

# Ecological Living versus Capitalist Philosophy in the Tribes of Koraput

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**Abstract:** The tribal communities of Koraput in Odisha preserve complex systems of ecological living rooted in collective ethics, reciprocity, sustainable food practices, ritual ecology, and deep spiritual relationships with nature. In contrast to capitalist modernity, which is driven by extraction, commodification, accumulation, and individualism, the indigenous life philosophies of Koraput are based on coexistence, restraint, and community centred living. This paper examines how the tribes of Koraput conceptualise their relationship with forests, hills, rivers, food systems, labour structures, rituals, and social life. Drawing upon indigenous ecology, deep ecology, and indigenous political ecology, the paper argues that tribal ecological consciousness offers an alternative framework for understanding sustainability and human existence in the contemporary world. The study further analyses how food culture, collective labour, cyclical notions of time, sacred ecological practices, and community relationships challenge capitalist ideas of development and consumption. At a time marked by climate crisis, ecological collapse, displacement, and the rapid expansion of extractive economies, the indigenous knowledge systems of Koraput possess immense contemporary relevance. The paper ultimately argues that the tribal communities of Koraput should not be viewed as isolated remnants of a primitive past but as custodians of sophisticated ecological philosophies capable of reshaping modern understandings of sustainability, ethics, and coexistence.

**Keywords:** ecology, tribal, capitalism, society, balance.

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world faces severe ecological crises caused by industrial capitalism, environmental exploitation, consumerism, deforestation, mining expansion, and unsustainable developmental practices. Modern capitalist systems often treat forests, rivers, mountains, agricultural land, and natural resources as commodities meant for extraction and economic profit. Such developmental models have created ecological imbalance, climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and social fragmentation across the globe (Moore 117). In this context, indigenous communities have gained increasing importance because their ecological philosophies offer alternative ways of understanding sustainability, coexistence, and human relationships with nature.

The tribal communities of Koraput in Odisha preserve deeply interconnected systems of ecological living rooted in collective ethics, reciprocity, sacred ecology, and sustainable food practices. Communities such as the Bonda, Gadaba, Kondh, Paraja, and Saora tribes maintain strong relationships with forests, rivers, hills, seeds, and seasonal agricultural cycles. Their lifestyles differ fundamentally from capitalist individualism and consumer culture because they prioritise community wellbeing, ecological balance, and collective responsibility over accumulation and profit.

This paper examines the contrast between ecological living and capitalist philosophy through the indigenous communities of Koraput. It argues that tribal ecological knowledge systems offer meaningful alternatives for reimagining sustainability, coexistence, and environmental ethics in the contemporary world.

### The Ecological Crisis of Capitalist Modernity

The twenty first century has witnessed unprecedented ecological crises caused by industrial capitalism, consumerism, deforestation, mining expansion, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable developmental practices. Across the globe, environmental destruction has become deeply connected with systems of capitalist extraction that reduce forests, rivers, mountains, agricultural systems, and even food cultures into commodities for economic profit. Scholars in Environmental Humanities and Indigenous Studies increasingly argue that modern capitalist development has created a dangerous separation between humans and the natural world, resulting in ecological imbalance and social fragmentation

(DeLoughrey et al. 12). The ecological crisis of the present era therefore demands not only technological solutions but also philosophical reconsiderations of how human societies conceptualise nature, community, labour, and wellbeing.

### **Indigenous Ecology as Alternative Philosophy**

In this context, indigenous communities across the world have gained renewed scholarly importance because their ecological philosophies challenge dominant capitalist models of development. Indigenous societies often preserve alternative systems of knowledge rooted in reciprocity, sustainability, sacred ecology, and collective ethics. Rather than viewing nature as an exploitable resource, indigenous cosmologies frequently understand forests, rivers, hills, animals, and land as living participants within a shared ecological existence (Cajete 23). Such perspectives are particularly significant in postcolonial societies where industrial development continues to displace indigenous populations and destroy ecological systems.

