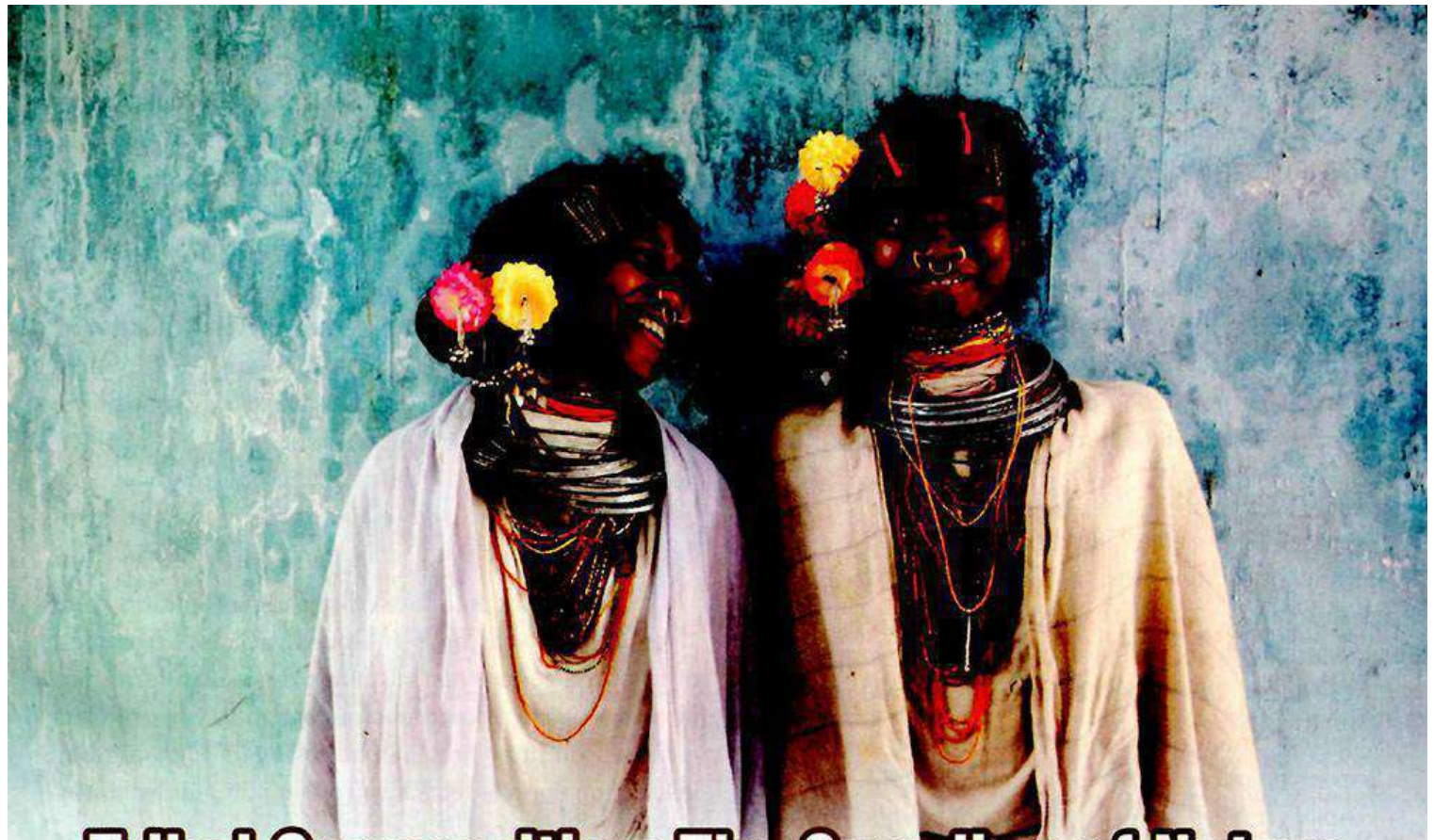




Tribal Communities: The Guardian of Nature

The assumption that tribal communities are custodians of nature simply because they live close to it is only partly true. Proximity alone does not guaranteed stewardship. History offers enough evidence of that. The defining feature of these communities is not geography but culture: a way of organising relationships with land through song, ritual, craft, seasonal festivals and systems of belief. The word conservation entered official vocabulary recently. The practice it describes has been running, without that name and without institutional support, across India's tribal hinterlands for centuries.

