

Tribal Resistance and Cultural Assertion: Comparative Perspectives from Odisha and Japan

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Abstract: This study explores the themes of tribal resistance and cultural assertion through a comparative lens, focusing on indigenous communities in Odisha, India, and Japan. It examines how tribal societies in both regions have historically resisted external domination—be it colonial, feudal, or state-imposed development—and how they have asserted their cultural identity in response to socio-political and economic pressures. In Odisha, tribal resistance has been deeply rooted in opposition to colonial exploitation, land alienation, and displacement caused by industrialization. Movements among tribes such as the Kondhs, Mundas, and Santals reflect a persistent defense of land rights and cultural traditions. In contrast, Japan's indigenous Ainu community has faced assimilationist state policies that have long denied their distinct ethnic identity. However, recent decades have witnessed a cultural revival and growing political recognition, catalyzed by both domestic activism and global indigenous rights discourses. This comparative analysis draws upon historical narratives, policy responses, and cultural practices to illustrate how resistance and assertion emerge as intertwined phenomena shaped by indigenous agency. The study also considers the role of postcolonial statehood, legal recognition, and global indigeneity movements in redefining the relationship between the state and tribal societies. By engaging with interdisciplinary sources, the paper highlights the complexities of identity, autonomy, and development in tribal contexts and emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive and participatory governance. It also investigates how state policies, civil society, and international frameworks like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have influenced tribal assertions in both nations.

Keywords: Ainu, Colonialism, Cultural Identity, Indigenous, Postcolonial State, Resistance.

Introduction

The history of human civilisation is a story of both resistance and conquering. Indigenous and tribal communities are among the numerous groups that have consistently resisted the pressures of dominance and assimilation, whose identities have frequently been endangered by colonialism, state creation, capitalist growth, and globalisation. In the

face of these pressures, tribal communities have not only rejected externally imposed changes, but also proclaimed their own cultural identities, languages, and cosmologies as a means of political and existential survival. This article conducts a comparative examination of tribal resistance and cultural assertion in two culturally and geographically dissimilar regions: Odisha, India, and Japan, with a specific emphasis on the Adivasi populations in Odisha and the Ainu and Ryukyuan in Japan. Odisha, a state in eastern India, has a considerable tribal population, accounting for about 23% of the total population (Government of Odisha, 2019). Tribes like the Kondh, Juang, Bonda, and Dongria Kondh have long participated in both violent and nonviolent opposition to colonial and postcolonial governmental policy. Their resistance is not confined to violent uprisings, but also includes campaigns for land, forest rights, and environmental preservation. Simultaneously, these groups affirm their identities through language, festivals, rituals, and oral traditions, challenging mainstream narratives that frequently characterise them as backward or primitive (Padel & Das, 2010).

In contrast, Japan has long projected an image of ethnic and cultural uniformity, concealing the existence of indigenous peoples such as the Ainu on the northern island of Hokkaido and the Ryukyuan or Okinawan groups in the south. These communities, despite their cultural and linguistic differences, have traditionally been subjected to assimilationist practices, marginalisation, and erasure by the Japanese government, notably during the Meiji period and thereafter. Despite these hurdles, the Ainu and Ryukyuan peoples have used various kinds of resistance—legal, cultural, and symbolic—to establish their rights and regain their identities (Siddle, 1996; McCormack and Norimatsu, 2012). This study uses a comparative perspective to investigate how indigenous groups in Odisha and Japan have responded to past oppression and present marginalisation via resistance and cultural assertion. By juxtaposing these two places, the study calls into question conventional indigeneity frameworks, which frequently focus on Euro-American contexts. While state formation, colonial legacies, and political economy differ greatly between India and Japan, the research contends that tribal and indigenous solutions share underlying logics of cultural preservation, land-based cosmologies, and strategic compromises with modernity.

Significance of the Paper

The comparative method used here provides an important prism through which to analyse the various paths of tribal resistance and cultural assertion in non-Western cultures. Most scholarly arguments of indigeneity centre on the Americas, Australia, and Canada. This study contributes to Asia-centered indigenous studies by focussing

on the situations of Odisha and Japan, and it provides insights into how various political regimes negotiate indigenous claims. Furthermore, by combining archival research, oral traditions, and modern legal changes, this study hopes to overcome the academic gap between anthropology, political science, and cultural studies. It views tribal resistance as more than just an act of disobedience, but as a complicated struggle between tradition and modernity, survival and sovereignty, quiet and expression.

1. Historical and Political Context of Tribes in Odisha

Odisha, located on India's eastern coast, is one of the state with the highest tribal population. With 62 officially recognised Scheduled Tribes accounting for roughly 23% of the total population (Census of India, 2011), Odisha has a dynamic socio-cultural landscape moulded by centuries of tribal existence, colonial intrusion, postcolonial development plans, and tribal resistance. The historical and political history of Odisha's tribal communities: particularly the Kondh, Dongria Kondh, Juang, Bonda, Santal, and Saura; reflects deeply ingrained systems of land-based governance, ecological cosmology, and self-sufficient sociopolitical institutions. This section examines the historical foundations of tribal political autonomy, their experiences under colonial control, and how the postcolonial Indian state rebuilt their political existence, paving the path for both resistance and cultural assertion in modern Odisha.

