



Empowering the Elderly in Tribal and Developing Societies: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities with Special Reference to G. N. Devy's *After Amnesia* and Related Works

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Abstract

*This paper explores the multifaceted role of elderly individuals in tribal and developing societies, focusing particularly on their cultural, social, and intellectual significance. Using G. N. Devy's *After Amnesia* and related works as a conceptual foundation; the study examines how tribal elders serve as custodians of oral traditions and collective memory. It identifies the systemic challenges they face—such as marginalization, loss of cultural authority, and lack of access to healthcare and social security—while also discussing opportunities for empowerment through inclusive policy, education, and cultural preservation initiatives. The paper concludes by proposing a culturally sensitive, community-based framework to restore the dignity and relevance of the elderly in tribal and underdeveloped settings.*

Keywords: *Elderly, Tribal Communities, Cultural Memory, Oral Tradition, G. N. Devy, Empowerment, Marginalization, Indigenous Knowledge*

Introduction

In tribal and developing societies, ageing is not merely a biological inevitability but a culturally significant phase that symbolizes the culmination of accumulated wisdom, lived experiences, and the transmission of community memory. Elders in these communities have traditionally functioned as the custodians of oral traditions, moral values, and indigenous knowledge systems—anchoring collective identity and social cohesion. However, with the rise of globalization, urbanization, and the homogenizing forces of modernity, the status and role of the elderly—particularly within indigenous populations—have become increasingly vulnerable and underappreciated.

The erosion of traditional knowledge structures and the displacement of oral narratives by dominant written cultures contribute to the growing invisibility of the elderly in public discourse. G. N. Devy's *After Amnesia* offers a compelling critique of this cultural shift, drawing attention to the systematic neglect of India's oral and tribal heritage. Devy articulates how modern epistemologies and institutional frameworks have marginalized non-mainstream voices, thereby contributing to a form of cultural amnesia that disproportionately affects tribal elders. These elders, once seen as vessels of wisdom and continuity, are now often perceived through a lens of obsolescence and dependency.

This paper situates the discussion of ageing within the broader context of cultural loss, socio-economic displacement, and policy inaction, highlighting the multidimensional challenges faced by the elderly in tribal and developing societies. At the same time, it seeks to foreground the opportunities for empowering this demographic by re-evaluating their roles, recognizing their contributions, and integrating their voices in cultural and developmental narratives.

Through a critical reading of *After Amnesia* and related works, the paper argues for a more inclusive and respectful engagement with the elderly, advocating for frameworks that restore their dignity, ensure their active participation in community life, and safeguard the intangible heritage they embody.

The Role of Tribal Elders as Cultural Repositories

Tribal elders have historically functioned as oral historians, ritual leaders, community healers, and moral anchors—serving not only as individuals with advanced age but as living embodiments of cultural continuity. Their memories and lived experiences hold the social codes, environmental knowledge, medicinal practices, oral literature, and mythologies that define the ethos of their communities. In many tribal societies, elders perform key roles in initiating rites of passage, resolving conflicts, interpreting dreams and omens, and preserving language and dialects that may otherwise face extinction.

For instance, among the Bhil and Gond tribes of central India, elders often recount traditional folk tales and myths during seasonal festivals, embedding moral lessons and historical consciousness in communal memory. Similarly, in the Dongria Kondh community of Odisha, elder women serve as custodians of sacred songs, ecological knowledge, and herbal remedies passed down through generations. These oral traditions not only convey history but also serve as practical guides for survival, sustainable living, and social harmony.

G. N. Devy, in *After Amnesia* (1992), sharply critiques the erasure of these oral epistemologies through what he terms “epistemic violence.” He argues that colonial and postcolonial educational frameworks privileged the written word over the spoken, institutionalizing a Eurocentric model of knowledge that effectively delegitimized the oral wisdom of tribal communities. This shift not only disrupted the knowledge continuum but also resulted in the systemic silencing of tribal voices—especially the elderly, who are the primary repositories of these voices.

Devy’s concern is deeply relevant in the context of India’s tribal communities today. When a society forgets to remember its oral traditions, it abandons not just stories but the storytellers themselves. The elderly thus suffer a double marginalization—first due to age, and second due to the cultural exclusion from a rapidly modernizing society that no longer values oral transmission. Their knowledge becomes seen as archaic or irrelevant, further alienating them from both policy frameworks and younger generations.

Challenges Facing the Elderly in Tribal and Developing Societies

1. Cultural Displacement

One of the most pressing challenges is cultural displacement. Modern education systems, digital technologies, consumerist ideologies, and the spread of mainstream religions often replace indigenous belief systems with dominant cultural narratives. In many schools, local languages and traditions are either ignored or ridiculed, while globalized content takes center stage. As a result, younger generations are increasingly disconnected from their ancestral roots and seldom seek the wisdom of their elders.

