

TRIBAL CULTURE IN ODISHA: AN ECOSOPHICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The relationship between Nature, the environment, and tribal communities constitutes an integral dimension of indigenous life, culture, and worldview. For tribal communities, nature is not merely a source of material resources, but a living entity deeply embedded in their social, cultural, religious, and economic practices. This article examines the intricate relationship between nature and tribal communities, with particular reference to Odisha's indigenous traditions and cultural practices. It explores the significance of sacred groves, totemism, clan identities, nature-based deities, and the worship of the earth, trees, mountains, and cattle in tribal belief systems. It also discusses how traditional festivals, rituals, and dance forms reflect the close link between tribal life and the natural environment. These practices embody indigenous ecological knowledge and show how customary beliefs help preserve biodiversity and maintain ecological balance. The article also highlights the growing challenges tribal communities face from deforestation, displacement, mining, industrialization, unsustainable development, and changing patterns of natural resource use. Such developments threaten not only the ecological foundations of tribal life but also their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and community identity. The study argues that tribal ecological traditions offer valuable insights into sustainable living and environmental conservation. It emphasizes the need to recognize indigenous knowledge systems and protect tribal cultural practices as essential components of ecological sustainability and environmental justice. Following Arne Næss and Felix Guattari's concept of 'Ecosophy', the article analyzes different tribes' culture in Odisha and their harmonious relationship with Nature in everyday life.

Keywords: Tribal Communities; Nature; Indigenous Knowledge System; Totemism; Ecosophy

Introduction

When we assess the relationship between ‘Nature’ or ‘Environment’ and the ‘Tribe’, many aspects become clear naturally. When we use alternative expressions such as primitive inhabitants, forest-dwellers and tribal people, we may say that we have already begun to explore the basic thread of this relationship. For tribal people, nature is inseparable from life and can be seen as a mirror of their traditional community life, philosophy of life, and worldview. Mother Earth remains at the centre of their social, cultural, economic, and religious life (Booth, 2003; McNeill, 2017).

As children of nature, they believe not in destroying nature but in preserving its traditional structure and renewing and regenerating it. This is reflected in their traditional agriculture and in the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Tribal communities possess an Indigenous Knowledge System which has sustained their way of life for generations. Through their traditional knowledge, they have preserved the earth's primitive ecosystems and found solutions to problems when necessary (Berkes et al., 2000).

In the worldview of ancient tribal communities, the natural world is profoundly sacred—a Sacred World. Because they are part of it, they are inseparable from the sacred earth. This is why they believe in preserving nature in its natural condition. From protecting water resources and conserving soil to protecting forests and forest animals, one can see an ecological consciousness among tribal communities, rooted in the idea that all these are parts of the sacred earth. They regard natural water sources as streams inspired or sent by the gods. To prevent soil erosion, they construct stone structures, terraces and steps on the land. They worship the land and the earth, regard trees as the abode of the deity, worship their ancestors through hills and trees, and treat animals and reptiles as reflections of their own lives, giving them respect and honour. They bow before the fundamental sources of nature’s resources and surrender themselves in reverence. Many such dimensions may be discussed while examining “Nature” and “Tribal People” (Kandari et al., 2014; Priyadarshini & Abhilash, 2019; Das et al., 2023).

Sacred Grove and Tribal People

A ‘Sacred Grove’ refers to a protected portion of forest that a community or tribal group develops based on religious and cultural beliefs. Indigenous or aboriginal people maintain a particular worldly and spiritual relationship with trees, plants and animals; Sacred Groves are a manifestation of that relationship. Indigenous people who regard themselves as part of Mother Earth develop, according to their respective communities and social groups, a spiritual

attachment to sacred trees: “Sacred groves or sacred wood are groves of trees and have special religious importance within a particular culture.”

Whatever the reason, a Sacred Grove signifies, in one form or another, the protection of forests. There is little doubt that tribal people have practised such conservation from the earliest stages of human civilisation. They understood the value and significance of natural resources, their relationship with environmental balance, and the medicinal value of forest plants. The preservation of natural biodiversity, medicinal plants, and wild animals in these areas is closely tied to folk sentiment and religious and cultural attachment. The protected forest patch may be understood as the shelter and life-breath of the larger forest itself.

