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# FROM ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE TO ECOLOGICAL ACTION: INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONSERVATION PRACTICES

By

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In an era marked by escalating environmental crises, the wisdom and contributions of Indigenous Peoples—particularly Indigenous women—stand as pillars of hope and

resilience. According to UN data and reports, Indigenous women constitute approximately 185 million individuals across more than 5,000 distinct Indigenous Peoples, representing a vital 6.2% of the global female population (United Nations DESA 2020). Far beyond being passive inhabitants of their lands, these women are active custodians of ecological knowledge, carrying within them generations of lived experience, observation, and harmonious coexistence

with nature. Often the quiet architects of sustainability within their communities, they preserve and transmit ancestral wisdom that embodies a holistic understanding of life's interconnections.

The wind whispers through ancient forests, carrying stories of resilience, balance, and belonging—tales etched into the soil, sung by the rivers, and guarded by the towering trees. These are not mere echoes of the past but living memories, sustained through the voices and hands of Indigenous women. They are the storytellers, seed keepers, and guardians of sacred traditions who understand that every breath of wind and rustle of leaf holds a lesson in survival and harmony. Through their songs, rituals, and daily acts of care, they sustain the dialogue between humanity and nature, reminding us that true wisdom flows not from domination of the Earth, but from listening to its quiet, eternal rhythm. --Their relationship with the natural world is neither purely theoretical nor limited to scientific understanding; it extends far beyond, rooted in generations of lived experience, experimentation, and spirituality—shaped by centuries of tending to soil, forests, and waters with reverence, care, and deep ecological awareness. This intimate knowledge encompasses the rhythms of the seasons, the cycles of regeneration, and the symbiotic relationships that sustain ecosystems. In every seed saved,



Adivasi women selling her farm yield of wild varieties in the weekly market in Borigumma block, Korput

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“The gentle rustle of leaves, the flowing song of rivers, and the timeless rhythm of planting and harvest are the daily classrooms of Indigenous women — whose lives and wisdom are inseparably woven into the heartbeat of the Earth”



*Indigenous women from the GADABA tribe making broom out of the grass in Village Kankda Guda, Koraput, Odisha.*

Photo credit: Arun Kashyap

forest protected, and ritual performed, Indigenous women remind humanity of an essential truth: that balance with nature is not an aspiration, but a way of life. Their voices and practices offer profound guidance for addressing today's ecological challenges, calling for a return to respect, reciprocity, and responsibility toward the Earth.

Indigenous women play a pivotal yet often underrecognized role in environmental conservation worldwide. Their intimate relationship with their lands and ecosystems, grounded in centuries of lived experience and traditional ecological knowledge, positions them uniquely as frontline defenders of biodiversity and climate resilience. This article explores the diverse and vital contributions of Indigenous women in India—who make up approximately (52 million) 4.24% of the nation's population (Government of India 2011)—to environmental stewardship. It highlights their deep ecological knowledge, the challenges they encounter in safeguarding their lands and livelihoods, and their emerging leadership roles in both national and global environmental policy arenas.

### **Women, Wisdom, and the Wilderness: A Historical and Cultural Context**

We cannot truly grasp the depth of today's global crises without examining the long-standing systems of power and inequality that have shaped human history and continue to influence our world. These systems are intertwined with hierarchies and discrimination rooted in race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Simply put, understanding how societies have functioned—both in the past and today—requires recognizing who has historically held power and who continues to live under its effects. The “dominated” are those whose lives, labor, and dignity have been exploited for accumulation and control: Indigenous peoples subjected to colonization, workers at the lowest economic levels, marginalized Black and Brown communities, and women who face overlapping and persistent forms of oppression (Brand, Fisher, and Wissen 2022). While this is a complex and multifaceted issue that merits separate, detailed discussion, its implications are deeply visible in environmental and social realities.

