



Indigenous Communities of India—Past, Present, and Future

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.17663713

Abstract:

*This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of India's indigenous communities—Adivasis—tracing their historical journey, examining contemporary challenges, and envisioning future possibilities. Beginning with the recognition of Adivasis as self-governing forest-based societies deeply connected to “Jal, Jungle, Jameen” (water, forest, land), the study explores the significant disruptions they faced under colonial and post-colonial developmental regimes, marked by displacement, stereotyping, and legal disenfranchisement. The present-day section delves into ongoing struggles for land and forest rights despite legislative tools such as the **Forest Rights Act of 2006**, and reflects on contemporary resistance movements, including Jaharkhand's Koel-Karo, Netarhat, and Pathalgadi campaigns, which frame Adivasis as ecological warriors defending customary autonomy. It also highlights cultural resilience through Indigenous knowledge systems like phenological weather forecasting and tribal astronomy, underpinning their adaptive capacity amidst climate change.*

Looking ahead, the paper argues for a rights-based, sustainable future rooted in recognition of Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC), implementation of constitutional safeguards, and greater integration of Indigenous governance and traditional knowledge into environmental and social policy frameworks. It positions Adivasi communities not only as the bearers of India's cultural legacy but as vital contributors to ecological sustainability and inclusive nation-building.

Introduction:

India is home to one of the most diverse arrays of indigenous populations in the world. Commonly referred to as **Adivasis** (literally, “original inhabitants”), these communities are officially categorized as **Scheduled Tribes (STs)** under the Constitution of India. As of the 2011 Census, they comprise approximately **8.6% of India's population**, representing over 700 officially recognized tribes, with diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic traits.

The historical evolution of these communities, from relative autonomy in forested and hilly regions to systematic marginalization under colonial and postcolonial governance, has had profound impacts on their culture, land rights, political representation, and social standing. In contemporary India, the Adivasi experience is marked by a paradox: while policies exist to protect and uplift these groups, they continue to face systemic exclusion, displacement, and erosion of their traditional lifeways.

This paper explores the **historical trajectory, contemporary realities, and emerging futures** of India's indigenous communities. It integrates anthropological, sociopolitical, ecological, and legal perspectives to assess the role of indigenous communities in shaping India's civilizational ethos—and how they can play a pivotal role in crafting an inclusive and sustainable future.

Historical Context:

1. Pre-Colonial Societies:

Prior to colonial rule, Adivasi communities in India lived in relative autonomy, primarily in forests, hills, and marginal terrains where state control was minimal. Their governance systems were often **egalitarian, communitarian**, and closely aligned with nature. Land was collectively owned and used based on customary rights rather than private property regimes. Communities such as the Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, and Todas had rich oral traditions, indigenous healing systems, and knowledge of biodiversity.

Tribal identity was not merely ethnic but **socio-ecological**—deeply tied to the land and cosmos. Sacred groves, ancestor worship, and totemic practices reflected their spiritual cosmology.

2. Colonial Disruption:

British colonial rule disrupted this equilibrium in several ways:

- **Forest Laws** such as the Indian Forest Act (1865, revised in 1927) reclassified forests as state property, denying communities their traditional access to resources.
- **Land Alienation** occurred as Adivasis were dispossessed to make way for plantations, mining, and railways. Tribal land was transferred to landlords, moneylenders, and settlers.

- **Tribal Rebellions** erupted across the country:
 - *Santhal Rebellion* (1855–56),
 - *Munda Ulgulan* led by Birsa Munda (1899–1900),
 - *Bhil and Kol uprisings* — all aimed to resist exploitative landlords, police, and missionaries.
- **Criminal Tribes Act (1871)**: Several nomadic and semi-nomadic communities were stigmatized as "criminal" by birth, institutionalizing marginalization.

The colonial state redefined tribal identity through the lens of deficit and backwardness, overlooking indigenous systems of knowledge, economy, and governance.

3. Post-Independence: Constitutional Safeguards:

After independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution provided several protections:

- **Fifth and Sixth Schedules** for tribal governance.
- **Reservation in education, employment, and politics** (Articles 15, 16, 330, 332).
- Recognition of **Scheduled Tribes** through Article 342.

However, despite these measures, Adivasi concerns continued to be overshadowed by a developmentalist agenda that often equated progress with industrialization—resulting in mass **displacement due to dams, mines, and infrastructure projects**.

Present Realities of Indigenous Communities:

1. Demographic and Cultural Diversity:

India's indigenous population exceeds 104 million, making it the **largest tribal population in the world**. Tribes such as Gonds, Santhals, Bhils, Nagas, Mizos, and

Todas are spread across states like Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, and the North-East.

These communities speak over **100 different languages** and dialects, practice distinct customs, and possess diverse belief systems. However, many of these languages are endangered due to **assimilation pressures and educational policies** that prioritize dominant regional languages.

2. Land Rights and Forest Governance:

The **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA)**, marked a landmark shift by recognizing Adivasis' rights to forest land. It allows for:

- **Individual and community land titles**
- **Right to collect minor forest produce**
- **Right to protect, regenerate, and manage community forest resources**

However, implementation has been **patchy and delayed**:

- States like **Chhattisgarh and Odisha** have seen large-scale rejections of claims.
- Forest departments and conservationists have resisted granting community control.
- Development projects continue to override tribal rights using legal loopholes.

