



E-ISSN: 2706-8927
P-ISSN: 2706-8919
Impact Factor (RJIF): 7.28
www.allstudyjournal.com
IJAAS 2025; 7(9): 24-32
Received: 08-06-2025
Accepted: 13-07-2025

Jagulu Dakapraska
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Education, School of Tribal
Heritage and Tribal Indology
(STHTI), and Centre for
Sacred Groves, Kalinga
Institute of Social Sciences
(KISS) Deemed to be
University, Bhubaneswar,
Odisha, India

Dr. Manoj Kumar Behera
Associate Professor, The
Centre Head, Centre for Sacred
Groves, Kalinga Institute of
Social Sciences (KISS) Deemed
to be University,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Corresponding Author:
Jagulu Dakapraska
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Education, School of Tribal
Heritage and Tribal Indology
(STHTI), and Centre for
Sacred Groves, Kalinga
Institute of Social Sciences
(KISS) Deemed to be
University, Bhubaneswar,
Odisha, India

Sacred groves and inclusive education: Empowering tribal women in Odisha

Jagulu Dakapraska and Manoj Kumar Behera

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2025.v7.i9a.1666>

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the role of sacred groves in promoting inclusive education and empowering tribal women in Odisha. "Spirituality and ecology of the sacred groves. Although the holy groves harbour an abundance of biodiversity, a living Indigenous knowledge system is also preserved among the Indigenous community of the sacred grove keepers. The need to protect the holy grove and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge through the traditional roles of tribal women helps maintain a strong cultural identity and promotes ecological stewardship of the area. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with a focus on ensuring equity, access, quality, inclusiveness, and accountability, promotes the integration of Indigenous knowledge at all levels of formal education. Based on secondary data analysis of government reports, ethnographic fieldwork, and policy documents, the study discusses the potential of sacred groves as educational resources. The reflexive use of sacred forest knowledge enhances ecological literacy, sustains traditional living, promotes gender justice, and supports tribal women in securing sustainable income opportunities. Advocacy to promote policy paradigms like community conservation and co-managed educational strategies that connect formal education and Indigenous knowledge could be the way forward. The study suggests that acknowledging the contributions of tribal women and initiating community-centric education might conserve their sacred groves and empower tribal women, thereby leading to the continuance of the valorisation of Indigenous knowledge, and inclusive and sustainable community development.

Keywords: Sacred groves, inclusive education, indigenous knowledge, tribal women empowerment, gender equity

1. Introductions

Community-protected Forest patches consecrated to local gods, ancestors, or guardian spirits are known as sacred groves. In Odisha, among the Kandha/Kondh, Saora, Gadaba, Juang, and other Adivasis, these are regulated by customary norms rather than formal laws. They are classrooms of life where ecological understandings, moral codes, ritual practices, and social solidarity are passed from generation to generation.

Sacred groves are forest patches which the local people have accorded a religious sanctity, and hence have been protected against any exploitation." Sacred groves are areas of virgin forest that have been traditionally preserved from all forms of resource extraction and are primarily dedicated to the mother goddess, as well as local deities. The sacred groves are not only historical tracts in nature, but they are also living archives of traditional knowledge and Odia heritage that extend beyond their status as biodiversity havens. Sacred groves are very special places and an essential part of tribal culture, particularly among the Kandha and other indigenous groups, as they create a sense of peace and brotherhood, and transfer traditional knowledge to the next generation. The sacred groves are not just a mirror image of a sustainable way of life and knowledge that is exclusive in itself, but are the essence of both spiritual and environmental identity.

The target of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is inclusion in education with a keen emphasis on equal opportunities to high-quality education while also respecting the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of India. A blend of formal education with the traditional wisdom of groves could empower the tribal women of Odisha. In addition to improving education, using Indigenous ecology in school curricula enables tribal women through socioeconomic development and sustains their traditional identity.

This paper explores the potential of sacred groves as powerful pedagogical resources for advancing inclusive education among tribal women in Odisha.

It unfolds the Indigenous knowledge system stored in sacred groves and how this helps in promoting educational equity. By integrating conventional modes of instruction with new pedagogy, policymakers and educators can simultaneously help provide more inclusive and culturally relevant learning environments. The study seeks to highlight potentialities and limitations of mainstreaming Indigenous knowledge into the formal banking system for sustainable NRM in tribal India. Considering the manifold challenges to the participation of active tribal women, this article seeks to highlight the socio-cultural, economic and political hurdles, facilitating an informed debate and focused actions for job participation of tribal women in gram panchayats. (Pradhan & Sethi, 2024) ^[8].

Women are considered to be inauspicious at the time of pollution & are banned in sacred places of the kitchen, like the kitchen room and sacred grove. These are powerful mechanisms through which patriarchy exerts control over education, health, property, knowledge, choice, freedom, decision-making, and sexuality of women. (Sabar, 2022) ^[16]. These groves have been considered sacred abodes in Adivasi societies in central India for a long time, and rituals, prayers, and ceremonies deeply linked to their culture are conducted in these areas. The Sacred Groves have been a strong symbolic indicator to recognize that the community owns land and resources. These places have served as a testament to the community's independence and self-reliance (Bisht, 2020) ^[23].

