

Religious Environmentalism and Magahi Folk Songs: An Ecocritical Study

Doctoral Thesis

by

Rakesh Kumar Pankaj
(2018HSZ0008)



DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ROPAR

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A Thesis Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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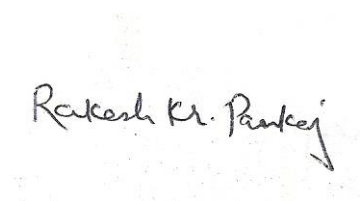


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Rakesh Kumar Pankaj: *Religious Environmentalism and Magahi Folk Songs: An Ecocritical Study*
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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled “**Religious Environmentalism and Magahi Folk Songs: An Ecocritical Study**” has been solely authored by me. It presents the result of my independent investigation/research conducted during the period from January 2019 to February 2024 under the supervision of Dr Dibyakusum Ray, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Ropar. To the best of my knowledge, it is an original work, both in terms of research content and narrative, and has not been submitted or accepted elsewhere, in part or in full, for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship, associate, or similar title of any university or institution. Further, due credit has been attributed to the relevant state-of-the-art collaborations (if any) with appropriate citations and acknowledgements in line with established ethical norms and practices. I also declare that no idea, data, fact, or source stated in my thesis has been fabricated, falsified, or misrepresented. All the principles of academic honesty and integrity have been followed. I fully understand that if the thesis is found to be unoriginal, fabricated, or plagiarized, the Institute reserves the right to withdraw the thesis from its archive and revoke the associated degree conferred. Additionally, the institute also reserves the right to appraise all concerned sections of the society of the matter for this information and necessary action (if any). If accepted, I hereby consent for my thesis to be available online in the Institute’s Open Access repository, inter-library loan, and the title abstract to be made available to outside organizations.



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Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my hard work and patience.

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Religious Environmentalism and Magahi Folk Songs: An Ecocritical Study**” submitted by **Rakesh Kumar Pankaj (2018HSZ0008)** for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** of the Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, is a record of bonafide research work carried out under my (our) guidance and supervision. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original and has not been submitted, either in part or full, for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship or similar title of any university or institution.

In my opinion, the thesis has reached the standard fulfilling the requirements of the regulations relating to the Degree.



Signature of the Supervisor(s)

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Lay Summary

The thesis presents a detailed study of the Magahi folk culture to understand how it addresses the questions of ecocriticism—a literary field investigating the relationship between literature and the environment. It attempts to examine and explore the relationship of Magahi people with their local environment. In times when pollution and biodiversity loss have become common phenomena, it is crucial to find a tangible solution to our ecological crisis. It is commonly believed that indigenous people stay in a harmonious communion with nature, which has significantly helped them protect and preserve their local flora and fauna. Through archived samples of folk songs, the thesis aims to ponder the ecological values ingrained in the Magahi way of life. Biodivinity (attaching divinity to nature) and ecocentrism (ecology is at the centre of the existence of life on the planet and not human beings) are the critical components in the ceremonial traditions of the Magadh region. Unlike anthropocentrism—which considers human beings superior to other forms of life- Magahi folk songs hint towards values that revere and respect nature and understand its significance for our existence. These songs offer insights into how past generations interacted with their environment and how they perceived it. Magahi folk songs can be divided into categories based on season, profession, caste, class, gender, etc. The thesis analyses these songs to make a comprehensive study of their inherent ecocritical elements.

Abstract

At the overlap of indigenous oral/religious tradition, ethnomusicology and Ecocriticism, the thesis proposes a detailed thematic analysis of Magahi folk songs. It is an indigenous oral tradition of Hinduism practiced in the Magadh region of Eastern India. Focusing on the theme of harmony between Nature and human beings, the study argues that Magahi folk culture provides a unique perspective in modern ecocritical thoughts by answering the recurrent queries asked by the discipline. Throughout its three decades of history, Ecocriticism has repeatedly questioned whether Nature can be perceived in non-anthropocentric terms by removing the human being as the sole purveyor and savior of ecology. The research argues that—despite the vast geo-political difference between Western Ecocriticism and Indian ethnic culturalism-- the Magahi song-texts can be read as a non-anthropocentric philosophy that regards Nature as an irreducible, agential deity that should be feared/revered, avoided/pleaded to, collaborated with/worshipped by the human beings. Divided into two parts, this thesis first talks about the aforementioned discourse of ‘perceiving’ Nature while avoiding the homocentric interest, then posits the archived and translated samples of Magahi song-texts as a possible embodiment of that, providing an intersection of ‘academic theory and pragmatic, indigenous eco-activism’.

Keywords: Village Hinduism, Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Indigenous studies, Religious environmentalism.

List of Publications from Thesis

Journal

- 1) Pankaj, Rakesh Kumar, and Dibyakusum Ray. "From Symbolic to Agential: The Evolution of Natural Representation in Indian Eco-Sensitive Films." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 2023. 10.1080/10509208.2023.2231820

Forthcoming:

- 2) "The Goddess is Singing on a Neem branch": the Nature-anthropic Harmony in Magahi Song-texts." *Duke University Press*. (with Dibyakusum Ray)
- 3) "Locating Magahi Folk Culturalism in Indian Indigenous Ecological Tradition." *Journal of Arts*.

Conference Presentation

1. "Exploring Traditional Ecological Knowledge in India and Southeast Asia: A Posthumanistic Study of Folk Culturalism." 5th ASLE/ASEAN Conference, Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai, Thailand (23-25 Nov, 2023).
2. "Religious Environmentalism and Magahi Folk Songs: An Ecocritical Study." How to Do Things with the World, Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. (16-17 April, 2021).

Book chapter

- 1) Pankaj, Rakesh Kumar. "Ecocriticism and its Theoretical Aspects." *Theories, Reality, and Politics*, Edited by Basu, Pradip. Gangchil Publication, 2022, pp. 75-92.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The thesis attempts an ecocritical study of Magahi folk culture, a set of traditional beliefs and practices performed in the Magadh provinces of Bihar and Jharkhand states of Eastern India. The study centres on the folk songs of Magahi– a language spoken by the inhabitants of the Magadh region to explore their crucial role in explaining the cultural behaviours and traditions of the Magadh society. Broadly, this research aims to examine the attitudes of the people of Magadh regarding nature and their conservation efforts, employing Magahi folk songs as a primary conduit for investigation. In the last few decades, the works on indigenous ecological wisdom have gained considerable research interest. However, in India, which is home to many such indigenous societies, many traditions have remained unnoticed– the Magahi folk culture is also one of them. Arguing that the Magahi folk practices also share a harmonious connection with nature, this research aims to examine the contribution of these folk songs not only to the existing canon of ecological traditions in India but also to understand their significance in addressing the questions posed by the field of ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as the “...study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Borrowing from Harlod Fromm’s book’s title, ecocriticism is the ‘Greening of the Literary Studies’, which, unlike its previous West-centric approach, now also encompasses literature from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. It aims to foster traditional and innovative scholarly practices in environmental literature to facilitate interdisciplinary research in literary studies. Ecocriticism as a literary theory was the product of a severe lack of academic and scientific research and awareness about the environmental crisis in literature. But now the question arises: why was it necessary to rethink or understand the interconnectedness and interdependence between human beings and nature? Several studies (White 1967; Sessions 1974; Carson 2000) suggest that the relationship between humans and nature weakened over time, leading to the birth of environmental abuse practised by human beings. Rachel Carson observes that Anthropocentrism, a philosophical standpoint which operates on the premise that human beings are the most significant creatures and thus should be considered at the centre of existence, is decidedly the reason behind disturbing the cycles of nature (264). If so, what are the possible remedies to such human-induced

ecological disasters, which threaten human existence on the planet and put the lives of many plants and animals at stake? The question that still hovers over the human head is whether it is possible to think of nature without prioritising human existence over species of flora and fauna. Is Magahi folk culture, a locally located yet internationally connected cultural phenomenon, worth critical attention? Against this backdrop, the thesis attempts to establish Magahi folk culture as a unique reply to the cognitive dissonance between humans and nature.

Human beings, states Frank Edwin Egler, can be divided into two broad categories: those who consider themselves of overriding importance and nature in whose belief only carries peripheral significance and those whose primary commitment and loyalty revolves around the management and maintenance of the manipulable and inferiorised nature (Elger 122-128). The discriminatory behaviour of human beings towards other species of plants and animals has given birth to many global issues, including but not limited to global warming, ozone layer depletion, species extinction, loss of biodiversity, plastic pollution, desertification, plastic pollution, etc. This homo-centric approach to controlling and trouncing non-human nature has cost us many species of plants and animals as we also move rapidly towards the sixth mass extinction (Novacek 9). The idea of humans' superiority over the other creatures on the planet has complex historical roots, which stem from the cognitive, linguistic, technological, cultural and philosophical evolution, which, in turn, shaped and affected the interaction between human beings and nature. The cognitive abilities of human beings guided by language created a notion that they understand their environment better than any other species and thus can manipulate and control them in whatever way they want, which has detrimental effects on the environment. Ronald A. Simkins argues that the roots of anthropocentrism can be traced back to the Creation story in the book of Genesis in the Bible, which mentions that human beings are created in the image of God and are instructed and directed by God to practice domination over the living creatures of the environment (398). This privileged position, which the Judeo-Christian Bible granted to human beings, placed human beings at the centre of creation, thus allowing them to ignore all the ethical discussions and environmental concerns arising from their unwarranted intervention into the earth's atmosphere. In addition to its broader implications, anthropocentrism is also charged with affecting technological developments and catalysing the profound changes associated with the Industrial

Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, which had far-reaching consequences on the environment as it significantly altered the foundations of the relationship between humans and nature (Steinberg 261). Thus, one may surmise that the Industrial Revolution marked a turning point in ecological transformation, representing a significant phase in the environmental history of the earth's biodiversity. In her book *Silent Spring* (2000), Rachel Carson critiques the integrity and ethical standards of the scientific community, which she holds responsible for the rising exploitation and depletion of environmental resources. She attributes it to the cultural mindset which prioritises human existence over the non-human world and considers it merely a commodity for exploitation rather than recognising it as a valuable living entity (Carson 264). If anthropocentrism is such a pervasive philosophy, is it impossible for human beings to think non-anthropocentrically, where they understand the interconnectedness between human beings and nature? And if possible, how can we rebuild our lost relationship with the natural world? Egler advocated a new and heightened integration in scientific knowledge, which does not only consider nature as something which should remain undisturbed by human intervention but also acknowledges that human beings and the natural environment "form one single whole in nature that can be, should be, and will be studied in its totality" (Sessions 71). However, not only does science influence our ways of thinking and behaving; other academic disciplines like sociology, psychology, anthropology, literature, and others also play an essential role in shaping the various aspects of our lives. How can these disciplines address the questions of environmental crisis and contribute to rectifying the deteriorated relationship between human beings and nature? The chapter further attempts to answer these questions.

Anthropocentrism, rooted in the religious teachings of the Bible, influenced science, consequently leading to an environmental crisis. The unchecked human interference in the earth's atmosphere and the resultant ecological degradation, say scientists, can be resolved using science and technology. Moreover, other disciplines can also play an essential role in shifting people away from an anthropocentric viewpoint, literature being one such example. In her article, *Literary Studies in the Age of Environmental Crisis*, Cheryll Glotfelty lists how the field also talks about the interdependence between human beings and the physical environment and how this ecologically informed criticism and behaviour can promote environmental awareness. Further, Glotfelty also acknowledges that ecology in literary studies as a

critical school of thought emerged relatively late. At the same time, discussions regarding environmental concerns came much earlier in academic disciplines like sociology, history, law, and philosophy. However, she seems hopeful and confident about how literature will address the relationship and the unfortunate tensions between humans and nature in the coming decades, much like other fields of intellectual inquiry (xvi-xviii). Ecocriticism, she states, will no longer be a movement dominated by white scholarship as “it will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion” (xxv). Moreover, scholars like Lynn White have portrayed Western Christianity as an anthropocentric religion, influencing Western science and technology, and suggested exploring such religious practices that view humans and nature equally and, even if they do not, at least indicate their sustainable use. Drawing on White’s and Glotfelty’s arguments, the thesis further attempts to delve into Magahi socio-religious practices through its folk songs to understand how this “locally based, regionally manifested, and globally relevant” (Brondízio et al. 481) village Hinduism can prove to be instrumental in contributing to the ecocritical thought. What is so significant and epoching about Magahi folk culture?

Before delving into the traditional practices of the Magadh region, the thesis investigates why one should study folk culture, which is restricted to a few million speakers in a densely populated country like India. What is so peculiar about Indian village Hinduist performances that distinguishes them from others? Several scholars, including those from Western countries, argue that Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, etc.) share a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature (Jenkins and Chapple; Duc; Nelson; Callicott; Kent; Shiva). In contrast to Western Christianity, Asian religions consider nature as inherently interconnected to human existence. They often perceive the presence of divinity in them and engage in worship to honour and connect with the sacred entity. Kinsley highlights Hinduism’s eco-friendly behaviour towards nature. He writes that the Hindu way of life includes “...deification of natural forces and objects, the sacred geography of India, monism, nonviolence, reincarnation, and the sacredness of the cow” (Gavin 9). Biodivinty, the practice of attaching and recognising the divine presence in every aspect of the natural world, is Hinduism’s significant and distinctive feature, manifested through diverse mythologies and rituals. This perspective promotes a holistic and harmonious

communion between humans and ecology, emphasising the sacredness and importance of all life forms in the natural order. Furthermore, Kinsley argues:

[t]he idea of reincarnation, like the *advaita* vision of nonduality, tends to undercut the importance of individuality and an ego-centered way of understanding reality. The particular biography we happen to be leading is not really ‘us’, it is only an infinitesimal part of a much larger picture that encompasses all of life (9).

Hindus believe in *punarjanma* (rebirth) and *karma* (roughly translated as ‘action’), which suggests a sense of interconnectedness between all the life forms on the planet. In Hinduism, the idea of the cycle of rebirth propagates that every sentient or even insentient being passes through millions of births and rebirths depending upon their behaviour and actions in their previous lives. Those who are kind-hearted and humble in their actions and intentions are liable to get happier and better rebirths, thus instigating human beings to be morally, socially, and ecologically responsible in their actions and behaviours (Okafor and Stella 5). It would not be accurate to say that all the rituals and doctrines of Hinduism propagate the idea of non-anthropocentrism, as there are scriptures which do not even believe that there is any connection between rebirths and karma (Becker and B. Becker). Moreover, scholars like Kelley D. Alley (1998), J. R. Freeman (1999), and Emma Tomalin (2002) argue that even though Hinduism supports the philosophy of Biodivinity and non-anthropocentrism, the idea of religious environmentalism is missing because, in most cases, people are worshipping nature only for the sake of worshipping without having any inherent idea of conservation in their minds. The thesis also tries to understand the concept of religious environmentalism in the later chapters.

It is also important to note that in India, many indigenous communities are not influenced by mainstream Hinduism’s doctrines; instead, they believe in their folk religions and treat nature according to their beliefs and traditions. The present study does not consider practices that do not consciously or unconsciously adhere to the Hindu way of life. This is because this study focuses on the Village Hinduist performances of the Magahi speakers, and hence, it centres around Hinduism only. But what is village Hinduism, and how exactly is it similar or different to the mainstream or official version? In her article, Heather Elgood writes that village Hinduism is non-Brahminic in nature

as, in most cases, it does not require any priest to reach their own folk deities, which always do not resemble mainstream gods and goddesses. However, he also noted that “...propitiation takes a form similar in many respects to that developed in mainstream devotional Hinduism...” (Elgood 328). Village Hinduism usually manifests diversity in the traditional practices specific to particular villages, making it difficult to study them as a uniform system. Like classical Hinduism, these localised and community-oriented practices share a holy relationship between humans and the natural environment. Several studies (Gadgil (1985); Shiva (1988); Narayanan (2001); Jain (2011)) have suggested the presence of ecological wisdom in the socio-religious practices of the village communities in India. However, there is a lack of literature on the socio-religious practices and traditions of the Magadh region that shed light on how people perceive nature. Do they view nature in non-anthropocentric terms, similar to mainstream Hinduism, and worship it to get their wishes fulfilled? Or do they have a different perspective on understanding nature? Magahi, the present study argues, speaks conceivably and persuasively of a euphonious concord and synergism between Nature and the human beings of the region, which gets manifested through a varied and rich tradition of folk songs dedicated to harvesting, seasons, festivals, professions and other rites of passage activities. But before delving into Magahi folk songs to see how nature is represented, it becomes necessary to understand what a folk song is.

From the beginning of the coinage of the term ‘folklore’ in 1846 by William Thomas, there have been debates around the definition of the term. Folklorists from various nations have varied ideas on what folklore is, but even those from the same nation may hold widely divergent opinions about the subject. However, as time passed, a common consensus developed about defining it. Broadly, folklore can be defined as a verbal art that “...comprises traditional creations of peoples, primitive and civilized” (“Definitions of Folklore” 255). Alan Dudes, in his book *The Study of Folklore* (1965), defines folklore as the common “...myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas” (2) followed by a group of people. Further, it also includes customs, beliefs, costumes, arts, crafts, medicine, musical instruments, house types, food recipes and other artistic and cultural manifestations. When the term was first coined, it focused only on rural peasants, ideally ignorant, and a few other groups largely unaffected by modern practices. Its modern definition expands

its periphery to incorporate diverse cultural artefacts which are not limited to villages only and are so organic and “flexible [that it] can refer to a nation as in American folklore or to a single family” (13). The beginning of modern folklore can be traced back to 19th-century Europe and, more specifically, Germany. Folklore materials are believed to be as old as human society; however, the systematic study of them to derive a better and comprehensive understanding of the older generations is an entirely new field of inquiry. Here, it is crucial to note that these interests in folklore materials happened against the backdrop of many social, political, historical, and economic developments, which triggered a number of theoretical and methodological contributions from a variety of disciplines. For example, in Germany, the Grimm brothers used folklore to sustain and support romantic nationalistic political ideologies, while in countries like Russia, the driving force behind its study was to promote and strengthen communism. In India, the Britishers initiated modern folklore studies with the purpose of gaining a better understanding or control over its subjects; however, this also made the Indian freedom fighters aware of their rich cultural roots, and they formed mass movements against the Britishers (Handoo 141). No matter how quickly folklore studies gained currency in intellectual circles, it took almost a century (20th century) for folklore to have well-established, independent and dedicated centres for the study of the field, and this was majorly because of the diversity of approaches—literature, anthropology, psychology, natural sciences, history etc.—it attracted. However, this perspectival heterogeneity also significantly helped folklore studies enrich and enhance their scope as there came into existence several theoretical standpoints, such as Anthropological theory, psychological theory, Comparative theory, Structural theory and historical-geographical theory, etc. (Handoo 116), which later became schools of studies.

To further the argument, the thesis provides a quick survey of the history of folklore studies in India. In international academic scholarship, India holds a significant space for its diversity and richness of oral traditions and is “...marked by diversity at social, cultural, linguistic, and many other levels.... religions, castes, a multitude of languages and dialects, religion-wise different festivals, caste-wise cultural rituals and customs, clothing styles and food habits, etc.” (Luhar 5). The *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*, the *Panchatantra*, the *Jataka Kathas*, etc., have contributed significantly to the canon of Indian folklore tradition. Even after such multiplicity and variety of folk traditions, the Indian concept of ‘folk’ is highly

influenced by Western academia. However, it would be wrong to assume that no attempts have been made to develop an Indian way of looking at folk practices, but they seem insufficient. The majority of the Indian folklore scholarship adopts the Western models of folklore studies and applies them to Indian contexts (Luhar 5). If we trace the history of folklore studies in India, we find that it began only after the Britishers invaded India. Jawaharlal Handoo categorises the growth of Indian folklore studies into three developmental stages: 1) The missionary period, 2) The nationalistic period and 3) the academic period (135). The Christian Missionaries, who travelled across the remotest and untraversed parts of the country with the purpose of promoting Christianity, were the first among the folklorists who collected and recorded the indigenous ways of living. J. Handoo, in his book *Folklore: An Introduction* (1989), notes how “these Anglo-Saxon fathers recorded all kinds of information – habits, manners, customs, oral traditions, rituals, etc. – about their subjects” (135). They successfully conveyed their main message using the local symbols by using part of this knowledge to preach the Christian faith to the indigenous populace. Despite the absence of coherence and proper theoretical investigation or pure academics in those missionaries’ publications, their works were and remain noteworthy due to their highly informational contents. Moreover, the foundation of The Asiatic Society in Bengal by William Jones in 1784 and many journals, including the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, the *Indian Antiquary* and the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* etc., contributed heavily to the canon of Indological Studies. Ironically, these works collected by the missionaries and the British civil servants helped the Indian intelligentsia to know about their rich and diverse cultural heritage, and they started “...reclaiming an un-Westernized Indian Identity...” (Narayan 186). This also encouraged the authors of that time to incorporate political and nationalistic themes and motifs in the folk songs and performances to create a sense of pride among the indigenous people. For example, Kirin Narayan notes (1993) how Rabindranath Tagore, an acclaimed nationalist folklorist, laid the foundation of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (Literary Society of Bengal) in 1893 and modelled many of his works on folklore (186-187). This was also when Indian scholars brought an Indian perspective to the study of folklore. Some other crucial works of the time include Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s *Burhi Ait Sashu* (1911), Dinesh Chandra Sen’s *Sati* (1917), and *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920); Zeverschand Meghani’s *Halardan* (1928); Dadajini Vato (1933) *Lok Sahitya and Kankavati* (1947) and many more. Mahatma Gandhi became a central figure for every household, and this also manifested in the folk songs of the

various regions of the country (Imam 601). Magahi folk culture, which is mainly underrepresented, also has references to Mahatma Gandhi, who penetrated the folk traditions of the Magadh region. One example is

Chhoti Chawanni Chani ke, jai bolo Mahatma ganhi ke.

Gandhi lele avatar, humar dukh harne ke (Singh 597).

[Small silver coins of twenty-five paise, say hail Mahatma Ganhi.

Gandhi took an avatar to alleviate our suffering].

The third phase of folklore studies began after Indian independence in 1947 when many universities and colleges started offering courses in the discipline– which focused more on the scientific and objective aspects of the folk rituals rather than using them merely for nationalistic and evangelistic purposes. Consequently, academicians and research scholars tried to analyse folk songs from an Indian perspective, which led the scholars to a pertinent question: Is it possible to look at folklore from an Indian perspective? If at all it is possible, how can it be achieved? Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, in his essay *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay* (1990) argues that, unlike the Euro-American culture, “...cultural ideologies and behavioural manifestations thereof in terms of an Indian psychology [is] “context-sensitive” (Wagoner). Further, he also expostulates that the Indian way of folklore studies is unique and epoching and has a different kind of rationale because it relies heavily on the principle of ‘intertextuality’-- the one in which Sanskritic and indigenous traditions interact and mutually influence one another (Wagnor). Ramanujan’s works, such as *Where Mirrors are Windows* (1989) and *Three Hundred Ramayanas* (1991), are some of India's defining works of folklore studies. However, he also acknowledges that all the Indian cultures have not been equally pondered upon, and he stresses the need for a comprehensive examination of the “...little traditions, especially folk traditions, necessarily or usually confined to small localities or dialectal communities” (Ramanujan 96-97). Robert Redfield, the Chicago anthropologist who impacted Indian anthropology during the 1950s and 1960s, observed that “in a civilisation, there is a great tradition of the reflective few and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many” (4)-- the Magahi folk culture being one of them. It is one such tradition that has constantly remained overlooked and unnoticed. This is an introduction to the marginalised folk traditions; the thesis delves deeper into these aspects in the subsequent chapters. Why has

Magahi been marginalised or pushed to the sidelines? Has the Magahi language always been like this, or does it also have a glorious past?

History of Magadh Region and Magahi Language

Based on Ramanujan's statement emphasising the importance of considering disregarded and ignored folk practices, the present study comprehensively studies Magahi folk songs to understand their ecological importance. Before discussing why, the Magahi language and its associated traditions got sidelined, it becomes pertinent to comprehend what the Magahi language is and its history. Magadh was an ancient Indian kingdom recognised among one of the sixteen *Mahajanpadas* (great kingdoms). During the Mauryan Dynasty (4th to 2nd century BCE), the boundaries of the Magadh empire were stretched up to the East into Bengal, to the West into present-day Baluchistan and to Eastern Afghanistan. Historically, the region was ruled by dynasties like Brihadratha, Haryanka (544- 413 BCE), Shaishunaga (413-345 BCE), Nanda (345-322 BCE), Mauryan (322- 184 BCE), Shunga (184- 73 BCE), Kanva (73- 28 BCE) and rulers like Ashok Maurya, Chandragupta Maurya, Bimbisara and Ajatshatru among others (Hurst 55). Moreover, the region was also a fertile ground for the development of religions like Buddhism and Jainism (Samaddar 2). The region of Magadh holds a significant place in the lives of people following different religions. In Bodh Gaya, Lord Buddha gained enlightenment, Lord Mahavira (24th Tirthankar (Supreme preacher) of Jainism) gained *moksha* (liberation for earthly sufferings), Patna (earlier Patliputra) witnessed the birth of the tenth Sikh Guru- Guru Govind Singh, and Gaya is sacred among Hindus for the ritual of *Pind Dan* (offering homage to ancestors). These traditional, historical and religious associations have contributed significantly to the varied, rich and diverse cultural tapestry of the Magadh region, making it a unique and spiritually enduring centre of reverence and pilgrimage in India. Moreover, the Magadh region is also mentioned in epics and sacred texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Vedas* and the *Mahabharata*. The ruler of Magadh during the time of Lord Krishna was Jarasandha, who attacked Mathura (kingdom of Lord Krishna) 17 times only to be defeated (Gitananda 6). However, the region of Magadh, these days, has been restricted to the districts of Patna, Nalanda, Gaya, Aurangabad, Jehanabad and Arwal, among a few other districts. Geographically, it is bounded on the North by the Ganges, East by the Champa, South by the Chhota Nagpur Plateau, and West by the Son River. Is the Magahi language as old as the Magadh region? What are the changes that the language underwent during these periods?

Magahi is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the Magadh region of Bihar and selected districts of India's Jharkhand and West Bengal states. The people of the Terai (foothills of the Himalayas) region of Nepal also speak the language. Magahi has its roots in Magadhi Prakrit, the linguistic form prevalent in the ancient kingdom of Magadh. Historically, wandering bards narrate lengthy epic poems in this language, leading to the evolution of the word "Magadhi", meaning "bard" (Diwakar). Speaking about how old the language is, Kachchayans say, "[t]here is a language which is the root [of all languages]; men and Brahmans spoke it at the commencement of Kalpa, who never before uttered a human accent, and even the supreme Buddhas spoke it; it is Magadhi" (Hurst 348). Believed to be an offshoot of Vedic Sanskrit, the development of Magahi in its current form can be divided into three periods: 1) Ancient Magadhi Period (800-1200 century), 2) Middle-Period Magadhi (1200-1600 century), and 3) Modern Magahi (1600 century onwards) (Sinha 274). In the Linguistic Survey of India (1903-1928), George Grierson included Magahi as one of the three Bihari languages, the other two being Bhojpuri and Maithili. According to the 2011 census, 20.7 million people speak the language, which also includes 8 million speakers of Khortha, which is regarded as the Magahi dialect. However, it is also true that Magahi is considered a dialect of Hindi as it is not among the list of 22 scheduled languages of India. But Magahi folk culture, like numerous other folk practices, speaks convincingly and conceivably about the vibrant society of the Magadh region. Many Magahi scholars, including Sampati Aryani (1975), Ramprasad Singh (1999) and Vishwanath Prasad (2005), have attempted to divide the Magahi folk songs into broad categories. The diversity of the folk songs is such that even these scholars admit that it is very strenuous to draw a conclusive and scientific division between them. However, based on the divisions made by scholars like Vishwanath Prasad, Magahi folk songs can be studied separately based on 1. Ritual 2. Season 3. Profession 4. Gender 5. Caste 6. Festival 7. Rite de Passage 8. Contemporary (Modern) issues. Magahi literature encompasses not just folk songs but also a variety of traditional forms of literature like folk tales, epics, drama, puzzles, riddles, idioms, and other components of indigenous knowledge (Aryani 5). These diverse forms of literary expression show the extensive and vibrant cultural heritage embedded in Magahi literature. Here is an example of *Sohar* (childbirth song), where the birth of a child is expressed through a song-text:

Aaj anand bhelai hamar nagari.

Mora dada lutawe andhan sona, mor dadi lutawe moti ke lari (Prasad 81).

[Today, the entire town is happy.

My grandfather distributes gold, and my grandmother's pearls.] (My translation)

There are songs for different occasions in Magahi, which assist in establishing a detailed understanding of the customs and traditions prevalent in the Magahi community. Furthermore, Magahi folk songs transcend the established religious categorisations, as the Muslim community also sing these songs during various rituals and performances.

Accha-accha tikwa bibi man bhave hey,

Baithi jungle me Khoda se paniyan maange hey.

Accha-accha chudiya bibi man bhave hey,

Baithi jungle me Khoda se paniyan maange hey (Singh 85).

