

Conscientious Knowers and Ecological Wisdom: Towards a Critical Recognition of Tribal Knowledge and Forest Epistemic Authority in Odisha through the Lens of Linda Zagzebski's Virtue Epistemology

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Abstract

Epistemology, as a branch of philosophy, concerns itself with the processes, conditions, and limits of human knowledge. While traditional epistemology has largely focused on abstract and classical theories of knowledge, this study turns to virtue epistemology, particularly the responsibilist approach advanced by Linda Zagzebski. The aim of this research is to critically examine the significance of virtue epistemology while contextualising it within the tribal worldview of Odisha, especially their knowledge of forests and land. Tribal communities possess a deep ecological wisdom, yet their ways of knowing are often marginalised, denied, or dismissed by mainstream society. Such marginalisation constitutes both hermeneutical and epistemic injustice.

This study explores how virtue epistemology, understood not merely as an individual-centred account but also in its communitarian dimension, can illuminate the epistemic practices of tribal communities. The virtues of individual knowers are inseparably linked to the flourishing of the community, just as communal practices of knowing sustain the integrity of individual epistemic agents. By analysing tribal knowledge of forests through the lens of virtue epistemology, this research seeks to uncover the ethical and political dimensions of epistemic authority. It interrogates how far tribal communities, as knowers of the forest, embody epistemic virtues, and conversely, how the state and its political structures, which claim authority over forest knowledge, measure up to such virtues. Ultimately, the study aims to reveal the tensions, injustices, and possibilities that emerge when virtue epistemology is situated within the lived realities of Odisha's tribal communities.

Keywords: Virtue Epistemology, Tribals of Odisha, Responsibilist, Epistemic Injustice, Hermeneutical Injustice, Knower of the Forest

Introduction

Epistemology, at its core, asks what it means to know. Yet too often, philosophy has confined this question to abstract debates over belief, justification, and truth, forgetting that knowledge is lived, embodied, and bound up with survival. In contexts of marginalisation, the question of knowledge becomes urgent: *whose knowledge is trusted, and whose is dismissed?* This research begins from that

urgency. It seeks to bring Linda Zagzebski's responsibilist virtue epistemology into dialogue with the ecological wisdom of the tribal communities of Odisha, showing how their ways of knowing not only challenge dominant epistemic frameworks but also reveal their deep ethical failures. The tribal peoples of Odisha, nearly sixty-two distinct groups, are among the most neglected yet most resilient communities in India. Living in regions rich in forests and minerals, they are paradoxically marked by dispossession. Their lands fuel industries; their forests are cut down in the name of development; their rivers and soil are polluted by mining. Promises of sustainable development remain hollow. What is taken for "progress" is, for them, a steady erasure of life-worlds. Their constitutional protections exist more in text than in practice. For these communities, the forest is not simply a "natural resource." It is a sacred power, a living presence that sustains material, cultural, and spiritual life. To destroy the forest is to wound existence itself. Thus, when the state claims to heal the environment through "afforestation", replacing diverse indigenous forests with monocultures of commercial trees, the tribes see not restoration but further violence. Their wisdom is captured in a striking oral saying: *"Planting trees is the most heinous crime in the world."* At first, this sounds paradoxical. Yet it reveals a profound ecological critique: planting monocultures under the guise of conservation is not healing but killing the spirit of the forest. What mainstream discourse celebrates as ecological virtue, the tribes experience as existential devastation.

Here, virtue epistemology becomes a crucial lens. Linda Zagzebski argues that knowledge is not merely about having the right beliefs, but about embodying intellectual virtues, courage, conscientiousness, and responsibility. In this light, one must ask: who is the truly virtuous knower, the state with its institutions and policies, or the tribal communities with their lived fidelity to ecological balance? Governmental epistemologies often claim authority, yet their actions betray irresponsibility, short-sightedness, and even epistemic arrogance. Tribal epistemologies, by contrast, demonstrate patience, humility, and relational responsibility. Their knowledge is not only intellectual but ethically grounded in care for land, community, and future generations. This contrast raises pressing questions. How do tribal communities interpret ecological change, and how do their interpretations differ from dominant frameworks? In what sense can their ecological wisdom embody intellectual virtues as defined by Zagzebski? Does the systematic neglect of this wisdom amount to epistemic injustice, a silencing of voices that deserve recognition within the constitutional order? What does the clash between industrial "development" and tribal worldviews reveal about the limits of state claims to virtue? Finally, can virtue epistemology itself serve as a bridge connecting constitutional ideals of justice with the lived ecological knowledge of marginalised peoples?