Odisha is home to rich and contemporary tribal cultures, Indigenous knowledge systems, and spiritual relationships with nature. In these cultures, sacred groves hold special significance, as they serve not only as cultural and religious centres but also as silent witnesses to conservation efforts. Tribal communities have preserved forest patches known as ca plantations as sacred groves for their customs and religious beliefs. They are considered part of local traditions, such as deities, customs, and festivals, as holy and a source of pride, as well as a means of managing the environment and nature around them.

The Importance of Sacred Groves in the Conservation and Transmission of Cultural Knowledge among Tribal Women of Odisha. These are the women who are the lifeline of traditional spiritual education, herb healing, and massive conservation of biodiversity. Ecological knowledge, cultural wisdom, and sustainable human practices are transmitted by tribal women to their children through their close contact with religiously significant trees. Their role, and their knowledge systems, are routinely undervalued in conventional educational paradigms. The objective of inclusive education is to integrate Indigenous knowledge into formal education in an attempt to recuperate this deprivation. The infusion of local contexts and cultural heritage into the learning process is a key aspect of the contours of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It highlights the importance of upholding fairness, diversity, and inclusion. Tribal women's understanding and participation, as well as their respect for sacred groves, are acknowledged and valued. Inclusive education can unite these societies and foster holistic learning. The present study attempts to explore how sacred groves can act as interfaces between school learning and Indigenous knowledge and gain attention of the society towards the knowledge system of the tribes with special reference to the knowledge commitment of tribal women. It discusses the potential and

challenges for incorporating such information into educational systems and the wider implications of empowering tribal women and promoting sustainable developments in Odisha.

2. Review of Literature

Behera, G. C., & Priyadarshini, P. (2025) ^[1]. Promoting social inclusion is crucial to empowering the tribals and valuing the contributions they make to education. Tribals continue to face socio-economic and educational problems even after the constitutional protections, and mostly because of the positive discrimination. India can develop a more inclusive approach to value education by mainstreaming tribal knowledge systems into its formal education and policy architecture. It is important that tribal culture is maintained and brought into the mainstream of schools and colleges in the process of global development. A collaboration of academicians, teachers, industrial persons, and policymakers is required to gain self-reliance in tribal society towards sustainable development.

Nath, S. (2024) ^[4] noticed, for instance, that the Dongria Kondh, an Adivasi community residing in the Niyamgiri Hill range in the State of Odisha (India), has been facing a high-intensity resistance battle since 2002. By doing so, this study attempts to offer a fuller biography of the Kondh movement and to simultaneously take stock of colonial and post-colonial Kondhness and of the Kondh resistance to hegemonic state narratives. Drawing on historical records and extensive ethnography, the article adopts a decolonial methodology to deconstruct subaltern voices and details the impact of colonial and nationalist framings on the Kondhs. It also discusses the double-edged oppression of the Kondhs by both the princely states of Odisha and by the princes, in cahoots with the British. Nor, as this study further emphasizes, is the mass mobilization of subaltern groups in democratic resistance in Odisha today; it is the persistence and dynamism of mass mobilization of subaltern groups in democratic resistance today in Odisha that highlights the urgency for recognizing the struggle of the Kondhs in the age of neo-liberal extractive capitalist accumulation.

Rathore, M. S. (2024) ^[9]. In this work, we focus on sacred groves, also known as holy forests, that hold religious and cultural significance for Indigenous populations around the world. They are an absolute key in terms of preserving biodiversity and traditional knowledge, and practices. These groves protect endangered plant and animal species and contribute to the health of ecosystems. They are also cultural signifiers, implanted with traditional lore, customs, performance, and visual art. The relationship between culture, nature, and spirit is a recurrent theme in literature, contributing to Indigenous cultural identity. Celebrated preservation of sacred groves not only enhances community welfare by offering resources and ecological services but also supports the livelihood of Indigenous communities. Community-oriented cooperative conservation is advocated, with the inclusion of traditional wisdom in current conservation programs. The urgency of the need to protect them is underscored by the fact that sacred groves are priceless to biodiversity and cultural values.

Mallick, R. (2023) ^[13] discovered that the sacred groves contribute significantly to the conservation of biodiversity through the medium of the Indigenous knowledge system and practices. These comprise Rajasthan's Oraons, regulated by means of generating taboos and use restrictions

of the resource in order to achieve ecological balance through customs and religious systems of beliefs. These sacred groves also contribute to soil conservation and carbon sequestration, helping to stabilize the soil and reduce atmospheric CO₂ levels. But scientific conservation models often sideline local communities to the extent that they are sidelined by law. More and more biodiversity hotspots are highlighting alternative approaches. Later policies, such as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act and Joint Forest Management, have attempted to integrate Indigenous peoples into conservation efforts. The Convention on Biological Diversity encourages the interlinking of traditional ecological knowledge with scientific methodology to achieve sustainable management of natural resources.

In a study carried out by Pandey, A. D. (2018) [27] studied Kondha of the Indian state of Odisha living in a struggle to protect their sacred Niyamgiri hill, which is quite popular among those interested in the valuable Bauxite the hill offers. Discovered in the 1990s, this area has been earmarked by the state and the transnational private entity, Vedanta, for investment and extraction. Their movement of struggle is mostly concerned with these projects, which have devastated their social world and the natural environment that surrounds them. It is under the partnership of Odisha and Vedanta that the bauxite resources are being exploited, compelling the Kondhs to fight the neoliberal economic, industrial, and modernization that the state supports. Since the 1990s, Niyamgiri has seen the beginnings of the Kondh resistance struggle against corporations and state looters of bauxite in their sacred land.

