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CENSORING KNOWLEDGE: INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL LITERATURES, RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND EPISTEMIC CONTROL IN INDIA AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The paper explores the intersection of book censorship and Indigenous/tribal research methodologies in India and Australia, arguing that censorship functions as a form of epistemic control. Rather than targeting only the content of texts, censorship in these contexts suppresses non-Western ways of knowing; particularly those grounded in oral traditions, spiritual belief systems, ecological knowledge and symbolic expression. Drawing on literary, legal and cultural case studies, the paper examines how Indigenous and tribal literatures are marginalized through legal bans, publishing gatekeeping and structural exclusion. It underscores the integration of ecological knowledge within Indigenous cosmovisions, the storytelling function of rituals and the foundational role of oral traditions in preserving and transmitting knowledge. Ultimately, the paper calls for a redefinition of literature as a legitimate site of research and for the recognition of diverse knowledge systems that have long been silenced. Decolonizing censorship, it argues, is inseparable from achieving epistemic justice and literary sovereignty for Indigenous and tribal communities.

Keywords:

Censorship, ecological knowledge, symbolic expression, literary sovereignty, Indigenous epistemology, tribal literature etc.

Introduction

Book censorship, often framed as a legal or moral act, also serves as a form of epistemic control; a process of determining whose knowledge is valued and whose is silenced. In settler-colonial Australia and postcolonial India, Indigenous and tribal literatures have long been subjected to censorship in both formal and informal ways. While the state may ban certain texts outright, more often the exclusion is structural: Indigenous and tribal knowledge systems are dismissed, their languages marginalized and their literary contributions deemed apolitical or irrelevant. The paper explores how Indigenous and tribal research methodologies; rooted in oral storytelling land-based knowledge, relationality and memory; confront dominant colonial and postcolonial systems. It argues that book censorship in both India and Australia represents a deeper epistemological crisis, where Indigenous/tribal literature is censored not only for its content but for its methodology and worldview.

Censorship of Indigenous and tribal knowledge is not always about banning books; it can also be:

- Excluding oral stories from literary anthologies
- Ignoring tribal languages in publishing
- Refusing to recognize sacred texts and rituals as valid forms of research
- Flattening symbolic systems into decorative or cultural elements

By framing language, signs and ceremony as literary and epistemic tools, we expand the definition of literature itself and expose the full scope of what censorship suppresses.

Epistemology and Indigenous/Tribal Research Methodologies

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with understanding knowledge; how it is acquired, what qualifies as legitimate knowledge and who has the authority to determine its value. In Western academia, knowledge is typically produced through written texts, objective methods and rational inquiry. This definition often excludes oral tradition, intuitive knowledge, spiritual insight and community-based forms of learning.

Indigenous methodologies emphasize relational accountability and community-centered knowledge production rather than detached objectivity (Chilisa 2012). According to Bagele Chilisa, Indigenous research paradigms “are relational, participatory, and transformative”

Indigenous/Tribal Ways of Knowing

For Indigenous and tribal communities, knowledge is often relational. It is developed through stories, spiritual practice, connection to land and intergenerational memory. Knowledge is lived and practiced, not just documented. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Bagele Chilisa and

Aileen Moreton-Robinson have emphasized that Indigenous research methods challenge the supposed neutrality of Western research by centering community ethics, reciprocity and responsibility.

Indigenous and tribal research methodologies are not limited to academic settings; they are embedded in daily life, cultural performance and collective memory. Practices such as oral storytelling, seasonal rituals, ecological observation and ancestral knowledge transmission serve not only social or spiritual functions but are also **rigorous ways of knowing and investigating the world**. These methods prioritize **relational accountability**, **community benefit** and **intergenerational continuity**, offering alternative frameworks to Western empirical science. Colonial regimes historically imposed Western standards of validity, marginalizing Indigenous and tribal knowledge systems (Smith 2-3).

Throughout the study, the analysis of literature, ceremony and oral forms reflects how such methodologies are encoded in Indigenous and tribal texts; and how their suppression through censorship reflects a broader rejection of non-Western ways of producing knowledge.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, "Research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary".

Literature as Methodology

Beyond Art: Literature as Knowledge

Indigenous and tribal literature; oral stories, poetry, songs, myths; is not simply expressive or creative. It serves as a vehicle for law, ethics, cosmology and political resistance. Thus, literature functions as a research methodology, especially in societies where written language was historically suppressed or where oral culture is dominant.

Methodological Legitimacy and Censorship

When Western literary and research institutions fail to recognize this, Indigenous literature is not just marginalized but epistemically censored. It is labeled "folklore," "myth" or "culture" but not "knowledge." This exclusion has the same effect as formal censorship: it denies the legitimacy of Indigenous and tribal perspectives.

Censorship and the Silencing of Aboriginal Knowledge in Australia

From the early 20th century, the Australian government used laws like the Customs Act 1901 to ban books deemed morally or politically subversive. Aboriginal authors were excluded from publishing or their works were edited, mediated or published only through non-Indigenous voices.

