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Manuscript Title: Rooted Worlds: Plants, Memory, and Indigenous Epistemologies among the Tribal Communities of Odisha

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound entanglements between plants, memory, and Indigenous epistemologies among the tribal communities of Odisha, foregrounding botanical life not merely as ecological resources but as active cultural agents embedded in everyday practices, oral traditions, and systems of knowledge transmission. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from environmental humanities, literary anthropology, and Indigenous studies, the study examines how plants function as mnemonic anchors, ethical teachers, and mediators of social relations within Adivasi lifeworlds. Rather than treating ethnobotanical knowledge as static or utilitarian, the paper conceptualises plant–human relationships as historically layered, linguistically encoded, and culturally narrated forms of knowing. Focusing on diverse tribal communities across forested and upland regions of Odisha, the analysis attends

to Indigenous vocabularies of flora, ritual uses of plants in seasonal festivals and healing practices, and narrative traditions in which trees, roots, and leaves emerge as sentient actors within cosmological and historical imaginaries. Sacred groves, shifting cultivation landscapes, and household herbal repertoires are read as living archives through which ecological memory is preserved and transmitted across generations. These plant-centred practices articulate Indigenous conceptions of kinship, territorial belonging, and moral responsibility that challenge extractivist and developmentalist frameworks imposed through colonial forestry regimes and postcolonial resource governance. By situating Odisha's tribal plant knowledge within broader debates on decolonial epistemology and multispecies humanities, the paper argues that Indigenous botanical worlds offer alternative modes of thinking about history, sustainability, and cultural continuity. Plants, in this account, do not merely sustain life materially but structure Indigenous temporalities, narrative forms, and ethical orientations to the more-than-human world. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to re-centre Indigenous knowledge systems as critical theoretical resources, demonstrating how attention to plant–human relations can reframe understandings of culture, literature, and historical consciousness in South Asia and beyond.

Keywords: *Indigenous epistemologies; Plant–human relationships; Odisha tribes; Environmental humanities; Cultural memory.*

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Introduction

Forests in Odisha have long been discussed in terms of inventory: mapped, measured, and identified as timber, minor forest produce, or ecological resource. Plants in these descriptions are depicted as silent objects, awaiting extraction, management, or preservation. The present paper starts with a refusal of silence. Among Adivasi communities, including *Dongria Kondh*, *Bonda* (Remo), *Juang*, and *Saora*, plants are not passive components of the

landscape; they are presences that remember, teach, and even dictate. Within these worlds, to enter a forest is to encounter a kind of knowledge in which the border between the human and the vegetal is neither fixed nor especially significant. Colonial and postcolonial epistemologies have profoundly dominated knowledge of forests. The British administration of forests in eastern India reconstituted wooded landscapes as state property, converting intricate ecological links into a set of features that could be understood in terms of revenue and law (Guha 45; Gadgil and Guha 112). Plants were deprived of their narrative and moral meaning and commoditised in the process. Numerous studies since then, though sympathetic, have frequently discussed Indigenous botanical knowledge through the prism of ethnobotany to chart the uses, remedies, and classifications of such knowledge, without considering the broader worlds of meaning in which that knowledge is situated (Sundar 89). What has not been fully researched is the possibility that plants play a role in the creation of history, not as metaphors but as actors in a system of remembrance and connection.[1]

This paper attempts to shift that frame. It considers plants not as resources for humans but as entities that participate in making knowledge. Adivasi lifeworlds have trees that indicate origin narratives; trees with specific leaves are the objects of rites of passage; and seasonal flowers indicate not only agricultural rhythms but also the passage of time itself. In this very sense, memory does not lie in texts or in monuments alone; it is entrenched, in quite a literal sense, in forms of life that endure across generations. To call plants archives is therefore not a poetic act but an analytical one: plants possess, transmit, and even govern collective memory.[2] This paper asks three questions. First, what are the mechanisms by which plants become repositories of memory in Adivasi societies, and how does that memory manifest itself? Second, how do the relations between plants and humans structure an ethical life that mediates notions of care, restraint, and territorial belonging? Third, how can such epistemologies unsettle mainstream histories and developmental models that still prioritise extraction over relations? These questions are pursued through a reading of ethnographic testimonies, oral accounts, and documented records of tribal people in the forested and upland regions of Odisha. The argument presented here is not only historical but also theoretical. It draws on environmental humanities and Indigenous studies to suggest what can

[1] On colonial forest policy and the epistemic implications identified by early critics of colonialism, see Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 45–47.

