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DECOLONISING SOCIAL SCIENCES: RETHINKING ADIVASI KNOWLEDGE AND INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

Dr. Kuntala Soy

Head Department of History, Talcher Autonomous College, Talcher

ABSTRACT

India is home to more than 104 million Scheduled Tribe (Adivasi) people, representing some of the most ancient and continuous knowledge traditions in the world. Yet this knowledge systems remain largely excluded from the mainstream social sciences, where they are treated as informal practices rather than as legitimate bodies of theory. This article examines the historical roots and present-day effects of this exclusion, drawing on colonial history, ecological science, legal studies, and education policy. It argues that decolonising social sciences requires more than adding Indigenous content to existing curricula. It demands a rethinking of what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is validated, and who is recognised as a knowledge producer. The article engages with the Niyamgiri case in Odisha, the ecological knowledge of Baiga and Gond communities, and the role of oral tradition as theory production. It also draws on global frameworks from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the IPBES Global Assessment to situate India's experience within an international conversation. The article concludes by calling for a plural epistemological framework in which multiple knowledge systems coexist without hierarchy.

KEYWORDS: *Adivasi Knowledge, Indigenous Epistemology, Decolonisation, Social Sciences, Niyamgiri, Oral Tradition, Ecological Knowledge.*

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INTRODUCTION

India is one of the most epistemically diverse nations in the world. Its social, cultural, and ecological landscape has given rise to a wide variety of ways of knowing, from classical philosophical traditions preserved in Sanskrit texts to the living ecological knowledge systems of its Adivasi communities. However, the formal social sciences as practised in Indian universities today are built primarily on European intellectual traditions. This creates a deep gap between the knowledge that institutions recognise and the knowledge that millions of Indians actually live by.This gap is not accidental. It is the product of a specific historical process: colonial rule and the knowledge structures it put in place. British colonial administrators classified Indian societies into rigid categories, shaped educational institutions to produce a certain kind of subject, and systematically devalued non-Western knowledge systems. The effects of this process continue to shape Indian universities, research frameworks, and curriculum design well into the twenty-first century.

India has 705 officially recognised Scheduled Tribes, with a combined population of 104,281,034 according to the 2011 Census, accounting for 8.61 percent of the national population.[1] These communities are not uniform. They span different language families, ecological zones, and cultural traditions. What they share, however, is a long history of being placed outside the mainstream social and political order, and of having their knowledge systems treated as primitive, informal, or irrelevant.

This article asks a foundational question: what would social sciences look like if Adivasi knowledge systems were treated not as data to be studied but as theory to be engaged with? The answer, it argues, requires a fundamental rethinking of knowledge itself.

Table 1: Scheduled Tribe Population in Selected States, Census of India 2011

State / Union Territory	ST Population (2011 Census)	% of Total State Population	Major Adivasi Groups
Odisha	9,590,756	22.85%	Santals, Kandhas, Gonds, Juangs
Jharkhand	8,645,042	26.21%	Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Hos
Madhya Pradesh	15,316,784	21.09%	Gonds, Baigas, Bhils, Korkus
Chhattisgarh	7,822,902	30.62%	Gonds, Baigas, Halbas
Gujarat	8,917,174	14.75%	Bhils, Dhodias, Gamits
Rajasthan	9,238,534	13.48%	Meenas, Bhils, Saharias
All India	**104,281,034**	**8.61%**	**Over 700 Scheduled Tribes**

COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS OF EPISTEMIC HIERARCHY

The social sciences inherited by postcolonial India were not neutral intellectual tools. They emerged from a specific historical context in which European powers sought to understand, classify, and govern non-European peoples. In India, British colonial administration used knowledge production as an instrument of political control.