The significance of this inquiry is profound. It is not only a philosophical exercise but an existential demand. Philosophically, it expands virtue epistemology from the individual to the communal, from abstract cognition to embodied ecological wisdom. Politically, it exposes how epistemic injustice underwrites ecological injustice, and how neglecting tribal wisdom is not merely a loss of culture but a threat to planetary survival. To take tribal knowledge seriously is to decolonise epistemology to affirm that the forest is not an object but a teacher, and that the truest intellectual virtues may be found not in policy documents but in the lived wisdom of those who dwell with the land.

Virtue Epistemology: Theoretical Foundations

Virtue epistemology is a modern way of studying knowledge that focuses on the role of intellectual virtues. It grew out of ideas in virtue ethics and was first introduced by Ernest Sosa in 19809

(Zagzebski, 1996). Since then, it has been used to look at problems like the Gettier problem, scepticism, and debates about how knowledge is justified. There are two main kinds. *Virtue Reliabilism* (Sosa, Greco) says intellectual virtues are reliable abilities, like memory, vision, or introspection, and knowledge is true belief that comes from these reliable abilities. *Virtue Responsibilism* (Zagzebski, Code) says intellectual virtues are good habits of mind, like being fair, open-minded, or careful. Zagzebski explains knowledge as belief formed through such intellectual virtues, while Code focuses more on responsibility, the social side of knowing, and the role of the knower, instead of giving a strict definition of knowledge (Baehr, 2004). Both groups refer to Aristotle but read him differently. Reliabilists see virtues as powers that lead us to truth, while Responsibilists see them as the intellectual version of moral virtues. The key debate is whether knowledge depends more on reliable mental abilities or on responsible intellectual character.

Zagzebski's Virtue Epistemology: Responsibilist

Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge (1996) is the main work of Zagzebski, wherein she specifically engages herself in the responsibilist theory of knowledge. Zagzebski's virtue epistemology is deeply shaped by Aristotle's virtue ethics and the broader Neo-Aristotelian revival in moral philosophy (Fairweather & Zagzebski, 2001, p.05). Drawing inspiration from the parallels between moral virtues, such as courage and justice, and intellectual virtues, like open-mindedness or intellectual courage, she develops an epistemological framework that places the character of the knower at its centre (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014, p.134). In doing so, she responds to the limitations of traditional approaches to epistemology, particularly foundationalism and coherentism, which often restricted themselves to abstract debates about justification and belief (Zagzebski, 1996). Instead, Zagzebski aims to unify moral and intellectual character theory, positioning herself in the responsibilist camp of virtue epistemology. Unlike Reliabilist approaches, which focus on the dependability of cognitive faculties, her work emphasises the intellectual character of the agent and the reflective pursuit of truth.

The reason behind her proposal of virtue epistemology lies in her dissatisfaction with the narrowness of classical epistemology. Traditional accounts often overlooked the role of the knower's motives, character, and intellectual integrity, reducing knowledge to the outcome of correct belief-forming mechanisms. Zagzebski sought to humanise epistemology by grounding it in the psychology and morality of the epistemic agent. For her, knowledge is not merely the product of reliable processes but the fruit of intellectual virtues exercised with a sincere love of truth (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014, p.134). This is why she is classified as a responsibility virtue epistemologist. Responsibilist virtue epistemology emphasises reflective intellectual character traits rather than natural, unreflective faculties. According to Zagzebski, a person must consciously aim at the truth and exercise epistemic conscientiousness, reflective awareness and intentional effort in belief formation. She argues that our natural, pre-reflective desire for truth can and should become reflective when we deliberately guide our beliefs with intention (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014, p.142). This insistence on reflective motivation and conscientious pursuit of truth places her firmly within the responsibilist tradition, in contrast to Reliabilists who see no need for such reflective awareness.

Her position brings both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it highlights the ethical dimension of knowledge, showing how epistemology and moral philosophy are deeply intertwined. It also moves beyond the reduction of knowledge to truth, belief, and justification by introducing an agent-centred,

virtue-based dimension. In doing so, it offers a rich framework for understanding intellectual virtues like humility, courage, and open-mindedness. However, critics such as Jason Baehr argue that Zagzebski's account sets the bar too high by requiring virtuous motivation for knowledge (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014). These standard risks exclude many ordinary instances of knowledge, such as a child knowing her own name without conscious virtuous intent. Furthermore, the demand for reflective motivation may make knowledge appear too rare and even elitist, accessible only to those who cultivate sophisticated intellectual virtues.