In some places, people living near forests or within forest regions transform a portion of the forest into a Sacred Grove because of ecological awareness or traditional belief. Since they believe that deities reside in Sacred Groves, they do not cut the forest there for religious reasons. Outside the protected forest land, they also often refrain from unnecessarily killing wild animals. Various communities respect and avoid harming community-specific trees, creepers, fruits, flowers, birds, animals and reptiles. In Odisha, such protected forest patches created by tribal communities are examples of natural forest conservation and are among the clearest expressions of tribal identification with nature.

From a worldwide perspective, Sacred Groves are generally found in three forms: (1) Temple Groves, situated near temples or shrines; (2) Traditional Groves, traditionally recognised as areas associated with village deities or village goddesses; and (3) Burial Groves or small forest patches associated with burial grounds. Many myths and legends are also connected with such places.

India has more than 14,000 Sacred Groves, while Odisha has more than 2,166. A 2016 source reportedly mentions 169 Sacred Groves in Koraput, whereas another source published in 2000 reportedly places the number in Koraput district is more than 322. Numerous examples are found in the district: 11 in Kunduli, 11 in Sadam, 9 in Rajput, 18 in Subai, 11 in Dudhahari, 8 in Gunaput, 14 in Dalaiguda, 7 in Nuttal, 16 in Pakajhola, 24 in Khudi, 8 in Renga, 13 in Hataguda and 13 in Kankiri, comprising small and large Sacred Groves.

Out of these places, especially among the Paraja at Aligaon, people worship Ganga Maa in the Sacred Grove; among the Mali and other tribal communities at Maulima, they worship Mahaprabhu. At Bhairabaguda, the Paik, Dora and Mali communities worship Bhairabi Devi. At Dudhahari, Paraja, Sundi, Mali, Paik and Kandha-Paraja communities worship Shiva. At Malidusara, Paraja tribal people worship Ganga Maa, while at Kantabaunsuni, Goud, Damba, Gadaba and Paraja communities worship Kantabaunsuni Devi.

The ‘Nishanimunda’, found in many villages of Koraput, may also fall under the concept of a small Sacred Grove. When a village is established, people collect soil through ritual from different directions of the village, select it as sacred soil, and ceremonially install it at a sacred place. Paraja (tribal) people and Mali, Rana, Kumbhar and other local communities regard this

soil as highly sacred. They perform worship there during festivals such as Diwali and Chaitra, and on other occasions. Some people call it the Earth Deity or Hundi Deity. People protect the sacred soil by placing it in a pit or enclosing it with large stones. Trees associated with Mother Earth are also preserved, thereby creating a small Sacred Grove.

The bamboo grove associated with the goddess Kantabaunsuni near Damonjodi in Koraput may also be mentioned. It is said to have been larger in the past; at present, the completely protected bamboo forest covers approximately 1.6 hectares. Since it is regarded as the abode of the goddess Kantabaunsuni, a healthy environment has developed there, making it an example of a successful Sacred Grove. The Koya (tribal) people of Malkangiri protect Mahula trees in sacred forest areas where they believe their Bija Gudi resides and where they worship their village deity, Gudimata.

In Mayurbhanja, the Bhumiya community calls such a sacred place a Jahirthan. They worship Jahirburu, Karkata, Baghut, Gramadevata, and Deoshali there. According to popular belief, evil spirits and contagious diseases cannot enter the village. During various festivals, the Dehuri performs worship there. Among the Ho tribal people of Mayurbhanj, Desauli, who protects the village and Singabonga (the Sun God), regarded as the supreme deity, and are worshipped in the Jahira or Sacred Grove. The Kol people of the region similarly regard the village sal forest as a Jahira or Sacred Grove. Jahira is their place of worship, where they make offerings, worship, and sacrifices, and where they believe their ancestors' spirits reside.

Among the Santhals of Mayurbhanj, the Sacred Grove is called Jaher, where *sal*, *asan*, *neem* and other trees are mainly found. In Nuapada district, a protected sacred grove is home to the Bhunjia people, who worship their presiding goddess, Sunadei. In the Nrusimhanath–Gandhamardan Hill region of Sambalpur district, the Binjhal tribal community worships its presiding goddess Vindhyavasini. During the Karama festival in the month of Bhadrab, Karmasani is invoked and brought to the place of worship; the Karma branch is brought from the Sacred Grove. Since the Karama tree is worshipped there, the surrounding forest beauty remains protected. People regard the area around the sacred tree as a symbol of their spiritual world.

