



ECO-SPIRITUALITY AND TRIBAL AESTHETICS: READING GOPINATH MOHANTY'S DADI BUDHA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of Eco-spirituality began to evolve when human beings were filled with awe, observing the natural calamities and forces befalling on them, and consequently became undone and helpless in the midst of nature. As Sharmila puts it,

The forces of nature have always filled awe in human minds and also inspired human imagination. The starry heaven with sun and the moon, the rhythmic repetition of climatic cycles coinciding with sun's position in the ecliptic, the eclipses that appear all of a sudden without a warning, the sky with clouds that also brought forth thunder and rain etc. were not only beyond human control (Sharmila, 2018).

From thereon, the concept of the Divine providence comes in and shapes the idea of Eco-spirituality, a conscious approach to faith that helps connect sacred and spiritual relations with men and nature. According to Philip Sheldrake, "eco-spirituality", is spirituality, which denotes the "deepest spiritual values and meanings by which people live" (Sheldrake, 2012). He posits that spirituality must originate from the core of the heart and be conscious of god's inherent presence in us and our surroundings too. Everything has been created by God and through his holiness, perfection and sanctity permeates his creation. Believing this very idea generates the core value of spiritual eco-sophy (Wheeler, 2022). The main point of contention, why do humans experience spiritual sterility? Is it, paying undue attention/importance to science and materiality that makes a person an atheist? Or have we to do with meaninglessness in human existence? Nature, in its true essence, manifests in different forms so as to impart moral ethics to human beings in terms of natural disasters/calamities. Considering the gravity of human interference on helpless nature, it started revolting with fearsome forms, as we already have known in recent occurrences. From time immemorial, this interconnection between man and nature is deeply rooted in human civilization,



especially in the context of Indian philosophy. When we go back to the annals of scriptures, in the Upanishads and Vedic literature, a special mention is found the inter-relationship between them. In terms of associating/representing Nature with Brahman, the divine and all-pervasive in every life-form. In Chandogya Upanishad, says,

tat tvamasi, śvetaketo, iti; bhūyaevamā, bhagavān, vijñāpayatviti; tathā, saumya, itihovāca” i.e., “That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for itself.

That is the true. That is the self. That art thou, śvetaketu.” Please, Venerable Sir, instruct me still further. “So be it, my dear,” said he. (Radhakrishnan, 1953).

This core tenet of Vedanta philosophy promotes the idea of religious belief, that everyone is a form of the ultimate reality or atman. It showcases the inherent religious value of godliness in every creation of God. The origin of Eco-spirituality from this lens is the time when human beings grapple with the frequent occurrences of ecological crisis. It is a philosophy proposed by Giancarlo Barbadoro, together with tribal leaders from all over the planet, to define a concept that comes from the experience of Natural peoples, those native peoples who have not been assimilated by the religions and ideologies of the majority society. Eco-spirituality is the philosophy of nature, an experience of inner harmony that extends to everything around us, respecting the environment and all forms of life. (Eco-spirituality Foundation 13).

It allows a close link between human beliefs and the sacredness of nature. The man-nature relationship is as old as the evolution of human civilization. Nature has become an integral part of humans. Deep ecologists support the idea that Eco-spirituality is greatly influenced by deep ecology, which values every living being and uses this view to shape environmental policies that respect the divine creation of God. The notion of Eco-spiritualism immediately means that the inherent bondage is closely observed between ecology and spirituality. Undoubtedly, one can view the spiritual dimension to ecology, and that spirituality is an inseparable part of ecology. According to Mohd. Nageen Rather & Vandana Singh, eco-spirituality locates the sacred not beyond the world but within it, affirming the inherent sanctity of the natural order. Here, God is not a remote, transcendent authority” (24). Eco-spirituality isn't just a philosophy or a literary discourse, but rather an attempt at a prayerful way of life. For Sister Ginny Virginia, eco-spirituality is a passionate call to action to embody the very essence of its core value, and Bonfiglio says, “Eco-spirituality is about helping people to experience the holy” in the natural world and to recognize their relationship as human beings to all creation” (Bonfiglio, 2012). According to Anne Carr,



Spirituality can be described as the whole of our deepest religious beliefs, convictions, and patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior in respect to what is ultimate, to God. Spirituality is holistic, encompassing our relationships to all of creation – to others, to society and nature, to work and recreation – in a fundamentally religious orientation (Carr, 1982).

