituted by Gond Community under Schedule Tribe *(Census,2011)*. In terms of socio-cultural practices of

the Gond tribe, it is also very diverse depending upon their location. As far as Education status of the Schedule Tribe is concerned, the major ST has a literacy rate 58.96% which indicates that the significant part of the Schedule Tribe is still illiterate although by and large Tribal education is on track of progress. But if we discuss the Gond literacy rate in Bihar which is not available in the government document. Which is the need of the hour to record such data for the welfare and socio-educational development of the Gond Tribe. If such data is available then any government and concerned institution will be able to make a plan for the welfare of the same. Tribal communities and their educational development have been a matter of grave concern for decades, despite having various constitutional provisions and policy initiatives. As per the article 46 of the Indian constitution which favors to promote the educational and economic interests of ST and protect them from exploitation and social injustice.

However, the ground realities of tribal groups mostly construct abruptly with such idealistic assurances. One such community is the Gond Tribe, one of the largest tribal groups in India. In Bihar, Tribal population constitute a lesser portion of the demographic structure, the Gond face significant socio-cultural and educational backwardness. According to *Census 2011,* Bihar ranks lowest in terms of literacy rate, on the other hand tribal literacy rate lags behind the state average.

In Bihar, Gond Tribe is only located in few districts and in rest very less population of Gond Tribe is Concentrated. Out of 38 districts only few Districts like Siwan (75537),Gopalganj (51425), Saran(33191), West Champaran(31102), Baxar (20974), Kaimur (14813), Bhojpur (10344), E.Champaran (9278), Rohtas (3387), Patna(1830) have high to moderate Gond population concentrated *(Office of the Register General, India*).Gond in Bihar is the community which is migrated from the Madhya Pradesh and mainly resides there in surrounding of Rajput because they are inspired with Rajput king. According to *Census 2011*, despite having such inspirations Gond community educational status is not at par. Especially women's condition is very severe in terms of educational progress. Present study has been done in accordance with following objectives and Methodology:

- To understand the Socio-cultural practices among the Gond Community of Bihar.
- To analyze the educational status of the Gond community in Bihar using existing literature, secondary data, government data and reports
- To review and critically evaluate national and state-level educational policies and govt. initiatives in India with a focus on tribal education, particularly for the Gond community.

The present study followed the Content Analysis methodology for conducting this study which consists of government educational policies, govt. initiatives, Research papers from various databases such as Sodhganga, Researchgate, Google scholar, Jstor and Scopus etc.

After discussing the Objectives and Methodological frameworks of the present study, Next section consists of the Socio-cultural practices Among Gond community, educational status of Gond Tribe in Bihar. Literatures have been reviewed from 1970 to present only related to Gond tribe of Bihar. Relying on secondary sources such as government data sources, literatures etc. The analysis of the present study aims to contribute the interpretive understanding of the educational reach, ground realities and gaps, participation and learning outcomes among Gond children of Bihar state.

II. Socio-Cultural practices among Gond Community in Bihar

The term Gond derived from these three terms such as Gund, Kond or Kund as mentioned by Hislop and these words are most probably associated with the Telugu which means Mountain. Similarly various scholars mentioned the derived words of Gond term such as Gondaloi by ptolemy, Goud by cunnigham, Go and And by V S Dhurve etc. In Bihar Gond surnames is being used by the Gond Community. Which mainly speaks in Bihar's local dialect i.e., Bhojpuri and Maithili etc. In Bihar there was no uniformity in the enumeration of Gond community. About 33232 out of a total Gond population of 33521 were enumerated as Hindu, only 407 of them speak Gondi,7548 Gond speak Hindi and 1617 speak Bhojpuri as mother tongues and others are bilingual (Sachchidananda,1970). There was 11652 and 11065 Gond Population concentrated in Saran and Champaran respectively constituting major Gond population (Census,1881). In the Census 1901 there was no Gond population reported from the above two districts and no clue found about the Gond migration from the same. As per the census 1911, Gond population reported around Chotanagpur, Gonr in Patna of Tirhut divisions, The Saran and Champaran numbered as 47621 and 2001 respectively. Saran was originally a single district which was further divided in 1972 into three independent districts i.e., Saran, Siwan and Gopalganj. As per Census 2011 Siwan district was reported the largest Gond population thereafter Gopalganj, Saran comes in descending order. As far as Socio-cultural practices is concerned it is very rich in among Gond community of Bihar such as nature

worship, oral storytelling, folklores during marriages and other auspicious activities. The women of Gond community apply traditional tattooes on palm, legs and hand. Usually married women do follow such tattooes stuff. Sohar is sung during the birth of Baby boy etc. They usually follow Bada-deva as God which is also known as Lord Shiva. Ghotul is the main sites for taking knowledge as it is like a dormitory for students to study and oral discussions etc.

III. Educational Status of Gond Community (ST) in Bihar

3.1 Literacy and Enrollment Trend: Bihar state is having one of the lowest literacy rates than the average literacy rate of India and other state literacy rates (Census,2011). As far as Bihar is concerned it comes in the bottom in terms of Literacy rate, i.e., Female literacy rate is 51.5% and its counterpart Male literacy rate is 71.2% (Census 2011, Office of Registrar General, India). If we see the literacy rate of the Schedule tribe of India then we can find that there is a huge gap between male and female literacy rate as female literacy rate is 45.89% and Male literacy rate is around 76.78% (Census,2011). In the below mentioned table, Literacy rate can be compared over the period of time. Gender gap can also be analyzed through this table.

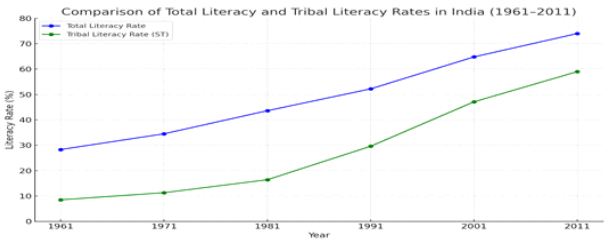
Table: 3.1 Literacy Rate of Scheduled Tribes in India (Census of India:1961-2011)

Year	Rural			Urban			Total Literacy
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	
1961	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1971	2.90	13.37	8.16	13.45	37.09	22.41	8.53
1981	4.36	16.92	10.68	19.64	37.09	28.84	11.30
1991	6.81	22.94	14.92	27.32	47.60	37.93	16.35
2000	16.02	38.45	27.38	45.66	66.56	56.60	26.60
2001	32.44	57.39	45.02	59.87	77.77	69.09	47.10
2011	46.94	66.81	45.89	70.32	83.16	76.78	58.90

Sources: Census of India, Office of Registrar General, India

Here is the graph mentioned below which is comparing Total Literacy Rate of India and Tribal Literacy Rate in India from the period 1961-2011. It clearly depicts the Continuous gap, although both the literacy rates have enhanced over the period of time.

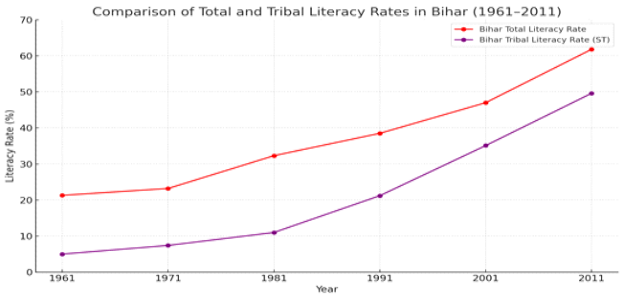
Fig:3.1.1 Comparison of Total Literacy and Tribal Literacy Rates in India (Census 1961-2011)



Source: Census of India (1961-2011)

Here, In the Graph mentioned below Bihar's total literacy rate has been shown in comparison to Bihar Tribal literacy rate. As per census (2011), Bihar tribal literacy rate is lower than the Bihar total literacy rate. Which shows that tribals are still lacking in educational status in Bihar state. Although, literacy rate of the separate Gond community is 29.89%. It shows that the Gond community is less literate than the country's (59%) and State (51.1%) average tribal population.

Fig:3.1.2 Comparison of Bihar Total Literacy rate and Bihar Tribal Literacy Rate (1961-2011)



Source: Census of India (1961-2011)

3.2 Retention and Dropouts Rate

Despite putting efforts on universalization of elementary education and retention among Schedule Tribe students with inclusion of the Gond community, it is still a major challenge in Bihar and all over India. According to the Tribal Development Report (2022), over 48.2% of Tribal Children left school before class VIII, and this number increased to 62.4% till class X. This figure shows both structural and socio-cultural factors hindering educational progress.

As far as Bihar is concerned, it is already staggering with low literacy rates. As per NITI Aayog's rationalization recommendations, the circumstances of the Bihar are getting complex for Tribal children because of merging the low-enrolment schools, such policy emphasize students to cover longer distances, which turns into high drop outs rate especially in tribal's helmets of remote area (The Hindu,2018). The

Study of (Biswal,2023) focuses that household responsibilities, early marriage, economic hardship, early marriage and lack of cultural significance in curriculum are main facets behind dropouts among tribal communities.

In addition to this infrequent teacher's attendance and lack of tribal language aid enhance the disconnection between school and community, which leads to low retention, especially among females. As per census 2011 the educational participation rate is 29.89% only among Gond community in Bihar. which indicates huge educational gap not just in terms of enrollment but with respect to retention all over the grade levels.

3.3 Infrastructure and Access

Infrastructure is one of the foundational issues in tribal education. Though the Government has promoted schemes such as Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs), Various tribal populated areas still lack proper school infrastructure. According to the MoTA (2023),46 out of 684 sanctioned EMRS had their own buildings and left functioning in makeshift premises.

In Bihar there are total 3 EMRS schools such as EMRS Jhajha, EMRS Adhaura and EMRS Belatandi. All three EMRS Schools are non-functional as per MoTA,2023 released list. This shows how dismal conditions of tribal schools are there in Bihar. It indicates less exposure of school to tribal students. In Bihar the block which comes in remote forest or hilly terrain has limited access to all-weather roads especially in the region of Gond community facilities such as toilets, electricity, internet, and libraries such parameters are also defined under the RTE Act are mainly lacking in many tribal schools. The closure of small village schools due to low enrolment has further hurt tribal communities. According to Hindu report (2018), The absence of schools within the vicinity of village or walking distance has led to soared absenteeism, especially among younger children. The practice contradicts the tribal community's demand for "neighbourhood schools". especially in regions with complex terrain.

3.4 Quality of Learning

Access to schooling only does not assure learning, learning outcomes are awfully low. As per ASER 2022 report, A large portion of class V children in tribal schools all over India are unable to perform tasks meant for II class students. This is fixed by the Tribal committee report (2014), which revealed that only 7% of students in tribal areas could meet the age-appropriate reading stage. One of the main issues is the exclusion of tribal languages during the classroom teaching-learning process. In various circumstances, teachers employed in tribal regions do not speak and comprehend the students' mother tongue, causing severe comprehension hurdles. Such a linguistic barrier was recognized in the NCERT report (2014) and reinstated in the Hindustan Times (2021), which called for inclusion of tribal wisdom and language into mainstream education.

Moreover, the curriculum usually avoids the lived experiences, knowledge systems and local understanding of the tribal communities. Tribal students get alienated due to absence of contextualized and culturally responsive pedagogy. When education fails to act on their environment and identity then students may lose motivation, and learning turns into a mechanical and meaningless process. Lack of eligible teachers, inadequate pupil-teacher ratios, and frequent teacher absenteeism further destroy learning outcomes. Even with initiatives like SSA, academic quality gap between tribal and non-tribal children remains desolate.

(Educational Status of Gond Community) Summary of key issues

S.no.	Indicator	Trend/Circumstances
1.	Literacy	Low literacy rate; only 29.89% Gond community engaged in education (Census 2011)
2.	Enrollment and Retention	Participation drops significantly after Primary Education, major dropouts occur between primary - secondary (78.94% to 57.68%) and secondary -higher education (57.68% to 18.7%) (Census 2011)
3.	Educational Access	The 6 -14 age group shows relatively high participation (78.94%), indicating good primary school access, at secondary and above limited access due to remoteness, poverty and language barriers (Census 2011).
4.	Learning Quality	The curriculum lacks tribal relevance, poor engagement and learning outcomes (Xaxa Tribal committee report,2014).

IV. Government Policies and initiatives for Tribal Education

This section critically reviews national and Bihar–specific education policies and initiatives for tribal education, examining their design and ground impact on tribal education, particularly for the Gond community.

4.1. National Level Policy Frameworks and Initiatives

4.1.1. National Education Policies NPE 1968, NPE 1986 and (NEP) 2020

❖ **National Policy of Education (NPE),1968**

In terms of Tribal welfare, the main focus of NPE 1968 was on the educational equity for weaker sections. It acknowledged the need of giving special emphasis on tribal education group. It also gave importance to disparities removal and regional imbalances. It also recommended to set up the boarding schools and hostels in tribal areas. It emphasized on creating instructional material in tribal languages at the foundation or primary stages. Hence It acknowledged the tribal communities as educationally backward and called for targeted initiations to promote equity and access.

❖ **National Policy of Education (NPE),1986**

As per NPE 1986, The main focus was on equality, empowerment and access. It declared education as universal access for all children and special strategies for tribal and rural areas. It focused on the need of providing educational facilities to the tribal areas with the opening of primary schools in large number as well as non-formal access and hostels. It also focused on curriculum that it should include tribal culture and knowledge systems to assure inclusion and identity preservation. Local languages at early stages and deployment of local teachers from the communities were also suggested. It introduced incentives schemes such as Free textbooks, scholarship and uniforms etc. to ease dropouts and improve tribal children's retention. Hence, In total it advocated multidimensional facets such as educational access, cultural significance, incentives and localized teacher recruitment.

❖ **National Education Policy (NEP),2020**

Language and Multilingualism: NEP 2020 directs mother-tongue instruction until Class Vth and mainly by class VIII, recognizing that teaching learning language affects learning outcomes and retention, especially among tribal children. Academic critiques focus the high dependence on aspirational norms without recognizing local language resource development or teacher training in local tribal language like Gondi.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems: NEP fully support infusing India's Indigenous Knowledge Systems for instance oral traditions, ethno-medicine, and ecological insights into curricula, impeding their historical exclusion from classrooms. Critics indicate that the effort stay in mainstream civilizational content, alienating tribal knowledges unless recovered in sanitized, symbolistic modules.

Cultural Contextualization: As NEP 2020 emphasizes experiential and culturally apt pedagogy, dearth of pathways for participatory curriculum development led by tribal communities. Critics contend that the policy was created with minimal representation from tribal educators, thereby continuing epistemic exclusion. Tribal knowledge is usually eased to optional content, encouraging assimilation rather than complete inclusion.

NEP 2020 holds promise for tribal inclusion in terms of IKS (Indian Knowledge system) and language provisions. Their outcome depends upon micro-level planning, resource development in tribal language for example Gondi language and encouraging tribal stakeholders in educational governance.

4.1.2 National Initiatives for Education

❖ **Samagra Siksha Abhiyan (SSA)**

SSA was designed in 2018-19 as unified elementary, secondary and teacher education schemes under a single framework formed for life-cycle learning from pre-primary to secondary stages. As per SSA there are various special provisions to target tribal learners such as free textbooks and uniforms; supplementary teaching-learning materials that includes culturally significant content; transportation services in remote areas; residential facilities as per KGBVs schemes with 75% reservation for SC/ST/OBC/minorities. It provides bridge courses for those who are out of school, also provides recruitment incentives for tribal teachers; and multilingual education initiatives such as primer development in tribal language. SSA also focus on district-level evidence-based planning and community mobilization via strengthened SMC in tribal areas. Although, SSA's success praised for systematic reviewing in increasing access and inclusivity especially for girls and marginalized groups. It also emphasizes evident challenges related to "inadequate funding, policy delays, bureaucratic bottlenecks and inconsistent checking" (Roy & Swargiary, 2024). That hinder its capability to completely deliver quality education equitably in tribal areas.

❖ **EMRS and KGBVs**

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) provide free education with proper residential setup to the tribal students from classes VI to XII. There are 711 EMRS sanctioned and 410 operational nationalities, serving approximately 127,500 students (Bandhu,Verma, Singh, & Sharma,2024)). Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBVs) complement EMRS by giving residential schooling facilities for disadvantaged girls; Although KGBVs have mostly hired teachers on contract basis due to lack of funds. That shows less motivation and carelessness among teachers towards their duty and they usually teach

indolently. It can have adverse effects on the students' performance and learning outcomes. According to a recent KGBV report titled National Evaluation of KGBV 2022, It discussed the conditions of different KGBVs across the country. Under this report lots of irregularities have been noticed such as financial barriers, lack of awareness, instructional activity, lack of cleanliness, congested dormitory and mess etc., were not in the better conditions. In such a way KGBVs schools need to be revamp as per the student requirement and teaching-learning aids.

4.2 State Level Interventions in Bihar

In Bihar there are many schemes which are working in the direction of improving the teaching learning process such as Mid-day meals for proper nutrition, Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojna for girls to reach school independently, monetary incentives after 10th,12th and graduation etc. However, SCERT Bihar. There is Mukhyamantri Anusuchit jati Evam Anusuchit Janjati Civil Sewa Protsahan Yojana to provide financial assistance for those SC/ST students who have cleared the preliminary exam for civil services. SHRESTHA scheme which provides residential education for high school students. Bihar student credit card scheme to provide financial aid to Bihar students to complete their higher education. Despite having such government incentives Bihar has a low literacy rate as per census 2011, It comes under the lowest literacy rate state. Which indicates that there is need to bring more awareness among Parents and students toward the importance of education among their life.

Table No.: 4.2 Evaluation of Govt. Policies, Initiatives and Implementation Gaps

Evaluation of Policy and Implementation Gap			
S.no.	**Policy/Scheme/Initiatives**	**features**	**Ground realities and Gaps**
1.	**NPE,1968**	-Primary education in mother tongue -Residential school and hostels -remove regional disparities	-Poor access, High dropout rates No localized teaching -No implementation program, Lack of budget and monitoring
2.	**NPE,1986 and PoA(1992)**	-Open more schools in tribal areas -Recruit local/tribal teachers -Provide incentives: scholarships, free textbooks -Include tribal culture in curriculum	- Increased enrollment, but poor retention, Hostels and facilities under-equipped -Cultural irrelevance of curriculum, Weak teacher training, Infrastructure delay
3.	**NEP 2020**	-Tribal language medium, IKS integration, cultural contextualization	-Slow Implementation, Digital divide persists, Shortage of teachers in EMRS -Lack of trained bilingual teachers, Limited tribal community participation
4.	**SSA**	-Universal access, tribal-hostel support, bridge courses	-Fund delays; poor monitoring; limited convergence with welfare schemes in tribal areas
5.	**EMRS, KGBV Scholarship**	-Residential facilities, girl-targeted support	-Infrastructure incomplete; language and pedagogy gaps; residual quality issues; misaligned with local languages. Bihar EMRS non-functional.
6.	**Bihar-specific initiatives**	-Localized hostels, bridge courses, SCERT training	-No proper Budget allocation among; negligible tribal -led curriculum inputs; poor

V. Suggestions and Recommendations

- In order to improve the educational status of Gond community in Bihar, must apply culturally rooted way so that the indigenous knowledge can also be incorporated in line of Inclusive development of the community. As NEP 2020 has clearly indicates about inclusion of cultural contextualization and multilingualism, which must be functioned by linking Gond community traditions for instance their ethno-medicinal ideas, agricultural practices, festivals, and oral form of storytelling into teaching content and school textbooks. In the foundational stage there must have instruction in mother tongue or local dialects spoken and understood by the Gonds.
- Teacher preparation is another complex area to select as recruitment purpose as it must prioritized candidates from the tribal background only. Which may ensure better communication and cultural understanding between the pupil- teacher. On the other hand, if any non- tribal is being recruited then he/she must undergo structured sensitization programs that provide them with tribal social norms and values, socio-cultural practices, tribal histories and lived realities etc. Such kind of initiatives or training can ease classroom discrimination significantly and yield an inclusive learning environment.
- Lack of proper infrastructure and safety can have a direct impact on retention in tribal school students. Hence, EMRS, KGBVs and other schools also must be strengthened in tribal dominated regions.
- Community participation is important for having change. Active school management committee (SMCs) must

include tribal elders, parents, and local bodies representatives. Only then it may lead to an effective role in tracking dropouts, attendance and addressing school accountability etc.

- At the policy level, inter-departmental mingling is important, Tribal education must not work in isolation but in the vicinity of tribal welfare, women and child development etc.
- As technology is becoming the pivotal part of education, in order to avoid the risk of exclusion there must be localized Edtech tools that may work offline and in local languages too, especially in poor internet access.
- Lastly, there must be sustained community-based research to assess the cultural significance of educational practices.

Collectively, mentioned above measures can aid in bridging the deep cultural and systematic gaps in tribal education and assure that policy transect into actual empowerment for communities such as Gonds in Bihar.

Conclusion

The educational status among Gond community of Bihar observed as continuous structural gaps w.r.t, retention, access, equity and quality. As per census 2011, About 29.89% participation of the Gond community in the educational institutions. The Gond tribal community's educational landscape reflects a composite reciprocity of socio-cultural dissonance, historical marginalization, and systematic policy gaps. Despite the presence of targeted interventions and constitutional safeguards by both central and state governments. Educational achievement of the STs have been observed to be less than the country's average literacy rate. Census data from 2001 and 2011 disclose incremental progress in terms of literacy rate. Although, dropout trends, gender disparities and little access to quality schooling proceed to prevent equitable learning outcomes. The data also reveals some pressing challenges of educational inclusion such as high dropout rates, limited infrastructural access, and a disconnect between formal and tribal socio-cultural contexts continue to prevent meaningful learning.

Resolving these issues is context-sensitive, inclusive and tribal-responsive educational strategies. Policy must talk, discuss and analyze by going beyond the enrollment figures to focus on retention, learning outcomes, quality learning and cultural significance. Infusing local knowledge system improving school infrastructure in tribal regions, contributing mother-based instruction, and boosting community involvement are pivotal for transformative change.

For grassroot level progress, educational planning must infuse tribal voices and acknowledge education not just as a right, but as a way to dignity, empowerment, and equity for communities such as Gonds.

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The Songs of Survival: Indigenous Women as Custodians of Cultural Memory in India

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ABSTRACT

In Indigenous communities, storytelling serves as a critical epistemic practice, acting as a medium for intergenerational memory, cultural continuity, and the transmission of ecological knowledge. Women, as primary custodians of oral traditions, mediate myth, ritual, and environmental wisdom, thereby sustaining collective memory and shaping socio-cultural imaginaries. Their narratives — articulated through speech, song, and embodied performance — operate as modalities of historical preservation, ethical praxis, and speculative envisioning of sustainable futures. This study interrogates the gendered dimensions of tribal storytelling, positioning women as agents of cultural resilience, linguistic stewardship, and custodians of communal epistemologies. Focusing on select Indian Indigenous communities, including the Gonds, Khasis, and Dongria Kondh, this study examines how women's narratives encode ancestral knowledge, articulate strategies of resistance to socio-environmental dispossession, and operationalise principles of spiritual ecology. These oral and performative traditions function as counter-discursive interventions, resisting cultural erasure, subverting hegemonic historiographies, and asserting fluid, evolving tribal identities through poetic, performative, and mnemonic registers. By foregrounding the perspectives of Indigenous women, this research paper reconceptualises storytelling as praxis at the intersection of decolonial theory, feminist epistemology, and cultural stewardship. It contends that women's narrative labour not only preserves memory but actively regenerates it, rendering history performative, transformative, and visionary, while continually rearticulating, embodying, and celebrating Indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: *Storytelling, tribal memory, gendered knowledge, decolonial resistance, cultural sustainability, oral traditions.*

INTRODUCTION

Tribal societies such as the Gonds of Central India, the Khasis of Meghalaya, and the Dongria Kondh of Odisha have long sustained complex epistemologies through multilayered oral traditions. These narrative matrices encode medicinal knowledge derived from forest ecologies, sacred ontologies of human–land relations, regenerative agrarian practices, and centuries of resistance to colonial and neocolonial incursions. Within these communities, women frequently emerge as principal custodians of this knowledge, functioning as living repositories of collective memory and intergenerational wisdom. Contemporary pressures — accelerating modernisation, extractive state policies, and environmentally destructive mining — pose existential threats to these oral cultures. The

attrition of a tribal language signifies more than mere linguistic loss; it entails the erasure of entire cosmologies, ethical frameworks, and socio-environmental epistemes. Similarly, the death of elders without the intergenerational transmission of their narratives precipitates the irreversible erosion of historical consciousness, while displacement from ancestral lands disrupts the intimate entanglement of stories with sacred geographies. In this context, storytelling operates not merely as a cultural praxis but as a subversive modality of survival. Women's narratives enact resistance, ecological pedagogy, and cultural continuity, mobilising protest songs, mythic tales, and ritualised lullabies as insurgent instruments of memory. These oral performances are neither static recollections nor mere archival records; they constitute dynamic acts of defiance, reclamation, and anticipatory imagination, sustaining identity and community in the face of structural erasure.

This paper interrogates the lives of tribal women and the narratives they carry—stories that function not merely as folklore but as assertions of identity, sovereignty, and resistance. In a world that persistently marginalises Indigenous voices, storytelling operates as a radical instrument—a declaration that "We endure. Our histories matter. Our lands are not for sale." Central to this study is the gendered dimension of storytelling within Indian tribal societies, with a focus on communities such as the Gonds, Khasis, and Dongria Kondh, where women act as narrators of ancestral wisdom, custodians of sacred geographies, and stewards of ecological knowledge. By examining storytelling as a modality of decolonial resistance and feminist praxis, the study foregrounds how Indigenous women's oral traditions subvert dominant historiographies and sustain cultural continuity.

In the measured cadence of a Gond grandmother's evening tale—where rivers are remembered through Digna myths—or in the resonant harmonies of Dongria Kondh women's Didayi Geet opposing mining incursions in Niyamgiri, storytelling emerges as a vital instrument of resilience. Across tribal India, women dismantle colonial and patriarchal structures by transforming memory into political practice. Whether through the Gond Pardhan woman singing the Bana, encoding ancestral land claims, the Khasi matriarch retelling Kynnah folktales in matrilineal dialects, or the Kondh mother imparting sacred topographies via protest songs, these voices constitute an insurgent archive. Far from nostalgic relics, such narratives operate as living cartographies of survival, where metaphor enacts legal defiance, ritual verse maps erased geographies, and lullabies carry subversive memory. Methodologically, this study adopts a feminist decolonial framework, integrating ethnographic and literary approaches, and draws upon oral histories, folk songs, and field documentation to analyse storytelling as both resistance and cultural preservation (Smith 34; Shiva 105).

At its core, indigenous storytelling reveals a profound and dynamic system of cultural preservation that far transcends conventional historical documentation. Unlike Western paradigms that compartmentalise knowledge into rigid silos of history, science, and spirituality, indigenous oral traditions embody what Leslie Marmon Silko describes as a "woven universe," where past, present, and future exist in continuous dialogue through narrative (Silko 88). Vine Deloria Jr. further asserts that these traditions operate as intricate epistemological systems, encoding not only events but also comprehensive worldviews within their narrative structures (Deloria 102). Among these communities, especially where women are the principal custodians of oral heritage, storytelling becomes what Linda Tuhiwai Smith characterises as "embodied historiography"—a form of lived historical consciousness rooted in indigenous episteme (Smith 34). The Gond women of central India exemplify this through their performance of *devhari*—sacred songs that serve not only as creation myths but as multisensory historical records. These performances function as ecological treatises detailing seasonal rhythms and plant lore, as ethical blueprints embedded in symbolic language, and as spiritual liturgies maintaining balance with the cosmos (Shiva 105). Indigenous storytelling is not merely a means of historical preservation but a generative process of memory- making. These oral traditions function as living repositories of ecological knowledge, spiritual philosophy, and communal identity. For tribal women, storytelling is embodied, with myth, song, and ritual enacted rather than merely remembered. Among the Gonds of central India, women perform devhari—sacred songs recounting cosmogony and linking human life to natural rhythms (Varma 2012). These narratives encode sustainable agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and ethical frameworks, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of wisdom.

Khasi women in Meghalaya play a pivotal role in preserving *ktien*, an oral tradition that encapsulates matrilineal kinship systems, forest stewardship practices, and ancestral governance mechanisms (Nongbri 56). Unlike written historical records that often ossify knowledge into fixed narratives, indigenous storytelling systems remain fluid,

capable of responding dynamically to contemporary socio-political and environmental challenges (Silko 88). The preservation of *Ktien* by Khasi women exemplifies the enduring functionality of indigenous storytelling as a form of living memory. These oral narratives do more than recall genealogies—they map complex matrilineal networks, record generational forest conservation strategies, embed climate adaptation practices within metaphor and motif, and preserve legal precedents regarding land rights and resource distribution (Smith 34; Shiva 108).

This living quality is equally evident in the evolving narratives of Gond women, who have transformed their *devhari* performances to confront urgent contemporary concerns. These sacred songs now integrate references to climate instability, deforestation, endangered medicinal flora, and state-imposed displacement (Padel and Das 171). *Devhari* is also performed during pregnancy, imprinting cosmological and ecological knowledge upon the unborn, while postpartum lullabies become repositories of medicinal wisdom and spiritual instruction (Varma 2012). In these oral traditions, everyday acts acquire epistemological significance: the kitchen becomes a pedagogical space where migration histories are retold using utensils as mnemonic tools; weaving is no longer a domestic craft but a mode of historical inscription, as clan symbols and ecological knowledge are encoded into textile patterns recited through *ktien* (Deloria 102).

The female body itself becomes an epistemic archive, where tattoos narrate lineage and resistance, hairstyles signify social identity, and heirloom jewellery encodes generational memory (Smith 37). In matrilineal communities such as the Khasi, storytelling extends beyond cultural labour to function as an instrument of juridical and spiritual authority. Women officiate naming ceremonies by reciting genealogies that legally bind offspring to land rights, and adjudicate familial disputes by invoking oral precedents embedded in folklore (Ambagudia 93). Furthermore, rituals surrounding menstruation, childbirth, and menopause double as ceremonies of narrative transmission, embedding ecological wisdom, reproductive health knowledge, and ethical codes within embodied memory. When a Khasi grandmother teaches a harvest song to her granddaughter, she transmits not only melody but centuries-old agricultural intelligence, lunar calendrical knowledge, and spiritual worldview—all of which remain uncaptured by colonial education systems or written texts (Shiva 105). Despite their critical role, these gendered systems of memory face erasure. Colonial epistemologies have historically relegated oral traditions to the realm of folklore, thereby marginalising women's intellectual labour and severing the vital connection between stories and the landscapes from which they originate (Smith 45; Bates 212).

The narratives of Indigenous women operate not as mere folktales but as insurgent texts, deliberately designed to challenge patriarchal hierarchies within their communities and contest colonial and neo-colonial structures that seek to silence them. Feminist scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen and Vandana Shiva contend that storytelling among Indigenous women constitutes a radical practice of memory reclamation and political assertion (Allen 213; Shiva 105). For example, when a Dongria Kondh woman voices *demsa* protest songs against mining corporations, she enacts more than a cultural ritual—she transforms oral memory into testimonial intervention. These ritualised chants, performed during demonstrations and even in legal forums, reconceptualise the Niyamgiri hills not as extractable commodities but as sentient ancestors deserving both spiritual reverence and juridical protection (Padel and Das 171). Women's leadership in such acts—forming human barricades, filling courtrooms with ancestral music— subverts gendered stereotypes that cast Indigenous women as passive or voiceless. Instead, they emerge as archivists, jurists, and ethical custodians of communal memory, leveraging orality as a strategic instrument to navigate, contest, and ultimately outmanoeuvre bureaucratic mechanisms of dispossession (Smith 45).

Gond women's *pandwani* ballads, likewise, enact a subtle but potent form of historical subversion. These performances do not merely recount mythic battles but re-centre erased perspectives, often foregrounding female figures such as midwives, herbalists, and mothers whose wisdom is systematically excluded from colonial narratives. A single ballad might reimagine resistance through the eyes of a tribal healer, transforming what dominant history views as peripheral roles into central agents of survival (Silko 89). Such narratives are often embedded with coded resistance: a tale of a cunning jackal may simultaneously critique patriarchal hoarding and capitalist extraction. Delivered in kitchens, around hearths, or during weaving, these domestic performances create radical pedagogical spaces where anti-colonial consciousness is transmitted beneath the veneer of everyday life. In these spaces, women reclaim their bodies as epistemic archives. Protest songs equate deforestation with bodily violation, while weaving

becomes a form of political inscription—every irregular stitch encoding ancestral grief and territorial memory. When a Dongria Kondh woman enters trance while singing of the raped earth, her trembling body archives generational trauma in ways that environmental impact reports cannot capture (Padel and Das 172). This embodied storytelling ensures that the memory of what was stolen continues to survive—in the gestures, chants, and crafts of the women who remember.

When Khasi women gather to recite *kynnah*, their intricate genealogical chants do far more than preserve lineage—they enact what Walter Mignolo describes as "epistemic disobedience," a deliberate refusal to conform to colonial knowledge hierarchies (Mignolo 84). These oral genealogies function as dynamic legal instruments, mapping kinship relations and land entitlements with a level of precision that colonial documentation often failed to achieve. In regions like the Khasi Hills, where British colonial administrators imposed patrilineal inheritance systems via manipulated land records, elderly women became custodians of justice, using oral testimony to assert ancestral claims in legal disputes. Their voices, echoing across generations, carry the same juridical weight as notarised deeds, affirming that indigenous speech and memory can constitute legitimate archives (Smith 45). This gendered dimension of decolonial resistance is further reinforced in Gond *pandwani* ballads, where grandmothers subvert colonial historiography by placing foremothers at the centre of anti-colonial narratives. These ballads reimagine acts of rebellion—women poisoning British tea with forest herbs or smuggling messages in their waistbands—not as peripheral domestic chores, but as strategic interventions in the struggle for autonomy (Padel and Das 173). Storytellers reconstruct history through indigenous relational frameworks, invoking seasonal cycles instead of colonial calendars and kinship terminologies instead of imperial hierarchies (Silko 90).

Within these traditions, the female body functions as a living locus of historiographical inscription. Khasi women, while performing kynnah, inscribe generational memory through precise corporeal gestures—touching the wrist for warriors, the shoulder for healers—thereby producing a dynamic, embodied cartography that subverts the rigid classificatory schemes imposed by colonial census regimes (Deloria 102). Gond storytellers similarly enact an embodied pedagogy, reanimating ancestral resistance through ritualised performance: grandmothers grinding grain for tribal armies or stitching wounds with spider silk transform memory into material labour, rendering the past tactile and performative. These oral practices now extend into legal and bureaucratic domains, challenging the epistemic authority of written evidence. When Khasi women present kynnah as courtroom testimony, they compel the judicial apparatus to confront its embedded biases, asserting the primacy of living memory over textual codification. Likewise, Gond women construct counter- archives by documenting sacred grove narratives that directly contest state-imposed cartographies. In doing so, these women do more than preserve culture—they actively decolonise the epistemological foundations of historical knowledge. The tremor in an elder's voice as she recounts stolen landscapes embodies an authenticity unattainable through maps or surveys. Through such performative narratives, tribal women not only reclaim the past but reconstruct the intellectual and cultural scaffolding upon which future Indigenous resurgence may emerge.

Storytelling within indigenous communities is not merely a mode of cultural preservation; it is a radical articulation of presence, agency, and resistance. As demonstrated throughout this study, tribal women from the Gond, Khasi, and Dongria Kondh communities in India are not passive inheritors of tradition but active agents of ecological consciousness, cultural resilience, and political defiance. Their narratives—sung in folk melodies, performed in ritual, and embedded in daily praxis—serve as living counter-histories to colonial erasure and neoliberal dispossession. For the Dongria Kondh, songs that sacralise the mountains are not symbolic myths but juridical assertions against corporate incursions. When Gond women perform *Dandari* dances, they do not simply retell rebellion; they reanimate its spirit, situating memory as praxis in ongoing struggles for survival and land. These oral traditions are not vestiges of the past but visionary blueprints for futures where land, identity, and memory are fundamentally interwoven.

The gendered dimension of storytelling positions women as the primary, though often unacknowledged, historians of their communities. In matrilineal Khasi societies, grandmother-led narratives operate as epistemic acts of defiance against patriarchal land regimes, asserting women's centrality in the production and preservation of communal memory. These narratives do more than record the past—they intervene, actively shaping social knowledge and asserting agency. As Bell Hooks observes, "speaking is an act of resistance" (Hooks 210); for tribal women, each recited story constitutes a refusal to be silenced. Oral traditions function as dynamic epistemologies— constantly

evolving, responsive to shifting socio-political landscapes, and embedding ethical and ecological wisdom. When a Khasi mother transmits a harvest song, she conveys not merely melody but an integrated philosophy of ecological stewardship. Likewise, a Gond storyteller articulates cosmologies that reinforce a sacred reciprocity between humans and the natural world. These narratives are not inert artefacts preserved behind glass; they are embodied, adaptive strategies for cultural survival, sustaining memory, ethical praxis, and communal identity in a world increasingly antagonistic to Indigenous life.

The struggle to preserve tribal memory extends beyond the mere conservation of the past; it constitutes a profound act of future-making. As Walter Mignolo contends, decolonisation necessitates epistemic disobedience, and Indigenous storytelling exemplifies an alternative knowledge system that challenges hegemonic historiographies (Mignolo 84). These narratives operate not merely as folklore but as juridical, spiritual, and ecological discourse, offering both warnings and frameworks for sustainable coexistence. In an era marked by ecological degradation and cultural erasure, each untold story represents a potential loss of irreplaceable knowledge. Yet within the voices of Gond grandmothers, Khasi singers, and Dongria Kondh storytellers, memory remains vibrant and operative. These women do not simply preserve history—they continually rearticulate, perform, and embody it. Their storytelling is neither an archival relic nor passive recollection; it is an active modality of resistance, a dynamic practice of cultural and epistemic resurgence. As long as their narratives echo across forests, rivers, and sacred landscapes, the ontological and ethical integrity of Indigenous worlds persists. In this sense, women's oral traditions are not merely acts of remembrance; they constitute living strategies for survival, sites of decolonial agency, and instruments for the imaginative reconstruction of both communal identity and planetary futures.

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Repeal The Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949: A Call for Justice and Equality

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the critical issue of Buddhist autonomy over the Mahabodhi Temple, emphasizing its significance in the broader context of humanitarian development. The study highlights the detrimental effects of partial Hindu control over the temple, particularly considering recent incidents involving violence against monks by right-wing factions. Utilizing a sociological approach grounded in Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony, alongside historical context and anthropological evidence, the research elucidates the trajectory of Buddhism's emergence from Nepal to KGF as a liberating force against casteism, now facing resurgence from oppressive systems. The findings also reveal the appropriation of Buddhist sites, such as identification of local deities in Tamil Nadu with Lord Buddha and the reclassification of Tirupati Balaji temple as a Buddhist site, reflecting a strategic trend of converting Buddhist heritage into Brahmanical temples. The paper asserts that Buddhism transcends mere rituals, embodying principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and posits that erasure or merging of Buddhism with Hinduism undermines the potential for holistic growth, essentially constituting an act against humanitarian intellectualism. It is essential for promoting social justice, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring that religious sites align with the principles of equality and pluralism enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The findings ultimately call for a re-examination of legal structures that govern religious spaces.

Keywords: *Mahabodhi temple, Buddhist autonomy, Governance of religious space*

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INTRODUCTION

The Mahabodhi Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site, holds profound religious and cultural significance for Buddhists worldwide. However, its administration and control remain a contested issue, marked by partial Hindu governance that has sparked tensions and incidents of violence, particularly against Buddhist monks by right-wing factions. This study investigates the critical issue of Buddhist autonomy over the Mahabodhi Temple within the broader framework of humanitarian development and social justice.

Buddhism originated in Nepal and subsequently spread extensively across multiple directions, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. To the west, it expanded into regions encompassing present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan; to the east, it reached countries such as Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and beyond; northwards into China; and southwards into Sri Lanka and Cambodia. This vast spread illustrates Buddhism's dynamic adaptability and its role as a unifying spiritual force across diverse socio-cultural landscapes.

Significantly, historical evidence shows a pattern of appropriation and reinterpretation of Buddhist heritage through the identification of local deities as incarnations of the Buddha. One recent example includes the Salem Thalaivetti Muniappan statue in Tamil Nadu, now recognized as a Buddha statue, underscoring the ongoing cultural processes that

obscure original Buddhist identities. Moreover, the rich accounts of ancient Chinese travelers—such as Fa-Hien and Xuanzang—document the establishment and flourishing of Buddhist shrines throughout the Indian subcontinent, especially in the Chidambaram and Kanchipuram regions. Many of these sites, originally Buddhist, have since been assimilated into Hindu religious practices, their Buddhist origins marginalized or obscured.

Recent months have seen a surge of peaceful protests by Buddhist monks demanding the repeal of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949, which governs the administration of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya. The Act mandates an eight-member management committee split equally between Hindus and Buddhists, with the Gaya District Magistrate—typically a Hindu—serving as ex-officio chairperson. This arrangement has long been a source of deep discontent for the Buddhist community, who view it as perpetuating Hindu dominance over one of the most sacred Buddhist sites, contrary to how other religions in India govern their own places of worship.

During recent protests, which included hunger strikes and peaceful demonstrations both at the Mahabodhi Temple complex and nearby roads, local authorities forcibly removed monks from temple premises, and police—often under government or political pressure—dispersed demonstrators. Many Buddhist organizations and leaders argue that these actions align with broader patterns of violent or coercive suppression by right-wing elements, especially as Hindu rituals have gained prominence at the site. Protesters have expressed feeling marginalized and unsafe, with accounts of police forcibly removing monks and threatening them if they persist in their demands for full Buddhist control.

This process of Hinduisation and appropriation of Buddhist shrines exemplifies Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, whereby dominant groups maintain control over cultural narratives and sacred spaces, often at the expense of marginalized traditions. The sustained reclassification of Buddhist heritage within Hindu frameworks not only diminishes Buddhism's distinct religious and philosophical identity but also threatens the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity that Buddhism embodies.

The erasure or merging of Buddhism into Hinduism transcends ritualistic concerns and represents a broader challenge to humanitarian intellectualism, cultural pluralism, and the constitutional ideals of equality in India. By addressing these complex dynamics, this paper aims to contribute to critical discussions on religious autonomy, cultural preservation, and the need to re-examine legal and administrative governance of sacred sites, advocating for frameworks that uphold social justice and pluralism.

RESEARCH GAP

Persistent Political and Social Controversies Without Resolution:

Despite decades of protests, legal petitions, and international appeals, there remains a lack of effective policy reform or judicial resolution. The government's reluctance and political considerations create a gap in actionable governance reforms that recognize Buddhist religious aspirations.

Neglect of the Socio-Cultural Impact of Hindu Appropriation:

The ongoing Hinduisation of Buddhist sites and appropriation of Buddhist heritage have cultural, social, and identity implications insufficiently addressed in existing studies. More focused interdisciplinary research is needed on how cultural hegemony operates through religious site management and affects Buddhist identity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What alternative temple management models could address the grievances of the Buddhist community while maintaining religious harmony?

In what ways does the concept of cultural hegemony explain the appropriation and Hinduisation of Buddhist religious sites in India, particularly the Mahabodhi Temple?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Persistent Political and Social Controversies Without Resolution

The current paper carefully traces the long history of Buddhist discontent with the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949, documenting repeated protests, legal petitions, and international appeals for full Buddhist governance of the Mahabodhi Temple. Despite these sustained efforts across decades, the management structure—mandating equal Hindu-Buddhist representation and typically placing the local (often Hindu) District Magistrate as chairperson—remains fundamentally unchanged. This legal and administrative inertia, as the paper meticulously documents, is enmeshed in the government's apprehension about political fallout and a reluctance to antagonize Hindu groups, despite the temple's exclusive religious significance for Buddhists.

This enduring lack of resolution demonstrates a key research gap: although contestations over temple control remain visible and vociferous at national and international levels, there has been no meaningful movement toward a governance model that genuinely recognizes Buddhist religious aspirations. The dialogue has remained confined to symbolic amendments (such as the 2013 modification allowing a non-Hindu chairperson), which fail to address the deeper grievances of the Buddhist community. The Indian and Bihar governments' preference for maintaining a 'status quo' underlines how political considerations, rather than constitutional or humanitarian principles, have dictated policy stasis.

Neglect of the Socio-Cultural Impact of Hindu Appropriation

The current paper goes beyond purely legal and administrative critique to foreground how the persistent inclusion of Hindus in the site's management is part of a broader, pan-Indian pattern of "Hinduisation" or Brahmanical appropriation of Buddhist religious spaces and symbols. Drawing upon anthropological, historical, and sociological analysis, the study highlights the following unresolved issues:

The gradual transformation of Buddhist sites (such as the Mahabodhi Temple, Tirupati, Pandharpur, Srisailam, and others) into Hindu temples or multi-faith sites through the identification or rebranding of deities, rituals, and iconography.

The resulting marginalization of distinctively Buddhist identities, rituals, and historical narratives, not just in physical site management but also in popular consciousness and public heritage debates.

The lack of robust academic or governmental inquiry into the psychological and community impacts on Buddhists, including issues of dignity, cultural erasure, and intergenerational identity loss that result from persistent misrecognition or appropriation.

The paper identifies that, while legal and policy materials often reference constitutional rights and secular principles, there has been insufficient interdisciplinary research into how such cultural hegemony is operationalized through religious site management and impacts lived Buddhist identity. Thus, the gap is not solely legal but cultural, sociological, and experiential.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design combining sociological, historical, anthropological, and legal analysis. It is exploratory in nature, aiming to illuminate the mechanisms of cultural hegemony and appropriation through a multi-method approach. Case study methodology is applied, with a primary focus on the Mahabodhi Temple's governance, set against a broader comparative frame (other Indian and global religious sites).

Materials

Archival Documents: Historical texts, British and postcolonial legal statutes (including the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949 and related amendments), court records, and temple management documents.

Travelogues: Accounts of Chinese pilgrims (e.g., Xuanzang, Fa-Hien) chronicling Buddhist shrine histories across India.

Published Works: Academic articles, books, and government reports on temple management, religious autonomy, and cultural appropriation.

Media and Public Discourse: Newspaper articles, protest documentation, interviews given to press, and social media outputs.

Visual Evidence: Photographs of temple icons, sites (including recently re-identified Buddha statues), and protest events.

Procedures

Document Analysis: Systematic review of legal, historical, and archival documents to trace the evolution and implementation of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act and related governance structures.

Case Study Approach: In-depth qualitative case study of the Mahabodhi Temple, with comparative reference to other appropriated or contested Buddhist sites (e.g., renamed temples in Tamil Nadu, Tirupati, etc.).

Discourse and Media Analysis: Analyze language and narratives in public statements, news reports, legal judgments, and social media to identify expressions of cultural hegemony, identity negotiation, and activism.

Data Triangulation and Theory Application: Integrate findings from multiple sources (documents, interviews, observations) and interpret them through conceptual frameworks (e.g., Gramscian cultural hegemony, interpretive anthropology).

This comprehensive approach allows for an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of both the structural and lived dimensions of the current

governance and cultural landscape surrounding the Bodh Gaya Temple and similar Buddhist sites.

REPLICATIONS OF STUDY

1. Alternative Temple Management Models

The research question—What alternative temple management models could address the grievances of the Buddhist community while maintaining religious harmony?—directly addresses the most urgent demand emerging from decades of contestation. The paper provides a detailed comparative analysis of religious site management across India (Hindu temples managed exclusively by Hindus, Sikh gurdwaras by Sikhs, mosques by Muslims)1. It also presents global Buddhist site models in places like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Japan—where exclusive Buddhist management and community stewardship are the norm.

By highlighting these models, the paper invites both policymakers and researchers to move beyond the false binary of "status quo or chaos," and to consider structures that have historically maintained religious harmony elsewhere, while granting communities true custodianship of their sacred sites. The lack of serious governmental or legal exploration of such alternative models is thus a central theme and unresolved problem identified by the current study.

2. Cultural Hegemony and Appropriation

The research question—In what ways does the concept of cultural hegemony explain the appropriation and Hinduisation of Buddhist religious sites in India, particularly the Mahabodhi Temple?—maps onto the theoretical backbone of the paper. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, the study situates legal and administrative practices within broader structures of social dominance, wherein "majoritarian" cultural narratives systematically subsume and repurpose minority heritage. This includes:

The strategic assimilation of Buddha and Buddhist sites into Hindu frameworks (as avatars, local deities, or through "self-manifested" idols) to facilitate religious conversion and cultural unification following Buddhism's decline.

The continued use of these assimilative practices in modern temple management, resulting in the suppression or distortion of Buddhist rituals and traditions.

The deployment of law and state policy to consolidate these hegemonic arrangements, with discursive justifications (such as "communal harmony" or historic "joint heritage") that marginalize Buddhist perspectives and rights.

By embedding the legal and activist struggles of the present day in a deeper frame of cultural power and historical appropriation, the paper makes clear that mere changes in administrative procedure will not suffice. What is needed is a fundamental re-examination of cultural narratives, heritage claims, and legal arrangements that have enabled—sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly—the subordination of Buddhist identity in its most sacred spaces.

Final Synthesis

In sum, the current paper's investigation of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949 and the continuing battle for Buddhist autonomy is not only a legal or administrative history but a critical engagement with the ongoing realities of cultural erasure and hegemonic religious politics in India. The identified research gaps are not rhetorical but expose the deep, unresolved fractures between constitutional ideals, political expediency, and community rights on the ground. The research questions framing alternative governance and the operationalization of cultural hegemony are therefore both urgent and under-addressed, representing the essential next steps for genuine reform, reconciliation, and social justice in the management of Buddhist religious heritage.

RESULTS

Historical evidence and contemporary accounts confirm that before the Mahabodhi Temple was formally entrusted to Buddhist monks in the 20th century, the site had become a locus for significant Hindu worship practices—including the installation and daily worship of Shiva idols and other Hindu deities.

From the late medieval period through to the 19th century, the temple complex was under the custodianship of a Shaivite (Hindu) Math, and for centuries prior to Buddhist reclamation efforts, it functioned essentially as a Hindu religious site. Swami Vivekanand from the Bodh Gaya Math and other sources explicitly acknowledge that idols of Lord Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesh, and other Hindu gods were installed and worshipped within the Mahabodhi Temple precincts alongside the Buddha image. The upper chambers also reportedly housed these idols, and devotees performed rituals for both the Buddha and Hindu gods. The Math authorities claim they preserved the Buddha image and, when possible, performed Hindu consecration ceremonies for statues within the complex.

When Anagarika Dharmapala visited in 1891, he discovered that the temple and its worship practices were managed by a Shaivite priest, with the Buddha image garlanded and treated as a Hindu deity—a situation that catalyzed the international movement for Buddhist reclamation. Protection strategies against non-Buddhists included placing images of Maheshvara (Shiva) at the entrance, further underlining the Shaivite identity the temple had acquired across centuries.

Constitutional and Legal Challenges: The Act is disputed on grounds that it violates constitutional freedoms guaranteed under Articles 25 and 26 (religious freedom and management rights) as well as equality under Article 14. Indian Supreme Court judgments affirm that religious communities should have exclusive control over their own institutions.

Legislative Changes: A 2013 amendment permitted a non-Hindu District Magistrate to serve as chairperson, relaxing the earlier requirement, but Buddhists maintain that the overall structure still underrepresents them.

Comparative Analysis: Unlike the Buddhist case at Bodh Gaya, Indian Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh religious institutions are managed exclusively by members of their respective faiths.

Buddhist organizations seek exclusive Buddhist governance of the temple.

Hindu groups are divided; some support shared management based on historical coexistence.

The government prefers maintaining harmony but political balance.

International Buddhist bodies and human rights advocates criticize the current policy as discriminatory.

Evidence for This Hypothesis:

The committee's composition inherently favors non-Buddhists due to the District Magistrate's chairpersonship and equal Hindu representation.

Historical norms and legal precedents across India show exclusive religious group control is standard practice.

Judicial rulings affirming religious communities' management rights buttress claims for Buddhist autonomy.

Persistent activism, petitions, and advocacy from Buddhist groups domestically and internationally highlight the broad dissatisfaction with the current legislation and demand reform.

Evidence from Chinese Pilgrims

Faxian (Fa-Hien, 5th century CE) and Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang, 7th century CE) meticulously documented their journeys to sites like Sarnath, Varanasi, Mathura, and others, describing grand stupas, Buddhist monasteries (viharas), and the vibrant monastic life surrounding these shrines.

For example: Xuanzang's travelogues record Sarnath as a bustling Buddhist center with unique stupas and a strong presence of monks, affirming Buddha's first sermon there—details still corroborated by archaeological remains.

In Varanasi (Kashi), Xuanzang and others describe extensive Buddhist infrastructure—stupas, monasteries, statues—adjacent to or at the locations where today major Hindu temples exist.

Mathura: Chinese accounts and Indian archaeological evidence agree that places like the Bhuteshwar and Gokarneshwar temples were ancient Buddhist centers. The famous Katra Mound, for example, was once home to Buddhist establishments during the Kushana era before its eventual transformation into Hindu religious sites in later centuries.

Khajuraho: Xuanzang and other travelers reference Buddhist settlements and monuments at Khajuraho, which later gave way to Jain and then Hindu temple patronage during the medieval Chandella period.

In Kashmir, records by Faxian, Xuanzang, I-Tsing, along with lesser-known pilgrims such as Fa-yong, Che-mong and Ou-Kong, document thriving Buddhist practice, monasteries, and relics, often at locations where later prominent Hindu shrines appeared. These travelers provide firsthand observations of the transformation or decline of these Buddhist places over centuries as shifts in religious power and cultural patronage occurred.

The Process of Religious Conversion

Scholarly analysis confirms that many "deva temples"—now classified firmly as Hindu—are identified by these ancient travelers as Buddhist religious sites, or regularly hosting Buddhist worship and festivals. Archaeological evidence further demonstrates Buddhist iconography and architectural remains underlying current Hindu structures in several cases (Sanchi, Mathura, Khajuraho, Sarnath, etc.).

APPROPRIATION, HINDUISATION, AND RE-COLONISATION OF BUDDHIST SITES INTO HINDU TEMPLES

Throughout Indian history, many prominent Hindu temples have been associated with or built upon older Buddhist sites. This transformation often involved a combination of iconographic

reinterpretation, rewriting of local legends, ritual adaptation, and deliberate socio-political strategies aimed at integrating Buddhist sacred spaces into an expanding Brahminical religious order. The process is discussed in meticulous detail with evidence spanning South and East India and involving sites such as Tirupati, Jagannath Puri, Pandharpur, Sabarimala, Srisailam, Badrinath, and others.

Mechanisms of Appropriation and Hinduisation

1. Religious and Architectural Overlap

Reuse of Structures: Archaeological and textual evidence shows numerous instances where Buddhist chaityas (prayer halls), viharas (monasteries), and stupas were directly repurposed for Brahminical worship. At sites like Ter, Chezarala, Aihole (Durga Temple), Ellora (Cave XV), and Undavalli, Buddhist structures were adapted and rededicated as Hindu temples, often incorporating Shaivite or Vaishnavite iconography into or over pre-existing Buddhist motifs.

Chiseling Out Buddhist Images: At Ellora, Buddhist statues and symbols were physically defaced or "chiseled out," making room for new Brahminical sculptures, with Vaishnavite and Shaivite reliefs frequently sharing the newly-appropriated sacred space.

2. Transformation of Iconography

Vishnu and Bodhisattva Resemblance: The image at Tirupati (Venkateswara/Balaji) is presented in the book as not conforming to classical Vishnu iconography: the weapons (conch and discus) are not integral, and the posture/mudras reflect traditional Buddhist Bodhisattva types, notably Avalokitesvara/Padmapani. Such features are more typically Buddhist than Vaishnavite, indicating transitional appropriation1.

Late Additions: In several cases, weapons and sectarian features (like Lakshmi on Vishnu's chest) are argued to be later additions, helping to rebrand the icon as Hindu while retaining much older forms beneath.

3. Ritual and Sociocultural Reinterpretation

Incorporation of Buddhist Rituals: Practices like tonsure (hair offerings), Ratha Yatra (Chariot Festival), and even tirtha-yatra (pilgrimages) which have early Buddhist roots were adopted and rebranded as Hindu ritual traditions.

Festival Continuity: Evidence from early literature points toward major festivals at sites such as Vengadam (Tirupati) prior to the presence of images that could be identified as Vishnu. These “Shravana” festivals are associated with Buddhist monastic traditions.

Devadasi System: In many temples, the tradition of devadasis (temple dancers) is traced to Buddhist bhikkhunis (nuns), who, after the fall of Buddhism, found themselves recast as Hindu temple servants, often of “lower” caste and associated with marginalized social functions.

4. Strategic Doctrinal and Textual Maneuvers

Avatarization of Buddha: The promotion of Buddha as an “avatar” of Vishnu in the Puranic texts was a calculated move. It allowed for the absorption of Buddhist sites, images, and even entire communities by recasting Buddha as an expression of the Hindu divine, but simultaneously condemned core Buddhist teachings as misleading or heretical in the Vaishnava tradition.

Sthalapurana and Mythmaking: The rewriting of temple legends (puranas and sthala-puranas) was a crucial step in re-legitimizing the newly Hinduized sites. Often, wholly new origin stories, miraculous manifestations, or appearances by Brahminical sages and gods were attached to appropriated images and places to obscure their non-Hindu, especially Buddhist, roots.

Change in Inscriptions: Around the 10th century CE, inscriptions began explicitly substituting “Emperuman” (a term applicable to Buddha as well as Vishnu) with “Sri Vaishnava” as a means of instituting and formalizing the Vaishnava identity of temples and their supporting communities.

5. Socio-Political Factors and "Dark Age" Narratives

Suppression of Buddhists: The decline of Buddhism in South India is described as due to coordinated efforts by Vaishnava and Shaiva groups, often accompanied by violence, the destruction or repurposing of monastic complexes, and the rewriting or eradication of Buddhist history. This period is described as a “dark age” by Brahminical commentators, coinciding with the ascendancy of ordaining rituals, stricter caste hierarchy, and the consolidation of Brahmin landholdings and temple complexes.

Proxy Images and Gradual Conversion: Strategic introduction of "proxy" images in accessible locations (as at Tiruchannur near Tirupati) functioned to convert or integrate local populations formerly loyal to Buddhist worship, before focusing major ritual life back onto the original site under new Hindu auspices.

Other Notable Examples & Patterns

Jagannath Puri: Original Buddhist or tribal worship absorbed and transformed into Vaishnavite tradition, with persistent older elements such as tribal participation, non-caste-exclusive ritual, and

legend of relic deposits (like Buddha's tooth).

Pandharpur (Vitthala/Vithoba): Saint-poet texts in Maharashtra (e.g., Eknath, Tukaram) explicitly equate Vithoba with Buddha; rituals, iconography, and festivals retain evident Buddhist/folk lineage, later assimilated via Vaishnavization and Sanskritization.

Sabarimala (Ayyappa): Reputedly a Dravidian/Buddhist tribal cult later integrated into Hindu Dharma Sasta/Ayyappa worship—with continued openness to all castes and elements of Buddhist ritual practice.

DISCUSSION

Upon formal handover to the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC) under the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949, Buddhist and Hindu representation was systematized, but Buddhist monks continue to stress that the practice of having Shiva and other Hindu idols inside the Mahabodhi precinct was an inherited legacy from the era of Shaivite dominance, not an authentic Buddhist tradition. Today, advocates for full Buddhist control demand removal of non-Buddhist idols and cessation of Hindu rituals within the temple, seeing such practices as incompatible with the temple's original Buddhist character.

The presence and worship of Shiva idols at the Mahabodhi Temple prior to its modern return to Buddhist management was a longstanding practice under Shaivite custodianship. This history is central to contemporary debates, as Buddhist activists seek to eliminate the remnants of these non-Buddhist rituals from what they view as an exclusively Buddhist sacred site.

Amend or entirely repeal the Bodh Gaya Temple Act to grant Buddhists majority or exclusive management rights.

Establish an autonomous Buddhist trust to administer the Mahabodhi Temple.

Align temple governance practices with those established for Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim religious institutions.

SIGNIFICANCE

The detailed descriptions by Chinese and other Buddhist pilgrims are invaluable historical records, showing that the current religious landscape is the product of centuries of change. Their observations confirm that numerous sites revered today as exclusively Hindu were once internationally renowned Buddhist sacred centers, substantiating claims of religious transformation and the often-shared heritage of these locations.

In summary, the testimony of foreign pilgrims—especially Chinese Buddhist monks—offers compelling, detailed evidence that many iconic Indian religious sites were originally Buddhist establishments before their conversion to Hindu worship, a process recognized in both textual and archaeological research

Conceptual and Theoretical Implications

The process of appropriating and Hinduising Buddhist sacred places was gradual, often spanning centuries, marked by periods of syncretism before full absorption.

Appropriation was not merely architectural but deeply socio-political, affecting caste, gender, ritual access, and regional identity.

Modern "orthodox" readings of these temples tend to treat dissenting or alternative origins as "myth" or "local legend," despite substantial archaeological, iconographic, and historical evidence to the contrary.

Recent cultural productions (such as the film Thangalaan) reclaim and reinterpret KGF's Buddhist and Dalit past, contrasting it with subsequent Brahminical influences. These stories seek to reassert Buddhist identity and challenge narratives that marginalized Dalit traditions in favor of dominant caste perspectives. Folklore about KGF (e.g., tales of "blood turning to gold") is sometimes presented as having roots in older, possibly Buddhist or tribal, traditions that were later adapted or overwritten by Brahminical stories.

Understanding Cultural Hegemony

Cultural hegemony is a concept coined by Antonio Gramsci, referring to the dominance of one social group over others not only through force or political and economic domination, but through cultural means—making the values, beliefs, and perceptions of the dominant group accepted as the societal "norm." This dominance shapes not just institutions and policies but the very common sense and worldviews of all members in society, effectively marginalizing and silencing the perspectives and traditions of minority groups.

Key features include:

Consent rather than force: The subordinate groups accept the leadership of the dominant culture as natural.

Institutionalization: Social, educational, and legal structures are designed to reflect and perpetuate the dominant culture's power.

Marginalization and erasure: Minority cultures are either assimilated, rendered invisible, or stereotyped.

CASE STUDY IN CULTURAL HEGEMONY

The Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya is regarded as the most sacred site in Buddhism—the site of Gautama Buddha's enlightenment. Historically, following the decline of Buddhism in India, the temple and its management came under the control of Hindu groups, particularly Shaiva mahants, despite its Buddhist origins and significance. After decades of protest and global pressure, the Indian government introduced the Bodh Gaya Temple Act in 1949 to provide a new management structure.

Analysis of cultural hegemony in the Act:

Structural domination: The Act created a management committee with an equal number of Hindus and Buddhists, but vested chairmanship in the local District Magistrate, who by law is almost always a Hindu. If the DM is not Hindu, a Hindu must be appointed as chair.

This arrangement ensures a permanent Hindu majority in administrative control.

In contrast, other Indian temples, mosques, and gurdwaras are managed exclusively by their own faith communities.

Normalization of domination: Official justification for the arrangement refers to "maintaining harmony" due to "shared" historical connections. However, this normalizes and legitimizes the presence—and predominance—of the majority community's representatives atop Buddhist institutions, framing it as natural or benevolent rather than as appropriation.

Marginalization of Buddhist agency: Buddhists do not have exclusive control over their holiest site, a sharp anomaly compared to other religious communities in India. Buddhist rituals are constrained or mediated by non-Buddhist authorities, and Buddhist monks' autonomy is restricted. This serves as a structural reminder of Buddhist marginalization in the land of Buddhism's birth.

Suppression of dissent: Decades of peaceful protest and legal challenge by Buddhists in India and across the Buddhist world for full control over the Mahabodhi Temple have been met with minimal legislative reform and continued appeals to "harmony," rather than substantive change. The law persists despite being widely seen as unjust by the global Buddhist community.

Why Repeal the Bodh Gaya Act, 1949? Challenging Hegemony

Repealing the Bodh Gaya Temple Act is presented as an urgent need not just for administrative justice, but as a symbolic and material challenge to Indian cultural hegemony. The primary arguments include:

Restoring religious autonomy: Buddhists should have the same exclusive management rights over their holiest shrine as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians do in India. The current regime perpetuates historical expropriation and marginalization.

Decolonizing religious spaces: The 1949 Act, made shortly after Indian independence, notably continued patterns set during colonial and pre-colonial rule, in which the Buddhist minority's most sacred site was held and regulated by non-Buddhists. Repeal would signify a decisive move away from such colonial and majoritarian legacies.

Addressing historical erasure: The current structure reinforces a narrative in which Buddhism is peripheral to Indian religious life and denies Buddhists a sense of historical—and spiritual—ownership in their own homeland.

Material and symbolic justice: For the world Buddhist community, repeal is a signal that India genuinely upholds pluralism, equal citizenship, and the restoration of dignity and agency to a long-marginalized minority.

An emphasis on the difference between subjective, lived religious reality and the objective (historically traceable) reality of origins.

1. Subjective Realities in Worship

Over centuries, people have developed deep subjective religious connections:

At Tirupati, Lord Balaji (Venkateswara) is worshipped by millions as a form of Vishnu.

At Bodh Gaya, a Shiva linga was installed by past Hindu custodians and worshipped as a form of Shiva, despite the site's centrality to Buddhists as the spot of Buddha's enlightenment.

In other sites (such as Jagannath Puri, Sabarimala, Pandharpur), deities are subjectively imagined and locally worshipped in ways that often obscure their original forms.

These realities are profound and meaningful for devotees. To question the subjective basis of such worship is to question the heart of much of Indian religious and cultural life.

2. The Objective, Historical Reality (as reconstructed by critical scholarship)

However, using epigraphy, iconography, historical literature, and the patterns of religious transformation in India—we frequently arrive at a different picture:

Tirupati (Balaji)

Iconography: The main murti does not closely fit canonical Vishnu images. Originally weaponless, it was later adorned with Vishnu's sankha and chakra; the pose and features more closely match Avalokitesvara (Bodhisattva) in Buddhist art.

Rituals and customs: Practices such as tonsure and the ratha yatra have clear Buddhist (and tribal) precedents.

Absence in early Hindu records: Earliest Sangam literature and inscriptions mention Buddhist and tribal presence, festivals, and worship at Vengadam (Tirupati), but no explicit Vishnu cult or icon.

Proxy imagery/history: The institution of a "proxy" image and the late (c. 10th century CE) shift in inscriptional terminology from generic "Emperuman" (which could mean "lord," including Buddha) to specific "Sri Vaishnava" reflects a process of Hinduisation.

Result: A strong scholarly argument exists that the original object of veneration at Tirupati was Lord Buddha (likely in the form of a Bodhisattva), and that the current identity as Balaji/Vishnu is a product of religious appropriation and cultural/political hegemonising.

Bodh Gaya

Original importance: Uncontroversially, this is the historical site of Buddha's enlightenment and built as a Buddhist site.

Hindu reinterpretation: Following Buddhism's decline in India, the Mahabodhi temple was occupied and managed by Shaiva (Hindu) mahants for centuries; Hindu rituals and even worship of the main image as Shiva were introduced.

Subjective reality: Many Hindus, during periods of non-Buddhist control, worshipped the image as Shiva, just as millions continue to worship Buddha as Balaji at Tirupati.

Institutionalisation of hegemony: The Bodh Gaya Temple Act 1949, enshrining Hindu input into Buddhist administration, is a prime legal example.

Result: The "actual reality" is again historical Buddhist primacy; any Hindu association is a product of appropriation during Buddhism's decline and subsequent majoritarian hegemony.

3. Cultural Hegemony and Appropriation: Signing Over Reality

This entire process—the overwriting of Buddhist sanctity by majoritarian (Hindu/Brahminical) tradition through new legends, iconography, rituals, sthalapuranas, legal acts—is itself an example of cultural hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's sense:

The dominant culture's view is made to seem "natural," while the history and claims of the original tradition (Buddhism) become invisible, or are consciously overwritten.

Over many generations, even former Buddhists themselves—now assimilated into Hindu identities—forget or reject all knowledge of an alternative reality, except perhaps through the memories kept alive in Dalit-Bahujan, tribal, or scholarly communities.

Action Plan: Rethinking Sacred Heritage, Pluralism, and Justice in India

The preceding analysis reveals that major Indian religious sites—such as Tirupati (Balaji) and Bodh Gaya (Mahabodhi)—are dynamic palimpsests where subjective devotional realities have, over centuries, often displaced and rewritten historical identities. Through persistent mechanisms of cultural hegemony and systematic appropriation, Buddhist origins and legacies have been obscured or assimilated into dominant Hindu frameworks, both in practice and law.

Yet, historical, epigraphic, and iconographic research consistently point to a Buddhist substratum beneath some of India's most revered contemporary Hindu shrines. These findings urge policymakers and society not to erase the living faith and agency of present-day worshippers, but to engage with the complex, plural realities of India's sacred spaces—honestly, inclusively, and justly.

Creative Government Action Plan

1. Decolonizing Religious Heritage Commissions

Establish an independent "Sacred Sites Pluralism Commission" tasked with:

Conducting comprehensive, interdisciplinary audits of the origins, transformations, and appropriations at major religious sites.

Documenting and publishing layered site histories (physical, ritual, and narrative), with input from historians, archaeologists, art historians, Buddhist and Hindu scholars, and local communities.

Recommending restorative justice measures that balance current practice with historical truth.

2. Restoration of Religious Agency and Ownership

Amend or repeal laws (e.g., Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949) that enshrine control by dominant groups over minority-origin sites.

Ensure exclusive management of Buddhist sites by Buddhists, mirroring rights enjoyed by all other major Indian faiths.

Create inclusive, rotating interfaith advisory boards (without voting or veto powers) to encourage dialogue and prevent new hegemonies.

3. Dual Heritage Recognition & Syncretic Pilgrimage Initiatives

Officially recognize "plural heritage status" at sites where shifting religious identities are well established (e.g., Tirupati, Jagannath Puri, Sabarimala).

Install multilingual interpretive displays narrating both Buddhist and later transformations, honoring both traditions without erasing either.

4. Cultural Curriculum Reforms

Integrate these revised, multi-vocal narratives into school and university curricula.

Develop digital archives, documentaries, and open-access research platforms on India's contested sacred geographies.

Sponsor creative arts programs—public art, theatre, storytelling—that animate the journey from subjective devotion to objective history.

5. Restorative Justice Scholarships and Fellowships

Fund "Buddhist Heritage Recovery" scholarships for Dalit-Bahujan, tribal, and Buddhist-descended youth to become stewards of reclaimed historical knowledge.

Support joint Hindu-Buddhist research projects, oral history initiatives, and international conferences on decolonizing sacred sites.

6. Global Partnerships for Buddhist Pluralism

Collaborate with Buddhist-majority nations on site management, conservation, and goodwill initiatives, aligning heritage management with global best practices and soft diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

The appropriation and Hinduisation of Buddhist sites into Hindu temples was a complex, long-term phenomenon involving physical, ritual, and textual strategies. Its outcomes are visible in the hybrid icons, rituals, social patterns, and legends associated with some of India's most important Hindu shrines today. While scholarly debate continues concerning the specifics at each site, the overall historical pattern is documented and critically discussed in multiple sources as a key aspect of post-Buddha Indian religious transformation.

The structure and persistence of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949 is a example of cultural hegemony in India: it institutionalizes and normalizes the dominance of the majority (Hindu) community over a minority (Buddhist) sacred institution, frames this as natural and harmonious, and resists transformative change despite long-standing protest. The demand for repeal is both a practical plea for religious equality and a call to confront the living realities of cultural hegemony and religious pluralism in modern India.

While devotees experience Lord Balaji at Tirupati as Vishnu and the figure at Bodh Gaya as Shiva (or as a shared sacred site), critical historical evidence overwhelmingly confirms that both murtis arose from Buddhist tradition—the actual reality is Buddhist, concealed through the workings of cultural hegemony and the mechanisms of religious transformation and appropriation.

From "Subjective" to "Actual" Reality

Subjective realities (Balaji as Vishnu, Buddha as Shiva) are deeply rooted, socially accepted, and performatively "real" for devotees—but are products of centuries of appropriation, legend-making, and cultural hegemony.

The historical reality, reconstructed through critical study, reveals that these sites—Tirupati, Bodh Gaya, and many others—were originally Buddhist in identity, and that the deities now worshipped are not the "actual" or original ones, but transformations layered on top of older, mostly Buddhist, sanctities.

The process of "proving" this reality involves exposing the mechanisms of hegemonic overwriting and reclaiming submerged or erased histories.