[2] On the transformation of Indian forests under colonial rule, see Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 110–115.

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be termed a plant-centred historical consciousness, one that views plants not as the background of social worlds, but as their co-constituting elements. This view overturns extractivist ways of thinking that have traditionally dominated forest policy and development planning in India. It also suggests a redesign of historical method itself: since archives are living beings, the task of the historian is not simply to read documents but to learn to listen differently to landscapes, to stories, and to the silent yet tenacious voice of the vegetal world.[3]

Theoretical Outline: Decentring the Human

To write about forests in Odisha without shaking the notion of the human as an independent centre of knowledge would be to rehearse the very assumptions that this paper endeavours to challenge. Much of modern thought, influenced by Enlightenment rationality and its colonial derivatives, rests on a perilous yet silent divide: human beings think, interpret, and act; the non-human world is something to be known, to be categorised, or to be made use of. Plants, in this scheme, are at the base of the hierarchy of importance. Although they are alive, they are seldom recognised as participants in meaning. What follows is an effort to leave behind this inherited hierarchy and to think within an alternative system of relations, in which plants are not background but presence. Recent environmental humanities scholarship has started to question this hierarchy by paying attention to what has been referred to as the more-than-human world, a phrase which attempts to reverse the simple distinction between human and non-human life (Abram 56; Tsing 22). But even within these debates, there remains a tendency to generalise a priori, that is, to consider all kinds of non-human life from a single conceptual perspective. The distinctiveness of Indigenous epistemologies in places like Odisha lies not merely in an abstract acknowledgement of non-human agency, but in a practical and historically entrenched system of relations in which plants are connected to daily moral and social life. Knowledge here is not produced by impersonal observation but is cultivated through the long process of living with plants, through practice, ritual, recollection, and restraint.

In the case of the *Dongria Kondh*, the side-slopes are recognised not only by the produce they yield but also by the trees that look after them, trees that are not owned or even casually visited. To cut such a tree without ritual authorisation is not just an economic act; it is a disruption of relations, one that could easily disturb the human as well as the non-human

[3]On the weakness of ethnobotanical studies in central India, see Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85–90.

world (Padel and Das 74). This can be seen among the *Saora* as well, where some species are associated with ancestors who are present and are used in ritual speech as eyewitnesses to events that lie beyond individual memory (Elwin 132). Such practices cannot be easily converted into a vocabulary of belief or custom. They also indicate a different kind of knowing whereby the plants are placed in an intermediate position between kin and resource. In this respect, multispecies thinking, which has been elaborated in recent scholarship, is more firmly rooted in an Indigenous context. So to talk of plants as co-agents is not to endow them with human-like intention, but to acknowledge that human life exists in a space of relations that also encompasses vegetation as active participants. Anna Tsing's study of encounters across species helps us to remember that life is never solitary, and that even asymmetrical or weak forms of cooperation can occur (28). This partnership is especially evident in the forested areas of Odisha, where cultivating, foraging, and ritual require both practical and moral attention to the rhythm of plants. Plants here are not silent settings: they determine the conditions of possibility for human life.

This knowledge also brings about a rethinking of memory. Traditional methods of memory research have been more inclined towards texts, monuments, and archives as the main sites where the past is deposited and reclaimed. However, among most Adivasi communities, memory is not limited to written expression. It dwells in landscapes: in the perseverance of certain trees, in the seasonal recurrence of certain flowers, and in the footpaths made in forests over generations. To call these landscapes living archives is to recognise that memory can reside in living bodies, which develop, decay, and reproduce. Such a landscape is a site where stories are present, where prohibitions are observed and encountered, and where the past is experienced as still present and refuses to go away; this stands in contrast to the classificatory impulse that came with colonial forestry (Deveraj 59).[4] Since the nineteenth century, British administrators have attempted to make forests legible in the form of surveys, maps, and legal categories. Trees were identified by species, classified as timber sources, and placed into regimes of extraction (Guha 67). What could not be quantified with ease—such as ritual significance, mnemonic association, and ethical restraint—was either disdained or declared superstition. The outcome was a narrowing that was ecological as well as epistemic, in which alternative modes of knowing forests were

[4] On the topic of sacred groves and ecological and cultural memory in eastern India, see R. Deveraj,*Sacred Groves of India* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1998), 55–62.