Nature/Environment and Tribal Totems

The Encyclopedia Britannica says, “A system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relation with a spirit-being, such as an animal or plant. The entity, or totem, is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol. The term totemism has been used to characterize a cluster of traits in the religion and in the social organization of many peoples.”

Put simply, members of certain clans and groups are linked to particular signs or symbols. As civilization developed, this became a symbolic form associated with religious belief and the tradition of non-human beings. It distinguishes people of one group from another and may indicate descent from a particular lineage or clan. It is also important in social institutions such

as marriage. Among tribal communities, totems or clans are generally associated with various animals, birds, reptiles, trees, plants, fruits, flowers, and other objects. Marriage is generally prohibited within the same totem because members regard themselves as belonging to the same lineage. At the same time, they do not harm the animals, plants, or objects associated with their clan. Significantly, the elements adopted as clan symbols are all connected with nature and the environment. Anthropologists suggest that a major reason is that tribal people live in harmony with nature and regard themselves as inseparable from it.

The Oxford Dictionary states: “A totem is a guardian spirit of a particular unit of kinship or social organization such as a clan or tribe. A totem may be a species of plant, insect, animal, bird, or even a mythical entity.” It also defines a totem as “a natural object or animal that is believed by a particular society to have spiritual significance, and that is adopted by it as an emblem.” Thus, a symbol associated with a clan's belief system and spirituality, whether a natural object, animal, tree, or plant, is fundamental to totemism.

The word “totem” is believed to have come from Ojibwa, an Algonquian language once spoken by American Indians. In English, it may be understood as an emblem, logo, or sign. The symbol carries the collective identity of a people, and with that identity is the tribe's origin and development.

Like other tribal communities, the Bathudi also have totems. While many Odisha tribes have clans based particularly on animals, birds, creatures and vegetation, the Bathudi are reported to regard animals, birds, fish, reptiles and different flowers as signs of their community or ethnic identity. Consequently, they do not kill animals belonging to their clan or harm the associated trees or flowers. Some totem names include *Dhanaphula*, *Nageswar*, *Dahuka*, *Nag*, *Shalmachha*, *De chadhei*, *Kukura-Mundia* and *Panipoka*. These associations also appear in titles or surnames such as Dhanda, Bagh, Baghasingh, Ulluka, Shankhial, Singh, Sapua, Neulia and Mushapalia.

Among the Bonda, two principal lineages are found: Ontal (Nag or Snake lineage) and Killo (Tiger lineage). Among the Didayi, five principal lineages are mentioned: *Unkhoo* or Tiger clan, Mala or *Nag* clan, *Gabe* or Bear clan, *Mosali* or Crocodile clan, and *Goi* or Tortoise clan. Various subdivisions occur within these lineages. The Kudbayas, or Cobra-Tiger-Tortoise clan group, may establish marriage relations across the specified divisions, whereas members of the Tortoise and Crocodile clans do not marry their own relatives.

The Paraja people of Koraput are divided into several sections such as Bada Paraja, Sana Paraja, Pengu Paraja, Parenga Paraja, Jhodia Paraja and Chelia Paraja. In some places, they also identify as Bonda Paraja and Kandha Paraja. Paraja clans include Tiger, Kite, Dog, Goat, Tortoise, and Kenkata. They worship the animals and birds associated with their clans and do not harm them.

The Kuttia community is divided into groups such as Bada Rana, Sana Rana, Putia, and Dulia. It has totems such as *Khara* (Sun), *Nag* (cobra), Tiger, Fish, *Hanu* (monkey), *Shamar/Shaguna*

(vulture), *Shugri* (cow), *Gami* (weaver bird), and *Magur Machha Phula* (a fish-related clan symbol).

