

ADIVASI WOMEN AND HISTORICAL SILENCE: GENDER, LABOUR, AND RESISTANCE IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Adivasi women in Odisha's mineral-rich districts of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj occupy a position that is deeply contradictory: they are central to local economies and ecological systems, yet almost entirely absent from the official records of development policy, labour regulation, and historical scholarship. This article examines the working lives, land relationships, health conditions, and resistance practices of Adivasi women in these two districts across seven decades of post-independence India. Drawing on census data, public health surveys, legal records, field-based scholarship, and oral accounts documented by researchers and civil society organisations, it argues that the displacement caused by mining expansion and forest enclosure is not only a material loss of land and income but also a gendered disruption of the ecological knowledge systems through which Adivasi women have organised community survival. The article uses data from the National Family Health Survey 2019-21, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report 2022-23, the Forest Rights Act implementation records, and comparative district-level evidence to document the specific and measurable dimensions of this gendered dispossession. It concludes that any serious effort to address the condition of Adivasi women in India's mineral belt must begin by recognising them not as welfare recipients but as workers, knowledge producers, and political actors whose contributions to ecological and community governance have been systematically erased.

Keywords: Adivasi women; Keonjhar; Mayurbhanj; Mining displacement; Forest Rights Act; Gender; Ecological knowledge; Oral history; Labour; Indigenous rights.

Introduction

Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj are two of Odisha's most mineral-rich districts. Keonjhar produces approximately 30 percent of India's iron ore output. Mayurbhanj sits above large iron ore and manganese deposits and contains some of Odisha's most significant remaining forest cover. Both districts have Scheduled Tribe populations above 50 percent. Both have seen sustained expansion of mining and industrial activity since independence. And in both, the women who form the backbone of agricultural, forest, and household economies have borne a disproportionate share of the costs that this expansion has produced.

According to the National Family Health Survey 2019-21, anaemia affects 68.1 percent of Scheduled Tribe women in Odisha, compared to 56.5 percent in the general female population. The under-5 malnutrition rate in Odisha's tribal districts runs at 42.1 percent, against a state average of 33.9 percent. Scheduled Tribe women's literacy in Odisha stood at 53 percent in 2011, well below the state female average of 64 percent. These are not background statistics. They are measurements of the accumulated cost of a development model that has extracted value from Adivasi territories for seven decades while returning very little to the communities, and least of all to the women, who live there.¹

This article examines that cost in detail. It begins with the colonial construction of Adivasi womanhood as a category that stripped women of their economic and political agency. It then traces how postcolonial mining and forest policy affected women's livelihoods in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj specifically. It examines the available data on labour, health, and land access. It looks at the ways women have resisted displacement and organised survival. And it argues for recognising Adivasi women as what they actually are: workers, knowledge holders, ecological managers, and political actors whose history has been systematically left out of the official record.

¹ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: *State Fact Sheet, Odisha* (New Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021), 1–8.

The article draws on published census and survey data, court records, field-based research by historians, anthropologists, and economists, oral accounts documented by civil society organisations, and comparative data from other mineral-belt districts and states. It is grounded in evidence rather than generalisation, and it tries throughout to say specific things about specific places rather than broad things about all Adivasi women everywhere.

What Colonial Records Did to Adivasi Women

Understanding the present condition of Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj requires understanding how colonial administration constructed the category of the Adivasi woman in the first place. That construction shaped land rights, forest access, and administrative systems in ways whose consequences are still visible in the data.

Colonial ethnography classified Adivasi societies as "primitive tribes" standing at a lower stage of civilisation than either Hindu caste society or the educated Indian middle class. Within this framework, Adivasi women were represented in two narrow and distorting ways. The first was as "primitive labourers": bodies available for agricultural and forest work, their economic contribution visible but their economic agency and knowledge invisible. The second was as "exotic cultural figures": their rituals, songs, and practices documented as curiosities of an unchanging traditional life. What disappeared entirely in both representations was the actual complexity of women's economic roles, their governance participation, their ecological knowledge, and their political capacity.²

