



GENDER AND TRIBAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: WOMEN'S ROLE IN PRESERVING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Manasi Kurtkoti¹ & Parnita Joshi²

¹Dr. D. Y. Patil Arts Commerce and Science College, Pimpri, Pune

²Dr. D. Y. Patil Arts Commerce and Science Women's College, Pimpri, Pune

Corresponding Author: Manasi Kurtkoti

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ABSTRACT:

This research explores the critical role of women in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge within tribal communities, focusing on their contributions to traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), healthcare practices, agriculture, and cultural heritage. Tribal women serve as custodians of vast bodies of knowledge that have been passed down through generations, often through oral traditions, practical engagement with the environment, and community-based practices. Their intimate relationship with natural resources—such as water, forests, and land—places them at the centre of sustainable practices related to agriculture, food security, and biodiversity conservation.

This study delves into the gendered dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems, highlighting how tribal women are often the primary conservators of medicinal plant knowledge, seed selection, food preservation techniques, and rituals connected to nature. It also examines the challenges tribal women face due to the pressures of modernization, loss of traditional livelihoods, and migration, which threaten the continuity of these knowledge systems.

Using a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and focused discussion with tribal women in Maharashtra, the research aims to document and analyse the specific roles tribal women play in preserving indigenous wisdom. It further investigates the potential for integrating these traditional practices into broader development frameworks, particularly in the fields of environmental conservation and sustainable agriculture. By recognizing and valuing the role of tribal women in maintaining indigenous knowledge, the research advocates for policies that empower these women and safeguard their cultural heritage in the face of rapid socio-economic change.

Keywords: Tribal women, Indigenous knowledge, Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), Gender, Biodiversity conservation, Cultural preservation, Sustainable practices, India.

INTRODUCTION:

In India, tribal communities form a significant part of the population, and within these communities, women play

a central role in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge systems that have sustained their way of life for generations. Tribal knowledge

systems, often referred to as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), encompass a vast range of practices, including sustainable agriculture, medicinal plant use, forest resource management, and cultural rituals. Women are the primary custodians of this knowledge, especially in areas related to food security, healthcare, and community well-being. (Gadgil, M., Berkes, F., & Folke, C. (1993). *Indigenous knowledge for biodiversity conservation*) Their intimate connection with nature, through daily activities like farming, gathering, and food preservation, places them at the core of knowledge transmission in their communities.

In tribal communities across India, women are primarily responsible for passing down knowledge through oral traditions and hands-on experience. (Rao, M. S. 2016, *Gender and biodiversity*). They maintain the diversity of crops by selecting and preserving seeds, ensuring resilience in agriculture. Additionally, women have specialized knowledge of medicinal plants, often acting as healers within their communities. (World Bank. (2019). *Empowering tribal women through indigenous knowledge systems*). This knowledge is vital for treating common ailments and is typically passed from mother to daughter. Women's role in food preservation techniques, such as drying, fermenting, and smoking, also helps sustain the community, especially

in regions with limited market access or during seasons of scarcity. (Banerjee, P., & Nayak, P. (2021). *The role of tribal women in sustainable agriculture: A study in India's indigenous communities*). Furthermore, they often play a key role in cultural and religious rituals that are intertwined with the environment, linking them closely to the spiritual aspects of tribal knowledge.

However, the transmission of this knowledge is increasingly threatened by external factors like migration, modernization, and shifts in livelihood patterns. Younger generations are often drawn to urban areas and wage labor, resulting in disconnect from traditional practices. (Singhal, R. 2017)

Additionally, environmental degradation and restricted access to natural resources further limit women's ability to continue practicing and passing on their knowledge.

In Maharashtra, where tribes like the Bhils, Gonds, Warlis, and MahadeoKolis reside, women's roles in preserving indigenous knowledge are especially prominent. (Mathur, N. 2018). Tribal women here are deeply involved in farming, where they employ traditional methods like mixed cropping, organic composting, and rotational farming. These sustainable practices are integral to maintaining soil health and crop diversity. Additionally, Maharashtra's tribal women possess

intricate knowledge of forest resources, particularly medicinal plants, which they use for healing and in cultural rituals.