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relegated to the periphery. Plants previously embedded in networks of relations were restructured as commodities.

The legacies of this change can still be seen today in modern developmental language that still views forests as sites of potential resource extraction, whether in the form of minerals, commercial plantation products, or conservation areas that compel the exclusion of local people. In such frameworks, Indigenous knowledge is given rhetorical acknowledgement but seldom a place in substantive policy formulation (Sundar 141). It is not only a system of practices that is being lost in this process, but a whole attitude towards the world, one that is geared towards reciprocity rather than extraction and continuity rather than short-term profitability. Taking Indigenous epistemologies seriously, however, requires more than the enclosure of knowledge in locally based frameworks. It calls for a rethinking of the frameworks themselves. Mnemonic ecologies, botanical kinship, and embodied knowledge are useful theoretical terms here, not in an abstract sense but as an effort to identify what is already in practice. Mnemonic ecologies draw attention to the ways in which memory is distributed across landscapes and retained in the associations between people and plants. Botanical kinship foregrounds the fact that plants are treated as beings, as relatives to whom one owes duties and from whom one learns. Embodied knowledge reminds us that these relations are not usually textual; they are enacted through gesture, work, and the recitation of rituals.

Such conceptual devices can also serve to place the discussion in the wider context of debates on decolonial knowledge. Scholars of decolonial thought have argued that colonialism was not a purely political and economic project, but also an epistemic project, that transformed the definition of knowledge and of who is qualified to create it (Mignolo 159).

Colonial Disruptions: Forests as Extractive Archives

Colonial rule in eastern India was not just an opening of forests to extraction; it fundamentally transformed what a forest was understood to be. What had been a lived landscape dense with memory, ritual, and commitment was slowly redefined as a calculable resource. This transformation was neither accidental nor merely economic. It was rooted in a deeper instrumentalisation of knowledge, in which the meaning attached to plants and forests was stripped of its social and ethical dimensions and expressed in the language of revenue, management, and control. This change was institutionalised through the proliferation of

British forest laws during the nineteenth century. Under the Indian Forest Acts, especially those of 1865 and 1878, huge areas of forest were placed under state control, and access became a privilege instead of the right it had previously been (Gadgil and Guha 125). These policies were applied in what is now Odisha through surveys and demarcations that paid minimal regard to existing patterns of usage. Shifting cultivation, locally referred to as *podu*, was gradually criminalised, not because such practices were unsustainable in their own right, but because they did not fit the state's wish to establish fixed, legible, and taxable land use (Sundar 102).[5]

The effects of these policies were not limited to restrictions on livelihood. They ushered in a new perspective on the forest. Trees were no longer implicated in a field of relations in which human and non-human existence was mutually dependent; they were counted according to species, quantified in terms of yield, and valued in terms of their potential for commercial use. Utilitarian timbers such as teak and sal were placed in the first category, while the broader range of plant life and the knowledge systems upon which it rests was moved to the periphery. The forest became an administrative object, increasingly referred to as a timber reserve, and the plant a resource unit—abstractions that masked the histories and relationships behind them (Guha 72). This was not just a material but also an epistemic shift. Indigenous use of forests, shaped by seasonal practice, ritual duty, and the memory of ancestors, was dismissed as anecdotal or preposterous. Verrier Elwin, who wrote in the mid-twentieth century, noted that colonial authorities usually viewed tribal culture with a certain degree of fascination and derision, and described their practices as a system of belief rather than as a body of coherent knowledge (198). These attitudes had tangible consequences. The protection of certain trees as belonging to ancestors or deities in Adivasi communities was hardly recognised in official structures. Rather, it was taken as superstition, which could at best be tolerated and at worst corrected.

The reorganisation of forests during the colonial regime thus produced a mode of epistemic violence that accompanied, and in many respects facilitated, material extraction. The undermining of Indigenous knowledge by the colonial state made it possible to impose alternative approaches to managing the environment. In Odisha, the process was not uniform yet consistent. Archival sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries record

[5] On the criminalisation of shifting cultivation and its environmental consequences, see Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 123–128; Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100–105.