3. Objectives

1. To consider how sacred groves blend traditional ecological knowledge with formal educational systems to facilitate inclusive education.
2. To examine the role of sacred grove activities in empowering tribal women in Odisha through knowledge transmission, leadership, and community involvement.
3. To explore the ecological and cultural significance of holy groves in the lives of tribal communities, focusing on their role in sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems.

4. Importance of the Study

- a) Sacred Groves as Indigenous Knowledge Sites:** Sacred groves are segments of the forest that are conserved by Indigenous people for environmental and spiritual functions of society. Sacred groves serve as sites for the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills on 'green environmental management' of resources and for traditional healing by the tribalistic people in parts of the Indian state of Odisha, especially the Kandha people. The construction of a curriculum welcoming Indigenous wisdom is possible by including these systems of knowledge within formal education.
- b) Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge:** The Indigenous tribes have preserved forest areas in the form of sacred groves, based on religious and cultural interpretation. Sacred groves have a lot of ecological and spiritual knowledge stored in them. Inclusive Knowledge: Traditional knowledge is conserved and

passed from one generation to another when it becomes part of inclusive education. The preservation and transfer of folk customs are held in the hands of tribal women as guardians of original customs.

- c) Advocacy for Environmental Sustainability:** Sacred forests are sanctuaries of biodiversity, which help maintain the ecosystem. By embedding these groves in formal education, Indigenous women can become environmental actors in the spirit of sustainable development, as outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
- d) Empowerment of Tribal Women through Education:** Tribal women have been given a chance to empower themselves and their community by imparting education to them that respects their traditional way of knowledge. It also added to the confidence of women by acknowledging their role as knowledge bearers, resulting in improved participation in local and regional decision-making.
- e) Bridging the Knowledge Divide:** The traditions of Sacred groves can become integrated into the formal curriculum for an integration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems. This method ensures that the wisdom of Aboriginal women is valued and respected by fostering respectful interactions between generations of traditional, ecological knowledge and scientific knowledge.
- f) Cultural Identity and Social Inclusion:** The Sacred tree is used as one of the symbols for cultural identity and spiritual belief in most of the tribal societies. It promotes and develops cultural pride and lessens marginalization by incorporating such elements into the curriculum. It guarantees the recognition and incorporation of the identity and life experience of Indigenous women in the history of education.
- g) Improving Livelihood Opportunities:** Knowledge about sacred groves is knowledge about sustenance. Disseminating this knowledge through accessible education programmes, Indigenous women can derive new sources of income, such as sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and herbal medicine.
- h) Encouraging Gender Equity:** Participation of tribal women is both voluntary and active, and gender discrimination is being addressed through integrated education with sacred grove-based knowledge. More gender equality ensures women's views and contributions are in the spotlight both in the community and advancement of education.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The research work is based on a descriptive and analytical research design, utilizing secondary data. The aim is to investigate the cultural, environmental, and educational significance of sacred groves and to promote women's empowerment among primitive tribal societies in Odisha through inclusive education.

5.2 Sources of Data

The secondary data for Tribal Affairs has been collected by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt of India, which includes data from the Census of India, Odisha Human Development Report, and various government websites. The research also examines shrines, local knowledge, and the empowerment

of women.

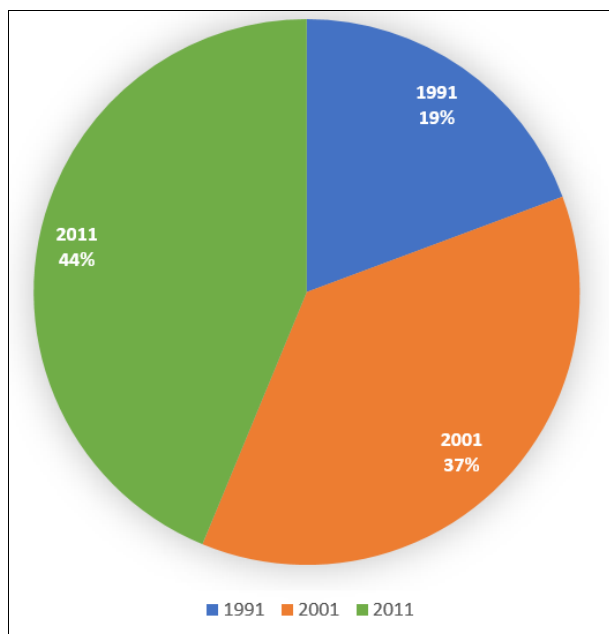


Fig 1: Literacy Rates of Odisha ST Women (1991–2011)

Tribal women in Odisha have faced low literacy rates since 1991, with only 19% of ST women being literate. By 2001, literacy rates had risen to 37%, but dropout rates remained high due to poverty, early marriage, and a lack of awareness. By 2011, literacy rates had reached 44%, and government schemes, including ST/SC hostels, scholarships, and reservations in higher education, helped increase enrolment. However, the gap remained wide compared to non-tribal women.

