

BUDDHIST PRECEPTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL WORLDVIEWS OF TRIBALS: A CASE STUDY OF DONGRIA KONDH IN ODISHA, INDIA.

Sili Rout and Kamal K Misra

Abstract

One of the fundamental philosophies of Buddhism is its inclusiveness. It teaches the right to livelihood, but without killing or stealing, that ensures co-existence with the environment. These kinds of environmental worldviews are replicated among many indigenous communities of India. This paper endeavors to recount some of these environmental worldviews, very similar to Buddhism, among the tribal communities of Odisha in India with the help of a case study of *Dongria Kondha* tribe. Tribal religious beliefs are reflected in the form of different rituals. There are allegorical terms that express a deep sense of unity of the *Dongria* with nature even without any literal meaning. Not only their religious life is closely related to the nature but also the tribal livelihood is characterized by a profound relationship between their economic life and the natural environment or habitat, which is generally the forest. In this manner they become the ultimate preserver of nature and maintains harmony between humans and the nature.

Keywords: Buddhism, Tribalism, Environmental Worldview, Ecological Coexistence, *Dongria Kondha*

Introduction

There is no religion in the world that supports violence and brutality, and Buddhism is no exception to this. However, Buddhism

* Sili Rout, Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, Kalahandi University, Bhawanipatna, Odisha

** Kamal K. Mishra, ICSSR Senior Fellow and Professor of Anthropology, Former Vice-Chancellor, Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

is different from other religions as non-violence and compassion for other living beings is perhaps more pronounced in its precepts as well as practices. One of the fundamental philosophies of Buddhism is its inclusiveness. It teaches that the idea of 'separateness' (Hanh, 2016) is always an illusion. One of the profound teachings of Buddha is the 'illusion of separateness'. In the Universe, there is always a lot of input and output. The input and the output happen every second, and we should learn how to look at life as streams of being, and not as separate entities. Venerable Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia, for example, preaches that the wellbeing of the whole universe is intimately connected with the wellbeing of its parts. And these parts are what constitute our environment: humans and other non-human living beings and non-living aspects of the environment. Buddhism also teaches us that life in whatever form has to be respected. Therefore, there is no room for violence. In a way, this teaches the spirit of harmony with other constituents of nature. Lord Buddha has repeatedly told us about simplicity and a modest lifestyle, to be away from greed and desire, as unfulfilled desire invariably leads to misery. Following this teaching inspires the devotees of Buddhism to protect and nourish the environment, as today's environmental crisis is squarely due to greed and unlimited desire towards material possessions. Buddhism also teaches the right to livelihood, but without killing or stealing, which ensures co-existence with the environment. These kinds of environmental worldviews are replicated among many tribal communities of India e.g. Gadaba tribe, Paroja tribe, and Kondha tribe.

Different insights and arguments regarding nature and environment constitute yet another variable of religion. Sponsel and Sponsel have stated that nature is nothing but the sum total of reality all beings and all things. In practice nature often means the Biosphere of planet Earth. Environment ranges between the extremes of wilderness as supposedly untouched nature and culturally constructed nature such as a Zen garden. Ecology is the natural science of environmental interactions. Environmentalism refers to the initiatives that promote the survival and health of relatively natural environments. Ecology and environmentalism developed in the west and it was inevitable that some who are Buddhologists and or Buddhists would inquire into the relationship between Buddhism and nature. Most view this as discovering green thinking in Buddhism. But few consider this as a preserved imposition of green thinking in Buddhism in response to contemporary environmental concerns (Sponsel and Sponsel, 2003).

In the contemporary era Buddhism is a way of life for many people all over the world. The enormous/extensive geographical, cultural, historical, ecological, religious and linguistic diversity is hallmark of Asia. And this has contributed to the local variations in the expression of Buddhism. Many indigenous communities are not aware of the Buddha and Buddhism, yet they inculcate many of Lord Buddha's thought and principles in their lives including the *DongriaKondha* tribals. Individuals often adhere to the syncretism (following a mixture of elements from different religions) form of religion (Lewis, 1997). Another variable is that, as in any religion, in Buddhism too, there are differences between ideal and practice, text and context, scholar and laity, and urban and rural (Calkowski, 2000).