The contrast between Reliabilists and responsibilist virtue epistemologies further clarifies her contribution. Reliabilists such as Ernest Sosa and John Greco equate virtues with reliable faculties like vision, memory, or reasoning, and they focus on processes that reliably lead to truth without requiring reflective awareness (Baehr, 2016). Responsibilists like Zagzebski and Lorraine Code, on the other hand, equate virtues with intellectual character traits such as honesty, humility, and courage, placing emphasis on motivation, reflective guidance, and conscientious pursuit of truth. For them, knowledge requires not only reliable belief but also the proper reflective motive (Zagzebski, 1996). Personally, I find Zagzebski's emphasis on intellectual character highly compelling, especially in today's world. Her account captures the ethical responsibility involved in belief formation, making it a timely reminder in an age of misinformation. Yet I also recognise the validity of Baehr's concern that her standard risks excluding many genuine knowers, particularly those who operate reliably but without conscious reflection (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014).

The relevance of her view is particularly striking in the digital age, where issues such as AI-generated content, deepfakes, and echo chambers threaten our epistemic environment. In such a context, responsible epistemic agency is indispensable. Intellectual virtues like open-mindedness and humility are crucial for resisting polarisation and fostering dialogue, while reflective awareness of our belief sources is essential for combating fake news. Her theory also offers educators a framework for teaching critical thinking as not merely a skill but as a moral and intellectual responsibility. Zagzebski's virtue epistemology bridges the gap between epistemology and ethics, making the moral-intellectual character of the knower central to the concept of knowledge. While her emphasis on virtuous motivation may be overly demanding and risk narrowing the scope of knowledge too much, the humanising and ethical dimension of her theory provides a valuable framework for an age in which truth-seeking is increasingly under pressure.

Contextualization of the Responsibilist with the Tribals of Odisha

Odisha has almost 62 tribal groups that have their own distinct languages, cultures, religions, and close connections with the land and forest. The Constitution of India provides many safeguards for these communities, but in reality, such protections remain mostly on paper. In the name of tribal development, the government spends large amounts of money, but the sad truth is that these funds rarely reach the tribals. Instead, government officials and other intermediaries benefit the most. Another serious issue is that much tribal land is taken by the government in the name of development. Development is important, but it should not come at the cost of tribals losing their land, forest, rivers, culture, and identity. Although the Constitution forbids the sale of tribal land to non-tribals, the government itself, though not a tribal body, can legally acquire land under the label of development. This creates a deep contradiction: the same government that is meant to protect tribal life often becomes the one that threatens it. In this situation, the *conscientiousness of the tribal community* and the *conscientiousness of the government*

stand in contradiction. Tribals have a conscientiousness rooted in peaceful coexistence with nature and an integrated knowledge of land and forest. The government, on the other hand, shows a form of conscientiousness tied to growth, control, and authority. This contrast can be better understood through Zagzebski's *theory of responsibilist virtue epistemology*. Zagzebski emphasises that knowledge is not only about true belief but about the character of the knower, especially virtues like conscientiousness, integrity, and responsibility.

However, her strong demand for a reflective and virtuous character raises a problem: not everyone can meet such a demanding standard, and this can lead to an *elitist form of knowledge*. Here, I use this insight to describe the government as an *elite group*. In Odisha, the government claims responsibility through constitutional and legal authority, but in practice, this becomes a kind of elitist claim to knowledge and decision-making. It excludes the tribals, whose experiential and ecological knowledge of forest and land is equally valid. Thus, while the tribals demonstrate a living form of *responsibilist knowledge* based on virtues of coexistence and care, the government represents the danger of *elitist reflective conscientiousness* using the language of responsibility while serving the interests of power and growth. In this way, Zagzebski's theory both matches the situation of Odisha's tribals and also helps us critique it. It reminds us that true responsibility must not be reduced to elitist authority, but must recognise the virtues already practised by tribal communities.