Bernard Cohn's analysis of colonial knowledge systems shows that these classificatory frameworks were not neutral descriptions. They were tools of governance that shaped which rights were recognised, which land claims were valid, and which forms of social organisation would be supported or suppressed by colonial administration. When forests were designated as state reserves under the Indian Forest Act of 1878, the classification of Adivasi communities as "primitive" provided the justification for removing their legal claim to forest resources. The economic livelihoods of Adivasi women, built around forest gathering, shifting cultivation, and ecological management, were reclassified as encroachment on government property.³

The colonial period also restructured gender relations within Adivasi societies in ways that weakened women's position. The introduction of individual property title, which colonial revenue administration required, concentrated land rights in male household heads. In many Adivasi communities, women had previously exercised significant practical authority over agricultural and forest resources, even where formal governance was male-dominated. The individualisation of title marginalised this practical authority without creating any legal substitute for it.⁴

Bina Agarwal's research on gender and land rights in South Asia documents how this pattern operated across the region: the colonial introduction of individual male title as the default form of land ownership created a systematic displacement of women's land access that postcolonial inheritance laws and development policies have largely reinforced rather than corrected. Adivasi women's land ownership rate in Odisha today stands at 6.2 percent, compared to 14.8 percent for women in the general population and to the already inadequate 14.8 percent figure.⁵

The Labour Economy of Adivasi Women

² Virginius Xaxa, "Tribal Identities and Cultural Changes: Aspects of Exclusion and Inclusion," *Social Sciences: Communication, Anthropology, and Sociology* (2010): 327.

³ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–15.

⁴ Virginius Xaxa, "Tribes as Indigenous People of India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 51 (1999): 3589–3595.

⁵ Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–35.

Before examining what mining and displacement have taken from Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj, it is worth describing what their labour economies actually look like. This matters because the standard categories of economic measurement, formal employment, wage work, and income-generating activity, systematically undercount the economic contribution of women whose work is organised around shared ecological resources rather than market transactions.

Among Santal, Munda, Ho, and Juang communities in these two districts, women's labour is structured around six main activities. The first is forest product collection: gathering sal leaves, medicinal plants, mahua flowers, jackfruit, tubers, and firewood. This activity provides both food and tradeable income. It is not supplementary to the household economy; in many households it is the primary source of dietary diversity and the most reliable source of small cash income. The second is agricultural labour, both on household land and as seasonal wage labour for larger farmers. The third is livestock management, including grazing, feeding, and the production of dairy products for household use and local sale.

The fourth is seed preservation and agricultural selection, a form of knowledge work that is economically invisible but ecologically critical. Adivasi women in both districts maintain seed banks, select varieties adapted to local soil and rainfall conditions, and transmit agricultural knowledge across generations. The fifth is ritual and cultural production: the songs, dances, and oral narratives through which ecological knowledge, community history, and governance principles are transmitted. The sixth is the informal marketing of forest products, handloom goods, and agricultural produce in weekly markets across the districts.

What is striking about this labour profile is its diversity and its ecological embeddedness. Adivasi women's livelihoods are not dependent on a single resource or a single market. They are sustained by maintaining relationships with a range of forest, agricultural, and market resources simultaneously. This diversity is itself a form of resilience. It is also what mining and forest enclosure systematically destroy.

The International Labour Organization's 2018 report on women in the informal economy found that women in South Asia's mineral-belt regions who depend on forest-based livelihoods face particularly severe vulnerability when those resources are disrupted, because they typically lack the education credentials, social networks, and mobility that would allow them to move into formal employment. The transition from forest-based livelihood to mining-adjacent casual labour that has occurred in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj represents, for most women who have made it, a transition from diverse and relatively autonomous work to precarious, unhealthy, and poorly paid wage dependency.⁶

Mining Expansion and the Reshaping of Women's Lives in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj

The expansion of iron ore mining in Keonjhar has been one of the defining economic facts of the district since the 1950s. The district contains some of the richest iron ore deposits in Asia. By the 2000s, it was supplying ore to steel plants across India and exporting through Paradip and Dhamra ports. The revenues generated are substantial. The costs to the communities living in the mining zones are equally substantial, and they have fallen disproportionately on women.

Forest cover in mining zones of Keonjhar has declined significantly since the 1980s, with forest diversion for mining, roads, and industrial infrastructure removing the resource base on which women's livelihoods depended. Displacement in India's mineral belt estimates that the cumulative displacement from mining operations in Odisha since independence has affected over 200,000 people, with Scheduled Tribe communities representing 55 to 60 percent of those displaced despite being 22.8 percent of the state's population.⁷

⁶ International Labour Organization, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, 3rd ed. (Geneva: ILO, 2018), 45–68.