Life is a precious gift of God, and among all his creations, human life is the highest and noblest one, endowed with intellect, reason, and moral consciousness. These unique potentials distinguish human beings from other species and enable them to think critically, create meaning, and cultivate spiritual as well as ethical values. Unlike other living creatures, humans possess the capacity for self-reflection, imagination, and responsibility toward society and nature. Therefore, human life is not merely biological existence but a sacred opportunity to pursue wisdom, compassion, creativity, and harmony with the divine order of creation.

Sandra M Schneiders has a definition for spirituality: “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (Sandra, 2005). This line invites one to inculcate a self-conscious life, truly understanding one’s position in the universe. And thus, expanding the boundaries of the self beyond the materiality of physical life and being conscious of theological values. Further, Wayne Teasdale says, Eco-spirituality has two sides of the spiritual journey. “... The awakening and actualization of who we are in our ultimate being is incomplete unless our compassion, sensitivity and love are similarly awakened and actualized in our lives and relationships” (Teasdale, 1999). Understanding the very idea of Eco-spirituality, the tribals of Lulla village do not differentiate between themselves with nature, rather happily live in the dense forest without having any fear of wild creatures, and equally respected nature as their life-giving force moving towards a holistic identity. As C.K. Janu says, “no one knows the forest like we do, the forest is mother to us, more than a mother because she never abandons us” (Janu, 2004). Through the indigenous knowledge of the tribes, they are able to know the cyclical changes of these seasons, and the time. It is obvious how closely they lived in very close proximity to nature. Further, she says, “in the forests one never knew what hunger was. We would dig up wild tubers and eat them” (Janu, 2004). The opulence of forests products and the very idea of nature as mother by the tribals has sustained them for ages.

Let's first examine how to distinguish between the spiritual and the religious. Spirituality can be pursued both inside and outside of organized religion, even if one does not believe in God.



It is challenging to give it a clear definition because it is based on an individual's inner experience, but it is typically connected to a search for self-awareness, transcendence, wisdom, and the divine. For Rachel Wheeler, Spirituality emphasizes seeking the sacred rather than relating to or with the sacred. But religion is an organized form of belief system which is well supported by norms and rites, with proper veneration and devotion to a deity. Rachel Wheeler says, “Eco-spirituality differs from religion and ecology and from ecotheology; however, is its focus on experience within the natural world being considered sacred and the holding in tension of our human identity as belonging within the natural world and enlivened in the ways other living beings are as well. When Eco-spirituality garners our attention to pay more importance to nature/ecology, it inspires us to engage in voicing justice to the deteriorated status of the planet thereon” (Wheeler, 2022). It is the same concept that gained popularity in the 1970s, following the first significant natural disasters on protecting the environment occurred, it serves as a clarion call to move beyond our comfort zone and be conscious of our surroundings and avoid the detrimental effects of the natural world. It is perhaps the reason that addresses the rise of spiritualization of nature, as John Locke has championed ‘Pantheism’, fostering the preservation of nature/environment from being destroyed by human agency. As a result, intending to protect the environment from destruction through reverence comparable to that shown toward gods and deities. Given that spirituality is associated with religious tradition, philosophical inquiries, or the pursuit of meaning, and ecology is a scientific discipline or a political movement (in a broad sense) that advocates for environmental protection, the two seem to be in distinct fields. However, since the 1980s, ecology and spirituality have been progressively becoming more closely related in North America, Europe, and other places through a variety of social practices at local or global, individual or collective levels, as well as fruitful intellectual exchanges (in academic circles and religious circles, including new religious movements). This chapter seeks to comprehend the great ideals and deeds of eco-spirituality's adherents, as well as the justifications, ramifications, and boundaries of establishing such a relationship with tribal cultures.