The Lodha tribe is divided into nine lineages, each with its own lineage name and totem. These totems are based on animals, birds, and fruits. For example, the Bhakta/Bhukta/Bhagada lineage has the *Churuki* or wild-yam totem. Members do not dig or eat the yam from the forest. It is believed that if a small *Churuki* yam is cut while collecting roots or tubers, blood will emerge. The Mallick lineage has crocodile and *Shalmachha* totems; its members neither kill crocodiles nor eat Shalmachha. The Katual/Katal/Kotal lineage has the *Chandra* (Moon) and *Phidingi* (lizard) totems, and its members never kill lizards, considering them relatives. The Naik/Laik lineage has Shalmachha; the Digara lineage has Kachima (tortoise), and its members neither catch nor eat tortoises and bathe after seeing one. The Pramanik/Pramanik lineage has the *Manik* bird as its totem and does not catch or eat it. The Dandapata/Bagh lineage has the tiger as its totem; when people of this community hear a tiger roar, they fold their hands in reverence and do not kill it. The Ahadi/Adi/Pahadi lineage has the Chanda fish as its totem and does not eat it. The Bhuyan/Bhuiyan lineage similarly observes restrictions concerning Shalmachha.

The Gond and Other Clan Traditions

Viewed across India, the Gond is a large tribal community. In the past, they were associated with the Gondwana kingdom, and in modern society, they are believed to have absorbed certain cultural forms connected to the legendary Gond world. They have different groups based on clans or lineages, and their worshipped deities also vary. Groups include Tin Deo, Char Deo, Panch Deo, Chha Deo, and Sat Deo. The Tin Deo worships the Kadamba tree; among the Panch Deo, the Somvanshi worship the Palash tree. Kadamba is a principal lineage symbol of Chha Deo, while the Gonds believe that the Sat Deo originated from the mouth of Nagaraja.

The Gonds of Odisha have adopted many creatures of nature as clan symbols. For example, some lineages are *Naitam* (dog), *Payam* (tortoise), *Bakdi* (goat), *Goi* (monitor lizard), *Kram* (jungle fowl), *Bondari* (monkey) and *Bagh* (tiger). They show respect to these animals and neither kill nor eat them.

The Matiya or Matia community, also known in some accounts as the Kela community, is a pottery-making tribal group whose clan system differs considerably from those of other tribes. Most of its clans are named after medicinal plants and trees, and several names appear to have been adopted from Telugu, such as Tulasi and others.

The Juang: An Origin Story of Clans

The Juang tribe has a distinctive story concerning its lineages and clans. Once, twelve sons of a sage and his wife, who lived in the forest, could find nothing while hunting. They killed a cow, buried its head, and returned home with the meat. When the sage and his wife discovered this, the sons falsely said that it was deer meat. The parents did not believe them, so everyone went to

the place where the head had been buried. The boys took an oath that if it were truly a cow's head; water would come out of it. Immediately, water began to flow from the spot. Two streams of water emerged from the nostrils and grew so strong that the current swept all twelve sons away. According to the spirit or object that protected each son, twelve new lineages were formed.

The lineages are described as follows: (1) Champeibak—from the son who took shelter under a Champa tree; (2) Jituabak—from the son saved by holding a Jitua tree; (3) Kiriyaaribak—from the son who took shelter under the Karada or Kiri tree; (4) Kaichabak—from the son saved by holding a tortoise; (5) Lanjiabak—from the son who held a type of thorny tree called Lanjia; (6) Rundalibak—from the son saved by taking shelter under a mushroom growing on a tree; (7) Sainbak—from the son saved by holding a type of grass-bush; (8) Salarbak—from the son who survived by holding a Salaki tree; (9) Saringbak—from the son who survived by holding a large fish; (10) Sariaaribak—from the son who took shelter in a Shiali creeper; (11) Shariyabak—from the son saved by holding a Sal tree; and (12) Tangarbak—from the son saved by climbing a Tangara Ant-hill-like mound. These were regarded as the first persons of their respective lineages, and from them the lineage and clan traditions began. All twelve elements were natural.

Another important point is that the Juang clans are named after different living and non-living elements. Their clans are associated with trees, animals, hills, streams, and cosmic objects. Their names come from their respective clan symbols. For example, the Tangarapadia Juang clan is called “Tangar”, referring to a particular stone from which the name is derived.

