

Environment and Ethics in Tribal Philosophy: A Study in Contemporary Relevance

Sudip Karmakar

Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy, Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Jharkhand & State Aided College Teacher (SACT-1), Dept. of Philosophy, Sukumar Sengupta Mahavidyalaya, Keshpur, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal

Abstract

The relationship between environment and ethics has become an important area of discussion in contemporary environmental philosophy. This paper analyses the characteristics of tribal philosophy as it relates to environmental and ethical issues, and provides an alternative way of viewing the relationship between humanity and nature. The theoretical concepts of environment and ethics from a tribal perspective are explored, along with their application to specific present-day environmental issues. Major characteristics of tribal philosophy, including: a relational world view; collective orientation toward living; the importance of nature's inherent value; and experiential knowledge, will be presented. Special attention will be given to the tribal perspective on nature as a living and worthwhile entity, rather than merely an economic resource. The role of indigenous knowledge in environmental management, conservation of biodiversity, and the sustainable use of natural resources will also be explored. In addition, tribal philosophy demonstrates the importance of environmental ethics by promoting values such as moderation, stewardship, ecological responsibility, and intergenerational fairness. Finally, tribal philosophy will be assessed against modern development, globalisation, and environmental governance in order to identify the strengths and limitations that exist in contemporary society. The paper ultimately argues that tribal philosophy provides ethical and practical insights into creating a more balanced and sustainable relationship between humans and nature, and will continue to be relevant when discussing environmental ethics and sustainability.

Keywords:

Tribal Philosophy; Environmental Ethics; Indigenous Knowledge; Sustainability; Biodiversity Conservation; Human–Nature Relationship; Ecological Responsibility.

Introduction

Environmental ethics is one of the most widely discussed areas in applied ethics. Environmental ethics is a branch of applied philosophy that examines the ethical basis of environmental values in social attitudes, actions and policies relating to biodiversity and ecological systems conservation (Environmental Ethics | Learn Science at Scitable)¹. This has

*Corresponding Author Email: sudipkarmakar52@gmail.com

Published: 17 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i6.45791>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

also made the paradigm of the environment-ethics relationship a key recent topic of philosophical discussion. Climate change, deforestation, catastrophic loss of biodiversity, pollution and unbridled, momentarily unsustainable harvesting of natural resources have delivered a dire dilemma with human civilisation in the twenty-first century. There is neither a scientific crisis nor a technological one in isolation, but there is rather an emergent nature of the connection among these aspects with all that relates human subjectivities to nature, economic value systems and moral position (DesJardins 15)². Consequently, environmental protection can only be solved with technical solutions along with alternative ethical and philosophical frameworks.

Tribal philosophy is extremely important in this context. The essence of the life philosophy of tribal societies is rooted in constant touch with nature, mutual dependence and collective wellbeing. Land, forests, rivers and other natural features are not economic resources to them — they are part of life, culture and existence. For that reason, the connection of humanity to Nature is not perceived through domination and exploitation but as being in harmony, respect and responsibility between them. This perspective provides a compelling alternative to existing anthropocentric development thinking, and reframes human–nature relations through the lenses of interdependence and ethical responsibility.

Many international organisations now consider indigenous ways of knowing and philosophising about our world to be an important part of eco-ethical discussions regarding sustainability, environmental ethics, and climate change. Indigenous perspectives represent not only cultural heritage but also an ethical system through which the relationship between people and their environment is a matter of shared responsibility for current and future generations. Evidence shows that most tribal groups have been following effective environmental management practices for generations to conserve biodiversity and sustain their natural resources. Additionally, many indigenous ways of knowing give profound experiential knowledge about how to address modern environmental crises.

However, the philosophical implications of tribal philosophy extend beyond simply helping us conserve our natural resources. They also help us grapple with foundational philosophical issues concerning environmental ethics, such as: What is the intrinsic value of nature? Are there obligations to future generations regarding the environment? What are the collective rights of tribes to use the environment? Finally, how do we ensure environmental justice for all over the globe? Therefore, tribal philosophy has emerged as a significant area of thought in contemporary environmental philosophy.

In essence, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a philosophical study into the notion of environment and ethics in terms of tribal philosophy and discuss its applicability and importance in regard to today's environmental issues. The paper will cover such aspects as tribal worldview, tribal view on nature, ethics in terms of the tribal philosophy and the value of the environment, among others.

Concept and Characteristics of Tribal Philosophy

Tribal philosophy can be defined as the system of wisdom, ethics, and world outlook that has emerged in the course of a lengthy period of historical development and has been shaped by

the tribes' closeness with nature and their collective lifestyle. It cannot be defined as a unified and universal theoretical approach, but as a combination of elements and ideas derived from a variety of experiences of different tribes. The key element of this philosophy is the recognition of a close and complex relationship between humans and nature in which nature cannot be viewed merely as resources.