In the Dharmic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, the ecology such as trees, rocks, rivers, fauna, and mountains, is a sacred and revered object of worship. Tribal communities venerate these objects of nature and are closely related to them in times of joy and sorrow. When observing festivals, they use the trees, leaves, and flowers to express their mirth and fun. And when they are in sorrow, they take resort to worshipping them (nature) by offering goat and chicken to appease the local deity (Dadi Budha). “Everyone would hope and wait. One day or other their



hopes would bear fruit. Dadi Budha would not cheat them. Innumerable chickens were sacrificed in front of Dadi Budha; a lot of wine was poured on the ground before him. Dry flowers remained scattered all around” (Mohanty, 2013). In doing so, they feel free from ominous spirits who writ troubles to their life. In this way, they are well associated with nature and consider it a divine power showering them with blessings. Animism is a practice intimately connected with tribes. Because they professed nature worship, every object of nature is regarded as God for them. From this very idea, the concept of Tribal Eco-spirituality began to shape its horizon in the public domain, but still many people have the view that it has been there before the establishment of conventional and organised forms of religion. And so, Tribals are considered the ancient forest dwellers, whose indigenous knowledge sufficed their basic needs before the advent of modern science and technology.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study embraces a qualitative, interpretive research methodology rooted in literary analysis, eco-criticism, eco-spiritualism and indigenous knowledge frameworks. Since the focus of the study lies in exploring the intersections of tribe, spirituality and eco-spirituality, the methodology emphasizes textual interpretation, thematic analysis and theoretical application rather than empirical data collection.

2.1. Research Design

This research employs a contextual literary analysis of *The Ancestors* (1997) by Gopinath Mohanty to explore relationship between human world (human beings) and non-human world (nature). The design is especially useful to show how this representation in literature forms a background for the major ecological crisis of the world today. This study sheds light on how literature intervene in current ecological and climate crisis.

2.2. Textual Analysis

The primary select text under study *The Ancestors* by Gopinath Mohanty will be subjected to close reading with attention given to narrative structure, symbolism, imagery and beliefs connected to nature, spirituality and ecological consciousness. Special focus of this analysis will be on how Mohanty integrates eco-spiritual dimensions, tribal cosmology into his text.

2.3. Theoretical Frameworks

- i. Eco-criticism (Buell, 1995; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) laid the foundation for examining how the text depicts the interconnection between human beings and nature (human world and natural world).



- ii. Eco-spirituality: An Introduction (Wheeler, 2022) is employed to interpret that spirituality emphasizes seeking the sacred rather than relating to or with the sacred. Most prominently, it highlights the sacredness towards nature.
- iii. Subaltern studies (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988) foreground the voices and worldview of the marginalized (tribal) community against the mainstream society. Here, it interprets how the tribal (Paraja community) people utilize their ecological rootedness as modes of resistance, agency and survival against the modern interventions and external exploitation claiming their identity and belongingness on their own.

2.4. Analytical Frameworks

The discussion follows a thematic approach that cover the major spiritual ecosophy issues in the select text:

- i. Identifying eco-spiritual elements in *The Ancestors*.
- ii. Tracing how tribal community (Paraja tribe) aligns with the natural world. (or how indigenous people align with the natural world through their rituals, beliefs and culture)
- iii. Interpreting how this text offers an idea of sacredness towards nature in this contemporary world of globalization and environmental degradation.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Eco-spiritualism is developed in the late 19th century and find its history in the relationship between spirituality and nature when the environment where we are living in is considered spiritual and sacred. Early scholars such as Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) focus on the need to interpret literature as a site of ecological awareness. Despite the growing body of scholarship in eco-criticism and indigenous literary studies, significant gaps can be traced in the field of eco spiritualism. Rachel Wheeler in his book *Eco-spirituality An Introduction* has laid the understanding and importance of eco-spiritualism

Moreover, existing studies of the text *The Ancestor* focus on depiction of tribal identity in the text *The Ancestor*. But there is an insufficient exploration of interconnection between nature, spirituality and indigenous people. There is a noticeable absence of studies that examine tribal cosmology and spiritual worldviews within the eco-spiritual study.

