

## Ethics of the Ethnics: What Tribals can Teach the World

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### Abstract:

The various theories and beliefs about the "Origin of the Earth," which estimate its age to be around 4.5 billion years, agree that humans originated from nature. This means that human existence is deeply connected to nature. Communities that have always remembered this fact and stayed closely tied to nature for their survival and growth are called indigenous people. The word "indigenous" represents more than 370 million people across over 70 countries, with about 8% of India's population belonging to these communities. As society, science, education, and technology advanced, humans became modern. However, during this progress, people faced a dilemma: if they did not adopt modernization, they would be left behind, but embracing it meant sacrificing nature. In this era of modernity, very few communities managed to stay connected to nature while still sustaining themselves and their societies through it. This does not mean these communities did not develop. Instead, they saw development as something that should go hand-in-hand with nature. Whenever they had to choose between nature and modern development, they chose nature. Their progress can be seen in their traditions, languages, and way of life, proving that they have developed while staying true to their connection with nature. This reminds us that we have much to learn from these people and communities who, although considered "left behind" in modernization, hold valuable lessons about living in harmony with nature.

**Key Words:** Indigenous, Nature, Community, Development, Tradition

### Introduction:

India's very old civilization, going back thousands of years, has always had a special significance for indigenous peoples. This is amply evident from their references in our ancient writings. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata both have many instances where the position and impact of tribal people have been highlighted. In the Ramayana, we hear of tribal characters like Guha and Shabari. Guha, or Nishadraj, was the chief of the tribal folk who dwelled on the banks of the Ganga (Chaturvedi, 2008). Likewise, the Mahabharata familiarizes us with Eklavya, a tribal hero who became a master of archery through his dedication and toil. These tribal heroes, as depicted in ancient literature, displayed their skills, bravery, and dedication, and taught humankind the art of living through their virtues and actions.

Recognizing the necessity, significance, and pertinence of the indigenous teachings in the current situation, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to incorporate local customs into the education system, offering a chance for indigenous knowledge to be incorporated into the mainstream. This can be made possible through experiential learning. As stated in Section 4.6 of the NEP-2020 document, experiential learning will be incorporated at all levels of education, encompassing hands-on activities, arts and sports integration, and storytelling-based pedagogy, among other approaches, to establish it as a standard instructional method across subjects while also encouraging interdisciplinary connections. Indigenous knowledge in itself is experience-based, having been developed through ongoing interaction with the environment and being honed over time through trial and error. It develops

cumulatively, growing with each generation's experiences and knowledge, eventually turning into wisdom. Panna (2022) calls attention to the rich traditions, performing arts, distinctive clothes, accessories, and oral traditions that characterize Indian tribal identity and urges the serious need to conserve these differentiated traditions in the presence of global developments and modernizing influence. The National Curriculum Framework 2023 looks to ancient Indian knowledge as the guiding light for its development. Learning in the ancient India did not only emphasis on information acquiring, but emphasized on life preparation in this world (NCFSE, 2023).

If definitions are viewed from an educational standpoint, Based on International Labor Organization, 'Tribal People' is a common denominator for over 370 million individuals, located in over 70 nations across the globe. They possess their own culture, language, customs, and institutions, which differentiate them from other segments of the society they inhabit. However, as viewed from the developed world, the image of the indigenous people is given below: N (2019) discusses a survey of 2011 conducted among the common people portrays tribals as 'A tribe is a group of people, generally residing in jungle locales, in a small town or village, absolutely illiterate poor, hardly dressed in clothes, generally dark and weak, completely living within their own community whose marriage always occurs among themselves, hunted for food and sought out roots, shoots, and fruits as their veg food and roasted animals as non-veg food, completely unaware of the political and economic condition of the country, opposing all attempts of development and have a strong resentment towards strangers and educated modern community.'

