

Impact Factor: 6.017

ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Special Issue on Tribal Culture, Literature and Languages

National Conference Organised by
Department of Marathi, Hindi and English

Government Vidarbha Institute of Science and
Humanities, Amravati (Autonomous)

13 Years of Open Access

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Portrayal of Nature and Environment in Tribal Narratives

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Abstract:

Tribal communities in India possess a profound and symbiotic relationship with their natural surroundings, which is meticulously reflected in their oral traditions, myths, and folklore. Much of tribal literature exists in oral form, yet select writers from various communities have worked to uncover the deep ecological consciousness embedded in these traditions. Indian tribal communities maintain an intimate relationship with nature, rooted in the belief that ‘humans belong to nature.’ Their culture, traditions, festivals, worship practices, and knowledge of natural medicine all reflect ecological philosophies and conservation ethics. These elements of tribal literature serve as a medium for environmental education and the transmission of sustainable practices across generations. This paper aims to deepen the understanding of the interconnections between indigenous literature, culture, and the environment through an analysis of selected tribal narratives.

Keywords: Tribal Narratives, Ecological Discourse.

Nature is the Great God, And we are all restless birds.

Bhujang Meshram

In an era defined by cutting-edge technology and artificial intelligence, the world has become faster and more connected, with information readily accessible at our fingertips. However, amidst this extensive availability of information and materialistic abundance, there is a growing societal need to rethink our way of life. This necessity compels us to revisit our indigenous roots, drawing us back into the richness of our culture, language, and thought, all of which are captured through various narratives. In a diverse country like India, where ancient knowledge and heritage are deeply embedded, different communities have shaped unique identities and



foundational ideas that are increasingly relevant in the 21st century. This paper focuses on one such group: the Tribal Communities, exploring their enduring contributions and the significance of reviving their perspectives in contemporary society.

Tribal communities in India have definitely nurtured a profound and symbiotic relationship with their natural surroundings, a bond deeply rooted into their oral traditions, myths, and folklore. The natural vicissitude is not merely a backdrop for tribal life; it is a living, breathing entity that commands reverence and respect. Tribal people not only believe that the fundamental principles of life are rooted in the surrounding natural world, but they also maintain a deep connection with the divine by honoring and worshipping nature through their daily activities. This sacred relationship with nature keeps them in harmony with the supreme power they revere as they fundamentally ‘recognize that the environment is a living entity and that everything in it is interconnected. They understand that harming one part of the ecosystem affects the whole.’ (Berkes, p. 5). These principles about nature and its vital importance remind us that, like human beings, the natural world is a living whole that must be preserved. Indigenous beliefs emphasise that everything is intermingled, and harm to any part of this delicate balance can lead to profound disruptions in society.

By examining the depiction of landscapes, animals, and natural phenomena within selected tribal narratives, this investigation aims to uncover the underlying ecological philosophies and conservation ethics inherent in tribal narratives.

Through the lens of notable authors such as Jacinta Kerketta, Mahasweta Devi, Alice Ekka, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, G. N. Devy, Ram Dayal Munda, Sushila Samad, Usha Kiran Atram, Motiravan Kangali, Ramdayal Munda, Vandana Tete, Waharu Sonwane, Paddam Anasuya, Mahadev Toppo, Maipati Arun Kumar, and Anuj Lugun, Many writers have chosen to present tribal literature in their native languages, recognizing the unique delicacy and intricacies of these tongues, which have primarily given rise to a rich oral tradition. Tribal writers often gravitate towards their own languages, as Noam Chomsky aptly noted, language serves as "a ‘mirror’ reflecting the natural creativity of the mind” (6). This connection stressed the importance of preserving linguistic authenticity in conveying the depth and richness of tribal narratives.