Bernard Cohn, in his landmark work *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, showed how the British transformed India into an object of knowledge through surveys, censuses, and ethnographic reports. These were not simply descriptive exercises. They produced categories of caste, tribe, and race that became the basis for legal, administrative, and educational policy. The category of "tribe" itself was a colonial construction, used to designate communities as primitive, isolated, and in need of governance from outside.[2]

The Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano developed the concept of the "coloniality of power" to describe how colonial hierarchies persist in knowledge structures even after political independence. In his framework, certain forms of knowledge, those associated with Europe, rationality, and writing, were elevated above others.[3] In India, this played out in specific ways. Adivasi knowledge was recorded selectively, stripped of its ecological and social context, and reframed through Western anthropological categories. Practices that functioned as governance systems, such as communal forest management or seasonal cultivation rituals, were described as superstition or backward custom.

[1] *Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, Census of India 2011: Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled Tribes (New Delhi: Government of India, 2013).*
[2] *Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–15.*
[3] *Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," Nepantla: Views from South 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580.*

The consequences of this framing are still visible. Indian university curricula in sociology, history, and political science continue to rely heavily on Western theoretical frameworks. Indigenous scholars and communities remain underrepresented in academic institutions.[4] The category of "tribal" continues to carry a stigma that marks communities as outside the modern, and therefore outside the legitimate production of knowledge.

WHAT IS INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY?

The term "Indigenous epistemology" refers to structured systems of knowledge that are rooted in specific ecological, cultural, and historical contexts. They are not simply collections of practices or beliefs. They have internal logic, methods of validation, and mechanisms of transmission. They produce claims about the world that are tested against experience and refined over time.

Adivasi knowledge systems in India include detailed ecological classification of plants, animals, soils, and water bodies. They include agricultural knowledge adapted to specific forest and hill ecosystems. They include medicinal systems based on biodiversity that continue to serve communities where formal healthcare is absent. They include oral histories that preserve memory over centuries and ritual systems that encode environmental ethics.[5]

A central misconception in mainstream social science is that these systems are fragmented or unsystematic. In fact, they function as coherent frameworks. Among Gond and Baiga communities in central India, ecological knowledge is transmitted through ritual narratives that encode seasonal cycles, soil regeneration processes, and forest conservation principles. The narrative is not simply cultural decoration. It is the vehicle for precise empirical information about the environment.

Similarly, Santal oral traditions preserve historical and political memory through song cycles that function as social archives. These traditions do not simply record events. They interpret them, assign responsibility, and transmit norms for communal behaviour across generations.[6]

The philosopher Boaventura de Sousa Santos has used the term "epistemicide" to describe the destruction of knowledge systems through colonial and modernising processes. In India, this process took the form of forest laws that criminalised Adivasi cultivation practices, educational policies that required Adivasi children to leave their communities, and academic frameworks that classified their knowledge as folklore rather than theory.[7]

Table 2: Comparative Framework of Western Academic and Adivasi Knowledge Systems

Dimension	Western Academic Knowledge	Adivasi / Indigenous Knowledge
Mode of Transmission	Written texts, journals, institutions	Oral tradition, ritual, performance
Validation Method	Peer review, citation, replication	Community consensus, lived experience
Relation to Nature	Nature as object of study	Nature as living, relational entity
Time Orientation	Linear and progressive	Cyclical and seasonal
Knowledge Holder	Individual expert or institution	Community, elders, practitioners
Ecological Approach	Extraction and management model	Regeneration and conservation model
Language	Dominant written languages	Local, indigenous languages

[4] *Nandini Sundar, Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-2006, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14–21.*
[5] *Fikret Berkes, Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1999), 8–12.*
[6] *Virginius Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008), 55–70.*
[7] *Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 42–50.*

ADIVASI ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND MODERN SCIENCE

One of the most important areas where Adivasi knowledge systems intersect with modern science is ecology. Indian forests and biodiversity have been managed and sustained by Adivasi communities for centuries. The knowledge that has developed in this context is not simply practical. It reflects a sophisticated understanding of ecological relationships that modern environmental science is only beginning to document.[8]

Fikret Berkes, one of the leading researchers on traditional ecological knowledge, has described such systems as scientifically valid frameworks for resource management. His research demonstrates that Indigenous communities develop knowledge through generations of careful observation and accumulated experience, and that this knowledge is adaptive, dynamic, and responsive to environmental change.[9]

In central India, Baiga communities have traditionally practised a form of shifting cultivation known as bewar or dahiya. This practice was condemned by colonial foresters and by some post-independence development planners as destructive. However, research into bewar cultivation shows that, when managed at low population densities and with adequate fallow periods, it maintains soil fertility, supports biodiversity, and regenerates forest cover. The Baiga refusal to use the plough, often mocked as superstition, reflects a sophisticated understanding of soil structure.

