

Unveiling Tribal Ecological Knowledge in Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's

*White as Milk and Rice*

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ABSTRACT

Tribal ecological knowledge (TEK) is a cumulative body of traditional knowledge transmitted through generations, offering insights into the intricate relationships between Indigenous communities and their environment. Acknowledging previously undocumented aspects of indigenous knowledge facilitates the restoration and maintenance of environmental equilibrium. The primary material opted for the study is Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice*. The study aims to investigate the crucial role of TEK in

fostering sustainable practices and elucidates the inherent value of TEK in promoting ecological integrity and social justice. The findings substantiate the lived experiences of these communities, thereby amplifying their unheard voices and contributing to the integration of TEK in achieving an equitable society.

Keywords: Tribal ecological knowledge, Ecological restoration, Collaborative conservation.

Tribal communities worldwide have cultivated a deeply rooted connection with their surrounding environments. Tribal ecology refers to the profound sense of unanimity and environmental entwinement, where the land is considered not merely a resource but an integral part of its cultural identity. Their long-standing existence with nature has taught them self-subsistent living without detaching the cords of nature. Their actions reciprocate with nature, and their ecosophy drowns one in amazement.

Tribal Ecological Knowledge is a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, handed down through generations by cultural transmission. The present study aims to investigate the crucial role of TEK in fostering sustainable practices and elucidates the inherent value of TEK in promoting ecological integrity and social justice. The tribal development model is incomparable to western developmental design, yet it has been frequently disturbed and intervened by the outsiders. Despite numerous modifications, most of the tribes have not compromised their nature-oriented lifestyle. They retain their traditional ways of living, tapping with the tunes of the natural world. Their knowledge systems, which were deemed by the westerners as unworthy, have profound scientific validations which the mainstream has misrepresented continuously.

Ecology refers to the study of inter-relationship with the environment. It is important to understand the surrounding environment because the survival of mankind depends on it. The gradual increase and intervention of the human population has resulted in the destruction of the natural environment. Not only

atomic warfare, even the tiniest thing human beings do have gradual effects on the environment. The signs may not be apocalyptic for now, but it is insidious. David Maybury Lewis rightly quotes about this insidious destruction in his book *Millenium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*,

Meanwhile, ordinary people sense that enormous changes are taking place. The globe is warming up and is increasingly polluted. We cannot take fresh air or clean water for granted anymore. Even our vast oceans are starting to choke on human garbage. The rain-forests are burning. The ozone layer is being depleted at rates that constantly exceed our estimates. Are we making our own earth uninhabitable, not in one grand moment of atomic destruction as we have feared, but simply by being bad stewards of it, by foolishly destroying the very environment that nurtures us? (35).

*White as Milk and Rice* by Nidhi Dugar Kundalia presents the ethnographic exploration of marginalized tribes, to unveil the profound symbiotic relationship between these groups with their natural environment. The narrative underscores dauntless resilience exerted by these communities through ecologically grounded existence. Kundalia highlights through her metaphorical narration the enduring ecological consciousness of the tribal population despite facing systemic rejection by mainstream society.

Kundalias's depiction of "The Halakkis of Ankola" exhibit their profound ecological interconnectedness wherein their livelihood is linked directly to their surrounding environment. The Halakkis' daily venture into the forest along with their architectural choice reveal their interdependence with nature. Their dwellings reverberate the sensual melodies of the sea, as they are constructed with laterite stone walls embedded with shells, while palm-thatched roofs provide natural insulation. Notably the usage of cow dung flooring underscores the embodied relationship with nature. The narrative substantiates, "The cool cow dung flooring still heals Sukri's toes after a long day at work and the valle always has hot water to bathe in.... The laterite stone walls, made from the sand at the beach, have shells here and there; if you listen closely, they echo the sea and its waves" (Kundalia 7). These eco-friendly sustainable practices

juxtaposed with contemporary luxurious lifestyle, amplify the holistic integration of human habitation and domestic practices with the natural world.

The TEK concerning medicinal plants is often underutilized. Their empirical knowledge gained because of constant interaction with nature can help treat everyday ailments. In “The Halakkis of Ankola” Sukri’s engagement with medicinal herbs exemplifies their ethno-medical expertise. As inhabitants of the forests the Halakkis possess a nuanced understanding of diverse flora which adds to their repository of traditional knowledge. To further quote from the text,

Occasionally, she plucks a few flowers of maddale for her husband. She will boil them in water and he’ll sip on it. Her mother used to say it cured asthma. Oh, that is brahmi—she could fry that with onions to make his mind sharper. Roots of kakke and leaves of kasamarda- she stocks them for fever and cold. Till last year, she always took kasamarda for her children (Kundalia 17).

Kundalia’s portrayal of “The Kurumbas of Nilgiris” highlights their entwinement with the region’s distinctive ecological aesthetics. They occupy the thickets of the forest and dwell in mud huts. The mountains of Nilgiris as mentioned in the text illuminate the cyclical blooming of the kurinji flower, wherein the mountain “... turns purple with kurinji flowers once in twelve years” (81). The powerful spectacle of the red earth, the green blades of grass and the mountains transforming into vibrant purple is an enthralling sight to feel the ecological abundance in the Kurumba settlements.