6. Empowerment Pathways for Tribal Women

- Educational Empowerment:** Including local ethnobotany, oral history, and sacred grove ecology into school and higher education leads to cultural applicability and increased involvement. Among the literacy and skill upgradation programmes for tribal women, adult and continuing education is the most significant, as it enhances women's confidence and opens the door to employment for them. There is a growing leadership in community learning, and the fact that women are recognized as knowledge-holders, albeit with support, so that they are included in the community mobilized as para-educators or resource persons, confers agency to women.
- Economic Empowerment:** The eco-based livelihoods training aids in sustainable harvest, preparation of herbal medicine, seed banking, and handicrafts associated with sacred groves. Women can manage eco-enterprises, forest product markets, and eco-tourism through SHGs. the skills training (tailoring, weaving, food processing, digital literacy) is also combined with the utilization of local resources and income generation.
- Social and Cultural Empowerment:** Institutional knowledge, acknowledging the positive change, and validating the women's role in rituals, oral history, and conservation, revitalized the women's social status in the community. The transfer of knowledge between generations, elder women teachers and younger learners, supports cultural continuity and women's

recognition as cultural leaders. Education and socialization can help overcome stereotypes, and the mindset can contest the gender constraints that prevent women from participating, say, in decision-making bodies.

- Health and Well-being Empowerment:** Integration of Indigenous healthcare should be taken to mean recognition of traditional health knowledge for women (herbs, food, ritual), as well as reproductive healthcare (modern healthcare). Community-driven education on maternal and child health: nutrition, hygiene, reproductive rights, and utilizing health facilities. Healthy minds, active engagement in group ceremonies, and being environmental stewards, all alleviate loneliness and foster connections.
- Political and Leadership Empowerment:** Women in Village Committees/Grove Conservation Committees/Panchayati Raj Institutions. Policy-exercise motivation must ensure that policy participation is represented in state-driven educational and environmental programs, which will have a policy influence. Understand the constitution and its rights, the FRA, and women's rights laws to strengthen your bargaining position.

7. Significance of Sacred Groves of Cultural and Ecological Dimension

The groves are small forested areas, or simply areas of natural vegetation, that are preserved by local communities because they have great spiritual, cultural, and ecological value. Throughout India (including Odisha and tribal areas), they function as a reservoir of biodiversity and a storehouse of traditional environmental knowledge. Their importance can be seen in two general dimensions:

7.1 Cultural Significance of Sacred Groves

- Custodians of Cosmology and Identity:** For most of the tribal communities in Odisha, sacred groves are the microcosmic centre of village life. Kandhas also consider that groves are occupied by the spirits of ancestors and deities, such as Dharni Penu (Earth Goddess) and TudraPenu (Village Guardian Spirit). Annual festivals, seed-sowing festivals, and harvest rituals are carried on, thereby nurturing a feeling of belonging and corporate identity. In the realm of education, these rituals convey moral teachings on civics, emphasizing solidarity, cooperation, and respect for nature. Teaching these aspects of culture in our schools is about validating students' identities and making sure that education is relatable.
- Community Governance and Ethical Norms:** Regulation of sacred groves is managed through traditional community-based organizations, such as village raiders or elders' councils. Regulations such as the ban on cutting down trees, hunting, and entering at particular rituals are maintained by oral laws and collective sanctions. These exercises make for an authentic lesson in community-based governance, rule-making, and conflict resolution, a native form of civics education that helps to invigorate democratic engagement.
- Oral Traditions and Intangible Heritage:** Songs, chants, myths, and folklore are also attached to sacred groves. Also, among the Kandhas, there are origin

myths about mahua or Sal trees, and among the Sauras about ancestors who turned into sacred stones in groves. Such stories are an organic basis for mother-tongue literacy, or storytelling-style pedagogy, and for the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

- **Gendered Knowledge Systems:** The Role of Women in SG represents the most important. They are the major gatherers of medicinal plants, forest foods (mushrooms and leafy greens), and ritual flowers. Older women are commonly traditional healers or guardians of seed knowledge. Acknowledging women's knowledge in school places women in a role of equal educator and raises their cultural and educational status.
- **Social Cohesion and Conflict Resolution:** The sacred groves provide fora for discussions, and in taking oaths and settling disputes. Ritual activities such as clearing roads, mending fences, or preparing for festivals necessitate communal efforts, inculcating values of solidarity and collaboration. For education, these types of activities equate to peer learning, team problem-solving, and leadership development.

7.2 Ecological Significance of Sacred Groves

- **Biodiversity Hotspots:** The sacred grove is a shelter within which native species that have vanished from the surrounding landscape through agriculture or logging continue to exist. Odisha- Groves are dominated by trees like Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Mahua (*Madhuca indica*), Kusum (*Schleichera oleosa*), Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), besides medicinal herbs and climbers, etc. These are not only ecologically important but also culturally important for food, medicine, and ritual. In terms of education, groves serve as a living classroom for biology lessons, species identification, and conservation awareness.
- **Water Security and Microclimate Regulation:** Groves shield springs, streams, and ponds through canopy and soil interception. Their cool shadow reduces temperature, and organic litter improves percolation. In tribal areas with unreliable rain, groves function as climate buffers. Students can inquire into differences in soil moisture, microclimate, and seasonal flows and can connect Indigenous ecological understandings with skills of scientific measurement.
- **Soil Fertility and Genetic Resources:** Leaf litter recycles nutrients into the soil, while wild relatives of crops provide the genetic diversity necessary for resilience. For example, uncultivated species of yams or pulses from groves are consumed as famine foods. Schools can teach some of this in agriculture, food security, and sustainability, and women elders can show how to store seeds and traditional recipes.
- **Disaster Risk Reduction:** Groves provide shelter against the wind, prevent soil erosion, and act as refuges during floods, heatwaves, and droughts. Their ecological resilience provides useful real-world lessons in disaster preparedness and climate adaptation, directly relevant to children's futures.
- **Ecosystem Services at No Cost:** The pollination, pest control, and stabilization against erosion that the crop groves provide will decrease the need for external agricultural inputs. Students can witness these

processes first-hand and connect them to current ideas of circular economies, sustainability, and low-carbon living.