As a result, the eco-spiritual dimension in the text *The Ancestor* have received limited critical attention. This study seeks to address the gap by offering an eco-spiritual reading of Gopinath



Mohanty's text *The Ancestor* grounded in indigenous knowledge and environmental awareness by understanding the meaning and significance of the concept of eco-spirituality.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. *Dadi Budha: A Living Totem*

A Totem basically represents a living presence of the spiritual cosmology for the indigenous or tribal world, in which it connects the collective identity of its community, its origin, ancestry, cultural memory, environment and understands the ethical responsibility towards the sacredness of nature. The Paraja people of Lulla village sanctify the ancient date palm tree as their 'Totem', the living god and named it 'Dadi Budha'.

Dadi Budha, a date palm tree, is considered a living totem that embodies the deep and sacred connection between the tribal community and the natural-spiritual world. It is characterized as an ancient date palm tree that signifies a grandfather in the language of the tribe and emphasizes the tree's role as a local deity for the Paraja community. It serves as an enduring witness to the daily lives, joys and sorrows of the tribal village. It is linked with various elements of nature, such as trees, forests, hills and sacred groves and is considered the local deity and everlasting ancestor within the everyday life of the tribal people and the community. Dadi Budha has an active influence in the life of the tribes, guiding moral conduct, protecting the community and maintaining ecological balance.

In the novella *The Ancestor (Dadi Budha)*, Dadi Budha is not just an external object but a belongingness to the Paraja community, whom they worship, live, experience and inherit through their ritual and memory. *Dadi Budha is the God, "a benign deity", the eternal ancestor"* (Mohanty, 2013). The customs, taboos and rituals of the Paraja people are shaped by Dadi Budha, which implicitly enforces harmony between human beings and nature. And any disruption caused by this tribe is not just seen as ecological damage, but as a spiritual violation, that is, a violation of their deity, Dadi Budha. As he (Dadi Budha) says, "The gurumai continued: I am Dadi Budha, the greatest of all gods. I am the creator and the destroyer. Whenever something happens, it happens according to my wishes. If I want to kill someone, I kill him. Do not ask me. I alone know my reasons. Do not ask me. I won't tell you" (Mohanty, 2013). On the other hand, there is another aspect of how the deity represents the benevolent form by guiding the locals and showing them the right path to live a peaceful life. "There is enough land at the foot of the Gadi Pabli hill. Build your houses there. The sooner you leave this village, the better you will prosper over there. Wherever you go, I shall be with you. I shall always stand by your side, in your joys and sorrows.



But leave this place and go” (Mohanty 2013). Dadi Budha, a true ‘Totem’, not only secures the life and habitation of the people but also ensures the progeny of their future generation.

Dadi Budha (The tree) further serves as the ultimate example of how, for the Paraja tribe, ecology and spirituality are inseparable, creating a world where they exist in the same way as trees, rivers and mountains. The Paraja community is profoundly attached to Mother Earth and perceives their identity and existence from natural ancestors such as rivers, mountains and forests, showing their interdependent and intrinsic relationship with nature. They have a deep conviction that if they follow their rituals and cultural traditions to worship their deities, it will ensure prosperity and harmony between them (humans) and the natural world. In this text, to the Paraja of Lulla village, every element of Mother Earth, from the Muran river to simple termite mounds, contains a divine spirit or represents a deceased relative.

4.2. Tribal Eco-spiritual Aesthetics

Eco-spiritual aesthetics refers to the way of understanding aesthetic perspective in which nature is not just a materialistic object or a mode of pleasing someone, but rather it is alive, meaningful and spiritually significant. In this novella by Gopinath Mohanty, the idea of eco-spiritual aesthetics is the perception of nature as animate and divine. Here, in this text, *The Ancestor*, the Paraja tribe views nature not just as a beautiful entity but as a sacred creation from above. They experience this beauty through a sense of spiritual connection and sacred duty.

