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## **Adivasi Studies: Revisiting the Culture and Beliefs from the Ancient Period to the Postmodern Era**

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### **Abstract:**

The term 'Adivasi' directs to a vivid picture of the jungle and hunting to many who still live in a dilemma, unaware of the fact that this tribe's deep connection to nature is a hallmark of Adivasi culture. Apart from hunting and forestry livelihood which is the history of the tribal people, this is how life began from the early man era. The fundamental aim of this article is to compare the lifestyle of Adivasis from the ancient period to the postmodern era. Since the advancement it has reached is exceedingly an appropriate topic to talk about. There's a lot to delve into the Adivasi lifestyle to open the eyes of the people around. A researcher always finds this study interesting because the majority of the pieces of information are quite eccentric and adventurous, which sometimes gives a sense of remote storytelling like R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* (1942) and Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra* (200 BCE). Adivasi tribal culture refers to the diverse traditions, beliefs, and practices of the indigenous communities in India. This particular community often has its social structures to maintain social order and resolve conflicts within the community. This research explores the culture, myths, beliefs, and challenges of tribal people to date. 'Adivasi Studies' has become a neoteric research trend that deals with environmental studies, subaltern studies, Indigenous studies, aboriginal studies, and anthropology. Moreover, the essay also emphasizes the ongoing discourse among the researchers and critics who write the Adivasis into a larger project of history.

**Keywords: Adivasi Studies, Beliefs, Challenges, Culture, Development, Myth.**

### **Introduction**

When a person hears the term tribe, it automatically gives a picture of backwardness, jungle, myth, supernatural elements, nomads, darkness, and illiteracy even today in this 21st



century. “The very name ‘tribe or tribal’ by which they are generally known creates a sense of inferiority complex that leads to exclusion” (Kujur 55). Few fail to understand the progress. Studying a particular tribe in the literature field requires knowledge and information about tribal literature. What is the study of tribal literature? Tribal literature refers to the body of oral and written works produced by indigenous or tribal communities. This literature often reflects these communities' unique cultural, social, spiritual, and historical experiences. It includes a wide range of forms such as myths, folktales, songs, poems, chants, and stories that have been passed down through generations, often orally before being transcribed in written form.

However, much of tribal literature originates from oral traditions, where stories, songs, and histories are passed down verbally from one generation to the next. It is deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of a specific community. It often reflects the values, beliefs, and practices that are central to the community's identity. Many tribal literatures emphasize a strong connection to the natural world, highlighting the interdependence between humans, animals, plants, and the environment. Furthermore, tribal studies contain elements of spirituality and mythology, involving gods, spirits, and supernatural beings that play a significant role in explaining the origins and functioning of the world. In many cases, tribal literature also serves as a form of resistance against cultural erasure and colonization, preserving the narratives, languages, and knowledge systems of indigenous peoples. Tribal literature is not just an artistic expression, it is a crucial way of maintaining cultural heritage, identity, and continuity within tribal communities.

This research particularly aims to study the lifestyle and progress of the Adivasi tribe in India. Adivasi tribal culture refers to the diverse traditions, beliefs, and practices of the indigenous communities in India, known collectively as Adivasis. Adivasis, which means ‘original inhabitants,’ encompasses a variety of tribes spread across different regions of India, each with its own unique cultural identity. India is home to over 700 Adivasi tribes, including well-known groups like the Gond, Bhil, Santhal, Oraon, Munda, and Khasi. Each tribe has its distinct language, customs, and traditions. Adivasi communities speak a variety of languages and dialects, many of which are not part of the Indo-European language family. Some of these languages have their scripts, while the majority are primarily oral. This said tribe often has its social structures, which can include clan systems, councils of elders, and community decision-making processes. These structures help maintain social order and resolve conflicts within the community. Discussing their livelihood, earlier they used to rely on the forest for their living,



engaging in activities like hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation. Nature is also central to their spiritual beliefs and rituals. Festivals and rituals play a significant role in Adivasi life.

These celebrations are often linked to agricultural cycles, seasonal changes, and religious beliefs. Festivals like Sarhul, Karma, and Sohrai are celebrated with music, dance, and communal feasting. Music and dance are integral to Adivasi culture. Traditional instruments, like drums, flutes, and stringed instruments, accompany dances that are performed during festivals, rituals, and social gatherings. Each tribe has its distinctive dance forms and musical styles. Adivasi communities are known for their rich artistic traditions, including wall paintings, pottery, beadwork, and weaving. These crafts often feature motifs inspired by nature and tribal mythology. Their beliefs are diverse and often involve a pantheon of deities, spirits, and ancestors. Many tribes practice animism, believing that natural objects and phenomena possess a spiritual essence. Rituals and ceremonies are conducted to honor these spirits and seek their blessings, though not all the divisions but the majority follow such lifestyles. Besides, they also face numerous challenges including displacement, loss of traditional lands, and socio-economic marginalization. Efforts are being made to preserve and promote Adivasi culture through government initiatives, NGOs, and grassroots movements.