8. Connecting sacred groves to inclusive education in Odisha

Odisha's tribal women need to be empowered; a secure environment is a must for inclusive education and revival of holy trees. Sacred groves (traditional forest belts dedicated to local deities) gain significant cultural, ecological, and botanical interest value from the views of Odisha tribal communities. It is religious and also part of the environment and human community health- these groves have the role of an Indigenous knowledge depository. Living school in Odisha. Sacred groves are an institution of a living school where spiritual values, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices are transmitted through generations among the tribal women of Odisha. Tribal women specifically play an integral role in teaching and caring for the ancestral land. In their sacred forests, they are taught the culture, knowledge about sustainable use of resources, and traditional practices that can help them form cultural identity and self-confidence. Conservation and dissemination of Indigenous knowledge are closely related to sacred trees. Tribal women play a vital role in maintaining these sacred areas, where they acquire and transfer essential ecological knowledge such as principles of sustainable harvesting, medicinal plant uses, and biodiversity conservation. Women's knowledge of weather, natural cycles, life, the weaving, or the interconnectedness of life through rituals and orality, consolidates their cultural identity and the use and control of their ecological systems. Social crusader Tulasi Munda has devoted her time to perfecting the literacy rates of the tribal population by making attempts to educate tribal children. Holy grove conservation leads to the empowerment of women of the Indigenous community by preserving their cultural heritage and also ensuring an alternative source of livelihood and a viable livelihood option in the long run. Inclusive education is more than access to a classroom; it is the recognition of multiple knowledges and the elimination of structural barriers to participation. Incorporating sacred groves in school curricula and community learning may:

1. **Validate Indigenous knowledge:** Incorporating grove-based knowledge into school lessons, project work, and assessments signals institutional respect for tribal culture. This recognition reduces stigma and helps tribal girls and women see their heritage reflected in formal learning spaces.
2. **Provide place-based learning:** Outdoor, grove-centred modules in science, civics, language, and art make learning relevant. Place-based projects mapping a grove, cataloguing plants, and documenting oral histories develop skills while fostering pride and belonging.
3. **Create intergenerational learning spaces:** Sacred groves naturally bring elders and youth together. Structured school-community programs can formalize these exchanges, giving older women official roles as resource persons or guest educators, thereby enhancing their social status.
4. **Support gender-sensitive pedagogy:** Programs can target female students with mentorship, life-skills training, and leadership opportunities tied to grove stewardship and eco-enterprises (seed banks, herbal

gardens), addressing both educational and economic inclusion.

9. Intergenerational Learning and Skill Development

The holy groves also act as sites of inter-generational learning where old women educate young women about the Indigenous ways of healing, religious ceremonies, and about the plants which have medicinal values. The donation of this wisdom empowers Indigenous women, giving them the skills they need to survive and thrive sustainably. The woods foster social cohesion and collective memory by providing spaces for cultural practices and relating fables. Sacred Groves embodies the form of a type of teacher education school that mediates formal education with a broad curriculum of Indigenous knowledge through a framework of inclusive pedagogy. As holders of Indigenous knowledge, tribal women act as a bridge between folk knowledge and modern education. The ecological and cultural experience of sacred groves can be used in educational curricula by making the schools a culturally relevant learning place for generations who no longer know Sacred groves, and also in nurturing environmentally and culturally sensitive schools.

10. Supporting Tribal Women Through Holy Groves and Education

The social and academic position of tribal women is elevated by their linkage to sacred groves that signify them as natural protectors and cultural custodians. They are empowered to be part of the decision-making process by initiatives promoting the collection, recording, and incorporation of grove-related information in the educational curricula. This recognition, which reinforces self-esteem and collective agency, enables women to claim their rights and to work for sustainable community development. Being a site of decision-making for the women of the tribe and a tool of cultural preservation, sacred groves are considered an important factor to empower tribal women. Tribal women can add to ecological literacy and environmentalism by introducing the inculcation of Indigenous knowledge obtained from sacred groves in the curriculum. Additionally, with the application of sustainable living, people can be socially and economically empowered. It also emphasises the involvement of NGOs and the State in financial initiatives to assist in the maintenance of sacred groves and in the empowerment of tribal women through education. The overall well-being of the tribal women and the sustainable livelihood systems are also based on this complete, wholesome mechanism for the conservation of the holy groves.

Adivasi women, where women have overcome systemic and intersectional barriers and shown solidarity, empathy, compassion, and unity toward a cause (e.g., social and epistemic injustice) in building networks of support and resilience for themselves and their subsequent generations. It will also critically interrogate this contrarian perspective on Adivasi society and movements, and particularly from an Adivasi woman's point of view. (Tirkey, *et al*, 2024)^[10].

