



The role of Nature and Environment in Tharu Religious Life: A Cultural analysis

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Abstract

The Tharu community, an indigenous ethnic group residing predominantly in the Terai belt that stretches across the Indo-Nepal border, holds a profound and time-honored spiritual connection with nature. This community has traditionally lived in harmony with their surrounding environment, developing a symbiotic relationship with the forests, rivers, animals, and seasonal cycles that characterize the region. Their religious and cultural practices are deeply embedded in an animistic worldview, wherein natural elements are revered as sacred entities imbued with spiritual significance. This ecological consciousness is reflected in their rituals, agricultural methods, architectural styles, and everyday practices, all of which demonstrate a deep respect for the natural world and a commitment to sustainability. This research article seeks to explore the intricate nexus between environmental stewardship and spirituality in Tharu life, with a particular emphasis on the Tharu settlements in Palia Kalan Tehsil of Lakhimpur Kheri district, situated close to the Indo-Nepal border. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, cultural documentation, oral histories, and insights from ecological anthropology, the study examines how the Tharu people's intimate knowledge of local ecosystems informs their socio-religious practices and cultural identity.

Keywords: Tharu tribe, ecology, animism, forest deities, sustainable living, Palia Kalan

Introduction

The Tharu people are a forest-dwelling indigenous community primarily living in the Terai plains that stretch across southern Nepal and adjoining regions in northern India. In India, a significant Tharu population is concentrated in Palia Kalan Tehsil of Lakhimpur Kheri district, Uttar Pradesh, located close to the Nepalese border and the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. This region is a landscape of rich biodiversity—sal forests, marshes, rivers, and grasslands—which has played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-cultural and religious fabric of the Tharu society. Their lifestyle is intrinsically bound to their natural surroundings, reflected in their architecture, festivals, healing practices, and daily rituals. The analysis delves into the symbolic meanings associated with sacred groves, river deities, and forest spirits, as well as the community's traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) that guides their farming practices, medicinal plant usage, and resource conservation strategies. By highlighting the ways in which nature shapes the spiritual and material dimensions of Tharu life, this article contributes to a broader understanding of indigenous environmental ethics and the importance of

preserving biocultural diversity in an era of rapid ecological degradation and cultural homogenization. In doing so, it underscores the relevance of indigenous worldviews in shaping sustainable living practices and offers critical insights for contemporary environmental discourse, policy-making, and culturally inclusive conservation efforts. Indigenous communities across the globe have long maintained intricate relationships with their natural surroundings, often guided by spiritual beliefs and ecological wisdom passed down through generations. Among these communities, the Tharu people of the Terai region—spanning parts of northern India and southern Nepal—stand out for their deeply rooted connection to nature. Their belief systems, cultural expressions, and daily practices are interwoven with the rhythms of the natural world, reflecting a holistic worldview that sees humans as part of, rather than separate from, the environment. This study seeks to explore the spiritual ecology of the Tharu community, with a specific focus on the Palia Kalan Tehsil in Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh, India. By examining the intersection of nature, culture, and belief, this research highlights the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems

in fostering sustainable and respectful interactions with the environment.

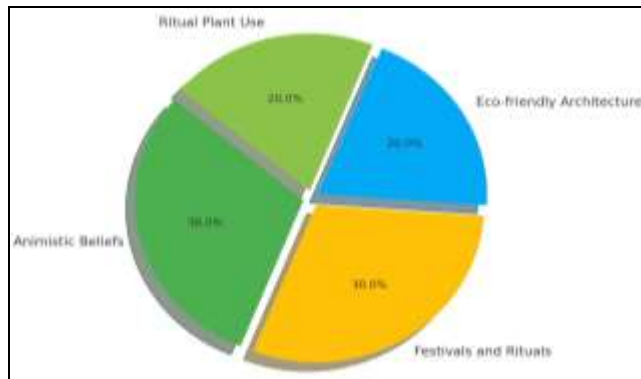


Fig 1: Environmental Dimensions in Tharu Religious Life

"Environmental Dimensions in Tharu Religious Life" showing the relative emphasis of each key aspect:

Animistic Beliefs: 30%

Festivals and Rituals: 30%

Eco-friendly Architecture: 20%

Ritual Plant Use: 20%

Environmental Dimensions in Tharu Religious Life – A Pie Chart Analysis

This pie chart visualizes the key ecological and religious components that form the foundation of the Tharu community's spiritual worldview, particularly in the Palia Kalan region of Lakhimpur Kheri.

Animistic Beliefs (30%)

Core Belief System: Tharu spirituality is deeply animistic, believing that spirits inhabit trees, rivers, mountains, animals, and even diseases.

Cultural Practices: Rituals are performed before entering forests or cutting trees, often accompanied by offerings.

Deity Examples: Forest spirits like Ban Devi, and ancestral ghosts (Bhoot, Churail) are central figures.

Significance: These beliefs maintain psychological and ecological harmony, reinforcing reverence for nature.

Festivals and Rituals (30%)

Major Rituals: Ashtimki, Maghi, Sakhiya, and Lathi Nach are performed in sync with seasonal changes and agricultural cycles.

Nature Linkage: Festivals involve river bathing, forest dancing, offering grains and herbs, and worship of celestial elements.

Sacred Art: Ashtimki Chitra (ritual mural) shows the sun, moon, trees, and spirits, drawn with natural dyes.

Eco-friendly Architecture (20%)

Sustainable Homes: Built from mud, bamboo, cow dung, and thatch-biodegradable, insulating, and cost-effective.

Ritual Symbolism: Homes include sacred storage pots (Denhari) and painted walls (Mokha) that depict ecological and spiritual stories.

