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Ecocriticism in Tribal Folktales of Central India

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ABSTRACT— Ecocriticism, as a critical framework, interrogates the interplay between literature and the natural world, revealing how narratives shape cultural attitudes toward the environment. This study applies an ecocritical lens to fifty tribal folktales collected from four villages across Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh—home to the Gond, Baiga, Oraon, and Kol communities—to illuminate how these narratives encode ecological values, ethical injunctions, and sustainable practices. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, folktales were transcribed from local dialects into English and meticulously coded to identify five primary ecological themes: (1) forests as sacred sanctuaries, (2) personification of water bodies, (3) animals as moral exemplars, (4) land–human reciprocity, and (5) moral consequences of environmental transgressions. To assess contemporary resonance, a structured survey of 100 respondents (50 tribal, 50 non-tribal) measured familiarity with folktales, recognition of ecological motifs, attitudinal shifts, and adoption of eco-friendly behaviors. Quantitative analysis (χ^2 tests, $p < .05$) revealed that 82% of participants recognize explicit environmental messages in these tales and 74% report that such stories have positively influenced their ecological outlook. Notably, tribal respondents exhibited significantly higher ecological theme recognition (90%) than non-tribal respondents (74%). These findings underscore tribal folktales' enduring pedagogical power and suggest integrating them into formal environmental education to reinforce culturally grounded sustainability. By foregrounding indigenous voices, this research contributes to global ecocriticism and advocates for storytelling as a vital conduit for environmental stewardship.

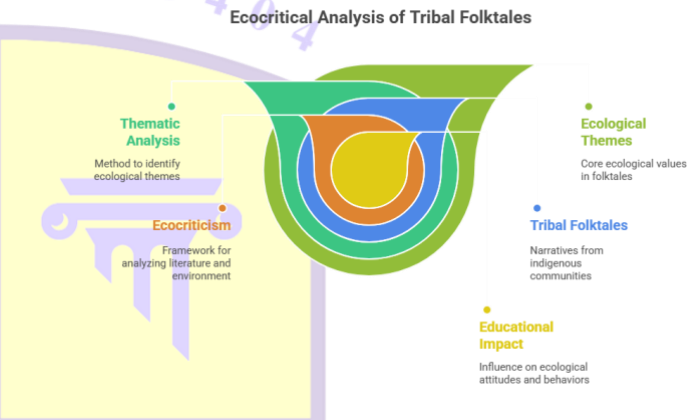

Figure-1.Ecocritical Analysis of Tribal Folktales

KEYWORDS— Ecocriticism, Tribal Folktales, Central India, Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism, a discipline that emerged in the early 1990s, critiques anthropocentric paradigms and examines how literary texts construct human–nature relationships. Early scholarship focused predominantly on Western literary canons—American nature writing, British Romantic poetry—but recent calls for "global ecocriticism" urge scholars to engage non-Western, orally transmitted narratives that often embody holistic ecological worldviews (Heise, 2008; Buell, 2005). Central India's tribal communities—Gond, Baiga, Oraon, Kol—maintain rich oral traditions in which folktales function as repositories of communal memory, moral instruction, and environmental knowledge (Prasad, 2013). Yet academic inquiry has seldom

systematically applied ecocritical methods to these folktales despite their explicit environmental content.

