



# The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health of Nomadic and Denotified Tribes

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**Abstract**

This paper presents the impact of climate change on Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (NT-DNT), based on interviews with women of the Ghisadi nomadic community, as well as case studies collected during the relief work for COVID-19 and other natural disasters in Maharashtra. The author belongs to a nomadic tribe, and uses her personal lived experiences to analyze the impact on NT-DNTs – that is more severe than experiences of other marginalised groups such as Dalit or Adivasi communities because of the former's criminalisation; from historical, legal, anti-caste, intersectional feminist, and mental justice perspectives.

This paper argues that NT-DNT communities who have harmed the environment the least are suffering the most from climate change. The paper aims to show how this impact goes beyond the more obvious social, financial, and physical suffering, and affects their mental justice.

The paper puts forth findings such as the relation between NT-DNTs and the environment, their historical contribution to the protection of the environment, absence of nomadic voices in current climate change movements, continuing criminalization of NT-DNTs by law which is to purportedly protect environment, and the influence of caste and socio-political isolation. The paper argues for reclamation of NT-DNT community histories to move towards social and environmental justice.

**Keywords:**

Nomadic and Denotified, Criminalisation, Climate Change, Mental Justice, Environmental Justice

## Introduction

“During the 2005 floods in Mumbai, we were living in a tent on a footpath near a bridge. After days of heavy downpour, all the water from surrounding areas started collecting in that spot because it is low-lying. This was not rainwater; it was sewage water; water filled with dead animals and other unclean things. The land could not take so much; it collapsed right below us. Our tent washed away; all our things were ruined. My little girls survived only because their father would carry them on his shoulders to a safe spot every night and bring them back in the day. All of us shivering in our wet clothes through days and nights. He constantly waded in and out of dirty floodwater for over 2 days. He never recovered from this. As his health started deteriorating, doctors told us that he had picked up many infections in that water. One day he simply collapsed and died. We were plunged into such poverty and fear that it is difficult to recount.”

This is an excerpt from a book of interviews the author has collected, of women of the Ghisadi Nomadic and Denotified tribe (NT-DNT) living in different parts of Maharashtra. The above story is the author’s personal experience. Stories like these are all around her community - a regular occurrence that collapses entire families and breaks the morale of the community over and over again.

Climate change is not a news item or an occasional phenomenon for people of the nomadic tribes, who live in close proximity to nature, whose occupations, livelihoods, culture, language, art - everything is closely connected to the environment. It affects them directly, with severe multigenerational impact on every aspect of their mental, financial, social, and political existence.

It is not that other communities do not face disasters; but the kind of assistance and administrative sympathy and help that people with even relative privilege are accorded, never reach communities like the nomadic tribes or Adivasis. The author has grown up hearing that her people are not worthy of any help, and in fact deserve the disasters that befall them, every time the community faces an emergency. This is more severe than the discrimination and apathy faced by other marginalised communities in India - because of the added layer of criminalization faced by NT-DNTs.

This paper argues – like several critical environmentalists have for indigenous communities – that the criminalised NT-DNT communities in India who have had the least hand in harming the environment are suffering the most from climate change. It could be stated that this kind of impact goes beyond the more obvious social, financial, and physical suffering, and hits NT-DNT communities even more deeply affecting their collective and inter-generational mental health, culture, identity, confidence, dignity, and very existence. The author has argued earlier (Pawar, 2021) that “oppression first begins with mental oppression by which communities are made weak mentally and over time made to accept discrimination and violence. That, over generations, mental terror must have been created by overburdening these communities with unending and insurmountable problems, finally forcing them to lose courage.” This kind of mental weakening and loss of courage over generations, exacerbates acutely in NT-DNT communities during disasters and other manifestations of climate change; which is compounded since they have to suffer this with almost no help or even recognition of their experiences from either the administration, political class or rest of society.

