



Tribal Participation in India's Environmental Movements: From History to Contemporary Times

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Abstract- Tribal communities in India have historically shared a deep and symbiotic relationship with their natural environment, relying on forests, rivers, and land for sustenance, culture, and identity. This paper explores the participation of tribal groups in India's environmental movements from the pre-colonial era to the present, highlighting their role as both ecological stewards and active resisters of environmental degradation. The study begins with an overview of traditional tribal ecological practices, including sacred groves, shifting cultivation, and community-based forest management, which reflect a sustainable ethos. The colonial period marked a turning point, as restrictive forest policies and commercial exploitation disrupted tribal life, leading to widespread displacement and uprisings such as the Santhal Rebellion and Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, which combined ecological concerns with socio-political resistance. Post-independence, tribal communities remained at the forefront of major environmental struggles. Their participation in the Chipko Movement underscored the connection between forest protection and survival. Similarly, in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, tribal groups resisted displacement due to large dam projects, exposing the developmental dilemma of growth versus ecological justice. Movements in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and North-East India against mining and deforestation further illustrate tribal resistance to exploitative development. Recent struggles, such as the Dongria Kondh's defense of Niyamgiri hills, demonstrate continuity in indigenous environmental ethics and resilience. The paper also examines the role of legislation such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) and PESA (1996), which aimed to restore tribal ecological rights, while analyzing persistent challenges. Through historical and contemporary case studies, the research argues that tribal participation in environmental movements is not merely defensive but represents an alternative vision of sustainable development rooted in harmony with nature. Recognizing tribal ecological knowledge is therefore crucial for shaping future environmental governance in India.

Keywords - Tribes, Environment, Forest Rights, Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Indigenous Knowledge, Colonial Policies, Tribal Resistance, Niyamgiri, Sustainable Development.

I. Introduction

The history of Indian society cannot be understood without acknowledging the deep-rooted relationship between tribal communities and the natural environment. Tribes, often described as the earliest settlers of the subcontinent, have lived in close proximity to forests, hills, and rivers, deriving sustenance, livelihood, and cultural identity from their natural surroundings. Their socio-economic organization, religious practices, and



cultural traditions are interwoven with ecological systems. Unlike the exploitative models introduced later under colonial and industrial regimes, tribal communities traditionally developed modes of resource utilization that ensured both human survival and environmental sustainability. As noted by Nirmal Kumar Bose in *Peasant Life in India* (Orient Longman, Calcutta, 1961, p. 42), tribal societies demonstrated “a remarkable harmony between their cultural institutions and ecological surroundings,” where every activity—from agriculture to rituals—was tied to the rhythms of nature.

The significance of tribes in maintaining ecological balance lies in their intimate knowledge of biodiversity, resource management, and conservation practices. For centuries, tribal communities across India practiced shifting cultivation, forest gathering, and rotational use of land, which prevented soil exhaustion and maintained forest regeneration. These practices, often criticized by colonial administrators as ‘primitive,’ are now being revisited as models of sustainable living in the age of ecological crisis. As anthropologist Verrier Elwin emphasized in *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1964, p. 118), tribal ecological traditions embodied a philosophy where “forest was not merely an economic resource but also a sacred abode of spirits, gods, and ancestors.” This worldview reflects an environmental ethic that contrasts with modern exploitative development paradigms. Historically, the presence of sacred groves, customary taboos, and clan-based forest regulations among tribes played a vital role in conserving biodiversity. For example, the Gonds of Central India and the Khasi tribes of Meghalaya preserved patches of forests as sacred, thereby ensuring the survival of rare species. Environmental historians such as Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, p. 85) argue that these traditional practices were not accidental but part of a coherent ecological consciousness. They illustrate how tribal cosmology integrated resource use with moral codes of restraint, thereby preventing overexploitation of nature.