Munda Clan Traditions

The Munda also have numerous clans, such as Hembrom (a kind of snake), Nagvanshi, Bhutkuar (a kind of fish), and Hassa (duck). Each clan is associated with a story. According to one folk narrative, in ancient times, before the Munda community had been formed, a tribal girl regularly went to a river to wash her clothes. A snake living in the water constantly observed her beauty and activities. Its name was Sheshanaga. He became deeply attracted to her and wished to marry her. Taking human form as a handsome man, Sheshanaga approached her and proposed marriage. She agreed, and they married. After some years, they had a son, but she did not know she had married a snake. One day, she noticed that the boy's tongue was like a snake's tongue. She understood everything and asked her husband who he was. Sheshanaga then took her to the river, assumed his original form, and revealed the entire story. Their descendants became Nagvanshi, and the community adopted the Nagvanshi clan. This is regarded as one of the important origin stories of the Munda clan system (Tripathy, 2018).

Similarly, among the Santhals, clans such as Murmu (a wild cattle), Chande (monitor lizard) and Boyar (a kind of fish) are found, while among the Ho there are Bage (tiger), Hansda (a kind of wild duck), Jamuda (buffalo) and Tiyu (Wolf). Many clans are also used as community titles.

Clan Identity and the Name of Koraput

Koraput also illustrates the importance of clan identity in place-naming. Local people call it 'Karaput'. One widely accepted view links the name to the Rana community, who bore the clan name 'Khara' and once lived in this region. It is said that these Rana people settled on the slopes of the hills at places called 'Put' or 'Putā'. Their community name was Kara or Khara, and their clan was also Kara or Khara. The word 'Khara' is said to mean 'rabbit'. Thus, Karaput or Koraput is interpreted as a place associated with the rabbit clan of the Rana people (Adhari et al., 2022).

Like other tribal communities, the Durua also have ancient lineage traditions. In Koraput, their ancient lineage traditions are visible in the Pottangi-Gunpur region. In Shiribeda village near Gunpur, Durua people belonging to the Nag and Tiger lineages have lived since ancient times. Their names differ according to lineage. Among the Tiger lineage are Dur, Kanjariya and Pedak, and Dur is further divided into Aldur, Dengadur and Kalengdur. Kanjariya Durua of the tiger clan is associated with their birth place Kanjarpadar. The Nag lineage includes names such as Kandaki, Charak, Kalak, Kudbak, Kumakuria, and Terabandar. The Nag lineage is also divided into two groups, Kalia Kandaki and Gunia Kandaki, who perform traditional community functions. Another designation is Kichek Naik. Apart from a few individuals, Durua people, whether of the Tiger or Nag lineage, generally use their surnames as Durua names.

Nature/Environment and Tribal Gods and Goddesses

Across the world, tribal people have traditionally lived by revering nature. Because water, forest, and land are understood as the principal foundations of life, and because nature has historically been the material basis of their social, economic, cultural, and religious existence, natural elements themselves become worthy of worship. Among the Kandha, for example, Bura Penu (Creator), Tana Penu (Earth Deity), Saru Penu (Mountain Deity), Suga Penu (Spring Deity), Gasa Penu (Forest Deity), Munda Penu (Water-reservoir Deity), Piku Penu (Rain Deity), Nakupenu (Village Deity), Joripenu (River and Stream Deity), Burbu Penu (Deity of the First Fruit), Jakeri Penu (Earth Goddess's sister), Ruja or Juga Penu (Deity of drought and natural calamities), Maulak Penu (Deity of disease), Pilakupenu (Hunting Deity), Lohapenu/Erenga Penu (War Deity), Sande Penu (Boundary Deity), Bela Penu (Sun Deity), Danju Penu (Moon Deity), Dharani Penu (Earth Deity), Churk Penu (Manure-pit Deity) and other deities are closely connected with nature. These are expressions and transformations of the everyday life of tribal communities. This is not limited to one tribal community; it is a common feature among tribal societies worldwide, although names and specific forms vary.

The transformation of natural powers and natural resources into tribal gods and goddesses is linked with social security and economic stability. Therefore, tribal people worship the earth, soil, trees, forests, wild animals, birds, rain, water, springs and mountains for a happy life and a prosperous economy. Several of these elements may be discussed separately.