The paper will begin with narrating few examples from NT-DNT women’s interviews; followed by findings – the relation between NT-DNTs and the environment, their historical contribution to protection of the environment despite which there is no notable nomadic voice today in national or international climate change movements, the continuing criminalization of NT-DNTs by law which is purportedly to protect the environment but ends up further marginalizing communities who live in close proximity to nature, and the influence of caste and socio-political isolation on how different communities experience climate change. Finally, the paper asserts that these communities need to reclaim their histories to move towards justice for themselves and nature.

Several studies highlight the detrimental impact of mainstream ideas of development on indigenous communities. A study (De, 2015) on development induced displacement of Adivasi women in Orissa, highlights how challenges faced by Adivasi communities have been compounded by the arrival of global mining giants, for whom governments have used the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894 to forcibly displace millions from their ancestral lands. “According

to an Indian government working group, fifty percent of those displaced by development projects are adivasis. Adivasis have faced a disproportionate share of displacement and women of their community suffer the most. Many tribal belts have now been identified as 'development sites' ideally suited for building large multi-purpose river valley projects such as mines, thermal power stations or paper factories".

Vaidya (2018) argues that Adivasis are "caught between the Indian state's modernist development" which is a mix of "the remnants of old colonial 'civilising' of indigenous populations, a post-colonial nationalist industrialism and a post-industrial urge toward conservation". The paper states how this is a kind of structural violence faced by Adivasi communities, and which can be connected to developmentalist and capitalist ideological frameworks. (Ramdas, 2021) states that "radical transformation of food systems is about dismantling and rebuilding a food system where social justice is central to Food Sovereignty. This is foremost a project of liberation from systemic structures of enslavement, and in the case of India these are capitalism, Brahmanism and Brahmanical patriarchy".

While similar studies are very less in the context of nomadic communities, given their similarities of opposition to colonialism and subsequent criminalisation by politically and socially dominant groups, and with the added layer of nomadism and therefore landlessness which makes them even more vulnerable than Adivasi communities, it is no surprise that when it comes to Nomadic groups, ideologies of Capitalism and Brahmanical Patriarchy operationalise to their great detriment, and I will reveal how it takes place through an analysis of policy and practice. This paper also tries to fill the gap in research around Climate Change and NT-DNT communities.

NT-DNTs were declared criminals by the Criminal Tribes of India Act in 1871, by British rulers because they were among the strongest to fight against colonialism; they fiercely resisted colonial takeover of lands and natural resources, and were criminalised for it. The community's existence has since been reduced to extreme marginalization due to the forced landlessness, relentless migration, and loss of culture and identity over generations of persecution.

Many stories of climate change-induced emergencies were heard during COVID-19 relief and flood relief work carried out in 2020-21 through Anubhuti – the organisation that was founded by the author in 2016. Over 8,000 families belonging to 22 different nomadic tribes were the beneficiaries – with whom the organisation interacted through direct relief work and also through awareness sessions, trainings, and vaccination camps. These stories represent a wide diversity in the socio-cultural dimensions of the community in terms of tribe identity, age, region, language, occupation, marital status, disability, family status, experience of violence, medical emergencies and so on. These intersections of different identities and experiences in these stories show the severity of climate change impact experienced by nomadic communities on every aspect of their lives which is more stark than that experienced by other marginalised groups such as Dalits and the general poor. These experiences include displacement, housing crisis, occupation crisis, education drop-out, sexual reproductive and other health emergencies, and mental health panic. Many of these experiences are from the perspective of women – bringing an intersectional feminist lens to climate change impact.

## **Narratives of NT-DNT Women About Climate Change Impact**

Women of nomadic communities speak most powerfully about the impact of climate change on different aspects of their lives because they take leading roles in family, economic and social aspects – such as cleaning up abandoned lands and setting up tent houses there after every migration, carrying out economic ventures for livelihood, looking for food and other essentials during ‘normal’ times and more so during crisis periods. Following are few stories shared by women of the Ghisadi Gadiya Lohar (ironsmith) nomadic tribe:

"We perform in social functions to earn a living. During the pandemic there were no social gatherings. To survive, we started picking up dead bodies of COVID patients. Pandemics and disasters mean different things to different people, but for people like us, it means absolute danger. No one even knew that this kind of work exists, and that there are certain people doing it. It is difficult to put into words what we felt when we were so terrified of the disease because if we caught

it, we had no money to seek treatment, and yet had to do this work to provide food for our families." - nomadic woman living in Nashik, Maharashtra.