[*Despite her liking for forehead jewellery, Muslim women pray for rain from Khuda.*

Despite her liking for bangles, Muslim women pray for rain from Khuda.] (My translation)

It is essential to note here that people of both Hindu and Muslim communities sing the same song but with slight variations and modifications. In Magahi songs sung within the Muslim community, words related to their religion and rituals are used; as seen in the above example, words like ‘bibi’ (wife) and ‘Khuda’ may be employed. Despite Magahi’s longstanding and culturally rich tradition of folk songs, there is a significant and noticeable scarcity of research and written literature in the language. Why are Magahi speakers shifting to other languages? Why does it lack written literature and research works?

Reasons for Magahi’s Oblivion

The thesis not only focuses on examining the ecocritical elements in Magahi folk culture but also attempts to position it in the broader spectrum of Indian folk tradition. It is equally essential to understand why a language as rich as Magadhi Prakrit, which has given rise to other Indian languages, is in such a situation today. It will help establish the necessity of working on such folk practice, which Ramanujan calls ‘little tradition.’ Performed, sung, and spread over almost seventeen districts of Bihar and Jharkhand, Magahi's age-old folk songs have a long and unrecorded history. According to the 2011

census, the Magahi language is estimated to be spoken by 20.7 million people. However, it is very difficult to figure out the exact number of its speakers because many residents of the Magadh region hesitate to call themselves speakers of the language. The rising hegemonic language majoritarianism and imperialism of Hindi and the governmental policies to promote the Hindi language have created a sense of shame in the minds of the speakers of the Magahi language (Jha 6). Moreover, Magahi (considered a variety of Hindi) is not listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution. Thus, it is denied many unique benefits that could have been granted otherwise. The impulsive imposition of Hindi, the resultant linguistic discrimination, and not being catalogued in the Eight Schedule have combinedly not only shifted its speakers to Hindi and English but also fostered discrimination “in many other spheres of social, economic, political and educational activities” (Mohanty 138). Bihar-- a state which, according to Niti Ayog (a body of the Indian government which determines policies), is multi-dimensionally poor, with over 50% of the population living in poverty. The people of Bihar and Jharkhand (including the Magadh region) are shifting to other parts of the country for better job opportunities, thus leaving their folk traditions and practices back in their homeland. The migration of the indigenous population and the rising domination of Hindi are posing a threat to the folk cultures of the region. The research attempts to present an account of Magahi folk songs to locate them in Indian folk practices.

Primarily oral and rural in its manifestation, the Magahi language lacks written books and urban speakers, and this unavailability has also posed and enhanced the challenges before its growth and development. Moreover, the Magadh region was believed to be the Kingdom of Jarasandha (a character in the Mahabharata who fought against Lord Krishna), and that is why it is often argued that learned Brahmins distanced themselves from the land, calling it an unholy and cursed land which anti-god and demonic people inhabit (Samaddar 7-8). Even during the rise of Buddhism in the Magadh region, it remained a site which challenged the orthodoxies and conservatism prevalent in the Hindu religion. This also triggered the educated Brahmins, and they did not find it a suitable place for writing and doing other religious performativities (Atreya et al. 53). Moreover, even the language is considered harsh and unpleasing to the ears. Again, it is concluded that the Brahmins never adopted Magahi as their means of

communication and writing. George Abraham Grierson, in his seminal work *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903), mentions that “*Magadha des kanchanpuri, log acche par bhasha buri*” (translated as Magadha is a golden city, people are good but the language is not). Scholars like Sampati Aryani often reject the idea of the harshness of any language and believe these claims to be vague, weak and misleading (Aryani 97). Every language has sonorant (sounds produced without obstruction) and obstruent (sounds produced by the obstruction of the airflow) sounds, and it is very unwise to call any language harsh or sonorous. However, Ram Nandan Prasad Sinha believes that “organisations were formed, agitations were initiated, and communication activities were encouraged in the form of publishing books and journals, making films, and indulging with electronic media” (Sinha 274), especially after 1947 as many literary and scholarly activities gained momentum. However, A.S Altekar believes that the “...larger vigorous languages overwhelm the smaller weaker languages with the march of time”, but languages on the verge of extinction should still preserve their “...cultural and intellectual heritage and build a legacy of standard literature worthy to be cherished by posterity” (290). The thesis makes such an attempt.

Outline of the Thesis Chapters

The previous sections are a cogent description of the analysis put forward in the thesis. Even more specifically, this section presents a short, chapter-by-chapter description of the contents of the chapters and their argumentative progression. The thesis is divided into five chapters, which also include an introduction and a conclusion.

The first chapter is an introduction to the thesis. It provides an overview of the entire thesis and introduces the fundamental concepts in the subsequent chapters. It serves as a foundational structure for the thesis, outlining the overarching themes and key points of inquiry that will be discussed in greater detail throughout the development of discourse. It also attempts to underscore the necessity of research in this particular domain while providing adequate rationales.

The second chapter presents a theoretical framework for the thesis by delving into ecocriticism— a field of literary enquiry which attempts to understand the complex yet inherent relationship between human beings and nature. It provides a detailed historical

account of the different developmental stages of ecocriticism to study its varied literary and theoretical aspects comprehensively. This chapter introduces the key terms like ‘anthropocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’, while also addressing the issue of global ecological crisis. Additionally, it focuses on how religion determines our attitudes and behaviours towards other life forms and seeks to find religious traditions that have lived in harmonious communion with nature.

The third chapter briefly describes indigenous cultures while focusing specifically on Indian folk traditions, which have been living sustainably with nature. It also attempts to establish the need for research in marginalised traditions which have remained overlooked and unnoticed. Traditional ecological wisdom (TEK) has played a significant role in numerous indigenous customs across India, enabling communities to safeguard and maintain their surrounding ecosystems. It also discusses the detrimental effects of ecological imperialism on the local fauna and flora, emphasising the critical importance of establishing biodiversity zones and national parks to reduce excessive human intervention. Further, it offers a rich tapestry of Indian ecological folk songs, sung across the diverse landscapes of the country. Additionally, it explores eco-sensitive folk songs within the Magahi language, highlighting their unique cultural and ecological significance.

The fourth chapter extensively examines Magahi folk songs to determine the extent to which they address the questions of ecocriticism. What is the attitude of Magahi people towards nature? Is it anthropocentric or ecocentric? Is it even possible for any folk tradition to be completely ecocentric? And if not, to what extent can authority be granted to human beings? Do Magahi rituals and customs adhere to the idea of religious environmentalism? This chapter delves into such enquiries to develop a comprehensive understanding of Magahi folk culture.

The fifth chapter serves as the concluding segment of the thesis. The ecocritical analysis of the Magahi folk songs suggests a lifestyle which reveres and honours nature with the hope of fulfilling wishes and desires. Numerous Magahi rituals highlight a harmonious relationship with nature, depicting it not as inferior but equally or more significant than human beings. The ideas of ecocentrism and biodivinity are central to the ecological beliefs of the people. However, the chapter also concludes that there are

certain occasions when human beings exercise their authority over nature and exploit it for their benefit.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights that human anthropocentric perspectives towards nature have led to an ecological crisis, emphasising an immediate and thorough critical enquiry. Various disciplines around the world are working towards finding a tangible solution to the ongoing human-induced crisis that has led to the extinction of plant and animal species. Literary studies also play an essential role in addressing the question of environmental degradation and exploring ways to change human behaviour and foster a respectful attitude towards nature. Ecocriticism in literature started in the mid-1980s and has travelled a long way to incorporate interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism. It also explores various indigenous and folk practices to explore ways of living that do not disturb the undeniably essential relationship between humans and nature while guiding future generations in judiciously utilising natural resources. Magahi folk culture, which is a part of the canon of Indian folk literature, is one such tradition which has remained overlooked and disregarded.

To bridge the research gap and explore how Magahi folk culture addresses the questions of ecocriticism and environmental catastrophe, the present study attempts to analyse Magahi folk songs. This involves content analysis to systematically examine the song-texts, themes and other elements ingrained in them, aiming to develop a meaningful and insightful understanding of them. The research methodology is strictly qualitative. The research uses ecocriticism as a theory to analyse the chosen song texts. It also attempts to present a sociological and historical overview of the folk songs. It has taken into account secondary materials like books and review articles. Finally, all the folk songs are translated into English to make them accessible to a broader audience.

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Chapter 2

Theoretical Aspects of Ecocriticism

“Not all the winds, and storms, and earthquakes, and seas, and seasons of the world, have done so much to revolutionize the earth as MAN, the power of an endless life, has done since the day he came forth upon it, and received dominion over it.” –H. Bushnell, Sermon on the Power of an Endless Life.

This chapter provides a detailed historical account of the different developmental stages of ecocriticism to study its varied literary and theoretical aspects comprehensively. Here, the study of ecocriticism is indispensable to develop an extensive insight into the recently developed yet notably widespread literary theory, subsequently intended for application to the exploration of Magahi folk culture to derive an ecocritical understanding of them. Additionally, the grasp will be pivotal in examining similar folk and indigenous cultures and traditions living in perfect communion with nature. Generated by technological advancements and guided by anthropocentric orientations, human expansionist and hubristic thinking have led us to an appalling situation of ecological degradation– “movement of objects by human action from places or conditions where they are natural or unobjectionable to places or conditions where they are unnatural, objectionable, and injurious” (Quigley 1). Human’s indefatigable and injudicious attempts to trounce, humanise and subjugate Nature and irreversible biological annihilation have put our existence at stake. Furthermore, contemporary scientific evidence suggests that we are also rapidly heading towards the sixth mass extinction, where many species of plants and animals will cease to exist. Irrevocable habitat loss, uncontrolled desertification, increasing global warming, invasive toxification, alarming climate emergency, and unrestricted plastic pollution epitomise the calamitous decrease in the population of species of plants and animals on the planet. The disconnected divide between humans and nature “...has made the biosphere uninhabitable, and it will produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time” (Arnold 9). This overriding planetary tragedy demands an exhaustive intellectual intervention which “...will require a massive reordering of modern industrial societies based upon a new humanistic-ecological conception of the man-nature relationship” (Sessions 71). In the times of opposing beliefs, is it possible to discuss a harmonious

communion between humans and Nature? If at all it is possible, what role can literature play in addressing the issues of our ecological concerns? Can literature, often viewed as something that encourages us to suspend and disbelieve the harsh realities to escape them or derive enjoyment from them, offer a tangible solution to our environmental problems?

William Rueckert is believed to have used the term ‘ecocriticism’ for the first time in his seminal work, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). The essay meditates upon a possible concord between literature and ecology and wonders how literature, with its vision, wisdom and ingenuity, can help address the human-made disasters on the planet (Rueckert 121). To find a more environmentally conscious way, it seeks to discover a shared connection where humans and nonhumans can live together in diverse ways. The attempts to establish literature as a tool to catalyse dialogues and debates about environmental issues opened new horizons for literary scholars. Literature is responsible for making a scientific study of nature and encouraging various ways to conceptualise and debate nature in our cultural and political manifestations. But how can literary scholars contribute to environmental scholarship and pedagogy? Cheryll Glotfelty unearths the potential of literature and considers that “literary scholars specialise in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language...” (xxii), and it is within these realms they can make substantial contributions to environmental literature. Human beings are the only creatures on the planet who can produce literature. And if literature is such a unique feature of human civilization, it must see “...what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us” (Meeker 3-4). Glotfelty believed that, unlike race, class and gender, environmental degradation remained peculiarly unnoticed by literary studies as it failed drastically to form societies and discussion groups on literature and Nature. Literary studies remained indifferent to ecological concerns while other allied fields like History, Sociology, Religion, etc., engaged in ‘greening’ the human consciousness. However, she acknowledges the contributions made by individual authors and cultural scholars who produced significant literary outputs on ecological catastrophe. Still, they look insufficient as they were not written as recognisable groups. With collaborative attempts like the publication of *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources* by F.O Waage in 1985, the formation of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) in 1992 and other similar projects like courses on environmental education, the field of study which was started by individual efforts got

recognition as a separate critical school. The establishment of ASLE was a significant step in promoting the sharing of ideas and information regarding literature to explore the interconnection between humans and nature and to advance and encourage more such investigations. Furthermore, it also attracted many scholars towards “new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii)). Glotfelty, inspired by WLA’s (The Western Literature Association) attention on ecocriticism, produced a collection of Ecocritical essays named *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* along with Harold Fromm in 1996. These two significant events mark the growth of ecocriticism as a literary and critical theory. The initial journals of the ecocritical movement, which included *ISLE* (International Studies in Literature and the Environment) and *Green Letters*, were essential landmarks in the development of ecocriticism as a theory.

Ecocriticism attempts an interdisciplinary approach to study the “relationships between things, in this case, between human culture and the physical world” (Glotfelty xx). It extends valuable insights into the intrinsic interconnectedness between the different life forms on earth, intending to re-establish the constantly blurring concord between humans and Nature. William Howarth believes that the word originates from the Greek words *oikos* (household) and *kritis* (judge). *Oikos*, here, can be treated as nature, while *kritis* is ‘the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order, no boots or dishes strewn about to ruin the original decor (163). Though ecocriticism developed as a literary theory in the late 1980s, the strands of ecology and its related concepts date back to the early canonical writings about nature and natural beauty, mostly seen in Romanticism (1798-1834) in England and Transcendentalism (the 1820s to 1860) in the USA. Published as a response against the orthodoxies of New Historicism in literary studies, Jonathan Bate’s pioneering work *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) revisits the writings of Wordsworth and “historicizes the notion of ‘ecology’ and finds important sources for it in Romantic attitudes to the environment and a tradition of texts” (10). The book attempts to reinstate Wordsworth as the first genuinely ecological poet whose poetry envisioned a strong and perennial integration between Nature and mankind, the one which became instrumental in formulating an impressionable influence in the field of environmental conservation.

Exploring the politics of Romantic poetry, Bate talks about the applicability of the ideals of Wordsworth's poetry in the 1990s. Kevin Hutchings (2007) traces the history of the idea of ecological conservation even before the Romantic Age. However, he also believes that the Romantic era was marked by an increase in urban population and rapid industrialisation, resulting in "...environmental problems became much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency" (175). The Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 18th century in England, attracted the rural agrarian people to the cities, who shifted there for better job opportunities. The green landscape was replaced by newly installed factories and warehouses, which led to crowded and polluted urban areas. The Romantic Age, which stood against the tenets of Enlightenment, witnessed an emotional shift towards pure and unadulterated Nature— one which offers an insightful journey towards human consciousness to re-establish the dwindling interrelatedness between humans and Nature (Kitson 15-18). Emmanuel Kant's description of the Enlightenment was man's transition from immaturity and uncertainty to reliance and conviction on his reasoning— *sapere aude*. The writers and intellectuals of the Enlightenment envisioned their era as a departure from centuries-old ignorance and obscurity and an emergence of an age characterised by science and rationalism. This confidence in human's capacity to understand every aspect of existence challenged the established norms of society, and beliefs and traditions related to nature also could not remain unquestioned. The upholders of enlightenment promoted deism, which accepted the existence of God but rejected any kind of God's intervention on the earth. This led to free will, which humans exercised to satisfy their selfish individualism. The Enlightenment has been accused of something that replaced theocentrism and promoted anthropocentrism ("Enlightenment")- the one that propelled a relentless pursuit of control and supremacy over a disenchanted nature. The radical environmentalists criticise it for being overtly homocentric and, thus, discouraging respect and regard for nature. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Enlightenment was a meaningless endeavour which propagated only an anthropocentric worldview as it also brought about many significant political and scientific alterations which helped rationality to prevail and thus "...would champion enlarging [Enlightenment] rationality to take ecological rationality into account" (Hinchman and Hinchman 691). The canonical Romantic poets both drew inspiration from and responded to the ideas of the

Enlightenment scholars. Romanticism's sincere effort to 'Return to Nature' has influenced the ecocritics to look back to the age as a formative period for environmental writings. Emphasising on the borrowings that modern ecocritics use while writing about nature, Donald Worster writes in *Nature's Economy* (1977):

At the very core of [the] Romantic view of nature was what later generations would come to call an ecological perspective: that is, a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth (82).

Romanticism served as a fertile ground for the proponents of ecocriticism, who drew inspiration from the ideals and principles of romantic poets and authors. They forged paths towards developing a philosophical standpoint that establishes a connection between human beings and nature and seeks to reconcile any potential disjuncture between the two. It becomes crucial to mention here that nature writing was not limited to just a few European countries but was also being practised by scholars in America. Inspired by German and English Romanticism, Transcendentalism— a philosophical movement which rose to prominence against the idea of rationalism, also represented nature as the manifestation of God. These two movements espoused a philosophical doctrine centred on the principles of sustainable living and a profound unity with the natural world. Lawrence Buell's book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) presents a vivid account of the history of Western Ecological legacy and its manifestation through the writings of authors like Wendell Berry, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold etc. With rising environmental devastation, the author attempts an enquiry into the crisis of imagination to re-establish the dwindling harmonious bond between Nature and human beings by attempting to imagine more ecocentric. Using Thoreau's *Walden* to search for significant environmental consciousness, Buell investigates prevailing ecological themes, a personification of Nature, and impending ecological threats to trace back the American history of environmental awareness during Industrialisation. Axel Goodbody (2014) observes that:

mother Nature was a poetic product of the age of the steam engine’-- Romantic writers like Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth conceptualised environmental pollution as both an external phenomenon resulting from industrialisation and an inner state resulting from the fragmentation and alienation of human personality (63).

However, if Romanticism and Transcendentalism, known for their environmentally conscious philosophies, are appreciated for their ecological sensibilities, one may wonder why there is a relative scarcity of nature-oriented literature in the subsequent ages. With expanding technological advancements, economic growth, industrialisation, and urbanisation, the Victorian Age (1837-1914), characterised for propagating an empirical worldview, could not hold the spirit of Romantic idealism in its literary outputs. During this age, we see a marked transformation in the literary depiction of the natural world, shifting from inspirational and benevolent representations to those that emphasise a more aggressive aspect. Moreover, the publication of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) rejected man’s misconception of superiority over Nature and other human beings as ‘the chosen people of God’ and unveiled his vulnerable position in his struggle with Nature. Darwin’s radical postulations about evolutionary biology and human beings and other life forms sharing a common descent stirred a dreadful sense of guilt in man’s mind, who in return paced up his struggle against “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson 1838) to ensure the ‘survival of the fittest ones’ on the earth. The Victorian age in English literature is marked by declining spirituality, prevailing pessimism, and an overarching sense of uncertainty during the age, creating an emotional and philosophical detachment between the authors and the natural world. Joseph Warren Beach (1993) points out that conscious design, providence, harmony, benevolence have all evaporated from the concept of nature. As a subject for poetic exaltation, it no longer has any value; and inevitably it goes into the discard, together with concepts more strictly theological. Thomas Hardy sounds the death-knell of the old nature-poetry. (260)

Even during the modern age (1914-1960s) in English literature, we do not see a substantial amount of work written on nature’s themes and issues. The age is characterised by literary movements like Individualism, Formalism, Absurdism, and Symbolism, which engaged in experimenting with literary writing techniques. Driven by

the impending threat of the collapse of the whole civilisation, the modern English writings were on 'civilising missions' as they focused on individual characters (the victims of the pre and post-war fears) and Nature again is relegated. As of now, we have discussed how nature, which held a central position during the Romantic Age, became a subject of progressive marginalisation during the Victorian and the modern ages. What happened to natural representations after the modern age? What happened in the subsequent age? How did the authors of the late 1960s respond to the question of nature and the ecological crisis? Was it similar to that of the Victorian and modern ages, and if it was not, how was it different from the previous literary ages?

Unlike the previous two literary ages, we see a rising interest in nature writing in the late 1960s. After the late 1960s, there came a surge of writings which started talking about ecology and the concerns around it. Critics like Rachel Carson, Raymond Williams and Leo Marx were writing extensively during the 1960s. Still, it was only after the late 1980s and early 1990s that ecocriticism became an identifiable field worth getting critical attention. But what are the factors owing to which nature, which remained overlooked and disregarded over a long period, suddenly started getting recognition? One of the reasons for this sudden increase in writings concerning ecology is a widespread urge to think about this unpostponable ecological worry. Raymond Williams' crucial contribution to ecocritical thought is marked by his seminal work *The Country and the City* (1973), which attempts to address the ecological crisis by developing a method of criticism. The book aims to explore the theoretical challenges associated with upholding apocalyptic thought in the context of present environmental devastations, which have significantly impacted the lives of people. He writes:

... the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (1)

Furthermore, one can observe the reverential regard granted to rural life for its proximity to the natural world. On the other hand, city life is regarded as adulterated and

unprincipled— the one which damages the earth's ecosystem. The expanding presence of ecological issues within literature has manifested such intensity that it attracted a host of authors who were unable to turn away from the escalating challenges of environmental concerns. This reflects a notable change during that period when pressing realities of environmental calamities penetrated literary discourse, demanding urgency and a heightened sense of awareness for their conservation and preservation. This era is marked by the authors' commencement of discussion on ecological crisis. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) questions the excessive use of pesticides on farmlands and their adverse effects on the environment. She wrote this book to bring the impending ecological catastrophe to the eyes of the American public to caution them against the production of environmental poisons like DDT by chemical companies. The book created a whole lot of chaos among the citizens, and that led to the banning of the use of DDT on agricultural farmlands. These texts brought a radical shift from the traditional ways of Nature's writing as the authors tried to establish the connections of literature to other disciplines. These authors and their works helped shape the future of ecocriticism as they brought ecological catastrophe into public debate. Talking about how vital the phase was in changing the discourse of nature's writing, Michael Malay considers Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973):

as an example of a method of criticism which blends the critical and the ecological, the textual and the social, and which is insistently anti-apocalyptic in its approach, in that it tries to make sense of, rather than sublimate, the multiplicity of issues involved in our dealings with the natural world. (9)

The period was also unique and epoching in the sense that it did not only focus on nostalgic rural life but also paved the way for a more serious, scientific and socially conscious form of writing. This era of what Richard Mabey calls 'Ecological Enlightenment' is also significant in its approach to experimenting with literary forms as the authors tried to build connections between literature and the environment. Joseph Meeker's seminal ecocritical work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974) steps further and explains comedy and tragedy in an entirely evolutionary way. Being a biologist, he knows ecology and its concerns as he applies the same to the two imaginative genres of tragedy and comedy to use them as adaptive behaviour in the natural world to talk about either our survival (comedy) or to distance us from other

forms of life (tragedy). He also suggests that the vicious nature of Western civilisation arises from the tragic mode, whereas the comic mode lays the foundation for emancipation. "Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon our ability to change ourselves rather than our environment and upon our ability to accept the limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting us" (21). Tragedy, on the other hand, is based on heroic myths where the hero struggles and finally dies for his ideals. Further, Meeker compares comedy with ecology and suggests that ecosystems that reduce the chances of environmental losses and promote biodiversity should be perfect examples of a healthy ecological system. Nevertheless, it is imperative to understand here that within the literature of the period extending between the 1960s and the 1980s, there was a notable departure from the representation of nature, distinguishing it from prior literary depictions.

Up to this point, the chapter has discussed how the literature of the 1960s-1980s saw a noticeable change in terms of the way nature was represented during that period. This also helped environmental concerns gain a significant place in the public consciousness, and we see literary associations being formed for scholarly thinking and outputs. With ecocriticism gaining institutional and organisational recognition, confusion regarding the theoretical foundations of the literary movement also developed. But despite all these challenges, Lawrence Buell notes that even though the area of ecocriticism is a recent development, the term has gained immense popularity in the last two decades, so much so that it generated a plethora of individual contributions and thus making the "distinctions become increasingly hard to make between them and other environmentally oriented humanists who would resist being called ecocritics however relevant their work seems to those who do" (88). The complexity, heterogeneity, and variety of critical models developed since its inception make it tedious for ecocritics to build consensus even on the field's basic tenets and distinctive principles. Scott Slovic, in his article *Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine* (2002) acknowledges the variety of ways in which ecocritical practice can be defined since "it is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world" (160-61). Many ecocritics like Lawrence Buell and Ursula Heise think that it has "a history both of strong position-taking by individual spokespersons and of reluctance to insist on a single normative, programmatic definition of its rightful scope, method, and stakes" (Buell 88). Ecocriticism, which Buell prefers to call 'environmental criticism' is

often applied as a catchall term which is not only confined to literary and cultural studies but also encompasses a variety of other intellectual disciplines like sociology, science, economics and ethics to derive moral and social adherence towards profound ecological concerns.

Waves of Ecocriticism

The first wave of Ecocriticism, originating in the 1980s, was a deliberate and critically self-conscious movement that sought to refocus the depiction of nature. Its primary focus was to underline the significance of nature as an essential and meaningful subject of analysis, with a central emphasis on earth care. Rooted in Arne Naess' idea of 'Deep Ecology' (an environmental principle which considers that the entire living ecology possesses some inherent worth) (Keller 140), the first wave tends to observe Nature and human beings as two opposing entities and argues vehemently that environmental criticism needs serious intellectual interventions to protect Nature from the devastations caused by the mankind. It also shaped Nature writing as a discipline, which became a more severe and intense critical and political endeavour. The pioneering contributions of Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, ASLE, and WLA also helped Ecocriticism develop as a separate area of intellectual discussion. With rigorous attempts to build closer associations with environmental and life sciences, the first wave of ecocriticism adopted an innovative approach to challenge the traditional way of looking at the ecological texts of Raymond Williams and Leo Marx. Joseph Carroll (1995) and Glen A. Love shifted their attention to evolutionary biology, while Ursula Heise was interested in fields like applied mathematics, risk theory, etc., to understand the concerns of ecological problems in a more comprehensive and scientific manner. In this connection, Lawrence Buell (2005) asserts that "first-wave ecocritical calls for greater scientific literacy tend to presuppose a bedrock "human" condition, to commend the scientific method's ability to describe natural laws and to look to science as a corrective to critical subjectivism and cultural relativism" (18). These scientific dispositions have an immense influence on environmental criticism. Here, one must understand that looking at cultural theory through a scientific lens is not the only way to find solutions to global climate disasters. The debate between science and literature must be dealt with objectively, rationally and consciously before we jump to any conclusions. Acknowledging the strengths and limitations of both scientific and literary studies would lead to a comprehensive understanding of the natural environment and the formulation of practical solutions that

consider the interdisciplinary nature of our environmental issues. However, the primary focus of first-wave ecocriticism remained to romanticise natural landscapes; therefore, the contributions of writers like Thoreau and Wordsworth were particularly highlighted during this phase. Revisiting the works of the pioneer figures of Romanticism and Transcendentalism helped the first wave to appreciate nature writing, and it further attracted new breeds of authors and poets who contributed significantly to the growth of ecocriticism. It would not be wrong to say that the first-wave ecocriticism was directed more towards celebrating imagined and virginal spaces that were untouched and unspoilt by human intervention. In the book, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014), Greg Garrard notes that “first-wave ecocriticism [is] inclined to celebrate nature rather than querying “nature” as a concept...” (1). Further, he also states that the phase drew inspiration from the natural environment, but still, it consciously ignored or instead chose to suspend Natural Sciences’ concern about the degradation of the environment. Thus, it failed to draw our attention to the environmental issues of the time. Furthermore, this phase of ecocriticism consciously favoured rural and wild spaces over urban landscapes and considered them closer to nature. First-wave ecocriticism left many questions unanswered, prompting the second-wave to attempt to find solutions. The inclusivity of urban landscapes and the idea of environmental justice also need our attention to expand the scope of ecocriticism without romanticising them.

We do not see any clear transition between the first and second waves because even the second wave continued the same awareness drive for the ailing planet. Lawrence Buell (2005) argues that “palimpsest” is a better metaphor than “wave” for the first wave of ecocriticism because “most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarrelling with precursors” (17). However, the second wave of Ecocriticism is marked by a new and more conscious approach to dealing with human and non-human distinctions with a view to finding independent and mutually integral relationships. It was profoundly self-investigative as it became more inclusive to extend its periphery to the urban and built landscapes; additionally, wilderness and pastoral spaces, multiethnic voices and multiple disciplines were also taken into account (Rangarajan 10). It included investigating the assumptions that underlie the growth and development of ecocriticism and also considered ways to improve its inclusiveness, relevance and efficiency in addressing ecological issues in literature and culture. This expansion in the meaning of

the word environment also incorporated movements like ecojustice to highlight the conditions and concerns of pollution's worst sufferers (the economically deprived section of society) through an ecocritical reading of texts on class, race, and gender. If the first wave promoted a realist and less controversial discussion on nature, the second wave, on the other hand, took a more diverse and sceptical standpoint. However, both these waves present a well-defined cultural study of Ecocriticism, which also looks evident in the third wave.