Ram Muduli did not get time to think. For him, there was life everywhere- in the ripe corn in the fields, in the vegetables and fruits, in the black gardens, in the castor trees on the hilltops, in the Kandula plants on the hill side, in the Suan fields below. Those were the friends of a farmer, the fruits of his labour, they were his sons and daughters. (Mohanty, 2013)

The tribal communities celebrate various festivals depending on the harvests they make on the hills. Like Chaita Parba, Kandula Parba etc. the foundation of their life relies on the mountains, tucked in forest ranges. The forest has become an integral part of their living system. They consider the earth their mother. The embodiment of fertility, nurturance and generative power of continuing human life. The concept of eco-spiritual aesthetics is also deeply embedded in the ritual and everyday practices of the tribal people. The ceremonies, songs and oral traditions they perform serve as a testament to their devotion to natural forces and ancestral spirits. Through their rituals and traditions, they live with nature and the environment, which shows how nature forms an integral part of the spiritual belief and identity of the characters present here. This realization of



profound forms of religious performances and oral practices exclusively addressed to nature shapes the basic foundation of eco-spirituality, which fosters a profound love and respect for every part of the natural world. This approach has not only been found in the indigenous knowledge system but also has become a mandate for everyone to follow throughout the world to live an eco-friendly life.

The Ancestor is a sojourn to the exploration of Eco-spiritual consciousness and tribal aesthetics. This novel is the first of its kind to touch upon the concept of tribal literature. It has deliberately exposed the distinctive lifestyles and identities, cultures of the tribe called Paraja, who basically reside in the southern belt of Odisha. The Paraja tribal colony presented in his novels is a self-sustained and motivated community that has still retained its myths, customs, beliefs, religion, proverbs, traditions, tales, and taboos with a maximum sense of duty. But all these undergo drastic transformation with the intervention of the white man "Gopinath's novels map the various contours of the tribal life in its struggle against the systematic encroachment of their cultural space" (Chopra, 2016). The physical realm of nature and the epistemological realm of their culture and religion are the focal points of the tribal world. Their traditional ideas and behaviours regarding nature are the source of their knowledge system and cosmological perspective. Additionally, their religion is founded on anthropomorphism, nature worship, animism, ancestor worship, and other beliefs. Such a religion is thought to have existed for thousands of years, as Ram Muduli says it is "as old as the hill, as old as the darkness" (Mohanty, 2013) and other religions like Christianity, make the avenue into the tribal world for conversion during colonization (Mohanty, 2013), is thought to be childish and "new", lacks the vigour to inspire credibility in tribal mind and to help the world during odds. Even though Elio, John, Alexander, Peter, Simon, Paul, Michael, and other Lulla tribal members who were converted Christians "led their lives in their own way," they became "oblivious to the pastor and looked up to Dadi Budha" (Mohanty, 2013) when they considered the existence of a god, possibly due to the tribe's belief in idolatry. Even the Christian Domb girl Santosh Kumari, who is portrayed in the book as a representation of modernity in the tribal culture, discreetly prays to the ancestor spirit (Dadi Budha) when she wishes to marry Thenga Jani outside of their community's customs. Her basis in a world where people are Christians yet follow their traditions is definitely the reason for this being attached to their cultural traditions. They devote themselves to Dadi Budha for happiness and security in "the privacy of their homes, in lonely places" (Mohanty, 2013).