Earth Worship and Tribal People

Earth worship is practised at different times and under different names in tribal societies worldwide. The respect shown to the soil is never separated from the soil itself. Whether it is Dharani Puja, Basumata Puja, Tana Penu Puja, Nishanimunda Puja, or other agricultural rituals, the close relationship between tribal people and the soil is evident. For example, the Kondh communities observe ‘Jhagidi Puja’ for the Earth or Dharani Deity. It is not held at a fixed annual interval; sometimes it is observed after fifty or even sixty years. It is a mass festival. In different regions, it is known as *Kedujatra*, *Podhajatra* and *Jhagidijatra*, replacing older sacrificial practices. The festival is performed when Mother Earth is believed to be displeased or when certain ominous signs appear, such as fire in the village, a tiger entering the village boundary and killing cattle, or the spread of disease.

People may say that “Mother Earth wants to dance”. In response, they may cut the ear and tail of a pig or another sacrificial animal. If an unfortunate event occurs, the ‘Jhagadi’ worship may be performed after three years. If it cannot be performed within those three years, the animal may be ritually killed; this is called *Chepana*. Pig’s ear and tongue are cut and buried at Turkipenu, and a longer period—sometimes one or two years—is requested through prayer for the Jhagadi ritual. Whatever the customary form of the festival, its underlying expression is a tribal experience rooted in the soil. Such earth-centred festivals are not confined to one tribe; they express intimacy and participation with nature.

Tree Worship and Tribal People

Tree worship has existed among various peoples and tribal communities worldwide since the earliest times. It has always expressed ‘life’ and ‘new creation’. Both Vedic and folk texts contain many references to the importance of tree worship. In ancient India, the ‘Panchadevavriksha’ tradition included *Ashvattha* (Peepul tree), *Udumbara*, *Nyagrodha* (Banyan tree), *Plaksha* and *Chuta* (Mango Tree); other trees were also accepted as sacred. According to the Brahmapurana and Padmapurana, Brahma resides in Peepul trees; Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara are associated with sacred trees. The *Brihat Ayurvedic Grantha* states that planting five trees is greater than constructing ten buildings because offerings to ancestors are made through the leaves, flowers, fruits and roots of trees. Similar statements occur in the *Varaha* and *Matsya* Puranas.

Through tree worship, people believe their gods, goddesses, and ancestors are pleased and that they may attain the four goals of life—*dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. Since trees are long-lived (very ancient) and support life and the earth, tribal people are believed to have worshipped their ancestors and deities in different trees from time immemorial. This is why tribal communities worldwide are associated with tree worship, and trees are closely connected to their social, cultural, economic, religious, and spiritual lives.

In discussing tree-worship traditions among the tribes of Odisha, the Karama festival immediately comes to mind. In western Odisha, the deity is worshipped as Karmasani, while in northern Odisha the same deity is worshipped as Karamaraja, symbolised by a tree branch. The festival is also observed in Jharkhand, Bihar and other regions. A tree branch symbolises Karama, and the festival is generally observed on the *Shukla Ekadashi* of the month of Bhadrab, although in some places it is observed before or after *Ekadashi*. Different communities use different tree branches. In Balangir, the branch is generally from the ‘Muer’ or ‘Mued’ tree; in Sambalpur, a branch of the ‘Amla’ or ‘Sal’ tree is worshipped; the Oram use a *Kendu* tree; and the Kisan use a Dimiri or Dumer tree. In northern Odisha, particularly, the branch of the Gihili tree is worshipped as Karamaraja. Whether called ‘Karmaraja’ or ‘Karmarani’, the deity is worshipped as a symbol of regeneration and the welfare of the household, village and society.

Among the Bhuyan tribe, the jackfruit tree holds an important place in religious, cultural, and social life. The main priest of a Bhuyan village is called Pradhan. The Pradhan’s house stands at the village centre, surrounded by large jackfruit trees. Jackfruit is an inseparable part of Bhuyan culture. Bhuyans dedicate the jackfruit trees around their homesteads to the village gods and goddesses. They use unripe jackfruit, ripe fruit, seeds, leaves and wood for various purposes. They also believe that they do not settle on land where good jackfruit does not grow.