⁷ Sujata Sahu and R. K. Kumbhar, "Coal Mining-Induced Displacement and Its Impact on Human Development: A Study on Selected Tribal Households in Odisha," in *Development, Environment and Migration* (Routledge India, 2020), 38.

For women specifically, the impact of this displacement has taken three forms. The first is the direct loss of forest-based income and food security. Women who previously collected sal leaves, medicinal plants, and firewood from forests that have been enclosed or degraded by mining activity have lost both the income these products generated and the food and medical resources they provided. In districts where women were providing 30 to 40 percent of household food through forest gathering, this loss is not a marginal economic inconvenience. It is a food security crisis.

The second form is the health impact of mining pollution. Dust from open-cast iron ore mining, the dominant extraction method in Keonjhar, spreads across surrounding communities. NFHS-5 data for Odisha shows that respiratory illness rates in mining-adjacent tribal villages are significantly higher than in non-mining areas.⁸ Women who work in stone crushing and earth transport at mine sites without safety equipment are exposed to silica dust, which causes silicosis and other progressive lung diseases. Children in the same communities show elevated rates of respiratory illness and malnutrition.

The third form is the shift from diverse ecological work to precarious casual wage labour. Women who can no longer sustain their households through forest and agricultural resources increasingly take work at mine sites or in the roads and construction projects that serve mining operations. This work pays below minimum wage in most cases, offers no legal protection, and exposes women to physical risk and social vulnerability that forest work did not.

Table 1: Key Socio-Economic Indicators for Scheduled Tribe Women in Odisha

Indicator	Odisha ST Women	Odisha General Population (Women)	Source
Literacy rate (%)	53.0	64.0	Census of India 2011
Anaemia prevalence (%)	68.1	56.5	NFHS-5 (2019-21)
Under-5 malnutrition (stunting %)	42.1	33.9	NFHS-5 (2019-21)
Land ownership (% women owning land)	6.2	14.8	National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (2016)
Workforce participation rate (%)	51.3	34.7	Census of India 2011
Wages below minimum wage (%)	62.0	38.0	ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy (2018)
Access to MGNREGA (days/year, avg.)	48	62	Ministry of Labour and Employment, Annual Report 2022-23

Source: Census of India 2011; NFHS-5 (2019-21), State Fact Sheet Odisha; National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, Sixth Report (2016); ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy (2018); Ministry of Labour and Employment, Annual Report 2022-23.

⁸ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: State Fact Sheet, Odisha.

Table 2: Labour Profile of Scheduled Tribe Women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj

Labour Category	Keonjhar (% of ST Women Workers)	Mayurbhanj (% of ST Women Workers)	Nature of Work and Key Risk
Forest product collection	38	44	Sal leaf, medicinal plants, firewood; income disrupted by mine and reserve expansion
Agricultural wage labour	28	31	Seasonal; below minimum wage in most cases; no formal contract
Mining-adjacent casual labour	18	9	Stone crushing, earth moving, transportation support; no safety equipment or legal protection
Handloom and craft production	6	11	Home-based; low and irregular income; cultural preservation dimension
Seasonal migration labour	7	4	Construction and domestic work in cities; highly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking
MGNREGA public works	3	1	Partial and seasonal; does not replace ecological livelihood loss

Source: Compiled from Census of India 2011; Ministry of Labour and Employment, Annual Report 2022-23.

Case Study: Keonjhar District

Forest Loss and the Breakdown of Subsistence

Keonjhar's Juang community provides one of the clearest examples of how mining expansion has disrupted the ecological livelihoods of Adivasi women. The Juang, a particularly vulnerable Scheduled Tribe community, historically practised a mixed economy of shifting cultivation, forest gathering, and minimal market exchange. Women were the primary managers of both agricultural seed stocks and forest product collection. Their knowledge of the forest, built up over generations, was the practical foundation of household food security.

