

Land, Identity and Belonging among Adivasi People

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Abstract—Land occupies a central place in the social, cultural, and emotional worlds of Adivasi communities. This paper examines the relationship between land, identity, and belonging among Indigenous peoples, with particular reference to the experiences of Kashipur and Kalinganagar in Odisha. It argues that land is understood not merely as a source of livelihood or economic value but as a foundation of ancestry, cultural continuity, collective memory, and community existence. Drawing on Indigenous perspectives, land rights literature, and case studies of development-induced change, the paper explores how attachment to territory shapes everyday life, social relationships, and cultural identity. The discussion highlights the contrasting experiences of defending homeland in Kashipur and negotiating displacement in Kalinganagar, demonstrating how the loss of land often produces a deeper crisis of belonging that extends beyond material deprivation. The paper further argues that conventional development approaches frequently overlook the cultural and emotional significance of place. Recognizing community-land relationships is therefore essential for socially just and culturally informed development. Protecting these relationships contributes not only to Indigenous well-being but also to the preservation of cultural diversity and collective heritage.

Index Terms—Adivasi Communities, Land and Identity, Indigenous Peoples, Kashipur, Kalinga Nagar, Cultural Continuity, Community-Land Relations

I. Introduction

For many Adivasi communities, land is much more than a physical resource or an economic asset. It is a living space that shapes identity, sustains cultural traditions, and connects people to their ancestors. Hills, forests, rivers, and village landscapes are not viewed as separate from community life. They form the foundation upon which social relationships, spiritual beliefs, livelihoods, and collective histories are built. To understand Adivasi society, therefore, one must first understand the deep relationship between people and the land they inhabit. Mainstream development policies often treat land as a commodity that can be acquired, exchanged, or compensated for in monetary terms. Indigenous perspectives frequently offer a different understanding. Land is not simply owned; it is inherited, cared for, and shared across generations. It carries memories of ancestors, stories of origin, sacred sites, burial grounds, and community histories. The relationship between people and territory is therefore emotional, cultural, and spiritual as much as it is economic. This understanding is reflected in international discussions on Indigenous rights, which recognize the close connection between Indigenous peoples and their traditional lands, territories, and resources.

The idea of belonging is central to this relationship. Belonging emerges from long-term interaction with a particular landscape and from the shared experiences that communities develop within it. Villages, agricultural fields, forests, and sacred places become markers of identity that help individuals locate themselves within a wider social and cultural world. In many Adivasi societies, community identity is inseparable from territory. To lose land is often to lose access to cultural practices, social networks, and traditional systems of knowledge that have evolved over generations. This connection becomes particularly important in situations of displacement. Across many parts of India, industrial projects, mining operations, dams, and infrastructure expansion have transformed Indigenous landscapes. While compensation packages may address economic losses, they rarely account for the cultural and emotional dimensions of displacement. As scholars of tribal development in Odisha have observed, attachment to homeland,

community resources, and local environments forms a powerful social bond that cannot easily be replaced through monetary measures alone. The disruption of these bonds often creates a deeper crisis of identity and belonging that extends beyond the loss of physical land. Against this background, this paper explores the relationship between land, identity, and belonging among Adivasi peoples. It argues that land functions not merely as a source of livelihood but as a foundation of community existence and cultural continuity. Through an examination of Indigenous perspectives and selected experiences from Odisha, particularly Kshipur and Kalinganagar, the paper seeks to understand how attachment to territory shapes identity and why the defence of land often becomes a defence of belonging itself.

II. Understanding Land, Identity and Belonging

2.1 Land as Cultural Space

For Indigenous and Adivasi communities, land is not simply a physical setting where life takes place. It is a cultural space where history, memory, spirituality, and everyday life are woven together. Mountains, forests, rivers, sacred groves, and agricultural fields often carry meanings that extend far beyond their material value. They serve as places where traditions are practiced, stories are remembered, and relationships between generations are maintained. In this sense, land becomes a living archive of collective experience. Many Indigenous communities understand territory as a network of relationships rather than a collection of resources. Human beings, ancestors, spirits, animals, forests, and water sources are often viewed as interconnected parts of a shared world. Such perspectives challenge modern approaches that separate nature from society. Instead, land is seen as an active participant in community life and cultural continuity.

Among many Adivasi societies, sacred landscapes play an important role in maintaining this connection. Sacred groves, hills, streams, and village spaces are linked to rituals, seasonal festivals, and community decision making. These places preserve not only ecological resources but also cultural knowledge that is transmitted across generations. The continuity of culture therefore depends significantly on the continuity of place. When these landscapes are disrupted, communities often experience not only material loss but also cultural disorientation.

