
BOOK REVIEW-I

Reviewed by

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Book Reviewed

Gupta, A. K. (2019). Traditional knowledge systems and sustainable livelihoods. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications. ISBN: 978-9353286173.

Introduction

The study of traditional knowledge systems has gained renewed relevance in contemporary social science scholarship, particularly in the context of environmental uncertainty, agrarian distress, and cultural erosion brought about by globalization and rapid urbanisation. Traditional Knowledge Systems and Sustainable Livelihoods by Anil K. Gupta is a seminal contribution to this discourse, offering an expansive examination of the role of indigenous knowledge in sustaining livelihoods, conserving biodiversity, and nurturing cultural resilience across rural and tribal communities in India. Through decades of ethnographic immersion, Gupta presents traditional knowledge not as a relic of the past, but as a living, evolving, and community-driven epistemology that continues to shape everyday life.

This book is an excellent fit for the theme of Indigeneity and Traditional Knowledge Systems, aligning strongly with the following sub-themes:

- Sustainable livelihoods
- Indigenous agricultural practices
- Cultural knowledge transmission
- Ecological wisdom and conservation
- Community-based models
- Indigenous women's roles as knowledge holders

- Traditional healing systems
- Impact of globalization
- Economic value of indigenous knowledge

This review evaluates the core arguments, structure, and scholarly significance of Gupta's work, while reflecting on its broader implications for social sciences, cultural sustainability, and policy design.

Overview and Structure of the Book

The book is divided into thematic sections, each addressing a core dimension of indigenous knowledge systems. Its structure is both systematic and narrative-driven:

Defining Traditional Knowledge

Gupta opens by debunking misconceptions that traditional knowledge is static or outdated. Instead, he conceptualizes it as dynamic, adaptive, and deeply contextual, emerging through generations via trial, error, observation, and ecological awareness.

Indigenous Agricultural Practices

This section explores seed conservation, crop diversity, mixed-cropping systems, and place-based ecological knowledge. Gupta provides vivid examples of tribal communities whose farming practices enhance soil fertility, reduce vulnerability to climate change, and promote biodiversity.

Traditional Healthcare and Wellness

Gupta documents herbal formulations, healing rituals, bone-setting techniques, midwifery practices, and other community-based health knowledge. He highlights the deep experiential wisdom embedded in these practices and the centrality of women healers.

Cultural Heritage, Rituals, and Seasonal Rhythms

The book highlights indigenous festival cycles, oral histories, and ritual calendars as eco-cultural systems that bind communities to land, seasons, and ancestors.

Gendered Knowledge and Women's Agency

A strength of the book is its nuanced focus on women's roles as custodians of seeds, biodiversity, culinary knowledge, home-based cures, and spiritual practices.

Globalisation and Threats to Knowledge Systems

Gupta offers a critical discussion on how globalization, commercial agriculture, monocropping, and aggressive market penetration erode indigenous systems.

Economic Value of Traditional Knowledge

The final chapters articulate policy arguments for recognising indigenous knowledge as a legitimate asset contributing to green economies and sustainable development.

Critical Analysis

Theoretical Strength and Ethnographic Depth

Gupta's ability to blend theory with extensive field narratives gives this book a distinctive strength. Whether discussing millet varieties grown by tribal women or herbal innovations developed by rural healers, his approach is ecological, participatory, and culturally sensitive.

He positions indigenous knowledge as a counter-narrative to technocratic development models, arguing that sustainability cannot be achieved without respecting local epistemologies.

Indigenous Agriculture and Ecological Wisdom

One of the strongest contributions of the book is its detailed documentation of indigenous agricultural practices. The case studies show how communities use:

- Mixed cropping to minimise risk
- Indigenous seeds adapted to micro-climates
- Sacred groves as biodiversity reservoirs
- Rituals to regulate hunting, water use, and land use

These practices challenge mainstream assumptions that modern agriculture is more efficient.

Traditional Healthcare and Wellness Systems

Gupta's chapters on healthcare illustrate how indigenous healing traditions—bone-setting, herbal therapies, postpartum care—offer sustainable, low-cost alternatives. The author emphasises that traditional knowledge survives because of women, who maintain family health infrastructures even in remote regions. This discussion resonates strongly with the sub-theme of traditional knowledge in healthcare and wellness.

Cultural Heritage and Oral Knowledge

Gupta argues that rituals, songs, and oral narratives are not merely cultural artefacts but vital knowledge archives that encode ecological information, historical memory, and moral values. Seasonal rituals regulate community behaviour in ways that ensure resource conservation.

Gender Roles and Women as Knowledge Custodians

A major highlight of the book is Gupta's assertion that women sustain India's traditional knowledge economy. They:

- Select and store seeds
- Maintain biodiversity in kitchen gardens
- Prepare herbal remedies
- Conduct rituals and transmit oral traditions
- Innovate in agriculture, cooking, healing, and water management

By foregrounding women's epistemic agency, Gupta challenges patriarchal development models that overlook women's contributions.

Globalisation and the Erosion of Knowledge

The book provides a sharp critique of global markets, mono-cropping, chemical farming, and intellectual property regimes that appropriate indigenous knowledge without benefit-sharing. Gupta warns that cultural homogenization threatens knowledge diversity as much as climate change does.

Community-Based and Green Economies

Gupta's proposal for grassroots innovation platforms and benefit-sharing models is visionary. He shows how indigenous knowledge can fuel green entrepreneurship, reform agricultural extension systems, and reduce rural distress.

Contribution to Scholarship

This book is a landmark contribution for several reasons:

- **Interdisciplinary relevance:** It speaks to sociology, anthropology, economics, ecology, gender studies, and public policy.
- **Empirical richness:** Gupta's decades of fieldwork make the analysis both credible and compelling.
- **Policy relevance:** The book offers clear pathways for integrating traditional knowledge into sustainable development strategies.
- **Cultural advocacy:** It reasserts the value of indigenous epistemologies in a globalised world.
- **Gender insights:** It foregrounds women's central role in sustaining and transmitting knowledge systems.
- **The work is especially timely** in an era of climate crisis, rapid urbanisation, and cultural disconnection.

Limitations

While the book is rich and expansive, two areas could be strengthened:

- A deeper comparative analysis with global indigenous communities
- Discussions on the digital preservation of traditional knowledge

However, these gaps do not undermine the book's scholarly impact.

Conclusion

Traditional Knowledge Systems and Sustainable Livelihoods is a powerful call to recognise, respect, and revitalise India's indigenous epistemologies. By documenting innovations,

ecological wisdom, and cultural resilience at the grassroots level, Gupta challenges dominant development models and urges policymakers to rethink sustainability.

For scholars of traditional knowledge, rural development, gender studies, and cultural anthropology, this book is an essential text. It is equally valuable for practitioners working in NGOs, government agencies, and environmental organisations.

Gupta's work ultimately reminds us that traditional knowledge is not the past—it is a living future. Its survival depends on community participation, institutional support, gender justice, and ethical policy frameworks. This book stands as a profound testament to the richness of indigenous wisdom and the urgent need to protect it in an increasingly homogenised world.