Visionary Outcome

By embarking on a strategy of truth-telling, plural recognition, and institutional reform, India can transform historic wounds into bridges—affirming its position as an exemplar of religious pluralism and cultural justice. The objective is not to "unmake" contemporary traditions but to honor the fullness of India's sacred inheritance, empowering all communities to participate meaningfully in the preservation and celebration of its extraordinary spiritual legacy.

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Storytelling and Subaltern Realities: Chau Dance as a Reflection of Lived Experiences and Cultural Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Purpose
This study investigates the Chau dance of Purulia (West Bengal), Odisha, and Jharkhand as a critical cultural site where storytelling becomes an act of resistance. By focusing on Chau's embodied narratives, the paper explores how the performance reimagines subaltern histories—particularly through figures like Birsa Munda—and articulates political memory and cultural survival.
Design/Methodology
Grounded in decolonial and subaltern theory, this interdisciplinary research employs performance analysis, ethnographic interpretation, and textual engagement with oral poetry (e.g., Swaraj Basu's *Kala Gulab*). The methodology emphasizes close readings of dance performances and their embedded historical-political symbolism.
Findings
Chau is revealed not merely as folkloric performance but as an "embodied archive" that preserves and renegotiates subaltern memory. Through the kinetic language of gesture, myth, and rhythm, the dance communicates layered narratives of displacement, dignity, and indigenous resistance. The inclusion of historical episodes like the Santal Rebellion and poetic texts deepens Chau's counter-narrative power against hegemonic cultural discourses.
Originality/Value
This paper offers a unique synthesis of folk performance and subaltern historiography, positioning Chau as a live site of cultural and political articulation. It reframes folk art as a medium of historical testimony and resistance against cultural erasure.
Implications
The study contributes to performance studies, subaltern historiography, and indigenous cultural preservation, asserting that traditional dance forms like Chau can inform contemporary dialogues on justice, identity, and memory.
Keywords
Chau dance, subaltern studies, Birsa Munda, cultural resistance, Kala Gula

INTRODUCTION

In the Indian folk traditions, the Chau dance of Purulia, Odisha, and Jharkhand emerges as a vibrant theatrical art form that is "as much a ritual offering as it is a performance" (Banerjee 74), drawing its dramatic power from the intersection of **oral folklore, mythological allegory**, and **embodied performance** to shape and assert the **social identity of marginalized communities**. Purulia's primitive landscape and historical evolution provide a crucial backdrop for understanding the development of Chau dance. The undulating terrain, the **red laterite soil, rugged hills, dense forests**, and seasonal climate of Purulia have historically nurtured a **semi-nomadic lifestyle** that forged a deep

interdependence between human life and nature. These geographical features shaped the livelihoods and spiritual practices of the people, many of which are reflected in Chau performances. To quote **Ananda Lal in this context,** "natural environment of Purulia forms an active agent in its folk theatre, influencing not only the aesthetics but also the rhythms and themes of performance" (Lal 213). Chau performances often depict the **worship of natural elements** like mountains, rivers, forests, and animals—underscoring this **ecological intimacy**.

The performative texts of Chau are deeply influenced by the lived experiences of early settlers engaged in **agriculture, forest foraging, and hunting**. These material conditions shaped their **cosmological views and oral traditions**, now reflected in narratives that blend epic myth with local legend. According to **Gautam Chatterjee**, "Chau is more than dance; it is an articulation of community memory, an aesthetic reply to marginality" (Chatterjee 52). The elaborate **masks**, **martial choreography**, and **ritualistic drumming** serve not only as artistic elements but as symbolic vehicles of collective resilience. In resisting the imposed narratives of "development" and modernity, Chau offers a decolonial aesthetic, one that privileges cyclical temporality, community voice, and indigenous epistemes. Its stories do not merely entertain—they re-inscribe histories omitted from written records, making Chau "a performative archive of resistance" (Schechner 119). Thus, the Purulia Chau must be understood not merely as folk entertainment, but as a philosophical, ecological, and political expression, preserving the sacred relationship between land, community, and cultural survival.

The spectators of Chau do not merely watch they *feel*, engaging in what **Susan Leigh Foster** describes as **"kinesthetic empathy,"** wherein "the audience connects with the dancer's emotional and physical experience through observation of movement" (Foster 5). In Chau, this empathy is heightened by the convergence of **myth, folklore, and legend**, where the **performer's body becomes a living text**, inscribing narratives of **labour, displacement, and protest**. Rooted in tribal traditions—especially those of the **Santhal, Mahato, Kurmi, Munda, and Bhumij**, Chau has long functioned as a **site of cultural survival**, resisting hegemonic erasure.

The voice of the people, often suppressed in state histories or mainstream narratives, finds liberation through the expressive arts. In this sense, Chau dance, like oral poetry, becomes a kinetic text—choreographed testimony to the historical wounds, communal aspirations, and political memory of indigenous and marginalized communities The inclusion of contemporary poetic texts such as Saraj Basu's *Kalagulab* deepens this discourse, as the poem itself becomes a vital lens to understand how Chau's socio-cultural space reflects and resists hegemonic definitions of progress, identity, and belonging.

While dominant frameworks have historically dismissed such traditions as *"primitive folklore"*, scholars like **Richard Schechner** argue that performance "is not just doing, but showing doing"—a gesture imbued with **historical and political agency** (Schechner 28). The **subaltern silence**, as **Gayatri Spivak** notes, is not absence but **a strategy of survival and resistance**, a repository of **pain, memory, and inherited wisdom** (Spivak 287). In this sense, Chau becomes a **counter-space** where **marginalized voices reassert their place in history**, outside the boundaries of written archives and dominant discourses. It is here that **postcolonial theory and performative epistemology** converge, illuminating Chau as both demonstration and transformation.

This paper aims to critically explore **Chau dance as a subaltern performative tradition** that articulates resistance, memory, and ecological consciousness through embodied storytelling. It seeks to analyse the performances, particularly in the Purulia region to extract the of Chau as a living archive for communities historically excluded from dominant historiographical narratives. Drawing on postcolonial, ecological, and performative theories, this study highlights Chau's relevance in contemporary cultural discourse and education, while emphasizing its role in reimagining mythology and asserting indigenous identity within both national and global frameworks.

Body

As Chau dance evolved, its thematic palette expanded beyond the epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to include politically resonant and socially grounded narratives. The entry of female performers and subaltern choreographers has significantly redefined the performative space, transforming Chau into a medium of protest and identity assertion. These modern adaptations underscore a growing consciousness among marginalized communities, who utilize Chau not only as aesthetic practice but as cultural resistance against erasure and exclusion.

During the pre-colonial period, tribal and lower-caste communities lived in forest-based and agrarian economies, sustained by customary land rights and community governance. However, colonial

interventions, particularly the **Permanent Settlement Act (1793)** and **Indian Forest Acts** disrupted these systems, leading to **economic disenfranchisement and cultural fragmentation**. The **Santal Hul (1855)** and the **Birsa Munda Uprising (1895–1900)** are pivotal markers of indigenous resistance. As Ranajit Guha notes, these movements "challenged not just colonial domination but internal structures of social hierarchy" (Guha 23). Yet their voices were suppressed, their legacies misrepresented or ignored in official historiography.

The marginalization of Chau performers today is rooted in this layered history. These communities, Mahato, Kurmi, Munda, Santal, Bhumij often face structural barriers due to their Scheduled Caste/Tribe status, subsistence economies, and cultural stigmatization. Their animistic beliefs and oral traditions, long dismissed as "primitive," are in fact vital epistemologies that survive through performance. In this context, Chau becomes a site of cultural memory, where dance functions as archive, resistance, and revival.

Within this textured landscape, the poem "*Kala Gulab*" by Swaraj Basu unfurls like a wound that sings. Translated into the current inquiry, the poem becomes more than metaphor; it stands as a declaration of presence from a people long cast in the shadows of "development." Its verses remember Birsa Munda, Sidhu, and Kanhu — names that throb with the pulse of unfinished revolutions, roots tangled in soil that refuses to forget. In *Kalagulab*, Saraj Basu gives voice to the Chau community's lived experiences, challenging dominant narratives of "development" and "progress." Through evocative imagery, "We work as labours day in and day out like the bovine ox", the poet reclaims metaphors of subjugation, transforming them into emblems of resilience and dignity. The comparison to the ox signifies a deep-rooted, earth-bound existence, emphasizing connection to land, labor, and ritual. Rather than romanticizing hardship, Basu critiques capitalist exploitation "You take away all that we have and increase your popularity" highlights indigenous lives are commodified by mainstream narratives of progress.

Rituals like evening dances to the rhythm of *madol* and chants of "*Dhi dhin tang dhitang*" assert cultural continuity as resistance. By invoking Birsa Munda, Sidhu, and Kanhu, the poem links present struggles to historic rebellions. The rhetorical query, "How did we develop then?" exposes the hypocrisy of development discourse that ignores sustainable indigenous practices. Importantly, the poet notes evolving gender roles "We are the same only learned to be presentable…" signifying a hybrid identity where modernity and tradition coexist. Basu's poem exemplifies what Martha Nussbaum terms "literary empathy," allowing readers to inhabit the Chau community's emotional world and reimagine subaltern resilience beyond imposed binaries of "primitive" and "civilized."

Despite stylistic distinctions Purulia's martial masks, Mayurbhanj's lyrical subtlety, and Saraikela's courtly grace each Chau form shares a unifying subaltern ethos. As Ananda Lal suggests, "Chau reclaims space for the rural voice through movement, embodying what the text omits" (Lal 215). Thus, Chau resists not only historical silencing but reasserts indigenous agency through performance.

The Chau performers often come from communities that are structurally marginalized due to their Caste and tribe affiliation (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes), economic dependence on seasonal labour, subsistence farming, or artisan work, lack of access to education, healthcare, and land ownership, and cultural othering: Their ritual practices, animistic faith systems, and oral traditions were often dismissed as "primitive" by both colonial administrators and postcolonial nationalist discourses. Chau dance in its three stylized forms prominent regional styles, Purulia Chau (West Bengal) emphasizing martial vigour and the use of elaborate masks, Mayurbhanj Chau (Odisha) known for its subtlety and maskless expressions and Saraikela Chau (Jharkhand) incorporating refined gestures and courtly influences despite regional differences has a unifying thread in common, their deep association with subaltern communities.

The overall analysis positions Chau as a dynamic cultural performance that gives voice to subaltern narratives, often excluded from dominant historiographies. In the Gramscian and Subaltern Studies tradition (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988), the term "subaltern" refers to those who exist outside the circuits of hegemonic power. Chau, in this context, becomes a vernacular archive where marginalized communities, particularly tribal and agrarian groups who narrate histories of dispossession, resistance, and survival. Performers, many of whom come from the peripheries of caste and class hierarchies, embed themes of land alienation, ecological degradation, and socio-political marginalization in their movement, mask, and rhythm.

For instance, Sunita Mahato's scripting and performance of *Sankhasur Badha* marks a significant feminist intervention. Her retelling critiques patriarchal and caste structures with mythological inversion, aligning with Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern women are often doubly silenced, first by the structures of colonialism and second by

indigenous patriarchy. In scripting myth from below, Mahato enacts what Saurabh Dube (2004) calls a "tangled temporality" where folk tradition and contemporary dissent converge. Her authorship becomes not just creative but insurgent, reclaiming narrative space through embodied resistance.

The figure of Birsa Munda (1875–1900), often neglected in nationalist metanarratives, has gained renewed cultural presence in Chau performances across Jharkhand and Purulia. Reinscribed through folk dramatization, Birsa's life is not merely remembered but restored. His story becomes a symbolic articulation of indigenous resistance against colonial rule and neoliberal exploitation. These performances resonate with the ideas of Edward Said (1978), who argues that reclaiming narrative space is central to decolonization. By portraying Birsa as a sacred ancestral figure, Chau resists domestication as a passive icon in state rhetoric, transforming him into a kinetic force of dissent.

The martial and ritualistic elements of Chau—such as the *madol* drum, acrobatic leaps, and the use of masks—further contribute to this resistance aesthetics. Drawing on Glotfelty and Fromm's (1996) ecocritical framework, one can argue that the dancing body in Chau is not only a political text but also an ecological signifier—defending indigenous symbiosis with land and community. In this sense, performance becomes protest; the stage becomes a battlefield where myth meets materiality, and folklore contests formal history.

As Tapati Mukherjee (2021) asserts, "the symbolism of Chau masks and choreography constructs a counter-narrative to erasures in national memory." The very act of re-performing Birsa's defiance becomes an act of survival and insurgency. It reflects what Partha Chatterjee (1993) calls the "fragmented nation," where vernacular publics reclaim fractured identities through cultural means. Chau, thus, is more than folk art—it is a living, breathing grammar of subaltern resistance.

In the absence of written records or elite patronage, Chau dance has persisted as a people's artform, preserving subaltern cosmology, collective memory, and resistance. Drawing from oral narration, barefoot martial movements, and symbolic masks, Chau subverts dominant, textual Brahmanical traditions by asserting a vernacular, non-elite cultural identity (Spivak, 1988; Dube, 2004). This non-literate mode of transmission echoes Judith Butler's notion of the body as a "continual and incessant materializing of possibilities" (Butler, 1993), where performance becomes an act of both survival and authorship.

In recent decades, the rise of female performers like Shilpa Mahato, Sunita Mahato, and Kusum Soren from Purulia represents a growing feminist subaltern consciousness. Their choreographies integrate contemporary issues—land alienation, gender justice, and tribal pride—into Chau narratives, aligning with Ranajit Guha's call to recognize subaltern agency within cultural forms (Guha, 1982). Yet, systemic challenges like limited funding, urban-centric cultural policy, and institutional exclusion threaten the autonomy of these performers, reflecting Spivak's argument that the subaltern often "cannot speak" within dominant structures unless modes of cultural translation and recognition are transformed (Spivak, 1988).

Any meaningful analysis of Chau as an aesthetic-political form must situate it within the Natyashastra (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), the foundational Indian treatise on dramaturgy. The Natyashastra's concepts of *katha* (narrative), *bhava-rasa* (emotion-aesthetic synthesis), and performative gesture (*angika-abhinaya*) provide critical insight into Chau's modulation of affect and myth. While classical theatre declined during the medieval period, folk theatre like Chau flourished, particularly from the 15th and 16th centuries, as a medium of dramatic expression rooted in epics, folklore, and biographical legends (Satpathy, 2001). Chau thus became a dominant form of *lokanatyam* (people's theatre), enabling rural communities to articulate cultural and moral values through stylized embodiment.

The Chau performers performing in open-air settings, often on village grounds offers an immersive form of storytelling where kinetic empathy bridges the gap between performer and audience. As Rustom Bharucha observes, "performance is a practice of remembering" (Bharucha, 1993, p. 90), and Chau becomes a site of *embodied historiography*, a term denoting the transmission of history through movement and gesture in the absence of written record. The acrobatics, mask-wearing, and musical rhythm (*madol* drum beats) serve as non-literate archival forms encoding inter-generational knowledge, trauma, and defiance.

Chau's narratives draw deeply from Indian epics—the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Devi Mahatmya*. For instance, performances like *Shiva Tandava*, *Arjuna's Battle*, and *Mahishasura Mardini* depict divine rage, warrior heroism, and feminine power. These stories, when rendered through the Chau idiom, move beyond religious retellings to embody *subaltern consciousness*, regional identity, and anti-colonial resistance (Guha, 1982; Banerjee, 2020). In Chau, *Shiva's Tandava*, drawn from the *Shiva Purana*, is portrayed using vigorous leaps, frenetic

footwork, and a mask featuring a third eye, symbolizing both divine energy and protest. The mythic dance, performed barefoot on village soil, marks a rejection of Vedic elitism and aligns Shiva with tribal and marginalized communities (Dube, 2004). His refusal to acknowledge Daksha's sacrifice and caste ritualism in the myth is reimagined in Chau as a symbolic rupture from Brahmanical authority, an interpretation consistent with Spivak's (1988) notion of subaltern articulation through embodied forms.

Indian creation myths also find resonance in Chau storytelling. The Nasadiya Sukta of the *Rig Veda* poetically explores the uncertainty of cosmic origins, while Hesiod's Theogony (700 BCE) traces the world's emergence from Chaos to structured divinity, and Egyptian cosmology narrates the solitary God Atumn rising from Nun's primordial waters to initiate creation. These mythic visions of cyclical time and elemental force find visual translation in Chau, particularly in dances like *Shiva Tandava*, which aligns with the idea of destruction as a path to regeneration. As seen in *Markandeya Purana* and *Linga Purana*, Shiva's dance in Chau is not merely spectacle—it is a cosmological argument performed through form.

Further, Chau's emotional arc is constructed using the principles of *rasa*, as outlined in the Natyashastra. Performances like *Mahishasura Mardini* balance *vira* (heroic) and *raudra* (furious) rasas to portray the goddess Durga not as a passive consort but as a fierce protector of dharma. Sushila Jain's (1990) analysis reinforces this interpretation: "Durga is not a victim but a warrior, a protector of truth and justice." These aesthetics of resistance are heightened through sound, costume, and barefoot movement, evoking what Bharucha (1993) terms "the political unconscious of performance."

The *Nasadiya Sukta* from the *Rig Veda* explores the origins of the cosmos with poetic ambiguity, reflecting on the creation as an interconnected process. Hesiod's *Theogony* describes the emergence of the universe from *Chaos*, leading to the formation of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Sky) : Creation myths centre around the god Atum, who emerges from the chaotic waters of *Nun* to create the world.



A picture extracted from Shiv Tandava (a scene collected from youtube)

The portrayal of Arjuna's heroic narratives, the battle scenes often echoes the grandeur of Heracles' feats and the symbolic struggle of Horus. Stories of Arjuna is **The Kshatriya Ideal and Warrior Identity** from the *Mahabharata* epitomize duty and moral dilemmas.

"You grieve for those who should not be grieved for, and yet you speak words of wisdom. The wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead." (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 11).

Arjuna's battlefield prowess is immortalized in the *Mahabharata*, particularly in the Kurukshetra war. His **duel with Karna and the Bhagavad Gita discourse** are two primary episodes depicted in Chau dance. The **warrior archetype in Chau dance** is characterized by exaggerated battle movements inspired by **martial techniques**, high-energy **weapon choreography** using wooden swords and shields, iconic moments like Arjuna **shooting the Pashupatastra**, represented through coordinated leaps and dramatic gestures. Mention subaltern elements

Unlike classical retellings that privilege Kshatriya ideals, Chau performances portray that Arjuna also **highlights the role of common foot soldiers**, the unseen warriors of the Mahabharata. As Chatterjee (1993) argues, folk narratives often **decentre elite protagonists**, bringing **ordinary warriors** to the forefront.

In Chau dance, Arjuna's quest for celestial weapons is dramatized with elaborate martial choreography. The labours of Heracles reflect themes of endurance and divine intervention. Both Arjuna and Heracles are archetypes of flawed but heroic individuals seeking purpose. Horus's battles against Seth, representing the struggle between order and chaos, mirror the moral and cosmic battles seen in Indian mythology.

"Sankhasur Badha," originally part of the oral performance repertoire in Purulia Chau, in the referred manuscript is scripted by **Sunita Mahato**, a female Chau artist from a rural community. The transition from **oral narrative to written script** marks a significant moment in subaltern literary history. Historically, Brahmanical and elite textual traditions have dominated Indian literature, often excluding voices from tribal, backward-caste, and rural women's spaces. By scripting a Chau pala traditionally preserved through memory, Sunita Mahato challenges this hegemony and **asserts the authority of the subaltern to narrate, document, and interpret their own stories**.

This movement from oral to written also implies

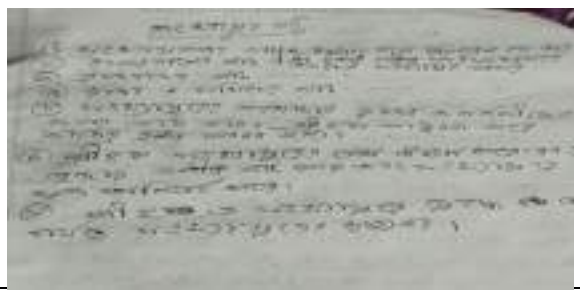
agency. As **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the subaltern is often spoken for, not allowed to speak. Mahato's authorship and narration mark a **radical act of reclaiming authorship**, allowing the marginalized voice not only to perform but to inscribe itself into cultural memory.

The process of creating any Chau pala particularly one led by a woman from a rural community is itself deeply subaltern. The **production of the script**, choreography, costumes, and music for *Sankhasur Badha* involved, **collective labour** from local artisans and performers, often from economically vulnerable community., The use of **indigenous materials**, local mythologies, and non-urban spaces of rehearsal and minimal access to institutional funding or elite cultural validation.

Oral texts, traditionally sidelined in literary canons, are now acknowledged for their **social impact** and narrative richness. As Walter J. Ong (1982) emphasizes in *Orality and Literacy*, oral traditions serve as living archives—encoding collective memory, resistance, and identity through performance. In **Chau dance**, oral storytelling transforms myth into a subaltern voice, preserving indigenous cosmologies while critiquing caste, gender, and colonial hierarchies (Spivak, 1988; Guha, 1982). These performances become crucial social tools for voicing injustice, reclaiming silenced histories, and resisting erasure.

Globally, this role of oral art resonates with literary works that address marginalization and cultural continuity. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck (1939) portrays the dispossessed as resilient agents of change a motif echoed in Chau's rural performers addressing land alienation and gender justice. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) shows memory as healing, mirroring Chau's community bonding through ritualistic dance. As Bharucha (1993) notes, "performance is a practice of remembering," where embodied storytelling bridges past and present.

Incorporating oral texts into mainstream literature democratizes cultural narratives, expanding beyond written hegemonies. Chau's oral performance texts, when viewed through this lens, emerge not just as folklore, but as potent literary and **sociopolitical expressions** that enrich both Indian and global literature.



An original oral script of " Sankhasur Badha" passed on by a female Chau Dancer Sunita Mahato to me during her interview in Purulia .

Pala Sankhasur Badha: The Dramatic Defeat of the Demon

The Pala tradition of folk theatre as discussed, practiced in regions like Purulia, has long served as a repository for mythic narratives and social ideals. One notable performance in this tradition is *Sankhasur Badha*, the dramatic recounting of the defeat of the demon Sankhasur. This folk drama, transmitted orally through generations, captures the spirit of communal resistance against tyranny and the triumph of righteousness over evil. As defined by Taylor, folklore comprises "the material that is handed on by tradition either by word of mouth or by custom and practice" (Taylor, 1985, p. 12). In this performance, creative impulses and traditional learning converge to present a narrative that is both entertaining and didactic. A better understanding of the play is possible if we discuss the Pala from a critical perspective. The stage set up, use of language, dramatic themes and cultural significance,

Like other folk dramas, *Sankhasur Badha* is characterized by a lack of formal staging and a reliance on local dialects, improvisation, and ritualistic invocation. The performance begins with an invocation akin to the *Asar Bandana*, an introductory segment that serves to bridge the gap between performers and the audience introduces the title of the play, invokes divine blessings from Gods, Goddesses, or Sufi saints (*Pirs*), and formally presents the performance troupe (Hollander, 2007). This ritualistic opening not only sets the thematic tone but also aligns the performance with traditional beliefs and communal ethos. Chau performance begins with the ritualistic invocation like other Folk Dramas which serves to bridge the gap between performers and the audience. This establishes a sacred and communal connection between performers and spectators (Acharya, 2013). While specific terminologies like "Asar Bandana" are not explicitly mentioned in available sources, the practice of commencing with invocations is well-documented.

In *Sankhasur Badha*, the language is both lyrical and forceful. The hero, whose identity is sometimes conflated with legendary warriors, confronts the demon with lines that have been preserved in oral tradition. As recorded in a critical edition of the performance (Dutta, 1987), the hero declares:

Hero: "O Sankhasur, you who have spread darkness over our land, your tyranny ends this very day! By the power of the sacred flame and the will of the people, I shall vanquish thee!" (Dutta, 1987, p. 34) In response, the demon Sankhasur retorts with defiance:

Sankhasur: "I fear no mortal, for my strength is eternal, and my wrath knows no bounds!" (Dutta, 1987, p. 35) Such dialogues are interspersed with musical interludes and vigorous dance movements.

The narrative of *Sankhasur Badha* is steeped in moral and ethical symbolism. It is a tale that extols the virtues of bravery and righteousness while critiquing the forces of chaos and injustice. The defeat of Sankhasur is not merely a mythic event but serves as a metaphor for the subaltern community's struggle against oppression. The performance employs stark, memorable dialogues and rhythmic gestures, hallmarks of Chau grammar to evoke both awe and moral introspection among the audience.

Furthermore, the performance's reliance on oral tradition ensures that the language remains fluid and adaptive. The dialogues, though rooted in ancient texts, are reinterpreted by each generation of performers, thereby reinforcing the living nature of folk literature (Satpathy, 2001).

Pala Sankhasur Badha exemplifies the enduring power of folk drama to convey complex moral narratives in an accessible and engaging form. Through its use of rhythmic dialogue, traditional music, and dynamic performance techniques, the drama not only preserves ancient myths but also offers contemporary audiences a reflection on the perennial struggle between good and evil.

It is to be noted that the tale of *Sankhasur Badha*, adapted from **indigenous mythology**, is rich in symbolic subaltern resistance. **Sankhasur**, the asura or demon, is not simply a villain but may be read as a **symbol of suppressed indigenous power**, a figure often demonized in classical Hindu narratives. The defeat of Sankhasur by a goddess (possibly an echo of Durga or a feminine divine force) can be reinterpreted through a **folk cosmology**, where local gods and spirits battle exploitative or alien forces. In subaltern discourse, this can be framed not as divine intervention but as a **metaphor for grassroots uprising** against feudal or colonial control. The moral codes, metaphors, and ethics in the script are **grounded in folk logic** not shastric Brahmanism—placing the values of local justice, retribution, and survival above dharmic duty. Moreover, the goddess in the narrative may be portrayed not as a remote ideal but as a **folk embodiment of female power**, resonating with tribal matriarchal traditions and **eco-feminist resistance**.

Chau is not simply a folk relic; it is a performative discourse of embodied memory, gendered resistance, and cosmic storytelling. It reflects the ecological, spiritual, and political consciousness of marginalized communities who continue to speak—not through the pen, but through dance.

Research Methodology and tools

This study employs a **qualitative interpretative approach**, integrating **performance analysis, oral narrative study, and subaltern theory**. It draws upon, poem Kala Gulab, reference to Shiv Tandava, **primary materials** such as scripts (e.g., *Sankhasur Badha* by Sunita Mahato), **field observations**, **interviews notably Sunita Mahato)**, and **video recordings** of performances, video documentation of Chau performances portraying **Birsa Munda and o**bservational field notes from Chau performances in Purulia. The study uses: t**extual analysis** of oral-to-scripted palas (folk plays), e**mbodied performance analysis** (gesture, rhythm, spatial dynamics), d**iscourse analysis** to assess socio-political undercurrents and i**ntersectional lens** (gender, caste, tribe, class)

These are analysed through the viewpoints of **Subaltern Studies**, **decolonial aesthetics**, and **embodied historiography**.

Research Findings

The analysis highlights key findings, focusing on Chau as a vehicle of subaltern expression, the rewriting of myths and histories through Birsa Munda on stage, the emergence of feminized subaltern narratives, and performance as protest and more grave issues, all of which reflect urgent socio-political concerns and cultural resistance relevant in today's context.

Chau as a vehicle of subaltern expression articulate their own stories, values, and resistances. Chau dance emerges as a **platform for subaltern communities** to Performers often come from tribal or marginalized agrarian backgrounds, and their narratives reflect **themes of land alienation, economic hardship, and cultural erasure**. The script of *Sankhasur Badha*, authored and performed by **Sunita Mahato**, reflects a **feminist subaltern perspective**. It critiques structural power through the retelling of myth while drawing parallels to contemporary gender and caste oppression. The process of scripting and performing by a rural woman constitutes a **radical reclamation of voice and authorship**.

The figure of **Birsa Munda** is increasingly incorporated into Chau performances, particularly in Purulia and Jharkhand. These Palas reframe him not as a distant rebel but as a **living ancestral force**, a spiritual and political icon. His story becomes a **symbolic resistance** to both colonial and contemporary injustice. The ritualistic and martial elements of Chau mask use, madol (drum) rhythms, and acrobatic dance become **aesthetic expressions of protest**. The **dancing body** encodes subaltern

histories, challenges erasure, and offers **counter-narratives** to mainstream cultural discourse.

The oral texts and embodied stories in Chau including the retelling of Birsa Munda's legacy—contribute richly to **global literature and mythology studies** by asserting **subaltern narratives** into the mainstream. As **Gayatri Spivak** posits in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), dominant historiographies often silence marginal voices. Chau dance challenges this by re-encoding myth and history through movement, voice, rhythm, and communal memory.

In this context, **Birsa becomes both myth and memory**, a living archive of resistance akin to legendary figures in global mythology (e.g., Prometheus, Heracles, or Moses). This transforms Chau into a **non-canonical epic tradition**, akin to Homeric oral tradition or African griot storytelling.

The integration of dance as literature (akin to Morrison's *Beloved* or Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) exemplifies ways in which embodied storytelling preserves collective trauma and aspiration, making the study globally relevant.

Crucially, this cultural discourse is not static. The inclusion of **female performers** such as **Shilpa Mahato**, **Sunita Mahato**, and **Kusum Soren**, marks a shift in authorship and visibility. Their choreographies not only reinterpret traditional tales but **infuse Chau with themes of gender justice, land alienation, and indigenous pride**. These women resist both **patriarchal norms and institutional gatekeeping**, offering a **counter-narrative to the masculinist, caste-dominant cultural paradigm**. Yet their work remains precarious undervalued in urban-centric policy frameworks and dependent on **inconsistent funding** and **folk-festival tokenism**. Thus, Chau dance today is not only **aesthetic performance** but **political practice**—a site where **movement becomes meaning**, and memory becomes a **form of resistance** against silencing.

"Without rasa, there is no art," states the *Natyashastra*—a foundational truth that finds renewed expression in Chau, where **narrative, movement, and emotion converge** to reflect the **lived experiences of subaltern communities**. Although composed between 2000 BCE and the 4th century CE, the *Natyashastra*'s principles of **bhava (emotion)** and **rasa (aesthetic essence)** remain embedded in the performative grammar of Chau. The stylized gestures (*mudras*), symbolic masks, and dynamic rhythm create a **multi-sensory engagement** that moves beyond entertainment into **social communication**.

Chau's evolution across centuries marks it as both **continuity and rupture** rooted in Sanskritic tradition but shaped profoundly by **oral, tribal, and non-Brahmanical epistemologies**. During the medieval period, while courtly arts flourished, **folk dramaturgy remained the voice of the people**, eventually solidifying in the 15th and 16th centuries as a dominant form of narrative performance in eastern India. As **Ananda Lal** argues, "Indian folk theatre is not a degenerated form of classical drama but an alternative tradition with its own aesthetic integrity" (Lal 98).

This aesthetic finds new ground in Chau, especially with the inclusion of contemporary themes, **displacement, ecological degradation, gender-based violence, and land alienation**—interpreted through **dance-as-resistance**. The emotional range in Chau, heightened by **kinesthetic empathy**, allows spectators to feel, not just see, the **realities of subaltern lives**.

Chau dance in **Purulia (West Bengal)**, **Mayurbhanj (Odisha)**, and **Saraikela (Jharkhand)** demonstrates a vibrant syncretism of **martial movement, stylized gestures, and mythic storytelling**. Its repertoire frequently draws from pan-Indian epics such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Devi Mahatmya*, yet these performances transcend mere religious retellings. In Chau, the stories of **Shiva's Tandava**, **Arjuna's battle scenes**, or **Durga's slaying of Mahishasura** become not only metaphysical or religious expressions but also **social allegories**, **vehicles for regional memory**, and acts of **subaltern reclamation**.

As **Ranajit Guha** suggests in *Subaltern Studies*, "folk traditions reflect the consciousness of those excluded from elite historiography" (Guha, 1982). Chau dancers, primarily from marginalized communities like the **Mahato, Kurmi, Bhumij, and Santhal**, reinterpret these mythic structures not just to affirm religious devotion but to express **regional identity**, **community resilience**, and **performative protest**. In this way, Chau becomes a **non-textual archive**, a living history where myth functions as metaphor for ongoing realities of oppression, survival, and spiritual endurance.

Rustom Bharucha's insight that "performance is a practice of remembering" (1993, p. 90) provides a crucial framework for analyzing Chau. Bharucha views traditional performance not as passive preservation of the past but as an **active re-inscription of cultural memory**. In Chau, **the body is the script**, and each movement becomes an act of historiography. This aligns with **Judith Butler's** claim that "the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities" (Butler, 1993). Within this context, Chau's codified battle steps, ritual masks, and bodily

discipline function as **vehicles of historical consciousness** in communities whose histories are otherwise **underrepresented or erased** from national archives.

A notable example is the Shiva Tandava performance. This tale, derived from the *Shiva Purana*, *Linga Purana*, and *Markandeya Purana* depicts Shiva's cosmic dance of destruction following the insult and death of Sati, his consort. In Chau, this is dramatized with acrobatic leaps, forceful stomps, and wide-mouthed, bulging-eyed masks, often featuring the third eye and matted locks of Shiva. The performance physically manifests cosmic equilibrium, suggesting that **destruction paves the way for regeneration**, a metaphor not lost on communities grappling with social erasure and displacement. As one Chau performer remarked during a field interview, "When I dance Shiva's Tandava, I am not only a god—I am my father's grief, my mother's silence, and my people's anger" (Mahato, 2024).

Chau thus functions within an **aesthetic system of rasa (emotive flavor)** and **bhava (expressed emotion)** as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, yet it transforms these classical paradigms through its **folk logic**. While *Natyashastra* discusses **katha (storytelling)** as central to drama, Chau reworks this principle through a **kinetic language**, favoring **bodily communication over verbal dialogue**. As **Ananda Lal** notes, "Folk theatre like Chau uses movement and rhythm to tell stories the text does not always permit" (Lal, 2004, p. 215).

This paper not only contributes to the **mythopoetic reimagination of tribal history** through Chau, but also resonates with the **educational reform agendas of NEP 2020/25**, by foregrounding marginalized voices, embracing performative learning, and revitalizing Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) through a critical lens.

The study centres around **Chau**, a folk form rooted in tribal knowledge, mythology, and oral performance. Focus on regional voices (Bhumij, Santhal, Mahato) and indigenous Chau as a performative pedagogy embodies experiential, participatory learning, especially in history, literature, and civic education. linguistic expression through performance. Themes of social justice, equality, and anti-caste/gender oppression are discussed through Birsa's role. The paper encourages reinterpretation of mythology and history, fostering deeper inquiry and expression. Chau is proposed as a mode of decolonizing education, breaking textual hegemony by valuing embodied learning.

This research aligns with key principles of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, particularly in promoting Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) by centering around Chau, a folk tradition rooted in indigenous cosmology, oral narratives, and performative pedagogy (Lal, 2004; Chatterjee, 2019). Through its multilingual and multicultural fabric, featuring the voices of Bhumij, Santhal, and Mahato communities, Chau fosters linguistic diversity and regional cultural identity. As an **art-integrated educational tool**, it cultivates participatory learning in history, literature, and civic values. By invoking figures like Birsa Munda, Chau interrogates caste and gender oppression, supporting value-based education. It thus serves as a creative, critical, and decolonial pedagogical model.

This paper bring into line with the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** through multiple foundational pillars. It promotes **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)** by foregrounding Chau tribal performance tradition deeply embedded in oral mythology and indigenous epistemology (Lal, 2004; Chatterjee, 2019). Emphasizing **multilingual and cultural education**, it gives space to Bhumij, Santhal, and Mahato voices. As **art-integrated learning**, Chau fosters experiential, embodied education across history and literature. Through the portrayal of Birsa Munda, the dance form nurtures **value-based and constitutional learning**, emphasizing justice and equity. Finally, by glorifying oral storytelling and performance, it enables **critical thinking** and **decolonial pedagogy**, reimagining curriculum and educational delivery.

Therefore, Chau dance is more than a folkloric performance, it is an embodied historiography, a decolonial narrative strategy, and a repository of collective memory. It enables subaltern communities to perform their silenced truths, inscribe their cosmologies, and resist cultural hegemony. The divine becomes political, and mythology becomes a language of survival, articulated through sweat, breath, drum, and silence.

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Spiritual Landscapes and Sovereign Claims: A Tribal Worldview

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ABSTRACT

The spiritual and cosmological aspects of *Birsa Munda's* leadership in an Adivasi *land rights* movement in eastern India are examined in this study. By invoking a *tribal cosmology* in which land is not just territory but a living, sacred creature inhabited by ancient spirits, his battle challenges prevailing notions of development and legal *sovereignty*. The study examines how ideas of *sovereignty*, resistance, and ecological stewardship are fundamentally influenced by indigenous cosmological beliefs. This study underscores the drawbacks of state-centric and solely economic interpretations of land conflicts in tribal areas by redefining *Birsa Munda's* movement within an indigenous epistemological framework.

Purpose:
The study analyses *Birsa Munda's* struggle for *land rights* as a case study to investigate how tribal cosmologies influence contemporary indigenous resistance movements citing the struggle for *land rights* in *Birsa Munda* as an example. It aims to express an indigenous understanding of *sovereignty* that is based on spiritual ties to the land.

Methodologies:
The study utilizes qualitative methods such as oral histories, ethnographic fieldwork, and textual analysis of archives and tribal narratives. Furthermore included is a comparative analysis with other indigenous movements throughout the world.

Results:
The procession of *Birsa Munda* illustrates how spiritual identities and ancestry links are intricately linked to land claims. When sacred circumstances are disturbed, resistance results from both material expropriation and leads to a universal revolution.

Originality:
By challenging prevailing materialist and legalistic narratives, this study approaches political opposition via a cosmological lens. Tribal epistemologies, which are frequently disregarded in scholarly and policy discussions, are given greater prominence.

Implications:
The results provide more culturally relevant and long-lasting frameworks for justice while urging lawmakers and scholars to incorporate indigenous worldviews in *land rights* discussions.

Keywords: *Indigenous sovereignty, tribal cosmology, land rights, Brisa Munda, spiritual ecology.*

INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming the Sacred in the Struggle for Land

In the dominant legal and developmental discourse, land is made abstract when it is measured, gridded, and monetized. Yet for many Indigenous communities across the world, land remains palpably alive: a sentient entity imbued with spirit, memory, and agency. Among the Adivasi communities of eastern India, this ontological tension between land-as-property and land-as-kin culminated in one of the most profound indigenous uprisings of the colonial period—**the Ulgulan**

("Great Tumult") led by **Birsa Munda** at the beginning of the 20th century[1]. It was the result of this ontological conflict between land as property and land as kin. The movement invoked an alternate cosmology in which land, ancestors, spirits (bonga), and the community were interconnected in a sacred geography, far from being an ordinary revolt over territory, revenues, or tenancy rights (Roy, 1912; Hoffmann, 1950).

This paper makes the case that the Birsa Munda movement should be reconstructed as a spiritual revolution rather than simply a tribal rebellion. It was an insurgent cosmology that questioned colonial and later postcolonial ideas of legality, development, and sovereignty. Birsa, in his role as Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth), did more than just lead a rebellion; he brought a world back to life. His supporters, those who were at times portrayed as peasants or crazies in historical accounts, saw themselves as representatives of sacred rebirth. Land was not "owned" but rather referred to in their songs, rituals, and dreams; sovereignty was inherited by cosmic obligation rather than enacted into law. These modes of resistance were expressed through ecological ethics, gendered land practices, oral prophecy, and ritual performance—all of which are still largely disregarded in popular legal and historic discussion.

In order to reveal a layered view of tribal resistance—one that emphasizes spiritual identity, cosmological governance, and ontological sovereignty—this study places Birsa Munda's land fight within a larger framework of indigenous epistemologies and holy cartographies. This study demonstrates how land claims arise from affective, ancestral, and sacred links rather than just rights-based reasoning by drawing on cultural research, oral histories, and cultural analysis of tribe songs, poetry, and ritual practices. This interpretation exposes the extent of epistemic violence involved in describing tribal land as just economic or legal property, in addition to reversing the materialist bias of the majority of state-centric land rights frameworks.

Land is an active agent of political resistance in these various regions rather than a passive platform for human activity. Indigenous cultures in each instance organise not only against enclosure and extraction but also against the erasure of entire worlds, where trees serve as archives, rivers as ancestors, and rituals as the rule of law. As global ecological crises and indigenous land struggles grow more intense, it becomes essential to acknowledge movements like Birsa Munda's—not just as pasts, but as epistemic futures. In this paper, a major shift is proposed: from legality as codification to legality as cosmic alignment; from sovereignty as control to sovereignty as custodianship; and from land rights to land partnerships. By promoting a decolonial view of land, law, and social life, it achieves this.

Methods and Materials

This study uses qualitative analysis based on comparative indigenous studies, critical historiography, and textual analysis. This research investigates how tribal cosmologies affect indigenous land resistance movements, with an emphasis on the legacy of Birsa Munda, by synthesizing existing secondary sources, both archival and contemporary, rather than undertaking original ethnographic fieldwork. Using publicly accessible academic literature, government documents, and digital oral history repositories, the approach emphasizes cultural epistemologies and decolonial frameworks.

1. **Analysis of Texts and Archives**

Critical textual analysis of colonial and postcolonial legal and ethnographic materials serves as the main methodological tool in this study, allowing for a deeper understanding of the ways in which land was created, controlled, and contested across time.

1.1 Colonial ethnographies, especially The Mundas and Their Country (1912) by S.C. Roy, which combines cultural and historical viewpoints. According to Roy's ethnography, Mundas wrote songs that portrayed colonisers as aggressive in order to oppose colonial control[2].

1.2 Missionary ethnographic records, especially those of J. B. Hoffmann, which assisted in creating protective laws regarding land and whose work culminated in the Encyclopaedia Mundarica which reflects the grievances of the Munda tribe with their land and cosmological beliefs.[3]

2. **Government Policies and Surveys**

2.1This study analysis of the government policies and surveys to understand the legal framework of land within which land conflicts are debated. These documents were analyzed for gaps between legal recognition and cultural legitimacy—especially in cases where land rights were treated as economic compensation rather than cosmological disruption.

2.2 **Parliamentary committee reports** on tribal welfare and displacement , data from the **Census of India** and **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act ,** implementation reports Development and displacement statistics from **NITI Aayog**, **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change**, and **Ministry of Rural Development** have been used as

sources.

3. **Digital Access to Indigenous Literature and Oral Traditions**

3.1 Indigenous oral traditions, songs, and stories that have been documented by academics or published by tribal rights organizations have been cited in the study. Tribal songs and oral histories from scholarly publications such as Being Adivasi, edited by Abhay Xaxa and Nandini Sundar are among the sources.

3.2 Online databases such as The People's Archive of Rural India (PARI)[6.] and the Indigenous Knowledge Systems portal (IKS Division, Ministry of Education), which contain digital oral histories and cultural practices of tribal communities

3.3 Digitized folktales and ritual accounts published by the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) Jharkhand and other regional institutions.[7.]

4. **Framework for Analysis: Cosmological and Decolonial Readings**

4.1 In order to comprehend tribal resistance, this study employs a decolonial methodology, paying particular attention to how indigenous worldviews interpret land. Deeply ingrained in Adivasi cosmologies, the research views land as a sacred and living presence rather than merely as property or a resource. According to this theory, land is a cosmological entity that is connected to ancestors, spirits, and ceremonial rituals that govern daily existence rather than being neutral or passive.

4.2 The theoretical lens is influenced by Indian scholars such as Ganesh Devy who emphasize that tribal knowledge systems and oral traditions are valid forms of political thought and ecological knowledge. For example, Ganesh Devy's work on cultural subalternity and linguistic traditions helps frame Adivasi songs and stories as archives of resistance.[4.]

4.3 Tribal songs, proverbs, and rites have been examined using a cosmological hermeneutics, which is the interpretation of symbols, rituals, and oral traditions (as recorded in works like as S.C. Roy's The Mundas and Their Country and in subsequent compilations by tribal researchers). This method makes it possible to understand land claims as spiritual acts of preservation and ancestry as well as political demands.

4.4 By centering these non-materialist worldviews, the framework challenges dominant legal interpretations that treat land conflicts as purely economic or administrative issues. Instead, it highlights how resistance often begins when the sacred balance between land, spirit, and community is disrupted—an idea often ignored in mainstream legal or policy debates.

Results: Cosmological Resistance and reclaiming sovereignty

The findings of this research show that Birsa Munda's struggle was a cosmic awakening rather than just a political or agrarian campaign. By closely examining tribal songs, oral traditions, and documents from the colonial era, this study discovers that land is viewed as a living entity with ancestors, spiritual duties, and environmental reciprocity. In his capacity as Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth), Birsa Munda assumes a sacred guardianship that positions him as a spiritual restorer of harmony between society and land in addition to being a leader.

Resistance as ritual renewal

A thorough investigation of Munda oral traditions, as recorded in books like as The Mundas and Their Country (S.C. Roy, 1912)[2.] and, more recently, Being Adivasi (Xaxa & Sundar, 2021)[5.], shows that ritual and symbolism, rather than just violence or protest, were used to express opposition. Colonial authorities are portrayed in songs gathered from the Munda oral culture as spiritual invaders who disturbed the sacred terrain. The idea that the British "cut the forest and silent the spirits" is a recurrent subject in these songs, illustrating the profound suffering brought on by ecological degradation.

In addition, during and after the uprising, traditions like Mage Parab (harvest celebration) and Sarhul (worship of the sal tree) gained new significance [7.]. In addition to serving as seasonal markers, these rituals exhibited the tribe's spiritual strength by asserting their ties to the natural world and resisting the legal frameworks that claimed their forests as "government territory." Thus, resistance was a cosmological and cultural need as well as a political effort.

Spiritual, Not State, Sovereignty

According to this study, Adivasi and Western juridical ideas of sovereignty diverge significantly. Sovereignty in tribal cosmologies is inherited by ecological preservation, ancestral memory, and ritual duty rather than imposed by laws or troops. Many tribal societies saw themselves as guardians rather than landowners, as Ganesh Devy has demonstrated in his articles on cultural subalternity.

This idea is best expressed by Birsa Munda's identification as Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth). He

was viewed as a cosmic steward, not a ruler, and was given the responsibility of restoring harmony between people and land.

Cosmological Legitimacy vs. Legal Recognition

The study's identification of the gap between tribal conceptions of land legitimacy and state-centric legal systems is one of its key findings. Restoring Adivasi land rights is the goal of laws like the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006). Implementation is still seriously faulty, though. Despite years of ceremonial and ancestral presence, more than half of claims submitted under the FRA are either denied or remain pending because there is insufficient "formal" documentation, according to Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2021) data.

While tribal epistemologies rely on oral memory, ritual practice, and ecological belonging, legal systems that need written evidence to prove land title exhibit epistemic prejudice. Many Adivasi elders use songline geographies—maps of the land created not with ink but with stories, seasons, and spirits—to trace their land rights, as demonstrated by oral testimony from digital platforms such as PARI (People's Archive of Rural India).

Birsa as a living cosmological symbol

Lastly, the study notes that Birsa Munda is a live representation of indigenous revival rather than just a historical figure. Birsa is invoked during spiritual rites, environmental protests, and land movements in modern-day Jharkhand and other tribal areas. For example, Birsa's notion of self-rule and spiritual sovereignty served as the basis for the Pathalgadi movement, in which tribal villages write constitutional rights on stone slabs as a means of local control.

Birsa's political disobedience is frequently recalled in tribal literature, official statues, and school curriculum. His greater significance, according to this study, comes from his cosmological role: he stands for a reassertion of holy geography, in which land is respected, described, and safeguarded rather than mined or sold.

Discussion

Birsa Munda's struggle cannot be reduced to a mere political rebellion. The Ulgulan was really a ritual act of restoration, an attempt to bring a chaotic world into compliance with the land's sacred laws, rather than a call for reform. Similar to many Indigenous cosmologies, the Munda worldview views land as a sentient being with memory, ancestry, and spirit rather than as lifeless terrain. In this situation, sovereignty is inherited by ecological obligation and spiritual alignment rather than granted by the law.

This discussion reframes Birsa's rebellion as an expression of cosmological sovereignty—a form of resistance that is enacted not only in slogans or skirmishes, but in songs, rituals, and collective memory. Drawing from oral testimonies, indigenous poetry, and ritual practice, we find that tribal movements often emerge not just in response to economic dispossession, but to the spiritual desecration of place. The forest, the river, the mountain—they are not resources, but relatives. Their disturbance is a cosmic offense.

By listening to the cultural languages of protest—songs sung at harvest, stories told around fires, festivals conducted under ancient trees—it unravels a legal and ethical framework encoded in oral tradition. It challenges the colonial and postcolonial state to reimagine law, not as a tool of control, but as a form of care for the sacred.

The Forest Speaks: Resistance in Song and Spirit

The spiritual poetics of the Adivasi worldview recast the forest not as a "resource" but as a living kin—*hitan re meneng bonga*, "the spirits sleep beneath the roots" (as one Oraon elder explained in a PARI oral history)[6]. In numerous oral testimonies, the forest is described not as wilderness but as temple, archive, and courtroom. Against colonial impositions of survey maps and legal titles, the Munda community offered a counter-cartography: one inscribed in song, in ritual, and in ancestral memory.

"Jaher than ma manitena,
Dharti bonga re godetena,
Sarkaari kagaz ghorache,
Amge geet re nyay ache."

("We do not bow at your court,
We kneel at the earth spirit's gate.
Your paper laws are foreign,
Our justice lives in song.") (PARI Oral Testimony, 2019)

This excerpt from a Kurukh protest song—sung during a forest rights demonstration in Jharkhand in 2019—epitomizes how legal sovereignty is reimagined through oral and spiritual epistemologies. When the land is seen as sacred and sentient, acts of resistance become acts of ritual renewal.

Cosmological Sovereignty: Birsa Munda as a Divine Interlocutor

Birsa Munda was far more than just a rebel; he was a cosmological medium who brought the voices of

ancestors and bonga (spirits) into the political sphere. His passionate and visionary lectures often mirrored the prophetic style of other indigenous leaders around the world, including Native American Ghost Dance prophets. This positioned him as a pathfinder rather than a warlord in the tribal worldview, repairing a shattered world psychologically.

He was known to proclaim:

"Ulgulan kara, dharti ke rakhwala bano!"

("Revolt! Take up arms to save the planet!")

These catchphrases, which combined spiritual commandment with ecological stewardship, are still deeply ingrained in contemporary Adivasi movements. This cosmological framing of leadership suggests that Adivasi political action is fundamentally inseparable from the sacred. This is not resistance for statehood—but for cosmic alignment.

Adivasi Legalities: Ritual as Record

Mainstream law demands proof: documents, seals, signatures. But tribal legalities function differently. Here, song and ceremony serve as affidavits of presence and belonging. The repeated performance of Sarhul, where the sal tree is worshipped, is both ecological thanksgiving and territorial affirmation. Similarly, festivals like Mage Parab and Sohrai are calendrical assertions of cultural and cosmological sovereignty [7].

In this regard: we must ask the question : How does a thousand-year-old song compare to a land deed?:

"Geet re mapa, itihas re likha— Bujho kagaz se nahi, dharti ki aatma se."

("The land is measured in song, History written not in papers, but in the earth's soul.") (PARI,2019)

Such poetic expressions, which appear frequently in tribal protest slogans and wall art during the Pathalgadi movement, defy bureaucratic norms of proof. They foreground the epistemic violence of demanding written evidence in an oral society—and demand a legal pluralism that honors indigenous ways of knowing.

Echoes Across the World: Comparative Cosmologies

By placing the Munda worldview in dialogue with other indigenous movements—such as the Mapuche of Chile, the Māori of Aotearoa, and the Standing Rock Sioux in North America—this study affirms the global nature of cosmological sovereignty. Whether it is the concept of *whenua* (Māori for land and placenta) or the sacred status of Black Hills for Lakota peoples, indigenous cosmologies share a refusal to abstract land from life.

Birsa Munda's cosmological resistance resonates with these traditions. His memory is carried in protest songs, stone tablets, and forest rituals—not because of nostalgia, but because he articulates a political vision that the modern state cannot see: a vision in which land rights are not about tenure, but about tending to sacred relationships.

Rethinking Land Policy: Toward a Plural Legal Imaginary

Policy frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act, while well-intentioned, fail to incorporate this cosmological worldview. They reduce land to commodity and culture to heritage. To meaningfully engage with Adivasi claims, the state must expand its legal imagination to include:

- **Ceremonial evidence** as proof of tenure.
- **Spiritual custodianship** as a form of governance.
- **Oral testimonies** as archival legitimacy.
- **Ritual and song** as living law.

Tribal land claims will continue to be rejected in the absence of such epistemic changes—not because they are untrue, but rather because they are not acknowledged.

Conclusion

The Ulgulan by Birsa Munda is reframed in this research as a significant act of cosmological resistance as opposed to a simple agrarian or political rebellion. Invoking a sacred connection between land, spirit, and community, Birsa questioned not only colonial power but also the fundamental tenets of Indian legal and developmental discourse. Instead of being a resource to be controlled, purchased, or sold, his position as Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth) was cosmological and affirmed a sovereign duty to care for the land as a living relative.

Through a close examination of tribal oral traditions, rituals, and cosmologies, this research underscores how indigenous worldviews interpret sovereignty not as a function of statehood, but as spiritual custodianship rooted in ancestral memory and ecological reciprocity (Roy, 1912; Xaxa & Sundar, 2021). The contrast between cosmological legitimacy and legal recognition highlights the epistemic violence inherent in bureaucratic systems that demand written proof of land tenure from oral cultures whose histories are etched in songs, rituals, and sacred sites (Devy, 2012).

From the Pathalgadi claims of self-rule to international indigenous protests that emphasize land as family rather than a commodity, Birsa's vision

continues to inspire modern indigenous movements. His memory endures as a living cosmology framework that many Adivasi tribes now use to interact with the outside world, in addition to being a legacy of resistance. The ideas of tribal cosmologies provide a crucial alternative as ecological crises worsen and indigenous conflicts become more pressing: land is not seen as property but as presence, and law is not seen as dominance but as caring.

To conclude, this study urges a decolonial change in legal and policy frameworks—to acknowledge oral traditions, spiritual ties, and ceremonial knowledge as legitimate sources of law. Without this change, land disputes will continue to be unresolved—not because claims are without substance, but rather because they are being told in a language that the state is still learning.

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Koraga Community: A Micro Study of Identity, Land, and Governance

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ABSTRACT

The Koragas are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) primarily found in the Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of coastal Karnataka. According to data from the 2011 Census, their population is around 16,000 individuals. They are traditionally known for crafting baskets, leaf plates, and drums. The Koraga people have lived in forest areas and adhered to their clan rules for many generations. In recent years, many families have relocated to cities like Bengaluru for improved living conditions.

The Koragas are unique because of their distinct language, customs, and traditional skills passed down through their families. Despite being constitutionally recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, many Koraga families face significant challenges concerning ownership, education, and housing. In urban areas, they are often excluded. in government records, making it hard for them to get welfare benefits.

This study aims to explore how the loss of traditional land and housing has influenced the identity and daily experiences of the Koraga community. It also seeks to evaluate the actual reach and effectiveness of government welfare schemes designed for them, particularly in urban settings. The research depends entirely on secondary sources, including district gazetteers, NGO reports, and official government publications.

In conclusion, the study underscores the pressing need to integrate smaller tribal communities, such as the Koragas, into development planning processes, thereby ensuring that governance is more inclusive, equitable, and respectful of their unique cultural identity.

Keywords: *Karnataka, Koraga, Tribal Identity, Land Rights, Welfare*

INTRODUCTION

The Koraga community is one of India's seventy-five Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Representing a small but culturally important aboriginal group in southern India. They primarily inhabit the coastal regions of Karnataka and Kerala, specifically in the Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka, as well as the Kasaragod district of Kerala. According to the 2011 Census, approximately sixteen thousand Koragas were staying in these states, with fourteen thousand seven hundred ninety-four in Karnataka and one thousand five hundred eighty-two in Kerala. The Koragas have lived in the coastal area known as Tulu Nadu for decades, making them the smallest tribal community in India.

This study aims to explore how the loss of traditional land and housing has influenced the identity and daily experiences of the Koraga community. It also seeks to evaluate the actual reach

and effectiveness of government welfare schemes designed for them, particularly in urban settings. This paper is based on a review of secondary sources from government records, including the Karnataka State Gazetteer, Udupi District (2012 edition), Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports, and Census of India 2011 data on Scheduled Tribe populations, Academic and research studies (especially the KIRTADS monograph on the Kerala Koragas), media articles, including Deccan Herald reports on Koraga culture and education, and NGO documentation from ActionAid and World Habitat project summaries.

Population and demographic data were obtained from the 2011 Census, as reported in the following sources. The study primarily focuses on the Koraga populations across three administrative units: Dakshina Kannada district, Udupi district in Karnataka, and urban settlements in Bengaluru. The study excludes primary fieldwork, relying entirely on documented secondary sources to maintain methodological consistency, given the limited available resources and institutional requirements.

Identity and Socio-cultural Status of Koraga People

The identity and socio-cultural status of the Koraga people are deeply intertwined with their traditional occupations, clan structure, and experiences of land loss and migration, which reflect both the historical roots and the changing realities at the heart of this paper's objectives. The Koraga maintain a distinct tribal identity characterised by traditional occupations, customs, and language. Historically, they practised hunting for survival and basket weaving in the forested areas. Basketry (working with bamboo and creeper) remains a cultural symbol. Koraga men and women traditionally wore simple clothes and ornaments made of palm fibre. Their musical life features the *Dholu* (double-sided drum) and the *Voote* (bamboo flute) used in ceremonies. Koragas have their Dravidian language, but cultural displacement has led most families to speak Tulu or Kannada at home instead. Today, they often prefer schooling and official business in Kannada, highlighting their linguistic assimilation into the Kannada-Tulu environment.

Socially, Koragas are among India's most marginalised groups. Community leaders (*Gurikar*) still handle traditional affairs such as naming, marriage and funeral rites, reflecting a largely closed village society. According to the Udupi district gazetteer, Koragas "were the natives of Tulu-nadu" (coastal Karnataka) whose "chief occupations were agriculture and basket weaving." Their caste status was one of historic "untouchability": they were considered ritually impure by other Hindus. Only after Independence did the government recognise Koragas as a Scheduled Tribe (1956); they are now officially PVTG, giving them rights to special welfare schemes. However, a lack of awareness and internalised shame meant many Koragas did not initially claim those benefits. As a result, until recently, most remained landless agricultural labourers or basket-makers. Literacy rates are very low: for example, among the 1,582 Koragas in Kerala (2011), only about 68 percent were literate, and only a handful held higher degrees. Poverty, poor health, and undernutrition remain widespread.

The study reveals significant cultural loss, particularly regarding language preservation, with most Koraga families now speaking Tulu instead of their indigenous language. Only settlements in Peradala, Madathadka, and Darbethadka maintain traditional linguistic practices, and even there, speakers show reluctance to use the Koraga language in front of outsiders due to concerns about social shame and discrimination. UNESCO's classification of the Koraga language as critically endangered, with only 16,665 speakers, highlights the urgency of preservation efforts.

This study emphasises the ritual significance of traditional crafts, particularly drum-making (*kaddayi*) and basket-weaving, which served both economic and cultural functions in maintaining community identity. These practices face severe market pressures, with basket-making becoming economically unviable due to competition from synthetic alternatives and reduced access to forest raw materials. The traditional occupation that once provided both livelihood and cultural identity now struggles for relevance in contemporary economic systems.

Urban migration accelerates cultural assimilation processes, with younger generations adopting mainstream educational and occupational patterns that create tensions between generations over the preservation of cultural heritage versus economic advancement. The matrilineal clan system (*baari*), which traditionally governs marriage rules and ritual responsibilities, faces challenges in urban contexts where traditional leadership structures become increasingly difficult to maintain and clan boundaries become blurred due to geographical dispersion.

Challenges faced by the Koraga community

The Koraga community has historically encountered persistent challenges regarding their social status

and legal recognition. Before India's independence, they were classified in different ways, like sometimes as aboriginals, sometimes as "Pariahs," or Scheduled Castes. It was only in 1956, through a Presidential Order, that they were officially recognised as a Scheduled Tribe under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution. Later, they were included in the special category of PVTG, acknowledging their extreme vulnerability and the need for special government assistance.

Despite having constitutional protection and PVTG status, the Koraga community continues to face huge problems across various social, economic, and political aspects of life. Population data show a downward decline trend, particularly in Dakshina Kannada district, which reported a dramatic drop from 11,656 Koragas in 2001 to just 4,858 in 2011. This 58% decrease has prompted government investigations to determine whether it represents an actual population decline or problems with counting and documentation.

Land ownership remains one of the most significant issues affecting the community's stability and cultural survival. Many Koraga families work on land without having proper ownership documents (khata), which creates legal problems that prevent them from accessing housing schemes and development programs designed for tribal communities through public policy. In 2016, the Karnataka government allocated ten crores for Koraga development, including land title regularisation for twenty-eight families, with eighty-eight additional cases still waiting for cabinet approval. This slow progress highlights the challenges the government faces in addressing land rights issues.

Movement to cities like Bengaluru has created new challenges for community identity and access to welfare benefits. Official records often fail to capture these urban populations due to documentation gaps, resulting in what other scholars refer to as "statistical invisibility." This creates blind spots in governance where migrant populations remain excluded from both rural tribal development programmes and urban welfare schemes, continuing cycles of marginalisation despite constitutional protections.

Cultural loss shows itself through multiple signs, including language loss, declining traditional practices, and disconnection between generations regarding heritage activities. Many studies indicate that only settlements in Peradala, Madathadka, and Darbethadka continue to maintain traditional Koraga language practices, while most families now speak Tulu due to social pressure and a desire to fit in with this society. Traditional jobs face severe market pressures, with basket-making being economically declining due to modern competition from synthetic alternatives.

The disconnection from formal legal protections to people-powered reality creates what ActionAid India describes as persevering marginalisation rooted in "centuries of oppression under India's historic and horrible caste system and their customs." Urban migration has exacerbated documentation challenges, with community members often excluded from both rural tribal development programs and urban welfare schemes. The absence of proper land records in many settlements prevents community members from accessing government benefits, while traditional clan governance systems become difficult to maintain in urban environments.

Discriminatory practices continue despite having legal bans, including the practice of Ajalu, where Koraga community members are forced to eat leftover food from upper-caste households mixed with uneatable substances. This practice was legally banned through the Karnataka Koragas (Prohibition of Ajalu Practice) Act, 2000, but still continues to be practised in some areas, showing that legal frameworks alone cannot address systemic discrimination without accompanying social and economic interventions from the government.. In effect, Koragas were historically treated as "agrestic slaves" sold along with agricultural land by their upper- caste masters. The result of these centuries of oppression is severe poverty, landlessness, and low human development for the community.

Land and Livelihoods

Landlessness has been a chronic problem for the Koragas. Under colonial and feudal systems, they were tied to land as bonded labour. Historically, they cleared waste forest to cultivate for landlords, but could be expelled at will, and often worked as slave labour. Modern policies have begun to reverse this. Since 2000, ActionAid's rights-based programme has enabled the Koragas to claim and secure land and housing. Reports show that in the Udupi District alone, the government allotted 117 acres of land specifically to the Koraga in 2003. Under the Forest Rights Act (FRA 2006), two thousand five hundred twenty-seven Koraga families subsequently obtained two thousand eight hundred fifty acres of forest land titles (community and individual combined). Altogether, nearly 49,000 acres of forestland have now been recognized for the Koraga and allied tribal communities (47,000 acres under community forest rights and 2,000 acres under individual rights). A significant number of hectares

of agricultural land (approximately 1,000 acres) have been distributed under government schemes.

The community has also experienced significant improvements in housing and livelihood support. Approximately 19,000 families from the Koraga and other forest communities have received rural housing grants and constructed new homes. State nutrition programmes have improved food security; for example, malnutrition rates among children have dropped where ActionAid has worked. New agricultural training and support (such as credit and irrigation) are enabling Koraga farmers to cultivate crops on the lands granted to them. Former labourers are now "proud farmers" tending their own fields. Nevertheless, gaps remain: a study in Kerala notes that some basket-weaving plants (such as bamboo creepers) face local extinction, and Koraga applicants often struggled under the FRA because their villages are not classified as "forest-dwelling" (leading to claim rejections). In short, while official land rights have expanded dramatically in recent years, achieving full economic security will require continued support and land management planning.

Population Dynamics and Urban Migration Patterns

Census data reveals complex demographic trends within the Koraga community that indicate both undercounting and significant migration patterns. While the overall Karnataka population was recorded at fourteen thousand seven hundred ninety-four in 2011, district-level analysis shows dramatic variations that require careful interpretation. Dakshina Kannada district reported 11,656 Koragas in 2001, but only 4,858 in 2011, representing a 58% decrease. This prompted a government investigation into potential demographic decline versus administrative undercounting of people./.

The Kerala Koraga population exhibits a notable presence, with 1,582 individuals recorded in 2011 across 530 families, distributed among 13 panchayats in Kasaragod district. However, this study indicates an undercounting of people due to migration patterns and documentation gaps, as many families migrate between Karnataka and Kerala for seasonal work opportunities and family survival. Documentation reveals that 530 families are distributed across multiple panchayaths, with the largest concentrations in Gerukatte (141 families) and Peradala (40 families), indicating both multiple panchayath consolidation and dispersal patterns.

Urban migration to Bengaluru and other cities represents a significant demographic shift that is not captured in official tribal census processes. The absence of urban tribal census mechanisms creates what other researchers term "statistical invisibility," which complicates the implementation of welfare schemes and resource allocation. This situation specifically affects younger generations seeking employment opportunities in urban informal sectors, leading to cultural pressures and disconnection from traditional community structures.

Government Welfare Policies and Their Implementation for the Koraga Community

The Government of India has established several welfare programmes specifically targeting the seventy-five Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, including the Koraga community. The primary national framework includes the Scheme of Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), which has been in effect since April 2015. This central scheme aims to achieve significant socio-economic development while preserving community culture and heritage through a habitat development approach.

The scheme covers multiple areas, including livelihood enhancement, employment opportunities, economic development, education, health, nutrition, housing, land distribution, agricultural development, animal husbandry, construction of link roads, installation of non-conventional energy sources, and social security measures. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs allocated substantial funds under this scheme, with three hundred thirty-eight crore rupees released in two thousand sixteen-seventeen, two hundred thirty-nine crore rupees in two thousand seventeen-eighteen, and two hundred fifty crore rupees in two thousand eighteen nineteen.

In November 2023, the government launched the Pradhan Mantri Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PM-PVTG) Development Mission with an unprecedented allocation of ₹ 20,000 crore. This mission encompasses eleven key interventions coordinated by nine ministries, including the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Awaas Yojana, Jal Jeevan Mission, Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, and schemes for tuberculosis elimination, complete immunisation, and financial inclusion.

Even as the State's tribal community, Karnataka has taken initiative through targeted implementation for the Koraga community beyond the national PVTG framework of welfare programmes. In 2016, the

Karnataka government gave a special package of ten crore rupees specifically for Koraga development, focusing on land title registration, family survival and housing support. Under the Forest Rights Act of two thousand six, two thousand five hundred twenty-seven Koraga families obtained two thousand eight hundred fifty acres of forest land titles through community and individual recognition.

The state has also implemented housing schemes specifically designed to benefit the Koraga population. Approximately nineteen thousand families from the Koraga and allied forest communities have received rural housing grants and successfully constructed new homes. These initiatives demonstrate targeted policy implementation that addresses the specific needs of the Koraga community within the broader PVTG framework of welfare programs.

The reach of these welfare programs to the Koraga community has been mixed, with numerous achievements alongside problematic delivery gaps. ActionAid India's documentation reveals that their rights-based programme, operating in conjunction with government schemes, has enabled thousands of Koraga families to secure land titles and access housing support. The community has gained access to 3,153 acres of land for cultivation and food production, along with complete forest access for collecting honey, medicinal plants, and bamboo, as per the Forest Rights Act.

Educational access has improved substantially, with 2,632 children enrolled in schools and significant numbers accessing scholarships and higher education programs. Women's participation in community decision-making has increased, with over one thousand women supported to achieve self-sufficiency through various livelihood programs, and their families have benefited as a result.

However, implementation remains uneven across different regions and communities. This paper reveals that substantial numbers of Koraga households still lack proper documentation essential for accessing government schemes. The use of allocated funds has not been done yet, with huge remaining unused amounts due to procedural barriers and insufficient follow-up by local authorities.

Several critical barriers hinder the effective implementation and delivery of welfare programs to the Koraga community. Documentation gaps represent the most important problem, as many Koraga families lack essential identity proofs and land records required for scheme eligibility. This problem is specifically for urban migrants only, who often remain unrecognized in the state's official records.

Bureaucratic delays lead to significant slowdowns in verification and approval procedures. Administrative inefficiencies and a lack of coordination between different departments lead to poor benefit delivery, with limited integration between various welfare initiatives. Limited awareness among Koraga families about their entitlements compounds these problems, as many community members remain uninformed about available schemes and application procedures.

A lack of sensitisation and training of local administrators prevents effective programme implementation. Most implementing agencies lack insight into tribal cultural contexts and community-based needs, resulting in culturally insensitive or inappropriate implementation strategies. The rural orientation of most schemes results in special disadvantages for urban migrants, who are neither covered by rural tribal development programmes nor by urban welfare schemes.

Urban migration has created new dimensions of exclusion for the Koraga community. The absence of urban tribal census mechanisms creates what researchers term "statistical invisibility," where migrant populations remain excluded from both rural and urban welfare systems. Official records often fail to capture urban Koraga populations due to documentation gaps, resulting in governance blind spots that perpetuate cycles of marginalisation.

To address these significant problems, policy reforms and implementation improvements are crucial for the betterment of their community. A record of documentation must be completed first, with the submission of solid reports in both rural and urban areas, to ensure that all Koraga families' land is properly registered and they are aware of their entitlements without any problems. Welfare schemes require adaptation to include urban migrants, with simplified documentation procedures and direct benefit transfer mechanisms. Urban-specific interventions should be developed, including the creation of community centres and support networks in cities with significant Koraga populations. These centres could maintain cultural ties while providing resources for migrants, supporting both the preservation of identity and socio-economic integration. Regular monitoring and community feedback techniques must be established to track programme delivery and impact, ensuring accountability and responsiveness to community needs. Capacity building for officials at all levels is crucial, with training programmes focusing on tribal

cultural contexts, community-specific needs, and rights-based approaches to development. Interdepartmental coordination should be strengthened to ensure integrated benefit delivery and eliminate poor service performance. Finally, participatory planning processes must involve Koraga community representatives in programme design and implementation, ensuring that interventions are culturally appropriate, improve lifestyle, and address the real needs of the community first.

Conclusion

The experience of the Koraga community represents both the resilience of indigenous identity and the significant challenges of overcoming historical marginalization. Legal recognition as a Scheduled Tribe and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group has brought progress, such as land titles, housing, and improved access to welfare, but many Koragas still face poverty, social exclusion, and barriers to fully realising their rights. The gap between policy and practice remains wide, particularly for urban migrants and those lacking documentation, while cultural loss persists alongside economic pressures and shifting governance structures.

This micro-study demonstrates that effective tribal governance requires more than constitutional recognition. It demands culturally sensitive implementation, accurate identification, and genuine community participation in policy design. The Koraga experience underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions that address specific community issues while respecting traditional knowledge systems and cultural governance. Respecting and upholding the well-being of the Koraga people requires the protection of their land, language, and culture, as well as their full rights within India's governance and development frameworks.

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Indigenous Knowledge of the Himalayan Tribes and Sustainable Resource Management: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Over generations, traditional knowledge has been developed by the indigenous communities. Indigenous knowledge is a vast storehouse of practices and wisdom. To deal with global challenges, specifically identified in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), indigenous knowledge has become important. This paper aims at understanding how traditional knowledge of the indigenous communities in the Eastern and Western Himalayan region helps in the sustainable management of resources. This review paper follows PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) reporting guidelines. 20 documents from Scopus database have been reviewed here. This paper seeks to find out how different Himalayan tribal communities e.g., Adi, Bodo, Mizo, Khasi, Karbi, Poumai, Konyak, Bakarwal, Balti, Beda use their traditional knowledge for the management of resources. Indigenous knowledge in the management of medicinal herbs, livestock, farming, irrigation system, sacred forest has been synthesized in this paper.