2.2 Place and Community Identity

Identity is often shaped by the places where people live and the histories they share within those places. For Adivasi communities, homeland is not merely a geographical location. It is a social and historical space that gives meaning to individual and collective existence. The memory of ancestors, the stories of settlement, and the knowledge of local landscapes contribute to a strong sense of attachment to territory. This attachment can be understood through the idea of emotional geography. Emotional geography refers to the feelings, memories, and meanings that people associate with particular places. A forest path, a village hill, or a community gathering space may appear ordinary to outsiders, yet they often hold deep emotional significance for those who belong there. Such places become symbols of continuity and identity because they connect present generations with those who came before them. Research on Adivasi perceptions of landscape demonstrates that traditional settlements were often created through a close relationship with local ecological conditions and cultural practices. Villages were not viewed merely as residential units. They were social worlds connected to sacred institutions, water bodies, agricultural fields, and forests that together shaped community life. Identity therefore emerged not only from kinship or language but also from long-standing interaction with a particular territory. This relationship explains why displacement is frequently experienced as a crisis of identity. When people are removed from ancestral lands, they may lose access to the places through which culture is practiced and remembered. The result is not only physical relocation but also a weakening of social bonds, collective memory, and cultural confidence.

2.3 Belonging Beyond Ownership

The concept of belonging offers a broader understanding of the relationship between people and land. Belonging is not based primarily on legal ownership or formal property rights. It emerges from

participation in a shared landscape and from the recognition that individuals are part of a larger community connected to place. Many Indigenous traditions emphasize collective relationships with land rather than exclusive individual possession. Land is often understood as something inherited from previous generations and held in trust for future ones. Such perspectives place responsibility alongside rights. Communities are expected to protect the land because their own survival and identity depend upon it. International discussions on Indigenous rights increasingly recognize this collective dimension. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples highlights the importance of lands, territories, resources, culture, and self-determination for Indigenous well-being and continuity. These principles reflect a broader understanding that belonging is inseparable from cultural survival.

For Adivasi communities, therefore, belonging extends beyond questions of ownership. It reflects a deeper relationship based on memory, responsibility, ancestry, and cultural continuity. Land provides the space where identities are formed, traditions are practiced, and communities sustain themselves across generations. To protect land is thus not only to safeguard a resource but also to preserve a way of life. Understanding this relationship is essential for appreciating why struggles over land often become struggles for identity, dignity, and existence itself.

Table 1. Dimensions of Land in Adivasi Life

Dimension	Significance in Adivasi Life	Illustrative Examples
Economic	Source of livelihood and subsistence	Agriculture, forest produce, grazing lands
Cultural	Preserves traditions, customs, and collective memory	Festivals, oral traditions, customary practices
Social	Strengthens kinship networks and community relationships	Village institutions, clan ties, collective labour
Spiritual	Connects people with sacred landscapes and ancestral beliefs	Sacred groves, hills, streams, ritual sites
Political	Supports rights, self-governance, and community autonomy	Customary governance, community decision-making
Emotional	Creates a sense of belonging, attachment, and identity	Ancestral homeland, memories, place-based identity
Ecological	Sustains traditional environmental knowledge	Knowledge of forests, water sources, biodiversity
Historical	Links present generations with ancestral experiences	Settlement histories, migration stories, sacred landscapes

Source: Compiled by the author based on Indigenous rights literature, Adivasi land studies, UNDRIP, and studies on tribal land and identity in Odisha.

III. Land and Identity in Everyday Life

3.1 Family, Kinship and Territory

The relationship between land and identity becomes most visible in everyday family life. For many Adivasi communities, land is not merely an individual possession but part of a wider network of kinship and social relationships. Families inherit agricultural fields, forest access, and village spaces across generations, creating a strong sense of continuity between ancestors, present members, and future generations. Knowledge about cultivation, forest use, and seasonal cycles is often transmitted within families, making land an important medium through which cultural values are preserved. Traditional settlements are also closely linked with clan and lineage systems. Particular families and clans maintain long-standing relationships with specific territories, water sources, forest patches, and agricultural lands. These relationships help define community identity and social belonging. Through everyday interaction with these landscapes, people develop a sense of attachment that extends beyond economic dependence and becomes part of who they are.

