

# Contribution of Tribal Women in Development of Sustainable Environment

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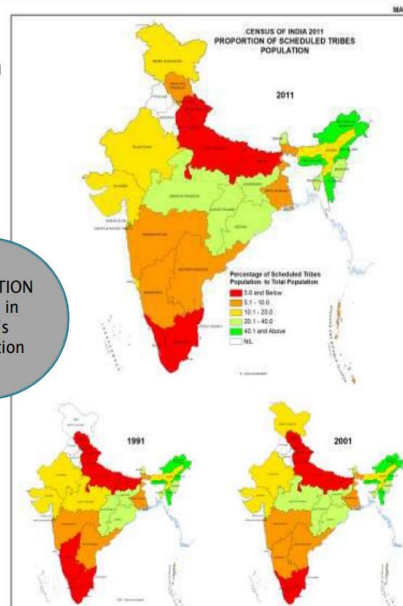
**Abstract-** This review is an attempt to trace the contribution of Indian tribes towards the sustainable development of the environment. It is to appreciate the efforts made by the so-called natives who until now were living a life of disadvantage in the context of education and technology. This is to trace down the significant planning of their fields, crop as to which one to follow keeping in mind the least wastage of natural resources. Their life style being simple and not luxurious and wasteful, they manage to respect their customs and traditions which in turn are in consonance with the preservation of the environment. They follow forestry management which is a cost-effective measure of farming leaving least carbon footprints. Their seasonal cycle of farming allows the cattle grazing in a set pattern. In terms of wildlife protection, the tribes attach religious totems so that the wildlife is protected. There are communities who use bamboo technique in place of pesticides in order to save the fisheries. Fish farming is an integral part of the tribes and the use of chemical pesticides is at minimum so as to save the fish. Their rituals and beliefs are in the environmental harmony so as not to harm the resources. The tribe population constitutes more than 9% of the Indian population and over a period of time they have accumulated enough knowledge about agriculture and cohabiting in the ecosystem. This includes their plant-based medicines also. The tribesmen mostly use herbs and plants for the treatment of various diseases.

**Keywords:** tribal, farming, sustainable, development, crop, natural resources, forest, selective harvesting, reforestation, irrigation, soil fertility, wildlife protection, agricultural practices, fishing

## Introduction:

Tribals, also known as adivasis or janajatis, comprise around 8.6% of the population per the Census of India 2011, and are an integral part of our social fabric [1]. There is a strong rural bias in the distribution of the Tribal population, with Scheduled Tribes (STs) constituting 11.3% of the rural population, while their proportion of the urban population is only 2.8%. 90 districts per Census 2011, (2021 Census data is not yet available) had a ST population of 50% or more, of which 48 were in the northeast [2]. Tribals have suffered a serious lag in development indicators as compared to the general population. While there has been significant improvement over the years, this gap still persists [3]. Illustratively the literacy rate amongst STs has improved from 8.5% in 1961 to 59% in 2021, yet still behind the 73% for all of India [4],[5]. Some of the tribes that are most commonly known in India are the Gonds, the Bheels, the Santhals, the Angamis, Chenchus, Kodaba. They are the people whose lives revolve around the forest area as they totally depend on natural resources for their survival. Their main occupation for their livelihood is farming and they live in areas which are deprived of connectivity, modern technology, largely untouched by the society around them. This is changing, albeit slowly, with greater integration and development visible in tribal communities [6].

Proportion of Scheduled Tribe Population States: 2011



PROPORTION OF STs in State's population

Fig 1. Percentage of tribal habitation (Source: Census of India 2011, Scheduled Tribes in India)

This is the map of our country indicating the percentage of the tribal habitation referred to in the foregoing paragraph. We can decipher that they inhabit the area which is rich in natural resources and is congenial for their humble living, usually far away from the modern cities [7].

