

Cultural Roots and Agricultural Practices of Indian Tribes

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India's tribal communities make up about 8.6% of the country's population, or over 104 million people. Most of them live in central, eastern, and northeastern parts of the country. For these communities, agriculture is not just a means of livelihood but a way of life that shapes their traditions, values, and relationship with nature. Today, as farming faces challenges from climate change and resource depletion, the traditional practices of tribal communities offer valuable lessons. Their emphasis on diversity, natural resource use, and soil care provides a model for sustainable agriculture. Over time, they have developed farming practices that work closely with the environment and support both people and land.

Biodiversity through traditional farming wisdom

Agriculture is the main source of income for most tribal households, with nearly 70-80% involved in farming or related activities. Their farming is guided by traditional knowledge that has been passed down through generations. Shifting cultivation, or *Jhum*, practiced by tribes such as the Garo, Naga, and Mizo, involves growing crops on small plots and then allowing the land to rest and regenerate. This helps maintain soil fertility and biodiversity. Communities like the Gond, Santhal, and Bhil follow mixed and intercropping systems, which protect them from crop loss and improve soil health. The use of local seeds, organic manure, and natural pest control reflects their sustainable approach to farming. Many studies have shown that tribal farming systems often support more biodiversity than modern monocropping, helping preserve native crops and protect the environment.

Coping with climate change through climate-friendly crops

For tribal communities, crops are more than just food. They are part of their cultural identity. Millets, pulses, tubers, and forest produce are common in their diets and traditions. Millets, often

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called tribal grains, have been grown for centuries in states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh. Known for their nutritional value and ability to grow in dry conditions, millets are once again gaining importance as part of India's efforts to promote healthy and climate-friendly foods. Tribal farmers have played a major role in keeping these crops alive and diverse.

Respect to mother nature through festivals and rituals

Agriculture is at the heart of many tribal festivals and rituals. The Karam festival in Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh celebrates the Karam tree and the spirit of fertility. In Odisha, Nua Khai marks the new harvest and gives thanks to the earth and the Gods. The Sohrai festival among the Santhal tribe celebrates cattle, crops, and prosperity through colourful wall paintings and folk art. Festivals like Wangala in Meghalaya and Bhagoria in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat mark the joy of harvest and community unity. These celebrations show how deeply farming is connected to faith, art, and social life in tribal culture.

Tribal life is built around respect for nature. Land, water, and forests are seen as sacred and are often linked with local deities. Before planting or harvesting, farmers perform rituals to thank the earth and pray for good rains. Many villages protect sacred groves, which are small patches of forest kept untouched as a mark of respect. These groves are important for conserving plants, birds, and animals and are examples of how traditional beliefs support ecological balance.

Thus, learning from and working with tribal knowledge can help build farming systems that are both productive and environmentally responsible. Protection of this agricultural heritage further explores finding practical answers for a sustainable future.