1.1. Pre-Colonial Tribal Autonomy and Cosmology

Before the advent of the British, Odisha's tribal societies lived mostly in forested uplands and hilly terrains, with distinct sociopolitical systems based on community land ownership, sacred geography, and clan government. Tribes such as the Kondhs had a matrilineal social structure and practiced rites such as the Meriah sacrifice, which symbolically fostered equilibrium between the human and natural realms. These societies were self-governing, with village councils and tribe elders, or shamans, wielding spiritual and political power. Their knowledge systems were strongly ingrained in oral traditions, animist beliefs, and non-exploitative land usage. While these tribes interacted with feudal kingdoms and princely monarchs, they were never fully absorbed into centralised government structures. This autonomy enabled them to keep their distinct ways of life for centuries.

1.2. Colonial Encounters and Disruption

British colonial rule in Odisha during the early nineteenth century had a profound impact on tribal autonomy. The implementation of new land tax systems, notably the

Zamindari system, threw off traditional land and forest tenure rights. Tribal lands were gradually taken over for income generating, tea and cotton plantations, and mineral extraction. Colonial anthropologists and bureaucrats regularly referred to Odisha's tribes as "primitive" and "criminal," strengthening paternalistic control strategies. At the same time, forest legislation such as the Indian Forest Act (1865, revised 1878 and 1927) criminalised traditional activities of shifting agriculture and hunting, displacing tribes off their ancestral lands (Sundar, 2007). This invasion sparked a succession of tribal upheavals and revolts, notably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: (a) The Bhumkal Movement (1910): A major rebellion led by Lakhma Bapu among the Koya tribe in Bastar (bordering Odisha), protesting British forest policies and interference in tribal governance; (b) The Kandha Revolts: The Kondh and Dongria Kondh communities in southern Odisha revolted multiple times, resisting land dispossession and missionary interventions; (c) The Saura Revolt (1930s): A response to increased tax burdens and the erosion of customary These acts of resistance were profoundly based in sacred cosmologies, were frequently led by spirit-mediums, shamans, or god-men, and blended sociopolitical complaints with spiritual mobilization—a feature of tribal resistance across South Asia.

1.3. Missionary Interventions and Cultural Displacement

The colonial state's collaboration with Christian missionaries introduced new vectors of change in tribal areas. While missionaries frequently offered education and health services, they also contributed to cultural displacement by (a) conducting conversion efforts, (b) disrupting indigenous ceremonial systems, and (c) introducing Western education that deemphasized tribal languages and worldviews. Missionary criticisms of tribal rites such as Meriah sacrifice led to its criminalisation by the British, cutting the Kondhs off from essential cultural activities that reinforced their holy geography (Behura & Mohanty, 2006).

1.4. Post-Independence State and Developmentalism

India's independence in 1947 marked the beginning of a new era, but it did not necessarily translate into tribal empowerment. The Indian Constitution provided protective measures such as: (a) Fifth Schedule (Article 244) for administration of Scheduled Areas, (b) Article 46 which mandates promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes, (c) Reservation in education, jobs, and legislatures. However, these measures were often undercut by the state's push for economic modernization, which viewed tribal areas as resource frontiers. The extraction of minerals, construction of

hydropower dams, and establishment of industries led to massive displacement and “development-induced displacement” (Fernandes, 2007). Examples include: (a) the Hirakud Dam Project (1956), which displaced approximately 26,000 tribal tribes in western Odisha; and (b) the Rengali and Upper Indravati Projects, which resulted in the loss of traditional farms and forests. Tribal resistance movements evolved not simply in response to physical displacements, but also to defend cultural identity and land-based spirituality. The Indian state frequently labelled these movements as “anti-development” or even “Naxalite,” thereby criminalising legitimate tribal protest.

1.5. Legal and Cultural Mobilization in the 21st Century

A turning point in tribal-state relations was the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). This act recognized: (a) Individual and community rights over forest land, (b) Right to protect and manage community forest resources, and (c) Legal empowerment for tribal Gram Sabhas (village councils). The Dongria Kondh's struggle against Vedanta Resources in the Niyamgiri Hills became the icon of tribal environmental resistance. Vedanta's intention to mine bauxite in holy hills sparked a massive mobilisation, which included (a) tribal community demonstrations, (b) support from civil society and environmental groups, and (c) legal action in India's Supreme Court. In 2013, the court ruled in favour of the Dongria Kondh, upholding the Gramme Sabha's right to decide on forest land use under the FRA; a historic victory for tribal self-determination (CSE, 2013).

1.6. Identity, Assertion, and Contemporary Politics

Today, Odisha's tribal communities express their identity through a combination of cultural resurgence, political involvement, and legal opposition. This includes: (a) the revival of festivals like Chaitra Parab and Nua Khai, (b) the strengthening of Adivasi student unions and youth organisations, and (c) political aspirations for more autonomy under PESA. At the same time, indigenous cultures are being commodified through tourism and government-sponsored events, generating worries about cultural appropriation and spectacle politics. The dynamic between preservation and performance, autonomy and integration, continues to characterise Odisha's tribal political landscape.