Therefore, it becomes evident what indigenous people are to those who identify themselves as developed and educated. In this representation of indigenous societies, we evaluate them according to our own definition of knowledge and capabilities. In the process, we forget their capabilities, wisdom, and culture. We realize that Indian indigenous societies continue to live in close proximity to nature and have remained untouched by the impacts of modernization to a great extent. They are guardians of the planet, and their indigenous knowledge is dependent on land and ecosystem-based practices. But we forget that indigenous peoples have an intangible cultural heritage that includes traditional knowledge systems (culture, rituals, and traditions). The heritage has much that is good and productive which, in turn, is truly priceless to the whole of mankind.

Generally, "development" is equated with economic development, technological progress, and urbanization. By this view, most indigenous communities will seem less developed by the yardstick of contemporary society. But this perception is a one-dimensional definition of development, discounting social, cultural, and environmental considerations.

If we consider development in a larger context, we can see that indigenous peoples have a number of characteristics that distinguish them:

- **Strong Relationship with Nature:** Indigenous people have learned to coexist with nature for centuries. They employ customary knowledge and practices to conserve the environment.
- **Strengthened Community Relationships:** Indigenous people possess strong social bonds. They support each other and share resources freely.

- **Cultural Diversity:** Indigenous peoples possess their own distinct cultures, languages, and traditions. These cultures have developed over centuries and contain important knowledge and understanding.

Indigenous societies have a wealth of knowledge and experience accumulated over thousands of years, which is of immense benefit to contemporary society. Even if we focus solely on the welfare of humanity, ignoring all other species in the universe, we still need to learn from indigenous communities to ensure the survival of our own existence.

### **LOVE FOR NATURE:**

Nature love is part and parcel of the lives of indigenous people. They have lived close to nature for thousands of years, and their entire life has its roots in nature. Forests to them are sacred, and they live in coexistence with nature. They perceive their life as being connected to the earth, not only because farming is their primary livelihood, but also because they consider nature to be their "mother"—a divine being. Toppo (2024) corroborates the assertion in the sense that by their system of religion, Adivasis capture a mode of life founded on egalitarian principles, the veneration of ancestors, and the stability of nature and human beings, both coexisting and respecting each other, a symbiotic relationship between the two. This is also testified by their devotion of the Saal and Karma trees during the major festivals of Sarna and Karam, respectively. Great importance was given to appreciating the harmony between nature and human beings, understanding that the health of an individual's surrounding environment is directly connected to their well-being (NCF, 2023). The indigenous people gauge their internal happiness according to nature. Their happiness is mostly assessed through their balanced interaction with the natural world, spirituality, and the wellness of the society. For example, the Oraon tribe measures their happiness in terms of their children, crops, and livestock (Kumar, 2014). The Meitei tribe in Manipur has adopted Loktak Lake as their residence. They did that without disturbing the natural environment of the lake. Rather than covering the lake with soil or any other substance, all their houses are constructed to float on the surface of the lake. Loktak Lake is equally renowned as the home to the world's sole floating national park and floating school. Further, the Dongria Kondh tribe of Odisha also worships the Niyamgiri Hills as the residence of their god, Niyam Raja. The happiness of their lives depends on the well-being of the hills, forests, and rivers, which are an integral part of their spiritual lives. The resistance of the Dongria Kondh to mining activities in the Niyamgiri Hills exemplifies how their inner satisfaction and identity are intertwined with maintaining their natural environment.

Indigenous societies represent a more civilised mode of existence, whereupon freedom from want, living in harmony with nature, respectful relationship among members, and sustainable use of natural resources are prioritised over carefree destruction. Their profound respect for nature is in direct comparison to contemporary environmental debasement practices. Jayakumar et al. (2023) develop an innovative education system that strives to maintain Adivasi community autonomy, dignity, and cultural identity while ensuring their modern-day skills. Such an approach synthesizes the disparities between the rich environmental knowledge and ecological sustainability strategies of the old way of Adivasi lifeway and those requirements of modern-day life. In doing so, it not only empowers Adivasi communities but also provides important lessons to global societies about living respectfully and sustainably. This model puts a strong emphasis on the preservation of culture and care of nature, illustrating how indigenous wisdom can lead humanity towards a more equitable and ecologically aware future.

