



# TRIBAL WAY OF LIVING: A SOLUTION TO CURRENT ECOLOGICAL CRISIS (ECO-SPIRITUALITY FROM ORAON PERSPECTIVE)

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**Abstract:** Ecology is the study of the relationship between all living beings, and their physical environment. Ecology as a science of the harmony of the relationship of nature with mankind has a foundational spirituality in relationship with God, the creator of nature. This article is an exposition of the spiritual possibilities of humankind with its living environment mainly from an Oraon tribal perspective. Tribal culture and spiritual traditions from the earliest time in India have been inspired deeply by the rhythm of nature. Hence tribal ecological spirituality seems to base itself on some of the axioms of nature's behaviour which were keenly observed by the contemplatives of tribal traditions. It is nature that provided them with all that they required for their livelihood. The medication (natural, preventive, and curative means of treatment), the life in harmony with nature and its various forms of living and non-living beings, unity of nature, the interdependence of nature and species, co-relation of all elements, regularity of species generations, convertibility of energies, etc. are formed the foundation for an eco-spirituality and ground rule for ecological behaviour of tribal people. This life that relied on nature could make their life revolves around the metaphysical relationship of the universe to One transcendental Reality, which they named as one supreme God. This paper is an attempt to highlight how Oraon's way of harmonious living with the environment and their sole reliability on One supreme entity paved the way for care for the surroundings they lived. This article underlines an important fact that the tribal way of understanding nature could probably be one of the solutions for the current ecological crisis.

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, Eco-spirituality, Tribals, Oraon, Ecological Crisis, Ecosophia, Environment*

## Introduction

Recently, I came across an article in a newspaper entitled, "Explained: Are frequent extreme weather events being fuelled by climate change?" This made me question "Is humanity in peril?" The entire world is particularly hit by the Covid-19 and extreme climate in the current year (2021). The Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), Petteri Taalas stated that ever increasing temperature of the universe can have catastrophic consequences, including great impact on health, food security, the

environment, and sustainable development. Rising temperatures lead to increased melting of ice, rising sea levels, more heat waves, and other extreme forms of weather. Many examples can be enumerated from our surroundings. This summer, sweltering heat waves have affected thousands of people in the US and Canada, devastating floods have traumatized Germany and China, and wildfires have gone out of control in Siberia, Turkey, and Greece, and cyclones *Taukate* and *Yaas* have struck India's coastal areas. Scientific studies reveal that extreme weather events are going to be more recurrent and strong with rising anthropogenic climate change. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), during the month of May 2021, the average CO<sub>2</sub> content in the atmosphere was around 419 parts per million which is the highest level reported in last sixty three years. The frequent occurrence and strength of such meteorological conditions around the world call our immediate attention to the present ecological crisis.

Pope Francis (2020) states, "Given the complexity of the present ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life, and spirituality. If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it" (*Laudato si*, 63. p. 45). Pope further elaborates by saying that there is a technocratic paradigm<sup>1</sup>, a propensity to condense everything under the purview of technology and resolve all issues using scientific advancements by empowering a few elite humans which minimizes nature and society to a formless mass awaiting manipulation by the same elite. It is the misuse of science and technology and their applications that lead to restricted understanding of the world where other forms of thoughts are neglected. In the present context, one needs to move from a mechanistic worldview and human exploitation of the earth, and embrace an ecological spirituality that provides due importance to nature in the scheme of thinking and acting that would ensure the sustainability of the life of the universe. Tribal way of thinking can be one of the frameworks to address the climatic issues grappling the entire world (DeCosse & Green, B.P., 2015).

Society is marked by a set of rules and regulations that are handed down orally in a very systematic manner for the populace of that society. Everyone is expected to adopt those norms for the proper social organization and to establish social control. The same holds when it comes to tribal life. It is observed that throughout the year, the tribal people in India perform varieties of religious functions which bring social control, social solidarity, and conformity to their society. Through these religious ceremonies, they also form an eco-centric spirituality. True spirituality encompasses belief system and value patterns of individuals which give a strong sense of deeper insights into the reality and bring about a kind of union between self, others, surrounding nature, and the universe as a whole (Jakovljevic 2017). It manifests a sense solid interconnectedness between a human being and others and involves close bonds to kin, groups, Mother Nature, and the universe (Walsh 2008 cited in Rowkith & Bhagwan, 2020). When it comes to tribal people myth and religious beliefs and practices that are normally centered on nature play a very significant role in

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<sup>1</sup> Technocratic paradigm is an application of scientific and technological power irrationally by an individual who thinks that he/she is powerful and wise enough to use his/her power to control all things.

shaping their spirituality. Spirituality is an integral part of tribal life and it serves as a guiding light for the people to live their lives in harmony with nature (Chatterjee & Sharma, 2018).

