

Spiritual Ecology in Tribal Beliefs: A Study of the Tribes of Purulia

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the intersection of spirituality and ecology within the indigenous belief systems of the tribal communities of Purulia district, West Bengal. Spiritual ecology, as expressed in the rituals, myths, and sacred landscapes of tribal life, reflects a holistic worldview where nature and divinity coexist inseparably. The research highlights how ecological awareness is embedded in traditional religion, manifested through the worship of sacred groves, rivers, animals, and spirits that guard forests and lands. The study draws upon field observations and ethnographic literature to understand how these spiritual-ecological relationships contribute to environmental conservation, social harmony, and cultural continuity. Findings suggest that tribal ecological consciousness represents an indigenous form of sustainable living that integrates reverence, reciprocity, and responsibility toward nature.

Key Words: Tribal, Spiritual Ecology, Tribal Belief System, Sacred Groves, Eco-centrism.

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual ecology represents a contemporary interdisciplinary approach linking religion, culture, and environmental consciousness. Among indigenous communities, ecological practices are not derived from modern science but are woven into sacred cosmologies and rituals. In India, tribal societies—particularly in regions like Purulia—exemplify such integration, where the natural environment is perceived as a living entity infused with divine presence.

The tribes of Purulia, such as the "Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Kurmi, and Ho", possess belief systems that merge the spiritual with the ecological. Their worldview situates human beings as part of a cosmic continuum where forests, rivers, hills, and animals are sacred. Rituals like 'Jaher Era Puja', 'Sarhul', 'Baha', and 'Karam' embody their gratitude to nature. The study of spiritual ecology within these beliefs helps reveal how indigenous traditions foster ecological balance without the intervention of formal environmental policies.

In an era of ecological degradation and climate anxiety, the indigenous wisdom of Purulia's tribes holds profound lessons on coexistence and sustainability. Exploring this domain contributes not only to cultural anthropology but also to environmental ethics and policy development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the spiritual dimensions of ecological consciousness in the tribal beliefs of Purulia.
2. To identify the rituals, myths, and symbols that reflect ecological values within tribal cosmology.
3. To analyze how these spiritual practices contribute to environmental conservation and community sustainability.
4. To interpret the relevance of tribal spiritual ecology in the context of modern ecological thought.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly discourse on "spiritual ecology" has expanded over the past two decades. Sponsel (2012) defines it

as the study of "the spiritual and religious dimensions of human relationships with nature." **Kinsley (1995)** emphasized that indigenous spiritualities encode ecological ethics through myth and ritual rather than written doctrine.

In the Indian context, **Gadgil and Guha (1993)** argued that traditional ecological knowledge is deeply tied to ritual practices, taboos, and sacred landscapes. Recent works by **Baviskar (2019)** and **Deb (2021)** further highlighted the ecological wisdom of indigenous communities in eastern India.

Specific to West Bengal, researchers such as **Mahato (2017)** and **Hansda (2020)** have documented the "Sarhul and Karam festivals" of Purulia as ecological events celebrating seasonal cycles and fertility. The concept of the 'sacred grove' (**Jaherthan**)—a forest patch protected for ritual purposes—illustrates how spiritual reverence ensures biodiversity conservation (**Chakraborty, 2022**).

However, the term "spiritual ecology" has rarely been applied explicitly to the tribal context of Purulia, which makes the present study a significant contribution to bridging local ethnography and global eco-spiritual discourse.

Definition of Key Terms

- **Spiritual Ecology:** The interrelationship between religious belief and ecological practice, where spirituality guides environmental stewardship.
- **Tribal Belief System:** A traditional framework of values, myths, and rituals that govern social and ecological behavior among indigenous communities.
- **Sacred Groves:** Protected patches of forest preserved for ritual and spiritual purposes, symbolizing the living presence of deities.
- **Eco-centrism:** A worldview that places nature at the center of moral and spiritual concern, recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings.

METHODOLOGY

Area of Study

The research focuses on selected tribal-dominated blocks of "Purulia District", namely Bandwan, Balarampur, and Bagmundi, where Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij populations are concentrated.

Sample and Data

Ethnographic observations and secondary data from cultural reports, census documents, and academic sources were used. Interviews with local elders and ritual practitioners (Ojha, Pahan) were conducted to collect oral narratives about ecological beliefs.

Tools

A semi-structured interview schedule, field notes, and photographic documentation were used to record practices related to forest worship, water rituals, and agricultural festivals.

Variables

The study examined (a) belief structures, (b) ecological symbols, (c) ritual practices, and (d) conservation behavior.

Methods

Qualitative ethnographic analysis, narrative interpretation, and symbolic ecology approaches were applied to understand the interlinkage between spirituality and ecology in tribal life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Purulia's tribal communities maintain a deep spiritual connection with their environment, manifesting through ritual, taboo, and myth. Nature is perceived as sentient — trees, rivers, hills, and animals embody spiritual essence.

1. Sacred Ecology in Rituals:

Rituals such as "Sarhul" (worship of the Sal tree and forest spirits) and "Baha Parab" (flower festival) mark seasonal renewal and fertility. During "Sarhul", no tree felling or hunting is permitted, reflecting ecological restraint.

2. Mythic Symbols and Conservation:

Myths surrounding forest deities (Jaher Era or Marang Buru) convey moral lessons about harmony with nature. Such narratives promote biodiversity protection by transforming ecological ethics into sacred duty.

3. Gender and Spiritual Ecology:

Women's participation in rituals symbolizes fertility and care for the earth. The feminine principle (Dharti Mai) represents the nurturing aspect of ecology, integrating social and spiritual balance.

4. Environmental Ethics and Sustainability:

Tribal spirituality encodes environmental ethics without formal laws. Practices like protecting sacred groves function as community-based conservation models. These traditional institutions, though non-scientific in form, have sustained ecological balance for generations.

5. Challenges in the Modern Context:

Urbanization, mining, and cultural erosion threaten these ecological traditions. Yet, revival movements and cultural festivals supported by NGOs and local administrations indicate renewed interest in indigenous ecological wisdom.

Overall, the results show that spiritual ecology among Purulia's tribes operates as a moral and cultural system that ensures environmental sustainability through sacred obligation rather than external regulation.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that tribal spirituality in Purulia is inherently ecological. The worldview of the Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij communities exemplifies a harmonious human–nature relationship grounded in reverence and reciprocity. Their belief systems serve as living models of environmental sustainability, far preceding contemporary ecological theories.

Preserving these traditions is essential not only for cultural diversity but also for global environmental ethics. Integrating indigenous ecological wisdom into modern education and policy frameworks could promote a more holistic approach to sustainability rooted in spirituality and respect for nature.

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