11. Opportunities and Challenges

The National Education Policy 2020 also encourages community-based learning, inclusion of education and interdisciplinarity is also encouraged in education, and the

cultural importance of the holy groves is protected. The sites can be conserved and preserved by empowering tribal women leaders and including traditional knowledge in education. These sites can also be conserved through community-based conservation, like women's self-help groups. Tribal women's opportunities to participate in decision-making may be restricted by social norms and gender inequities, and their access to formal education is frequently limited. Environmental factors, including land development and habitation as well as deforestation, also threaten the survival of sacred groves, as they depreciate the groves as cultural and educational resources.

11.1 Opportunities

Despite these challenges, sacred groves also offer immense opportunities for inclusive education and women's empowerment. If approached sensitively, they can become bridges between traditional wisdom and modern education.

- **Contextualized, Place-Based Education:** Religious groves provide outdoor classrooms where scientific knowledge can be demonstrated and shared as well as imparted. For example, lessons on biodiversity can be linked to the sacred Banyan or Neem trees, and climate education can be learned from seasonal festivals." Such locally based learning not only provides meaning to education but also serves as the bridge between Indigenous and modern systems of knowledge.
- **Intergenerational Learning Models:** The elders, particularly the women 'custodians' of the groves, can be formally included in schools, for community education. They can swap stories, songs, and environmental practices with students. This is a model that respects the knowledge of women, promotes respect between old and new generations, and ensures that cultural heritage is passed on through educational activity.
- **Culturally Responsive Curriculum:** Under NEP 2020, Odisha proposed that local content can be included in the syllabus. Sacred-grove myths, tribal festivals such as *Meriah* (Kandha), or eco-rituals such as *Chait Parab* (Saora) can be introduced in textbooks. Environmental studies is a potential space for the inclusion of folklore, ritual songs, medicinal plant lore, and the conservation of sacred groves. It affirms that tribal women know about it and leaves girls proud of who they are.
- **Girls' Leadership and Agency:** Girls' leadership can be fostered through sacred-grove initiatives. Girl Mediums Sacred Groves Girls serve as cultural guides, grove tenders, peer-educators on conservation, leaders in the club, and cultural guides for the eco-tourism. These roles boost their self-esteem, ability to communicate, and decision-making skills. Tribal women themselves eventually can become educators, leaders, and conservationists.
- **Eco-Cultural Tourism and Livelihoods:** Sustainable living could be generated through community-based eco-tourism at sacred groves. Women can give tours, Women can be storytellers, or guides who describe the cultural importance of the woodland. This not only adds to the household income but also reflects women's role as upholders of tradition. Revenue also enhances financial independence for women and helps to finance education for girls.

- **Holistic Health and Well-Being:** Sacred groves are home to plants with medicinal value, such as Tulsi, Neem, and Ashwagandha, used as the mainstay of the healthcare system for the tribes. This knowledge may also help integrate traditional practices in school health programs to make nutritional, maternal, and preventive health services useful to tribal women. Education that explicitly makes well-being better is better and more sustainable.
- **Digital Documentation and Bilingual Education:** Digital resources also enable us to record oral histories, myths, and ecological knowledges. Tribal girls can be taught to make digital storybooks or short films in their languages. This maintains knowledge and enhances digital literacy, as well as promotes bilingual education. Girls are not just knowledge keepers but creators.
- **Policy Leverage under NEP 2020 and Biodiversity Laws:** The National Education Policy 2020 stresses holistic, inclusive, and culturally rooted education. Likewise, the Biological Diversity Act (2002) gives power to the communities to safeguard their traditional knowledge. Both of these policies can be seen as part of a wider legal context for the incorporation of sacred-grove knowledge into curricula. These are some slots where tribal women can seek recognition and resources under these provisions.
- **Strengthening Identity and Social Capital:** Acknowledging sacred-grove knowledge in schools builds cultural identity and pride. Tribal girls are not moving out of school if their culture is being valued in the classrooms. The position of women as protectors and preservers of sacred groves is rationalized, and thus, social capital as well as gender equity is enhanced. 'Education no longer remains a tool for literacy but a technique of cultural empowerment.
- **Language Barriers:** In the state of Odisha, where the study was undertaken, tribal communities converse in languages like Kui, Saora, and Desia, etc., and sacred knowledge is conveyed orally in these mother tongues through songs, myths, and chants. But schools often impart knowledge in Odia or English, which limits understanding of the subject and is, in fact, behind the gross alienation of tribal girls from their mother-tongue constituency of a primary education; they are thus denied an understanding of the curriculum, while the sacred traditional knowledge of their communities, passed on to them in their mother tongues, is undermined. It is the absence of bilingual or multilingual education that perpetuates exclusion, decreasing the effectiveness of inclusive education.
- **Economic Pressures:** One of the biggest challenges in educating girls in tribal areas is economic hardship. The compulsion of poverty often drives women and girls to work as wage labourers, farm hands, and collect forest products every day. Especially during farming seasons, girls are frequently taken out of school to work in the fields. The sacred-grove rituals also need time, energy, and free labour, hence increasing their burden. When survival is on the line, education drops on the priority list. Consequently, poverty limits the access of women to both formal schooling and sacred-grove conservation.
- **Loss of Traditional Knowledge:** Tribal elders are adaptively managing sacred groves, where ecological knowledge and traditional practices are rooted in stories, songs, and rituals. Intergenerational transmission has been disrupted, though, by migration, modernization, changes in society, and adapted lifestyles. Younger women are growing up without a connection to sacred-grove knowledge, and formal schools do not address that connection. Without good information, its communication into schools, this treasure could be lost. Such erosion of traditional knowledge threatens cultural identity, as well as the position of women as keepers of ecological knowledge.
- **Environmental Degradation:** The synchronous destruction of forests through mining and quick urbanisation in districts such as Rayagada, Koraput, and Kandhamal has put extensive stress on sacred groves. These biodiverse spaces are disappearing. For women from tribal communities, the degradation of groves translates into loss of access to medicinal plants, fodder, and sacred spaces. And without its living laboratories, sacred-grove wisdom cannot be linked to what academia teaches. In other words, as the world devastates its environment, it diminishes its own methods for holding back environmental destruction through both ecology and education.
- **Policy and Governance Gaps:** People identified Sacred Groves as an ecological asset, but the forest laws neglect the cultural and educational value of Sacred Groves. Just as education policies focus on expanding access and the content of 21st-century knowledge, the Indigenous traditions are rarely woven into curriculum offerings. Different wings of governance, such as the Forest Department, Education Department, or the Tribal Welfare Department, are not in sync with each other. The contribution of tribal women as guardians of groves, as well as players in