Keywords: *Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous communities, Sustainable resource management, Sustainable Development Goals, PRISMA*

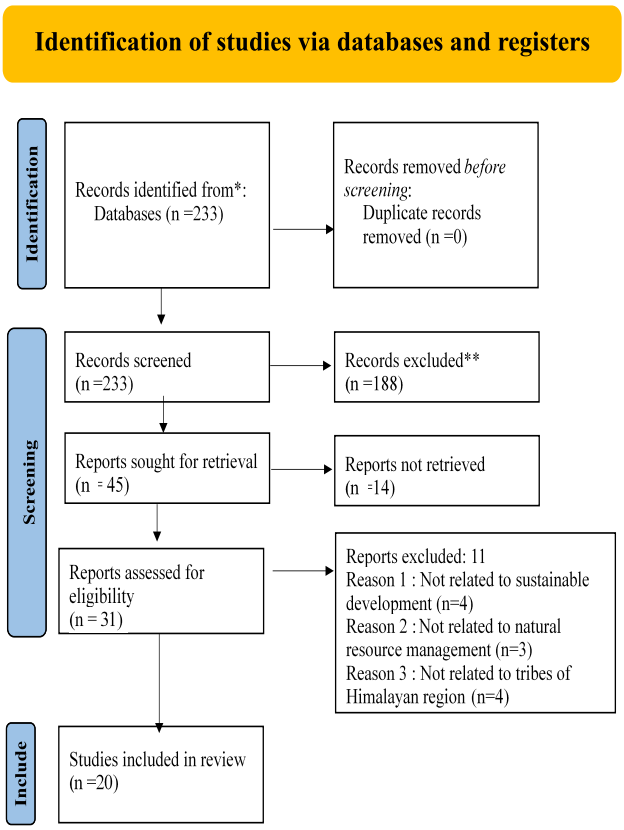
INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people are those people who sustain the customs or other elements of an early civilization of a specific area. Indigenous knowledge can be defined as the cumulative and complex forms of knowledge, skill, practices and representations which are developed and maintained by the local communities. These local communities have been indulged in the interaction with the natural environment over generations.

In 2015, all the member states of United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which focus on the prosperity and peace for the earth and its population at the present and the future. Without effective and efficient management of natural resources, environmental sustainability cannot be achieved. Sustainable use oriented natural resource management focuses on using natural resources such a way that their productivity at present and their future availability are ensured. Natural resource management can be referred as the planning, implementation and the evaluation of strategies used for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Through interaction with a variety of cultures, the researchers can record the rich essence of traditional knowledge.

Materials and methods: This paper follows

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) reporting guidelines. It includes quantitative, qualitative and mixed method researches. Search in Scopus database included 'indigenous knowledge and sustainable development in India', 'indigenous knowledge of the Himalayan tribes and sustainable resource management', 'indigenous knowledge of the western Himalayas and sustainable development' and 'indigenous knowledge of the Himalayas'. Those documents which were published in English between 2020-2025 were included. The whole process has been given here-



Results and discussion:

The Eastern Himalayas: Between river Teesta and Brahmaputra, lies the Eastern Himalaya. It has three broad ranges i.e., Bhutan Himalaya, Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya and Arunachal Himalaya. Different tribes reside here who exhibit distinct cultures. Their indigenous knowledge regarding sustainable resource management has been discussed below:

1. **Sustainable management of medicinal plants:** Mal and Saikia (2025) investigated indigenous medicinal knowledge of the women of Garo tribe of Meghalaya. *Achik medicine* is the indigenous medicine system of Garo tribe. *Ojhas*, the traditional healers have extensive knowledge regarding medicines and local herbs. *Poron* is the most used *Achik* medicine which is used to cure headache. The use of medicinal flora in traditional healthcare practices demonstrates an intense spiritual and cultural bond between Khasi people of Meghalaya and their environment. Some plant species possess anti-arthritic, anti-inflammatory, antirheumatism, anti-bacterial and analgesic properties which are helpful in the treatments of bonerelated ailments. (Hinge et.al., 2025). In Northeast India, tribes like Khasi, Karbi use ginger, turmeric, gooseberry, passion fruit and papaya, as medicinal resources (Kropi, 2024). This traditional knowledge of medicinal plants leads local people to adopt sustainable agriculture and consequently conserving valuable plant species.

2. **Sustainable cultivation:** Environmental sustainability can be seen from the perspectives of indigenous agricultural practices. The tribal farmers' wisdom is the basis of indigenous agriculture. In Meghalaya, tribal communities follow slash and burn agriculture aka *Jhum* and terrace cultivation which is known as *Bun*. The *Bun* farming enhances productivity, retains soil moisture, obstructs soil erosion (Das et al., 2023). Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is used in shifting cultivation *jhum* (Dasgupta et al., 2021; Das et al., 2023). In Nagaland, Konyak Nagas use fertilizers free from chemicals. Their traditional knowledge guides them to use manual labour instead of modern machinery. It helps to maintain the fertility of the agricultural land (Tiwari, 2024). In Arunachal Pradesh, Adi women who live in the areas close to the urban areas have less knowledge about indigenous practices related to harvesting, cultivating and the use of local food from varying ecosystems. (Turner and Turnaer, 2004; Singh et al., 2010, as cited in Singh et al., 2020). Diverse food plants are found in the home gardens and *Jhum* lands. As traditional practice of agronomy, Adi women, in remote villages, practise mixed cropping as well as relay cropping. This help to maintain soil fertility and ignore climatic and ecological risks related to particular species. (Singh et al., 2020). On the other hand, *Zabo* system is a traditional method of rice cultivation used in Nagaland. In *Zabo* process, agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry are combined. Yimchunger, Angami, Chakhasang, Chang and Konyak tribes in Nagaland practice agroforestry. Indigenous agricultural practices in Northeast India helps in the maintenance of biodiversity, conserve land, water, soil and other natural resources.

It also helps to enhance food security (Das et al., 2023).

Nyishi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh use sustainable method in the utilization of sugar palm tree. Tassey, a

derivative product of the sugar palm, holds an important part of their culture and heritage. The practices of Nyishi tribe regarding the utilization of Tassey is aligned with minimizing environmental impact (Akhtar et al., 2024).

3. **Sustainable management of water:** Traditional irrigation system used in Northeast India are bamboo drip irrigation, *cheo-ozihi, dong* etc (Das et al., 2023). In *dongs* system in Assam, the *Bodo* tribes divert water from nearby water bodies (river, lake) through small canals that help to supply water for the use of the villagers. *Dong* is very helpful as it supplies drinking water during the winter when water is scarce (Das et al., 2021). In Zabo system, agriculture is rainfed. So, water resource is managed effectively ((Das et al., 2023).

4. **Sustainable construction of houses:** Indigenous tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh use bamboo for the construction of houses making it a sustainable alternative to other materials like concrete and steel. Bamboo plantation enhances soil productivity by reducing soil erosion. It also raises the water table after the extraction of minerals (Sailo et al., 2025).

5. **Sustainable management of biodiversity:** Traditional communities worship flora and fauna in different parts of Northeast India. Rabha and Bodo communities in Assam sustain sacred forest in the form of *Than*. Trees are not cut in the sacred forest as it is associated with deities. These forests are habitat to different animals. Sacred groves are known as *Law Kyntang* or *Law Lyngdoh* in Meghalaya, *Ngawpui* in Mizoram (Das et al., 2023).

The Western Himalayas: It includes Kashmir Himalayas, Himachal Himalayas and Kumaun (Uttarakhand) Himalayas. Most of the reviewed research papers on sustainable management of natural resources by the western Himalayan tribes deal with the sustainable management of medicinal plants.

1. Van Gujjar tribe, in Uttarakhand, utilize various local plant species as medicines. They use *Bathua* leaves as vegetables to treat Anemia, root and fruit of *Jatamansi* to treat hair fall, *Aparajita* leaves as brain tonic and so on. They protect these plant species with medicinal properties so that they can be used in emergency in the future (Gupta et al., 2023).

2. Ethnomedicinal knowledge of Jaunsari tribe in Uttarakhand includes the use of plants like cannabis, onion, fenugreek, neem which helps to cure wound due to bee sting, indigestion, cold, skin disease respectively (Bhatt et al., 2023).

3. The tribes of Chamba region in Himachal Pradesh, use the horse chestnut, a wild forest tree which has edible qualities as well as medicinal properties. Seek, the starch of horse chestnut, is eaten to keep body warm. Its seeds also have various medicinal properties (Mohapatra et al., 2023).

4. In Jammu and Kashmir, tribes use medicinal plants to cure stomach problems, problems related to bone and joints, fever, cough and cold. For example, edible roots of *Ganullo* shrub used to treat asthma, the seeds of *Chamchipatar* herb are useful in treating typhoid fever (Asif et al., 2021).

5. Indigenous knowledge of tribes like Gujjar, Bakarwals of Kashmir Himalayas includes the use of medicinal plants like *Bhang* that cures wound and skin infections, *Veer* that treats fever, rheumatism, muscle pain and skin infections (Mir et al., 2022). They commonly use leaves, roots and fruits of the wild edible plants. For example, the leaves of willow herbs are used in tea, the fruits of *Bankakri* or May apple is used against stomach ulcer (Khan et al., 2024). These plants are full of nutrition which keeps them healthy.

6. Balti, Brokpa and Beda tribe in Ladakh use *Rgya-Sho*/ Green Amarnath. It is an edible herb whose leaves heal wound and bone fractures. They also use *Doftakleja*/ Fragrant Columbine. The flowers of this herb are used in ornamentation (Haq et al., 2021).

Traditional knowledge of medicinal plants has limited to the elderly people because the young generation is reluctant to adopt it (Mir et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2022; Bhatt et al., 2023, Das et al., 2021).

The Bakarwals in Kashmir, practise transhumance where ecological resilience and resource conservation are prioritized (Rajput, 2024). The tribes believe that certain plants have magical powers which they offer to their deities. The fear of supernatural power leads them towards the conservation and sustainable use of the flora. Kinnaura tribe in Himachal Pradesh use roots, twigs, flowers, leaves, seeds, branches in their festivals (Lata, 2024).

Conclusion: This study explores different indigenous practices in the management of natural resources. It has been seen that tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland use their extensive indigenous knowledge in sustainable medicinal practices, sustainable cultivation, sustainable management of water and biodiversity, sustainable construction of houses. In Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and Uttarakhand, how tribes use their traditional knowledge in the management of medicinal flora that also has been discussed. So, it can be concluded that indigenous knowledge and sustainability are interrelated. If we want a sustainable world, we need

to go back to indigenous knowledge.

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Echoes of ulgulan: Reclaiming sovereignty through tribal governance in India

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the legacy of Birsa Munda in shaping the discourse on tribal governance and sovereignty in India. It explores how indigenous governance systems rooted in community autonomy, customary law, and resistance to colonial and post-colonial state structures continue to inform tribal self-rule movements today.

Methodology: Adopting an analytical research method, the study critically examines constitutional provisions (Fifth and Sixth Schedules, PESA Act), key judicial decisions, and historical records, particularly the *Ulgulan* (rebellion) led by Birsa Munda. It analyses tribal resistance as a legal and political assertion of sovereignty and studies contemporary tribal governance in Jharkhand and adjoining regions through secondary literature, government reports, and comparative legal frameworks.

Findings: The research reveals that Birsa Munda's vision of tribal self-rule anchored in spiritualpolitical leadership and collective land ownership laid the foundation for the idea of indigenous sovereignty in India. Present-day tribal governance structures such as gram sabhas reflect this legacy but face systemic dilution through bureaucratic interventions and weak enforcement of protective laws like PESA. Tribal institutions continue to struggle for recognition and autonomy.

Originality: The study uniquely contextualizes tribal governance through the intellectual and political legacy of Birsa Munda, offering a historical continuum between colonial resistance and constitutional rights. It reframes sovereignty not merely as state power, but as rooted in indigenous cultural-political identity.

Implications: The research urges for the revitalization of tribal self-governance mechanisms through legal empowerment, policy reforms, and deeper integration of customary law into the Indian constitutional order.

Keywords: *Birsa Munda, Tribal Sovereignty, Customary Law, PESA, Indigenous Governance.*

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INTRODUCTION

overeignty, as traditionally conceived in political theory, refers to the absolute authority of the state over its territory and population, exercised through centralized institutions of governance, law, and coercive control. This Westphalian understanding of sovereignty assumes homogeneity in legal authority and cultural norms within a nation-state. However, in a pluralistic country like India, where diverse ethnic and indigenous communities coexist with vastly different social systems, this monolithic notion of sovereignty fails to accommodate the lived realities of tribal populations. For India's Adivasi (indigenous) communities, sovereignty is not derived from constitutional delegation or statutory permission, but from ancestral claims to land, customary law, spiritual authority, and community-based governance systems that predate the modern Indian state.

The Indian tribal worldview challenges the statist paradigm by grounding political authority in

spiritual ecology, collective ownership, and customary institutions. Nowhere is this alternative political imagination more powerfully expressed than in the life and resistance of Birsa Munda, a 19th-century tribal leader and spiritual revolutionary. His movement popularly known as

Ulgulan, or "The Great Tumult" was not merely an anti-colonial insurrection but a profound assertion of tribal self-rule against exploitative land policies, cultural erasure, and forced conversions. Birsa Munda's vision of *tribal raj* was embedded in the moral and spiritual reclamation of land, identity, and justice.[3] His rebellion was a political-theological response to colonialism, which sought to reinstate a world where Adivasi communities governed themselves in accordance with their traditions, customs, and sacred relationships with nature.

In postcolonial India, the constitutional framework attempted to institutionalize these aspirations through specific provisions. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution and the later enactment of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) were designed to empower tribal communities through autonomous governance structures. These instruments recognize tribal distinctiveness, support decentralized decision-making, and seek to safeguard customary law. However, implementation has remained inadequate and fragmented. In most Scheduled Areas, Gram Sabhas function more as administrative formalities than as empowered self-governing bodies. States have either delayed rulemaking under PESA or diluted its core provisions by restricting the powers of traditional institutions. As a result, tribal sovereignty, though acknowledged in principle, is rarely realized in practice.

At the same time, judicial interventions have occasionally affirmed tribal rights and the importance of customary law. Landmark rulings, such as in Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1997) and the Niyamgiri case (2013), have underscored the constitutional commitment to tribal autonomy and the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for development projects in tribal areas. These decisions highlight the potential of India's constitutional framework to uphold indigenous sovereignty, but also reveal the inconsistency and fragility of its enforcement.

This paper seeks to interrogate the legacy of Birsa Munda and the ideological foundations of

Ulgulan in the context of contemporary legal and policy frameworks governing tribal self-rule in India. It critically examines how far India has progressed in transforming symbolic recognition of tribal identity into meaningful autonomy. Using doctrinal and analytical methods, it analyzes constitutional provisions, case law, and governance practices in tribal regions particularly

Jharkhand, where Birsa Munda's legacy is most deeply rooted. The paper also explores how customary institutions continue to operate, often in tension with state mechanisms, and how grassroots resistance reflects an ongoing struggle to reclaim indigenous sovereignty.

By reframing the discourse on sovereignty to include customary law, ecological stewardship, and moral-political legitimacy, this study seeks to propose a rights-based, pluralistic framework that not only honours India's constitutional ideals but also realizes the vision of justice and dignity that animated Birsa Munda's struggle. In doing so, it contributes to the broader conversation on legal pluralism, indigenous rights, and participatory democracy in India's evolving constitutional order.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research methodology, rooted in doctrinal analysis and supported by historical interpretation and comparative policy review. The research focuses on understanding the evolution, scope, and contemporary relevance of tribal selfgovernance in India by critically examining legal texts, constitutional provisions, judicial pronouncements, and secondary scholarly literature. The central approach involves identifying how indigenous governance systems, particularly those inspired by the ideological and spiritual leadership of Birsa Munda, interact with or are constrained by modern legal frameworks.

Primary sources used in the study include constitutional provisions such as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). These legal instruments were analyzed to evaluate the extent of formal recognition granted to tribal institutions and customary practices. Additionally, landmark judicial decisions particularly Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1997) and Orissa Mining Corporation v. Ministry of Environment and Forests (2013) were studied for their role in shaping the jurisprudence around tribal autonomy, land rights, and participatory decision-making.

Secondary sources comprise academic commentaries, government reports, policy briefs, and historical records that trace the legacy of Birsa Munda and the continued relevance of his vision in contemporary tribal movements. Special emphasis

was placed on legal scholarship dealing with customary law, legal pluralism, and indigenous rights under international human rights frameworks such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The study is based entirely on desk research and does not involve fieldwork or empirical interviews. Through this methodological framework, the paper seeks to highlight both the normative and practical dimensions of tribal sovereignty in India's legal and constitutional context.

Results

The findings of this research demonstrate that the vision of tribal sovereignty articulated by Birsa Munda remains deeply relevant in contemporary governance debates in India. His conception of *tribal raj*, grounded in customary law, collective land ownership, and spiritual-political leadership, challenged the colonial legal order and continues to inspire indigenous movements for autonomy and recognition. Birsa Munda's legacy has shaped the political consciousness of tribal communities, particularly in Jharkhand and adjoining regions, where governance struggles are intimately connected to the defense of cultural identity and traditional institutions.

An analysis of the Indian Constitution reveals a clear attempt to accommodate tribal autonomy through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. The Fifth Schedule applies to mainland India and empowers the Governor to regulate laws in Scheduled Areas, while also mandating the creation of Tribes Advisory Councils (TACs). However, the implementation of these provisions has been inconsistent and largely symbolic. In contrast, the Sixth Schedule, which governs certain northeastern states, provides for Autonomous District Councils with legislative and judicial powers. These councils have had more success in operationalizing self-governance, though challenges of representation and administrative capacity remain. The comparative framework highlights a clear disparity between the two schedules in terms of devolution of power.

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was intended to be a transformative legislation that would decentralize governance in Scheduled Areas by recognizing the authority of Gram Sabhas. PESA explicitly empowers tribal assemblies to approve development projects, manage resources, and resolve disputes using customary law. Despite this progressive mandate, the law's implementation has been weak. Most states have either failed to enact supporting rules or have significantly diluted its provisions, undermining the autonomy of Gram Sabhas. In Jharkhand, traditional tribal institutions such as the Munda-Manki and ManjhiPargana systems still function, but lack formal recognition. These customary bodies are often sidelined in administrative processes, diminishing their authority and legitimacy.

Judicial decisions have occasionally reinforced tribal rights. In Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1997), the Supreme Court held that transferring tribal land to private mining companies in Scheduled Areas violated the Fifth Schedule, affirming the protective nature of constitutional provisions. Similarly, in the Orissa Mining Corporation v. Ministry of Environment and Forests (2013) the Niyamgiri case the Court upheld the authority of Gram Sabhas to determine whether bauxite mining could proceed on sacred tribal lands. This decision endorsed the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and recognized the cultural rights of the Dongria Kondh tribe. These judgments represent important milestones in indigenous rights jurisprudence, but they remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Contemporary tribal governance practices reveal a tension between customary authority and formal legal systems. Tribal communities continue to assert their right to govern through traditional forums, particularly in matters related to land, forests, and resource use. However, these institutions are often viewed as informal or extra-legal by state actors. Movements like Pathalgadi in Jharkhand have emerged as responses to this exclusion, asserting constitutional rights by installing stone plaques declaring village sovereignty. Although the movement was met with state repression, it symbolized a powerful assertion of indigenous identity and governance.

In sum, the results indicate that while the legal architecture for tribal self-governance exists, its implementation remains fragmented and politically contested. Customary institutions continue to be relevant and functional, but their authority is weakened by a lack of state recognition and support. The persistence of resistance movements and judicial endorsements reflects the resilience of tribal communities and the continuing relevance of Birsa Munda's call for self-rule.

Discussion

The findings of this research underscore the critical disjuncture between the constitutional ideal of tribal self-governance and its real-world application. While the Indian Constitution, through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, and PESA, attempts to incorporate tribal autonomy within the broader federal structure,

implementation has been hindered by a combination of bureaucratic inertia, political apathy, and structural inequality. The situation reflects a deeper philosophical tension between a centralised state structure rooted in colonial legal rationality and a pluralistic society that demands recognition of customary and decentralized governance systems.

A key insight from this research is that sovereignty must be reframed in the Indian context. Rather than viewing sovereignty as a hierarchical, top-down authority exercised exclusively by the state, it must be understood as a shared, layered, and culturally contingent concept. Tribal sovereignty, as envisioned by Birsa Munda, is not a separatist aspiration but a moral-political demand for community control over land, resources, and identity. It is rooted in collective memory, ecological consciousness, and customary norms. This vision of self-rule emphasizes participatory governance, ethical leadership, and harmonious coexistence with nature values that resonate with contemporary global discourses on sustainable development and indigenous rights.

Despite India's formal commitments to tribal autonomy, including its endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the state apparatus continues to privilege top-down development models. These models prioritize industrialization, resource extraction, and infrastructure over the rights and consent of tribal communities. As the Niyamgiri judgment illustrates, Gram Sabhas can exercise real power when empowered and respected, but such moments remain isolated and often contested. In practice, Gram Sabhas are frequently bypassed or undermined, and tribal leaders are subjected to harassment, co-optation, or criminalization.

The legal invisibility of customary law is another significant concern. Although PESA formally recognizes customary law and institutions, there has been little effort at the state level to document, codify, or integrate these legal systems into the wider constitutional order. Without such integration, customary practices remain vulnerable to erosion or outright dismissal by administrative agencies and courts. Legal pluralism must be recognized not only as a reality but as a normative framework for governance in tribal areas. This requires moving beyond the token acknowledgment of traditional practices to their institutional incorporation through legislation, judicial recognition, and administrative practices.

Importantly, tribal governance systems are not static or regressive. On the contrary, they demonstrate adaptive capacity and internal legitimacy. Traditional institutions like the MundaManki and Manjhi-Pargana systems have evolved mechanisms for conflict resolution, land management, and social regulation that are deeply embedded in tribal life. These systems often operate with a degree of democratic participation and social accountability that surpasses many formal institutions. However, their informal status deprives them of legal authority and resources, leading to parallel governance systems that often clash or duplicate efforts.

Another layer of complexity is added by political economy and resource control. Tribal areas are rich in natural resources minerals, forests, and water but the benefits of extraction rarely accrue to the local populations. Instead, they face displacement, environmental degradation, and cultural disintegration. This economic marginalization is compounded by legal disempowerment, where the inability of tribal communities to assert ownership or veto rights over their territories renders them spectators in their own land. Implementing the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in all development and conservation projects in Scheduled Areas is a critical requirement for bridging this governance gap.

To move forward, a multi-pronged legal and policy strategy is necessary. First, states must operationalize PESA in its full spirit, ensuring that Gram Sabhas are empowered not only on paper but in actual decision-making, especially over natural resource governance. Second, there is a need for codification of customary law with the participation of tribal communities, ensuring that its dynamic nature is preserved while giving it legal weight. Third, capacity-building programs must be designed for both tribal leaders and bureaucratic officials to foster mutual understanding of constitutional rights and customary practices. Fourth, judicial training and sensitization on indigenous governance is necessary so that courts do not default to formalist interpretations that delegitimize tribal institutions.

In addition, there is a pressing need to institutionalize accountability mechanisms at the state and central levels for violations of tribal rights. Regular monitoring by independent bodies, backed by constitutional mandates, can ensure that protective laws like PESA and the Forest Rights Act are not subverted. Integrating international norms, particularly those found in UNDRIP, into domestic law can further bolster the rights framework for India's tribal communities.

Lastly, the narrative around tribal governance must shift from one of developmental deficiency to democratic innovation. The wisdom embedded in customary governance offers insights into non-extractive, sustainable, and community-driven

models of development. These models deserve not only preservation but promotion as alternatives to the dominant paradigms that have led to ecological and social crises.

In conclusion, Birsa Munda's vision of *Ulgulan* was a call not only for resistance but for regeneration. It offered a blueprint for a just society grounded in moral authority, collective ownership, and cultural self-respect. Recognizing and revitalizing this vision within India's constitutional democracy requires a concerted effort to dismantle institutional barriers, confront epistemic injustice, and embrace the plural legal traditions that define the Indian polity. Only then can tribal sovereignty be realized not as an exception but as an integral part of India's democratic future.

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The Indigenous Voices of Nicobar Culture, Continuity, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Nicobar, a group of 19 islands in the Indian Ocean and part of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, is renowned for its rich biodiversity, including coral reefs, rainforests, mangroves, and one of the largest leatherback turtle colonies in the Asia-Pacific region.

The islands are home to several indigenous communities, including the Nicobarese, Shompens, Sentinelese, Jarawas, Andamanese, Onge, and Akabea, many of whom live in voluntary isolation. While some have partially adapted to modern life, most maintain a distance from external contact to preserve their autonomy. These communities are traditionally self-sufficient, organized around kinship-based joint families, and deeply connected to their environment through spiritual and ecological bonds. Each group's cultural identity is shaped by its natural environment and ancestral wisdom, contributing to a vibrant mosaic of indigenous traditions.

In modern times, exposure to formal education, media, and shifting economic patterns has led to a gradual hybridization of identity. Although matrilocal and patrilocal family structures and native languages persist, the influence of modern life has changed their significance. This reflects the broader struggle faced by indigenous peoples in preserving their identity, autonomy, and sustainable livelihoods amid rapid modernization.

This study seeks to explore the sociocultural fabric of the Nicobar Islands. It aims to examine the cultural identity of the indigenous communities and the challenges they face in preserving their traditions. It also focuses on how these communities respond to modernization, adaptation, assimilation, or resistance while striving to protect their unique way of life.

This study is based on secondary research, utilizing official reports, academic databases such as eHRAF and Google Scholar, government websites, newspapers, and journals, including the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT).

Keywords: *Indigenous communities, Cultural identity, Voluntary isolation, Modernization, Challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located at the southeastern end of the Bay of Bengal, stretch for 700 geographical miles and cover 8,250 square kilometers. Rising 568 meters above sea level, this archipelago comprises 572 islands, with only 38 inhabited, and is formed by the peaks of Burma's Arakan Yoma mountain range. The Coromandel Coast lies to its west, Myanmar to its north, and Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula to its east. The two main island groups are separated by the 150-kilometer-wide, 400-fathom-deep Ten-degree Channel.

Geologically young, these islands originated in the Tertiary period (63 to 1 million years ago) and host two volcanoes: an active one on Barren Island and a dormant one on Narcondam Island. The tectonically active Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie above several critical fault lines, notably the Andaman Trench (where the Indian Plate slides beneath the Eurasian Plate), along with the West

Andaman Fault, the Andaman-Nicobar Fault, and the Eastern Margin Fault. Situated in Zone V, the most perilous seismic zone, this region is highly prone to earthquakes and tsunamis.

History

The Nicobar Islands, documented by Marco Polo (13th C) and Friar Oderic (14th C), were vital maritime trade stops. Rajendra Chola I (11th century) established a naval base for Southeast Asian expeditions, as evidenced by the 1050 CE Tanjore inscriptions, which name it "Ma- Nakkavaram.The Danes, via the East India Company, claimed "New Denmark" (1756) after their arrival in December 1755, but abandoned it by 1848 due to the prevalence of malaria. British interest began in 1789, focusing on naval/penal colonies, with the first hundred prisoners being sent between 1794 and 1796. After failed Italian bids, the Danes ceded Nicobar to Britain (Oct 16, 1868), formally joining British India in 1869 under a Port Blair Commissioner.

Post-1857 Mutiny, the islands became 'Kala Pani' (Black Waters), a grim penal colony. The Cellular Jail (1896-1906), built for brutal isolation and torture, aimed to break spirits and cause social annihilation, holding figures like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Sachindra Nath Sanyal, and Sher Ali Afridi. During WW II (1942-1945), Japanese occupation saw the Cellular Jail repurposed and parts dismantled, distressing locals until British reoccupation.

India gained independence on August 15, 1947, integrating the islands as a Union Territory in 1950. Initially, tribal protection (as mandated by the 1956 Act, which forbade entry to the Nicobar) was prioritized. The policy shifted by the late 1960s, promoting non-tribal settlement, including 330 ex-defense personnel and Plantation Tamils, for national building. This caused 165 Nicobarese families to migrate by 1973, leading to reduced tribal autonomy, cultural erosion, and the ongoing "development versus indigenous rights" debate.

Tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

The indigenous tribal communities are the true essence of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These tribes stem from two distinct ancestral lineages. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands' essence lies in their indigenous tribes, deeply connected to nature and stemming from two distinct ancestral lineages. The Andaman "Negrito" tribes—comprising the Great Andamanese (around 59 on Strait Island), Onge (100-117 on Little Andaman), Jarawa (250-400 on Middle/South Andaman), and Sentinelese (80-150 on North Sentinel Island)—settled 20,000 to 60,000 years ago as East Eurasian hunter-gatherers, with the Sentinelese notably uncontacted and resisting outside interaction.In contrast, the Nicobar "Mongoloid" tribes, the Nicobarese and Shompen (around 400 in central Nicobar), migrated 4,500 to 5,000 years ago from the Malay-Burma region, related to Austroasiatic Southeast Asians. The Nicobarese, found throughout the islands, adhere to traditional customs and cultivate crops despite a decline in population. The Shompen, primarily hunter-gatherers, reside in central Nicobar, often split into riverine and inland groups.

This study aims to explore the sociocultural fabric of the Nicobar Islands, examining the cultural identity of indigenous communities and the challenges they face in preserving their traditions. It also focuses on how these communities respond to modernization through adaptation, assimilation, or resistance, while striving to maintain their unique way of life. This study is based on secondary research, utilizing official reports, academic databases such as eHRAF and Google Scholar, government websites, newspapers, and journals, including the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT).

A case study of the tribes of Nicobar

The Nicobar group of islands lies in the Bay of Bengal to the southeast of the Andaman Islands. They lie in close proximity to Sumatra, an Indonesian island, approximately 145 kilometers away. The archipelago covers an area of 1841 square kilometers. They are a group of 19 islands, out of which only 12 are inhabited. The populated islands include Great Nicobar, Car Nicobar, Little Nicobar, and Nancowry. The terrain is largely hilly in nature, covered by lush, green rainforests. However, some of the smaller islands appear to be flat and covered with coral. The islands experience a tropical, equatorial climate as they lie between 6 degrees north and 10 degrees north latitude. The temperatures range between 33 degrees Celsius (91°F) and 18 degrees Celsius (64°F). The annual rainfall ranges between 230 centimeters and 340 centimeters. The islands are covered by a thick canopy of tropical evergreen forests. Unfortunately, large- scale deforestation is observed due to the increased human population

Geographically, the Nicobar Islands are distinctly separated from the Andaman group by the Ten Degree Channel, a strait approximately 150 km wide. This geographical isolation has played a pivotal role in shaping the unique evolutionary trajectories of its inhabitants. The Nicobar archipelago is home to two indigenous tribes - the Nicobarese and the Shompen.
81Ancestry and Evolutionary Origins

The Nicobar Islands are home to the Shompen and Nicobarese tribes, both Mongoloid in origin, tracing their ancestry to Southeast Asia. This contrasts sharply with the Negrito tribes of the Andaman region—the Great Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge, and Sentinelese—who are believed to have migrated from Africa approximately 60,000 years ago.
The Nicobarese migrated from the Malay-Burma peninsula (present-day Myanmar and Malaysia). A study led by Kumarasamy Thangaraj and Gyaneshwer Chaubey, published in the European Journal of Human Genetics, revolutionized previous beliefs, finding this migration occurred 5,000 years ago, not 11,000. This research also established a genetic link between Nicobar tribes and the Htin Mal of the Laos-Thailand region, as well as with Austroasiatic populations in South and Southeast Asia, further confirming their Southeast Asian ancestry.

The Shompen's ancestry is debated: some scholars consider them an "offshoot of the Nicobarese," while others believe they arrived in the region about 10,000 years ago from Sumatra. A 2006 publication in the Journal of Human Genetics suggested that both Mongoloid tribes share a common ancestry but have undergone distinct evolutionary paths. Differences between the communities are attributed to varied migratory periods and the Shompen's extreme isolation, which preserved distinctive physical features.

Agriculture and Industry

Both the Nicobarese and Shompen communities possess immense Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS), with their lives and survival intrinsically linked to the environment. The Nicobarese demonstrate profound Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) through their sustainable horticultural practices. They cultivate various tuber crops like greater yam, colocasia, tannia, sweet potato, cassava, arrowroot, and tacca, which form the cornerstone of their diet. Utilizing "tuhet" (joint family) land, they employ dried coral and wood for demarcation. Their sustainable methods include simultaneous planting of multiple tuber varieties, natural fencing, marking planting pits with coconut frond midribs, using ash for soil enrichment, and systematic forest clearing. They also possess sophisticated knowledge of storage (e.g., bamboo bins foryams) and transportation to enhance shelf life. In contrast, the Shompen are hunter-gatherers, relying on wild resources whose availability is seasonal. While primarily dependent on wild foraging, they are observed to cultivate small gardens of lemon, chilies, and betel.
The island communities are heavily engaged in fishing, making seafood a significant part of their diet; the Nicobarese, although primarily horticulturalists, also rear pigs and fish. In contrast, the Shompen are nomadic hunter-gatherers dwelling in Great Nicobar's dense rainforest interiors, relying immensely on seasonal wild resources and unlikely to practice animal husbandry due to their isolated nature.

Social Organization and Kinship

The Nicobarese demonstrate a well-developed social organisation. Strong kinship ties are also observed. Their societies are characterised by 'tuhets' or clans. They are conventionally a joint family or members belonging to the same family, which evidences strong familial ties. They are patriarchal in nature. The Tuhet System holds land communally. The Tuhet system also governs the intricate sharing of harvested produce.[2] The socio-cultural life of the Nicobarese revolves around three pillars: village councils, customary laws, and communal cooperation.

There are certain village councils that exist, governed by customary laws. The institutions are comprised of the call elders and leaders. Their functions involve conflict resolution and decision- making. The elders of the 'tuhets' are conventionally the members of such councils and play the role of both a judge and a 'policy maker'. The local authority is egalitarian in nature, and decisions are taken collectively. Popular conflict resolution methods include reconciliation, as opposed to retributive methods.

The councils also dabble in matrimonial alliances. They practice exogamy. Although the council arranges for arranged marriages, love marriages are not forbidden. However, it is vital to adhere to matrilocal traditions and customary laws. The newlyweds are to move near the bride's family.
The societal organization of the Shompen tribe is basic. They live in small, nuclear families. This is a product of their nomadic lifestyle. The oldest male in the family is the head, as the family is patriarchal in nature. Most families reside near the rivers Galthea and Alexandra, which flow through the Great Nicobar Island. Their identities are associated with their proximity to the former and latter. It is unclear whether settlements can be found in close proximity to the Dagmar River. However, one can only speculate due to the elusive nature.

Medicine

'Traditional healers' play a vital role in Nicobarese medicinal practices, utilizing the forest's abundance. For gastrointestinal issues, they frequently employ

plants from the Euphorbiaceae family, alongside Morinda citrifolia L., Tabernaemontana crispa Roxb., and Colubrina asiatica (L.). Brongn. During parturition, a decoction of Grewia acuminata Juss leaves alleviates pain and aids post-delivery cleansing. Rheumatism is treated topically by applying a mixture of boiled Ipomoea pescaprae (L.) Sweet and Euphorbia potato, Forst in coconut oil. Snakebites are managed by washing the wound with Annona squamosa juice, followed by a paste of Datura metel L. leaves. For severe stomachaches, Alstonia macrophylla Roxb. and Phyllanthus amarus Schum & Thonn. are used in combination with coconut water, and Guettarda speciosa L. leaves are consumed with water to alleviate flatulence. Remedies for increased milk production are also administered orally, topically, or as eye/ear drops.

On the other hand, the medical practices of the Shompen are relatively unknown, though they possess a sophisticated ethno-medicine system derived from forest resources, reflecting a deep understanding of the island's unique biodiversity and making use of what the forest provides.

Spirituality and Religious Practices

The island community's spiritual system encompasses beliefs in spirits, souls, and ghosts. 'Shaitan' is a spirit, seen as an agent of natural disasters and illnesses, appeased through ritualistic sacrifices of pigs or chickens. 'Iyum' are immortal, metaphysical souls, while 'Huihe' are ghosts, believed to be transformed from the deceased and to ubiquitously roam the islands. Shamans are revered spiritual guides and healers who thwart bad luck or 'Shaitan's' anger through ritualisticanimal slaughter. Chowra Island is known for its shamans, and young men undertake a pilgrimage there to meet one, marking their entry into manhood.

The most important festival celebrated by these people is the “Panuohonot”, which can be translated into "Pig Festival” or "Ossuary Feast” in English. It involves ritualistic pig slaughter and communal remembrance of the dead.[3]This festival is held over a few days and typically takes place in August. It involves ritualistic pig slaughter and communal remembrance of the dead, with ceremonies including elaborate feasts, exhumation and cleaning of ancestral bones, reburial, dances, and a pig fight. 'Spirit houses' are sacred family groves for offerings, and the festival underscores familial bonds and ancestor veneration.

The followers of this ancient religion have reduced by leaps and bounds. According to the 1981 census, 94.23% of the Nicobarese population identifies itself as Christian. The missionary John Christian has been credited with spreading Christianity in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He educated the locals in the Nicobarese language. He translated the New Testament to Nicobarese. He became a respected leader of this island community. He even attained a bishop-like status during the Japanese occupation. There is a small number of Hindus and Muslims on the island as well.

The Shompen worship elements of nature. For instance, the deity 'thicket' is the moon, which has taken up the persona of a goddess. It is believed that most of their deities are derived from elements of the rainforest, upon which their survival depends. Furthermore, it is safe to assume that deities inspired by the rainforest may also be worshipped.

Cultural Heritage of the Nicobar tribes

Art and music are paramount to the Nicobarese indigenous community. They are experts at weaving, sculpting intricate sculptures, and making handicrafts. A key sculpting tradition is the 'Kareau', wooden figurines believed to house ancestral souls. Placed at home entrances, they are revered for protection and prayed to during illnesses to coax the soul back into the patient. The
Nicobarese are excellent weavers; this skill has evolved into a modern industry. They produce baskets and mats from natural fibers, such as hemp, which are used daily and in community ceremonies.

Historically, tattooing was a deeply meaningful cultural practice that expressed identity through symbols denoting clan affiliation, life milestones, status, and totems. Shamans often administered them for spiritual protection in communal settings, using tools made from thorns and wood, as well as dyes derived from local plants. Families and friends got tattooed together. Although this tradition waned with modernity, a 'tribal revival' movement is gaining momentum as young people reconnect with their roots by acquiring traditional tattoos. In contrast, much remains unknown about the artistic and musical traditions of the Shompen indigenous community. Their material culture notably includes essential tools, such as bows, arrows, and spears, as well as decorative items like bamboo earplugs and bead necklaces.

The distinct ways of life in the Nicobarese and Shompen communities showcase human adaptation and cultural diversity, with both tribes deeply revering their surroundings and applying their Traditional Knowledge Systems to sustainable living. While the Nicobarese exemplify advanced

horticulture, intricate social structures, and rich arts, the elusive Shompen maintain a hunter-gatherer existence, collectively highlighting the enduring power of tradition and generational wisdom.

Modernity and Challenges

The Nicobarese people's lives are gradually transforming through modern advancements. Government initiatives provide children with schools and hostels, while improved healthcare services, clinics, and trained doctors reduce reliance on traditional medicine and lower death rates. Modern infrastructure, like roads, electricity, and mobile networks, also enhances daily life.

A significant step in modernization was Jyoti Kumari's facilitation of the Shompen tribe's first participation in voting, where she used interpreters and visual aids, enabling seven Shompens to proudly cast their votes for democratic inclusion. Modernization has extended to remote islandsvia new e-corner centers, providing digital access to government services. Efforts continue to enhance health, education, and livelihoods while respecting local traditions, with events like marathons and the mascot 'Megha' fostering unity. Kumari's leadership demonstrated that progress can be achieved without sacrificing cultural heritage; instead, it can involve growth alongside preservation.[4]

However, modernization has also brought its share of challenges. Many young Nicobarese individuals are increasingly adopting mainland lifestyles, including clothing and languages, which is slowly eroding their traditional identity. Welfare schemes and the provision of free food have unfortunately led to dependency, reducing their interest in traditional occupations such as farming and fishing. To address this, schools have begun incorporating Nicobarese language and cultural elements into their curricula, and local festivals are being supported to help safeguard their heritage.[5]

The proposed Holistic Development of Great Nicobar project plans extensive construction (airport, port, power plant, and township) covering over 160 square kilometers, with 130 square kilometers being untouched forest. This threatens the land and traditional life of the vulnerable Nicobarese and Shompens (population 200–300). Tribal communities claim inadequate information. Asha Lakra of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) noted that the tribes do not fully understand how their rights and lands might be affected. Alarmed that ancestral lands, which had been abandoned after the 2004 tsunami, were being claimed, the tribal council at a 2021 Campbell Bay meeting demanded involvement in decisions and withdrew their No Objection Certificate (NOC) due to crucial details not being shared. Tribal councils in the region, established under a 2009 law, possess limited advisory powers and no direct authority.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, situated in a highly seismic zone, are prone to natural disasters. The 2004 tsunami, for instance, tragically claimed nearly one-fifth of the Nicobar population and devastated 90% of its mangrove forests. The subsequent influx of aid rapidly altered the Nicobarese economy; once self-sufficient through fishing, farming, and livestock rearing, many became reliant on free rations and government employment. Unaccustomed to handling cash, many Nicobarese were exploited by external traders, disrupting their traditional economy.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in a highly seismic zone, are prone to natural disasters. The 2004 tsunami claimed nearly one-fifth of the Nicobar population and devastated 90% of its mangrove forests, shifting the economy from self-sufficiency to aid reliance and leading to exploitation by traders.

Increased tourism harms vital coral reefs through infrastructure, which is compounded by rising ocean temperatures. Non-traditional security threats like illegal immigration, smuggling, and poaching also jeopardize ecological balance and national security due to porous boundaries.

Invasive species (e.g., Indian bullfrog, giant African snail) damage local ecosystems, impacting tribal survival. Globalization policies that prioritize resource extraction (such as timber, minerals, and land) conflict with tribal sustainable use, leading to deforestation, pollution, habitat loss, and cultural erosion. Tribes are often excluded from development, their land rights overlooked, leading to displacement.

The islands' strategic location in the Indo-Pacific is crucial for India's maritime security and the development of its "blue economy." Geopolitical tensions, notably China's growing influence via Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, raise concerns for India's regional control. Overall, the Nicobarese and Shompen communities face mixed effects from modernization; while progress offers opportunities, it also risks compromising their culture and environment. A balanced approach respecting tribal voices and heritage is crucial for sustainable development.Conclusion

To preserve the unique, threatened culture of Nicobar's tribal communities, documenting their

heritage, establishing museums, and integrating knowledge into education, involving elders, is crucial. Supporting traditional crafts, protecting sacred sites, and empowering tribal councils are also vital, with a strong emphasis on always prioritizing tribal consent. Concurrently, India must enhance maritime security through Navy technology and an Island Security Model and restart undersea internet cables to improve access to online services, such as education and telemedicine.

As Dr. S.C. Roy once remarked, "These islands, cradled in the vast ocean, are not merely geographical entities; they are living repositories of ancient human sagas, where every custom, every belief, and every whispered tale echoes the profound communion between humanity and the untamed spirit of nature."

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Matrilineal Paradox: Tapping into the Masked Patriarchy of the Matrilineal Khasi Tribe

Aaheli Basu[1]

ABSTRACT

The web search identifies the Khasis as one of the few Indian tribes that practice a matrilineal and matriarchal society, a concept that is unique and rarely seen even in ostensibly modern and sophisticated Indian families. However, what appears to represent a different side of the coin conceals the same reality: a glaring and evident patriarchy.

The Khasi tribes belong to the North-eastern part of the country, mostly from Meghalaya. They are reputed to trace lineage, property rights, and even marital customs through the mother, or rather the women's side of the family, like the youngest daughter inheriting the property, husbands staying with their wives' families after marriage, among many others. Yet, amidst such a different display of culture, the disguised patriarchy screams out. The *kni* (maternal uncle) plays a central role in property distribution and is often the key decision-maker in important family matters. The religious and *dorbar kur* (clan council) duties are also taken by men.

The paper provides in-depth research to understand the embedded patriarchy that places the *kni* or other male members' position on a pedestal, surpassing even elder female family members. The author further examines how Khasi men, while acknowledging lineage to women, maintain control over rituals, public discourse, and institutions, exposing a hidden structure of patriarchal dominance. Relying primarily on published secondary sources, the author has also taken into account the word of mouth of the locals to understand the perception of the current and previous generations on their own culture.

Keywords: *Matrilineal, patriarchy, disguised*

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INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is probably one of the most widely discussed concepts currently, not just in academia, but also in colloquial language. Patriarchy is "an 'umbrella' term for describing men's systemic dominance of women" (Pease, 2000, p. 20). It is reflected in everyday practices, in basic aspects such as wage gaps and women's lack of voice, reaffirming their subordinate position to men. Standing in the 21st century, amidst the ever-developing Artificial Intelligence, India still accounts for more than five thousand dowry deaths every single year (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). To add to the agony, women themselves are often the torchbearers of patriarchy, belittling themselves and womenkind at large.

However, amidst such an agonizing image, the Khasi tribe of North-east India tells a different story. Matrilineal practices dominate the tribe. Instances include the groom changing his residential location to his bride's parental home after marriage, the

youngest daughter, known as '*Ka Khadduh*', inherits the ancestral property. However, amidst such an agonizing image, the Khasi tribe of North East India tells a different story. Matrilineal practices dominate the tribe. Instances include the groom changing his residential location to his bride's parental home after marriage, and the youngest daughter, known as 'Ka Khadduh', inheriting the ancestral property. These customs, at first glance, suggest a society where women are empowered, central to kinship structures, and celebrated as the bearers of lineage and tradition. The Khasi are often portrayed as a progressive exception in a region where patriarchal norms are otherwise deeply entrenched.

Yet, beneath this matrilineal surface lies a complex and often contradictory reality. The structural prominence of women in inheritance and lineage does not necessarily translate into authority or decision-making power in the public or even domestic sphere. While women may inherit, they do not govern, and while their names continue the family line, their voices are often absent from clan councils, religious rituals, and village governance. It is within this contradiction, between symbolic status and practical exclusion, that the matrilineal paradox emerges.

This paper explores how masked patriarchy persists within the matrilineal framework of the Khasi tribe. Through an examination of kinship roles, cultural rituals, gendered spaces, and the power dynamics within clan and community institutions, this study aims to uncover the silent mechanisms through which male authority continues to dominate, despite the visible prominence of women. In doing so, it challenges the romanticized notion of matrilineal empowerment and invites a more critical understanding of what true gender equality entails.

A Short Review of Literature

Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the assumed gender equity of matrilineal societies. Roy's (2018) study titled *Discord in Matrilineality: Insight into the Khasi Society in Meghalaya* provides a contemporary critique of the Khasi social system. Roy explores how traditional matrilineal norms are being reshaped by modern pressures, especially regarding male political dominance. The article reveals that, despite women continuing to inherit property through the maternal line, actual control over decisions, including land use and resource management, is predominantly exercised by men. This reveals a deeper contradiction, where cultural symbols of female authority coexist with a strong male influence in public and community leadership. Roy argues that male relatives, particularly maternal uncles or *kni*, have strategically adapted the tradition to preserve their power while maintaining the appearance of matrilineal continuity.

In a similar vein, Ellena's (2017) ethnographic study, titled *Changing Gender Roles and Relations among the Matrilineal Khasi*, offers a comparative perspective on how gender roles have evolved within the tribe. Her fieldwork highlights the exclusion of Khasi women from decision-making in *dorbar shnong*, the traditional village councils, despite their being viewed as the custodians of family lineage and property. Ellena argues that economic rights do not necessarily translate into social or political empowerment. Her research illustrates how gender asymmetry persists in public domains, where Khasi men dominate leadership roles and maintain greater access to institutional power. This creates a dual reality where matrilineal structure exists primarily in the private sphere, while patriarchal systems govern communal life.

A critical contribution to this discourse is Nongbri's (2000) widely cited article *Khasi Women and Matriliny: Transformations in Gender Relations*. Nongbri critiques the romanticization of matriliny and presents evidence to demonstrate how power in Khasi society remains heavily skewed toward men. She points out that although women inherit property and retain the family name, they are systematically kept away from political institutions and are not permitted to participate in the management of customary laws or village governance. Nongbri also highlights the role of state intervention in reinforcing this inequality. Her work reveals how legal codification of customs and interactions with state mechanisms have disproportionately favored men, enabling them to formalize their control within both indigenous and external frameworks of authority.

Syiem's (2014) reflective essay, *Khasi Matrilineal Society: The Paradox Within,* offers a more literary and philosophical angle on the same theme. She delves into the internal contradictions of matrilineal identity, suggesting that Khasi women, while symbolic of cultural preservation, are subjected to systemic domestic silencing. Syiem notes the persistence of domestic violence and the normalization of male dominance within the household, which contradicts the idea of female-centric power. The essay is particularly powerful in portraying the emotional and symbolic toll of masked patriarchy. Syiem's observations draw attention to how ritualistic and cultural practices continue to uphold male privilege, even within a matrilineal framework that outwardly honours women.

The 2013 study titled *Discrimination against Women in*

a Matrilineal Society: A Reality in the Khasi Tribe by Das Gupta and colleagues uses empirical data to challenge the common perception that matriliny guarantees gender equality. The study involved structured interviews with Khasi women across urban and rural regions, revealing a widespread pattern of economic and social discrimination. Although women are heirs to property, many report having limited control over these assets, which are often managed by male guardians or influenced by brothers and maternal uncles. The study also documents instances of gender bias in education, healthcare access, and legal recourse. This empirical evidence undermines the narrative that Khasi matriliny is inherently progressive and instead positions it as a complex system where tradition and patriarchy often intersect (Das Gupta et al., 2013).

Finally, the foundational anthropological work *Matriliny among the Khasis: A Study in Retrospect and Prospect* by Sasikumar (2019), published under the Anthropological Survey of India, offers a historical and cultural overview of the Khasi social order. Sasikumar meticulously outlines the traditional roles of the *kni*, the maternal uncle, whose influence often surpasses that of the mother or daughter in decision-making, particularly in matters concerning land and lineage. The study further shows how Christianization and market forces have intensified patriarchal tendencies, often under the guise of modernity and rational governance. Sasikumar's work helps ground the more recent critiques by showing how the seeds of masked patriarchy were embedded in the very design of Khasi matriliny, even before formal colonization and state intervention.

Together, these works emphasize that Khasi matriliny is not a space of female dominance but a system where patriarchy operates subtly yet effectively. Although women inherit property and act as lineage bearers, they remain marginalized in power, governance, and agency. The term "matrilineal paradox" captures this contradiction, showing how matrilineal systems can exist alongside deeply rooted patriarchal norms. The literature demonstrates that symbolic female centrality often conceals real male control, making the Khasi case a crucial example for rethinking gender, tradition, and power in non-Western contexts.

Discussion

1. Beyond Matrilineality: The Illusion of Female Power

Minera, a 20-year-old student at a prestigious college, says, "*We get the property, what more must we need?*". This seemingly simple statement encapsulates the core contradiction in the Khasi matrilineal system, the conflation of inheritance with empowerment. This raises an important question: Is this truly a sense of satisfaction or merely another reflection of the faulty conditioning of women? A strikingly similar conditioning has been thrust on women, in the name of protection and comfort. In her timeless classic novel *Subarnalata*, Ashapurna Debi poignantly captures the deeply internalized patriarchy of her time through the voice of an orthodox elder lady who asks, "

?" (What more does a woman need than a good husband and a house?), a question that subtly reflects the systemic silencing of women's aspirations beyond limitations (Debi, 1967). Likewise, here, the phrase "… what more do we need" signals the accepted and internalized limitation.

Power is highly symbolic, something that is just visible on a superficial level. It signals a socialized belief that material inheritance is equivalent to complete empowerment, thereby neglecting the importance of voice, agency, and decision-making power in familial and communal spaces. This kind of sentiment often stems from a lifetime of gendered conditioning, where women are taught to value their symbolic roles but discouraged, either overtly or subtly, from questioning their absence in decision-making spaces.

The most horrifying parts happen to be that women themselves believe that they are empowered because they inherit the property or need not necessarily leave their parental house after marriage. However, what is often perceived as 'power' in such contexts is, in truth, merely a fragment of what should be considered ordinary and basic entitlements mistaken for empowerment.

Moreover, it reflects how patriarchal control operates subtly in matrilineal societies by offering women the illusion of ownership while reserving the power to manage, distribute, or make decisions for male figures. Interestingly, even though the husband or in-laws don't have much of an opinion or claim on the wives' properties, the brother and the uncle do. So, ultimately, it is a male lead. The belief that property equals power is deeply flawed when women lack control over how that property is used, to whom it is passed, or what decisions are made within that household.

This statement also inadvertently silences structural critique by reducing empowerment to possession rather than participation. When Khasi women express this view, it often reinforces the patriarchal status quo, shielding it from scrutiny under the guise

of cultural pride or tradition. The illusion of matrilineal empowerment masks the deeper gender asymmetry embedded in familial and community decision-making processes. In essence, the matrilineal label becomes a veneer, shielding an entrenched patriarchal hierarchy from critique and reform.

2. Women's Agency: Acceptance or Acquiescence?

Understanding the position of Khasi women within their matrilineal society requires a deeper analysis beyond just surface-level inheritance rights or lineage structures. Although the global feminist perspective often praises the Khasi tribe for its apparent gender progressiveness, women's actual experiences often reveal a more complex reality, one characterized by the tension between perceived agency and socially conditioned compliance.

Tiplut Nongbri (2003) in her seminal work *Gender, Matriliny and Entrepreneurship: The Khasis of North-East India*, observes that Khasi women, while being the legal heirs, often defer important household and economic decisions to their maternal uncles or elder male relatives. This reflects an internalized hierarchy where the symbolic value of the woman as lineage-bearer exists alongside a practical submission to male authority.

She quotes: **"Women may inherit property, but the exercise of control over it, be it economic or symbolic, is often in the hands of male kin."** (Nongbri, 2000)

The paradox becomes more apparent when examining women's exclusion from public decision-making spaces like the *Dorbar Shnong* (village council), which remains male-dominated. Despite being cultural custodians, women are often excluded from political discourse, reinforcing the idea that their role is confined to the private and symbolic sphere.

This leads to the critical question: When Khasi women speak about their roles, are they really articulating agency?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the emerging voices of younger Khasi women—especially those with exposure to feminist thought and legal education—who have started questioning the disparity between inherited property and excluded power. As one young woman interviewed by Nongbri noted:

"We are proud of our matrilineal system, but I often wonder, if I own the land, why can't I sit in the Dorbar?"

This statement, along with others, marks a shift from acquiescence to critical reflection. It also signals the beginnings of an indigenous feminist discourse that seeks not to dismantle tradition, but to interrogate and reform the gendered assumptions that underpin it.

3. Comparative Reflections: Matriliny vs Matriarchy

The distinction between matriliny and matriarchy is essential for understanding the paradox that characterizes the gender dynamics of the Khasi tribe. However, a closer look shows that they describe fundamentally different systems; one relates to the transmission of lineage and property, while the other pertains to the actual exercise of power and authority within society. Matriliny is a kinship system where descent, inheritance, and clan identity are traced through the female line. This is the model used by the Khasis. At first glance, this might suggest a society where women are central, respected, and powerful. However, matriliny mainly concerns the structure of social organization and the custodianship of lineage, not leadership, governance, or public authority.

In contrast, a matriarchy implies a system where women not only inherit property but also hold and exercise institutional, political, and religious authority. A matriarchal society would be one where women dominate both the private and public spheres, occupy decision-making positions, and define the community's social and moral norms. In such a setting, women would preside over councils, control land distribution, perform religious rituals, and have an equal or superior voice in legal and political matters.

Contemporary debates, both within and outside the Khasi community, are increasingly questioning this conflation. Educated Khasi women, feminist activists, and scholars are beginning to differentiate between ownership and control, between symbolic centrality and actual power, and between cultural pride and gender justice. Their voices are crucial in shifting the discourse from celebrating matriliny as a token of progress to interrogating the structures that restrict women's full participation in the systems that govern their lives.

4. Cultural Rituals and Male-Centric Symbolism

At first glance, the matrilineal structure of the Khasi tribe may appear to centre on women, not only through inheritance and clan continuity, but also through the symbolic status of the *ka khadduh* (the youngest daughter). However, a closer examination of Khasi ritual life, clan customs, and religious

practices reveals a cultural system in which ritual authority is overwhelmingly male-centric. These rituals serve as both reflections and reinforcements of a social order where men occupy the sacred, authoritative, and visible roles, while women, despite their centrality to lineage, remain marginal in actual ritual performance and leadership.

One of the clearest examples of this gender asymmetry is seen in funerary and ancestral rites. In Khasi society, although women inherit the ancestral property and are the custodians of the clan, it is the *kni* (maternal uncle) who presides over funeral ceremonies, performs rituals to honour the dead, and ensures the continuity of the clan's spiritual lineage. The ritual space becomes a stage for male performance, where masculinity is equated with responsibility, leadership, and spiritual authority.

Furthermore, these rituals are taught, internalized, and repeated through oral traditions and kinship education. From a young age, Khasi girls are taught to take pride in being the inheritor (*ka khadduh*), but are also told that the uncle must perform the rites, the brother must speak in council, and the men must defend the clan's honour. These ritual prescriptions create a gendered map of cultural legitimacy, where women are given space as symbols of tradition but not as agents of authority within it.

In this sense, Khasi rituals embody a form of "masked patriarchy", a system where gender inequality is not codified in law but embedded in culture, custom, and the sacred. The irony of matriliny lies here: while women may hold the keys to the household, men hold the voice of the ancestors, the symbols of continuity, and the ritual vocabulary of power.

Conclusion

At first glance, the Khasi tribe seems to offer a refreshing alternative to the dominant patriarchal systems present across most of India. Women inherit property, pass on lineage, and appear to be at the heart of family and cultural life. However, as this paper reveals, this visibility often conceals a deeper truth: the true sources of power—those related to decision-making, ritual authority, and public leadership—remain firmly in men's hands. The image of equality exists but is more symbolic than actual.

This contradiction is most evident in the role of the maternal uncle, who performs vital ceremonies, makes key family decisions, and represents the clan in matters of tradition and belief. Despite being the legal heir, the woman is rarely the one who leads or governs. Her presence is honoured, yet her voice is often absent. Many Khasi women express pride in their customs, believing property inheritance suffices. But when asked why they are not allowed to participate in councils or rituals, their silence speaks volumes.

This subtle exclusion is not always visible. It is embedded in rituals, language, and stories passed down through generations. It resides in the belief that women should be grateful for what they already have. And it is precisely this subtlety that makes it so powerful.

True empowerment cannot be limited to property ownership or tradition. It must encompass participation, agency, and the capacity to influence and lead. While the matrilineal structure of the Khasi tribe provides a good starting point, unless women are equally involved in all aspects of cultural, religious, and political life, genuine gender equality will remain just beyond reach, promised but not fully realized.

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The Politics of Recognition: Van Gujjars and the Exclusions of India's Tribal Policy Framework

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Van Gujjars, a nomadic forest-dwelling pastoralist community inhabiting the Shivalik foothills of Uttarakhand and western Uttar Pradesh, to interrogate the exclusions embedded within India's tribal policy frameworks. The purpose is to critically analyse how current classifications deny Van Gujjars key constitutional and ecological rights, unlike Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh who are recognised as Scheduled Tribes (ST**).** Methodologically**,** the paper draws on field reports, oral narratives, Forest Rights Act (FRA) case studies, and digital testimonies, including social media advocacy and visual archives, to understand the Van Gujjars' socio-political resistance and knowledge systems. Findings reveal that the community's seasonal migration, ecological wisdom, and sustainable forest practices directly challenge dominant conservation paradigms that seek to evict them under the guise of eco-tourism or wildlife protection. Their refusal to be sedentarised echoes the legacy of Birsa Munda's anti-colonial resistance to forest control and affirms indigenous modes of mobility and land use**.** The paper's originality lies in theorising "mobile resistance" as a framework to redefine indigeneity beyond village-bound, sedentary models. It positions Van Gujjar pastoralism as a form of ecological citizenship rooted in movement, not stasis.Implications include the need for: (1) ST recognition of Van Gujjars in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh; (2) FRA amendments to accommodate nomadic life; and (3) formal recognition of Van Gujjar pastoralism as an ecological knowledge system. The paper advocates for a justice-oriented redefinition of tribal citizenship that validates nomadic indigeneity and the right to mobility.

Keywords: *Nomadic Pastoralism*, *Van Gujjars*, *Forest Rights Act (FRA), Scheduled Tribes, Indigenous*

INTRODUCTION

The Van Gujjars, a nomadic pastoralist Muslim community residing in the Shivalik ranges of Uttarakhand and western Uttar Pradesh, illustrate the complexities and disparities embedded within India's framework for tribal recognition. Their means of existence are deeply intertwined with buffalo pastoralism, seasonal migration, and a significant ecological connection to the forests they travel through. In spite of their cultural and ethnographic closeness to the Gujjars in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir, who are recognized as Scheduled Tribes (ST), the Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand continue to be categorized as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This exclusion undermines their constitutional protections, access to welfare benefits, and political representation, simultaneously reinforcing structural marginalization and increasing their susceptibility to displacement.

The politics of recognition in India transcends mere categorization of communities by cultural traits; it is, in fact, a profoundly political and bureaucratic endeavor. Recognition is contingent upon a

confluence of ethnographic evidence, state priorities, historical contingencies, and the underlying sedentarist assumptions that permeate legal and conservation frameworks. The ST classification in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh affords Gujjars certain affirmative action policies and legal protections, whereas their counterparts in Uttarakhand remain overlooked, underscoring the influence of political geography on the accessibility of rights.

The Van Gujjars 'relationship with forests is often romanticised as one of inherent harmony with nature. Yet, as Tandon (2024) notes, such idealisations may paradoxically undermine the community. Restrictions on seasonal mobility, such as prohibitions on moving to higher pastures during summer, not only disrupt traditional pastoral cycles but also reveal the limitations of forest management frameworks that ignore human ecological knowledge. The Van Gujjars 'seasonal migrations through Rajaji and Corbett National Parks place them in direct conflict with conservationist projects and eco-tourism initiatives that treat forests as pristine spaces devoid of human habitation (Guha, 1989; Sundar, 1999). Unlike sedentary communities who can produce land titles, the Van Gujjars' mobility complicates claims under formal forest governance frameworks, leaving them vulnerable to administrative neglect and exclusion.

The Van Gujjars 'pastoralism demonstrates a distinct form of ecological citizenship: maintaining water sources, preventing forest fires, dispersing seeds, and sustaining biodiversity through low-impact grazing. Despite the sustainability of these practices, state policies continue to criminalise their presence, while eco-tourism and infrastructure projects are valorised as environmentally responsible. By highlighting the disjunction between policy frameworks and lived experience, the paper positions the Van Gujjars 'seasonal migrations not as a deficit to be corrected but as an alternative model of environmental stewardship, mobility, and political agency.

Objectives and Hypothesis

This research endeavors to achieve three interrelated aims. Firstly, it explores the legal and political factors that contribute to the Van Gujjars' exclusion from the Scheduled Tribe classification, despite their ethnographic and cultural affinities with the Gujjars in adjacent states. Secondly, it examines the manner in which the FRA and associated forest governance frameworks marginalize nomadic communities by depending on inflexible documentation prerequisites. Third, it examines the ways in which Van Gujjar pastoralism, oral traditions, and resistance practices challenge and redefine prevailing concepts of indignity, mobility, and citizenship. The prevailing hypothesis posits that the frameworks for tribal recognition in India exhibit a structural bias favoring sedentary populations that are documented in revenue records. This bias renders nomadic tribes such as the Van Gujjars imperceptible within policy frameworks and the public consciousness, criminalizing their livelihood practices while obliterating their ecological contributions.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on forest governance and conservation in India has long critiqued the creation of protected areas as zones of exclusion. Guha (1989) and Sundar (1999) document how the colonial and postcolonial forest management paradigms valorize "pristine" forests, often positioning human presence as inherently destructive. While such analyses illuminate the broader dynamics of conservation-related displacement, they primarily focus on sedentary Adivasi communities, leaving nomadic groups like the Van Gujjars largely unexamined. Similarly, studies of conservation policy, such as those by Chhatre and Agrawal (2009) and Lele (2013), highlight bureaucratic delays and structural biases in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), but these accounts predominantly assume sedentary settlement, rendering pastoral nomads invisible in discussions of rights and legal access.

The body of work on the Van Gujjars (and related groups like the Gaddis) consistently shows how their traditional pastoral, forest-based livelihoods have been and continue to be contested by state conservation, legal regimes, and changing environmental discourses. Gooch (2009) in "*Victims of Conservation or Rights as Forest Dwellers"* traces how colonial and post-colonial policies regulated Van Gujjar mobility and marginalized them, while recent legislation such as the Forest Rights Act offers potential avenues for recognition of rights but faces challenges in implementation. In "Conservation for Whom? Van Gujjars and the Rajaji National Park" (Gooch, 1997), the onset of conflict with park authorities after the establishment of protected areas is shown to mark a shift in how the forest becomes a site of exclusion rather than shared livelihood. More recently, Srivastava (2022) in *The Making of Pastoralisms* compares how the Gaddis and Van Gujjars have differently negotiated state pressures (sedentarisation, conservation, revenue, climate concerns), showing that while both face constraints, their historical legal statuses, religious identities, and

relationships with neighbouring settled populations lead to divergent outcomes. Another recent paper, *Contested forests: The Van Gujjars' struggle to settle* (Amir, 2023) examines how Van Gujjars are reproducing forest-settlement forms, i.e. adapting to pressure by trying to settle, which has implications for both their rights and forest relations.

Comparative studies of Gujjar communities across northern India highlight the arbitrariness of recognition. While Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh benefit from Scheduled Tribe status, access to affirmative action, and legal forest rights, their counterparts in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh remain classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This uneven treatment points to the role of political geography, state-level recommendations, and historical contingencies in shaping eligibility for recognition.

Research Gaps

In light of the expanding body of research surrounding conservation, displacement, and recognition in India, three significant drawbacks remain concerning the Van Gujjars. Initially, although Adivasi communities have garnered significant attention in ethnographic and policy research, nomadic pastoralists such as the Van Gujjars continue to be overlooked, resulting in their experiences of displacement and marginalization being insufficiently examined. Furthermore, the convergence of mobility, ecological responsibility, and legal structures remains insufficiently explored; the majority of examinations presuppose stationary livelihoods, neglecting to recognize seasonal migration as a valid expression of forest reliance and citizenship. Third, the inconsistencies in Scheduled Tribe recognition across state lines, where Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are designated as STs, while those in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh are categorized as OBCs, have not been rigorously analyzed, thereby obscuring the political and administrative factors influencing recognition.

Methodology

The Van Gujjars' experiences of recognition, exclusion, and forest governance are examined in this study using a qualitative, multidisciplinary methodology. To create a thorough understanding of the marginalization of the community, it integrates textual analysis, media-based field narratives, and comparative policy examination. Records of Forest Rights Act (FRA) claim denials in Rajaji and Corbett National Parks, narratives recorded in media reports, NGO case studies, and digital campaigns, comprise primary data. Additional resources include advocacy outputs from groups that elevate Van Gujjar viewpoints in public discourse, such as Adivasi Lives Matter, Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP), and SOPHIA. Secondary data comprises policy documents comparing the recognition of Gujjars across Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh, highlighting the role of state borders and administrative decisions in shaping access to rights.

Discussion

Recognition and Exclusion

Despite having similar ethnicity, means of subsistence, and familial ties, Gujjars in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh are categorized as OBCs, while those in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are recognized as STs. This discrepancy illustrates how recognition is mediated more by administrative and bureaucratic priorities than by ethnographic reality, reflecting political circumstances at the state level rather than any significant cultural or ecological differences. Their categorisation as OBCs has significant ramifications. It limits their political representation, keeps them out of specific welfare programs, and denies them constitutional protections under the Fifth Schedule. Most significantly, it constrains access to forest rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). As Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs), they must provide evidence of residence on forest land for at least seventy-five years, a near-impossible requirement for a nomadic population dependent on cyclical migration (Menon, 2021). This reliance on fixed, documentary proof exemplifies the FRA's structural bias toward sedentary communities, marginalizing groups whose identity and belonging are expressed through routes, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge.

Mobility as Resistance

Mobility is essential as a form of ecological and political resistance as well as an economic tactic. The Van Gujjar people continue to follow centuries-old seasonal migration patterns, relocating buffalo herds between the Shivalik foothills and higher pastures in spite of numerous state interventions, such as eviction drives, the denial of grazing permits, and incentives for rehabilitation. Their cultural customs, social cohesiveness, and pastoral economy are all supported by this cyclical movement. The community challenges traditional state logic of governance and legibility by refusing permanent settlement, claiming that territorial belonging does not necessitate a fixed address or revenue document (Scott, 1998). The state interprets this mobility as

disorder, framing Van Gujjars as "encroachers" within protected areas. Yet their cyclical migration preserves ecological balance, disperses seeds, fertilizes soil, and mitigates fire hazards, functions that the state's conservation policies often overlook. Here, mobility embodies a distinct form of ecological citizenship, in which the assertion of presence, care, and knowledge substitutes for formal recognition (Chatty, 2006; Rao, 2018).

Territorial Archives and Ecological Knowledge

Unlike sedentary communities, whose land claims are substantiated through maps, deeds, and revenue records, the Van Gujjars maintain what can be described as a living territorial archive. Knowledge of migration routes, water sources, seasonal grazing patterns, and forest ecology is transmitted orally across generations, forming a repository of ecological and cultural intelligence. These oral-ecological archives operate as both practical guides and markers of belonging, challenging the state's fixation on written documentation as the sole legitimate proof of residence (Menon, 2021). Ecological sustainability is a feature of Van Gujjar mobility's pastoral practices. Rotational grazing keeps pastures from degrading, and the movement of buffalo helps to maintain biodiversity by fertilizing the soil and spreading seeds (Preston, 2023). In contrast to many sedentary interventions, like monoculture plantations or tourism infrastructure, which frequently result in ecological degradation, seasonal grazing area vacating promotes natural regeneration (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Despite these efforts, the community is portrayed as a forest threat, while ecotourism initiatives such as roads, resorts, and automobile traffic are approved by policy as sustainable substitutes (Guha, 1989; Sundar, 1999).

Challenging Conservationist Myths

The prevailing "empty forest" narrative, which assumes human absence as a prerequisite for ecological preservation, systematically erases centuries of indigenous forest stewardship. Rajaji and Corbett National Parks exemplify this model, privileging wildlife protection while excluding human presence, even when communities like the Van Gujjars have historically enhanced ecosystem resilience. By maintaining water sources, clearing undergrowth, and controlling invasive species such as *Lantana camara*, the Van Gujjars perform tangible conservation work that formal policies fail to recognize (Prakash, 2024).

Reframing conservation requires moving from exclusionary fortress models to participatory frameworks. Integrating local ecological knowledge into forest management acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between mobility and environmental stewardship. This approach aligns with broader arguments for conservation "with people," rather than against them, suggesting that co-management can achieve both ecological protection and social justice (Agrawal & Redford, 2006).

Ecological Citizenship Beyond the State

The prefix "Van," historically adopted by this nomadic community, signals a deliberate distinction from mainstream Gujjars and a claim to forest-dwelling identity. Despite repeated appeals for recognition as forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes, the Van Gujjars remain categorized as OBCs, illustrating how legal frameworks often fail to accommodate non-sedentary forms of belonging (Menon, 2021).

Their relationship with the forest exemplifies an alternative conception of citizenship. Unlike conventional state-mediated rights, ecological citizenship is enacted through stewardship, cyclical mobility, and oral memory. Pastoralism here is both an ethical and ecological practice: low-carbon, biodiversity-friendly, and embedded in the rhythms of the forest. In effect, the Van Gujjars perform responsibilities of environmental citizenship more effectively than many sedentary communities with formal titles or documentation. By refusing sedentarisation, they contest normative assumptions about backwardness and dependency. Ecological care, mobility, and oral traditions form a moral economy of reciprocity with nature, positioning the Van Gujjars as active agents of governance, rather than passive subjects of state intervention. Their lived practices reveal the limitations of rigid legal categories such as ST, OBC, or OTFD and underscore the need for recognition frameworks that value mobility, embodied knowledge, and ethical stewardship as legitimate grounds for belonging.

Table 1

Estimated Van Gujjar Population, Legal Status, and Ecological Contributions by State

State	Estimated Van Gujjar Population	ST Recognition	FRA Access	Ecological Contributions
Uttarakhand	60,000–70,000	No	Limited	Seasonal migration, rotational grazing, fire hazard reduction, seed dispersal, soil fertilization
Uttar Pradesh	~2,000	No	Limited	Similar to Uttarakhand; however, smaller population and less documented ecological impact
Himachal Pradesh	~92,000	Yes	Full	Recognized as ST; active participation in forest management and conservation initiatives
Jammu & Kashmir	~980,000	Yes	Full	Recognized as ST; significant involvement in forest conservation and management

Note: Data compiled from *Wikipedia*,

and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs '*Forest Rights Act Rules* (Government of India, 2012). The table summarizes Van Gujjar population estimates, their legal recognition as Scheduled Tribes (ST), access to Forest Rights Act (FRA) entitlements, and their contributions to forest ecology.