Responsibilism: From Subjective to Community-Based

Zagzebski's idea of Responsibilism is grounded in the conscientious reflection of the individual agent in making a knowledge claim. I agree that all beginnings arise from one and then spread into multiple bodies. Yet here lies a problem in her framework: how can those marginalised, who are excluded from the mainstream of society, ever be situated within this standard of the individual conscientious knower? Take the Adivasis of Odisha, who, for the most part, have not been given proper access to formal education. Whose standard of reflection then counts? Which conscience has the authority over the subjective agent, or the community as a whole? History itself exposes the danger. The caste system in India, for instance, can be traced to one man, Manu, whose *Manusmriti* legitimised caste hierarchy (Pranav Jeevan P, 2020). For the elites, Manu became the "conscientious knower," the moral authority. But what followed was epistemic injustice on a mass scale: one man's knowledge claim became an oppressive communal norm. Zagzebski's emphasis on the conscientious subject does indeed seek to move beyond such elitism, but the category itself is precarious. It allows "conscientious reflection" to mask domination. When the knower is defined only in terms of the solitary agent, marginal voices are erased, and power writes itself as conscience.

Here, I propose a reframing. If we translate Zagzebski's idea into the lived struggles of Adivasis in Odisha, particularly around land and forest, the problem becomes clearer. The government appears as the supposed conscientious agent, cloaked in constitutional authority, but in reality, it acts through fabrication and exclusion, rarely including the tribal community in its deliberations. As an Adivasi myself, I know that tribal epistemology does not rest on rigid, individualistic standards. Knowledge is lived relationally, with an interrelatedness that embraces human and non-human alike. Our claims about the forest are not motivated by abstract ecological crises in the way the mainstream imagines. They are grounded in centuries of co-existence, where exploitation, whether of people, animals, or land, is always a violation of knowledge itself. But what we see instead is the monetisation of forestry in Odisha, driven by governmental and corporate interests. Indigenous flora, fauna, and medicinal plants are cut down in

favour of teak plantations that never belonged to these ecosystems. Under the guise of scientific or economic “conscience,” knowledge becomes complicit in exploitation. This is where a purely agent-based Responsibilism collapses. Thus, I argue that Zagzebski’s Responsibilism must be reworked as *Community-Based Responsibilism*. Yet this does not mean rejecting the agent altogether. Knowledge begins with the one, but in the face of high marginalisation, when entire communities are silenced, knowledge must be authenticated through community reflection. This is why the Niyamgiri Verdict of the Supreme Court is instructive: it recognised tribal communities as legitimate epistemic authorities regarding their forest (Marshall & Balaton-Chrimes, 2016). But even here, their knowledge claim was only victorious once international voices amplified it. Tribal epistemology was not accepted on its own terms.

This reveals a deeper crisis: Responsibilism must not become a category mistake that privileges elite subjectivity while rejecting the authority of marginalised communities. Authority belongs to all mainstream or marginal provided knowledge is never used to exploit any existential being in the universe. *Community-Based Responsibilism as Crisis Balance*: What I therefore propose is not the abolition of the agent but a crisis balance. In contexts of acute injustice, such as the ongoing marginalisation of Adivasis community-based Responsibilism becomes a more workable model. It guards against elite monopolies of conscience while giving space for marginalised voices to shape knowledge as lived relation. At the same time, the role of the agent remains indispensable: knowledge begins in the singular and only then becomes communal. The challenge of our age is to hold both together without collapsing into either extreme. Community-based Responsibilism affirms the authority of the marginalised, while subjective reflection preserves the dynamism of the individual conscience. In this balancing act, Responsibilism is no longer merely a theory of knowledge; it becomes an ethic of survival, an insistence that knowledge itself must resist exploitation, whether of forest, land, or the most vulnerable among us.

Relevance in the Tribals as Knower of the Forest

It is true that a person on earth can better understand the earth from within, yet due to our mainstream society’s frameworks of knowledge, we have lost touch with the real meaning of our relationship with the planet. For tribals, however, the understanding of earth and forest goes beyond the mainstream conception. Adivasis know the forest not simply as a resource or “data,” but as an existential-relational reality that sustains the very possibility of life. Here, Zagzebski’s notion of conscientious reflection aligns deeply with the tribal way of knowing. While Reliabilist approaches remain external and procedural, tribal ecological wisdom resonates more with a responsibilist orientation, one that embodies conscientious reflection, courage, honesty, and existential care. In fact, the tribal knower of the forest does not only engage as an *individual agent* but as part of a *communitarian conscientious reflection*, where truth-claims are carried boldly and courageously by the community, even in the face of systemic marginalisation. This is particularly evident in Odisha, where many Adivasis, though falsely accused and imprisoned, continue to speak about the importance of forests—not merely for their survival but for the survival of the world itself. Thus, the *Epistemology of Adivasi Existential-Relational Responsibilism* emerges as a vital model, combining open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, carefulness, thorough inquiry, intellectual courage, honesty, and rigour. This is not a romanticisation but a recognition of an authentic, lived epistemology rooted in existential responsibility toward Being.

