



Around the forest: An anthropological study of tribal psychology in India

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Abstract

Forests have historically constituted the ecological, economic, cultural, and psychological foundation of tribal societies in India (Elwin (1939) ^[7]; Gadgil & Guha (1992) ^[12]; Berkes (2018) ^[2]. For generations, Indigenous communities have depended upon forests for food, medicine, housing materials, livelihood, cultural practices, and spiritual identity (Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2014) ^[20]; FAO (2021) ^[9]. Consequently, the psychological orientation of tribal communities has evolved in close interaction with forest ecosystems. This paper examines the relationship between forests and tribal psychology from an anthropological perspective and argues that the abundance of natural resources has traditionally fostered a positive psychological environment characterized by security, cooperation, optimism, collective identity, and ecological stewardship. However, rapid deforestation, extractive development projects, mining, industrialization, infrastructure expansion, displacement, and increasing state intervention in tribal regions have fundamentally transformed this relationship. The depletion of forests has not only undermined traditional livelihoods but has also generated widespread psychological stress, anxiety, insecurity, social fragmentation, and resistance among tribal communities (Cunsolo & Ellis (2018) ^[5]; WHO (2022). The paper further explores how ecological destruction, forced displacement, criminalization of environmental defenders, and prolonged legal conflicts have reshaped tribal consciousness from one of ecological harmony to one increasingly characterized by uncertainty and collective resistance (Sundar (2016) ^[24]; People's Union for Civil Liberties (where appropriate). Drawing upon anthropological literature, political ecology, environmental psychology, and empirical observations from tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and other Fifth Schedule Areas, the paper argues that forest conservation should be recognized not merely as an environmental concern but also as a prerequisite for safeguarding the mental well-being, cultural continuity, and sustainable development of Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Tribal psychology, forests, indigenous communities, environmental anthropology, political ecology, mental well-being, forest rights, tribal development, India

Introduction

India is home to one of the largest Indigenous populations in the world, officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes, comprising more than one hundred million people distributed across diverse ecological landscapes (Census of India (2011) ^[4]. Most tribal communities have historically inhabited forested regions where their economic organization, cultural institutions, social relations, and worldview have evolved through long-term interaction with nature (Haimendorf (1982) ^[15]; Descola (2013) ^[6]; Elwin (1939) ^[7]. Unlike industrial societies where forests are primarily viewed as economic resources, tribal societies perceive forests as living landscapes that sustain both material existence and cultural identity.

Anthropologists have long argued that human psychology cannot be understood independently of environmental conditions. Ecological settings shape patterns of cognition, emotion, behaviour, and social organization (Steward (1955) ^[23]; Ingold (2000) ^[16]; Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) ^[18]. In tribal societies, forests are not merely sources of livelihood but constitute an extension of the community itself. Forests provide edible fruits, tubers, mushrooms, medicinal plants, fuelwood, construction materials, grazing lands, water sources, and non-timber forest products that ensure subsistence throughout the year. Simultaneously, sacred groves, ancestral sites, rivers, hills, and wildlife occupy central positions within tribal cosmology and religious beliefs.

The close dependence upon forests has historically produced a psychological orientation characterized by confidence, collective responsibility, environmental ethics, and emotional attachment to nature. Children grow up in healthy ecological environments where access to food, medicinal plants, clean water, and open spaces reduces many forms of social and psychological stress commonly associated with urban societies. Parents traditionally experience comparatively lower anxiety regarding food security, healthcare, recreation, and childhood development because forests provide multiple safety nets for survival.

However, during the last several decades, tribal regions have undergone profound transformations resulting from rapid economic development. Large-scale mining, industrialization, hydroelectric projects, road construction, urban expansion, commercial forestry, and extraction of natural resources have significantly reduced forest cover across many tribal areas. Simultaneously, environmental degradation caused by climate change, irregular rainfall, forest fires, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and water scarcity has further weakened the ecological foundation of tribal life. These changes have altered not only tribal economies but also the psychological well-being of Indigenous communities. Loss of forests has generated widespread uncertainty regarding livelihood, education, employment, food security, housing, and cultural survival. The traditional relationship between communities and nature has increasingly been replaced by experiences of displacement,

legal disputes, environmental conflicts, and political marginalization.