This paper endeavors to recount some of these environmental worldviews that are very similar to Buddhism, which are widely practiced among the tribal communities of Odisha in India. In the present study it has drawn that the Kondha (a particularly vulnerable tribal group) tribe of Odisha, is not aware of the Buddha and Buddhism, still they inculcate many of his thought and principles in their lives. It is interesting to note the existing relationship between the doctrinal tradition or 'great tradition' (Buddhism) and local practices or the 'little tradition' (Tribalism). The doctrine of interdependence is of primary importance, in regard to nature conservation. Even the tradition of their belief in spirits that inhabit trees and other plants and animal species in nature appears to be important. The existence of the later concept has much influence in regards to nature conservation in Odisha.

The Buddhist Attitude towards Nature

The connection between Buddhism and nature is inseparable. When Siddhartha left his royal palace in search of truth, he spent quite a significant part of his life in natural surroundings to attain enlightenment. Nature is never absent from the four main events of the Buddha's life: birth, enlightenment, First Sermon and death. Nature was the context of source of Siddhartha's search for an eventual achievement of enlightenment (Ryan, 1998). Moreover, he always appreciated nature and encouraged others to do the same. The most significant instance that shows his attitude towards nature is the week he spent following his Enlightenment staring at the *Bodhi* tree out of appreciation for the tree that gave him shade during his struggle for his final enlightenment. Buddhists consider

this as a mark of his gratitude towards the tree. This example is just the first of its kind in Buddhist literature where one can find many other remarkable incidents. The Dhammapada; Verse 99 records Buddha's appreciation for the tranquility of forests:

“Delightful are the forests
where folk do not delight,
there the Passionless delight,
they're not pleasure-seekers”.

On the other hand, there is a vast difference between Buddhist monastic and ordinary people's approach to animals. When the ordinary people use weapons to domesticate and train the animals, the Buddhist ideology is against using weapons and promotes to exercise loving, kindness and compassion towards animals. In the words of Ven. Priya Rakkhit “Complete abstinence from engaging with nature is impossible, especially in the case of the laity, more so if he is a farmer. The layperson is not prohibited from engaging with nature or agricultural pursuits, since he depends on it for his livelihood but the Buddhist ideal of right livelihood as expressed in the Noble Eight Fold Path prohibits him from trading in any animals” (Rakkhit, 2014).

“When we respect the environment, then nature will be good to us. When our hearts are good, then the sky will be good to us. The trees are like our mother and father, they feed us, nourish us, and provide us with everything; the fruit, leaves, the branches, the trunk. They give us food and satisfy many of our needs. So we spread the Dharma (truth) of protecting ourselves and protecting our environment, which is the Dharma of the Buddha.”

(In the words of Venerable Maha Ghosananda)

“Buddhism is so close to nature that the religion deserves to be called as the ‘religion of nature’ (Yenchai, 1989). According to Buddhism changeability is one of the perennial principles of nature. Though change is inherent in nature, Buddhism believes that natural processes are affected by the morals of human. The relationship between Buddhism and nature stems from Buddha's life and teachings. Buddha spent all of the major events of his life amid the natural forest and the tree (Bodhi tree) became the most sacred symbol throughout the Buddhist world - the. The first Buddhist communities were forest dwellers and Buddhist monks initially lived under trees in natural surroundings. The Buddha said, “There is no spot on the ground where men had not died and therefore every

part of nature will be endowed with a spirit, these will be the spirits of the trees, the mountains and the water....” (Usher, 1990) In Buddhist literature nature was never treated as something ‘outside’ of the human realm but rather as an extension of human love. These ideas are linked to the attitude of respect for nature practiced amongst the Buddhist community. A consequence of Dharma practice is living close to nature and loving not only human beings, but also animals and plants and all of nature. It is also Buddha’s teaching that humans should live in an appropriate environment. This environment does not mean only having a good neighborhood, but also a ‘natural’ environment. Trees not only yield fruit, but make the environment green, the land fertile and the air healthy. At the same time, the relationship with nature is renewed as part of the process of ‘going back to nature’ that has taken place in the community we live in. “There must be a relationship not only with human beings, but also with all other beings and finally with the whole universe to create a balance, harmony and unity of the All which is one” (Seri, 1988).