### **Methodology**

This research is a quantitative method of Adivasi Studies, comparing their lifestyle from the ancient to the postmodern period. The work has been achieved by the application of the study of Tribal literature in postmodern writing which has been the philosophical underpinnings of this research. The work undergoes a close reading and detailed analysis of the works of the scholars. The collection of data from secondary sources viz, research works of prominent scholars and writers, reviews, library visits, and watching a few interviews have smoothly helped in finding conclusions in the research process. The social commentaries and the reviews (criticisms) from the critics are incorporated to draw the lines between the findings and the research. This research is relevant to those researchers who would like to delve deeper into the Tribal literature specifically Adivasi Studies. This research comprises the facts and social reality of tribal living and their progress from the past till date. The presentation of this research has followed the MLA style Eighth Edition.



## Literature Review

In the work of Vinita Damodaran and Dasgupta, titled, “Multiple Worlds of the Adivasi. An Introduction,” the authors in the *Modern Asian Studies* 2022, open a platform for the researchers to discuss the 1959 event of the inauguration of the Damodar Valley Corporation Dam project in Bihar, where the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Who inaugurated with a 15-year-old Adivasi Girl called Budhini Manjhiyan and this news was flared across the newspaper nationally. There was a debate regarding this act of the Prime Minister whether this signifies the development and change in the tribal life in India or it was just a gesture to benefit the country. This research discloses the fact that after a few years, when the girl returned to her hometown Jharkhand, she was battling to keep her body and soul together and struggling to provide the necessities for her children. Her experience reflects the way Adivasis has been included more and more in discussions about indigeneity, identity, conversion, development, and climate change in recent years.

However, there is a narrative of Adivasi agency assertion hidden amid this marginalization. “Voices of Adivasis—although multiple and fractured, can be heard as they assert their identity, express their politics, and creatively negotiate with the state and its institutions” (Damodaran and Dasgupta 1353). The topic of "Adivasi Studies," which is focused on the Adivasi, is becoming increasingly important as Adivasis is seen in narratives of marginalization, resiliency, and assertion. The area of "Adivasi Studies," which is focused on the Adivasi, is becoming more and more important as stories of marginalization, resiliency, and assertion featuring Adivasis grow more prevalent. This special issue is the result of our joint effort to define the boundaries of this recently developed topic. Adivasi Studies, in contrast to Dalit Studies, has yet to fully claim its territory and establish itself as a respectable area of study into the politics, ecology, history, and history of communities as well as their complex relationship to modernity.

Dr. Md. Siddique Hossain comments on his work “Voices of the Marginalised: The Rise and Impact of Dalit, Adivasi, and Feminist Literature in Modern Indian Literary Landscape,” about Modern Indian Literature, which has observed an important growth in works that highlights the experiences of “socially marginalized groups” (Hossain 1) like Adivasis, Dalits, and women. Hossain states that this genre has become increasingly popular among readers and academics alike, with its roots in the socio-political struggles of marginalized populations. Oral histories, autobiographical narratives, and translations have



given these voices a voice in the current literary conversation. The author explores the origins, workings, and effects of marginalized literature in India, emphasizing how it addresses issues of social justice, identity, and economic marginalization while promoting cultural awareness and social realism. Yet “Adivasis, Dalits, and females continue to experience enduring social prejudice and economic marginalization.” (2). However, literature has emerged as a significant means of self-expression for these societies, suggesting a stronger sense of social identity.

In the article, “Poetess-Mother-Earth Mother: Solidarities and Intersectionalities in Select Native American and Indian Adivasi Women's Poetry” Namrata Chaturvedi applies the cultural comparison study through the application of comparative literature and theory. The writer has pointed out Prathama Banerjee's (2016) dependency on “ethnographic and anthropological discursive criticism, inadvertently imposing on historical identity discourse on the Adivasi subject. (Chaturvedi 2). Further, the writer discusses the legitimacy and potential of comparative literary criticism by concentrating on a few examples of Native American and Native American women poets. By analyzing the imagery, philosophic and cultural outlines, parallels, and divergences found in the poetry of Joram Yalam Nabam, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, and Jacinta Kerketta. Her work argues for the recognition of the “trans-ethnic and inter-poetic literary solidarity, wherein the poetic and critical trajectories of two diverse yet interconnected cultural geographies” (1) can be guided by the works of women writers.