### How Tribal Lifestyle Sustains Development

The 17 SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals, were adopted by the United Nations in the year 2015 under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These seek not only to spur economic development and end poverty and deprivation, but concurrently lower inequality, preserve our forests and oceans while managing climate change and boost education and health. Learnings from the tribal communities can be a useful guide to achieving this delicate and difficult balance. Refer Fig. 2 for a summarization of how tribal lifestyles support sustainability [8], [9].

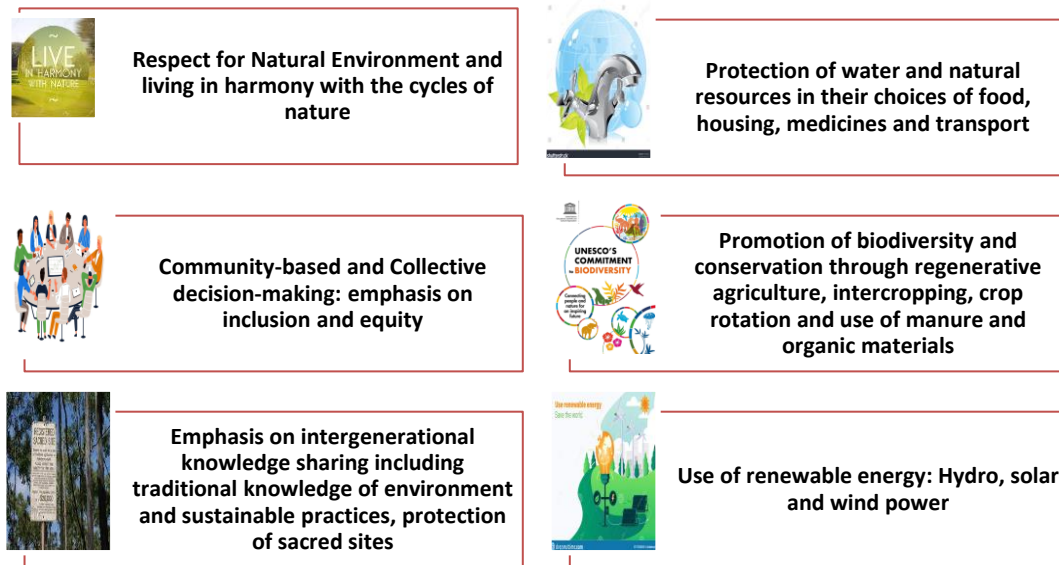


Fig 2. Various ways the tribal lifestyle supports sustainability

### Role of Tribal Women:

Women by their instinctive reflexes provide subsistence to their families by judicious management and use of natural resources [10]. They are not only caretakers but also educators, producers and consumers and play a pivotal role in creating a sustainable ecosystem. Tribal women constitute 47% of India's tribal population. Their deep connections to their community and their profound understanding of their ecosystem places them in a unique position to play a bigger role in the sustainable development of the environment [11]. They often play the role as archives of traditional knowledge and traditions, helping to pass on valuable insights on climate and sustainability. There have been many movements by the tribal women from various parts of the country in their own ways to achieve the same goal.

Despite their humble lives and livelihood they have always made a difference in playing their role in not only living a self-sufficient life but also in conserving and promoting the sustainable development of the environment. Their traditional choices in agriculture, housing, food, transport and medicine embody a deep respect for our natural environment. Their rituals and beliefs are in consonance with the same feeling. Through their continuous experience and communication with nature, they have been able to build their own eco system. They have been able to achieve this by provisioning their own food and medicines in the form of herbs, climate regulation, their aesthetic beauty and most importantly water recycling [9]. The appointment of Mrs. Droupadi Murmu, a tribal woman as President of India, should give a boost to aspirations of more such women to play the role of change agents and community influencers.

