



# Environmental Degradation And The Impact Of Conflict In Ethnic Minorities

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**Abstract** : Indian sub-continent is regarded as one of richest ecospheres of flora and fauna. From centuries ahead, several ethnic groups have reared the natural world of life in the nation. However, at the rapid growth of industrialization, several ethnic communities are undergoing serious threats of extinction considering the “green ethos” of conservation processes administered by the government from time to time. This paper dwells upon the consequences of modernization among the ethnic minorities and aims to seek for a sustainable understanding over the issue.

**Key words** : industrialization, green ethos, conservation, ethnic, modernization, sustainable.

## Introduction

India is home to a large concentration of ethnic tribes and communities and it has very long history as a home to different cultures with miniature demography compared to the mainstream. Many of the rural ethnic tribes in India live nearby the forest and hills covering almost 10% of the country’s total demography. These ethnic tribes make the forest lands as their home as well as their source of survival. By the time of colonial expansion, the issues of Environmental concerns raised the eyebrows of several environmentalists. India, during the time of 1854, was covered by 40% forest cover out of the total land mass of 320 million hectares. But a century later, the area decreased to 22% or 72 million hectares to be precise. The National Forest Policy of 1952 however stipulated that 33% of the country’s area should be covered by forestland. This policy required a 50% increase in extant tree cover to ensure ecological balance. But unfortunately quite the opposite took place. Rampant deforestation during the next three decades resultant in the loss of 12% of tree covers which was seriously a disturbing factor. By that time, the total forest cover plummeted to only 10% of the land mass. This serious environmental threat caught the attention of then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi. She agreed with the argument that the nation’s forests were the last bulwark against ecological disaster. As a result, wild life and forest conservation became a major concern for the Indian Govt. which called for drastic measures. The first set of action was seen in the government passing an amendment removing the subjects of forests from the profligate state governments and including it in the concurrent list. The next step was that the union Law, the Conservation of Forest Act 1980 made the forests out of bound for “tree fellers” and prohibited the conversion of forest land to any other use without the express permission of the Union Govt. the third establishment was to re-establish the forest cover through massive social forestry programmes and wasteland development. Another measure was that the conservation option to progressively curb all human interference. It literally meant to “exclude” or “evict” the ethnic human tribes from the “conservation enclaves”. This policy for environmental conservation ultimately jeopardized millions of indigenous people living near by the forests.

## Exclusion or Integration?

Through the inclined efforts to maintain ecological balance by the government, with the aid of laws like Conservation of Forests and Natural Ecosystems Act proved to be a threat in proportion to the 70% ethnic tribes living nearby the forest enclaves. These people have found their ecological niche in the forests but due to the bureaucracy and state sponsored laws, the tribes lost their nature based living. In spite of fact that these ethnic tribes are only the 10 % of India's total demography, they inhibited relatively in a close encounter with nature. Several ethnic tribe inhabited regions like the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh garnered almost 67% of the state's total tribal demography covering almost 55% of the state's total forest area. This statistics show that the people living nearby the forest enclaves are mostly responsible for either protecting or destroying natural resources. But with enforcement of several wildlife conservation laws and acts, they have to be the mute spectators of their impending Ethnocide. Meanwhile, their role with the natural world is also not beyond any doubt. While some conservationists argue over their eviction from the enclaves on the right path, another section, both outside and inside the government, insisted on the symbiotic relationship of the ethnographic tribes with mother nature. These ethnic tribes who have lived in forests near nature, possess an indigenous wisdom having respect for all the living creatures. They uphold the world view of oneness with earth and nature as expressed in thought and action. A reputed Indian anthropologist, B.K. Roy Burman has provided his idea of the indigenous which possibly can raise concern over the sense of oneness of these people with nature.

While some ethnic tribes like the Madia Gonds of Abujmad or the Onge of the Andaman Islands still live in the lap of nature proving Roy Burman's idea of the indigenous. Whereas there are many tribes who have been pushed out of the security of their forests through mining, industrialisation, development, conservation projects and planned migration. They had to cope up with the intense pressure placed on their survival resources and severely constricted survival places. Many of these people depend their living on farming, cultivation and raw materials they get from the forests. But due to the so called conservation projects and prohibition acts restrict their financial movements ultimately bringing them on the verge of dying in poverty. Some youth are even exploited by the extremist groups thus leading them to illegal activities often going against the state apparatus.