11.2 Challenges

- **Cultural Educational Disconnect:** The fundamental issue is the gap between learning in Indigenous cultures and learning in schools. "The sacred groves of the Kandha or Saora tribes are living treasures of ecological and spiritual knowledge. They instil a sense of community cooperation, respect for the environment, and value for life. But the state-mandated curriculum for schools is rooted in mainstream scientific understanding, with scant mention of tribal traditions. A grove-ritual girl learns in intimate ways about the tissue of the soil, water, plants, and wood, but as she goes to school, no one has the lessons or claims it to be a superstition. This difference creates a problem that distances tribal girls from education and demotivates them to pursue further schooling.
- **Gendered Mobility and Access:** Tribal societies frequently impose limitations on women's freedom of movement and involvement in sacred occasions. Men overwhelmingly hold positions of religious authority and leadership, assigning women supportive tasks like readying presents or orchestrating events. Additionally, the substantial demands of women's household duties, gathering fuel, and farm work depleted their time for instruction in sacred woods and standard schooling alike. The heavy weight of work at home and social responsibilities served to relegate women's chances to learn and develop their knowledge.

education, is ignored in policy, thereby under-utilizing the resources.

- **Institutional Bias and Discrimination:** Tribal women are discriminated against on two levels: as women and as members of a marginalised tribe. Non-tribal teachers in schools sometimes label tribal students as "backward" or "uncivilized." It may not be ecological knowledge, but superstition, and sacred-grove practices may be denigrated as such. Such institutional bias erodes the self-confidence of women, steering them from taking up leadership positions in education and community leadership.
- **Intellectual Property & Exploitation Risks:** Communities risk exploitation by documenting sacred knowledge and cultural practices without protective measures. In India, cases of biopiracy have been reported where herbal remedies familiar to tribals have been patented by pharmaceutical firms. Some tribal women say that if they tell outsiders about their secrets of the sacred grove, the knowledge will be exploited while not benefiting their communities. Providing maximum protection of the sacred knowledge has generated wariness toward assimilating this knowledge into formal systems of education.

12. Findings

Education, therefore, can empower Indigenous women and thus can help in transferring Indigenous knowledge; therefore, sacred groves are important. They preserve cultural values and eco-peaceful wisdom and are hubs of learning for communities. One of the ways to support inclusive education is by including the traditional knowledge gained from sacred groves in the lessons at schools. However, challenges every bit as complex, such as socioeconomic barriers, gender inequities, and a lack of acknowledgment of Indigenous knowledge systems, remain. Examples of opportunities in policy and practice include sacred groves as living classrooms, the use of community-based education methods, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge into mainstream education.

13. Suggestions

- Use the data to create educational modules blending ecology, tradition, and gender.
- Develop culturally rooted education curricula featuring forest wisdom and stories from sacred groves.
- Scale community-led learning huts ("kutir") as inclusive centres.
- Expand the use of mother-tongue instruction and mobile labs.
- Create tailored training modules for women educators and forest guardians anchored in local knowledge and governance frameworks.
- Encourage university partnerships that centre tribal women in research, policy advocacy, and leadership.

14. Conclusion

Sacred Groves of Odisha are culturally, ecologically, and educationally important, particularly for the tribal women of the tribe community who have been guarding the Indigenous knowledge, keeping the spiritual beliefs, ecological practices, and cultural traditions. The tribal women impart rich knowledge on conservation of

biodiversity, herbal medicine, and sustainable management of resources; hence, sacred groves are practically living repositories of such knowledge. One of the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is to notice and incorporate this knowledge in formal education, as inclusive education has been the key focus of the NEP 2020, even the role of Indigenous knowledge. Sacred groves provide an innovative approach towards learning that combines contemporary pedagogy with traditional ecological knowledge. By incorporating the knowledge of these holy places in the curriculum, a convergence between traditional Indigenous knowledge and modern scientific knowledge is drawn, thus understanding and respecting each other. By acknowledging their role in the healthy development of society, this inclusion elevates the social, educational status of tribal women. Local governance can thus be infused with tribal women, their rights secured, sustainable development promoted through such women educated in the sacred grove tradition. This ensures gender equality. While (some) Indigenous women are active in ecological conservation and research ecotourism and herbal medicine to survive sustainably, this knowledge also guarantees conservation of the environment. But government backing, community-led conservation models, and inclusive policies are needed to overcome issues such as land grabbing, environmental decline, gender inequity, and limited access to education that erode sacred groves and prevent their knowledge from entering the formal education curriculum. By encouraging community-driven conservation and participatory learning approaches, we can enable tribal women, protect and conserve sacred groves, and build a more sustainable, inclusive future for all.