2. Historical and Political Context of Indigenous Peoples in Japan

Japan is often portrayed as an ethnically and culturally homogenous nation-state, a story bolstered by decades of state-building, education, and legal uniformity. However,

this fiction of uniformity obscures the lengthy and contentious history of indigenous peoples, notably the Ainu of northern Hokkaido and the Ryukyuan or Okinawans of the southern islands. These groups, which have separate languages, religious systems, and cultural practices, have been marginalised, absorbed, and erased by successive waves of Japanese state expansion—from the Tokugawa shogunate to the Meiji Restoration and the postwar modern Japanese state. Understanding the historical and political trajectory of Japan's indigenous peoples is critical to understanding their current battles for cultural assertion and legal recognition. While the Ainu were only formally recognised as indigenous in 2008, they have been culturally marginalised for generations. The Ryukyuan people, while not technically recognised as indigenous by the Japanese government, have a unique history of annexation and militarisation that continues to shape their identity politics today.

2.1. The Ainu: Historical Marginalization and Cultural Suppression

2.1.1. Origins and Early Contact

The Ainu are considered the original people of northern Japan, particularly Hokkaido (previously Ezo), with origins dating back to the Jomon Dynasty (14,000-300 BCE). They created a unique culture based on animism, oral epics (yukar), and sustained hunting-fishing economies. Their social system centred on family, ceremonial animal offerings, and seasonal festivities. Contact with Japanese feudal lords increased between the 15th and 17th centuries, notably through the Matsumae clan's efforts, which monopolised commerce and eroded Ainu autonomy. By the early 18th century, the Ainu had been dragged into exploitative commercial links and forced labour systems, which exacerbated tensions.

2.1.2. Meiji Colonization and Legal Erasure

The Meiji Restoration (1868) marked a significant shift in Japanese official policy towards the Ainu. With the formal annexation of Hokkaido in 1869, the Japanese government: (a) renamed the region "Hokkaido," replacing "Ezo," (b) designated Ainu lands as state property, and (c) enacted the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act (1899), which appeared to offer protection but in reality enforced assimilation. This Act made Ainu language usage in schools illegal, forbade traditional activities like tattooing and bear worship, and required the adoption of Japanese names and agricultural lifestyles. Ainu children were frequently subjected to cultural denigration in schools, which exacerbated language and identity loss (Siddle, 1996).

2.2. The Ryukyuan/Okinawan People: Annexation and Resistance

2.2.1. The Ryukyu Kingdom and Early Sovereignty

For centuries, the Ryukyu Kingdom, centred on Okinawa, maintained a semi-independent position by engaging in tribute relations with both China and Japan. Its culture included Chinese, Southeast Asian, and indigenous traditions, as seen by language, dress, religious beliefs, and government institutions. This autonomy ended in 1879, when the Meiji government conquered the kingdom, deposing the monarchy and renaming it Okinawa Prefecture. This act of internal colonisation ended centuries of Ryukyuan sovereignty and began a protracted period of cultural suppression and economic marginalisation.

2.2.2. Japanization and Post-War US Occupation

Following annexation, Okinawans were subjected to Japanization measures that: (a) prohibited the use of the Ryukyuan language in schools, (b) dismissed indigenous religious leaders, and (c) denigrated Okinawan traditional manifestations as “backward.” Despite their Japanese citizenship, Okinawans were seen as genetically and culturally inferior by mainland elites. This marginalisation was exacerbated during and after World War II, when Okinawa became a battlefield during the 1945 Allied invasion, resulting in significant civilian losses. After the war, Okinawa was occupied by the US military until 1972, during which time: (a) land was expropriated for military bases, (b) local political autonomy was limited, and (c) a hybrid system of Americanization and militarisation emerged. Even after reversion to Japan, Okinawa continues to house over 70% of US military facilities in Japan, fuelling local hostility and resistance movements (McCormack & Norimatsu, 2012).

2.3. Post-War Era: Continuities and Transformations

Despite Japan’s post-World War II democratisation and economic progress, Ainu and Okinawan problems were overlooked. Although the postwar Constitution of 1947 promised equality, it did not specifically recognise minorities or indigenous rights. From the 1950s to the 1980s, there was an increase in Ainu family urban migration, the loss of intergenerational language transmission, and efforts by both Ainu and Okinawan activists to restore cultural practices, frequently in the face of governmental indifference. Cultural stereotypes and prejudice remained prevalent in schools, the media, and the workplace. Ainu, for example, were frequently depicted in television and cinema as “exotic” or “vanishing,” which reinforced their marginalisation while denying them political agency (Sjöberg, 1993).

2.4. Ainu Recognition and Legal Developments

A turning point in Ainu activism occurred in the late twentieth century, culminating in a series of significant events: (a) In 1997, the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act was established, which replaced the 1899 Protection Act and recognised the importance of preserving Ainu culture. However, it did not recognise the Ainu as indigenous people or guarantee collective rights; (b) 2008: Following international pressure, particularly from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), the Japanese Diet passed a resolution formally recognising the Ainu as indigenous; (c) 2019: The Ainu Policy Promotion Act was enacted, with the goal of furthering cultural and economic revitalisation. Critics claim it lacks enforceable measures for property rights, education reform, and political representation (Kashiwazaki, 2020). The legal recognition of the Ainu has progressed, but without robust reparative justice measures, it remains symbolic in many ways.