### **Eco-Spirituality of Tribals: A General Understanding**

Tribal life in general is characterised by community living and a strong attachment to the environment in which they live. They manifest a strong bond with those departed from their midst and those who are yet to be born. In a nut shell, their community consists of living members, the unborn, the deceased, and nature as a whole and these elements are essentially intertwined to form a unique spirituality (Wangoola, 2000 & Ritskes, 2011). The practice of taboos, the importance given to the environment in worship, utilization of minimal natural resources for reverential rituals, shifting cultivation, etc. are some of the unique ways they exhibit this spiritual relationship (James, 2015). Kechutzar (2008) points out that, tribals have a firm faith that a supernatural being or God has blessed nature with abundance of gifts, concomitantly fulfilling the role of guide and *guru* for their protection and fortune. This belief also results in their active rendezvous with dreams, divination and omens. These engagements also constitute a substantial chunk of their spirituality (cited in James, 2015).

The tribals are the real citizens of their land and they have a unique and distinct history of the culture of their own. They consider the land as an indivisible space and within the context of reciprocity, and inter connectedness; they feel that it belongs to them. This sentimental attachment gives them a collective identity and a strong sense of communal living. They consider the mother earth as the place of their abode, which was gifted to them divinely by the supernatural being. They have collective proprietorship of the land and its assets resulting in an egalitarian society with strong sense of solidarity. Their understanding of societal and cosmological relationships accentuates a tremendous veneration for self, others, and the environment. As per Vontress (2005), this viewpoint is the vital element of sustainability and stable and harmonious living. The use of sacred medicines, rites, and the application of other aboriginal methods of the traditional healing stems from this ecological relationship. In addition to remain strongly connected to their natural land space, they also believe in the existence of the Spirit in it.

There appears among the tribals a profound interconnectedness with various animate and inanimate elements of the universe, where all inhabitants including the celestial beings are in synergy with each other (Rowkith & Bhagwan, 2020). They venerate nature as Deity and call this Deity as the God of Green, who through the resources of the earth sustains them. They worship the transcendental God through a variety of practices like veneration of nature, animism, and totemism. The prayers are directed to the trees and plants, animals, and various sources of water. As part of their reverence, they make food to totems (Tripathi, 2016; Chatterjee & Sharma, 2018; Pandikattu, 2017). Their admiration for nature is deeply rooted in their intense belief that divine spirits and mystical powers are present within woods, hills, and aquatic bodies (Chatterjee & Sharma 2018). Tribals consider several trees and animals to be pious and sacred (Kandari et al. 2014). The tribals encourage and promote happiness by integrating nature worship and demonstrating admiration and confidence in the transcendental nature of terrestrial phenomena. They have a solid religious view that they can ward off malevolent spirits through such practices (Chatterjee & Sharma, 2018). They have great devotions to *Hira Dev* (God of Green) because they believe in God's providence for formal livelihoods.

They consider the plants and animals as manifestations of divine energy, pray to animals or totems and revere earth-bound creatures like tigers, rodents, snakes, etc. (Pandikattu, 2017).

## Oraon

Oraon, also known as Uraon, Oran, or Oram, is an aborigine inhabits found in different states of India and Bangladesh. They are Dravidian tribe and have settled in the Chotanagpur region since ancient times. Oraon, also known as Kurukh tribe, is one of the largest tribal communities in India. Traditionally, they relied on the forest for their livelihood and lived an eco-friendly life. Oraons are divided into several sub-tribes namely; *Kujur, Bara, Lakra, Ekka, Tirkey, Tigga, Barla, Bakhla, Toppo, Minz, Kispotta,* and *Kerketta*. They are also divided into many totemic clans. The Head of Oraon is called Pannu. When an offender is reinstated, Pannu takes upon himself the burden of erring one's wrongdoing. To mark the occasion, ceremoniously he first drinks water from his hand. Oraons eat all kinds of food; however, their food habit is greatly influenced by the environment in which they live (Xaxa, 2001).