The 2019 Global Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) acknowledged that biodiversity loss is significantly lower in territories managed by Indigenous peoples than in other areas. The report noted that Indigenous and local knowledge is a critical resource for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.[10]

This is a remarkable development. It means that the dominant global scientific framework is now acknowledging what Adivasi communities have known and practised for generations. The question this raises for social sciences is significant: if ecological science can recognise the validity of Indigenous knowledge, why do social science institutions continue to treat it as marginal?[11]

THE NIYAMGIRI CASE

The Niyamgiri movement in Odisha represents one of the most important recent examples of Indigenous epistemology operating within a legal and political framework. The Dongria Kondh community's resistance to open-cast bauxite mining on the Niyamgiri hills was grounded in a worldview that understands the hills as a living, sacred entity. This is not simply a cultural or religious claim. It encodes a system of land ethics, resource governance, and environmental responsibility.[12]

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[8] *Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South (London: Earthscan, 1997), 3.*
[9] *Berkes, Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management(Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1999).*
[10] *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (Bonn: IPBES Secretariat, 2019), 29.*
[11] *Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 49.*
[12] *Survival International, "India: Supreme Court Upholds Dongria Kondh Tribe's Right to Reject Vedanta Mine," News release(18 April 2013), https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/9128.*

In 2013, the Supreme Court of India ordered that Gram Sabha consultations be held in the affected villages before any decision on mining could be made. The court recognised that the constitutional and legal rights of the Dongria Kondh community required their free, prior, and informed consent. This was a landmark application of the Forest Rights Act, 2006.[13]

All twelve Gram Sabhas voted unanimously to reject the mining proposal. This outcome was not simply a political victory. It was a demonstration that Indigenous epistemological claims, the belief that the hills are sacred and inseparable from community life, can function as valid legal reasoning within the formal judicial system. The Kondh community did not need to translate their worldview into Western legal categories to be heard. The court created a space where their own framework of environmental ethics carried legal weight.

Table 3: Niyamgiri Gram Sabha Consultations and Voting Outcomes, 2013

Gram Sabha Location	Date of Vote (2013)	Vote Outcome	Community Represented
Khambesi	18 July 2013	Rejected	Dongria Kondh
Palberi	18 July 2013	Rejected	Kutia Kondh
Jarapa	1 August 2013	Rejected	Dongria Kondh
Kunakadu	5 August 2013	Rejected	Dongria Kondh
Lakhapadar	19 August 2013	Rejected	Dongria Kondh
Total (12 Gram Sabhas)	**July - August 2013**	**12 of 12 Rejected**	**Various Kondh Groups**

The Niyamgiri case also illustrates the potential and the limits of using existing legal structures to protect Indigenous knowledge. The victory was won through the formal judicial system, which required litigation over many years. The Dongria Kondh community needed support from NGOs, lawyers, and journalists to make their case heard. The broader lesson is that while institutional frameworks can sometimes accommodate Indigenous epistemology, sustainable recognition requires structural transformation.

ORAL TRADITION AS A FORM OF THEORY PRODUCTION

One of the most persistent assumptions in social science is that knowledge must be written to be systematic. This assumption reflects the specific historical conditions in which European universities developed. It does not reflect a universal truth about knowledge. Oral traditions represent highly sophisticated systems of knowledge production and transmission that do not require writing to be rigorous.[14]

In Adivasi societies, myths and ritual narratives encode ecological principles in a form that is memorable, portable, and adaptable. Songs preserve historical and political memory in ways that can survive the loss of written records, the disruption of communities, and the suppression of formal institutions. Storytelling transmits ethical frameworks across generations, establishing norms for social and environmental behaviour.