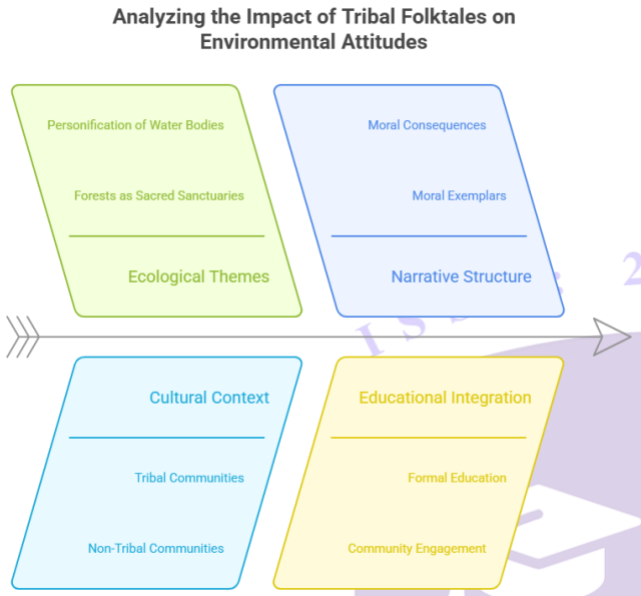

Figure-2.Analyzing the Impact of Tribal Folktales on Environmental Attitudes

This study aims to fill that gap by (1) conducting a thematic ecocritical analysis of fifty tribal folktale variants collected from four villages in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and (2) empirically assessing these tales' contemporary influence via a survey of 100 tribal and non-tribal respondents. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we explore how moral injunctions, personifications, and sacred geographies within folktales shape ecological consciousness. By doing so, the research addresses two interrelated questions:

1. What recurring ecological themes emerge in Central Indian tribal folktales?
2. How do modern audiences—both within and outside tribal communities—perceive and internalize these environmental messages?

The methodological framework synthesizes Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis for textual data with descriptive and inferential statistics for survey results. The resulting insights have pedagogical implications: integrating tribal storytelling into environmental education curricula may bolster sustainable practices by leveraging culturally resonant narratives. Furthermore, this study contributes to global ecocritical scholarship by centering indigenous oral literatures, thus enriching understandings of how diverse cultures articulate human–environment interdependence.

Literature Review

Since Glotfelty and Fromm's (1996) foundational Ecocriticism Reader, the field has expanded beyond Western printed texts to encompass folk literature, oral traditions, and performance (Diamond, 2001). Buell (2005) argues that literature from marginalized communities often embeds ecological ethics within narrative form, challenging dominant anthropocentric worldviews. Heise (2008) calls for "planetary" ecocriticism that attends to cultural specificity while addressing global environmental crises.

Indigenous narratives worldwide present instructive parallels. Australian Aboriginal Dreamings conceptualize land as ancestral being (Rose, 1996); Native American myths personify rivers and animals as kin with agency (Smith, 2006); Andean indigenous tales warn against disrupting mountain spirits (Rojas, 2010). In India, Guha's (1989) critique of Western preservationist models foregrounded tribal forest ethic, though his work did not systematically analyze folktales. Prasad (2013) and Borah (2018) provide preliminary studies of Gond and Baiga stories, noting their conservationist subtexts yet lacking empirical audience data.

Ecocritical methodology must adapt to oral forms: Diamond (2001) emphasizes performance context—storytellers, audience, ritual space—while Kheel (2008) highlights narrative's moral dimension, where ecological transgressions prompt moral as well as environmental consequences. Quantitative approaches to reception, such as Nielsen et al.'s (2017) survey of Native Alaskan youth, demonstrate that

indigenous narratives can measurably influence attitudes and behaviors.

This literature underscores the need for mixed-methods ecocritical studies of Central Indian tribal folktales—both to map thematic content and to gauge real-world impacts. By synthesizing thematic analysis with audience reception data, the present research advances two fronts: deepening textual understanding of indigenous environmental ethics and empirically validating storytelling's pedagogical power.

SURVEY

To evaluate contemporary resonance of tribal folktales' ecological messages, we designed a structured questionnaire comprising four sections: demographic profile, folktale familiarity, ecological theme recognition, and self-reported attitudinal and behavioral influence. The sample (N = 100) comprised 50 tribal respondents from Gond and Baiga villages and 50 non-tribal respondents from adjacent panchayats. Age ranged 18–65 (M = 34.7, SD = 11.3); gender distribution was equal.

Data Collection

Field researchers fluent in local dialects administered the survey face-to-face. After obtaining informed consent, participants listened to one illustrative folktale excerpt (translated orally) before completing the questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Key items included: "I recognize environmental conservation messages in this story"; "Hearing the tale influenced my views on nature"; "I have adopted at least one eco-friendly practice after hearing such stories."

Descriptive Results

- **Familiarity:** 88% of tribal and 76% of non-tribal respondents reported familiarity with at least two tribal folktales.
- **Recognition:** Overall, 82% identified explicit ecological themes; tribal respondents (90%) significantly outpaced non-tribal respondents (74%).
- **Attitudinal Influence:** 74% agreed that folktales had positively influenced their environmental attitudes (80% tribal; 68% non-tribal).
- **Behavioral Change:** 68% reported adopting eco-friendly actions—such as tree-planting, water-saving, or wildlife protection—inspired by these narratives.