The Dharma is the paradigm for keeping the relationship of humans in balance with all beings in the universe. This is difficult in practice because such balanced relationship is being broken by the consumerist and materialistic values of modern society. In the Words of Phongphit Seri “Forests are being cut down, fish and animals are almost no more to be seen in the wild. These facts are evidences of the corrupt relationship between man and the environment.” In the Buddhist context, Inada made the following conclusions regarding human and the environment. In describing humanity’s place in the environment, we should not treat humans or the environment as independent of each other. This is the major premise upon which all concerns for the environment must begin. Although this is a simple premise it is difficult to abide by as can be seen by the destruction of natural resources everywhere. In order to stop this destruction, there must be an alternative vision. The Buddha concentrated on human’s experiential nature and developed a vision of the ‘continuity of existence.’ That is, to involve our nature is to involve the more extensive and unlimited relationship to our surroundings (Inada, 1989). “As living parts of a living environment, with every manipulation of our means of survival, we affect both our external surroundings and ourselves. Buddhist philosophy is founded on the notions of phenomenal interdependence and interrelationship.... Such an outlook should have significant bearing for our approach to ecological problems” (Belak, 1990) Rolston identifies ‘Karma’ as another Buddhist doctrine with relevance to nature conservation.

Karma is a doctrine about the persistence of moral value. Moral value is assumed to be present in human life. Through reincarnation, value is passed on to other generations and also to nonhuman lives. “This stretches morality out from personal life and supposes it to be present as a determinant in animal life, so that monkeys or snakes are what they are because of bad karma. Lives are of higher value, as far as individuals go, if they can get themselves reborn and have the possibility by stages of improvement to gain more value”. The other side of this belief is that animals, though they have less good karma than human lives, are in fact beings that once were and might be again human beings, and so are of high value. **Humans here have relational links with all other forms of life.** “This conviction is the principle root for the ethical injunction to ‘ahimsa’¹ or reverence for life. The first Buddhist commandment is that one should harm no living thing or minimize harm not simply to humans but to nonhuman animals as well” (Rolston, 1986). ‘

The philosophy of self-reliance is very much rooted in the Buddhist philosophy. It promotes integrated farming and the way of life attached to a particular kind of agriculture that is closely attached to the Buddhist teachings. This is why it is called Buddhist agriculture. According to Prawase, to practice Buddhist agriculture one must adhere to the following seven Buddhist principles (Prawase, 1988);

1. Itapachayata - effort to see things as being related to each other;
2. AttahiAttanoNato - self-reliance causes life and society to be happy and independent;
3. Sila - discipline in life;
4. Iddhipada - the path to success is determined by aspiration, effort, thoughtfulness and reasoning;
5. Sandosa - how to live a simple life;
6. Kammatthana - how to train one’s mind;
7. Sammaggi Dharma - unity.

These principles focus on the balancing relationship between the economic pattern and the existing community culture, natural environment and production pattern in community life. It can be used to highlight the people’s religion and their perspective in the management of natural resources to serve the good of the community.

Tribal Attitude towards Nature

“Mother Earth is pregnant with problems and only the tribal way of life can save it from decay. Global warming, unpredictable climatic changes, melting of glaciers, tsunamis, famines and floods are the consequences of man’s unthinking mindful interference with nature and if one has to escape them, the only way is to take to the primitive way.”

(Adivasi Sanskritik Ekta Mahasammelan)

Odisha, in Eastern India, is an ecologically rich and diverse landscape. *Adivasis*/Tribals (‘original dwellers’) constitute around twenty two percent of the population in Odisha but almost half of those displaced by development projects. With foreign companies’, eager to exploit the vast mineral reserves hidden beneath the soil, in 2009, of fifteen areas of interest demarked by extractive industries in Odisha, thirteen were in Adivasi areas. The *DongriaKondhs* of India’s Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha created an exceptional history after they won a heroic victory against the mining giant Vedanta Resources to save their sacred hills. The *DongriaKondha* is one of the subgroup of the Kondha tribe, and they are densely inhabited in Rayagada, Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Odisha. Their major concentration is mostly found in the blocks of Kalyansinghpur, Bissam Cuttack and Muniguda (Devi, 2016).

