

Tribal Identity and Cultural Resilience in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Indian Indigenous (Adivasi) population is a mosaic of more than 700 scheduled tribes, each having different linguistic, social and ecological systems. These communities are under unprecedented threats to their survival under strong pressure from the so-called “neo-liberal” economic development, displacement, cultural assimilation and globalization. This research article looks at the intricacies of tribal identity and the process of cultural resilience in the context of modern India. In the paper, using an interdisciplinary approach of engaging with subaltern studies, indigenous sociology, and eco-criticism, the author examines the ways in which tribal communities actively resist cultural erasure. The study emphasises the importance of Adivasiyat as a lived philosophy, which sees identity, ancestral land (Zameen) and ecological systems as an intertwined, sacred continuum, which is at the core of tribal resilience. Based on the analysis of language revitalisation movements (like the spread of the script of Olchiki among the Santal), the defence of community-led forest governance and the reinvention of traditional rituals, this paper shows that indigenous communities are not victims of modernization. Rather, they are agents of cultural continuity. It suggests that the incorporation of a tribal resilience framework into the country's policy framework is the key to the establishment of sustainable and eco-centric solutions to the current environmental crises in the global context and the attainment of real democratic pluralism.

Keywords: Tribal Identity, Cultural Resilience, *Adivasiyat*, Indigenous Knowledge, Neo-liberalism.

INTRODUCTION

Indian society and culture today are beset by conflict between the dominant, neo-liberal development paradigm and the protection of native ecosystems. Scheduled Tribes (STs) are the tribal communities officially recognized under Indian Constitution which represent more than 8.6% of the population of India and the population of the STs as per the Census of India (2011) is 104 million. These communities are far from homogeneous, with each community being cantered around different language families, kinship, and religious traditions and being located in different geographical zones, from high altitudes of the Northeast to the forests of Central India.

The tribal communities have been granted constitutional protection and have rich historical presence in India. However, they are subject to significant structural problems in the twenty-first century. Adivasis have been displaced from their ancestral lands due to mega-development projects, large scale mining, deforestation and administrative changes. This physical displacement is often accompanied by cultural erasure, where regional dominant languages and religious practices, and market driven consumerism, force indigenous youth to assimilate into the mainstream society.

The story of today's lives of the Adivasis, however, is not one of passive suffering. It is a strong narrative of cultural resilience—the ability of a community as a whole to preserve its identity, psychological autonomy and core culture and traditions and to sustain an effective response to changing external environments. This research paper discusses how the contemporary Indian tribes assert their identity and how they are culturally resilient. This paper illustrates how tribal communities struggle to balance the modernization process without

compromising their traditional heritage, by examining the revival of indigenous scripts, the defence of indigenous forest rights and the survival of oral literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic study of tribal societies in India has evolved across three major phases: colonial ethnography, nationalist assimilation studies, and subaltern-indigenous revisionism. Colonial administrators and ethnographers, such as L.S.S. O'Malley and H.H. Risley, originally framed Indian tribes through an exoticized, social-evolutionary lens, categorizing them as 'primitive', static isolates existing outside the flow of historical progress.

In the post-independence era, early Indian sociologists like G.S. Ghurye (1943) conceptualized tribes as 'backward Hindus', arguing that their eventual integration required systemic assimilation into the mainstream socio-religious hierarchy. This assimilationist approach was partially countered by Verrier Elwin (1960), who advocated for tribal autonomy and protection against external economic exploitation within dedicated administrative enclaves.

In recent decades, the emergence of Subaltern Studies and indigenous sociology has fundamentally corrected these top-down perspectives. Scholars such as K.S. Singh (2002) and Virginius Xaxa (2008) have reframed the discourse around the concept of **Adivasiyat**—an indigenous epistemological framework that emphasizes the absolute equality of communities, democratic self-governance, and an eco-spiritual connection to nature. Xaxa (2008) explicitly argues that tribal identity in contemporary India is not a relic of a primitive past, but a modern political and cultural construct forged through continuous resistance against external exploitation (*Diku* systems).

Concurrently, global psychological and sociological literature on resilience (such as the work of Michael Ungar and Laurence Kirmayer) defines cultural resilience not as a passive return to past forms, but as a dynamic process of navigation and negotiation for cultural resources. In the Indian context, Devendra Nath Das (2015) illustrates that this resilience is heavily tied to Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). When tribal communities protect their ecosystems, they are simultaneously protecting their linguistic idioms, ritual structures, and historical memory. This paper builds upon this contemporary framework, exploring specific case studies where language, law, and ecology intersect to sustain modern tribal identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative, interpretive and interdisciplinary research methodology. The study uses a multi-faceted approach to understanding the complex concepts of tribal identity and tribal strength and resilience:

1. **Policy and Constitutional Review:** A review of legal mechanisms that regulate tribal autonomy such as Fifth and Sixth Scheduled Areas of the Indian Constitution, Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996 and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006.
2. **Textual Evaluation of Sociolinguistic Movements:** Analysis of the institutional expansion, educational integration and documentation strategies of indigenous languages, with the case of Santali Olchiki script movement as a key reference point.
3. **Secondary Ethno-Historiographical Data:** A systematic compilation of sociological journals from peer-reviewed journals, field monographs and case reports from tribal institutes across Jharkhand, Odisha and Northeast India.

Using an ecocritical and subaltern approach, the collected material is analysed to interpret the meaning of the local level of structural resistance and how this relates to cultural continuity.