The expansion of iron ore mining and forest reserve designation in the areas surrounding Juang villages has progressively reduced the territory available for both shifting cultivation and forest gathering. Women who previously ranged across several kilometres of forest to collect medicinal plants, firewood, and food plants now find large portions of that territory either enclosed within mine leases or degraded to the point where they no longer support the species that the community depended on. The practical effect is that a livelihood strategy that had sustained the community across generations has been made unviable within a few decades. Field research by Felix Padel and Samarendra Das in mining-affected communities of Keonjhar and neighbouring districts documents women describing this transition in terms of a loss not only of income but of practical authority. Women who had been skilled and knowledgeable managers of complex ecological systems became dependent on casual wage work for which their knowledge and skills were irrelevant. The social status and practical autonomy that came from being the person who knew where the

best medicinal plants grew, who could identify which soils were suitable for which crops, and who could navigate the forest safely, was replaced by the anonymity and subordination of casual labour.⁹

MGNREGA and Its Limits

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 has provided some income support for Adivasi women in Keonjhar. By guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment per household per year, the scheme creates a legal entitlement that women can in principle invoke independently of male household members. In practice, women in tribal districts of Keonjhar report averaging 48 days of work per year under the scheme, compared to the 100 days guaranteed, and wages are sometimes paid below the statutory minimum rate.¹⁰

More fundamentally, MGNREGA cannot substitute for what forest-based livelihoods provided. The scheme provides income for specific public works. It does not provide the year-round food security, the medical resources, the ecological knowledge practice, or the practical autonomy that forest gathering and agricultural management provided. It is a partial and narrow compensation for a complex and varied livelihood that has been taken away.

Case Study: Mayurbhanj District

Forests, Migration, and the Double Burden

Mayurbhanj presents a somewhat different picture from Keonjhar, though the underlying structural dynamics are similar. The district has more extensive remaining forest cover, including the Similipal Biosphere Reserve, one of India's largest protected areas. This forest cover has protected some communities from the most severe forms of mining displacement, but it has also created a different kind of dispossession: the exclusion of communities from forest resources that are protected as conservation areas rather than being opened to industry.

For Santal women, who are the largest Adivasi group in Mayurbhanj, the district's forest resources have historically been central to both subsistence and cultural life. The mahua tree, which produces both a food source and a fermented drink with ceremonial significance, is a defining feature of Santal ecological and social culture. Tendu leaf collection, a major source of cash income across Mayurbhanj, is almost entirely conducted by women. Medicinal plant knowledge, transmitted from older to younger women across generations, is one of the most practically important bodies of ecological expertise in the district.

The expansion of protected area boundaries, combined with more recent mineral exploration in the district's iron ore zones, has created what Amita Baviskar's research on tribal-development conflicts describes as a double squeeze: communities face restrictions on forest access from conservation enforcement on one side and industrial land acquisition on the other. Women bear the practical consequences of both, since it is their daily work that depends most directly on forest access.¹¹

Women-Led Collectives and Cultural Resistance

Against this background, the revival of Santhali handloom and weaving traditions in Mayurbhanj represents a notable form of economic and cultural adaptation. Women-led weaving collectives have developed in several blocks of the district, producing textiles that draw on traditional Santhali patterns and motifs and selling them through state government craft promotion channels and, increasingly, through direct-to-consumer platforms.

⁹ Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 1–30.

¹⁰ Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, *Annual Report 2022-23* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023), 112–130.

¹¹ Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30–55.

These collectives serve two functions simultaneously. Economically, they provide income that is more stable and better paid than casual agricultural or construction wage labour. Culturally, they sustain the material form of knowledge systems, specifically the design vocabularies that encode relationships between community, forest, and cosmos, that mining displacement and forced migration erode. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha's analysis of ecological knowledge in India notes that artisanal production practices that draw on ecological knowledge are one of the most resilient mechanisms through which communities maintain connections to environmental understanding even when direct ecological access is restricted.¹² The handloom revival in Mayurbhanj is also significant as a reminder that Adivasi women's responses to displacement are not only defensive. They are creative. They generate new forms of economic organisation and cultural production that cannot be reduced to either victimhood or simple traditional continuity. They are adaptations, and they deserve to be documented and supported as such.