Mohanty's first well-known book, *The Ancestor (Dadi Budha)*, released in 1944 vividly portrays tribal life and serves as its basis. In the Paraja (tribe) language, 'Dadi' means 'grandfather', and in the Kondh language, 'Budha' also means 'grandfather'. Dadi Budha is the direct God and the everlasting ancestor of the tribal people of the Koraput region of Odisha. The date palm tree, 'Dadi Budha', symbolises the spirit of the ancestors as well as the spirit of nature. The palm tree is considered a superior spirit and presiding deity by the indigenous inhabitants of Lulla village. The palm tree and termite (Hunka Budha) mound are considered the spiritual beings of their tribal faith due to their naive belief. The ancient date palm tree known as 'Dadi Budha' (The Ancestor) symbolizes the eternal ancestor who silently watches over the happiness and sorrows of the tribal people. It also represents the tribal people's cultural legacy as it is expressed through their ceremonies and customs. 'Hunka Budha', a termite peak near Dadi Budha, is another representation of the tribal people's rustic and unsophisticated beliefs. The belief in nature and natural powers was quite strong among the primitive people. However, as the contemporary day progresses, the cultural practices of the average person are progressively disappearing. Additionally, an effort is made to draw attention to the existential issues inside tribal life as well as the breakdown of a tribal community due to the influence of modern civilisation. The prevalence of superstitious belief systems is seen when we take a close look at rural tribal life. When tribal life first emerged, they coexisted with the natural world. They do not worry about future survival because nature serves and nurtures them daily, which becomes an integral part of their interconnected relationships. The Ancestor serves as their everlasting godfather, guiding and assisting them in living and achieving their goals. The Dadi Budha, who is standing strong to lead them at every turn in life, is the one they can turn to and share their joys and sorrows with. When people suffer from unidentified illnesses and ailments, he is the only person who can understand and offer consolation for their woes.

The connection between 'Dadi Budha' and 'Hunka Budha', a nearby termite mound, further reinforces this theme. Both stand as silent, steadfast symbols of the tribe's faith in nature and the spiritual forces that govern their existence. The termite mound, representing ancient, primitive and simple honest adherence to the beliefs of the people, contrasts with the forces of modernity that are gradually eroding their cultural practices. This shift in tribal life under modern civilisation is a key theme in Mohanty's work, as it shows how technological advancement and external influences can weaken the deep spiritual connection with their natural surroundings. The novel explores the existential struggles of the tribal community, especially in these present times



as modernity encroaches upon their way of life. Their belief systems, deeply rooted in their relationship with nature, begin to clash with new modern ideas and lifestyles. As they face diseases, ailments, and existential crises, the tribe turns to their sacred symbols, such as 'Dadi Budha' for solace and guidance and 'Hunka Budha' for curing their ailments and infirmities. The tree becomes a silent observer from dawn to dusk of every single day made by the inmates of the village; they do not discriminate against any of their emotions and feelings, be it joy or sorrow, offering comfort and spiritual guidance in this rapidly changing world. The deep ecology perspective, which values every living being and seeks to protect the sacredness of all life, aligns closely with the tribal people's beliefs as portrayed in *The Ancestor*. The novel vividly presents how nature is not only a basis for the existence of the tribal community but also forms an essential part of their merry-making, intricately intertwined with their spirituality and survival. Their faith in natural forces is not blind superstition but a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all life.

The Ancestor provides a rich narrative that underscores the importance of eco-spirituality in tribal societies. It discusses how nature plays a vital role in shaping the purity of their identity, rituals, and worldview, highlighting the profound religious connection with the natural world. Mohanty's novel also critiques the encroachment of modernity and its impact on these traditional beliefs, reflecting on the tension between spiritual continuity and the forces of change. Through the symbols of 'Dadi Budha' and 'Hunka Budha', the narrative invites readers to reflect on the value of eco-spirituality and the wisdom that comes from a deep, respectful relationship with nature.

4.3.Salvation through Nature

Tribes always inhabit steep and mountainous areas as their habitats. Since the beginning of time, they have relied on nature for their livelihood and nutrition. Instead of being surrounded by a throng of people, they discover tranquillity, harmony, and wealth in the midst of nature. Their tribal cultural norms and traditions, as well as their indigenous knowledge, absorb and orient them. Bucke notes that the natural objects "add to the repose of the mind, tend to the restoration and preservation of health" (Bucke, 1813). In the romantic sense, nature calms the troubled mind and weary body, and its components stimulate people's senses. Thenga Jani, the son of village headman Ram Muduli, was strolling in the low-lying mountain valley when he felt the warm, pleasant autumnal midday sun, which "intoxicated him and made his mind swing" (Mohanty, 2013). The farmers of the hamlet of Lulla, including the headman, are reenergized and given strength by the cold breeze that blows across the corn fields, the shadow of the hill forest, the water of the river



Muran, the starry night, etc. These natural forces are depicted as therapy that reenergizes the community and provides solace and comfort after trauma to the Paraja tribe people. The springtime harvest festival instils fresh hope and energy for the upcoming season's arduous work. The freshness of the food, water, and mahula made at home, salapa rasa, rice water, ragi gruel, etc. supports a good physique, and the natural world is the repository of medicine for them.