“We too have the Sun Literatures from the Adivasi and Dalit Communities of East India” by Sipra Mukherjee, questions whether Dalit and Adivasi Literature can be studied together. The answer is Social Scientists Social scientists examine the two groups independently, and they find notable distinctions between them. Compared to current Adivasi-written literature, which has had a greater influence recently, Dalit-written literature has achieved greater recognition and traveled a greater distance since the 1970s. Reading the literature written by the Adivasi and Dalit communities reveals cultural fusions like what Hansda had experienced and Azad Sekhar Manjhi had mentioned. Even if the two communities' histories and identities have been markedly different, the realities of the late 20th century have led to a growing recognition of a shared environment. “This connection was underscored by the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha (the Bengali Dalit Literary Association) in West Bengal” (Mukherjee 498)

Alex Akhup in his research “Social Work Research Through Tribal/Adivasi People’s Lens: Observation from Academic Engagement” 2022, explores social work research through



the views of tribal people's lens. It also pictures the idea of creating a context-appropriate frame of reference for research involvement is explored in this work. It illustrates how one specific topic of context-based study is represented by the scheduled/tribal areas. To achieve this, the author sheds some light on how social research is contextualized concerning tribal and Adivasi areas using observations gleaned via academic interactions. "Currently, Anthropology departments of Universities which got implanted in the 1920s continue to include 'tribal studies' as one of the subjects of disciplinary engagement" (Akhup 30).

The paper "The Realistic Picture of the Tribals in the Adivasi Will Not Dance: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar" by Manmohan Krishna and Dr. Anupam Kumar, 2020, throws light on Tribal India and the harsh realities of tribals. The research is slightly like an investigation of the short stories. 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. The many levels of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's stories have never been thoroughly explored in literary works. Very few writers have addressed the social, economic, educational, and moral concerns that the tribal people face. For Cultured writers, tribal India represents a "different world", where academics are the primary subject rather than the terrible realities faced by tribal people. However, a small number of Indian English writers have explored the subject of tribal India in their works.

### **Research Findings and Gap**

This research has been achieved to get some findings after going through the articles and literature review. Several works are focused on the progress of the tribal communities, their development, and their struggle. Few scholars have included the Adivasi tribe in Dalits and incorporated their research along with the women (feminism), as the minority study. Contradictorily, the other authors question in their articles, whether Dalit and Adivasi literature can be studied together. Moreover, comparative literature has been employed in various works to study and compare tribal communities such as 'Native American and Indian Adivasi women's poetry. Whereas, highly renowned researchers criticize inadvertently imposing a historical identity discourse on the Adivasi subject. Yet there's a gap observed while researching the development of tribal communities there arises a question of the percentage or rate of progress in India. Though there are many discussions and debates regarding progress, people often forget to discuss the mythological beliefs which is one of the reasons behind the lack of advancement. Although the facts about the illiteracy rate and the backwardness continue to remain.



## Challenges faced by Adivasi Tribe

Every Indian knows that many Adivasi communities live in remote or forested areas, making it difficult for students to access schools. Schools in Adivasi areas often lack basic facilities, such as proper classrooms, drinking water, and sanitation. Therefore, this research reviews the articles of prominent scholars and writers and the fact is quite lucid when their works create awareness of the future livelihood of these tribal communities. “Scheduled castes in India suffer from cultural and social discrimination. The education was forbidden for them from ancient times till British rule in India. Education is centered on cultural privileges was not extended to the lower strata of the society” (Patil and Mashere 9142). They encounter issues like low motivation, inadequate direction, an unfavorable environment, financial hardships, and language barriers while they are in school.

All of these issues have an impact on their degree of motivation, academic achievement, and, eventually, the advancement of their careers. Besides Economic pressures sometimes force children to work instead of attending school. “India’s tribal communities form 8.6 percent of the country’s population according to the 2011 Census. But they are at the bottom of the country’s development pyramid even after 75 years of independence” (Jha 2022) medium of instruction is often not in the local languages spoken by Adivasi students, which can lead to learning difficulties and disengagement. The students sometimes face discrimination and bias within educational institutions, impacting their educational experiences and outcomes. Strategies to reduce dropout rates, such as providing financial incentives and support services, are crucial. “Adivasis, Dalits, Muslims have lower life expectancy than higher-caste Hindus, study reveals Adivasis account for 13% of total convicts, 10% of total under-trials, shows data” (2022).