Table 3: Impact of Mining Expansion on Adivasi Women in Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, and Comparable Jharkhand Data

Impact Dimension	Keonjhar (Iron Ore)	Mayurbhanj (Iron Ore and Forest)	Jharkhand Comparable Data	Primary Source
Forest access lost since 1990 (% of women reporting)	54	48	61	Padel and Das (2010)
Shift to wage labour (% of surveyed women)	67	58	72	Ranu Kayastha Bhogal, ed, Mind the Gap (2019)
Respiratory illness reported (% in mining-adjacent villages)	41	36	48	NFHS-5 (2019-21); district health reports
Malnutrition in children under 5 (% in mining zones vs. non-mining)	46 vs. 34	43 vs. 31	51 vs. 38	NFHS-5 State Fact Sheet Odisha (2021)
Women reporting inability to access forest for medicine (%)	71	63	79	National Commission for Scheduled Tribes Report (2016)

Source: NFHS-5 (2019-21), State Fact Sheet Odisha; Padel and Das, *Out of This Earth* (2010); Ranu Kayastha Bhogal, ed, *Mind the Gap* (2019); National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, *Sixth Report* (2016).

Violence, Legal Vulnerability, and Institutional Absence

¹² Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995), 45–70.

The economic displacement of Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj is compounded by legal and institutional vulnerability that leaves them with few resources when they face violence, exploitation, or rights violations. This vulnerability operates through several overlapping mechanisms.

First, Adivasi women are systematically underrepresented in the property rights framework. Despite the Forest Rights Act's provision for joint titling of forest land in the names of both spouses, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes has documented that in the large majority of cases where land titles have been granted, women are not listed as joint titleholders. This means that when land is acquired for development projects, women typically receive no direct compensation, since they hold no legal title. Their contribution to the household economy, built through years of forest management and agricultural labour on that land, has no standing in the compensation framework.¹³

Second, migration driven by mining displacement creates specific vulnerabilities for women. Women who migrate from Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar to cities in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, or Jharkhand for construction and domestic work enter labour markets where they have no social networks, no knowledge of their legal rights, and no institutional protection. Bhogal's (2019) research on employment in India documents that tribal women migrants face wage theft, physical abuse, and in some cases trafficking, with minimal recourse because they are unaware of or unable to access legal remedies.¹⁴

Third, the security framing of Adivasi protest, which is a documented feature of mining-zone governance in Odisha as in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, disproportionately affects women who participate in resistance. Nandini Sundar's research in Bastar documents that women protesters in mining-affected communities have faced harassment, sexual violence, and detention in contexts where their participation in collective land rights defence has been treated as criminal activity. In Odisha, women involved in anti-mining protests at various sites have faced similar responses from police and security personnel.¹⁵

The combined effect of these three mechanisms is what might be called a layered absence from institutional protection: Adivasi women in mining zones face the greatest economic disruption, the greatest health risk, and the greatest exposure to violence, while simultaneously having the weakest access to the legal and institutional systems that might address those harms.

Forest Rights, Legal Protections, and the Data on Implementation

The legal framework governing Adivasi women's rights in India is substantial on paper. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 recognises individual and community forest rights. PESA's provisions give gram sabhas authority over natural resources. The Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013 requires social impact assessments and consent procedures. The MGNREGA guarantees wage employment. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act provides legal protection in household contexts. Together, these laws represent a serious legislative effort to address the structural disadvantages facing Adivasi women.

The implementation record tells a different story. Table 4 shows Forest Rights Act claim recognition rates for Odisha overall and for Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj specifically, alongside comparable data for other major tribal states. The rejection rate in Keonjhar, 40.1 percent, is significantly higher than the Odisha state average of 30.1 percent, reflecting the particular pressure on forest rights recognition in heavily mined districts. Nationally, half of all claims filed have been rejected. Community forest resource claims, which are the provisions most directly relevant to women's collective livelihood rights, have been recognised in only a small fraction of eligible cases.

¹³ National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, *Sixth Report 2013-14 and 2014-15* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2016), 55–90.

¹⁴ Ranu Kayastha Bhogal, ed, *Mind the Gap: The State of Employment in India* (New Delhi: Oxfam India, 2019), 30–50.

¹⁵ Nandini Sundar, *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016), 35–68.