### **Koraput and Its Indigenous Communities**

The tribal communities of the district of Koraput, Odisha, India, represent one of the most important examples of indigenous ecological living in eastern India. Koraput, located in the southern region of Odisha, is home to several tribal communities including the "Bonda Tribe", "Gadaba Tribe", "Paraja Tribe", "Kondh Tribe", "Saora Tribe" etc. These communities maintain deeply interconnected relationships with forests, agricultural systems, hills, rivers, seeds, seasonal cycles, and collective labour structures. Their lifestyles continue to preserve forms of ecological consciousness that differ fundamentally from capitalist individualism and consumer culture.

This paper looks at the contrast between ecological living and capitalist philosophy through a study of the tribes of Koraput. It argues that tribal life philosophies offer an alternative model of human existence based upon coexistence, reciprocity, collective wellbeing, and ecological balance. The paper studies how indigenous relationships with nature, food systems, labour ethics, ritual structures, and community centred social life challenge capitalist notions of ownership, accumulation, productivity, and development.

### **Indigenous Ecology and Deep Ecology**

The study primarily employs Indigenous Ecology as its theoretical framework while also drawing from Deep Ecology and Indigenous Political Ecology. Indigenous Ecology examines how indigenous communities construct relationships with nature through spirituality, kinship, relational ethics, and collective responsibility. It rejects the capitalist separation between humans and ecology and instead emphasises interconnected coexistence (Cajete 41). Indigenous Political Ecology further critiques colonial and capitalist developmental systems that commodify land and marginalise indigenous ecological knowledge (Malik and Ford).

The paper also engages with the philosophical ideas of identity given by Arne Naess, whose theory of deep ecology argues that all forms of life possess intrinsic value beyond economic usefulness (Naess 101). Naess challenges anthropocentric models of modernity that place human profit above ecological wellbeing. This philosophical framework strongly resonates with the tribal cosmologies of Koraput where forests, hills, rivers, and seeds are treated not as commodities but as sacred participants in collective existence. Similarly, the work of Vandana Shiva - *Environmental activist and ecofeminist* provides important insight into indigenous agriculture, biodiversity conservation, seed sovereignty, and resistance to capitalist monoculture systems (Shiva 63).

### **Contemporary Relevance of Indigenous Ecological Thought**

The contemporary relevance of this topic is immense. Climate change, industrial agriculture, extractive mining, ecological collapse, and unsustainable consumption have increasingly exposed the limitations of capitalist developmental models. Indigenous communities are now recognised not merely as subjects of anthropology but as important custodians of ecological knowledge and sustainable living practices. The tribal communities of Koraput preserve systems of living based on restraint, reciprocity, collective labour, ecological balance, and spiritual relationships with nature. The district is home to several indigenous communities including the Bonda, Gadaba, Paraja, Kondh, and Saora tribes, each possessing distinct ritual systems, oral traditions, food cultures, dress practices, agricultural structures, and modes of collective existence. Despite their cultural differences, these communities share a deeply relational understanding of land, labour, kinship, and ecology that differs sharply from capitalist individualism and market dependency. Their life

philosophies therefore offer valuable insights into alternative futures beyond capitalist consumerism and environmental exploitation.

### **Nature as Kinship in Tribal Cosmology**

The tribes of Koraput conceptualise nature not as property but as kinship. Forests, rivers, hills, and agricultural lands are deeply integrated within cultural memory, spiritual life, ritual practices, and community identity. Such ecological relationships fundamentally differ from capitalist environmental logic, which views nature primarily as a resource for extraction and accumulation. The contrast between ecological living and capitalist philosophy therefore becomes central to understanding both indigenous sustainability and the environmental crises of modernity.

### **Forests as Sacred Ecological Spaces**

One of the most significant aspects of tribal ecological philosophy in Koraput is the understanding of forests as living entities. Among the Bonda communities, hills and forests are often associated with ancestral continuity and sacred protection, while the Gadaba tribes maintain ritual traditions closely linked with agriculture, dance, music, and seasonal cycles. The Saora communities preserve elaborate systems of spiritual symbolism and ritual painting connected to ancestor worship and ecological consciousness. Similarly, Kondh rituals historically centred upon sacred relationships with land, fertility, forests, and agricultural balance. These ritual systems demonstrate that ecological consciousness among the tribes of Koraput is not abstract philosophy but an everyday lived structure embedded within social and cultural life. Forests are not merely physical spaces that provide economic resources. They are associated with ancestral memory, sacred presence, medicinal knowledge, and community survival. Tribal communities maintain emotional, spiritual, and cultural relationships with forests that regulate ecological behaviour through ethics rather than external law. Sacred groves, ritual forests, and culturally protected ecological spaces continue to preserve biodiversity through collective belief systems (Gadgil and Vartak 281).