"These lands were garbage dumps, lands used for open defecation, graveyards. We would clean them up by our own hands, and set up our tents there. Till then, no one had looked twice towards these spots. But once we had cleaned them up and started existing there, powerful people would come to drive us away and claim these places. Being landless is a curse that gives unending pain and indignity." - a nomadic woman living in Satara, Maharashtra.

As can be seen, the women here are talking about multi-faceted losses - of land, homes, livelihood, safety, dignity, and of mental stability.

The author wishes to highlight here that these kinds of experiences cause mental injustice which goes beyond material losses, because the deep-rooted impact of the mental terror felt during these times cannot be regained even if the material losses are.

To understand mental injustice, the author wishes to elaborate here upon the concept of Mental Justice which has been explained thus, "when an individual from a vulnerable social identity (of gender, caste, class, sexuality, nationality, and so on), experiences any kind of mental health issue, such as an illness, distress, or imbalance, the root causes of this condition can be found in the injustice, discrimination or violence that they have faced directly or indirectly because of being a part of said minority community. Mental justice therefore is important; when we speak of mental health, it remains limited to the treatment of an individual, but when we speak of these communities, we cannot speak of their mental health on only an individual basis—we need to realise that the constant violation of justice that they face in social, political, economic and every other field impacts their communal, collective as well as individual mental health. The response to such mental health impact too needs to come from a space of justice—which comes from our Constitution. Mental Justice is when individuals and communities are able to access their rights of development, opportunities, participation, leadership, and other rights in a dignified and non-discriminatory manner that the Constitution safeguards" (Pawar, 2021).

The impact on mental justice in times of disasters is evident from the narrative given at the beginning of this paper. The effects of such mental injustice cause deeper losses because they lead to the loss of social confidence to access any kind of resource, help or opportunity over generations – directly impacting entire communities' historical development and existence.

The criminalization of today's nomadic communities by British rulers in 1871 was followed by forced evictions, their lands taken away forcefully, made forcefully nomadic by inhuman practices such as not being allowed to stay in one spot for more than three weeks and many other abuses including arbitrary arrests and police brutality. This was accompanied by societal suspicion towards entire communities including children and women who are till date seen as criminals, thieves, kidnappers, etc. In fact, they are actually victims of some of the most heinous crimes including mob lynching, being paraded naked, blatant sexual violence, kidnapping of children and women – without any protection because the police ignore them at best, or further targets them at worst.

NT-DNT families live on the most dangerous lands. They clean them up, and set up tent homes using simple materials – leaving hardly any human footprint behind. For these invaluable services, they are not only not remunerated, instead criminalised and stigmatised, all while facing extreme forms of violence and displacement.

Within them, NT-DNT women – unlike women of settled communities – take leading roles in their communities' occupations; they have invented and continue to carry out work requiring direct scientific knowledge of different natural elements – of physics, chemistry and biology.

Feminists have equated the exploitation of nature to the exploitation faced by women. But, the exploitation of all women is not the same; women who have closer connections to nature face a higher degree of exploitation. For eg. Adivasi and NT-DNT women who respect and fiercely protect the reproductive powers of the environment, one of the most famous and successful of which has been the Chipko movement – have faced the most violent silencing of their voices.



Practices like witch-hunting being used as a tool to target strong nomadic and Adivasi women leaders have been well documented. A study in Jharkhand (Shekhar 2020) estimates that every year 200 women are suspected to be 'witches' and killed in this state. It calls out the criminalization, torture, and forced displacement of Adivasi women - among them single, childless, unmarried and old women targeted more - by branding them 'witches' and persecuting them. Shekhar identifies the coveting of land and natural resources by powerful groups as one of the main reasons for witch-hunting: "Witch killings are also an act of the Land Mafia. Miscreants use social superstitions to uproot families from the land they have an eye on and later acquire their property at throwaway prices. The importance of Adivasi land has increased in recent years as these areas have been found to be rich in minerals and forest produce, resulting in the unlawful encroachment by both the Government and corporations and thereby making the land a scarce and highly valuable resource within these communities."