The relational worldview of tribal philosophy is a central characteristic. Humans are not separate from nature or isolated from it; rather, humans, animals, plants, rivers, forests, and land represent one holistic system. This relational perspective calls into question the dualism of contemporary thought and provides an integrated ontological framework in which existence is interdependent and shared among all.

Ethical responsibility toward nature is another important feature. It treats nature not as something to be manipulated and exploited but rather something that deserves care, respect, and protection. This ethical stance is directly connected with the welfare of future generations and collective life sustainability. Control of resource use is, in such cases, need-based and ecological balance for the future is long-term (Garnett et al. 369-370)³.

One of the defining features of tribal philosophy is its epistemological structure, which tends to be very experiential and passed from generation to generation. Last but not least, knowledge is rarely recorded in any written form. We carry it across our collective lips, in the stories, the rituals, and our mundane lives. That in turn makes this a living and changing knowledge system that grows and mutates according to local ecological and social conditions.

Tribal philosophy is based on collectivism. Community interest is placed ahead of individual well-being. It makes for stronger social cohesion, cooperation, and equitable resource-sharing. It also expresses the relationship between human beings and Nature in both economic and ethical or spiritual ways.

Tribal philosophy is a complex knowledge system that synthesises ontology, epistemology and ethics in an interconnected web. It provides an oppositional way to the notion of human-nature-centric approaches, therein redeploing a relationship-centred and morally cognizant perspective. These features of tribal philosophy render it a unique philosophical resource within the framework of the contemporary environmental crisis.

Environment and Ethics in Tribal Philosophy

Ethics and the environment are closely connected in tribal philosophy. Ethics is not limited to rules of human behaviour, but extends to a broader framework that defines relationships with the entire biosphere, nature, and non-human entities. The philosophical worldview in this case recognises that man is not above nature, but a constituent part of nature, responsible morally for its actions towards other living things. Hence, ethics is a relational concept where life exists through interdependence. This, in turn, makes the philosophy of ethics relevant for criticising modern morality.

One of the key principles that underlies the philosophy is the intrinsic value of nature. Nature is valuable on its own accord without any relation to humanity and its usefulness (Taylor 99-100)⁴. Nature is appreciated not only for its instrumental value, but in itself, where rivers,

forests, animals, birds, and lands are not used resources, but subjects of existence with dignity. This corresponds to some modern concepts of environmental ethics.

The tribal ethical structure relies heavily on nurturing a responsibility-based relationship. Humans have a relationship with nature, kind of a moral contract that allows them to use natural resources as long as they do it moderately, sustainably and considerately towards future generations. Such a perspective moves environmental protection from being about the exploiter to being about stewardship; This necessitates making environmental protection a civic duty, both on an individual and collective basis.

Another feature of tribal environmental ethics is its spirituality. Nature is seen not only as a physical reality but also as alive and sacred. This spiritual bond encourages the values of discipline, dignity and duty among individuals to ensure a harmonious interaction with nature. This has led to tribal ethics being more widely recognised as a viable philosophical basis for solutions to modern ecological disasters.

So, in tribal philosophy, there is no distinction between environment and ethics. The two together combine to form a holistic worldview of existence, morality and nature, that is integral to one another. This integrated worldview represents a significant philosophical alternative in relation to the current global environmental crisis.

Indigenous Knowledge System and Environmental Management

The indigenous knowledge system is essentially a practical and life-based knowledge system that has emerged from a prolonged history of observation and interaction with nature. It is not theoretical knowledge but a functional knowledge system that has close ties to life, such as agriculture, forestry, preservation of water resources, and biodiversity. The knowledge in this case is normally passed down through generations by oral traditions, social practices, and cultural practices, hence an adaptive knowledge system.

One prominent characteristic of this kind of knowledge system is the intimate relationship between knowledge and environment. The tribal people are very observant about the environment and climatic conditions in their immediate environments. They understand and know well how seasons operate and how plants and animals behave in different seasons within their environments. This knowledge is useful for regulating the exploitation of natural resources for ecological balance. In other words, it complements modern science knowledge systems (Garnett et al. 370-371)⁵.

Tribal environmental management places a high value on collective ownership and responsibility. It is where forests, rivers and land are not considered private property but also community-based resources. Use of resources is need-based and regulated so as to reduce overexploitation, due to which natural resources can be sustained longer.

The other critical aspect of indigenous knowledge systems is the integration of spiritual and ethical values into environmental management. Nature is understood to be sacred and alive, and the destruction of the environment is seen not only as an economic loss but also as a crime against moral order. This worldview imposes a compelling moral and social duty to save the environment.

Therefore, the indigenous knowledge system can be a good alternative and complementary framework to modern environmental management. It combines science, ethics, local experience, and common responsibility into one monolithic model of environmental protection.