### Movements Established by Tribal Women for Environment:

Deforestation is one of the major environmental issues that has demanded to be addressed on an urgent basis. In the Khandmal district of Odisha, this issue has been dealt by the women of the area in a novel way. The breadwinners in this tribe are the women. Despite being involved in farming they have not been given the status of farmers by the state government thus depriving them of the benefits that are showered on their male counterparts. The women of this tribe have resorted to millet farming which is profitable in two ways. One it is economical, yielding good results, secondly it is friendly to the eco system.

The Garasia tribe in Rajasthan in the district Sirohi is supposedly most knowledgeable in ethno medicinal plants. To conserve and protect the same, the women of the tribe have developed small patches of their forest and treat the same as the sacred groves for their folk deities.

More tribal women from Himachal Pradesh cultivate barley and buckwheat during the summers for their survival. After the harvest of the crop, cattle grazing are allowed so that the fields are ready for the next crop. The women of the Bhotia tribe of this state also grow medicinal plants. This is called seasonal farming and the way they utilize their farms as pastures is known as transhumance. In the tribal society, women always have an upper hand. They are the bread winners of the family and the socio-economic decisions rest with them. The women most often employ the tactics of attaching the religious values to various activities thus curtailing the felling of trees and the animal culling. For instance, killing of tigers, sparrows and pangolins are banned as they are considered

sacred. The cutting of banyan tree is prohibited as the women of Adi tribes in Arunachal Pradesh feel the act would invite death and famine. This act of the women in Arunachal Pradesh has helped in the preservation of these species.

The tribes in Nagaland are called Nagas [12]. There are many tribal areas but they speak different languages though their culture and the roots are same. Women of this tribe work both at home and in the fields, though unlike the other tribes their contribution is not acknowledged by their tribesmen. The Naga women play a major role in their usage of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as they have innumerable experience in the direct contact with nature. Almost 66% of women are involved in agriculture and its related activities as compared to 44% of men. They stand for a cause of sustaining the resources which the nature provides them in their area.



The women of Naga tribes are mainly responsible for their continuous preservation and the propagation of their native and edible plants and vegetables. They follow a seed exchange program within the community which strengthens their relationship and bonds along with the originality of the yield. The Naga women are careful in extracting from nature only what is required and do not indulge in wastefulness.

Tribal women of Jharkhand State are at a disadvantage from the point of natural resources and agriculture. Still the tribal women have worked relentlessly to throw timber mafia out of Jharkhand. Apart from being an economic boon this has helped them conserving the environment in their areas. The women of Munda tribe of Jharkhand have undertaken this task to chase out the people who are out to destroy their trees and forest area.



Tulasi Gowda is a 72-year-old tribal woman from Karnataka. She was bestowed the fourth highest civilian Padmashri award for her extraordinary contribution in the protection of environment. She belongs to the Halakki tribe of Karnataka, and she is also called the ‘‘Encyclopedia of Forest’’ as a result of her knowledge of the various species of herbs and plants.

### Conclusion:

We can see that the mostly uneducated tribal women have made a mark of difference through their knowledge and skill. The list of such achievers is innumerable. Their contribution towards the sustainable development of the environment is praiseworthy. They practice the agricultural methods which are sustainable. They promote the use of manure which is organic and try to make use of the unused barren land which in turn boosts their income at the same time also protects the forests from deforestation. They have been able to successfully raise their voice against deforestation and water conservation. These indigenous women have been the indispensable forces in maintaining the eco system across the regions. To amplify their influence, it is critical that they be given a voice in matters that concern their future [13]. Their stories need wider circulation so they can become part of the mainstream. Their inclusion on community platforms such as block development committees and other Panchayati Raj institutions is critical. So is capacity building through training and education. They have amply demonstrated that given a chance they can shine and lead the way.

The best way to conserve high biodiversity areas is by respecting the rights of tribals. Studies reveal that tribal lands have better biodiversity, lesser forests fire rates and deforestation. The world needs to respect the tribals and understand that human diversity and the environment is protected with tribal people and their traditions.

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