Another article on Adivasi Lives Matter (Bara 2022) mentions several incidents of mobs of men stripping, thrashing, battering to death, beheading and murdering Adivasi women in Jharkhand, West Bengal and Gujarat after branding them as 'witches' as recently as 2020 and 2021.

Also, natural calamities induced displacement and migration have severe impacts. The author has seen during her work, that many women of nomadic and Dalit communities displaced due to droughts and earthquakes, who were dependant on carrying out their traditional occupations earlier, could no longer do so and were forced into work like rag picking, selling scrap, selling cloth rags, etc. which pay very little, involve very unsafe work conditions, and have no dignity. They had to leave a land they were familiar with, to set up life again on disputed lands. Domestic violence, social insecurity, decreasing access to education and a cycle of problems began for the women, with an impact even on their average life span. In Adivasi settlements in Attappadi in Kerala - which have seen the disappearance of traditional methods of agriculture and of the particular crops they have been depending on for subsistence and excessive encroachment of their farmlands by settlers - the life expectancy shrank by 11 years within 35 years (Jayaraj 2013). Rampant poverty, disappearance of their traditional system of medicine and discrepancies in their new food habits added to the severity of the

problem. Many of the severe health problems including uterine cancer, lessening breast milk and serious disorders of the thyroid were seen to be affecting women.

17% or 13861 women sugarcane cutters in Beed District of Maharashtra have undergone hysterectomy, according to 2019 data of Public Health Department of Maharashtra (Sah 2022). These women are among the approximately 2.5 lakh migrant workers who seasonally migrate to work in sugarcane fields in western Maharashtra for six months every year. The backbreaking work does not even allow for toilet breaks, much less for women to take a break during menstruation for self-care, and the other options are so harmful that the drastic step of hysterectomy has been opted for by thousands.

### **No Place of NT-DNTS in Climate Change Narratives**

Despite the closeness of nomadic populations to nature, and the subsequent disproportionately larger impact of climate change suffered by them compared to other communities, there are no notable voices from nomadic communities in the global climate change movement.

Internationally, policies, narratives and practices around Climate Change and Environmental Justice are largely driven by developed countries - by think tanks, universities, academics, politicians, administrators, etc. who invariably occupy a privileged space. They are not direct experiencers of climate change the way that nomadic populations are - who are at the bottom of all social, economic, political, administrative and legal hierarchies. On the other hand, nomadic and indigenous communities are actually at the forefront as climate activists - but unknown and not as part of any movement but as part of their daily lives - living as they do among animals, birds, plants, near natural lands and water bodies. Since their existence and dignity depend on the existence and dignity accorded to nature, they organically defend the latter.

These indigenous populations have contributed the most in environmental preservation; their denigrated and stigmatised lifestyles since historical times, in fact, are nothing but life-long activism for sustainable and environmentally harmless living. The culture, traditions, practices, belief systems, rituals, thoughts,

science, inventions, art, techniques, languages of Nomadic and Adivasi communities have historically been relegated as backward and superstitious – causing great harm to their dignity and existence as well as to the global climate change movement. This movement has a lot to learn from these communities, whose entire people – children, women, the old – everyone is an environmental activist by way of life. NT-DNTs and Adivasi communities have historically faced maximum targeting and persecution because of their closeness to nature. However, despite the sacrifices they have made for environmental justice, the climate change movement knows very little about them, and they hold almost no space in the knowledge or practices of this movement. National or global movements working on climate change, like most other movements, remain dominated by voices from privileged backgrounds.

## **NT-DNTs and the Environment**

NT-DNT and Adivasi communities are seen to be dealing with constant injustice, and this can be connected to the injustice being propagated on nature.