This study seeks to expound how these narratives serve as a medium for environmental education and the transmission of sustainable practices across generations. In the face of modernization and environmental degradation, preserving these narratives is of paramount importance, as they hold enduring relevance in contemporary ecological discourse. The aforementioned writers have profoundly captured the richness of tribal life, emphasising that



much of tribal literature remains either overlooked or inaccessible. This underscores the pressing need articulated by Gerald Vizenor that "Tribal stories must be told, not just recorded" (Vizenor, p. 6). These tribal authors have effectively engaged with the idea of revisiting indigenous discourses, bringing to light the intrinsic connection between tribal communities and nature. They explore how these communities' philosophies of sustainability, methods of preservation, and extensive environmental knowledge have contributed to conservation efforts and environmental education in today's contemporary society. These are the key themes that I will be investigating in the current paper.

Tribal literature is a repository of ecological wisdom, with narratives that are often imbued with a profound respect for the natural world. Jacinta Kerketta, a contemporary tribal poet and writer, eloquently captures the essence of this relationship in her works. Jacinta Kerketta's first anthology of poems titled as "Angor," having forty-one poems, contemplate the deep connection between tribal communities and nature, critiquing the exploitation of natural resources and stressing the protection of indigenous lands. In her poem 'Jungle Se Maat' (A Lesson from the Forest) Kerketta states "The forest teaches us / the language of life / its rustling leaves / speak of patience and harmony / where every creature finds its place." (Kerketta, p. 45), This poem illustrates how tribal people share respect for the forest, which they view as a teacher and guardian, imparting wisdom about coexistence and balance in nature. Kerketta's poetry meticulously captures diverse themes, drawing readers in by fostering a sense of belonging and emphasising ecological discourse. Her poetry definitely echoes the sentiments expressed by Leonard M. Scigaj in 'Sustainable Poetry: Four American Eco-poets', where he notes that poetry "distils ecological processes into aesthetic techniques to restore our sense of connectedness to the planet that bore and sustains us" (Scigaj, p. 12).

Kerketta's evocative imagery and poignant verses accentuate the vital role that nature plays in the cultural and spiritual lives of tribal people. Her work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving the environment not only for its own sake but also for the cultural identity and well-being of indigenous communities.

Mahasweta Devi, a towering figure in Indian literature, is a Bengali novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, columnist, editor, and a dedicated socio-cultural activist.

has extensively written about the lives and struggles of tribal communities. In her seminal work "Aranyer Adhikar" (The Right to the Forest), Devi delves into the history of the tribal leader Birsa Munda and his fight against British colonial oppression. The forest, in Devi's narrative, is not just a setting but a protagonist in its own right, representing the lifeblood of the tribal people. The forest is depicted as a source of sustenance, a spiritual haven, and a



symbol of resistance against external exploitation. Also She portrays the profound connection between tribal people and their natural environment, particularly emphasizing their extensive knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs. The tribal communities depicted in the novel possess a rich, inherited understanding of the forest's flora, using it to treat various ailments and sustain their health. This knowledge is not just practical but also deeply embedded in their cultural and spiritual practices, passed down through generations as part of their oral traditions. Devi highlights how these natural medicines are an integral part of their survival, especially in times of scarcity, and how this knowledge is a testament to their intimate relationship with the forest. The novel underscores the importance of preserving both the forest and the traditional wisdom of the tribal people, which are inextricably linked.

Devi's portrayal of the tribal relationship with the forest foregrounds the intricate knowledge and sustainable practices that have been passed down through generations, highlighting the ecological wisdom embedded in tribal culture.

Alice Ekka and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar also contribute significantly to the discourse on tribal ecology through their literary works. Ekka's narratives often centre around the intimate bond between tribal communities and their nature, emphasising the symbiotic relationship that ensures the sustainability of both. Shekhar, in his acclaimed novel "The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey," explores the intersection of tribal beliefs, traditional medicine, and the natural world. The novel depicts how the tribal community's knowledge of local flora and fauna is integral to their health and well-being. Numerous instances in the text reflect the profound ecological knowledge of tribal people. Shekhar captures this expertise, noting, "Rupi was a man from Jadugora renowned for his ability to cure diseases using roots, resin, fruits, seeds, and herbs he gathered from the forest" (Shekhar, p. 124). This passage echoes the depth of traditional medicinal practices rooted in a deep understanding of the natural world of Santal communities in the novel.