The colonial intrusion into tribal regions significantly disrupted this balance. With the introduction of forest laws and commercialization of resources, the traditional symbiosis between tribes and environment was undermined. Tribal resistance to colonial forest policies was both an ecological and cultural response, as displacement meant not just economic deprivation but also the erosion of their identity and sacred geography. Scholars like Ram Dayal Munda in *Adivasi Societies and Development* (Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1987, p. 63) observe that colonial forest acts criminalized tribal livelihoods such as shifting cultivation and forest gathering, pushing them into conflicts with the state and marking the beginning of their active role in ecological resistance.

Even in the post-independence era, when the state emphasized large-scale development through dams, industries, and mining projects, tribal communities continued to assert their ecological rights. Their opposition to displacement and environmental degradation reflected not only their struggle for survival but also their commitment to preserving ecological integrity. The Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand, the Narmada Bachao Andolan in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, and the Niyamgiri struggle in Odisha all testify to the vital role of tribal participation in India’s environmental movements.



These struggles illustrate how tribes became central actors in redefining environmental justice and sustainable development.

Historical Context of Tribes and Environment in India

The relationship between tribes and environment in India is rooted in deep antiquity. Archaeological evidence suggests that tribal communities were among the earliest settlers of the subcontinent, inhabiting forests, hills, and river valleys long before the rise of urban civilizations. Their settlements were typically located near natural resources—forests for food and fuel, rivers for water and fish, and hills for protection and minerals. These communities developed a unique mode of ecological adaptation, sustaining themselves without causing large-scale environmental degradation. As D.N. Majumdar notes in *Races and Cultures of India* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, p. 64), tribal groups survived “not by conquering nature but by harmonizing with its cycles,” which distinguished them from later sedentary agrarian and urban populations. Prehistoric tribes practiced rudimentary forms of hunting, fishing, and food gathering, gradually incorporating agriculture through shifting cultivation methods, thereby creating a flexible and adaptive mode of subsistence.

Traditional systems of forest management formed the backbone of tribal ecological practices. Unlike the rigid land ownership structures of settled civilizations, tribes relied on collective rights and customary norms to regulate the use of forests. Hunting was typically seasonal, restricted by taboos and clan-based rules to prevent overexploitation. Shifting cultivation, also known as *jhum* in North-East India, was not merely an economic activity but also a cultural one, accompanied by rituals to appease deities and ensure ecological regeneration. Anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, in his seminal work *The Chenchus: Jungle Folk of the Deccan* (Macmillan, London, 1943, p. 92), documented how tribal groups left plots fallow for years to allow natural regeneration, thereby maintaining soil fertility and biodiversity. Though often criticized by colonial administrators as destructive, shifting cultivation exemplified a form of ecological knowledge attuned to the carrying capacity of the land.

Sacred groves (*devrai*, *sarna*, *law lyngdoh*) played an equally important role in tribal-environmental ethics. These groves, often dedicated to local deities or spirits, were strictly protected from exploitation. The Khasi and Garo tribes of Meghalaya, the Gonds of Central India, and the Kodavas of Karnataka maintained sacred patches of forest where cutting trees, hunting animals, or plucking fruits was forbidden. These practices not only preserved biodiversity but also reinforced spiritual ties with nature. Madhav Gadgil and V.D. Vartak, in their pioneering study *Sacred Groves of India: A Case Study* (Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, 1976, p. 17), argue that sacred groves represent “an indigenous system of environmental conservation, predating modern ecological science by centuries.” These groves acted as reservoirs of medicinal plants, rare species, and water sources, demonstrating the ecological rationality embedded in tribal cosmology.

Folk traditions and oral narratives further reinforced ecological values among tribal communities. Myths, songs, and rituals often personified natural elements as divine entities—forests as mothers, rivers as goddesses, and mountains as ancestors. Such traditions instilled respect for natural resources and regulated their use through cultural



sanctions. Verrier Elwin, in *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (Oxford University Press, London, 1955, p. 141), observed that the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh considered it sacrilegious to plough the earth, believing that such action would wound the mother goddess. Instead, they relied on shifting cultivation and forest produce, reflecting a deep spiritual ecology. These traditions functioned as informal institutions of environmental governance, ensuring that exploitation was checked by cultural beliefs and collective responsibility.