For much of the 20th century, Aboriginal literature was left out of school curricula, literary anthologies and academic publishing. Works that did appear often faced critical skepticism or were accused of unauthenticity.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) told the story of a family reclaiming its Aboriginal identity after generations of state-enforced erasure. Though popular, it sparked debates about authenticity and legitimacy, reflecting ongoing discomfort with Aboriginal self-representation.

Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* challenged colonial myths by presenting Aboriginal people as sophisticated agriculturalists. The book was praised, but also condemned for rewriting "Australian history", highlighting the political tension surrounding Indigenous truth-telling. The dismissal of Indigenous land-based knowledge mirrors the historical misrepresentation of Aboriginal societies as non-agricultural, a claim challenged in *Dark Emu* (Pascoe 14-18).

Book Censorship and Tribal Literature in India

During British colonial rule, tribal communities in India were studied through the lens of ethnography and anthropology, often reduced to "primitive" categories. Their rich oral traditions were recorded as "folklore," not literature or epistemology.

India's tribal communities speak over 100 distinct languages (e.g., *Santhali, Gondi, Ho, Bhili*), yet very few works in these languages are published nationally. The publishing industry, academia and government institutions rarely fund or promote tribal literature, creating a silent but pervasive censorship.

A notable case is Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, whose short story collection "*The Adivasi Will Not Dance*" was banned in Jharkhand in 2017 and led to his suspension as a civil servant. Critics claimed the book portrayed *adivasis* negatively, while supporters argued it exposed uncomfortable truths about exploitation and marginalization. This shows how tribal writers are policed not only for content but for voice and tone. The temporary ban on *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* illustrates how tribal narratives are policed when they challenge dominant moral and political frameworks (Shekhar 2015)

Points of Convergence: Australia and India

Despite their distinct colonial and postcolonial histories, both Australia and India demonstrate remarkably similar strategies of silencing Indigenous and tribal literatures. In each context, censorship functions not just as the prohibition of certain texts, but as a broader mechanism for controlling knowledge production. Literature emerging from Indigenous and tribal communities is frequently filtered through dominant frameworks that determine what is "credible," "serious" or "worthy" of preservation and study.

Oral histories are frequently marginalized, while spiritual and ritual forms of knowledge are disregarded and land-centered ways of knowing are often labeled as unscientific or lacking literary value. In both countries, these exclusions happen not only through direct bans but via institutional

mechanisms: publishing industries, educational curricula and academic disciplines that prioritize Western literary standards.

What emerges is a pattern of structural censorship - subtle, systemic and deeply rooted in ongoing colonial ideologies. These systems collectively suppress indigenous and tribal voices, despite occasional token recognition or selective celebration of their contributions.

Indigenous/Tribal Worldviews and the Censorship of Ecological Knowledge

a) Perspectives of Cosmo vision and Spiritual Beliefs

Indigenous and tribal worldviews often emerge from Cosmo visions; spiritual frameworks in which all beings are interrelated. Knowledge is embedded in land, ancestors, spirit and ritual, and it is transferred through oral forms like myths and songs. These are not just cultural artifacts; they are living research systems. Colonial powers, however, rejected these as superstition and silenced them in formal literature. Today, literature that draws on such frameworks still faces marginalization in academic and publishing institutions that prioritize secular and empirical knowledge systems. Knowledge is received through dreams, ceremony and stories; deeply entwined with ethical and spiritual responsibility. Such worldviews are embedded in literature and storytelling, which are often targeted for censorship or misclassification.

b) Diversity in Indigenous/Tribal Thought Systems

Across India and Australia, Indigenous and tribal peoples represent a **diverse array of thought systems**. Each community has its own philosophical and ethical systems shaped by geography, language and history and has distinct practices of storytelling, environmental knowledge and moral reasoning. Yet colonial and national narratives often reduce this diversity to monolithic stereotypes. By suppressing literature that reflects this complexity; through exclusion, translation bias or academic neglect; dominant systems effectively **flatten Indigenous epistemologies**. Censorship thus works by denying diversity as much as by banning content.

c) Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Sustainable Resource Management

Traditional Ecological Knowledge includes centuries-old knowledge of sustainable land use, water management and ecological cycles. It is transmitted through rituals, stories and seasonal calendars. In Australia, Aboriginal fire management (cultural burning) is being revived, while in India, sacred groves and seed rituals carry ecological insight. Yet, when these knowledge systems are not formally recognized in literature or policy, they are effectively censored out of environmental discourse. When these systems are excluded from academic research or published literature; or when tribal voices are not credited; the result is a **form of epistemic theft and ecological censorship**. Traditional Ecological Knowledge in literature is rarely treated as scientific or valid, which further marginalizes the communities who developed it.

d) Indigenous/Tribal Studies and Ecological Concerns

As environmental crises escalate, there is global interest in Indigenous ecological knowledge; but too often this interest is extractive. Indigenous authors who critique mining, deforestation and development often face backlash or silence. In India, tribal resistance to forest displacement is rarely documented in mainstream literature. In Australia, protest literature against land degradation is dismissed as "radical." This shows that **censorship extends to ecological critique**, especially when it challenges state or corporate narratives. Such literature is frequently marginalized not because of its inaccuracy, but because it exposes the environmental costs of colonial and capitalist expansion. The selective amplification of apolitical or commodifiable aspects of indigenous knowledge further reveals a pattern of tokenism rather than true engagement.