2.5. Okinawan Movements: Cultural Revival and Anti-Militarism

Unlike the Ainu, the Ryukyuan people are still not considered indigenous under Japanese law, despite worldwide appeals for inclusion. Nonetheless, Okinawan cultural and political movements have gained traction, fuelled by: (a) language preservation efforts, such as immersion schools and digital archives; (b) revivals of traditional festivals, dance, and music (e.g., Eisa); and (c) anti-base protests, particularly those opposing the expansion of Futenma and Henoko military facilities. Okinawan resistance is motivated by both cultural dignity and political autonomy. The phrase “All Okinawa” highlights the intersection of identity politics and peace action. The 2019 Okinawa referendum, in which more than 70% of voters opposed the proposed base in Henoko, shows democratic resistance to Tokyo’s militarised policy.

3. Contemporary Forms of Resistance in Odisha

Odisha’s contemporary tribal resistance is defined by a lengthy history of marginalisation, land alienation, and cultural erasure. However, contemporary resistance is more than just a continuation of previous rebellions; it has grown into a complex combination of legal, environmental, cultural, and symbolic forms that integrate indigenous cosmologies with modern lobbying methods. This section investigates how Adivasi groups in Odisha, notably the Dongria Kondh, Kondh, Juang, Santal, and Saura, fight governmental policies, corporate extraction, and cultural assimilation in multifaceted ways.

3.1. Land Rights and Environmental Resistance

3.1.1. The Niyamgiri Movement

One of the most significant examples of contemporary tribal resistance is the Dongria Kondh's fight against Vedanta Resources in the Niyamgiri Hills. In the early 2000s, Vedanta considered mining bauxite from these hills for its aluminium plant in Lanjigarh. The Dongria Kondh, on the other hand, revere the Niyamgiri Hills as the home of Niyam Raja, the mountain deity. Their resistance was not just environmental, but also cultural and spiritual. The community declined to agree to the mining proposal, citing: (a) the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, which empowered Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) to vote on land use in forest regions, and (b) Indigenous cosmologies that view land as kin rather than property. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India affirmed Gram Sabhas' rights, resulting in a unanimous rejection of Vedanta's project by 12 villages, marking a watershed moment in Indian environmental jurisprudence. This resistance was a combination of (a) traditional beliefs and rituals, (b) legal literacy, and (c) alliances with NGOs, lawyers, and international human rights groups.

3.1.2. Kashipur and Kalinganagar Movements

Other examples include: (a) Kashipur (Rayagada district), where the Kondh have been resisting Utkal Alumina's bauxite project since the 1990s, culminating in police firing and deaths in 2000; and (b) Kalinganagar (Jajpur district), where 13 tribal protesters were killed in 2006 during resistance to Tata Steel's plant, sparking widespread outrage and forming a pan-Odisha tribal solidarity network. These events demonstrate how tribal resistance today frequently centres on the right to land, life, and dignity, confronting both private enterprises and state development models.

3.2. Legal Resistance and the Use of Rights-Based Frameworks

One of the most effective instruments of contemporary resistance is the deliberate use of legislative frameworks meant to defend tribal sovereignty. Key legislative tools include: (a) The Forest Rights Act (2006), which grants individual and community rights to forest land; (b) The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA (1996), which empowers tribal Gramme Sabhas in decision-making; and (c) The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, which requires the formation of Tribes Advisory Councils and gives governors power to protect tribal interests. Tribal communities and their allies have used Public Interest Litigation (PIL), Gram Sabha resolutions, and community forest resource mapping to combat state-sponsored or corporate-led land takeovers.

For example, in Similipal and Debrigarh, groups used FRA rules to avoid eviction from wildlife sanctuaries, while in Kandhamal, the community asserted rights to forest products in opposition to restrictive forest department policies.

3.3. Cultural and Symbolic Resistance

3.3.1. Revitalizing Indigenous Traditions

Resistance is fought not just in the courts and jungles, but also in cultural spaces. Tribes around Odisha are actively recreating ancient festivals, music, dances, and oral traditions as a means of cultural self-expression. Examples include: (a) the Chaitra Parab, Nua Khai, and Magha Parab festivals, which are increasingly celebrated not just ritually but also politically as events that affirm identity and demand visibility; and (b) the revival of indigenous healing systems, shamanic rituals, and animist belief frameworks. This resurgence contests the dominant perception of Adivasis as “backward” and instead portrays them as holders of significant ecological and spiritual knowledge systems.

3.3.2. Language and Identity Assertion

The marginalisation of tribal languages, including Kui, Saura, Juang, and Bonda, has resulted in cultural deterioration. Contemporary resistance includes (a) calls for tribal languages to be recognised in education and administration, (b) community-led language documentation initiatives like Saura song archives and Kui oral epics, and (c) cultural camps and youth workshops that teach language, folklore, and history. This type of resistance seeks to maintain identity in the face of language homogenisation and to reconstruct intergenerational knowledge transfer.

3.4. Youth Movements and Adivasi Consciousness

Tribal youth in Odisha today are increasingly politically conscious and technologically connected. Organisations like the Adivasi Yuva Mahasabha, Bharatiya Adivasi Ekta Manch, and Kondh Youth Collective have arisen as strong advocates for tribal rights. Their techniques include: (a) social media campaigns on land rights, environmental justice, and identity, (b) organising street plays, youth festivals, and panel discussions to promote awareness, and (c) participating in state politics and advocating for the inclusion of tribal histories in the curriculum. This youth-led action is reframing tribal resistance as a vision for an alternative modernity rooted in indigenous values, rather than a nostalgic look back at the past.