They are called *Dongria* or dweller of *Donger* (“hill” in *Odia*) and settle in higher altitudes due to their economic demands. They live by the stream (*Jharana*) side so they called themselves as *Jharnia*. They



Map: Major Concentration of *Dongria Kondha* Population in Different Blocks of Rayagada District



Settlement pattern of *Dongria Kondha* in the high altitudes of Niyamagiri hills.
(Note: Photo taken by the author during fieldwork)

claim that they are the Royal descendants of the mountain God, i.e., Niyamagiri. Niyamgiri stretches across Rayagada and Kalahandi districts of Odisha. Approx. 150 million tons of bauxite reserves at the top of Niyamgiri hills soak up monsoon rains and is the source of hundreds of perennial streams and the Vamshadhara River. The Niyamgiri hill range in Odisha is home to the *DongriaKondha* tribe. DongriaKondhs depend on these streams for drinking, irrigation, and other purposes. Dongrias worship Niyamgiri as they consider it the residence of their presiding deity. The tribe completely relies on the forest for their sustainability and has very little to do with the world outside.

During my fieldwork with *DongriaKondha*, I got the opportunity to interact with this community. Their distinct connection with nature and sole dependence on nature attract me to get better insight into their natural life. After visiting this tribal community I realized how embedded nature and worship are inherent to the forest people of Niyamgiri. Their religious beliefs are reflected in the form of different rituals. Right from birth to death there are a number of stages following different rituals. The birth of a child is hailed by the villagers and they call it arrival of a new guest. When the child is in the mother's womb, they believe that the child is on the hill top beyond the visibility of others. When a child is born, it is called as the child has appeared; child has come down the hill, from invisibility to visibility. There are allegorical terms which express a deep sense of unity of the *Dongria* with nature even without any literal meaning.



A view of Dongria women's while singing their folk songs holding each other's shoulder in the nature's lap this shows their integrity with environment.
(Note: Photo taken by the author during fieldwork)



The Dongrias considered themselves as the royal descendants of Niyamraja and their right to cultivate Niyamgiri's slopes has been conferred on them by Niyamraja. This is a paddy sowing picture of *Dongria Kondha* tribe on their *podu* fields.
(Note: Photo taken by the author during fieldwork)

Not only their religious life is closely related to the nature but also the tribal livelihood is characterized by a profound relationship between their economic life and the natural environment or habitat, which is generally the forest. In this manner they become the ultimate preserver of nature and they achieve harmony between humans and nature.

Through the years of the struggle², they have been articulating their interdependence with the Niyamgiri hills. Several reports show that *they consider their way of life allied to the 'sacred law', as prescribed by Niyamraja which disallows unsustainable exploitation of the forest and the land at the behest of greed; theirs is an 'economy of restraint'*. They refer to *Niyamraja* as the provider and keeper of the forest. Alongside *Niyamraja*, the most important deity is *dharanipenu* (earth goddess). The entire cycle of sowing and harvest is controlled by *dharanipenu* who is to be revered before and after the farming season. Natural elements such as water, stones, rocks, animals are all thought to have a soul, which is to be revered. Thus, the polytheist or the animist belief is guided by the proximity to the moods and rhythms of nature, commanding respect for and cooperation with natural forces. This is reflected in the way of life practiced by the community and in their socio-cultural relationships. The Niyamgiri hills, abode of *Niyamraja* are thus entirely sacred, and the daily practices of life, habitation and subsistence are thus deeply integral to the sacred life-giving capacity of Niyamgiri. Losing Niyamgiri has been likened by many *DongriaKondha* to losing their identity. This deep belief of being guardians is manifested through their unique forest management techniques employed in the agricultural practice. The trees at the top of the hills are never cut, since they consider these to be the abode of the pantheon of gods and goddesses, and these are also the origins of streams that protect the loss of soil and water during the monsoon.