At this point, Abhay Flavian Xaxa's declaration "I am not your data" becomes especially important. As recalled by Chitrangada Choudhury and Aniket Aga (2019), Xaxa led a powerful protest on 18 March 2015 against the Land Acquisition Bill, where sixty Adivasi men symbolically defecated on copies of the Act. His accompanying poem "*I Am Not Your Data*" refuses the reduction of Adivasis to categories, numbers, or "vote banks," and asserts instead: "So I draw my own picture, and invent my own grammar." This refusal resonates directly with the epistemic claim being made here: knowledge is not data. Tribal knowledge is not a statistic to be extracted or manipulated, but an existential-relational wisdom that affirms the dignity of Being. To read Adivasi ecological consciousness through the lens of Zagzebski's responsibilist epistemology is to see how subjective conscientious reflection becomes communitarian conscientious reflection, one that rejects exploitation and affirms an ecological conscience. Yet this is not without challenges. In Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh, certain tribal leaders, including MLAs, MPs, and even Chief Ministers, have often failed to exhibit the very virtues and traits of conscientious knowledge that Zagzebski demands. Some are diverted by monetary and political power, resulting in what may be called a "monetary-funded conscience," where tribal voices are silenced and ecological responsibility is neglected. This complicates the narrative: while tribals are fundamentally forest-conscientious knowers, not all live up to this epistemic responsibility, particularly when subsumed under the machinery of state and party politics. Nevertheless, in the era of global climate crisis, the authority of Adivasi knowledge, as an *ecological conscientious knowing*, is profoundly relevant. It offers not just an epistemic alternative but an existential imperative for the survival of planetary life.

State-Sponsored Hermeneutical Injustice against Tribals as Knowers of the Forest

As hermeneutics deals with the interpretation of the text, when we look at the tribals of Odisha, we find that every government, whether central or state, interprets their existence and environment in ways disconnected from their lived reality. For the government, environment and tribal culture are not integral to India's life-world, but only instruments of development. Thus, when questions of mining forest land and mountains arise, constitutional interpretation often makes forests appear "useless" in terms of economic utility, while the same constitution is strongly upheld during elections, when tribal votes are needed. In this way, Zagzebski's call for a conscientious and ethical knower exposes the contradictions of state governance, where the tribal worldview is consistently misinterpreted through a developmentalist lens. Tribals do not deny development but suggest forms of non-violent, well-planned mining where the environment is not polluted. Yet, in the eyes of the state, such perspectives are dismissed, and whenever tribals raise their voices, they are branded as anti-nationals or Maoists, a phenomenon deeply visible in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

Here, virtue epistemology itself comes into question, because the conscientious reflection that Zagzebski advocates is not made practical at the governmental level. Even though India has legal provisions such as the PESA Act, FRA, Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, and SPT Act, as well as constitutional protections under the 5th Schedule for Scheduled Areas, the state consistently fails to implement them in ways that honour tribal epistemic authority (Pandey, 2021; Jitendra, 2015). Instead, these frameworks are selectively applied or bypassed when economic interests, such as mining, are at stake. The hermeneutical understanding of tribals toward the forest goes far beyond governmental interpretation. For the state, forests are property and monetary assets. For tribals, however, forests embody life itself, grounded in deeply relational and existential realities. Selling forest land is not merely an economic

transaction but the destruction of millions of lives, human, animal, plant, and even non-living beings, since all exist in a web of interdependence and mutual energy. This holistic vision is systematically ignored by the government, which prioritises industrial expansion even in constitutionally protected areas.

The lived reality of this injustice can be seen in regions such as Sundergarh, where, despite being designated a Fifth Schedule District, rampant mining has led to polluted rivers, forests, and land, while industries earn capital unchecked and without environmental regulation. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that many tribals remain unaware of their constitutional rights due to a lack of education, enabling the state to continually misinterpret and exploit their knowledge systems. Thus, the hermeneutical injustice faced by tribals reveals not only a denial of ecological wisdom but also the failure of virtue epistemology to safeguard their authority as knowers of the forest.