**RESPECT OF WOMEN:**

Adivasi/tribal women contribute a significant part of the tribal lifeworld by being their identities, knowledge, values, and experiences (Ekka and Giangthandunliu, 2024). Women in tribal society are shown much respect. This is based on their position, knowledge, and contribution towards society. Tribal culture is heavily associated with nature, and the woman is recognized as a goddess of nature and respected just as nature is. Tribal women have significant roles to play at home and in society. Xaxa (2004) substantiates the argument in her research that in households where people are closely attached to land and agriculture, women still perform their gender-specific agricultural roles, and when male members go out for work, women assume the added responsibility of carrying out tasks that are traditionally done by men so that agricultural work is continued in their absence. They labor in the fields, look after the children, and also engage in community decision-making. Yadav (2024) observes that the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, otherwise known as Dafla and Bangni, practices a clan-based kinship system. The tribe believes in the practice of equal rights and status for women, considering them to be the personification of strength, prosperity, and peace. Consequently, family men always consult their female members prior to decision-making, no matter how insignificant the decisions may be. A girl's birth is a cause for celebration as a festival in Meghalaya. The Khasi tribe is a matrilineal society. Family property goes to the daughter, and children share the mother's surname. Following marriage, the daughter resides with her husband at her mother's residence. The Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, and Lalung people of Meghalaya in Northeast India and the Mappilas of Kerala are societies that practice a matrilineal system, where family and inheritance follow the line of the mother (Burman, 2012).

Burman (2012) observes that women in many tribes of Northeast India are highly entrepreneurial. For instance, women of the Khasi tribe are famous for operating shops in markets such as Shillong and Nongpoh in Meghalaya, while in Mizoram many women operate large businesses and shops. Lalhriatpuui (2010) observes that a large percentage of the female labour force in Mizoram is occupied in the primary sector, many of whom are employed as agricultural labourers. She further observes that women tend to operate small family enterprises, referred to as micro-enterprises, which have low capital requirements for their establishment. Such firms would entail selling products like food stuff or home-based handicrafts. Although women earn good rates of return on their modest investments because they have limited access to capital, the very low capital-to-labour ratios tend to confine them to low-productivity operations with limited opportunities for growth.

In a society where arguments concerning women's rights tend to be about what women can or cannot do, the tribal people have a different thing to say (Sen, 2014). As we proceed towards equality and justice, we must be guided by the sense of the tribal people who realized long ago that equality and respect for each other have an ennobling impact.

**SELF RELIANCE:**

The idea of self-reliance has been a part of Indian society and culture for decades. The ancient Indian scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, and Ramayana put lot of importance on self-reliance. At the time of India's freedom struggle, self-reliance was an influential national movement. Mahatma Gandhi spread the idea and inspired it via the Swadeshi movement. To this date, self-reliance continues to be a national objective of utmost importance

to India. The Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign has been initiated by the Indian government with the goal of making India self-reliant through policy reforms in different sectors.

Likewise, in tribal societies, there exists a notion of self-reliance in food, resources, agriculture, and so on. Adivasis in India, tend to be self-reliant because they have a strong affinity with nature, traditional knowledge systems, and community-based practices. Their self-reliance is based on sustainable living, management of resources, and cultural autonomy. Tribals practice self-reliance in their life. The research of Sen (2014) attempts to figure out how the Jharkhand Adivasis, even in the presence of socio-economic struggle, preserves a lighthearted and cheerful disposition driven by a unique cultural methodology towards time. Sen (2014) examines the idea of temporality among Adivasis, highlighting how they experience the present as the most concrete temporal mode that overshadows past and future. Adivasi societies engage in sustainable agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and traditional knowledge systems that guarantee their economic and emotional well-being. For example, the Santal tribe in Jharkhand and West Bengal depends on forest produce, agriculture, and fishing, which are closely related to their sense of fulfillment. Their traditional farming system is sustainable without the application of harmful substances. For instance, farmers in Dharav village, Madhya Pradesh, follow the "Utera" system (Dogra & Mayaram, 2016). They store seeds from the last harvest, sow more than one seed simultaneously, employ animals for fertilizing land, and refrain from using chemicals. Moreover, mixed farming facilitates losses due to crop failure. Tribals continue to follow the age-old practice of gathering food from the forest. They obtain approximately 30% of their food from the forest. The philosophy of "Jal, Jungle, Zameen" (Water, Forest, Land) revolves around Adivasi joy. Displacement from these resources owing to industrialization or deforestation commonly ends in loss of cultural identity and inner peace. In a world where there are plenty of processed foods packaged with plastic, tribal societies impart to us how to get food from readily accessible resources.