Policy Recommendations

The exclusion of the Van Gujjars is not inevitable; it is the product of narrow policy frameworks and bureaucratic rigidities. Addressing this requires interventions at multiple levels like legal, administrative, and conceptual.

1. **Legal Recognition of Nomadic Pastoralism** Sedentary communities are favored by current frameworks. Although the Forest Rights Act (2006) acknowledges other traditional forest dwellers, it actually requires proof of residency for 75 years, which is unfeasible for nomadic groups. Nomadic pastoralism must be specifically recognized by legal reform as a legitimate way to live in forests. Oral testimony, community affidavits, and migration route records are examples of mobility-based criteria of belonging that would need to be added to the FRA in order to accomplish this.
2. **Oral Archives as Legitimate Evidence** Policy should move beyond written documentation and incorporate oral and ecological knowledge as valid forms of proof. Community testimonies, genealogies of migration, and ecological practices could be verified through participatory mechanisms involving anthropologists, ecologists, and community elders. This would counter the bureaucratic bias toward written records and affirm the legitimacy of living archives.
3. **Participatory Conservation Models** Co-management strategies that acknowledge Van Gujjars as partners should take the place of the exclusive model of fortress conservation. Eco-tourism cooperatives, buffer zone councils, and joint forest management committees can incorporate local knowledge into conservation plans. For instance, park management plans could formalize the Van Gujjar people's proficiency in preserving water sources and preventing forest fires.
4. **Education and Healthcare without Sedentarisation** : The state often justifies sedentarisation by citing the need to provide education and healthcare. However, mobile schools, seasonal health camps, and telemedicine offer alternative solutions that respect pastoral mobility. Policy should focus on delivering services along migration routes rather than coercing communities into settlements.
5. **Reframing Eco-Tourism** Eco-tourism projects should be regulated to prevent the displacement of indigenous communities. Instead of privileging private resorts, policies could support community-led tourism where Van Gujjars guide visitors, share ecological knowledge, and directly benefit from revenues. This would create an alternative economic model that is both sustainable and inclusive.
6. **Broadening the Idea of Citizenship** Most importantly, policy must rethink citizenship itself. Rather than tying belonging to fixed addresses and documents, citizenship could be reimagined as an ethic of care and contribution. Recognising ecological citizenship would mean valuing practices of stewardship (such as sustainable grazing and fire prevention) on par with documentary evidence.

Conclusion

The Van Gujjars' case explores the boundaries of state recognition in general as well as the struggles of a particular community. The policy's normative presumptions that citizenship necessitates sedentariness, that belonging necessitates documentation, and that conservation necessitates the absence of people are revealed by their exclusion from Scheduled Tribe status. The Van Gujjars challenge these presumptions by refusing to settle, maintaining oral archives, and practicing ecological care. This paper demonstrates that recognition is a political endeavor influenced by the state's need for legibility rather than an impartial act of inclusion. The state delegitimizes mobility and oral memory by giving written records and fixed property priority. However, an alternative recognition regime based on stewardship, reciprocity, and ecological citizenship is embodied in the pastoral practices of the Van Gujjars. The grammar of citizenship itself must be expanded in order to reimagine recognition. Policy must recognize the contributions of nomadic pastoralists as environmental citizens rather than considering them as "deficient" due to their lack of permanent residences or documentation. In this context, recognition refers to acknowledging forms of belonging that have already been implemented on the ground rather than bestowing rights from above. The Van Gujjars' low-impact living and mobility model provides important lessons in these times of

ecological fragility and climate crisis. Their exclusion is a loss for ecological futures as well as an injustice to a community. In order to solve this, India needs to abandon the restrictive ST/OBC/OTFD classifications and adopt a more expansive, flexible definition of recognition that acknowledges memory, mobility, and ecological ethics as valid reasons for belonging.

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Cultural adaptation and identity: A study of mising community in the plains of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: In this paper, the primary focus is dwelled on the lifestyles, festivals and supernatural beliefs of the Mising community that are rooted with their cultural practices with a special emphasis on the people living in the plains of Assam.

Design/Methodology: The research uses both primary and secondary data, including interviews with Mising individuals, observation and analysis of prior scholarly work.

Findings: The Mising community is spread across Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of North-East India with differences in their dialects and adaptation to modernity. They face discrimination because of the deregatory entitlements used against them. Their voice remains distinguished because of their contribution to the cultural diaspora, literature, fine arts as well as economic growth. However, westernisation has led to cultural erosion- evident in the younger generation's declining fluency in the Mising language, a core marker of identity.

Originality: This study offers unique insights by analysing Mising folks tales to understand current belief systems, and how oral traditions sustain identity without written history.

Implications: This study will provide us a base about the possible external threats and will invoke a sense of responsibility and awareness to create a platform where its safe and secure for every individual irrespective of their tribe or race to preserve their own cultural roots.

Keywords: *Mising, folk tales, plains of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, cultural significance.*

INTRODUCTION

The land of Assam is not just a tapestry of rich flora and fauna, progressive cultural traditions or remarkable heritage but also a land of diverse tribal communities that still stand strong and provide us some of the historic achievements that makes them beautiful and unique at the same time. Misings or the Miris (as officially documented) are the second largest tribal groups in Assam, primarily belonging to the Tani group of tribes believe that they are the descendants of the Sun and Moon also known as 'Donyi-Poloism'. Any religious activity is incomplete without the worship of Donyi and Polo who are considered as the father and mother figures respectively. Donyi-Poloism is an indigenious animist religion centred on the worship of Donyi (the Sun) and Polo (the Moon), who are considered as the supreme deities, cosmic witnesses, and the source of all creation and life. Many of the tribes including Adis, Apatanis, Galos, Nyshis, Tagins as well as the Misings believe in a common ancestor named Abotani, who is considered the progenitor of the Tani tribes.

Before their migration from the hills of Arunachal

Pradesh to the plains of Assam; the Misings were the jhum cultivators (shifting cultivation or slash-and burn). However, after settling in the plains of Assam, they adapted to the riverine environment and have largely mastered wet paddy cultivation, which is more settled form of agriculture. Although, with time, permanent cultivation is more prevalent to them, still there are sources which suggest that shifting cultivation has not been completely abandoned by all the Mising communities. And as they were mostly surrounded by rivers, they had established their own traditional stilt houses (also known as Chang Ghar in Assamese) , for a variety of practical reasons directly related to their environment in the plains of Assam. 'Chang Ghar' provided them safety from flood as well as from wild life and pests and this design allows for better air circulation underneath and through the house which is essential for comfort in the hot and humid climate of Assam. Other bonus points for this witty infrastructure includes a space beneath the stilt house which can be utilised for various purposes, such as storing firewood, agricultural tools, or even sheltering livestock during less severe floods.



Figure: 1
Chang Ghar built in today's plains of Assam.
Picture Credits: Captured during the primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.

The Misings drafted their written history only after post-colonialism period. Because of which, for the pre-colonial era we are mostly depended on its oral history. There are more than one theories to provide us with an unresolved conclusion about its history. One theory states that the written history of the Misings was ruined to save it from the British before they could use it for any mischievous activity against them for profit and invasion. Another theory talks about the story of a man who wrote Mising history on the skin of dead animal. But as the British got to know about his work, a search team was sent to collect it. In the fear of losing his own vital creation, he took his work and ran along with his family into the dense forests where no one could ever find them! But, the journey wasn't sweet, as they were cursed with intolerable hunger, that made the family ruin their own evidence by eating up the skin of the dead animal before they could submit it to the British. And hence, it brought an end to the history that was never born!

FESTIVALS:

Just like any other tribal group, the Misings also have their own indigenous festivals which are mostly associated with their agriculture and lifestyle. Although they are a part of the mainstream Assamese society and these cultural aspects enhances their distinctive belief system, it is important to acknowledge their determination to keep their roots alive and vibrant. Some of which have been described below:

1. ALI-AYE-LIGANG: The very name of this festival can be associated with how this festival is celebrated. The word "Ali" refers to seeds or roots, and "Aye" signifies fruits, whereas "Ligang" means to sow. Ali-Aye-Ligang is a festival celebrated annually on the 1st of Wednesday of the Assamese month of Fagun (February) and it marks the commencement of the sowing season, particular for the Ahu paddy. Some people also like to call this festival as "Narasiga Bihu" in Assamese.

2. পঃৰাগ উৎসৱ (Poraag Utsav): Unlike the Ali-Aye-Ligang, Poraag is not an annual festival but is rather determined by the harvest and community needs. This occasion is celebrated to give a sense of contentment to their ancestors as well as to the nature and the Almighty. It is usually celebrated after a period of two to five years after the harvest season and it collectively brings together the youth of one village to the another village for the annual fest.

3. Dobür Puja: The Mising Community believes in the existence of both good and evil spirits. They also believe in the existence of grave misfortunes caused by negative energies such as famine, flood, erosion and death. Dobür Puja is performed to appease these spirits and purify the community from any negative influences. They avoid eating non-vegetarian food like meat (which involves animal killing) during this time and they also give sacrifice of 2 chicken and 1 pig as a part of this ritual activity. The person who does all these sacrificial activities is known as "Hatula".

4. Indrachandra Puja: Indrachandra Puja is yet another agricultural based traditional festival performed by the Misings of Assam. In this occasion, they worship the celestial bodies which consists of

invoking the rain and asking for the protection of their crops. All these ritual activities are carried out by the 'mibu', which also plays a significant role in directing such agricultural activities.



Figure: 2
Picture Credits: Captured during the primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.

The Misings have their own artistic way of featuring their skill through weaving and using elaborate patterns which are inspired by motifs like nature, animals, geometrical patterns and floral patterns. The general colours which are used for handwoving these clothes are red, yellow, black and green.

TRADITIONAL ATTIRE WORN BY MISING MEN AND WOMEN:



Figure: 3
Mibu Galok: It's an upper garment traditionally worn by Mising men.
Picture Credits: Google.



Figure: 4
Erkok: A muffler woven which is often red in colour with black stripes on it.
Picture Credits: GOOGLE



Figure: 5
Lakpun: Its a traditional handwear garment often worn by Mising women and are usually woven in three colours: Red, Black and White.
Picture Credits: Captured during the primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.



Figure: 6
Ege: Its the Mising version of Mekhela or the lower garment/skirt worn traditionally by Mising women.
Picture credits: GOOGLE.



Figure: 7
Ugon: Its a traditional lower garment worn by the Mising tribe, particularly by the males of the plains of Assam as a dhoti.
Picture Credits: GOOGLE.

FOOD:

Food is an intregal aspect for every occasion to begin or end with. Culturally speaking, our traditional food mainly comes from the environment that we are surrounded with and hence it is also linked with the occasional religious activities. Inspite of being predominantly non-vegetarian, the Mising diet includes a large amount of greens and herbs.



Figure: 8
A Mising Food Platter.
Image Source: GOOGLE.

Rice is their staple food just like most of the living communities in Assam and they consume meat like pork, duck, chicken as well as fish since they are largely surrounded around riverine bodies. Misings consume various types of rice, including sticky rice which is often prepared by boiling or steaming. "Purang Apin" involve wrapping sticky rice in wild cardamom leaves and then boiling it. Rice beer or "Apong" is their traditional alcoholic beverage which they prepare using fermented rice.



Figure: 9
Fermented Rice that will be later used to make Apong.
Image Source: Captured during the primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.



Figure: 10
Traditional Mising Kitchen Setting.
Image Source: Captured during the primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.

METHODS:

For this research paper, both primary as well as secondary data was collected and then drafted with the consent of the respective interviewees. For primary data collection, I was accompanied by Bornali Taye, a local resident of Balikhuti Gummotha Gaon who had helped me in getting access with the Mising community. I was acknowledged by the Gaon Panchayat, Mr. Giridhar Lachon, who also interviewed for the process and provided me with details like the religious beliefs, cultural traditions, as well as submitted me two books that provided me more information about the Mising Tribal Community.

Two other prominent interviewees that provided me with additional information were: Bornali Taye and Dhrubojyoti Mili. Secondary data collection for this report includes reference from published articles about the Mising community. The names of those two books that are used for reference are listed below:

1. পঃৰাগ (তৃতীয় সংখ্যক বালিখুটি গোমঠা পঃৰাগ গৃদৃ-২০২৪ ৰ স্মৰণিকা।
2. DÍRBÍ Mouthpiece of Mising Dírbí Kébang.

Other secondary data articles as well as videos that have been used for reference are listed below:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

THE ROLE OF WOMEN-

In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, " Educating a boy means educating a person, educating a woman means educating the whole family.
Presently, the education rate of Mising women has increased significantly. However, they are still lagging behind those educated men in terms of equality and acknowlegement. Especially in rural areas, this difference causes a bridge between them and development. Therefore, it is necessary to educate women equally with men if Misings and the society as a whole want to progress forward on an equal footing with other societies.

Emphasis must be placed on increasing the number or quantity of highly educated women as well as quality education. Quality education means understanding every subject or applying that knowledge in practice. The knowledge earned from experience and skills will help a society to live their lives better, get an understanding of complex problems and will help them solve those problems with unity.

About half of the population are women. If those half are educated as much as the men, they can contribute a lot to the improvement and development of our society in any aspect. A highly educated woman can manage herself, have independence as well as possibly refrain herself from the ill odds or misfortunes that a society can contribute. She can think well of herself, her family, and all the other broader perspectives.

Women can also be able to become economically self-reliant and achieve their self esteem and high position in society. Women's empowerment is the equal status of women with men in all social, political, religious, economic, educational and cultural spheres.



Figure: 11
A Mising Woman who volunteered for this project.
Image credits: Captured during the primary data collection at the Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.

Educated Mising women can acquire knowledge in all fields of politics, social, business, and religion and take the Mising society forward. In order to increase the rate of higher education and vocational and technical literacy of women, we as a society must be aware and shouldn't discriminate between boys and girls as they are all equal.

Another burning problem of the Mising society is child marriage. Marriage without completing

education at an early age, without physical and mental maturity and without income causes many problems. Early motherhood leads to physical decline in women. Children born at a young age and immature physical condition may also be born malnourished or physically and mentally weak. As a result, the child may not be able to progress as he or she should in any area in the future. Therefore, the problem with child marriage must be addressed.

DECLINE OF THEIR CULTURAL FEATURES-

According to the recent census, the Misings account for approximately 8 lakhs of population in Assam. Their population is concentrated in areas like the Brahmaputra Valley, particularly in the districts like Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, and Dibrugarh. Over the period of time, they have undergone several changes such as displacement of a significant number of people from the villages in the riverine bodies to the modern towns and cities. Another transition includes the shift from 'Chaang Ghar' to a modern Assam-type house. Such architectural features speak a lot about their acceptance to modernity. It also showcases their gradual decline from their original choice of inhabitants.

Secondly, the younger generations are increasingly learning and speaking languages at the expense of their own native Mising language. Due to the increase in globalisation, parents prefer their children to learn foreign languages like English to suit them well with technology. But this preference has also caused them to ignore their own Mising language. Which is why, this has become a possible cultural threat for the Mising culture and it is at risk of being lost.



Figure: 12
A teenager preparing handloom clothes.
Image Credits: Captured during primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.

Last but not the least, Misings are skilled with their traditional way of preparing handloom clothes. However, due to westernisation, people are moving fast with their trends, getting more and more options has become easier in the market. Which is why, we really can't assure if this traditionality will last forever, or will it end like a ritual for only special occasions.

These factors are mostly a contribution of the complexities that the society has grown with time. Only serious activity with regard to protecting one's culture can be a solution to bring less or no harm to the society. Every tribe must have faced one or the other cultural threat in its history. Nonetheless, it's the vision or the perspective that will help a tribe to move ahead with its time, while also keeping aware of their cultural roots. Only then, we can expect a society to not just be progressive, liberal or open to scientific but also promising culture and ethnicity at its side.



Figure: 13
A Mising woman using a traditional pounding tool.
Image Credits: Captured during primary data collection at Balikhuti Gumotha Gaon.

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Title: Integrating Modern Education and Traditional Knowledge Systems in Tribal Communities

Dr. Shraddha Verma[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamic interface between modern education and traditional knowledge systems (TKS) within tribal communities, aiming to assess how these paradigms can coexist and enrich each other without undermining cultural identity. Using a qualitative methodology, the study draws on ethnographic case studies from tribal regions of central India. Data was collected through field observations, interviews with tribal elders, educators, and students, along with curriculum analysis in select tribal schools. The framework employed draws upon critical pedagogy and culturally responsive education models. The study reveals that traditional knowledge—rooted in ecological awareness, oral history, and community rituals—holds pedagogical value often overlooked in standardized curricula. Where modern education has integrated TKS (e.g., through bilingual instruction, local ecological content), student engagement and retention rates improved. Conversely, systems that marginalize indigenous practices contribute to alienation and dropout. This paper adds value by offering a model for inclusive education that respects tribal epistemologies. It challenges the binary opposition between "modern" and "indigenous," advocating for hybrid educational spaces that validate both systems.

Findings would suggest policy-level shifts towards contextualized curricula and teacher training programs that equip educators to draw upon local knowledge. This integration fosters cultural preservation while enhancing educational outcomes.

Keywords: *Traditional Knowledge Systems, Tribal Education, Indigenous Pedagogy, Cultural Integration, Inclusive Curriculum*

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1.Introduction

India's tribal communities possess intricate and locally evolved systems of knowledge that are often excluded from mainstream education. These knowledge systems encompass ecological understanding, health practices, agriculture, cosmology, and oral traditions (Raina, 2014). Despite their depth and relevance, traditional knowledge systems (TKS) face erosion due to standardized curricula and centralized education policies. The National Education Policy 2020 marks a significant shift by emphasizing mother tongue instruction, local content, and Indian Knowledge Systems (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020).

This paper explores how integrating TKS with modern education can enrich pedagogical practices, bridge cultural gaps, and enhance learning outcomes among tribal learners. It also highlights challenges and ethical considerations in adopting such integrative approaches.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Approach

The study employs a qualitative review methodology grounded in constructivist and decolonial epistemologies (Vygotsky, 1978; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Data sources include policy documents, ethnographic studies, institutional reports, and scholarly literature across education, anthropology, and development disciplines.

2.2Data Collection

Key documents analyzed:- National Education Policy 2020 (MoE, 2020)
-Census and tribal development reports (Census of India, 2011)
- Case studies of Vidyodaya School (Tamil Nadu), Lok Jumbish Project (Rajasthan), and Ashram Schools (Chhattisgarh)

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is anchored in constructivist learning theory, which views knowledge as actively constructed through interaction with cultural and social environments (Vygotsky, 1978). A decolonial lens is used to critique the marginalization of indigenous epistemologies and advocate for culturally responsive education (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

3. Results

3.1 Presence and Relevance of Tribal Knowledge

Tribal communities possess centuries-old knowledge related to forest conservation, herbal medicine, climate patterns, and spiritual rituals. For instance, the Baiga and Gond communities in Central India align agricultural activities with lunar cycles, while the Kani tribe in Kerala contributed to the herbal formulation "Jeevani" (Raina, 2014).

3.2 Gaps in Formal Education

Mainstream education often alienates tribal learners by prioritizing standardized content in non-native languages. Dropout rates remain disproportionately high among tribal children due to cultural disconnects and inaccessible pedagogies (Devy, 2020).

3.3 Case-Based Insights

- Vidyodaya School (Tamil Nadu): Run by the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam, the school combines indigenous stories, games, and crafts with formal subjects, creating a more engaging and relevant curriculum (Jain, 2011).

- Lok Jumbish Project (Rajasthan): Enabled community involvement in curriculum design, emphasizing local languages and knowledge.

- Ashram Schools (Chhattisgarh):Mixed results, with some successfully integrating tribal arts and stories while others remain bureaucratically rigid.
3.4 Policy Advancements

NEP 2020 supports mother-tongue instruction and emphasizes India's diverse knowledge heritage. It encourages schools to source content from local cultures, crafts, and oral traditions(MoE,2020)

4. Discussion

4.1 Pedagogical Benefits of Integration

Incorporating traditional knowledge into classrooms enhances cognitive resonance, fosters cultural pride, and makes learning more contextual. Storytelling, community rituals, and local ecology offer unique entry points into language, science, and ethics.

4.2 Challenges to Implementation

Despite the promise, several challenges persist:

- Standardization vs. Local Diversity: One-size-fits-all models marginalize localized knowledge (Visvanathan, 1997).

- Documentation Limitations: Oral traditions lack formal records, making curriculum integration complex (Raina, 2014).

- Teacher Preparedness: Most educators are unfamiliar with tribal languages and customs.

4.3 Ethical and Cultural Considerations

Using tribal knowledge without community consent risks appropriation. Equitable participation from tribal elders, women, and youth is vital to ensure ethical knowledge sharing and curriculum co-creation (Jain, 2011).

4.4 Pathways Forward

- Curricular Decentralization: Encourage state and district-level adaptations based on local tribal contexts

- Teacher Training: Include modules on indigenous pedagogy and multilingual teaching.

- Technology and Archiving: Create digital repositories for tribal stories, music, and art in native languages.

- Research Support: Fund ethnographic and participatory research by tribal scholars.

5. Conclusion

Integrating traditional knowledge with modern education is essential for equitable, inclusive, and

relevant learning, especially in tribal contexts. Such integration not only empowers tribal youth but also enriches India's broader educational landscape by embracing epistemic diversity. A sensitive, participatory, and decolonial approach to educational design can bridge generational wisdom and contemporary needs, paving the way for holistic development.

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Tracing Footprints: Transition of Traditional Knowledge System to Modern Education With Reference to the Bodo Community of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Education is considered as an invincible tool for the development of society. The human civilization from time immemorial has imparted norms, superstition, knowledge, folklores orally or in a written record. The Bodos are the largest indigenous community residing in the Northeastern state of India in the foothills of the Himalayas and possess a significant cultural legacy. They are referred to as the indigenous people and native tribes of the state of Assam. The paper delves into the evolution of knowledge systems in the Bodo community of Assam and the multifaceted role it played in the elevation of the community. The earliest form of knowledge system among the Bodo community can be traced to the culture of weaving. The practice of weaving, predominantly undertaken by women, possesses significant symbolism and metaphorical parallels to several aspects of society including as a tool of education and preservation of identity. The significance of handloom textile and weaving in the lives of the Bodo weavers can be understood as a manifestation of local wisdom and tradition deeply ingrained into their cultural practices. In the colonial era Francis Jenkins, then Commissioner of Assam in 1835 initiated the process of imparting education to the Bodos through the means of opening three public schools and a few numbers of private schools in the Darrang district. From 1854, the Provincial Government adopted a specific educational policy in relation to the Bodo people of Darrang district through the Christian Missionaries. The American Baptist Missionaries were the first to reach the Bodo- Kacharis however they later handed over the responsibility to the Australian Baptist missionary in the year 1965 to work among the Bodo community.

Keywords: *Bodo, Knowledge system, Christian missionaries, Kalicharan Brahma*

INTRODUCTION

The Tibeto-Burman people are predominant in the whole Northeastern region. The Bodos are one of the sections of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Bodos are one of the earliest settlers in Assam. The term 'Bodo' was first used by [4]B.H Hodgson as an ethnological term to refer to the 'Meches', the Bodo speaking people of Darjeeling district in 1846. The Bodos racially belonged to the Mongoloid and certainly migrated from Central Asia, the mainland of Mongoloid people. Most of the scholars in India agree that the Bodos migrated into India about 5000 BC. The Bodos settlements extended throughout the entire Brahmaputra valley, as well as certain areas of North Bengal and East Bengal. At present, the greater part of the population resides in the southern bank of the Brahmaputra valley, comprising the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. Both the term "Bodo' and 'Boro' can be used as reference but the term 'Bodo' is widely accepted and politically recognized. The term 'Bodo' is particularly used by the people themselves as a self-referential term and is often interchangeable with 'Bodo'. The Bodo maintains a distinct linguistic, cultural identity, and folk narratives. These narratives serve

as poignant reflections of the deeply rooted traditional beliefs, customs, and rituals that represent the rich tapestry of communal wisdom and practices of life of the Bodo community. Indigenous knowledge includes the expressions, practices, beliefs, understandings, insights, and experiences of Indigenous groups, generated over centuries of profound interaction with a particular territory (Grey, 2014, p. 3230). Much prior to the development of modern science, the knowledge and wisdom gathered by the people helped them in their survival and existence. It has been preserved and passed down through generations. Indigenous knowledge is embedded in folklore, superstitions, customs, beliefs, religion etc. such that it can be regarded as the foundation of a community. The Bodos were a backward society and the only source of livelihood for the women were weaving and for the men was agricultural. The presence of an indigenous knowledge system through 'weaving' was found but was limited to folklores and mores. With the intervention of British policies and the coming of the Christian Missionaries certain section of the Bodo community received formal education and literacy but such efforts were limited to few regions and could not accommodate the whole Bodo population.

With the establishment of 'Brahma Dharma', Kalicharan Brahma was able to set the guidelines for the development and the upliftment of the Bodo society and laid the foundation of the further development of the community.

METHODOLODY

This study was done based on secondary data and sources from articles, research papers, books and journals.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To understand the chronological order of the emergence of a knowledge system in the Bodo community and the further development of formal and informal education in the pre and post-colonial times.

DISCUSSION

Education is considered as an invincible tool for the development of society. The human civilization from time immemorial has imparted norms, superstition, knowledge, folklores orally or in a written record. Findings of formal education in the Bodo community prior to the 19th century is few or negligible due the practice of oral tradition and thus can be comprehended as a 'preliterate society'. Though there might be an absence of formal educational structure the presence of an indigenous knowledge system through 'weaving' was very much prevalent and dominant. Weaving holds a significant historical and cultural significance in the Bodo community. The practice of weaving, predominantly undertaken by women, possesses significant symbolism and metaphorical parallels to several aspects of society including as a tool of education and preservation of identity. The traditional garments created by Bodo weavers serve as tangible manifestations of cultural and philosophical elements, therefore significantly enhancing comprehension of these principles (Narzi 2003). The significance of handloom textile and weaving in the lives of the Bodo weavers can be understood as a manifestation of local wisdom and tradition deeply ingrained into their cultural practices.

By exploring the hidden aspects of a weave, one discovers a multitude of narratives concealed within the colors, patterns, and origin. These stories revolve around human craftsmanship, mystical gods, and benevolent woodland entities (Bhuyan, 2017). These narratives further provide tangible evidence of the legends that have been transmitted orally within each tribe for centuries and render the highly meaningful in the scholarship of the region's socio-cultural structure.

Prior to the introduction of British rule in Assam, the educational scenario in Assam deteriorated on account of the political chaos, conflicts and internal rebellions and henceforth there was no formal education among the Bodos. Moreover, the Christian Missionaries also played a significant role in spreading the western knowledge system in this region of the country. Francis Jenkins who was the then Commissioner of Assam in 1835 undertook the initiative of imparting education among the Bodo tribe. He opened three public schools and few private schools in the Darrang district. From 1854, the Provincial Government adopted a specific educational policy in relation to the Bodo people of Darrang district through the Christian Missionaries. The American Baptist Missionaries were the first to came to in contact with the Bodos. After their establishment of a center at Guwahati in 1843, they formed a boarding school in 1846 with a few Bodo students. One of them from the Jhargaon village of North Kamrup, namely Apentha, got baptized in 1849 at Guwahati Church. However, the American Baptist Church was mainly concentrated on the Garos, and in 1965, they handed over the

responsibility to the Australian Baptist missionary to work among the Bodo community (Sabastian, 1997).

There was a change in policy after the revolt of 1857 and the government imposed strict rules and supervision in the activities of such institutions. The new mission society operated towards the cause of the Bodos and in the beginning of 1864, the mission station was fully upgraded for the Bodos. Rev. C. [5]Heesselmever was made the first in charge of the Kachari mission. In that same year twelve schools were established in Darrang for the Bodos and one for the Miris. Under the supervision of Rev. C. H. Hesselmeyer, 277 boys received elementary instructions mainly in Assamese with moderate use of Bengali in the said newly established schools.

The number of governments aided schools in Goalpara district increased from 15 in 1856-57 to 31 in 1870-1871. In 1872 Sir George Campbell introduced an educational reform scheme by extending grant-in-aid rules to large number of unaided schools of villages. By 31st March 1873, under this scheme 82 schools with enrollment of 1,882 students received government aids. 33 In 1872-1873, 65 more government aided primary schools including two girls' pathsalas in the district were established. Like other districts in Assam the number of primary schools rose in Goalpara district ranging from only 80 primary schools in 1874- 1875 to 129 primary schools by the 1876. In 1929 the mission established a permanent mission station in Gaurang which is near Kokrajhar along with a primary school which was later upgraded to Middle English school and a high school in 1947. For the Bodos in other parts of the region such as Bongaigoan etc the mission established a boarding school for extending education along with convenience in 1935.

Umon K. Marak played a pivotal role in the development of Bodo education, particularly during the formative years following India's independence. As the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) of Assam in the early 1960s, he made a landmark decision in 1963 by approving the introduction of the Bodo language as a medium of instruction at the primary school level. Marak also supported the creation and standardization of Bodo textbooks and literature, ensuring that students could study in their mother tongue with quality resources. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (Bodo Literary Organisation), the Bodo Language was

introduced as a medium of teaching of primary level in 1963 and then at secondary level in 1968. The efforts of the British government were successful upto a certain extent as they were unable to understand the grass root cause and the structural elements of the Bodo community. The turning point in the history of Bodo Education came with the Revolutionary thinker and Social Reformer Kalicharan Brahma who played a pivotal role in the upliftment of the Bodo society.

Srimat Kalicharan Brahma was born in a well to do family in the year 1826 at Kajigoan village under Dhubri sub-division, the then Goalpara district. His father Khoularam Mech was a man of high dignity in the society. His mother's name was Randini Mech. Kalicharan Brahma started his preliminary education under Bir Narayan Sarkar (Baro). He could not continue his education after his father's death and undertook the profession of his father 'timber merchant'. He was deeply influenced by the teachings of a book [16]Saranityakriya' written in Hindi and felt that the teachings of the of the [17]Brahma Dharma' would be beneficial for the Bodo society and he determined to preach Brahma Dharma among the Bodos. Brahma Dharma is a monotheistic religion based on the belief in the existence of a supreme being called Brahma, a collection of Upanishadic Brahma (Moshahary R.N. 1985). The basic principle of this religion is that Brahma is the only God and manifests himself in "Light" that emanates from the Sun and the Moon. The burning and worship of fire that is Hom – Yogya, known to the Bodos as Ahuti Shaoni, is the symbolic adoration of the light or Brahma, and that is all that required one to lead to Brahma. Kalicharan Brahma realized the importance of education in the context of the Bodos. To educate the people, Kalicharan Brahma established a Minor School weaving centre and also a carpentry school at Tipkai which was recognized by the British Government in 1912 named Brahma Boarding or Brahma company in Dhubri (Brahma: 1993: 198). It was well known to Kalicharan Brahma that the Bodo society was an economically backward. So forming all kinds of organization he tried to engage the people in trade and commerce so that they can strengthen their economic conditions. In 1916 Kalicharan Brahma accompanied with then the

D.C. of Goalpara district Mr. Lighney submitted a Memorandum to the education commissioner of the British government. He pointed in his memorandum to establish another high school at Tipkai along with the M.E school so that higher education can be achieved by the educationally backward society. Following the advice of Kalicharan Brahma, Goalpara district 'Bodo Chatra Sanmilan' was organized in 1919 and first Bodo Chatra Sanmilan was convened at the heart of Kokrajhar town in the same year. The second Boro Chatra Sanmilan was convened at Kokrajhar Puthimary M.V. school in the year 1920. That year Yuba Sanmilan was organized

at Danguri. While the 3rd Boro Chatra Sanmilan was convened at Tipkai under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma as written in the first magazine of the Bodos, titled the '[8]Bibar'.

In the aforesaid Convention, discussion on the development of language, Cultural heritage and literature got topmost priority in the delegate session. Kalicharan Brahma took active participation in each convention and its discussion in the delegate session.

To fulfil educational, social, and political aspirations of the Bodo community, Kalicharan Brahma, along with Srdar Belbung Ram Kachari, Baburam Brahma, Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, Karendra Narayan Mandal, Mohammed Giasuddin Ahmed, under the banner of the Bodo Association approached the Simon Commission at Shillong on 4 January 1929. They submitted a memorandum with the clauses related to socio-economic, and political demands of the Bodos. The Clause Eight of the memorandum mentioned that "we the undersigned beg to lay before you the community should receive special treatment at the hands of the govt. in matters of Appointments and Education. Our community is most backward in points of education… To remove this drawback there should be compulsory free primary education and special scholarships for giving facility to higher education of the Bodo students be provided for" (Narzary,2003). Thus, the submission of the memorandum had marked a new approach in the history of the Bodo society.

CONCLUSION

Even after the independence of the country and the introduction of education in the Bodo society the level of education and literacy in the region did not mark significant development. It has to be mentioned that only by opening educational institutions and teaching students does not imply growth in education, there are several material conditions that affect the socio-economic aspects of people which prevents them from reaching the desired level of education. Apart from social conditions the Bodo students also faced language barriers which further aggravated the situation. The rate of literacy was even worse for the Bodo women which had put them in really disadvantageous position in every aspect of life. The female literacy rate was just 9.3 percent against the male literacy rate which was 29.88 percent in the year 1961(Census of India 1961). Nonetheless efforts has been made by the state government along with different non-governmental institutions to provide awareness of importance of education and since than a lot of policies have been put in force to remove the systematic stagnati

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Assessing Cultural Continuity and Loss among Baiga PVTG: A Survey-Based Study using the CCI - CLR Model

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ABSTRACT

Tribal societies, which are deeply connected with their tradition and nature, are now experiencing cultural loss due to increased interaction with modern society. It is a problem of cultural erosion, and many tribes are facing it. This study focuses on the Baiga PVTGs of Singrauli District, Madhya Pradesh. They are facing socio-economic and cultural challenges. The study is based on primary data from 400 households, collected through surveys, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and field observations. The study analyzes cultural loss among Baiga youth. Using the Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) and Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR). It evaluates three traditional elements: tattooing, folk songs, and knowledge of deities. Findings show a cultural loss and a significant decline in traditions, particularly in tattoo, music, and dance traditions, over the past two decades and it indicates the urgent need for cultural preservation.

Keywords: *Baiga Tribe, PVTG, Cultural loss, Cultural Continuity Index (CCI), Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR), Godana.*

INTRODUCTION

India is home to one of the world's largest tribal populations, with over 705 Scheduled Tribes comprising about 8.6% of the population *(Census 2011)*. Mostly living in central, eastern, and northeastern regions, these communities show rich cultural, linguistic, and lifestyle diversity. Traditionally living close to nature, they face ongoing challenges like poverty, forced migration, and cultural loss due to developmental activities. Among them, the Baiga tribe, classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Madhya Pradesh, is known for its deep bond with nature and unique cultural identity. They found mainly in forest areas of eastern Madhya Pradesh (Dindori, Mandla, Balaghat, Umaria, Shahdol, Singrauli etc.) and parts of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The Baigas practiced 'bewar,' a shifting cultivation method done without ploughing because they are respecting mother earth. Their spiritual life is reflected in songs, dances, and godna (tattooing). They are totally depending on forests for their herbal medicine, and oral traditions. Baiga life is changing under deforestation, displacement, and policy impacts. Yet, they continue to protect their tradition,

tattoo art, and rituals. Although elders playing a key role in passing down cultural knowledge but now, they are facing the problem of cultural erosion specially among youths.

Literature Review: Cultural Loss in Tribal Communities

In recent times, many researchers have highlighted how globalization, industrialization, and weak policy support are leading to cultural loss among tribal communities. Rao and Manasa (2019) described that globalization forces India's tribals to abandon traditional ways of life. Pushplata (2019) explained that in Jharkhand, modernization and poor governance have harmed tribal culture, education, and health. Kazi (2022) described that global influences are making local art, music, and languages disappear in Northeast India. Lal (2021) explained how globalization affects Adivasi health, economy, and social life. Urban migration also weakens cultural identity, as Jangir and Kumar (2023) pointed out. Goswami (2023) showed how global trends are reshaping tribal customs in Northeast India. Nagaraja (2024) raised concerns about tribal rights being lost under globalization, while Ahmed (2024) used works like Chotti Munda and His Arrow to show how global pressures disturb tribal life and their bond with nature. These studies together show that both external forces like globalization and internal shifts like migration are causing serious cultural loss, a concern, especially for tribes like the Baiga, whose traditions are deeply connected with nature.

Research Gap and Contribution of the Present Study

While so many studies on tribal cultural loss based on theory or secondary data, few capture how communities like the Baiga experience and respond to cultural change in daily life. This study addresses that gap through direct engagement with Baiga respondents, cultural practitioners, and leaders in Singrauli, a region often ignored in tribal research. Using interviews, FGDs, visual records, and methods like the Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) and Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR), it documents on ground experiences and cultural shifts. It also highlights the weak implementation of protective laws like Schedule 5 and PESA in Singrauli. By focusing on this vulnerable group, the study offers new insights into cultural loss and preservation efforts.

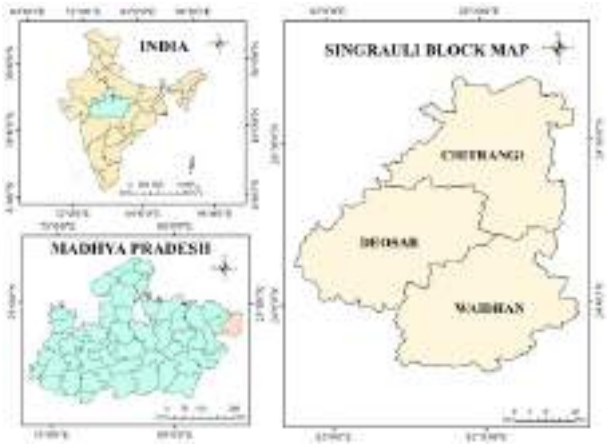
Study Area

Singrauli district, located in northeastern Madhya Pradesh (map 1), was carved out of Sidhi district in 2008 and spans 5,672 sq. km with a population of 1,178,273 *(Census 2011)*. The sex ratio is 920 females per 1,000 males, and the literacy rate is 60.41% (male 71.34%, female 48.53%). Singrauli is known as the "Energy Capital of India," and also known for major coal mines and thermal power plants run by companies like NTPC, NCL, Hindalco, and Essar. Despite its industrial image, Singrauli has a strong tribal presence, especially of the Baiga, Gond, and Kol tribal communities, known for their rich cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and forest-based livelihoods. However, rapid industrialization has created challenges to these communities. Here table 1 presents the district's demographic profile.

Table (1): Demographic Profile of Singrauli District, Madhya Pradesh

S.no.	Indicator	Value
1	Total Population	1,178,273
2	Male Population	613,637
3	Female Population	564,636
4	Sex Ratio (females/1000 males)	920
5	Literacy Rate	60.41%
6	Male Literacy Rate	71.34%
7	Female Literacy Rate	48.53%

(Source: Census of India 2011)



Map (1): Location Map of Study Area- Singrauli District, Madhya Pradesh

(Source: Made by using Arc gis 10.8)

The Baiga tribe is officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in several states, including Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and Maharashtra. In Madhya Pradesh, the Baiga population is 414,526 *(Census of India 2011)*. The population of the Baiga tribe in different blocks of the Singrauli District is shown in Table 2.

Table (2): Block-wise Baiga Population in Singrauli District, Madhya Pradesh

S.no.	Block Name	Households	Population
1	Waidhan	2,110	10,313
2	Deosar	3,853	16,368
3	Chitrangi	5,772	24,318

(Source: PM-JANMAN Survey report 2024, Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh)

Objectives

- Ø To assess the nature and causes of cultural loss in the Baiga tribal community of Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh.
- Ø To propose recommendations for cultural preservation in tribal communities.

Data base and Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining primary and secondary data to assess cultural loss among the Baiga community in Singrauli. Primary data was collected through household surveys, KIIs, FGDs, and observations from 400 households in Waidhan, Deosar, and Chitarangi blocks. The Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) and Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR) were applied as quantitative techniques. A key interview has also taken with Padma Shri Arjun Singh Dhurve and that was focused on preserving traditional songs and dances through tribal tourism and it helped to frame the SATAT model (Sustainable Approach for Tribal Art and Tradition) for linking cultural preservation with livelihoods. Secondary data from block offices supported demographic profiling. Data analysis combined thematic coding of qualitative inputs with tabular and graphical presentation of quantitative findings.

Sampling Method

To estimate the required sample size for this study, the Taro Yamane (1967) formula was applied, which is widely used for determining sample size in finite populations. The formula is expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N \cdot (e)^2}$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = total population = 50,999
- e = acceptable margin of error = 0.05 (5%)

Solution:

N = 50,999/ (1+50,999×0.0025)

= 50,999/ (1+127.4975)

= 50,999 / 128.4975 = 396.74

Final sample size:

Therefore, the ideal sample size was calculated as approximately 397. To facilitate perfect distribution across the selected study blocks and ensure data manageability, the sample size was rounded off to 400 respondents. The sample size and number of selected grampanchayts and names of selected grampanchayts has shown in table 3 and 4 respectively.

Table (3): Final Sample Size & Number of Selected Gram panchayats

S.No.	Block name	Baiga Population	Households	% of Baiga population	Sample size	No. of selected GPs
1	Waidhan	10,313	2110	20	80	10
2	Deosar	16,368	3853	32	128	11
3	Chitarangi	24,318	5772	48	192	18
		50,999	**11,735**	**100**	**400**	**39**

(Source: PM JANMAN report 2024, Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh for Baiga population statistics; sample size derived by the researcher based on proportional representation method)

Table (4): Name of Selected Gram panchayats

S.no.	Block	Name of selected GPs
1	Waidhan	Piprakrund, Barahphan, Karauti, Gobha, Chargoda, Urti, Chingitola, Tiyara, Ukhrawal, Bhamarkhoh
2	Deosar	Jogini, Baghadih, Majhauli, Charaki, Bharsendi, Sajapani, Jiyawan, Parma, Bodi, Dhonga (Tikar & Bodia), Majhigawan 2
3	Chitarangi	Daar, Suda, Khamhaniya, Jharkatiya, Bodakhunta, Gerui, Birkunia, Churki, Rajdaha, Sukhar, Mahdeia, Katarihaar, Deori 1, Bairdah, Baheri, Matihani, Bagdari, Chitarangi

(Source: Field Survey conducted by the researcher, 2025 based on PM JANMAN report, 2024 population distribution and purposive selection of Gram Panchayats)

Respondents` Profile

The respondent profile (Tables 5, 6, 7) on age, education, and occupation closely links to the study's focus on cultural loss. Most were aged 36–45 or older, key cultural knowledge holders whose views helped assess situation of cultural erosion. Despite low formal education (mostly primary or below), the youth's traditional knowledge remains weak. Occupation-wise, most were in agriculture or labor,

reflecting traditional livelihoods now shifting. Convenience sampling ensured access to available respondents.

Table (5): Age profile of Respondents

S.no	Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	20–25 years	35	8.75%
2	26–35 years	68	17%
3	36–45 years	185	46.25%
4	46–55 years	72	18%
5	56 & above	40	10%
	Total	**400**	**100%**

(Source: Compiled by Author, based on Field Survey Data)

Table (6): Educational Profile of Respondents

S.no	Level of education	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	No Formal Education	120	30%
2	Primary Education	170	42.5%
3	Secondary Education	65	16.25%
4	Higher Secondary	30	7.5%
5	College degree or above	15	3.75%
	Total	**400**	**100%**

(Source: Compiled by Author, based on Field Survey Data)

Table (7): Occupational Profile of Respondents

S.no	Occupation	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Agriculture + Labour	240	60.0%
2	Daily wage labour	100	25.0%
3	Business	40	10.0%
4	Private employee	20	5.0%
	Total	**400**	**100%**

(Source: Compiled by Author, based on Field Survey Data)

Methodological framework

The methodological framework (fig.1) used both primary and secondary data to understand cultural change among the Baiga community. Primary data was gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), field surveys, and direct observations of daily life, rituals, and cultural practices. Secondary data, especially Baiga population details, was sourced from the PM-JANMAN Survey. The collected data was analyzed using the Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) and Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR), helping to measure how much cultural knowledge and practices are retained or lost. The findings were presented through tables, graphs, and photographs, providing a holistic view. This mixed-method approach ensured that both statistical trends and lived experiences were captured for meaningful insights. This framework ensured a balanced use of quantitative and qualitative data for a deeper understanding of cultural erosion.



Figure (1):

Methodological framework

Results and Discussion

To understand the situation of cultural continuity and loss among the Baiga tribe of Singrauli district, three core cultural variables were identified: (1) Traditional tattooing (Godana), (2) Familiarity with folk songs and dances, and (3) Knowledge of tribal deities.

Traditional Tattooing (Godana): A Marker of Cultural Identity

The Baiga tribe, recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Madhya Pradesh. It is known as tattoo tribe as well. Baiga holds the tradition of Godna (tattooing) as a sacred cultural marker symbolizing identity, protection, and key life stages like puberty, marriage, and childbirth. Baiga women traditionally have tattoos on their arms, legs, forehead, and chest. These tattoos show hills, forests, animals, the sun, and the moon. The designs come from old traditions and are passed down through generations by oral tradition. A baiga woman said during fieldwork, ***"Upar ke sab gehna to chhoot jaahin, lekin godna hi ae chij hae jee sang-sang bhagwan ke paas jay,"*** (fig.8). However, modernization and social changes have led to a sharp decline in this practice. Survey data from 400 Baiga households shows only 9.25% of youth continue the tradition, while 90.75% have abandoned it, reflecting a clear generational disconnect. It has been shown through table 8 and fig. 2 (a). The fading of Godna among the Baigas is mainly due to rising costs, the decline of traditional tattoo artists (badanin), and growing modern influences and it is highlighting a significant cultural loss.

Baiga Deities and Worship Practices: Bond with Nature and Ancestral Spirits

Baiga spirituality is deeply connected with nature worship and animistic beliefs, where gods represent

forests, earth, and ancestors. Key figures include Bhagavan Dulha Deo (protector of households), Burha Deo (village guardian), Thakur Dev (linked to rain and farming), and goddesses like Jhoori Devi, Phulmati Devi, and Jarasur Devi (fertility and health). Rituals, led by Baiga Ojhas, use simple offerings symbolizing deep nature-ancestor bonds. Most households maintain a sacred space called chaura, wooden poles (fig.7) and red flags on top of the house. Despite nature-centric beliefs, people also worship Lord Shiva and it shows a mixed spiritual identity. Survey findings show only 24% of Baiga youth are aware of their traditional deities and rituals, while 76% lack such knowledge. It has been shown through table 8 and fig. 2 (b), pointing to a growing cultural disconnect among youth due to modernization.

Songs and Dances: Folk Expression in Baiga Culture as Living Heritage

Baiga music and dance has a deep spiritual bond with nature and ancestors. Performed during festivals, life events, and farming rituals, group dances like Saila, Karma, and Reena feature circular formations with mandar and dhol beats. Songs in the Baiga dialect reflect forest life, ancestral reverence, and seasonal rhythms. Men and women perform in traditional attire, men in dhotis and turbans, women in sarees adorned with beads, shells, and Godna symbolizing identity and ritual significance (fig 8). These performances, often held in sacred groves or courtyards, are believed to honour deities and maintain cosmic balance. Beyond art, they serve as oral archives preserving community stories and values. However, the survey shows only 20% of Baiga youth are familiar with traditional songs, while 80% have lost touch. It has been shown through table 8 and fig. 2 (c), indicating a decline in traditions due to modernization.

Table (8): Household Awareness on Cultural Practices

S. no.	Variables	Category	Households (Out of 400)
1	Godana or Tattoo	Youth with tattoo	37
		Youth without tattoo	363
		Total surveyed households	400
2	Traditional deities	Youth aware of traditional deities	96
		Youth unaware or disconnected	304
		Total surveyed households	400
3	Traditional folk Songs & dances	Youth know about traditional folk songs & dances	80
		Youth do not know the traditional folk songs & dances	320
		Total surveyed households	400

(Source: Field Survey & Author's Data Compilation)

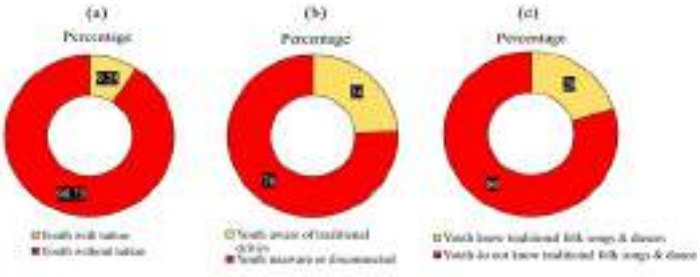


Figure (2): *Cultural Retention & Loss among Baiga Youth (Graphical Analysis)*

(Source: Field Survey & Author's Data Compilation)

Retaining vs. Relinquishing Traditional Cultural Elements among Baiga Youth

Figure 2 compares Baiga youth's retention and relinquishment of godna, folk songs, and knowledge of tribal deities. Knowledge of deities remains slightly higher due to their link with daily rituals and ancestral worship. Folk songs show a decline due to fading interest and weak transmission, surviving mainly in memories or on special occasions. Godna faces the sharpest drop, seen as outdated amid rising education, job focus, and social stigma reflecting deeper shifts in values and identity among Baiga youth.

Assessing Cultural Continuity and Loss: Application of CCI and CLR Indicators

In this segment of the study, a combined analytical approach using the Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) and Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR) is employed to interpret generational cultural shifts. Based on three core indicators: tattooing, folk song familiarity, and tribal deity knowledge, the model quantifies cultural retention and erosion across 400 Baiga households.

Cultural Continuity Index (CCI)

The Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) is a composite indicator designed to measure the extent to which traditional cultural practices are retained among youth. It reflects intergenerational transmission of values such as rituals, symbols, oral traditions, and indigenous identity, offering insight into cultural survival within tribal communities.

Formula:

$$CCI = \frac{\textbf{Awareness \% in all 3 domains}}{3}$$

Values:

- Tattoo = 9.25%
- Song = 20%
- Deity = 24%

$$CCI = \frac{9.25\% + 20\% + 24\%}{3} = \frac{53.25\%}{3} = 17.75\%$$

Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR)

Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR) is a composite, survey-based indicator that quantifies the degree of cultural erosion among youth. It reflects how much traditional knowledge, practices, and beliefs such as oral traditions, rituals, and symbols have been forgotten or discontinued, highlighting generational disconnect in tribal communities.

Formula:

$$CLR = \frac{Tattoo\ loss\ \% + Song\ loss\ \% + Deity\ loss\ \%}{3}$$

Values:

- Tattoo Loss = 90.75%
- Song Loss = 80%
- Deity Loss = 76%

$$CLR = \frac{90.75 + 80 + 76}{3} = \frac{246.75}{3} = 82 \cdot 25\%$$

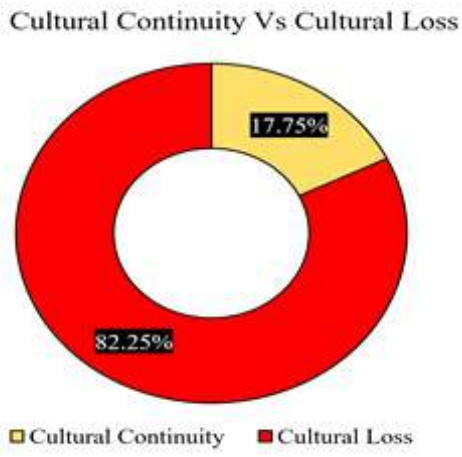


Figure (3): *Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) & Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR), (Graphical Analysis)*

(Source: Field Survey & Author's Data Compilation)

Findings

The Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) assessed the retention of godna, folk songs, and tribal deity worship among Baiga youth, giving equal weight to each. Survey results showed less than one-fourth knew their religious traditions, even fewer recalled traditional songs, and tattooing was rare. The CCI score stood at 17.75%, indicating weak cultural retention, while the Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR) reached 82.25%, which has been shown in graphical way in fig. 3 and it is highlighting the problem of cultural loss or cultural erosion. These findings indicate the urgent need for cultural revival and youth engagement in heritage preservation.

Conclusion

This research provides a field-based view of cultural changes among Baiga youth, using surveys, interviews, and group discussions. It highlights the decline in key traditions like godna, folk songs, and deity worship. The Cultural Continuity Index (CCI) at 17.75% and Cultural Loss Ratio (CLR) at 82.25% reflect a sharp cultural disconnect, influenced by modernity and social media. This research also provides an important insight that the educational profile and Occupational profile do not play any role in cultural loss. The study also indicates the need for cultural safeguarding and community-driven revival. By capturing disappearing practices, it offers insights into tribal identity shifts and suggests tribal tourism as a means for cultural preservation and sustainable development.

Suggestion of a tribal tourism model to prevent tribal cultural loss

Tribal tourism can aid both cultural preservation and development if rooted in respect, authenticity, and sustainability. For lasting impact, it must ensure fair economic benefits, active community participation, and visitor sensitivity. In regions like Singrauli, home to Baiga, Gond, and Kol tribes, traditions such as godna, folklore, and rituals are fading due to high costs and declining youth interest. A well-designed, community-led tourism model, supported by local bodies and government, can help revive these traditions while providing sustainable livelihoods, making cultural preservation a collective responsibility beyond mere tourism.

SATAT Model of Tribal Tourism

Sustainable Adivasi Tourism for Authentic Traditions (SATAT) is a decentralized model aimed at preserving tribal culture and promoting sustainable livelihoods through community-led tourism. Though policy guidance flows from national (TCTB) to village-level (GSTC) bodies, real control rests with the Gram Sabha, ensuring tourism occurs with their free, prior, and informed consent. The structure and flow of model has been shown through fig. 4. The SATAT model also encourages community enterprises like tribal cafes, homestays, and cultural events under the principle ***"Preserve—Empower—Sustain."*** The model draws

on field insights, experiences of Padma Shri Arjun Singh Dhurve, and successful examples from UAE, Sri Lanka, Kerala, and Raipur, emphasizing cultural respect and community ownership.

Structure & Flow of Model Implementation

(From Policy Formulation to Community-led Implementation)

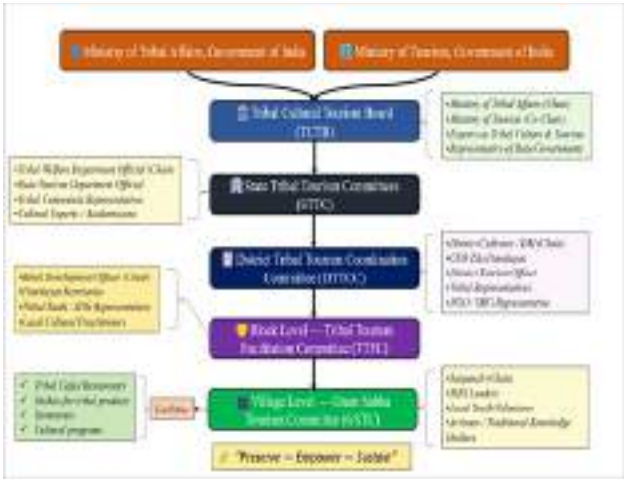


Figure (4): *Structure & Flow of Model Implementation*
(Source: Based on Primary Research & Comparative Tourism Models)



Figure 6*: Field Surveys and Community Interactions during Data Collection*
Figure 7*: Baiga Shrines and Tribal Worship Symbols*
Figure 8*: Tattoo (Godna) and Folk Dance Practices among Baiga Youth*
(Note- All photographs were taken during field visits with the verbal consent of the participants, in accordance with ethical norms for social science research)

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Reimagining Digital Praxis in Tribal Political Landscapes in West Bengal: A Decolonizing Approach to Indigenous Digital Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the emerging digital trends in the political life of tribal communities in West Bengal, focusing on the foundational concepts and frameworks that inform their development and consequences. Borrowing the concepts of digital intersection, political persona, and cultural hybridity (Castells, 2009; Hall, 1996), this study investigates the role of digital technologies in reconstructing tribal political agency and their engagement within the community. From a theoretical perspective, the framework incorporates Manuel Castells' network society theory, focusing on the role of the internet in decentralized political activism among tribal communities (Castells, 1999), and Benedict Anderson's imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) for the construction of political identity in virtual spaces. Moreover, the study applies Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and cultural negotiation (Bhabha, 1994) to examine the reconfiguration of tribal identity within the digital world and the transformation of politically adaptive and resilient modes of tribe identity. There is a call for policy action on digital participation for the empowerment of marginalized communities and participatory governance. This study also calls for action on the digital practices of self-determination, agenda-setting, and socio-political resistance among tribal communities, underscoring the need for proactive strategic frameworks.

Keywords: *Digital Praxis, Tribal Politics, Tribal Community, West Bengal, Cultural Hybridity, Political Identity*

Introduction

The global push for digitalization, often marketed as a transformative solution to development deficits, has increasingly permeated postcolonial contexts like India. As technology for bridging inclusion, boosting efficiency, and gaining transparency for the marginalized parts of populations, notably tribes, e-governance frameworks and digital connectedness are distinguished in statements that acknowledge Escobar's (2020) assertions. However, the notion that communities, such as tribes, lose their agency when using social media is questioned. In order to understand the historical context of state-tribe relations, where integration and assimilation have been the defining characteristics of colonial and postcolonial governmentality, it is necessary to contextualize tribes' digital engagements (Xaxa, 2008).

In this regard, Roy and Deb (2022) broaden the definition of "digital praxis" beyond merely technical interactions to include the relationships of political logic, implications, and actions that arise alongside the interactions of political tribes, the state, and global digital frameworks. It is a political action that

is created and reconstructed within a site's concurrently dominant "political ecology," which includes its historical, social, and material dimensions (Tilly, 2003). The coexistence of historically constructed, bounded, geographic identities with the new, digital, and global networks of information presents a special paradox for tribes.

According to the 2011 census, West Bengal has 5,296,963 Scheduled Tribes, which makes up 5.8% of the state's total population. From the 1855–1856 Santhal Rebellion to the ongoing land rights issues, the Santhal, Bhumij, Munda, and Oraon tribes have not only endured but are still fighting against persecution (Bose & Choudhary, 2023). Adoption is challenging and risky, despite the allure of new digital technologies' potential to support creative forms of political activism. This paper posits that, unlike the 'polemical digital rage' as witnessed in many discourses, digital praxis in tribal geographies should be understood as a multilayered and complex condition. In terms of the consequences for tribal autonomy, it must be analyzed via a decolonial lens as a place of imposition, contestation, and defiance all at once. This is the cause of tribal dissatisfaction since digital oppression is fundamental to the political situation rather than incidental.

This is examined by first establishing the historical and material conditions that have shaped tribal political ecology in West Bengal, Malda. The second section defines the primary theoretical methods that underpin this investigation. The third portion discusses the shared and different global and local articulations of tribal digital activism, The final section covers the primary reasons that summarise tribal peoples' varying positions on digital technologies. It concludes with a section outlining the political implications of reconsidering state-tribe digital ties.

The Political Ecology of the Tribal Subject in West Bengal: The State and the Construction of the 'Tribal' Other

The category of "tribe" in South Asia is not a neutral descriptor but a colonial artifact. British administrators, grappling with India's ethnic and cultural diversity, imposed rigid classifications to simplify governance, reducing fluid, localized identities into fixed, bureaucratic categories (Béteille, 1993). This act of enumeration was inherently political: tribes were defined by criteria such as "geographical isolation," "primitive traits," and "distinct culture," positioning them as "other" relative to the dominant caste-Hindu society (Béteille, 1993). Post-independence, the Indian state retained this colonial framework, legalizing tribal identity through schedules (STs) while framing it through a lens of "backwardness" requiring state intervention (Lokur Committee, 1965).

Tribal culture preservation and integration into the national mainstream are two contradictory state projects that have been shaped by this manufactured identity (Xaxa, 2022). Article 342 of the Constitution gives STs special protections, but assimilation is frequently given priority in development plans, which presume that tribes must "modernize" in order to prosper (Xaxa, 2008). As e-governance is entwined with these competing goals, this contradiction—the state as both modernizer and protector—underlies the political framework for digital praxis.

Development, Dispossession, and the Political Landscape of Malda

A significant location for studying tribal political ecology is the Malda district, which borders Bangladesh and serves as West Bengal's entryway to the eastern Himalayas. Here, the Santal and Sauria Paharia communities—which make up more than 40% of the district's ST population; Government of West Bengal, 2021—face severe material exclusion. 65% of tribal households are classified as landless laborers, meaning that the majority rely on subsistence farming (Sen & Chaudhury, 2021). Indebtedness is a distressing issue, particularly with respect to local moneylenders and exploitative contractors following the Dadon system. Under this system, contractors provide loans against coercive forced labor. As a result, the poverty rate has reached over 30%, compared to 19% on the state average (Breman and Deshingar, 2009). There is a strong sense of economic and cultural dislocation. Among tribal children of school age, only 12% are educated in a school where the medium of instruction is Santali (West Bengal Bureau of Tribal Welfare, 2022). This cultural dislocation is starkly highlighted by the predominance of the languages (Ho & Santali) on tribal tongues, which are excluded from the languages of administration and education. Additionally, the appropriation of "jal, jangal, jamin" (water, jungle, and land) has brought on a dislocation with significant disruption, both relationally and spatially, with nature. This dislocation has roots in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Land displacement continues to impact the tribal population, particularly in Malda where (Behera and Tiwari, 2023) document 25% tribal displacement since 2000. This is partly due to the 1980 Forest Conservation Act, land requisition and subsequent restructuring of state coal mining and agribusiness. However, Malda's tribal political landscape is not

defined solely by victimization; Civil disobedience has also been a case of community mobilization, from the 21st century land rights movements to the 1855–1856 Santal Hul uprisings against colonial land robbers (Xaxa, 1999). In spite of their underrepresentation in the population (just 8% of panchayat posts are occupied by members of tribes; (Pramanik & Jana, 2018), official involvement in political procedures shows a low-key but persevering level of involvement. The enactment of digital practice occurs against a backdrop of historical tragedies and contemporary cultural and economic conditions. Rather than being inserted onto a tabula rasa, digital technologies are embedded within a pre-existing framework of exclusion. Factors like systemic poverty (Per capita income: ₹45,000 vs. state average ₹70,000; SPRF, 2022), infrastructural neglect (only 35% of tribal villages have 4G connectivity; National Statistical Office, 2023), and linguistic barriers (70% of tribal households are non-literate in Bengali; West Bengal Bureau of Tribal Welfare, 2022) mean that digital tools often reinforce, rather than dismantle, inequalities. E-governance platforms, for instance, require fluency in Bengali or English, biometric data uploads, and access to smartphones—all forms of "digital capital" (van Dijk, 2020) that the most marginalized lack. Therefore, the digital integration in Malda signifies a crossroads where tribal identity (the "Self") meets state authority (the "Net").

Theoretical Frameworks

The dynamics of digital practice interactions within tribal political space are investigated in this study by applying four interrelated theoretical frameworks. Manuel Castells's application of the "network society" theory elucidates the transformation of social interactions and the reconfiguration of political power within digital networks. Castells' definition of "networked social movements" encompasses a tribe's digital activism and political participation.

For another, Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" have a strong parallel with today's internet environment. Anderson's emphasis on the political and social solidarity that communities and tribes might achieve serves as a foundation for explaining how tribal groups build fresh solidarity and political identity through the Internet. This highlights how modern Internet technologies allow us to transcend modern geographic boundaries and maintain translocal tribal identities.

Conversely, Homi Bhabha's studies on cultural hybridity and his "third space" provide abundant examples of how digital technologies are being used to work through and layer cultural identity. Indigenous peoples are "coming into" modern political activities that transcend the lines between "old" and "new" digital components, as Bhabha points out. This calls into question the strict division between "traditional" and "modern" political activities.

The loop of digital contemporary theories is closed by Stuart Hall and the encodings/decodings model of communication. When combined, they offer a wealth of materials for analysing the conflicts and inconsistencies of digital practice.

Understanding Digital Praxis in Indigenous Contexts

The emergence of digital technologies as tools for political empowerment among marginalized communities has generated significant scholarly interest, yet the specific dynamics of tribal digital praxis remain under-theorized. This literature review synthesizes key theoretical frameworks and empirical findings that inform our understanding of how indigenous communities are negotiating digital modernity while maintaining cultural sovereignty. The review is organized around four central theoretical pillars: digital praxis and critical pedagogy, network society and informational politics, and cultural hybridity in postcolonial digital spaces.

Digital Praxis: From Paulo Freire to Digital Activism

The concept of praxis, as developed by Paulo Freire in his seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," provides a foundational framework for understanding the relationship between critical reflection and transformative action in digital spaces. Freire defined praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed," emphasizing the dialectical relationship between theory and practice in processes of social change. This conceptualization has profound implications for understanding how tribal communities might engage with digital technologies not merely as tools for communication, but as instruments for political transformation.

Recent scholarship has extended Freire's concept of praxis to digital contexts, recognizing that online spaces have become crucial sites for the development of critical consciousness and collective action. Digital praxis involves more than technical literacy; it encompasses the ability to critically analyze digital power structures, challenge algorithmic bias, and leverage technological affordances for social justice

goals. For tribal communities, digital praxis represents a form of "digital decolonization" that challenges the coloniality of technological infrastructures while asserting indigenous epistemologies and political aspirations.

The application of Freirean pedagogy to digital contexts is particularly relevant for understanding how tribal communities are developing what might be termed "digital conscientization"—the process of developing critical awareness about the political potential and limitations of digital technologies. It is important to recognize the ambivalence of online platforms regarding political expression by Indigenous peoples. Moreover, formulating policy aimed at optimizing empowering opportunities while alleviating the negative effects of surveillance, cultural appropriation, and online marginalization is equally important.

Research on digital activism by and for marginalized communities highlights the importance of understanding digital praxis as a collective, rather than an individual, enterprise. Indigenous digital activists creatively and purposefully reforge the political use of digital platforms for new forms of "networked resistance." More than political goals, their use of 'legally reframed' technologies demonstrates an understanding of how digital infrastructures can be transformed for political decolonization.

The Network and the Self: E-Governance as Instrumental Logic (Castells)

In order to model the necessary tension involved in the digital interaction, Manuel Castells's pioneering work on the network society offers a critical macro-sociological framework (Castells, 1996). Castells argues that contemporary society is increasingly organized by a binary antagonism between the "Net" and the "Self" (Castells, 1997). "Net" denotes here the planetary networks of instrumental communication mediated by information and communication technologies. This "Net" framework is typified by a structure of non-local, abstract, and ageless circulation of capital and information (Castells, 2004). A characteristic exemplification of this "Net" structure is e-governance, endeavoring to incorporate citizens into a normalized, expedient, and deterritorialized administrative structure (Chaudhary, 2020).

In contrast to the "Self," which Castells has described as being defined by "territorial affinities, cultural codes, &historical memory" (Castells, 1997); identity & meaning are constituted here. When applied to the tribal societies of West Bengal, the "Self" manifests as part of the collective identity of the Santals or the Sauria Paharias, which are tied to a particular place (disum), a specific relationship with nature(jal, jangal, jamin), and a shared survival and resistance culture (Xaxa, 2008). Theoretically, localized, land-based, and historically constituted tribal "Self" logic will always contradict the instrumental, universalizing, e-governance "Net" (Castells, 2000). As Juris (2005) points out, this structural tension is what will always prevent "digital integration". Rather, primitive "digital integration" will always become a crisis point. "Self" and "Net" are two dimensions of identity and meaning, respectively, which the digital world dissociates.

Digital Encounters in the 'Third Space' (Bhabha)

Post-colonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, along with macro-structural context theorist, Manuel Castells, offers a micro-level analytic tool for understanding interaction processes (Bhabha, 1994). Per Bhabha, socio-cultural encounters are not and cannot be a simplistic binary of "dominance and resistance" with "dominance" and "resistance" respectively as the poles. He presents the concept of the "Third Space of enunciation," which is defined as an ambivalent, hybrid, and interstitial space where identity and meaning are negotiated and transformed for both colonizers and colonized. This concept is highly applicable in the digital realm, allowing digital sites to be viewed as a "Third Space" for intercultural interactions rather than as a single, state-imposed instrument. Here, within a digital "Third Space," ideals of efficiency, transparency, and a single model of citizenship cemented by the state into e-governance designs are not merely accepted nor dismissed outright (Bhabha, 1994). Lived experiences and cultural sensitivities of tribal users negotiate, redefine and hybridize these constructs dynamically (Bhabha, 1994). Such a framework for analysis makes it possible to anticipate the new hybrid political and cultural identities that are likely to emerge. They represent the new that has been produced in the contingent and contradictory space of the digital encounter. They are not purely 'authentically' traditional and frozen in time, nor are they completely assimilated to some state idea of digital modernity. In the fundamentalist and rigid identities of the dominant discourse the new modes of cultural expression are a departure and a significant articulation of the ambivalence of the dominant discourse. The process of hybridization here has the potential to subvert authority in the rigid and fundamentalist.

Imagining Community in the Digital Age (Anderson)

Benedict Anderson's seminal thesis of 'imagined

communities' provides a significant historical analysis about the role of media in the construction of a collective identity (Anderson, 1983). Anderson argued that modern nation, for the first time, was a reality thanks to 'print capitalism' of newspapers and novels. It enabled millions of people who would never meet each other, to imagine themselves as a unitary, sovereign community. This frame of analysis can also be applied to the digital modern times when new media technologies are providing new and powerful ways of imagining communities.

Digital networks are a new medium for creating and challenging imagined communities, and they can be applied to the political lives of tribes. Positively, websites such as social media and community sites can foster a new form of pan-tribal solidarity by bringing together geographically dispersed individuals and groups who share an Adivasi identity and a shared history of being marginalized. It has the potential to foster political activism and strengthen collective identity, thereby establishing an imagined community of resistance that transcends regional boundaries. However, those same digital networks also serve as efficient conduits for the dissemination of the prevailing national imaginary. State-sponsored digital media and the overwhelming presence of mainstream cultural content can accelerate the integration of tribal individuals, particularly youth, into the imagined community of the nation, potentially weakening their affiliation with their own distinct cultural and political communities (de Maaker, 2021). Thus, According to Calhoun (2016), the digital sphere is a disputed arena where several imagined communities compete for loyalty.

Encoding Statehood, Decoding Praxis (Hall)

Finally, a precise analytical instrument for analyzing the communication process inherent in digital praxis is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model from reception theory (Hall, 1980). Hall maintained that media texts are "encoded" by producers with prevailing interpretations that reflect their ideological stances, but viewers do not always accept these meanings; instead, they "decode" them according to their particular social settings and knowledge frameworks (Hall, 1973). One could think of e-governance platforms and other digital projects run by the state as ideological "texts." They contain the prevailing ideologies of the contemporary state: legibility, individual accountability, rationalization, bureaucratic efficiency, and a particular idea of the perfect, data-producing citizen.

The theoretical emphasis then switches to the tribal user's "decoding" moment, which forms the basis of digital practice. Following Hall, three ideal-typical modes of decoding, or praxis, can be proposed (Hall, 1980) :

1. **Dominant-Hegemonic Praxis:** The user accepts the state's encoded framework and its preferred meanings without question. They use digital services exactly as designed, internalizing the system's logic and considering it as natural and useful. This way of practice leads to greater absorption and assimilation into the state's administrative and ideological systems.
2. **Negotiated Praxis:** The user broadly accepts the legitimacy of the dominant framework but adapts its application to fit their specific local conditions and interests. They may use an e-governance site to achieve a benefit but criticize its impersonality, or they may use a social media platform for community organizing in ways that its architects did not envision. This is an example of pragmatic engagement, which combines adaptation and resistance.
3. **Oppositional Praxis:** The user recognizes the prevailing encoded meaning, but decodes it using a different, counter-hegemonic framework. They reject the state's principles and actively employ digital means for resistance, such as documenting human rights violations, rallying for land rights, or maintaining and promoting indigenous culture in opposition to mainstream narratives. This kind of action poses a direct political challenge to the established order. This approach enables a dynamic understanding of digital praxis, viewing it as a range of viable political responses formed by the intricate interplay of state power and community agency rather than a single outcome.

Table 1: A Theoretical Framework for Digital Praxis in Tribal West Bengal

Theorist	Core Concept	Application to E - Governance	Manifestation in Tribal Praxis
Manuel Castells	The Network vs. The Self	E-governance as the abstract, instrumental logic of the "Net".	The fundamental tension between the state's digital system and the community's land-based "Self".
Homi K. Bhabha	The Third Space / Hybridity	The digital platform as a site of cultural encounter and negotiation.	The emergence of hybrid digital identities, blending traditional norms with new technological practices.
Benedict Anderson	Imagined Communities	Digital networks as a medium for constructing new forms of collective identity.	Potential for both reinforced pan-tribal solidarity and deeper integration into the national imaginary.
Stuart Hall	Encoding / Decoding	E-governance platforms as ideological "texts" encoded by the state.	Praxis is defined as the act of deciphering the state's digital framework: accepting (dominant), adjusting (negotiated), or resisting (oppositional).