I asked a *bejuni* (sorcerer/ the young village priestess) and other folks of Sokta village of Muniguda block that, who is *Niyamraja*? And what if there is no *Niyamraja*? “He is all the hills... he keeps the jungles, roots, tubers and water safe for us.” “If he will not be there, then who will tell our worries to the other gods? When it does not rain, we pray to *Niyamrajah* sends word to *bhimapenu* (god of rains).” For the *Dongria'sNiyamrajais* not only keeper and provider but also their communicator with other forces of nature, the rain, the sun (*gamapenu*), the earth (*dharanipenu*) and the numerous perennial streams (*gangipenu*). She also tells me, as a mark of respect to the hill god they never clear any hill top of the Niyamgiri range.

They cultivate over 20 varieties of millets on their *podu* fields, apart from lentils and oilseeds. They believe that this bounty is provided by *dharanipenu*, the earth goddess, who is worshiped before sowing and after harvesting the crop. Before sowing all the villagers bring their seeds to a *kutumba*(clans) gathering where the *bejuni* offers these to *dharanipenu*. They also collect a variety of forest produce including

siali leaves, bamboo shoot, wild ginger and turmeric, mushrooms and tubers, a variety of green leafy vegetables, fish and mollusks from the numerous streams; this included till recently, several hundred wild foods. Some of these are sold. The community practices traditional forms of healing, with herbs and other substances available in the forests. The community has traditional healers who have a deep knowledge of nature cures. In Niyamgiri, as is the case in almost all tribal tracts, livelihoods and culture are thus intricately linked to, and inseparable from nature; a trait of the submission to, and management of hill dwelling tribes of their natural terrain. The villages they live are in spread throughout the hills.

The *Dongria*'s considered themselves as the royal descendants of *Niyamraja* and their right to cultivate on the Niyamgiri's slopes has been conferred on them by *Niyamraja*. Their primitive knowledge and inherited ancestral skills make them expert of their forests, the plants and wildlife they hold. Forest supplies them wild foods such as wild mango, pineapple, jackfruit, and honey. Their traditional knowledge on ethno-medicinal plants and rare medicinal herbs also help them to survive in bounty and abundance. *Dongrias* prefer to use these medicinal plants to treat a range of ailments including arthritis, dysentery, bone fractures, malaria and snake bites then going to a modern chemist. That apart, they use hill slopes for horticultural productions such as oranges, bananas, ginger, sweet papaya and the aromatic resin *jhunu*, all of which are sold at local markets. *Dongria* also cultivate orchards in the forest. A recent study conducted by Survival International Organisation, found that the "*Dongria gather different foods from their forests and harvest over a hundred crops from their fields. This amazing diversity sustains them year-round, with little need for food or goods from beyond their hills. The tribe also keeps chicken, pigs, goats and buffalo. Dongria men gather juice from the forest's giant sago palm trees, a drink that provides energy for the long hikes they make throughout the Niyamgiri Hills*" (Survival International.org, n.d.).

Harvesting festivals are traditionally observed after the harvest and before the planting of the New Year's crop, both in the villages and on the mountain tops. Each village has specific sites for worship of the mother goddess *Dharni*, *Niyamraja*, and other gods of the hills. Each house also has sacred spaces for worship of the many domestic and local gods. The *DongriaKondha* have no over-arching political or religious leader; clans and villages have their own leaders and individuals with specific ceremonial functions, including the *beju* and *bejuni*, male and female priests. Among the *Dongraias* mother goddess is highly worshipped, they believe that mother goddess is



Harvesting ceremony is being conducted by the bejuni in the field after the New Year crop harvested.

(Note: Photo taken by the author during fieldwork)

the root for the recites of life force and soul in the animals, plants, mountains and other specific sites and streams.

The mineral resources capped the Niyamgiri hills, giving rise to more than a hundred perennial streams and rivers, including the Vamshadhara River. These streams provide water for the survival of the *Dongria* who live in the hills, and provide drinking and irrigation water for those living in the plains. Over centuries, with a strong and determined dedication to nature, the *Dongria* have managed to maintain the rich biodiversity of their fauna and flora, where some of the extinct animals like tigers, leopards, giant squirrels and sloth bears freely roam around (Survival International.org, n.d.).