For example, in many tribal regions of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, school curriculums are taught in Hindi or English with little to no representation of tribal knowledge or dialects. This linguistic alienation not only impacts students' learning but also severs the bridge between generations. Elders who once taught through song, story, and hands-on demonstration now find their roles diminished or irrelevant in the eyes of youth trained to value “modern” knowledge. Similarly, the penetration of television, smartphones, and social media into tribal areas has further contributed to the erosion of traditional practices. Ritual songs, agricultural customs, and oral genealogies are fast disappearing as younger individuals turn to digital content, distancing themselves from local heritage and the elders who preserve it.

In many cases, the arrival of evangelical missions or mainstream religious movements has also led to the abandonment of tribal rituals and deities, often labeling them as “superstitions.” Elders, who once led sacred ceremonies or acted as spiritual guides, now face resistance or indifference from their own communities.

This cultural shift leads to a widening generational gap and a deep loss of respect for elders. No longer seen as knowledge bearers or sources of guidance, the elderly find themselves isolated within their own homes and villages—culturally displaced in the very society they helped to sustain.

Economic Insecurity

Economic insecurity remains one of the most critical issues confronting elderly individuals in tribal and developing societies. Unlike urban or semi-urban elderly populations who may have access to pensions, savings, or social welfare programs, most tribal elders are excluded from formal financial structures. They often lack documentation such as birth certificates, land titles, or Aadhaar cards, which are prerequisites for accessing government pensions or subsidies.

Furthermore, many tribal elders have traditionally engaged in subsistence agriculture, foraging, or craft-based livelihoods that become unviable with age. With diminishing physical strength and the absence of younger family members—many of whom migrate to cities for work—the elderly are left without support systems. For instance, in regions like the Narmada Valley and parts of Madhya Pradesh, displaced tribal elders from development projects often lose access to forest resources and customary lands, pushing them into extreme poverty.

In such scenarios, they become economically dependent on extended families or local charities, which can reinforce feelings of burden and invisibility. Without sustainable economic engagement or formal recognition, their contributions to society remain undervalued, leading to both material and psychological marginalization.

Healthcare Access

Healthcare access is another domain where tribal elders face severe exclusion. In many tribal belts—such as those in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and the North-Eastern states—health infrastructure is inadequate or entirely absent. Tribal elders often suffer from preventable and treatable illnesses such as cataracts, hypertension, arthritis, tuberculosis, and malnutrition, but due to geographical remoteness, linguistic barriers, and financial constraints, they rarely receive timely treatment.

Moreover, the absence of culturally sensitive healthcare models means that tribal medical knowledge is dismissed, and modern medical practitioners are often ill-equipped to engage with indigenous belief systems. For example, an elder from the Santhal tribe might prefer traditional healing practices using medicinal plants and rituals, but modern clinics may reject such approaches outright, creating a trust deficit. This leads many elders to avoid medical services altogether.

Mobile health units and ASHA workers often fail to reach the most remote and forested areas where these elders reside, and even when services do exist, they are usually designed without the input or inclusion of elderly tribal individuals, making them less effective.

Policy Gaps

Despite several national welfare schemes for the elderly—such as the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) or the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme—tribal elders often remain outside their ambit due to lack of access, awareness, or administrative barriers. Policies are typically framed within a homogenized, urban-centric model of ageing that fails to account for the cultural, linguistic, and environmental distinctiveness of tribal populations.

Crucially, these policies do not recognize the elderly as cultural custodians or potential contributors to society. Instead, they are seen primarily as dependents, in need of charity rather

than dignity. There is minimal consultation with tribal elders in planning or implementing programs that affect them directly, resulting in a disconnect between intention and impact. For example, elderly individuals from the Toda or Irula tribes may have unique dietary needs, spiritual practices, and social roles that are not acknowledged in general geriatric care programs. Moreover, welfare officers deployed in tribal regions are often unfamiliar with local languages and customs, further widening the gap between policy and practice.

Opportunities for Empowerment

Cultural Revitalization and Oral Archives

Despite these challenges, there are meaningful opportunities to empower tribal elders by re-integrating them into cultural, social, and developmental frameworks. One such path lies in the revitalization of oral traditions and the documentation of indigenous knowledge systems. Inspired by G. N. Devy's *People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI)*, community-driven efforts can be initiated to create oral archives where elders are employed as narrators, translators, and cultural historians.

These projects serve a dual purpose: they preserve endangered languages, folklore, and ecological knowledge, while also reaffirming the value of the elderly as knowledge-bearers and mentors. In Gujarat, for instance, some tribal schools have begun integrating local legends and environmental knowledge into classroom storytelling sessions conducted by village elders, thus bridging generational divides and restoring intergenerational respect.

