



Revisiting Environmental Movements in the Context of Indigenous Culture: An Indian Perspective through Literary Analysis

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Abstract

This study critically revisits environmental movements in India through the lens of indigenous cultural practices, knowledge systems, and literary representations. In the 21st century, when ecological crises are intensifying globally, this research underscores the urgent need to recognise and integrate indigenous worldviews into mainstream environmental discourses. Environmental movements like the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Silent Valley protest have historically drawn upon indigenous ecological ethics, which view nature not as a resource to exploit but as a living, sacred entity intertwined with human and non-human life. Indigenous communities often embody a holistic, symbiotic relationship with their environment, rooted in traditions of stewardship, oral narratives, and spiritual reverence toward the Earth. This paper explores such ecological values through literary and cultural texts that reflect the indigenous ethos, including tribal poetry, folklore, and narratives that resist ecological degradation. The paper also critiques the neo-colonial and capitalist frameworks that marginalise indigenous voices and commodify nature under the guise of development. By weaving together ecocritical theory and indigenous perspectives, the study challenges dominant paradigms and calls for a re-evaluation of what constitutes environmental activism. It argues for a paradigm shift that honours indigenous agency and ecological wisdom, not merely as cultural artefacts but as essential frameworks for achieving environmental sustainability and justice. Through this re-

contextualisation, the research opens a dialogue between ecological movements and indigenous epistemologies to envision a more inclusive and culturally rooted environmental future.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental Movements, Cultural Sustainability, Indian Ecology

Introduction

In the face of escalating environmental crises, societies worldwide have begun to revisit their ecological values, often turning to indigenous knowledge systems for guidance. In India, environmental movements have historically found resonance within indigenous cultural practices that emphasise harmonious coexistence with nature. While modern environmentalism often relies on scientific frameworks and policy reform, indigenous perspectives present an alternative, holistic vision of ecological balance rooted in the primitive traditions and spiritual beliefs. The objective of this research is to explore the intersection of Indian environmental movements with indigenous cultural thought, particularly as reflected in literature.

Indigenous communities in India, such as the *Bhils*, *Gonds*, *Santals*, and *Dongria Kondhs*, among others, have cultivated a rich repository of ecological wisdom, expressed through myths, rituals, oral stories, and literary narratives. These communities have not only preserved biodiversity but also resisted industrial encroachments through sustained environmental movements. Literary works that portray indigenous life and struggles offer valuable insights into these movements, often revealing ecological philosophies that are antithetical to exploitative models.

By analysing select Indian literary texts, including Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*, Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, and tribal oral epics, this paper aims to demonstrate how literature can serve as a vessel for indigenous ecological knowledge. Further, it revisits key environmental movements such as the Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and Dongria Kondh resistance, revealing how literature and lived experience converge in articulating environmental

concerns. The methodological approach combines ecocriticism with postcolonial and subaltern studies to interpret the role of indigenous culture in shaping environmental discourse.

Part I: Indigenous Worldviews and the Philosophy of Nature

1. The Sacred Geography of Indigenous Beliefs

Indian indigenous communities often perceive the environment as sacred. Mountains, rivers, forests, and animals are imbued with spiritual significance, forming part of a cosmology where nature is not a resource to be exploited but a living entity to be revered. The Dongria Kondh people of Odisha consider the Niyamgiri Hills as the abode of their deity Niyam Raja. Their cosmology, deeply rooted in animistic beliefs, reflects a profound ecological sensibility. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil argue that “Indian ecological traditions derive from a sense of reverence towards all forms of life” (Guha and Gadgil, 1989, p. 115). This reverence becomes the bedrock for resistance against environmental degradation. The philosophy is not merely religious but ecological, articulating a relational ontology where human existence is inextricably linked with the well-being of the non-human world.

2. Oral Literature and Environmental Ethics

Oral narratives form a crucial part of indigenous cultural heritage. These stories often convey ecological principles, warn against overexploitation of resources, and teach sustainable living. Among the Santals, for instance, oral tales like *Buru Song* recount the origin of forests, animals, and human beings in a shared universe where balance and reciprocity are paramount. Such narratives challenge dominant anthropocentric paradigms. In this context, Vandana Shiva notes, “The forest for the indigenous people is not wilderness but a cultural space” (Shiva, 1989, p. 82). Oral traditions encode ecological wisdom in performative and mnemonic ways, ensuring its transmission across generations. In this sense, literature, written or oral, acts as an archive of environmental ethics.