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recurrent clashes between forest officials and local people over access to resources and grazing land, the harvesting of minor forest produce, and the persistence of shifting cultivation (Padel and Das 91). Among the less noticeable effects of this change was the gradual break-up of ecological memory.[6] As access to forests was limited and practices like *podu* were eliminated, the contexts of knowledge transmission in the forest began to deteriorate. Plants that had previously been regularly encountered in cultivation, foraging, or ritual became less available. This diminishing contact weakened the tales, songs, and practices that had sustained this type of knowledge. In this sense, memory did not disappear suddenly but became increasingly frayed, making it more difficult to pass on to new generations. A depiction of colonial forestry as a sort of epistemicide can sound abstract, but it expresses something fundamental about the extent of this change. It is not merely that forests were exploited, but that other forms of knowledge about forests were systematically undervalued and, in some instances, rendered unusable. What was lost was not a body of information but a system of interrelations between people and plants, between past and present, which had long shaped life in these areas. The historical memory of this past still plays a crucial role in modern interactions with forests in Odisha.

Plants as Memory: Landscapes as Living Archives

If one starts from the supposition that only what is written can be remembered, the forest appears to be free of history. There are no inscriptions on bark, no books enclosed beneath the canopy. But in the Adivasi societies of Odisha, paper is not necessary to sustain memory. It is carried in the growing of plants, the repetition of the seasons, and the ways in which people remain attached to specific plants over time. That memory is grown rather than written is not a metaphor; it describes how the past is stored, recollected, and reproduced in such landscapes. Sacred groves are among the best examples of this interaction. These groves, which occur widely in upland Odisha, are not merely pieces of preserved plant life; they are areas of taboo and nurture, in which harvesting, pasturing, or even untidy occupation may be restricted. These limitations are imposed not legally but through shared understanding, an intuition that certain trees are under ancestral watch or the guard of a spirit

[6] Detailed descriptions of Adivasi peoples in eastern India and, to a lesser extent, of their conflicts with colonial forest administration can be found in Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth* (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 88–95.

(Deveraj 61).[7] The *Saora* tend to treat groves, like those visited by Elwin, as places where the living and the dead exist in close, silent contact and where ritual performances renew this contact across generations (Elwin 140). To go into such a grove is to enter a stratified time, in which the past is not elsewhere but is caught up here in the very structure of trees. In such environments, certain species acquire mnemonic weight. A tree can serve to indicate where a clan originally settled, where an event such as a migration, battle, or alliance once took place. Such relations are not written; they must be recalled through repeated telling and visiting. The *Dongria Kondh* have some fruit-bearing trees connected to origin myths that explain a community's beginnings, along with its duty to the land (Padel and Das 109). In such instances the tree is not an inert sign of history. It is involved in its maintenance, and is a living centre to which tales come back.

Another axis along which memory is organised is seasonal change. The blossoming of a given plant can signal when it is time to plant, or mark the beginning of a festival or the celebration of an occasion deep in a group's memory. These cycles are not simply lived through as an abstract notion of time; they structure everyday life as rhythms. To be aware of when a tree flowers is also to be aware of when to harvest, when to plant, and when to remember. Here, plants shape the memory of time and place in recurring forms that are ecological as well as social (Gadgil and Guha 151).[8] Time here does not exist in homogeneous units but is experienced through the rebirth of vegetal life. This entanglement of plants and memory is reinforced by oral traditions. Myths, ritual narratives, and songs tend to focus on particular species, embedding botanical knowledge in storytelling that is both aesthetic and mnemonic. A song might trace the path of a forebear through the woods, naming the trees met along the way; a myth may explain why a particular plant should never be cut, referring to some incident of change or sacrifice. These narratives do not merely pass on information. They cultivate sensitivity to plants, so that the body of knowledge is no longer represented by abstract data but is encountered as a component of experience (Bird-David 189–196).[9] Ethnographic descriptions of Odisha repeatedly indicate how plants are incorporated into rites of passage. The use of leaves and roots in birth rituals is not guided by

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[7] Sacred groves are loci of ecological and cultural continuity; see, for example, R. Deveraj, *Sacred Groves of India* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1998), 60–63.

[8] Seasonal cycles and ecological understanding in Indian settings are discussed in Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha,*This Fissured Land* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[9] Nurit Bird-David, "The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Gatherer-Hunters," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1990, pp. 189–196.