Warli women, for example, play a significant role in the preparation and performance of rituals related to harvest and nature worship. Their artistic expressions, such as the Warli paintings, are another form of preserving indigenous knowledge, as they depict agricultural cycles, forest life, and tribal cosmology. The MahadeoKoli women, similarly, have deep knowledge of forest management and agricultural practices, often using methods passed down through generations to ensure the sustainability of their communities.

Despite their crucial role, tribal women in Maharashtra face similar challenges to those in other parts of India. Rapid urbanization, deforestation, and loss of traditional livelihoods due to industrialization threaten their ability to sustain and transmit indigenous knowledge. (Agrawal, A. 1995). In some cases, government restrictions on forest access have also impacted their capacity to gather necessary resources for medicinal and cultural practices.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To investigate how women in tribal communities act as custodians of traditional ecological knowledge,

agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and cultural rituals.

2. To explore areas such as sustainable agriculture, medicinal plant usage, food preservation techniques, and cultural ceremonies where tribal women's knowledge is most prominent.
3. To study the effects of migration, industrialization, and changes in traditional livelihoods on the transmission and continuity of indigenous knowledge among tribal women.
4. To analyze how gender influences the distribution, transmission, and practice of indigenous knowledge and how women's roles differ from those of men in these systems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study aims to explore the role of tribal women as custodians of indigenous knowledge, focusing on traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and cultural rituals. The research methodology will employ a combination of **qualitative** and **participatory research methods**

Study Area: Select tribal communities from Maharashtra (e.g., Gond, Warli, Bhil, Katkari) where traditional knowledge systems are still prominent. The study will focus on both forested

and agrarian tribal societies to capture diverse experiences.

Target Population: Tribal women who are actively engaged in knowledge preservation, such as traditional healers, agriculturists, midwives, and cultural leaders.

Sampling Method:

Purposive Sampling: The study will adopt purposive sampling to select key informants and community members with specialized knowledge. This will ensure the inclusion of tribal women who are recognized within their communities for their knowledge and practices.

Sample Size: Approximately **50-100 respondents** across multiple communities will be selected to ensure diversity in the data and perspectives.

Data collection Method: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Women's Groups: FGDs were conducted with groups of tribal women to gather collective insights on their knowledge systems, community roles, and strategies for transmitting knowledge to younger generations.

An open ended questionnaire consisting of 23 questions were given to 100 tribal women with or without productive role selected by the researchers.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- **Language Barriers:** Communication challenges due to

language differences may require the use of local interpreters, which could affect the nuances of responses.

- **Access to Remote Areas:** Gaining access to remote tribal communities and earning their trust may take time and effort, potentially limiting the duration of the fieldwork.
- **Generalizability:** The study focuses on specific tribal communities, and findings may not be fully generalizable to all tribal groups across India.

THE FINDINGS ARE AS UNDER:

- Tribal women are primary knowledge holders in areas like agriculture, medicinal plant usage, and natural resource management. Their knowledge is often passed down orally and through hands-on experience within the family.
- Women are involved in gathering, selecting, and preserving seeds, ensuring crop diversity and resilience, which supports food security in the community.
- Women play significant roles in ceremonies linked to agriculture and health, where rituals are performed to ensure successful harvests or to seek divine intervention during illnesses.
- Women often hold specific knowledge about forest resources,

including the use of herbs for healing and rituals. However, this knowledge is rarely formalized, leaving it vulnerable to loss as older generations pass on.