DISCUSSION

The Ecological Anchor: *Jal, Jungle, Zameen* as an Identity Continuum

The sense of identity is intertwined with geography for the tribal communities of today's India. In mainstream consumerist societies, land is regarded as a property, a financial asset or a commodity which can be traded. Adivasiyat on the other hand, sees land (Zameen), water (Jal) and forest (Jungle) as a spiritual and physical continuum. The ecosystem is the space of ancestral spirits, of community laws, of the anchoring of historical memories.

The loss inflicted on a tribal community by an industrial project is more than an economic loss, it is a deep wound in the continuity of the tribe's culture. This is a deep trauma because of the incompatibility of worldviews about nature's resources. The indigenous Adivasiyat's view of land as a sacred place and place of culture contrasts with the mainstream modernity view of land as a commodity which moves directly to financial capital. Thus, it is not just that corporations and states are taking over these territories, but that they are destroying an entire epistemological system in which ancestral spirits, community law and collective memory play a role. Cultural resilience is a concerted community response to these existential risks, marked by an active campaign to preserve these sites. Through progressivist legislation, such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), or through organizing monumental grass roots movements, indigenous peoples have shown that their environmental activism is in essence a form of cultural self-defence, that defending the sacred geography is essential to protect a culture for generations to come.

If a tribal community is uprooted by an industrial project, the effects are not only economic but also a serious disruption of their cultural continuity. Cultural resilience emerges through a collective will to safeguard these places.

By leveraging progressive legislation like the **Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006** and **PESA (1996)**, tribal villages across states like Odisha (e.g., the historic Niyamgiri movement of the Dongria Kondh tribe) have asserted their constitutional right to protect sacred hills from corporate mining. These movements demonstrate that environmental activism among indigenous populations is fundamentally an act of cultural self-defences. By saving their forests, they preserve the sacred spaces necessary to sustain their community rituals, oral histories, and long-term existential identity.

Linguistic Resilience: The Assertiveness of Native Orthographies

Loss of language is one of the most noticeable symptoms of cultural decline. In India the tribal languages are minoritized languages and constantly subjected to pressure from the official state language in administration, commerce and media. It is important to note that there are grassroots efforts to restore and institutionalize native scripts that are an illustration of cultural resistance to this linguistic homogenization.

One of the most noticeable examples is the history of the Santali language and its script Olchiki. The script was developed by Pandit Raghunath Murmu during the year 1925 for the purpose of recording the unique phonetic characteristics of the language, it proved to be a potent instrument for the unification of the communities on a nationwide scale. After decades of continuous mobilisation by a group of Santal intellectuals and activists, Santali was added in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution in 2004.

In today's classroom, multilingual education (MLE) supports indigenous students' protection from cultural alienation by way of the script. If a tribal child is educated in their native language with a unique alphabet, the school becomes more a place of resistance to cultural assimilation than a place of cultural affirmation, and at the same time becomes a place of insuring academic success and the survival of vulnerable oral traditions.

Ritual Reinvention and Digital Adivasiyat

One of the misconceptions in the older anthropological literature is that keeping the community entirely isolated from modern technology is necessary for their survival. Instead, today's youth in the villages of India are actively working to document, celebrate and preserve their traditions through the use of contemporary digital tools, social media and multimedia archives, which are now referred to as 'Digital Adivasiyat'.

Traditional cultural values are being creatively adapted to digital environments, providing a powerful illustration of the contemporary matrix of cultural resilience among indigenous communities. For example, oral history and oral lore, which has been handed down through chanted tales on the lips of the village elders like the sacred Binti and Karam stories, are being documented and shared at greater scale via podcasts, YouTube channels and digital archives diligently charted by young people from the tribes. Likewise, the indestructibility of indigenous orthography has been realized through the process of Unicode standardisation, the development of dedicated mobile apps for the keyboards and advanced digital typography. In addition, seasonal eco-festivals around sacred grove dances and ritual meetings, like karam, Sohrai and Baha, have spread beyond geo-political borders. Today, these celebrations are sustained and made tangible by global hyper-local broadcasting and a new digital photography exhibition, along with linked pan-tribal networks, which enable technology to be a powerful tool for cultural continuity and not assimilation.

This conscious use of technology is a clear proof of the dynamic and adaptive nature of modern tribal identity. The younger generation is actively decolonizing the internet by developing digital dictionaries, making videos of traditional farming methods, and establishing online networks to promote indigenous rights. They are making sure that their traditional, eco-centric perspectives continue to be present and prominent in the current global discourse.

CONCLUSION

A sense of tribal identity is not an elusive and static memory of the past that is about to disappear to meet the challenges of modernization in the course of India's development. Rather, it is a very flexible and resilient, and politically aware set of living. Face with serious structural problems like displacement of industries, economic marginalization, linguistic assimilation, the Adivasis are showing incredible cultural resilience.

It is rooted in an Adivasiyat ideology, a philosophical approach that sees human societies and the natural world as a whole. From contesting government policies to safeguard sacred forests to the revival of such indigenous scripts as Olchiki, or the innovative application of digital media, tribal communities are charting their own course in modernity.

To retain the essence of democratic pluralism as a central feature of the Indian republic, state policies need to step beyond welfare models. Unconditional respect of tribal autonomy, enactment of forest rights legislation and promotion of learning in tribal languages – these are essential for real progress. The preservation of the survival and vitality of India's tribal cultures is not only a social justice issue related to marginalised communities but also a repository of eco-centric knowledge which is crucial in the direction of humanity moving toward a sustainable future.

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