3.5. Role of Civil Society, NGOs, and the Media

Civil society has played a crucial role in supporting tribal resistance: (a) NGOs like Samata, Action Aid, Odisha Jungle Manch, and Vasundhara have provided legal aid, capacity building, and forest mapping training; (b) Documentaries such as “Wira Pdika” (2005) on the Niyamgiri struggle and “Mining the Sacred” (2011) have brought tribal voices to national and international platforms; and (c) alternative media and grassroots journalism have amplified the resistance narrative. However, this participation raises questions about NGO-ization, reliance, and representation, particularly when tribal voices are filtered through external actors.

3.6. Challenges to Resistance

Despite many successes, tribal resistance in Odisha faces formidable challenges, including (a) state repression through arrests, surveillance, and sedition charges, (b) internal fragmentation caused by political co-optation, factionalism, and developmental promises, (c) ongoing displacement from mining, roads, wildlife corridors, and mega-projects, and (d) limited access to mainstream media, digital tools, and higher education. However, the persistence of resistance underscores the resilience of Adivasi worldviews and their refusal to be wiped from history.

4. Contemporary Forms of Assertion in Japan

In contemporary Japan, indigenous assertion, notably among the Ainu and Ryukyuan (Okinawan) peoples, takes several forms, including cultural revival, legal activism, international advocacy, and identity politics. Unlike overt resistance movements centred on land rights or environmental justice (as seen in Odisha), indigenous assertion in Japan is frequently focused on acknowledgement, compensation, and cultural restoration in the face of historical erasure and governmental assimilation programs. This section looks at how these communities maintain their identity and dignity in post-industrial Japan, where symbolic inclusion has frequently replaced genuine fairness.

4.1. Ainu Cultural Revival and Institutional Recognition

4.1.1. Cultural Promotion and Revitalization

Since the late twentieth century, the Ainu people of Hokkaido have embarked on a concerted cultural revitalisation movement, declaring their history in reaction to generations of forced assimilation and marginalisation. Key forms of assertion include: (a) the revival of the Ainu language (Ainu itak) through immersion schools, online

courses, and community centres, (b) the performance and preservation of traditional dances, music (mukkuri, tonkori), and oral epics (yukar), (c) the publication of Ainu dictionaries, poetry, and folklore compilations, and (d) the use of traditional tattooing motifs, crafts, and woodcarvings as cultural symbols and acts of defiance. These behaviours are more than just nostalgia or tourism; they are decolonial assertions of living identity (Siddle, 2003).

4.1.2. State Response: From Cultural Promotion Act to Indigenous Recognition

In response to Ainu activism and international pressure, the Japanese government has made moves towards institutional recognition: (a) 1997: The Ainu Cultural Promotion Act was passed, supporting cultural programs but lacking indigenous rights provisions; (b) 2008: The Japanese Diet officially recognised the Ainu as “an indigenous people of Japan” for the first time, following the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007); and (c) 2019: The Ainu Policy Promotion Act was enacted, aiming to facilitate Ainu cultural promotion and local economic development through However, many Ainu activists criticise these policies as symbolic appeasement, claiming that: (a) land rights are not addressed, (b) historical injustices are not acknowledged, and (c) no autonomous political institutions or self-governance mechanisms are established. Thus, while the state recognises Ainu cultural identity, it continues to depoliticise their historical and territorial claims.

4.2. Media, Representation, and Reclamation

The assertion of indigenous identity in Japan has spread to popular culture, visual media, and international art arenas. Film and Literature: Contemporary Ainu authors, filmmakers, and cultural activists are recovering narrative spaces. (a) Kayano Shigeru: A pioneering Ainu activist and writer whose works combine autobiography, ethnography, and indigenous epistemology; (b) Nibutani Museum (founded by Kayano): A repository of Ainu heritage and a space for political discourse; and (c) Ainu Mosir (2020), a film that explores the tensions between cultural heritage and modern youth identity. These media interventions emphasise cultural continuity, intergenerational knowledge, and resistance to assimilation. Tourism and Cultural Commodification: Tourist attractions like as the Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park (which opened in 2020) seek to showcase Ainu history. While they provide awareness, they also risk commercialising culture rather than strengthening communities. Ainu groups have responded by advocating for community-controlled

representation, ensuring that cultural activities serve educational and rehabilitative purposes rather than being produced for spectacle.

4.3. Legal and International Assertion

Legal Advocacy: Ainu activists have taken legal action to protect their rights. One major case, the Nibutani Dam Case (1997), included two Ainu landowners suing the government over dam building on holy ground. While the court approved the dam's construction, it also recognised the Ainu as indigenous people for the first time in Japanese legal history. This case paved the way for future legal strategies including (a) land claims, (b) cultural preservation, and (c) consultation rights in development projects. **International Forums:** Ainu organisations actively engage with international institutions through (a) participation in UN forums (particularly the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues), (b) submission of shadow reports to the UN Human Rights Council, and (c) alliances with other indigenous movements around the world to exert diplomatic pressure on Japan. This transnational participation is an important kind of assertion since it exposes Japan's domestic policies to worldwide scrutiny and elevates Ainu voices on a broader platform.