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material properties but by associations with protection and continuity. Similarly, some trees are used in funerary rites, mediating between life and death as part of a larger process of renewal. Such uses are found among the *Juang*, for example, where the use of certain branches in mortuary rituals indicates that death is not an end but a movement into what they regard as a greater ecological order (Mohanty 93).[10]

To conceptualise the landscape in such a manner is to see it as an archive that depends not on storage but on continuity. This contrasts with written archives, which may be maintained even when removed from context; this archive, by comparison, is maintained only as long as the relationships on which it is built remain intact. A flattened grove, a lost species, a forgotten use: all of these are ecological losses as well as erosions of memory. In this sense, the archive is vulnerable, requiring continual interaction. The idea of plants as the memory of generations is thus both descriptive and analytical. It brings into view the forms of knowledge that are easily missed when one focuses only on textual materials. It also raises a more challenging question: what would happen to memory if the circumstances that support it were broken? When access to forests is limited or landscapes are altered, the capacity of plants to act as memory markers is reduced.

Ritual, Healing, and Everyday Knowledge

Plant knowledge often appears in narratives of Indigenous life in the form of catalogues: roots to treat fever, leaves to treat wounds, barks to aid digestion. There is nothing wrong with such descriptions, but something is lacking. They detach knowledge from the circumstances in which it is learned and practised. For Adivasi people in Odisha, plants are not merely objects to be known; they are drawn into relationships that are practised in ritual, healing, and daily care. Knowledge is not possessed apart from life; it lives in it. Healing is a particularly revealing entry point. In societies like those of the Bonda and Saora, the making of herbal remedies is hardly a technical process. It usually entails verbal prayers, gestures, and awareness of the plant as beyond a material being. A leaf applied to a wound can be accompanied by a chant that places the action in the broader context of morality and cosmology. The efficacy of the remedy is not perceived to reside in its chemical properties, but rather in the relationship set up between healer, patient and plant (Elwin 214).[11] In this regard, the act of healing is not merely the active expression of knowledge but also the

[10] B. B. Mohanty, *Tribal Life in Orissa* (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2004), 90–95.

[11] Verrier Elwin, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 210–215.

establishment of a set of relations within which plants participate. These practices are also gendered. Women in most families are at the forefront of preserving and passing on knowledge of how to use local plants: which ones to pick, how to cook them, and when to use them. This type of knowledge is hardly formalised. It is learnt through observation and repeated participation. A girl is not so much taught as taken into the woods by the elders, where she observes how leaves are chosen, roots washed, and mixtures made. What is transmitted is not just information but a form of care for the world, an attentiveness that is moral as well as practical (Sahoo 137).[12]

Plants become even more entangled in the web of collective life through seasonal festivals. The leaves, flowers, and roots are collected, and rituals are performed to celebrate the start of a new agricultural cycle or to mark events in the community. Plants are not interchangeable when this happens. Certain species are selected because of their associations, their history, and their perceived efficacy. For example, the *Dongria Kondh* use specific flowers in their seasonal rituals, which are associated with notions of regeneration and continuity, linking the present to both personal and larger temporal periods (Padel and Das 118). These practices not only adorn ritual space, but also place plant life at the heart of shared experience. In the homestead, knowledge of plants assumes less vocal but no less important forms. Food preparation, the treatment of minor ailments, and the continuing attention to small kitchen gardens all, in one way or another, engage with plant life. This knowledge is not studied by children as a separate subject but is part of everyday routine. A grandmother may explain, while cooking, how two similar-looking leaves differ, or why one plant must not be completely uprooted. These situations rarely announce themselves as instruction, yet they constitute a pedagogy that is both cumulative and ongoing. With time, familiarity develops into knowing. The way in which they are passed down makes these forms of knowledge unique. They are not codified in manuals or stabilised in written form. They depend on presence in the forest, in the field, and in the household, where the practices are carried out. Memory is lodged in the body as much as in the mind: in the touch of a leaf, the timing of a harvest, the tune of a chant. To learn is to engage, and to engage is to enter a configuration of relations that extends beyond the human.

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[12] A. K. Sahoo, "Traditional Herbal Practices among Tribal Communities of Odisha," *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2010, pp. 135–140.