For nomadic and adivasi communities, the environment is not only a source for consumption of resources – for them it is their language, art, belief systems, expressions, and their every aspect of existence.

Their livelihoods, homes, food, culture, art, fashion, and overall lifestyles are very close and conducive to nature. They live and work closely with animals, birds and plants, and being nomadic, they do not own any land and live by cleaning up any piece of land available.

However, the impact of climate change is most severely faced by these communities.

Entire villages have to migrate due to disastrous changes in environmental patterns (floods, droughts, etc.). Migration is not just about movement of people across a geography, it is also about children migrating to a different education system, women navigating a different health system, families trying to gain acceptance in a different social system, and communities dealing with different

security and justice systems. Each of these is a veritable landmine where already criminalised communities enter with deep disadvantages.

Migration is also about a constant erosion of culture – there is nothing so historically injurious to a population’s existence and identity as much as loss of culture. These communities have been holding on to their languages, arts, music, skills, fashion, technologies and architecture by literally carrying these with them everytime they move, but this cannot be continued for much longer; much more powerful forces of globalization and modernization have made many aspects of their cultures endangered. Climate change is accelerating this cultural erosion.

Their occupations are deeply connected to nature – its cycles, patterns, seasons, and weather changes. When these are disturbed, their occupations are disturbed. In the case of NT-DNT communities, occupations are not only about financial sustainability – but of their community confidence, nurturing of historical community skills, and identity.

## **Climate Change, Law and Criminalization**

Climate change does not affect NT-DNT & indigenous communities with only environmental impacts, but also increases their criminalization. When laws are brought in criminalizing certain human actions – ostensibly done to protect forests, wildlife and animals, but which disproportionately target these communities who are not only dependant on nature but are its protectors, it is like “crushing worms while milling wheat” (translated from a Marathi phrase) where nomadic people can be seen to be treated as worms and crushed. For example, the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 has been formed with good intentions, but has ended up criminalizing nomadic tribes who work with forest produce. This law and its implementers do not have the understanding that nomadic and Adivasi tribes who live and work with wildlife, do not harm them; many a times these tribes have led great movements such as the Niyamgiri movement at great risk to their existence to protect forests from big corporates. However, the law ends up destroying and criminalizing their valid and harmless occupations.

Similarly, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act 1940 which regulates the import, manufacture and distribution of drugs in India, have criminalised many healers from the Vaidu community who find, make and sell medicinal plants and concoctions.

There are many other examples such as the Arms Act of 1959, which curbs illegal weapons and violence stemming from them. Many members of the Ghisadi Gadiya Lohar community - who make iron tools and weapons by hand - have been criminalised under this Act. The weapons they make are coveted by farmer and fisher communities for their work - they are not used for wars. The Ghisadi community is anyway so vulnerable, they have no control over how their produce is used; if there are any wrongdoers, it is the dominant communities who wrongfully use the weapons. But the Ghisadi community being an easy target is picked up and criminalised by the police. Seeing these legal actions, one is forced to ask - is the historical knowledge of these communities, that has been invented, recorded and saved over centuries, to now be considered criminal knowledge? If this is the case, then the deep injustice should be considered of criminalizing knowledge of communities who have caused the least harm to nature - in the name of protecting it.

The legal and policy mindset anyway is to view and treat NT-DNTs as unwanted. There has been no census that counts these communities separately for many decades; the 2008 Renke Commission estimated the population of NT-DNT communities in India to be 10.74 crores based on the 2001 Census, that is, 10% of the population. When such a large population is not only neglected, but their knowledge, customs and lifestyles nurtured for generations are also so easily targeted by laws and policies, it is a continuation of their historical invisibilization and criminalization.

Any law in a democratic and constitutional country should empower and uplift vulnerable communities. However, in the case of nomadic and indigenous communities, laws are leading to criminalization and extinction.

Laws are a significant part of curbing the effects of climate change; however, these laws need to be cognisant and considerate towards the realities and diversities of nomadic communities, not further criminalise them.