The Silencing of Tribal Knowledge of the Forest by Mainstream Society

In the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh Munda declared, “*Yes, I am a Jungli. But who are you to teach us democracy, when we have already practised it in our tribal society?*” His challenge was not just political; it was epistemological. He exposed the arrogance of a society that dismisses tribal knowledge while pretending to educate us in values we have long embodied (Indian History Collective, 2022). I know this dismissal intimately. When I moved to Indore for higher education in 2016, I was branded “ancient,” as if my world belonged to prehistory, simply because I did not know how to operate the latest gadgets. For the mainstream, a lack of gadget literacy meant a lack of intelligence. Yet what disturbed me more than their mockery was what I saw in their so-called modern city: rivers and canals choked with filth, consumerism ballooning under the grip of corporations, and pollution so dense that it weighed on my very existence. I was told this was “progress.” I could not help but see it as *decay masked as development*.

This is where the concept of Epistemic Injustice (Fricker) and Epistemicide (de Sousa Santos) is not just theoretical; it is lived (Fricker, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2014). Tribal knowledge, with its insistence that what harms forest, river, land, and community is not “good,” is dismissed as primitive, even laughable, while the modern knowledge that floods cities with waste is called advanced. Whose ignorance is this, really? My ancestors did not need formal education to know the difference between life-giving and life-destroying practices. They were not naïve romantics. They deliberately withheld certain knowledge from money-driven outsiders, knowing full well that such knowledge, once commodified, would be used to exploit the very conditions of life. This is not backwardness; it is an *epistemic virtue* of the highest order. Zagzebski’s virtue epistemology insists that true knowledge requires conscientious reflection (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014). My ancestors practised that reflection. The mainstream, in contrast, reflects only enough to justify its consumption.

I have seen this hypocrisy play out in ecology as well. Urban elites host seminars, plant saplings for photo opportunities, and parade their concern for the environment while consuming at unsustainable levels. In Odisha, the Forest Department plants trees for commercial gain while letting old forests die. This is not preservation; it is *ecological fraud*. My ancestors were right when they said, “*When nature is sold, know that this is the manipulation of life’s very existence.*” What shocks me is not that tribal knowledge is marginalised, but that the very society that mocks us as *jungli* (in Hindi language, untamed or uneducated or uncivilised used by mainstream society without knowing really meaning of it) calls its own destructive habits “rational” and “developed.” If this is development, it is nothing more than *the*

organised destruction of life, disguised as progress. The mainstream has perfected the art of masking reality with abstractions. Wealth is abstract, ecology is abstract, and education is abstract. The malls that celebrate “green aesthetics” are temples of consumption, not guardians of life. The real forest living, breathing, resisting commodification is silenced. If truth still matters, then it is time to admit: it is not the tribal who is uneducated, but the mainstream who is unreflective. It is not the tribal who must catch up to modernity, but modernity that must finally learn from the tribal.

Virtue Epistemology’s Failure on Tribal Land and Forest

I do not entirely disagree with Zagzebski’s idea of virtue epistemology, particularly her focus on Responsibilism. However, because it depends heavily on subjective reflection, it risks creating an elite class within society. In Odisha, for example, government officers are often highly educated, yet when it comes to protecting tribal land and forests, they fail to act even though the constitution grants tribals explicit rights. This exposes a critical problem in virtue epistemology: many of its practitioners appear more concerned with Reliabilism than Responsibilism. Government elites are often appointed based on measurable knowledge achievements rather than the combination of *character and intellectual virtue* that Zagzebski emphasises (Steup, Turri, & Sosa, 2014). As Jason Baehr (2016) notes, Sosa’s mature conception of virtue epistemology requires both Reliabilism and Responsibilism to be fully effective. These ideas, if applied properly, would strengthen the knowledge claims of tribals, whose authority over forests is rooted in ecological wisdom that mainstream society often reduces to abstract “environmental knowledge.” For tribals, however, this knowledge is not abstract; it is the very *existence of life itself*. Yet, when power and politics enter the equation, Zagzebski’s model appears almost naive. Corporate and political interests routinely override ethical knowledge: forests are handed to corporations without proper safeguards, and constitutional rights are manipulated through selective interpretation. I do not claim this failure is purely political; factors like resource nationalism, GDP-driven development, population growth, and resource distribution also play a role, but it starkly demonstrates the limitations of a virtue epistemology that relies solely on subjective conscientious reflection in a world structured by power and self-interest.