In 2009, *MELUS: Multiethnic Literatures of the United States* published a special issue in which Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic proposed a “new third wave” in Guest Editor’s Introduction: *The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism*. The third wave started at the beginning of the 21st century. It is characterised by its unique tendency to associate everything with the earth to acknowledge individual problems as significant global concerns. Ursula Heise highlights the need to introduce the ideas of ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’ and ‘world citizenship’ to develop a sense of how the local culture and environment can be enveloped together as globally similar ones. She further argues that we share a “common destiny” where concerns like global warming and climate change are always haunting us. Ecocriticism in the third wave also deals with animality to discuss ideas like animal subjectivity and agency. This wave also takes into account a range of other diversified approaches: material ecofeminism, eco-masculinism, and posthumanism. Here, one should also note that the line between the third and the fourth waves is again very blurry, as ecocriticism today is an amalgamation of both these waves. Scott Slovic defines the fourth wave in the Fall 2012 issue of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. The fourth wave, which dates back to 2008, is defined by “Material Ecocriticism”. He sees a decisive material paradigm in Ecocriticism and proposes an entirely new era, which he calls the fourth wave of Ecocriticism. In the article *From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency* (2014), Serpil Oppermann writes:

the radical revisions of our ideas about the description of physical entities, chemical and biological processes, and their ethical, political, and cultural implications represented in recent discourses of feminist science studies, posthumanism, and the environmental humanities have also occasioned

considerable interest among ecocritics, leading to the emergence of material ecocriticism (27).

It is tedious to confine the waves in a particular time frame because even with time, we tend to see a meaningful connection between the waves. The overlapping and blending of the ideas figure consistently throughout the waves. However, it is also evident that the organic progression of the waves of ecocriticism fostered new perspectives, methodologies and discourses. They highlight key theoretical structures and academic debates and help contextualise contemporary environmental concerns with broader intellectual movements.

Religion and Ecology

In the last couple of decades, there has been an intensified increase in theological writings, intellectual engagements, institutional discussions and scholarship over the interrelatedness between religion and environment. These scholarly communities have opened up a variety of confrontational debates on our attitudes towards Nature and the environmental crisis hovering over us. There has always been a debate on the role of Western Christianity in propagating the idea of anthropocentrism. In his article, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* (1967), White contends that our treatment of things around us depends primarily upon the association/relationship we share with them. He argues that Religion plays a vital role in establishing our habits and behaviours. He accuses Christianity of growing anthropocentrism and believes that the very idea that no item in the physical creation has any purpose other than to serve man's purposes seems to advocate our position as a superior creature on the earth. Furthermore, he also criticises the post-Enlightenment philosophy for inseminating an anthropocentric attitude that hierarchises mankind over nature (1205-1207). The exploitative nature of Modern Science has its roots in natural theology. The accusation of seeing nature in a human-centred way is believed to have its roots in Western Christianity. Desmond A. Gillmor (1996) states that such selfish human behaviours have "laid the basis for society's arrogant attitude towards nature, providing the divine mandate for resource exploitation and resulting in ecological damage" (262). The uncontrollable and environmentally damaging economic growth which developed in the Christian West tended to form "the cultural basis of our environmental crisis" (Moncrief 508), even in other parts of the globe like "the North American colonies of England and France [who] were quick to

pick up the technical and social innovations that were taking place in their motherlands” (510). This biased privilege, which we human beings enjoy as an advantaged species in terms of intellect and instincts, has its roots in how we have designed gods in our image. In his 2010 book, Gary Steiner (2010) points out that “the fact that the Greeks drew their gods as the likeness of human beings reveals their anthropocentrism, the view that human beings are primary and central in the order of things” (1). He further argues that placing human beings closer to divinity and keeping animal kingdoms only next to mankind in the hierarchy of perfectionism is highly unjustifiable and unreasonable. Are human beings privileged? Has God truly created us differently from other living beings, and if so, do we thus get the freedom to exploit them to fulfil our incessant needs? Evolution has certainly developed us more intellectually than other creatures, and we consider ourselves evolved beings, adhering to Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest, as we continue to exploit in accordance with it. No matter what instigates human beings to behave in the way they have been doing for ages, it has undoubtedly come at the cost of the loss of many species of plants and animals. Is our anthropocentric attitude reasonable, or are we just defending our indefensible position for the sake of our benefits?

Tim Hayward, in his *Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem* (1997), expostulates that “[a]nthropocentrism can intelligibly be criticised as an ontological error, but attempts to conceive of it as an ethical error are liable to conceptual a practical confusion” (49). This sheer urgency of human denunciation is counterproductive and an act of self-defamation at the same time. Choosing not to use ‘anthropocentrism’ for human’s everlasting greed, Helen Kopnina (2018) et al. talk about human chauvinism and speciesism as truly objectionable: when humans prioritise the welfare of the individuals within their own community over the well-being of individuals from other species on morally unreasonable grounds (111). He finds criticisms of anthropocentrism both on ontological and ethical grounds, but he reflects more on human chauvinism:

...[it] ultimately values humans because they are humans. While the human chauvinist may officially claim there are criteria which provide reasons for preferring humans—such as that they have language, rationality, sociality etc.—no amount of evidence that other beings fulfill these criteria would satisfy them that they should be afforded a similar

moral concern. The bottom line for the human chauvinist is that being human is a necessary and sufficient condition of moral concern (112).

Our outwardly preferential attitude towards the other forms of life on the planet raises ethical questions about the objectivity and justifiability of such predispositions. It also requires a reflection on the ethical foundations that guide human behaviour in the context of inter-species relationships and environmental stewardship. It makes us reflect upon whether we have moral commitments that go beyond the boundaries of our own species and how these considerations influence how we interact with the larger ecosystem. Do we have an alternative way of looking at the ecosystem? Or are we trapped in a vicious circle where thinking in a non-anthropocentric way is not possible? In any case, the consequences of this human-centric behaviour seem precarious for life.

Humans' heedless and exploitative attitude has encouraged biodiversity degradation and its loss. However, some thinkers justify humans' arrogant anthropocentrism because humans are the only creatures with intelligence, language, and a developed brain. Frederick Ferre, in the article *Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm* (1994), scrutinises this most debated divide between 'personalism' and 'organicism' and expostulates that anthropocentrism should not be constantly compared with an egotistical and self-observed behaviour by humans because we are in an unavoidable and inescapable position where an alternative way of dealing with the environment is not possible for us. Proposing the idea of 'perspectival anthropocentrism', Ferre posits that even anthropocentrism engrained in 'personalistic organicism' is not questionable. He adds, "[w]e have no choice but to think as humans, to take a human point of view even while we try to transcend egoism by cultivating sympathy and concern for other centres of intrinsic value" (72). Human-centredness has always been a much-appreciated word, and there is nothing wrong if human cognition regulates our ethical attitude towards other organisms on the earth. Tim Hayward (1997) believes "self-love, properly understood, can be considered a precondition of loving others, so, by analogy, it could be maintained that only if humans know how to treat their fellow humans decently will they begin to be able to treat other species decently" (52). The opposite of this can also be considered valid. If humans learn to love other living beings, they will also love humans. Why should human beings always be prioritised? Why don't we question our prerogative? Is it so because we do not want to challenge our position as the supreme creation of God?

Up to this point, this chapter has examined the arguments put forward by numerous scholars advocating for anthropocentrism. It has elucidated how these proponents highlight the unique cognitive abilities of human beings, positioning them superior to other creatures. Is it not the case of ‘anthropic bias’, where we think ourselves intelligent and assume that God has designed this universe for rational creatures like us? However, it would be wrong to assume that no scholars challenge the notion of anthropocentrism. Environmental thinkers also observe that our advantaged position as human beings is highly exclusionary, preferential and misleading. Humans unnecessarily think of themselves as someone with a distinctive characteristic of being rational, which justifies their stand as biologically superior creatures (Coward 421). Anthropocentrism is a product of conceptual division, the gradual growth of objectivating science, which has created an illusion of privileged human rationality, capacity and autonomy of selfhood. William Grey (1993) dismisses human’s illogical and self-indulgent claim of supremacy and states that Copernicus’ idea of ‘heliocentrism’, Darwin’s disagreement on our biologically advantaged orientation, and Freud’s revolutionary thoughts professing ‘rationality’ a hoax, have already destabilised our hubristic and opinionated vantage point over the interests of nonhuman entities (Grey 463). Human beings who face the charge of ‘speciesism’ (a term coined by Richard Ryder to denote a discriminatory attitude against the members of other species) have made the world “...increasingly humanized, tame, and more predictable [where] “the Human centre has all but overtaken the whole, displacing into the peripheries of invisibility all that is “uncivilized” (Crist and Kopnina 389). The continuous ‘cognitive belittlement’ and unauthorised hegemonic power, argues Katie Mcshane (2007), are the results of our astigmatic and injudicious behaviour. Here, we can see that many scholars are advocating the supreme position of human beings while others refute it. This dichotomy adds complexity to the situation, demanding careful consideration regarding which philosophical stance should be endorsed and put into practice.

It is often argued that no matter how deadly and problematic the consequences of our anthropocentric actions, we cannot shift to other modes of lifestyle by ignoring the needs and demands of human existence. Although anthropocentrism is a heavily criticised critical concept, there are scholars like Tim Hayward (1997), who hold strong opinions that the presumption of non-anthropocentric environmental ethics is utterly fallacious and misguided. They do acknowledge the disastrous consequences of this

anthropocentric bias. Still, they are also under the impression that we cannot think of an expedient environmental philosophy without taking anthropocentrism into consideration. However, William Grey (1998) advocates a modified and less harmful version, which focuses on the “...need for an enlarged, enriched, and fortified notion of human interests, which explicitly acknowledges obligations to, and the value of, nonhuman and natural items” (98). Granting full authority and supreme power in the hands of human beings and neglecting Nature to the periphery invoked intellectual movements for the rights of Nature. Still, it failed drastically as the intelligentsia could not offer a convincing argument in favour of the rights of Nature. In the article, *Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value*, Eugene C. Hargrove argues that there are definitional problems in non-anthropocentric value systems, which is why they have never gained prominence among environmental ethicists (183). Ewa Domanska (2010) defines non-anthropocentric humanities or post humanities as “an institutionalised set of research topics, techniques and interests that derives its ethos from the intellectual movement and ethical stance called posthumanism” (118). However, the absence of a uniformly defined approach is still missing even in the case of posthumanism, which is “very complex because there is no singular, homogenous trends, styles of thinking or philosophical directions that can be related to this term” (119).

The inadequacy of comprehensive non-anthropocentric philosophical theories for rising global climatic concerns helped the supporters of anthropocentrism stay firm on their outlook, favouring human existence over other creatures on the planet. However, most agreed to adopt a more inclusive and less harmful version of anthropocentrism. The moral dilemma of human existence is such that “...human interests are sufficient to underpin the case for preservation, and the interests of the human future call for a long-term approach to nature independently of appeal to non-human interests” (Attfield 30-31). The ethical stance of anthropocentrism to transcend unwarranted human interests to include an undivided attention towards the well-being of non-human creatures is the rallying cry of the time when humans can’t even imagine their survival without the presence and conservation of its equally important counterpart. Natural entities are crucial to our lives because they enhance the possibility of our existence on the planet as they participate in numerous ways to provide a sustainable environment. Quoting Bryan Norton in the article *Beyond Anthropocentrism*, Robbin Attfield (2011) points out:

certainly, if human interests are confined to human preferences, as in what he called ‘strong anthropocentrism’, not enough preservation will be justified, but this deficiency will be made good (he believes) if instead we adopt ‘weak anthropocentrism’, and concern ourselves with rational human preferences and thus with human interests much more broadly conceptualised (31).

Bryan G. Norton argues vehemently that environmental ethics cannot be imagined only by keeping human interests in mind, nor can it be derived from talking about nonhuman rights. Environmental thinkers must look for a guiding principle which postulates or is somewhat convinced that nonhuman species have an independent intrinsic value in them, placing them on equal moral footing with us. While discussing the ethical approaches of Western decision-making regarding ecological problems, Eugene C. Hargrove (1992) talks about two entirely divergent outlooks— one of which is a ‘virtue approach’ while the other is a ‘rule approach’. The virtue approach believes that only by transforming human beings into morally good and responsible citizens can we expect them to behave and act in environmentally viable ways. The rule approach, on the other hand, puts forward an idea that aspires to formulate universal rules that are supposed to be implemented in such a way that they do not discriminate between human and nonhuman entities. Hargrove is of the opinion that the virtue approach fails to guarantee environmentally sustainable ways, and that is why the rule approach “has gained support in the modern period because of the fear that the open form in which decisions naturally and normally take place will allow unscrupulous or weak moral agents to waver and modify principles to their own immoral advantage” (185). Our holistic obligations, which Robin Attfield (2008) believes, cannot only be achieved through moral lessons on biological loss, but we need to bring some universal principles and laws which are strictly implemented “to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (xvii). How can ecological principles be achieved? Are there any traditional practices that adhere to the idea of non-anthropocentrism?

When Lynn White talks about the role of Western Christianity in propagating anthropocentrism, he also finds hope in the age-old practices of panpsychism, pantheism and animism and advocates that our historical blunders, which are primarily religious, can only be cured through traditional ways of living. Lynn White (1967) also asserts:

since the roots of our troubles are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction, I propose Francis as a patron saint of ecologists (1207).

White observes that our environmentally destructive ways can only be straightened out if we adopt spiritual intelligence, ethical valuing, and emotional and affective cognisance of the uninstitutionalised modes of religious practices. As Christopher Ives (2017) argues, “particular religious inheritances, traditions, communities, or practices cannot be fully understood apart from the environmental history from which they emerged and whose ecological relations they in turn influenced” (Ives 46). In Western monotheistic religious practices and beliefs, there used to be a common consent and agreement that it is not us but the gods who created nature, and hence we human beings cannot claim ownership over it. These traditional, religious, and ecological values helped develop a sense of gratitude towards the creations of gods until people formulated a divisive philosophical standpoint of divine ownership. This jaundiced viewpoint of human’s authoritative position over the nonhumans also gets reflected when Kant talks about “cosmopolitanism, in which human beings stand alone among earthly as capable of perfecting their natures and achieving the status of lord[s] of nature” (Steiner 1). With mainstream Western Christianity being questioned, theologians started surveying traditional and marginalised religious practices to defend the quavery position of religion. Western Christianity’s exclusivist perspectives and the resultant confrontation have given place to many unorganised, uninstitutionalised and marginalised spiritual traditions of Christianity to trace the roots to communion between Nature and human beings. However, theologians and philosophers contest White’s arguments, which consider Saint Franciscan's primitive model as a remedy for our environmental abuse against other aspects of creation because even his idea of biocentrism “emerged from his understanding of the biblical tradition” (Simkins 399). The claims regarding different interpretations of the Bible created a massive uproar as many eco-theologists shared their disagreements on White’s viewpoints on Judeo-Christian religion and termed those merely as his version of biblical interpretation. Some biblical scholars and theologians

interrogated whether the mechanical advancements that resulted in environmental degradation were stimulated by the Christian way of looking at things. Many other Biblical scholars also questioned if the Bible encouraged human beings to treat the other forms of creation in an environmentally unsustainable way. Wendell Berry (2002) shares an entirely different exegesis of the 'dominance' episode interpreted by White and argues that:

there is no doubt that Adam's superiority over the rest of Creation was represented ... by this act of naming; he was given dominance. But that this dominance was meant to be tyrannical, or that "subdue [the earth]" means to destroy, is by no means a necessary inference. Indeed, it might be argued that the correct understanding of this "dominance" is given in Genesis 2:15, which says that Adam and Eve were put into the Garden "to dress and keep it" (294).

Calling White's essay "famous and controversial", Timothy J Burberry, in his article *Ecocriticism and Christian Literary Scholarship* (2012), speaks emphatically against it and "recognizes that the essay has been rightly criticized as overly simplistic, and perhaps as garnering more respect and attention than it deserves" (196). If wrong interpretation is the only thing to be blamed, how can we conclude that the non-anthropocentric exposition of the Bible is the correct version? If these ideological differences stemming from contradictory interpretational standpoints have their own grounds for rationalisation, which set of beliefs should be considered while making arguments? If a marriage between these two diverse opinions is possible, what will be the foundation of the common interest? Do the Christian theologians need to re-read the religious texts to derive ecologically viable interpretations?

Historically and even in the existing circumstances, religions across the globe have been significantly conducive to reshaping and rethinking our relationship with the natural sphere. It is often argued that no matter how hard we try, our spiritual beliefs are so ingrained in our cognitive behaviour that we consciously or unconsciously keep acting according to our religious teachings. To what extent is it right to think that our religion-driven thinking has always led in the wrong direction, and we are bearing the consequences of it? Therefore, we should make an effort to think beyond religion. Is it possible to find alternative perspectives from religions that have influenced humanity for

centuries, and if so, have religions brought only detrimental things to human civilisation? If we analyse it judiciously, we find that religions across the world have also been instrumental in paving a better future for the world. It is unarguably right that “from abolishing slavery in the 19th century to promoting civil rights in this century, religions have frequently had a prophetic role in evoking new visions of social justice” (Tucker 5). Here, it is also essential to note that religion has also been used to justify and sustain slavery and discrimination. However, figures like Martin Luther King Jr. advocated or used Christian teachings to promote love, equality, compassion, and justice. Interpretations of religious texts can vary from person to person and thus can be used both for oppression and liberation. So, it can be argued that religion, if employed or elucidated in an ethical manner, can lead to positive impacts in society. If religions have played such important roles in extending and expanding egalitarianism, can they offer a remedy to our ecological tragedy? The development of environmental philosophies like deep ecology and environmental ethics or justice and their growing research interest have helped Western Christianity get out of the charge of anthropocentrism. As propounded by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, deep ecology is an environmental philosophy predicated on the idea that human beings should fundamentally alter how they relate to nature to acknowledge that it also has an intrinsic value. One can find interesting perspectives of intersections between deep ecology and Christianity as both advocate ethical considerations and harmonious coexistence with nature. Moreover, Green Christianity presents a deep-rooted ecological outlook of ‘stewardship’ inherent in the religion and argues that the Bible has been wrongly held accountable for advocating ‘ownership’ over other non-human creatures on the planet. The doctrine of stewardship attempts to redefine our anti-ecological approach towards Nature as it rejects the legitimisation of human agency over other forms of life on the earth and espouses that the earth belongs to the Lord and not its human inhabitants. Among a flurry of responses against the anthropocentric attitude of Christianity, environmentalists and ethicists often cite an example from Leviticus (the book of the Old Testament), which states that “the land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Wikipedia). If God is the Alpha and the Omega and “we have been given the earth to live, not on, but with and from, and only on the condition that we care properly for it” (Lagat 7), human beings have no ascendancy over other creatures. In sustainability Science, environmental stewardship refers to actions of environmental conservation like creating protected areas for animals and plants without human interference to let them grow and survive independently. These ecologically sustainable

endeavours of restoration and preservation of animal and plant species are also questioned by authors like Clare Palmer, who does not seem satisfied with it and outlines the need for an entirely “different language... with which to speak about the place of humanity in the natural world than concepts of ‘ownership’ and ‘conquest’ of nature have afforded us, little may be gained if we unreflectively replace one problematic idiom with another” (Welchman 298). Rejecting the stewardship’s theological standpoint for being anthropocentric like the previous approaches, Palmer further asserts that “stewardship of the natural world, whether Christian or otherwise... remains profoundly anthropocentric and un-ecological, legitimating and encouraging increased human use over the natural world” (305). Considered to be historically and essentially biased, speciesist, human-centred and authoritative, stewardship never gets accepted by a majority of eco-theologians never accepted it as a basis of environmentally advantageous moral conduct. However, it cannot be ignored that, unlike staunch anthropocentrism, stewardship prioritises Nature at least by adding a sense of responsibility for the careful and judicious use of natural elements. Furthermore, Welchman (2012) accepts this theological concept's limitation when she writes that “environmental stewardship is not a full-blown normative theory, a rival to utilitarianism, virtue ethics, contractarianism or Kantian deontology” (308). If stewardship is also a weak version of anthropocentrism, should we start believing that we human beings cannot think beyond it? Are we so concerned with our existence that we keep neglecting the rights of other beings on earth? Can’t we think of a non-anthropocentric way of living judiciously and ecologically sustainably?

Christian Stewardship does not offer an epistemological replacement for the existing anthropocentric Western Christian worldview. Instead, it serves as a reformist movement to change our egocentric and humancentric behaviour towards Nature. Deep Ecology, on the other hand, turns out to be foundational and radically diverse as it “[sought] a new metaphysics, epistemology, cosmology, and environmental ethics of person/planet” (Devall 299). While other movements of environmentalism focus primarily on reforming our ecologically unsuitable ways of living, deep ecology further and downrightly interrogates our prevalent presumptions of an ascendant social paradigm. The world is a complex system of relationships where all living and non-living entities are associated in such a way that any unwarranted human intervention may lead to an ecological crisis for any particular entity and the entire ecology. Deep ecology argues that we should develop and promote ethical relations that understand that human

beings, like other communities, are also composed of the same biotic factors. Developed by Arne Naess and George Sessions, it is an eco-philosophy that longs for a holistic outlook that considers all sentient beings as a part of the greater ecological whole where human beings are not greater or superior to others. The philosophy of deep Ecology challenged the age-old idea of anthropocentric environmentalism, which argues that human beings are the prime holders of Nature and treats other living creatures merely as resources to be exploited to serve the purposes of the supreme creation of God (Humans). Anthropocentrism is a human-centred set of value systems that see Nature with regard to its value to humans.

Deep Ecologists contend with the instrumentalist worldview of Nature, and they also refuse to accept that humans are in a way more important than other creatures on the planet. They advocate the philosophy that our existence on the Earth is dependent on the well-being of the ecological whole, of which separate ecosystems are a part. Arne Naess, in his 1973 article *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movements: A Summary* accounts his concern for prevailing insensitivity towards environmental degradation and loss. He opines that attempts made by anthropocentric ecologists to regain ecological health are inadequate, insufficient and ‘shallow’, and the only way out is ‘Deep Ecology’, which adopts an ecosophical standpoint to address issues like global warming, climate change, pollution, and deforestation. He further asserts in his book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (1989) that

Quality of life is here considered to be something incompatible with artificial, material standards above that necessary for the satisfaction of fundamental needs, and secondly, that ecological considerations are to be regarded as preconditions for life quality, therefore not outside human responsibility...The lifestyle of the majority should be changed so that the material standard of living in Western countries becomes universalisable within this century. A consumption over and above that which everyone can attain within the foreseeable future cannot be justified (89).

Scholars like Arne Naess, George Sessions and Bill Devall fear shallow environmentalism and long for truly nature-centred ventures like “biocentric equality”, “biospherical egalitarianism”, and “ecological egalitarianism” (Keller 140) to tackle the alarming situation of environmental emergency. Naess condemns the seriousness of Judeo-Christianity in addressing ecological concerns and states that the arrogance of

Christian stewardship is doing nothing but promoting age-old human superiority over other creatures. Deep ecology looks forward to major Eastern religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism as the precursors of deep ecology. Do Hinduism and Buddhism really have tangible solutions to the ecological problems? If at all these religions provide solace to the problems, how exactly are these religions fundamentally different from Western Christianity? Do Hinduism and Buddhism have plausible environmental moral standing?

Eastern Religions and Natural Representation

We have discussed how Western Christianity has failed to attract environmentalists and eco-theologists even after several reformatory ecological endeavours. This enduring hopelessness and despondency and an exhaustive search for a spiritual tradition which places human beings and other creatures of the natural world on the same moral footing have shifted the attention of the philosophers and researchers to Eastern religious practices with a hope of getting an ecologically sustainable culture of living. Unlike the prophetic tradition of the West, Eastern religions have different environmental rhetoric, which, in many ways, is distinct from Christianity. For example, “in Hinduism, the entire universe is God, and for Buddhism, reincarnation as an animal in a future life is fully compatible with being a human in this one” (Gottlieb 2). The idea of rebirth and reincarnation, and that too in any form of life, is a central trope in these religions, which creates a fear in the minds of the human community that if they do not act judiciously and religiously, they might be turned into animals in their next life. While the majority of the denominations of Christianity reject the doctrine of reincarnation, Buddhism firmly sticks to this idea and believes that human actions should be morally guided “[a]nd, in any case, the goal of a realised Buddhist (at least in the Mahayana tradition) [is] to ease the suffering of “all sentient beings” not just of people” (2). These Eastern religions, including Jainism, also believe in the philosophy of ‘Karma’ (our actions), which determines how much higher/lower we can go on the spiritual ladder. In India, which has been a fertile ground for many of the world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, people have “believed in and acted on this concept of biodivinity (the world around them was divinified)” (2) and this tradition of associating everything with divinity has been successfully and usefully translated into action by its practitioners. The religious doctrines of Mahābhūta (great elements) in Hinduism and Catudhātu (four

elements) in Buddhism are ingrained so consciously in the minds of its true practitioners that they keep realising the significance of space, earth, water, air and fire ('panchtatva' or the 'five elements' are described in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad) in the formation of their body. Since all the five elements which constitute the human body belong to Nature, the followers of these religions feel indebted to Nature and that gets reflected in their attaching divinity to air (vayu devta), water (jal devta) and fire (agni devta) and revering them like 'devatas' (mentioned in the Vedic literature of Hinduism, 'devata' is a Sanskrit word for deity). Vasudha Narayanan (2001) espouses that "Hinduism is more than a religion; it is a way of life" (179). Further, she also acknowledges that "there is a deep relationship between religion and ingrained social structures and behavioural patterns" (180). The West looks to the East for a religious, environmental rhetoric that is not discriminatory, unecological, and destructive, and the East offers a tradition and culture of living that is not divisive, if not all-inclusive. So, are we in a position to argue that Eastern religious practices can propose a panacea to the problems of ecological damage? Do Eastern religious beliefs and customs propagate a naturalist lifestyle? If yes, why do the countries practising these religions face the same ecological concerns?

In the previous paragraphs, we discussed three major religions of the world, hoping to find a remedy to our contemporary challenges of ecological loss. Though Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism cultivate biocentric attitudes and behaviours that are significantly different from the ones which Western Christianity teach, the solutions to the problems of Nature seem far away. Pondering over the question of whether our problems have become so refractory and uncontrollable that no religion looks sufficient to address them? David L. Haberman (2017) argues that environmental ravage in its present purview is such that it "demands new responses; no religious tradition in its present form is fully prepared to address the current problems" (36). Emma Tomalin (2004) espouses that Hindu religious practices abound in bio-divinity elements that attach divinity to Nature. However, Tomalin also feels that Hindu traditions and performances lack the idea of environmental conservation and protection as they worship Nature only for worshipping. She refuses to accept that there is any inherent philosophy of ecological sustainability in Hinduism. Religious environmentalism— the application of the beliefs and practices of biodivinity in dealing with environmental issues—, Tomalin argues had never been a part of Hinduist religious

performativities. She dismisses the popular belief that all Hinduist religious practices are environmentally friendly and writes:

while all religious traditions can be interpreted in a way that supports environmentalist thinking, and there are numerous examples where religion has served to preserve natural features, it is anachronistic to claim that religious traditions are inherently environmentally friendly or that people who practised them were environmentalists (268).

Mary Evelyn Tucker (2017) also emphatically stated, “No Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic scriptures contain concepts like ‘environmental crisis’, ‘ecosystems’ or ‘sustainable development’, or concepts corresponding to them” (36). However, this does not imply a lack of concern for the natural environment. Even though the explicit terms frequently used in the modern-day ecological discourse are absent from the scriptures of Eastern religions, we cannot assume that there are no underlying references or principles of environmental stewardship in these religious traditions. The ideas of bio-divinity, interconnectedness, sustainable living and ethical treatment of the ecology have helped these socio-religious practices live peacefully with nature. If such was the case that Eastern religions, even after being biocentric, lack the concept of environmental protection, why was the West looking to them for solutions to environmental problems? Ramchandra Guha, in his article *Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique* (1989), remarks that “this appropriation of Eastern traditions is in part dictated by the need to construct an authentic lineage and in part a desire to promote deep ecology as a universalistic philosophy” (3). Guha further observes that the “reading of Eastern traditions is selective and does not bother to differentiate between alternate (and changing) religious and cultural traditions” (3). Guha’s arguments on the everchanging and volatile nature of religions are crucial and notable if we want to understand the loss of faith and religious traditions. Emma Tomalin (2004) blames globalisation, capitalism, and secularisation as the major forces behind the ecological crisis as they have affected the local biocentric beliefs and customs of religious traditions. Mentioning the case of diminishing groves, Tomalin asserts that “sacred groves are decreasing because of the dilution of traditional values, westernisation, and migration” (275). The commercialisation of the land by the Britishers with the introduction of coffee plantations led to the deforestation of these pristine forests. The implementation of the British Forest Act of 1865 rejected the villagers’

claim over the forests. She also finds mainstream Hindu Religion responsible for ecological degradation as it thrusts upon its gods and goddesses over local deities (277). Local beliefs and traditions significantly impact the lives of the locales as they fear their local deities and avoid doing what has been prohibited. With the introduction of mainstream gods, the belief tends to follow the rituals of the mainstream religion, and the local sets of rules and customs break away, resulting in the loss of culture and practices. However, Tomalin refuses to accept that local socio-religious practices ingrain ecological values in them as she states that “any protection of biodiversity was coincidental rather than intentional and that sacred groves were protected out of respect of the deity rather than because of an innate belief in the intrinsic value of nature” (278). The Western countries unhesitantly claim that ‘environmentalism’ is the product of Western post-materialistic spiritual ethics, and the Eastern religious practices received the philosophy of environmentalism only from the West. Calling it Western hypocrisy, Ramchandra Guha attacks this prerogative and writes:

it is, the allegedly civilized, who have decimated forests and the wildlife that previously sustained both tiger and tribal. With rifles and quest for trophies, [they] first hunted wild species to extinction; now [they] disguise [themselves] as conservationists and complain that Adivasis are getting in the way. The real ‘population problem’ is in America, where the birth of one child has the same impact on the global environment as the birth of about seventy Indonesian children. Worse, the birth of an American dog or cat was the ecological equivalent of the birth of a dozen Bangladeshi children (303).