Similarly, NGOs like Bhasha Research Centre in Vadodara and organizations working in Jharkhand and Nagaland have initiated projects where elders are actively involved in the documentation of songs, proverbs, rituals, and traditional agricultural practices. These efforts not only counteract cultural erosion but also provide emotional and social validation for the elderly.

Such models could be scaled and supported by state or central government programs that view the elderly not as passive recipients of aid, but as active participants in cultural preservation and community development.

Community-Based Elder Councils

One of the most effective strategies for empowering tribal elders is to restore or strengthen traditional community structures, such as *elder councils* or *tribal courts*, which have historically played pivotal roles in local governance, moral adjudication, and social cohesion. These councils are more than advisory bodies; they are institutions of moral authority and collective memory.

In many tribal regions of central and eastern India, such as among the Gond, Munda, and Ho communities, these councils once played key roles in resolving disputes, allocating community resources, and guiding rituals. Reviving these platforms allows the elderly not only to regain their voice but also to reinforce culturally embedded mechanisms of justice and leadership.

For instance, in Nagaland, the *Gaon Buras* (village elders) still function in an official capacity under the state's recognition, resolving minor disputes and guiding community welfare. Such models, when supported by legal recognition and community trust, can serve as bridges between traditional and modern governance systems, affirming the relevance of elders in contemporary contexts.

Intergenerational Dialogue Programs

A growing generational gap in tribal societies—widened by urban migration, modern education, and media influence—has led to cultural dissonance. To counter this, intergenerational dialogue initiatives can play a crucial role in restoring continuity. These programs involve structured platforms where elders share stories, songs, proverbs, and life experiences with the youth.

Schools and NGOs can institutionalize these dialogues through storytelling circles, oral history workshops, or mentorship programs that bring together elders and students in shared learning spaces. In Jharkhand, for example, some village schools have introduced *local wisdom periods*, during which elders narrate traditional stories or explain the significance of festivals and medicinal plants. This not only fosters mutual respect but also strengthens cultural literacy and linguistic continuity.

Moreover, involving elders in curriculum design for tribal schools—particularly those operating in local languages—can ensure that education aligns with community ethos rather than erasing it. When young people see elders as educators, guides, and narrators, it transforms perceptions of ageing from decline to dignity.

Culturally Sensitive Policies

Policy interventions often fail when they are designed with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that overlooks cultural specificity. To address the real needs of tribal elders, policies must be region-specific, culturally grounded, and informed by community participation.

This includes tailoring healthcare initiatives to include indigenous medicinal systems, recognizing traditional roles of elders in welfare schemes, and offering financial support in forms that reflect tribal social structures. For example, rather than just providing pensions, governments can sponsor elders as resource persons in language preservation or traditional skill training projects.

Initiatives like Kerala’s *Vayomithram* (a scheme for senior citizens’ wellness) can be adapted to tribal contexts if they integrate local healers and traditional practices into health services. Similarly, state education policies can reserve teaching positions for elderly tribal individuals fluent in endangered dialects, thereby formalizing their role in cultural education.

Importantly, policy formation should involve tribal elders themselves as stakeholders and advisors. Their firsthand insights are essential for designing welfare mechanisms that do not alienate but uplift them.

The Way Forward: A Holistic and Inclusive Framework

Empowering elderly tribal citizens requires a shift from fragmented welfare models to a comprehensive cultural paradigm. Ageing in these societies should be reimagined not as a phase of decline but as a culmination of wisdom, resilience, and continuity. This reimagination must deconstruct dominant epistemologies that value only the written, the urban, and the youthful—precisely what G. N. Devy critiques in *After Amnesia*.

A truly inclusive framework would involve:

- **Institutional recognition of elder-led knowledge systems**
- **Localized health and economic services designed in consultation with elders**
- **Partnerships between governments, NGOs, and indigenous communities**
- **Integration of oral histories into academic and policy discourses**

When such a framework is implemented, it not only revitalizes tribal cultures but also restores dignity and purpose to the lives of elderly individuals.

Conclusion

Elderly individuals in tribal and developing societies are not merely aging bodies but living archives of collective memory, environmental intelligence, and cultural philosophy. In *After Amnesia*, G. N. Devy reminds us of the cost of epistemic neglect and the need to reclaim the voices drowned out by historical and developmental narratives.

To empower these elders is to recognize that they are essential bridges between the past and the future. Cultural preservation, policy inclusion, and community engagement must be intertwined to ensure that the wisdom they carry does not fade into silence. Through a deliberate and inclusive strategy, we can transform ageing from marginality into leadership—and let the legacy of our elders illuminate the paths ahead.

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