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This does not imply that this kind of knowledge is static or that it cannot change. In fact, it is receptive and adapts to environmental and circumstantial changes. But because it is oral, embodied, and experiential, it is susceptible to disruption. The continuity of knowledge is threatened when access to forests is limited or when younger generations turn to other activities. The stakes lie not in a collection of techniques but in a way of regarding plants as agents of co-existence. The fact that this knowledge is not codified does not mean that it is disorganised or uncoordinated. Its organisation lies elsewhere: in the rhythms of practice, in the repetition of ritual, in the slow accretion of experience. It is knowledge that is hard to abstract. Plants in this context are not downgraded to functions. They are met as presences that need attention, respect, and, on occasion, restraint. When understood in this way, ritual and everyday practice are not a periphery of knowledge; rather, they are its foundation. They ensure that what is known is not distanced from how one lives. This can still be seen in the forests and villages of Odisha, however strained they have become.

Language, Naming, and Botanical Worlds

Perhaps the most obvious difference between scientific and Indigenous perspectives on plants can be seen in language. Naming is not a neutral thing to do. It does not merely identify; it locates a thing in a broader world of relationships. In contemporary botanical systems, plants are classified by Latin *binomials*, arranged into families and genera on the basis of their morphological characteristics. This system possesses its own integrity and usefulness, but it decontextualises plants. A tree becomes an instance of a species, its name frozen in a form that travels across boundaries with ease but is not necessarily filled with local meaning. Plant names among the Adivasi people of Odisha do not work this way. They lie within histories, events, and relationships that are beyond the scope of classification. The same plant can be called by several names that indicate the various facets of its existence: its use, its role in a legend, or its association with a particular place. For example, among the *Saora*, some trees have names that recall the involvement or experiences of the ancestors, so that the act of naming is itself bound up with remembrance (Elwin 167). The name does not merely label the plant; it locates it in a story. This linguistic richness also manifests itself as a relational rather than hierarchical mode of classification. Plants can be classified by more than physical similarity: by their use in ordinary activities such as medicine, by the taboos or dangers that restrict their use, or by the rituals in which they feature. These dimensions of differentiation are not as rigid as scientific taxonomy; they can be, and indeed are, reinterpreted according to

changing practices and circumstances. What remains constant is the focus on relation: a plant is known by what it does, how it is approached, and what obligations it carries.

Naming practices tend to draw on cosmological and moral systems. Some plants are attributed to protective spirits, others to cautionary stories that record the effects of abuse. A tree that must not be cut can be given a name that encodes this taboo, a reminder of the limits that organise human activity. Through such means, language becomes a medium through which ecological ethics are passed down. To learn the name of a plant is to learn how to act in its presence. This contrasts with scientific taxonomy, which is generalising. Although scientific taxonomy aims at stabilising identity through universal categories, Indigenous naming practices enable multiplicity and context. The meaning of a plant is not fixed by its classification but exists in its interactions with people, places, and narratives. To offer a scientific equivalent of such names is to lose precisely what makes them significant. This does not imply the displacement of one system by another, but rather an understanding that they operate on different logics. Scientific taxonomy excels at comparison across distances; Indigenous vocabularies excel at situating knowledge in lived environments. The challenge arises when the former is considered the sole authorised form of knowledge, rendering the latter invisible or secondary. To attend to Indigenous language, then, is to encounter another ontology of plants, one in which plants do not exist as isolated entities but are constituents of a web of relations. Language does not exist in isolation from this web; it helps to maintain it. Plants are embedded in memory, morality, and practice through naming. They are not merely named; they are invoked.

Contemporary Crisis: Development vs. Indigenous Ecologies

The developmental language of modern India tends to portray infrastructure, industrial growth, and assimilation into broader markets as progressive and promising. But in the forested areas of Odisha, these projects often follow earlier patterns of action. The landscape might have changed to encompass mining and industrial growth, but the logic behind it is, regrettably, not unfamiliar: forests have turned into reservoirs of value that can be tapped, and the residents who make the forest their home have become obstacles on the way to advancement. In this regard, development is not as much a break with colonial practice as its continuation in another register. This tension has been brought into sharp focus by the mining that has extended to districts such as Kalahandi and Rayagada. Bauxite mining has targeted hills of rich ecological and cultural value, many of them sites where the *Dongria Kondh* live, provoking strong opposition to these developments (Padel and Das 142). For the locals, the

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value of land and livelihood does not fully capture the loss at stake. That loss includes the rupture of relationships developed over generations with this or that tree, with this or that grove, and with the rhythms according to which memory and ritual life are organised. Each time a hill is levelled or a forest cleared, a field of meaning is lost.