## **Caste and Climate Change**

Internationally, it is well documented and accepted that climate change needs to be seen from a lens of race to understand its differential impact. Recently, a United Nations expert stated in her report to the General Assembly that there can be no meaningful solution to the global climate and ecological crisis without addressing systemic racism (OHCHR 2022). She says, “The ongoing destruction of our planet affects everyone. But what experts also make clear is that race, ethnicity and national origin continue to result in the unjust enrichment of some, and the utter exploitation, abuse and even death of others on account of the discrimination at the core of environmental and climate injustice.” In India, the dominant discrimination system that contributes to environmental injustice, is caste.

Any community’s development is connected to resources, and for about 2500 years, resources in India have been occupied by dominant castes. Those on the lower ranks of the caste hierarchy have historically been treated as service and labour providers, without access to resources. Climate change therefore impacts those lower in the hierarchy of caste much more – their housing, nutrition, civic facilities, reach in decision-making bodies, importance given for relief and rehabilitation during disasters and so on, are all very poor. Most importantly, this historical denial of fundamental access, translates to very low social guts – they are not able to ask for the help they are entitled to as citizens, due to the fear, demotivation and expectation of failure developed over generations of experiencing denial at every turn.

## **Socio-Political Isolation and Climate Change**

Communities oppressed due to caste, sexuality and disability face compounded impacts of climate change because of their social and political isolation. NT-DNT, Adivasi and Dalit communities are among the first to be denied the right

of claiming their share of resources and support systems. In other cases of vulnerability among them such as, the LGBTIQ community and persons with disability, the inaccessibility to supporting resources is much more severe. They are not only socially isolated, but politically and legally marginalised and negated. In any work against climate change impacts, actual change can only be brought about with political will; but when seen from the eyes of highly vulnerable groups such as the NT-DNT, Adivasi and LGBTIQ communities, this political will is almost non-existent.

### **Conclusion: Community Resilience and History Reclamation for Environmental Justice**

The harm that NT-DNT and Adivasi communities are facing due to climate change - who have contributed the least to environmental degradation - when seen from the lens of the Indian Constitutional framework, is a disrespect of every human value that the Constitution guarantees.

Deep-rooted attitudinal changes are necessary across sectors to rectify this.

Firstly, it is imperative that NT-DNT and Adivasi knowledge is seen with dignity and respect, instead of labelling it backward as has been done historically; this is a form of 'knowledge isolation' that is as harmful as any kind of social or political ostracisation. It is not that nomadic people have never tried to bring forth their voices, thoughts and beliefs about environmental justice to policy-makers and decision-makers - they have always tried to do this in their simple and direct ways throughout history - partly due to which they have faced such a high level of criminalization. If they had been heard with respect and with community understanding, they would probably have been thought-leaders in the work being done against climate change.

The issue of climate change is incomplete without political willingness to work on it. Decision-makers, on priority, need to take appropriate steps keeping in mind the severe and almost constant impact of climate changes on NT-DNT and Adivasi populations. For this, the first step is to take efforts to understand the

primary problems of these communities; and then understand how these are related to climate change.

It is high time for policy-makers and implementers of development planning to keep in mind Environmental Justice in every aspect of their work. Ignoring this has not only caused irreparable harm to the environment as can be seen by various dire world records being broken recently such as highest ever ocean surface temperature (The Guardian 2023) to the world's hottest day ever since records began (BBC News 2023), but also has resulted in communities who live in close connection with nature to lose their cultural, economic, mental, and social strength.

It is necessary that national and international discussions around climate change create space in their platforms for NT-DNT and Adivasi grassroot activists to represent their views. This should be done with the preparedness that these representatives may stake claim to leadership and intellectual positions in these spaces – and not just as providers of labor or of data and stories.

Movement-building among the NT-DNTs is required so that their existing indigenous environment-friendly knowledge and skills can be bolstered with the required resources so that they may heal themselves from the effects of climate change, and to ensure that they raise their voices in climate change movements.

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