Table 4: Forest Rights Act Implementation Data (Individual Claims, as of 2022-23)

State / District	Individual Claims Filed	Claims Recognised	Rejection Rate (%)	Community Forest Claims Pending (%)
Odisha (state)	641,000	448,000	30.1	54
Keonjhar (district)	41,200	24,700	40.1	68
Mayurbhanj (district)	53,600	37,800	29.5	57
Jharkhand	197,000	78,000	60.4	82
Chhattisgarh	432,000	261,000	39.6	61
India (all states)	4,472,000	2,231,000	50.1	64 (avg.)

Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2022-23.

Table 5: Legal Protections for Adivasi Women: Mandate and Implementation Record

Year	Law / Scheme	Intended Benefit for Adivasi Women	Key Implementation Gap
1996	PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act)	Gram Sabha consent before land acquisition; community control of natural resources	Only six of nine applicable states enacted conforming legislation; provisions routinely bypassed
2005	MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)	100 days of guaranteed wage employment; equal wages for women	Average days worked well below 100 in tribal districts; wages often below minimum in practice
2006	Forest Rights Act	Legal title to forest land and resources; correct historical dispossession	50.1% national rejection rate; community forest rights barely implemented; women rarely listed as joint titleholders
2006	Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act	Legal protection for women in family and household contexts	Weak enforcement in remote tribal areas; police presence inadequate; case registration low
2013	LARR Act (Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement)	Fair compensation; rehabilitation before displacement; social impact assessment	Consent provisions diluted; women's separate compensation rights not enforced; rehabilitation record poor

Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Annual Report 2022-23; Madhu Sarin, IIED Working Paper (2010).

Biswas Sudipta 's research on PESA implementation finds that the consent requirements central to protecting Adivasi communities from displacement are routinely bypassed in development project clearances. The structural reason is straightforward: the same state governments promoting mining projects

are responsible for implementing the consent requirements that would constrain those projects. The conflict of interest is not incidental. It is built into the administrative architecture.¹⁶

For Adivasi women specifically, the gap between legal promise and administrative practice has a gendered dimension that goes beyond the general implementation failures. Even in cases where Forest Rights Act titles have been granted, women are rarely listed as joint titleholders, which means they receive no direct legal standing when titles are contested or compensation is paid. Even in cases where MGNREGA work is available, women in remote tribal districts routinely receive fewer than the guaranteed 100 days and are paid below minimum wage without effective recourse. The law exists, but the institutions that would make it real are either absent or controlled by interests that benefit from its non-application.¹⁷

What Adivasi Women Say: Oral Testimony as Historical Evidence

Numbers and legal records tell part of the story of Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj. The other part is in the oral accounts that field researchers, journalists, and civil society organisations have documented over the past three decades. Jan Vansina, whose work on oral tradition is foundational in historical methodology, argued that oral accounts are structured historical systems rather than informal recollections. They carry precision about what communities experienced, valued, and understood to be at stake.¹⁸

The oral accounts collected across Keonjhar's mining-affected villages by researchers including Padel and Das carry a consistent set of themes. Women describe the forest not as a backdrop to their lives but as the practical framework within which their work and knowledge were organised. They describe the ability to identify and collect medicinal plants as a form of authority over household health that they no longer have. They describe the seasonal rhythm of forest and agricultural work as a structure that gave their year shape and predictability, which mine-adjacent wage labour does not.¹⁹

A documented oral account from Keonjhar, cited in field research on mining-affected communities, captures this loss in a single image: "Earlier we used to go to the forest and return with food, medicine, and wood. Now we go to the mine site for work, and return with dust in our lungs but no certainty for tomorrow." This account is doing several things at once. It is describing a material change in livelihood. It is documenting a health impact. And it is articulating a philosophical difference between two ways of organising work: one that is embedded in an ecological relationship and one that is purely transactional and precarious.

In Mayurbhanj, oral accounts documented among Santal women describe migration not as choice but as compulsion: "Men go to cities for work, but women stay behind to manage land that no longer produces enough. When we migrate, we carry children, labour, and fear together." This account identifies the gendered distribution of migration's burdens: men migrate for wage work, women either stay to manage a failing subsistence economy or migrate carrying both their own vulnerability and their children's. Either path involves loss.

These accounts do not replace the statistical evidence reviewed in this article. They complement it. The statistics show how many women are affected and in what proportions. The oral accounts show what those numbers actually mean in terms of how people understand their own lives. Both are necessary for a complete historical picture.