3. The Concept of “Deep Ecology” in Indigenous Thought

The concept of deep ecology, as proposed by Arne Naess, aligns closely with indigenous ecological philosophies. Deep ecology advocates for the intrinsic value of all living beings,

regardless of their utility to human needs. Indian tribal traditions resonate with this idea, as they often regard animals, plants, and natural elements as significant parts of the entire biosphere. In tribal poetry from the Northeast and Central India, trees are not inert objects but conscious entities that communicate and respond to human actions. In Garo folk songs, trees weep when felled without ritual, and rivers change course in protest. These beliefs illustrate an eco-spiritual perspective that finds parallels in Naess's vision of "Deep Ecology."

Part II: Literary Representation of Indigenous Environmentalism

1. Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* and the Forest as Resistance

Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest)* is a seminal literary work that exemplifies how literature becomes a powerful vehicle for environmental and indigenous activism. The novel is based on the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who led a rebellion against British colonial forces in the late 19th century. The forest in this narrative is not a passive backdrop but a living entity intertwined with the tribal people's identity, livelihood, and resistance. Devi reclaims the forest as a political and cultural space, exposing the exploitative interventions of the colonial state and feudal landlords. The Mundas' resistance is not merely against economic oppression but also against ecological disruption. As Devi writes, "For the adivasi, the jungle was not a wilderness; it was home, temple, and workplace" (Devi, 2010, p. 94). The British forest laws, which criminalised indigenous practices like shifting cultivation and forest gathering, were tantamount to cultural erasure. Through this narrative, Devi critiques the historical processes that alienated indigenous people from their ecological surroundings. The forest becomes a symbol of autonomy and spiritual sustenance, thereby challenging the developmental paradigms that disregard indigenous environmental consciousness.

2. Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* and the Struggles of Land and Identity

Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* offers another profound engagement with indigenous environmental ethics through the story of the Paraja tribe in Odisha. The novel portrays the life of Sukru Jani and his children, who are systematically dispossessed of their land by legal manipulations and market forces. As the narrative unfolds, the loss of land becomes synonymous with the erosion

of cultural identity. The forest in *Paraja* is more than a physical landscape—it is an existential domain. Mohanty’s prose captures the intimate relationship between the Parajas and the natural world. Their rhythms of life, rituals, and worldview are all shaped by seasonal changes and the ecological character of their environment. The displacement from the land leads to social disintegration and moral despair. In this context, Subrat Kumar writes, “The ecological devastation is not external to the narrative but is embedded in the character’s psychological and social fragmentation” (Kumar, 2015, p. 176). Thus, *Paraja* illustrates how environmental degradation is interwoven with social injustice and how indigenous resistance is deeply tied to reclaiming both land and dignity.

3. Contemporary Tribal Poetry and Environmental Consciousness

In recent decades, tribal poets writing in both regional languages and English have emerged as voices of environmental and cultural reclamation. Poets such as Jacinta Kerketta (Oraon) and Nandini Sahu engage with themes of environmental destruction, loss of indigenous knowledge, and resistance through poetic form. Jacinta Kerketta’s poem “The Forest Will Not Be Silent” captures the anguish of a disappearing landscape and asserts a voice of resistance:

“You think the forest sleeps.

It watches.

It remembers.

It will rise in the rustling of leaves.” (Kerketta, 2016)

Her poetry bridges traditional ecological knowledge and modern forms of activism. The forest is not voiceless; it remembers history, colonial violence, and ecological betrayal. Similarly, Sahu’s work blends myth, memory, and ecofeminism, linking women’s bodies and the earth in shared suffering and resilience.

4. Myth, Folklore, and Ecofeminist Dimensions

Indian indigenous folklore often portrays a deep connection with nature. Deities like Banadurga or Kherwal Devi symbolise both fertility and forest protection. These cultural narratives

empower women as custodians of the environment, contrary to the dominant developmental discourse that marginalises both nature and the women. Ecofeminist readings of tribal myths reveal an ontological parity between the earth and the woman. This connection is also explored in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, where indigenous identities are often linked to land and environmental grief. Though not focused solely on tribal characters, Desai's portrayal of Nepali and tribal workers in the Himalayas opens space for a subaltern environmental discourse.