4.4. Okinawan Assertion: Culture, Identity, and Anti-Militarism

Although the Ryukyuan people (Okinawans) are not recognised as indigenous by the Japanese government, they make tremendous cultural and political statements that rival Ainu efforts. **Language and Cultural Revitalisation:** Okinawan languages (Uchinaaguchi and others) are endangered, but they are central to cultural revival efforts: (a) Language nests and school programs encourage children to use them, (b) Artists incorporate Ryukyuan lyrics and folklore into music and theatre, and (c) Shisa dances, sanshin music, and Eisa festivals serve as cultural expressions of resilience and pride. These cultural practices assert a unique Ryukyuan identity, countering Tokyo's postwar Japanization policies. **Political Assertion: Anti-Base Movement—**A major axis of Okinawan assertion is the anti-military base movement, rooted in: (a) High land occupation by U.S. military bases (over 70% of U.S. bases in Japan are in Okinawa), (b) Environmental destruction, and (c) Incidents of violence, crime, and displacement linked to the bases. Assertion here takes form in: (a) Mass protests and referenda (e.g., the 2019 referendum where 70% voted against new bases), (b) Campaigns to “decolonize” Okinawa and demand local autonomy, and (c) Appeals to international law and self-determination rights. Although the Japanese central government often ignores these democratic expressions, they remain powerful assertions of Okinawan agency and resistance to external domination.

4.5. Youth, Education, and Grassroots Movements

Youth are increasingly involved in Japanese indigenous assertion: (a) Ainu and Okinawan student associations organise workshops, cultural events, and online campaigns; (b) Young activists challenge racial discrimination and advocate for inclusive education that reflects indigenous histories; and (c) digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and independent blogs are used to share indigenous perspectives and mobilise solidarity. This increasing digital indigeneity is altering how cultural assertion occurs in modern Japan, not just on ancestral territories but also in global cyberspace.

4.6. Challenges and Limitations

Despite increasing visibility, indigenous assertion in Japan faces significant challenges, including (a) a lack of constitutional recognition for indigenous rights, (b) tokenistic state policies with no redistribution or autonomy, (c) commercialisation of culture through tourism, and (d) racism and denial of indigenous existence in mainstream discourse. These limits necessitate a transition from performative multiculturalism to structural justice.

5. Comparative Analysis: Odisha and Japan

The tribal experiences of Odisha, India, and Japan's Ainu and Okinawan communities exhibit a stunning combination of shared issues and diverse answers. Despite geographic, political, and historical differences, both stories demonstrate how indigenous groups resist control and claim cultural sovereignty in the face of assimilationist policies, land expropriation, and epistemic marginalisation. This comparative research looks at thematic similarities and differences between tribal resistance in Odisha and indigenous assertion in Japan across four key dimensions: historical marginalisation, state policies, cultural revival, and legal-political strategies.

5.1. Historical Marginalization and Colonization

Internal Colonisation and Development Displacement in Odisha—(a) Odisha's tribal communities were historically autonomous, with socio-spiritual systems rooted in land, ecology, and ritual; (b) Colonial interventions—land revenue systems, forest laws, missionary disruptions—began the process of internal colonisation; and (c) Post-independence, state-led industrial and mining projects (e.g., Niyamgiri, Kalinganagar) exacerbated development-induced displacement. Cultural Erasure and Political Annexation in Japan: (a) The Ainu were forced to assimilate after being colonised in Hokkaido during the Meiji period; (b) The Ryukyuan people were annexed in 1879,

and their language, religion, and political institutions were erased; and (c) Okinawa became a militarised periphery as a result of post-World War II U.S. occupation and Japanese state policies. While Odisha's tribes suffered resource exploitation and physical expulsion, Japan's indigenous peoples were subjected to a more subtle type of erasure: coerced assimilation and symbolic exclusion. Both instances demonstrate how colonial logic has been domesticated inside modern nation-states.

5.2. State Policies and Legal Recognition

In Odisha (India), (a) the Indian Constitution provides special safeguards: the Fifth Schedule, PESA (1996), and the Forest Rights Act (2006); (b) legal tools have enabled Gramme Sabha-based resistance (e.g., the Niyamgiri victory); and (c) however, the state-corporate nexus and bureaucratic apathy frequently undermine implementation. Japan: (a) The Ainu were formally recognised as indigenous in 2008, and the Ainu Policy Promotion Act (2019) promotes cultural preservation; (b) The Ryukyuan people are not recognised as indigenous; and (c) Japan lacks constitutional or enforceable frameworks ensuring land, political, and linguistic rights. Comparative Insight: India has a more strong legislative architecture, but implementation deficiencies exist. Japan provides symbolic acknowledgement without legal empowerment, highlighting the distinction between de jure protections and de facto cultural tokenism.

5.3. Cultural Assertion and Identity Politics

In Odisha, cultural assertion is achieved through: (a) the restoration of festivals (like Nua Khai); (ii) the development of languages (Kui, Saura); (iii) the reclaiming of pride by Adivasi youth forums; and (b) the repositioning of rituals and oral traditions as instruments of political identity. In Japan, the Ainu cultural revival consists of the following: (a) the reintroduction of the Ainu language, music, and crafts; (ii) the establishment of museums (like Upopoy); (ii) the self-representation of literature and film; and (b) Okinawan assertion, which emphasises heritage preservation, language recovery, and anti-base motivation. Comparative Perspective: Politics is culture in both situations. One way to fight against epistemic violence is to express oneself via words, celebrations, and rituals. However, Japan's cultural assertion is becoming more institutionally managed and state-curated, whereas Odisha's is frequently driven from the bottom up.