Understanding Digital Praxis in Indigenous Contexts: Global Insights and Local Relevance

Indigenous digital praxis is a global phenomena that varies depending on the setting. Global literature on indigenous digital activism (for example, livestreams from Australia's Aboriginal Yabun festival and Canada's Indigenous Digital Equity Alliance) identifies three similar strategies: cultural preservation, political mobilization, and international solidarity (Roy & Deb, 2022). These studies emphasize the importance of digital sovereignty—community control over data, platforms, and narratives—in resisting colonial information hierarchies (Tuck and Yang, 2014).

These instances highlight how indigenous digital engagement is proactive rather than reactive, using technology to assert self-determination. For example, in Australia, the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organizations (ACCHOs) created apps to record traditional medicinal practices, circumventing state-controlled databases (Smith, 2020), and in Canada, First Nations use TikTok to challenge stereotypes by fusing storytelling with viral content (Browne, 2021).

Relatively isolated geography will determine the practice. Tribals in Malda District encounter boundary challenges. For example, digital connectivity is very weak (60% of the villages have 2G-exclusive connectivity; National Statistical Office, 2023), low digital literacy (only 15% of tribal adults can fill out basic online forms; SPRF, 2022), and the language problem (Santali is the language of the people, but it hasn't been formally digitized; West Bengal Bureau of Tribal Welfare, 2022). In contrast to Australia's ACCHOs, Malda's tribes have no official institutional frameworks that support community-led digital infrastructure, making the reliance on state systems more probable—and more contentious.

Global notions on digital decolonization (e.g. Kimmerer; 2020 on Indigenous Science) argue that the technology ought to stimulate indigenous ways of knowing, including the values of reciprocity with the ecosystem and cooperative decision-making. For Malda's Sauria Paharias—the community deemed caretakers of the forests—the potential of state-issued computerized land recording tools (e.g. MGNREGA portal) is also a problem, as it promotes a record-keeping ethos rather than a nuanced ecological understanding. This illustrates the need to adapt global digital praxis frameworks in West Bengal to local realities, particularly in the use of the term "tribal," which denotes a complex mosaic of diverse histories and aspirations as opposed to a monolithic or singular classification.

Theoretical Propositions on Digital Praxis and Tribal Politics

Conceptual propositions as the theoretical 'findings' of the investigation can be articulated after applying the synthesized framework to the political ecology of tribal West Bengal (Xaxa, 1999). Viewing digital praxis as a site of interlinked subjugation, negotiation, and resistance, these propositions attempt to grasp the varied and at times contradictory implications of the praxis. Thus, the digital encounter is articulated as a complex and manifold political phenomenon that shifts power dynamics contrarily to the notion of a mere technological phenomenon (Castells, 2011).

Praxis as Subjection: The Political Economy of the Digital Divide

The first proposition asserts that in the context of tribal West Bengal, the 'digital divide' is not a mere technical gap in access but a structural manifestation of the region's deeply entrenched political economy (Laskar, 2023). This discontinuity is sustained marginalization from a historical perspective as opposed to 'lack of development'. The state's increasing reliance on digital interfaces for the delivery of essential services constitutes another highly surfaced layer of exclusion in a context of systemic poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure, low formal literacy levels, and linguistic mismatches. E-governance for social rights such as social security to e-statements of property, poses challenges that require a particular form of 'digital capital' which the state provides in the form of digital devices, internet connectivity, and computer literacy.

In the absence of such capital, deeply marginalized tribal communities experience a form of 'digital servitude' (Bauer et al. 2022). This situation is paradoxical: despite the fact that the state's administrative gaze can now more deeply examine

tribal citizens' lives through data collection and digital surveillance, tribal citizens' access to the state and its benefits becomes more mediated, conditional, and frequently impossible. The digital interface perpetuates the very disparities it is intended to address by acting as a barrier rather than promoting a positive relationship between the public and the government. This process deepens the power asymmetry, making the state more powerful in its capacity to monitor and manage populations, while rendering the citizen more dependent on a technological infrastructure they do not control and can scarcely access (van Dijk, 2020).

Praxis as Negotiation: The Articulation of Hybrid Political Subjectivities

The second proposition focuses on those who do manage to cross the digital divide, arguing that their praxis is primarily an act of negotiation, leading to the formation of hybrid political and cultural subjectivities (Bhabha, 1994). This can be seen in tribal youth. They see and use the digital world as a 'Third Space' where global cultural flows meet and interact with local and traditional identities. Social media allows them to articulate and perform tribal identities that are modern, global, and Adivasi. They will be the first to encounter the tensions and contradictions that arise from individualistic, consumerist, and homogenizing digital logics, as opposed to the collective values of the community.

The emerging hybrid subjectivity bears political ramifications as it challenges and disrupts certain established identification matrices (Hall, 2018). It disputes the stabled, untarnished anthropological perspective of the 'real' tribal subject and contest the state's hegemony of a uniform 'digital citizen' (Xaxa, 2008). Negotiated praxis as cultural and political work materializes new potentials and meanings, asserting that identity is a process of becoming, and, as such, it is not something that needs to be preserved as a fixed essence (Bhabha, 1994). Tribal identity's future in the digital era is being shaped in this equivocal space—not by merely rejecting modernity, but by critically and creatively appropriating it.

Praxis as Resistance: Towards Digital Self-Determination

The final proposition theorizes the potential for digital praxis to become a mode of resistance, an 'oppositional decoding' of the state's encoded messages and a form of counter-power that challenges dominant structures (Hall, 1980). This aligns with the historical struggles of tribal communities for self-rule and autonomy (*Abua Disum Abua Raj*) (Xaxa, 2022). Digital networks offer the potential to bypass traditional media and state gatekeepers, allowing tribal communities to represent themselves, articulate their own narratives, document injustices, and mobilize politically across geographical distances. This constitutes the formation of what Castells terms 'networks of outrage and hope', where mass self-communication becomes a tool for social movements (Castells, 2015).

However, this praxis of resistance is fraught with a fundamental paradox of digital representation (Hall, 1997). Although digital platforms can be utilized for political self-representation and cultural preservation, their very logic—which is based on algorithms that prioritize participation, virality, and simplicity—can put pressure on communities to commercialize their own culture. Complex customs, languages, and histories run the risk of being reduced to easily shared digital "material" that a non-tribal, international audience can consume. Although digital self-representation is meant to uphold and assert identity, it may unintentionally change that identity into a hybrid form influenced by digital capitalism's instrumental logic.

Therefore, the idea of "digital sovereignty" is the ultimate goal for this resistance practice (Roy & Deb, 2022). This goes beyond merely making use of already-existing platforms and involves the fight for community control over the data, communication networks, and digital infrastructures that influence their daily lives. Regaining control over virtual areas where political and cultural life is increasingly being enacted, as well as over physical land, would constitute a modern expression of the desire for self-determination and constitute digital sovereignty (Xaxa, 2022). It is the battle to control the tools of digital enunciation itself, in addition to speaking out against the status quo.

Conclusion

The goal of this theoretical investigation has been to rethink how West Bengali tribal tribes interact with the increasing realm of digital governance. In order to see "Digital Praxis" as a highly political and historically placed phenomena, this article has put out a conceptual framework that goes beyond a simplistic, technocratic lens that frames the issue as one of simple access or deficit (Xaxa, 2008). Long-standing conflicts over identity, power, and autonomy are being reenacted and remade in the digital sphere, which the research has argued is a new and potent landscape rather than a neutral force for growth. The basic claims of this study are that digital praxis is a complex and conflicting process in the tribal political environment (Castells, 1997).

As the political economy of the digital divide reinforces historical marginalization and produces new forms of exclusion, it can also serve as a mode of

subjection, making fundamental rights contingent on a type of capital that the most vulnerable lack (SPRF, 2022). It functions as a means of negotiation at the same time, where interaction with digital platforms establishes a "Third Space" for the expression of hybrid political and cultural subjectivities that resist categorization and subvert assimilationist and preservationist narratives (Bhabha, 1994). Lastly, digital praxis contains the potential for resistance, allowing digital instruments to be appropriated for counter-hegemonic goals and indicating the possibility of digital self-determination as a contemporary manifestation of the long-standing Adivasi fight for self-rule (Xaxa, 2022).Ultimately, the digital encounter in places like Malda is the newest chapter in the complex and ongoing political history of the relationship between the post-colonial state and India's tribal communities (Xaxa, 2008). The challenges and opportunities presented by this encounter are not fundamentally technological; they are political. They are rooted in unresolved questions of justice, recognition, and the right to self-determination in a society marked by deep structural inequalities. Therefore, any meaningful effort to reimagine digital praxis must be, at its core, a project dedicated to reimagining the political relationship between the state and its tribal citizens, striving for a future where technology serves not as a tool of administration and control, but as a medium for genuine empowerment and autonomy (Xaxa Committee, 2014).

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Traditional Healing Practices of the Hakki Pikki Tribe and their role in Alternative Medicine

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ABSTRACT

"Indigenous knowledge is not primitive; it is original and vital to the well-being of the planet."

– Wangari Maathai

The Hakki Pikki, a semi-nomadic tribal group of Karnataka, India, are traditionally bird catchers, forest dwellers, and herbal and spiritual healers. They have evolved from forest-based existence to that of informal healers in international alternative medicine networks over time. The members of the tribe, in most cases through oral tradition and inherited knowledge, have become well-known for curing diseases with the aid of locally available herbs and spiritual treatment.The study aims to understand how Hakki Pikki's traditional healing practices have evolved, specifically their unique access to international healing networks, as evidenced by their increasing presence in countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, and South Africa. The research examines how their traditional knowledge, once confined to local environments, has evolved into a survival strategy and a form of cultural diplomacy. The research is grounded in secondary materials like ethnographic accounts, AYUSH and WHO reports, government reports, and mainstream newspapers. This study chronicles the different opportunities and challenges the community faces. Some of these include legal ambiguity in foreign environments, non-official status, and the threat of cultural commodification. The paper advocates for ethical recognition of tribal medicinal knowledge and the protection of indigenous intellectual heritage. By situating the Hakki Pikki's experience within the global discourse on traditional medicine, it underscores the relevance of their knowledge in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Tribe, Hakki Pikki, indigenous knowledge, alternative health systems*

INTRODUCTION

India is home to many tribal communities, each with their own culture, tradition, and social system. These communities, though, were marginalised for years, played a key role in preserving their rich traditions and indigenous knowledge, especially ethnobotanical understanding, natural healing, and spiritual practices. In various cases, this tribal medicine acted as a holistic practice that linked body, spirit, community, and cosmos, not restricted to physical recovery.

Karnataka is also known for having more than fifty Scheduled Tribes; Soligas, Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba, Hakki Pikki, Koragas and many more. These communities have a unique system of medicinal knowledge purely based on generations of close interaction with forest ecologies. Hakki Pikki is one such example of cultural resilience. They are well known for their skill on herbal remedies using local flora and spiritual healing methods. Over a period, they have settled in various parts of Karnataka. What distinguishes their recent

trajectory is transnational reach for their healing practice, which was once confined to their community, is now getting attention in African countries.

The paper studies traditional healing practices of Hakki Pikki and how this has led to their livelihood across the border. It also examines how orally passed traditional herbal knowledge is adapting to meet the needs of new geographies and people. It also highlights vulnerability of non-codified system of knowledge and institutional gaps. By tracing the journey of Hakki Pikki healers from the margins of Indian forests to informal markets in African cities, this study seeks to situate their story within larger questions of indigenous knowledge, global health, and postcolonial identity.

The research draws entirely from secondary sources including ethnographic literature, government reports, academic journals, and news publications. A thematic content analysis has been used to show core patterns such as medicinal plant use, spiritual belief systems, cross-border mobility, and socio-political marginalisation. In doing so, the study advocates for a deeper recognition of indigenous healing systems not as relics of the past but as living traditions with global significance.

Life and Legacy of the Hakki Pikki

Hakki Pikki is a semi-nomadic community, and their habitat is mostly in southern India, in Karnataka. Their title, "bird catchers" in Kannada, is indeed a testament to their early vocation of catching birds and small animals for trade and consumption. They were previously forest-dependent, and the tribe had a symbiotic relationship with nature, utilizing it for food, medicine, rituals, and religion.

Oral histories about their ancestry trace back to areas in northwestern India, namely Gujarat and Rajasthan. One interpretation of their past links them to Maharana Pratap's armies, presenting a history of resistance and warrior society. Following their dispersal from the northern regions, they migrated in an orderly manner to the south, finally settling in Karnataka. Government rehabilitation initiatives in the mid-20th century facilitated the transition away from a nomadic lifestyle to one centered on settlement, agriculture, and settled homes, although many continued to maintain their traditional occupations in altered forms.

The Hakki Pikki society includes four separate clans: *Gujaratia*, *Panwar*, *Kaliwala*, and *Mewara*, each with its own abilities and identities. While the *Panwar* clan has vast knowledge of medicinal plants, the *Kaliwala* clan is skilled at bird-catching. Despite the clan, the society has rigid exogamous customs, with cross-cousin marriage being the focal point of matrimonial activities and oral kinship being the tradition.

Their daily lives are heavily affected by a strong regard for oral traditions. Ceremonies, song, and narratives are all significant modes for passing along cultural values and medicinal lore. They are necessary caregivers and knowledge keepers, especially in healing arts related to childbirth, childcare, and spiritual healing. Children learn plant identification and its application through direct observation and hands-on activities, rather than formal education. This experiential, hands-on learning is the foundation of their traditional healthcare system.

Religious faith is intricately integrated into their worldview. The tribe believes in a supreme deity called *Dadaji*, as well as clan deities such as *Vikhil* and *Dugao-Kalka*. The deities are not only prayed for blessings, but also to diagnose illness or repel misfortune. Ceremonies like the *kandora* (postnatal protection ceremony) and *jatra* (mass worship) strengthen spiritual ties and group identity. Burial instead of cremation is the practice based on the belief that the dead have to go back to the earth in fulfillment of a divine promise.

Their foraging history is reflected in their eating habits. While the settled agriculture or petty trade has become predominant for the majority, their original diet remains protein-based and non-vegetarian, especially during festivals or life-cycle rituals. Liquor and toddy are integral to traditional celebrations, and food practices are inextricably linked to social mores and status.

Hakki Pikki healers emerged as informal, transnational, and alternative medical practitioners, as their lives are economy-based, with their livelihoods revolving around practices such as local medicine preparation, crafts, and petty trade. Even though they thrive in a physical settlement, their practices have become quite popular internationally, beyond Karnataka, due to their low-cost effectiveness while culturally acceptable treatments are being required. This shift has transformed their identity from forest dwellers to cultural entrepreneurs.

Traditional Healing Practices

Hakki Pikki's traditional healing practices are a mixture of spiritual faith, ethnobotanical knowledge, and tradition. They have developed various therapies and medicines using locally available herbs and forest vegetation. These therapies are based on experiential observation, oral transmission of

knowledge, and cultural-spiritual logic and are therefore both practically effective and symbolically meaningful.

An ethno-medical report of the Hakki Pikki provides some herbal uses for conditions like hair loss, asthma, fever, diarrhoea, jaundice, and skin infections. Plant leaves of the *Eclipta prostrata*, known in the region as *Garuda soppu*, are crushed into oil to cure hair loss. *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis (Japta)* flowers are used to dye and strengthen grey hair. For breathing conditions like asthma, the tribe uses *Vitex negundo* (*Indrani gida*), blending dry leaves and roots with milk.

Among the most referred therapeutic practices is the use of sugarcane juice (*Saccharum officinarum)* and papaya fruit (*Carica papaya*) to treat jaundice and liver disease. Sugarcane juice is consumed daily, while ripe papaya is boiled and served with pigeon meat to stimulate liver activity. The practice is supported by evidence that sugarcane is hepatoprotective and plays a role in the liver's detoxification processes. *Carica papaya* also contains papain, as well as flavonoids, which activate liver enzyme activity and decrease oxidative stress, thereby justifying its use in traditional jaundice management.

For gastrointestinal illnesses, Emblica officinalis (also known as bettani *or amla)* is used. The powdered fruit, combined with cold water and black salt, is used to treat diarrhoea, a treatment supported by its known astringent, antioxidant, and antimicrobial activity. *Citrus aurantifolia (nimbu)*, commonly used by the community, is used for fever (as a forehead compress), worm infestations (lemon seed water), and scabies (with neem and *Swertia chirata* for external application). Scientific literature verifies these uses: C. *aurantifolia* contains limonene, flavonoids, and vitamin C, which have anthelmintic, antimicrobial, and anti-inflammatory activities.

Dermatological infections, such as scabies, are treated with a synergistic effect of neem (*Azadirachta indica*), lemon, and chirata (*Swertia chirata*). Chirata twigs are crushed with water to prepare a paste, which is applied externally, and the resulting liquid is consumed in the morning to detoxify the blood. Neem is especially renowned for its widespread acceptance of antifungal, antiparasitic, and antiseptic activities, hence validating its inclusion in this traditional remedy.

For tonsillitis, the tribe combines seeds of *Curcuma domestica* (turmeric), *Myrobalan*, and *Spondias mangifera* and boils them as a gargle. All the plant species are anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial. For example, turmeric has curcumin, an extensively researched anti-inflammatory and immune-modulating agent.

The diagnostic methods used by Hakki Pikki healers are intuitive and non-instrumental. They observe physical symptoms, palpation, and behavioral clues. However, their understanding of illness tends to be more than physical, including environmental factors, spiritual disharmony, and social taboos. Healing may involve the offering of gifts to gods or spirits of the dead, particularly in cases of unexplained or chronic illness.

Women play a central role in the collection, processing, and transmission of medicinal products, particularly in relation to reproductive health, postpartum recovery, and childcare. Castor oil pack treatments, fenugreek tea, and topical treatments from turmeric make up a substantial portion of a woman's medical workload in most families. Word-of-mouth transmission enables adaptation to local conditions but risks eroding intergenerational transmission unless it is well-recorded and transmitted within the community.

Currently, some Hakki Pikki practitioners manufacture and package herbal products, which are marketed during festive seasons or exported, but without official certification. Although these therapies appear to be effective, they are not recognized in India's AYUSH system or listed in intellectual property registers or indigenous medicine-related databases. Hence, this makes them vulnerable to commercial misappropriation, exploitation, and regulation. Thus, the Hakki Pikki traditional healing system is not only significant from a medical perspective but also possesses deep cultural roots and scientific validity. They demonstrate the remarkable way in which indigenous knowledge systems and biodiversity-based medicine can persist, evolve, and play a significant role in health practices at both local and global levels.

Global Migration and Transnational Network

Over the last two decades, the Hakki Pikki tribe has emerged as an exceptional example of a transnational indigenous community, renowned for exporting their traditional healing knowledge to foreign markets, particularly in parts of Africa. What began as a small community of tribal healers in search of new business opportunities has evolved into an unofficial yet expanding diaspora of traditional healers. This migration, primarily to countries like Sudan, Nigeria, South Africa, and Botswana, is simultaneously an economic survival strategy and a new mode of cultural diplomacy enabled by traditional healing.

The primary causes of this migration are economic needs and a growing international demand for herbal and alternative medicines, particularly in developing countries where access to traditional medicine is limited or prohibitively expensive. Hakki Pikki practitioners migrate with specially prepared herbal medicines, oils, powders, and syrups produced in their individual home communities. These medicines, which cure prevalent health conditions such as arthritis, skin diseases, asthma, and sexual dysfunction, are retailed in marketplace stalls or distributed through unofficial word of mouth among clients in African cities. The community has established unregulated yet effective healing networks, founded on kinship, multilingualism, and a proven track record of successful treatment.

This new form of migration-based therapeutic economy is largely dependent on self-financing arrangements. The majority of healers take loans, pawn valuable assets like jewellery or land, or raise money from within their communities to finance travel and medical equipment. Although the money earned abroad can be considerable, usually ₹2–5 lakh per visit, the journey is not risk-free. Healers travel on visas not for medical practice, usually tourist or business visas, and do not have formal recognition of their medical qualifications by Indian regulatory bodies (like AYUSH) or host countries. This legal grey area makes them vulnerable to possible arrest, deportation, or exploitation abroad. The 2023 Sudan conflict, which trapped several Hakki Pikki healers without documentation, highlighted the dangers of operating in foreign zones without consular support.

Hakki Pikki's are flexible and proficient in terms of language, they know various Indian languages and manage to speak basic phrases in African languages. Their ability to contextualise treatment and connect it with their knowledge and local beliefs has made them more acceptable among the local people of Africa. Moreover, their knowledge system assimilates various aspects across countries and continents. All these have brought success to the community.

However, they lack institutional support. While in India, Ayurveda, Homeopathy, Unani, and other practitioners are recognised under AYUSH, Hakki Pikki do not enjoy such coverage. Due to a lack of certification, they can't claim legal and intellectual rights over their indigenous knowledge. Additionally, due to a lack of documentation, their practices are prone to imitation by third parties or commodification without fair benefit sharing. While transnational reach has given them new platform, it has made them equally vulnerable. While they are celebrated in abroad, they are not recognised in their own country. This compels policymakers to revisit and develop more inclusive policies that protect and promote various traditional knowledge systems.

Recommendations

First, there is an immediate need for intensive documentation of the tribe's medicinal knowledge. Since most of their healing principles are passed on orally, they risk losing it as later generations move away from traditional roles. Attempts at ethnobotanical recording undertaken within the community in indigenous languages, with the active involvement of tribal elders, especially women, can help preserve this knowledge without infringing on the community's ownership rights.

Second, policy structures, like India's AYUSH, must be expanded to support non-codified indigenous medicine. Currently, only systems supported, like Ayurveda, Unani, and Homeopathy, receive state patronage. Traditional healing practices, as exemplified by the Hakki Pikki, do not fall under these categories and are therefore not supported by the state. Certification tracks, legal safeguards, and funding streams for tribal healers must be created, not merely to support their practice but to integrate them into broader public health narratives.

Third, official international recognition of the tribe's cross-border healing activities is required. Their practice overseas is a credit to both entrepreneurial skill and cultural resilience, but these very same practices also make them vulnerable to various threats, such as exploitation, insufficient legal protection, and even potential statelessness in crises. A move in policy to ensure safe international movement of indigenous healers, albeit through special visas, cultural exchange programs, or tribal health diplomacy mechanisms, would considerably enhance the protection of their well-being and contributions. Moreover, intergenerational transfer of knowledge has to be revived. It can be achieved by having schools with tribal studies or non-formal learning centres.

Conclusion

The Hakki Pikki tribes indeed have a deep and thoughtful traditional healing system, which is community-based and relies heavily on real-life experience and environment. Unlike the modern medical system, which relies on formal education and institutional support, Hakki Pikki's traditional medicines are developed by the community and passed down through generations. For them it's not just about curing the body, it is about managing balance between nature person and spirituality.

Hakki Pikki's are very flexible and adaptable, though they no longer stay in the forest and face various issues in modern life, they continue to keep the traditional knowledge alive by adjusting to the new conditions. They still treat various common illnesses using easily accessible flora and in a simple way. They barely rely on hospitals and modern medicines. This shows their independence and the strength of their medicines. Their practices are more like a holistic health system as they also believe in the importance of mental, physical, and spiritual health and not just physical well-being.

Gender plays an important role in their healing practices. Women, particularly older women, play a crucial role; they take care of the sick, perform rituals, and mainly protect and pass on knowledge to the next generation. This practice is unique to Hakki Pikki, as many other traditional practices feature men as the main healers. This also signifies the importance of female wisdom and caregiving in the community.

It is surprising to see how the community has taken their practices beyond borders and has seen a growing demand for it in countries, especially in Africa. They have utilized their knowledge to earn a living and connect with people globally. This demonstrates that traditional knowledge is not limited to local use but can be applied across countries and cultures. This transnational reach also brings them problems as they travel without any legal documents or official protection, and also have to work informally abroad, which pushes them to vulnerability of cheating, exploitation, and marginalisation.

Ironically, while Hakki Pikki's are informally recognised outside the country, they barely have any recognition in their own country. They operate outside the mainstream medical system, while also providing medical services to individuals who lack access to healthcare. Since they are not included in any policies, they are unable to contribute directly to improving healthcare at the rural level.

We must also consider the issue of sustainability. Much of their knowledge is unwritten and passed on through oral tradition. If young generations choose not to learn these practices—perhaps because of contemporary education systems, urban migration, or social stigma—radical healing systems may be lost. The documentation, intergenerational transmission, and respectful integration of their knowledge into wider systems are therefore not only desirable but critically necessary. This then leads to the discussion that the Hakki Pikki are not just surviving, but rather, they are innovating, adapting, and pioneering in new ways. Their healing practices are dynamic systems, not fixed traditions, which allow for the potential combination of culture, economic factors, and community resilience. Rather than being viewed solely as a community that needs to be developed, they can also be referred to as a community deserving of recognition, in the same way that traditional knowledge can persist in contemporary society when it is valued and maintained.

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Home is Where the Heart is: Exploring the Image of Home in Limbu Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualizes a theoretical outline for the poetic image of "home" as contemporary Limbu poets imagine. The Limbus are an autochthonous, ethnic tribal community mainly living in the Eastern Himalayas. In India, they are indigenous to the states of Sikkim, hills of West Bengal and adjacent areas, and are recognized as Scheduled Tribes by their governments. They also reside in many other parts of India and countries across the world. Their language and script are termed as *Yakthungpa:n* and *Sirijonga* respectively. Historically known by various names, their endonym is Yakthung, while they are most often known as Limbu and shall be referred to by the same in this paper. Two published poems - *Aasi:ma Aegangba Heem: Thokwao Keda:ba*' by BL Khamdhak and '*Ghar*' by Sujanhang - are primary texts with the central poetic image of *"heem"* (home) situated temporally, spatially and socially, and as sensed by the collaboration of the poet's self with the community. For this purpose, both poems are subjected to textual analysis within an exploratory approach to generate themes on the presentation of home as a modernizing space of reflexivity mediating "complexities and poignancy", constraining and enabling the orientation and experience of their Limbu identity. Furthermore, Victor Turner's concept of 'communitas' will inform this paper to bring forward the depth of the studied poetic image.

Keywords: *Limbu tribe, poetic image of home, communitas, reflexivity, textual analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Pallasmaa (1995) writes that home is "not, perhaps, at all a notion of architecture, but of psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology". The Limbu way of life seems to be in accordance with this observation as *heem* transcends material dimensions oscillating between its physical and symbolic motives. Negotiating between ancestral continuities and modern sensibilities, such movement leads to "complex, unstable positions" (Nicholls, 2009). Certo and Beymer (2020) comment upon this "transitory and impermanent" quality of home, stating while they "do not conceive of home as a stable construct…home is a primary character in shaping human beings' experiences, voices, perspectives and identities". Limbu poetry translates this as experiential space irretrievably woven into their sense of selves. *Heem* therefore embodies a developing sense of identity emerging from contesting socio-historical self-references. Under such circumstances, this space can involve both demotivating and empowering connotations. Space can embody negative emotions, memories, estrangement or trauma, revealing the struggles of the person and his/ her cultural domain. Some homes reek of quiet neglect, its walls painted in fear, its windows shut so that light can never disperse the darkness within. In the *Mundhum* lore of Kesami and Namsami, heem is not a safe abode. The human brother Namsami is in constant alert of his tiger

sibling Kesami's increasingly murderous intentions towards him when they are at home together. Namsami eventually secures refuge in the jungle away from his *heem*. St. Pierre (2008) captures this conflict when she writes - "At home we're supposed to know who we are; we're supposed to be safe. We are the Same, not the Other, at home. In some of our homes, anyway" - implying that home can devolve into a site of socio-historical breakdown. On the other side, *heem* also evokes the positivity of a "felicitous space" (Bachelard, 2014), underlining the emancipatory aspects of space and how its residents can participate in it. As an "oneiric" space, a *heem* "has its psyche and soul in addition to its formal and quantifiable qualities" (Pallasmaa, 1995) - a sanctuary of belonging and warmth. Both connotations therefore indicate the studied image to be a flexible and versatile poetic device capable of communicating a wide range of ideas and emotions.

It may also be that the above dichotomous imagery might be symptomatic of "simple modernity", hinting to a theoretical outline requiring to go beyond the objective directions of the assumed moralistic binaries and understand deeper subjectivities, the dialectics causing a "sense of emotions and experiences, reflecting particular ways of behaving, thinking and being" (Mackian, 2004). Written Limbu history does record an abrupt and widespread social change, and this predicament has persisted to shape modernity for them. *Yakthungpa:n* was discriminated against for centuries, with several texts destroyed. Demographic imbalances and religious proselytization were tactfully encouraged under the then fundamentalist establishments of Tibeto-Sikkimese and Nepali/Gorkhali hegemonies since the 18th and 19th CE respectively. In Sikkim, relief began only in the 1960's with the introduction of Limbu language curricula in schools and the establishment of one *Tsong* (Limbu) seat in the Sikkimese Assembly (this seat would not be reinstated at the time of Sikkim's merger into the Indian Republic) (Sanyal, 1979; Mullard, 2011; Foning, 2022). Relations with the latter remain chequered, though there is growing improvement in recognizing the tribe's distinct identity. Occasional mentioning of Limbus by the British Raj were vastly second-hand and uninspired, unlike for major North East Indian tribes, the Lepchas and the like. Becoming part of the Indian Republic has given some respite with Scheduled Tribe status and its relevant institutional provisions as the new millennium is delivering better conditions. Proper action and critique is required for a better structural appraisal. The consequent dissolution of ancestral social norms and circumstances to establish or adapt to new social structures as coping mechanisms has led the Limbu tribe into a state of instability inducing "temporary disorientation, if not lasting trauma" (Hearn, 1980). Though Limbu history of oppression is not the subject matter of this study, it becomes pertinent to mention events, episodes and narratives that shall assist readers to understand why and how the poetic image of home gains prominence. *Heem* mitigates despair and hopelessness by reinforcing meaningful, reflexive affirmation of human bonds - "communitas" as Victor Turner (1991) introduced in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*.

Modernisation- especially after liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation - can push a tribe into "anti-structure" (Turner, 1991), fracturing their social fabric. According to Turner (1991), those experiencing anti-structure "(1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs". Due to disorientation and instability that accompanies periods of social disintegration, communitas allows afflicted parties to reflexively refer to their past and humanely gather contents by which they might contextualize *what is* and *what might be*, with the inconspicuous goal of avoiding loss and detachment. The past reaffirms self recognition, transcending through the present to the future in anticipation of what could have been, thus reconstructing a more approved social reality. There is a peculiar altruism to communitas, one in constant correspondence with the despair tribal life undergoes, one that rigid hierarchical differentiation along "politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating in terms of 'more' or 'less'" (Turner, 1969, as cited in Hearn, 1980) might not be able to justify substantively. Through these manifestations of structural dislocation, a vision of bonding and togetherness sans directives gets the opportunity to assert the human in them. Such complementarity of the poetic vision and the larger tribe becomes paramount as self-image is quintessentially relational, encouraging social balance and innovation. This study contends that achieving communitas temporally grounds the tribe in the present, prospectively binding the conservation of events and lessons of the past to the future through the practice of poetry. If, as Hearn (1980) considers, "minimizing the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty" from the ambiguity of historical processes becomes imperative, this paper contends that poetry borne from communitas maintains this potential. Even if this state is temporary, it opens space for the tribe to use their agency to gauge their values, what it can be and how it can be implemented.

The poetic heritage of Limbus rests on the *Mundhum* which is their oral spiritual narrative (now also liturgical texts) meant to guide "devotion, concentration, and inwardness" (Prell-Foldes, 1980)

within the Limbu lifeworld. Through the ceremonial recitation of *Mundhum,* ancestral memories and moral lessons are passed down from one Limbu shaman (*murabang or peli-fangsam)* to another, from one generation of the learned and esteemed elders (*tuttugen tumyahang)* to the next, one village to another and amongst clans. There are various categories of *Mundhum,* duly invoked with its prescribed sacred rituals and incantations by the *murabang*s under the careful watch of the *tuttugen tumyahangs* fulfilling the occasion's purpose. Mundhum is more than an occasional performance - it is oriented towards a social (re)construction in the 'in-between' stage of the start of a rite of passage and the end of it. There is a commitment concerning the space of *heem* and the stories that find their way out of there supported by rhythm and cadence, which shape Limbu poetic sensibilities as data analysis will show. Along this line of inquiry, Philippe Sagant (1996) observes the abundance of domestic rituals among the Limbus, and stresses the cultural and spiritual significance of their home which "within the system of representations, seems to carry considerable weight". Social self becomes reflexive, examining itself both as the one reflecting (subject) and the one being reflected upon (object), allowing new imaginative perspectives to emerge and explore what could be, not just what is. The image of *heem* facilitates this self-reflexive process where poetry gives voice to myriad opinions and resolutions, with the continuity of Limbu agency being of profound prominence. In contra-distinction to organized religions, the social, physical and emotional world of tribal life is deeply related with the landscape they have inherited. Their home converses with the patch of earth it stands upon as a sacred space emanating their long held beliefs, norms and values, thereby serving a vital existential function. For example, the Toda tribe in Tamil Nadu reveres buffaloes - their self-recognition is dependent on this beast of burden and is therefore honoured as a prime imagery within their homes (AP & Renuga, 2022). Experiencing life is therefore constitutive of relationality - there is intentional practice of faith in the face of uncertainty in building and preserving a home. Perhaps the conventional bounds of structural understanding of a phenomenon such as this may benefit by acknowledging its inherent transcendental nature. There are existential, moral and sentimental engagements that the imagery of home inculcates within the perception of the person and comity eliciting awareness that sees through "social and historical discontinuities" (Cottle and Klineberg, 1974, as cited in Hearn, 1980).

Research Objectives

Building on the above suppositions, the primary objectives of this inquiry are to:

1. locate and observe the image of *'heem'* as an intense deliberation on the Limbu tribal condition passing through a subjective world to a rapidly modernizing world, and
2. uncover how such a movement involves reflexive interaction that poetry comes to reveal.

Methods

Two poems have been selected and their sentences coded by textual analysis for this study:

1. *Aasi:ma Aegangba Heem:Thokwao Keda:ba* ("My House After Death: That Appears in Dreams") originally written by BL Khamdhak in *Yakthungpa:n.* The translated version by Rosy Chamling is used here, published in 2024.
2. *Ghar* ('Home') originally by Sujanhang in Nepali and published in 2021. The translated version by Sudisha Limbu is used for this paper exclusively.

This study emphasizes responsiveness to Limbu tribal poetry for a meaningful interpretation of motifs associated with reflexive evaluation by the individual poet of his own and the collective experience. Selection of the poems is based on their portrayal of moral, meaningful and emotional intensity beyond mere informing, as the *heem's* dimensions reflexively morph unconstrained and coherently. These poems make an effort to balance the flattening of the tribal lifeworld that modernity is stimulating across human geographies. Whenever there is purposeful participation, such as the communal reading of a tribal poem, social transformations are inseparable from reflexive evaluations allowing 'one to live simultaneously in history and in the present' (Prell-Foldes, 1980). There are realities pushed back in the depths of consciousness requiring the vigilant eye to be at times both within and outside this participation - an attribute both poems possess. The tables with the coded analysis for both poems are sequentially provided under Appendix A and B.

The poems can become "social space" (Barthes, 1971) and their writing a discourse on the "matter" of the text. With this, McKee's (2003) approach of "textual analysis" as 'an *interpretation* of something's *meaning*' seems suitable to explicate the research itself. Creeber (2006) acknowledges scholars' stressing more on the interpretation of the text rather than the text itself, and argues in favour of textual analysis continuing to "self-reflexively examine the procedures and methods by which its own judgements are made" and thus maintaining its credibility as a methodology. The reflexive nature of textual analysis for this study is further

supplemented by observations of Flick et al. (2004) - as *heem* is a site of "social reality" evoked by the poet as a member of a community, a shared sense-making as an "unfolding reflexive process" emerges to communicate the possible objective circumstances through subjective interpretations.

Researchers have also aimed to integrate the values, behaviours and cultural procedures that indigenous methodologies aim for (Smith, 1999). Researchers are aware of how they find themselves embedded in the theorizing of a tribal self-mediating the simultaneous timelines to define a relation with others.

Results

Analysis has yielded the following broad encompassing themes:

1. interconnectedness of the image of *heem* and Limbu identity
2. neglect of said identity
3. measured optimism for the future.

These are further narrativised by:

1. representation of body and bodily harm
2. use of imagery from nature
3. allusion to Limbu folklore and culture for deeper connection with ancestral heritage
4. inheritance of Limbu identity
5. faith on culture's protective essence
6. need to strike a balance between continuing ancestral traditions whilst integrating modern sensibilities.

Codes on the interconnectedness aspect reveals the employing of imagery on invocation of Limbu ancestral knowledge with the intention of imparting protection to the *heem*. There is also association of *heem* with preceding generations as represented by grandfather and father. Codes of optimistic hope for the future builds an imagery of a central, grand, revered home, acknowledging the importance of positive association with in-group identity. Codes associated with the neglect of Limbu identity showed repeated imagery of a vacant home that has fallen into disrepair.

Discussion

Both poems contemplate on the impact of anti-structure, but divergently. Sujanhang's tone is indubitably bleak, contemplating over his ancestral *heem's* fall from grace into disrepair and ruins, sheltering rodents and pests but not welcoming occupants. His *heem* flourished under his grandfather and father's care, but has fallen into disrepair under *his* (the poet's) supervision instead. The motifs of his elders physically repairing and caring for their *heem*, and of them dreaming "colourful" dreams in the safety of their home, are associated with Sujanhang's position on the matter of *heem*/identity- he is failing at preserving his identity. The poet is insinuating that inheritance of identity may not override the chance of an individual's will - hence he is "the land surveyor", reflexively assessing the "value" of the land and the *heem* that his own grandfather nurtured unquestioningly. The distance between his ancestors' and his own vision and efforts causes dissociation and a heightened awareness of what he perceives as failure. Therefore, Sujanhang's *heem* is not a felicitous space, but a reminder of how he has failed his ancestors. On the contrary, Khamdhak adopts a more optimistic view of times to come. Though he acknowledges the significance of the original *mattane* (traditional design of a Limbu home), he envisions the tribe coming together to build a new *heem,* more grand and revered than the dilapidated one that falls short in giving security. In his poem, bodily and mental harm sustained by the dwellers reciprocates the inadequacy *heem* signifies. The new home is supposed to signal an "upgrade" for his people, or else the anxieties of trials and tribulations will extinguish the tribe. The stark difference in the nature of poetry by the two poets here is the role of intentions, "the sentiment of humankindness" (Turner, 1969, as cited in Prell-Foldes, 1980), directing where and how they may go through their shared dilemma. Remembrance is malleable, and he believes that the new heem "unifies as it destroys, integrates as it disrupts" (Hearn, 1980). Since the poet knows *what* needs to be done, the growing communitas is *how* it must be done without which any search for stability lacks effect. Sujanhang's feeling of hopelessness and detachment with which he observes the slow disintegration of his home presents a foil to the optimism of Khamdhak's poem. If Khamdhak's poem invokes communitas as an anecdote to disintegrating structure, Sujanhang moves ever so slowly towards anomie due to his inability to find a purpose, or a meaning, to his existence within the space of his *heem*.

The efforts and pains faced by the previous generations in relation with the construction and maintenance of their *heem* holds significance for both. In Khamdhak's poem, ancestors built their *heem* even at the cost of physical well-being. Khamdhak (2024) contemplates that such a daunting construction is "not a single man's task", and that "the broken limbs and bones of all built it" - self-awareness must *be* from the conscious and voluntary participation of all tribal

relatives. As they engage and disengage with their cultural roots, their pride is driven towards their fuzzy heritage, their anxieties colouring how modernity might affect their community, and their nascent hopes for the future. When poetry is then employed for creative reflection, *heem* is morphed into a reflexive space allowing discourse of multiple perspectives. For instance, khandhak explicitly invokes his cultural heritage by summoning supernatural powers invoking deities, shamans and rituals for protection against natural calamities. Sujanhang is subtle as he relies on the relic of inheritance - of his grandfather and father, his *heem* and his bloodline.

Analysis reveals that a dualism can emerge from reflexive engagements, exposing the vulnerability of the structures that inform a group's self-image. The poetic image of *heem* provides a creative reflexive space, allowing these poets to engage with the structural frameworks from their past which simultaneously inform and refine their subjective understandings of their current situations. Through poetry, they comprehend how their futures might unfold. Due to his inclination towards fostering communitas, for Khamdhak it has a cathartic effect - the emotional, physical and mental burden of having to live in an unstable home is removed, his mind instead lightened by his optimism. One must pay attention to the cathartic function of symbolic representation. The disintegration of known values carries the threat of imprisoning the tribe in abandonment and bereavement, and it is in communitas that the fashioning of a new language can adequately provide expression to experience. The poems studied here have become sites of reflection bridging the distance between "deficient and incomplete understandings of reality and the reason and reflexivity provided by critical discourse" (Hearn, 1980). Such poetic engagement encourages a more personal investigation into the tribe's dislocation that makes precarity manageable. Inner conversations that often do not find place in daily language find emancipation through reflexive engagements. Thus poetry, and literature in general, allows one to safely explore the possible - one that means freedom from liminality, marginalization and inferiority.

An important finding this study provides is the effect of time on how space is experienced. It seems that although the image of *heem* on the outset maintains an accepted spatial appearance, time progressively alters its dimensions. The Limbu tribe's dependence on their ancestors (the past) to their descendants (the future) in the poems marks the temporal shift. As a literary device, *heem* is also a chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981) serving the fusion of memory, materiality and identity. The physical dimensions that time alters allows Limbu poems to create a resonance between history and continuity within reality, as it serves as a constant reminder that the narrative unfolding in the poems is relational - as it is with their elders and descendants.

Conclusion

At the background of this research lie the moral questions that animate this inquiry and the studied poetic expression. It is noticed that some of them emerge from the epistemology involved. In the absence of an (1) authoritative social history of the Limbu tribe and literature specifically, and (2) general theorizing on a congruent subject - there are gaps that hinder knowledge production. The events and episodes causing the dissolution of known structures, norms and values that appear force the need for a historical continuity to protect one's identity - what are the mechanisms constraining and enabling them?

There is a gaze that tribal folks think looks (down) at them. This is the insider/outsider dichotomy that is insinuated to reduce what is episteme for the tribe to doxa for the non-tribe. Indigenous methodologies insist on research respecting the lived experience and locale of the participants. This coming together of ethics with epistemology towards a praxis is appreciable. Furthermore, collaborative inquiry must be encouraged between the researcher and the participant when it comes to analysis based on "text". However, the difference that a non-tribal gaze brings can give new perspectives to navigate through limitations. The nuanced understanding here is to acknowledge that studies on tribal conditions are revitalization initiatives through periods of relived apathy. The role of the individual in any capacity depends on how much he/she is integrated into the reliving process.

Another aspect is that reflexivity and modernity have been utilised in their broadest sense, as setting an outline is the objective of this study. Both concepts have decades long theorizing resting on varied paradigmatic positions and should be incorporated likewise.

Eventually, this study shows that the poetic image of home is a conscious decision on many different levels. Of the poet and the tribe for sure, and it is also of the researchers, signifying the relationship between the warmth of belonging and the isolating chill of unfamiliarity, the comfort of known norms and the anticipation of an unknown future.

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Integrating Modern Education and Traditional Knowledge Systems: Pathways to Inclusive Learning for Tribal Communities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

This paper aims to explore the potential of integrating traditional tribal knowledge systems with modern education to foster inclusive, culturally responsive learning for tribal students in India.

Design/Methodologies:

A qualitative approach was adopted, drawing on case studies, policy reviews, and semi-structured interviews with educators, tribal elders, and community members from selected tribal regions. The research analysed efforts to incorporate indigenous knowledge—such as oral traditions, ecological practices, and community-based learning—into formal education settings.

Findings:

The study reveals that tribal students often experience cultural dissonance within mainstream educational systems, leading to alienation and dropout. However, educational models that respect and integrate traditional knowledge enhance student engagement, preserve cultural identity, and promote ecological awareness. Successful initiatives include bilingual teaching, use of folklore in curricula, and partnerships with community knowledge holders.

Originality:

This paper contributes original insights by linking educational inclusivity with indigenous cultural sustainability. It highlights underexplored grassroots models where traditional and modern knowledge co-exist, offering a framework that can inform educational policy and curriculum design.

Implications:

Findings may underscore the importance of culturally contextualized education in tribal areas. Policymakers, educators, and institutions must collaborate with tribal communities to co-create learning experiences that empower students both culturally and academically.

Keywords : *Traditional knowledge, inclusive education, tribal communities, indigenous pedagogy, cultural sustainability*

Introduction

In roots of tradition, their wisdom lies,
Yet in schools, their voice barely flies.

India is home to more than 700 Scheduled Tribes (STs), accounting for approximately 8.6% of the nation's population. These communities represent some of the most culturally rich and ecologically knowledgeable populations in the country. Yet, despite constitutional protections and decades of policy interventions, tribal communities have remained largely marginalized within India's mainstream education system. This marginalization is deeply rooted in factors such as geographic isolation, economic vulnerability, linguistic and cultural discontinuities, and systemic neglect.

Access to quality education for tribal learners

continues to be hindered by inadequate infrastructure, limited availability of trained teachers, and the predominance of standardized curricula that ignore indigenous worldviews, languages, and ways of knowing. Consequently, tribal students often find themselves alienated in formal educational settings, leading to high dropout rates, poor academic performance, and diminished educational aspirations. Mainstream schools are frequently perceived by tribal children as culturally disconnected spaces—reinforcing their sense of exclusion and detachment from learning.

Compounding this issue is the deficit-oriented lens through which tribal education is often approached—one that emphasizes what tribal communities lack rather than what they possess. This perspective not only undermines the richness of traditional tribal knowledge systems but also perpetuates educational practices that devalue community-based knowledge, sustainable living practices, and oral traditions. In such a context, the urgency to reimagine education for tribal learners becomes paramount. There is a growing need for inclusive, culturally responsive pedagogies that validate indigenous knowledge (IK), promote multilingual education, and encourage the active participation of tribal communities in shaping educational content and delivery.

In the 21st century, the relevance of Indigenous Knowledge has gained global recognition as humanity confronts interconnected challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, socio-economic inequalities, and the erosion of cultural diversity. Rooted in centuries of lived experience, IK offers sustainable and locally adapted responses to these challenges. It emphasizes ecological balance, collective wisdom, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge—values that align closely with global discourses on sustainability and equity. Educational integration of IK not only affirms tribal identities but also fosters critical thinking, resilience, and environmental consciousness among all learners. Frameworks such as UNESCO's Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) initiative and India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly advocate for the inclusion of IK in mainstream education to promote holistic, contextual, and inclusive learning.

At the policy level, the NEP 2020 marks a significant paradigm shift by emphasizing mother tongue instruction, curriculum contextualization, and the preservation of India's diverse cultural heritage—including indigenous languages and knowledge systems. Simultaneously, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, with specific focus on marginalized populations. These frameworks collectively offer an enabling policy environment for bridging the gap between traditional wisdom and contemporary pedagogy.

However, despite these progressive policy frameworks, practical integration of IK into formal education remains sporadic and underdeveloped. Educational practices often continue to favour uniform, centralized curricula that leave little room for community-specific knowledge. Initiatives aimed at bringing tribal knowledge into the classroom tend to be fragmented, lacking in systematic documentation, institutional backing, or pedagogical innovation. Additionally, tribal voices remain largely absent in decision-making spaces related to curriculum development and teacher training, thereby impeding the creation of truly inclusive learning environments.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore and document the scope, practices, and implications of integrating traditional tribal knowledge systems into modern education. It aims to examine successful community-led educational initiatives, identify systemic and cultural barriers, and advocate for pedagogical models that meaningfully incorporate tribal epistemologies. By doing so, the study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on educational equity, sustainability, and cultural preservation—while offering actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are holistic, context-specific, and transmitted across generations through oral traditions, direct observation, and practical engagement with the environment. Semali and Kincheloe (1999) argue that IKS represents a valid epistemological system capable of enriching mainstream education. Rather than being seen as static folklore, IKS is dynamic and deeply embedded in community life—reflecting sustainable practices related to agriculture, health, forest management, and spirituality. Battiste (2002) highlights that decolonizing education requires recognition of these alternative ways of knowing, especially in contexts where indigenous communities have historically been marginalized.

In the Indian context, tribal communities such as the Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, and Nagas possess rich oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and community governance structures. However, these knowledge systems are largely absent in formal school curricula. Agrawal (1995) and Xaxa (2005) have pointed out that the dominance of Western-centric education models

has contributed to the erosion of tribal identity and the displacement of indigenous knowledge from educational spaces.

One of the recurring concerns in tribal education is the cultural disconnect between tribal learners and formal schooling. Jhingran (2005) notes that tribal children are often taught in unfamiliar languages and through content that does not reflect their lived realities, leading to confusion, disinterest, and eventual dropout. Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2011) also emphasize that a lack of cultural relevance in pedagogy contributes to low participation rates and poor learning outcomes among tribal students. Mehta (2016) further argues that mainstream education often functions as a tool of assimilation rather than empowerment, promoting a uniform national identity at the cost of indigenous knowledge and local wisdom.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) offers a transformative framework to address these gaps. Defined by Gay (2000) and developed further by Ladson-Billings (1995), CRP encourages educators to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, values, and experiences into the teaching-learning process. In India, scholars such as Mohanty (2009) and Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty (2013) advocate for mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) as a practical and culturally sensitive approach to tribal education. Several case studies from Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh have shown that when education is grounded in the child's linguistic and cultural context—with participation from tribal elders and the inclusion of oral narratives—student engagement and retention improve significantly (Patnaik, 2014).

Preserving tribal languages is integral to preserving indigenous knowledge. UNESCO (2022) has reported that nearly 197 languages in India are endangered, a significant portion of which belong to tribal communities. Language is not only a medium of instruction but also a repository of knowledge and cultural identity. The People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), led by G.N. Devy (2013), underscores the urgency of documenting and revitalizing tribal languages as a means to preserve community heritage. Without their linguistic foundations, entire knowledge systems risk extinction. Efforts like MTB-MLE and community language documentation initiatives have shown promise, but remain sporadic and underfunded.

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a much-needed policy shift in support of integrating indigenous knowledge in education. It emphasizes early childhood education in the mother tongue, localized curriculum, and community participation in school governance. The NEP aligns with global frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, including indigenous communities. Additionally, UNESCO's Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) initiative promotes the inclusion of traditional knowledge in education to strengthen sustainability and resilience.

Despite these encouraging policy frameworks, several implementation challenges persist. Rani and Bisht (2021) observe that most reforms in tribal education remain top-down, with minimal input from tribal communities. There is a lack of teacher training focused on indigenous pedagogies, limited representation of tribal voices in curriculum design, and inadequate documentation of community-based educational models. As a result, the actual classroom practices remain disconnected from the cultural context of tribal learners.

Although theoretical and policy-oriented research on indigenous knowledge is growing, empirical studies that examine how IKS is integrated into the teaching-learning process remain limited. There is a notable gap in research documenting grassroots-level educational innovations led by tribal communities. Furthermore, little is known about how tribal elders, educators, and youth perceive the role of traditional knowledge in modern education. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the possibilities, practices, and challenges of integrating tribal knowledge systems into formal education through a culturally responsive lens.

OBJECTIVES

1. **To explore the perceptions and lived experiences** of tribal community members, educators, and learners regarding the relevance of Indigenous Knowledge in education.
2. **To document community-based educational practices and local innovations** that incorporate traditional tribal knowledge systems in teaching and learning.
3. **To understand the enablers and barriers** affecting the integration of tribal knowledge in formal education, including aspects like curriculum, language, and teacher preparedness.
4. **To investigate the role of tribal elders and local institutions** in preserving, transmitting, and sustaining Indigenous Knowledge through educational processes.

HYPOTHESES

1. Tribal communities perceive Indigenous Knowledge as central to cultural identity and as a meaningful component of the learning process.
2. There are grassroots-level educational practices and innovations that actively integrate tribal knowledge into formal or informal learning.
3. Institutional and systemic factors such as language exclusion, rigid curriculum design, and inadequate teacher training limit the inclusion of tribal knowledge in schools.
4. Tribal elders and local cultural institutions play a significant but often unacknowledged role in knowledge transmission within tribal education systems.

METHODOLOGY

1. **Research Design** This study adopted a qualitative and exploratory research design aimed at understanding the lived experiences, perspectives, and practices of tribal communities, educators, and students concerning the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in education. The design was appropriate for capturing rich, descriptive data and for exploring phenomena deeply rooted in cultural, social, and contextual realities.
2. **Study Area** The study was conducted in **Narela**, a tribal-influenced region in the North-West district of Delhi. The area was selected due to its significant population of Scheduled Caste and tribal migrant communities, where traditional knowledge continues to shape daily life and cultural practices. The location also offered a suitable context to observe both formal education and informal, community-based knowledge transmission.
3. **Sampling Strategy** A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify information-rich participants directly involved in or knowledgeable about tribal education and indigenous knowledge systems.

The sample included:

- Tribal elders and community knowledge holders
- Primary school teachers and local educators (in government or community-run schools)
- Parents of tribal students
- School-age students (as informal respondents)
- Local NGO workers or educational volunteers (where available)

A total of **18 participants** were selected, ensuring diversity in age, gender, and roles within the community's knowledge ecosystem.

4. **Data Collection Methods** Multiple qualitative tools were used to capture a holistic view of the research topic:

a. **In-depth Semi-structured Interviews** Open-ended interviews were conducted with tribal elders, parents, and educators to gather insights on:

- Their understanding and transmission of indigenous knowledge
- Their views on formal schooling and its cultural relevance
- Challenges and possibilities in integrating IKS into school curricula

b. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** FGDs were held with groups of parents and teachers to gather shared experiences, collective perspectives, and local practices related to culturally relevant education.

c. **Field Observation** Non-participant observations were carried out in classrooms, schoolyards, and community spaces such as temples, gatherings, and storytelling events. A structured checklist was used to observe:

- Language practices in classrooms
- Presence (or absence) of local content in curriculum and pedagogy
- Informal knowledge-sharing practices outside school

d. **Document and Content Review** Textbooks, school curriculum outlines, and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 documents were reviewed to assess the inclusion (or exclusion) of tribal knowledge and culture in formal education content.

5. **Data Analysis**

Data collected from interviews and FGDs were transcribed and analysed using **Thematic Analysis** as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved:

- Familiarization with transcripts
- Coding of recurring patterns and categories

- Identification of major themes (e.g., cultural disconnection, barriers to IKS integration, enabling practices)
- Interpretation of themes in alignment with the objectives of the study

While coding was done manually, data were organized using spreadsheet software for clarity and synthesis.

6. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including verbal consent from elders and written consent from teachers and parents. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. The purpose of the study was clearly explained, and participants were given the option to withdraw at any point. All indigenous knowledge and cultural expressions were documented with utmost respect and sensitivity to community values and ownership.

7. Limitations

As a qualitative and context-specific study, the findings are not statistically generalizable. However, the insights derived offer valuable depth and can inform culturally responsive educational practices in similar tribal or marginalized contexts.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings derived from interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document reviews conducted in Narela. The results are organized thematically to align with the research objectives and interpreted in light of existing literature.

1. Cultural Disconnect in Schooling

Participants—especially tribal elders and parents—expressed concern that formal education alienated children from their cultural roots. Most respondents noted that school textbooks did not reflect tribal knowledge, customs, or local history. For example, traditional stories, agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and local festivals were absent from classroom discussions. This cultural mismatch led to a lack of interest among children and a growing disconnect between home and school environments.

This finding resonates with Sharma (2020), who observed that standardized curricula in tribal-dominated areas often neglect local epistemologies, contributing to educational disengagement and dropout.

2. Informal Indigenous Knowledge Transmission Still Active

Despite limited recognition in formal education, indigenous knowledge remained vibrant within homes and communities. Tribal elders shared that storytelling, ritual practices, farming techniques, and herbal remedies were regularly passed down orally. This informal system of knowledge transfer was described as "natural" and "interactive," often involving hands-on learning through observation and participation.

Focus group participants emphasized the intergenerational value of such practices, though they expressed worry about their decline due to modern schooling and digital distractions.

3. Teachers' Perspectives: Supportive but Ill-equipped

Primary school teachers interviewed acknowledged the importance of integrating tribal knowledge into lessons but cited a lack of training, resources, and autonomy. Many teachers were non-tribal and unfamiliar with local customs, making it difficult for them to confidently incorporate community knowledge in classrooms. Some teachers also mentioned rigid curriculum frameworks and assessment patterns as barriers.

This echoes Pandey and Pandey (2021), who found that while educators recognize the pedagogical potential of Technology-Enabled or Contextualized Learning, structural constraints often prevent meaningful implementation.

4. Parental Aspirations and Concerns

While valuing their traditions, parents were pragmatic about education. They desired formal schooling for their children to ensure employment and mobility but did not want it to come at the cost of cultural loss. Several parents suggested a "blended" model, where schools respect and include tribal practices alongside mainstream academic content.

This dual aspiration reflects what Laurillard (2013) calls the need for education systems to support both continuity and change—preserving identity while enabling progress.

5. Policy-Practice Gaps

Review of textbooks and NEP 2020 guidelines revealed policy provisions for culturally responsive pedagogy and mother tongue instruction. However, field-level implementation remained weak. There was no evidence of structured inclusion of tribal knowledge in school planning or curriculum delivery. Even well-intentioned educators struggled without policy-level support and professional development mechanisms.

Theme	Key Findings
Cultural Disconnect	Schools often ignore local knowledge; children feel alienated.
Indigenous Knowledge Practices	Still transmitted orally; rich in ecological, medicinal, and cultural content.
Teacher Capacity & Constraints	Willingness to integrate IKS, but lack of training and resources.
Parental Views	Support formal education, but want cultural identity preserved.
Policy-Practice Mismatch	NEP 2020 provisions exist but remain poorly implemented on ground.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative and exploratory study examined the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within the formal education framework in Narela, a peri-urban region in Delhi with notable tribal settlements. Drawing insights from community elders, educators, parents, and students, the research revealed critical disjuncture between the lived cultural realities of tribal communities and the formal education being imparted in schools.

Despite progressive policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and global mandates under SDG 4 that emphasize culturally inclusive and locally rooted education, tribal communities in Narela continue to face systemic educational marginalization. Formal school environments, while striving for universal access, often remain indifferent to the linguistic, ecological, and epistemological heritage of tribal learners. This leads to an erosion of identity, low engagement, and in some cases, complete disengagement from the schooling process.

The study illuminated that indigenous knowledge continues to be transmitted organically through storytelling, agricultural practices, rituals, and intergenerational learning in tribal households. However, these practices remain undervalued or completely absent in classroom pedagogy, which tends to prioritize standardized, textbook-driven instruction. Teachers, though often well-meaning, are constrained by rigid curricula, lack of training in culturally responsive pedagogies, and institutional inertia.

Parents interviewed in the study expressed a dual aspiration: they desire modern education as a pathway to economic mobility for their children, but they are also concerned about the diminishing value of their cultural roots. They emphasized the need for an educational system that acknowledges and respects their community's contributions rather than alienating their children through linguistic and cultural dissonance.

At the policy level, although NEP 2020 recognizes the need for multilingual and experiential learning, its implementation in tribal areas like Narela remains fragmented and inconsistent. There is a lack of structured programs, institutional support, and teacher preparedness to operationalize the integration of indigenous knowledge meaningfully.

This study argues that the marginalization of tribal learners is not solely a consequence of socio-economic factors but also of the epistemic exclusion embedded in formal education systems. If schools are to become inclusive spaces for tribal children, they must transition from being mere centers of academic instruction to vibrant ecosystems of cultural recognition, identity affirmation, and community partnership.

Integrating IKS into formal education is not just about preserving heritage—it is a pedagogical necessity in the 21st century. Tribal knowledge systems offer sustainable models of living, deep ecological awareness, and holistic worldviews that can enrich modern curricula and pedagogy. Recognizing, documenting, and integrating this knowledge into education will not only improve educational outcomes for tribal students but also contribute to a more sustainable, equitable, and culturally diverse society.

Ultimately, the transformation of education in tribal regions like Narela requires a shift in mind set—from viewing tribal learners as deficient or backward to acknowledging them as custodians of valuable knowledge. It calls for a reimagining of curriculum, pedagogy, and policy through the lens of cultural inclusivity and social justice. This study contributes to that vision by foregrounding tribal voices, validating their knowledge systems, and advocating for an education that truly includes all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this exploratory study, the following recommendations are proposed to promote the meaningful integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in formal education, especially in tribal-dominated regions like Narela:

1. Curricular Reforms and Contextualization

- Develop localized curricula that incorporate tribal knowledge, practices, folklore, oral histories, and ecological wisdom.
- Allow flexibility for schools in tribal areas to adapt curriculum content that resonates with the community's lived experiences and

environment.

2. Bilingual and Multilingual Instruction

- Promote the use of mother tongue or tribal dialects as the medium of instruction, particularly at the foundational level, as supported by NEP 2020.
- Train teachers in bilingual education strategies to bridge the gap between home and school languages.

3. Teacher Sensitization and Capacity Building

- Conduct regular training programs for teachers to raise awareness about cultural diversity and equip them with strategies for culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Encourage the recruitment of teachers from tribal backgrounds who are culturally aligned with the students' context.

4. Community Involvement in Education

- Institutionalize platforms for active participation of tribal elders and knowledge holders in curriculum planning, classroom instruction, and co-curricular activities.
- Recognize and formally engage tribal resource persons as "community educators" or "para-teachers" to enrich learning experiences.

5. Documenting and Digitizing Indigenous Knowledge

- Launch initiatives to document tribal knowledge in local languages with the help of communities, educators, and NGOs.
- Use technology to preserve and disseminate indigenous stories, practices, and rituals through audio-visual tools and digital libraries in schools.

6. Inclusive Educational Policy Implementation

- Strengthen policy-level mandates (like NEP 2020) with clear guidelines, monitoring, and funding mechanisms for integrating IKS.
- Encourage SCERTs, DIETs, and education departments to develop state- and district-level frameworks for inclusive, culture-based education.

7. Pilot Programs and Model Schools

- Establish model schools in tribal regions like Narela to pilot the integration of IKS into pedagogy and school culture.
- Document and scale up successful innovations through action research and institutional collaboration.

8. Evaluation and Research

- Promote ongoing research to assess the impact of integrating IKS on student learning, retention, identity development, and community engagement.
- Create feedback mechanisms involving students, teachers, and parents to continuously improve the relevance and inclusivity of education.

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Moyna and Malli: Representation of Tribal Culture in Mahashweta Devi's The *Why-Why Girl* (2003) and Santhosh Shivan's Malli (1998)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically examine the film *Malli* (1998) directed by Santhosh Shivan and the picture book *The Why Why Girl* (2003) by Mahashweta Devi so as to analyse how literary and film media can be used to present the nuances of tribal life and cultural practices through the child protagonist. Using the tools of discourse analysis and visual analysis, the paper will look into the representation of tribal life from the standpoint of age, gender, and social position, while also looking at impact of urban influence, and individual/community interaction with the ecosystem. It will also look at storytelling both as a method of activism and awareness, as well as a literary device within the texts. Using the theoretical framework of Tribal Studies, Ecocriticism and Children's Literature, the paper will engage with the creative world building process employed in these tales and analyse its implications on tribal identity formation. The paper locates the child protagonists and their contrasting points of view within the Tribal universe and studies how they achieve agency through different means in their respective narratives. While Moyna learns to use the system. Malli's story does not include this state intervention. The child becomes an unblemished lens that reflects the reality of tribal life. The unique vantage point of the child protagonist opens up new opportunities for awareness and knowledge dissemination and goes a long way in dispelling social prejudice. The paper looks at the interaction and attitude of the tribal child to the world around, reflecting on the larger ethos of tribal knowledge systems and its acceptance of the primordial nature of the environment.

Keywords: *Children's Literature, child perspective, development and education, tribal life, Storytelling.*

Introduction

This paper intends to study the nuances of tribal representation in two Children's narratives with the aim of examining the discursive capacity of visual narratives in empowering marginalized peoples and their perspectives. It intends to locate the child protagonist as representative of culture, tracing the interaction between the Adivasi child and the world to delineate patterns of identity assertion and agency.

One of the earliest theorizations regarding the purpose of children's literature revolves around its capacity to not just entertain but also inform and instruct its audience of the world, its inhabitants and the structure of order and power that governs their world (Hunt,1999). The common assumption being that this collective primarily consists of children and

individuals in the nascent cognitive development stage. In the context of this approach, both the texts being discussed in this paper perform a crucial function in defining and establishing the identity of a tribal space and its inhabitants within the minds of a mainstream audience, who were unlikely to be exposed to this culture in their daily interaction. Furthermore, they do so with the assumption that the mind they are shaping is open and untainted by prejudice. However, the reality of Children's Literature is that it always precludes an adult reader who either facilitates the reading or is involved in the cycle of procurement itself. In such a context, the texts chosen for study make an interesting case for instruction as well as unlearning prejudice.

The creation of a form of literature or media created specifically to appeal to the child, meant that the child became the prime customer and the center of the story, even if it was an adult who foots the bill or chose the text. This interesting, and contradictory, reversal of roles is also seen the common tropes of Children's Literature which include the child hero who fights injustice to bring about order. In the real world, the child is usually the responsibility of or at the mercy of an adult over whom they have little influence. The child has little to no real agency. However, within the realm of the children's tale they become the converging point of a gritty and jaded reality and an untried, imagination full of possibility. The child hero can change the world. (Natov, 2019)

Both Mahashweta Devi's *Why Why Girl* (2003) and Santhosh Shivan's *Malli* (1998) feature young tribal children as protagonists who create an image of tribal life and childhood. Both pieces are profoundly true to their space and indigenous identity, elevating the tribal existence from inaccurate view as primitive societies, and creating a direct contrast to the view of the city-bound/ non-tribal, and the adult. The fact that both texts feature girl children from marginalized communities who seize agency through their own methods, outside of adult intervention, underscores the distinctive nature of the tribal perspective showcased in these texts. Both Moyna and Malli occupy decidedly peripheral statuses given their triply marginalized identity—female, tribal, and child. But this view point is given center-stage, automatically subverting the power dynamics between the mainstream and the non-mainstream and, more importantly demanding acknowledgement of this perspective. This subversion is underscored by the choice of genre as well. Children's Literature and media for children are often dismissed as less worthy of theoretical study and as such occupy a peripheral status in terms of serious academic study. In short, perspectives studied here are off the beaten track of academic engagement in every sense.

To understand the context and literary significance of the texts in discussion, it is essential to briefly delve into the history of children's literature and children's films as a genre as well as its adoption into the Indian milieu.

Children's Literature as a genre comes into amorphous being in the West around the 18th and 19th Century. Up till the 19th C the primary function of Children's Literature was religious (Giedraityte, 2014) vis a vis moral tales, biblical stories etc. It was in the 19thC that the primary focus shifted to the promotion of literacy and pushing social values as much as moral values. John Locke was particularly influential in championing the cause of the illustrated book or the picture book, noting astutely that the child will be more open to an aesthetic instruction rather than a didactic mode (Locke, 1693). The rise of the middle class, which had burgeoning aspirations for social growth, further expanded the market for books that had instructional and doctrinal value. Leonard S Marcus writes in the 2023 article titled "On the Role of Children's Book Within the Realm of Social Evolution",

> A clear pattern thus emerged that would repeat itself elsewhere around the globe many times over: the recognition of a critical link between literacy and economic and social advancement, and of the illustrated children's book as a gateway to literacy and a better life…Soaring literacy rates and middle-class expectations fed the demand for children's books across the nineteenth-century industrial world, with London at the center.
>
> As advances in printing technology made color illustration an affordable option, the artistically refined English picture book gathered steam and flourished. (Marcus, 2023)

The early samples of Children's Literature were predominantly western and pushed a narrow and uniformly white and western view of not just childhood, but also the world itself. Louis Althusser's theorization of the Ideological State Apparatus, where forms of culture and media are used to gently nudge an unsuspecting populace into complying with a hegemonic narrative, becomes all too real in the context of these texts, where jingoistic nationalism, racial stereotypes, and rampant othering are just as much the norm as talking animals.

The anglo-centricism of Children's literature was undercut by the wealth of folk and children's tales in vernacular forms, and parallel literary movements, notably in the far East, that found more reach in the late 19th and early 20th C. This offered a

counter point to the mainstream narrative of Children's Literature presenting more regional concerns and an international angle to the genre. India, in particular, had a distinctly different take to the concept of childhood itself. The emergence of publications like *Chandamama* in 1947, and publishing houses Children's Book Trust (CBT) and the National Book Trust (NBT) in 1953 did much to create region and culture specific representations tailored to the Indian child. While the majority of the tales tended to veer towards mythological stories and references to the epics, contemporary Children's books publishing houses like Pratham and Tulika have moved steadily into a more secular mode, showcasing stories that highlight not just different regions but also different experiences across the spectrum of intersectional issues like gender, age, social strata etc. (Nayar, 2022). Consequently, contemporary children's literature actively challenges a mainstream narrative of universally homogenous childhood experience and exposes the child to a host of realities that were not considered classical children's literature material.

The journey of Children's Cinema, on the other hand, is much more overt in its relationship to the State. The intervention of the state in media production has a significant influence on the rise of children's films in India. In fact, the film *Malli* too was made as a part of the National Centre for Children and Young People. The state-funded Children's Film Society, formed in 1955, was instrumental in setting up benchmarks for entertainment that was meant for children. While the institution was prolific, it lacked the systems of circulation that made commercial cinema so easily accessible. Consequently, Children's cinema was essentially a niche criterion with little to no commercial interest. (Brown, 2017). In a case of deep irony, while film festivals regularly hosted these films, the regular child rarely got a chance to access these narratives. Furthermore, the categorization of films in term of their rating—R, U , PG-13 etc.— gave the genre a fluidity that belied its content. For example, not all films rated U were children's films. Similarly, films about children and films for children can be mutually exclusive categories. The genre of children's cinema was based on a discursive intent—whose world view was being shown? What is the take away in terms of the reality of the film: is it an adult reality or a child's reality?

This question gets additional significance when the reality being presented veers so decidedly away from the mainstream. Representation of Tribal realities suffer from the absence of access and reach. Most representations of tribal life in India either treat it as an isolated culture, relegated to reserved land and forest areas, or within the class- caste continuum as the certified Other. The Adivasi identity is essentially defined outside the bounds of the organized State and tribal societies are seen as non-State collectives (Beteille). This division sets the stage for either neglect or blatant stereotyping. Based on the requirement of the State, the Adivasi is either exoticized as a primal figure that embodies an ecocritical utopia or a reduced to a figure of extreme pathos or disdain mired in primitive discordance with marching progress. Neither of these stereotypes accurately represent the reality of Tribal existence and tends to define the Adivasi in negation to the mainstream/urban/non-tribal presence, as opposed to being a unique civilization unto itself.

The texts discussed in the paper provides a shift from this marginalized perspective by placing the Adivasi child at the centre. In both Santhosh Shivan's *Malli* (1998) and Mahashweta Devi's *The Why Why Girl* (2003) we see a childlike reality where the child hero defines her world and defies the accepted/ expected limitations of their real lives.

Mahashweta Devi's works have always showcased a renegotiation of accepted social hierarchies and critiqued the reigning prejudices regarding the underprivileged. Her activism for Tribal rights and emancipation has had immense impact and has actively contributed to the emancipation and empowerment of the community, especially in West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh. Whether it is through the tragedy of her young, exploited Douloti or her fierce and indomitable Dopdi, Mahashweta Devi raised awareness regarding the heinous social injustice and systemic brutality meted out to the tribal community. Her foray into children's literature is an additional angle to this struggle, where she uses the medium of the children's story to further push her message. Santhosh Shivan, primarily known for his virtuosity in the field of cinematography, has a repertoire studded with exciting alternative perspectives. Whether it is his controversial *Terrorist* (1998), starring Ayesha Dharker, or his heart wrenching *Ceylon* (2013), Shivan has not shied away from taking on politically charged subjects in his work. Given his ability to juggle commercial and alternate cinema, his penchant for creating children's films is unsurprising. *Malli* (1998) won a slew of cinematic accolades, including the Silver Lotus Award for Best Child artist and Best Film on Environment reservation/Conservation at the 46th National Film Awards.