In capitalist philosophy, however, forests are transformed into timber reserves, mining territories, industrial land, or market commodities. Capitalist modernity depends upon the extraction and commodification of ecological systems for economic expansion (Moore 117). Such systems encourage deforestation, displacement, and ecological destruction because nature is valued according to profit rather than coexistence. The tribal communities of Koraput challenge this developmental logic by conceptualising forests through kinship and reciprocity instead of ownership and exploitation.

### **Sacred Geography and Spiritual Ecology**

The sacred geography of Koraput also reflects indigenous ecological consciousness. Hills, rivers, trees, and agricultural landscapes possess spiritual significance within tribal cosmology. Certain hills are associated with ancestral spirits and local deities. Rivers become sources of ritual purification, agricultural continuity, and collective identity. Trees such as sal and neem hold both ecological and sacred value. These cultural beliefs create systems of ecological conservation rooted in spirituality and ethical responsibility rather than institutional environmentalism (Elwin 84).

The indigenous understanding of nature as kinship differs fundamentally from capitalist anthropocentrism. Capitalist modernity places humans above ecological systems and justifies environmental exploitation in the name of economic growth. Tribal ecological philosophy instead views humans as participants within a larger network of ecological relationships. Animals, rivers, forests, seeds, and land are connected through reciprocal systems of coexistence (Cajete 39). Such perspectives encourage restraint, ecological humility, and sustainability.

### **Food Culture and Ecological Sustainability**

Food culture among the tribes of Koraput further reflects ecological consciousness and resistance to capitalist consumerism. Tribal communities continue to practice seasonal eating patterns based on local ecological rhythms rather than industrial market systems. Millets, forest fruits, roots, herbs, fermented foods, and locally cultivated grains remain central to indigenous cuisine. Food is directly connected to climate, agricultural cycles, biodiversity, and community relationships.

### **Millet Culture and Indigenous Agricultural Wisdom**

Millet culture is particularly important in understanding tribal sustainability. Indigenous millet varieties cultivated in Koraput are climate resilient, nutritious, and ecologically sustainable. Unlike industrial monoculture crops that depend

heavily on chemical fertilisers, corporate seeds, and large-scale irrigation, millets adapt naturally to local environmental conditions and preserve biodiversity (Shiva 71). The global revival of millet culture today reflects increasing recognition of indigenous agricultural wisdom.

### **Seed Sovereignty and Biodiversity Preservation**

The tribes of Koraput have preserved seed diversity for generations through local knowledge systems and community centred agricultural practices. Seed preservation functions not merely as agricultural activity but as cultural memory and ecological continuity. Women often play crucial roles in maintaining indigenous seed systems and preserving food traditions. Such practices resist corporate control over food systems and challenge capitalist agricultural economies dependent upon monoculture and market dependency.

### **Forest Foods and Sustainable Consumption**

Forest foods also demonstrate ecological balance and sustainable consumption. Tribal communities gather mushrooms, fruits, medicinal herbs, roots, and leafy vegetables from forests through practices shaped by restraint and ecological awareness. Gathering is guided by seasonal knowledge and collective ethics rather than commercial extraction. Capitalist food economies, by contrast, are increasingly characterised by industrial agriculture, processed foods, overproduction, excessive consumption, and ecological degradation (Patel 91).

The tribal food systems of Koraput therefore challenge capitalist consumer culture by promoting moderation, sustainability, and local self-sufficiency. Food is not treated merely as market commodity but as a collective relationship between land, labour, climate, and community. Waste generation within tribal systems remains comparatively minimal because survival depends upon ecological balance rather than excessive accumulation.