Undoubtedly, religions across the globe have decisively changed and transformed the lives of human communities. However, our moral and ethical responsibilities towards the nonhuman entities of the natural world need to be reevaluated and revisited, as it will be too late if we continue at such a pace. Eastern religions and their scriptures look ecologically more sustainable. However, the ecological wisdom of even these religions is not properly and usefully transferred into action. So, should we conclude that religions can’t be helpful in our struggle against ecological tragedy? Roger S. Gottlieb (2006) looks optimistic and believes that “despite the fact that conservative and fundamentalist forces in religion have been at the centre of public attention for some time, a blanket claim about religion’s backward social role is dreadfully sloppy” (9). So far, we have talked about the mainstream religions’ approaches towards the environment and the

associated calamities, but are they the only factors affecting human behavioural attitudes? Many marginalised varieties of mainstream religions exist in different parts of the globe. Indigenous religions that adhere to their customs and rituals have the potential to significantly contribute to the canon of environmentalism and eco-theology through their unique perspectives and practices. Should we not look at the indigenous ways of living to develop a better understanding of the religions? What is religious environmentalism, and how can it be crucial in addressing the issues of biodiversity degradation?

Religious Environmentalism

Religious environmentalism, a practice of natural protection derived from religious texts' teachings, is significant in shaping the followers' attitude towards environmental protection. As discussed earlier, Eastern religions are believed to share a harmonious relationship with the natural world, as their teachings promote reverence, interconnectedness, and sustainable development. Religious environmentalism attempts to foster a mindset that asserts that a divine entity has created this world. Therefore, it should be protected from human exploitative interventions. Lynn White (1967) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr acknowledge that our societal values bear a profound imprint of religious influence. Nasr, in particular, posits that the pervasive ecological devastation is not an isolated crisis but rather symptomatic of a broader problem of values deeply rooted in religious principles. (Sayem 272). However, we also see attempts to find alternative solutions to the impending ecological disasters where religion has no role. Numerous research works from the fields of Sociology, Education, and Economics suggest various ways to deal with issues related to the environment. They also believed that the solution to the ecological crisis doesn't need to come solely from religion because it affects and determines our values and attitudes towards the other forms of life on the planet. The solutions can often be found without centralising religion, and exploring alternatives may be possible. For example, there can be instances where our behaviour is shaped and conditioned by other institutional or cultural influences like political doctrines. Moreover, Religious congruence, Mark Chaves (2010) observes, is rare because "...religious ideas and practices generally are fragmented, compartmentalized, loosely connected, unexamined, and context dependent" (2). Here, Chaves is not undermining religion's role in defining our behaviour; his assertion about religious congruence underscores that human beings do not exclusively ascribe

responsibility for their actions to religion. And if our religious attitudes are not in agreement or harmony, how can it be assertively concluded that all our actions are the results of our religious upbringing? Is it not true that we behave differently in various situations, and often, it is possible that our actions are contrary to religious scriptures? If this is the case, asserting that not all our actions conform to religious norms would be accurate. Also, should we believe the interpretations of our religious texts so impulsively that we keep rejecting other possible explanations of it? And if we agree to believe that our religion-influenced behaviour might be the consequence of our wrong assumption about the text, are we ready to adopt the right version of it? Bron Taylor (2005) advocates the inclusion of anthropological, sociological and materialist study and interpretation of our religious attitudes and behaviour and argues that the cosmological reading of our religious texts has misrepresented our relationship with ecology and society (xv). Our anthropocentric outlook towards nature might be the result of our misinterpretation of religious texts, as it is often argued that scholars have “left much nature-related religiosity out of sight” (1375-1376), and White’s debatable arguments about Christianity are no exception. But even when scholars refuted the indictment of Christianity, Elspeth Whitney (2005) argues that Lynn White’s argument on religion being the only way to tackle our environmental problems still remains unchallenged. Citing Whitney’s arguments, Willis Jenkins (2009), elucidates that no matter to what extent eco-theologians expostulate against White’s assumptions, they would also end up believing that “...environmentalism was at bottom a religious and ethical movement” (286). Religious environmentalism, in this case, becomes an important tool to address the issues of natural calamity. This is possible because, as discussed above, our behaviours are significantly influenced by religion, and we are seeking solutions to our environmental catastrophes through religion.

As discussed earlier, Eastern religions and many indigenous religious practices have components or rituals that regard nature as something that needs to be protected for our survival on the planet. Many Western scholars argue that environmentalism is a prerogative of Western scholarship, and thus, no Eastern religions can claim themselves to be inherently environmentalists. However, Eliza F. Kent, in her book *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India* (2013), mentions some examples of sacred groves from the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu where people have protected their local environment. Christianity and other indigenous religious practices,

which were once charged with being anthropocentric, have also evolved to adopt environmentalism as their central tenet. Many Christian communities help people re-interpret religious texts to promote environmental ethics, as they also try to make practical theological strategies so they can be implemented easily.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed ecocriticism, a 20th-century literary and cultural theory that studies the association between nature and literature. Ecocriticism was an attempt to include nature and its related issues in literature, which was absent from it. We also took into account the different developmental stages of Ecocriticism to understand how, since its inception in the 1960s, ecocriticism as a theory has evolved to include the ideas of ecofeminism, eco-Marxism posthumanism, ethnicity, eco(post)colonialism and ecocentrism. Adopting the wave metaphor of feminism, Lawrence Buell divides ecocriticism into waves where he tries to draw lines between first-wave and second-wave ecocriticism. However, he finds it tedious to make conclusive remarks about them as there are many points of productive overlap between the two. First-wave ecocriticism focused mainly on nature writing, while second-wave ecocriticism shifted its attention to the ideas of environmental justice and, thus, unlike its predecessor, it “has favoured a sociocentric rather than biocentric and/or individual-experience-oriented ethics and aesthetics, placing particular emphasis on environmental justice concerns” (Buell et al. 419). Also, Buell (2011) observes that first-wave ecocriticism favoured rural and wild settings over urban landscapes. Contrary to the first wave, the second wave of ecocriticism opposes any artificial division between the rural and urban spaces and foregrounds, stating that both should be studied and analysed together to better understand the natural environment (93). Third-wave ecocriticism, on the other hand, takes a multidisciplinary approach to look at the representation of nature from the perspectives of ethnicity and indigeneity, but at the same time, it also goes beyond the barriers of ethnic/local and national boundaries. It has made significant advances to include unexplored literary pieces by authors of colour and women—this was what Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) wished for when she wrote, “...we can expect to see ecocritical scholarship becoming ever more interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international” (xxv). We also discussed how Lynn White Jr. attests that Western Christianity is one of the primary reasons behind our anthropocentric attitude towards nature, as it inculcated the idea of human supremacy over other forms of life on the planet. White’s

controversial and debated take on religion became so central to the discussion around preserving and conserving environments that scholars started looking for religions and indigenous practices that share harmonious interconnectedness with nature. Eastern religions, scholars argue, are inherently biocentric or ecocentric, and their practitioners behave in an ecologically sustainable way. Lastly, we talked about the idea of religious environmentalism— an idea developed in the West and not Eastern religions can claim themselves to be environmentalists—which scholars believe can be an essential tool for tackling the issues of environmental crisis.

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Chapter 3

Indigenous Cultures, Ecological Wisdom and Magahi Folk Songs

In the previous chapter, we analysed the theoretical aspects and the different developmental stages of ecocriticism to discuss how human civilisation has exploited the other aspects of life forms to fulfil our trifling and inconsequential needs. We also explored and examined the different environmentalist approaches in an attempt to develop a detailed and comprehensive understanding of the disastrous situation of Nature and our palpable position on the planet. Further, we delved into Western Christianity to ponder their roles in inseminating an unecological and anthropocentric behaviour towards the plant and animal kingdom. Lynn White's debated article *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (1967) on the role of Western Christianity in propagating human-centred attitudes gave rise to an endless number of scholarly debates, intellectual discussions, academic discourses and, of course, controversies. White's philosophical standpoint on the nature of the Judeo-Christian anthropocentric outlook became decisive and central to many disciplines, including eco-philosophy and eco-theology. However, we also explicitly talked about different and varied voices against the viewpoint that Western Christianity, which is essentialist and innately anthropocentric, has guided the modern-day ecological abuse and crisis. Interpretation of the spiritual texts of Christianity also seemed to be a major argument against the allegation of anthropocentrism, as Christian theologians discredited this indictment and insisted on the reinterpretation of the Bible. Frederick Ferre, for instance, defends the human-centric attitude towards other non-human entities because human existence is only possible if humans think like humans. On the other hand, William Grey is opposed to Ferre's extreme and uncompromising views and suggests that our actions should be such that they do not disturb the cycles of Nature. The chapter also discussed concepts like 'weak anthropocentrism' to justify our unavoidable position as superior creatures. Is 'weak anthropocentrism' the only way of looking at nature? Or can there be other possible solutions for growing environmental degradation?

Besides this, we also ventured into Eastern religious traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism to trace how they are different from Western Christianity in dealing with matters related to ecological sustainability. The Eastern religions' eco-philosophical doctrine of biodivinity looks promising as they not only regard nature as something that

needs to be cared for, valued, and worshipped but also, on many occasions, try to protect them. The idea of biodivinty stems from the philosophy of ecocentrism, which inarguably places nature at the centre of the existence of life on the planet. The previous chapter also talked about the feminist ideology of ecofeminism– a political and social activism that studies the relationship between the sufferings of nature and women. After examining a long array of religious practices, it becomes apparent that Eastern religions attempt to place nature on a higher moral pedestal. If not, they at least aim to treat human and non-human entities with equal regard. The Eco-philosophies like deep ecology and biodivinty also look promising in providing permanent and feasible models of environmentalism. The discussion from the previous chapter clarified that religion constitutes an integral part of human lives, significantly affecting their attitude and behaviours and defining them on many levels. Traditional indigenous religious practices (mostly obscure and neglected by the mainstream religious practices), which we discussed at the end of the first chapter, signalled overarching credence in reestablishing the synergism between humans and other aspects of creations. Are indigenous practices ecologically friendly? How are indigenous religions different from mainstream religions? To what extent can they be helpful in adequately addressing our biospheric problems? This chapter, while attempting to answer these questions, also looks at copious amount of field-collected Magahi folk song-texts both in this chapter and the subsequent chapter to see how their address the questions of environmental crisis.

Hinduism and Nature

This chapter proposes a detailed analysis of indigenous religious customs and beliefs to ascertain how these traditional modes of living can be pivotal and decisive in redefining our attempts to safeguard the environment in a rapidly changing world. The concern of the present study, however, is strictly focused on the ecological elements in Magahi folk culture. Here, it is also important to note that the study revolves around ‘religious environmentalism’ as manifested in folk songs of the Magahi community. Which religion is referenced in the Magahi folk songs? Is it Hinduism or some folk religion? In any case, it is essential to briefly look at the ecological values ingrained in and promoted through Hinduism, the largest religion in India. However, it should be made clear that the present research does not aim to bracket indigenous religions with the larger idea of Hinduism. But it will also be equally appropriate to say that many indigenous practices these days look highly influenced by Hinduism, the reasons for which, however, can vary

from place to place. Hinduism is a religion that emphasises ecocentrism and advocates for harmony between human beings and the natural environment (Stoll 265). Even during the Indus Valley Civilization, archaeologists and historians have found evidence of animals and plants on the seals and coins used for merchant activities during those times, which is reflective of the proximity between humans and non-human entities (42-43). Right from the advent of one of the oldest river valley human civilizations, people have worshipped and feared Nature gods, the evidence of which can be traced back to the different icons and artefacts of that time. Further, the sacred Hindu texts like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Geeta*, etc., also have many references to attaching divinity to Nature— rivers, plants, animals, etc. Summarising this ancient bond between humans and Nature, Kapila Vatsyanan writes:

Man's life depends upon and is conditioned by all that surrounds him and sustains him, namely, inanimate, mineral and animate, aquatic, vegetative, animal and gaseous life. It is, therefore, Man's duty to constantly remind himself – in individual and collective life – of the environment and the ecology (Coward 412).

Citing the inherent ecological principle in the Hindu way of life, Peter Marshall (1992) argues that “Hinduism is unique among the world's major religions in having no organization or formal institutionalized controls” and thus “has always been tolerant of and hospitable to different beliefs and practices” (Marshall 35). He further asserts that Hinduism, unlike Judaeo-Christian, is an ecocentric religion which operates around the doctrine of ahimsa (non-violence or non-harm) and Karma, with strong and clear faith in the cycle of rebirth— the one which gives equal opportunity to all the living entities to climb up or down the ladder of being, depending upon the way they behave with other forms of existence on the planet. Hinduism has never been an organised religion, and this fluidity in the religious practices makes it “a practice-based religion rather than a faith-based one” (Spinner-Halev 29) -- where culture is given more importance than creed. But the inherent Hindu philosophy that binds these diverse cultures together is the Sanskrit phrase *Tat Twam Assi*, which means ‘thou art that’. This total submission before the supreme creator creates a sense of mutual respect for other creatures on the planet. Traditionally, the Hindu religious texts consider *Panch Mahabhutas* (five great elements) -- *Prithivi* (earth), *Agni* (fire), *Vayu* (air), *Jal* (water) and *Akash* (space) as the

fundamental material causes of creation on the planet which also gets specified in *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*:

Yenavritam nityamidam hi sarvam ...

Teneshitam karma vivartate ha prithvyaptejoanilkhani chintyam

[The Brahman by whom this entire universe is engulfed...this creation is governed by Him as well as the five great elements: earth, air, space, water, and light.]

(Dwivedi 27)

Often deified by the Hindu communities, these five *Mahabhutas* are believed to create, sustain and nurture the life forms, and after death or decay, they are absorbed by their parent bodies– the ones from where they originated earlier. This intricate and incessant relationship between the human society and the *Mahabhutas* often gets reflected in the community's religious practices as they worship and revere them as *devatas* (the gods)– Agni devata and Vayu devata, etc. Moreover, these deities serve as the community's guardians and protectors, significantly influencing their lives and activities. People also follow strict rules for protecting and preserving the entities associated with these gods (Negi and Saklani 131). People across different Hindu communities commonly believe that a *Devata* is someone who bestows (*jo deta hai wahi devata hai*). Hence, we see deities related to many aspects of human survival– Van Devta and Jal Devata, etc. Humans and these deities also play an integrative role and carry social responsibility related to protecting the family, environment, livestock and agriculture from calamities. Talking about the ecospirituality in India's context, O. P. Dwivedi mentions four different approaches: 1) *Vasudeva sarvam*, the Supreme Being that resides in all beings; 2) *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, the family of Mother Earth; 3) *Sarva-bhuta-hita*, the welfare of all beings; and 4) Dharmic ecology to better understand the Hindu's ways of ecological management (Chapple and Tucker 4). Further, he also explains how the Hindu religious text the *Bhagavad Geeta* propounds the belief that “ether, air, fire, water, earth, planets, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers, and seas, they all are organs of God's body; remembering this, a devotee respects all species” (5). All these philosophical and religious standpoints of Hinduism drive its proponents towards living a sustainable life, keeping in view the well-being of the other creatures on the planet. What are indigenous practices, and how do they exactly differ from Hinduism?

Indigenous Ecological Traditions and Cultural Imperialism

In this section of the chapter, we propose a detailed analysis of indigenous religious customs and beliefs to understand how indigenous cultures address the question of environmental degradation. This overview of indigenous practices is important because it highlights the crucial role of traditional practices in maintaining a symbiotic relationship with nature. It also seeks to shed light on how these ancient practices have been excluded from modern discussions. Emphasising their significance can help argue for their role in environmental protection. Our concern here is to investigate the role of ecological imperialism in disturbing and damaging the indigenous ecosystem. Ecological imperialism is a form of imperialism advocated by Alfred Crosby (1986) to extend the periphery of cultural and political domination and brutality to the ecology and biosphere of the indigenous communities. On the other hand (we will take this point up in detail later in this and the subsequent chapters) indigenous practices can be defined as a set of belief systems, languages, deities, rituals, customs, festivities, and ceremonies of small-scale societies that can offer an alternate way to negate the effects of such imperialism. Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft, in the book entitled *Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)* (2017), describe indigenous religion as:

a globalising discourse, consisting of notions of an indigenous we and a flexible, but standardised, vocabulary of assumed similarities: harmony with and care for nature; healing and holism: antiquity and spirituality; shamanism and animism; and autochthonous claims to place announced in the idiom of genealogical connections between the living, ancestors, and the cosmos itself (4).

Practised in almost every corner of the world, indigenous traditions share holistic, sustainable, dynamic, and customary practices and rites of passage that contribute to maintaining a fine balance between nature and human beings. Indigenous traditions share a lot of commonalities, including Nature worship, belief in multiple deities, community gathering and participation, structural flexibility and an ecocentric lifestyle. Aboriginal paradigms and ethics are very close to Nature as they share the ideas of balance, sustainability and interrelatedness with and within ecology. These native and primordial structures of ancient knowledge of restorative egalitarianism can be crucial in imparting commitments and responsibilities toward the biosphere. Mostly environment-friendly in

their approaches and attitude, indigenous religions do not disturb the environmental cycles as they believe that Nature, too, has the right “to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles” (Anderson et al. 2). Granting rights to the biotic and abiotic components of the environment, these endemic traditional ethics and ecological principles consider Nature as a living entity and ensure that human beings are not abusing it for their selfish and arrogant demands. Across many indigenous cultures, we see a variety of practices that illustrate ethical codes of behaviour intended to conserve and protect Nature. This ancient environmental wisdom of sharing, caring, and mutual respect has been significant in maintaining a cordial relationship with nature, manifesting through the ecological balance at their designated places. Transferred through generations, these customary exercises of revering the environment and considering sentient and insentient entities as conscious and responsive beings help these communities to develop a holy communion with Nature. The environmental philosophy of biodivinity (attaching divinity to biotic entities) is a common trait among indigenous practices. This biocentric (non-anthropocentric) vantage point sets these primeval convictions apart from the practitioners of anthropocentrism. These primitive and native understandings of ecology are not merely abstract belief systems but are lived and practised experiences which still have their function in this mechanised and industrialised world. Mary N. Macdonald, in the article *The Primitive, the Primal, and the Indigenous in the Study of Religion* (2011), highlights the importance of these non-globalised religious performativities and argues that they “may help us to better appreciate religion as a lived reality informing the behaviour of individuals and communities” (815). This mutual and cooperative interchange of ecological experiences between globalised and local religious communities can have favourable and advantageous consequences on the well-being of Nature. If indigenous environmental traditions have so much to offer to solve our ecological problems, why don’t the institutionalised religions accept these ancient, native and sustainable practices? Why do these practices still remain marginalised and unnoticed?

Globalised religions have well-established centres, scholarly research, and designated and designed courses and syllabi; however, aboriginal religious practices lack such institutionalised and centralised endeavours. The absence of any combined governmental approach and political activism to make a systematic, methodical and exhaustive study keeps these religious traditions on the fringes of religious studies.

Gloria Snively, in *Honoring Aboriginal Science Knowledge and Wisdom in an Environmental Education Graduate Program* (2006), quotes Devine and Tehennepe and argues that:

[a]lthough first nation residents have long utilized time-tested approaches to sustaining both human communities and environments, academic interest among scientists and science educators in living indigenous approaches is recent, and science instruction and research have been linked with marginalizing and even alienating Native students and entire communities (195).

She further notes that “[n]ative culture and history are often presented in both university education courses and school curricula as narrow, stereotypical portrayals based on inaccurate accounts of the nature of science, history and indigenous culture” (195). Moreover, the diversity and vastness of the reach of these practices to far-off places like dense forests, indefatigable mountains, and fathomless deserts create immense trouble for the researchers in building a common consensus and concord on the commonality they have within them. James L. Cox (2007) observes that “to speak of Indigenous Religions as a single category is highly problematic, particularly since there are as many indigenous religious traditions as there are indigenous peoples, and because indigenous views often have been adapted into the world religions themselves” (1). Citing the indigenous traditions of India, he further remarks that “with an ancient history of engagement between various civilizations, the problem is so difficult that to speak of indigenous peoples tends to confuse issues of identity rather than to clarify them” (2). When mainstream religions failed tremendously to extend any relief to the existing ecological devastation, they shifted their attention to aboriginal environmental practices for a remedy to those issues. Usually, the major religious traditions consciously keep neglecting indigenous traditions' ethical values and spiritual cognisance by rejecting and disparaging their performativities as unenlightened and benighted. Institutionalised religions consciously involve themselves in marginalising primitive religions with the aim of projecting themselves as superior and civilised. Here, we should not forget the politics of creating the ‘other’ to present and establish ourselves as more enlightened and humanised to remain in an authoritative position. The repressive colonial history of discrimination, chauvinism and bigotry speak conceivably of the atrocities of the colonisers on the indigenous communities in the name of ‘civilising missions.’ Kyle

Whyte, in the article *Settler Colonialism, Ecology and Environmental Justice* (2018), quotes Lee Maracle, who compares the brutality inflicted on Nature and human beings and argues that “violence to earth and violence between humans are connected” (125). This endemic colonial ‘barbarity’ and ‘ferocity’ of the native culture, ritual and naturalist intelligence disturbed the fabric of existing mutual interdependence between humans and non-humans. Attacking the local belief systems, the colonisers forced the indigenous people to accept their language, culture, religion and tradition. This systematised and organised cultural violence against the aboriginal communities to make it a new homeland by acquiring their share of land, water and other natural resources led to settler colonialism (replacement of the indigenous groups to claim their land). This structured attempt to latch onto others' property is “the disruption of indigenous relationship to land [that] represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (Tuck and Yang 5). Settler colonialism’s gross ecological injustice and irrevocable loss of local environmental ethics are such that it has significantly disturbed the interconnection of the natives with the flora and fauna of the land. However, we still can trace some effective intellectual and ecological insights to tackle our environmentally destructive ways of living. If some indigenous practices still exist that can solve our ecological ways, how difficult is it to track them? Are the mainstream religious practices and the powerful nations serious about these native and traditional ways of existence?

Settler colonialism’s autocratic, despotic and theocentric attitude toward dealing with the native people has been so devastating that the majority of the traditional environmental wisdom has perished. Marie Battiste compares these absolutist behaviours of the colonisers as a form of ‘cognitive imperialism’– “a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values” (Traditional Knowledge). These intergenerational ethical, ecological, and eco-social modules of coexistence failed to understand the politics involved in the colonisers' claim to civilise the native population. Patrick Wolfe, in the article *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the native* (2006), writes:

...with the European sovereigns who laid claim to the territories of non-Christian (or, in later secularized versions, uncivilized) inhabitants of the rest of the world: justifications for this claim were derived from a disputatious arena of scholarly controversy that had been prompted by

European conquests in the Americas and is misleadingly referred to, in the singular, as the doctrine of discovery. Though a thoroughgoing diminution of native entitlement was axiomatic to discovery, the discourse was primarily addressed to relations between European sovereigns rather than to relations between Europeans and natives (390).

The Eurocentric understanding and justification of the genocide and the loss of biodiversity in the ecologically pristine areas look insufficient and illogical. Settler colonists made several attempts to eliminate and replace the local people to have complete control and authority over the land and other resources that could be used to garner economic benefits. The severity of brutality and cruelty of the elimination projects can be acknowledged by the number of genocides and massacres that took place in those areas. The flawed and fictitious claims of racial, religious, lingual and intellectual superiority by the imperial nations to gain dominance over the aboriginal communities “involve[d] the use of particularized modes of control- prisons, ghettos minoritizing, schooling, policing” (Tuck and Yang 5). European countries like Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal exercised their cruel and vicious imperial control over many parts of the non-European countries, damaging the local beliefs and systems. This dominance over the flora and fauna was so huge that by 1945, “Britain and France had about 75% of Africa under their colonial control” (Oloruntoba and Falola 173). Settler colonies provided a safe home for European emigrants from Britain, France, Germany, Italy, etc., who rushed to these newly acquired lands, but they continued their cultural, religious and educational ties with their motherlands. With colonisers bringing unjustifiable acts, rules and regulations to have full sovereignty over the rightful owners of the land, the locals got displaced to newer settlements, resulting in a break from their cultural progression. The resettlement of the aboriginal people to new lands disrupted their traditional and cultural values, including the practices of nature worship and reverence of local deities. What are the other main reasons behind the loss of ecological values and ethics? How have the mainstream religions contributed to the degradation of the culture and tradition of the indigenous communities? Apart from the land acquisition acts, what were the other violent and exclusionary means that the colonisers adopted to destroy the ecological sacredness of the land?

Previously, we discussed the role of settler colonialism in aggravating the folk traditions of ethnic communities across the world. Though land accession was one of the

significant destructive means they used to get a hold of their colonies, other factors also contributed to demeaning the colonised ways of worship, harvesting, festivities, birthing and several other rites of passage performativities. Since the majority of the countries involved in the colonising projects were Christian-following nations, they even used religion as a weapon to denigrate and disparage indigenous religious practices. Supported and sponsored by the state mechanism, Christianity was used as an arrogant religious weapon by the imperialist powers of Europe to denounce and castigate the aboriginal systems of beliefs and traditions. Edward E. Andrews, in the article *Christian Missions and Colonial Empires Reconsidered: A Black Evangelist in West Africa 1766-1816* (2010) noted that Christianity “although emotionally appealing to many, the imperial approach was not completely intellectually satisfying” as the missionaries dubiously projected themselves as “visible saints, exemplars of idea piety in a sea of persistent savagery”, but with time their real intentions were exposed after the “civil rights movements, anti-colonialism, and growing secularization” (663-666). Intellectuals and academicians lambast Christianity as the doctrines of the religion were used to rationalise their brutal and inhumane agendas of control and dominance over the native people. In his revisionist study of the role of Christianity in disseminating colonial agendas, Ian Copland (2006) argues that:

...European imperialism was actuated by a quest for ‘God, Gold and Glory’-‘God’, in this alliterative tripos, standing in for Christian (or more specifically, Protestant Christian) missionary proselytizing to spread the ‘good news’ of the Gospels that sinners can find redemption - and gain ‘eternal life’-through the ‘saving grace’ of Jesus Christ. Where the flag went, another metaphor proclaimed, the cross was never far behind (1025).

European expansionist and schismatic policies employed Christianity to expand and extend their colonies not only to garner economic benefits but also to convert people to Christianity, which they considered as their duty to save indigenous people from eternal damnation. Stating that the “agenda of colonialism in Africa was similar to that of Christianity”, Toyin Falola (1998) quotes Rev. Jan H. Boer and opines that “colonialism is a form of imperialism based on a divine mandate and designed to bring liberation—spiritual, cultural, economic and political— by sharing the blessings of the Christ-inspired civilization of the West” (33). The Christian missionaries opened new schools (which

primarily aimed at converting indigenous people to Christianity), and even the old schools were used to promote the doctrine of the Bible. This constant and gradual shrinking of natives' schools, housing landscapes and places of worship negatively affected the indigenous religious and cultural practices. With diminishing local religiosity, the relationship that the indigenous people used to share with the environment also weakened. On the one hand, the continuous and ceaseless encroachment of the land and places of worship and the perpetual wearing out of the native religious and environmental ethics led the primaeval ecologically sustainable traditions to the fringes. The religious traditions of revering and protecting the species of plants and animals because of the fear of the local deities' intervention slowly and gradually became things of the distant past. The massive emigration of people from the colonising country disturbed the demography of the colonised states, resulting in ecological imbalance. Unaware of the local environment and systems of rituals and beliefs, the Europeans exploited the native flora and fauna that the aboriginal communities otherwise considered sacred and protected. Religious militancy appropriated by the Christian missionaries was so devastating and impactful that traces of the ecological ransacking can still be found. When European invaders came to the 'Neo-Europe' (the places captured, colonised and conquered by the Europeans), they also brought their countries' plants and animals, thus damaging and disturbing the native ecosystem. In his seminal work *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (1986), Alfred Crosby mentions many such cases of ecological imperialism over the animal and plant kingdom of the native land. Crosby writes that:

the imported weeds must have taken over large areas in the West Indies, Mexico, and other places, because the Iberian conquest created enormous areas of disturbed ground. Forests were razed for timber and fuel and to make ways for new enterprises; burgeoning herds of Old World grazed and overgrazed the grasslands and invaded the woodlands; and the cultivated fields of the declining Amerindian populations reverted to nature, a nature whose most aggressive plants were now exotic immigrants (151).