Both Malli and Moyna are quintessential child heroes with their distinct purpose and personalities. Malli is from an unnamed jungle dwelling tribal community in Tamil Nadu. Moyna is a Shabar, one of the Munda tribes that inhabit northern Odisha and South West Bengal. While

Malli's story is essentially a quest centered around her friendship with the hearing-impaired and mute Cuckoo, Moyna's story is an individual journey where she questions the reigning social structures and hierarchies and champions the upliftment of her community.

Shivan and Devi have diverging perspectives of the position of the child hero. While Malli comes off as soft and child-like in the strictest sense of the word, Moyna is more assertive and worldly, she is extremely self- aware and acts almost like the adult in her interactions with the actual adults. Malli's interactions with the adults in her world are largely unpleasant, with the exception of the Lettermama who anonymously fulfils her wish, and the Doctor who saves the faun from a bullet wound inflicted by poachers. Moyna, on the other hand, takes on a forceful role, attacking the autocratic adult with sharp 'Whys' that demand answers. This dynamic is a critical prism of the representative lens through which tribal existence is seen in the text.

Santhosh Shivan takes a classic, Romantic approach to his representation of Tribal life. The film revolves around the friendship between the Adivasi child and her deaf-mute friend Cuckoo who is visiting from the city. Malli loves her friend and embarks on a quest to find a legendary blue stone that was supposed to grant a voice to the one it is given to. In the course of this quest, Malli ends up saving a faun, protecting the sacred trees and foiling the attempts of a gang of poachers to hunt the wildlife in her land.

Malli, a young tribal girl, presumably from the Nilgiris belt, is the quintessential pastoral child hero (Natov, 2006). She embodies the child archetype— creative, innocent and joyful. Much like the Romantic notion of childhood, Malli is open, and closely connected to Nature and all living things. Malli's relationship to the land and her anthropomorphizing of the environment, flora and fauna reflects the Romantic idyl of the Noble Savage (Rousseau, —the human being born in Nature and inherently noble in their natural state. Through Malli we are presented with an unsullied world; and the lone child becomes the eye which reveals the world. Much like Rousseau's Emile, Malli is free and uncorrupted. She runs wild in the wilderness and is predisposed to goodness, kindness and empathy. Malli, in short becomes a reflection of Nature at its budding best, and shares an almost familial bond with the land.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the adults—specifically the male characters in the film—are transient characters who either do not have roots in the land (as in the case of Muthu, the forest department staff, Letter-mama the postman, the Doctor, or Cuckoo's father) or are migrating individuals like Malli's own father who works in the city. The female characters, with the exception of Cuckoo, and the visiting journalist, are all rooted to the space and actively engaged in the propagating and sustaining of life there. From an ecofeminist perspective, this equation also signals the role of women as custodians of the land and their almost instinctive connection to the landscape. The men move away or actively aspire to leave to the city or metropolis in search of greener pastures and at the whims and fancies of their employers. The women remain to hold the land. One of the recurring shots in the film is Malli either cradled in the branches of the large tree near the lake, or hugging the tree trunk with her tiny body—a pose reminiscent of the Chipko movement. These moments are evocative of her instinctive and close bond with the greenery and the landscape she inhabits.

The landscape takes on additional symbolic weight, bringing an ecocentric angle to what would otherwise be a simple story of friendship. Malli's relationship with the flora and fauna of her habitat, and her sense of responsibility for the conservation and the protection of the same forms a central aspect of her character. The film opens with shot of a tree trunk the foreground behind which chirps the unrevealed heroine who addresses the audience directly, happily breaking the fourth wall. She names the animals, plants, the sky, and lakes—who she personifies and calls sister— girded by hills and greenery as her audience. At regular junctures in the film, she narrates tales about the land around her, invoking a sacred and esoteric connection that is embedded in her through the stories told by the aged Moyar Paati. Malli's world view is informed by the Adivasi traditions transmitted through the oral tradition showcased in the film. Young as she is, Malli is aware of the interconnectedness of Nature and human beings and recognizes the presence of unnamable powers that govern the world. Malli is the first to recognize the threat to the sacred grounds, about which she manages to alert the authorities. She witnesses the desecration of the same by the poachers and illegal wood cutters who make recurring, menacing appearances in the film, and actively thwarts their plans and mitigates the damage they inflict. She stops them from felling the sacred trees by bringing in help right in time. When they pollute 'kollathakka' with the blood of slaughtered animals, Malli follows the instructions of the old storyteller and painstakingly fills a bamboo jar with freshly collected dew and pours it into the water to purify the lake.

By practicing the rituals of her indigenous

faith, Malli becomes a protector of her land, intervening to save those who dwell there whether they be animal, human or geographical feature. But her methods are not solely based on folk traditions. She knows that the only way to save the wounded faun is to get it to the vet on time and she is also aware that there is a give and take between the material reality of modern scientific process and the ancient wisdom of her people. On an unconscious level, Malli uses a combination of both perspectives in her quest for the happiness and safety of the ones she holds dear to herself. This aspect is notable as it presents realistic take on indigenous knowledge systems and their propagation alongside an awareness and access to contemporary scientific practices. Malli embodies both the traditions of her ancestors and well the knowledge of her present in her actions. These actions are consistently altruistic even if they are misunderstood.

It is a telling point that Malli is constantly chastised even when she is blameless. Her quiet presence in the 'wrong place at the wrong time' incites ire and invites censure. For example: when she is caught near the animal enclosure by the doctor's orderly she is immediately scolded and treated like a naughty child, while in reality she had not been disruptive at all. The irony being that Cuckoo who was actively letting the animals out of their enclosure is not discovered and has a great time. Similarly, towards the end of the film when Malli brings the wounded faun to the vet and waits to see if it survived, she is again caught and angrily chased away. The injustice of this is underscored by her inability to defend herself from such treatment and her bewildered hurt which receives no recompense. Yet, she continues to act in the best interests of the people and the world she cares for, going the extra mile to make miracles happen.

Malli is saved from unrealistic, sainthood, by her tendency for truancy, her diffidence in front of adult authority, her rambling rhymes that she spins on the spot, her fervent aspiration for a multi-coloured pattupavadai and davani, and her devotion to her much more assertive and naughtier friend, Cuckoo.

The relationship between Malli and Cuckoo is interesting in that it seems to confirm the bias towards the centre, with the city-educated Cuckoo, who is the daughter of the resident forest official, being the more assertive character in the equation. However, the narrative flips this dynamic as Cuckoo's disabilities render her physically weaker than Malli. Malli, now takes on the role of the benefactor and sisterly role— a role that awaits her in the future, with reference to her to her unborn sibling—to the lonely and physically fragile Cuckoo. Malli's generosity and care for her differently abled friend is not only showcased in her obvious joy in her company, but also in the arduous task she sets of herself. Malli decides to use her indigenous knowledge and her access to the sacred grounds to give Cuckoo a voice.

The legend of the Mayilkadavul who grants the magic blue stone, narrated by Moyar Paati, the old storyteller, provides a religious etiological myth to Malli's cultural space. The myth speaks of time of drought and hardship where the land was drained of its energy and the animals lost their voice. The faithful fauna, now rendered mute, offered sincere prayers to the indigenous God Mayilkadavul (loosely be translated to 'Peacock God) who graciously handed over a magic blue stone to one of the animals, a little rabbit, and restored the voice to the muted land. The parallels between the myth and Malli's reality are self-evident, it powers the quest motif in the narrative. Malli seeks to bring blessings to those in her care. In the foreground is her vibrant and lively friend Cuckoo who cannot express herself fully, and in the background, there is the foreboding presence of the poachers and the wood cutters hinting at calamity that can strike the land. This last point is further underscored by the fact that the poachers attack the Mayilmaram, the sacred tree growing in the holy ground of the Mayilkadavul, implying an attack on the spiritual soul of the land and its indigenous peoples. This event becomes a moment of cognitive dissonance in Malli's consciousness and a crack in the pristine poetics of her childlike world view. Moyar paati's foreboding statements about the grudges inherited by the human race serve as a chilling promise of retribution to the transgressors, and unwittingly charges Malli with a motive to protect her land and her God.

From here on, Malli's quest takes two levels, first to help her friend gain her voice, secondly, almost accidentally to protect the land from the humans who would hurt it. Malli takes on the penance and the vigil to collect magic stones, specifically the magic blue stone, to grant her friend the power of speech regardless of personal discomfort, and as the post-script to the film says the profoundly hearing-impaired child actress who played Cuckoo was able to learn to speak achieve a voice. In a curious mutation of the break in the fourth wall, the audience is left feeling that this was the successful fruition of Malli's wish and faith. She is the archetypal magical child who is able to bend her reality by the dint of her faith, and ultimately succeeds. In her interactions with Cuckoo, she comes off as the more knowledgeable one, who protects Cuckoo even from her own impetuousness.

One notices a curious recalibration of

privilege and power in their dynamic. While, Cuckoo definitely wields the confidence and the power of social capital, she is severely impaired by her physical conditions, and is essentially out of her depth in this new world of wilderness. Her story arc matches what Terry Glifford calls "the retreat and return cycle" (Kerridge 540) and she must return to her urban reality when her vacation ends. She is a visitor in the Eden that is Malli's home, essentially the outsider in this spatial origin equation. Regardless of her feisty attitude she remains very much under the power and influence of the others in the story. In the scene where Malli refuses to hide her in the grass because of possible dangers, Cuckoo feels betrayed and must allow herself to be handed over to the adults she is avoiding. The audience is reminded of her vulnerability and lack of agency. Her anger and rejection of the bead necklace that Malli painstakingly put together for her, only seems like a reiteration of her lack of control, not only her emotions but also of her situation in general.

In contrast, Malli takes autonomous decisions that affect her surroundings and she is able to change the lives around her. In terms of her ability to bring about change, Malli is the most important and effective character in her little world even if she is not the most powerful. At the end of the film she has gifted the hard-earned blue bead to Cuckoo and sacrificed her prized green pavadai to save the faun. Both the things that she wanted at the start of the film are no longer hers. However, even when she is left behind when her friend returns to the city, Malli is able to close her eyes, imagine and dream again to find a new path.

A new path is precisely what Moyna intends to forge for herself and her community in Mahashweta Devi's *The Why Why Girl* (2003). The picture book is a non-fictional account that follows the story of young, inquisitive Moyna of the Shabar tribe who fearlessly questions the world around her, determined to arrive at a satisfactory answer, or change the world itself. The story is narrated from the perspective of the grown up Mahashweta Devi who is very aware that Moyna is a special child who is able to recognize the patterns and the injustices that delineate her world. Unlike the obedient or submissive child who follows adult instruction, Moyna confronts these issues head-on, shaking the adults from their stasis of acceptance. Through Moyna's incisive 'why's we are shown a realistic picture of the lives of underprivileged tribal children and the transformative role that education can play in furthering empowerment.

Unlike Shivan's pastoral, Romantic vision, Mahashweta Devi presents a child who takes on adult concerns and responsibilities long before she is out of childhood. Moyna belonged to the Shabar tribe, she is penniless, owns no land and has to support multiple siblings. Her father works as a migrant labourer in a far away city —a characteristic that is share with Malli—and Moyna, like a several children her age, needs to work grazing the livestock of the local landowner, and doing several other odd jobs to survive. She is extremely aware that and her ilk cannot afford the luxury of rest. As she tells the narrator when they attempt to get her to rest, "Who will bring the goats home? And collect firewood and fetch water and lay traps for the birds?" (Devi, 5) Moyna is also aware that her world has power hierarchies that do not make logical sense to her unbiased young mind. When her mother Kiri reminds her to thank the Babu for the leftover rice, Moyna is quick to ask why she must do so when she does not actually want the Babu's leftovers. Furthermore, why should she be the grateful one, when she is the one who does several jobs of the Babu and he has never thanked her. This simple logic destabilises centuries worth of sedimented oppression and class/caste hierarchies. Moyna's strident why, forces the adult and the reading urban child to examine social hierarchies with their inherent prejudices and demands an inquiry into the hypocrisy that keeps these structures afloat.

The fact that this an adult voice observing a child and narrating her story already adds a degree of adult negotiation of child sensibility. There is a duality to this representation that carries an adult worldliness alongside childlike candour. This factor is underscored by Mahashweta Devi's life long activism for Tribal and women's rights. Therefore, as an audience, we are ready for her advocacy of social justice and the presence of State mechanism in the text. For example, the episode with Malati the teacher at the Samiti school, where Moyna demands that the timings of the school be changed to suit her requirements. Moyna points out that a school built for children like her must necessarily accommodate their working lifestyle. After all isn't the school made for its students? This instance of dual address—where the text simultaneously addresses the child audience who is assumed to be a blank slate, as well as the adult who is presumed to have some knowledge of the world— becomes a moment of learning and unlearning. The child learns that a school can function differently, and the adult learns that a one-size-fits-all approach to infrastructure cannot be effective. Mahashweta Devi uses Moyna's voice to question a system that has not made itself flexible enough to suit the needs of the marginalised. Her child protagonist is at the centre of the narrative because of her tenacious drive to not be pushed to the periphery. This tendency is highlighted in the instance where Moyna unilaterally decides to move

in with the narrator because there is enough room in the quarters for one more. Unfettered by social niceties, Moyna asks logical questions that are only stoppered by social mores and culture induced diffidence. Why would Moyna live crammed in her full house when there is so much empty room that she can easily occupy? Why wouldn't she take up that space? Moyna's straightforward and undaunted approach belies the gritty truth that her own home may not have had as much space or sturdiness as the Samiti quarters.

Moyna is proud, dauntless and outspoken. Unlike the narrator, who is unfamiliar with the forest and its denizens, she will happily chase after a cobra, care for her pet mongoose, and talk happily of the delicious snake curry her mother makes with the ease of the insider. She does not want charity, and knows at an early age there is a difference between the Babus and the Shabars, but she does not know why. Or rather, all the reasons she meets are not good enough. A little before the narrator leaves the community, Moyna asks her why she reads so many books, and once she is told that the answers for all her whys can be found in books, for the first time she does not offer a counter question.

If one were to view *The Why Why Girl* as a bildungsroman, Moyna's journey moves from someone who asks questions because she does not understand to someone who asks question because she understand. Education is presented as a means for people to know what question to ask and to keep asking the right questions. At the end of the story, when the narrator returns to the same place, she finds a now grown Moyna just as interrogative and outspoken, but now focussed on passing on this voice to other children. The text showcases a message of community empowerment, where the individual who gains agency and the advantage of knowledge passes on the torch to illuminate the way for the entire collective. Moyna urges her charges to ask questions and to never accept the world and the words of others as is. She is aware of her rights and exercises them to be an example to others like herself.

The illustrations by Kanyika Kini add further nuance to the text. Picture books have the advantage of visual connect. The typography and art style used in the *The Why Why Girl* contribute significantly to the texts effective communication of an alternative perspective on childhood and indigenous cultures. The art style itself captures this flavour. Moyna's long lashed, fish shaped eyes are reminiscent of the Madhubani paintings of Bihar. The gradient tone created through the pointillism style seems to reference the Gond art style, as do the elongated neck of Moyna's pet mongoose and hen, and the curved horns of the goats she grazes. The use of elements of tribal art in the creation of the picture book gives visual confirmation of the distinctiveness of the Adivasi identity with its own aesthetics and motifs. The child reader is introduced to a slice of the culture through the art itself.

Additionally, the typography mirrors the cadence of Moyna's speech, hinting at the crests and troughs of her voice and accent. The text opens with the words "But Why?" placed in a bold arch above the rest of the narrative—signalling the decibel level and the tone of Moyna's question. At another juncture, the line "Why shouldn't I study too?" is arranged in larger font, like a wave, again capturing the warble of her voice. These typographical elements communicate a nuance of temperament that compensate for paragraphs worth of description. Moyna's costume, the fauna that frolic across the pages and vibrant rays of imagination emanating from her, all indicate a uniqueness of space and culture. The arrange of the pictorial elements on the page are also open to interpretation. The first page of the text features a proud, dark cobra in the centre of the page, indicating the central position of the wilderness and the untamed which inspires fear elsewhere. The text which is arranged in the margins seems to shy away from the image, mirroring the warning that the narrator calls out to avoid this dangerous creature. Moyna, of course, asks why. After all it is only a cobra, she is not afraid of what is natural to her space. This first page sets up the eco-centric perspective that is showcased in the text. Later, when Moyna speaks of the Babus, the page features a large, rotund figure that lounges at the top of the page while the rest of the text and images are arranged below. This is indicative of the prevalent social hierarchy of Moyna's world, where the landowners are at the very top of the social order (Ray 2024). Moyna's figure is small and fragile in comparison to the bulky form of the Babu, further underscoring the difference in power and privilege. The narrator too is aware of her privilege, evidenced in her access to her own living quarters and the multitude of books she mentions. But she is also aware that she is only a transient element in this world and her power is limited. Her presence there will soon be gone. It is up to Moyna and children like her to carry their community forward. This is mirrored in the absence of the narrator as a visual element in the text and the fact that the reader do not get to see a visual of the grown up Moyna. The text seems to indicate that the future is in the hands of the children.

There are as many childhoods as there are children, and the representation of the life of an Adivasi child is a loaded task. Moyna and Malli are

extremely different children from vastly different worlds. The media and the format used to tell the story, ensure that their attitude to the world will be framed differently for the audience's eye. Moyna's story is based on real- life incidents and is rooted to the reality of the Adivasi world. Malli's is a fictional narrative with a dream-like quality. While Moyna's story focusses on a large-scale social impact, Malli's quest is individual and focused on someone outside her community. Even the setting of the stories in terms of timeline are reflective of the different in temperament. Malli and Cuckoo's story unfolds while their respective schools are on vacation—in fact the school signals the end of breezy freedom. Whereas in the case of Moyna, her freedom comes from being able to go to school. These differences can also be tied to the intention of the author and director of each text. Mahashweta Devi's works tend to sharply critique State negligence by throwing light on the lives that fell between the cracks of the system. Santhosh Sivan, was working through a State endorsed film body to create the film, his critical eye falls solidly on the transgressive, criminal elements that endanger the environment. The protagonists of both texts mirror the concerns of their creators and therefore take on different priorities. Moyna is the assertive activist, Malli is the caring conservationist.

The stories converge in their meticulous detailing of Tribal Culture and their subversion of social, class and caste biases. The characters also share an abiding connection with their environment, accepting the flora and fauna as natural part of their everyday existence. Both Moyna and Malli are individuals who work for the betterment of the world around them—whether it's through the questions they ask or the quests they take on. They showcase a self-respect and self-determination that is outside the bounds of adult definitions and interventions. The Tribal space is re-presented through the uncorrupted vision of a child still discovering the world, where the rules have not yet been set in stone. The visual representation of diverse settings and distinctive characters encourage children to critically examine the societal norms and values prevalent in their world. This process allows young readers to envision a more equitable world, where everyone is valued and respected. The stories discussed in this paper reinforce the necessity for reviewing our perspectives and positions in the larger socio-political scheme.

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Rooted Resilience: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Climate Survival in Richard Powers *The Overstory*

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ABSTRACT

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a sweeping ecological novel that weaves together with the lives of nine individuals, each extremely strained by trees in transformative ways. Through an interconnected narratives, the novel shares how human lives are entwined with the extensive natural world, especially in the forests, which are portrayed not just as settings but also informative entities and living. Drawing on the environmental philosophy, scientific research and emotional storytelling, Powers setup a richly layered narrative that challenges readers to rethink the boundaries between non human life and human. The novel unfolds across various locations and timelines, gradually sharing how each character's personal awakening is catalyzed by their connection with trees. These connections propel them toward activism, environmental awareness, numerous cases and sacrifice. As their stories are intersect, *The Overstory* paints a broader picture of eco-friendly crisis and the resistance, emphasizing the agency of trees, intelligence and often-destructive myopia of the human progress. Innovative in both theme and structure, the novel pushes the boundaries of the traditional fiction by implanting the environmental systems at the heart of its narrative arc. It motivate the readers to shift from an anthropocentric to ecocentric worldview, promoting a deeper sense of moral responsibility and interconnectedness. With scientific depth and lyrical prose, Powers rethink of storytelling as a vehicle for environmental reflection and change.

Keywords: *Environmental Ethics, Activism, Ecocriticism, Interconnectedness, Ecofiction.*

INTRODUCTION

Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Overstory (2018) is a masterful fusion of narrative innovation, environmental philosophy, and ecological awareness. Weaving together the lives of nine characters, the novel constructs a tapestry of human and non-human interdependence, with trees serving as both catalysts and characters. Powers reshapes conventional storytelling by placing the natural world, not merely as background but as a central force, endowed with agency, intelligence, and historical depth. The novel invites readers to transcend anthropocentric limitations and adopt an ecocentric lens, where the survival and wisdom of trees reflect the fragility and potential of human life. Grounded in scientific research and emotional storytelling, The Overstory stands as a paradigm of ecofiction, where literature becomes a medium of environmental ethics and activism.

Trees as Protagonists: Reimagining Narrative Agency in Ecofiction

In The Overstory, trees do not merely occupy space in the backdrop; they assert their presence as sentient beings whose existence predates, surpasses, and outlives human life. Powers challenges traditional narrative forms by granting trees a narrative voice and structural significance. The novel's opening segment, "Roots," introduces

characters whose lives are individually shaped by their early encounters with trees—experiences that will later guide their environmental awareness and action. For instance, the Hotel Chestnut tree becomes a symbol of generational memory and continuity, while Patricia Westerford's research into tree communication offers scientific affirmation of arboreal intelligence.

Patricia's character, based on real-world botanists like Suzanne Simard, affirms that "trees talk to each other, over the air and through the roots" (Powers 142). By rooting her epiphany in empirical science, Powers elevates ecological awareness to the level of truth rather than metaphor. The novel's nonlinear structure further mirrors natural ecosystems: complex, layered, and interconnected. This approach undermines the linear, progress-oriented narrative traditions of Western literature, embracing instead a cyclical temporality akin to forest ecology. In doing so, The Overstory redefines what it means to be a protagonist, blurring the lines between character and environment.

Ecological Awakening and Environmental Activism

The intertwined narratives of the characters reflect different modes of ecological awakening, catalyzed by intimate connections with trees. Characters such as Olivia Vandergriff and Nick Hoel transition from apathy to activism, with their transformation echoing broader cultural shifts toward environmental resistance. Olivia's near-death experience and subsequent spiritual connection to nature imbue her with a prophetic urgency to protect the forest, while Nick's artistic tribute to trees becomes a visual manifesto. Together, their journey leads to participation in direct action—tree-sitting protests against deforestation emphasizing the moral imperative to resist ecological destruction.

Powers portrays activism not as monolithic but as diverse in motivation and method. Douglas Pavlicek's military past collides with his environmental convictions, suggesting that ecological consciousness can emerge from unexpected places. These varied stories underline the idea that personal transformation is often necessary before collective action can occur. The activism depicted in The Overstory also raises ethical questions: What constitutes moral resistance in the face of environmental collapse? Can sabotage or civil disobedience be justified to preserve non-human life? By exploring these dilemmas, Powers not only critiques the destructiveness of industrial capitalism but also affirms the agency of individual choice in the age of ecological crisis.

From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: Ethical Shifts in Human-Nature Relations

One of the most profound philosophical undercurrents in The Overstory is its call to move from an anthropocentric worldview—where nature exists for human use, toward an ecocentric ethic that recognizes the intrinsic value of non-human life. Patricia Westerford's life work, though marginalized by academia, becomes a blueprint for this shift. She argues that human beings are "tree blind," unable to perceive the scale and complexity of arboreal life because of their own short lifespan and narrow perception (Powers 238). This blindness, Powers suggests, is at the root of ecological degradation.

The novel challenges readers to recognize trees as "time machines," offering access to evolutionary memory and resilience. In this view, forests are not merely resources but communities with rights and narratives of their own. By integrating indigenous knowledge systems, deep ecology, and contemporary environmental science, Powers critiques the extractivist logic of modernity. As characters experience ecological revelation, they begin to view trees not as objects but as kin. This transformation resonates with ecocriticism's central aim: to reshape human consciousness and storytelling in ways that honor the interconnectedness of all life forms (Garrard 168).

Ultimately, The Overstory urges a reconceptualization of moral responsibility. The novel's elegiac tone, especially in its final chapters, serves as both warning and call to action. By portraying the consequences of human indifference alongside the potential of ecological solidarity, Powers advocates for a world where storytelling itself becomes an act of environmental resistance and renewals.

Conclusion

The Overstory is more than a novel it is a forest of stories, branching and intertwining to reflect the complex, fragile, and enduring relationship between humans and the natural world. Richard Powers crafts a narrative that is not linear but ecological in structure, mimicking the interconnectedness and resilience of forests themselves. Through its polyphonic voice, scientific insight, philosophical reflection, and lyrical prose, The Overstory invites readers into a radically different way of thinking one that displaces humans from the center of the narrative and instead situates them within a vast, intricate web of life. Trees are not mere backdrops or symbols; they are living entities endowed with history, communication, and agency. This literary

strategy challenges the anthropocentric paradigms of traditional fiction and calls for an ethical shift in how readers perceive both literature and the living world.

By positioning trees as protagonists, Powers radically redefines the boundaries of literary agency. The novel's forest is not passive; it acts, reacts, remembers, and even guides. This portrayal urges a reconsideration of what storytelling can do and whom it can include. As Powers incorporates ecological science particularly tree communication, symbiosis, and deep time into his narrative, he bridges the gap between scientific discourse and emotional resonance. Through characters like Patricia Westerford, based on real-life ecologists such as Suzanne Simard, Powers emphasizes that trees are not isolated organisms but participants in a vast community. They speak, share resources, and respond to environmental change. These revelations lead the characters toward an awakening that is both spiritual and political, highlighting how ecological awareness can spur ethical and activist responses.

The transformation of characters such as Olivia Vandergriff, Nick Hoel, and Adam Appich reflects a spectrum of responses to environmental crisis from spiritual reverence to scientific understanding, and from visual art to radical resistance. Their journeys are not merely individual but emblematic of broader cultural shifts in the Anthropocene a term that signifies humanity's geological impact on Earth. In giving voice to nonhuman life and depicting resistance to deforestation and environmental degradation, The Overstory critiques the capitalist logic of extraction, commodification, and ecological amnesia. The narrative makes clear that environmental destruction is not only a scientific or economic issue, but also a moral and philosophical crisis. The novel's characters are ultimately confronted with the consequences of human shortsightedness and the cost of inaction.

Powers does not offer easy solutions; rather, he demands a reframing of perspective. By urging a movement from anthropocentrism the belief in human supremacy to ecocentrism, which recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms, The Overstory fosters a deeper sense of environmental ethics. Literature, in this context, becomes an instrument of ecological consciousness. The novel reimagines storytelling as a form of activism, as a means to awaken empathy, and as a vehicle for systemic change. In doing so, The Overstory not only reflects the crisis of our times but also becomes part of the solution, inspiring readers to engage, reflect, and act. Powers novel is a profound call to awareness a reminder that the fate of humanity is inextricably tied to the fate of the forests, rivers, animals, and ecosystems we so often overlook. As climate change, deforestation, and species extinction intensify, The Overstory stands as both elegy and anthem a literary monument to trees, and a passionate plea for their preservation. It asks readers not only to see the forest, but to hear it, feel it, and fight for it.

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Khamm: The Dramatic and Musical Pulse of Korku Culture –Indigenous Performance and Social Commentary in Melghat

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

This research paper explores Khamm, a unique and spontaneous musical drama performed by the Korku tribal community in the Melghat region of the Satpuda mountain ranges. It aims to document this rich oral performance tradition and examine its role as a medium of entertainment, cultural identity, and social commentary.

Design/Methodology:

The study is based on first-hand fieldwork conducted in the remote tribal village of Khokmar during the Navratri festival of 2024. Ethnographic observation, informal interviews with performers, and visual documentation were used to understand the performative elements, structure, and sociocultural relevance of Khamm.

Findings:

Khamm is an unscripted dramatic dance performed around a symbolic khamb (pillar), featuring characters such as a joker, Ganeshji, Durgadevi, and laymen, with male performers enacting female roles. The dialogues are impromptu and humorous, yet they subtly highlight social vices and communal concerns. Accompanied by traditional instruments like the harmonium, dholak, tabla, and flute, the performance serves both entertainment and reformative purposes.

Originality:

This study offers a rare documentation of an underexplored tribal art form that has not been formally recorded or scripted. It reveals the cultural depth and dynamic expression of the Korku people through indigenous performance practices.

Implication:

The research underscores the need for preservation and promotion of oral tribal traditions like Khamm that act as vital tools of cultural continuity and community awareness.

Keywords: *Khamm, Korku, Indigenous, Satpuda, Melghat*

(This research paper is the result of ethnographic research funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi.)

Introduction

The roots of Indian theatrical expression trace back to prehistoric times, where performance, dance, and mimicry were deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life. From the rhythmic cave paintings to the symbolic sculptures of the Indus Valley Civilization, early humans used body, gesture, and ritual to communicate and celebrate life. Dance, considered the mother of theatre, formed the basis of these primal performances, evolving gradually into more structured dramatic forms.

India's rich cultural heritage reflects a dual tradition

of performance: the classical, text-based forms practiced by elites, and the vibrant folk and tribal traditions sustained by the masses. While classical theatre followed codified norms, folk theatre remained rooted in ritual, community life, and oral storytelling. Across the subcontinent, especially in tribal regions, these indigenous forms of expression continue to thrive-preserving belief systems, social memories, and artistic identities.

In Maharashtra and its adjoining regions, tribal communities such as the Korkus, Gonds, Pawras, Madias, and Bhils have cultivated rich performance traditions that intricately blend music, dance, drama, and ritual. Among these, Khamm, a vibrant dance-drama practiced by the Korkus residing in the Satpuda mountain ranges of the states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, emerges as a compelling form of indigenous theatrical expression, typically performed during festivals and religious ceremonies. Deeply symbolic and inherently communal, Khamm embodies a harmonious fusion of devotion, entertainment, and cultural preservation within tribal life.

This research paper examines the origins, structural components, and cultural relevance of Khamm, positioning it within the broader framework of traditional indigenous theatre. Through an analysis of its performative elements and social functions, the study demonstrates how Khamm not only serves as a source of entertainment but also acts as a vehicle for reinforcing collective identity, cultural memory, and social cohesion. Furthermore, the performance holds a reformative dimension by addressing moral and social issues.

Korku Khamm Natya and Oral Legends

The ritual tradition of Khamm Natya in the Korku community is deeply rooted in oral legends that reflect their spiritual worldview and cultural identity. Two prominent narratives explain the origin of Khamm - the sacred pole-and its associated performance.

The first legend recounts how a destructive demon once plagued the Korku land. In response to the people's prayers, Lord Shiva instructed his devotee Ravana, who sent his son Meghnath to defeat the demon. Meghnath's victory is commemorated through post-Holi rituals that honour his courage and divine intervention.

The second legend speaks of Lord Shiva's uncontrollable rage, which threatened cosmic destruction. To calm him, Parvati sent performers who used music, dance, and mimicry to pacify Shiva. This divine moment is believed to have inspired the birth of Khamm Natya, performed to appease Shiva and maintain cosmic balance.

Both legends highlight Shiva as a central figure and underscore themes of devotion, divine appeasement, and cultural pride. The Korkus revere Ravana, Meghnath, and Kumbhakarna not as villains but as heroic ancestors - symbols of non-Aryan valour. The Khamm tradition thus emerges as a symbolic synthesis of faith, myth, and indigenous identity.

Structure and Space of the Performance

As an entirely oral tradition, Khamm has no written script. It is a spontaneous and incidental dramatic form. It emerges from the lived experiences and social rituals of the community, expressed through songs, dance, music, dialogues, and symbolic action. This makes Khamm Natya a multidimensional performance art. It bears close resemblance to other regional performance forms such as Dandar and Songi Bhajan in Maharashtra, Maach in Madhya Pradesh, and Swang of the Braj region.

The performances begin after dinner, and villagers gather in a central open space. A large circle is drawn with lime, symbolizing the stage. At the centre stands the Meghanad pole, often topped with a bullock cart wheel. The audience sits around the perimeter of the circle, turning the village square into a sacred performative space.

Before the actual play begins, the Khamm pole is ritually worshipped, and sweets like jaggery and roasted chickpeas are distributed as offerings to the audience. This ceremonial start sets the spiritual tone of the performance.

The term Khamm translates to “pole,” and the performance associated with it is a spontaneous, community-specific expression deeply rooted in occasion and context. Traditionally, Khamm Natya begins during Ganesh Utsav and reaches its expressive zenith during the festival of Holi. However, fieldwork and ethnographic observations conducted for this study reveal that, in practice, authentic Khamm performances are now largely limited to Ganesh Utsav and Navami during Navratri. Only a handful of tribal villages continue to uphold this tradition, primarily in the more remote interior regions of Melghat.

Field Documentation of Khamm in Khokmar, Melghat

During fieldwork across Korku settlements in Melghat, Khokmar - a remote village near the Madhya Pradesh border - was identified as a rare site where Khamm continues to be performed in its traditional, spontaneous form. Unlike the competitive and often commercialized versions seen in places like Semadoh, Dharni, and Baitul, the Khokmar performance retains ritual depth and improvisational energy rooted in local festivals.

The documented performance occurred on Navami night (October 10, 2024) during Navratri. Reaching Khokmar, located 130 km from Amravati, involved navigating rugged forest terrain beyond Chaurakund, the last motorable point. The journey, though arduous, revealed the stark remoteness and cultural isolation of the village. En route, only one village, Chopan, was encountered, where younger residents seemed unaware of Khamm - indicating a generational cultural disconnect.

Despite lacking electricity, the villagers of Khokmar creatively arranged for battery-powered lights and a makeshift sound system. Musical instruments were assembled around a central pole, with ritual elements adorning a shrine dedicated to the village deity. The performance drew the community together, showcasing not only their commitment to tradition but also the enduring role of Khamm in preserving identity and memory.

The documentation further reveals a concerning trend: children attending Ashram schools often grow up disconnected from their cultural roots. This, combined with the increasing formalization of Khamm, highlights the need for culturally embedded preservation strategies that promote authenticity, community participation, and intergenerational transmission.

Characters in the Khamm-based Song-Natya (Dramatic Performance):

In the Song-Natya, a group of around seven to eight individuals enacts various characters to present the performance. One character typically carries a bucket filled with burning cow dung cakes over which incense is placed. The rising smoke from the incense spreads through the space, creating a dramatic and immersive atmosphere. Two other male characters hold either a stick or a kettle as part of their role. Interestingly, female roles in the performance are portrayed exclusively by men. Two to three young men from the village don traditional women's attire-*saree* and *choli*-and participate in the singing and dancing, their faces veiled. These female characters usually have minimal dialogue. In a Khamm Natya performed at Khokmar, a unique instance was noted where a young girl played the role of the goddess Amba Devi. She enacted the deity by sitting on another character's back in a blessing-giving pose.

One character plays the role of a clown, referred to locally as Maskarya. The term likely derives from the Hindi word maskari, meaning jest or comic relief. This clown character, through humorous attire and exaggerated bodily movements, provides comic entertainment to the audience. Other characters also engage in expressive gestures and continue to dance in a circular rhythm to the musical beats.



Spectators watching Khamm performance and the performers / artists backstage

Musical Instruments Used in Khamm Natya:

The musical backdrop for Songi Khamm and Khamm Bhajan is created using a modest collection of traditional instruments, including the dholak, tabla, harmonium, bansuri (flute), tal (cymbals), zanj (large cymbals), and dafli (tambourine). Often, the musicians also double as actors during the performance.

Narrative Structure in Khamm

Like many forms of Maharashtrian folk theatre, Khamm is divided into two parts: the Purvarang (introductory section) and Uttarang (main dramatic narrative).

Purvarang: Devotion and Aesthetic Elevation

Prior to the commencement of the dramatic enactment, a ritualistic veneration of the Khamm is performed. Offerings, particularly traditional sweets such as jaggery and roasted Chickpeas, are distributed among the audience as prasada, underscoring the sacral character of the event and its embeddedness within the community's devotional practices.

The performance begins with the Purvaranga, or preliminary segment, in which elderly singers of the village circumambulate the Khamm pole while singing invocatory hymns. These chants are predominantly addressed to Lord Ganesha - the remover of obstacles - and frequently incorporate references to deities such as Mahadev (Shiva) and Goddess Parvati. These devotional verses reflect the

syncretic spiritual worldview of the Korku community, wherein performance and worship are interwoven to create a liminal space of reverence, expression, and cultural affirmation:

Original Hindi Song:

"Bolo bada bada Mata-Pita ki Jai,
Ho Durge Mata ki Jai.

Ganpati ko pehle manao Ganpati... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Ganpati ko pehle manao Ganpati... Ganpati ko pehle manao

Kaun thaari mata aur kaun thaara pita?
Kaun thaari mata aur kaun thaara pita?
Kin ghar liye avataar... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Ganpati ko pehle manao Ganpati... Ganpati ko pehle manao

Gauri thaari mata, pita Shivshankar
Pita Shivshankar Deva, pita Shivshankar
Kin ghar liye avataar... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Ganpati ko pehle manao Ganpati... Ganpati ko pehle manao

Jawa jawa maangega wo modak laddu
Moti ka laddu... bhaiyya moti ka laddu
O laddu wala bhog lagaave wo... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Laddu wala bhog lagaave wo... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Ganpati ko pehle manao Ganpati... Ganpati ko pehle manao

Tel ka diya aur tilak lagaaye
Tilak lagaaye wo, tilak lagaaye
Phoolon ka haar chadhaaye wo... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Phoolon ka haar chadhaaye wo... Ganpati ko pehle manao
Ganpati ko pehle manao Ganpati... Ganpati ko pehle manao

Bolo Ganpati Maharaj ki Jai!
Hari Om Namah Shivaya!"

(The song emphasizes beginning all rituals by worshipping Lord Ganpati, acknowledging him as the son of Goddess Gauri and Lord Shiva. It describes offerings like modak, laddus, flowers, and tilak made with devotion. The chant concludes with praises for Ganpati and Shiva.)

Following this, a performance known as Rasgwal is presented - a Krishna-themed devotional song that recounts the leelas (divine play) and mahatmya (greatness) of Lord Krishna. Scholars suggest that the Ganesh Vandana and Rasgwal segments in Khamm show the influence of the Nimadi devotional song tradition, along with elements of Hindi, Braj Bhasha, and other regional languages. A representative bhajan from this tradition is as follows:

Original Hindi Song
"Kanhaiyalaal tune mhari ghagar fode
Kanhaiyalaal tune mhari ghagar fodo
Itpar ganga utpar jamuna
Beech me jamuna bharave Nandlaal
tune mhari ghagar fode
jamuna ke neerteer, gaua chraye
beech me sakhiya naache Nandlaal
tune mhari ghagar fode"

English transcript:

"Kanhaiyalal, you broke my water pot,
Kanhaiyalal, you broke my pot!
On one side the Ganga, on the other the Yamuna, between them flows the Jamuna.
O Nandlal! You broke my pot!"

By the banks of the Yamuna, the cows graze,
Amidst them dance the sakhis (Krishna's companions),
O Nandlal! You broke my pot!





Artists singing Khamm Bhajan

Rasmandal: Dance and Divine Embodiment

The Rasmandal forms a vital component of the Purvarang. During this part, male performers dressed in female attire perform graceful dances in a circular formation to the tune of the Rasgwal. These dancers are referred to as 'Radhas', and typically, two or three perform at a time. These Radhas, present in nearly every Korku village, are well-known for their expressive dance.

As the performance reaches its peak, the fusion of song, rhythm, music, and dance creates an atmosphere of spiritual ecstasy. The villagers, enchanted by the divine narrative and artistic skill, become fully immersed in this collective cultural experience.

Uttarang:

Upon entering the performance space, the Song-Natya troupe begins with a unique Ganesh Vandana around the Khamm, featuring an actor portraying an irate Lord Ganesha. A ritualistic sequence follows, including attempts to pacify the deity with aarti and coconut offerings. Once appeased, the Ganesha figure dances to traditional rhythms and exits. This is followed by a thematic Song-Natya Geet that introduces the forthcoming drama's theme and tone.

Themes Explored in Khamm

The drama then explores issues like the farmer's struggle, highlighting failed rains, hunger, and exploitation by contractors. Spirit possession, ghost exorcisms, and supernatural beliefs-rooted in the tribal worldview-are frequently portrayed. Khamm performances also depict daily life with comic or critical portrayals of drunkards, domestic disputes, corrupt officials, and socio-political issues such as exploitation by contractors, moneylenders, law enforcement, and insincere politicians. Through rustic dialogue and male-only performances - where men also play female roles - Khamm uses humour to reflect harsh social realities, fostering empathy and awareness through theatrical art.

Bodh Geet or Jagaran Geet

The concluding section of the Uttarang of the Khamm dance drama, known as the "Bodh Geet" (Didactic Song), is also referred to as the "Jagaran Geet" (Awakening Song). This final segment features all the characters of the play gathering around the central figure of Khamm, where they collectively sing a song that conveys a moral or social message relevant to the theme of the performance. Much like the Bharud tradition in Marathi folk culture, which seamlessly blends entertainment with moral instruction, Khamm theatre also serves as a medium for both amusement and awareness.

For instance, In the Korku community, the consumption of alcohol called Siddu made from Mahua flowers is alarmingly high. Many households are destroyed due to the addiction to alcohol. Regular heavy drinking leads to loss of livelihood as individuals spend the entire day intoxicated and eventually collapse into inactivity. This devastates families and ruins health. Hence, to raise awareness, Khamm Natya is used as a platform to convey messages about quitting alcohol and preventing addiction. Since many in the Korku community have abandoned their education due to alcoholism, this awareness becomes even more critical.





Artists enacting scenes from the Khamm dance-drama

Dialogues and songs performed during the Khamm Natya:

Original dialogues in Hindi

"O bhai, mera bhai bahut dino se pareshan karta hai
Woh bahut daaru peeta hai
Toh daaru chhodne ke liye koi jagah milta kya?
Usko Amravati mein Ambadevi ke paas leke jana padta
Theek hai, Mangalvaar ko chalenge
Mangalvaar Devi ka din rehta"

Translation/Meaning in English:

"O brother, my brother has been troubling us for a long time.
He drinks a lot of liquor.
Is there any place where he can get help to quit?
We have to take him to Ambadevi in

Amravati.
Alright, we'll go on Tuesday.
Tuesday is considered the goddess's day."

At this point, the drunkard brother enters. Someone addresses him and says: "Are daru mat pi…Mera bhabhi bhi uski wajah se bhaag gaya." Means - "Don't drink... even my sister-in-law left home because of it." When he is told that he must go to Amravati to quit drinking, he hesitantly agrees. Following this, several scenes depict how habitual drinkers make various excuses and find ways to avoid giving up alcohol. Through such dramatized interactions and songs public awareness is spread.

Original Song in Hindi

"Daaru pina chhodo re bhaiyya
Ab to zind ko badhana hai
Daaru pina chhodo re bhaiyya
Ab to zind ko badhana hai
Zind ko badhana hai
Ab to zind ko badhana hai

Padhna likhna seekho re bhaiyya
Ab to zind ko badhana hai
Padhna likhna seekho re bhaiyya
Ab to zind ko badhana hai
Doctor banana seekho re bhaiyya
Ab to zind ko badhana hai"

Translation/Meaning in English:

"Give up drinking, brother,
Now it's time to improve your life.
Give up drinking, brother,
Now it's time to grow in life.
To grow in life,
Now it's time to grow in life.

Learn to read and write, brother,
Now it's time to improve your life.
Learn to read and write, brother,
Now it's time to improve your life.
Aim to become a doctor, brother,
Now it's time to grow in life."

In this manner, the Bodh Geet addresses issues such as the eradication of superstition, abandonment of alcoholism, the importance of education, and the nurturing of human values - all conveyed in an engaging and entertaining format

Phases in the Evolution of Khamm Natya

Khamm Natya, a ritual theatre tradition of the Korku community, comprises two main forms: *Songi Khamm* (dramatic enactment) and *Khamm Bhajan* (devotional singing and dance). Traditionally passed down orally, it has undergone significant transformation over time, as revealed through community elders' testimonies. Its evolution can be understood in three distinct phases:

Early Manifestation:

Rooted in Korku religious beliefs and communal well-being, early Khamm Natya drew from local myths involving Mahadev, Ravan, and Meghnath. The *Meghnath Khamba* served as a symbolic centre, linking the form to ritual and mytho-historical consciousness.

Intercultural Influences:

Over time, Khamm absorbed elements from neighbouring theatrical traditions like Gawli, Maach, and Raas Natya. Episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, along with motifs like *Gop-Gopika* and *Krishna Raas*, enriched the purvaranga, reflecting devotional and performative syncretism.

Contemporary Expression:

While the structural elements (e.g., *Ganesh Vandana, Bodhgeet*) remain, thematic shifts are evident. Influenced by education, media, and social mobility, Khamm now incorporates modern social and political issues, marking its ongoing adaptation and relevance.

Khamm and the Kitchen: Cultural Unity Beyond the Stage

During the Khamm performance at the Khokmar hamlet, several noteworthy observations emerged. As the performance unfolded, a group of young men began preparing the next morning's meal. They took on tasks such as digging fire pits, arranging utensils, and gathering ingredients like vegetables, flour, and spices. Interestingly, unlike in daily life where cooking is typically managed by women, the entire process on this occasion was handled exclusively by men. Activities such as chopping vegetables, rolling puris, peeling garlic, and grinding spices were all undertaken with cooperation and a sense of shared enjoyment, even as the performance continued in the background.

This collective involvement may reflect an intention to relieve women from their daily responsibilities, suggesting a moment of gendered understanding and shared domestic responsibility within the community. Once prepared, the puris were topped with mango twigs to retain their softness for the next day, an important step given that Khamm performances usually commence around midnight and continue until early morning.





Male villagers preparing community meals after midnight during the Khamm

Conclusion

Khamm is not just a theatrical event; it is a cultural ritual, oral narrative, and communal celebration. It reflects the Korkus' spiritual beliefs, mythological consciousness, and artistic expression. Through its unique structure, symbolic space, and rich performative traditions, Khamm continues to sustain cultural memory and reinforce social unity in tribal communities of the Satpuda region.

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Folktales of Tripura as a knowledge transmission to the society in reference to *Kuchuk Kherengbar*

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ABSTRACT

Oral tradition and storytelling is a vital method of knowledge transmission in preserving one's culture, values, history and social norms of a society from generation to generation. *Kuckhuk Kherengbar*, a Kokborok folktales of Tripura, it is one of the famous folktales of Tripuri community. The folktale is about a young boy name *Rwmai* and young girl name *Lari* both of them fall in love but due to curse by nature the boy was turned into *Huluk* (male Gibbon) and the girl into a *Muphuk* (monitor lizard). As due to family's obligation the young boy and girl eloped to the forest for being forever together, while walking in the forest girl get attract to the sweet smell of the flower and insist the boy to pluck the flower, the boy hesitantly plucked the flower but with a conditions as she was instructed before touching the beautiful *Kherengbar* (Fox tail orchid or Rhynchostylis) flower, that she was supposed to rub the flower in the ground and smell it and also not to pick the flower from ground until the boy gets down from tree but as the girl was so much attracted by the strong fragrance and the beauty of the flower she couldn't resist it and smell it directly without following the instruction and they were cursed and it was also believed that from that day onwards the flower lost its fragrance forever.

Thus oral tradition through its folktales transmits knowledge about a society's laws and norms, about its culture, religion, economy and political condition and passes this knowledge to its future generation. The entitled paper will focus in Tripura's culture, social tradition, social taboo and natural repercussion through this folktale.

Keywords: *Folktales, Oral Tradition, Kokborok*

Oral tradition and storytelling plays a pivotal role in knowledge transmission in a society or a community, where culture in written language is absent and oral communication is prevalent. It involves narrating of folktales, history, cultural values and social law and norms of a society or community which is passed from one generation to another generation. This kind of transmission of knowledge orally shows a rich cultural identity, social structures and moral codes of a society or community.

Folktales are a specific genre in oral tradition referring to fictional stories that often showcase cultural values and highlight social law and norms, historical narratives of a society or a community and this kind of oral narratives is passed from one generation to another generation.

Folktales act as a repository of cultural knowledge, values and practical wisdom passed down through generation to generation. Folktales as a transmission of knowledge is not only about storytelling, but it also give insights on a society's political, social and economic condition of the people and also knowledge on a community's cultural practices and

social law, norms and taboos which were prevalent during that period.

Tripura one of the state of north-eastern region have a rich culture and heritage and also a huge repository of folktales from different communities of the state. The different folktales of Tripura belonging from different communities is a great source of knowledge transmission which narrates Tripura's rich culture and heritage and also led a reader to know about these communities culture, economy, political, societal laws and norms and belief system. Some folktales also narrate the monarchial rule. Thus the Tripuri folktale *Kuchuk Kherengbar (The forbidden love story)* is one of the famous folktales of the Kokborok speaking people, through this folktale one comes to know the social taboo and some rules and regulation and also consequences of breaking such societal rules and regulation. Folktales also teach a moral lesson to the society.

Material and Methodology

The main objective of the entitled paper is to understand the importance of folktales as a important source of knowledge transmission which led one to know the cultural values, history, socio-economic, political condition and social laws and norms which one have to abide to live in a society. Thus folktales also give a social message to people which have a great impact in shaping a society.

The primary and secondary source has been used to write this paper. The method here as secondary is literature review such as published books, articles, journals and also some Kokborok short film based on the referred folktales.

The primary source used is the folktale narration by some elderly people and depth interview has been done with respondents.

The study is a qualitative study. Data collected from field survey has been analyzed thoroughly and content analysis has also been done for secondary literature.

Result and Discussion

For countless generations, ancient societies have depended on oral tradition to maintain and transmit their historical narratives, especially in the absence of written documentation. The formal discipline of oral history, however, emerged in the 1940s through the efforts of Allan Nevins and his colleagues at Columbia University.

Oral tradition, along with other oral sources and forms of oral evidence, constitutes a major foundation for reconstructing the past of societies, especially those without written records. It is considered a reliable source of history, as communities that lack written documentation have long relied on oral tradition to preserve and transmit their historical knowledge across generations.

Oral tradition serves as a vital means of transmitting a community's history, values, customs, traditions, folklore, folktales, and other cultural expressions across generations, often without interruption. It significantly contributes to the preservation and continuity of a society's cultural identity. Moreover, oral tradition encourages individuals to follow shared norms and values, thereby strengthening the sense of unity within the community. It often reflects the cultural reality of a group and influences how people understand their heritage and environment.

The different types of oral literature such as folktales, proverbs, chants, and folksongs have many roles in society. They help to teach lessons, support traditional ceremonies, and express beliefs. These forms are useful for passing on knowledge, guiding behavior, and building group identity.

Unlike personal knowledge, which derives from individual experience where as oral tradition represents a collective body of cultural knowledge passed down through generations. For information to become part of oral tradition, it must be preserved in memory and transmitted orally from elders to younger members of the community. This process relies entirely on speech rather than written records.

Important parts of oral tradition include folklore, folktales, and folksongs. These are related but not exactly the same. The *Folklore* includes all the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a group, while *folktales* are specific stories told by word of mouth, often with lessons or messages about life and culture. Folktales are actually a part of folklore. Folktales are used to tell shared stories from the past, to teach values, and to show important customs. They are not only entertaining but also educational, helping to guide younger generations and connect them to their community's tradition.

Folktales have long been an inseparable element of every society, passed down through generations. They have served as a source of wisdom and have sparked curiosity in learning about a community's past, cultural practices, and ethnic background. These traditional narratives also play a key role in reinforcing moral values and nurturing collective identity and shared beliefs. Tripura stands as a

notable example of harmony in diversity.

As one of the oldest states in Northeast India, it is distinguished by its vibrant cultural heritage, historical depth, and rich tapestry of ethnic communities.

Folktales have been an enduring part of human society, handed down from one generation to the next. They have long served as an important means of conveying knowledge, sparking interest in the historical background, customs, and ethnic identities of different communities. Moreover, these stories contribute to upholding ethical values and strengthening the collective spirit of the community. Tripura exemplifies the spirit of unity amidst diversity. As one of the most historically significant regions in Northeast India, it is renowned for its rich traditions, culture, history, and vibrant mosaic of ethnic groups.

Folktales have long played a significant role in the cultural life of communities across generations. They serve as a means of imparting knowledge, sparking interest, and offering insights into the historical background, cultural practices, and ethnic identities of a group. At the same time, they also reinforce ethical values and promote collective traditions. Tripura exemplifies the idea of unity in diversity. Recognized as one of the oldest regions in Northeast India, the state is renowned for its rich cultural traditions, historical significance, and the vibrant coexistence of various ethnic groups.

The cultural history of tribal communities in Tripura is often preserved through myths and oral traditions, making folktales an important source for understanding their customs and way of life. These tales serve not only as repositories of cultural and traditional knowledge but also as tools for promoting public awareness about heritage, social norms, and values. Folktales from Tripura frequently highlight the close bond between indigenous communities and the natural environment. They portray the important aspects of the socio-economic structure and value systems embedded within the society. Many of these stories involve wild animals and plants, symbolizing a deep, interdependent connection with nature and reflecting the largely egalitarian character of tribal life.

Folktales have been passed down for generations and continue to play a meaningful role in today's cultural landscape. One such story from the Kokborok-speaking community is *Kuchuk Kherengbar* (The Forbidden Love Story), which holds an important place in the oral tradition. It reflects the community's deeply connection to cultural beliefs and values. In traditional Kokborok villages, settlements often consisted of about 60 or more households and were led by a Chokdori, or village chief. In one such village, a couple remained childless despite being married for many years, a situation viewed as a serious social stigma. Consequently, the Chokdori, with the support of the village elders, made the harsh decision to expel the couple from the community. After their expulsion, the couple found it nearly impossible to gain acceptance in any nearby village. With no other choice, they sought refuge in the depths of the forest, far removed from any human settlement, where they began a life of isolation.

The villagers primarily survived through *huk*, (shifting cultivation), and the debarred couple too depended on this traditional method of farming to make a living. Over the years, their lives gradually changed, and they were eventually blessed with a son, whom they named *Rwmai*. Coincidentally, during the same period, a daughter was born into the family of the Chokdori, the village chief, and she was named *Lari*.

The boy spent his early years surrounded by nature, and over time, he matured into a handsome young man. At the same time, the daughter of the village chief, born around the same period, was growing up in the village. Both families were engaged in huk, or shifting cultivation, and during their daily activities, the two often encountered each other. These repeated interactions gradually led to a blossoming romance. Unaware of their family backgrounds or past events, the boy and girl fell in love.

When news of their relationship reached the Chokdori, the village chief, he was furious and strongly opposed the union. Summoning his daughter, he forbade her from continuing the relationship and explained the history of the boy's family, how they had once been expelled from the village, and why, in his view, the relationship was unacceptable.

Understanding the gravity of the situation, the girl secretly left her home to meet the boy. She shared what her father had told her, including his harsh reaction. Unable to accept a future apart and feeling rejected by society, the young couple resolved to run away into the depths of the forest, far from human

settlements. As they traveled across rivers, valleys, and rugged terrain, the girl suddenly noticed a sweet and enchanting floral scent. Drawn to it, she insisted on having the flower to wear in her hair. Eventually, they found the source of the fragrance, a *Kherengbar* flower (foxtail orchid or *Rhynchostylis retusa*) blooming at the top of a tall tree. The boy hesitated, aware of the sacred status of the flower in their culture. Tradition held that disturbing it could bring misfortune. Still, moved by her deep desire, he agreed to climb the tree and pluck it, but under one condition: when he dropped the flower to the ground, she was to wait until he had descended before picking it up, and before adorning it in her hair, she had to first touch it to the earth. Though the girl agreed, she was overwhelmed by the flower's scent and picked it up immediately after it fell, holding it close to her face. At that instant, the boy cried out in sorrow, accusing her of breaking the promise. When she looked up, she was shocked to see that he had transformed into a *Huluk* (male gibbon). Moments later, she too began to change, eventually turning into a *Muphuk* (monitor lizard). Yet even in their transformed states, their love endured. To this day, members of the Kokborok speaking community believe that when a *Huluk* calls out with its haunting cry through the forest, the *Muphuk* responds by striking its chest as a lasting symbol of their eternal bond. Another belief held that from that day onward, the sweet smelling *Kherengbar* (fox tail orchid) permanently lost its fragrance.

Conclusion

Folktales have traditionally been valued as rich sources of knowledge, preserving the collective memory of generations. They offer unique insights for examining the socio-cultural, political, and economic aspects of tribal communities. Beyond their narrative charm, folktales contribute significantly to the literary heritage of a society. They also serve as ethical guides criticizing behavior that violates social norms, celebrating those who embody community ideals, and upholding the moral fabric of the society. As some scholars suggest, folktales operate as powerful instruments for promoting culturally accepted standards and shaping models of behavior.

The Kokborok folktale *Kuchuk Kherengbar* 'The Forbidden Love Story' offers insight into the cultural ethos of the Kokborok speaking people. It reveals their close relationship with nature, traditional forms of livelihood, local governance systems, and community driven social rules. This narrative, centered on the ill-fated love between two individuals from families with a troubled past, emphasizes themes such as social prohibitions and the natural consequences of breaking with tradition symbolized by the lovers' transformation into animals.

The story provides a window into Tripuri society, illustrating a strong connection with the natural world and its reliance on *huk (*shifting cultivation) not just as an economic activity, but also as a cultural practice that strengthens community ties. It further reflects the community's reverence for natural law and the spiritual consequences of defying it.

The tale also draws attention to the prevailing orthodox beliefs of the time, such as the stigma surrounding childlessness, illustrated by the expulsion of the boy's parents due to infertility. In addition, it highlights the structure of village leadership, particularly the role of the Chokdori (village chief) and the council of elders, who were responsible for maintaining law, order, and traditional values.

The transformation of the lovers into a *Huluk* (male gibbon) and *Muphuk* (monitor lizard) stands as a symbolic expression of nature's judgment, emphasizing that the environment is not passive but reacts meaningfully to human actions within the community's belief system.

In essence, folktales like this one function as voices of cultural introspection. They offer profound insights into social organization, ethical thinking, and spiritual worldviews. Tripura, with its wealth of ethnic diversity, is home to hundreds of such narratives each reflecting the unique heritage of its people. These stories continue to be shared orally, often by elders telling bedtime tales to children. However, the tradition is increasingly under threat due to the widespread appeal of digital media and technological entertainment among younger generations. Despite this, folktales remain vital in helping communities understand their customs, values, and social expectations. They underscore the enduring role of oral tradition in preserving and shaping collective cultural consciousness. Through these age old narratives, the communities try to maintain a strong connection to their identity and also continue to pass on moral teachings and share principles from one generation to the another generation.

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Coins used as Cultural Texts: Understanding the indigenous practices of Tribes in Ancient India.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores tribal coins as a significant component of India's cultural heritage, linking tribal studies with ancient Indian History. It adopts interdisciplinary approach to analyze symbolism on coins, connecting historical context with indigenous tribal practices.

Symbolism as noted by scholar Kristian Smidt, simplifies imagery to it's essence- conveying expression more than form. Here, the term "tribe" refers to politically influential communities in ancient India (6 century BCE-5 century CE) , such as the Arjunayanas, Audumbaras, Kunindas, Yaudheyas and others, primarily from North India. These tribes operated under varied systems like Republics, Monarchies and confederacies.

For instance, (Type 111) one coin features a tree motif with Brahmi script reading "Rano Muka" {King Muka} with tree on the obverse and a lion with curled tails and folded legs on the reverse. This suggests deep forest connection of the tribals and fauna recognized by the tribal community. The lion, a symbol of power, aligns with Ananda Coomaraswamy's view of the coins as an emblem of authority and truth.

Thus, coins served not only as currency but as symbolic tools reflecting tribal governance and cultural practices. Further study of such coins will offer insight into indigenous tradition, ecology, and societal structures of ancient Indian Tribes. Through this, coins become crucial tools in understanding indigenous practices and their evolution, potentially offering insights into both ancient and contemporary tribal societies.

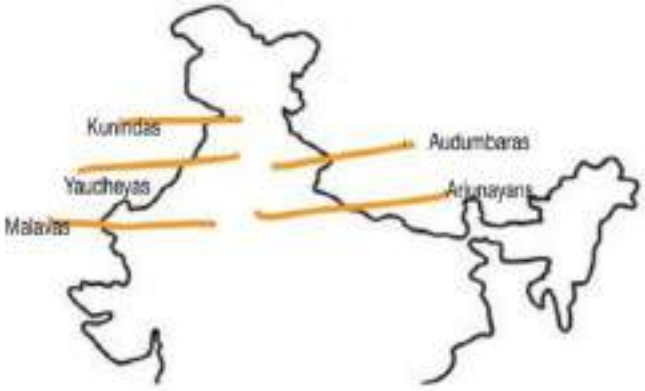
Keywords: *Tribals, Coins, Symbolism, Heritage, Indigenous Practices.*

Introduction

A significant part of India's total population comprises tribal communities. This paper is mainly concerned with the Tribal communities of ancient India. The study of their indigenous practices through the medium of coins. The coins are an important part of our tangible heritage, and the symbols on the coins form the most important part of our intangible heritage. Thus, the symbols on the coins are to highlight about the indigenous tribal practices. The intended word tribe represents the clans dominating the political scenario during the 6th century B.C.E. to 5th century C.E. Thus, inscribed symbols explain about the culture and practices during that period, and it can be connected to their rich tribal history. The ancient tribal history is connected to present tribal practices and culture.

The historiographical analysis of studying these coins by several historians. **V.A. Smith** divided these coins into different categories like the local coins, tribal coins, coins of the Kings of North Panchala and Kosala, and coins of kings and satraps of Mathura. **J. Allan** studied the symbols on the coins and observed that these can be successively labeled as tribal coins. **Parmeshwari Lal Gupta** considers all these species as local coins and further subdivides them into 1. Local

2. Tribal 3. Monarchical issues. **Nisar Ahmad** considers the issues of the species bearing names of tribes as tribal coins. These coins are studied by him and have been classified under the section of tribal coins. **Ajay Mitra Shastri** studies the legends on the coins as they give names of the issuing tribes, and also coupled with the name of the ruling chief. The anomaly in drawing an exact meaning about these coins often persists. The vocabulary that they contain is fully understood by the concerned tribal communities and groups of people who use them. But drawing an understanding in contemporary times by the people who analyze those coins helps to create ideas based on the contemporary tribal practices. Sometimes the connection between the legends and devices is so explicit that it is difficult to draw understanding for later interpreters. According to **Ajay Mitra Shastri**, "the devices are mainly related to religious deities of that period, so we get clarity on the religion present at that time." (Mitra 1977)So the major task is to understand the knowledge of these symbols to understand the religious practices of this period. In the present paper, an attempt is made to study some of the important symbols and see their bearing on the religious history of the period.



(Source: Adobe Stock, www.google.com) The map above shows the presence of different tribes in North India during the 6th century B.C.E. and 5th century C.E. These tribes mainly inhabited the northern part of the Indian Subcontinent. The coins issued by them are studied in detail to understand the indigenous cultural, religious practices of that time period, and it is still prevalent in today's tribal society.

The methodology involved in the findings about the indigenous tribal practices is the study of the coins in detail. The decipherment of the symbols and how it is connected to the contemporary tribal society. The examples of coins from different tribal kingdoms are studied in detail.

Kunindas

The tribal republic of the Kunindas is located in a



(Source: The coin image is borrowed from http://indiannumismaticgallery.com/product-tag/amoghabhuti **)**

Obverse: A deer or stag, which clearly shows the tribal association with the fauna. In present times, we see that tribal communities are deeply associated with the forest. To the right with a female figure (generally identified as Goddess Laxmi) standing facing right, holding a flower in uplifted right hand, which shows that mother Goddess worship was prevalent among the tribal societies from ancient times. Between the horns, above and sometimes also below the deer are symbols like Srivatsa (two cobras), a tree in the railing shows the importance of the forest for this community from the very beginning. crescent hill (or chaitya), svastika, a religious symbol, and the Brahmi legend reads: "*Rajnah Kuni[m]das(y)a Amoghabhu(u)tis(y)a with Maharajas(y)a.*"

Reverse: Six arched hill surmounted by an umbrella signifies hill or chaitya in another context as interpreted by Devendra Handa in his book, and he also wrote another interpretation as mountain because this tribe inhabited around that region, and a nandi pada in the center signifies the footprints of Nandi [bull] i.e., Association with Saivism, tree in railing having 3 or 4 horizontal branches with drooping leaves on the right, svastika above an Indra dhvaja (triangle-headed standard) on the left, and wavy line below often interpreted as snake, also its association with the Saivism sect. The Kharosthi Legend along the border reads "*Rana Am[o]ghabh[u]t[i]sa* with *Maharajasa"* in the exergue.

Controversy around the name Amoghabhuti inscribed on the coin: Smith refers to Amoghabhuti as be name of the king of the Kunindas, but as the coins bearing this name vary much in execution, Smith had an idea that the extension was over a considerable time. Another interpretation of Amoghabhuti, which existed before Kunindas, was a powerful ruler, so their name existed in continuation in the Kuninda coins. PL Gupta says Amogha and Bhuti, which stands for Siva.

Yaudheyas

The provenance of their coins leads to the location of

the tribe in Eastern Punjab. From Rohtak, a large number of coin molds and their fragments have been found, which shows that Rohtak was possibly a mint town of Yaudheyas. Obverse: Humped bull to right before sacrificial post in railing reversed legend *Yaudheyanam* running from right to left along the margin.

Reverse: Elephant to right with a nandipada above and an uncertain pennon-like object (dhvaja banner) behind.

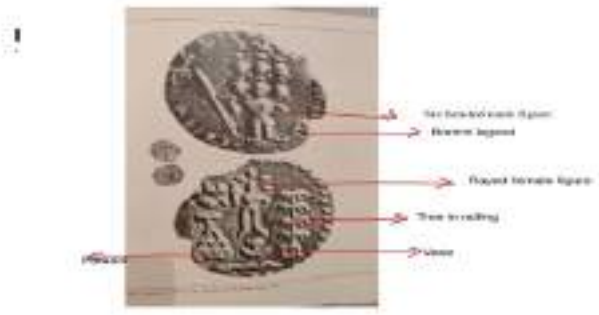


From this image, it is seen that the image of the elephant and Bull, which clearly connects to fauna and which is often worshipped by the tribals, and other than the nandipada symbol, which is often interpreted as footprints of Nandi, vahana of Lord Siva. As interpreted by Mahesh Kumar Sharan, Hindus who worshipped Lord Siva either in his tiger skin attire or in the form of Linga believed also in the fact that Nandi was his vahana as we find the figure of Nandi in sitting or standing positions in almost all Siva temples and therefore the footprints were of religious importance. (Sharan n.d.) He interpreted bull signifying power; they have been put on coins of Yaudheyas primarily to depict the power of these fighting and brave tribes. Elephants are coupled with a symbol of great power and royal authority of their administration, and a major force involved in warlike activities.

Second: The unique Silver Coin

Obverse: Six-headed male figure standing to front, holding a spear in the right hand, the left hand resting on the hip. Inscription, the coin in the Indian letter of an early date, *Bhagvato Swamina Brahmanya Yaudheya*.

Reverse: A Rayed female figure standing to the front with right upraised hand, and then left hand resting on the hip. "Beneath her feet a vase, to the right a Buddhi (Bodhi) tree surrounded by a Buddhist railing, to left a Chaitya, surrounded by Dharma chakra, or a Holy wheel symbol, the whole surrounded by a circle of dots."



(Source: The coin image is borrowed from Devendra Handa: Pl. XLII. Yaudheya silver Coins, type 1-1a)

The warrior figure, as interpreted by Mahesh Kumar Sharan, is the figure accepted as belonging to Lord Kartikeya by all historians. Lord Kartikeya was the tutelary deity of the tribe. The Yaudheyas were principally fighters and therefore looked towards this God of War for his blessings and favors for their success in campaigns and strategy, and therefore Yaudheyas gave a suitable position to deities on the coins.

The reverse has the image of Goddess Lakshmi as the mother Goddess and Goddess of prosperity and brings in good luck and fortune. The tree in railing as interpreted in Rig Veda as worship of Aranyam, in Atharvaveda, Aitareya Brahman, and Upanishad, we find mention of tree worship, and this becomes one of the important features of tribal society as the forest is considered a sacred place by the Tribals even in contemporary times. The sacred vase or Kalash is thought to be of immense importance in today's time, for holding sacred water, thus connecting it to the Religious practices of the Hindus. The other figure is that of a parasol or stupa or also called chaitya, and often interpreted as a hill or mountain by historians, thus connecting tribals to nature, and the mountains and hills form an important part of our nature. The zig-zag line at the bottom is often interpreted to be of a snake or a river, and other than that, it is also interpreted by historians as serving ornamental purposes.

Audumbaras

Audumbaras are located in the western part of the Kangra district (Himachal Pradesh) and the Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur districts of Punjab. "The Audumbara coins may be grouped into three classes: a series of square, a few silver, a group of copper, and billions of coins without a name." (Lahiri 1977)

Obverse: On the filleted trident with a kettle drum below and battle axe attached to the shaft further below on the right, a tree in an enclosure on the right. Brahmi legend around *Mahadevasa Rano Dharaghosha*.

Reverse: Bearded Vishwamitra standing facing, with right hand raised and holding skin on katyavalambita left hand. Kharosthi legend *Vispa* on his left and mitra on his right, *Mahadevasa rana dharmaghosha.*



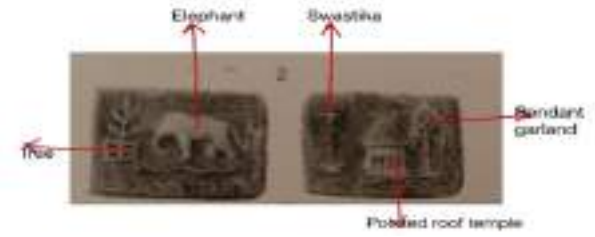
(Source: The coin image is borrowed from Devendra Handa, PL.IX)

According to Devendra Handa, the image of the human figure *Dharaghosa*. Handa in his work highlighted that J. N Banerjee often interprets the figure as Vishwamitra as one of the appellations of Siva. Though the trident battleaxe depicted on the coins also indicates the Saiva affiliations of the tribe yet the label inscription clearly names the figure as that of Vishwamitra. "The beard noticed on the face also highlights the saintly nature of the figure." The tree occurring on Audumbura coins was identified by Cunningham with Udumbura- ficus glomerata. "The depiction of a tree in an enclosure bespeaks its sacred nature". (Handa n.d.) The trident with battleaxe attached to its shaft is a Shiva weapon. The kettle drum is also an attribute of Shiva. Thus, it can be seen that the religious depiction on the coins of Audumburas.

Yet, another example from Audumbaras is taken:

Obverse: Pointed roof of two or three storeys, with pillars, swastika on railed pillar on the left, and pendant garland.

Reverse: Elephant to the left before tree in railing, wavy line below, incomplete Kharoshthi legend with *Odumbura* written below the wavy line.



(Source: The coin image is borrowed from A. Cunningham: Coins of Ancient India from The Earliest Times Down to the 7th century A.D, Plate IV, Image 2)

According to Mahesh Kumar Sharan, tree as one of the Important representations on the tribal coins. Tree in general regarded as abodes of the Gods. The tree considered to be a *sthala vriksh* of the Audumbura tribe, and an important feature of tribal society. Sometimes the representation of Elephant is also connected with Buddhism by Alexander Cunningham, who describes the elephant as one of the important symbols of Power, and along with that, the dream of the elephant by Mayadevi, also connects it with the Buddhist sect. The Kharoshti legend in the bottom is often interpreted as *Odumbara*. Temple a figure represented on the Audumbura coinages, has *Dhvaja*, Trisula and Battle Axes. The scholars mostly associate it with Saiva temple.

Arjunayanas

They lived within the area between Delhi, Agra and Jaipur and were neighbors of Yaudheyas on the north and Malavas in the South.

Obverse: Tree in railing in the center and traces of the Brahmi legend written as *Arjunayanam.*

Reverse: Lion sitting on hind legs to the right with curled tail facing a post.

(Source: The coin image is borrowed from Devendra Handa, Plate V, Coin 4, and the second image is taken from Page 20, Type III image.)

This depiction of Arjunayanas coins as studied and interpreted by Devendra Handa, the depiction of the tree on the obverse with a Brahmi legend in the side written as Arjunayanam, and on the reverse is the representation of lion as a symbol of power. Thus, it can be interpreted that the forest as one of the very important elements of tribal society, and along with that depiction of animals is also shown, which connects tribals to nature and forests. This considered to be one of the important properties of the indigenous tribal society.