### **Community Centred Living and Collective Ethics**

Community centred living forms another important dimension of indigenous ecological philosophy in Koraput. The tribal communities of the region preserve highly collective modes of social existence where labour, rituals, agricultural activities, and celebrations are often shared by the wider community. Traditional Gadaba dance festivals, Bonda communal interactions, Kondh agricultural ceremonies, and Saora ritual gatherings reinforce social cohesion and ecological continuity through collective participation. Such practices strengthen kinship networks and preserve cultural identity across generations.

### **Collective Labour versus Capitalist Individualism**

Tribal social structures are deeply rooted in reciprocity, shared labour, collective participation, and mutual dependence. Agricultural activities, house construction, harvest festivals, and rituals often involve collective cooperation rather than isolated individual labour. Community relationships are therefore sustained through systems of mutual support and shared responsibility.

Capitalist philosophy, however, emphasises private ownership, individual profit, competition, and economic hierarchy. Modern capitalist societies increasingly encourage hyper individualism where social value becomes connected to productivity, wealth accumulation, and personal advancement (Harvey 22). Such systems often weaken collective relationships and create social fragmentation.

The tribes of Koraput resist this logic through collective labour systems and community ethics. Shared labour strengthens social bonds while reducing economic inequality within the community. Reciprocity functions as both moral principle and economic practice. Community centred living therefore challenges capitalist assumptions that competition and accumulation are necessary conditions of development.

Collective ownership of resources also differs fundamentally from capitalist property structures. Forests, water systems, and agricultural spaces within many tribal communities are connected to collective identity rather than absolute private ownership. Land is viewed through stewardship and shared responsibility rather than commercial possession. Capitalist developmental projects such as mining and industrial expansion frequently disrupt these indigenous relationships with land by transforming ecological systems into market commodities (Guha and Martinez Alier 129).

The increasing expansion of mining industries in tribal regions of Odisha reveals the direct conflict between ecological living and capitalist extraction. Mining projects often destroy forests, displace indigenous communities, contaminate water systems, and disrupt cultural continuity. The capitalist promise of development frequently ignores the ecological and social costs experienced by indigenous populations. Tribal resistance to displacement therefore becomes not merely economic struggle but defence of ecological existence and cultural identity.

### **Cultural Survival within Capitalist Systems**

Many tribal communities in Koraput continue to struggle within expanding capitalist systems that demand integration into wage labour economies, industrial development, market dependency, and consumer culture. Indigenous lifestyles based on subsistence agriculture, communal exchange, forest dependence, and seasonal rhythms often become marginalised within modern developmental discourse. Younger generations increasingly face pressure to migrate for labour, adapt to urban economic systems, or abandon traditional practices in favour of market-oriented survival.

This struggle is not merely economic but deeply cultural and philosophical. Capitalist systems prioritise private ownership, individual success, competition, and productivity, whereas tribal social structures in Koraput continue to value reciprocity, shared labour, ritual participation, and ecological balance. As a result, many indigenous communities experience cultural dislocation when forced into developmental systems that neither recognise nor respect collective ecological living. The erosion of indigenous languages, ritual traditions, seed diversity, and communal lifestyles therefore reflects broader tensions between tribal philosophies and capitalist modernity.

The tribal understanding of time and labour also differs sharply from capitalist modernity. Indigenous life in Koraput follows cyclical patterns connected to agricultural seasons, rainfall, harvest periods, forest rhythms, and ritual calendars. Time is experienced through ecological continuity rather than industrial schedules. Labour remains integrated with environmental cycles and community wellbeing.

Capitalist systems, by contrast, treat time as productivity and economic efficiency. Industrial modernity disciplines labour through mechanised schedules, continuous production, and accumulation driven economic systems (Thompson 61). Human value becomes measured according to output and profitability. Such systems often alienate labour from ecological relationships and disconnect workers from the environmental consequences of production (Marx 72).

The tribes of Koraput maintain forms of labour that remain embedded within ecological and communal structures. Agricultural labour, seed preservation, forest gathering, and ritual participation are integrated within systems of coexistence and reciprocity. Labour is connected not merely to economic profit but to collective survival and ecological continuity.

### **The Philosophy of Sufficiency versus Consumerism**

The indigenous idea of living well therefore differs significantly from capitalist ideas of living more. Tribal ecological philosophy values balance, sufficiency, and collective wellbeing rather than endless accumulation and consumerist expansion. Such perspectives possess increasing relevance in a world facing climate crisis, resource depletion, and social inequality.