Hemanth Menon

The more one reads about tribal communities and their relationship with nature, the harder it becomes to accept the popular description of them as 'natural conservationists'.

The issue is not that the description is incorrect; rather, it lacks sufficient detail. Framing centuries-old knowledge traditions primarily through the lens of conservation risks obscuring the cultural systems that produced those outcomes in the first place.

In this interpretation tribal communities become ecological heroes-picturesque, instinctively wise, the

answer to environmental challenges that modern society recognised too late. Such a view overlooks something far more significant. These traditions are first and foremost expressions of culture. It is precisely because they are lived, embodied, transmitted through song, story, ritual and craft, that they generate ecological outcomes that formal conservation efforts often struggle to achieve.

India is home to over 104 million indigenous people, distributed across more than 700 distinct communities. The sheer diversity of this inheritance resists easy generalisation. Yet across this diversity runs a common

thread. For these communities, the natural world is woven into culture itself rather than standing apart from it as something to be exploited or protected. It is the very ground on which culture stands, the condition of possibility for everything the community knows, makes, worships, celebrates, and remembers. Their songs, rituals and seasonal festivals are living repositories of environmental knowledge, community memory, and sustainable practice. In the tribal imagination, ecology is not the subject of culture but one of its outcomes.

The Ecology of Memory

The knowledge traditions of India's tribal communities are, with a few exceptions, oral and performative. By that standard, oral traditions can appear fragile or unsystematic. Yet the longevity of these knowledge systems that tell a different story.

Oral traditions embed knowledge within the narrative, music, ceremony, and collective memory, keeping it alive across generations. When an elder recites a creation myth over several evenings, or a community song traces the fruiting seasons of the forest, a generation absorbs what no written record in that community has ever stored. The loss of an indigenous language takes with it an ecological encyclopaedia that no translation can reconstruct.

The Soliga tribe of Karnataka's Biligirirangana Hills offers one of the clearer illustrations of how this works in practice. Their understanding of the forest, the movement of species, the logic of seasonal cycles, the boundaries of responsible consumption, has been carried entirely through oral tradition and folk song across generations. At the centre of this tradition is Huli Veerappa, the tiger, revered as sacred deity and vehicle of Lord Madeshwara. A community that holds its apex predator in religious reverence rather than fear does not need a wildlife protection law to govern its behaviour toward that animal; the cultural relationship has already settled the question.

The recognition of the Soligas' rights within a core Tiger Reserve was an institutional acknowledgement of what the culture had sustained on its own terms for far longer. Their practice of taragu benki, controlled early-season litter fires passed down through cultural instruction, prevented catastrophic summer wildfires and encouraged native grass growth across the forest.

The Festival as a Living Curriculum

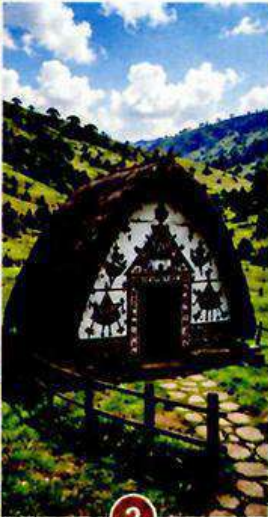
If oral tradition serves as the archive, the festival is the periodic renewal of that archive, the occasion on which a community's accumulated understanding is made visible, circulated, and kept from dwindling



1

HARVEST FESTIVAL
A celebration of the diversity and abundance of seeds and knowledge.





2

TRIBAL ARCHITECTURE
A fine example of harmony between nature, local materials, and traditional craftsmanship.