Thus, it can be said that the coins above acted as cultural texts, as it discloses a lot about the practices that were prevalent in the tribal societies. The images are deciphered differently by different historians, and each of them has their standard understanding about the symbols inscribed on the coins. Using their interpretation, a standard understanding is developed around the symbols of these coins. The coins, therefore play a very important role in the interpretation of the indigenous religious, cultural practices which are very much similar to the contemporary tribal society. The connection of tribals to fauna and flora is prevalent from ancient times represented symbolically as crescent hills, snake,

tree, lion, bull, elephant. Thus, a close connection to nature is clearly evident, and other than that the worship of the mother goddess figurine is often present today in tribal societies. Thus, the tribals in contemporary society worshipped nature, and this is also evident through the coins these tribals stayed close to nature. Thus, the tribals in ancient and contemporary society share common culture and traditions. And the study of symbols on the ancient tribal coins tells us a lot about the continuity in practices that went on through the ages and are still prevalent today.

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Retrogression of Maternal Health and the Misalignment of Tribal Knowledge and Contemporary Schemes: A Critical Review of Attapadi

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ABSTRACT

Attapadi, a taluk in the district of Palakkad, also known as the tribal hamlet of Kerala, has had a history of poor maternal health, high infant mortality and maternal deaths, substance abuse and socioeconomic disparities despite many instances of government intervention. According to a report by The National Institute of Nutrition in 2023, 86.8% of pregnant women and 80% of lactating women are anaemic. Additionally, 91.2% of children aged 12– 59 months suffer from anaemia, leading to poor health outcomes. According to government reports, 121 infant deaths have been reported from 2013 to 2021; however, many of these deaths go unreported. This research attempts to analyse how a lack of knowledge on the tribal ways of living can result in the failure of public policy, and how these issues can be resolved. This study is a literature review based on analysing existing research, government reports, and institutional studies. Due to their tribal identity, tribal communities have been discriminated against for centuries, which has resulted in poverty. In marginalised communities, women and children are said to be the worst affected. As a result, there has been rampant malnutrition among women, which also affects their children they bear. To resolve these issues, many schemes have been introduced; however, most of them have failed to make a difference. Numerous community kitchens have been opened; however, this has not helped the tribals, as they provide rice, wheat, and sambar, despite the tribals' diets mainly consisting of millets. This shows how just the introduction of schemes does not necessarily mean development; extensive research must be conducted, and these schemes must be implemented according to the tribal ways of living, and it must be to conserve the ways rather than to change them.

Keywords: *Maternal Health, Tribal ways of living, Failure of public policy, Conserving the tribal identity*

INTRODUCTION

Kerala has been celebrated for its remarkable achievements in human development and has been set as a model for the rest of the Indian states. With a literacy rate of 94%(as per the 2011 Census) and an infant mortality rate of 5.13 per 1,000 live births in 2020 (as per the Kerala's Department of Economics & Statistics), the state is more advanced in the health and education sector compared to the national average. Its public health infrastructure, access to primary education, and progressive public policy have contributed to these developments.

However, these developments are not seen throughout the state. Despite the state's achievements, Indigenous populations have been excluded from development. An example of this is the tribal population of Attapadi. According to the 2011 census, Attapadi has a total population of 64,318 and a tribal population of 27,627, composed of three tribes, with Irula being 84%, Muduga at 10% and Kurumba at 6%. Cases of rampant malnutrition, poor maternal health and infant mortality have been reported. According to a report by The National Institute of Nutrition in 2023, 86.8% of pregnant

women and 80% of lactating women are anaemic. Additionally, 91.2% of children aged 12–59 months suffer from anaemia, leading to poor health outcomes, and according to government reports, 121 infant deaths have been reported from 2013 to 2021, and many of them go unreported, so the actual figures are estimated to be higher. This study focuses on maternal health and nutritional issues among the indigenous peoples of Attapadi. Even though there have been many government schemes announced in order to tackle these issues, most of them are not implemented properly and not according to the conditions of the place. There is no integration of tribal knowledge patterns, and this has resulted in the failure of the schemes.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a literature review based on an analysis of existing research, government reports, institutional studies and numerous articles. Most of the statistical information has been drawed from the 2011 Census and the report published in 2023 by the National Institute of Nutrition and the Indian Council of Medical Research. Apart from that information has been referred from journals like, International Journal for Equity in Health, Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology and many more as well as secondary sources including newspaper articles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marginalisation and Exclusion of Tribal Communities in Kerala

Martinez-Rodríguez et al. (2020) state that the Kerala model of development, while being successful in improving the overall living standards of the state, has faced criticism for failing to make a successful model including the marginalised sections of society, such as the tribes and fishermen. A major issue tribal communities in Kerala continue to face issues such as land alienation, small holdings, lack of capital and infrastructure, conflict with wild animals and drought due to poor rainfall. Although various reforms have contributed to Kerala's progress, they remain ineffective in uplifting tribal populations. The life expectancy and literacy rates of tribes remain below the state average, with limited success from literacy missions. Many communities like the Paniya and Kattunayakka remain illiterate and live in primitive conditions. Health and economic disparities further deepen the marginalisation of tribal groups. High infant and maternal mortality, nutritional deficiency, sickle cell anaemia, tuberculosis, cancer, etc. prevail among the tribes of Kerala. The overall economic conditions are dire, with many families living below the poverty line.

Sunu et al. (2024) start by defining indigenous peoples as per the United Nations Permanent Forum. It defines indigenous peoples as those maintaining historical continuity with a specific region before annexation. India has a tribal population of 104.3 million people; however, they remain marginalised and discriminated against. This has resulted in land dispossession as well as disassociation from their culture, traditions and identity, creating disparities in health and education.

Nutritional Deficiencies and Dietary Incompatibility with Government Schemes

Sunu et al. (2024) mention that studies of tribals conducted in Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala showed high levels of undernutrition. The case is no different among the indigenous people of Attapadi. Attapadi consists of three tribes and approximately 80 per cent of the population is from the Irula tribe, 13 per cent from the Muduga tribe and 7 per cent from the Kurumba tribe. These tribes suffer from severe malnutrition, and high neonatal and infant mortality. According to this study, the 136 infant deaths between 2012 and 2022 in Attapad were due to premature delivery, pre-eclampsia and anaemia. The majority of women of reproductive age (WRA) in Attappady suffer from anaemia, with rates of 97% among adolescent girls aged 15–19 years, 87% among pregnant women, and 80% among lactating mothers. They had deficiencies in iron, calcium, zinc and many other nutrients. The most prominent food groups consumed by WRA were grains, roots and tubers, pulses, and some fruits and vegetables. However, consumption of nutritious foods such as green leafy vegetables, vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables, milk, meat and milk products was found to be lacking. As a result, the government has a targeted public distribution system, which provides rice and pulses, and many households rely on this system. There are also mid-day meal schemes as well as community kitchens aimed at providing food to pregnant women, children and lactating women. Many people, however, end up relying solely on this provision and it causes deficiencies in other nutrients. These deficiencies severely impact both the mothers' as well as the baby's health and are one of the primary contributors to the high maternal as well as infant mortality.

Child Rights and You (2015) indicate how it's

important to bring in the tribal perspective on food rather than the distribution of rice. The issue of nutritional deficiencies has been connected to land encroachment, which was the result of the migration of non-tribals to Attapadi. Census data reveal a sharp decline in the tribal population in Attapadi—from 91% in 1951 to 43% in 2011. Earlier, the tribals used to cultivate foods such as leafy vegetables, millets and other nutritious produce; they also used to consume fish, honey and forest fruits. However, due to the influx of immigrants, the tribals lost their land as well as their ability to cultivate such foods. Even though there were laws such as Recovery of Lost Land Act of 1975 introduced, they were not implemented properly and many tribals are still yet to receive their lands. Because of these reasons, the tribals have fallen prey to malnutrition and due to poverty, the tribals are also forced to rely on the government for their healthcare as well as their nutritional needs.

Maternal and Infant Health Crisis

Prabharakaran et al. (2016) point out that there are three government primary health centres (PHC) in Pudur, Sholayur and Vattulukki and one community health centre (CHC) in Agali. There are 172 anganwadis in Attappady, ASHA workers who are supposed to monitor the villages, and there are also some private hospitals. Despite this health care system being in place, it was seen that high levels of infant mortality and severe malnutrition still persisted. Eating nutritious food is important during pregnancy for both the mother and the child; however, this study explains how the tribals believe that eating less meant an easier delivery, and they usually avoided eating many foods such as fish, egg and some vegetables and fruits, which in turn worsened nutritional deficiencies. During pregnancy, the women mainly ate white rice with a curry known as kuzhambu, which is made with pulses. This study also mentioned how in the Kootathara tribal speciality hospital, there was only one gynaecologist at that time, 1 labour room, NICU and ventilator; there was also no anaesthetist, and many facilities were not available. Due to these reasons, this hospital was used as a referral hospital. There has also been a failure in the distribution of iron folic acid.

Inadequacies in Healthcare Infrastructure

In **George et al. (2020)** it was observed how the beliefs and practices of the indigenous communities are rooted in their culture and traditions. However, there was a lack of effort to integrate tribal traditions and beliefs into the health care system. These majoritarian approaches have led to the failure of schemes. Among health care officials, there was no understanding of local beliefs, and they found tribal practices superstitious and harmful. An example of this is the practice of a tradition where the husband of a pregnant woman would not cut his hair until the child was born and named; however, this was considered unhygienic by some health care officials. Though there were healers in the community, people were expected to know the usage of different medicinal plants. The tribals felt their remedies were in decline, and the local health system believed such remedies were not effective. This knowledge system and the use of traditional healers and medicines is a central part of their cultural traditions, and the decline of this left them more vulnerable. Many elders refused healthcare as they believed that when they left the hills, they were no longer under the protection of elders, and people referred outside did not survive, as they were already in severe condition. This has caused fear among the tribes. There were also instances of forced compliance. Pregnant women were required to visit the tribal hospital in Kottathara for ANC care. Many women went due to fear. Healthcare officials stated they did this for the community's good, but this has led to distrust. There were also instances of community members feeling discriminated against. Some felt that the image of a "savage" still remained. Even though discriminatory acts were rare, they said there was unconscious bias, especially in language.

Disregard for Tribal Knowledge and Cultural Practices

George and Beegum R.K. (2019), and Unni (2024), mention how tribal villages already have their own political structure with the 'Oorukootam' (village council) presided by the 'Oorumoopan', who is the head. However, they are not consulted while making decisions. Political representation of the tribals is also very limited. Hence, it must be ensured that the tribals are politically empowered as well as consulted for making decisions.

Implementation Failures of Government Schemes

Many schemes are introduced; however, they have not been implemented properly such as The Janma Raksha Scheme, a scheme launched to provide ₹2000 per month for 18 months to pregnant women, has not reached many intended beneficiaries. **Sankar (2021)** states that many women are not included in the list.

Government schemes have been aimed at solving these issues, and for this purpose, schemes and

mechanisms are implemented on paper, but despite this, they have not been effective.

This is because most of these schemes are not implemented according to the ways of living or knowledge patterns of these tribals. **Sankar (2021)** mentions how ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers, and other government officials are required to monitor villages and educate the community; however, they do not effectively carry out this duty. Many community kitchens have been opened in order to tackle nutritional deficiency in the taluk, but most of them are not operational and even when they are operational, they provide rice, wheat, and sambar, despite the tribals' diets mainly consisting of millets. **George, Ramu and Prasad (2022)** also depict how the Millet Village Scheme was introduced in 2017, with the aim of rejuvenating traditional agriculture in Attapadi. Every village is known to have a "mannukaran" (man of the soil), who is responsible for understanding the nature of the soil, the right to cultivate and the right time to sow. However, during the implementation of this scheme, they were not consulted, leading to sowing happening during the wrong season as well as improper irrigation.

ANALYSIS

The paper is a critical review of maternal health issues and the failure of successful government interventions in the tribal region of Attapadi, also known as the 'Tribal hamlet of Kerala'. Though there have been various schemes and initiatives introduced, they have not been effective as they do not align with the cultural realities. Drawing on sources such as government reports, academic journals, institutional studies and secondary sources, this paper identifies problems of malnutrition, anaemia, infant mortality, and poor healthcare infrastructure among tribal community of Attapadi, particularly women and children.

This paper intends to demonstrate how schemes have failed to be effective as they have overlooked the realities and traditional practices of the communities. An example of this is the mismatch between community kitchens offering rice and wheat despite the traditional tribal diet being millets. Similarly, the Millet Village Scheme's failure due to the non- inclusion of traditional knowledge practitioners like the "mannukaran" demonstrates the consequences of not integrating indigenous knowledge.

The analysis of maternal health illustrates how cultural beliefs, food patterns, and traditional medical systems of the tribals are not considered in public policy. Health workers and institutional systems often dismiss tribal practices as superstitious, leading to distrust and forced compliance. The health care system has failed to create a culturally safe space for the tribals. Additionally, poor access to health care is further deepened by inadequate infrastructure, such as understaffed hospitals and a lack of facilities, along with the difficulties in travelling to hospitals and PHCs, due to the absence of perennial roads.

The paper also connects the issue of nutrition to historical problems such as land alienation. It demonstrates how the issue of nutritional deficiencies is connected to land loss, due to the migration of non-tribals. Even though there were land recovery laws in place, they have not been effective, forcing the tribals to rely on the government to meet their nutritional needs.

The broader issue of marginalisation and failure to integrate the tribal structures and knowledge patterns is seen in the lack of political representation, failure of schemes like Janma Raksha, and the exclusion of tribal decision-making bodies such as

the 'Oorukootam' from governance decisions. The government has followed a paternalistic model rather than an empowerment one. Instead of empowering the tribals to reclaim their autonomy and traditional practices, government interventions such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and various schemes have led to dependency.

Overall, the paper emphasises on the importance of aligning health and nutrition interventions and policies with the cultural, political, and ecological realities of indigenous communities. It highlights the consequences of neglecting tribal knowledge systems and the urgent need to reframe policies around the principles of inclusion, consultation, and cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

The situation in Attapadi reveals how the failure to integrate tribal knowledge systems and ways of living has led to poor maternal health outcomes, high infant mortality, and nutritional deficiencies. Despite numerous schemes and interventions introduced by the government, their failure to align with the cultural practices and traditional systems of the tribals has rendered them ineffective. The analysis shows that development cannot be achieved solely through the introduction of schemes; rather, it requires an understanding of the tribal ways of living and an effort to conserve them rather than change

them.

A key issue is the historical problem of land alienation. The migration of non-tribals led to land loss for the indigenous communities, which affected their ability to cultivate traditional foods such as millets, leafy vegetables and other nutritious produce. Even though land recovery laws were introduced, they have not been effectively implemented. This loss of land and traditional food sources has forced the tribals to depend on the government for their nutritional and healthcare needs

Government schemes continue to follow a top-down, paternalistic approach rather than an empowering one. The exclusion of traditional decision-making structures like the Oorukootam and knowledge holders such as the Mannukaran has contributed to the failure of many initiatives. For development to be effective in Attapadi, policies must be framed through inclusion, consultation, and conservation of tribal identity. Only then can sustainable health outcomes and meaningful progress be achieved for the tribal communities of Attapadi.

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Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Indigenous Sustainability
A Case Study of Soliga Tribe in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

The Soligas are an indigenous tribe of Karnataka, inhabiting the peripheral forest area near the Biligiri Rangana Hills and Male Mahadeshwara Hill in the Chamarajanagar district. In the local Kannada language, the Soligas are known as "Children of Bamboo," a name that embodies their deep connection to the forest. The Soligas depend on hunting and shifting agriculture. Traditionally, the Soligas are recognized for their Traditional Ecological Knowledge regarding forest conservation and sustainable agriculture.

The study examines the symbiotic relationship between the Soliga tribes and the forest, focusing on their reliance on forest resources for food, medicine, and income, as well as their role in sustaining forest ecosystems through Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Additionally, it explores how the Soligas' livelihood practices—particularly the harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) and approaches to Sustainable Forest Management—contribute to ecological resilience and socio-economic adaptation in the face of environmental change.

The study employs a secondary research methodology. Relevant data were gathered from a wide range of existing sources, including ethnographic studies, academic journal articles, government reports, forest policy documents, and publications by NGOs working with indigenous communities in Karnataka. The study underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing indigenous knowledge systems in conservation efforts and sustainable development initiatives.

Keywords: *Soliga Tribe, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Indigenous Sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

India is a land where diversity thrives among its tribal populations, accounting for approximately 8.61% of the total population, which translates to around 104 million people. Nearly 4.2 million tribal individuals live in Karnataka, reflecting a 22.66% increase over the past decade. Although only about 6.95% of Karnataka's population constitutes tribal people, there are 50 distinct tribes within the state. Some of these tribes include the Soliga, which have a distinct cultural and ecological heritage, primarily located in the southern districts of Mysore and Chamarajanagar. The Soligas people live in the Biligiri Rangana Hills in the Chamarajanagar district. Having experienced a semi-nomadic lifestyle for many years, the Soligas have mainly relied on shifting agriculture and gathering non-timber forest products (NTFPs). This paper aims to investigate the extensive Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) landscape that the Soliga embody, in light of their practices resonating with modern-day concepts of sustainable development.

TEK, also known as ILK (Indigenous Local Knowledge) or ITK (Indigenous Traditional Knowledge), is a rich repository of information developed over countless years. This knowledge is deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of the communities, reflecting a strong connection and understanding of the natural environment. TEK covers a broad range of practices and

observations—often qualitative and accumulated over long periods—related to hunting, fishing, gathering, and farming. What makes TEK distinct is its holistic approach. It integrates practical resource management with cultural, spiritual, and social aspects, ensuring that crucial knowledge is preserved through oral traditions and rituals. From agricultural practices to medicinal plant uses. TEK promotes sustainable resource use and community resilience—a necessity in today's rapidly changing environmental conditions.

The Soliga tribe in Karnataka has inhabited the lush forests of the Western Ghats for generations, living in harmony with the natural world around them. Their bond with the forest extends beyond mere survival; they truly listen to it and understand its subtleties, caring for it in ways many of us are just beginning to learn about. Their approach to the environment is rooted in deep respect for the land, viewing humanity as part of nature rather than separate from it. This perspective influences their traditional practices, from carefully gathering fruits and herbs to protecting sacred groves. The Soligas have developed a sustainable way of living that allows the forest's diverse life—trees, plants, and animals—to thrive alongside them. The wisdom they pass down through generations via stories and personal experiences provides us with valuable insights into how we can live more gently and thoughtfully with our planet.

PROFILE OF THE SOLIGA TRIBE

The Soligas, also known as Soliga, Sholiga, or Soligaru, are an indigenous community primarily found in Karnataka's Chamarajangara district. Their rich cultural heritage and traditions are closely linked to the dense forests of the Biligiri Rangana Hills and Male Mahadeshwara Hills, especially around Yelanduru and Kollegala taluks. Although a large number of Soligas reside here, they are also found in Mysore and parts of Tamil Nadu. According to the 2011 Census, their total population is approximately 33,871 in Karnataka and 5,965 in Tamil Nadu, while their habitats are affectionately referred to as 'haadi' and 'poodu.'

The Soligas use a language called Sholaga, or Soliganudi, which belongs to the Dravidian language family. The unique language is similar to Kannada but has been further influenced by Tamil, reflecting the historical interactions of the community. Traditionally, shifting cultivation was used by the Soligas, although its use has significantly declined over the years. They now primarily cultivate Ragi (finger millet) for subsistence. Much of their income is derived from the collection and sale of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), which comprises a variety of products, including honey, nellikai (gooseberry), bamboo, lichen, wild turmeric, Indian blackberries, soapnuts, and nennari (wild root). They are also skilled craftsmen, capable of creating delicate bamboo baskets. In recent times, government schemes and NGOs have attempted to mainstream the Soligas. Resettlement to surrounding areas close to urban areas has happened for many of them, and communities named Podus have developed. Even so, most of their traditional forest land has been designated as wildlife reserves, with significant areas, such as the Biligiriranga Hills, marked as a Wildlife Sanctuary, and Bandipur as a National Park. This situation has ignited considerable controversy about their right to harvest NTFP in light of conservation priorities

Sub-Groups of Soligas

The Soliga community comprises several sub-groups, each with distinct traits :

- Male Soliga - Predominantly Kannada speakers from Karnataka.
- Urali Soliga - Located in Tamil Nadu's border regions, speaking both Kannada and Tamil.
- Pujari Group - Inhabiting the Maleya Mahadeshwara Hills.
- Kadu Soliga - Settled near the Bandipur Forest.
- Burude Soliga - Living in Heggadadevanakote Taluk and Kodagu.[2]

Religious practices

The Soligas' spiritual belief system presents a fascinating blend of naturism, animism, and Hinduism. Of the numerous gods, some of the principal ones are Madeshwara, Rangaswamy of Biligirirangana Hills, Karayya, Kyate Devaru, and Jadeswamy. Other important entities before whom respect is considered to be paid include Basaveshwara, Nanjundeshwara, and Sri Alamelu Ranganayaki, together with Sri Ranganatha; these point to the vast culture and affection for nature. The Soligas are a fine example of the interplay of tradition, change, and resilience that makes the community an area of interest within the domain of indigenous studies.

TEK PRACTICES AMONG THE SOLIGAS

Soligas, like any other tribe, possess a vast Traditional

Ecological Knowledge (TEK) that represents their intimate linkages with nature. All Soliga tribal practices are based on a sustainable climate, and all activities are guided by a conservation approach. This includes the sustainable harvesting of NTFPs, such as honey, gooseberries, and wild turmeric, whereby the trees from which these products are extracted are allowed to regenerate. They also protect some sacred groves as biodiversity reserves; agriculture is primarily organic and rain-fed, and they utilize indigenous seeds. The Soligas possess extensive knowledge of medicinal plants, forest wildlife behavior, and seasonal ecological indicators that guide their everyday activities and cultural events. They practice controlled burning that limits the occurrence of severe forest fires and maintains ecological equilibrium. They regard most natural watercourses as clean and purifying. This kind of knowledge is inherited through oral traditions, songs, and by direct forest-based experiences, thereby making Soliga TEK a prime example for modern biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and sustainable livelihood.

- Invasive species management

  According to Soliga elders, most of the now-visible ecological alterations in the B.R. Hills started after traditional litter-burning activities ceased, which prevented the spread of Lantana camara. This invasive plant has distressed the native ecosystem, affecting the Soliga communities and domestic wildlife habitats.

- Medicinal Plant Use

  The Soligas are well-versed in using medicinal plants to treat a wide range of illnesses, from chronic conditions to the common cold. Both Phyllanthus and Terminalia chebula are examples that are employed in healing, including Emblica. Their preparation techniques, including poultice and decoction, prioritize efficacy. The Soligas also employ traditional diagnostic methods, including reading pulses and observing symptoms, to determine treatments. This traditional medicine works well alongside modern medicine, besides providing a cheaper and easily accessible option for scattered and remote communities. They also understand these plants in terms of their impact on ecosystem health.

- Sustainable Agriculture

  The community practices traditional cropping methods, consisting of mixed cropping and intercropping, which tend to improve soil quality and deter pests. Mixed cropping involves growing crops such as millets, pulses, and oilseeds helps develop a good nutrient cycle while decreasing the chances of complete crop failure. The Soligas also use organic fertilizers prepared from animal waste and decomposed plant materials, which enhance soil fertility without posing long-term degradation risks. Such measures fall within the realm of present agroecology, aiming to promote resilience to climate change. The Soligas also use organic fertilizers prepared from animal waste and decomposed plant materials to enhance soil fertility without posing long-term degradation risks.[3]

- Water conservation techniques

Water conservation techniques, such as constructing small check dams and following traditional irrigation methods, ensure efficient use of water. The sustainable farming methods they employ are models for solving food-security problems in resource-poor settings. Wherever they engaged in shifting agriculture, the Soligas dug pits or wells for holding drinking water, which afterward became sources for animals when they moved onward. Normally, in a new place, they would dig about two to five pits or wells to meet daily water requirements. Their indigenous knowledge also aided in water conservation by creating waterholes for wildlife.

- Cultural heritage and community well-being

  The Soligas possess a rich heritage of traditional knowledge that has been utilized for various purposes. This traditional knowledge is deeply linked to the forest. The Soligas are raised and pass away within their forest surroundings; all aspects of tribal life - from birth and marriage to traditional rituals, festivals, and songs are connected to the forest.

- Traditional calendar

  The Soligas have their own method of predicting rain and controlling diseases and pests through their indigenous agricultural calendar. This calendar reflects their farming activities and rituals throughout the year. It also offers insights into their traditional farming practices and cultural rituals.

- Responsible resource consumption:

The Soligas harvest amla from trees bearing over 25 kgs of fruit, leaving smaller trees unharvested. They also leave enough fruit on the ground and still on the trees to aid plant regeneration and provide food for animals. This practice is also followed when harvesting other fruits like soap nut, soapberry, wild mango, and jamun. When collecting magali beru (Decalapis hamilton), only a few roots are taken, with two to three left behind to ensure the plant's future growth. Soil is replenished to support regeneration, allowing roots to be harvested in subsequent years. Only mature plants are picked, not young ones. The same approach applies when collecting tubers (neve, nure, and belare) for consumption.[4]

The Soliga people have a profound cultural connection with tigers. They worship tigers, calling them Dodda Nayi, and have a temple dedicated to this deity. This reverence fosters a protective attitude toward the species. Their practices help reduce human-animal conflicts in the region. The Soligas believe in a sustainable lifestyle that respects wildlife habitats.The Soliga people have a deep cultural connection with tigers. They worship tigers, referring to them as Dodda Nayi, and even have a temple dedicated to this deity. This reverence encourages a protective attitude toward the species. Their practices help reduce human-animal conflict in the region. The Soligas believe in a sustainable lifestyle that respects wildlife habitats

□ Sustainable honey collection

Soligas collect honey mainly from the wild rock bee (Apis dorsata), which builds large hives on tall trees and cliffs. They use natural ropes made of vines or bamboo ladders to climb dangerous heights. To reduce bee aggression, they burn dry leaves or bark to generate smoke that calms the bees before extraction. The tribe follows eco-sensitive practices. Only mature hives are harvested. Larvae and a portion of the honey are left behind to allow colony regeneration. This ensures the same hives can be harvested year after year. Decisions on when and how to harvest are based on indigenous ecological knowledge of bee behavior and seasons. In winter (November–February), Bee activity is lower, resulting in less honey in the hives. Harvesting Cycle Soligas often harvest twice a year:

□ Main harvest – Summer (March–June)

□ Secondary harvest – If conditions permit, around October–November

□ However, they typically avoid overharvesting to allow hives to regenerate, following sustainable and rotational gathering practices

TEK AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS LINKAGES

The Soligas of Karnataka are one example that typifies this relationship with long-standing. The strong connection between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) illustrates the significant contribution that native peoples must make to global environmental sustainability initiatives. TEK offers crucial data on resource management in line with sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. It is founded on generations of ecological care and lived experience. Practices of the Western Ghats, where their deep understanding of forest ecosystems allows them to manage resources in an environmentally sound way while maintaining their identity.

The use of TEK by the Soligas is congruent with lands including Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Life on Land (SDG 15), and Climate Action (SDG 13). While ensuring a sustainable harvest of non-timber forest products, they conserve the sacred groves and other aspects of biodiversity.

Thereby, this conservation effort stands as a testimony to how crucial indigenous knowledge is for enhancing both ecological integrity and social justice. Firmly grounded in their experience is the realization that TEK has to enter mainstream development discourse if resilient and inclusive options for sustainable development are to be built upon.

Data excerpt	Theme	Linked SDG(s)	Ecological Indicator
Sustainable honey collection	Responsible consumption and production, life on earth.	SDG 12, SDG 15	Pollinator health, tree regeneration
Controlled early-season fire use	Climate Action	SDG 13	Fire frequncy reduction, Fire severity control
Knowledge erosion	Challenges to Knowledge Transmission	SDG 4	Intergenerational transmission of TEK
Sacred grove protection	Cultural-Spiritual Conservation Ethics(life on land)	SDG 15	Biodiversity hotspots, tree canopy integrity
NTFP income generation	Sustainable Forest-based Livelihoods (no poverty)	SDG 1	Household income, seasonal forest-product trade
Seasonal biodiversity indicators	Ecological Monitoring through TEK (climate action)	SDG 13	Seasonal calendar accuracy, Agro-climatic patterns
Invasive species management	Life on land	SDG15	Traditional litter burning practices
Use of medicinal plants	Good health and Well-being	SDG 3	Accessible healthcare alternatives, Traditional diagnostic techniques.

*cited from United nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development

This table provides the linkages between the traditional ecological knowledge practiced by Soligas of Karnataka and the Sustainable Development Goals

□ Sustainable Honey Collection

Sustainable honey collection-using traditional knowledge-ensures rightful practices such as non-destructive harvesting of hives and respect for bee breeding cycles. This ensures the health of pollinators, which is critical for crops and biodiversity. Moreover, bees sometimes domicile in old trees or trees of certain tree species-and by conserving these, natural regeneration of trees may be promoted. To that end, these methods support SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), promoting sustainable use of natural resources, and SDG 15 (Life on Land) by way of conserving forest ecosystems and biodiversity through community stewardship.

□ Controlled Early-Season Fire Use

Early dry-season strategic fire application is often part of traditional ecological knowledge to reduce underbrush so that wildfires of a larger and more destructive kind do not ensue later in the year. These controlled burns are, technically, low-intensity, and they diminish fuel loads, frequencies of fires, and intensities towards severities. The practice of controlled fire facilitates SDG 13 (Climate Action), its amelioration of and response to climate change, aided by reduced carbon emissions from wildfires and diminished damage to ecosystems by way of wildfires.

□ Knowledge Erosion

Knowledge erosion means the gradual loss of TEKs as the younger generations are slowly removed from land-based practices because of modernization, formal education, or even migration. This decline puts a halt to either the local capacity of ecosystems to be sustainably managed or cultural identity. Transfer of TEK across generations is very important for the conservation of biodiversity, climate resilience, and sustainable livelihoods. Halting knowledge erosion is one of the offensive strategies under SDG 4 (Quality Education), which calls for the promotion of inclusive and culturally relevant education that respects and integrates Indigenous and local knowledge systems.

□ Sacred Grove Protection

Sacred groves are little forest patches protected by spiritual beliefs and cultural taboos that probably harbor biodiversity habitats in landscapes that are continuously being degraded. The areas are repositories of rare/endemic species, they protect water sources, and maintain the integrity of the tree canopy. Community reverence for sacred groves constitutes a very powerful conservation ethic based in culture and tradition. Their protection supports SDG 15 (Life on Land) by maintaining biodiversity hotspots and forest cover through community-led spiritual and ethical stewardship.

□ NTFP Income Generation

Non-timber forest products, such as bamboo, wild fruits, nuts, resins, or medicinal plants, constitute an important income for forest-dwelling communities, especially in lean times. The activities ensure sustainable forest use and thus prevent deforestation, upon which livelihoods and the conservation of ecosystems depend. Seasonal harvesting keeps the resources available on a long-term basis and strengthens the ability of the people to resist climate and economic shocks. This, therefore, supports SDG 1 (No Poverty) by enhancing income opportunities derived from forest resources and by minimizing the vulnerabilities of forest-based rural populations through multiple livelihood options.

□ Seasonal Biodiversity Indicators

Indigenous communities use biodiversity indicators to mark seasonal changes, such as bird migrations, flowering, and insect behavior. These seasonal indicators form the basis of traditional seasonal calendars. The indicators provide an indication of possible climatic conditions and help inform decisions related to farming, foraging, wild harvesting, and fire management. Thus, as climatic patterns themselves alter, the degree of environmental change can be gauged with the help of these indicators. This, in turn, creates an opportunity to support SDG 13 (Climate Action) by enhancing adaptive capacity and resilience through community- based ecology.

□ Invasive Species Management

Invasive species threaten native biodiversity and disturb local ecosystems. Traditional methods of control include selective burning, weeding, or controlled grazing. For instance, selective burning or burning accumulated litter at appropriate times of

the year can inhibit the growth of invasive species without harming native flora. These adaptive techniques are a means for these communities to maintain ecological balance, developed through ages of observation. God willing, such practices restore ecosystems and conserve native species through traditional ecological management, thereby contributing to SDG 15: Life on Land.

□ Use of Medicinal Plants

The use of medicinal plants constitutes a major part of Indigenous healthcare systems, providing accessible and low-cost methods of treatment that are based on a thorough understanding of ecology. Usually, such methods are provided along with diagnostic methods that have been passed down for generations, thus offering culturally appropriate healthcare for remote or underserved areas. Medicinal plants promote less dependence on external health systems and an urge to further conserve medicinal species, thereby conserving biodiversity. It helps in achieving SDG 3-Good Health and Well-being through building inclusive health systems and valuing.

CHALLENGES AND THREATS FACED BY SOLIGA TRIBES

The Soligas are an indigenous people of the forests in Karnataka who face numerous challenges in maintaining their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which is deeply embedded in their cultural identity and symbiosis with nature. The establishment of protected areas, such as the BRT Tiger Reserve, restricts the collection of forest produce for their sustenance, while modern education, urban migration, and government conservation policies often overlook indigenous viewpoints.

The diminishing use of the Soliga language, the sidelining of their knowledge systems, and the growing effects of climate change and biodiversity loss jeopardize the passing down of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) across generations. Additionally, commercialization, encroachment, and increasing conflicts between humans and wildlife are further disrupting their ecological practices, which in turn affect their cultural identity and conservation efforts.

□ Restricted Access to Forest Areas

The establishment of protected areas such as the BRT Tiger Reserve has henceforth denied the Soligas free usage of the forest resources. Such a restriction inherently inhibited their interaction with the forest, which was crucial for the transfer of plant-based knowledge, animal behavior, and seasonal changes.

□ Decline of Language and Oral Heritage

The Soliga language is on the brink of extinction. Many ecological concepts and forest-based practices have been rooted in their native tongue, and their loss is an ominous threat to the retention of this knowledge.

□ Government Regulations and Conservation Policies

Conservation policies, which focus on forest conservation, often disregard the views of indigenous peoples. Strict laws to collect NTFPs (Non-timber Forest Products), such as honey or medicinal plants, interrupt traditional uses.

□ Influence of Modern Education and Cultural Changes

Increasingly, younger Soligas are attracted to formal schooling and city jobs. Since the passing of knowledge from an older generation to the younger generation in most of TEK [Traditional Ecological Knowledge] occurs through oral means, this change to modern lifestyles decreases the time for getting knowledge from elders.

□ Marginalization and Lack of Acknowledgment

Mainstream scientific and policy frameworks frequently undervalue TEK. The Soliga people's role as protectors of the forest is seldom acknowledged in conservation strategies.

□ Impact of Climate Change and Loss of Biodiversity

Alterations in rainfall regimes, deforestation, and changes in wildlife migrations also upset the traditional ecological calendars and observations.

□ Commercial Exploitation and Development Projects

Tourism, mining, and road construction in forest areas threaten biodiversity and displace the indigenous populations. Most of these developments are anti-TEK and chip away at the cultural landscapes.

- Encroachment and Human-Wildlife Conflicts

Growing human populations near forest leads to resource competition. Conflicts with wildlife, such as elephants and big cats, discourage close interactions with nature.

Conclusion

In summary, the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of the Soliga tribe is a vital part of their culture, closely connected to their relationship with nature. Several key steps are needed to keep this valuable knowledge system alive and functional. These include establishing strong IPR frameworks to safeguard the Soliga's traditional wisdom from misappropriation so that the Soligas themselves can benefit from it. TEK should be integrated into school curricula, especially in environmental science and social studies, alongside bilingual education in Kannada and the Soliga dialect—this will help preserve both the knowledge and the language. Through cultural revitalization efforts such as promoting traditional festivals, storytelling, and eco-tourism initiatives, the community's pride and sustainable economic development can be fostered. Additionally, community-driven documentation, including participatory storytelling, recording—both written and digital—and creating accessible cultural archives, will enable the Soligas to take the lead in conserving and sharing their heritage. These initiatives will help the community work toward safeguarding the Soligas' cultural legacy.

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Mapping Museum Collection To Tribal Cultures Through A Decolonial Approach

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ABSTRACT

The International Committee on Museums ICOM defines museum as a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. The museum serves as a storehouse of tangible resources to trace the past yet the intangible heritage needs to be preserved, practiced and passed on to the future generations to promote the traditional knowledge systems of indigenous people. However in India till date traditional, chronological or thematic based displays form a major role in exhibiting museum collection since colonial times. This paper first throws light in understanding the colonial practices that are object centric in nation building.

Secondly an awareness is created on decolonial practices in museum space through critical viewing of objects and collaborative work culture. The study explores on how museum's tribal collection be made more engaging to public through immersive learning experiences. The paper reestablishes that a community-centered approach enables visitors to reimagine tribal cultures, identity and heritage in their natural environment through ethnographic museums.

Keywords: *Decolonial, Heritage, Intangible, Museum, Tribal*

INTRODUCTION

The new definition of museum approved during ICOM Prague 2022 is as follows: "A museum as a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing".

The new definition highlights that the inclusiveness of diversity in museum is shaped by the participation of local communities working towards sustainability and sharing of traditional knowledge systems. Not only the definition, museums today require a change in their design, to display to the public in a new way unlike the classic colonial models that is inherited by the accumulation of material culture rather than subject context. It is important to reflect the deepness of colonialism that had embedded in our thinking in intangible ways apart from the tangible material power culture. Within the space of museum, colonialism was of higher order of acceptance by society to prove the wealth of the nation state through the ancient belongings it holds. The concept of exhibiting the artefacts in a museum in glass boxes is in itself a colonial approach where objects are treated as specimens of art and aesthetics

rather than a subject that has a contextual narrative tied to the personal or collective legacy of the owner. Of course the glass box technique is a standard practice to conserve an object for longer period. However the narratives submerge into the objects in a muted form requiring a medium to communicate to the public. In this paper, a critical analysis of museum collections in tribal arts gallery of National Museum, Delhi along with the collections of Crafts Museum, Delhi will be discussed on the aspect of decolonial approach that can be applied in museum space. By conducting literature review and museum visits, I have limited my scope of study to the Tribal arts gallery at National Museum Delhi, due to the proximity of my location. Also I had taken a reference of Crafts Museum Delhi to showcase the progress of Tribal culture museums in India post independence in a parallel series.

The origin of museums in India started during colonial rule. Hence the museum building, artefact collection, display units and ordering of objects all uniformly follow the western style of architecture like glass box display with object labels. Further the collections are ordered and displayed along chronology, depicting the nation's lost heritage on historical perspectives. The others are grouped into thematic collections such as textiles, coins, paintings, sculptures, etc., For flora and fauna, the museum of natural history uses dioramas to showcase wildlife in their natural habitat. In this paper, National Museum at Delhi is explored to understand the museum collection of the tribal arts gallery.

While taking a quick tour of the National Museum, you will notice the ground floor of the museum starts with the Harrapan gallery transporting from pre historic times to the Mauryan gallery, Kushana gallery and the Gupta gallery depicting the chronological history of India's past. Later the galleries are grouped thematically as paintings, bronze sculptures and decorative arts gallery. Although the museum provides information and evidence of India's past yet we see there is no equanimity in the representation of artefacts belonging to the late medieval, Mughal and the kingdoms of the southern, eastern and western India. While the museum boasts of masterpiece collection, the diversity is missed in the representation of objects. (Kavita Singh).

In this study, the tribal arts gallery of the National museum is analyzed from a visitor's point of view. On entering the gallery, there is an array of pictures of people from the northeast India on the left side of the wall and on the other side there are paintings. But there is neither labeling nor information regarding the pictures as who are the people, where do they belong or when was the picture taken and from whom did they source the photo. One could see the tribal rural lifestyle of northeast India. Pictures of men and women in their traditional attire with jewelry and accessories, women hand pounding, weeding grains, weaving blankets are displayed. Walking through the gallery, we find objects grouped into categories and are showcased within glass boxes with object labels describing the name of the objects. We could find jewellery, textiles, masks, headgears, objects of daily kitchen chores made of bamboo, grass, stone and wood like utensils,

Creation of museums in India post independence was to showcase the lost heritage of the country through material assets of royal palaces and personal collections of the elite and popular personalities. However the shift in the agenda of the nationalistic approach or nation building in the recent times had led to the creation of Tribal Museums in native location to portray the ethnicity of the country by linking to the lost roots of mankind. In other way, museum, exhibitions, home stays and craft emporiums have opened up channels of communication from the indigenous people to the outside world through a mutually beneficial platform.

Considering the vast artefacts in the tribal lifestyle gallery of the northeast, there has been no mention with respect to how these artefacts were collected and who procured it. The simplicity of the craftsmanship leaves no room for accredition as we see the collections hold name to tribes and they belong to a collective legacy rather than personal collection. The immense variety of objects grouped under thematic displays of textiles, jewellery, statues, masks, headgears, decorative objects and objects of everyday use describe the rich cultural knowledge possessed by the community in making of each object naturally using sustainable materials.

Case Study

The gallery has a rich collection of daily use objects from the seven sister states of northeast India. Experiencing the critical view of the objects is much better in a crafts museum rather than the galleries at the National museum and the Rasthrapathi museum at Delhi. My observation and findings are presented below

Location of the gallery at the second floor of the National museum exhausts visitors and no spark of curiosity is save to learn the living cultures of the northeast India.

It is difficult for international visitors to connect to the functionality of the object kept in glass cases to their actual function. The dioramas of two people exhibiting their tribal attire and accessories in the glass cases are presented with object labels. But no correlation can be made easily connecting the collection to the pictures. There is no mention as from whom the collection was obtained and when the collection was obtained. Again there is a common ownership of the tribe rather than an individual person.

Likewise the Janjatiya collection at the Rasthrapathi Bhavan museum too is vast and neatly displayed and categorized based on each state's tribe. However only a few minutes of walk along the allotted slot timings do not permit the visitors to have enough time and detailed exploration of the gallery. Again the objects are centered to aesthetic appeal as artwork rather than inspiring nature based sustainable artefact.. So the critical questioning or the contextual understanding is missing with respect to tribal collection.

My suggestive measures are only based on to increase the engagement of public to tribal cultures.

The curation of the tribal arts and lifestyle gallery at the National museum is clearly represented utilizing each and every small space to fill a picture and photo or poster to present maximum available information or objects. But the objects in muted state in a crowd does not talk to visitors, So it is essential to provide an audio video guide using projection screens or display unit to demonstrate the act of making the artefact, weaving, folklore music and dance etc.,

Tribal culture is not mere art but is followed in every aspect of their daily life and livelihood. There are enormous object making techniques that include the making of their homes from natural sourced materials like bamboo, mud, stone and wood, cultivation of crops, processing of grains by hand pounding, fermenting drinks, preserving food during winter, weaving cloth, rug, shawl and textiles of all forms, making baskets, jewelley, accessories, masks, headgears and their unique food culture, music, dance and spiritual and religious rituals render magnificent craftsmanship of simplicity and sustainability in all forms supporting the local flora, fauna and habitat in a natural way.

There has been a lot of effort put by the museum curators in making the gallery interactive by placing treasure hunt riddles of invoking curiosity among the visitors to search for the mentioned object from the presented collection. However visitors fail to notice or get tired to perform this exercise at the end of the museum trail, as they have no energy left for such engagement. Increasing the seating space in museum galleries may allow the visitors to rest and observe collection in detail taking their own time.

Comparative analysis of the different state tribal culture may help to differentiate unique cultures and their values if presented in a clear form.

These are living cultures of our country inhabiting in natural spaces along the mountains, valleys, rivers and forests, hence they serve as evidence for connecting to the roots of humanity in anthropological studies so this gallery must not be OTHERED as the other states of the nation by diluting their cultures to unified one.

The recent Bihar State Museum opening is also an example of state unification as the ethnicity of different language speaking communities of Bihar namely Bihari, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Santali, etc., are clubbed to form a unified Bihar narrative.

Although it represents the notion of the state yet states comprising indigenous population loose their vernacular identity and culture over time due to migration, modern education and technological advancements. So there is an immediate need to archive the intangible cultures of tribal arts, artefacts and craft making. Recent opening of ten Tribal Museums across all states comprising of major tribal population is a great initiative in exposing the tribal culture to the world and regular exhibition and workshops in museums in one way provide livelihood for the tribal people and on the other helps them rooted to their cultures. Hence the community centre approach based ethnographic museums would play a larger role in building a future sustainable and environment friendly. One such example is the Indira Gandhi Manav Sangralaya in Bhopal.

Conclusion

The state seeks to establish a complicated relationship with the tribal by the act of museumizing

it. The state distances the tribal identity from the national selfhood, which is why a "tribal" museum is conceived as exclusive from a national museum.(Rose Sebastian) The recent museum culture of engaging tribal communities to work in Tribal Museums encourages tribal people to come out of their cocoon however there is no complete economic progress in the livelihood of the tribals due to mass migration, climate change, infrastructure development and technological progress. Tribal communities cannot be burdened with running the museum, however a mutual relationship between the government and tribals must coexist in running ethnographic museums that are to be opened in upcoming years. The visitors gaze of viewing the tribals as primitive humans and their crafts as artistic must change beyond artistic gaze to understanding their lifestyle and culture. This would help in recognizing tribal art and artefacts as objects of simplicity, humility and sustainability. The Tribal museums open up markets in the stream of tourism and seasonal exhibition showcasing tribal products helps in growing native crafts products marketing. However these crafts are objects affordable only to the elite when set in a museum space and the government must introduce new schemes in all spheres apart from museums for the tribals to have an upward mobility in economic prosperity.

Simultaneously the traditional knowledge systems of tribals in all forms like crafts, music, dance, weaving, medicine, architecture etc., must be preserved in a form that can be practically used as a discourse for future generations to benefit from tribal cultures.

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The Snake, The Story and the Woman: Indigenous ways of knowing in Nagamandala

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Girish Karnad's play *Nagamandala* from the perspective of indigenous knowledge systems, emphasizing the ways in which storytelling, symbolism, and the feminine voice preserve cultural wisdom that frequently exists outside of written traditions. This study portrays folk narratives as intricate stories of epistemology knowing that is firmly anchored in oral, symbolic, and affective traditions instead of treating them as simple folklore. This study employs a qualitative literary approach to examine the play's three main components - the woman, the story, and the snake as cultural symbols that reflect indigenous and tribal reasoning. The snake represents emotional truth, ancestry, and a bond with nature. While the woman, Rani, represents the voice that is silenced but gains agency through narrative transformation, the personified story becomes a living, breathing archive of collective memory. All of these components show how the play enacts indigenous forms of knowledge transmission rather than merely describing them. The results imply that *Nagamandala* embraces cyclical time, intuitive logic, and performative wisdom in order to challenge colonial and patriarchal storytelling conventions. Karnad establishes a dramaturgical space that enhances cultural survival, honors the oral voice, and preserves heritage. Reclaiming oral storytelling, according to this paper, is about creating room for alternative knowledge systems to exist, oppose, and be heard on their own terms, not just about upholding tradition.

Keywords: *Indigenous knowledge, oral storytelling, cultural memory, Girish Karnad, symbolic resistance*

INTRODUCTION

Narratives have always been the pulse of societies, though among indigenous and tribal cultures, storytelling is indeed more than entertainment; it is a mode through which people know, remember, heal, also resist. Knowledge can be personified in voice and can be transmitted in myths, symbols, and performances from one generation to another here, not taking the form of any written text or archives. It is borne on a memory and an intuition and a lived experience yet not constrained by logic or chronology. Formalized written texts are a tendency within contemporary literary studies. However, indigenous worldviews do work upon a canvas that is far larger for orality, feeling, and symbolism coexist there with ease. Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, a powerful rare contemporary play, pays homage toward this tradition. The play bases itself on Kannada folklore yet it presents modern indigenous epistemology especially in its main characters: the snake, the tale, and the woman.

This paper looks at how *Nagamandala* is a place where indigenous knowledge is being recovered. The process transforms it from a dramatization of the folktales into a performance of ancestral memory, emotional intelligence, and

cultural resistance. A symbol of fertility, continuity, and change, the snake is not only a magical animal but also an archetype in many tribal cultures. The story, which is embodied and conscious, illustrates how oral cultures preserve knowledge through storytelling rather than ink. And the woman, Rani, emerges as a voice that has been suppressed by social structures for a long time. She begins to describe her world in her own words by relating it to the land and stories.

With the displacement, erasure, and ecological exploitation of tribal cultures across India, plays like *Nagamandala* offer a window through which we can understand what it means to preserve not just land or language but also the intangible heritage of worldview, values, and voice. The Karnad's embedded stories, magical realism, and nonlinear narrative appeal to oral cultures' aesthetic sensibilities. The wise practices of those who live in close proximity to the earth, whose truths are sensed first and written later, are reflected in these buildings, contrary to Western literary conventions.

Using a qualitative literary approach grounded in indigenous epistemological frameworks and cultural criticism, this paper approaches oral tradition as a valid epistemology grounded in experience and symbolic richness rather than as folklore. "Indigenous knowledge is about relationships between people, the land, and the spiritual world," according to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith 74). Karnad constructs *Nagamandala* as a living model of this relational knowledge, either consciously or intuitively. Storytelling is taking place here. According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Stories are medicine… they do political work" (Simpson 35). In *Nagamandala*, the woman fights back, the snake changes, and the story itself heals. They collaborate to create a theatre that not only provides entertainment but also takes over the space so that indigenous knowledge can be felt, heard, and remembered.

Materials and Methodology

The analysis closely examines the original text and applies a cultural framework to examine the structure, characters, motifs, and symbols of *Nagamandala*. The play is an act of storytelling rather than merely recounting stories, despite its roots in Indian folklore. When the script is read with an awareness of the oral tradition, its circular pattern, narrator changes, blurring of fact and fantasy, and intuitive moral logic are all revealed. Many indigenous and tribal stories share these traits. Oral cultures prioritize emotional resonance, rhythm, and memorability over abstract logic, as Walter J. Ong reminds us (Ong 36). *Nagamandala* exemplifies the idea that highly artistic characters sing, remember, and come to life in addition to speaking.

This approach also respects the fact that stories in many indigenous knowledge keeping systems are truths expressed in a unique way rather than works of fiction. They instill cultural values, spiritual vitality, and ancestral wisdom despite not adhering to a strict plot or linear time. This research looks at the story's role in *Nagamandala* as a character rather than a plot point. It is alive, alternating between the narrator's world and the world of the fires, bringing to our attention what might otherwise be lost. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states that storytelling in indigenous contexts is "a form of theory" that is passed down through voice, body, and earth and is not separated from the people but rather woven into their tenacity (Simpson 22). This understanding guides how the story is read here, not for the sake of enjoying the story but rather to convey knowledge.

The methodology emphasizes symbolic understanding, especially in the woman and snake representations. The snake is considered a sacred symbol in the majority of indigenous cultures. Snakes are often associated with the divine feminine, seasonal change, and earth energies in Indian tribal cultures. These features align with the symbolic proportions of Karnad's snake character. Tribal knowledge is highly perceptive and adaptive, as demonstrated by the cobra's ability to change shape and observe silently. In indigenous cosmologies, animals are kin and knowledge keepers rather than symbolic metaphors, as Vine Deloria Jr. reminds us (Deloria 59). In *Nagamandala*, the snake serves as both a magical lover and a messenger of truths that the sensible world is unable to accept.

In a similar vein, Rani's metamorphosis through storytelling is analysed as a gendered epistemological development. The oral memory keepers of songs, stories, rituals, and healing practices are women in many indigenous and tribal societies. It's no coincidence that the play focuses on Rani's inner world, her dreams, and her relationship to the natural and spiritual worlds (through the snake and the story). It represents a deeper cultural logic that recognizes narrative agency, emotional intelligence, and intuitive knowing as legitimate modes of understanding. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, indigenous research frameworks need to "respect the wisdom of experience, the power of voice, and the value of silence" (Smith 142). This study interprets Rani's journey as a process of reclaiming voice, identity, and embodied knowledge rather than just as a psychological arc.

Secondary sources were chosen on the basis of their applicability to symbolic anthropology,

indigenous theory, and decolonial critique. The study is noteworthy for its refusal to reduce tribal wisdom to metaphor. Instead, it utilizes *Nagamandala*'s symbols - the fire, the snake, and the story, as meaning-makers with ancient histories that predate contemporary theatre. The decision to view the play through this lens is consistent with the ideas of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who argues that oral heritage literature must be interpreted according to its social and performative dynamics rather than its textual content (Thiong'o 87). The play is interpreted with a sense of place within a universe of cultural and religious allusions rather than in an abstract manner.

The study also makes a distinction between storytelling's performative nature. Indian folk performance customs, particularly Yakshagana, are intricately interwoven with Karnad's theatre. Despite not addressing staging, the paper recognizes that a large portion of the script, the chorus, the meta-theatrical narrator, and the ambiguity between actors and audience members all evoke a world in which the narrative is shared by bodies and spaces rather than belonging to a single voice. In tribal story circles, where participation and repetition are just as important as the story itself, such stage components are appealing. As Robin Wall Kimmerer discovers, "stories can be both medicine and seed," offering hope for healing as well as rebirth (Kimmerer 34). *Nagamandala* is a text that also serves as a vehicle for renewal in this sense.

Finally, by adopting this perspective, the research is incorporated into decolonizing approaches. It aims to understand indigenous symbols on their own terms within their own cultural context rather than comparing them to Western literary theory. According to Margaret Kovach, it is more important to allow indigenous observations to alter the way we ask questions and seek knowledge than it is to impose them into academic models (Kovach 49). Therefore, this research listens to what each of them reports in the language of native existence rather than reducing the snake to a phallic icon, the story to a trick, or the female to a cliche.

The paper honors the epistemology that *Nagamandala* performs by allowing symbolic, emotional, and oral traditions to influence how the play is read. This epistemology is one in which truth is relational, meaning is palimpsested, and narratives are inhabited rather than analysed. When working with pieces that capture the spirit of communities that have relied on stories for centuries to not only survive but also thrive, this human-centered, culturally-based approach is essential.

Results

In looking at *Nagamandala* with an eye to indigenous knowledge systems, a number of profound and complicated insights arise insights that are not merely thematic but embodied within the structure and voice of the play itself. This is not a play that simply retells folktales; rather, it reframes how we perceive truth, memory, and knowledge in light of symbols, intuition, and personal experience. The snake, the story, and the woman develop into more than just literary devices; they all have unique knowledge systems that speak to tribal epistemologies, particularly those that encompass India's many indigenous and folk cultures. The snake must be understood in the context of its mythological exterior.

In *Nagamandala*, the cobra is a force for emotional clarity, transformation, and protection rather than an enemy or a demonic spirit. Snakes are revered and associated with fertility, ancestor spirits, and agricultural seasons in the majority of Indian tribal societies. The snake's transformational ability is not deceitful; rather, it reflects flexibility, which is highly valued in the majority of indigenous societies. In his reflections on Indian oral epics, A.K. Ramanujan notes that "the animal in the story is often closer to the self than the hero is" (Ramanujan 53). In this case, the snake stands in for the intuitive self, which is aware of desire, longing, and vulnerability without the use of language's linear thinking. Its unspoken wisdom asserts a more intuitive, body-based knowing and challenges the reduction of knowledge to the written or rational.

The story itself may be the most profound example of indigenous epistemology in the play since it is a traveling, talking being. It does not have an anchor. It moves, it changes, and it only exists because it is spoken. This aligns well with oral traditions, where storytelling is more about shared memory than authorship. Tribal knowledge systems view stories as shared property that are told for educational, therapeutic, and commemorative purposes rather than for amusement. G.N. Devy states that "the story in an oral tradition is a contract with the past and a responsibility to the future" (Devy 17). The story in *Nagamandala* endures by infiltrating dreams, influencing destinies, and igniting new lives. It understands that being remembered is a political act. Its presence serves as a reminder that forgetting is not passive but rather forced, and silence is not absence but pause.

The play's emotional and intellectual core is the woman, Rani. Her journey from loneliness to symbolic rebirth is cultural as well as personal. Conflict is not how Rani fights for dominance. She

reclaims space by identifying with spiritual truth and storytelling, two themes that are prevalent in many matriarchal and indigenous cultures. Her initial quiet is not a sign of emptiness but rather the accumulation of learned voicelessness, inherited roles, and cultural pressure. It is renewal, not rebellion, when she starts to dream and then talk. As Uma Chakravarti insists in her feminist interpretation of oral traditions, "women's silences in patriarchal contexts are filled with encoded memories" (Chakravarti 61). Rani's transformation is not from weak to strong, but from mute to meaningful from culturally contained to spiritually connected.

Throughout the play, symbolism functions as an indigenous language. The flames that "listen" to stories, the roots that entangle desire, the threads of hair used in rituals, all suggest that the world is alive and communicative. This interconnectivity is fundamental to tribal philosophy, in which knowledge is not about objects so much as relations: human-animal, nature-spirit, self-narrative. Karnad doesn't merely write this, he performs it. The composition of *Nagamandala* replicates this web of relations, playing a story within a tale within a myth, repeatedly looping back on itself. This non-linear design reflects what H.S. Shivaprakash refers to the "spiraling time of folk cosmology," where there are no clear beginnings or endings, and truth is felt, not empirically known (Shivaprakash 78). The rhythm of the narrative, its repetition, interruptions, and reverberating voices realizes this spiral.

The meta-theatricality of the play, the story telling a story to a flame, which relays it to a storyteller calls attention to an indigenous concept of performance per se. For tribal communities, performance is not representational but presentational. To narrate is to bring something into being, even the sacred. The play respects such a faith, having the audience sit not outside the narrative as spectators but inside it as participants. Karnad's theatrical practice takes us into a collective space of knowing, akin to a village circle of people sitting by the fire. As Kirtana Thangavelu puts it, "theatre in India's oral traditions was never separate from life, it was a way of living, knowing, and healing" (Thangavelu 44). In *Nagamandala*, this spirit comes back.

More importantly, *Nagamandala* contests contemporary ideas of truth and fidelity ideas filtered through patriarchal and colonial paradigms. The play doesn't provide moral tidiness. The husband goes unpunished, the snake is not vanquished, and Rani is not exonerated in the traditional sense. But something deeper is reinstated: balance, voice, presence. In much tribal jurisprudence, resolution may not be as much about right and wrong as it is about harmony. Karnad appears to be invoking this principle, inferring that truth is known in the body rather than always documented on paper. As Meenakshi Mukherjee proposes in her analysis of regional tales, "truth in folklore is atmospheric, it envelops rather than convinces" (Mukherjee 28). This enveloping truth is what the audience is experiencing at the conclusion of *Nagamandala,* even if they are not able to articulate it.

Finally, the snake's ultimate act of becoming one with Rani is not a death, but a transformation. This scene ties together all the strands of the play: the woman achieves her autonomy, the tale achieves its conclusion, and the snake achieves its symbolic purpose. It is a gesture of emotional completion, rather than narrative resolution. In the folklore of tribal societies, such pairings occur with frequency not as a romantic technique but as a metaphor for joining. Human and animal, narrator and listener, woman and wisdom merging is not fantasy, it is allegiance to a mode of knowing in which boundaries blur and meaning is communal.

These observations do not arise from pulling out fixed meanings but rather from approaching the play as a cultural body. Every symbol breathes. Every voice ring out a greater world. The snake, the narrative, and the woman are not elements of a plot, they are elements of a philosophy. Karnad does not expound indigenous knowledge; he enacts it. And in enacting it, *Nagamandala* turns from a play into a ceremony of remembering.

Discussions

An understanding of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* through an indigenous philosophical perspective enables us to see the play not just as a piece of theatre, but as an intentional gesture of cultural recovery. By combining oral narrative, symbolic discourse, and feminine self, Karnad stages a narrative field wherein indigenous ways of knowing are enacted instead of being discussed. Its performance structure, narrative content, and characters collectively dramatize knowledge that is typically silenced, marginalized, or disavowed in dominant scholarly and literary spheres. Through this, the play responds to broader questions regarding how cultures persist by means of memory, voice, and imagination.

What is also unique to *Nagamandala* is its conscious refusal to binary oppositions. It subverts the hierarchical binarism between written and oral, man and woman, truth and myth, sacred and

profane. The narrative is not linear because the narrative isn't supposed to fall into linear thinking. In folk and tribal cultures, narratives move in spirals; they come back, they echo, they ring through generations. This pattern of a spiral is ingrained in the very format of the play, which ebbs and flows from dreams, memories, and oral myths. As A.K. Ramanujan noted, "Indian folktales are seldom about solution; they are about experience" (Ramanujan 61). Karnad's dramaturgy is therefore in keeping with the experiential, somatic nature of tribal folklore.

The transformation of the character Rani cannot be quantified merely in terms of psychology. She changes from being a silent youth bride to a symbolically empowered being. Its engagement with the snake is at the heart of this transformation, yet the symbolism of the snake is much more nuanced than romantic fantasies or supernatural specter. It symbolizes a force of nature, protector, and expression of native spiritual reason. In most tribal societies throughout India, snakes are associated with fertility, earth knowledge, and perpetuity of ancestral lines. As H.S. Shivaprakash puts it, "The serpent in Indian thought is not demonic, but dialectical, negotiating between desire and transcendence" (Shivaprakash 48).

So too is the story in the play, literally embodied and endowed with agency, a living archive. It speaks, moves, and gets transformed, all characteristics of oral knowledge regimes. In contrast to print culture that stabilizes meaning, oral traditions permit multiplicity, revision, and common ownership. G.N. Devy points out that in orality, "language lives in the presence of its listener" (Devy 29). This is the case in *Nagamandala*, where the narrative comes to be only because it is heard, remembered, and spoken. The play becomes a ritual of listening and passing on collectively.

Significantly, Karnad does not idealize the past. He does not imply that native knowledge is fixed or untainted. Instead, he acknowledges its hybridity, its adaptability, and its rootedness in emotion and ethics. Rani's choices, the snake's transformations, and the storyteller's reflections all point toward a flexible cultural logic that values connection over conquest. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Regional narratives work not by isolating identity, but by weaving it into a larger web of shared symbols and emotional truth" (Mukherjee 38).

This emotional reality is important in thinking about how the play resists dominant gender ideologies. In a patriarchal world, the woman's body may be the place of silence and scrutiny. But in *Nagamandala,* the woman's voice her dreams, her tales, her instincts is the source of freedom. Rani is not saved by any outside power; she takes back her life through her engagement with story and symbol. Uma Chakravarti notes that "women's retellings of myths offer alternate maps of meaning, where silence itself can become a form of speech" (Chakravarti 82). Rani's silence at the beginning is not emptiness but potential, which the story unlocks.

The form of the play itself plays a vital role in this epistemological shift. Karnad uses metatheatre, embedded narratives, magical realism, and symbolic storytelling not only as matters of aesthetics but as instruments of knowledge. These are the same devices that reflect the layered, frequently non-linear nature of indigenous myths. Kirtana Thangavelu posits that "Theater rooted in folk logic is not linear but associative, where each act contains echoes of other times and voices" (Thangavelu 55). By using these techniques, *Nagamandala* becomes a dramatic landscape where the past, present, and future co-exist.

Furthermore, the act of storytelling in the play challenges colonial frameworks of knowledge. It proposes that knowing is not always about proving; sometimes, it is about feeling, remembering, and imagining. The story resists closure. Even at the end, the truth of Rani's experience remains outside the rational grasp of her husband or society. This refusal to resolve is not a flaw in storytelling but a philosophical position. As Gauri Viswanathan contends, "Colonial knowledge demanded closure, while indigenous knowledge thrives in ambiguity" (Viswanathan 102). Karnad's failure to put an end to the narrative is a tribute to this ambiguity.

The eventual fusion of the snake and Rani is a ritual gesture. It is a gesture of integration, not conquest. In most tribal cultures, union with spirit or nature is not domination but profound relationality. The snake becomes one with Rani, not physically, but as an existing presence that confirms her autonomy and dignity. It is a symbol for learning that is absorbed and not imposed. This is maybe the most revolutionary move of the play to demonstrate how wisdom, identity, and healing can be derived from storytelling itself.

In a world that increasingly discounts oral histories and native cultures, *Nagamandala* presents a subtle but powerful reminder that stories hold not only meaning but memory, not only plot but power. Karnad does not show us tribal knowledge as an artifact to admire, but as a living force that continues to speak. Through Rani, the snake, and the tale, he asks us to listen. And listening, we remember.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* is much more than a reworking of a folk tale. It is an exercise in cultural memory and philosophical investigation, acted out through symbols, narrative, and silence. The snake, the narrative, and the woman are not discrete motifs; rather, they are strands of a tapestry that continue indigenous ways of knowing modes of knowing that are based on emotion, remembrance, ritual, and relationality. By framing these items in a non-linear, word-of-mouth format, Karnad blurs traditional hierarchies of truth, authorship, and narrative closure.

The transformation of Rani, the symbolic union of the snake, and the living presence of the story affirm a world where meaning is not imposed but uncovered through being present. In folk and tribal cultures, wisdom is not located in certainty but in continuity, in listening, remembering, and retelling. As G.N. Devy would point out, "The authority of the word in oral traditions lies not in what is said, but in how and when it is said" (Devy 42). *Nagamandala* captures this rhythm, presenting a layered experience instead of one conclusive statement.

The play also reclaims space for feminine voice and intuition in a world that often renders them invisible. Rani's quiet assertion of self is deeply political, not in a confrontational sense, but in how it honors storytelling as resistance. Uma Chakravarti observes, "The transformation of the mythic woman into a subject is itself a historical act" (Chakravarti 90). Karnad gives that act a stage.

Finally, the strength of *Nagamandala* is in its unwillingness to be reduced. It refuses the binary, respects ambiguity, and approaches stories as living containers rather than as fossil remains. As H.S. Shivaprakash puts it, "Myth is not memory lost in time, it is memory alive in form" (Shivaprakash 63). This research has tried to listen to that living memory and follow it along its quiet, abiding wisdom.

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Rethinking Science Education: Integration of Rhizomatic Approach in Ethnopedagogy-based Science Education

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ABSTRACT

Ethnopedagogy is a method of integrating indigenous knowledge and practices in the teaching and learning process. This method, when given through the Rhizomatic approach, can promote constructivism and empower learners to think and use their past experiences in learning. Therefore, in this study, an attempt has been made to understand how a rhizomatic approach can aid the ethnopedagogy-based science education. The data have been collected through an ethnographic field survey method to document the experiences of the students and teachers in the integration of the rhizomatic approach in ethnopedology-based science education. The findings of the study reveal that integration of rhizomatic approach in ethnopegogy based science education can significantly improve the learning of science concepts among indigenous students. This study aims to bridge the gap between indigenous knowledge and mainstream science education through the use of a rhizomatic approach in ethnopedagogy-based science education. The study highlights the potential of combining rhizomatic approach with ethnopedagogy to create culturally responsive science education. It implies that such integration can enhance conceptual clarity, student engagement, and active participation in the classroom.

Keywords: *Ethnopedagogy, Rhizomatic Approach,Traditional Knowledge System (TKS), Science Education, Tribal Education.*

INTRODUCTION

India is a country rich in diversified culture, which needs diversified pedagogical inputs. In the era where the global education system strives for inclusivity, Indian has published the National Education Policy (NEP-2020), which primarily focuses on a transformative framework, advocating for a holistic, multidisciplinary, indigenously rooted approach to learning (Das & Ray, 2024). National Education Policy (2020) strictly recommended that "All curriculum and pedagogy, from the foundational stage onwards, will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, customs, language, philosophy, geography, ancient and contemporary knowledge, societal and scientific needs, indigenous and traditional ways of learning etc." In this regard, when we look back at the National Policy on Tribals (2006), it recommends regarding the benefits of Tribal Education Such as:-

- Mother tongue should be used for tribal school students.
- Educated tribal teachers should be employed as teachers.
- Student-centric pedagogy must be followed for tribal dominated students so that they can relate the classroom teaching to their regular practices.
- Tribal games and sports, archery, medicinal value, crafts, art and culture, folk dance and folk songs, folk paintings, etc,

should be included in the curricula practices.

The main aim of science education is to develop scientific temperament among learners. It believes in the process of inquiry to understand the natural world, which needs the acquisition of valid knowledge about the world through formulating questions and hypotheses, inquiry, evidence-based thinking, creativity, understanding cause and effect relationships, and decision making (NCFSE, 2023). However, Science education faces several challenges due to lack in context appropriate teaching methodologies for engaging students according to their learning needs. Traditional teaching approaches are fully capitalized and often rely on lecture-based methods, unable to cater to students' diverse learning styles and preferences, which shows the need for a comprehensive analysis of teaching methodologies in science education (Moises, 2024). Hence, it is a major challenge for a teacher to develop conceptual understanding of students, which may be due to the curricula load, rigid time table settings, disconnection between students' observation and theories, and lack of infrastructure for laboratories. To counter these challenges, learning science should not only be about learning theories and facts, but also making conceptual connections with real life, acquiring the process capacities of science, and applying such knowledge to understand the world, which is most important (NCFSE, 2023).

Tribals students feels like alien in this regard; as their lifestyle is totally different from the textbook environment as well as school environment (Mohapatra, 2023). If there is alignment between current ideas and what is discussed in classrooms, ideas get strengthened (Moises,2024). Meanwhile, to fulfil the challenges of tribal learners in Science Education, ethnopedagogy can be the best tool for connecting science with local cultural practices (Rahmawati, 2020). Ethnopedagogy is the systematic scientific and educational experiences of ethnic groups, which are in practice both internally and also in the outer environment throughout generations (Alimbekov, 2007). It is the process of systematic representation of ethnic experiences scientifically (Hamzaj & Selvi, 2020). Also, leveraging ethnopedagogy in classroom practice helps the learners to develop cognitive understanding, emotional attitudes, and behavioural action (Selasih & Sudarsana, 2018). Consequently, the Rhizomatic learning approach refers to the process of extending, nurturing, cultivating, and catalyzing the development of a living network consisting of knowledgeable elements both from material and non-material resources (Brailas, 2020).

As a part of a diverse cultural country, it is the responsibility of a teacher to promote learner-centric teaching methodologies, which relate to their daily life experiences. So, it is time to rethink teaching practices- specifically science teaching practices to relate to the everyday life experiences of learners. In this sense, when we talk about tribal learners living in a distinct geographical setup, which is totally different from the mainstream. Integrating their living experiences into their science learning process may enhance their understanding of science. So, it can be inferred that the textbook scientific concept can again be reconnected and reconstructed with the logical and scientific everyday living practices of local people. For this, the job of the educator is to discover the theoretical and practical connection in science education. Hence, everyday practices of local communities can build a scientific connection with theoretical concepts, such as rhizome, by connecting the nodes of practical experiences.

Objectives

The present study has explored the following objectives:

1. To explore the ongoing ethnopedagogical practices in science Teaching
2. To examine the connection between ethnic practices and Science Education

Methodology of the Study

A qualitative survey design will be used for the study. An in-depth unstructured interview method was used to collect the primary information throughout the field survey.

So, during a field survey in the tribal block (Komna Block) of Nuapada, Odisha, it was found that some teachers are trying to relate the local wisdom in teaching-learning practices. The data is collected from the 3 high school teachers (Science Teacher, Math Teacher, and English Teacher) through snowball sampling of Komna Jitamitra High School through unstructured interviews.

Results

Ethnopedagogical Practices in Science Teaching

While conducting a field visit to explore the ongoing pedagogical practices of secondary school science teachers of Odisha, the researcher found some examples of using ethnopedagogy in their classroom teaching.



Example of Ethnopedagogy in a Real Classroom Situation

The researcher has a research topic that is relevant to exploring ethnopedagogical practices in the secondary-level schools of Nuapada, Odisha. For this purpose, the researcher has visited the study area for a preliminary field survey. Nuapada District has a total of 5 blocks. However, the Komna block has a large tribal population of various tribal groups. Due to the highly tribal populated area, the researcher has selected a preliminary visit.

The positionality of the researcher is the local residence, but does not belong to any tribal community.

Interview Results

As the researcher visited the schools for a preliminary field survey, a formal introduction conversation happened with the CRCC and the Headmaster. They are permitted to interact with teachers. With their permission, the researcher again introduced herself to the respective teachers for the repo. By briefing the concept of ethnopedagogy, the researcher has raised the following questions to them:

Q1. What is your teaching discipline?

Ans- Teachers are from three different disciplines: Mathematics Teacher (Head Sir), Science Teacher, and English Teacher.

Q2. What are the students' different cultural backgrounds?

Ans- Most of the students belong to tribal cultural backgrounds such as Gond, Majhi, Sabar, and Paharia.

Q3. What is your cultural background? Are you from a local cultural background or from a different culture?

Ans- Mathematics Teacher- belongs to another cultural group

Science Teacher- belongs to the local cultural group but not the tribal community

English Teacher- belongs to the local cultural group but not among the tribal community

Q4. Do you know the local cultural practices of learners?

Ans- The science and English teachers are aware of the local cultural practices; however, the mathematics teacher replied that he is trying to learn.

Q5. Can you please share some of the cultural practices?

Ans- Science Teacher – "Yes, sure, ma'am. I belong to the local area, and this is my birthplace also. I am closely associated with these people. I am fond of their dalkhai dance; sometimes, I join with them. I want to share my experience that traditionally, there was a practice of keeping food warm, where people used calcium salt (CaCl2) with water to cover the food. And it keeps food warm for a long time." Another practice I also want to share is bullock cart riding, which is my favorite one.