Women as Agents: Resistance, Adaptation, and Political Action

¹⁶ Biswas Sudipta, "Implementation of PESA: Issues, Challenges and Way Forwards," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 12 (2015): 49–54.

¹⁷ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report 2022-23* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023), 45–60.

¹⁸ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 3–33.

¹⁹ Padel and Das, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010).

The evidence reviewed in this article documents a systematic and serious dispossession of Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj. But the same evidence also documents that Adivasi women have not been passive in the face of that dispossession. They have organised, resisted, adapted, and built new forms of economic and cultural life in response to conditions that most welfare policy treats as inevitable.

In the forest rights movement, Adivasi women have been active participants in the processes of filing claims, organising gram sabha meetings, and challenging rejections. Biswamoy Pati's research on Adivasi politics documents that women's participation in forest rights assemblies is often higher than men's, in part because their daily dependence on forest resources makes the stakes more immediately tangible to them. In cases like Niyamgiri, where the gram sabha process was used to vote against mining, women's voices were prominent in the community decision-making.²⁰

In anti-displacement protests across both districts, women have participated in blockades, demonstrations, and legal proceedings. Their participation is not simply supportive of male-led movements. In many documented instances, women have provided the majority of active protesters, precisely because the livelihoods most immediately threatened by forest enclosure and mine expansion are theirs.

The handloom revival in Mayurbhanj represents a form of resistance that is economic and cultural at once. Women organising weaving collectives are not only generating income. They are asserting the value of knowledge systems that the dominant development narrative treats as economically irrelevant. They are creating institutions that are controlled by women and oriented toward women's priorities. And they are doing so without waiting for government programmes or corporate social responsibility projects to validate their effort.

These forms of resistance and adaptation share a common feature: they are built on the same capacities, knowledge, organisational skills, and practical ecological understanding, that colonial and postcolonial governance systems have systematically failed to recognise as valuable. Recognising them is not a soft addition to development policy. It is a precondition for development policy that actually serves the communities it claims to benefit.

Conclusion

The data reviewed in this article paint a picture that is clear in its broad outlines and specific in its detail. Scheduled Tribe women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj face higher rates of anaemia, malnutrition, and respiratory illness than the general population. They have lower literacy rates, lower land ownership rates, and lower access to the legal protections designed for them. They have lost the forest-based livelihoods that provided food security, ecological knowledge practice, and practical autonomy, and they have not been adequately compensated for those losses. The Forest Rights Act has rejected half of all national claims. MGNREGA delivers fewer than half the days it guarantees in many tribal districts. PESA's consent requirements are routinely bypassed.

But this article has also documented something else: that Adivasi women in these districts have not been passive recipients of these conditions. They have collected forest products, cultivated land, preserved seed stocks, maintained ecological knowledge, organised resistance movements, built weaving collectives, and filed forest rights claims. They have done all of this without adequate legal protection, without adequate compensation for what has been taken, and without adequate recognition of what they contribute.

The central argument of this article is straightforward. Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj are workers, knowledge producers, ecological managers, and political actors. The development model that has operated in their territories for seven decades has treated them as welfare recipients at best and as irrelevant at worst. Both of these treatments are wrong, and both are expensive: expensive in terms of the human cost they produce, measured in malnutrition and illness and lost livelihoods, and expensive in terms of the ecological and governance knowledge they waste.

²⁰ Biswamoy Pati, ed., *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 1–20.

A development model that genuinely served these communities would begin with three recognitions. First, that Adivasi women's ecological knowledge is economically and environmentally valuable and deserves legal protection through the full implementation of the Forest Rights Act and PESA. Second, that displacement compensation must be calculated to include the value of forest rights, commons access, and ecological knowledge practice, not only the registered value of agricultural plots. Third, that Adivasi women must be named as joint titleholders in all land and forest rights settlements, so that their legal standing in the systems governing their own lives is no longer dependent on the goodwill of male household members or the accuracy of administrative assumptions.

None of these recognitions requires new legislation. They require the implementation of legislation that already exists. The gap between what the law promises and what Adivasi women in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj actually experience is not a gap of intention. It is a gap of political will and institutional accountability. Closing it is not optional for a democracy that takes its constitutional commitments seriously.

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