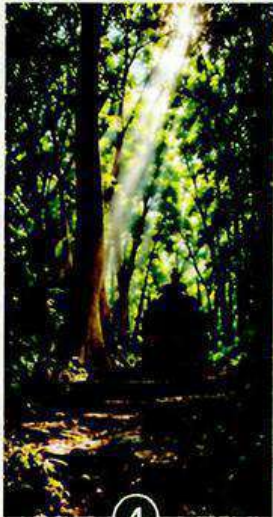




3

LIVING ROOT BRIDGE
A naturally built bridge by the local community, demonstrating patience, ingenuity, and deep respect for nature.

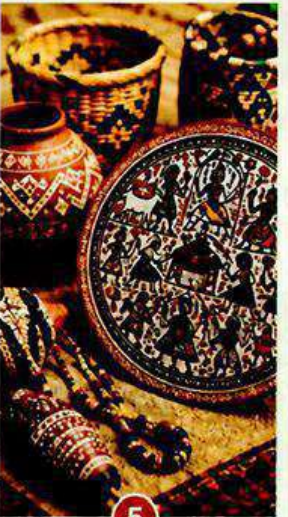




4

SACRED GROVES
Protected forests and habitats conserved by our ancestors as a legacy of biodiversity and life.





5

INDIGENOUS ART & CRAFTS
A reflection of creativity, heritage, and the wisdom of generations.





KERALA SEED FESTIVAL 2026

Conserving Biodiversity • Empowering Farmers



WOMEN FARMERS

Recognizing women as custodians of traditional agricultural knowledge.



SEED DIVERSITY

Safeguarding indigenous and climate-resilient varieties.



SEED EXCHANGE

Sharing, exchanging and conserving traditional seeds.



HERITAGE SEEDS

Preserving heritage seeds and local crop varieties.

SAVE SEEDS • SAVE DIVERSITY • SAVE FUTURE



into the knowledge of a single household or a single generation. Tribal agricultural festivals across India operate in precisely this way, serving simultaneously as expressions of communal life and as careful mechanisms for preserving the variety of crops and seeds that sustain the community.

Seed festivals such as the Wayanad Community Seed Fest in Kerala and the millet festivals of Tamil Nadu's Kolli Hills may appear as celebrations, but they also function as important knowledge exchanges. Tribal women, who serve across most communities as custodians of seed knowledge, gather to exchange heirloom crop varieties and share insights over generation. These seeds embody knowledge about soil preferences, rainfall patterns, pest resistances, nutritional properties.

The Dongria Kondh of Odisha's Niyamgiri Hills offer a particularly powerful example, for them Niyamgiri is not merely a landscape. It is Niyam Raja, their supreme deity, expressed through mountain, forest, and stream. The religious duty to protect this landscape is not separable from how they grow and forage their food; it is the foundation of it. A single Dongria farming plot sustains a rich variety of traditional millets alongside pigeon peas, tubers, and seasonally foraged forest

foods, including Jerhul flowers and the many-purposed Mahua tree, harvested with a restraint that the culture mandates and the community enforces. This self-sustaining way of growing and foraging food is recognised by modern agronomists as an exemplary model of climate-resilient food sovereignty, suggesting that highly effective climate adaptation is often the product of religious devotion rather than agricultural policy.

When Making Becomes Knowing

The things a community makes are never simply aesthetic objects. They are the residue of a long negotiation with the surrounding environment, conducted through practice, ritual, and accumulated experience over generations. In the tribal societies this engagement

produces what might be called symbiotic engineering, the creation of shelters, tools, and infrastructure not on nature but with it, in ways that leave the ecosystem essentially intact.

The Toda tribe of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve built their traditional barrel-vaulted dwellings, the Arsh, from sustainably harvested bamboo, rattan, and dried grass thatch. These structures required no foundation and left the grassland ecosystem essentially undisturbed. Their entrance openings, barely three feet wide, were direct responses to cold highland winds and the proximity of wild animals, solutions arrived at through the same patient attention to their surroundings that characterises every other dimension of Toda life. Beyond their architecture, their iconic red, black, and white Poothukuli embroidery serves as a cultural mirror of this environment, with motifs explicitly mimicking local flora, including the blooming of the rare Kurinji flower.