Despite their indispensable roles in cultural and ecological preservation, Indigenous women continue to bear disproportionate burdens stemming from centuries of colonization, resource extraction, and patriarchal systems that displaced traditional matriarchal governance. Their exclusion from decision-making about land, water, and forest resources reflects a historical imbalance that persists today. Across regions, women have not only resisted the destructive impacts of extractive industries but have also challenged patriarchal constraints within their communities. As custodians of biodiversity and caretakers of the land, Indigenous and rural women face the frontlines of climate change—adapting seeds, managing water, and sustaining life systems often without recognition or support. This enduring marginalization limits access to resources and drives social and health inequities, with higher rates of malnutrition, food insecurity, and chronic illness among Indigenous women globally (UN Women 2022). Addressing these inequities requires inclusive, gender-responsive policies that uphold Indigenous women's traditional knowledge and leadership in shaping sustainable futures.

In India, Indigenous (Adivasi) women embody a long-standing tradition of ecological guardianship, rooted in cultural reciprocity with the natural world. Their roles in maintaining seed diversity, protecting forests, and managing community resources exemplify sustainable living practices grounded in intergenerational knowledge. Historical and contemporary environmental movements—such as the Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand, the Appiko Movement in Karnataka, and the Niyamgiri Movement in Odisha led by the Dongria Kondh women—reflect their leadership in defending nature against industrial exploitation. These movements not only signify acts of resistance but also reaffirm women's ancestral connection to land as a source of identity, spirituality, and sustenance. Despite centuries of marginalization, Indigenous women remain at the forefront of ecological resilience, embodying the bridge between cultural continuity and climate action.

## From Ancestral Wisdom to Modern Solutions: Indigenous Women's Knowledge Systems for Conservation and Climate Resilience.

The ancestral ecological knowledge carried by Indigenous women is holistic, deeply experiential, and rooted in centuries of observation and interaction with the natural world. It encompasses an intricate understanding of seasonal cycles, species behavior, soil fertility, forest dynamics, and ecosystem interdependencies. Far from being static folklore, this Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is a dynamic and adaptive system that continues to inform sustainable living and modern conservation science, particularly in the face of accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss.

Recognizing Indigenous women as custodians of TEK is central to appreciating their vital role in sustaining ecological balance and community resilience. Their knowledge extends beyond resource management—it reflects a worldview of reciprocity and interconnectedness between humans and nature. This knowledge is transmitted through oral traditions, songs, and hands-on learning, guiding both daily survival and long-term stewardship (Borthakur and Singh 268). Indigenous women also anchor cultural and spiritual practices tied to land and water, reaffirming a sacred relationship with nature that modern science increasingly acknowledges as critical for environmental restoration.

In India, where Indigenous peoples constitute about 8.6% of the population, women are often the primary knowledge bearers. In states like Maharashtra, among Bhil, Gond, Warli, and Mahadeo Koli communities, women's expertise shapes farming, forest use, and healing traditions. In Odisha, among tribes such as the Kondh, Santal, Juang, and Bonda, women's ecological knowledge forms the backbone of community resilience. Their expertise in seed selection, forest food gathering, herbal medicine, and water conservation sustains both biodiversity and livelihoods. Through practices like shifting cultivation, composting, and mixed cropping, these women maintain soil fertility, ensure food security, and preserve traditional ecological knowledge that aligns with natural rhythms and local climate cycles (Pattnaik and Sahu 348). "Kutir" gatherings—small forest-edge huts where women teach younger generations about sustainable forest management and traditional crafts—serve as living classrooms of ecological wisdom. Their knowledge of medicinal plants and food preservation techniques such as fermenting, drying, and smoking ensures community survival, especially in times of scarcity (Mathur, 2018).

Globally, studies affirm that Indigenous women's ecological wisdom is indispensable for sustainable agriculture, healthcare, and biodiversity conservation.

Indigenous women embody living libraries of ecological wisdom — their knowledge systems form the very heartbeat of planetary health, offering humanity a guiding compass to navigate and restore the delicate balance of life on Earth.

Yet modernization, deforestation, and sociocultural shifts threaten to erode these knowledge systems. Empowering Indigenous women, documenting their contributions, and integrating their ecological perspectives into formal conservation and policy frameworks are essential steps. Without urgent action, humanity risks losing an irreplaceable reservoir of wisdom—one that holds keys to ecological harmony and climate resilience for future generations.