Tribal Philosophy and Contemporary Environmental Crisis

We are passing through a concrete and multi-dimensional environmental crisis in the contemporary world. The future existence of human civilisation in a sustainable manner is seriously compromised due to climate change, deforestation, rapid loss of biodiversity, pollution and the over-exploitation of natural resources. The nature of this crisis is neither confined to the technical or scientific areas, but also part of a more generalised moral and spiritual malaise in man's attitude toward nature. Tribal philosophy, as an alternative ethical and epistemological framework, has gained quite a lot of ground in this regard.

The most important perspective from tribal philosophy is that of the relationship between human beings and nature, being explained in terms of interdependence and co-existence and not as one of domination. In such a scenario, it becomes very clear that human beings cannot be separated from nature since they are all one entity with moral accountability.

The consumer-driven development model and over-dependence on natural resources are some main reasons for the modern environmental crisis. In this context, tribal philosophy proposes another path of restriction, moderation and community health. Of course, this view is in line with sustainable development, whereby controls are imposed on the present generation that is not entitled to compete for resources available only today at the expense of future generations.

Furthermore, the global importance of indigenous communities for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection has been heavily acknowledged. Many indigenous inhabited regions endure as centres of biodiversity, and with this represents long accustomed environments management techniques by local people. This realisation establishes tribal philosophy as not merely theoretical but, indeed, a model of environmental sustainability.

In all certainty, in the framework of the ongoing ecological emergency, tribal reasoning offers a valuable ideological alternative. It redefined the human-nature relationship and allows for a new holistic perspective on sustainability that draws upon responsibility, restraint, and universal flourishing.

Relevance of Tribal Philosophy in the Contemporary Environmental Crisis

The world is currently experiencing various environmental issues, which include global warming, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, pollution, and over-exploitation of the environment. This problem is not just scientific, but it is also associated with human perceptions regarding nature and moral standpoints. Modern developmental paradigms have always treated the environment as a means for production purposes, leading to its gradual imbalance. In this regard, the tribal philosophy presents another way of environmental ethics whereby man is considered to be part of nature, rather than its master.

The knowledge of the tribes in relation to the environment plays an important role in solving the current environmental problem. The experience gained through their observations

concerning climate, forest products, and biodiversity has proved very helpful in dealing with the environmental problems. They may provide complementary information that could enhance environmental policymaking.

Tribal philosophy plays a very important role in biodiversity conservation. Forests are not only for the local (tribal) communities a means of economic earnings, but also, more than that, they are an integral part of their culture, spiritual beliefs, and social life. It is due to this worldview that so many tribal inhabited regions have remained more or less biodiversity-rich. Respect for nature and coexistence, the ethical sense of which turns environmental protection into a social responsibility, is quite consistent with modern conservation thought.

Development in modern consumer-driven economic systems is measured based on endless production and consumption. With the growing density of human activity, this has resulted in more and more strain on natural resources and a hastened decay of the environment. On the other hand, tribal philosophy teaches the wisdom of restraint, moderation and use of resources as per need. Such a way of life reveals the reciprocal interdependency between people and nature while raising an essential ethical basis for ecologically sustainable development.

Tribal philosophy remains ever more relevant in the current discourse on sustainable development. In many tribal societies, land, forests and water resources are seen not only as a commodity for current use but also as an inheritance to be passed down through generations. The intergenerational responsibility of sustainable development is deeply intertwined with the principles that underpin the millennial commitment, and environmental protection and social well-being should go together.

Another important aspect of environmental justice has long been tribal philosophy. Tribal communities are often the most affected victims of environmental degradation, which includes mining projects, industrialisation, deforestation and land acquisition. This truth shows the deep intertwining of environmental and social justice. It characterises the environment as a shared commons and prescribes equitable and courteous conduct of humans toward other living things, furnishing an appropriate moral basis for contemporary environmental justice philosophy.

In this regard, tribal philosophy gains significance in light of the present-day environmental challenge, as values like coexistence with nature, reverence for biodiversity, moderation in life, and responsibility towards posterity provide substantial guidance to address the issue of environmental protection and sustainability in philosophical terms. In this sense, tribal philosophy can be regarded as an important alternative ethical and epistemological foundation in contemporary environmental thought.

Critical discussion

Tribal philosophy has become an important alternative perspective for environmental thinking in contemporary times. It is essential to examine the strengths, weaknesses and practical application of this philosophy simultaneously. Tribal philosophy provides a strong ethical basis from which to think about environmental issues, but its limitations, challenges and difficulties of implementation are also present within the frameworks of modern state systems and market economies; therefore, all three must be examined together.