- Women use sustainable, traditional agricultural methods such as mixed cropping, rotational farming, and organic composting, practices that promote soil health and resilience to environmental changes.
- Knowledge about medicinal plants is highly specialized among tribal women, particularly related to treating common ailments, childbirth, and seasonal diseases. However, younger generations may not be as knowledgeable due to shifts toward modern healthcare systems.
- Food preservation techniques, such as drying, fermenting, and smoking, are commonly practiced by women and are critical during times of scarcity. This knowledge is especially important in regions with limited access to refrigeration and markets.
- In many tribes, women are the primary participants in rituals connected to the harvest, birth ceremonies, and traditional healing practices, often seen as the spiritual guardians of community well-being.
- Migration and urbanization are leading to the erosion of traditional knowledge systems. Younger women, particularly those who migrate for work or education, often lose connection with these practices and are less interested in learning them.
- Industrialization and the introduction of modern agricultural techniques are replacing traditional methods, resulting in the loss of indigenous agricultural and ecological knowledge, especially among women.
- Communities that have shifted from subsistence farming to wage labor have seen a decline in the practice of traditional medicinal knowledge, as people rely more on formal healthcare systems.
- However, there are cases where women have adapted their traditional knowledge to new circumstances, integrating both modern and indigenous practices to sustain livelihoods.
- Gender plays a significant role in how knowledge is distributed and practiced. Women's knowledge tends to focus on day-to-day survival and community well-being (e.g., farming, healthcare, rituals), while men's knowledge is often tied to external affairs like

hunting, trade, and forest management.

- Knowledge transmission is generally matrilineal in some tribal societies, where mothers and grandmothers pass down their wisdom to daughters. However, with shifts in lifestyle, the traditional systems of transmission are weakening.
- Men and women have distinct but complementary roles. While men may focus on physical labor or resource extraction, women are responsible for maintaining the household's food security and health, giving them a vital role in sustaining the community.
- Women's contributions are often undervalued, both within and outside the community. This gendered division of labor has historically marginalized women's roles, especially when it comes to formal recognition of their knowledge.
- Deforestation, soil erosion, and climate change are directly affecting the resources that women depend on for their traditional practices. For instance, medicinal plants are becoming harder to find, and changing rainfall patterns disrupt traditional farming cycles.
- Restrictions on access to forests, due to government policies or commercial exploitation, have

limited women's ability to gather materials for medicinal, agricultural, or ritualistic purposes, thereby threatening their traditional knowledge base.

- Western education, migration to cities, and exposure to modern technologies are reducing interest among younger women in learning traditional practices. The emphasis on modernity often leads to a devaluation of indigenous knowledge, seen as "backward" or "unscientific."
- Elders express concern that the younger generation, especially girls, are not as interested in traditional knowledge due to the allure of modern lifestyles and employment opportunities outside the community.
- Lack of institutional support for preserving tribal women's knowledge, coupled with gender biases, marginalizes their contributions and leads to further erosion of their roles in indigenous knowledge systems.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

- Some women are actively engaged in reviving and documenting their knowledge, often through NGO-led programs or government initiatives that focus on biodiversity and cultural preservation. However, these

initiatives are still few and far between.

- There is a need for **policy interventions** to protect and promote women's roles in indigenous knowledge systems, such as offering incentives for younger generations to learn from elders or formalizing traditional practices in educational curricula.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. Women's Critical Role as Custodians of Indigenous Knowledge:

The research underscores that tribal women are central to the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge, agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and cultural rituals. They hold an intimate understanding of their natural environment and are instrumental in ensuring food security, healthcare, and the cultural continuity of their communities.

2. Knowledge Systems Under Threat from Modernization and Social Change:

The impact of modernization, migration, and socio-economic changes has caused a gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge among tribal women. Younger generations are increasingly disconnected from these practices due to migration to urban areas, the introduction of modern

farming techniques, and shifts toward wage-based labor. This threatens the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, with younger women less engaged in learning traditional methods.

3. Distinct Gender Roles in the Practice and Transmission of Knowledge:

The research reveals a clear gendered division in the distribution and practice of indigenous knowledge within tribal communities. While men are often involved in tasks such as hunting, fishing, and resource extraction, women hold a more comprehensive understanding of daily survival-related practices such as agriculture, medicinal plant use, and food preservation. However, despite women's vital contributions, their knowledge is often marginalized and undervalued in both internal community structures and external policy frameworks.

4. Environmental and Resource-Related Challenges:

Environmental degradation, deforestation, and restricted access to natural resources are key external threats to the preservation of indigenous knowledge. As forests are depleted and climate patterns shift, the availability of medicinal plants and other resources that women depend on is decreasing. This has a direct impact on women's ability to practice and pass down their knowledge, further

endangering the sustainability of these traditions.