Corby further quotes Friar Bartolome de las Casas, who argues that "large herds of cattle and other European animals in the West Indies eating native plants down to the roots in the first half of the sixteenth century, followed by the spread of ferns, thistles, plantain...." (151). The colonisers exposed the indigenous people to foreign trade and

commerce, which escalated the rate of deforestation and other ecological exploitations. Even Karl Marx was vocal about the capitalist politics involved in wiping out the cultural and traditional ways of ecological justice practised by the primordial communities. John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, in their article *Ecological Imperialism: The Curse of Capitalism* (2004), mention Karl Marx, who opines that “the removal of peasants from the land-by-land enclosures and the abrogation of customary, common rights, [distance them from] direct access to or control over the material means of production” (187). Capitalism, religious militancy, and migration combinedly displaced native masses who understood their ecosystems better than the colonisers, and the settling of the European natives to ‘Neo-Europe fulfilled the aims of ecological imperialism.

This trend of ecological imperialism became a usual practice across the colonised communities, spreading over Australia, India, and many African countries. Though they struggled and faced many casualties during their attempt to control and disturb the native ecosystem, they continued their imperial project of gaining control over the natural resources of the colonies. They were so arrogant in their behaviour that they hardly strived to “understand the land and how it had already supported human life made it easier made it easier for them to simply impose their own worldview... [because for them] the colony’s ecology meant that the land became a blank canvas on which an imperial vision could be established” (Crosby 15). Even the local population that earlier used to worship Nature and avoided exploiting it because they feared some mishappenings when saw the foreigners making money out of them, they also started violating the traditional ecological modes of attaching themselves to them. Emma Tomalin (2004) mentions one such incident from India:

basically, underlying this one is the greed you see. It is due to materialism and the influence of Western culture. Because of that, we have lost our values and culture. ... These things wouldn’t have happened ten years back, twenty years back– it was unthinkable. Today, they are encroaching, tomorrow the sacred groves will be denuded (275).

There were several other instances of European viciousness over the native population and their local belief systems. Adrienne Mayor, in the article *The Nessus Shirt in the New World: Smallpox Blankets in History and Legend* (1995), hints toward a more notorious and noxious way of dealing with the native population by contaminating them with

diseases like smallpox. They provided the aboriginal people with infected blankets, clothes, food, etc., to wipe them out of the place so that they could get a hold of the land and other resources. Mayor, in her article, gives a reference to a “British commander Amherst [who] ordered his men to infect Indians by presenting them with blankets used by smallpox victims” (57). This deliberate transmission of endemic diseases was part of a despicable plan to exterminate the local population. Not only this, but the Europeans also “encouraged suspicion among Indians and non-Indians, by blaming one another and various outsiders, for spreading the contagion, and by their threats to send smallpox” (59). As of now, we have discussed how ecological imperialism spread all over the world and used organised Christianity and chronic capitalism to inferiorise and manipulate Nature to execute their models of economic and religious superiority. Now, we will shift our attention to other forms of ecological destruction. We will also examine the reasons which fostered the environmentally destructive ways even after colonisation.

Ecological Imperialism in India

Previously, we discussed how ecological imperialism has disturbed and destroyed the native ecosystem across countries like Africa, America and Australia. We also extensively examined the role of religion and capitalism in the ‘civilising mission’ of the European nations. They slyly and wittingly forced the non-European countries to believe that they are backward, uncivilised, barbaric, unenlightened, and sinners (because they don’t believe in Christian God) to exploit their resources to meet their economic demands. In the name of development, the colonisers ripped many nations off their ecological diversity and heterogeneity, derailing the land's environmental rhetoric. India, which was one of the major colonies of the British and European governments, could not remain untouched by the exploitative and divisive policies of European rule. Colonised mainly by Britain and partly by France and Portugal, India also has a long history of colonial rule. Even before British rule, India was under various foreign rules, which exploited the native ecosystem of the country. We will not survey the historical account of various rules by the foreign countries in India; however, we will try to study how these non-native rulers, who were not adequately aware of the aboriginal flora and fauna, dealt with the native ecological diversity. Our focus will primarily be on British rule, but we may also invariably look into the other rulers’ approaches and attitudes toward Nature. In the name of development and an enlightened lifestyle, the British government demolished the land's biological diversity, resulting in the loss of many species of plants

and animals. The colonisers introduced many acts and rules to felicitate their modes of economic growth without paying any attention to the devastation resulting from them. The forceful and authoritative implementation of these acts and regulations significantly affected the relationship between forest communities (the communities of people dependent on forests) and dwellers with nature. The rights they previously enjoyed were curtailed, and their ecologically sustainable ways of living with Nature were also not taken proper care of. Ramchandra Guha, in his article *Forestry in British and post-British India: A Historical Analysis* (1983), observes that “the intrusion of commercialisation has led to substantial deforestation and allied ecological degradation” (1882). This slow weakening of the local environmental values of the native population because of the non-ecological policies of the government had a long-lasting influence on the ecosystem of the land, the traces of which can still be found. The forest communities shared a holistic communion with Nature and knew how to use it sustainably. Guha further argues that “this dependence [with Nature] was institutionalised through a variety of cultural and religious mechanisms which enabled the forest dwellers to reproduce their existence” (1883). Since the forest communities were highly dependent upon the forests, they took good care of them and carefully and judiciously used the resources. How did the British government ensure systematic and extensive deforestation of the forests in India? What changes did they bring to ascertain their full command over the Natural resources in the country? To what extent was the Indian Forest Act 1865 crucial in empowering British rule?

Formulated by the British government in 1865, the Indian Forest Act was a significant step toward gaining control over the Indian forest for manufacturing and other commercial activities. This act was planned to deprive the forest communities of their rights over the forests. With the implementation of the Indian Forest Act of 1865, the British asserted that any land covered with forests was government property, and the government reserved rights for its management. This act paved the way for railway construction across the country as the government could purposefully clear the lands covered by forests. However, the construction of railways by the colonial government had never ensured comfortable accessibility for the general public. Ramchandra Guha (1983) highlights the politics behind the manufacturing of new railway tracks and declares that “this was created to meet the need for rapid troop communication felt after the Mutiny and for enabling the characteristic pattern of the colonial trade– i.e, export of

primary commodities from the colony and import of finished goods into the colony from the metropolis” (1883). The introduction of laws to take control of the teak woods which are very tough and long-lasting ship-making materials helped the regime to expand its naval boundaries. K. Sivaramakrishnan, in the article *Colonialism and Forestry in India: Imagining the Past in Present Politics* (1995), emphasises the involvement of the British government in manipulating the forest acts and regulations for their economic benefit. He quotes Said, who believes that “all knowledge is a historically contingent construction that cannot be adequately understood without referring to contemporary politics and power” (4). We can argue here that the impact of colonial rule in terms of ecological ravage was so profound and severe that it still influences the life of biotic and abiotic communities in India today. Sivaramakrishnan further talks about the harmful effects of impulsive and injudicious policies of forestry and writes that “the destruction of forests in the catchment areas and on the sides of the hills in the drier parts of the country affected the level of water in big rivers, decreased local water supply and rainfall, and caused erosion and avalanches” (7). It can be concluded that even the government's conservatory policies were only for commercial purposes and the imperial needs of the Britishers. They hardly cared about the loss of biological resources and diversity and the displacement of indigenous communities to other places. With time, the forests for them were reduced merely to lands for cultivation, and they harvested acres of forests to generate revenue for the government. The centuries-old ecologically sustainable customary practices of living in communion with Nature were put at stake. Many tribal communities and forest dwellers were deprived of their legal and natural rights over the forests. However, it would be wrong to say that all the British people supported the forestry rules and regulations formulated by the rule as many officials blatantly opposed the policies and declared them divisive and non-ecological. Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, in the article entitled *State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India* (1989), mention how the state rejected the ecological concerns raised by their officials and continued their environmentally hazardous projects for economic gains. Guha and Gadgil note how “several officials within the colonial administration were sharply critical of the new legislation, calling it an act of confiscation and predicting (accurately, as we shall see) widespread discontent at its application” (145). These significant but discordant changes in the modes and methods of the management of the forests and the lands disrupted the local and ecologically viable structures of the use and control of the trees and natural resources. Implemented by the

rulers, these detrimental and pernicious unecological decrees affected “almost a dozen communities in the Indian subcontinent depended on the original mode of sustenance of human populations, hunting and gathering” (148). Now the question arises whether only the British rulers were involved in the destruction of nature or the Indian ‘Rajas’ were doing the same. What were the attitudes and approaches of the Hindu Rajas and the Mughal emperors towards the environment? What kind of relationship the rulers before the British government used to share with the ecology?

Deforestation and other environmentally destructive activities were not carried out for the first time in the history of the country. Even the native monarchs and feudal lords exploited the natural habitats. They tried to control them “to extend his domination over these wild areas, to placate the uncontrolled powers, inhabiting them, and thus to protect his people against them, while displaying his own superior might” (Pouchepadass 2061) Further, he discusses how even the Mughal Empires demolished the forests when he writes that “Muslim chronicles in India often refer to the forests that the armies of the sultans of Delhi or the Mughals had to chop down in the course of their campaign against rebel chieftains” (2061-62). In Hindu tradition, there are also instances where forests are considered to be a “place of spiritual retreat, of regeneration, of salvation, where saints choose to reside, and where, according to the Hindu model of ‘ashramas’, men ideally should retire as ‘vanaprasthas’ (forest dwellers) at the end of their life” (2061). But one cannot even ignore the various other symbolic interpretations of forests as dark, chaotic and ambiguous places which need to be controlled and civilised by the rulers. Many Indian rulers, including Hindu rulers, tried to exert superiority over the forests by cutting trees and killing animals. Moreover, the hunting of animals like tigers, lions, and deer was also quite a rampant exercise, and hunting was often considered a symbol of courage and manliness. However, the rate at which the colonial structures ruined and demolished the biological diversity using modern technologies has never been practised before. Joseph Sramek, in the article “*Face Him like a Briton*”: *Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India* (2006) speaks about how tigers were hunted to manifest courage, valour and kingship. They tried to imitate the Mughal emperors, who also killed tigers in considerable numbers to exhibit their strength and masculinity. Not even all the Britishers were allowed to go hunting as it was restricted to elites and people of the higher social and political class. Forests, once accessible to all classes of people, were made private destinations for the royal people to showcase their bravery and

courage. Trophies and prizes were also announced for those excelling at the game of hunting, and this reckless and ruthless killing of animals helped Britain to become a hunting frontier. Sramek further explains how “tiger hunting was an important symbol in the construction of British imperial and masculine identities during the nineteenth century.... because tigers were dangerous and powerful beasts, tiger hunting represented a struggle with fearsome nature that needed to be resolutely faced “like a Briton” ...” (659). Mughal emperors like Jehangir and Shah Jahan killed animals, including tigers, to showcase their bravery as a routine practice for their enjoyment and delight. Sramek also noted that “Jehangir had a minute account kept of his prolific hunting over a thirty-six-year period between 1580 to 1616, during which time he is said personally to have killed 17,167 animals, including eighty tigers” (660). British colonists, to imitate the Mughal emperors and Indian Hindu rulers, carried on the practice of hunting animals. This brutal and cruel continuance of animal killing helped them not only to get imperial dominance but also to represent their dominance over the native ecosystem and environment. So far, we have explored how British colonialism and the other Indian rulers, including the Mughals and the Hindu rulers, damaged and dismantled the country's biological diversity.

Now, it becomes significant to understand how the colonisers' exploitative practices were similar or different to the previous state apparatuses. Were they continuing the same destructive environmental patterns, or was their intention to damage nature different? What do Guha and Gadgil mean when they talk about the ‘golden age’ of ecological consonance in pre-British times? Gadgil and Guha, in their book *The Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1992), write:

despite the grave inequalities of caste and class, then, pre-colonial Indian society had a considerable degree of coherence and stability. This permitted a rapid turnover of ruling dynasties without major upheavals at the level of the village. On the other hand, cultural traditions of prudence ensured the long-term viability of the system of production... [e]ven the Mughals, whose religion was Islam, were unable, or perhaps unwilling to radically alter the existing patterns of resource use and the social structures in which they were embedded (2).

Vandana Swami, in her article *Environmental History and British Colonialism in India: A Prime Political Agenda* (2003), agrees with the problem of categorising the history of environmental economics and observes that “[t]he question of choosing an appropriate time frame for thinking and writing the environmental history of India does not have any resolution.... [as] the time frame remains debatable...” (116). Ramchandra Guha (1983) is of the view that “such reconstruction has to be done largely from the writings of the colonial administrators themselves” (1883). However, a sufficient number of historical research works reject Gadgil’s and Guha’s opinions on the existence of an ecologically sustainable ‘golden age’ before the Britishers colonised the country. Authors like Richard Grove dismissed the writings of Gadgil and Guha because they overlooked not only the ecological ravage done by the Hindu and Mughal emperors but also ignored the conservationist policies of the Britishers. Vandana Swami (2003) disagrees with the “golden-ageist” view, rejecting Guha and Gadgil’s dismissal of the efforts of colonial conservation and forestry regulation as mere disguises by a subordinate colonial science for resource exploitation and forest control” (116). However, it can also be argued that even if talking about a ‘golden age’ was a sham, it can’t be disregarded that the colonial exploitative practices and patterns were more systematic and destructive than those of the previous regimes. The British rule severely challenged the customary restraints and prudence of environmental conservation and the ecological values, ethics and systems of use and control. However, the British also established national parks and other protected areas for the conservation of plant, bird, and animal species (MacKenzie 201). Keith Thomas, in his book *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (1983), talks about the changing attitudes of the Britishers towards the natural environment. Thomas observes that the cities and the towns, which were once considered the “home of learning, manners, taste and sophistication” (322), were no more an achievement because “long before 1802, it had become a commonplace to maintain that the countryside was more beautiful than the town” (323). But this is how the project of ‘Green Imperialism’ led to the creation of national parks and biodiversity zones, resulting in the introduction of policies for the protection and conservation of nature. But, how did Indian folk traditions face ecological imperialism? What was the resistive counterargument against which the Indian folk traditions provided against ecological imperialism?

Indian Ecological Traditions

The previous section discussed how environmental degradation has been a major concern to human and non-human lives on the planet. We also examined the pre-colonial periods to explore how even the local governments exploited the resources of the land without caring about its long-lasting detrimental effects like displacement, migration, habitat loss and other repercussions. Even long before the Britishers came to India, Mughal emperors and Hindu rajas were mercilessly and brutally engaged in hunting tigers, elephants, deer and other ferocious animals to exhibit and manifest their strength, courage and toxic masculinity (Parpia 2016). However, we also noticed that with Britishers and other European imperial powers taking centre stage after colonisation, the situation got aggravated and worsened as they used modern technology and tools to wipe out the species of plants and animals not only for economic benefits but also to exert control and dominance over the people of the colonised countries. When human and environmental rights organisations severely criticised their unrelenting and uncompromising exploitation, they introduced plans to establish protected areas to check the rising ecological imbalance. However, even the construction of protected areas like national parks and wildlife sanctuaries couldn't bring any relief to the indigenous populations' loss of rights, habitats, sacred sites, and other necessary aspects of their survival and existence. Now, we will shift our focus to Indian ecological traditions through their generational oral song-texts to examine their traditional and religious practices to ascertain how they contribute to the protection of nature.

In our discussion, we have explored how Hindu religious texts have imparted ecological wisdom, which nurtures practitioners to live in a symbiotic relationship with nature. We also observed how this mode of co-existence can be decisive in tackling the problems of the environmental crisis— which has emerged mainly due to our negligence towards the other forms of life on the planet. Before moving to Magahi folk culture to see how it treats flora and fauna and whether it adheres to the tenets of ecocriticism, we will briefly investigate the other indigenous cultures to comprehensively study them. However, in India, the diversity of indigenous cultures is such that it seems problematic to consider them as followers of Hinduism. Arguing that Hinduism is a religion that encompasses many texts, stories, traditions, folk ritualism, philosophies and performativities of the subcontinent, Gavin Van Horn (2006) points out:

...the term “Hinduism” is historically foreign to Indian culture(s), since it was first imposed externally, even if now it has been more widely adopted by different groups in India (not unlike– with some irony, it might be added– American “Indians” being used as an appellation for the incredibly diverse peoples who were “discovered” by Europeans in the fifteenth century) (6).

Moreover, highlighting the importance of ecology in the native and primordial cultures of India, Madhav Gadgil and M. D. Subash Chandran (1992) opine that “[a]pparently due to the greater plasticity of Hinduism, which itself evolved absorbing numberless local cults, including many tribals ones, instead of vanquishing them as done by other major religions, a large number of sacred groves remained in our country” (183-84). However, this primitive unity with nature has been lost as people shifted rapidly to artificial and unnatural civilisations. No matter to what extent these primitive and sustainable modes of living have waned and thus gone out of fashion, it would be inappropriate and unreasonable to assume that we cannot find the existing evidence of them in the ritualistic practices of the indigenous societies. Studying a particular region’s folklore helps us understand their beliefs and practices. Here, it becomes pertinent to study different folk cultures of India to know how they have been living sustainably in the natural environment. Inspired and amazed by the diversity of sacred groves in India and how these religiously motivated attitudes of the communities have helped the interconnectedness of human beings and nature to sustain, Dietrich Brandis wrote,

[v]ery little has been published regarding sacred groves in India, but they are, or rather were, very numerous. I have found them in all provinces...These sacred forests, as a rule, are never touched by the axe, except when wood is required for the repair of religious buildings or in special cases for other purposes (Kent 1).

Traditionally, many tribal communities have arranged themselves in close-knit groups with shared environmental maintenance obligations. By using a community-based conservation strategy, resources are exploited wisely and holistically. Eliza F. Kent, in her book *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India* (2013), discusses the religious beliefs and practices around sacred groves to understand how they serve as an ancient Indian ecological tradition. She documents the ecological

awareness of the non-Brahminic Tamil communities and delves into the integration of their environmental sensibilities with local customs and beliefs. The book further highlights the susceptibility of this ecological awareness to the transformations arising from factors such as education, development and the influence of Hindu Ideology. Describing the sacred groves in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu, she observes how the Ambalakkarakar and Muttaraiyar communities' "...constant vigilance has been fairly effective at human's overuse of the groves' flora and fauna" (12). The community is so rigid and cohesive about their beliefs and customs that they do not even allow construction in the vicinity of the sacred groves. However, Kent also sees the depletion of these age-old traditions of ecological wisdom when she notes how the sacred groves in the Tiruvannamalai region are cleared "...as a part of self-improvement efforts of the upwardly mobile members of the community" (13). The text additionally delineates endeavours aimed at augmenting awareness among the communities by NGOs and other government agencies regarding the pivotal role of sacred groves in sustaining our existence. Analogous case studies can be observed not only in Tamil Nadu but also in the South Indian state of Kerala, wherein indigenous societies have actively immersed themselves in the preservation of surrounding biodiversity. Gadgil and Chandran (1992) emphasise in their writings on the sacred groves of Kerala how Malayali Hindus in the region dedicated the forests to deities like *Bhagwati* (mother goddess) and *Sarpakavu* (Snakes), making it possible to protect them (184). In the Kerala context, as highlighted by Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998), the classification of sacred groves is contingent upon distinct management paradigms. This categorisation identifies three primary groups: those overseen by individual families, those managed by groups of families and communities and those under the governance of statutory authorities tasked with managing temples (165). J. R Freeman, in the article *Gods, Groves and Culture of Nature in Kerala* (1999), adopts an anthropological, folkloric and ethnohistorical approach to document the popular attitudes of the indigenous societies of Kerala towards the forest and other natural resources. However, Freeman disregards the viewpoint that the traditional Kerala communities are inherently environmentalist and argues that restraints related to the protection of sacred groves were "...environmentally unnecessary, or was, at any rate, not perceived as necessary" (293). The abundance of resources, coupled with the low population density and basic or outdated technologies and methods of exploitation and transportation, should be believed to be a contributing factor to the protection of the sacred groves and the environmentalist thinking behind it. Whether the

tradition of Indian sacred groves is fundamentally environmentalist has been a perennial subject of research where many scholars, including Emma Tomalin and others, opine that there is no apparent underlying philosophy in these practices that can be unequivocally labelled as environmentalist. To what extent are these arguments about the non-environmentalist behaviour of the Indian indigenous communities justified? The chapter will ponder the opposing views while discussing the other native cultures of India.

The history of sacred groves in India can be traced back to the times of the hunting-gathering societies, where the primitive people attached divinity and sacredness to the natural resources and thus contributed to safeguarding their biodiversity. Madhav Gadgil, J. Donald Hughes and M. D Subash Chandran (1976) have worked extensively on the sacred groves of the Western Ghats, which cover the Western coast of the Indian peninsula, and they also argue that the indigenous cults and nature-worship practices of the communities of the Western Ghats are very old and primitive (160). It is fascinating to note how the native populace has maintained and managed their local environment for centuries. However, as Anwesha Borthakur (2013) asserts, it has been possible only because most people have been complying with the taboos associated with the local deities they fear. And if your reverence and respect for the biosphere have roots that do not adhere to scientific or logical thinking, it would be difficult to maintain such an environment-friendly relationship for longer. That is why we see a depletion of such values over time as people tend to shift to money-making activities where they hardly care about the consequences of their actions. Borathakur mentions how “the taboos associated with the sacred groves have been on the wane” (25). People still hesitate to cut live trees, but they certainly have started encroaching on the sacred forested patches by bringing leaves and deadwood from the jungle. But even if these traditions are not intrinsically environmentalist, their augmentation towards the productive use of resources should not be undermined because what they have been doing for ages is indeed worthy of research. Similarly, the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan practised hugging the trees to save them, even at the cost of risking their lives. Other similar examples can be found in the northeastern parts of India, which are inhabited by many tribal and indigenous communities like Garo, Khasi, Chakma, Bodo, and Adi. The Khasi and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya have their sacred groves known as “law Kyntangs”, where they offer prayers and seek blessings from their folk deities who are supposed to care for the native population. These forests have been undisturbed for generations, and

thus, they function as important sites of biodiversity hotspots. The spiritual connection with the surroundings highlights the traditional ecological wisdom on safeguarding the environment as a moral obligation (Thacker). Meities people of Manipur believe that deities or evil spirits reside on these plants/trees, and they should not be cut. They also grow ritualistic plants and preserve them in sacred groves (Singh et al. 67). Anyone attempting to disrupt the rituals may incur the wrath of the folk deities, potentially resulting in unfortunate consequences. In the Northern-eastern regions of India, examples of sacred groves abound, where communities continue to exist with nature by leveraging traditional ecological wisdom. These instances exemplify a profound integration of indigenous knowledge, fostering a symbiotic relationship with local flora and fauna (Das et al. 276). Studies from the Himalayan states of India also suggest ecologically viable modes of living, including traditional sacred groves, water recharge, cultivation, and medical systems practised without damaging the natural environment (Anthwal et al. 965). The above conversation makes it evident that India is home to numerous indigenous communities living in a harmonious communion with the natural environment. It would not be unjustified to argue that these societies have certainly been instrumental in safeguarding many species of plants and animals in their regions. But whether their practices adhere to environmentalism tenets is a question that remains unanswered and needs critical enquiry. And if these local cults and beliefs are not environmentalist in their approach, what are the factors behind them?

The above discussion establishes that the majority of Indian indigenous communities coexist harmoniously with the environment and not only worship the various elements of nature but also actively participate in their preservation and conservation. Here, it should not be confused that these age-old traditions abound only in practices which prioritise and safeguard sacred groves. There are just as many examples where reverence for animals and other living and non-living things is similarly observed. This respect and worship for natural beings extend beyond just sacred groves to include mountains, rivers, reptiles and other elements of nature, acknowledging their intrinsic value and interdependence within a complex web of life on the planet. However, it would also not be inappropriate to say that, in most instances, their beliefs and practices are rooted in myths, superstitions and taboos. For example, cutting down trees may displease and enrage the folk deities, which in turn may create situations unfavourable to the existence of human beings in their regions. Building upon these observations, many

Western environmentalists (Alley (1998); Freeman (1999); Tomalin (2004)) argue that the practices of Indian indigenous societies may appear environmentally friendly, but these claims lack substantial evidence. But it is also equally true that even if these practices do not abide by the definitions of environmentalism, these community-based efforts have resulted in creating, maintaining and managing many sacred groves in the country, which still, in many cases, lie undisturbed by human intervention. Kay Milton (1996) observes that claiming primitive ecological wisdom as an environmentalist thought is industrial societies' highly opinionated and romanticised way of looking at indigenous peoples. Further, he also argues such thinking to be a "...part of civilized humanity's image of the noble savage, part of the romantic tradition which idealizes the natural, and from which some of the values central to environmentalism are derived" (109). The idealised perception of primitive societies is rooted in the comparative study that the members of industrial societies undertake with the non-industrial communities and find them more natural than their way of living. This is a problematic method of analysing their culture because even if these communities have the tradition of raising sacred groves, we still find examples of these communities practising hunting and slash-and-burn agricultural techniques for their survival, and these actions should not be considered environmentally friendly. It is inarguably accurate that they have exploited fewer natural resources than the industrial societies, but that was possible only because these communities usually had a smaller number of people in their clans, leading to fewer needs. Also, they lack exposure to the capitalist and materialistic world outside, forcing them to adapt to a life with limited resources (Ellen 10-12). This misconception is the result of our myth-making attitude, which keeps us believing that our cultural practices contain those values other cultures lack. In the case of India, Freeman argues that in matters related to sacred groves, the influence of Neo-Hinduism becomes evident because it firmly believes that "...environmentalist consciousness in India [is] both antedated and is supported by 'science', or by shastra...." (Freeman 293). This is also prevalent among intellectuals who attempt to link and assimilate innovations with traditional thoughts. Moreover, Freeman also points out a negative corollary that "...anything desirable the West has to offer was already established by the Indian sages as authentically traditional and antedated...." (294). However, he also admits that there are many research works that hint towards the ecological wisdom of the Indian *Rishis* who discussed and adopted such techniques that are not environmentally damaging (293). Are the claims mainly of the Western environmentalist thinkers about Indian

indigenous practices valid? And if they are not true, what are opposing views against those accusations?

The previous section, using some scholars' arguments, suggests that much of the primitive ecological wisdom, including that of Indian indigenous societies, is often romanticised or idealised, and has little to do with actual environmentalist philosophy. Also, scholars like Tomalin and Freeman believe that environmentalism was developed in the West, so how can Eastern traditions claim to be environmentalists in their traditional beliefs and practices? In such a situation, research works have observed that Indian traditional beliefs are less about environmental conservation and more about myth-making processes, which may include honouring and protecting the elements of nature without consciously recognising their value to the environment. It cannot be strictly labelled as environmentalism. To provide an opposing view, which establishes Indian Indigenous practices not merely as myth-making activities but regards them as concrete embodiments of environmentalism, a more focused critical inquiry into Indian traditions is required. Vandana Shiva disagrees with what Western scholars have claimed about Indian indigenous cultural practices, as she writes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988),

[s]acred forests and sacred groves were created and maintained throughout India as a cultural response for their protection...All religions and cultures of the South Asian region have been rooted in the forests, not through fear and ignorance but through ecological insight (54-55).

Shiva does not unequivocally align with the perspective positing that the foundation of Indian sustainable practices predominantly rests on feelings of fear and reverence, as opposed to being grounded in scientific reasoning. The people of India have historically acknowledged the relationship between humans and the survival of natural resources. Consequently, they systematically analysed and developed an understanding of the local animals and forest ecosystems, leading to the conceptualisation of informal principles and systems of ecology management which carry scientific temperament. Shiva further argues that it is quite inappropriate and misleading to think that scientific forestry in India comes with British rule as India already had Science-induced management practices. Such thinking that Britishers taught us science and management skills about caring for the environment stems from the misconception that Western science is the

only authentic science. One can find scientific evidence about plant kingdoms in ancient Indian traditions, where there are many references to plant diseases and how they can be cured. There are many ancient texts like *Vriksayurveda* (science of the treatment of plant diseases), *Vanaspati vidya* (plant studies), and *Aranyakas* (forest texts) which speak conceivably about the inherent scientific spirit in Indian tradition way before Britishers came to India (Shiva 55). Sudhir Kakar believes that the Indian urban elite influenced by Western ideologies also tends to perceive Indian traditional socio-cultural outpourings as regressive and unscientific. So, Kakar argues, it would not be surprising if Western thinkers treat Indian “...norms, rituals, and narratives, and...pragmatic discourses that surround sacred groves as strange and morally questionable” (Kent 8). Scholars like Richard H. Grove (1992), Emma Tomalin (2004) and Munjed M. Murad (2023) assert that environmentalism is a Western concept; therefore, practices related to Indian sacred groves cannot be considered environmentalist. On the contrary, Scholars like Vandana Shiva and Sudhir Kakar argue why we should grant Western thinkers the authority to make judgments about Indian traditions. In the academic discourse surrounding the Indian forestry system, divergent and contrasting perspectives reflective of academic debate underscore the complexity inherent in interpreting them, making the scenario mired with claims and counterclaims.