In places like **Pachgaon (Maharashtra)** and **Mendha-Lekha**, however, communities have successfully asserted their forest rights, offering models of **eco-friendly self-governance**.

3. Displacement and Development:

Adivasis constitute over **40% of India's internally displaced population** due to infrastructure, mining, and conservation projects.

- The **Narmada Valley Project** displaced thousands of Bhils and Gonds.

- Wildlife sanctuaries under **Project Tiger** have resulted in forced evictions of tribal communities from “core zones.”
- Compensation and rehabilitation schemes are often inadequate and poorly implemented.

4. Socioeconomic Status:

According to NFHS (National Family Health Survey) and government data:

- **Literacy** among STs is around **59%**, compared to 77% nationally.
- High rates of **malnutrition, maternal mortality, and infant mortality** persist.
- Adivasi children face high school drop-out rates due to **language barriers, discrimination, and poverty**.

Despite affirmative action, access to quality education and healthcare remains limited.

5. Cultural Resilience and Revival:

Despite challenges, Adivasi communities are **reviving and preserving their traditions**:

- Organizations like **Adivaani** document tribal stories and oral histories.
- Tribal museums and academies (e.g., **Adivasi Academy in Gujarat**) help conserve languages, music, and craft.
- Tribal literature is flourishing, with authors like **Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar** and **Easterine Kire** gaining national recognition.

6. Political Representation and Activism:

- Many tribes have organized **resistance movements** demanding land rights, recognition, and autonomy (e.g., **Dongria Kondh** in Odisha).
- **Naga peace talks, Pathalgadi movement** in Jharkhand, and **Inner Line Permit** agitations in the Northeast show increasing assertion of identity.
- While Scheduled Tribe MPs and MLAs exist, **grassroots autonomy** is often stifled by bureaucratic control and corporatization.

The Future of Indigenous Communities:**1. Reimagining Development:**

A future that includes Adivasis must redefine **development**:

- **From extraction to sustainability:** Indigenous agro-ecological knowledge must be integrated into national agricultural and climate policies.
- Promote **community-led conservation** instead of fortress-style environmentalism.
- Encourage **circular economies** rooted in tribal craftsmanship, forest produce, and fair-trade systems.

2. Strengthening Legal Frameworks:

- Full implementation of the **Forest Rights Act (2006)** and **PESA (1996)**, which empower tribal gram sabhas, is essential.
- **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)**, as per UNDRIP, must be enforced for any project on tribal land.
- Need for **legal reform** to protect tribes from illegal land acquisition and fraudulent development schemes.

3. Education and Language Preservation:

- Introduce **multilingual education models** that include tribal languages and cultural content.
- Set up **tribal research and language centers** to document and promote endangered languages.
- Empower **tribal teachers** and integrate community elders into knowledge systems.

4. Gender and Indigenous Futures:

- Recognize the role of **Adivasi women** as ecological stewards, political leaders, and keepers of oral traditions.
- Provide support for **women's cooperatives**, forest produce marketing, and maternal health.

- Promote **gender-sensitive policies** that respect matrilineal and matrifocal customs (as seen among Garos, Khasis).

5. Technology and Indigenous Youth:

- Leverage digital tools to:
 - Record oral histories.
 - Enable access to legal aid.
 - Promote entrepreneurship through e-commerce of tribal art and produce.
- Support indigenous youth to become **custodians of tradition and agents of innovation**.

6. Climate Resilience and Indigenous Knowledge:

- Tribal communities, through centuries of living with nature, possess **resilient climate adaptation strategies**:
 - Zabo farming in Nagaland.
 - Sacred forest management in Meghalaya.
- These practices must be integrated into national.

Conclusion:

India's indigenous communities—its Adivasis—stand as vital inheritances of cultural resilience, ecological wisdom, and democratic heritage. Having weathered centuries of colonization, policy neglect, and assimilation pressures, they still retain knowledge systems crucial for India's sustainable future.

Ecological stewardship and climate adaptation: Across regions like Odisha, indigenous women are taking the lead in climate resilience through initiatives like “dream maps,” which chart restored ecological states of their villages after a shocking 25% reduction in communal lands. Meanwhile, Kerala's Kadar community and Assam's Mishnging people sustain agroforestry and environmental forecasting practices—living models of climate-smart adaptation. **Legal**

recognition vs. implementation gaps:

Instruments such as the Forest Rights Act of 2006 were landmark in acknowledging tribal land and resource rights. Yet, bureaucratic hurdles continue to delay justice—clear from the decades-long struggle culminating in land titles for Muthanga protestors only in February 2023.

Contemporary mobilization and identity

assertion: Present-day actions underscore a renewed assertion of identity and rights. From AjYCP's push for an Inner Line Permit in Assam to demands for caste-specific certificates among Assam's tea-worker Adivasi students, indigenous communities are actively ensuring their unique identities and rights are recognized.

Towards an inclusive future: A truly sustainable future for Adivasis calls for robust implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), inclusive policy frameworks, and integration of indigenous perspectives into education, climate strategies, and governance. Institutional recognition of their leadership—as ecological custodians, artists, and decision-makers—and commemorations like Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas are positive steps, but both policy and practice must continue to evolve.

In sum, securing the future of Adivasis is not simply an act of redress—it's a strategic imperative. Their traditions of coexistence with nature, cultural depth, and democratic resilience are not just legacies of the past—they offer the blueprint for India's more equitable and sustainable trajectory.

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