Both Ekka and Shekhar's works highlight the importance of preserving this ecological knowledge in the face of modern challenges.

G. N. Devy's extensive research on tribal languages and literature reveals the rich repository of ecological wisdom embedded in these cultures. Devy argues that the preservation of tribal languages is crucial for maintaining the ecological knowledge and sustainable practices that are often encoded in these languages. As he stated "The indigenous communities in all parts of the words have been experiencing the phenomenon of language loss as an everyday reality" (Devy. p. 2) Preserving oral languages and translating them into modern terminology is essential. Since language reflects the essence of a culture, studying the languages of indigenous



communities can reveal numerous aspects of their traditions and beliefs. This understanding is invaluable for uncovering indigenous methods of environmental conservation and their extensive knowledge of medicine and nature.

His work underscores the importance of linguistic diversity in fostering ecological resilience and cultural continuity. Ram Dayal Munda, a prominent scholar, linguist and cultural activist, also emphasises the role of tribal music and folklore in fostering a kind of respect for nature. Munda's contributions to the documentation and preservation of tribal oral traditions highlight the ways in which these traditions serve as a vehicle for ecological education and cultural preservation. Ram Dayal Munda's *'Adi-Dharam'* is a highly acclaimed work that delves into the rich cultural heritage of the Munda tribe, to which he belongs. The title, 'Adi-Dharam', meaning "ancient religion," captures the essence of the tribe's spiritual practices. The book meticulously documents the various festivals celebrated by the Munda tribe, such as Sarhul, Karma, and Sohrai. Through these celebrations, Munda illustrates how tribal communities consciously honor their connection to the surrounding ecology, using these festivals as a means to maintain a deep bond with nature and preserve their environmental heritage.

Tribal literature serves as a powerful tool for environmental education, conveying essential lessons on conservation ethics and sustainable practices. Much of tribal narratives have remained on the periphery of mainstream discourse, leading to a lack of recognition for the conservation ethics and environmental consciousness inherent in tribal communities. However, notable efforts by tribal writers and scholars have begun to bring these crucial aspects to the forefront. As Boyd notes, "Colonial societies have long ignored Indigenous perspectives, and the legacies of this marginalisation have been acknowledged by scholars across various fields and disciplines for decades" (Boyd, p. 7). Despite limited exposure, tribal literature emphasises the inherited wisdom of these communities and their ability to preserve it across generations. Many tribal writers, such as Shushila Samad and Usha Kiran Atram, have voiced the ethical dimensions of conservation and revived traditional forms of education. These and other tribal authors have explored similar themes, highlighting the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge and practices. The principle of environmental conservation is ingrained in the thought processes of tribal communities, manifesting in their way of life and reverence for the natural world. These communities engage in practices that embody their ethical approaches to environmental stewardship. For instance, their "programs began with a prayer (pooja) in honor of Dharti Mata (Mother Earth), a ritual that reflects a common spiritual tradition across Adivasi communities in the subcontinent" (Tilche, p. 181). Such practices are frequently explored in the writings of tribal authors from various communities across India.



Sushila Samad's works, for instance, are replete with narratives that emphasize the importance of living in harmony with nature. Her stories often depict the consequences of ecological imbalance, serving as cautionary tales that underscore the need for environmental stewardship. Usha Kiran Atram's writings also contribute to this discourse by illustrating how traditional knowledge and practices ensure the sustainability of natural resources. Atram's works, such as '*Morki*', her first book featuring a remarkable collection of poems, along with '*Katha Sangrah*' and '*Gondwana ki Veeranganayein*', offer valuable insights into the community-based conservation efforts that have been rooted in tribal societies for generations. These works highlight the rich traditions and practices of environmental stewardship that are integral to tribal life.