5.4. Legal and Grassroots Resistance

In Odisha, (a) legal opposition has won significant triumphs (like Niyamgiri); (b) human rights and environmental laws are used by NGOs, Gramme Sabhas, and youth

collectives; and (c) Adivasi resistance is frequently land-based and collective. Japan— (a) Ainu legal efforts (e.g., Nibutani Dam case) resulted in symbolic recognition but little restitution; (b) Ryukyuan resistance takes the form of political and anti-military resistance, focussing on peace and autonomy; and (c) the assertion is framed more around cultural survival and dignity than legal property terms. In contrast to Japan’s claim, which emphasises cultural purity and acknowledgement, Odisha’s resistance centres on tangible rights (land, forests). Hegemonic national discourses that oppose pluralism confront both.

5.5. Role of Youth and Transnational Solidarity

In Odisha, Adivasi youth raise awareness and fight absorption using internet platforms, poetry, and theatre. In Japan, young Ainu and Okinawan people participate in worldwide indigenous forums, digital storytelling, and cultural education. Both movements are increasingly aligned with global indigenous frameworks: (a) UNDRIP (2007), (b) Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and (c) decolonial discourse. Comparative Perspective: Youth are revival catalysts, creating new forms of assertion using glocal techniques ranging from village-based rites to UN forums and internet campaigning.

6. Emerging Challenges and Global Context

Both in Odisha and Japan, tribal and indigenous populations function in quickly changing national and international environments that provide both new possibilities and risks. The boundaries of assertion and resistance are always shifting due to factors including identity politics, global capitalism, and climate change. Within a larger global context of indigenous resistance, this section examines new issues that Adivasis in Odisha and indigenous populations in Japan—mainly the Ainu and Ryukyuan peoples—are facing. It draws attention to how modern indigenous experiences are impacted by transnational movements, environmental catastrophes, digital changes, and altering geopolitics.

6.1. Environmental Degradation and Climate Change

Tribal areas in Odisha are frequently rich in natural resources, such as rivers, forests, and minerals, which makes them popular destinations for extractive enterprises. Climate change increases susceptibility in another way: (a) Traditional farming and foraging methods are impacted by changing rainfall patterns, deforestation, and soil erosion; (b) mining-induced displacement exacerbates water contamination, forest loss, and biodiversity degradation; and (c) Industrial projects and natural disasters like floods and cyclones cause double displacement for many tribal communities. In addition to

threatening livelihoods, this ecological fragility also jeopardises Adivasi cosmologies' fundamental cultural and spiritual ties to the land. Regarding the Ainu and Okinawans in Japan: (a) the Ainu continue to lose their hunting and fishing rights in Hokkaido as a result of climate change and government-imposed restrictions, and (b) Okinawa is facing the collapse of its marine ecosystem as a result of the construction of military bases (like Henoko), coral reef damage, and sea level rise brought on by global warming. Thus, environmental issues and cultural and territorial erasure converge, necessitating land recovery and ecological care led by indigenous peoples.

6.2. Digital Technologies and Cultural Survival

Opportunities include (a) digital tools for archiving and disseminating oral traditions, languages, and rituals; (b) youth in Odisha and Japan use social media, podcasts, and community platforms to tell their stories; and (c) projects such as virtual museums, language learning apps, and online activism broaden the audience for indigenous narratives. Risks: (a) Digital surveillance and state monitoring of activists (particularly in India) endangers free expression, (b) Corporate platforms may appropriate or commodify indigenous content without community consent, and (b) Access remains unequal: tribal areas in Odisha frequently lack digital infrastructure, exacerbating the digital divide. Digital technologies have a double edge: they may empower or delete, depending on who owns the platforms and data.

6.3. Political Nationalism and Majoritarianism

In India, (a) the rise of Hindu majoritarianism threatens the secular and plural foundations of Adivasi identities; (b) efforts to Hinduize Adivasi customs (e.g., labelling them as “Vanvasis”) dilute their distinct cosmologies; and (c) Adivasi resistance is also framed as anti-national or left-wing extremism, criminalising grassroots movements. In Japan, the illusion of racial unity remains, despite Ainu acknowledgement. Ryukyuan aspirations are marginalised by national security discourses; (b) Okinawan political movements are frequently rejected as regional disturbance rather than legitimate cultural assertion; and (c) Japan's global image as a peaceful democracy is at odds with its domestic suppression of indigenous autonomy. Nationalism erodes the room for indigenous pluralism by portraying cultural assertion as divisive or disloyal.

6.4. Militarization and Strategic Geopolitics

Okinawa, Japan: (a) Okinawa is both militarily saturated and strategically important due to the U.S.-Japan military alliance; and (b) base expansion proceeds in spite of

public resistance, underscoring the importance of international strategic interests over local democracy. Resource Geopolitics in India: (a) Odisha's tribal regions play a crucial role in the country's mineral economy, which has worldwide ramifications for the production of steel, aluminium, and rare earth elements; and (b) India's drive for energy security and infrastructure frequently comes at the expense of Adivasi forests and lands. By putting commercial and military interests ahead of human rights, global geopolitics exacerbate indigenous marginalisation in both situations.