## Consequences

Most of these ethnic tribes face ongoing threat both to the continuity of their culture and to security of their sheer physical survival. The character of their green consciousness proves to be different. However, in following Roy Burman's idea of indigenous ethnic groups, several communities in India would fail to live up to its "green ethos" and thereby not have the right to attain indigenous status. They also might find it hard to satisfy the Romanticized expectations that "green" bring to the issue. It proclaims the fact that by not behaving in an ecologically sound manner according to the "greens", these ethnic tribes run the risk of losing the moral right to base their living amidst forests, land or mountains. Another scholar, David Hardiman, studying the tribal communities of western India, opined that the historical accounts of several ethnic communities lack historical understanding. He refutes the concept of historical understanding by referring to the Dangs of Gujarat, where the tribal 'Bhil' chiefs controlled the extraction of timber before the trade was monopolized by the British. The pre colonial timber trade did not have any immediate effect on the forest ecology at large but this accountability was not due to any conservationist policy among the Bhils. For them, the forest was eternal and they did not have the slightest idea that human beings can cause any harm to nature. Hardiman also called for the notion of "reverse Orientalism" that Partha Chatterjee labelled in describing the people of the Orient. Based on his essentialist understanding, the large scale deforestation which took place prior to colonial rule, cannot be taken into account. Hardiman's critique often finds its base and relevance in understanding the condition of the innumerable ethnic communities in India. But considering the common widespread notion that tribals and forest dwellers are destroying the forests, the focus shifts to indigenous forms of ecological balance largely depend upon politicized strategies. These indigenous communities today base their political claims on the specified notion of special life style and cultural ethos in harmony with nature. Technically, there appear a crucial dichotomy between the people representing themselves as natural conservationists and outsider's attempt to represent them as such. Larry Lohman, an onlooker ecologist, also warns against the green environmentalism in the western idea of environment persists, impose their "green world view" on indigenous people and Non-western societies at large. A far more balanced statement propounded in the publication of *Cultural Survival* argues over the fact that the ethnic tribal people are not the "conservationists" in the modern western sense, despite of the fact that their systems of resource management are more sustainable in maintaining balance with nature.

## Diversifications

Even though the situation in India differs from that of the Amazonian Indians in Brazil, it is obvious that the tribal struggles for land and forest will be fought in the domain of “eco-politics” and sustainability at the root. The conflict of the Van-Gujjars in north-west India with the state is one such example where the Van-Gujjars are accused of destroying the ecosystems with their large scale buffalo grazing habits. To prevent the same, during the 1980s those traditional grazing grounds had been merged into new and larger national parks and as the outcome, they were evicted from their habitats. The conflict reached a climax when they were prevented from entering the national parks with their herds of buffalo. This conflict of the Van-Gujjars caught the media attention and thus cited as an example of the consequences of the eviction of innumerable ethnic communities all over India. The question that still persists that were the Van-Gujjars destroying their traditional habitat or were they the true guardians of the forests, living with the resources and amenities of nature itself. However, things turned around when Roy Burman argued against the conservationists for blaming the Van-Gujjars in destroying the forest ecology. It was also later argued that the Van-Gujjars should rather be made the care-takers of the Rajaji National Park in Uttar Pradesh thereby making it the first ever people’s national park in India.

Another environmentalist, Smitu Kothari argued that those local communities who give up their traditional way of life, experience several other consequences in relation to their survival. Their necessities and demands increase and change over the due course of modernization, thus projecting them less respectful to towards nature and incapable of maintaining a sustainable “green ethos” which they lead throughout generations hence. A few more concentration of environmentalists put forward their suggestion that such modernized ethnic groups and societies should not enjoy the “customary rights in natural habitats”. Through the rapid growth of modernization and homogenization, several ethnic groups face manifolded consequences along with the main stream people living near by the ethnic tribals. The formation of the Sixth Scheduled clause in the constitution allowed the ethnic communities some privileges but also raised dissatisfaction among the main stream people as due to different forms of reservation policies as well as the protection of land ownership in the Sixth scheduled areas. As a result, often inter-community tension grows giving fuel to several separatist forces working in the country. Some ethnic tribes even consider the mainstream people as unrecognized threats to their tribal or ethnic identity. Sometimes, these tensions can even grow to the extent that mass murders appear to be serious issue in those tribal habitat areas. This is resultant due to the ongoing threat of extinction among different ethnic communities living away from the mainstream India and wish to retain and protect their own indigenous cultural ethos. Above all, several Govt. policies have created a group of tribal elite, who are enjoying the lion’s share of the development opportunities. These people have achieved material prosperity and almost adjusted with the mainstream country. They have become the examples of standard living among their counter parts but they have become alienated from their indigenous roots. Moreover, the creation of a large mass of ethnic groups disoriented by the policies and practice of the government and demoralised by what was happening to them along with their cultures. Whenever they adversely show up their dissatisfaction, their protests are either given into political colour or suppressed brutally. A significant number of ethnic tribals have also joined the ranks of ecological refugees’ resultant to their despair and anomie replacing their political voice of hope. The nation building process too brought an uncharted threat to a greater section of ethnicity. More than 72% of the country’s mineral and natural wealth lies in the tribal ethnic habitat areas which was thus explored, distorted and used severely. This has led them to open up towards contractors, traders, alcohol vendors, timber merchants and money lenders who entered these areas and forced them into indebtedness, polluted environments and slavery. This sense of alienation has also created the condition that reaches nearby ethnocide among these demographical locations.

## Conclusion

Looking at the wider world with a sense of detachment that has been growing among the ethnic tribes over the centuries, they have started to accept the fact that the outside world has a worldview negating their existence with the natural world. They acknowledged that the mainstream society cannot understand their symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. The dominant mainstream people can neither perceive the dynamic interactions between the techniques used in socialising nature nor can they apprehend the organic totality in which the material, cultural aspects of these ethnic communities are minutely interwoven.

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