Motiravan Kangali's stories often feature animals and natural phenomena as central characters, illustrating the interconnectedness of all life forms. His narratives uncover the belief that humans are not separate from nature but are an integral part of the natural world. This worldview fosters a sense of responsibility towards the environment, promoting conservation ethics that are essential for sustainable living. Vandana Tete and Waharu Sonwane's writings further explore these themes, highlighting the role of traditional ecological knowledge in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Their works advocate for the recognition and respect of indigenous ecological knowledge in modern conservation efforts. Sanjay Lohakare delves into similar themes by reflecting on the Mahadeo Koli community's way of life through compelling stories such as *Raab*, *Avanee*, *Kaansari*, *Rankanda*, and *Jeetrab*. Translated by Dr. Durgesh V. Borse, these stories capture the community's practices that "inspire us to rethink our ways towards nature" (Borse, p. 3).

The communities reside in the north east of maharashtra mainly depends upon the farm, cultivating

Paddam Anasuya and Mahadev Toppo's works delve into the cultural practices that ensure the sustainability of natural resources. Anasuya's narratives often depict the rituals and customs that are performed to honor and protect the environment, demonstrating how these practices are integral to the community's way of life. Toppo's writings provide a critical examination of the impact of modern development on tribal lands and ecosystems, advocating for policies that prioritize ecological sustainability and the rights of indigenous communities. Both authors emphasize the importance of preserving traditional ecological knowledge and integrating it into contemporary environmental policies.

Maipati Arun Kumar and Anuj Lugun's contributions to tribal literature also emphasise the need to recognize and respect indigenous ecological knowledge. Kumar's work often



highlights the environmental degradation caused by industrialization and the exploitation of natural resources, calling for a return to sustainable practices rooted in traditional knowledge. Lugun, in his poetry and prose, articulates the deep-seated connection between tribal identity and the natural world, advocating for the preservation of both cultural and ecological heritage. Their writings serve as a powerful reminder of the resilience and wisdom of indigenous communities in the face of environmental challenges.

The preservation of tribal narratives is crucial in the context of modernization and environmental degradation. These stories not only document the environmental knowledge of indigenous communities but also provide valuable lessons for contemporary society. By analysing the works of the aforementioned authors, this paper underlines the importance of integrating indigenous ecological philosophies into modern conservation efforts. The relevance of tribal literature in contemporary ecological discourse lies in its ability to offer alternative perspectives on environmental sustainability, grounded in centuries-old traditions and practices.

As the world grapples with the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, the wisdom contained in tribal narratives can guide us toward more sustainable and harmonious ways of living. The ecological philosophies and conservation ethics embedded in tribal literature offer a holistic approach to environmental stewardship, one that emphasises the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of maintaining ecological balance. By preserving and promoting these narratives, we can foster a greater understanding of the interconnections between literature, culture, and the environment.

The works of Jacinta Kerketta, Mahasweta Devi, Alice Ekka, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, G. N. Devy, Ram Dayal Munda, Sushila Samad, Usha Kiran Atram, Motiravan Kangali, Ramdayal Munda, Vandana Tete, Waharu Sonwane, Paddam Anasuya, Mahadev Toppo, Maipati Arun Kumar, and Anuj Lugun provide invaluable insights into the sustainable practices and environmental stewardship of tribal societies. Their narratives highlight the importance of preserving the natural world not only for its intrinsic value but also for the cultural and spiritual well-being of indigenous communities. In recognizing and respecting the ecological knowledge embedded in tribal literature, we can contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable approach to environmental conservation.

Conclusion

The exploration of ecological discourse and conservation ethics in Indian tribal literature denotes that the plethora of tribal literature offers a connection between indigenous



communities and their natural surroundings. The literature emerging in tribal narratives have provided invaluable insights into sustainable practices and environmental preservation. By sustaining these narratives and inculcating their wisdom into contemporary ecological discourse, we can enrich a greater understanding of the interconnections between literature, culture, and the environment.

Therefore, this study shows the recognition and respect of indigenous ecological knowledge, emphasising its significance in addressing the pressing environmental challenges of our time.

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Theory, vol. XIII, no. II, 2024, pp. 1-11, <https://doi.org/2347-2073>. Accessed 11 Aug. 2024.