5. Social and Cultural Shifts Weakening Knowledge Transmission:

The research highlights that social and cultural shifts, such as the increasing influence of Western education, modern healthcare systems, and economic pressures, are weakening the traditional systems of knowledge transmission. Tribal women, particularly the younger generation, are finding less value in learning and practicing indigenous methods, which they often perceive as outdated. This poses a significant challenge to the survival of indigenous knowledge systems.

6. Revival Efforts and the Need for Institutional Support:

While some revival efforts are being made through NGO and government-led initiatives, these are not widespread enough to reverse the current trend. Institutional support, such as formal recognition of women's indigenous knowledge and its integration into local education and conservation programs, is crucial for preserving these knowledge systems. There is also a need for gender-sensitive policies that empower tribal women as knowledge holders and facilitators of sustainable development.

7. Urgent Need for Policy Interventions and Cultural Preservation:

The findings emphasize the importance of immediate policy interventions that protect tribal women's knowledge and ensure its continuity. This includes providing resources for women to document and formalize their knowledge, creating platforms for knowledge-sharing, and ensuring that tribal women have access to natural resources. Additionally, policies should focus on creating incentives for younger women to engage with their cultural heritage, while offering opportunities to integrate both traditional and modern practices for sustainable development.

FINAL CONCLUSION:

The study concludes that tribal women's knowledge is an invaluable resource for sustainable agriculture, healthcare, and cultural preservation within tribal communities. However, the increasing pressures of modernization, environmental degradation, and socio-cultural shifts pose serious threats to the survival of these knowledge systems. Empowering tribal women, recognizing their contributions, and integrating their knowledge into broader development and conservation strategies is essential for preserving both their cultural heritage and their role in sustainable practices. Without

urgent intervention, the rich body of knowledge held by tribal women risks being lost to future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Document and Formalize Indigenous Knowledge:

- **Action:** Governments, NGOs, and academic institutions should collaborate to document and preserve the indigenous knowledge of tribal women. This can include creating oral histories, written records, and digital archives of women’s knowledge in areas like agriculture, medicinal plants, food preservation, and cultural rituals.
- **Benefit:** This will safeguard indigenous knowledge for future generations and ensure that it is not lost due to modernization, migration, or the passing of elders.
- **Implementation:** Training programs can be set up within communities to teach women how to document their knowledge, including providing them with the tools (audio recorders, cameras, etc.) to do so effectively.

2. Integrate Indigenous Knowledge into Education Systems:

- **Action:** Indigenous knowledge, particularly women’s

contributions, should be integrated into local school curricula to ensure that younger generations recognize and value traditional practices. This could involve teaching traditional agricultural methods, medicinal plant usage, and food preservation techniques in schools.

- **Benefit:** Formalizing indigenous knowledge within education systems will enhance its prestige and ensure that it is transmitted to younger generations in a structured manner.
- **Implementation:** The Ministry of Education and tribal organizations could partner to develop community-based curricula that respect local knowledge and ensure that teaching methods are culturally appropriate.

3. Create Community Knowledge Exchange Platforms:

- **Action:** Establish community knowledge-sharing platforms where tribal women can teach and pass on their knowledge to younger generations. These platforms could take the form of workshops, intergenerational dialogue sessions, or traditional knowledge fairs.
- **Benefit:** These platforms would encourage the transmission of

indigenous knowledge and ensure that younger women are actively engaged in learning from the elders.

- **Implementation:** Local governments, community leaders, and NGOs can organize regular events and workshops, facilitated by both older and younger women, to promote knowledge exchange and collaborative learning.

4. Promote Gender-Sensitive Policies:

- **Action:** Policy frameworks need to be developed that explicitly recognize and protect the knowledge held by tribal women. Gender-sensitive policies should be created to ensure that women have equitable access to resources, decision-making processes, and opportunities for leadership in knowledge preservation initiatives.
- **Benefit:** By recognizing the unique role women play in indigenous knowledge systems, gender-sensitive policies will ensure that their contributions are valued and supported, leading to better preservation and sustainability of tribal knowledge.
- **Implementation:** Governments and development agencies should include gender-specific

provisions in policies related to natural resource management, education, and community leadership to ensure the protection and empowerment of tribal women.