Tribal dependence on natural resources was multifaceted and sustainable. Forests provided food in the form of fruits, tubers, and game, while rivers and streams supplied fish and water for daily use. Bamboo, cane, and wood were used for constructing houses and tools, while medicinal plants formed the basis of indigenous healthcare systems. Importantly, this dependence was marked by reciprocity rather than extraction. As noted by Ramachandra Guha in *The Unquiet Woods* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p. 44), tribal livelihoods were characterized by “use without abuse,” where consumption was limited to immediate needs rather than accumulation. This approach not only preserved ecological balance but also created a sustainable mode of existence that lasted for centuries.

The sustainability of tribal practices can also be seen in their systems of resource sharing and communal management. Land, forests, and water were treated as common property, managed collectively by village councils or clan elders. This communal ethic reduced individual greed and prevented monopolization of resources. The Khasi *dorbar shnong* (village council), the Gond *panch*, and the Oraon *parha* system exemplify such governance structures, where decisions about land use, forest access, and hunting were made collectively. As pointed out by Surajit Sinha in *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India* (K.P. Bagchi & Co., Calcutta, 1987, p. 56), tribal political institutions were inherently tied to ecological management, making them both socio-political and environmental in character.

Thus, the historical context of tribes and environment in India reveals a long tradition of ecological wisdom, embedded in social institutions, religious beliefs, and economic practices. Far from being primitive, these practices reflect sophisticated environmental management systems that ensured both human survival and biodiversity conservation. The arrival of colonial rule in the nineteenth century disrupted this equilibrium through restrictive forest policies and commercialization of resources, but the foundations of tribal-environmental relations remained resilient. Understanding these historical practices is not merely an academic exercise but also a valuable lesson for contemporary environmental policy, where sustainability has once again become a central concern.

Colonial Period and Environmental Disruptions

The colonial period in India brought about profound disruptions in the symbiotic relationship between tribal communities and their environment. Before the advent of British rule, tribes maintained a relatively autonomous system of resource management, guided by customary laws, spiritual beliefs, and communal rights. However, with the consolidation of colonial administration, forests, land, and water—once central to tribal life—were redefined as state property. This transition marked the beginning of an



exploitative regime that not only undermined ecological sustainability but also dispossessed tribal communities of their ancestral rights. As Richard H. Grove observes in *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 237), colonial policies were driven by commercial interests and the resource needs of the empire, which radically altered the environmental history of colonized societies.

One of the most disruptive interventions was the introduction of forest laws, which criminalized traditional tribal practices. The Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 redefined forests as government property, depriving tribal communities of their customary rights to shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering. The 1878 Act, in particular, created categories of “reserved” and “protected” forests, where tribal access was strictly curtailed. This not only disrupted subsistence activities but also criminalized cultural practices such as collecting forest produce, fishing in streams, or grazing cattle. Ramachandra Guha, in *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p. 58), notes that “colonial forest policies converted communities who had for centuries lived in harmony with the forest into trespassers and criminals.” The colonial state prioritized timber extraction for railway expansion, shipbuilding, and military needs, with little concern for ecological or human costs.

The colonial emphasis on commercial forestry further aggravated ecological imbalance. Scientific forestry, introduced by German-trained experts in the late nineteenth century, advocated monoculture plantations of commercially valuable species such as teak and sal. This system ignored the ecological diversity of Indian forests and marginalized the subsistence needs of tribal communities. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, in *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, p. 113), argue that monoculture forestry not only degraded soil and biodiversity but also destroyed the multiple-use character of forests, which had long sustained tribal livelihoods. The replacement of diverse forest ecosystems with commercially driven plantations represented a fundamental shift from subsistence ecology to extractive economy.