General Relevance and Problems of Zagzebski’s Theory

Zagzebski’s emphasis on intellectual virtues, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, carefulness, thoroughness, intellectual courage, honesty, and rigour remains theoretically compelling, particularly for evaluating knowledge grounded in ethical and communal responsibility. Tribal communities, such as the Adivasis of Odisha, live these virtues in a way that is existentially and ecologically profound. Their conscientious reflection, humility, courage, and integrity are not abstract ideals but daily practices that sustain life itself, demonstrating a living, community-oriented form of virtue epistemology that far surpasses mere Western theorisation. Yet, the brutal reality is that Zagzebski’s framework fractures under the weight of structural oppression. Tribal societies are embedded in contexts radically different from the Western settings where her ideas were conceived. While her theory is pure and insightful in principle, its application in Odisha’s forests and land is distorted by power, politics, and bureaucratic machinery that epistemically and hermeneutically silence the voices of tribal communities. Constitutional rights are selectively interpreted, forests are handed over to corporations, and the ethical knowledge of tribals is repeatedly ignored or vilified. In this context, conscientious reflection at the

individual level becomes almost irrelevant; the system itself undermines the very virtues Zagzebski celebrates.

Moreover, some tribals have been co-opted by political and economic forces, producing what can be called “*monetary- and politics-driven conscientious knowers*”, who claim knowledge but act in the service of profit rather than life. This stark duality exposes the limits of individualist virtue epistemology: while tribals embody extraordinary ethical and ecological wisdom, structural power and exploitation distort the recognition and application of that knowledge. To be meaningful in such contexts, Zagzebski’s framework must be radically expanded to communal, relational, and existential dimensions, acknowledging that virtues are not only personal traits but collective practices crucial to survival and ecological justice.

Conclusion

Tribal knowledge, particularly that of the Adivasis of Odisha, exposes the profound limits of mainstream epistemology and the constraints of even Zagzebski’s sophisticated virtue epistemology. While her emphasis on intellectual virtues, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, carefulness, thoroughness, intellectual courage, honesty, and rigour is philosophically compelling, it collapses when confronted with structural oppression, political co-optation, and corporate exploitation. Tribal knowledge is not an abstract, individual pursuit; it is relational, communal, and existential, inseparable from forests, rivers, and ecosystems that sustain life. This problem is not unique to Odisha. Across Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and the North-Eastern states, tribal epistemic authority is routinely undermined. Governments and corporations interpret constitutional rights and environmental safeguards in ways that serve profit, political leverage, and extractive interests, rather than protect the knowledge and lives of indigenous communities. In this context, Zagzebski’s focus on individual conscientious reflection appears both naive and insufficient, as it cannot contend with systemic epistemic violence or the hermeneutical distortion of tribal wisdom. Some tribals have been co-opted into political or economic agendas, producing what can be called “*monetary- and politics-driven conscientious knowers*”, who claim knowledge but act in self-interest rather than in the service of life or ethical responsibility. This duality exposes the fragility of epistemic virtue under structural pressure: tribal communities embody extraordinary ecological and ethical wisdom, yet their knowledge is routinely ignored, manipulated, or trivialised.

Tribal communities are grateful for constitutional protections, yet they rightly insist that these safeguards must be implemented in practice, not merely documented in law or academic discussion. Their lived experience reveals the failure of both the state and mainstream epistemology to respect, protect, and amplify their knowledge. The ecological, cultural, and existential wisdom of tribals should not be subordinated to extractive development or abstract Western frameworks of knowing. Further research could critically interrogate Zagzebski’s virtue epistemology, exploring its application across diverse tribal contexts nationwide, and examining how communal, relational, and ecological dimensions of knowledge can be integrated into theory. This would challenge the elitist, individualistic assumptions of Western epistemology and provide insights for ethically responsible, community-centred knowledge governance. Ultimately, the marginalisation of tribal knowledge is not only a philosophical failure but a moral, political, and ecological crisis. Recognising tribal knowledge as a legitimate epistemic virtue demands that epistemology itself confront the violence, exploitation, and systemic injustice embedded in

mainstream society, acknowledging that relational and ecological knowledge is not secondary but central to the survival of life itself.

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