It is here that the limits of dominant patterns of environmental governance are drawn. Policies to manage forest utilisation or to lessen ecological harm typically operate within the same intellectual frontiers that facilitated earlier forms of extraction. They may recognise the existence of Indigenous communities, even granting them some rights of access, but they hardly ever address the epistemologies through which those communities understand and inhabit the forest (Sundar 223). The outcome is the shrinking of what can be considered a loss. The displacement is registered in the statistics: hectares acquired, families resettled, compensation paid. The erosion of memory embedded in the landscape has largely gone unaccounted for. Sacred groves that once hosted rituals are disrupted; plants which marked the time and history are out of reach; the practices and traditions by which the knowledge was inherited become deprived of their context. The archive, or whatever one may call it, is not consumed at a single stroke. It is worn away, its continuity interrupted. Meanwhile, these processes have also given rise to forms of resistance that appeal directly to Indigenous conceptions of the forest. Adivasi communities in Odisha have framed their opposition not just in terms of rights but also of responsibility to land, to ancestors, and to the non-human life with which they are intertwined. This opposition makes development a difficult good to believe in. It insists that what is at stake is not only the availability of resources but also the continuation of means of knowing and being that cannot easily be fitted into mainstream economic discourses.

Reimagining Knowledge: Toward a Decolonial Ecology

To treat Indigenous plant knowledge as merely traditional is to relegate it to history, as though it were a residue to be preserved rather than a way of thinking that can mould the present. What emerges from the forests of Odisha suggests the contrary. The relationship of Adivasi communities with plants, marked by keeping them unharmed, by reciprocity, and by attention, is not just a way of life but also a way of thought. These are, in effect, theories of the world formulated in practice rather than in abstraction. The redefinition of such knowledge as intellectual instead of residual has significant implications. Writing history requires going beyond text-based archives to embrace landscapes as sites of the production of memory and meaning. In contemporary discussions of sustainability, it provides an

alternative to models based on the dominance of extraction tempered by managerial restraint. Here plants are not resources to be optimised but beings that guide ethical behaviour. They also structure time, serve as guides, and place human life in larger cycles of regeneration. What is suggested is not a romanticisation of the past but an extension of what counts as knowledge. Decolonial ecology starts by considering the possibility that forests think and, in learning to attend to this thinking, new modes of writing the past and envisioning ecological futures might become feasible.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that plants are not incidental or silent in the Adivasi worlds of Odisha. The language they use is not that of words but of cycles, presences, and relationships passed from generation to generation. They recall, through incidents of movement, rite, and place. They educate and mould the forms of attention and restraint by which life in the forest is conducted. Recognising this means seeing plants no longer as constraints on human action but as participants in the formation of social and historical worlds. Against this backdrop, the structures of knowledge in modern times, be they colonial forestry or modern development, seem to be characterised by an endemic deafness. They turn relations of memory and meaning into a kind of silence by transforming forests into resources and plants into units of value. What is silenced is not only a way of knowing but a way of inhabiting the world, one that locates human life in a broader sphere of obligation and concern.[13] To write Indigenous histories, both approach and perspective must change. It requires reading the archive differently: rather than reading conventionally, one reads the landscape as a site of inscription. In this view, forests need not be documented; they are already narrated, their meanings attached to the growth of trees, the passing of seasons, and the rootedness of people in place through acts of marking it. To read them is not straightforward. It requires learning to see the forms of memory that are not established in writing but maintained by repetition and association.[14]

The implications of such a change extend beyond historiography. At a time when ecological crises are increasingly treated through technical modes of control, the visions discussed here indicate a third way based on attentiveness rather than control. Rediscovering

[13] Early forms of forest use and administrative methods of timber management are documented in Odisha Forest Department reports (1890–1920).

[14] For discussions of sacred groves and their role within eastern Indian culture, see regional ethnographic surveys and village-level studies carried out in upland Odisha.

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the skill of listening, not to information but to trees, could shape the future of ecological thought.

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