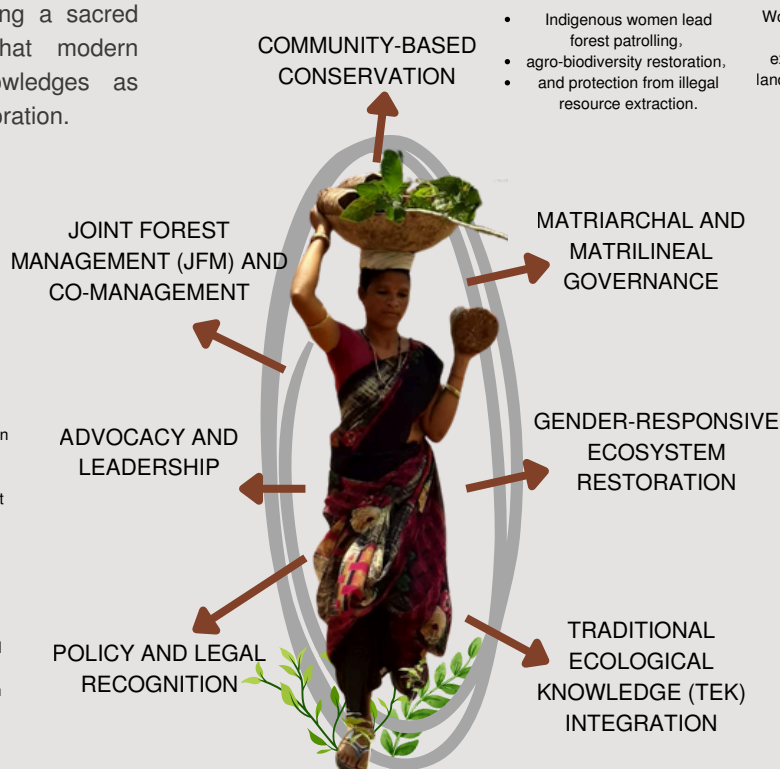
### Rematriation and Ecological Leadership: Reviving Indigenous Women's Roles in Environmental Stewardship and Governance

The concept of rematriation—the restoration of balance through the return of traditional feminine and Earth-centered

In India, Joint Forest Management and Forest Rights Committees increasingly include women's participation, leveraging their expertise in indigenous tenure, seasonal harvesting, and restoration activities for forest sustainability.

Indigenous women act as environmental defenders, advocating for land rights, environmental justice, and self-determination on national and international platforms. Mexican Chinantla region – Indigenous women partner with NGOs and government agencies to lead local conservation and empower community governance.

Successful conservation requires legal recognition of Indigenous women's land rights and decision-making authority in resource management, reflected in both national and international frameworks.



## INDIGENOUS WOMEN INVOLVEMENT FOR CONSERVATION MODELS



values—has emerged as a transformative force in both Indigenous and global environmental movements. Rooted in the sacred responsibilities of women as guardians of water, land, and life, rematriation reclaims Indigenous women’s central roles in governance, community decision-making, and ecological care (Anderson 45). It challenges patriarchal and colonial disruptions that displaced matriarchal systems, emphasizing instead a return to reciprocity, respect, and relational accountability with the natural world (Simpson 79).

This approach transcends the transactional view of conservation and redefines it as a relational responsibility rooted in kinship with the Earth (Kimmerer 85). Through this rematriated lens, women leaders bridge ancestral wisdom with contemporary science, guiding their communities toward climate resilience and ecological regeneration (LaDuke 118). Their leadership in protecting watersheds, forests, and food systems reflects a philosophy of healing rather than



Praja tribal women, in village Mutlu Guda, near the western corner of Odisha during seed sharing festival.  
Photo credit: Pradeep Nayak

DIMENSION	KEY CONCEPTS	ACADEMIC FIELDS	INDIGENOUS WOMEN’S ROLES AND INSIGHTS
Ecological	Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Biodiversity Conservation, Climate Adaptation, Agroecology	Environmental Science, Ecology, Climatology	Hold place-based ecological wisdom; lead biodiversity restoration, sustainable agriculture, and climate solutions.
Sociological	Matriarchal Governance, Collective Action, Community Resilience, Social-Ecological Systems	Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies	Mobilize collective action; uphold matriarchal traditions; build resilient communities through cooperation.
Ethical/Legal	Land Rights, Data Sovereignty, Intellectual Property, Environmental Justice	Ethics, Political Science, Law	Advocate for land and resource rights; defend data and intellectual sovereignty; seek justice and policy reform.
Psychological	Spiritual Connection, Well-being, Identity, Intergenerational Trauma/Healing	Psychology, Religious Studies, Counseling	Foster spiritual well-being; nurture identity; transmit healing practices and cultural continuity across generations.