The Kurumba subsistence practices as depicted in Kundalia’s narrative exemplify their reciprocal relationship with the ecosystem. Berries, herbs and tubers grow in the forest like weeds, reflecting the ecological richness of the region and its capacity to sustain the Kurumba community. Furthermore, the Kurumbas honey gathering technique reveals their ritualistic approach towards resource procurement. Honey gathering festivities celebrated with singing by elderly women, drumming by men and circular dances by young women, underscore the socio-cultural importance of the activity. The performance of

ancestral puja during the festival signifies the spiritual dimension added to the activity making it a ritual rather than mere resource acquisition for economic necessity.

“The Kurumbas of Nilgiris” showcases the ideal methods employed by the characters Siva and Mani for gathering honey. Siva's subsequent use of the bugiri, a flute-like instrument, accompanied by chanted prayers to ward off a snake, the smoking of the hive, slicing the comb necessary for consumption and leaving the rest for the wild represent a ritualized form of interaction with the natural world. The techniques employed reveal the care and concern they hold for the ecosystem. The Kurumba honey gathering process reveals a sophisticated understanding of interspecies communication and a ritualized approach to resource extraction.

The Kurumbas' oneness with their environment is essentially ecstatic and is characterized by embodied reverence. The text accentuates, “Kurumbas always walk barefoot, a sign of respect they accord to Mother Nature” (Kundalia 91). This signifies the ecological ethos ingrained in the minds of the individuals. Likewise, the Kurumbas of Nilgiris also have a collective knowledge of medicinal herbs, which is preserved by the tribe for generations. This expertise positions them as acknowledged healers, who can heal several ailments. This can be understood from the text as,

Besides possessing extraordinary spiritual powers, Kurumbas also act as healers by curing ailments; they are especially good at curing piles, joint pain and even diabetes. Flowers, roots, leaves, dry bark, tender twigs, climbing tendrils, twining shrubs and seeds which they dare not reveal names of, for the fear of reducing the Kurumba power and their knowledge... (Kundalia 82-83).

The Kurumbas' reluctance in sharing their traditional knowledge is viewed as a protective mechanism against exploitation and commercialization of traditional knowledge. The text illuminates, “...they strongly believe that if the names of such plant species are revealed to others, the medicines lose

their potency and that act also invites supernatural punishment” (Kundalia 85). This strategic concealment aids in maintaining their cultural autonomy and showcases their commitment in safeguarding their ethnomedical expertise.

The Khasis are a set of matrilineal tribes, their rich repository of traditional knowledge is embodied in their prehistoric sacred forest called the Mawphlang, which has been preserved for ages by the Lyngdoh clan. The Mawphlang has around 450 species of flora and fauna, attracting rain clouds and regulating the local climate. It even has 700-year-old trees standing like an edifice unshaken by time. The Mawphlang is a protected reserve guarded with strict regulations, where even the utterance of profane language is forbidden, and no one is allowed to take even a dead leaf. It is like a *sanctum sanctorum* for the Khasis, because for them “God is present in nature” (Kundalia 166). The Mawphlang, as a tangible manifestation of their spiritual worldview, highlights the link between their cultural identity and the preservation of their natural environment.

In ‘The Khasis of Shillong’ the ecological interdependence of the Khasis is witnessed through two old women, Wansuk and Syrpai. Wansuk’s act of feeding sugar to black ants, in contrast to contemporary pest eradication practices, demonstrates a fundamental respect for all living beings and a commitment to maintaining ecological balance. This act of microcosmic altruism highlights the Khasis’ fundamental recognition of insects as integral components of the natural world.

Tribal ecological knowledge promotes a better understanding of the historic relationship between people and their environment. Contrary to western science, tribal knowledge systems are often treated with less or no importance. As ecological degradation has plagued the natural living, many started focusing on ecological restoration, which is the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, and destroyed. It is from this point that collaborative projects with TEK have taken adrift. To redeem and restore ecological diversity, this rising sense of ecological consciousness is trying to

bring out tribal wisdom to the forefront. As elucidated by Fikret Berkes in his work *Sacred Ecology*, local or indigenous knowledge systems must complement scientific ecology. Berkes approaches TEK as a knowledge-practice-belief complex. He examines traditional knowledge as a challenge to the positivist-reductionist paradigm in western science and unveils the potential of TEK in science of ecology and resource management.

In conclusion, Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice* transcends a mere ethnographic documentation, into a profound exploration of the intricate relationship between marginalized tribal communities and their respective environments. The narrative demonstrates a consistent thread of embodied ecological knowledge, ritualized resource management, and a profound sense of interconnectedness with the natural world. The ecosophy of the tribal world is a thing to be appreciated and admired. Its sublime beauty can be sensed only by the eyes that look for it. Their knowledge system is far-fetched from our understanding. Tribal ecological canon is a thing to be embraced and not judged based on underlying norms.

Kundalia's work serves as a powerful reminder of the urgent need to recognize and value these alternative worldviews, particularly in an era marked by accelerating environmental degradation. The imperative to cultivate a harmonious coexistence, as articulated in Kundalia's *White as Milk and Rice*, resonates with transcendentalist philosophy. Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden*, advocates, "Live each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth" (14). This transcendentalist philosophy of a triune living with nature will lead towards the best. As stewards of the natural world, it is essential to express euphoric existence with the environment, as jeopardizing it would take humanity to peril. Therefore, adopting a more holistic and respectful approach to our relationship with the environment is not merely an ethical choice, but a fundamental prerequisite for our existence.

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