It is accepted that everything is transformed by nature and time. The headman's mental turmoil, which he had accumulated following his son's kidnapping with Christian Dom girl Santosh Kumari, eventually subsided as the days and seasons went by, and he slowly returned to normal life. By overcoming the pain of the past, "the water of Muran swept away memories" of their lover from Saria Dan and Saria Phoola as the full moon night drew near, "waves of happiness sprang from the peaks of the hills and spread over the whole area" (Mohanty, 2013). Ram Muduli "tried to muster the courage to enable him to live the rest of his life" after the night's lovely dance provided him with "some solace, some comfort" (Mohanty, 2013). Thus, for life has to move on as events and happenings of everyday life are the inevitable chapters of life as a whole. Joy arises from every phenomenon, including day and night. In addition to promoting community life, the night is a time for celebration, conversation on various subjects, and communion with the natural and ancestral spirits rather than a constellation of frightening hours. Joy is organic and stems directly from the harmony of nature; it is not restricted to a particular location or substance. Working in the field at the end of the day could be a celebration since it allows them to receive Mother Earth's bounties in the shape of various harvests. The elements of the dynamic natural environment are always changing. Nature at its best, displaying its magnificent overview of beauty. As it portrays, "the waving of woods and crop fields, the gliding stream of Muran, the flight of the birds, the herd of cows grazing along the valley, fishes in the stream, the majestic movement of the clouds" (Bucke, 1813), making life more enchanting and exciting and the narratives go, "along with the dance of the beautiful tribal girls, add life to the valley and meaning to life" (Bucke, 1813). It is clear that the tribal people are an integral component of the natural system and that they live here. Because they coexist with the environment and show love and respect for it, they may be referred to as "the children of nature" (Panigrahi, 2006). Their passion for improving the natural environment is a direct result of their love for it. Their hamlet, which offers both cultural identity and life-sustaining conditions, is like "the soiled anchal of an old mother" (Mohanty, 2013). In order to appreciate the abundance of nature, they put a lot of effort into being one with it and forgetting they are there. They are the eco-people; they exist in the same way as trees, fountains,



and mountains. As Mohanty presents: “Throughout the day they worked in the mud, stones and pebbles. They were utterly indifferent to everything: joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure. They were creatures of the earth; they had no complaints” (Mohanty, 2013). The crops are the “fruits of their labour,” bestowed by the natural and ancestral spirit; and “gazing at this beauty of creation, a man could rid himself of his despair and desolation”; and man receives pristine and pure energy of nature as “ever young in his own creation” (Mohanty, 2013). They find the crop fields, the green valley, the circle of hills, and the cyclorama of seasons as their friends. Nature provides individuals with cues to display their abilities, such as dancing and performing other kinds of art in the forest.

4.4. Nature as Healer: Eco-spiritual dimensions of Tribal Medicine

In the tribal world, nature functions not merely as a background setting but as a holy sustainer of indigenous healing practices. Natural elements like plants, herbs and roots are used as medicine not only for their physical properties but also for their symbolic and ritual significance, which shows that the body, mind, nature and spirit of the tribes have a kinship linkage with each other. Tribal society follows traditional ecological knowledge and practices passed down through generations, strengthening a sense of continuity and belonging among them. This knowledge of the tribe is very experiential, oral and deeply embedded in their cultural practices. Tribal people rely on cultural preservation, and in return, nature acts as a site of healing for them, which leads to harmony between this community (human) and nature.

The text *The Ancestor* portrays this relationship of harmony between human and nature, where the tribal community depends on forests for sustenance, medicine and cultural identity. This novella offers a rich framework to examine the eco-spiritual dimensions of tribal medicine, where healing practices are inseparable from the sacredness of the natural world. In this text, the act of healing often involves invoking spiritual entities, suggesting that illness is perceived as both a physical and metaphysical imbalance. For example, Paraja tribe, as depicted in this text, considers Hunka Budha as sacred and uses its soil as a healer whenever their physical condition gets deteriorated, as Mohanty observes:

While making a wish devotees would scrap some dust of Hunka Budha’s body.