6.5. Global Indigenous Rights Frameworks

Despite ongoing challenges, indigenous communities have found support in international forums: (a) UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage program has supported cultural mapping and safeguarding initiatives; (b) the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) has played a significant role in shaping global discourse; and (c) the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 169 on indigenous rights, which sets standards for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) and cultural protection, has not been ratified by Japan or India. These forums are being used more and more by Adivasi and Ainu activists to engage in international indigenous movements, exert pressure on their governments, and foster transnational solidarity.

6.6. Neoliberalism and Cultural Commodification

Indigenous culture in both nations is becoming more and more commercialised for travel, celebrations, and national branding. (A) Odisha: Tribal dances and handicrafts are frequently displayed at cultural expos without fair benefit sharing; and (b) Japan: Ainu culture is promoted in state-funded venues such as Upopoy, however others contend that this might spectacularize culture while ignoring justice. This leads to a conflict: although exposure is desirable, it turns exploitative if it isn't accompanied with autonomy or restitution.

6.7. Health, Education, and Social Indicators

Despite advancements, tribal and indigenous communities continue to face disadvantages in important areas of human development: Adivasi literacy, nutrition, and maternal health are below national norms in Odisha, and (b) there is little access to high-quality, mother-tongue schooling. In Japan, young Ainu and Okinawan people experience economic instability, under-representation in schools, and racial bullying. Also, culturally sensitive systems seldom address mental health issues associated with identity loss, erasure, and historical trauma.

6.8. Resistance in the Global South-North Continuum

The comparison of Odisha and Japan also shows how indigenous issues cross the Global South–North divide: (a) Adivasis in Odisha experience bureaucratic authoritarianism and extractive capitalism in a postcolonial setting, (b) indigenous communities in Japan experience soft repression and cultural invisibility in a Global North democracy, and (c) both countries dispel the myth that only countries in the Global South marginalise indigenous people. Since resistance and assertion transcend developmental status, they indicate systemic problems with nation-states’ handling of diversity.

Conclusion and Policy Reflections

This study examined at the ways that tribal and indigenous communities in Japan and Odisha, India, reject and proclaim their cultures in the face of various historical and current forms of marginalisation. Several similar motifs surfaced despite variations in location, legal systems, and sociopolitical histories: Under the pretence of development or nation-building, the Adivasi groups in Odisha and the Ainu and Okinawan peoples in Japan have also experienced assimilation, cultural erasure, and eviction. Using both grassroots activism and legal instruments like the Forest Rights Act, resistance in Odisha has mostly concentrated on land rights, environmental justice, and livelihood protection. In Japan, especially among the Ainu and Ryukyuan, assertion has focused on international advocacy, cultural revival, and identity recognition, frequently in the midst of symbolic pluralism and subtle repression. In addition to addressing new issues like internet commercialisation, climate change, and nationalist politics, both situations show how indigenous cultures recover their dignity via language, ritual, and young activism.

Policy Reflections for Odisha (India): (a) Strengthen Legal and Institutional Mechanisms—Ensure the effective implementation of FRA (2006) and PESA (1996) via training, legal aid, and community education. Protect Gram Sabha autonomy against bureaucratic encroachment and corporate pressure. Improve judicial accountability to avoid the dilution of tribal land rights; (b) Inclusive Development Planning—Design development projects with the affected tribal populations’ free, prior, and informed consent. In addition to official paperwork, recognise traditional land rights and holy geographies. Ensure tribal ownership of forest products, ecotourism, and biodiversity management; (c) Cultural and Educational Revitalization—Promote mother-tongue instruction in tribal schools through culturally responsive curriculum. Establish tribal-run cultural centres and archives. Fund community-led festivals and oral history documentation initiatives; and (d) Protect against criminalisation by decriminalising

peaceful protests and repealing sedition or anti-terror legislation that have been exploited against tribal activists. Establish tribal human rights commissions at the state level to oversee infractions.

Policy Reflections for Japan: (a) Go beyond Symbolic Recognition: Amend the Japanese Constitution to expressly recognise the Ainu and Ryukyuan as indigenous peoples with special rights. Ratify ILO Convention 169 to ensure legal safeguards and consultative processes; (b) Restore Land and Resource Rights—establish mechanisms for land restitution or compensation for Ainu communities displaced by settlement expansion and state projects. Allow for traditional use rights in forests, rivers, and hunting areas; and (c) Demilitarise Okinawa—Re-evaluate Japan’s basing policy in Okinawa through participative, democratic engagement. Recognise anti-base protests as valid manifestations of local self-determination, rather than threats to national security; (d) Indigenous-led Cultural Programming—Move from state-curated to community-controlled cultural institutions including museums and language schools. Support youth-led internet venues for cultural exchange, storytelling, and political discourse.

Common Ground for Global Policy: Despite national differences, both India and Japan can benefit from a shared commitment to indigenous justice, guided by international standards such as: The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), The Convention on Biological Diversity, and The United Nation Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Transnational collaboration—academic exchanges, legal workshops, indigenous congresses—can deepen solidarity and knowledge-sharing between Adivasi and Ainu/Okinawan communities.

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