As discussed above, India provides a favourable environment for the flourishing of indigenous communities, which have their unique way of interacting with nature. We need to analyse different indigenous cultures in India to form a more informed and comprehensive understanding of the Magahi folk culture and how it treats the ecology around them. In India, one can come across a vast and diverse range of indigenous societies; some reside in the lofty mountains of the Himalayas, while others inhabit the dense forests. Some live in arid desert regions like the Thar, while others inhabit rocky terrains and coastal areas. For convenience, the diverse regions have been categorically delineated into broader classifications like Northern India, Southern India, Eastern India and Southern India. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is a central feature of Indian environmental stewardship. Transmitted across generations, traditional ecological knowledge entails a profound comprehension of the surrounding ecosystem, including the species of plants and animals and natural resources. Those communities that rely heavily on nature for their livelihoods share their insights on the proper utilisation and conservation of natural resources to ensure their sustenance to future generations (Das et

al. 276). Indigenous cultures in India have long understood the value of communal ownership and control of natural resources. Here is one example from the Kannada language of the Southern Indian state of Karnataka:

All the lakes have dried up

Frogs have conceived

Why have you not come yet, Oh Rain? (Sen and Nagendra 291)

Analysing the excerpts of the above folk songs reveals that human beings, amidst their struggle for water, are not only preoccupied with the scarcity of water for themselves but also express their concern for the lives of other aquatic creatures. Such songs highlight the interdependence between nature and human life, a recurring theme in Indian folk practices. These songs also underscore the shared challenges faced by individuals in both ecological and interpersonal contexts. For example, in the following song-text, one can see how people are in the practice of worshipping their water bodies (Gangamma-mother Ganga, a river in India) with the belief that the river, *which is the mother to the world*, will not only quench the thirst of the human beings but is also essential for the sustenance of other life forms on the planet.

To every place, to every place

To satisfy their thirst

To survive we need water, oh mother

Gangamma You are the mother to the world

You are the mother to the world, oh Gangamma

Gangamma, you are our mother (Sen and Nagendra 284).

Upon analysing the Indian indigenous traditions closely, it becomes clear that a sense of harmony and consideration for the local environment is closely knit in the narratives of various folk songs across the country. However, it is also true that there are instances where we can find traces of anthropocentrism, where human concerns for other life forms are motivated by the desire for mutual benefit or cooperation, ensuring the fulfilment of human needs. But it is also arguably true that many instances reflected an ecocentric way of living by the indigenous people, indicating a selfless regard for nature which is devoid of humans' unwarranted interventions into the ecology. Also, even if the practices are anthropocentric, it is agreeable that they at least know how to use their resources judiciously without damaging their local environment, as evidenced by the various arguments discussed later in the chapter. For now, one can see how a North

Bengal tribal community expresses their reverence for the natural elements through folk songs:

chuote lebe gi minto

sime guolo saien

[With your kind blessings the streams are filled up with water and the fishes can be alive there.] (Bhattacharjee 325)

The song-text above indicates a deep and symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings, where people are happy when it rains because they need water, but at the same time, they are also concerned about aquatic life.

nate lebe minto

taese guolo saein

[The nature is protecting the animals, plants and human being with the bright sunshine and rain.] (Bhattacharjee 325)

The manifestation of a symbiotic relationship between human beings and the natural environment finds heightened exposition in these verses, thereby delving deeper into the ecocentric ethos of the community. This also highlights how the local people regard nature as something superior/lifegiving to their existence and thus should be revered and protected. The idea of biodiversity and ecocentrism manifested through folk songs elucidates a nuanced understanding of the indispensable role of nature in sustaining human livelihoods and natural equilibrium.

Nindaa Nindaa Taapi Taapi

Aale bay Da jaapid ked

Aalaam Hiju Banilaa Siaal

Aale Boy da jaapid keya

Aalaam Hiju Baru Baanaa

Aale Baabu Da jaapid ked

Nir jamme Baana Siaal ka

[My dear son. You sleep. If your cry breaks the silence in the cold atmosphere and serenity of the forest, the tail-less fox of the forest and bears or tigers of the bush will go away, and the cordial relationship between man and beast will be at stake. My son is a good chap; he is not naughty like the beasts of the forest.] (Mahanta 74)

Here, in the above-mentioned song-text of the Santhal region, one can observe how a mother is trying to calm her child because she believes that if he continues crying, he might disturb the animals living in the jungle nearby. She also appears concerned that if her child remains quiet, the harmonious communion between humans and nature could be disturbed, resulting in unfavourable circumstances. Analysing symbolically, it can be argued that the maternal figure, representing nature, seeks harmony between her son, symbolising humans and animals of the forest. This suggests a desire to maintain a mutual relationship between the two. However, in the last line, she also seems to be drawing a demarcation between human beings' innocence and the jungle's beastliness. The folk songs discussed above are a true testament to how Indian ecological traditions address environmental crises and help maintain a harmonious balance between humans and nature. These folk songs convey deep respect and reverence for nature, encouraging a symbiotic and sustainable approach to living that has been practised and cherished for centuries. This brings us to a pertinent question: what is the attitude of the people of Magadh towards nature? Do Magahi folk songs also incorporate such elements which hint towards sustainable living? We will address such questions in the subsequent sections and chapter. Before delving into the ecological traditions of the Magadh region, let us first take a moment to explore the various categories of Magahi and Indian folk traditions. This overview will provide a rich context for understanding the intricate connections between these traditions and their reverence for nature.

Magahi and Other Indian Folk Traditions

As discussed earlier also, Indian folk traditions encompass a rich tapestry of cultural expressions and extend far beyond the realm of environmental conservation. Folk songs also celebrate various aspects of social life, including caste, class, profession, and gender. They are also an intricate part of festivals, childbirth, weddings, and seasonal cycles. These traditions provide insights into the historical and socio-cultural contexts of different indigenous communities, highlighting their unique identities and shared heritage. Before delving into the various ecological folk traditions of India, it is essential to consider the diverse range of folk expressions that characterise Indian culture. The rich linguistic and cultural diversity of India give rise to a vibrant tapestry of folk traditions, each unique and deeply rooted in the heritage of its community. Devendra Kumar's book and research articles on Haryanvi folk songs highlight the rich tradition of folk music in the region, offering deep insights into its cultural heritage. In his book *Jakari: Haryanvi*

Mahilaon ke Sarv-Sulabh Lokgeet (2015), he explores the folk songs on the lives of women, frequently focusing on themes such as marriage, motherhood, their aspirations, and emotions, which are usually neglected by society. Further, in his research article, *Jatanā: A Peasant Woman's Ballad from Haryana in North India* (2017), Kumar also cites song-texts to highlight how women are represented in the patriarchal norms of the society:

‘Tūñ merī Jatanā jāmataḍī mar jyāy, aṅsaryā sāre e mohbī pūḍā’.

‘You should have died O my Jatanā [pain] the moment you were born,

Only a son can attend to [a father's] unaccomplished [task].’ (Kumar 67)

Similarly, in her book *Unearthing Gender: Folk Songs of North India* (2012), Smita Tewari Jassal explores the portrayal of women in Bhojpuri (a language spoken in the parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and countries like Nepal and Mauritius etc.) society through the medium of folk songs of the region.

Je kuch arajihe e bābā, adhiyā hamār

Adhiyā adhiyā jini kara betī

Sabhe dhan tohār

Cutki bhar sindurvā e betī

Tu ta jayebu kaunā pār

In all you earn, Father, I stake a claim for half.

“Insist not on half your share, daughter,

This entire wealth is yours, after all.

Just a pinch of vermilion, daughter,

Before long, far and away you’ll be gone.’ (Jassal 19-20)

These folk songs, sung on various occasions such as weddings, childbirth, seasons, festivals, and labour, not only depict the subjugation of women in society but also reveal dissenting voices against patriarchy within them. One such example from Magahi folk songs is here:

Devar ji se lagal hai re piritiya

Saiyan ji se chupke-chupke na

Laddo bhi lailan, peda bhi lailan

Barfi bigal hai re picchutiya

Saiyan ji se chupke-chupke na
Saya bhi lailan, saari bhi lailan
Saiyan se chupke-chupke na (“Devar ji se lagal hai re piritiya” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])
 [I harbour love for my brother-in-law
 My husband is unaware of our affair
 He brings laddoo and peda for me
 Out of my husband’s fear, I have thrown the Barfi behind the house
 He brings a saree and petticoat for me
 My husband is unaware of our affair.] (My Translation)

The song mentioned above is *Jhoomar geet* (a type of wedding song), where women assert their rights as wives and warn their husbands that if their needs are not met, they will start a love affair with their brothers-in-law. Similarly, Ann Grodzins Gold (1997) provides an in-depth analysis of gender roles in Rajasthani folk songs, while Kirin Narayan (2016) examines the representation of women in Himachali folk practices. Emphasising the significance of songs sung by women, Kumar notes that it would be no exaggeration to say that the songs of women form the very essence of Haryanvi folk music (Translated by me, 4). This observation is equally valid in the context of Magahi folk songs. A significant portions of Magahi folk songs centers around women, intricately weaving their emotions, experiences and lives. Here is an example of a ‘Ritu Geet’ (Songs for seasons):

Siraba pe le le koerin saag baignma,
Chali gelai raja ke duwar he.
Ghar ke bahar bhela raja ji ke betwa,
Pari gel koaerin par dheeth he (Aryani 48)
 [Koerin sells greens and eggplants on her head,
 She goes to the landlord with her produce
 She meets the landlord’s son outside the house,
 He looks at the koerin with lustful eyes. [My Translation]

This song is sung during the rainy season (barsaat); hence it is called ‘barsaati’. This song can also be categorised as a caste-related song, where a specific community of Koeri (a caste), particularly involved in agricultural works, is mentioned. In this context,

the song also portrays class difference, as the landlord's son desires to harass a woman belonging to a backward caste and lower socioeconomic background. Although most folk songs revolve around women, it would be incorrect to say that they do not encompass diversity.

Indian folk traditions are rich with agricultural folk songs, which labourers sing to ward off fatigue and boost each other's morale. These songs are performed on a range of agricultural occasions, from the initial stage of sowing seeds to the culmination of harvesting crops. In these songs, labourers often invoke prayers to their deities, seeking divine favour for a good harvest. Look at this translated Tamil folk song:

Looking towards Indra (God of Gods)
I take the sacred seedling
looking towards Chandra (the moon)
I take the sacred seedling
The sacred seedlings I plant
Should grow to heights
Paddy should be plentiful
Tall stalks should shoot up. (Ramaswamy 118)

Here, one can observe how the labourers anticipate a good harvest and invoke the rain God, Indra. In folk practices, people seek blessings from the local deities for good harvest, health, children, and more through worship, often expressing their devotion through songs and dances. In the article *Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala* (1999), J. R Freeman expostulates that “[h]uman relations... depend on the nature of the interest in plant resource and on the nature of being inhabiting it” (272). There are plenty of such songs being sung in the Magadh region as well, where people worship their deities to seek blessings. In the song-text below, which is sung also during the rice transplanting (Ropani), agricultural labourers are praying to the Ganga River to relieve them from flood-like conditions so that they can have a good harvest.

Taniki sanjohun lahariya ye Gangaji
Doobal ye khetwa dagariya ye Gangaji (“Taniki sanjohun lahariya ye Gangaji”
[Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])
[Gentle your flow Gangaji
Fields and routes are all submerged in water.] [My Translation]

In Magadh, most people earn their livelihood through agriculture, which is why songs related to farming are more prevalent in this region. The songs are sung during the times of planting (Ropani), harvesting (Katani), grinding (Jantsaar) and weeding (Sohani) (Aryani 19). See, for example, a Jantsaar song:

*Barah baras se piawa videswa gelan ho Ram,
Sasu nanadiya ho piawa, ghar-banvaswa delan ho Ram* (Singh 311)
[O husband, you have been away for twelve years,
Your mother and sister have kept me in house exile.] [My translation]

The song depicts a woman's longing, detailing how her husband is far from her and how her mother-in-law has made her life a nightmare. It can also be studied as a 'birah geet' (songs of separation, a variety of Magahi folk songs which is very prevalent among women. Alongside songs related to agriculture, the Magadh region also features a lot of rituals, with wedding songs playing a significant role in the lives and culture of the place. Additionally, there are songs for festivals and other celebratory events as well. In the book *Magahi Sanskar Geet* (Magahi Ritual Songs), Vishwanath Prasad provides an in-depth analysis of ritual songs sung in the Magadh region. The following song-text is an example of a wedding song sung during the 'hardi' (turmeric) ritual. In this ceremony family members and their relatives (aunty, uncle, sister-in-law, and others) apply turmeric to the bride/groom. The atmosphere remains lively and playful, with everyone teasing each other as they also apply turmeric to each other. In songs, abusive words are also used sometimes to tease each other and to keep the atmosphere cheerful.

*Sone katoriya mami pisal haradiya mami
Hardi lagaweli chhinar mami lahe-lahe
Hardi lagawe mami man hulsawe mami
Aaj subh dinwa ke sonwa lutawe mami* ("Sone katoriya mami pisal haradiya mami" [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])
[Ground turmeric lies in a golden bowl
Immoral aunt applies the turmeric
As she applies the turmeric, her joys gleam
Aunt scatters gold on this auspicious day.] (My Translation]

In the tradition of Magahi folk songs, 'gari geet' (songs with abusive language or humourous tones) also hold significance. Women sing such songs to tease their relatives,

however, these abusive words are not meant to be taken seriously as they are limited to playfulness.

Kathar ke ped tar sutathin anjano bahini

Lag gaile kathar ke laasa, tamasa dekha (“Kathar ke ped tar sutathin anjano bahini” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Unnamed sister sleeps under a jackfruit tree

She got stuck with jackfruit’s glue, such a fun atmosphere.] [My Translation]

In this section, we have centered on different categories of Magahi folk songs, while also discussing the folk traditions from other regions of India. However, we do not claim that we have covered all the folk traditions of the country. In the subsequent sections and chapters, we will delve into folk songs related to Indian ecological traditions, followed by a detailed exploration of the depiction of nature in Magahi folk songs. So far, we have seen how the Indian ecological tradition is kept alive through the rich tapestry of multilingual folk songs. As we will further see, the crux of this thesis– the Magahi folk song tradition– is a perfect embodiment of the folk ideology of the harmonious existence between human beings and nature. In this sense, the Magahi folk song tradition is a culmination of the very core ideology of Indian folk tradition– symbiosis. We have theoretically established the origin and manifestation of the symbiotic relationship in the next chapter with a wider focus on the Magahi folk tradition, but in the conclusion of the present chapter, it will not be out of place to mention a few Magahi song-texts which display a more general, but suitably deep sensitivity towards nature.

Magahi Eco-Sensitive Folk Songs

So far, our discussion has examined how Indian indigenous traditions not only engage in nature worship but also have distinct methods of protecting the local flora and fauna. We have observed that although the rituals practised by these communities frequently differ from those of Hinduism, there is an increasing influence of Hinduism on their traditional practices. Furthermore, we also explored the impact of institutionalised religions and ecological imperialism on the folk traditions and practices of India. Folk religions are rooted in local beliefs and customs of the community and involve and worship local/folk deities, spirits, ancestors and natural objects. These impulsive and community-driven traditions are often flexible and vary significantly from one place to another. Institutionalised religions, on the other hand, are structured and codified, maintained and

propagated by a particular class and caste of people. They often involve formal ceremonies and rituals outlined in sacred texts. We also analysed how, in the Indian context, through the processes of conversion, assimilation and standardisation, many folk religions were either integrated into the institutionalised religion in a weakened form or entirely wiped out. The integration of folk deities and religions has led to the decline and disappearance of rich folk traditions and practices that have supported the communities for generations. Now, we will investigate Magahi culturalism to understand how its rich and diverse culture of folk songs sung during different rites of passage activities addresses the questions of ecological degradation. Before delving into how Magahi folk songs embody the idea of preservation of nature, it is essential to explore the essence of Magahi folk practices. Does this align with mainstream Hinduism, or does it represent a distinct tradition? Here, we wish to inform the readers that the frequent references to religion are intentional, as we are attempting to explore ‘religious environmentalism’ within Magahi folk practices. Additionally, repeated mentions of Hinduism are necessary to clarify that these are folk practices, rather than purely Hindu traditions. Through examples from Magahi folk songs, we will endeavour to discern whether there exists an idea of religious environmentalism in Magadh, or if worship is merely performed for the sake of worship. In the subsequent chapter, we will analyse Magahi folk songs to develop an ecocritical understanding of the folk practices of the region. In Chapter 4, we will also attempt to evaluate Magahi folk songs against the recent developments and principles of ecocriticism. This approach aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of whether these age-old beliefs and customs align with contemporary ecocritical standards. For now, we will focus on examining whether the concept of religious environmentalism exists within Magahi folk practices.

Magahi socio-religious ethics and rituals also accommodate and assimilate cultural and traditional ecological wisdom, which has helped its practitioners live in holy communion with Nature for ages. Magahi village religious and socio-cultural operations believe the natural environment is an integral and intrinsic part of human life. Sampati Aryani, an eminent critic and scholar of the Magahi language, argues persuasively about the tacit presence of a large number of ‘gram devatas’ (village deities) in the Magadh region. She observes that “we do not have sufficient evidence to claim that these ‘gram devatas’ are mentioned in the Puranas (Hindu religious texts devoted to diverse topics), but they do are worshipped and revered on different auspicious occasions in the

households of the Magadh region” [our translation] (Aryani 22). Hindu gods and goddesses like Shiva, Hanuman, Durga, Kali Rama, etc., also play a significant role in the village performativities of the region, but the presence of the local deities adds diversity and richness to the culture, which also gets reflected in the folk tradition. Ram Prasad Singh (1999), in his book *Magahi Lokgeet ka Vrihad Sangrah* [A comprehensive Collection of Magahi Folk Songs], gives a detailed account of the folk songs dedicated to the local deities and cultural and traditional practices of the society. There is an almost equal number of folk songs dedicated to the Hindu gods and goddesses; however, we will focus on the folk songs devoted to the native and indigenous deities. In the Magadh region, the sun is considered to be the source and epitome of all power and energy, and the practitioners of the Magahi culture believe that the sun god transmits positive energy, vitality and zeal, and therefore, they have been adoring and revering the sun god since ages. Celebrated specifically in the Magadh regions of Bihar and Jharkhand (also celebrated in other parts of these states), this ancient festival of ‘Chhath Puja’ (worship of Sun God) is observed in the months of Chaitra (March-April) and Kartika (October-November) by men and women for prosperity, well-being, happiness and pregnancy. ‘Brati’ (Magahi version for the Hindi word ‘Vrati’-- one who observes fasting) and devotees gather near adequately cleaned and purified water bodies to pay gratitude and obligation to both the rising and setting sun god– supreme source of energy. These native, indigenous, and unique religious practices are considered to be eco-friendly because they attach divinity and sacredness not only to the sun but also to water sources and some plants. Take, for example:

Char kona ke pokharwa, jal umadal jaye, dudh umadal jaye.

Lehun na dulraitu babu dauriya, bahangi ghaat pahunchaye (“Char kona ke pokharwa” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[The four-cornered puddle’s water, pure like milk overflows.

Please! beloved, carry the basket full of offerings to the shore.] (My Translation)

In the above snippet of the folk song, we see a sense of total submission before the sun god, which, according to the native folk belief, is the primary and ultimate source of energy for the biotic communities of the earth. Magahi people also tend to acknowledge the importance of water bodies for their survival in the above extracts, we can comprehend how the purity of the pond’s water is compared with white milk, and the cleansing of the river precedes the prayer. The devotees understand how the introduction

of unwanted materials can disturb the natural balance of the ecology, and that is why they hesitate and refrain from offering anything they do not get directly from the environment. This indigenous belief in maintaining the purity of biodiversity suggests and implies the presence of an inherent attitude toward conservation and protection of the environment. Moreover, the people fear that if they fail to follow what has been practised seen ages, the sun god might get angry the consequences of which can be very disastrous and calamitous. This lingering fear and the attached divinity to plants and animals help the ecology to survive without any harmful human intervention. Even if environmentalism is a Western concept, Which Emma Tomalin and other scholars argue, the Magahi indigenous people were unknowingly contributing to the conservation and preservation of biodiversity. Here, in the extract below, we see how a lady bowing before God thinks that she has not harmed the banana plant; why is God angry with her?

Duare hi kelawa ki ganchiya suruj ugale jhamay.

Kaun kasurwe ji suruj ugala jhamay (Singh 217)

[Lies undisturbed is the banana tree, the sun is not shining with full grace.

What a mistake I have made. The sun is not shining with a full face.] (My Translation)

Here, it is essential to note that sacred local practices and celebrations often lay a strong conservatory foundation and underpinning in the attitudes and behaviour of the local masses. These customs are often implemented and followed so piously and devoutly that even a child's innocent mistake is not tolerated. This implies and symbolises that the Magahi traditional and religious exercises forbid any kind of impurities to be mixed with the original and genuine composition of a substance they believe that by doing so, we may disturb and disappoint their deities. Here, in the following snippet, we see how is seeking forgiveness and trying to persuade the god who she believes will not accept the offerings defiled by her child:

Sajalo daurwa suruj ke, balka deli juthiaye,

Balka ke maiya hathwa jodele, suruj howa n sahay ("*Sajalo daurawa sasurji*"

[*Rakesh Kumar Pankaj*])

[The basket is all set to be offered; the son faked the food,

Standing with her folded hands, the mother goes to persuade.] (My Translation)

These pre-Brahminic god-fearing and rule-abiding communities have greatly contributed to the environmental protection of their respective areas. Eliza F. Kent (2013) discusses many sacred sites of Southern India to see how these communities have preserved their local cultures and beliefs, which have ultimately resulted in the protection and conservation of their forests and other ecological sites. She further quotes Madhav Gadgil, who in his article *Groves Dedicated to the Gods* (1971), talks vehemently about the ecological importance of these sacred groves and writes:

[t]hese deities are generally of an extremely primitive nature: mother goddesses in the form of unshaped stone lumps smeared with red paint, lying open to the sky . . . But for the believers, they are amongst the fiercest of deities; breaking even a dead twig in a sacred grove may result in a serious illness or in violent death. Such strict taboos have led to the preservation in these sacred groves of forest in its virgin condition, relics of the forest that must have once covered much of India (82).

We find such dedication and devotion towards the deities even in the Magahi folk religion, where even plucking fruits from some sacred trees without god's permission is highly forbiddable and formidable. The people also think of losing blessings and grace if they violate the orally transmitted set of ecological ethics, rules and rituals from their forefathers. In the Magahi folk practices, even today, the Hindus hesitate to cut the peepal (*ficus religiosa*) tree not only because of their religiosity attached to it but also because they strongly believe that trees like peepal, mango, neem etc. are used by species of birds and animals as their dwellings. So, even if the peepal tree is harming the structure of their own houses, they would request some Muslim man to cut the tree. Here, we see a similar example where a woman pleads before God because she thinks that god has mistakenly angry with her for plucking a fruit without his consent:

Chhoti-muti kewalwa ke gacchiya, pharle ladmud,

Kewalo na todli, kaun paap bhel (Singh 232)

[On a small-tiny orange plant, laden are the fruits,

I didn't pluck the fruit, what sins have I committed.] (My Translation)

In many folk songs in the Magahi language, we also find a mention of planting trees on many occasions, which include pregnancy. Magahi's way of total submission before the folk deities not only prohibits the cutting and exploitation of the natural environment but

also promotes the plantation of trees. During pregnancy, husbands were supposed to plant citrus fruits to please their wives. Not only this but it is also observed that certain flowers and fruits amuse some gods, so there has been a tradition of planting such trees to welcome them home. In the example below, we see how women plant a sapling of a jasmine flower to please and woo ‘Sokha’ devata (A deity among many deities placed at houses in the Magadh region).

Raja boya gariya chhoharwa he, badamwan mora man-bhave re.

Angana me lemu boya, duare anar boya ji, ... (Singh 13)

[The husband has planted coconut and dates, groundnuts please my heart.

Sowed orange in the court, pomegranate outside the yard] (My Translation)

Ahe oriya ke tare beli ropab, newta pethaeb,

Aho newta pethaeb Sokha dewa keahe man-vedil (Singh 14)

[I would plant jasmine below the roof, and would invite

Send summons to Sokha God, why would he be annoyed.] (My Translation)

Many sacred trees associated with the local deity are planted around the temple areas to please them, and this practice helps in the conservation of certain species of plants out of the fear of the wrath of the local god; people do not exploit and disturb those plants. These places of religious importance are attached to a range of socio-cultural beliefs and habits that understand the value of ecological dynamics. Ecocritics and even ecotheologians across the world often argue that “[s]acred sites also represent ancient and profound cultural values. The roles of sacred sites’ custodians from the indigenous, local community and mainstream religions are expressions of dedicated efforts that have specifically, if not always consciously, cared for nature in various ways” (Verschuuren et al. 5). We find a similar and universal feeling of solicitousness and tenderness prevalent in the Magahi folk religion, where plantation and greenery near a temple or sacred site used to be common practice. The plants of Neem and china rose are often associated with ‘saptmatrika’ or ‘satbahini’ (Seven sister goddesses), and these plants are also considered to be their abode where they live and play. See, for example, the following extract:

Kane haen baans-baswariya, kane haen kedali ke phulwa,

Kane haen maiya ke mandilwa? (“Kane haen baans-baswariya” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Where is the bamboo forest, where does the kedali flower lie,
Where can I goddess' temple find?] (My Translation)

Nanhi-nanhi orahul gachhiya, bhuiyan lote dhadh maiya he.

Tahi tare saato bahiniyan, khele jugwa saar, maiya he. (“Nanhi-nahi orahul gacchiya” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Small-tiny branches of china rose, lie spread on the ground.

Assembled under its branch, the seven sisters play gamble.] (My Translation)

Based on our ongoing discussions and the references to folk songs, it is evident that Magahi folk practices contain strong evidence of religious environmentalism. The people of the Magadh region do not only worship nature but also engage in its preservation and care.

Conclusion

To conclude, chapter 3 provided a comprehensive examination of indigenous traditions and their potential significance in tackling the issues of environmental crisis. Firstly, it defined indigenous traditions while highlighting their distinctions from mainstream religious practices. Several indigenous cultures share a symbiotic relationship with nature and worship them to get their wishes fulfilled. Their activities and behaviour ensure that they do not harm the biological diversity of the palace because they understand that any disturbance and imbalance in the ecology may threaten their existence. For ages, this mutual and coherent interrelatedness between people and nature has been instrumental in developing a harmonious, amicable and workable concord between the two. The chapter also took into account the notable absence of extensive research in the field. This lack of scholarly investigation reflects a broader historical trend of marginalisation of such indigenous cultures which have been living sustainably with nature. Unlike mainstream religions, which often have well-established centres for scholarly discussions, these largely overlooked and marginalised cultures lack research infrastructures and discourse. Moreover, numerous such traditions face endangerment due to rising globalisation, migration, imperialism and secularisation. It also investigated Magahi folk songs dedicated to nature worship to understand how they address the questions of environmental crisis. The people of Magadh perform worship rituals for their local deities, often distinct from Hindu Gods and Goddesses. In the folk songs,

dedicated to these deities, one can find a discourse on nature conservation, including mentions of protecting rivers and ponds and planting trees.

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Ecocritical Analysis of Magahi Folk Songs

In the previous chapters, the thesis discussed how indigenous cultures and religions have been conducive to refashioning and redefining our endeavours to protect the earth from injurious human alteration. The first chapter, which is an introduction to the thesis, reflected upon the need for research in Magahi folk culture. It also delineated the key terms that are requisite for the present research. The second chapter attempted to investigate ecocriticism as a literary discourse, encompassing its different waves and theoretical aspects to understand how this literary theory, which developed in Western countries, is currently assimilating voices from diverse regions of the world. The subsequent chapter introduces indigenous traditions and endeavours to elaborate on how ecological imperialism has significantly affected ecological values across the world. It investigated many aboriginal beliefs and customs from different indigenous communities of the world in an attempt to produce unconventional and traditional wisdom and methods of ecological preservation, which have been instrumental in safeguarding their local flora and fauna. With the rise of ecological imperialism in the European colonies of India, Africa and Australia, the harmonious communion between the native people and the other aspects of life forms in their locality was severely affected to the extent that acres of forests were razed and animals were brutally slaughtered to benefit the colonising mission of the colonisers. The imperialist states also realised their fallacious and exploitative policies and practices. They proposed the idea of Green Imperialism, which advocated the introduction of national parks and other conservation zones to tackle the declining number of plant and animal species in colonised countries. However, even the introduction of national parks could not pacify the discontent of the local population as their consent was never taken into consideration; as a result, these conservation zones remained critical sites where Western countries exercised monopoly and authority. Further, we examined the untraversed and unexplored Magahi culture to argue how socio-religious performances' ecological values and ethics can contribute to the canon of Indian ecological tradition. We also attempted to position the overlooked and disapproved Magahi ecological practices in the realm of different ecological expressions of India to argue how they can equally and significantly contribute to this

canon. What can Magahi's ecological practices offer to the field of ecological studies? Is it even possible to position an unnoticed Indian ecological tradition in the field of ecocriticism, which is claimed to be the intellectual property of Western countries?