This research also criticizes the varied mythologies and beliefs that are deeply intertwined with their cultural practices and daily lives, and this becomes one of the reasons for the lack of growth in education and living. These myths and beliefs often center around the natural world, ancestral spirits, and divine entities, reflecting a deep effect on daily life. Many Adivasi tribes practice animism, believing that natural elements like rivers, trees, mountains, and animals possess spiritual significance. They often worship these natural entities as deities or spirits. ancestral spirits play a crucial role in the spiritual life of many Adivasi communities. Ancestors are revered, and their spirits are believed to influence the lives of their descendants. Some tribes worship a pantheon of local deities or gods, each associated with particular aspects





of life or nature. These deities might be considered guardians of specific places or protectors of particular activities like agriculture or hunting. Apparently, in a few tribes, mythological figures, such as nature spirits or demigods, are central to their religious practices. These figures may be depicted in stories, rituals, and festivals.

Certain practices or behaviors may be considered taboo in Adivasi cultures, often related to the protection of sacred sites or adherence to traditional norms. Violations of these taboos can be believed to bring misfortune or divine displeasure. There are still people across the country who have myths involving mythical creatures or animals that possess special powers or significance. Beliefs in supernatural beings, such as spirits or ghosts, are common. These beings might be thought to inhabit specific places or interact with the living in various ways. In many Adivasi cultures, shamans or traditional healers act as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. While traditional beliefs remain strong, some Adivasi communities have integrated modern elements into their spiritual practices, blending old and new influences. Because these beliefs somewhere lead people to darkness. Faith and beliefs are always respected but if those elements turn into myths or beyond reality this becomes the crucial feature of living in the void.

The sense of time is sharper in the tribal mind than the sense of distance. Tribal tribes appear to have realized at some point in human civilization that controlling territory was not their destiny. As a result, they appear to have become almost compulsively focused on dominating over time. This need is supported by their yearly practice of speaking with their deceased ancestors. Tribal people in various regions of India worship terracotta or carved wood artifacts that are believed to be their ancestors in hopes of entering a trance where they can communicate with the dead. “The importance of memory in tribal systems of knowledge has not yet been sufficiently recognized but the aesthetic proportions of the houses that tribals build, the objects they make, and the rituals they perform fascinate the curious onlooker” (Sharma 209) Tribal people have developed a very intricate system of knowledge throughout the ages by classifying natural and manufactured objects thanks to their exceptionally good memories.

### **Tribal India in the 21st Century**

Talking about their modern influences, many Adivasi communities today strive to preserve their traditional ways of life, they are also influenced by modernization and globalization. This has led to a dynamic blending of traditional and contemporary practices in



some areas. Adivasi culture is a vital part of India's cultural heritage and, to some extent, offers a rich tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and practices that reflect the country's diversity. In the west-north Indian regions, the influx of modern values, consumerism, and lifestyles has led to the erosion of traditional Adivasi practices, rituals, and languages, as younger generations adopt more mainstream cultural norms. At times, missionary activities and other external influences have led to religious conversions, sometimes causing divisions within communities and altering traditional belief systems. Additionally, large-scale industrial projects, mining, and urban expansion have led to the displacement of Adivasi communities from their ancestral lands, resulting in loss of livelihoods and cultural dislocation. Environmental degradation due to modern industrial activities has been impacting the natural resources that Adivasi communities rely on for their traditional way of life. Focusing on equality and marginalization, some Adivasis have benefited economically, while others remain marginalized, facing poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to basic services. There is a risk of forced assimilation into dominant cultures, where Adivasi identity and traditions are subsumed or disregarded in favor of mainstream norms.

The contact with the outside world has provided knowledge about new diseases, which were previously unknown to Adivasi communities, and with limited access to appropriate healthcare responses, many had faced great loss. Modern influences, including the availability of alcohol and drugs, have led to social issues such as substance abuse in some Adivasi communities. Efforts include promoting bilingual education (teaching in both the local tribal language and the national language), revitalizing traditional arts and crafts, and advocating for land rights and environmental protection. The ongoing challenge is to ensure that the benefits of modernity are realized without sacrificing the rich cultural heritage and sustainable lifestyles that have long defined these communities.