## Religious Life of Oraons

*Sarna* Dharma is the traditional religion of Oraon. Some Oraons practice their religion Hindu way due to the impact of Hindu Religion. The followers of *Sarna* perform spiritual rites under the shade of a sacred grove and adore Sun as *Biri* and Moon as *Chanda*. The words *Chanda* and *Biri* are words are commonly used in *Sarna* Puja. They consider the earth as mother. Researches reveal that today many Oraons have gave up their original beliefs of *Sarna*. The charitable work of Christian missionaries among them made many Oraons to accept Christianity as their religion (Purkayastha, 2018).

## Ecological Profile of Oraons

The connectivity between Oraon and the environment is easily manifested in house construction, household items, and other artefacts. Mud walls, tile roofs, timber, and bamboo are usually used for the construction of their houses. They use forest products for making the domestic items like mat, cot, wooden stool, basket, plate, cup, cushion, rope, mortar and pestle, and oil pressers. The apparatus for hunting and fishing tools are prepared using forest products. Twine is used for making fishing nets. Gungu leaves and bamboo are used for making umbrellas. Gungu leaves are also used in making the hooded waterproof coat.

Major rituals among them are associated with birth, wedding, and death. The marriage ceremonies are very much environment-centric. Some of the marriage customs include: males go to the woods to get firewood and females bring *sal* leaves to prepare cups and plates; preparing marriage mat and baskets of different dimensions and setting up a *marwa*. In *Marwa*, nine *sal* saplings are planted in the courtyard in three rows with leaves on top. The middle saplings of the second row differ in its height. They use branches of mango, bamboo, *sidha*, *bhelwa*, and *mahua*. Mango symbolizes perpetuity of descendants, bamboo represents progeny, *sidha* signifies faithfulness of husband and wife, *bhelwa* indicates protection from the evil eye and *mahua* symbolizes love between the couple. Without the invocation of trees and plants, the wedding ceremonies are incomplete. The centrality of nature is also manifested during funerals. The festivals they celebrate are related to forest, hunting, agriculture, and cattle. They also conduct *jatras* which are socio-religious gathering usually organized at the beginning of different seasons (Purkayastha, 2018).

## Eco-Spirituality of Oraons

Tribal are nature-loving people. It is perhaps to show their solidarity with nature that they build their house close to or in the very midst of forests. They own everything in common without the attitude of hoarding, monopolizing, accumulating, or calculating because of the future. In simple words, it can be said that tribal people follow the system of need fulfillment rather than greed fulfillment which would also mean hand to mouth system relying on God's providence.

### 1. The world is filled with the Spirit of God

One of the basic understandings of tribal religion is that the world is primarily inhabited by the spirits who are controlled by the one Supreme God. This earth is not an empty space, but it has been occupied by the presence of various spirits like Spirit of God, village guardian spirit, hill spirit, a forest spirit, fountain spirit, and the ancestral spirits as well as the evil spirits. They emphasize through their way of life and practice the all-enveloping and indwelling presence of the divine Spirit in the universe and particularly on this earth. This forms the basis of their spirituality.

Just as the universe is spirit-centred, every tribal house has a special place for the spirits of the ancestors. They offer sacrifices to the ancestral spirits. Houses are surrounded by different kinds of fruit-bearing and non-fruit-bearing trees and shrubs. They believe that the creatures are the manifested forms of the invisible Divine spirit. This attitude prompts them to respect and cherish all forms of life (animal and plant life). Hence non-violence to nature and natural realities is very basic to the tribal ecological spiritual outlook. Mundu (2006) reports, "The village proper is like a forest where we find various kinds of full-grown fruit trees. The village would never be on plain ground. Close to the village or within the boundary of the village one would see a cluster of old *sal* trees which is called the sacred grove (*sarna*). The house itself will have sections for humans (living and dead), animals, and fowls living nearby. The physical set-up of the dwellings illustrates the interrelationships and mutual communion of humans, animals, land, and invisible supernatural beings and God. Rootedness in the land is central to interrelationship and survival" (p.67).