Kothari (2020) points to encouraging instances of self-sufficiency among rural communities, such as Adivasis, who have used traditional knowledge, collective action, and sustainable approaches to attain autonomy. Dalit women farmers in Telangana were once plagued by hunger and poverty, but now they are donating food grains to pandemic relief. Likewise, farmers on the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border have been providing organic vegetables to Bengaluru even during the lockdown. At the same time, Adivasi villages in central India are employing community resources to aid returning migrant workers. These remarkable examples illustrate the strength and capability of empowered rural communities to respond efficiently to crises.

### **MEDICINAL KNOWLEDGE:**

Presently, the Indian pharmaceutical sector worth 50 billion dollars is among the world's top five largest pharmaceutical sectors. Yet, the majority of these medicines have chemicals that tend to produce more side effects. Moreover, these medicines are costly, and middle-class individuals at times even struggle to buy them. In medicine and healthcare, tribal societies are in front of us because they have their traditional customs.

Adivasis have rich knowledge of medicinal plants, eco-friendly agriculture, and forest protection, which enhances their physical and mental health. Sharma et al. (2021) report that the utilization of forest plants for medicine and as wild food is an integral part of indigenous people's traditions. While indigenous communities represent only 4% of the world's population,



they govern and safeguard 11% of the entire forest coverage of the world. India, representing only 2% of the earth's landmass, sustains about 8% of the biodiversity of the world, placing it on the list of 17 mega-diversity hotspots of the world. This differentiation is characterized by the abundance and high percentages of endemic species present throughout its varied agro-climatic zones (Vijayakumar et al., 2015). Cultural and geographical variation in the nation contributes to the role played in determining the difference in ethnomedicinal knowledge among various communities. Tribal societies, who mostly reside in forests, hills, plateaus, and inaccessible areas, maintain ethnic variation and indigenous information, which form a major chunk of ethnobotanical studies (Sharma et al., 2021).

The Kani people of Kerala, for example, employ age-old knowledge about the Arogyapacha plant for their medicinal needs, which improves their health and happiness. Ethnomedicine or tribal medicine refers to the study of traditional healing practices based on culturally constructed explanations of health, sickness, and diseases. It relies on bioactive compounds present in plants and animals. The Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh employ some trees, herbs, plants, and roots for medicinal purposes. They have various ways of curing all types of diseases using different kinds of herbal medicines. The medicines are utilized to cure diseases such as fever, malaria, jaundice, etc. If we adopt this practice in our healthcare system, then it can prove to be a good substitute for curing most diseases and also for lessening the intake of chemical-based drugs.

#### **IDENTIFICATION OF ANCIENT AND ESTEEMED TRADITION:**

It's the tribal people who possess the ability to hold onto older traditions. They are convinced that the tradition has been handed down to them as a heritage from their forefathers and they are responsible for keeping the traditions alive and passing them on to the next generation. It is the blessing of their ancestors, they say, and because of these traditions, they are still living.