3.2 Festivals, Rituals and Landscapes

Land is also central to many cultural and religious practices. Agricultural seasons, harvest celebrations, and village festivals are often closely connected to local landscapes. Sacred hills, groves, streams, and forests serve as important sites for rituals that reinforce the bond between communities and their environment. Many Adivasi festivals express gratitude for the fertility of the land, the availability of forest resources, and the well-being of the community. These celebrations bring together different generations and create opportunities for transmitting cultural knowledge. Through songs, dances, rituals, and collective gatherings, landscapes become active participants in community life rather than passive surroundings. Such practices help maintain cultural continuity. They remind community members that their relationship with land is based not only on use but also on respect, responsibility, and shared memory.

3.3 Community Memory and Place

Places often function as repositories of collective memory. Certain hills, forests, village centres, and water bodies are associated with stories of settlement, ancestral experiences, and significant community events. These memories are passed down through oral narratives, local traditions, and everyday conversations. For many Adivasi communities, the landscape itself becomes a record of history. Community members remember the locations where ancestors first settled, where important rituals were performed, and where collective struggles took place. Such memories strengthen emotional attachment to place and help sustain a shared sense of identity. This connection explains why displacement frequently causes profound social and cultural disruption. When people are separated from ancestral landscapes, they lose not only physical access to land but also many of the places through which memory and belonging are maintained. The loss therefore extends beyond livelihood and affects the cultural foundations of community life.

3.4 Gender and Land Relationships

Women's relationship with land forms an important yet often overlooked dimension of Adivasi life. Women contribute significantly to agriculture, collection of forest produce, seed preservation, food security, and household livelihoods. Their daily interaction with fields, forests, streams, and village environments gives them extensive knowledge of local ecosystems. In many communities, women play a key role in maintaining cultural traditions linked to land. They participate in agricultural rituals, seasonal festivals, and the transmission of knowledge to younger generations. Their experiences reveal that belonging is created not only through ownership but also through care, labour, and everyday engagement with the landscape. Understanding gender relationships therefore broadens our understanding of land itself. Land is not simply a resource controlled by communities. It is a living space shaped through the contributions of both men and women. Through cultivation, ritual practices, memory, and care, women help sustain the social and cultural bonds that connect communities to their homeland. Taken together, family ties, cultural practices, collective memory, and gendered experiences demonstrate that land occupies a central place in everyday Adivasi life. It provides livelihood and security, but it also nurtures identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. The

significance of land therefore lies not only in what it produces but also in the relationships and meanings that it sustains across generations.

IV. Kashipur: Defending Homeland and Community Identity

4.1 Baphlimali and Adivasi Attachment to Land

The relationship between land and identity becomes particularly visible in Kashipur, where the Baphlimali hills occupy a central place in the lives of local Adivasi communities. For generations, communities such as the Jhodia, Kondha, Paraja, and Penga have lived in the valleys and hill slopes surrounding Baphlimali. Their connection with the landscape extends beyond cultivation and livelihood. The hills provide water, forest produce, medicinal plants, grazing spaces, and agricultural support, but they also carry cultural and spiritual meanings that shape community life.

For many villagers, Baphlimali is not simply a geographical feature. It is a homeland that embodies memory, ancestry, and belonging. Local narratives describe the hills as a source of protection and well-being. Sacred beliefs associated with Baphalai Budhi, the deity believed to reside on the hilltop, reinforce the idea that land is part of a living relationship between people, nature, and the spiritual world. Through everyday interactions with forests, streams, and agricultural fields, generations have developed a strong emotional attachment to the landscape. In this sense, Baphlimali represents not only territory but also identity.

4.2 Development and the Question of Displacement

The arrival of large-scale mining proposals introduced a different understanding of land. Development planning often viewed Baphlimali primarily as a mineral-rich resource with economic potential. For local communities, however, the proposed transformation of the hills raised deeper concerns about the future of their society and culture. The issue was not restricted to compensation or employment opportunities. It involved questions about what would happen to a community when its homeland was fundamentally altered. Research on Kashipur repeatedly highlights that local people feared the loss of agricultural land, forests, water sources, and traditional livelihoods. Yet their concerns also reflected broader anxieties about social and cultural survival. Displacement was perceived as more than physical relocation. It meant separation from ancestral landscapes, sacred places, and community networks that had sustained generations. Many residents questioned whether financial compensation could replace relationships built over centuries between people and place. The landscape contained memories, rituals, and forms of knowledge that could not easily be transferred elsewhere. As a result, development was often viewed through the lens of cultural continuity rather than economic gain alone. This perspective helps explain why opposition emerged even when promises of infrastructure, employment, and modernization were presented as benefits.