The colonial intrusion into tribal areas was not limited to forests but extended to land and agriculture. Revenue settlements such as the Zamindari and Ryotwari systems redefined land as taxable property, undermining the communal ownership patterns of tribes. The penetration of moneylenders, traders, and landlords into tribal areas led to indebtedness, alienation of land, and loss of autonomy. D.N. Majumdar, in *Forty Years of Bengal Anthropology* (Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1955, p. 92), highlights how tribal peasants were forced into bonded labor and wage dependency, eroding their self-sufficient ecological systems. This economic exploitation was deeply tied to ecological disruptions, as deforestation for revenue and commercial crops displaced traditional subsistence practices.

The ecological dislocation caused by colonial policies triggered numerous tribal uprisings, many of which combined political, economic, and environmental grievances. The Santhal Rebellion of 1855–56 was not only a response to economic oppression by moneylenders and landlords but also a protest against the loss of land and forests that sustained their livelihoods. Similarly, the Ulgulan (Great Tumult) led by Birsa Munda



(1899–1900) reflected tribal anger against forest restrictions and land alienation. Birsa's call for "jal, jangal, zameen" (water, forest, land) symbolized the inseparability of environment and identity in tribal consciousness. As K.S. Singh records in *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chotanagpur, 1874–1901* (Manohar, Delhi, 1983, p. 142), the movement highlighted the ecological dimension of tribal resistance, where forests were not merely economic assets but sacred entities linked to their collective survival.

Colonial mining projects also created widespread displacements in tribal areas. The discovery and exploitation of coal, iron ore, and other minerals in central and eastern India transformed tribal regions into industrial frontiers. Tribes such as the Oraons, Mundas, and Santals were uprooted from their ancestral lands to make way for mining colonies and plantations. This not only destroyed ecological habitats but also disrupted tribal cultural systems tied to sacred landscapes. As Walter Fernandes argues in *Land, People and Forests in Tribal Areas* (Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1982, p. 88), the colonial emphasis on resource extraction created "a cycle of ecological degradation and social disintegration" from which tribal communities continue to suffer.

The colonial encounter also altered tribal knowledge systems. Many communities that once practiced shifting cultivation, hunting, and medicinal plant use were forced to abandon these practices due to criminalization and displacement. Yet, despite these disruptions, tribal resistance often incorporated ecological dimensions. The Bhil uprisings, the Koya rebellion in Andhra, and the Rampa revolt (1922–24) led by Alluri Sitarama Raju were partly responses to forest restrictions and exploitation of natural resources. These revolts demonstrate that tribal resistance was as much about environmental survival as about political freedom. David Hardiman, in *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987, p. 73), emphasizes that many tribal movements invoked spiritual authority and ecological symbolism, illustrating the continuity of environmental ethics even under colonial duress.

Thus, the colonial period marked a watershed in the history of tribes and environment in India. By redefining forests as state property, prioritizing commercial extraction, and introducing exploitative land systems, the colonial state dismantled centuries-old systems of ecological management. The disruption of tribal-environment relations was not merely economic but also cultural and spiritual, as communities were alienated from sacred landscapes and ancestral practices. Tribal resistance during this period must therefore be understood as both political assertion and ecological defense. As Ram Dayal Munda and B.B. Pandey argue in *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India* (IWGIA, Copenhagen, 2005, p. 41), colonialism transformed tribal struggles into movements for survival, where reclaiming land, forests, and water became synonymous with reclaiming identity and dignity.

Tribal Participation in Environmental Movements (Post-Independence)

The post-independence era in India was marked by ambitious development projects aimed at industrialization, modernization, and economic growth. Large-scale dams, mining, hydro-power projects, and expansion of industries were initiated in tribal-dominated regions such as central India, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and the North-East. While these projects symbolized progress for the nation, they caused immense displacement, ecological disruption, and cultural dislocation for tribal



communities. Scholars like Walter Fernandes in *Development, Displacement and Rehabilitation in India* (Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1991, p. 27) estimate that more than 40% of the displaced population due to large development projects in India belonged to Scheduled Tribes, even though they constituted less than 10% of the national population. This disproportionate impact ensured that tribal communities became central actors in India's post-independence environmental struggles. Their resistance movements were not only struggles for survival but also assertions of ecological justice and cultural identity.