The people of Karnataka, the Halakkis, hold the belief that music unites two generations. Their folk songs are oral tradition, which they hand down from generation to generation. Halakki women sing their folk songs while performing their day-to-day activities without the use of musical instruments. These women, without receiving any formal music education, convey their feelings, like happiness, sadness, and anxiety, through these songs (Kundalia, 2020). To keep and uphold this tradition, the Government of India awarded Sukari Bomagowda the Padma Shri award. Galo people in Arunachal Pradesh are able to remember the names of their ancestors from 20 generations back, thanks to their distinctive naming system. They have a pattern where the son's name starts with the second sound of the father's name, and the end of the father's name is inherited by the son. They can follow the names of their ancestors based on the first sound or initial of their names. For instance, Bagda's father, Memo, is 20th generation, his grandfather is Megum, and his great-grandfather is Gumme. The 'Me' in the name of his great-grandfather was prefixed from his grandfather's name, with the prefix defining the father's name.

Tribal communities also educate us on how to identify, save, and retain our traditions alive (Sen, 2014). Adivasis maintain their traditions through oral traditions, songs, proverbs, rituals, and public assemblies. These acts not only continue their cultural heritage but also sustain the transfer of ecological wisdom, moral values, and historical tales to subsequent generations. In spite of the difficulties that modernization presents, Adivasis still hold on to their oral traditions as an integral aspect of their heritage. Traditions and civilization assist human beings in

comprehending their lives. We are known in the world because of our traditions. It is India's tradition that enables us to be considered with dignity all over the world. We are known by the good works that our ancestors have done. The world still respects us due to the deeds of humanity that our ancestors had carried out. Due to conserving and continuing these traditions, we will keep getting respect in the times to come as well.

**Conclusion:**

The tribal society can be considered a retrograde community nowadays, but the reason is that the so-called advanced society lives in the wrong manner. The tribals point to us the much better path in life wherein the resources are not used unnecessarily, people belonging to the society are treated more respectfully, their ancient customs are kept intact, and nature is worshiped and not destroyed. If we analyze the activities of the contemporary world, including deforestation, global warming, and the disappearance of animals, we can observe that tribals educate us regarding the importance of living with nature. Learning from Adivasis, i.e., India's native people, is very important in order to create a sustainable, just, and culturally vibrant society. Their love for nature and their harmonious rapport with nature provide very valuable lessons about conservation of the environment. Adivasis consider forests, rivers, and mountains as sacred, living sustainably off resources and conserving biodiversity. This respect for nature is the antithesis of contemporary exploitation, and their ecological wisdom must be learned in order to stem global environmental catastrophes. Their respect for women is equally significant, with women holding central positions in Adivasi society. Women take a leading role in farming, craft production, and communal decision-making, demonstrating a gender-balanced style of working against patriarchal expectations. This women's role appreciation is a testament to the need for inclusivity and equality in developing resilient communities. Adivasis are also manifestations of self-sufficiency, drawing on local knowledge and local resources for survival. From sustainable agriculture to forest-based livelihood options, they show that communities may live without excessive reliance on the outside world, providing an economic and social independence model. Their traditional medicine is yet another field of invaluable significance. Adivasis have long and proven experience in the use of herbs and plants for medicine, which has enriched modern medicine and provides possible solutions for cheap, natural health. Conserving and synthesizing this knowledge can fill the gap between ancient and contemporary medical systems. Lastly, Adivasis' capacity to conserve their traditions through oral narratives, rituals, and communal practices demonstrates the significance of cultural continuity. Their tales, songs, and ceremonies not only preserve their heritage but also impart to younger generations their identity, values, and sense of belonging to the land. In a world struggling with ecological degradation, social injustice, and cultural loss, the Adivasi lifestyle offers a holistic model for sustainable living, gender respect, and the maintenance of cultural diversity. Through learning from their wisdom, we can build a more balanced and harmonious future that respects both people and planet. For our own development, for the development of society, and for the development of the world, we must keep learning throughout our lives, from everyone. Learning from tribals must not be thought of as detrimental to our ego. They can provide us with a means of better living that cannot be achieved in books. They are not behind us; their way of life is just different. We have to learn from them for our development and for our being.

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