Chapter 4 presents a comprehensive and comparative investigation of Magahi folk culture to observe how its ecological practices address and fulfil the demands of ecocriticism. In the previous chapter, we discussed Magadhi folk songs related to ecology and its preservation in general, in tandem with other languages. This chapter, however, will explain how Magahi song-texts can introduce a new dimension in ecocriticism that addresses the ongoing debate in Western Academic discipline, and furthers ecological ideologies that are original, unique and profound. Here, we will explore different aspects of Magahi folk songs and folklores to explore the relationship between the language speakers and the natural environment. Focusing on the theme of harmony between nature and human beings, it argues that Magahi folk culture provides a unique perspective in modern ecocritical thoughts by answering the recurrent queries asked by the discipline. Ecocriticism, throughout its three decades of history, has repeatedly queried whether nature can be perceived in non-anthropocentric terms by removing the human being as the sole purveyor and saviour of ecology. It argues that—in spite of the vast geo-political difference between Western Ecocriticism and Indian ethnic culture-- the Magahi song-texts can be read as a non-anthropocentric philosophy that regards nature as an irreducible, agential deity that should be feared/revered, avoided/pleaded to, collaborated with/worshipped by the human beings. Divided into two parts, it first talks about the aforementioned discourse of ‘perceiving’ nature while avoiding the homocentric interest, then posits the archived and translated samples of Magahi song-texts as a possible embodiment of that, providing an intersection of academic theory and pragmatic, indigenous ecological wisdom.

Ecocriticism’s Dilemma and the Magahi’s Response

*Haathe sinhorwa khoichha pakal paan chalan bahuaron dei aamma manawan
Uthun-uthun amma are humaro bachaniya, humahun je aile lalna ji ke cheriya,
Kaise me uthun-uthun toharo bachaniya, toharo lalanwa mamorale dhadhia,
Amma tora pallav thumihayan gadyabon, amma toro pallav kalsa chdhiabo.*
(“Haathe sinhorwa khoichha pakal paan” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[With vermilion in hand and mature betel leaves in saree, women go to the mango trees to persuade,
Please heed my words and come with me, let go of your anger, I beg your pardon on my son's behalf,
How can I accept your apologies and come with you, your son has broken my branches,
Mother fruit, we promise to position your twig and offer your tender leaves on an earthen pot.] (My Translation)

This part of the chapter proposes a detailed analysis of the euphony of humans and Nature in the Magahi folk songs— an indigenous religious oral tradition of the Magadh region¹ of Eastern India. The study wants to explore a possible relationship between this particular cultural practice and modern Western ecocritical academia, which is focused on the anthropocentric aspect of thinking of nature and ecological preservation while pursuing a sustainable response to the current ecological crisis through “time-honoured local and foreign wisdom” (Binsbergen 10). Can a relatively obscure ethnic culture— dedicated to a complex relation between the devotees and their pantheon of elemental deities— “get critical theory and ecology to address each other in ways they do not now sufficiently do” (Callaghan 81)? Can the Magahi people think of Nature in the latter's inherent terms? We have elaborated the ethnic identity of the Magahi culture later in this study; for now, the reader should note that we are talking about song-texts used in several rituals of the Magahi people who, linguistically descending from the ancient Magadhi Prakrit language group (which is a part of the larger Indo-Aryan language group), now reside at the confluence of the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal in India. We are indebted to Emma Tomalin (2002) for the foundational idea that a correlation between religious practice and non-otherizing environmental preservation (one that treats the natural environment as part of a symbiotic network termed as ‘Creative Stewardship’) (Dubos 461) is indeed theoretically possible². However, this study also wants to posit itself as a response to Tomalin's postulations. Speaking specifically about the Indian context, Tomalin (2002) opines that it is a mere happenstance when an act of natural preservation is performed through traditional religiosity— there is no evidence of a ‘primitive ecological wisdom’ in such practices, only an irrational reverence to some divine monoliths. Tomalin mostly talks about the post-1990s resurgence of the political Hinduism in India that gained currency along

hardcore nationalistic lines, and her borrowing of Alley D. Kelly's (1998) observations of the ritualistic pollution of the river Ganga manifests her somewhat stringent impression of Indian religiosity. We want to offer an alternative to this monolithic argument by invoking the little-known 'village-Hinduist' tradition of the Magahi ritual that is ubiquitous at temple worship, harvesting, birthing and a range of other *rites de passage* elements. We argue that the Magahi ritualism— majorly manifested through the song-texts— finds an incidental ally in the last few decades of 'ecocentric' thoughts. Especially in the last three decades, more so after the advent of the third-wave Ecocriticism, it has been repeatedly argued that Ecocriticism should be more inclusive beyond its hermetic Western borders. The discipline now is remoulded into a "polyphonic nature" which is no longer geo-ethnically or thematically unipolar, instead birthing a number of parallel, multi-ethnic ecocritical narratives that Serpil Oppermann calls 'rhizomatic activity' (19).

The opening quoted lines, for example, express a deep, almost deferential attitude of the village females after their children broke the monolithic mango tree's twigs and leaves without permission. The women hence came to the tree to appease it through songs, rituals and sacrifices in an earthen pot— all symbolising the adherence to the natural coda, its elements and the 'repayment' of its lost property. This song-text is an example of a wedding song. One can find songs of similar themes being sung on various other occasions. The fear towards nature arises from the conviction that natural entities embody divine beings or that any disturbance or contamination of these entities may lead to unfavourable situations. Furthermore, these song-texts also articulate the principles of biodiversity and ecocentrism, which are deeply ingrained in the cultural ethos of the Magahi community. These ancient god-fearing and rule-abiding communities have greatly contributed to the environmental protection of their respective areas. Eliza F. Kent, in her book *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India* (2013), discusses many sacred sites of Southern India to see how these communities have preserved their local cultures and beliefs, which have ultimately resulted in the protection and conservation of their forests and other ecological sites. Such attempts to restore and preserve the 'natural' thus provide a possible broadening of Lynn White's (1967) vitriolic critique of Christianity (that, in fact, addresses any religio-institutional monolith) as a "dominance over them (the natural elements). God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any

purpose save to serve man's purposes" (1205) (brackets mine). Can the ancient and unsung Magahi-culture hint at a possibility of concord in the overwhelmingly anthropocentric relation of humans and nature, by focusing on rituals regarding nature as an agential entity? We will analyse this question by focusing on the song-texts profusely used in those rituals.

To study the Magahi song-texts as a relevant response to nature vs the anthropocentric interpretation of it, we need to survey the most recent trends in international ecocritical thoughts. Ecocriticism as a discipline emerged as an inclusionary school that attempted to take the focus away from human-centrism and posited it within a dense network of life forms, cultures, rituals and (in)animate objects, with the humans occupying only a fraction of the critical space (Marland 846): "beyond biocentrism (ethics that sees inherent value to all living things) by including environmental systems as wholes, and their abiotic aspects" (Haydn Washington et al. 35). Yet, is such an inclusion indeed possible for the human faculty to comprehend? Even more essentially, is it possible to *think* of nature as an agential being— one that exists in an inscrutable network of animate/inanimate, alive/insentient? *Thinking*, which is by default a human action, inevitably sways towards perceiving the entire ecology in human-centric, human-serving terms. Thus, it is difficult for human beings to engage in a 'true' appreciation of nature in its *own* terms, without the slightest hint of utilizing and appropriating nature for the human's egotistical gain. To understand the idea of ecological divinity and its symbiotic relationship with the human beings that govern Magahi culture, one first needs to survey such conceptual challenges, and then analyse how our case studies represent an "ecocentric philosophy that placed nonhuman nature on an equal moral footing with people"³ (Woodhouse 96). 'Nonhuman', a term used by the likes of Woodhouse (2018) and Rowe (1994), means not only '[the] trees, bears, fish and grasshoppers' (96-97), but "the inorganic/organic nature that encapsulates them" (2). The challenge for the human subject is to recognise its place as a part of this encapsulation, and not imagine itself at the centre of it—a concept much similar to J. Baird Callicott's reading of Aldo Leopold's 'Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair', which propounds that the foundation of any environmental ethic is to disburse the "supreme moral value as residing within biotic wholes..., not within any individual type" (Dixon 272). In other words, the human self has to be unthought to think about the benefit of the ecosystem. This is indeed challenging for the human being since the very terms of our existence from the dawn of

modern civilisation have been to utilise and control the elements we perceive as misaligned to our interests: “[m]an and nature are two things, and man is master” (Glottfelty 9). Even the acts of ecological preservation, by this causation, are speciesist as “[t]he standard justifications for the protection of nature—recreation, beauty, scientific interest, stabilization of ecosystems, etc.—were all “anthropocentric values”” (Woodhouse 104). In other words, human beings are likely to perceive natural preservation as the furtherance of its existence, putting themselves as the facilitator and the sole beneficiary of the natural bounty.

Magahi song-texts can be read as resistive to this egocentric perpetuation. Our claim about this specific canon of folk-culture is to recognise “the profound interconnections between different forms of life in the composite world where previously we had seen separations” (Oppermann 275). Collectively, these songs hint towards natural preservation by the way of reverent recompensation—what you take, so shall you return; what you desire, so shall you entreat; what you utilize, so shall you conciliate; what gives you life, so shall you revere. The majority of Magahi songs rest on the central motif of conversing, dealing with, and seeking assent from a higher, unknowable authority with a deep reverence, distance, entreaty and a more or less open-ended hope of reasonable fulfilment. The persistent paradox of Ecocriticism—how to *think* of the non-human other in the latter’s own terms—can thus be partially answered by this recompensing approach to the Magahi rituals further. This tradition also desists from over-explaining or analysing the natural machinations, which can be argued as the human tendency to manipulate the natural laws to its own benefit (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 171)⁴. Nature in the Magahi tradition is an ancient, wise and complex entity never attempted to be fully understood. It is not a “moral guide for human activity” (Hovardas 1472), but a hybrid of the benevolent, the unmoved and the inscrutable. The Magahi song-texts humanize nature, yet keep distance from it; revere and protect it, yet are afraid of it; plead to it, yet are helpless before its machinations. Nature is a deity both familial and affectless for the Magahi people. One should note that modern Ecocriticism also furthers the same argument regarding the human/nature relationship, no longer attempting to discover the most coherent pedagogy of ‘nature’s ways. Nature can be an essential mystery now (exuding a sense of “commingled wonder and horror” (Moreland 35)), pushing its boundaries beyond the anthropological conception of nature as a predictable and generous ‘giver’, pliant to the demands of sustenance of the humankind.

Similarly, Magahi culture establishes a reverential transaction with nature, adopting a middle path that benefits from the ecology without being invasive and imposing, and attempting to symbolically give back what is taken. This connection between the most recent critical turn and an arcane ritualistic tradition thus posits our case studies as a unique imagining of the non-anthropocentric ‘other’. We aim to decipher the cosmological complexity of the Magahi philosophy behind its seemingly simplistic façade (Monani and Adamson 215).

Magahi Song-texts and Anthropocentric Interests

Let us remind the reader that ‘Magahi’ is a language spoken in at least five dialects spread over nearly 14000 square miles of North to East India, by at least 20.7 million people in variant formats, hybrids and interlinguistic experimentations (Prasad 2-4). Over a thousand years old, this language is a direct descendant of Magadhi Prakrit— one of the monolithic written languages of ancient India that dates back to the 5th to 6th century BC, and is now proliferated over at least seventeen districts of the states Bihar and Jharkhand, debatably even making inroads into the neighbouring state of West Bengal. A detailed linguistic or phonological profiling is not our concern here⁵; we are rather focused on the generations-old folk ritualistic songs normally performed during rites-of-passage celebrations like birth, labour, festival, coming of age, harvesting, etc. All these have their origin in Vedic ritualistic traditions to varying degrees, yet including “relatively informal and private acts of worship on the part of individual devotees, whilst on other occasions highly formalized ritual procedure defined in Sanskrit texts” (Sharma 1), thus achieving the moniker “Village Hinduism”, mostly targeted to “the means by which villagers seek to allay problems attributed to the spirit world” (Elgood 328) reminiscent of portions in the *Atharvaveda* (Singh 7). Although Magahi as a spoken unit is not limited to the village communities, the aforementioned songs have a wider practice in rural areas due to the urban community’s ethnically divergent nature (Aryani 2000; Dorson 212). The songs’ Hindu ritualistic roots also bring us back to Emma Tomalin’s (2004) previously mentioned dismissal of mainstream Hinduism’s eco-consciousness as a misguided practice that acts “against the interests of environmental protection” by fussing “about ritual purity and [does] not consider physical pollution to threaten the spiritual purity” (Tomalin 17) (Our brackets). Tomalin’s (267-68) works in this field have a political undertone (one that criticizes the post-liberal uprising of divisive Hindu fundamentalism in India— a juncture we have avoided), but even without it, she finds

strong abutment from Kelly D. Alley's *Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution* (1998). Alley (1998), later supported by many like Shrivastava (2010), Rai (2013), and Chaudhary *et al* (2019), talks about the failure of river water preservation endeavours like the Ganga Action Plan. "On Daśāśvamedha ghat, while pilgrims perform ablutions, others wash clothes with soap, a pandā spits, an old woman 'does latrine' on a corner of the ghāt (for lack of public facilities), and urban sewage flows into the river under the ghat floor" (307) (This asynchronicity between the earthly and the spiritual purity renders Hindu rituals facile in eco-preservation, argues Tomalin, although there is no dearth of deification of natural elements (the 'mother' Ganga, for example) in Indian mainstream religiosity. The more we idolise, the heedless we grow to the actual purity of the water and the forests, throwing sacrificial items and daily rejects abundantly into nature because it supposedly filters everything spiritually, for itself and its devotees alike. This endemic anthropocentrism, one that shows "no particular commitment to pursuing a religiously inspired environmentalism" (Tomalin 25), finds a far superior, philosophically ambivalent, actively conservation-oriented foil in the Magahi song-texts, elaborated in the following paragraphs.

The dates and names of the song-texts are all lost in the dense network of myths, legends and facts. All we know is that these songs are sung for ages (Singh 20), performed while fulfilling some other duties like praying, tilling land, wedding rituals etc. The relation between the physical task and the songs is arbitrary—their themes may or may not correlate (while planting the seeds in the paddy field, the local women may sing of their longing for the men of the house who, as migrant workers, reside in faraway land). In this section, we are solely focusing on the ecological theme in these songs, which is a thematic mainstay across the canon of these song-texts. As we said before, these songs propound a reverential transaction with the natural elements. Having said that, there are hints of a variation in the degrees of anthropocentrism displayed in the texts, reminiscent of Burberry's (201-202) (after Buell) theorization that a total purging of human interest from eco-themed texts is, after all, impossible: there can be only 'strong' and 'weak' anthropocentrisms. Take, for example:

*Pahile je marbo sahil, sahil kaanta chahila he,
lalna tabe hum marbo mirigiya, mirig chhala chahila he,
lalna tabe hum kaatbo parsawa, paras danta chahila he.* (Singh 50)

[We kill the porcupine first, its thorns are what we want,

Then, son, comes the deer, its skin is what we want,

Then, son, we'll cut the Ficus tree, its sticks are what we want.] (My Translation)

The above-quoted lines denote the preparations of the Hindu Brahmin ritual of the Sacred Threading— a rite-of-passage ritual that officially denotes a young man's initiation into the higher strata of religious practice (or even manhood after puberty). It involves the ceremonial wearing of a bunch of threads across the torso, and it is the preparation of those threads depicted in the quoted lines. The goal, obviously, is anthropic and natural resources are to be indiscriminately used for it by violent means. However, there are finer variations amongst the rare unambiguously anthropocentric Magahi song-texts as we see in the following quoted lines from a different song. Although the declaration of violence to safeguard the human interest in nature is still clear, there is a tone of submission to a higher power that watches over all— man and animal alike:

Nariarwa je pharela khabad se ohi par suga madaraye.

Marbo re sugwa dhanukh se suga gire murjhaye.

*Oo je sugni je royele viyog se, aadit hoyi na sahay*⁶ ("Nariarwa je pharela khabad se" [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Yonder the coconut hangs in a bunch, and the parrot hovers on it

Will shoot the bird with an arrow, and the ground it'll hit.

Its mate shall cry in pain, please aadit [Sun god], watch over it.] (My Translation)

While we hesitate to call the last line 'sympathetic', it is certainly less fatalist than the first one— the callous homocentrism is now replaced by a faith in something akin to Calvin's interpretation of Predestination⁷: some unwavering and inscrutable credence in a pagan god's ubiquitousness in 'watching over' all creatures. This, however, is made further problematic by the tone conveyed through: 'aadit hoyi na sahay', translated as "please Sun god, watch over it", with *na* roughly denoting a puerile tenaciousness one usually displays in imploring to a guardian— 'please'. The anthropocentrism, as compared to the first song, is 'softening' here, as it is glazed over by an appeal to a supreme protector. On the other hand, the protector (*aadit*) is imagined as a benevolent Anthropos, somebody who can be approached and pleaded to. Thus, while less vehement in propounding the human interest above all else, this particular song-text still favours anthropocentrism while feeling pensive about it, and humanizes the deity in the last line.

‘Human’ is the ultimate thematic mainstay in this song, thus cementing the inescapability of anthropocentric undercurrents even in the seemingly other-centric utterances. A similar ethos is propagated through the following song-text, sung by the Magahi speakers in Nepal. This folk song, dedicated to the local folk deity ‘Karikh’, belongs to the revered category of the deity (dev-devi geet) songs in the Magahi language. In the example of the Chhath song mentioned above and in the following song, one can observe a common theme where both songs begin with human intervention in nature. However, by the songs’ conclusion, there is a realisation that the birds are also the manifestation of the supreme power (in both instances, the sun god). Consequently, thinking of harming them is in a way displeasing the deity.

Pharo naahi khaiet ha he suga

Phulo naahi hi khaiet ha

He he daare-paati karaiet ha he suga

.

.

.

Kate neende sutal ho hahu, ho Karikh ho dularua?

Ho ho sugawa ke lehu na bajhaye ho

He kawno ghare hai ge maiya ge teersi dhanuswa?

Ki kawno ghare me hau ge mai jaalwa

Ho dharamak ghar me hau ho baua Karikh teersi dhanuswa

Ho ho sati ghar me hae ho mummy jaalwa

He ek jaal phekali ge maiya, dosar jaal phekali

He he tesre jaal sugawa he udal aakas he

He sugawa je rotai ge maiya ke junglawwa udi jatai

He he eho hathin saheb dina nath he

Pahile je kahita baua Karikh, ho charan pakharati

Ho anchara pasari ho jas mangati

Hum nahi janali ge maiya, saheb hai dinanath

Ge he hum na bicchaiti ge mai jal he

He angane me detiai ge maiya ge dudhwa ke dharwa (“Pharo naahi khaiet ha he suga” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Parrot, you neither eat the fruits

Nor do you savour the flowers
 You just hover from branch to branch
 .
 .
 .
 How deeply you sleep, O dear Karikh?
 Trap the poet in a net
 Mother, in which room are the arrows and bows kept
 And where have you placed the net?
 Arrows and bows lie in the room of righteousness
 The net in the room of truth, O son! Karikh
 My first attempt goes in vain, and so does the second
 The third attempt is also unsuccessful, the parrot flies into the sky
 The crying parrot hurried to the forest, mother
 Ah! he was the Sun God
 Had I known before, I would have washed your feet
 Spreading my saree before you, I would have sought glory
 I couldn't realise, mother, that he is the Sun God
 Had I known, I wouldn't have cast my net
 Rather, I would have fed him milk.] (My Translation)

In the above-mentioned song-text, it is noteworthy that the bird represents nature. The items used to catch and kill it, such as the net, bow and arrow, are mentioned to be used keeping righteousness and truth in mind. This can be interpreted as a form of ecological wisdom prevalent in society. It emphasises that even when utilising natural resources, one should be mindful of their sustainable and judicious use. The last example in this context, a mere fragment of only two lines, resorts to the casual instrumentalization of beings:

Aao ge khudbudi chirhayan, anda parle jo,
Tore ande aag laago, bau khelaule jo.
Aadha roti roj debau, tikari mahinna
Aao ki khudbud chiraiya, anda paar-paar jo. (Singh 563)
 [Come here sprightly sparrow, the eggs that you lay

Let them lie unguarded, my child wants to play.

Will feed you sweets a month, a bread a day

Come here sprightly sparrow, forget the eggs you lay.] (My Translation)

The subtext of violence is even more muted here, but the innate exploitation of nature “in a mood of indifference” (White 1205) cannot be denied. The village mother wants the sparrow to come and watch over the kid even if its nestful of eggs lie unprotected. In a similar folk song, which is sung during the festivals of the Magadh region, a woman appears to be upset with the parrot because it is dropping ripe and sweet plums on the ground. Here, too, we can observe a form of human agency attempting to exert control over what is not human. In both cases, human intervention in nature is evident, which might appear to be anthropocentric and unnecessary. The line “niman baeriya girawa he re sugawa” seems to indicate how human activities may be infringing upon the natural habitats and rights of birds on nature. This can also be interpreted as how humans believe they have the first right to natural elements and stop other living beings of nature from accessing them:

Ghar pacchuwarwa me baeriya ke gacchiya

Ki baeriya pharale laale-laal he

Niman baeriya girawa he re sugawa

Khaite lagela bada meeth he (“Ghar pacchuwarwa me baeriya ke gacchiya”

[Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Behind the house lies a plum

Its fruits are red and ripe

Parrot, why do you drop the good berries?

Their taste is sweet and fine.] (My Translation]

The narrative features a parrot who is wasting good and ripe fruits. This song imagines a human spectator in the background, who— although invisible and non-intrusive— still tries to control the actions of the non-anthropoc. The overall theme seems to be a scrutiny of human intervention in the natural world, questioning the extent to which human beings can truly be “non-intrusive” or whether our presence inevitably disturbs the balance of nature. However, this can also be studied as a way to encourage the sustainable and judicious use of natural resources, rather than its exploitation.

Beyond Anthropocentrism: Magahi Song-texts and Ecocentrism

We have observed the Magahi song-texts' innate connection with nature coloured by a homocentric tendency that aims to utilise natural resources for human benefit. While there are touches of reverential acknowledgement of the pagan deities, the main aim is to harness and employ devoid of a symbiotic interrelation. This is not endemic to Magahi and can be found in several global folk cultures as well. For example, Laura Tohe (2017) records while speaking of her native Navajo oratorio, the 'Seeker'-- the everyman Navajo hero going through his rites of passage-- imbibes the natural elements of his surroundings to come out as a matured, iconic warrior: "Seeker, five-fingered being, /Child of dawn/Child of daylight/Child of evening twilight/Child of darkness" (91). This fixation with a core human absorption at the cost of the natural agency, so far observed in the cited Magahi song-texts, is somehow challenged in the first example of the next cluster of lyrics we have gathered:

Ropaloon men lemua anaar to auro amarudvaa ropaloon he.

Lalanaa se ho fulavariyaa lagai anhaar ek to balamuaa binu he. ("Ropaloon men lemua anaar" [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[I planted lemon, pomegranate and guava.

Blossoming like an infant, the garden is dark without a lover.] (My Translation)

The discerning reader can still find traces of human interest in this fragment. Insemination and fertility are heavily metaphorised through the planting of lemon, pomegranate and guava trees-- all bearing fruits with multiple seeds and are citrous in composition. This obvious imagery of pregnancy notwithstanding, there is a clear self-serving intent behind the very act of plantation. The reader will also note the lady's perceived loss of interest in the garden while longing for her lover-- by separation or by death. The reason why we treat this fragment to be the transition between the two rough thematic clusters is its complete absence of enforcing anthropic interest (killing, cutting, skinning, shooting, burning, etc.) and its reverential separation of the natural and human interests. nature is supreme here-- superior, benevolent but independent. The garden, though planted as a manifestation of the desire to bear a child, now blossoms (possibly having granted her wish already) regardless of the present pensiveness the lady goes through. The garden *seems* dark ("*lagai anhaar*") without the father of the child-- the emotional burden belongs to the subject while nature progresses in its inscrutable

rhythm. This progression towards the benign anthropocentrism is even more apparent in ‘*Bengwa je roba he benguchiya ke korwa hey na, /Daiya paani binu pade hahakarwa hey na*’ (Singh 42) which roughly describes the plight of a toad couple in the face of constant drought as they are shown to be lamenting in a very human way: ‘*Bengwa je roba he benguchiya ke korwa hey na*’ [the he-toad wails in the embrace of his mate]. While this is certainly anthropomorphic, Magahi song-texts consistently display an awareness of the enfeebled man or animal before the natural way of the world. The impotence of the anthropic agency before the natural prowess breeds a fear-laced reverence, and the reverence breeds conservation. Here is another example:

Saanp Chhodle Saanp kenchuli

Ganga Maiya Chhodle Arar (“*Saanp Chhodle Saanp kenchuli*” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[The snake has shed its skin

Mother Ganga has left her bank.] (My Translation)

In the previously discussed folk song, humans are depicted as being concerned about nature, particularly depicted through their growing distress over the drying up of the river Ganga. Not only that, but even creatures like snakes are also troubled by the rising temperature and heat, and humans also seem to be worried about their plight. This relationship is not just practical but also spiritual and emotional. In one of the very few annotated collections of Magahi song-texts, Ram Prasad Singh in *Magahi Lok Geet ka Vrihad Sangrah* (1999) [The Mammoth Collection of Magahi Folk-songs], further talks about how ethereal fear acts as a positive deterrence: ‘It is forbidden and comparable to deicide (‘*Brahmahatya*’) to climb a sequoia after sundown. Hence, in folk culture, trees like Ficus and Neem are taken to be an abode of the pagan gods and are always protected from chopping. The Vishnupurana adores these giant trees repeatedly (Singh 87) (My Translation). The role of deterrence— most commonly of a divine outrage— is thus creating an evolved version of the human’s moral pivot here⁸. One can also find such folk songs which prohibit the cutting of trees, recognising the essential role trees play not only in human life but also as habitats for various animal and bird species. Take for example:

Nimiya ke daadh mat tu katiha ji dulraitu papa

Nimiya hau chidiya ke basera maai he

Hoete bhinusarwa papa chhidiya udi jaetau ji
Rah jaetau Nimiya akela maai he
Dhiawa ke bojha mat samajhiha ji dulraitu papa
Dhiawa hau du din ke mehman maai he
Hoete bhinusarwa dhiawa chali jaetau ji
Rah jaitan mummy akela maai he (“Nimiya ke daadh mat tu katiha ji” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])
 [My dear father, please do not get the neem tree branch cut
 The neem tree is a home for birds
 As dawn breaks, the bird will fly away
 Leaving the neem tree alone
 My dear father, please do not consider the daughter a burden
 A daughter is a guest for just a few days
 As the dawn breaks, the daughter will go away
 Leaving the mother alone.] (My Translation)

Here, the relationship between trees and birds is compared to that of a mother and daughter, which provides an insight into the significance of nature in Magahi folk life. This song, sung during the departure of the bride at a wedding emphasises how integral and cherished the natural environment is, reflecting its essential role in the cultural and daily life of the community. In Magahi folk songs, we also come across such examples where natural entities seem to advise and warn human beings about impending danger. This indicates a sense of interconnectedness between nature and humans, highlighting the reciprocal relationship present in these cultural expressions. After the rice harvest, there has been a practice of hanging bundles of paddy (dhaan ki baali) around the rooftops and ventilators for the birds to feed on them. And, in return, according to the folk belief, birds and animals provide information about the auspicious moments to begin anything. See, for example the following song-texts:

Maai he kahe lagi banwa me mor bolela?
Maai he kahe lagi koelar gohar karela?
Maai he sagun lagi vanawa me mor bolela
Maai he sagun lagi koelar gohar karela
Maai he kahe lagi dularu damad aawela?

Maai he kahi lagi sajan bariaat aawela?

Maai he sobha lagi sajan bariaat aawela

Maai he dhiawa lagi dularu damad aawela (“Maai he kahe lagi banwa me mor bolela?” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Mother, why does the peacock sing in the woods?

And why does the cuckoo plead?

In the forest, the peacock proclaims the auspicious hour

And so does the cuckoo signal

Mother, why does the beloved son-in-law come?

And why does he bring the wedding procession?

The wedding procession is to show grandeur

And the beloved son-in-law comes for progeny.] (My Translation)

Aamwa ke daadh chhadi bole koelia

Sagun-sagun ririaye ji, ki koi nahi shagun molaye ji (“Aamwa ke daadh chhadi bole koelia” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])

[Sitting on a mango branch

The cuckoo is chirping, no one seems anxious about the auspicious time.] (My Translation)

The two above-mentioned songs belong to the category of wedding songs (Vivah Geet) sung in the Magadh region. There is a tradition of observing auspicious times before undertaking any task, in which animals and birds also appear to be included. In the second song-text, the bird seems to be so involved in the ritualistic practices of human beings that it cries out (*ririaye*) to inform them about the auspicious time. This suggests a relationship that is both unique and symbiotic, where elements of nature become one to celebrate the oneness of nature. But the relationship between the two is not always so seamless; sometimes nature reveals its harsh powers in response to human activities, a theme which we will explore later.