This paper therefore seeks to examine how environmental transformations influence tribal psychology and how ecological degradation contributes to changing mental health patterns among Indigenous populations in India.

Forests as the Foundation of Positive Tribal Psychology

For centuries, forests have functioned as the primary source of physical survival and emotional security for tribal communities. The availability of abundant natural resources has ensured a stable subsistence economy based upon sustainable harvesting rather than excessive accumulation (Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2014) ^[20]; FRA Committee Reports). Forests provide fruits, edible leaves, roots, tubers, mushrooms, medicinal herbs, bamboo, fuelwood, fodder, honey, lac, tendu leaves, mahua flowers, sal seeds, and numerous other non-timber forest products

The regular availability of these resources creates psychological stability by reducing uncertainty about daily survival (Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) ^[18]; Berkes (2018) ^[2]; Kohn (2013) ^[19]). Tribal communities generally perceive forests as generous providers rather than commodities for commercial exploitation. This perception nurtures optimism, reciprocity, cooperation, and collective ownership.

Children raised in forest environments benefit from nutritious traditional foods, clean ecological surroundings, physical activity, and continuous interaction with nature. Traditional ecological knowledge transmitted across generations strengthens cultural identity and emotional resilience. Consequently, tribal societies historically exhibited relatively strong social cohesion, mutual cooperation, and collective responsibility toward environmental conservation.

Environmental Degradation and Transformation of Tribal Psychology

The continuous depletion of forests has significantly altered this ecological equilibrium. Deforestation reduces access to food, fuelwood, medicinal plants, water resources, and wildlife, thereby weakening the traditional subsistence economy.

Environmental changes such as climate variability, irregular rainfall, declining biodiversity, forest fires, landslides, and drying rivers further intensify ecological uncertainty (IPCC (2023) ^[17]; Forest Survey of India (2023) ^[11]). As forests disappear, tribal families become increasingly dependent upon unstable wage labour and market economies (Ostrom (1990) ^[21]; Gadgil & Guha (1992) ^[12]). Economic insecurity gradually transforms into psychological insecurity.

Parents who previously depended upon forests for children's nutrition and healthcare now face growing concerns regarding education, employment, healthcare expenses, and long-term livelihood opportunities. This transition has increased chronic anxiety, emotional distress, and uncertainty about the future among many tribal households.

Development Projects and Psychological Stress

Large-scale development projects—including mining, dams, industries, highways, railway corridors, transmission lines, commercial plantations, and urban expansion—have substantially transformed India's tribal landscapes (Fernandes (2006) ^[10]; Baviskar (2005) ^[1]; Cernea (1997) ^[3]).

Although these projects contribute to national economic growth, they frequently involve large-scale acquisition of forest land and displacement of Indigenous communities. Millions of trees have been removed for industrial expansion in several tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and northeastern India.

The destruction of forests affects tribal communities far beyond economic loss. It disrupts sacred landscapes, ancestral memories, cultural practices, social networks, and emotional attachment to place (Escobar (2008) ^[8]; Berkes (2018) ^[2]; Kohn (2013) ^[19]). Anthropologists describe such experiences as forms of ecological grief or environmental bereavement, where communities experience mourning over the loss of ecosystems central to their identity.

Consequently, many tribal communities perceive these interventions as existential threats rather than merely developmental changes.

Criminalization, Conflict, and Collective Psychological Trauma

In several tribal regions, conflicts over forests, mining, land acquisition, and natural resource governance have generated prolonged confrontations between local communities and the state. Individuals participating in movements for the protection of forests, rivers, mountains, and community lands have, in some cases, faced legal proceedings, detention, or prolonged imprisonment.

When community members remain incarcerated for extended periods, the psychological consequences extend beyond the individuals concerned. Families experience chronic emotional distress, economic hardship, social stigma, and uncertainty. Children may grow up without parental support, while spouses and elderly relatives' shoulder increased responsibilities under conditions of financial and emotional strain.

Observers and human rights organizations have documented such experiences in parts of Bastar and Surguja in Chhattisgarh, where allegations of wrongful arrests under accusations of association with insurgent groups have been raised in some cases, while the state has maintained that security measures are necessary to address armed conflict. The factual circumstances vary across cases and should therefore be examined individually through due legal process. Nevertheless, prolonged conflict situations can contribute to cumulative psychological trauma among affected communities.