4.3 Voices from the Community

Community testimonies from Kashipur consistently reveal a strong sense of attachment to Baphlimali. Local residents often describe the hills as providers of life, water, food, and security. Such expressions demonstrate that land is understood as a source of collective well-being rather than a commodity for exchange. Villagers repeatedly emphasized that forests and hills support their agriculture, preserve local biodiversity, and sustain everyday livelihoods. Many also expressed concern that mining would affect streams, soil fertility, and food security. These concerns were rooted in lived experience rather than abstract environmental arguments. Community members evaluated proposed changes according to how they would affect everyday life, cultural practices, and future generations. Equally important was the perception that decisions regarding the landscape were being made without meaningful participation from those most directly affected. This generated feelings of uncertainty and distrust. Community voices therefore reflected a desire not only to protect land but also to defend the right to shape their own future. The demand for recognition of local perspectives became closely linked with the defence of identity and dignity.

4.4 Belonging as Resistance

The experience of Kashipur demonstrates that resistance cannot be understood solely as opposition to a development project. It was also an expression of belonging. Communities defended Baphlimali because the hills represented a way of life that could not be separated from the people who lived there. Belonging created a powerful motivation for collective action. The defence of land became a defence of memory, culture, and community continuity. In this context, resistance emerged from a desire to protect relationships that connected people to their homeland. The landscape functioned as a repository of shared experiences, social bonds, and cultural values that communities wished to preserve. Kashipur therefore illustrates a broader reality visible in many Indigenous struggles across the world. Conflicts over land are often conflicts over identity. They involve competing understandings of territory, development, and human well-being. While external actors may view land primarily as a resource, local communities may see it as the foundation of existence itself. The significance of Kashipur lies in revealing how homeland, identity, and belonging shape community responses to change. The defence of Baphlimali was not simply a reaction to possible displacement. It reflected a deeper commitment to protecting a cultural landscape through which people understood who they were, where they belonged, and how they wished to live. In this sense, belonging itself became a form of resistance.

V. Kalinganagar: Displacement and the Crisis of Belonging

5.1 Industrial Expansion and Land Acquisition

The experience of Kalinganagar in Odisha illustrates the complex relationship between industrial development and Indigenous belonging. Located in the mineral-rich region of Jajpur district, Kalinganagar emerged as a major industrial hub following the establishment of large steel and manufacturing projects. Land acquisition for industrial expansion transformed an area that had long been inhabited by Adivasi and other rural communities whose lives were closely connected to agriculture, forests, and common resources. For local communities, land represented far more than an economic asset. Agricultural fields, village settlements, grazing lands, water sources, and sacred sites formed part of a broader cultural landscape that sustained everyday life. The acquisition of land for industrial projects therefore created concerns not only about livelihood but also about the future of community identity and social continuity. Many families perceived the loss of land as the loss of a way of life that had been shaped over generations. Development policies often emphasized industrial growth, employment generation, and regional economic transformation. However, local experiences revealed that these benefits were not always viewed in the same way by affected communities. For many residents, the question was not simply whether development should occur but whether it should come at the cost of homeland and belonging.

5.2 Loss of Place and Social Identity

Displacement produces consequences that extend beyond relocation. When people are separated from ancestral landscapes, they often lose access to the social, cultural, and emotional foundations of community life. In Kalinganagar, displacement disrupted long-established relationships between people and place, creating a profound sense of uncertainty and loss. Traditional settlements had provided more than shelter. They functioned as spaces where kinship networks, cultural practices, agricultural activities, and community institutions operated together. The movement of families into resettlement colonies altered these relationships. Familiar landscapes were replaced by new environments that often lacked the historical and cultural meanings attached to ancestral villages. Many studies on displacement in Kalinganagar highlight the weakening of traditional livelihood systems after relocation. Agriculture, forest-based activities, and access to common resources became more difficult, affecting both economic security and cultural practices. The disruption of these relationships contributed to feelings of marginalization and social fragmentation. The impact was particularly significant because identity in many Adivasi communities is closely linked with territory. Homeland provides a sense of orientation and belonging. When that connection is broken, individuals often experience a deeper crisis involving memory, social relationships, and self-understanding. Displacement therefore becomes not only a physical process but also a cultural and emotional one.