Analytical Framework for Indigenous Women’s Roles

Across many Indigenous cultures, women traditionally held decision-making authority in matters of environmental stewardship, agriculture, and community well-being. Their leadership was grounded in a deep ecological consciousness that recognized the interdependence of all living beings and the cyclical nature of life (LaDuke 112). Water, often regarded as the first medicine, symbolizes this relationship—women, as life-givers, understand its sacred role in sustaining ecosystems and human communities alike (Kimmerer 53). Today, this ancient understanding finds renewed expression through Indigenous women’s participation in climate action, biodiversity conservation, and environmental justice movements (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 71).

extraction, and of collective well-being over individual gain (Anderson 62). As teachers, activists, and policymakers, Indigenous women continue to embody the living link between cultural continuity and environmental stewardship, ensuring that the wisdom of the past remains a guiding force for future generations (Simpson 83).

The Path Forward: Strengthening Indigenous Women’s Roles in Climate Resilience and Policy

The path forward emphasizes an urgent and ethical imperative—to strengthen and amplify Indigenous women’s leadership in environmental stewardship, climate resilience, and community well-being. As the custodians of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Indigenous women embody intergenerational wisdom that i



Tribal women making natural pesticides from leaves of Neem (Azadirachta indica), Karanj (Pongamia pinnata), Ark (Calotropis gigantea) and Kaner (Nerium oleander) utilised for their crop protection.  
Photo credit: Arun Kashyap





*A six-year-old child from Kudutai village, Odisha, is seen helping her mother harvest Arbi (taro roots), reflecting how traditional farming knowledge is passed down naturally through generations.*

Photo credit: Pradeep Nayak

integrates ecological balance, cultural continuity, and spiritual reciprocity with nature. Recognizing and empowering their leadership is not an act of inclusion alone, but a necessary step toward planetary regeneration and environmental justice (UN Women 2022; Hill et al. 2020).

A key dimension of this transformation lies in developing rematriarchal funding frameworks—financial models rooted in Indigenous values of reciprocity, care, and balance. Such funding should be created in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and directed toward community-led adaptation, biodiversity restoration, and traditional knowledge preservation. These mechanisms must ensure sustained, flexible financial flows that allow communities to determine their own ty,

priorities and implement long-term strategies for climate action and cultural revitalization (Anderson and Coombes 2019). Beyond short-term grants, these investments should foster self-determined development pathways, reinforcing Indigenous women's autonomy and authority over natural resources.

Equally vital is policy inclusion that moves beyond token consultation to genuine partnership. Indigenous women's leadership must be institutionalized in environmental governance structures, from local resource management to international climate negotiations. Policies should respect traditional governance models, protect Indigenous sovereign and recognize matriarchal leadership systems that have guided ecological stewardship for centuries (Arora-Jonsson 2011). This approach transforms governance by integrating ethics of care, collective well-being, and intergenerational accountability—principles deeply embedded in Indigenous worldviews.

Capacity-building programs must intertwine traditional knowledge systems with modern environmental science. Educational initiatives, leadership fellowships, and mentorship networks can help Indigenous women strengthen both ancestral wisdom and contemporary skills for addressing climate challenges. These programs should honor community-based

alongside technical training in conservation and climate policy (Kimmerer 2013).

Finally, recognition and protection of Indigenous women's intellectual and cultural contributions must move beyond symbolic appreciation. Supporting Indigenous-led research, securing intellectual property rights, and documenting success stories are essential steps to ensure their work continues to inspire and inform future generations. Celebrating Indigenous women's leadership within climate discourse reinforces their position not merely as participants but as principal architects of sustainable futures (Whyte 2018). Empowering Indigenous women is, therefore, not only a matter of equity—it is a path toward restoring harmony between humanity and the Earth. Their leadership, grounded in ancestral ecological wisdom, offers a holistic model for environmental governance that unites tradition, science, and spirituality in the service of planetary well-being.