One major strength of this tribal philosophy is its integrated worldview. Tribal peoples view humans, nature and the entire ecological system as an integral part of a larger interconnected whole. This integrated worldview interprets environmental problems (issues related to ecology) not only as technical failures, but also moral and philosophical failures. Because of this view of the world, tribal peoples provide strong ethical bases for thinking about environmental issues (Berkes 12-14)⁶.

Another major strength is the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature in tribal philosophy. In modern economic thinking, nature is often thought of as a resource. However, within the tribal philosophy of the world's indigenous peoples, nature is perceived as a living entity that possesses both dignity and moral worth. Such a position aligns closely with the fundamental principles of environmental ethics and provides strong moral justification for protecting the environment.

Tribal Knowledge Systems contain rich, experiential, ecological understandings of agriculture, forest management and biodiversity and support environmental sustainability. Often this body of knowledge functions as a complement to contemporary scientific methods and is essential for understanding the ecological sustainability of Land, Forest and Culture.

However, it also has some important limitations:

Firstly, tribal societies themselves are diverse; their values, ways of living, and attitudes toward nature differ from place to place. It means that discussing the philosophy of such people within a single framework is inappropriate.

Secondly, influenced by the modern system of states, economy, and globalisation processes, many traditions of indigenous communities have changed or become weaker. As a consequence, there will be some clashes between the practice of such a philosophy and the current social and political environment.

Thirdly, there are many inaccurate assumptions about the inherent environmental benefits associated with tribal culture. Not every practice produced by tribal people is environmentally friendly; thus, it is critical that a critical perspective be taken into consideration in evaluating these types of relationships.

Nevertheless, tribal philosophy may still serve as a valuable example of an alternative approach to environmental ethics. It is grounded on the view of the human-nature interaction as a relationship between coexistence and responsibility. As far as the present environmental crisis goes, the ethical position of the theory continues to be topical.

In conclusion, one should admit that tribal philosophy is both an established tradition and a dynamic source of knowledge. However, for it to be successfully applied, it should be critically evaluated against current sources of knowledge.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this analysis was to examine the connection between environment and ethics in terms of tribal philosophy and its applicability for understanding the environmental crisis today. It appears evident from the analysis that tribal philosophy is an integrated and

relational nature-centred way of knowing that sees man as part of nature rather than something outside it. Therefore, it may serve as a good philosophical alternative to explain the current environmental crisis.

One of the distinctive aspects of tribal philosophy is the presence of interdependence between people and nature, as well as the morality involved. The latter means that nature is not viewed as something to be used but as a living reality, and for this reason, respecting nature, sparing its resources, and conserving biodiversity become moral obligations. In this regard, the mentioned point can be regarded as an important one within contemporary environmental ethics, as it helps develop a more profound basis for the idea of sustainable development (DesJardins 15)⁷.

Tribal environmental philosophies are embedded in the daily life experience of tribes. They have elements such as forest conservation, working together to manage resources, local ecological traditions or rituals, and using the wisdom gained through experience to protect the environment. Historically, this tribal experiential knowledge has acted as an important aspect of traditional environmental management along with modern scientific methods, and in many situations.

On the other hand, it is equally vital to take note of the fact that tribal communities are diverse in terms of their knowledge bases, culture and environmental philosophies. Further, because of the effects of modern economies, state policy, and globalisation, there is continual change in these knowledge systems. Hence, tribal philosophy must not be viewed as a static theory but as an ever-changing knowledge base.

As the environmental crisis becomes increasingly complex and intertwined in today's world, the moral and epistemological importance of tribal philosophy is growing. Tribal philosophy looks at the environment as not only a technological problem but also as a moral and philosophical one. Intergenerational responsibility, social welfare, and the inherent worth of nature serve as the fundamental pillars of this philosophy.

Thus, tribal philosophy cannot be viewed strictly from the point of view of culture and history. Instead, this philosophy needs to be incorporated into contemporary environmental ethics, environmental education, and environmental policymaking. This would very likely create a new and more balanced, equitable and sustainable relationship between humanity and nature.

References

1. "Environmental Ethics, Learn Science at Scitable." Nature.Com, 2026, <https://www.nature.com/scitable/knowledge/environmental-ethics-96467512/>. Accessed 9 March 2026.
2. DesJardins, Joseph R. Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy. 3rd ed., Wadsworth, 2000, p. 15.
3. Garnett, Stephen T., et al. "A Spatial Overview of the Global Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation." Nature Sustainability, vol. 1, no. 7, 2018, pp. 369-370.

4. Taylor, Paul W. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton UP, 1986, pp. 99-100.
5. Garnett, Stephen T., et al. "A Spatial Overview of the Global Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation." *Nature Sustainability*, vol. 1, no. 7, 2018, pp. 370-371.
6. Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology*. 4th ed., Routledge, 2018, pp. 12-14.
7. DesJardins, Joseph R. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. 3rd ed., Wadsworth, 2000, p. 15.