References

1. Behera GC, Priyadarshini P. Social Inclusion of Tribals and Their Contribution to Value Education in Indian Society. *Idealistic Journal of Advanced Research in Progressive Spectrums (IJARPS)* eISSN-2583-6986. 2025;4(03):70-80.
2. Das P. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM NEP 2020. In: *Voices for Change*. 2025. p. 316.
3. Kumar BR, Madhuri A. EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: BRIDGING GAPS FOR A JUST SOCIETY. In: *Voices for Change*. 2025. p. 11.
4. Raj SB. Pathways to inclusive higher education: learnings from India's National Education Policy 2020. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*. 2025;11(1):82-92.
5. Varre RK. Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education: A Special Reference to India. *Idealistic Journal of Advanced Research in Progressive Spectrums (IJARPS)* eISSN-2583-6986. 2025;4(04):14-20.
6. Aneraye MAV. Inclusive Education in India: Issues and Conflicts. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Explorer*. 2024;4(3):8-29.
7. Nath S. Defending the sacred: discourses of development, identity, and everyday resistance among the Dongria Kondh [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Sussex; 2024.
8. Pradhan B, Sethi SR. Empowering Tribal Women: A comprehensive exploration of their roles and participation in local government. 2024.

9. Rathore MS. Sacred groves: a bastion of biodiversity and cultural heritage. *International Education and Research Journal*. 2024.
10. Tirkey NN, Ekka KT, Soren S, Soren S. Adivasi women, sacred groves and religious practices: unveiling the epistemic injustice in the East-Central Belt of India. *Sociological Bulletin*. 2024;73(4):481-93.
11. Ullah A. NEP 2020 and the Quest for Equity: Promoting Inclusion in Higher Education. *MANAVIKI*. 2024;16(2):395-412.
12. Vimi Neeroo LB, Martin S, Swaleha P. Inclusive Education in Higher Education Institutions: A Comprehensive Review of Key Components and Framework for Implementation. *Journal of Business and Social Sciences*. 2024;2024(15):1-9.
13. Mallick R. Young Voices. *IMPACT AND POLICY RESEARCH*. 2023;3(2):70-7.
14. Paul S, Chatterjee B. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN 21 st CENTURY OF INDIA. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*. 2023;10(2):623-33.
15. Bajaj G. Inclusive Education from School to Higher Education in India: Provisions, Possibilities and Progress. In: *Critical Sites of Inclusion in India's Higher Education*. Singapore: Springer Singapore; 2022. p. 97-118.
16. Sabar B. Culture, gender and inequality: narratives from a particularly vulnerable tribal Group in Odisha, India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 2022;57(8):1626-49.
17. Kumar R, Prajapati U, Koli VK. Factors driving the tree species richness in sacred groves in Indian subcontinent: a review. *Biodiversity and Conservation*. 2022;31(12):2927-43.
18. Ray P, Dnyanoba KR, Rajesh PP, Dattatray KA, Kumar S. Importance of sacred groves in conservation of medicinal plants. *Medico-Biowealth of India*. 2022;5:45-52.
19. Sengupta P. Assessing inclusion in India's higher education: NEP 2020 in perspective. In: *Critical Sites of Inclusion in India's Higher Education*. Singapore: Springer Singapore; 2022. p. 149-88.
20. Barik R. Empowerment of Tribal Women: A Case Study of Odisha. 2021.
21. Sharma S, Kumar R. Sacred groves of India: repositories of a rich heritage and tools for biodiversity conservation. *Journal of Forestry Research*. 2021;32(3):899-916.
22. Binjha P. Empowerment of Tribal Women Through Education. *Change*. 2020;30:435-64.
23. Bisht A. Between extractivism and sacredness: the struggle for environmental inheritances by the Adivasi communities of India. In: Valtonen A, Rantala O, Farah PD, editors. *Ethics and politics of space for the anthropocene*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd; 2020. p. 124-48.
24. Carrin M. Indigenous learning in tribal communities: The Santals of South Asia. *Handbook of Education Systems in South Asia*. 2020;1-20.
25. Rath S, Ormsby AA. Conservation through traditional knowledge: a review of research on the sacred groves of Odisha, India. *Human Ecology*. 2020;48(4):455-63.
26. Luthy TH. Sacred Groves and Local Goddesses: Nature Romanticism, Ecomaternalism, and Environmental Discourse in Vrindavan, India [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Hawai'i at Manoa; 2019.
27. Pandey AD. Kondhs' Resistance movement to save sacred Niyamgiri, Odisha. In: *Indigenous Perspectives on Sacred Natural Sites*. Routledge; 2018. p. 61-89.
28. Kumari D. Social Inclusion in Indian Higher education: Equity in Access. *Centre for Civil Society*. 2014;1-61.
29. Sahni R, Kalyan Shankar V. Girls' higher education in India on the road to inclusiveness: on track but heading where?. *Higher Education*. 2012;63(2):237-56.
30. Malhotra KC, Gokhale Y, Chatterjee S, Srivastava S. Cultural and ecological dimensions of sacred groves in India. *INSA, New Delhi*; 2001. p. 1-30.