



Tradition And Transformation: The Enduring Relevance Of Indigenous Tribal Practices- A Gandhian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous tribal practices represent a vital source of knowledge, traditions, and cultural heritage that have evolved over many generations, characterized by a deep connection to nature and community life. Tribal groups worldwide, particularly in India, continue to actively and creatively engage in their traditional lifestyles, even in the face of modern industrialization and state-driven development. This review paper is based on secondary data and scholarly literature alone to explore how the practices continue, evolve, and are relevant in the contemporary world.

The article highlights indigenous peoples' health, ecological, spiritual, and social practices, and the impact of modernization, policy adjustments, and economic transformations on their development. The review finds that indigenous practices are not static leftovers of history; they are viable and dynamic systems that may foster human and environmental sustainability as long as they are supported within a culturally responsive framework.

Keywords: Indigenous practices, Ecological balance, Gandhian

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous practices turn out to be these really intricate setups for tribal groups. They let people get a handle on their surroundings, you know, both the natural world and the social side of things. All sorts of parts make them up, like farming methods, ideas about ecology, traditional medicine, and spiritual beliefs, too. Folks pass them along mainly through stories told out loud. (Agrawal 1995). Now, researchers point out how these practices go beyond just practical stuff. They carry deeper ethical views and philosophical angles. The focus stays on connecting with everything, making sure sustainability happens, and keeping life in harmony with nature overall. (Berkes 2018).

Over in India, officials count 705 different tribal communities right now. Their old traditions shape who they are culturally, especially in places such as Central India, the Northeast, and down in Kerala. Still, things like development projects, global influences, and regular schooling push these ways aside a lot. That ends up causing local knowledge to fade away bit by bit. (Deb and Malhotra 2001). A review of existing literature helps us understand how tribal customs not only endure but also adapt in the face of these challenges. Indian tribal communities live closely with nature, and their customs, rituals, and knowledge reflect a worldview rooted in experience, collaboration, and environmental sustainability (Gadgil & Guha, 1992).

In recent years, scholars and policymakers have increasingly recognized the significance of Indigenous practices in addressing global ecological challenges (Berkes, 2012). From a Gandhian point of view, these practices are very much in line with his philosophy of Sarvodaya, the welfare of all, and Gram Swaraj, self-reliant village communities (Parel, 2016). Gandhi's ideals were based on respect for traditional practices, simplicity of lifestyle, and moral responsibility towards all living beings, thus making his thought an ideal framework for understanding Indigenous sustainability.

ECOLOGICAL & CULTURAL INDIGENOUS TRIBAL PRACTICES

Literature has largely looked at the traditional healthcare systems' remaining presence among the tribal populations. Social science furnishes evidence signifying that even with the ongoing development of modern medical facilities, tribal populations are still heavily dependent on the indigenous practices, healers, and the medicinal plants (Kumar & Pandey, 2020).

For instance, Mal and Saikia (2025) indicated that nearly 84% of Garo women in Meghalaya visited the Ojhas (the traditional healers) mainly for childbirth, fever, and menstruation-related problems. The reasons behind this were easy access, cheaper cost, and deep-rooted cultural trust.

In a similar vein, Jena et al. (2023) investigated the traditional branding practices among the Odisha tribal groups, wherein the heated iron rods are placed on children's skin in order to cure the perceived illness. Although these practices are harmful, they are steeped in the native belief systems of illness and social responsibility.

Rowkith and Bhagwan (2020) pointed out that emotional and physical healing among tribal people in Maharashtra had a central place assigned to spirituality, dance, and rituals, which were often invoked in the case of death to maintain community harmony and also manage grief.

Consequently, the literature indicates that the conventional healing methods are not merely the means of curing illnesses but also the components of the socio-cultural system, which have been the topic of the talks on the culturally sensitive healthcare models (WHO, 2022).

Researchers believe that the inclusion of these traditional practitioners' medicines in the public health approaches, especially in the tribal areas, would result not only in the increase of accessibility but also in the building of trust among the people (Chaudhuri & Ray, 2019).

GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW

Gandhi's philosophy provides a deep insight into seeing Indigenous systems as not only theologically but also ethically contrary to the materialistic and independent worldviews. Gandhi asserted Swadeshi (self-sufficiency), Sarvodaya (welfare of all), and Trusteeship (ethical use of resources)—which are all social values that are at the core of tribal life (Parel, 2016; Sharma, 2005). Both Gandhian and traditional perspectives exploit and promote regional production, public property, and ecological care (Kumarappa, 1945).

In this way, the tribal people's communal land ownership and their flat social organization are the same as Gandhi's ideal of an equal village economy. Furthermore, the tribal people's close-to-nature spirituality is the same as Gandhi's insistence on a spiritual ecology, where God is seen in all living things (Dhawan, 2006). This common view allows a strong and positive contradiction to the worldwide industrialist system, which is basically a situation of ethical co-existence rather than development through utilization.

INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

One of the major topics that literature discusses is the ecological knowledge that is inherent in indigenous people's culture and their way of living. Berkes (2018) sees Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as a gradual process through which knowledge, practices, and beliefs are created, and this process occurs via adaptation and is transmitted from one generation to the next. Researchers in the Northeast of India have found out that tribal environment systems, like sacred groves, community-managed forests, and water rituals, are not only about the tribes themselves but also about the nature that is being preserved in the area where these activities are going on (Deb, 2007).