Lakra (2005) states "Respect for creation, gratitude toward the creator, non-transferability, and non-possessiveness of the lands is based on the belief that everything that has its origin in and from God; it is, therefore, sacred, worthy of special respect. For Adivasi, to sell or to transfer a piece of land is an unforgivable sin and crime. They believe in community ownership of the land. They follow the life pattern of nature, i.e. remain free and happy like the birds of the air" (p.29). We have made for harmony, for communion with God, the world around us, and one another. This union is a transparently open and free communion. The myth of tribal religion brings to light deep insight into the life in creation. First of all, the myth affirms the abiding communion, interdependence, fellowship, and self-emptying mode of the servanthood of all beings in serving one another, each one lives and helps others to live and makes the creation a life-promoting and enhancing one.

Hemron (2008) reports, "Adivasis' relation to nature and the spirit world provide us positive values which have ecological importance. Because of their belief that spirits reside in trees, bushes, and roots they have respect for them, and they use them keeping in view their sustainability. They also have a symbolic relationship with trees, animals, and birds, and it is proved from the fact that *Adivasis* have their totems

derived from some of them, because of this they regard them as members of the family.” (p.133) Because of the relation conscious *Adivasis* try to maintain harmony with nature and the spirit world.

No one can exercise his/her mastery over others for his/her advantage. Human beings cannot do with the natural resources and other fellow beings according to their wants and needs. The tribal myth reveals that the creation is not a unicellular being but it is a communion of beings that are necessarily interrelated and interdependent. The interrelationship is not based on autonomy or heteronomy but ontonomy<sup>2</sup>. The ontonomic relationship is a supposition that there exists an internal and constitutive relationship between every element of the entire cosmos. In this concept, nothing is disconnected and progress of one being should not take place at the expense of another (Panikkar, 1973).

## 2. Tribal's Relation to Socio-Community life

Tribals have a well-knit community where they live, work, celebrate and suffer together. There is no scope for individualism among them. Punitive measures are taken against the lawbreakers by their village communities and the one who does not abide by the norms of the community is cut off from all associations. There is a tremendous sense of equality and justice prevails among them. There is no distinction based on the status of caste. They follow the direct democratic system and propose and elect the leaders based on simple majority consensus. However, decision-making power is not invested in the elected officials. On the other hand, all the decisions are made by the community in the presence of the elected official (Tirkey, 2003).

Tribals by nature are communitarian; their village settlements are proof to their deep sense of belonging to a community. All normal activities of life and all the rites of passage necessitate the dynamic involvement of the community. The topography of the indigenous peoples of Chota-Nagpur very clearly demarcates their lifestyle. There is a marked difference from the lifestyle of non-indigenous people. They live amidst hills, valleys, and plains, with bushes and shrubs all around. They have evolved mutual help systems called *pancha* and *madait* to carry out the heavy work. This type of heavy work is accomplished for just a meal and rice beer. Occasions like marriage, the guests and relatives bring along with them rice, pulse, rice-beer, and leaf-cups which reduces greatly the expenses of the family (Kullu, 2003).

## 3. Spirituality of Ecological Harmony

“From the ecological setting described above which has constitutive alignment with the elements of the earth and spiritual linking with divine-human life is destined to realize and ecological harmony with nature, human and God in a more intimate and interlinked manner”(Manickam,1997, p. 215). The human ecological constitution, which has direct linking in both direction, spiritual and material, both situated in the

<sup>2</sup> “Ontonomy is sensitive to the peculiarities proper to each being or class of beings, without absolutizing such regularities as if other beings did not exist and without enslaving them in the service of higher entities, as if lower beings did not also have their own laws.” (*Ontonomía de la ciencia. Sobre el sentido de la ciencia y sus relaciones con la filosofía*, Madrid 1961). The concept of ontonomy is applicable to every level: scientific, philosophical, theological – spiritual, political, economic and other areas of human life. Panikkar calls for an ontonomic attitude that involves the elimination of autonomy (separate disconnected independence of various spheres of being) and heteronomy (predominance of some species over others), in order to achieve ontonomy (a harmonious integration of the distinct parts in the whole). This permits the harmonious unfolding of a being according to its intimate constitution without doing violence to the other beings (*Misterio y Revelacion*). This permits a being to develop harmoniously based on its intimate constitution without causing any harm to the other beings (*Misterio y Revelacion*). He further states that nature of a particular faith does not rest on the independent nature of human being, rather it depends on his/her ontonomic structure as a being in, with and through God (*Religión y religions*, Madrid 1965). (Retrieved from <https://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-ontonomy.html>)