The tree is vital to nature and the environment. Trees are not merely useful for sustaining the natural world and living beings; for tribal people, they are indispensable sources of food, shelter, and housing. Tribal people learned to use natural knowledge—for example, using the fibre of the ‘Kerang’ tree to make clothing. Human civilisation cannot survive without trees, and tribal people learned this from their Indigenous Knowledge in the earliest times. This knowledge became an essential part of their long historical life.

Mountain Worship and Tribal People

Bathudi culture is often linked to the Jagannath-Shabar tradition, partly because of worship of the Badam deity. In each Bathudi village, the Badam deity is found beneath a particular tree called Badam Sal. In the Shabar-Munda cultural tradition, they worship the mountain deity as ‘Marangburu’ or ‘Burubenga’. In some places, the deity is also known as ‘Patsarin’ and is particularly worshipped for rain. The Santhals also worship the mountain deity as ‘Marangburu’, while in some places ‘Sanupenu’ is worshipped as the mountain deity. The Shabar call the mountain ‘Darima’; the Juang call it ‘Pat’; and the Oram call it ‘Marangburu’—the Juang worship hills such as Renkapat, Kodapat, Malyagiri and Chandragiri. In Rayagada, the hill and mountain of Niyamgiri symbolise the life and spiritual world of the Dongria/ Gongaria Kondh people. The belief that they cannot exist without the mountain points to the ancient roots of mountain worship. Not only these communities but almost all tribal peoples worldwide regard mountains, like the earth, as objects of worship and faith.

Cattle Worship and Tribal Culture

Almost all tribal communities worship different deities for the protection and welfare of cattle. Directly or indirectly, this practice relates to nature. Therefore, in many tribal villages, the cowshed and manure pit also have associated deities. Among the Bhumija tribal people, “Saharai Banga” (Cattle Worship), is one example. They observe this worship with strict discipline and ritual. Dharmadevata, Gramadevata, Gareya, Buru Banga, Hapaluma Banga, Mahadev Banga, Gana Hankar Banga (protector of the cowshed), Gana Mahar (cowshed deity), Gana Uttara (ancient cowshed deity), Chandan Deuli/Leda Deuli, Bagal Banga, Bagudi Banga, Hapaluma Banga and other deities are worshipped for the protection of cows and buffaloes. They also worship them for protection from wild animals and disease. During the “Gai Chuman” ritual performed by Bhumija women, men play the *madal* (a classical musical instrument like a barrel-shaped drum) and sing songs. This is another example of the many ways in which tribal people relate to nature.

Another important feature of tribal culture is the celebration of Diwali. Tribal communities generally do not observe the mainstream Diwali festival in the same way. During this season they observe several of their own festivals, among which Diali is important. Among the Paraja of Koraput, Diali is not identical to Diwali, although it is observed after Diwali. The Paraja call the month ‘Diali month’ and they observe the festival around the full moon. After worshipping all new articles or goods at Nishanimunda, the community eats and drinks together and celebrates Diali with dance, song and joy. Diali may generally be regarded as an agriculture-based and auspicious festival.

The Bhatra tribe observes Diali twice. The first takes place on the full moon of Kartika, when cattle are worshipped in the cowshed and fed rice as part of the ritual; only the ceremonial pitha is prepared. This is called the first or original Diali. The second Diali is held at another time, the date being fixed by the *Naria* or *Gaudia* who tends the cattle. On that day, the village prepares pitha and meat. Paraja, Bhatra and several other tribal communities observe the festival. Diali aims to ensure the prosperity and welfare of cattle and domestic animals, as well as the well-being of the village and family. Cattle worship is therefore also recalled in this context.

Nature/Environment and Tribal Dance

Anthropologists have argued that in the earliest phase of human civilisation, tribal dance and song arose through imitation of nature. They are believed to be connected with the movements, rhythms, and behaviour of animals and birds, as well as with various trees and creepers. Several examples may be cited.

Among the Bhuyan, several dances are especially attractive. *Baghapali Nach* imitates the tiger hunting a deer and is performed collectively by Bhuyan youths. Similarly, Bhuyan girls perform *Bhalupali Nach* based on the behaviour of the bear while collecting forest produce. Their *Sapapali Nach* is very popular. Though it is a comic dance, young men and women lie on the ground and move exactly like snakes. *Mrugapali Nach* depicts the deer and the hunter. In

Hatipali Nach, Bhuyan girls hold the end of a cloth and form it into an elephant-trunk shape; small children sit on their backs, and they dance with an elephant-like movement.