### **Policy Recommendations for Supporting Indigenous Women: A Framework for Inclusive Conservation and Climate Action**

Indigenous women are among the world's most vital custodians of biodiversity, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural continuity. Their lived experiences and ancestral stewardship practices embody a holistic understanding of sustainability—one that connects environmental balance with community well-being. However, systemic inequities such as land dispossession, cultural marginalization, and exclusion from governance structures continue to limit their participation and recognition. Despite contributing immensely to climate resilience and ecosystem management, Indigenous women remain underrepresented in policymaking and conservation leadership globally (UN Women, 2023).

To achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes, policy frameworks must center Indigenous women as key environmental actors, ensuring their rights, knowledge, and leadership are both recognized and protected. This approach demands legal, financial, and institutional support to advance gender equity and Indigenous sovereignty. The following



*Women from Paraja tribe of Mutluguda in Chitrakonda are seen harvesting rice—a reflection of their enduring tradition of collective farming. In this community, the idea of paid labor does not exist; instead, every villager contributes their time and effort to each farmer's sowing and harvesting, keeping alive the spirit of mutual cooperation and shared prosperity.*

Photo credit: Pradeep Nayak



recommendations offer a multidimensional policy framework for governments, NGOs, and international institutions:

- Recognize and Secure Land, Resource, and Territorial Rights
  - Legally acknowledge Indigenous women's collective and individual rights to land, water, and biodiversity.
  - Guarantee active participation in governance and natural resource decision-making (UNPFII, 2022).
- Ensure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)
  - Enforce FPIC mechanisms before initiating any project or policy affecting Indigenous lands and livelihoods.
  - Promote Gender Equality in Access to Services and Benefits
  - Eliminate barriers to education, healthcare, and financial inclusion.
  - Provide equal access to conservation funding, employment, and social programs (FAO, 2021).
  - Enable Equitable Participation and Leadership
  - Ensure representation of Indigenous women in climate, biodiversity, and governance forums.
  - Support Indigenous women's networks and leadership training initiatives.
  - Value and Integrate Traditional Knowledge (TEK)
    - Formally recognize TEK within environmental policies and research frameworks.
    - Establish co-management systems integrating TEK and scientific data (UNESCO, 2019).
- Invest in Sustainable, Long-Term Funding



Woman of Paraja tribe from a remote tribal village Mutlu Guda, near Chitrakonda town in Malkangiri district. They speak Desia dialect. Interestingly none of them remember their birth date.

Photo credit: Pradeep Nayak

- Direct flexible funding toward Indigenous women-led conservation and enterprise initiatives.
- Ensure transparent access to climate finance at the community level.
- Support Customary Justice and Human Rights Protections
  - Strengthen customary justice systems that safeguard women's roles as peacekeepers and resource managers.
  - Establish protective mechanisms against discrimination and gender-based violence.
- Design Gender-Responsive Climate Action and Disaster Plans
  - Incorporate Indigenous women's perspectives into climate adaptation and resilience frameworks.
- Foster Partnerships and Cross-Cultural Exchanges
  - Create equitable partnerships



Women from nearby Kondh tribal areas are being trained on natural pesticides, and seed saving methods at Sambhav, Rohibanka, Dist. Nayagarh, Odisha.

Photo credit: Pradeep Nayak

between Indigenous communities, researchers, and policymakers.

- Encourage intergenerational and intercultural knowledge-sharing platforms.



Women from the GADABA tribe and author of this article in Village Kankda Guda, Koraput, Odisha.

Photo credit: Aswin Kr. Nayak

These policy measures align with international commitments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Empowering Indigenous women is not only a matter of social justice but a proven strategy for achieving environmental sustainability, climate resilience, and inclusive development (UNDP, 2022).

Indigenous women stand at the heart of

conservation efforts, bridging ancestral knowledge and modern ecological action. Their stewardship, shaped by centuries of intimate relationship with nature, reveals a profound ethical commitment to sustaining biodiversity and community well-being. As guardians of traditional knowledge and frontline defenders against environmental degradation, their contributions underscore the need for inclusive, equitable conservation approaches that honor cultural heritage and empower marginalized voices. Embracing Indigenous women's leadership offers a powerful pathway toward resilient ecosystems and just environmental futures that benefit all life on Earth.

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