Divine milieu of God's created cosmic environment, spontaneously exposes tribals to the realities of nature and invites them to be open to the divine Spirit which is dwelling within them and in the nature. Living in two realms of nature and divine spirit makes one enjoy some of the benefits of this alignment such as pleasant feeling, the serenity of mind, peaceful atmosphere, and its resultant food and health. Chatterjee & Sharma (2018) reported that tribal's belief in supernatural power controls the universe is also directly related to their religion and regular life. Rowkith & Bhagwan (2020) reported in their studies the unique spirituality of the tribal community which has been traditionally handed down from the ancient times, through the generations. They relied on oral traditions since they do not have sacred texts like Holy Bible and Bhagavad Gita. The beautiful songs and stories truly portray the inherent spiritual values and philosophies that guide their life. The tribal way of living, understanding, and being on this earth is embedded within both the simplicity and the complexity of their all-embracing worldview. This exceptional spirituality is marked by true respect for nature, stress on intimate family ties, and a festive culture and ceremonies that are totally entrenched in their psychological makeup. In fact, nature and all natural phenomena are considered as their religion.

In short, an awareness of God's presence in their life is called tribal spirituality that is based on justice, peace, equality, harmony with nature, and harmony with neighbour and God. Oraons believe that they are called to belong to the tribal community, within which they find happiness and fulfillment in this world.

### **Conclusion**

People, in general, would like to have a mystical experience; this feeling is very strong when we are immersed in quietness of the nature. However, this quietness is not experienced when we are totally engrossed in the busyness of life which is often postmodern and urbanized. The experiences we long for have a significant relation with the environment in which live. To have such experiences, the world requires an investigation into human beings' amicability with the environment and a reconceptualization of a new cosmo-ecology that transforms a person's lifestyle and actions and facilitates concrete steps towards sustainable and harmonious living with *oikos* (Schalkwyk, 2011). This reconceptualization requires first and foremost a transition from merely a mechanistic worldview to a cosmo-ecology and then finally to a deep eco-spirituality. Eco-spirituality guides the human consciousness to have deep sense of belonging and interconnectedness with the mother earth. This spiritual centric ecological awareness (Capra, 1997) guides one's life choices and actions. A deliberate and conscious approach rooted in eco-spirituality make the human beings to live in harmony with the creation and the Creator and makes them less manipulative. If every individual makes effort to understand his or her link to ecology and how each activity which are not well thought out adversely harm the welfare of fellow human beings and other species, then one can begin to choose lifestyles and actions which promote sustainable living and care for the common home (*oikos*). This is precisely what the tribals did exactly in their life.

Eco-spirituality calls for the willingness to immerse oneself in nature and not to exert domination or control and objectify nature. This plunge helps one to find one's connection with nature and move him/her towards loving the environment (*ecophilia*). This profound inter-connectedness and cohesion is spiritual and

transcendental in nature. It guides an individual to become one with the Sacred and make him/her bio-centric rather than anthropocentric. In fact, a deeper commitment to nature and the integration of eco values become hallmark for the membership in the earth community. This sense of belonging leads to deep questioning about our attitude towards the earth and spurs us into action when in any way the whole web of relationship between humans and earth is affected.

The ecological insights of the tribal cultural traditions described above have their specific contributions toward spirituality of ecological harmony. Peaceful co-existence, calmness, and peacefulness are spiritual values that nurtured tribal ecological harmony. For them, ploughing, tilling, weeding, sowing, planting, manuring, harvesting, threshing, etc., are agricultural and spiritual actions because through these acts they participate genuinely in the work of God whose transformative actions in the universe make the earth home for all creation. True rootedness in eco-spirituality nurtures lifestyles and practices which support sustainability. It is truly divine when the interconnectedness of the web of beings is understood and individuals make continuous effort to learn from the wisdom of Mother Nature and work with it. The present day environmental crisis necessitates a worldview that recognizes the Sacred in the whole web of life as Tribals do in their life. The life and practices of Oraon tribe is indeed a great lesson for all those who are striving sincerely to shepherd our common home (mother earth). All are called to be the stewards of nature rather than script obituary of it.

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