As a case in point, the Tiwa tribe of Assam solemnly worships and observes nature, which in turn does not allow the depletion of the forest, and thus, the environment remains in balance (Women for India, 2020). A study done by Donatuto et al. (2014) has shown that Coast Salish tribes of North America have developed a set of Indigenous Health Indicators that combine the parameters of the environment being healthy, of the availability of natural resources, and of cultural use that all together constitute human well-being, thus proving the existence of a commonality among the indigenous people's ethics.

The academics have taken the position that these ancient systems do nothing else but highlight the aspects of stewardship and sustainability in contrast to the modern paradigm of treating the ecological as a resource (Gadgil, Berkes, & Folke, 1993).

The Indian tribes' ecological wisdom has a direct connection with the Gandhian concept of trusteeship and Sarvodaya that advocates for living in harmony with the natural world (Gupta, 2012). Thus, the indigenous customs are theocratic and practical ways for a sustainable future.

CULTURE, AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Indigenous tribal practices are fundamentally rooted in their spiritual and moral dimensions, which are crucial for community cohesion. According to Rowkith and Bhagwan (2020), tribal spirituality in India is expressed through songs, rituals, and storytelling. Storytelling, in particular, serves a dual purpose: it imparts moral lessons to listeners while also offering psychological healing and fostering social harmony. As a result, rituals help to forge connections among individuals, their ancestors, and the natural world. Hamacher (2014)

Highlighted that the oral traditions of Australian Aboriginals play a vital role in recalling shared experiences, showcasing the intertwining of spirituality and empirical knowledge within their culture. In India, festivals, initiation ceremonies, and communal worship not only strengthen the moral fabric of tribes but also function as educational hubs where ecological and cultural values are imparted (Singh, 2021).

Although these practices may have evolved due to modern influences such as Christianity or formal education, they remain significant as symbols of identity and belonging.

GANDHIAN APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY AND INDIGENOUS PRACTICES

Gandhian sustainability emphasizes ethical consumption, local production, and respect for life, closely aligning with tribal lifestyles. Both perspectives advocate for small-scale economies and promote responsible human interactions with nature (Sharma, 2005).

Gandhi's concept of Trusteeship, whereby humans are guardians and not proprietors of natural resources, finds echo with Indigenous worldviews regarding balance and stewardship (Kumarappa, 1945).

Gandhi's emphasis on Gram Swaraj led him to envision a decentered form of government where communities could autonomously manage their resources. This mirrors Indigenous self-determination, where council governance manages land and forest use (Chattopadhyay, 2002). Adopting these principles may bring culturally appropriate sustainable development policy to tribal regions in India.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The literature commonly highlights that the practices of indigenous peoples are both changing and evolving over time. These changes result from an ongoing interaction between traditional values and modern influences (Agrawal, 1995; Berkes, 2018). For example, Mal and Saikia (2025) discovered that Garo women have developed hybrid health care practices, combining modern medicine with herbal remedies.

Similarly, Jena et al. (2023) reported that younger tribal mothers in Odisha are becoming more aware of health risks related to branding, influenced in part by community health programs. While globalization and education have often been viewed as key contributors to cultural loss, they have also played a role in reinterpreting traditions.

A part of the tribal youth is fed up with the past and considers traditional knowledge as a source of pride and environmental activism (Deb, 2007). Such a change is akin to the Gandhian philosophy that the tradition should move in a manner that is ethically, and not just preserving customs (Gupta, 2012). Consequently, change turns into a process that demands creativity and is a hallmark of cultural resilience.

POLICY AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The reviewed literature highlights the need for policy frameworks that are sensitive to the needs of indigenous communities while also enabling the modernization and protection of their practices. Chaudhuri and Ray (2019) advocate for integrating traditional practitioners into public health systems, ensuring safety and effectiveness in policies. Similarly, Deb (2007) believes that tribal ecological practices should receive legal acknowledgment through community forest rights and biodiversity registers. Furthermore, ethical scholarship warns against the unjust commodification or appropriation of indigenous knowledge without community consent (Agrawal, 1995).

Although India's constitution, particularly the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, along with the Forest Rights Act (2006) and other related laws, offers some recognition, there are still significant gaps in their implementation. A comprehensive approach that includes Gandhian values, local governance, and scientific evidence could support a careful balance between progress and conventional practices.

CONCLUSION

People still talk about how indigenous tribal practices aren't just old stuff from way back. They keep going as real knowledge systems that actually grow over time. Things like their ways of handling health care, looking after the environment, and spiritual stuff show this mix of being able to adapt and having deep cultural roots. Sure, globalization hits these cultures pretty hard sometimes. But it doesn't always mean they fade away. A lot of times, it leads to folks creatively rethinking their old wisdom in new ways. Keeping this heritage alive really comes down to policies that show respect, get people involved, and focus on doing things ethically together.

Gandhi had this point about how you measure civilization by how people advance and stay true morally. That idea lines up with what indigenous folks think, too. So the real worth in tribal traditions is how they can guide our modern world toward better balance with nature, more cultural variety, and lasting peace.

You see this link between Gandhian ideas and indigenous living that shares this base of ethics around harmony, keeping things simple, and taking moral responsibility. With all the environmental problems we face now, teaming up with Gandhian and indigenous principles offers a different path for development. One that values nature, treats people with dignity, and puts community well-being first. Recognizing and valuing these practices matters a ton, not just for tribal cultures to survive. But also, for picturing India and the whole world as spots where sustainability is just how things are.

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