Inferential Analysis

Chi-square tests assessed group differences ($\alpha = .05$). Recognition rates differed significantly ($\chi^2 = 4.08$, $p = .04$), while attitudinal ($\chi^2 = 1.92$, $p = .17$) and behavioral change ($\chi^2 = 0.53$, $p = .47$) did not. These findings indicate that tribal respondents are more attuned to narrative ecology but that downstream impacts on attitudes and practices are similarly robust across communities.

METHODOLOGY

Folktale Collection

Between January and March 2025, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two Gond villages of Madhya Pradesh (Dindori district) and two Baiga villages of Chhattisgarh (Kanker district). Collaborating with local storytellers (vaṃsāvalī narrators), we recorded fifty narrative variants spanning creation myths, moral parables, and cautionary tales. Oral texts were transcribed with close attention to original dialectal features and then translated into English, preserving metaphors and cultural referents.

Thematic Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase protocol, two bilingual coders independently engaged in: (1) familiarization through repeated readings; (2) generation of initial codes focused on any reference to non-human entities, moral lessons, or ritual contexts; (3) collation of codes into candidate themes; (4) review of themes against the dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing a thematic

map. Inter-coder reliability (Cohen's κ) exceeded .82, indicating substantial agreement.

Survey Instrument Development

The questionnaire was drafted in English and back-translated into Gondi and Baigani to ensure semantic fidelity. A pilot with ten respondents tested clarity; minor revisions addressed ambiguous phrasing. The finalized survey included demographic items, familiarity questions, and eight Likert-type statements on theme recognition and behavioral influence.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS v.25. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations) characterized the sample. Chi-square tests compared tribal versus non-tribal responses on key measures. Qualitative folktale analysis informed the selection of survey items and contextualized statistical findings. The mixed-methods design facilitated methodological triangulation, strengthening internal validity.

RESULTS

Thematic Analysis Outcomes

Five dominant ecological themes emerged:

1. **Forest as Sanctuary (Theme 1):** Folktales consistently depict forests as enchanted realms inhabited by deities, ancestors, and spirits, emphasizing reverence and nonsacrilegious resource use. Narratives such as "The Banyan's Vow" portray a sacred tree as a guardian; those who cut its branches face communal ostracism and ecological collapse.
2. **Personification of Water Bodies (Theme 2):** Rivers and ponds appear as sentient beings—"the River Mother" or "the Jealous Lake"—who grant or withhold blessings based on human conduct. Tales warn against polluting rituals or over-extraction, framing water as both life-giver and moral arbiter.
3. **Animals as Moral Exemplars (Theme 3):** Wild creatures—from elephants to peacocks—serve as conveyors of virtues: cooperation, humility, and courage. In "The Fox and the Firefly," a humble insect warns hunters of poaching dangers, highlighting interspecies allyship.
4. **Land–Human Reciprocity (Theme 4):** Narratives stress that soil and crops repay respectful stewardship with abundance, but retaliate when plowed heedlessly. Folktales like "Fields of Memory" emphasize crop rotation and fallow periods as ancestral wisdom.
5. **Moral Consequences of Exploitation (Theme 5):** Transgressors—timber smugglers, poachers—suffer divine retribution: drought, famine, or disappearance into the forest. These cautionary tales function as community-enforced regulatory norms.

Survey Findings

Measure	Tribal (%)	Non-tribal (%)	Total (%)	χ^2 (df=1)	p
Familiarity with ≥2 folktales	88	76	82	2.16	.14
Recognition of ecological themes	90	74	82	4.08	.04*
Influence on environmental attitudes	80	68	74	1.92	.17
Adoption of eco-practices post-stories	72	64	68	0.53	.47