### **Ritual Ecology and Sacred Environmental Ethics**

Ritual ecology forms another important aspect of tribal ecological consciousness in Koraput. Harvest rituals, sacred groves, ancestor worship, seasonal festivals, and ceremonial practices reinforce relationships between humans and nature. These rituals regulate ecological behaviour through spiritual ethics and cultural memory.

Harvest festivals celebrate agricultural cycles and express gratitude toward land, forests, seeds, and seasonal abundance. Ritual participation strengthens ecological awareness because agriculture is understood not as industrial production but as cooperative relationship with nature. Sacred groves function as culturally protected ecological spaces where exploitation is restricted due to spiritual beliefs (Gadgil and Vartak 284).

Ancestor worship also reflects ecological continuity because ancestors remain symbolically connected to forests, hills, rivers, and community landscapes. Spirituality therefore becomes deeply integrated with environmental ethics. Tribal

ecological systems do not separate religion, culture, labour, and ecology into isolated categories. Instead, these elements function together within interconnected systems of life.

Capitalist modernity often fragments these relationships by separating economy from spirituality and ecology from culture. Industrial modernity reduces nature to economic utility while weakening communal and sacred relationships with ecological systems. The ritual ecology of Koraput tribes therefore offers an important critique of capitalist environmental logic.

### **Climate Crisis and the Contemporary Relevance of Indigenous Knowledge**

The contemporary relevance of tribal ecological philosophies has become increasingly significant in the context of global environmental crises. Climate change, biodiversity loss, industrial pollution, water scarcity, and ecological collapse have exposed the destructive consequences of capitalist developmental systems. Governments and international organisations increasingly acknowledge the importance of indigenous ecological knowledge in biodiversity conservation and sustainable living.

The tribes of Koraput preserve sophisticated systems of ecological knowledge developed through generations of coexistence with forests, agricultural systems, and seasonal environments. Their lifestyles demonstrate that sustainability is not merely technological innovation but ethical and cultural practice. Collective labour, moderation in consumption, biodiversity preservation, sacred ecology, and community centred living provide alternative models for understanding human wellbeing.

The revival of millet-based agriculture across India further demonstrates the contemporary importance of indigenous food systems. Climate resilient crops traditionally cultivated by tribal communities are now recognised as important solutions for sustainable agriculture and food security. Such recognition reveals how indigenous knowledge systems often contain ecological wisdom neglected by industrial modernity.

### **Threats to Indigenous Ecological Systems**

At the same time, indigenous communities continue to face threats from mining expansion, deforestation, displacement, cultural assimilation, and market penetration. Tribal ecological systems are increasingly disrupted by capitalist developmental projects that prioritise extraction and profit over environmental balance and community wellbeing. The study of tribal ecological philosophy therefore also becomes politically important because it highlights the need to protect indigenous knowledge systems and ecological cultures.

### **Indigenous Philosophy as an Alternative Future**

The tribes of Koraput should not be viewed merely as isolated or backward populations existing outside modernity. Their lifestyles represent sophisticated systems of ecological ethics and social organisation that challenge dominant capitalist assumptions regarding development, productivity, ownership, and progress. Indigenous ecological living offers important philosophical insights into coexistence, sustainability, reciprocity, and collective responsibility.

The contrast between ecological living and capitalist philosophy ultimately reveals two fundamentally different ways of understanding human existence. Capitalist modernity prioritises extraction, accumulation, productivity, and individual advancement. Tribal ecological philosophy prioritises balance, coexistence, collective wellbeing, and relational ethics. In an era shaped by ecological uncertainty and environmental crisis, the indigenous life philosophies of Koraput possess immense relevance for reimagining sustainable futures.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that the tribes of Koraput preserve ecological knowledge systems that challenge the ideological foundations of capitalist modernity. Their food practices, labour ethics, ritual structures, community centred lifestyles, and sacred relationships with nature demonstrate alternative possibilities for organising social life beyond consumerism and environmental exploitation. Indigenous ecological living therefore represents not a primitive past but a meaningful and necessary philosophical alternative for the contemporary world.

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