In Meghalaya, the Khasi and Jaintia tribes arrived at what may be the most striking example of symbiotic engineering anywhere on the subcontinent. The Jingkieng Jri, the Living Root Bridge, is not built. It is grown. The aerial roots of the Rubber Fig tree are guided



over decades across the width of a river, intertwined and trained until they fuse into a structure that grows stronger with each passing year and can last for five centuries. Because a bridge may take up to fifty years to become fully functional, the person who plants the roots will likely not live to cross the finished structure. This architectural practice demands a profound culture of long-termism and intergenerational responsibility, a willingness to labour for the benefit of people one will never meet.

The Conservation Embedded in Healing

Traditional medicine in tribal communities makes the connection between cultural practice and environmental stewardship. The Irula tribe of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve draws on over seventy wild plant species to treat conditions ranging from respiratory ailments to liver disorders. The harvesting practices are as significant as the knowledge itself: roots, barks, and leaves are taken in ways that ensure the parent plant survives. The Irula protect the forest because their tradition of healing is only as viable as the ecosystem that sustains it.

The principle extends to India's Sacred Groves, known as Umanglai in Manipur, Orans in Rajasthan, Sarnas in central India, and Kavus in Kerala. These groves shelter rare and endemic flora long eradicated from the surrounding landscapes, protected not only by legal compulsion but also by cultural conviction that has outlasted most formal conservation efforts by centuries.

The Classical and the Indigenous: A Model Worth Following

Classical art forms in India have benefited for institutional support. They possess codified texts, established pedagogy, organised performance circuits and bodies that advocate consistently for their preservation. This did not emerge naturally, rather it was built through deliberate cultural effort. The result is that classical traditions, however pressured by the modern world, possess a visibility and an institutional voice that tribal traditions, for the most part, do not.

The organisations like SPIC MACAY significant is that they have recognised this gap and chosen to work against it, insisting in practice and in programming that tribal traditions belong on the same platform and deserve the same seriousness. At the 11th Annual International Convention held at IIT

Kharagpur in May 2026, thousands of young delegates encountered the Ghussadi of the Raj Gond, three forms of Chhau, and the Hojagiri of Tripura alongside classical performances, as equal bearers of artistic and intellectual depth. In the craft sessions, students worked directly with master artisans, learning Gond tribal painting and natural-fibre handloom weaving, traditions that carry within them as much ecological understanding as any forest survey. One of the more revealing moments at the convention came not during a performance but during the craft sessions. Students who had never encountered Gond painting before lingered long after the session ended, questioning the artists about colours, symbols, and techniques. The exchange illustrated how quickly assumptions about what constitutes knowledge can shift when a tradition is encountered firsthand. That is the model worth following.

There is no reasonable argument for why tribal and indigenous knowledge systems should be held to a different standard or offered lesser support. The dialogue between the classical and the indigenous, when pursued honestly, enriches both. The classical tradition recovers its roots; the indigenous tradition gains a platform equal to its depth.

A Precedent, Not an Exception

The tribal communities of India do not need to be repositioned as environmental heroes for contemporary conversation about climate and biodiversity. The narrative already exists in the cultural systems they have sustained for generation. The song that maps a forest's seasonal rhythms, the festival that keeps a seed library alive, the craft that records a community's observation of its landscape, the sacred grove that enforces a philosophy of restraint through the force of belief: these are not incidental expressions of culture that happen to carry environmental lessons. They are the primary means through which an accumulated understanding of the living world has been created, preserved, and handed on across generations.

Protecting these traditions demands the same institutional seriousness and patience that India has, at its best, extended to its classical arts. Whether that model is treated as an exception or as a precedent will determine considerably more than the fate of these art forms alone. □