Part III: Revisiting Environmental Movements through Indigenous Culture

1. The Chipko Movement and the Embodiment of Forest Rights

The Chipko Movement, which originated in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand in the 1970s, stands as one of India's most iconic environmental movements. Though often celebrated for its Gandhian non-violent philosophy and women's participation, it also reflects indigenous ecological ethics. Villagers, any of them belonging to forest-dependent communities, literally embraced trees to prevent commercial logging. Their actions were rooted in traditional forest rights and spiritual reverence for nature. Vandana Shiva identifies Chipko as a "people's ecological movement that challenges both colonial and postcolonial commodification of nature" (Shiva, 1989, p. 102). Local folklore, sacred groves, and customary conservation practices informed the protest. The movement was not merely against tree felling but against the larger structure of ecological imperialism that marginalised local knowledge. The protest songs and slogans of Chipko reveal how indigenous idioms and performative culture were integrated into environmental resistance. The slogan "What do the forests bear? Soil, water, and pure air" reflects a deep ecological understanding that goes beyond economic valuation of forests. Thus, Chipko became both a cultural and ecological resistance.

2. Narmada Bachao Andolan and Subaltern Ecologies

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), initiated in the 1980s to protest the Sardar Sarovar Dam project, brought global attention to the ecological and human cost of large-scale development. While the movement included urban activists like Medha Patkar, a substantial part of its strength came from indigenous Adivasi communities inhabiting the Narmada Valley. These communities

viewed the Narmada River not only as a water source but as a sacred entity, *Narmada Mai* (Mother Narmada). Their opposition to displacement was rooted in both cultural and ecological grounds. Literary representations, including Arundhati Roy's *The Cost of Living*, underscore the spiritual and ecological violence done to the valley's indigenous people. Roy critiques the developmentalist logic, stating that "the displacement of millions for a few megawatts is not progress, but cruelty masked as necessity" (Roy, 1999, p. 73). The NBA redefined environmentalism by foregrounding indigenous voices and offering an alternative paradigm—what Felix Padel calls "subaltern ecologies," based on sustainability, cultural continuity, and autonomy.

3. The Dongria Kondh and the Niyamgiri Resistance

One of the most powerful examples of indigenous resistance in recent Indian history is the Dongria Kondh tribe's opposition to Vedanta's bauxite mining project in the Niyamgiri Hills. The proposed mining threatened to destroy the ecologically rich hills and displace the Dongria Kondhs, who consider Niyamgiri sacred. This movement, backed by the Forest Rights Act of 2006, culminated in a 2013 Supreme Court verdict requiring consent from the local gram sabhas (village assemblies). In a historic decision, the villagers unanimously rejected the mining project. Literature and documentaries, such as *Wira Pdika* and *The Mountain of God*, have captured this indigenous environmentalism as a model of culturally rooted ecological governance. The Dongria Kondh's cosmology, in which forests and mountains are divine entities, challenges modern notions of resource extraction. Their resistance reaffirms the idea that environmental movements grounded in indigenous culture offer a deeper, more sustainable form of ecological consciousness.

4. Integration of Indigenous Knowledge in Contemporary Environmental Discourse

Environmental policy in India has often been criticised for ignoring indigenous ecological knowledge. However, movements like Chipko, NBA, and Niyamgiri have forced a reevaluation. Scholars and policymakers are increasingly advocating for the inclusion of indigenous frameworks in forest governance, conservation, and climate adaptation strategies. The 2006



Forest Rights Act and the Biodiversity Act are steps toward legitimising indigenous practices. Yet, challenges remain in terms of actual implementation and resisting top-down developmental models. Literature, in this context, plays a critical role in making indigenous perspectives visible and valued.

Part IV: Conclusion and Critical Reflections

The ecological wisdom of India's indigenous communities offers an invaluable resource in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Through literary analysis and case studies of environmental movements, the paper foregrounds how indigenous worldviews constitute a distinct ecological philosophy, one that is ethical, spiritual, and practical. The indigenous relationship with nature, rooted in reverence, reciprocity, and stewardship, contrasts starkly with the anthropocentric and exploitative paradigms of mainstream development. Texts such as *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Paraja* reveal how literature serves not only as a mirror to indigenous realities but also as a site of resistance and reclamation. These literary works document the loss of ecological balance, cultural identity, and human dignity due to systemic exploitation. At the same time, they assert the agency of indigenous voices in envisioning an alternative, sustainable future.

Environmental movements like Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Dongria Kondh's resistance against mining have reaffirmed the role of indigenous culture in ecological conservation. These movements embody a deep-rooted environmentalism that is both political and philosophical. They demonstrate that ecological struggles are also cultural struggles, and any solution to the climate crisis must involve those who have historically lived in harmony with nature. In the Anthropocene epoch, where ecological degradation is accelerating, the need to revisit indigenous ecological philosophies becomes ever more urgent. By integrating indigenous knowledge systems with environmental policy and education, India can move toward a model of ecological justice that is both inclusive and enduring.

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