5. Strengthen Legal Protections for Indigenous Knowledge:

- **Action:** Establish legal frameworks to protect indigenous knowledge from exploitation by external entities, such as pharmaceutical companies or agribusinesses, without fair compensation or acknowledgment to the knowledge holders.
- **Benefit:** Protecting indigenous knowledge through legal mechanisms will ensure that tribal women are not only acknowledged as the rightful custodians of this knowledge but are also compensated if their knowledge is used by outside organizations.
- **Implementation:** Legal protections can be strengthened by enacting laws related to intellectual property rights for indigenous communities, with special emphasis on gender-specific protections for women's knowledge.

6. Encourage Sustainable Livelihood Programs:

- **Action:** Develop programs that link traditional knowledge with sustainable livelihoods for tribal women. These could include the commercialization of organic agriculture, traditional medicines, or artisanal crafts, where tribal women can use their indigenous knowledge to generate income.
- **Benefit:** By providing tribal women with opportunities to turn their knowledge into sustainable livelihoods, it will increase the economic value of their knowledge and provide incentives for them to continue practicing and preserving it.
- **Implementation:** Partner with NGOs, government agencies, and private sector organizations to provide training, resources, and market access for tribal women to start small enterprises based on their indigenous knowledge.

7. Develop Training Programs for Sustainable Practices:

- **Action:** Introduce training programs that blend traditional knowledge with modern sustainable practices, especially in areas like agriculture and natural resource management. These programs should focus on enhancing tribal women's

knowledge while ensuring they can adapt to modern environmental and socio-economic challenges.

- **Benefit:** Such programs will equip women with both traditional and modern skills, ensuring that they are better prepared to tackle challenges like climate change, deforestation, and food insecurity.
- **Implementation:** NGOs, educational institutions, and government departments specializing in agriculture and environment should develop and deliver these programs within tribal communities.

8. Support Initiatives for Knowledge Revival and Preservation:

- **Action:** Support local and international initiatives aimed at reviving and preserving endangered knowledge systems within tribal communities. Funding should be allocated to initiatives that focus on women's roles in indigenous knowledge, with priority given to projects that facilitate intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer.
- **Benefit:** This will help restore pride and engagement in traditional knowledge systems, ensuring they remain vibrant

and relevant to modern-day challenges.

- **Implementation:** Local governments, international development agencies, and philanthropic organizations can provide grants and resources to grassroots organizations focused on knowledge revival, especially those involving women.

9. Facilitate Access to Natural Resources:

- **Action:** Implement policies that guarantee tribal communities' and women's access to forests, rivers, and other natural resources essential for practicing and transmitting traditional knowledge. These policies should include community-managed resource rights to protect indigenous ways of life.
- **Benefit:** Ensuring access to natural resources is critical for the continued practice of traditional knowledge, especially in areas like medicinal plant use, agriculture, and cultural ceremonies.
- **Implementation:** Governments and local authorities should collaborate with tribal councils and women's groups to develop resource management frameworks that prioritize community ownership and access.

10. Raise Awareness and Recognition of Tribal Women's Knowledge:

- **Action:** Raise awareness among the wider public, policymakers, and development organizations about the importance of tribal women's knowledge in promoting sustainable development and biodiversity conservation.
- **Benefit:** Greater awareness and recognition will help increase the value placed on women's contributions, leading to more support for initiatives that protect and promote their knowledge.
- **Implementation:** Organize public awareness campaigns, academic conferences, and publications that highlight the importance of women's roles in indigenous knowledge systems and the threats they face due to modernization.

FINAL RECOMMENDATION:

There is a pressing need for a holistic approach to preserving indigenous knowledge systems, one that integrates traditional wisdom with modern practices and ensures the inclusion and empowerment of tribal women. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, communities, and development agencies

can work together to protect the invaluable knowledge held by tribal women, ensuring its sustainability and relevance for future generations.

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