5.3 Rebuilding Community After Displacement

Despite these challenges, displaced communities have sought ways to rebuild social life and maintain cultural continuity. Resettlement colonies became spaces where families attempted to recreate networks of support, preserve traditions, and adapt to changing circumstances. Community gatherings, festivals, and cultural practices continued to play an important role in sustaining collective identity. At the same time, rebuilding life after displacement has not been easy. Studies from Kalinganagar show that many households experienced occupational shifts from traditional agriculture to wage labour and informal employment. Such changes affected economic stability as well as cultural relationships with land. The transition often required communities to negotiate new forms of livelihood while attempting to preserve older forms of identity. The experiences of women further reveal the long-term consequences of displacement. Research indicates that many displaced tribal women faced declining economic participation and reduced access to traditional livelihood activities after relocation. Their experiences demonstrate how displacement reshapes everyday life and creates new forms of vulnerability within communities. Yet belonging does not disappear completely after displacement. Communities continue to carry memories of ancestral villages, sacred places, and former landscapes. These memories remain important sources of identity and collective strength. In many cases, people maintain emotional connections with their homeland even when physical return is impossible. The story of Kalinganagar therefore highlights a central theme of this paper. Land is not merely a resource that can be exchanged or compensated for. It is a foundation of identity, memory, and belonging. The experience of displacement reveals how deeply these connections are embedded within community life and why the loss of homeland often produces consequences that extend far beyond material deprivation.

VI. Rethinking Development Through Adivasi Perspectives

The experiences discussed in this paper invite a broader reconsideration of how development is understood and evaluated. Conventional development models often measure progress through industrial growth, infrastructure expansion, investment, and economic output. While these indicators remain important, they do not always capture the social and cultural realities of communities whose lives are deeply connected to land and territory. For many Adivasi communities, development cannot be assessed only through financial compensation or promises of employment. It must also be evaluated in terms of its impact on identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. The cases of Kashipur and Kalinganagar demonstrate that compensation cannot easily replace homeland. Land is not simply an asset that can be exchanged for money. It contains memories of ancestors, sacred sites, community histories, and everyday relationships that have developed over generations. When these connections are disrupted, the loss extends beyond livelihood and enters the realm of culture, memory, and social existence. A new house or monetary package may provide material support, but it cannot recreate the meanings embedded in ancestral landscapes. Adivasi perspectives therefore offer an alternative understanding of progress. Rather than viewing land primarily as a resource for extraction, many Indigenous communities understand it as a living foundation of collective life. Well-being is closely linked to ecological balance, community relationships, cultural practices, and the ability to maintain meaningful connections with place. From this perspective, development should strengthen rather than weaken these relationships. Recognizing the cultural costs of displacement is essential for building more inclusive and just development policies. Projects that overlook identity, memory, and belonging risk creating long-term social disruptions even when economic benefits are promised. Adivasi experiences remind us that genuine progress is not only about transforming landscapes but also about protecting the human relationships that give those landscapes meaning. Development becomes truly sustainable when it respects both material needs and cultural existence.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has explored the deep and enduring relationship between land, identity, and belonging among Adivasi communities. It has argued that land cannot be understood solely as a physical resource or an economic asset. For many Indigenous communities, land is a lived space where culture, memory, ancestry, and everyday life come together. It shapes how people understand themselves, relate to others, and

maintain connections with past and future generations. The significance of land therefore extends far beyond ownership and livelihood. It forms the foundation of collective identity and community existence. The experiences of Kashipur and Kalinganagar highlight different dimensions of this relationship. Kashipur demonstrates how attachment to homeland can inspire communities to defend the landscapes that sustain their cultural and social worlds. Kalinganagar, in contrast, reveals the long-term consequences of displacement and the challenges of rebuilding belonging after the loss of ancestral territory. Together, these experiences show that the impacts of land acquisition cannot be measured only through economic indicators. They must also be understood through their effects on identity, memory, social relationships, and cultural continuity.

The discussion further suggests that development policies need to engage more seriously with Indigenous understandings of land and well-being. Compensation and rehabilitation programmes may address material losses, but they often fail to recognise the emotional, cultural, and historical meanings attached to place. A more inclusive approach to development must therefore acknowledge community relationships with land as an essential component of justice and sustainability. Ultimately, protecting community-land relationships is not simply a matter of safeguarding territory. It is a means of preserving cultural diversity, collective memory, and ways of life that have evolved through generations of interaction with particular landscapes. Understanding this relationship is essential for building development pathways that are both equitable and culturally informed.

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