From Ecological Harmony to Resistance

Historically, tribal psychology has been characterized by coexistence with nature, collective solidarity, and ecological stewardship. However, continued ecological degradation, displacement, livelihood insecurity, and prolonged conflict have contributed to the emergence of resistance-oriented collective identities in many tribal regions.

Resistance should not be understood solely as political opposition but also as a psychological response to perceived threats against cultural identity, ancestral territories, and community survival. Feelings of alienation, distrust, and marginalization may emerge when communities perceive that decisions affecting their forests and livelihoods are made without meaningful participation.

Anthropologically, such transformations represent adaptive responses to changing socio-political environments rather than inherent characteristics of tribal societies.

Discussion

The relationship between forests and tribal psychology extends beyond resource dependence and enters the domain of identity formation, emotional well-being, cultural continuity, and collective resilience. Environmental anthropology demonstrates that ecological settings influence not only material life but also systems of meaning, emotional expression, and social behaviour (Steward (1955) ^[23]; Ingold (2000) ^[16]; Descola (2013) ^[6]). Tribal societies in India have historically developed a positive psychological orientation because forests fulfilled multiple dimensions of human well-being simultaneously: subsistence, healthcare, spirituality, recreation, and social cohesion.

The degradation of forest ecosystems therefore represents both an ecological and a psychological crisis. Deforestation, biodiversity loss, displacement, and environmental conflicts disrupt traditional adaptive systems that have evolved over centuries. As ecological security declines, psychological insecurity increases, producing anxiety regarding food security, employment, education, housing, and cultural survival.

This transformation can also be interpreted through political ecology, which emphasizes that environmental change is closely connected with unequal power relations, resource governance, and development policies (Robbins (2020) ^[22]; Escobar (2008) ^[8]). Where communities experience exclusion from decisions affecting their ancestral lands, psychological stress may be intensified by perceptions of injustice and loss of agency. At the same time, it is important to recognize that development projects can also generate benefits such as infrastructure, employment, healthcare, and education when implemented with genuine participation, equitable compensation, and effective environmental safeguards. The challenge lies not in opposing development itself but in ensuring that development is socially just, environmentally sustainable, and respectful of Indigenous rights.

The findings also support perspectives from environmental psychology suggesting that sustained interaction with healthy natural environments contributes to emotional stability, resilience, and mental well-being (Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) ^[18]; WHO (2022)). Protecting forests is therefore not only an ecological imperative but also a public health and human development priority for tribal communities.

Policy Recommendations

1. Recognize forests as ecological, cultural, and psychological assets rather than solely economic resources.
2. Strengthen implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 to ensure meaningful participation of Gram Sabhas in decisions affecting forests and land (Government of India (2006) ^[13]; Government of India (1996) ^[14]).
3. Integrate mental health and psychosocial support into rehabilitation and resettlement programmes for communities affected by displacement and environmental conflict.

4. Promote community-based forest management by recognizing and incorporating Indigenous ecological knowledge.
5. Ensure transparent environmental impact assessments that evaluate not only ecological and economic effects but also social, cultural, and psychological consequences.
6. Expand livelihood opportunities based on sustainable non-timber forest products, agroforestry, and biodiversity conservation.
7. Encourage dialogue among governments, local communities, civil society organizations, and industry to reduce conflict and build trust through participatory governance.

Conclusion

The psychology of India's tribal communities has historically been shaped by intimate and enduring relationships with forests. Forest ecosystems have provided not only food, shelter, medicine, and livelihood but also emotional security, cultural identity, and collective resilience. As forests decline because of ecological degradation and developmental pressures, tribal psychology is undergoing profound transformation, characterized by increasing insecurity, ecological grief, and, in some contexts, collective resistance (Cunsolo & Ellis (2018) ^[5]). Sustainable development in tribal regions therefore requires an integrated approach that balances environmental conservation, economic progress, constitutional protections, and Indigenous participation. Protecting forests ultimately means protecting the psychological well-being, cultural heritage, and future of India's Indigenous peoples.

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