Gundaripali Nach and *Gidhapali Nach* are also imitative bird dances. The *Gundari* bird moves by swinging its tail and body backwards and the girls imitate this movement. In the vulture or *Gidhapali* dance, one girl lies down as a corpse while the others move around her like vultures and imitate the act of feeding on a dead body. In these dances, people can experience the behaviour of living beings and the natural world directly, revealing another dimension of the relationship between nature and human beings.

Among the tribal communities of Nandahandi in Nabarangpur district, the Karan or Amanatya people have an ancient animal-and-bird dance. *Hans Nach* is one of them. Two to six young men and two young women perform it, though sometimes more people join. The girls first invite the boys, who then dance together. Wearing large swan masks, they imitate swans. This dance reminds us of the intimate relationship between human beings and nature.

Researchers have also recorded that the Juang perform numerous dances imitating animals and birds. These include Bear Dance, Pigeon Dance, Mouse Dance, Tortoise Dance, Tiger Dance, *Titiri* Bird Dance, Deer Dance, Bull Dance, Peacock Dance, Cock Dance, Boar Dance, Elephant Dance, Snake Dance, Cuckoo Dance, House-Sparrow Dance and Harada Bird Dance. Some dances, such as Pigeon Dance and Wild Pig or Vulture Dance, are reportedly no longer performed.

Pigeon Dance is associated with romantic and affectionate feelings, whereas the Boar Dance is highly expressive. In it, young men and women express their sexual vitality. The young men perform with the strength and courage associated with the wild boar. In Pig or Vulture Dance, a Juang youth lies on the ground in an unconscious or death-like condition. Other young people stand around him, sing sorrowful songs and dance group-wise. The dance enacts death and expresses affection for the deceased. The spectators may even shed tears. Such a dance gradually disappeared because tribal life is essentially hopeful and oriented toward joy, and such a death-centred performance did not fit comfortably into their social and cultural life. Nevertheless, the Juang community still has a large body of dances centred on animals, birds, and reptiles, demonstrating its close relationship with nature. Even where the outward forms of many dances have changed, their underlying orientation has not disappeared.

Conclusion

Whenever cultural diversity is discussed worldwide, tribal communities come to the forefront. Approximately 370 million indigenous people live worldwide, making up about 20 per cent of the global population, and around 5,000 distinct tribal communities represent traditional cultures. Yet today tribal people, increasingly reduced to numerical minorities, are facing numerous problems.

Their land rights may exist in law but remain insecure in practice. They are forcibly displaced in the name of social and economic development and technological progress. The promotion of advanced seeds or hybrid varieties, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, cash-crop cultivation and large-scale plantation programmes has contributed to environmental degradation. It has weakened the traditional, nature-dependent ecosystems on which tribal people rely. Unsustainable development, and at times large industrial projects, roads, railways, dams, river-valley and barrage projects, mining activities and even tourism development have caused considerable damage. Without adequate and appropriate rehabilitation, thousands of tribal people have been displaced and relocated.

In some places, people have been evicted from forest-adjacent areas in the name of protecting wildlife sanctuaries and have lost their traditional homes and forests. In many cases, forests they naturally protected have degraded after being taken from their traditional custodians. Tribal people have also suffered from the effects of climate change caused by urban-industrial civilisation, although they have never caused the problem. Climate change has become an extreme obstacle to their existence.

Encroachment and eviction from water, forests, and land have disrupted the basic life of tribal communities, and women have been particularly affected in many ways. Women who sustain household economies by collecting forest produce and minor forest products now face numerous obstacles. Inability to collect fuelwood and other forest resources has created serious economic difficulties for ordinary tribal families.

Therefore, although the idea of bringing tribal people into the “mainstream” may seem attractive, it does not necessarily align with their interests. Those who have lived with nature as its children are often made to suffer through a kind of alienation by being separated from nature. The expression “bringing tribals into the mainstream”, itself requires critical examination. Instead of forcing assimilation, if we provide a parallel alternative in which tribal communities can continue their language and culture while participating in wider development, our way of seeing the world may change? In such a world, on both sides, we may be able to see ourselves reflected in the mirror of the other.

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