Language, Signs and Symbols in Indigenous/Tribal Knowledge

The richness of Indigenous and tribal knowledge systems lies not only in their ideas but in the **forms of expression** they employ - oral language, symbols, ceremonies and ritual performance. These modes of communication are not secondary to content; they are **central to how knowledge is encoded and transmitted**. Censorship, therefore, can operate not just at the level of banning books, but by erasing, dismissing or mistranslating these non-Western semiotic systems. Understanding Indigenous and tribal literatures requires engaging seriously with their **linguistic, symbolic and ritual forms**.

a) Oral Cultures and Traditions

Indigenous and tribal communities often function as **oral cultures**, where stories, laws, ethics, histories and cosmologies are transmitted through spoken word. This includes **myths, chants, poetry, songs, riddles and memory cycles**. These oral forms are dynamic and performed within specific cultural contexts, often tied to land, season and ceremony.

Western literary standards, however, have historically **devalued oral traditions**, treating them as pre-literate, primitive or non-intellectual. In Australia, the oral nature of Aboriginal Dreaming stories made them targets for exclusion from school curricula. In India, tribal storytelling in languages like *Santhali* or *Gondi* is rarely included in mainstream literature or publishing platforms. This is a form of **epistemological censorship**; where knowledge is disqualified not by content, but by form.

b) Languages and Sacred Texts as Knowledge Carriers

Language is a repository of worldview. Many Indigenous and tribal languages hold concepts that cannot be directly translated. Sacred chants, invocations or seasonal songs are knowledge archives. When these languages are excluded from print or policy, knowledge dies with them.

Languages are not just tools for communication; they **encode worldviews**. Indigenous and tribal languages often contain concepts that are **untranslatable** into dominant national languages. For instance, words that describe specific ecological rhythms, ancestral spirits or sacred geography often have no direct equivalents in English or Hindi. Sacred texts or verbal formulae passed down through ritual are often **embedded in performance**, not written form. These can include healing chants, spirit invocations or genealogical recitations that serve legal or social functions.

When these languages are excluded from publishing, education or state recognition, it constitutes a **form of linguistic and cultural erasure**. Even when tribal literature is translated, much of its conceptual richness is lost; especially when sacred language is flattened or secularized.

c) Symbolism and Ceremony

Symbols such as masks, dance patterns, body painting and ritual objects encode law, ethics and memory. Aboriginal dot paintings and Indian tribal motifs are not merely art; they are epistemic maps. These are often dismissed as decorative or folkloric in literary discourse, thus erased from meaningful analysis.

Symbols; such as totems, masks, dance patterns and paintings; are **non-verbal carriers of meaning** in many Indigenous and tribal cultures. In Australian Aboriginal traditions, dot paintings and ceremonial designs are not just art; they are **encoded maps, genealogies and stories**. In many Indian tribal communities, ritual tattoos, body art or ceremonial dress symbolize **cosmic relationships and ethical obligations**.

Ceremony itself is a **performative archive**, a live enactment of cultural memory and knowledge transmission. Yet these symbolic systems are often **excluded from literary and academic canons**. They are labeled as “custom” or “culture” but not considered part of a community’s literature or intellectual output. This invisibility is a subtle but pervasive form of **symbolic censorship**.

d) Literariness of Indigenous/Tribal Rituals

Rituals in Indigenous and tribal communities are not merely religious; they are literary performances. They involve narrative structure, repetition, metaphor, embodied memory and collective authorship. These forms reflect a sophisticated aesthetic and epistemic system that Western frameworks often fail to recognize as "literature."

For instance:

- In Australia, corroborees (ceremonial gatherings) are narrative events that transmit law, history and cosmology.
- In India, festivals like *Karam, Sarhul or Bastar Dussehra* involve storytelling, drumming, and dramatic performance that preserve tribal law and ethics.

Yet, such forms are rarely anthologized or analyzed alongside written tribal texts. Their literariness is overlooked and they are consigned to the margins of folklore or anthropology rather than literature. This marginalization reflects a deeper structural censorship: the refusal to recognize what doesn't fit the dominant model of literary form, authorship or textuality.

Conclusion

In both India and Australia, the suppression of Indigenous and tribal literature is part of a broader effort to control and dominate knowledge systems. Whether through legal bans, publishing exclusions or curricular neglect, these literatures have been marginalized not only for their content but for their methods of meaning-making. Recognizing literature as a form of research; and Indigenous/tribal storytelling as a legitimate methodology; offers a path toward epistemic justice. In resisting censorship, these literatures reclaim not just voice, but the sovereignty of knowledge, environment and belief. The work of decolonization, then, must begin with listening to what has long been silenced.

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