English Teacher- English sir has shared that he likes the folk music and folk tales of the tribal community. The tribal community has different folk music for different societal rituals, such as birth ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, cultivation songs, and death rituals ceremonies. There is also different music. Another ritual of tribals is that they have the practice of sacrificing animals for their God and Goddess to make them happy. Sir has also quoted that "it is very few times they take hospital treatment, they have blind faith on their jhankar (priest)" .

Mathematics Teacher- "I am learning the local language for better communication".

Q6. Wow, those are really great experiences. What is the academic achievement of the learners?

Ans- Science Teacher- "The learners are improving at a slow pace; we are trying our level best to understand them, but the outcome is not at that level. Somehow, they are improving due to our continuous involvement. It is because of their low socio-economic status that sometimes they miss class to earn money. And they feel stressed and hopeless due to this reason."

Q7. What are the remedial measures taken by the school for improvement?

Ans- Mathematics Teacher (Head Master)- We all the teachers work as a team. We know their concern and try to make them aware of their future. All of our ST students are aware of the scholarship scheme. Sometimes, we organize different co-curricular activities to engage learners, such as sports activities, cultural activities, essays, debates, etc.

Q8. Okay, Sir, then what teaching-learning approaches do you follow in the classroom?

Ans- Mathematics Teacher (Head Master)- We are using learner-centered approaches for the teaching-learning process. We use technology integration and the project method, and assess students regularly for their development.

Q9. Do any of you use the cultural practices as teaching-learning materials?

Ans- The headmaster, sir, said No.

English Sir says sometimes I discuss the folktales for teaching moral lessons.

And the Science Teacher replied that he often uses cultural practices in his classroom teaching-learning process.

Q10. Sir, can you please give some examples of classroom teaching-learning practices, sir? (To Science Teacher)

Ans- Surely. As previously discussed, the traditional food warming process, i.e., Calcium salt / Calcium Chloride (CaCl2) reacts with water (H2O) and produces heat.

$CaCl2+2H2O = Ca(OH)2+ 2HCl$

This is an example of the exothermic reaction. An exothermic reaction is when energy is released in the form of heat as a byproduct. This is why the solution releases heats when we add calcium chloride to water. More Ex- Snow formation in cloud

And while discussing about the poor conductor and insulator, the best example can be our mud houses. As mud is a poor conductor of heat (it doesn't allow heat to pass through it), it acts as an insulator that prevents heat from flowing from outside to inside. This is the reason that mud houses are naturally cooler in summer and conversely, make houses warmer in winter.

Another example is that our ancestors had a high perception of timing and could accurately predict the time through the shadow of a tree.

Next, bullock cart wheels are the best examples for understanding rotational motion. The wheels of the bullock cart rotated around their own axes is rotational motion, and moving forward is translational motion.

Here, the people were previously cultivated through shifting cultivation. Now, they are aware of the environmental loss, and most of them have stopped destroying the jungle.

Because the village is near to jungle, people are aware of various flora and fauna. And also, people have knowledge about medicinal herbs.

Q11. Do you know the name of this teaching-learning approach?

Ans- No ma'am. As it is in my regular practice, I just use this knowledge to make learning easier.

Q12. Thank you, Sir; now my question is, what is the effect of your culture-integrated classroom?

Ans- Yes, ma'am, it is good; some of the learners already know and relate to the textbook. The sir also added "I personally feel that learners are taking an interest to learn about science in their own way of learning."

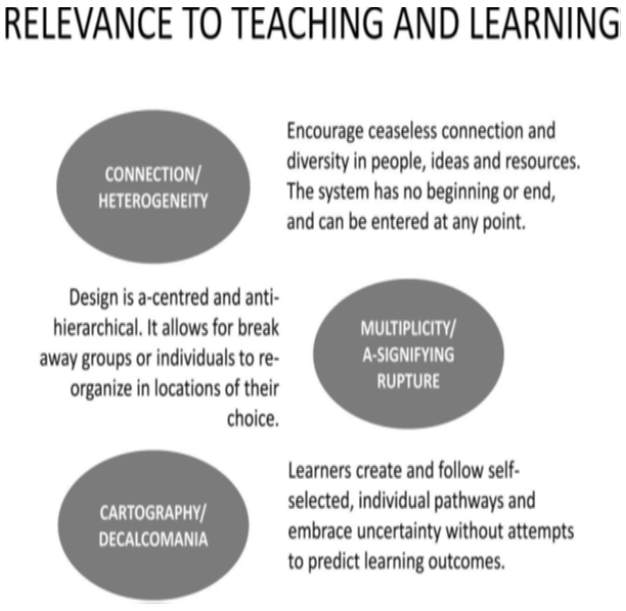
Q13. What are the challenges you face in making the classroom culturally integrated?

Ans- I didn't face any challenges as I know all the practices; it is a regular practice in my village and in my home also. English, sir, replied that he actually never thinks about the cultural integration of knowledge into classroom practices. The syllabus also needs to be completed within the particular time period, the headmaster added.

Rhizomatic approach as a node between science learning and ethnic practices

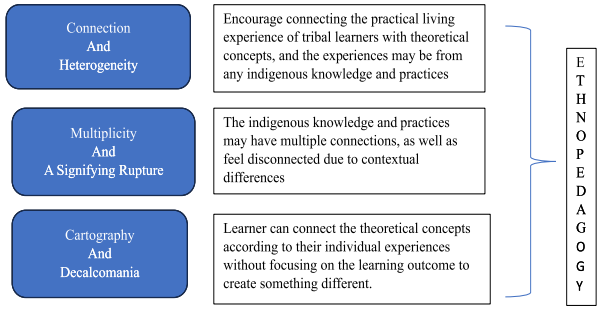
As we have already discussed, according to the rhizomatic viewpoint, knowledge can be negotiated and contextualized through collaborative learning experiences shared by constructivist and connective pedagogy experts (Cormier, 2008). The concept of Rhizomatic theory was given by Deleuze and Guattari in 2002 with six principles, such as Connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalcomania (Khine, 2023).

These six principles may be relevant to the teaching and learning process as follows:-



[Fig:- The Relevance of the Rhizome in the teaching and learning process]
Source: Funes, 2015 in Mackness et al., 2016

In this way, by integrating ethnic practices into the science teaching and learning process, the results may produce successful ethnopedagogy.



Now, from the example of ethnopedagogy in classroom teaching, we can connect the traditional knowledge and practices wherever the theoretical concepts are scientifically related to the practical living experiences. Here, the rhizomatic approach may work as a node for connecting traditional knowledge with textbook science content to make ethnopedagogy more stronger.

Conclusion

The present study argues that ethnopedagogy is an important approach for tribal adolescent learners. Tribal students often feel excluded from the textbook content; however, knowledge is not limited to textbook standard ideas only. On the other hand, it is clearly mentioned in the NEP 2020 policy that the aim of education is to promote inclusiveness. Moreover, Culture is that element that is core to every individual, which makes us feel our ownness and understand the concept. Therefore, according to the research idea, it is found that the ethnopedagogy approach has the power to accelerate the tribal students' understanding of theoretical concepts and specifically for understanding science. In this situation, the rhizomatic approach plays a crucial role in connecting the traditional knowledge with the theories of science textbooks. Hence, it is time to rethink science education to follow ethnopedagogical teaching practices to fulfil the national policy Goals.

Suggestions

Furthermore, strategies can be applied for promoting ethnopedagogy-based science learning as follows: -

1. Assessment of learners' needs
2. Need to be aware of the diversity of the classroom
3. Awareness and good attitude towards the local cultural practices
4. Try to map the textbook concept with the local context rhizomatically
5. Try to find out the scientific reason or logic behind the particular practices
6. Discuss the example or present the demonstration in the classroom
7. Check learner's feedback
8. Involve community participation in the teaching-learning process

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Decolonising Virtual Spaces: Digital Disability, Tribal Resistance, and the Legacy of Birsa Munda in Ready Player One

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to critically examine the intersection between digital disability and indigenous defiance by analyzing the book Ready Player One by Ernest Cline and the resistance by the Munda tribe in India as part of their past struggle. This paper suggests that the virtual world, OASIS, as discussed by the Assemblage Theory (Deleuze & Guattari) and the Postcolonial Digital Divide phenomenon, is a space of conflict that ironically leads to the reconstruction of the colonial order because of the avatar-based emancipation. Three issues are revealed: (1) The hyper-able avatar of Parzival temporarily constructs agency by effacing his physical disability, and likewise the Munda tribe also finds themselves creatively erased and preserved digitally; (2) the commercial domination of the OASIS by the IOI is also reminiscent of the American land dispossession strategies such as those currently affecting India (with only 12 percent tribal populations having broadband access); and (3) the Indigenous technologies, such as the Adivasi Bhasha language app, can provide counter-examples to the neoliberal discourse. The tribal research and textual analysis reveal how the gaming discourse portrays, at the same time, resembles, and challenges the conditions of structural marginalisation. This gives way to the suggestion, along the lines of the Birsa Munda anti-colonial perspective, to the idea of design justice laws. The research paper contributes to the decolonial game study level by highlighting the epistemology of tribal knowledge as a basis for critiquing virtual worlds. Additionally, it provides actionable examples to support the practice of achieving a fairer praxis in digital futures.

Keywords: Assemblage Theory, Digital Identity, Virtual Worlds and Disability, Avatar Creation, Neoliberal Design in Digital Spaces

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Virtual Worlds and the Illusion of Liberation

Online games and metaverses are often portrayed as worlds with infinite possibilities, offering no boundaries on the identities users can explore. Nevertheless, critical theorists believe that such places are not neutral but rather integrate established social stratification. Nakamura (2002) and Kleege

(2018) focus on the pervasiveness of digital ableism in the virtual design that displaces disabled users with avatar technologies that promote correcting the bodily difference and keeping it hidden. Games and metaverses based on this decision that allow the possibility to fix or hide symptoms are among the most obvious cases in which this is programmed on the level of platforms (Seymour, 2020; Garland-Thomson, 2009).

On the same note, Indigenous epistemologies are continuously pushed aside, which brings about symbolic erasure and maintains a set of settler colonialism ideologies (Dyson, Hendriks, & Grant, 2016). Such spatial and epistemological occupation is known in Tuck and Yang (2012) as settler moves to innocence, in which stories of progress, futurism, or neutrality conceal the erasure of the presence of Indigenous people. Such aspects explain why virtual worlds contribute to structural exclusion in the guise of universal access.

1.2 The Problem: Colonialism and Ableism in *Ready Player One*

The Ready Player One (2011) by Ernest Cline presents readers with OASIS, a virtual world that offers users a chance to escape their harsh physical reality. However, beneath its utopian surface lies a form that supports neoliberal and colonial thinking. By creating a hyper-able avatar, the main character, Parzival, removes his disability in the real world and re-creates the so-called New Jim Code, as defined by Benjamin (2019), in which seemingly objective technologies are manipulated to perpetuate inequality based on algorithmic design.

The transformation of Parzival can also be described using what Mitchell and Snyder (2015) offer as narrative prosthesis, in which the concept of disability is treated as a narrative tool to be defeated or overcome. It is part of a bigger pattern of writing of video games, which operate on notions of disability as temporary or conditional or as something that can be removed (Kleege, 2018; Seymour, 2020).

Moreover, Indigenous people are not present in the OASIS with their representative, which also reflects colonial tactics of spatial control and culture eradication that they exercised in the past over tribal populations such as the Mundas (Shah, 2004). According to Gajjala (2019), what is lacking in OASIS is an Indigenous geography, mythology, and language, something that comprises a crucial component of what he calls the postcolonial digital divide, a systematic discrimination practised by global digital spaces involving non-Western sources and creators of content.

The colonial feature is the aspect of IOI corporation to seize OASIS and try to monopolise it as a digital conquest of colonialism and seizure of land, as was done by British policies in India in the 19th century, which confiscated tribal land. Such business practice in the sphere of games can be discussed as digital imperialism and defined by monetising user labour and access in the form of an extraction and control process (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). This colonisation online has a horrible parallel with the past injustices, creating preconditions for decolonial analysis.

1.3 Birsa Munda and Indigenous Resistance as Counter-Narrative

In revolt against British imperialism, Birsa Munda organised tribal movements in Jharkhand to demand land rights and cultural oppression, as well as against the imperial abuse of self-governing rights. The legacy he leaves has provided a powerful model of contesting the colonial and digital versions of dispossession (Singh, 1983; Shah, 2004). The spiritual reclamation, linguistic confirmation, and environmental awareness: These are the values Munda shared in their movement but are currently being electronically brought back to life, including in the Adivasi Bhasha app (Adivasi Bhasha Project, 2021).

These online projects are counter-hegemonic and fight against the epistemic silencing typical of metaverse stories of the West. Costanza-Chock (2020) focuses on the importance of platforms created through the principles of design justice, that is, neighbourhood-based architectures, which are introduced by the community they serve. These platforms provide a possible alternative to the exploitative architectures of the mainstream systems.

Therefore, on the one hand, IOI practices a virtual monopoly, and OASIS subjugates embodied/cultural diversity. On the other hand, the legacy of Birsa Munda, as an anti-colonial imaginary, opens the perspectives onto the design imagination of resistance, sovereignty, and inclusion.

1.4 Research Objectives

This paper will analyse how the themes of disability, tribal resistance, and design justice overlap in Ready Player One by the following objectives:

1. To analyse erasing disability using avatar customisations at OASIS.
2. To provide some historical parallels between the digital monopoly of IOI and land dispossession by the British colonialists in India, especially in the case of the Munda tribe.
3. To suggest alternative digital design models based on the legacy of Birsa Munda anti-colonialism

and extractive digital movements of the contemporary Indigenous, such as the Adivasi Bhasha App.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

1.5.1 Assemblage Theory

Assemblage Theory of identity, based on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), views identity as being constructed dynamically, rather than being stable, based on relations in and across human and non-human entities. With the OASIS, algorithms, interface design, the will of the user, and economic influence identity, in which the primary means of actively forgetting about disability and indigeneity (not to mention only passively regarding them) all exist on a structural level, systematically negating their inclusion within seemingly dominant digital identities (Braidotti, 2013).

Postcolonial Digital Divide

According to Gajjala (2019), the Postcolonial Digital Divide is a concept meant to criticise the ways the infrastructures dominated by the West exclude marginalised people in the digital space and narratives. The technological agency or representational power of indigenous and disabled users may be deprived many times, and they cannot even fully live within the realm of virtual life. Such digital inequality resonates with the past colonisation imbalances and calls on decolonial analysis as well as design solutions.

1.6 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite gaining new status as a compelling domain in academic research, the crossroads between disability studies and Indigenous epistemologies is the sphere that is notably unexamined, at least about virtual narratives and avatar design. Most of the literature does not take into consideration the problems of co-occurring erasure experienced by the disabled and Indigenous users, wherein both categories are pushed to the periphery of cyber worlds.

In this paper, this gap is covered by:

1. Assessing the Colonial and ableist digital frameworks: An analysis of the extractive, colonial, and ableist logic in virtual spaces.
2. Bringing Tribal Resistance to the Fore: Establishing Indigenous resistance narratives, above all, the cultural and historical legacy of Aboriginal tribes, as the medium of decolonial dialectics.
3. Imagining a Design Justice Model: To put forward a Design Justice Model based on the Indigenous knowledge systems, which can focus on the design that is participatory, community-based, and anti-oppressive.
4. Incorporating Crip Technoscience: Using Crip Technoscience (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019) to present prototype designs that are accessibility-based and disability-initiated and question practices of exclusion.

This study integrates decolonial game studies and Indigenous approaches with accessibility-based design to create a theory of digital space comprehensiveness and inclusiveness that would create changes.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This paper is a qualitative critical study with the interdisciplinary tools of postcolonial theory, disability studies, and digital humanities. The idea is not to measure the trends but to explain how cultural texts and practices, as well as historical and literary works, and even digital, replicate or challenge the ruling ideologies. This is how the deconstruction of narrative constructions, socio-political metaphors, and design systems that generate digital identity and representation can be done.

The ludic perspective also takes inspiration from cultural critique and decolonial approaches, which prioritise orientations and concerns of the minority groups and highlight structural agency like ableism, settler colonialism, and platform capitalism (Benjamin, 2019; Gajjala, 2019). It involves critical disability epistemologies and Indigenous digital praxis-based research that aims to disrupt conventional and corporate-friendly approaches to virtual worlds.

2.2 Data Sources

2.2.1 Literary Text

One of the primary forms of analysis is *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline (2011). The novel is analyzed through close reading, a literary criticism technique that examines the language use, character design, plot devices, and narrative ideology. The main subject of the analysis is given to the hero Parzival, turned into a hyper-able avatar and dimming out bodily difference that symbolises digital ableism and narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Kleege, 2018).

2.2.2 Historical Archives

The study is based on archival writings and second-hand history on the colonial policies of Britain in India, particularly in the tribal areas. The

Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) is considered a law based on the reprisal of tribal rebellions as well as the disposal of tribal lands, specifically, by the Munda group. Among the primary sources, one can include the written work of *Singh* (1983) on the tribal movements and the review of the social resistance in colonial India in the book Social Movements in India: A Review of the Literature by Ghanshyam Shah (2004). Such records present the historical analogue of the virtual monopoly portrayed by IOI in the OASIS.

2.2.3 Digital Case Study

To equate literary and historical analysis with the modern Indigenous digital resistance, the paper will use the Adivasi Bhasha Project (2021) as a case study of a digital project. The mobile app of the project, designed to save the tribal languages and cultural knowledge, is considered a design justice intervention. Central to its approach is the inclusionary design, which answers the exclusionary logic of such platforms as OASIS to give some insights on how Indigenous epistemologies can shape the digital futures (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019).

2.3 Analytical Tools

2.3.1 Assemblage Theory

Based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Assemblage Theory, the paper focuses on the argument that the construction of digital identities in the novel *Ready Player One* does not merely take place because of individual choice but is done through a network of material and immaterial forces, including avatar creation systems, socio-economic access and platform design. It is with the help of this theory that one may map power relations within the avatar construction process, demonstrating how the body of Parzival becomes an assemblage of normative desires and neoliberal fantasies (Braidotti, 2013).

2.3.2 Comparative Historical Analysis

Comparative historical analysis is a study that is used to make comparisons between the IOI digital enclosure of OASIS and British colonial theories of land policy that dispossessed tribal populations in India. It is a method of connecting the literature tropes with historical trends, demonstrating that digital colonialism follows the extractive ideology of the empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Spivak, 1999). The analysis highlights structural equivalence of the old and new modes of exclusions, both in land and in bits, territory, and avatar.

3. Results

This section gives the main results of the close reading of *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011), an archival study of British colonial labour, and research on Indigenous digital initiatives in the modern world. The results are sorted by theme and titled under research aims. Though theories guide the choice and the way data are framed, interpretive analysis can be found in the Discussion part.

3.1 Hyper-Able Avatars and Digital Disembodiment

One of the main conclusions of the literary analysis of the novel *Ready Player One* concerns the conscious removal of the physical disability of the main character Wade Watts by building his avatar, his alter Self under the name of Parzival. In the physical world, Wade has been characterised as overweight, undernourished, and physically weak because of years of poverty and isolation. Once he goes on the OASIS, however, he creates an avatar who is tall, muscular, and appears attractive, boldly claiming that it is devoid of zits, scars, and fat (Cline, 2011, p. 60).

OASIS avatar customisation system not only allows but encourages the bodily change in the direction of the normative, able-bodied ideal. Visual enhancement of avatars gives players social prestige, more straightforward navigation, and more credibility. No representation of disability is visible in the interface, and there is no support for the inclusive design features, including mobility aids and neurodivergent characteristics. The avatar can be referred to as a technological prosthesis that enables Wade to act in a desirable identity and to override his embodied existence.

The discovery speaks to the arguments against digital ableism that also observe how architectures of platforms tend to favour the aesthetics and bodies accepted as the norm (Garland-Thomson, 2009; Kleege, 2018). As Hamraie and Fritsch (2019) state in the Crip Technoscience Manifesto, technological platforms often erase or instead do not make space for disability, making it an object of cure and concealment. The OASIS becomes a world of conditional involvement: belonging will only be an option on the condition of recoding the disabled body, or annihilating it.

3.2 IOI and Corporate Digital Colonialism

The second significant discovery is the system of mandatory labour adopted by the corporation IOI (Innovative Online Industries), which brings control over specific sections of the OASIS. The mechanic applied in the novel is that, during the process of acquiring debt or being unable to purchase in-game services, users are forced into contracts as a "Sixer." Such indentured avatars are assigned numbers (e.g., IOI-655321), subjected to regulated labour camps,

and emotionally pressured to undertake unimaginative digital work to benefit the corporate interests (Cline, 2011, p. 192199).

The system is very similar to the Sixer system in the British indentured labour system in India and the colonial places after the official abolition of slavery. As Bates (2000) stated, Indian employees were numbered and contracted under terms that amounted to exploitation, lacking mobility and agency, which constituted the patterns of power configurations in the digital regime of IOI. These similarities are aspects of digital recoding of colonial forms of labour, where identity is amputated and labour is commercially feminised in the interests of a centralised power.

A similar parallel is also strengthened with real-life digital inequality. According to the report presented by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020), access to broadband connection is offered to just 12 % of the tribal population in India. These statistics reveal digital dispossession, which continues to deny the Indigenous communities their participation in the infrastructural advantages of the internet economy. The digital infrastructures, which the West dominates, reproduce the world's colonial structures of power, where power is mediated by having those who design, speak, and even form part of the digital worlds (Gajjala, 2019).

3.3 Indigenous Digital Resistance: The Adivasi Bhasha Project

The Adivasi Bhasha Project showcases Indigenous digital resistance that counters the top-down control of digital labour and representation exercised by IOI. This grassroots movement has come up with a smartphone application aimed at maintaining the dying tribal languages like Gondi, Kurukh, Santhali, and Mundari. Users will be able to record oral histories, vocabularies, traditional songs, and stories all in their native languages (Adivasi Bhasha Project, 2021).

The Adivasi Bhasha app is based on the principles of design justice in contrast to the commercial platforms where the data of the users is extracted (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Instead of being passive in consuming content, it enables the Indigenous user to become the author of culture and epistemic agents. The app is designed in the manner of local storytelling patterns, phonetic correspondence, and systems of knowledge, related to each other. It does not incorporate gamification, advertisement, and surveillance, which dominate the corporate platforms such as OASIS.

In addition, the tribal communities managed to maintain sovereignty of data, narratives, and cultural symbols through the co-design process. It is a form of epistemological act of resistance, contradicting both digital colonialism and the disappearance of Indigenous people within the mainstream virtual spaces, head-on.

4. Discussion

4.1 Virtual Utopias and the Assemblage of Normativity

In *Ready Player One*, the OASIS is first introduced as a kind of digital utopia. In this metaverse, the computing audience could overcome social constraints, be it disability, poverty, or marginalisation. However, this liberation is highly conditional. With reference to Assemblage Theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), it is evident that digital identity in OASIS is not free as its elements are pre-determined by users but is instead composed of bricolages arranged by capitalist-technological arrangements. To have full access to the digital economy, users such as Wade Watts must follow the aesthetic and functional conventions inscribed in the system, economic access, cultural capital, able-bodied visual exemplars, and algorithmic optimisation, to ensure their full inclusion in the digital economy.

The avatar of Parzival, which eliminates Wade's physical disability and improves his appearance, is not only a matter of individual preference but also a necessary aesthetic change imposed by the universe's development. This assemblage is therefore not a radical but a normative one, which is a grid orienting the body towards neoliberal ideals of productivity, beauty, and velocity (Braidotti, 2013). Here, the inclusion is based on being like the able-bodied, technologically efficient self.

This mandatory optimisation process is a feature of what Hamraie and Fritsch (2019) refer to as cripping technoscientific erasure, where design systems are based on the need to get rid of the disabled body, instead of on how to integrate it. OASIS provides its users with the freedom from the oblivion of bodily difference. In such a way, disability is not an element of the identity that should be accepted, but rather an element that is eliminated to gain access. The issue of able-bodiedness becomes infrastructural, embedded into the source of the digital world.

This points to the real rationale behind techno-utopianism: techno-utopian platforms such as the OASIS standardise and turn identity into a commodity by imposing a normative ideal, which generates algorithmically readable and marketable users.

4.2 IOI and the Postcolonial Digital Divide

The colonial and digital systems of extraction are presented with the IOI exploitative labour system,

employing indentured Sixers with their autonomy taken away and with dependency on corporate service as indentured labour. This framework corresponds precisely with historical patterns of imperial domination over Britain, which was empirically expressed through a system of indentured labour by Bates (2000), where local people were redefined, renamed, and reined in legal and numeric rationale.

In the regime of IOI, people are reduced to numbers, akin to Foucault's (1977) formulation of the docile body. These working avatars are controlled, utilised, and exploited in a gamified company setting. What comes up is the platform colonialism whereby data, identity, and labour are mined just as land, resources, and bodies in history have been mined.

This framework, similar to the Postcolonial Digital Divide framework found by Gajjala (2019), works towards criticising the continued exclusion of marginalised communities in the field of digital authorship, access, and infrastructure. The gap is not only technological, but also quite political and epistemic. The fact reported by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in India when it states that out of all tribal communities, there are only 12 %with dependable broadband service (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020) is not just a statistic or a reporting problem; it proves the ongoing problem of digital apartheid that limits those capable of speaking, designing, or being seen in metaverses.

Therefore, the practices at IOI are not dystopian fantasies but are parallel to current digital colonialism and reflect a repetition of the imperial logic of occupation and dispossession of extractive corporate architectures in a virtual context.

4.3 Indigenous Epistemologies and Decolonial Digital Futures

Indigenous knowledge systems offer radical solutions to platform capitalism by addressing the structures of exclusion. An example is Munda cosmology, which gives prominence to relationality, reciprocity, and interdependence of ecology (Singh, 1983). Such alternative visions to techno-utopianism oppose the alienated, individualistic thinking of techno-utopianism by grounding identity in the place and community. Violent and extractive capitalism is contested by Indigenous futurisms not only because it is based on colonialism, but because it is put into question via survivance in terms of relational and ancestral design approaches (Whyte, 2017).

The anti-colonial uprising led by Birsa Munda could therefore be brought back to an alternative history, as a movement of proto-design justice: it was against centralised ownership, it emphasised communal sovereignty, and it reclaimed space, physical and, by extension, virtual, in which to exist. The application of this legacy to a digital one allows for the establishment of a decolonial imaginary, according to which digital technologies will not be constructed based on conquest but caring.

This is the praxis reflected through the Adivasi Bhasha App. It is not simply a language application; it is a tier of epistemological opposition. It is defined by the requirements, rhythms, and knowledge of tribal societies (Adivasi Bhasha Project, 2021). This app enables the preservation of cultural continuity and community ownership of digital identity, without necessitating a complete erasure that would promote cultural inertness, as OASIS requires.

Such platforms are also able to restore power to the edges by implementing the principles of Design Justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020), demonstrating that instead of poking at corporate platforms (which may or may not be less harmful), those with the power to establish new infrastructures can create digital futures that are more inclusive overall.

4.4 Toward Design Justice Legislation

These findings must be synthesised and require action rather than criticism. Policy transformation should be grounded in theoretical knowledge to prevent the ongoing replication of colonial and ableist systems in digital systems. Based on the work by Costanza-Chock (2020), this paper will offer a framework of the Design Justice Legislation based on Indigenous and Crip design values.

Legislation of this sort ought to:

Make a practice of co-designing with tribal, disabled, and other marginalised communities, and make sure we have them represented in our platforms, make sure that their needs, their aesthetics, and their knowledge systems influence platform architecture.

Require accessibility and cultural audits of all significant undertakings and construction of digital infrastructure to avoid epistemic erasure.

Advocate local and pluralist standards of design where various ontologies, relational, cyclical, and even spiritual, may inform digital construction, as well as Euro-Western ones.

Such changes are in line with the vision of Birsa Munda of land and knowledge sovereignty, which has been redefined in the digital era. Instead of extending empire through code, the platforms need to be reimagined in ways that enable multiplicity, justice, and collective healing.

4.5 Limitations and Future Research

Although this work has yielded valuable information, it bears the weight of methodology and epistemic shortcomings. To begin with, the analysis excludes several literary works as the object of analysis, as a single literary work cannot exemplify the variety of virtual spaces or the narrative structure. Second, the study concentrates on the Munda tribe as a case study. However, it does not cover the entire extent of the Indigenous world, whose numerous communities provide special ontologies and digital tactics.

Future studies will be:

Reach multi-modal formats such as virtual reality platforms, decentralised web applications, and Indigenous mapping applications on mobile.

Examine similar aboriginal programs like Mapuche Web activism, Māori data sovereignty actions, or Dalit open-source models.

Use the participatory and collaborative approach where communities become co-authors of academic critique and contribute to defining the direction of research, design, and implementation.

This kind of work will bring us not only past critique, but past transformations to remake the digital horizon not only as one of resistance, but of reparative work, one in which we collectively reconstruct the world.

5. Conclusion

The paper has examined the digital disability, corporate platform power, and Indigenous opposition in an interdisciplinary reading of Ready Player One (Cline, 2011) and the British colonial system of labor (Bates, 2000) about that of Indigenous-led digital work of having a voice, such as the Adivasi Bhasha App (Adivasi Bhasha Project, 2021). Taking these theories as its guiding framework, namely the Assemblage Theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), Postcolonial Digital Divide (Gajjala, 2019), Crip Technoscience (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019) and Design Justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020), the paper indicates that virtual worlds do not represent neutral spaces of liberation: digital worlds represent coded hierarchies which reproduce and amplify past structures of exclusion.

5.1 Summary of Findings

In the study, there were three key findings:

First, Ready Player One gives the user the incentive to erase the non-normative embodiment, especially disability, through the help of avatar mechanics in pursuit of social mobility and inclusion. The logics of Parzival/Wade transformation show a platform logic of capacity equals value. It is indicative of a larger technoscientific logic by which disabled people are either cured or deactivated out of existence by technology (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019).

Second, there is a reproduction of colonial labour structures through the corporate architecture of IOI. Its utilisation of numerical identifications together with bondage of contractual servitude resembles British imperial indenturing (Bates, 2000). Moreover, the digital segregation of Indigenous communities, noticed even in such countries as India (where tribal people have access to 12% of broadband connections), proves the point made by Gajjala (2019) that digital infrastructures perpetuate the postcolonial disparities.

Third, the initiative of the Adivasi Bhasha App is an example of Indigenous digital practice that suggests another model based on epistemic sovereignty, co-design, and cultural preservation (Adivasi Bhasha Project, 2021). Such platforms cannot only be considered as forms of knowledge transmission but rather as acts of resistance to digital erasure, representing the principles of Design Justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

5.2 Contribution and Impact

By offering counter-intuitive learning about the design of digital worlds, the paper can add a facet to understanding the field of decolonial game studies and critical media studies, as that is where tribal epistemologies and disability justice can be used in reframing the design of digital worlds. It points out that techno-liberation stories such as the one in Ready Player One are hollow at their core until they reflect on the systemic exclusion inherent in the digital infrastructures.

The paper explores the hexagonal anti-colonial struggles, as expressed by Birsa Munda in the past and by the struggles of the platform in the present, thereby situating decoloniality not just as a project of the past but as a design imperative of today (Singh, 1983; Whyte, 2017). It is also interdisciplinary labour that speaks across the fields of literature, postcolonial history, digital design, and disability studies to reveal that justice-oriented virtual futures are not only necessary but possible.

5.3 Call to Action

As immersive technologies and AI-powered platforms grow, it is time to start constructing equal and accessible virtual places. A recommendation of this study includes:

Funding, collaboration in policy making, and academic research to support Indigenous-led digital sovereignty initiatives.

Intervention in laws through the implementation of Design Justice laws that require

the practices of co-design with the tribal and disabled groups (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

Auditing of metaverse and video game portals in terms of accessibility and cultural effects.

Making local knowledge and collaborative authorship the priorities in interface design and creation of digital assets.

All in all, Ready Player One reveals the risks of settler-colonial able-bodied groundings of digital utopias. In contrast, the Adivasi Bhasha Project and the long tradition of Birsa Munda bring to light other routes of design logic that rest on justice, relationality, and resistance.

6. Limitations and Future Research

6.1 Limitations

Although this research is of great value, in terms of bringing together the digital humanities, postcolonial studies and the discourse of disability, there are a couple of limitations that need to be taken into consideration.

Scope Restriction to a Single Text and Tribe

To begin with, the study is limited to a narrow scope of textual analysis of one speculative fiction novel in a Western environment, Ready Player One (Cline, 2011). Though the story provides a valuable model of exploring the issues of avatar politics, digital work, and techno-utopianism, it is not an exhaustive map of other global virtual stories and cultures of gaming. Therefore, it is possible that the drawn conclusions are not universal in terms of various genres, platforms, or sociocultural backgrounds (Gray & Leonard, 2018).

Secondly, the given research is dedicated to the legacy of Birsa Munda and the experience of the Munda tribe in Jharkhand, India, particularly. Although such a case study eloquently demonstrates how land-based resistance can be combined with digital design, it fails to show how the variety of Indigenous worldviews and digital tactics are employed by other tribal communities (both in India and beyond). The danger in this, as Smith (2012) cautions, is to fall into this essentialization, which raises a particular tale to represent the overall and multitudinous experiences.

Methodological Constraints

The article is also based on the qualitative interpretative approach: i.e., textual analysis, archival comparison, and thematic synthesis, with no direct community involvement or empirical data gathering. The study is thus a theory-driven and not community-based research. Although this can provide deep theoretical understanding, it restricts how realistic the analysis can be to the reality of the disabled or tribal online users (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Costanza-Chock, 2020).

6.2 Future Research Directions

The limitations identified should motivate further studies to address them by becoming more comparative, multimodal, and participatory.

Comparative Analysis Across Narratives and Platforms

The research of several digital stories, such as movies (e.g., Black Panther or Avatar), video games (Never Alone, Assassin's Creed Valhalla), or transmedia storytelling websites, is one such promising direction. Such comparisons might divulge how digital colonialism, the erasure paradigm of avatars, and the resurgence of Indigenous might operate in the various media flows and genres (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Nakamura, 2012).

Also, the non-Western stories, such as South American, African, and Southeast Asian digital cultures, should be targeted. It has become clear that the postcolonial digital divide takes a varied form regionally and platform-wise, and cross-regional comparisons can also determine similar processes of inclusion and exclusion as singular aspects of resistance (Gajjala, 2019; Noble, 2018).

Community-Based and Participatory Methods

Participatory action research (PAR) or community co-design models should also be adopted in the future. One way to integrate localised knowledge and lived experience into research is by collaborating with tribal elders, young people, disabled designers, and local technologists. As Hamraie & Fritsch (2019) and Costanza-Chock (2020) stress, our understanding of design and research inclusiveness should start with the needs, epistemologies, and priorities of marginalised users and not with top-down academic establishments.

Empirical Accessibility and Platform Audits

The other future direction is to perform accessibility tests in the currently existing metaverse and gaming solutions (e.g., Roblox, Meta Horizon, Fortnite) and incorporate user experiences (UX) assessment, interface research, and ethnography-based feedback of disabled and tribal users. Such direction based on numbers might offer measurable support of ableist and colonial bias in system architecture (Brown, 2021).

Policy, Law, and Decolonial Governance of the Web

Lastly, the governance of international tech should be interdisciplinary, investigating how Indigenous data sovereignty principles (Rainie et al., 2019) and crip-

informed digital policy can be integrated into international practice. AI bias and digital land rights, as well as questions of the ethics of immersive design, will need to have lawyers, philosophers, and engineers collaborating on scholarship.

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The history of tribal resistance and resilience: A case study on Jharkhand

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ABSTRACT

The tribal is not a problem, the problem lies in our understanding of him."
- Verrier Elwin

Tribal communities have a strong bond with their land and a unique sense of community, rooted in their indigenous values. Jharkhand is home to 32 tribal groups, including eight Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), such as the Birhor, Asur, and Sauria Paharia. Each tribe has its language, traditions, beliefs, and way of life. For these communities, the forest, land, and water are not just resources—they are integral to their cultural identity.

This study traces the historical trajectory of tribal resistance in Jharkhand, with a focus on how these movements sought to preserve tribal identity and respond to land alienation, exploitation, and cultural marginalisation. It also highlights the significant contributions of women in these movements, underscoring their active participation and profound impact. The study further contextualises these struggles within the broader demand for political and cultural autonomy, ultimately leading to the formation of the state of Jharkhand.

One of the key socio-cultural implications of the tribal movements in Jharkhand has been highlighting and recognising the indigenous leaders and freedom fighters. The tribal movements laid the foundation for the assertion of tribal rights and the preservation of indigenous culture, embodying the resilience of tribal communities.

A secondary research approach will be employed, referring to sources such as, articles, published journals, and scholarly literature, to understand the history of indigenous defiance of the tribal community against exploitation.

Keywords: *Community, Jharkhand, Tribal resistance, Indigenous, Tribal movements*

Introduction

Tribals share a strong bond with their land and a unique sense of community, which is rooted in their indigenous values. The state of Jharkhand, located in eastern India, is home to 32 tribal communities, which also include eight Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), such as the Birhor, Asur, Birjia, Korwa, Savar, Mal Paharia, Paharia, and Sauria Paharia. These tribal communities consider land, forests, and water resources as extensions of their culture and identity. Each of these tribal groups is characterised by its own customs, languages, and value systems that they follows.

The major tribes of Jharkhand comprise the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, and Kharia. The Santhals, being the largest tribal group, are mainly agricultural people. They are known for their oral traditions and for having their own language, called Santhali, which is an Austroasiatic tongue. The language utilizes the Ol Chiki script, developed by Pandit

Raghunath Murmu in 1925.

The people of the Munda tribe speak Mundari, a language of the Austroasiatic family. It is written using the Mundari Bani script, developed by Rohindas Singh Nag. The Munda tribe practices the Mundari Khuntkatti system. The Khuntkatti system is a traditional land tenure system in which land cleared and made cultivable by a clan is communally owned by the family members of that clan. The Munda tribe embraces communal living and shares a deep connection with the land.

The Oraon tribe, also known as Kurukh, belongs to a Dravidian linguistic group with their traditional lifestyle being tied to forest ecosystems. They primarily speak Kurukh, a Dravidian language. Many Oraons are engaged in forest-based livelihoods and agriculture in the state of Jharkhand. They practice Sarna Dharma, a tribal religion centred around nature worship.

The Ho are one of the major tribal communities of Jharkhand. They are linguistically and ethnically linked to the Munda group of tribes. They speak the Ho language which is an Austroasiatic tongue written in Devanagari, Latin, and also in the indigenous Warang Chiti script developed by Lako Bodra. The community is mainly agrarian and is dependent on farming and wage labour.

The Kharia tribe is one of the prominent Scheduled Tribes of Jharkhand, with their historical lineage tracing back to Central Asia. The Kharias are divided into three groups namely, Paharia, Dhelki, and Dudh Kharia. Their society is organised through gotras or clans, which help determine their social customs and marriage rules. Historically, the Kharias have resisted Mughal and British oppression, particularly through the rebellion led by Veer Telanga Kharia.

From the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 to the tussle led by Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, tribes across Jharkhand have led various resistance movements to assert tribal identity and justice in the broader sense. These movements have been crucial in standing against resource-draining industrialisation and exploitation, while resisting the loss of forest and land rights.

This research aims to recognise the history of tribal resistance movements in Jharkhand. Tribal communities have continually stood up against tribal land alienation and disruption of their culture and livelihoods. By revisiting some of the key movements of tribal resistance, this study seeks to understand the struggle towards the preservation of tribal culture and identity.

A secondary research approach is employed, drawing on sources such as published journals and scholarly literature, to understand the history of indigenous defiance by the tribal community against exploitation.

The Santhal Rebellion of 1855

The Santhal rebellion was one of the earliest tribal uprisings in India. The rebellion was fought by the Santhal tribes against the Zamindars, moneylenders, and British officials. The moneylenders lent money to the tribes and charged exorbitant interest rates, which affected the tribals. Without being able to pay back such a high rate of interest, the tribal men became bonded labourers within their own lands.

The exploitation by moneylenders, Zamindars, and the outsiders of the Santhal regions (called Dhikus) worsened the condition of the Santhals, who were poor, uneducated, and unfamiliar with outside systems. Many worked as bonded labourers at the behest of moneylenders who charged high rates and ultimately lost their lands. This oppression led to the Santhal rebellion, which was led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, the chief leaders of the rebellion.

In 1855, the Santhal people were stirred into action by what they believed to be divine command from their god, Thakur. According to their leaders, Thakur communicated a vision of spiritual awakening, instructing them to protect their land and expel outsiders from the Santhal territories, urging a collective uprising. They created a unifying emblem of resistance, "Thakur," which was embodied by fire, a book, and a cartwheel. Each of the four elements represented strength, knowledge, and movement. On 30th June 1855, around 30,000 Santhals marched together, targeting and razing the homes of exploitative moneylenders.

As the Santhal rebellion intensified, the British grew increasingly brutal in their efforts to suppress the uprising. Nearly 15,000 Santhals were killed in the course of the uprising. In response to the growing unrest, the British handed the task of suppressing the uprising to Brigadier Lloyd. He introduced changes aimed at reforming the agrarian system in an attempt to calm the region. Alongside him, A.C. Bidwell was also appointed as a special commissioner tasked to crush the rebellion. As the uprising lost momentum, its two chief leaders were killed one after the other. This marked the end of the earliest tribal uprisings in colonial history.

By November 1855, the British imposed martial law to curb the uprising. The British recognized that the Santhal region contributed to their revenue and economic benefit. The colonial administration introduced a series of legal reforms, with the

creation of the Santhal Pargana in 1856 being the most significant reform. The rebellion woke people up, binding them together and fostering a sense of cultural pride and unity.

The women of the Santhal tribe had played a crucial role in the widespread rebellion. This rebellion that had initially started as protests against moneylenders and landlords, changed its course to become a retaliation against the British. The women showed their mass support by taking up traditional arms and facing the British with full force. The Santhal women showed their support by acting as spies and even organised secret meetings. Phulo and Jhano, the sisters of Sidhu and Kanhu, were two notable figures and gained recognition for allegedly killing 21 British soldiers. This revolt exhibited the remarkable participation of women as fearless warriors/

Birsa Munda's Ulgulan: Tribal Resistance to Colonial Oppression

Tribal dominated territories in India began experiencing the intensification of colonial exploitation in the late 19th century. Indigenous landholding systems such as the Khuntkatti system practised by the Munda tribe were disrupted, further marginalising the tribal communities of regions like Chotanagpur in Jharkhand. The Mundari Khuntkatti system was a collective land ownership system under which the land cleared and made cultivable by a clan was communally owned by the members of the clan. However, the British classified communal holdings as individual property, paving the way towards taxation and alienation of land. The Mundas, being unfamiliar with formal legal systems, were easily exploited by outsiders, who seized tribal land by deception.

The oppressive colonial tax regime and the criminalisation of shifting cultivation affected the Mundas, who were dependent upon agriculture and the use of forest resources. The Mundas were also subjected to Begari or forced unpaid labour. This deepened their wounds and made them vulnerable to exploitation, both at the hands of the colonial power and landlords.

Emergence of Birsa Munda as a resistance figure

Birsa Munda was born on November 15, 1875, in the village of Ulihatu, Ranchi District, Bengal Presidency (now in Khunti District, Jharkhand). He was revered as Dharti Aba or Father of the Earth by his followers. He was a person who advocated against colonial practices and urged the tribal people to reclaim their land. He urged a rebellion against exploitative systems of oppression that targeted tribal land autonomy.

The Ulgulan movement, led by Birsa Munda, which peaked between 1899 and 1900, was characterized by orchestrating coordinated attacks on colonial establishments, such as police stations, courthouses, and exploitative landlords who had seized tribal lands. The rebellion began to grow, and tribal women and youth also participated actively to support the cause. Though Birsa was eventually captured and died in custody in 1900, the movement was left with lasting effects.

Legal Outcomes of Birsa Munda's Rebellion

The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 was one of the most significant legal responses to the Birsa Munda rebellion. As a result of the unrest caused by the movement, the CNT Act was introduced to alleviate the frustration of the tribals over the increasing loss of land to non-tribal settlers. The CNT Act acknowledged the importance of traditional land systems, such as the Khuntkatti land system. These systems have been steadily disturbed by colonial taxation policies and non-tribal landlords. With this new law in place, tribal land could no longer be sold to non-tribals. Thus, providing legal protection for traditional communal land ownership practices that had been integral to tribal identity, culture, and existence.

Kol Rebellion (1831-1832)

The Kol Rebellion of 1831-32 primarily took place on the Chotanagpur plateau. Their uprising was instigated by the socio-economic exploitation, cultural alienation, and Adivasi resentment against the British. Prominent figures of the rebellion were Budho Bhagat, Desai Manki, and others. The movement was a result of exploitative colonial land revenue policies, excise laws, and increasing encroachment upon customary Adivasi tenures like bhuinhari.

As a result of the jagirdari system, the Kols had to deal with systemic dispossession, which led to the marginalisation of traditional authorities like Mankis and Pahans. The resentment towards the British further increased with the colonial excise laws, which deemed their religious and cultural practice of brewing handia, a traditional rice beer, an essential part of tribal rituals, as illegal, along with the sharp increase in land tax. These economic and cultural disruptions added to the cause of the

movement. The uprising faced heavy military suppression; however, the revolt did not falter. The Kols were armed with traditional weapons and maintained steadfast resistance, with leaders like Budho Bhagat choosing martyrdom over surrender. The British introduced administrative changes in Chotanagpur, adopting a distinct governance strategy for the tribal community due to their ecological and social distinctiveness.

To conclude, the rebellion laid the groundwork for future uprisings and shed light on the colonial attitude towards tribal communities in eastern India.

Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-1919)

The Tana Bhagat movement started in 1914 and lasted till 1919. It was led by Jatra Oraon and later Sibu Oraon. It was a prominent revolt that took place mainly in the Chotanagpur region (presently in Jharkhand) against colonial exploitation. The Oraon tribe led a movement that revolted against British-imposed taxes, the systematic exploitation by zamindars and local moneylenders. They adopted non-violent civil disobedience much before the nationwide satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi. Their political resistance was closely aligned with their religious beliefs, which were based on simplicity, truth, and devotion, giving them a distinct socio-religious identity.

Being deeply influenced by Gandhian principles of ahimsa and swadeshi, their revolution came in the form of rejecting foreign goods, embracing khadi, and actively participating in the nationwide movement against the British. They aligned their movement with the Indian freedom struggle and actively took part in the sessions held by the Congress. This change in their movement was a significant transformation from regional tribal resistance to a more comprehensive nationalist participation.

In the post-independence phase, the Indian government introduced welfare measures to rehabilitate and integrate the Tana Bhagats. There were welfare schemes such as land restitution, free railway passes for freedom fighters, agricultural assistance, and the establishment of specific institutions for the community. However, these schemes did not have a significant impact, as the implications were often inconsistent.

The Tana Bhagat movement's legacy can be rather complex as even though its historical significance is widely recognised, especially through the commemoration of Jatra Bhagat as an Adivasi icon, its contemporary situation is marked with fragmentation and marginalisation.

However, the Tana Bhagat movement has retained its symbolic cultural and historical relevance. Especially in the case of the Oraon community, which lacked a significant nationalist figure compared to Birsa Munda of the Munda community, witnessed a change with Jatra Bhagat gaining recognition and becoming a source of pride, thereby tightly knitting a shared identity amongst the community.

Women's participation in this movement evolved from being followers to taking up leadership roles. The Tana Bhagat movement was led by Jatra Oraon, and it was a mass-based, non-violent movement. Deomani Bandhani was a prominent figure, stepping into the role of a leader when Jatra Oraon was imprisoned. Women's mobilisations did not only consist of raids but also social gatherings and peaceful demonstrations. The movement retained its non-violent character, serving as a testament to the fact that women were politically astute and capable of taking on leadership roles.

Formation of Jharkhand

Jharkhand's attainment of statehood was a result of decades of tribal resistance advocating for their separate cultural identity. Jharkhand was created on 15th November 2000. This day marked the climax of a long-standing socio-political movement which revolved around tribal identity, regional disparity, and political marginalisation. The demand for statehood was a deeply rooted declaration of indigenous rights, autonomy, and cultural preservation. The origin of the Jharkhand movement had its historical roots in the colonial era, when tribal communities, such as the Santhals, Mundas, and Hos, initiated their revolution by resisting British exploitation.

Jharkhand is a state with several indigenous communities that preserve and take pride in a distinct cultural heritage, which is characterized by their diverse languages, including Santali, Mundari, and Ho. They have not only preserved their cultural roots but have also stood by their profound connection with forests and lands, which contributed in shaping their ecological ethos.

The post-independence era of the Jharkhand movement had shifted from cultural assertion to regional political activism. Jaipal Singh Munda, a former Oxford scholar and hockey captain, played a pivotal role in the development. The Adivasi Mahasabha was founded by Jaipal Singh Munda, which later evolved into the Jharkhand Party in 1949. This party had set its ideology on

demanding a separate state encompassing tribal-majority regions in Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. Their proposal was rejected by the State Reorganisation Commission due to insufficient population percentage of the tribal communities and apprehension regarding economic sustainability.

However, their demand for statehood remained steadfast, and it later escalated due to the continuous exploitation of the region's rich natural resources. Large-scale industrialisation like Tata Steel, HEC, and DVC led to tribal displacement without sufficient compensation, resulting in dispossession among tribals. The inadequate funding allocated to the region for development was another contributing factor. The ecological degradation, economic disparity, and cultural marginalisation gave rise to widespread dissatisfaction. Tribals were left alienated from their lands with little representation in the modern industrial employment sector.

The following years saw a division within the movement itself, with multiple groups coming to light, like the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Jharkhand Kranti Dal, and Birsa Seva Dal. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, led by Shibu Soren, strengthened the cause by uniting non- Christian tribals and focusing on economic disparities and land rights. The movement gained momentum with the support of the All-Jharkhand Students Union's youngsters. Despite several setbacks, the establishment of the Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council in 1995 marked a significant step towards achieving self-rule. However, the movement changed its course and gained more prominence when national parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party lent their support, with the 1996 Lok Sabha elections delivering a landslide victory for pro-statehood candidates. The general agreement among the parties eventually cleared the path to the Bihar Reorganisation Act 2000, which resulted in the official acceptance of Jharkhand as a state.

Findings

Together, the tribal resistance movements shared a common cause, standing against exploitation, land alienation, and displacement. Movements like the Santhal Rebellion, Ulgulan, Kol uprising, and Tana Bhagat protest were reactions to years of exploitation and loss of tribal land. The Santhals rose in rebellion against moneylenders and landlords after being forcibly displaced from their land and subjected to debt bondage. The Birsa Munda's Ulgulan was a cry against the disruption of Khuntkatti, a traditional land system followed by the Munda tribe, and the control of outsiders over tribal land and their traditional way of living. The Kol Rebellion erupted when colonial authorities dismissed local chiefs and brought in unfair laws. The Tana Bhagat movement sought to introduce religious reforms, incorporating elements of nonviolent resistance. At the baseline of all of these uprisings is a strong resistance towards the erasure of indigenous culture and tribal identity. The unity and collective rebellion among tribes led to the rise of political awakening, paving the way towards the formation of Jharkhand. In the contemporary situation, the Tana Bhagat tribe has been facing the issue of a deteriorating population of approximately 10,000 and internal polarisation with no strong political standing.

Conclusion

This study has traced the four prominent tribal movements and the common cause between the movements has been the dire need to fight for their distinct traditional lifestyle and the preservation of their indigeneity.

Economic empowerment and community-led initiatives must be a key area of focus to achieve long-term stability among the tribal communities in Jharkhand. Measures to restore traditional land systems, such as Khuntkatti, must be taken to ensure secure land rights and recognize collective ownership. Supporting traditional crafts and encouraging tribal-run cooperatives can help strengthen ties of cultural identity.

For the most part, the historical trajectory of tribal resistance in Jharkhand has been overlooked in mainstream narratives. Emphasizing key movements like the Santhal movement, Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, the Kol rebellion, and the Tana Bhagat movement, as well as honoring leaders like Birsa Munda in the academic curriculum, can help build a deeper connection to indigenous identity, fostering political awareness and sensitivity towards tribal communities.

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Tribal communities in the Crossfire: The unintended consequences of Government-corporate Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

The effects of corporatization on India's tribal communities since independence are critically examined in this abstract. It examines the historical background of these, which frequently arise from the drive for modernization, LPG and economic growth in tribal areas with abundant natural resources. The traditional livelihoods, self-governance, and cultural integrity of indigenous populations have often been compromised by the incursion of corporate interests into tribal lands.

The study's analysis of case studies from different states shows notable differences in the distribution of resources and the socioeconomic effects on tribal communities, which frequently result in social disintegration, loss of livelihood, and displacement.

Such as the Displacement of tribals in Jamshedpur for Tata steel plan, NH-7 highway road extension in 2025, Theni tribals being evicted by forest department, Banning of tribal organization in Chatisgarh, Factors of Climate change, exploitation of resources and so on. We bring a critical analysis from these issues and provide Legal and Constitutional Safeguards & Regulation of Corporates and Development Projects.

It also draws attention to the complicity of government policies that have unintentionally enabled the exploitation of tribal rights and resources, despite their stated goals of reducing poverty and developing infrastructure.

At concluding it, we bring the sustainable practices that enables the community to engage with the citizens of the country without Extremism by proposing actions and preservation.

Keywords: *Climate change, Exploitation, Policy regulations, Extremism, LPG.*

INTRODUCTION

Since India's independence, the trajectory of modernization and economic liberalization—accelerated by policies of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG)—has brought dramatic changes to the social, economic, and ecological fabric of the nation. Nowhere are these transformations more starkly evident than in the tribal regions, where abundant natural resources have attracted persistent waves of government-backed corporate enterprise. Tribal communities, who have nurtured distinct livelihoods, self-governance models, and cultural identities for generations, find themselves at the intersection of progress and dispossession.

Corporate-driven projects, whether in mining, infrastructure, or large-scale industries, often become epicenters for contestation and upheaval. Iconic examples—such as the mass displacement of Adivasis for the Tata Steel plant in Jamshedpur, the expansion of the NH-7 highway in 2025 leading to further disruption, forced evictions of Theni tribals by the forest department, and the banning of tribal organizations in Chhattisgarh—underscore the heavy social and ecological costs paid by indigenous populations. These interventions routinely erode

traditional livelihoods, fracture community bonds, and undermine time-honored systems of resource management. Beyond displacement, such projects precipitate acute loss of cultural heritage, expose communities to the vagaries of climate change, and set in motion cycles of marginalization that are often irreversible.

Underlying these developments is the paradoxical role of the state. On one hand, the state proclaims poverty alleviation and infrastructure development as its objectives, seeking to integrate tribal regions into the national mainstream. On the other, policy frameworks and regulatory mechanisms—however well-intentioned—have frequently facilitated the transfer of tribal lands and resources into corporate hands, sidelining legal and constitutional safeguards designed to protect indigenous rights. Inadequate implementation of protective legislation, bureaucratic inertia, and the lack of effective community participation reinforce the vulnerabilities of tribal communities.

This research paper embarks on a critical examination of corporate and governmental engagements in tribal India, tracing their economic, social, and cultural ramifications through selected case studies from different states. It analyzes patterns of dispossession, displacement, and social disintegration, while exploring how the complex matrix of climate change, resource exploitation, and policy failures perpetuates inequity and unrest. The study also scrutinizes the adequacy of existing legal and constitutional protections—assessing their capacity to regulate corporate conduct and to ensure justice for tribal communities.

In its concluding section, the paper foregrounds avenues for sustainable development that honor both the rights and aspirations of indigenous peoples. It outlines actionable recommendations for enabling tribal communities to engage constructively with the broader citizenry and national economy—eschewing extremism and fostering paths of inclusive growth, cultural preservation, and participatory governance. By illuminating the unintended consequences of current developmental paradigms, this research seeks to inform a more equitable and sustainable future for India's tribal heartlands.

Research Gap

While previous scholarship on India's tribal communities has largely centered on policy evolution, democratic reforms, and the legal frameworks designed to protect indigenous rights, there remains a significant gap in critical analyses that address the lived realities and unintended consequences of government-corporate partnerships. Earlier studies tend to adopt a macro-level, top-down approach, often falling short of capturing the nuanced socio-cultural disruptions, loss of livelihoods, community disintegration, and cultural erasure experienced by tribal populations due to privatization and corporatization of traditionally held lands. Furthermore, research typically neglects an explicit critique of capitalism as it manifests in tribal areas, sidestepping the exploration of viable alternatives, models of resistance, or the voices of tribal communities themselves. As a result, the subjective pain, dispossession, and marginalization faced by these communities remain underrepresented in the academic discourse.

Research Questions

How do top-down policy decisions, especially those rooted in privatization and corporatization, fail to account for the lived experiences and voices of indigenous populations?

In what ways are existing legal and constitutional safeguards inadequate in protecting tribal rights amidst increasing corporate presence?

How have tribal communities responded to displacement, resource exploitation, and loss of traditional livelihoods brought on by development projects?

Context for the Research

This research emerges from a context in which the development narrative in India has been dominated by relentless pursuit of modernization through Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG). Tribal regions, rich in natural resources, have become focal points for government-corporate collaborations meant to drive national growth but, paradoxically, have frequently resulted in dispossession, displacement, and the erosion of centuries-old socio-cultural systems within tribal communities. Corporate projects in mining, infrastructure, and industry—like the Tata Steel plant in Jamshedpur, highway expansions, and forest clearances—have repeatedly demonstrated the high social and ecological costs paid by Adivasi populations.

Despite constitutional protections and ostensibly progressive policies, implementation failures and superficial engagement have often left tribal voices marginalized and their rights vulnerable to state and corporate interests. In this environment, criticism of the mainstream development paradigm becomes crucial, particularly when previous research has been

limited to the evaluation of policy reforms without sufficiently interrogating the capitalist logic driving privatization. By foregrounding the stories, resistances, and alternative visions of tribal communities—rather than solely focusing on top-down institutional changes—this study aims to inform a more equitable model of development that centers inclusion, agency, and sustainability for India's indigenous populations.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research uses a qualitative case study design rooted in critical and participatory approaches. The study aims to dissect the nexus of state policy, corporate power, and public exploitation, using various cases. The design is comparative and integrative, drawing lessons from the Nano project and similar large-scale industrial endeavors that have relied on public resources, secret government-corporate agreements, and the displacement of marginalized populations.

To ground the macro-structural critique in lived realities, the study triangulates multiple sources: policy documents, archival newspaper reports, government notifications, protest literature, academic commentary, stakeholder interviews, and narratives of displacement and impact.

Displaced farmers and rural households from Singur (West Bengal) and Sanand (Gujarat) affected by Tata Nano land acquisition and resettlement.

Middle-class car buyers and Nano customers, as a lens into aspirational marketing and consumer perceptions.

Local community leaders, activists, and political representatives who were involved in resistance movements or negotiations.

State officials and bureaucrats involved in land allocation, industrial policy, and benefit disbursal & Tata Group officials (where public statements or interviews are available).

Journalists, academics, and observers who have documented or analyzed the episodes.

Newspaper archives, press reports, and documentary evidence chronicling protests, policy changes, and plant operations.

First-person narratives: interviews and testimonies gathered from affected farmers, protestors, and Nano buyers (using semi-structured protocols).

Oral histories from middle-class Nano buyers, to capture consumer experience versus promotional narratives.

Focus groups with protest movements and farmer unions to understand local perceptions of compensation, coercion, and loss.

Data Analysis:

Triangulation of qualitative accounts with archival documents and quantitative data for robust interpretation.

Reflexive journaling to identify researcher stance, influence, and limitations in interpreting politically contested history.

Ethical Considerations:

Sensitivity to trauma, displacement, and ongoing litigations among participant groups.

This methodological framework ensures the research is multivocal, rigorous, and context-sensitive—capturing the political, economic, and social stakes of the projects. The aim is to illuminate how policies framed as "development" can mask deep forms of public exploitation, while giving center stage to the voices and experiences of those most affected.

Replicating this research on the political economy of the state-corporate partnerships is both essential and challenging.

1. Comparative Case Studies

Cross-State Replication: Comparing land acquisition, compensation, rehabilitation, and protest dynamics across various Indian states (such as West Bengal, Gujarat, Odisha, Maharashtra) where industrialization has triggered similar conflicts.

2. Temporal and Thematic Expansion

Historical Replications: Applying the protocol to earlier landmark projects (e.g., Bhilai Steel Plant, Narmada Dam) offers insight into the continuity and change in state-corporate practices and public opposition over time.

Sectoral Variations: Replicating the study in sectors like automobiles, mining, energy, or urban infrastructure—illuminates differences in policy, public impact, and protest strategies.

Replication is feasible and valuable can illuminate the socio-political dynamics of "development" in multiple contexts. It offers an empirically grounded template for unpacking the hidden costs and contested realities of state-led industrialization and corporate expansion. Each replication, with its own specificities, will further enrich our collective understanding of how public resources are mobilized and contested in the name of progress.

RESULTS

Detailed findings from each major case study presenting the official government and corporate statements, what was publicly believed or intended according to these statements, and the actual observed outcomes regarding corporate interests, tribal rights, land acquisition, exploitation, and related issues.

1. Krishnagiri (NH-7/NH-44 Highway Expansion, Tamil Nadu)

Government/Corporate Position:

Highway expansion projects cited as being undertaken for public infrastructure and "development," with official assurances that displaced families with legal land titles (pattas) would be relocated and compensated.

Provision of alternative sites (bare land) for some affected families; government claims due process was followed.

Popular/Public Belief:

Many believed relocation and compensation would secure new opportunities or at least basic security for displaced tribal families.

The process presented as lawful, limited, and in the public interest.

Actual Outcomes:

Only 22 of 42 tribal families received land titles and relocation benefits; 20 remain without any legal recognition or security.

The alternative land provided lacked infrastructure (no housing built); another local individual encroached upon the allotted area, with no government intervention.

Families without land titles were left vulnerable and ignored, forced to live in substandard conditions with no recourse.

The state's engagement ended at the formal allocation of land, with no meaningful rehabilitation; compensation and welfare promises were unfulfilled, deepening poverty and precarity for most.

2. Chhattisgarh: Ban on Moolvasi Bachao Manch (MBM) and Militarization

Government/Corporate Position:

The ban on MBM was justified under the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act (CSPSA), labeling the group as "illegal" and as Maoist collaborators obstructing "development" projects, especially those concerning mining and mineral extraction.

Government maintained that military and police interventions (including arrests and suppression of protests) were necessary for law and order, combating extremism, and ensuring regional stability.

Corporate involvement in mining framed as essential for national progress and employment.

Popular/Public Belief:

Many outside the region accepted the official narrative that insurgency was a major threat and that military action and bans were necessary to facilitate development.

Media coverage tended to echo claims that increased mineral extraction was a national need.

Actual Outcomes:

The ban was used to suppress grassroots tribal mobilization for land, resource, and civil rights—targeting those opposing corporate mining projects.

Over 800 tribal activists were arrested, while over 300 protestors and villagers died in violent crackdowns within a single year.

Tribal leaders and communities faced branding as "Maoists" to justify criminalization, bypassing any accountability for corporate land grabs or environmental harms.

Law and order justifications concealed violent displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and silencing of community voices.

3. Odisha: Dalmia Cement Land Acquisition, Sundergarh District

Government/Corporate Position:

The Dalmia Cement expansion project was presented as legal and developmental, with claims of land acquisition according to due process, government approval, and future economic benefits ,including jobs and infrastructure.

Officials stated that compensation offers and consent collection had taken place.

Popular/Public Belief:

Some locals and the broader public believed that economic opportunities and infrastructure would trickle down from such industrial investments.

The use of Gram Sabha resolutions and legal frameworks provided a sense of procedural legitimacy.

Actual Outcomes:

Protestors claimed that Gram Sabha decisions against

the acquisition were ignored, with officials bypassing or forging consents.

Land (750 acres initially, with 2,150 acres planned) was allocated to Dalmia Cement despite categorical and widely documented local opposition.

Over 60,000 tribal residents from 57 villages faced displacement, with community identity, livelihood, and cultural continuity at risk.

No substantive evidence emerged of large-scale, community-wide benefits; instead, loss of land, lack of prior consent, and marginalization escalated.

4. Karnataka: Jenu Kuruba Eviction & Forest Rights

Government/Corporate Position:

Policy justified forced evictions under forest conservation and anti-encroachment laws, presenting relocation as necessary for environmental protection and, at times, for eco-tourism or corporate hospitality ventures.

Compensation and rehabilitation were cited as part of official procedure, and the Forest (Conservation) Rules 2022 were referenced as a legal basis.

Popular/Public Belief:

Broader society often accepted conservation narratives, with the belief that forest protection required indigenous relocation and that compensations were fair.

Some viewed new housing and cash support as adequate forms of rehabilitation.

Actual Outcomes:

Jenu Kuruba families were forcibly evicted, losing access to ancestral forests vital for spiritual, nutritional, and communal well-being.

Provided compensation proved insufficient: land given was often uncultivable, new homes inadequate, and health and cultural practices deteriorated.

Community was excluded from forest decision-making, restricted in worship, and subject to harassment and violence by forest officials.

State practices focused on control and surveillance, not on tribal welfare or empowerment.

5. Bastar, Chhattisgarh: Militarization and Corporate Mining

Government/Corporate Position:

Military camps and intensified operations (such as Operation Kagar) justified as necessary for combating insurgency, ensuring government services, and making "development" projects (roads, mining) possible in tribal districts.

Resource extraction by private and public corporations (outside a minority of public sector leases) framed as crucial for state revenue and national growth.

Popular/Public Belief:

Many believed heightened military presence was to combat terrorism/Maoism, and accepted claims that these measures would bring security, democracy, and progress.

Road construction and infrastructure projects were promoted as public goods.

Actual Outcomes:

Tribal communities found their lands militarized, with military presence enabling corporate access to mines and resources rather than supporting local well-being.

Over 230 military camps established with no community consent, weekly life and markets came under surveillance, and human rights abuses (arrests, killings) soared.

Public sector's share of leased land shrank as private corporate exploitation thrived, despite rhetoric of "balanced development."

Tribal protests against dispossession were met with violence and criminalization; legal rights under PESA and FRA were systematically violated.

6. Tata Nano Project: Land Acquisition in West Bengal and Gujarat

Government/Corporate Position:

Tata Nano project portrayed as a national milestone for affordable mobility, modernization, and industrial growth.

Land acquired for the factory and massive financial incentives (tax breaks, soft loans, infrastructure) were defended as necessary investments for job creation and future prosperity.

Displacement and compensation were officially described as fair and within legal bounds.

Popular/Public Belief:

Many in the middle class viewed the Nano as a symbol of progress, mobility, and inclusive development.

Media and official narratives promoted the deal as a technical and social breakthrough for India.

Actual Outcomes:

In West Bengal (Singur), 950 acres of fertile land were forcibly acquired, leading to mass displacement, widespread protest, and police violence; in Gujarat,

1,100 acres transferred to Tata at minimal cost and unprecedented concessions.

State-provided subsidies, tax breaks, and regulatory waivers amounted to over ₹30,000 crore over 20 years, with costs absorbed by the broader public rather than the company.

Promised jobs and spinoff benefits never materialized at scale; the car itself failed commercially after initial hype—production ceased, resale value plummeted, and safety/quality concerns rose.

The project catalyzed long-term political unrest and skepticism towards future government-corporate collaborations.

DISCUSSION

The case studies analyzed—from Krishnagiri to Bastar, Odisha to Gujarat—collectively illustrate a repeating pattern in India's development trajectory: the systematic privileging of corporate interests over the rights, welfare, and futures of marginalized communities, especially tribals and small farmers. The declared rationale—"development," "modernization," or "security"—routinely masks an underlying reality of dispossession, neglect, and the transfer of public resources into private hands. This section synthesizes major thematic insights, critiques the prevailing capitalist framework, and offers creative alternative pathways rooted in genuine people's welfare.

1. Revealing the Myth of "Public Welfare" in Corporate-State Projects

Despite being wrapped in the rhetoric of progress and national growth, projects like highway expansions, mining, cement plants, and the Tata Nano factory demonstrate how state policy is often designed to serve corporate ambition, not the collective good:

Land as Capital, Not Livelihood: Everywhere, agricultural or forest land—life-sustaining for tribals and farmers—is commodified for industry with scant regard for the profound cultural, social, and ecological ties people hold with their environment.

Procedural Compliance, Substantive Neglect: Legal "compliance"—allocation of bare land, symbolic compensation, or staged public hearings—stands in for substantive justice; rehabilitation is routinely minimal or absent.

Denial of Collective Rights: Statutes like PESA, FRA, and the constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes exist mostly on paper; Gram Sabha decisions, local consensus, and free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) are bypassed or forged.

2. Creative Interpretation: The Real Purpose of State-Corporate Partnerships

Instrument of Resource Transfer: Under capitalism's current form, the state acts less as an impartial provider of equity or opportunity and more as an agent for the upward transfer of land, labor, and capital to large corporations. This is clear in:

Concessionary land and loans (e.g., Gujarat's multi-crore package for Tata, Odisha's deals with Dalmia).

The direct conversion of collective assets (tribal land, forests, minerals) into private capital.

Socialization of Risk, Privatization of Profit: Costs and risks—displacement, public debt, environmental harm—are socialized, while profits and benefits accumulate with select private actors.

Weaponizing Law and Security: Militarization, criminalization of protest, and anti-"extremist" laws are used not against crime but to suppress dissent and enable resource extraction.

3. Critique of Contemporary Capitalism in the Indian Context

Crony Capitalism Over Welfare State: Operational reality upends the theoretical promise of "trickle-down economics." Instead of "rising tides lifting all boats," only a handful of corporate ships rise, while others sink deeper—witnessed in cases like the Tata Nano or Adani mining in tribal heartlands.

Democracy on Paper, Oligarchy in Practice: Policy is formulated and executed with minimal consultation with affected communities; "public participation" is tokenistic, while negotiations and agreements are secret, often shielded from public scrutiny.

Marginalization as Policy Feature, Not Bug: Tribals, farmers, and the rural poor are essentialized as obstacles to be managed, rather than stakeholders to be empowered. Their "rehabilitation" is engineered for containment, not restoration.

Cultural and Identity Erosion: The loss of land is not just economic—customary rights, spiritual relationships with land, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural identities are obliterated through capitalist "development."

4. Unique Ideas and Alternatives for Genuine People-Centric Development

A. Legal and Structural Overhauls

True Community Consent: Enforce Gram Sabha decisions as binding, not advisory—free, prior, and informed consent must be practical, not ritual.

Transparent Public Review: All large land or resource

deals must be made public before signing; independent impact reviews and community transparency portals should be mandated.

B. Economic Alternatives

Cooperative Models: Promote community-owned cooperatives for value addition in agriculture, forestry, and minerals—shifting profits and decision-making back to the grassroots.

Revenue-Sharing Mechanisms: Institutionalize legal mechanisms for permanent profit-sharing from all extractive and industrial activities involving community land.

Participatory Budgeting in Displacement Areas: Empower communities to direct public funds (including those from "development" concessions) toward locally prioritized projects.

C. Governance and Accountability

Rights-Based Monitoring Committees: Establish independent bodies with majority tribal/affected-community representation to oversee project compliance, rehabilitation, and environmental commitments.

Legal Redress and Boycott Mechanisms: Communities must be empowered with legal standing to halt projects (through fast-track environmental and rights tribunals) and initiate consumer/market boycotts against exploitative corporates.

D. Social Innovation

Cultural and Ecological Restoration: Replace "rehabilitation" with comprehensive restoration—replant sacred groves, restore traditional livelihoods, support language and cultural survival programs.

Digital Documentation of Rights: Use blockchain and open-access digital platforms to register and assert customary land, water, and forest rights, building distributed records that cannot be easily falsified.

5. From Protest to Policy: Pathways Forward

Acknowledge Historical and Current Wrongs: Mandate official public apologies, truth commissions, and reparations for past and ongoing dispossessions.

Reverse Extractivism: Shift away from resource-intensive, export-led models to local, low-footprint, regenerative economic pathways—rooted in agroecology, eco-tourism (managed by communities), and decentralized renewable energy.

Prioritize Public Over Private: Restore public investment in health, education, and transport, rather than skewing fiscal and policy incentives toward a handful of corporations.

Each case in this research demonstrates that India's capitalist development has become a mechanism for transferring collective wealth, claims, and identities into private corporate interests—with the state as broker, enforcer, and beneficiary. For a just future, new frameworks must be forged—rooted in people's rights, local autonomy, and redistributive justice—so that "development" is not a tool for exploitation, but a vehicle for collective flourishing.

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