Significant advancements in life and literature have characterized the Adivasi groups' success in India during the 21st century. Although there are still many obstacles to overcome, there have been noteworthy developments in several fields that have an impact on their socioeconomic standing, literary expression, and cultural preservation. There has been a substantial rise in the enrollment of Adivasi children in schools, especially in states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. "Tribal populations continue to have one of the lowest enrolments and retention rates as well as learning outcomes in the country, despite more than half a century of interventions to improve their educational status" (Patil and Mashere 9142). Government schemes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the establishment of Ashram schools



(residential schools for tribal children) have contributed to this. The Adivasis have a long history of being marginalized, which has caused them to lose their means of subsistence and fall farther into the poverty-poverty cycle. State policies are one of the things that led to the marginalization of Adivasis.

Woven around the Adivasi, several monographs and essays in edited volumes have been published in the last decade-and-a-half, along with journals like Adivasi, a journal of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, Bhubaneswar, and the Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies...Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: Primitives and History-Writing in a Colonial Society*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006; Ganesh N. Devy, *A Nomad Called Thief: Reflections on Adivasi Silence*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2006; Shereen Ratnagar, *Being Tribal*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2010; Alpa Shah (Damodaran and Dasgupta 1354).

Many studies have focused on governmental policies to understand the social regression and economic degradation of the tribal people, especially those related to tribal land and the integration of Adivasis through uniform laws into mainstream society. “ the process of displacement and proletarianization and dominant discourse of development have not only fractured the Adivasi political consciousness but also relegated them to the status of welfare recipients” (Sarap and Motkuri 18). There’s an urgent need to address issues like the disregard for tribal self-rule, the constitutional promise and the purpose of several laws, and the subjugation of Adivasi society. In this 21st century, more Adivasi students are now pursuing higher education, with some even reaching prestigious institutions. Reservation policies have played a role in enabling access to colleges and universities. There are reservation quotas for Adivasi students in higher education institutions, which can help improve access to quality education.

After independent, concerted efforts are being made to integrate the Adivasi communities with rest of the India by making education a constitutional right for Adivasi communities. Constitutional provisions and other policy commitments have been made to address the issue of Adivasis or to combat factors affecting their development negatively.



Some important initiatives have been taken to improve the positions of the Adivasis in education. (Kujur 55).

Yet Adivasi children still face exclusion in several educational domains, there are still uncountable students who have dropped out or not enrolled yet, especially in the “Adivasi-dominated districts of Jharkhand” (55). The author Kujur has conducted experimental research for his article.

Prathamesh Ambasta chief executive of Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation BRLF said:

If we look at any issue, be it of sanitation, education, nutrition, access to drinking water and education, we will see that despite 70 years of independence, Adivasis are the most deprived. This makes it important to focus on the challenges that Adivasis face (Jha 2022)

Promod Boro the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Council, Assam, states, “There are many tribal communities that prefer isolation and silence. They are shy and are not going to reach out to the outside world on their own. Policymakers and leaders of the country need to understand this trait and then work towards the welfare of Adivasis so that they connect with them in a better way,” he said” (2022).

The writings of Arunachal Pradesh-born writer-scholar Joram Yalam Nabam have been chosen for the Indian Adivasi context. Yalam is a prize-winning novelist who has just started writing poetry. Poet-activist Jacinta Kerketta, who also works in Hindi and is engaged in digital media, is the other writer this paper will discuss. These authors' work challenges us to find poetic and philosophical commonalities that force us to see beyond Western literary standards to put their writing in context. These Indigenous poets “have been advocating a ‘universal’ approach to Indigenous poetry and culture- an approach that need not be essentialist but progressive; not fossilizing culture but recognizing the evolutions and challenges of Indigenous cultural expressions in the wake of changing realities” (Chaturvedi 4).

## **Conclusion**

While significant progress has occurred, challenges remain, including the continued marginalization of Adivasi voices in mainstream literature, the threat of cultural erosion, and the need for greater economic and social inclusion. However, the resilience and adaptability of Adivasi communities suggest that they will continue to make strides in preserving their identity



while navigating the complexities of the modern world. Conversely, Adivasi writers and activists increasingly use social media platforms to share their writings, connect with broader audiences, and discuss issues pertinent to their communities. Scholars and researchers are showing greater interest in Adivasi literature, leading to more studies, anthologies, and critical works that analyze and celebrate Adivasi literary contributions. Works by Adivasi writers are increasingly being translated into English and other Indian languages, allowing their stories to reach broader audiences. The issue remains, continued efforts are needed to address these issues and ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students.

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