Chipko Movement (1970s–80s)

The Chipko Movement, which emerged in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand during the 1970s, remains one of the most iconic environmental movements in India. While the movement is often remembered for the participation of hill peasants, especially women, tribal groups in the region also played a significant role in defending their forests. The practice of hugging trees to prevent their felling was rooted in the indigenous understanding that forests were essential for water, fuel, fodder, and soil conservation. Guha, in *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p. 111), notes that the participation of Bhotiya and other tribal communities highlighted how traditional forest users resisted commercial logging sanctioned by the state. Tribal involvement reinforced the idea that forests were not just economic resources but integral to cultural survival and ecological security. Women, many from marginalized communities, emerged as leaders, showing how tribal and rural populations converged in the defense of nature.

Jharkhand Movements for Land and Forest Rights

In central India, particularly in the Chotanagpur plateau, tribes such as the Mundas, Oraons, and Santals engaged in protracted struggles for land, forests, and autonomy. The Jharkhand Movement, which gained momentum in the 1970s and culminated in the creation of Jharkhand state in 2000, had a strong ecological dimension. Leaders like Shibu Soren and organizations such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha emphasized that mining, deforestation, and displacement were destroying tribal livelihoods and cultures. Ram Dayal Munda, in *Adivasi Societies and Development* (Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1987, p. 74), argues that tribal demands in Jharkhand were framed around the slogan of “jal, jangal, zameen” (water, forest, land), encapsulating the ecological essence of their struggle. These movements challenged the state's model of development, exposing the contradictions between economic growth and environmental justice.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)

Perhaps the most significant post-independence environmental movement with tribal participation was the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Initiated in the mid-1980s, NBA opposed the construction of large dams such as the Sardar Sarovar and Narmada Sagar, which threatened to displace thousands of tribal families across Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. Tribal groups like the Bhils, Bhilalas, and Gonds were among the worst affected. Medha Patkar, a leading figure of the NBA, consistently



emphasized the voice of tribal communities who faced the loss of not only their homes but also their sacred rivers and forests. Amita Baviskar, in *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p. 56), highlights how tribals linked displacement to cultural and ecological death, as rivers like the Narmada were central to their cosmology. The NBA revealed how environmental movements in India were deeply intertwined with issues of social justice, indigenous rights, and ecological sustainability.

Movements in North-East India

The North-East, home to diverse tribal communities, witnessed several environmental struggles in the post-independence period, particularly against large hydro-power projects and deforestation. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Meghalaya resisted dams on rivers such as the Subansiri and Siang, which threatened to submerge villages and forests. Sanjoy Hazarika, in *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (Penguin, New Delhi, 1994, p. 148), observes that these movements were not just about displacement but about preserving fragile mountain ecosystems and indigenous ways of life. The Khasi and Garo communities in Meghalaya also mobilized to protect their sacred groves and ancestral lands from mining and deforestation, reinforcing the link between cultural identity and ecological survival. These struggles highlighted the unique environmental consciousness of North-East tribes, shaped by their cosmology and dependence on rivers and forests.

Struggles Against Mining and Industrial Projects

In tribal-dominated states like Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, the expansion of mining and industrial projects after independence triggered a wave of tribal resistance. The extraction of coal, iron ore, bauxite, and other minerals often led to the displacement of entire villages, destruction of forests, and pollution of rivers. One of the most well-documented struggles was the Dongria Kondh's resistance against Vedanta's bauxite mining project in the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha during the 2000s. The Dongria Kondhs considered the Niyamgiri hills sacred, home to their deity Niyam Raja, and therefore non-negotiable for mining. Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, in *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2010, p. 215), describe how the Dongria Kondh mobilized with civil society groups to resist Vedanta, eventually leading to a historic Supreme Court judgment in 2013 recognizing their right to decide on the fate of their land. This struggle exemplified how tribal movements combined ecological ethics, spiritual values, and legal activism in defense of their environment.