Gond cosmology, for example, encodes a relational understanding of humans, animals, and forests that is not simply symbolic. It establishes rules for how communities should relate to their environment, what can be taken and what must be left, when and how resources can be used. These rules are enforced through social mechanisms, not legal ones, but they are no less effective for that.[15]

[13] *Supreme Court of India, Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd. v. Ministry of Environment and Forest, Civil Appeal No. 4628 of 2012, Judgment dated 18 April 2013.*
[14] *Walter Mignolo, Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17–22.*
[15] *Shiv Visvanathan, "The Search for Cognitive Justice," Seminar 597 (May 2009).*

The dismissal of oral tradition as mere folklore reflects a bias towards textuality that has no epistemological justification. A community that has maintained a sustainable relationship with its forest environment for centuries has clearly been producing and transmitting valid ecological knowledge. The fact that this knowledge is oral rather than written does not make it less reliable. In many cases, oral traditions preserve environmental knowledge that written records have lost entirely.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Potawatomi botanist, has argued that Indigenous ways of knowing include modes of attention, reciprocity, and observation that scientific method often lacks. Her work suggests that the integration of Indigenous knowledge into ecological science would strengthen, not weaken, scientific understanding.[16]

EDUCATION, CURRICULUM, AND THE REPRODUCTION OF EPISTEMIC HIERARCHY

Formal education systems are among the most powerful mechanisms through which epistemic hierarchies are reproduced. School and university curricula determine what counts as knowledge worth learning, whose frameworks are presented as universal, and what forms of knowing are marginalised or ignored.

For Adivasi students, entering the formal education system often involves a process of separation from their own cultural and ecological knowledge. The school curriculum, in most Indian states, does not acknowledge the ecological knowledge of their communities, does not teach in their languages, and does not present their history from their own perspective. The result is what can be described as epistemic displacement: the experience of having one's own knowledge rendered invisible by the institutions that are supposed to provide learning.

Table 4: Literacy Rates among Scheduled Tribes and Total Population, Census of India 2001 and 2011

Category	Literacy Rate 2001 (%)	Literacy Rate 2011 (%)	Change (%)
Total Population (India)	64.84	74.04	+9.20
Scheduled Tribes (All)	47.10	59.00	+11.90
ST Males	59.17	68.50	+9.33
ST Females	34.76	49.35	+14.59
ST Rural	44.67	56.93	+12.26
ST Urban	69.68	77.00	+7.32

The data in Table 4 shows that Scheduled Tribe literacy rates, while improving, remain significantly below the national average, particularly for women in rural areas. This gap is not simply a matter of access. It also reflects the mismatch between formal education and the knowledge systems of Adivasi communities.

India's National Education Policy of 2020 acknowledged the importance of teaching in home languages at the primary level and of drawing on local knowledge in curricula. This is a positive step, but implementation remains limited. The structural challenge is that epistemic hierarchies are embedded in curriculum design, in examination systems, and in what is considered legitimate knowledge for academic and professional advancement.[17]Development models that treated Adivasi lands as resources for national economic growth also treated Adivasi knowledge as an obstacle to progress. The displacement of communities from forests was accompanied by the displacement of their knowledge from educational and policy frameworks.

[16]*Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 49.*
[17] *Ministry of Education, Government of India, National Education Policy 2020 (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020), 4–6.*

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION AND EPISTEMIC EXTRACTION

When Adivasi knowledge enters academic or policy frameworks, it typically does so through a process of translation. Ecological practices are described in the language of environmental science. Ritual systems are interpreted through the categories of anthropology. Oral histories are rendered as data for historical analysis. This translation is sometimes productive, but it also carries significant risks.