Religious deterrence, as it commingles reverence and trepidation, thus establishes one of the primary features of the uniquely eco-preservationist aspects of Magahi song-texts (however, there are other equally strong eco-sensitive features in the other song texts, as discussed later). The fear, distance and submission— elements buried in the mainstream ritual practices prevalent in Hinduism— govern these indigenous modes of

worshipping to the natural manifestations of the mostly benevolent, but sometimes harsh pagan deities. There is a ravishing flood in the nearby river, but the time of the son's wedding is nigh, and the auspicious moment is passing soon. What if the water engulfs the house? More importantly, what if the son remains unmarried?

*Kaani-kaani chithiya likhthi dulraitu babu nadiya alai toofan hey,
Supli khelete tuhun dulraitu bahini, nadiya alah mania hey,
Laganiyan mor utahul, sagunwa bhal ham paili hey* (Singh 52).

[As he writes, father's eyes fill up with tear,
Quit playing O daughter mine your brother's wedding is so near,
Go, pray to the river god, its wrath is what I fear.] (My Translation)

Here is a complete submission of the anthropic interest to the whims of natural calamities. The interest is homocentric, but there is no apparent panacea to the impending disaster other than blind praying. There is a helpless attempt to rationalize (hence somehow control) the river's wrath by appealing to the innocently playing ('Supli' -- a local game for children) daughter to pray to the god of the deluge. The river deity is traditionally taken to be a female in pan-Indian culture, and the father desists from praying to it himself. Is there a subliminal gendered narrative here (a female can only be coaxed by another female)? Does the innocently playing girl somehow denote the cosmic, unpredictable whims of nature? Irrespective of the debated nuances, the progressively unobtrusive human agency in natural machination further shapes the infusion of Magahi religious ideology and the quotidian crises of its people. Singh further notes the deeper religious emotions the Magahi people foster with nature that transcends the boundaries of holy fear. In this phase, natural sanctity is unquestioned, its manifestation almost corpuscular: "the gods live in every leaf of the ficus tree. Hence it is forbidden to cut or burn them... the mango leaf symbolizes purity. The sequoias are revered as the abode of a thousand birds" (92)-- writes Singh. The divine existence is thus weaved into the very core of the wilderness. God is everywhere-- not only theologically, but tangibly as well. Everything is holy. It can be utilised, pleaded, bargained with, feared and worshipped, yet the Magahi culture desists from over-formulizing and exploiting it. See, for example, the following song-texts:

*Kahwan me matiya lihle jalmiya, kahwan me matiya tohro biyah?
Kur khet matiya lihle jalmiya, madwa me matiya tohro biyah.*

Uthun-uthun matiya lal piyariya, so toro binu matiya kaise biyah? (Singh 54)

[Wherefrom you come Earth, whose home are you married to?

You come from the unploughed Earth, and you will be placed at the wedding spot.

Arise-arise o golden red Earth, a wedding you must attend to?)] (My Translation)

Mati je Utah he jalamal, sohag ke mati he

Dulrait papa pokhra khanawale, mati upajawale he (“Mati je Utah he jalamal, sohag ke mati he” [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj]

[Arise, O fresh and newly-born soil, the sanctity of union springs from you

You came from the pond which my father had dug.] (My Translation)

Both these folk songs, sung during ‘madwa’ ritual of weddings in Magadh, depict the inherent relationship between humans and nature, where humans acknowledge the importance of nature in their lives by worshipping it. These folk songs are more than just a form of amusement, they are a profound cultural expression that underscores the essential and sacred relationship between humans and nature, emphasising respect, reverence and gratitude for the natural environment. The lines “toro binu matiya kaise biyah” and “sohag ke maati”, clearly illustrate the vital role of soil in the lives of the people of Magadh. They emphasise the integration of natural elements into daily human activities and cultural practices, highlighting the symbolic and practical significance of soil in traditional ceremonies and rituals. This is certainly ecocentric, as it places nature in the centre of human existence, or at the very least, on equal moral footing with humanity. Imagining the deity as a domiciliary, familial, gracious entity is an undercurrent of village Hinduism (however, this feature is not just of village Hinduism, but of mainstream Hinduism, especially the Bhakti kind flourishing in the 15th century A.D.) that has persisted for centuries all over the country, especially in East Indian states like Bengal and Bihar. Hearn (1879), although parts of his thesis now debatable, made a distinction between the uncaring cosmic forces (which the Aryan forefathers felt belittled by) and the ‘house-god’ who nullifies the effect of such denigration in the ancient Aryan context (also debated to be the progenitor of the Hindu religion and its scriptural practices): “very present help in trouble, the Divine and Gracious Protector who cared, and cared exclusively, for him and his” (47). So far in Magahi ritualism, we have observed the progress from confrontational anthropocentrism to the fearfully reverent self-effacement of human-centric proclivities— from killing animals to praying to the

deluge. This last phase is concerned with the reverential domestication of the gods— one that protects, nourishes and symbiotically grows along with the quotidian fulfilment of the family’s ordinary desires. The god is a member of the household here, suffused in the domestic elements, actions and transience, akin to the *laukika* (‘temporal, secular (as opposed to the scriptural or sacral), or pertaining to the everyday life’ (Sengupta 3)) tradition of— for example— Bengal, that is both derived from the scriptures and transcending it by imbibing a more inclusionary aspect. Sengupta (2021) has isolated the ‘meyeli’ (womanly) manifestation of divinity in Bengali folk culture where the feminine (along with all the values of gender hierarchies such as ‘familial, primitive, innocent, affective, irrational, ignorant, and so on’) is worshipped as the domestic embodier of godly values. Something similar is happening in the last quoted Magahi song-text. The earth is not only imagined as a woman, it is a gorgeous woman soon to be married, and to be taken— blushing red (‘lal piyariya’) -- to the ceremony along with the human girl of the house. The motif of the earth as the eternal mother, hence feminine, is reiterated here along with imagining it as part of the family both literally and figuratively: the Magahi people carry a potful of domestic earth to the actual wedding ceremony, possibly symbolizing the union on a metaphysical level. The earth nourishes and safeguards like the archetypical female imaginary, hence human beings are obliged to shower all the anthropic gestures of love and care upon it. This tranquil, settled, habitual portrayal of the traditional rural life is the final spectrum of the Magahi song-text this study wants to project, where the god exists in perfect somatic harmony with the human, somehow subverting Ecocriticism’s perceived dichotomy between the anthropic and the natural. The gods are everywhere, and within us. To think about one is to think about the ‘other’, and the interest of the ‘self’ must be aligned with the ‘bigger’ picture. A philosophical balance— however puerile and simplistic— is indeed possible in Magahi ritualism, that surpassing conflicts, fear, terror and dominance, can simply be content by looking at the gently swaying Neem branches in a breeze. As it swings, the god swings. As nature seems happy, the deity seems satisfied. As the toddler of the family plays, the ‘other’ feels content.

*Nimiya ke dadh maiya lagale hindolwa,
 ki dhuli-dhuli maiya gawah geet, ki dhuli-dhuli.
 Dhulte-dhulte maiya lagale piasiya,
 Ki chali bhel malhoriya anganwa.*

Sutal ha ki jagal tuhun malin ge betiya,
Ki bunda ek mora paniya pilaw ki bunda ek na.
Sone ke gahilawa maiya, rupe ke basanwa,
Resam dori maiya piya judwa paani.
Ek cheeru peelee maiya, dui cheeru peelee,
Ki teesre me maiya deh asis,
Jaise judawala malin humara,
Ki oisahi tora, betiya judav.
Ki oisahi tora, putohiya judav. (“Nimiya ke dadh maiya lagale hindolwa”
 [Rakesh Kumar Pankaj])
 [The Goddess is swinging and singing on a Neem branch
 O how she hums her song upon that swing.
 The Goddess becomes thirsty while playing and,
 She goes to the gardener’s abode.
 “Are you home, oh lady of the house” she asks,
 “Grant me a drop of water to drink”.
 “The water is in the golden pot” the lady says
 “I filled it with care, with a silver pail and a silken rope. Kindly help yourself,
 mother”.
 The goddess drinks a gulp or two, and blesses the lady,
 “The way you have given me peace,
 The same way, may your daughter find peace
 The same way, may your daughter-in-law find peace]. (My Translation)

Many sacred trees associated with the local deity are planted around the temple areas to please them, and this practice helps in the conservation of certain species of plants out of the fear of the wrath of the local god, people don’t exploit and disturb those plants. These places of religious importance are attached to various socio-cultural beliefs and habits that understand the value of the ecological dynamics. Ecocritics and even eco-theologians across the world often argue that “[s]acred sites also represent ancient and profound cultural values. The roles of sacred sites’ custodians from the indigenous, local community and mainstream religions are expressions of dedicated efforts that have specifically, if not always consciously, cared for nature in various ways” (Verschuuren 5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we come back to one of the resonant questions we raised earlier in the study: is there any possibility of circumvention of the inevitability of thinking of nature in anthropic terms? The answer— if a survey of Magahi song-texts can be called so— is a tentative ‘yes’ that signals the critically ignored practices of the Indian indigene that have formulised a way to live symbiotically with nature. To elaborate, we have observed Magahi ritualism’s multi-layered invocation of nature as a tool, a provider, an ambivalent divinity, an all-pervasive safe keeper, a mother, a daughter and a symbiotic agency that nourishes if nourished. The Magahi culture may be read as an obscure but significant branch of Hinduism that performs its reverence in a symbiotic and preservationist manner, worshipping natural monoliths with a unique set of ritualistic practices and reverential utterances. We are not claiming that this small corpus of fragmentary song-texts (the majority of the Magahi songs used in this study are indeed fragmentary. They are performed majorly in the versions presented in this study. We have attempted to include full texts wherever available) to establish a defining canon that answers the most defining question Ecocriticism asks: how to live with nature. We simply want to signal that, through Magahi song-texts, a harmony and agential merging between humans and nature can be deciphered through fear, reverence and familialism. Human expectations are tempered by a reverential distance and stoicism, pacifying (and being pacified by) nature, ultimately living in familial harmony, peace and mediating agency. The phrase we used earlier— ‘reverential transaction’—can thus be a possible way to ponder in the shadows of an almost-certain ecological disaster and debilitated socio-political actions that hasten it. The song-texts can also ‘open the way for questioning and replacing the prevailing reductionist form of naturalism, along with scientism engendered by and supporting it; and correspondingly “... the debased notions of life and humanity” (Gare 6). Has the obscure and unsung Magahi people found their way to natural concord? Can this canon be a tentative answer to the nature/anthropic dichotomy? “The Goddess is swinging and singing on a Neem branch.”

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The thesis thus attempted to examine Magahi folk songs, exploring how they engage with the inquiries raised by ecocriticism. The study also sought to contextualise Magahi folk culture within the broader framework of the Indian ecological tradition. The study discussed ecocriticism and its different dimensions, the tradition of Magahi folk songs, and the challenges that have led to the deteriorating condition of the Magahi language in the present era, along with analysing the Indian ecological tradition through its rich and diverse folk culture. The first chapter of the thesis, which is also the introduction of the work, laid the foundation by exploring key concepts and ideas discussed in the subsequent chapters. It also articulated the reasoning behind the necessity of research within this domain, explaining its academic, social and linguistic significance. The second chapter talked about ecocriticism, a recent yet rapidly growing literary theory that attempts to understand the intricate and inherent relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Originating and developed in the West, ecocriticism has expanded its scope to encourage and invite ecocritical investigation of texts and cultures from diverse global perspectives. Additionally, ecocriticism is heavily influenced by the writings of Lynn White Jr. (1967), who argued that Western Christianity and Science are anthropocentric and, thus, are the root cause of the majority of environmental catastrophes. The objective is to find and adopt a behaviour and attitude that transcends anthropocentrism and promotes sustainable ways of understanding and living. It aimed to identify possible and potential remedies to global ecological problems like climate change, global warming, deforestation, desertification, plastic pollution, ozone layer depletion, and more. Preceding the investigation of Indian folk traditions dedicated to ecology, the third chapter delved into the adverse impact of ecological imperialism on the local flora and fauna of the countries and societies colonised by the European nations. Simultaneously, it also presented an account of how the establishment of national parks and special biodiversity zones have proved crucial in safeguarding various species of plants and animals across the globe. The fourth chapter presented a detailed account of Magahi folk culture and made a comprehensive analysis of its folk songs to see to what extent they address the questions posed by ecocriticism. Do the people of Magadh live lives that do not harm nature? Are their traditional ecological wisdom and

ways in which they protect nature based on rationality and scientific temperament, or are they merely based on superstitions? Can people from a multi-dimensionally poor state like Bihar follow ecological practices without considering their monetary benefits? The fourth chapter attempted to find these answers through the analysis of Magahi folk songs.

To conclude, it would be accurate to say that Magahi folk songs allude to traditions and practices that hint towards a sustainable way of life. The analysis of the lyrical expressions of these folk songs provides crucial insights into customs and rituals that encourage environmentally conscious, sustainable and harmonious lifestyles. Numerous folk rituals suggest and emphasise a balanced and euphonious relationship with nature, portraying it not as a subordinate or second-grade entity but as of higher importance, potentially surpassing or, at the very least, equalling the significance granted to human beings. Fundamental principles like ecocentrism and biodivinity are central to the Magahi lifestyle, where nature is not merely treated equally but is revered through various ritualistic performances held throughout the year. In the Magadh region, in addition to showing respect and care for plants and animals, worshipping water bodies (rivers, ponds, wells, etc.), soil, birds, grass, hills, and even poisonous reptiles like snakes is also a common practice. This highlights the profound interconnectedness and commitment to respecting and acknowledging the inherent value of the diverse natural resources within the Magahi cultural context. These socio-religious practices express gratitude and recognise the interdependence between human beings and the broader ecosystem. Very similar to mainstream Hinduism in day-to-day affairs, the village Hinduist performances of the Magadh region express thanks and appreciation for the blessings of life on the earth as well as the fulfilment of specific aspirations. These expressions of gratitude extend beyond personal well-being to include the celebration of Earth's bounties. These performances serve as religious observances and as community gatherings and celebrations that strengthen the social bonds within the village. Citing the example of *Chhath Puja* (a folk festival indigenous to Bihar and Jharkhand states of India), K. S. Singh observes:

...there is a strong streak of austerity in the celebration. The offerings are of the simplest kind, made up of milk, jaggery (gur), pancake (roti) made of freshly-harvested paddy, sugarcane stalk, coconut, seasonal and dry fruits, vegetables which even an ordinary family can afford (35).

This highlights the sustainable approach of the indigenous festivals of the region towards utilising the natural resources judiciously, avoiding their exploitation to fulfil human greed. These festivals incorporate an entrenched ethos of symbiotic relationships and accountable resource management. This traditional ecological wisdom, manifested through numerous folk practices, is rooted in non-anthropocentric belief systems. However, the discussion in the previous chapters also suggests that many instances mentioned in the folk songs promote anthropocentric behaviour where people of the region engage themselves in exercising control over the elements of nature. One example of such anthropocentric behaviour could be the practice of animal sacrifice (*bali pratha*), where goats, sheep, and other animals are slaughtered to appease the folk deities and fulfil personal wishes. But is it possible to survive by neglecting human interests? Can human beings who themselves have not overcome the political, economic, and natural uncertainties and whose very existence is constantly threatened by wars, poverty, and ecological disasters ignore their survival? Will frightened humanity, facing such challenges, not prioritise its existence without caring for fellow people or future generations? The previous chapters attempted to address such questions to derive an objective study of Magahi folk songs.

As evident from the discussion in the previous chapters, Magahi folk culture has the elements of ecocentrism as it perceives nature as the manifestation of the divine, worshipping it accordingly. However, it is also clear that many rituals and customs contain the elements of anthropocentrism. This raises the question of whether non-anthropocentrism is possible. Or as Lawrence Buell writes in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005), ‘strong anthropocentrism’, no doubt, will be hazardous for the earth’s atmosphere, but besides ‘weak anthropocentrism’, there may not be any other possible path for the existence of human being on the planet (134). However, it should also be made clear here that Buell is not opposed to the idea of biocentrism and ecocentrism rather, he believes that anthropocentrism in its weaker form is inevitable. He writes that “... it is entirely possible without hypocrisy to maintain biocentric values in principle while recognising that in practice these must be constrained by anthropocentric considerations, whether as a matter of strategy or as a matter of intractable human self-interestedness” (134). Similarly, Tim Hayward, in the article *Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem* (1997), opines that “...the best reason for preserving ecosystems is the realization that

these ecosystems constitute the ‘life support system’ for humans” (60). Additionally, Hayward also believes that anthropocentrism has been misunderstood by scholars, and the fundamental issue is not anthropocentrism but rather speciesism and human chauvinism, which have led to ecological imbalances. It is also equally valid that the responsibility for the decline in biodiversity has been generalised to encompass all of humanity rather than specifically calling out the over-exploitative practices of the elites. Several studies (Holland et al. 2009; Andrich et al. 2010; Haupt and Lawrence 2012; Elliott 2013) have shown how economic inequality triggers a humancentric attitude and thus contributes to ecosystem degradation (112). In this context, it becomes crucial to understand that the call for environmental protection and conservation extends beyond individual actions and calls for more incredible systematic changes to address the questions of economic disparities and their environmental impacts. Here, it is also interesting to note that unlike in the West, where environmentalism is a product of the scientists, environmentalism in India took birth from the protests of rural communities. Drawing inspiration from the Chipko Movement (also known as the ‘hugging movement’, a forest conservation movement which started in the 1970s), numerous similar movements emerged across the country aiming for awareness and protests against the activities of forest loggers (Guha). However, many non-apparent threats before traditional ecological wisdom were not directly confronting it but instead influencing people’s mindset, thus resulting in people shifting to profit-making and anthropocentric lifestyles. The traditional rituals and customs indigenous to the Magadh region confront nuanced challenges that extend beyond a mere contestation of their lived values; instead, these challenges manifest as transformative influences, impacting the attitudes and behaviours of the indigenous people towards nature.

Scholars like Emma Tomalin (2002; 2004), Kelley D. Alley (1992) and J. R. Freeman (1999) argue that Indian ecological traditions, which also include Magahi folk culture, do not inherently follow the principles and practices of ‘religious environmentalism’. The majority of examples pertaining to nature worship and biodiversity are often limited to nature worship, lacking a robust inclusion of a profound scientific disposition. It can be argued that these traditional practices, claiming to be environmentalist in their approach, are undertaken primarily as precautionary steps, which arise from superstitious fear that neglecting the protection of nature could potentially result in displeasing the folk deities. However, as discussed in the previous

chapter, Magahi folk songs do hint towards such practices which have the elements of ‘religious environmentalism’, especially the ones which consider some of the trees commonly found in the Magadh region as *Panch Mahavriksha* (five sacred trees) and not only worship them but also protect them because they are homes to many species of insects, birds, and reptiles. Sinha et al., however, do not classify these practices as instances of environmentalism, viewing them instead as a fallacy held by environmental scholars to believe that “the worship of specific trees is understood as leading to a general reverence for forests, in turn leading to an even broader reverence for nature” (71). Tomalin characterises such ecological values as a component of ‘nature religion’ but not necessarily ‘religious environmentalism’ (18). There are also opposing views to such ideological contestations. Numerous scholars like Vandana Shiva (1998) and Ramchandra Guha (1989) argued that the West should come out of its privileged position of considering environmentalism as its prerogative. Both agreed unanimously that the perspective of looking at the East from the West in this regard is not only biased but also orientalist. Shiva goes on to the extent of saying that such views, which consider that environmentalism is a product of the West, can be “...possible only if one accepts that modern Western science is the only valid science” (55). It is undoubtedly a tedious task to develop a consensus on whether Indian socio-religious practices, in general and Magahi folk practices, in particular, follow environmentalist principles. However, they all acknowledge that environmentalism heavily depends on people's economic status. Those who are not economically stable are more likely to shift to anthropocentric means to get their needs fulfilled, and Magahi people are no exception. What are the other reasons that affect people's ecological values? Is economic condition the only reason behind it? Many other factors also contribute to the fading of environmentally friendly behaviour of people and thus lead to the degradation and loss of plant and animal species.

The fading of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is becoming increasingly noticeable with time. Contemporary societal trends reflect a departure from the ecological values that have helped primitive societies live in perfect and peaceful communion with nature for ages. The prevailing lifestyles exhibit a disturbing departure from a non-anthropocentric or weak anthropocentric way of living, resulting in irreversible degradation of the natural environment. Now, the question arises: if traditional ecological knowledge was rooted in superstitions and myth-making processes

and was not guided by scientific thought, why should there be a sense of loss if they are fading away? Vandana Shiva notes that the socio-religious practices of South Asian countries, which contain environmental ethics, do not necessarily arise from fear and ignorance but have inherent ecological insight (55). And even if they are rooted in mistaken beliefs, their contribution towards the protection of their local flora and fauna should not be ignored. However, numerous studies (Tomalin 2004; Gómez-Baggethun 2013; Tang and Gavin 2016) suggest a rising erosion in traditional ecological knowledge across the globe. In her article *Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India* (2004), Tomalin holds migration and westernisation as one of the foremost proponents behind the dilution of the ecological values in the Indian states. Further, she adds that the impact of Westernisation and materialism is so profound that people no longer prioritise the ecological values they have upheld for generations. Migration of people also leads to the depletion of environmental ethics as the migrants are unaware of the sacredness traditionally attached to nature in that place. Citing the example of Coorg (a place in Karnataka, India), she mentions, “there is no sacredness of the forest. It is only for the Coorg people, because of their culture.... Those who migrate from outside, even from Kerala, they just don’t have any feeling” (275). It becomes pertinent to understand that the migrant workers not only contribute to the dilution of the ecological knowledge of other regions but also; by staying away from their cultural zones, they tend to forget their own sets of values and rules associated with the reverence and protection of the natural environment. Highlighting the loss of ecological wisdom, Gómez-Baggethun et al. (2013) write:

[e]rosion of Erosion of TEK systems owes to complex and multifaceted reasons, including the compounding influences of formal schooling and loss of local languages...; dominant religions...; changes in land use...; market integration...; loss of access to resources through conservation programs...; mechanization of resource systems..., and, more generally, industrialization and globalization processes... (2).

The increasing influence of the dominant religions is also considered one of the major reasons behind the devaluation and dilution of traditional ecological knowledge, where people leave their folk or indigenous religious practices and adopt the mainstream and official or popular version of the religion (268). Even in Magahi folk culture, a similar pattern can be observed where people have begun distancing themselves from the folk

deities, rituals, and customs associated with them, moving towards mainstream Hinduism. Numerous folk deities of the Magadh region are no longer worshipped today, and even if they are worshipped, the number of worshippers has certainly decreased a lot. The construction of temples dedicated to mainstream gods and goddesses has drawn people's interest. This apathy towards local deities has led individuals to shift their attention towards temples, prompting a gradual inclination of people towards these religious structures. Anil Gopi writes,

[t]he spread of Hinduism often produces influences in the local traditions of folk religious type and the result is a mix of both, the mainstream Hinduism and the folk religion. The final observable trait of this mixing will be mostly the dominance of the mainstream Hindu belief and practices (2).

It is crucial to note that such movements, which triggered indigenous people to adopt the popular versions of the religion, have also brought people together under the umbrella of an official religion. Brahmins were crucial in propagating new religious and behavioural norms to the tribal and indigenous people (28). The introduction of a new religious outlook and the construction of temples distanced the aboriginal communities from their sets of socio-religious practices, which they had been following for ages. But this was not the only reason behind the depletion of folk rituals and customs. The preference given to English, Hindi, and other dominant languages over the regional languages/mother tongues also played a crucial role in the decline of folk practices, leading to the loss of the ecological values ingrained in traditional practices. How can language be so crucial in determining people's values? What are steps that can be taken to avoid the loss of regional languages, which are the repository of culture, heritage, traditions, and numerous other linguistic expressions?

It is commonly believed that folk traditions are transferred to future generations through language, often in an oral form. However, they can also be passed on by observing and participating in socio-religious practices (2). Despite this, it cannot or rather should not be denied that language plays an essential role in the transmission of folk practices to later generations, whether in oral or written forms. But what will happen if the language dies or is replaced by another dominant language? Tang and Gavin believe that "TEK is often conveyed via indigenous languages, and the loss of language

diversity directly affects loss of knowledge diversity” (59). Magahi, considered a dialect of Hindi, is not listed in the ‘Eighth Schedule to the Indian Constitution’ and is thus denied many preferences which scheduled languages get. This non-preferential treatment of Magahi has led Magahi-speaking people to shift to Hindi and English. Dominant languages are often considered superior to minor/regional languages, leading to a sense of pride among their speakers. Additionally, the availability of better job opportunities in them often encourages the speakers of indigenous languages to shift to these languages. Consequently, this shift puts folk traditions at risk and dilutes the ecological values attached to them (59-60).

To conclude, the Magahi folk culture encompasses elements that hint towards an ecologically sustainable and viable mode of living. The thesis— by way of the larger rubric of ecocriticism and folk traditions in the Indian context— incorporated extracts of song-texts to analyse Magahi’s symbiotic way of living with nature. Magahi folk songs provide a sustainable way of looking at nature, which expresses its reverence through symbiotic and preservationist modes of living. Magahi people protect nature and believe that by doing so, nature will protect them. However, it is also true that on numerous occasions Magahi people turn anthropocentric in their attitudes and behaviours and exploit nature for their benefits. It also observed how the language and religion sanctioned and endorsed by the state have resulted in the loss of the indigenous Magahi ecological values. This constant and conscious attempt to ignore and overlook the minority languages and religious practices, and the accompanying view of India as a Hindi/Hindu-only nation, has led to the disintegration of many such primordial cultural manifestations and occurrences— the Magahi culture being one of them. How will the globalising of such unmediated indigeneity be possible? If at all it is possible, how can it be achieved in times when the majoritarian markers define political axioms? Or should humans start believing Levi-Strauss’ idea that “the universe is an object of thought at least as much as it is a means of satisfying needs” (1962 3)?

Future Scope of Research

Magahi language has a large corpus of folk songs for numerous occasions, which are further divided into various categories based on gender, class, caste, profession, festivals, and seasons, to name a few. Future research scholars can study and analyse these various divisions to comprehensively understand the Magadh region and Magahi way of life. The

representation of various sections of society, including women, Dalits and workers in Magahi folk songs, can also be an exciting area of research. Migration has always been a severe problem in the Magadh region of Bihar. One can also study the lives of Magahi-speaking migrants and folk songs related to them. This investigation will help the researcher understand the pangs of suffering and hardships faced not only by the migrants themselves but also the numerous challenges endured by their left-behind wives, including emotional distress, financial struggles and social stigma in many cases. Additionally, research scholars can develop syllabi and curricula for Magahi language learners. The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 emphasises the promotion of mother tongue/regional language/local language as a medium of instruction up to class fifth, which can also be extended to class eighth and beyond. Taking this into consideration, further research works can be carried out for the development of the Magahi language and literature.

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¹ Once expanded from Bengal in the East, to present-day Baluchistan in the West, the Magadh Empire was one of the Sixteen Mahajanapadas (Great Kingdoms) of the Second Urbanization of India (600-200 BCE). However, it is now restricted to the districts of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal in Eastern India.

² Tomalin (2002, 15-16) concedes that in extant religio-cultural traditions, one can observe a 'reflexive application of religious ideas to contemporary environmental concerns', calling it 'Religious Environmentalism' and not 'Nature Religion'; the latter denoting an adulatory worshipping of Nature, without any thought of its well-being and preservation.

³ In the book *The Ecocentrists*, Keith Woodhouse talks about the mid-1980s tendency to break away from mainstream environmentalism of law-making, negotiations and gradual progression. Groups like *Earth First!* advocated for a complete absence of people from the wilderness and strict avoidance of liberal democratic processes. The militancy was a direct result of the environmentalists' impatience with conventional reforms which were finally anthropocentric at their essence (96). The Magahi song-texts, while reticent, non-violent and unpolitical, similarly provide an alternate way from the mainstream preservationist approach. Instead of a complete separation between Nature and humans, they further a symbiotic ideology.

⁴ For example, in their 2016 book *Culture and Conservation: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina hold the conservation sciences as primarily responsible for natural degradation with its 'emphasis on human economic development as the primary responsibility of conservation, [replicating] the language of the profit-driven and powerful elites' (171).

⁵ The interested reader may look into works like Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1928), Ram Prasad Singh's *Magahi Lok Geet ka Vrihad Sangrah* (1999) [The Mammoth Collection of Magahi Folk-songs] and Saryoo Prasad's *Magahi Phonology: A Descriptive Study* (2008).

⁶ Even the remaining part of the poem repeats the same thing with only the name of the fruits changed.

⁷ Calvin's (1559) Predestination, while not a precise tool to explain this instance of Magahi ritual, talks about God's inexplicable but intransigent act of saving those whom he intends to save, and it stands unquestionable and infallible: 'when they inquire into predestination, let them remember that they are penetrating the recesses of the divine wisdom'.

⁸ A similar divine deterrence can be traced in the preservationism of the Akan community of Ghana, which has a history of ideological conflict with the missionary Church, thus leading to— as Adu-Gyamfi notes— a degradation of the diverse flora previously protected by the tribe's fear of their deity: '... sacred groves are associated with religious beliefs and practices, we should not ignore their ecological value... Our ancestors instilled religious fear in order to ensure the preservation of the groves' (Adu-Gyamfi 149).