Similarly, in Chhattisgarh, the Bastar region witnessed resistance against mining and industrial projects that threatened forests and rivers. Tribes such as the Murias and Marias mobilized against corporate exploitation, often facing violent suppression. Nandini Sundar, in *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, p. 219), highlights how these struggles were embedded in the larger politics of autonomy, resource control, and ecological survival.

Legal Framework and Tribal Rights

The participation of tribes in environmental movements also intersected with legal and policy frameworks. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA)



gave Gram Sabhas in tribal areas the power to decide on matters of natural resource use, while the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 recognized the historical injustice done to forest-dwelling communities by granting them rights over forest land and resources. However, implementation has often been weak, leading to continued mobilization. Upendra Baxi, in *The Future of Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, p. 134), argues that legal recognition alone is insufficient unless tribal communities are empowered to exercise these rights effectively. Environmental movements thus became platforms to assert these legal entitlements and challenge state inaction.

Analysis

Post-independence environmental movements reveal that tribal participation was not passive but central. From the Chipko Movement in the Himalayas to the Narmada Bachao Andolan in central India, and from the Niyamgiri struggle in Odisha to dam resistance in the North-East, tribal communities consistently articulated an alternative vision of development. Their struggles emphasized that forests, rivers, and land were not mere commodities but part of a sacred ecology integral to their cultural survival. As Vandana Shiva notes in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (Zed Books, London, 1988, p. 77), tribal and peasant movements challenged the dominant development paradigm by asserting the principles of ecological sustainability and social justice. Tribal participation in these movements thus redefined the environmental discourse in India, highlighting the inseparability of ecology, identity, and survival.

II. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of tribal participation in India's environmental struggles demonstrates the deep and enduring relationship between indigenous communities and their natural surroundings. From prehistoric times, when tribal societies evolved sustainable practices of hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and sacred grove preservation, to the colonial era, when these practices were criminalized and disrupted by exploitative forest policies, the tribes of India have consistently been at the frontline of ecological defense. Their struggles in the colonial period, exemplified by uprisings such as the Santhal Rebellion and Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, highlighted that resistance to political domination was inseparably linked to resistance against ecological dispossession. In the post-independence era, despite constitutional guarantees and welfare promises, the continuation of large dams, mining, and industrial projects in tribal regions once again threatened their survival, making them central actors in landmark environmental movements such as the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Niyamgiri struggle.

A key lesson emerging from these movements is that tribal participation in environmental struggles has always gone beyond mere survival. It embodies a philosophy of ecological justice where forests, rivers, and land are viewed not as commodities but as living entities connected to community identity, culture, and spirituality. This worldview contrasts sharply with mainstream development paradigms that prioritize extraction and profit over sustainability and equity. As movements in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and the North-East illustrate, the tribal assertion for "jal, jangal, zameen" (water, forest, land) is not simply a demand for resources but a defense of a holistic way of life that balances human needs with ecological preservation. Their



resistance has compelled both the state and civil society to re-examine questions of displacement, rights, and sustainability in the broader framework of environmental governance.

In contemporary times, when climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation pose global challenges, the ecological knowledge and practices of tribal communities acquire renewed significance. Their participation in environmental movements highlights the urgent need to integrate indigenous perspectives into policy-making and conservation strategies. Recognizing tribal rights through legislations like the Forest Rights Act (2006) and PESA (1996) is a step forward, but the true test lies in effective implementation and empowerment of local communities. The history of tribal participation makes it evident that sustainable development in India cannot be achieved without acknowledging and strengthening the role of its indigenous peoples. Ultimately, the survival of tribal communities and the preservation of India's environment are interdependent, making their struggles not just local or marginal issues, but central to the nation's ecological future.

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