Translation involves simplification. A ritual narrative that encodes ecological knowledge, social rules, and historical memory at once loses its multi-layered character when it is converted into a single academic category. The performative dimension, the fact that the knowledge is activated through song, dance, or communal gathering, is lost entirely when it becomes text.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential argument that the subaltern cannot easily speak within dominant epistemic systems is relevant here. The problem is not simply that Adivasi communities lack a platform. It is that the dominant platforms are structured in ways that do not recognise the forms in which their knowledge is held and expressed.[18]

A further problem is what can be called epistemic extraction: the removal of knowledge from its community context for academic or commercial use without recognition, compensation, or consent. Medicinal knowledge developed by Adivasi communities over centuries has repeatedly been documented by researchers and then commercialised by pharmaceutical companies without acknowledgment. This pattern reproduces, in the domain of knowledge, the same dynamics of resource extraction that Adivasi communities experience in relation to their land and forests.[19]

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, includes specific provisions regarding Indigenous intellectual property and the right to maintain, protect, and develop knowledge systems. India voted in favour of the declaration, but domestic legal protections remain incomplete.[20]

TOWARDS A PLURAL EPISTEMOLOGY

The argument for decolonising social sciences is not an argument against Western knowledge. It is an argument for epistemic pluralism: the recognition that multiple knowledge systems can coexist, interact, and learn from each other without one being subordinated to another.

Walter Mignolo has described this as "border thinking": the capacity to reason from the perspective of multiple epistemological frameworks simultaneously. In the Indian context, this would mean bringing Adivasi frameworks of ecological ethics into dialogue with environmental science, placing oral traditions alongside written history, and recognising communal decision-making structures as legitimate forms of political theory.[21]

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[18] *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.*
[19] *Archana Prasad, Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2003), 8–12.*
[20] *United Nations, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (New York: United Nations, 2007), Articles 11–14.*
[21] *Mignolo, Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).*

Several steps are needed to move towards this kind of pluralism. First, social science curricula in Indian universities need to be revised to include Adivasi epistemologies not as supplementary material but as core theoretical frameworks. This means assigning the same intellectual seriousness to oral theory as to written theory, and to ecological knowledge as to laboratory science. Second, research methodologies need to change. Current methods, based primarily on ethnographic observation, interview, and textual analysis, often position Adivasi communities as objects of study rather than partners in knowledge production. Community-based participatory research methods, co-designed with Adivasi scholars and communities, offer a different approach. Third, institutional support for Adivasi scholars in universities and research institutions needs to be substantially increased. Reservation policies have opened some access, but the academic environment in most institutions does not yet support the kinds of knowledge claims that Adivasi scholars are positioned to make. Fourth, and perhaps most fundamentally, the philosophy of knowledge itself needs to be taught differently. Students of social science should learn that objectivity, rationality, and evidence are contested concepts with specific histories, not universal properties that define knowledge as such.

CONCLUSION

The decolonisation of social sciences is not a project for the margins of academic life. It is a central intellectual and political task for Indian universities in the twenty-first century. The argument made in this article is that Adivasi knowledge systems, with their oral traditions, ecological ethics, communal governance structures, and relational understanding of the natural world, represent sophisticated epistemological frameworks that deserve to be engaged with as theory, not merely documented as data.

The Niyamgiri case demonstrates that Indigenous epistemology can carry legal weight when institutional conditions are right. The IPBES Global Assessment shows that ecological science increasingly recognises the validity of Indigenous knowledge. These developments suggest that the case for epistemic pluralism is not simply a political argument. It rests on substantial intellectual and empirical foundations.The challenge is to translate this recognition into structural change within academic institutions. This means revising curricula, reforming research methodologies, supporting Adivasi scholars, and teaching the philosophy of knowledge in ways that open students to epistemological diversity. None of this is easy. All of it is necessary.

India's knowledge traditions are richer and more varied than its social sciences currently acknowledge. The path forward is not to abandon the intellectual tools of Western social science but to hold them alongside other tools, shaped in other contexts, tested against other realities, and rooted in a very different relationship between human communities and the natural world. To decolonise knowledge is not to close inquiry. It is to open it more widely than it has ever been opened before.

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