Spatial Harmony: Open courtyards allow natural light, ventilation, and serve as ritual spaces.

Ritual Plant Use (20%)

Medicinal Herbs: Neem, Tulsi, Aloe Vera, and Ashwagandha are used for physical and spiritual healing.

Plant Worship: Certain trees are considered sacred; cutting them without rituals is taboo.

Healers (Guruwa/Jhakri): Use chants, forest plants, and sacred water to heal diseases believed to be caused by spiritual imbalance.

Conclusion

This pie chart reflects how each component of the Tharu religious life is intertwined with ecological practices. Together, they:

Sustain the environment

Guide social behavior

Maintain cultural identity

These insights reinforce the need to recognize indigenous knowledge in conservation, education, and policy-making.

Tharu Worldview: Nature as a Sacred Entity

The Tharu belief system is deeply animistic. They see spirits inhabiting trees, rivers, animals, stones, and even diseases.

Nature is not just a resource; it is a living force.

Forests are considered sacred zones.

Rivers and ponds are respected as purifying agents.

Animals-especially snakes and tigers-are seen as manifestations of divine power.

Their cosmology does not divide the sacred from the natural. There is no strict separation between secular life and spiritual life; nature is central to both.

Religious Practices Tied to the Environment

Tharu religious ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and healing practices are aligned with environmental changes.

Jhakri and Guruwa Traditions

Tharu shamans, known as Jhakri or Guruwa, perform healing rituals using forest herbs, chants, and dances. They invoke forest spirits (like Ban Devi, Bhoot, Baba Thakur) for healing and protection.

Household Rituals

Every Tharu household keeps a sacred corner for Kul Devi or ancestral deities. These are honored through mud idols, leaf offerings, and fire rituals. Offerings often include:

Grains from the first harvest

Leaves from sacred trees (Neem, Peepal)

Earthen pots (Denhari)

Environmental Calendar: The religious calendar is ecological. Rituals coincide with:

Harvests (March, October)
 Rain (monsoon-related worship)
 Winter solstice (Ashtimki festival)
 Springtime marriage and fertility rituals

Architecture: Eco-Spiritual Structures

Tharu homes are built from mud, thatch, bamboo, and cow dung-biodegradable materials sourced locally. Their architecture reflects harmony with climate and ecology. Walls are decorated with Mokha art-folk paintings depicting deities, tigers, and trees. Courtyards are kept open for performances and rituals. Storage vessels (Denhari) are sacred; breaking one is symbolic during marriage. These eco-friendly structures represent a form of ritual ecology, integrating functionality, sustainability, and spirituality.

Festivals and Seasonal Worship

Ashtimki (Tharu Janmashtami)

Ashtimki celebrates Lord Krishna's birth. Tharu families create a sacred wall painting-Ashtimki Chitra-using natural dyes from flowers, soil, and ash. The art depicts universal balance: sun, moon, trees, animals, and divine beings.

Maghi Festival

Held in January, Maghi marks the new year and agricultural renewal. Cattle are bathed in rivers, and nature deities are thanked for abundance.

Sakhiya and Lathi Nach

These folk dances are often performed during autumn festivals. They mimic movements of forest animals, storms, and celestial elements.

Medicinal Ecology and Sacred Plants

Tharu medicinal knowledge draws from ethnobotany and ritual healing. Neem and Tulsi are not only medicines but also revered as goddesses. Aloe Vera, Ashwagandha, and Kariyala are used with spiritual chants. Trees are never cut without a ritual apology. Their practices are aligned with conservation ethics long before modern sustainability entered mainstream discourse.

Women, Rituals, and Environmental Roles

Tharu women are central to cultural preservation: They prepare ritual food offerings. Lead the Mokha painting and Denhari ceremonies. Pass on oral ecological knowledge to children. Their symbolic roles tie together land fertility, forest health, and household well-being.

Conservation, Climate, and Threats to Tradition

Modern challenges are affecting Tharu spiritual-ecological life: Eco-tourism and conservation policies have restricted access to forests. Climate change has disturbed seasonal cycles, impacting ritual timings. Youth migration threatens the continuity of traditional

knowledge.

Despite these challenges, organizations and scholars are promoting cultural eco-tourism, community-based forest management, and ethno-education in areas like Palia Kalan.

Case Focus: Palia Kalan and Dudhwa Interface

Located near the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, Palia Kalan's Tharu villages are surrounded by sal forests and swamps. Key observations: Temples dedicated to forest spirits are located on village outskirts. Many villages still hold seasonal rituals at sacred groves. Sacred ponds are preserved and cleaned ritually. The proximity to Dudhwa Reserve has led to increased NGO activity, which is helping document and revive cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Tharu religious life represents a vibrant and intricate tapestry woven from the threads of ecological reverence, deep-rooted spiritual symbolism, and time-tested sustainable practices. The relationship between the Tharu people and the natural world transcends the boundaries of utility or livelihood-it is sacred, intimate, and holistic. For the Tharu, nature is not merely a passive backdrop or a collection of exploitable resources; instead, it is regarded as a sentient, breathing participant in the spiritual and material cycles of life. Every tree, river, hill, and animal is believed to possess a soul or spirit that is interwoven with human destiny. Understanding the Tharu worldview offers valuable lessons for contemporary global discourses on climate justice, biodiversity conservation, indigenous rights, and sustainable development. In an age marked by environmental degradation, cultural homogenization, and ecological crises, the Tharu community provides a model of resilience-demonstrating how traditional ecological knowledge can guide more ethical and harmonious ways of living with nature. By recognizing and integrating such indigenous perspectives, policymakers, environmentalists, and scholars can foster approaches that are not only more inclusive and just but also more effective in achieving long-term sustainability.

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