Considering it sacred, they would apply a bit of it on their forehead and taste a bit. For all the villagers- those who were childless, those having indigestion, those who had been ailing for a long time- it became routine to offer their homage to Dadi Budha. Life flowed on (Mohanty, 2013).



This reverence for the local deity reinforces the superiority of the religious values of the tribals, which supersedes the established forms of other religious performances. To substantiate his point, he further contends, “Hunka Budha spread himself out. People collected his dust, took it as a cure for headache and fever; some took it with the hope of getting a child. But he grew longer and made up for the loss” (Mohanty, 2013). These medicinal and ritual practices mark the indigenous and traditional knowledge of ancient times, where no facility for treatment was available, unlike the latest development of science and technology offers at the forefront, including community health centers, multi-specialist hospitals, AIIMS, etc., in recent times, but for them, what was a need of the hour was to find a herb to treat the patients on a daily basis. This signifies nature’s healing property. Unknown were the diseases that were most dreaded in those times. As simple, humble and rustic villagers hover over the forest and find their subsistence and lead a happy life.

Nature also acts as a healing medium for the Paraja people to come out of their grief. Nature enhances recovery through its elemental components like water, fire, rivers, mountains, land and wind, which form a central notion to Paraja rituals. Their deities reside in trees and stones. The Paraja people externalize their anguish by offering prayers to these embodiments of nature. Through their ritual practices and prayers to these deities, they surrender themselves to these natural spirits, which represent an important part of the ecosystem. The beauty of the landscape and the aesthetic experiences pull the grieving individual (tribal people) out of their internal darkness and back into the vibrant present moment.

In moments of their extreme grief and personal losses, the characters present in the text *The Ancestors* often retreat into the wilderness, where the silence of the date palm tree (Dadi Budha) provides a non-judgmental space for the sorrows of these characters. “The old man looked around. Seeing none, he hastily went up to Dadi Budha. Silencing all his thoughts, he stood in front of the deity. This was the right moment for him, when he and his god stood face to face with no barriers separating them. Sitting at the feet of Dadi Budha, he burst into tears” (Mohanty, 2013).

Gopinath Mohanty, in the above lines, has shown how the village headman Ram Muduli expresses his personal loss and grief without any judgement in front of their deity Dadi Budha, represented by a date palm tree. The village headman is crying in front of Dadi Budha for his fate. This shows how nature acts as an innate therapist for the Paraja community. Healing, therefore, for the tribe is not purely a biological process but a spiritual engagement with these natural forces. To appease the deity, they perform religious rituals, engaging a shaman to avert unwanted misfortune from befalling on them. In those days, the latest development in terms of medicine and



hospitals was a general idea, but they knew about herbal medicines to cure their ailments and infirmities. It is for this reason that they hold supreme reverence for the forests and mountains as their living gods.

5. CONCLUSION

Tribal eco-spirituality offers a perspective on human existence that is radically different from modern, industrialized worldviews. In these communities, nature is not an external object to be studied or controlled; rather, it is a vital part of their identity, beliefs, and practices. Through a deep connection with the land, the elements, and ancestral spirits, the tribal people create a world where spirituality and ecology are inseparable. Their traditional knowledge systems, their agricultural practices, and their religious customs all work together to preserve both their cultural identity and the environment in which they live.

As demonstrated in *The Ancestor*, the tribal worldview sees nature not as something to be mastered but as something to be revered and preserved. This relationship is not only crucial for their existence but also a profound spiritual practice. In a world increasingly defined by the separation of humans from nature, tribal eco-spirituality provides a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of all life forms and the sacredness of the natural world. For these communities, their spiritual and ecological practices are the foundations of a life lived in harmony with nature, offering valuable lessons for modern society in addressing environmental crises and fostering a more sustainable and spiritually fulfilling future.

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