Conclusion

“Your temples are made of bricks and cement; ours are these hills, forests, leaves and streams. If you dig these, we will die with our gods,”

(*Bejuni*, village priestess of a Dongria Kondha tribal hamlet)

Humanity has/Humans have to rediscover its relationship with the natural world and this can only happen when it has regained its meaningful relationship with nature. There are many elements of the Buddhist doctrine and practice which promote respect and

conservation of nature. Buddhism tries to preserve life in different degrees for human needs and conserve animal and plant life forms. The same thought and principles are reflected in many world religions as well as in folk religions.

The *DongriaKondha* of Odisha, being unknown to the Buddha and Buddhism, they incorporate many of his thoughts and principles in their life. The *Dongria* consider the whole of Niyamgiri hills to be their territory, presided over by *Niyamraja*. Their spiritual concern towards the nature encourages them to protect the nature and environment. The above mentioned statement of a *Dongria* woman reveals their profound relationship with nature. Over centuries, the *Dongria* have helped to maintain the rich biodiversity of their forests, where tigers, leopards, giant squirrels and sloth bears roam. This profound relationship of *Dongrias* with Mother Nature reveals the **relational links with all other forms of life**. Buddhism also teaches the right to livelihood, but without killing or stealing, that ensure co-existence with the environment. The same kind of environmental worldviews are replicated among *DongriaKondha* tribal community of India. With regards to the livelihood of the *DongriaKondhas*, they are heavily dependent on the nature and forest to meet their daily needs, but it also shows that they are not greedy with the nature. In Odisha, their religion is considered as a sacred cultural right but the extermination of their culture and worship is seen as a sign of progress in mainstreaming these oldest of the world's first peoples. Their cultural relationship with nature is sacred and hence religious and requires protection.

Reference

1. Belak, Brenda & Shotaro Iida, "Toward a Realignment of the Universal Garlands: A Proposal for a New Paradigm of Nature and Man," 1990, p. 3-12.
2. Calkowski, Marcia. 'Buddhism.' In *Religion and Culture: An Anthropological Focus*, Raymond Scupin, ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000, pp. 249-274.
3. Devi, Sanjeeta. 'Socio-economic status of the DongriaKondhs: A primitive Tribal group of Niyamgiri hills in Eastern Ghats of Orissa.' In *The Researchers*, Vol-II, Issue I, 2016. pp. 60-71.
4. Hanh. Thich N. 'Awakening from the Illusion of Separation.' *Uplift*, 2016. <https://upliftconnect.com/illusion-of-separation/>
5. Inada, Kenneth K. "Environmental Problematics," 1989, p. 243.
6. Lewis, Todd T. 'Buddhist communities: historical precedents and ethnographic paradigms.' In *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, Stephen D. Glazier, ed. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997, pp.319-368.
7. PrawaseWasi, "Buddhist Agriculture and the Tranquillity of Thai Society," 1988, p. 29.

8. Rakkhit, Priya. 'Significance of Nature in Buddhism.' In Buddhist door International, 2014-02-07.
9. Rolston, Holmes, "New Wine in Old Wine Skins: Science Based vs. Traditional Cultural Values in the Conservation of Nature," 1986, pp. 7-8.
10. Ryan, P.D. *Buddhism and the Natural World*. Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1998.
11. Seri Phongphit, Religion in a Changing Society, 1988, pp.153-166.
12. Sponsel, Leslie E. and PoraneeNatadechaSponsel. 'Buddhist Views of Nature and the Environment.' In *Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, Helaine Selin, ed. Springer Netherlands, 2003, pp. 351-371.
13. Usher, Ann Danaiya, "The End of Wilderness," 1990, p. 16.
14. Yenchai, Laohanavich, "A Thai Buddhist View of Nature," 1989, p. 259.
15. 'We'll lose our soul. Niyangiri is our soul.' <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/dongria>