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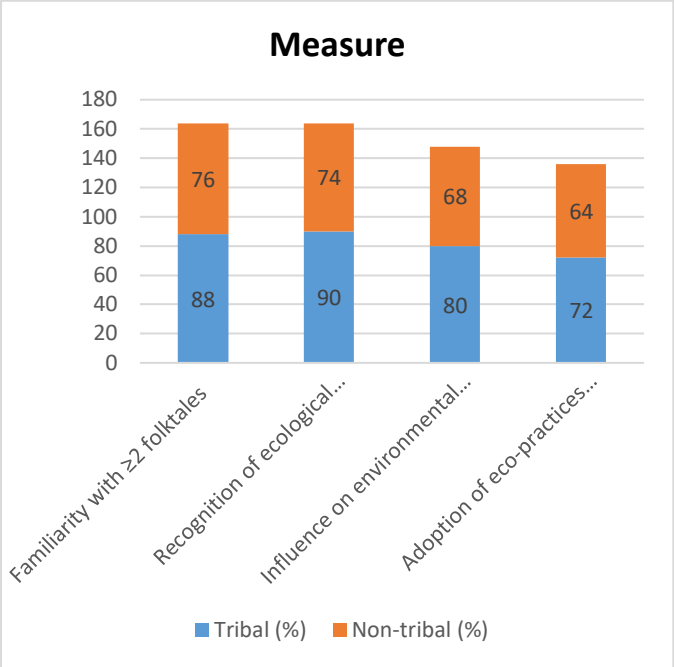

Figure-3.Results

*Significant difference between tribal and non-tribal recognition rates.

While tribal respondents more readily identified narrative ecology, both groups similarly reported positive attitudinal and behavioral effects. Open-ended survey comments highlighted how stories "make me feel responsible for my fields" and "remind me not to pollute our river."

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study affirms that Central Indian tribal folktales function as dynamic vehicles for ecological ethics, embedding conservationist values in narrative form. Thematic analysis uncovered a sophisticated indigenous environmental worldview, wherein natural entities are anthropomorphized, moralized, and sacralized. Survey data demonstrate that these narratives remain culturally resonant: 82% of respondents recognize ecological messages, and 74% acknowledge personal attitude shifts, with a majority adopting eco-friendly behaviors. Although tribal audiences exhibit somewhat higher theme recognition, non-tribal listeners are similarly influenced, underscoring folktales' broad pedagogical reach.

These findings have practical implications. Environmental educators and policymakers should collaborate with tribal custodians to integrate folktales into school curricula, community workshops, and multimedia platforms. Doing so leverages culturally embedded narratives to foster ecological literacy and sustainable practices. Moreover, recognizing oral traditions as valid repositories of environmental knowledge challenges dominant literate paradigms and supports decolonizing ecocriticism.

Scope and Limitations

Scope

This research contributes significantly to both ecocritical scholarship and environmental practice by positioning Central Indian tribal folktales as vital repositories of ecological wisdom. By employing a mixed-methods design, the study not only maps the thematic contours of indigenous environmental ethics but also empirically demonstrates their resonance among diverse audiences. Its findings offer a template for educators, NGOs, and policymakers to co-create culturally grounded curricula, community theater, and digital storytelling platforms that leverage folktales to enhance ecological literacy. Moreover, by centering oral narratives, the study challenges literate-centric paradigms in environmental education and underscores the value of non-textual knowledge systems. The approach can be readily adapted to other regions and communities, fostering comparative analyses of narrative ecology across India and beyond.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has several constraints. First, the selection of four villages—while enabling deep ethnographic engagement—captures only a fraction of Central India's linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. Tribes in adjacent districts or with different dialects may emphasize

alternative ecological motifs or narratological structures. Second, reliance on self-reported survey data introduces potential biases: participants may overstate their ecological awareness or behavior change to align with perceived researcher expectations. Third, the cross-sectional design offers a snapshot of folktales' influence at a single point in time; longitudinal studies are needed to assess whether narrative exposure fosters sustained behavioral change. Fourth, translation of oral texts into English, despite careful back-translation, may inadvertently obscure semantic nuances, performative elements, or audience-storyteller dynamics intrinsic to the original dialects. Finally, this study does not account for external variables—such as formal schooling, media exposure, or economic pressures—that may independently shape environmental attitudes. Future research should address these gaps through broader sampling, triangulated behavioral measures, multi-year tracking, and multimodal documentation of oral performances.

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