

Rooted in Earth: The Ecohumanist Spirit of Gond Art and Culture

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Abstract

Some fundamental yet unsettling questions continue to haunt contemporary consciousness: who is modern? Who is literate? Who is developed? Although seemingly simple, these questions are endowed with deeply embedded connotations. Every day witnesses the emergence of new projects and novel developments in science and technology, and progress is evident in every walk of life. Simultaneously, cities are advancing with giant strides to engulf cultivated lands and forests. Placed in this context, the present research paper explores Verrier Elwin's perspective on the Gonds — their art and culture — and explicates, through the theoretical framework of ecohumanism, how these communities exemplify an ecohumanist way of life. Their art and culture are intrinsically rooted in the natural world, as they walk in consonance with nature and foreground a profound philosophy of coexistence.

Keywords: Development, Gonds, art, culture, ecohumanism

Introduction: The Paradox of Progress

In an age where concrete proliferates at the cost of the cultivated and the forested, some fundamental yet unsettling questions continue to haunt contemporary consciousness: who is truly modern? Who is literate? Who is developed? While seemingly simple, these questions are laden with deeply embedded ideological connotations. Although progress is manifest in every walk of life through ceaseless scientific and technological innovations, this advancement is paralleled by the aggressive expansion of urban spaces engulfing agrarian lands and forests. It is from this critical juncture that the present research paper draws its significance.

This study undertakes a critical exploration of Verrier Elwin's *The Gonds: Their Art and Culture*. Moving beyond a conventional ethnographic reading, it employs the theoretical framework of ecohumanism to argue that Gond art and culture are not merely influenced by nature but are intrinsically rooted in the earth itself. For the Gonds, existence is a harmonious walk with nature, and their aesthetic and cultural expressions foreground a profound and enduring philosophy of coexistence. However, the modern juggernaut entered in the domain of the tribal community, "The rapid advance of modern civilization has had and is still having a great influence on the life and culture of the primitive peoples everywhere, and India, although not so advanced industrially as the West has had her share of modifying influence profoundly affecting those who have somehow or other been brought into contact with this industrial and urban life. It is also significant that the mineral resources of India are located in areas inhabited by the tribal people (Singh, v)."

The Gonds constitute a prominent tribal community predominantly concentrated in the Central Provinces and its contiguous regions. The community is widely recognised for its chivalrous ethos and innate warrior spirit. However, the most quintessential aspect of their identity lies in their intimate and symbiotic bonding with nature. Their worldview is fundamentally anchored in the sustainability of the natural world, wherein their art and culture revolve around and emanate from the rhythms of nature itself. To comprehend the emplotment of Gond life and culture, it is imperative to delve into the conceptual framework of ecohumanism. As Patil defines it, ecohumanism means "an equivalence relation of man and woman by dissolving dualistic approach to resolve ecological crisis through common consensus (Patil, 146)." It signifies the profound interconnection and mutual understanding between human beings, man and woman, and ecology. It underscores a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship wherein neither the human nor the natural world is positioned as superior, but both coexist in a state of mutual sustenance. The present paper applies this theoretical lens of ecohumanism to critically understand and explicate the art and culture of the Gonds. It argues that Gond cultural expressions cannot be viewed in isolation from their ecological embeddedness, as their very emplotment is rooted in earth and structured around this reciprocal bond with nature.

Gonds as Ecohumanists: An Analysis

The Gonds are one of the largest tribal communities in India, known for their simplicity, honesty, and deep connection with nature. They consider themselves the children of Mother Earth and depend on nature for their livelihood, beliefs, and way of life. They draw their food, shelter, and spiritual strength directly from natural

forces. Although they live a simple life away from modern comforts, their culture, art, and traditions are very rich and meaningful. The art and culture of the Gonds clearly show their love and respect for nature. For them, nature is not just a background, but the centre of life. This is visible in every part of their culture. Their folk songs, stories, and poems are woven around natural elements like the earth, sky, forests, rivers, hills, animals, and the changing seasons. They celebrate nature through their festivals, rituals, and everyday practices. Their dance and music also reflect this close bond with the environment. Their dance is not just for entertainment, but has a deeper connection with natural cycles. As Verrier Elwin observes, their dance “symbolises the growth of the green branches of the forest in the spring; sometimes a tree is set up in the village, and the people dance round it (Elwin, 49).” This practice shows how they celebrate the growth and renewal of life in nature. Thus, it can be said that Gond art is not separate from life or nature. It grows from the earth and is rooted in their daily experience. Their lifestyle teaches respect, care, and coexistence with nature. In this sense, the Gonds can be truly called ecohumanists, as they show a way of living where humans and nature exist together in harmony and balance.

Another important art form of the Gonds is the art of the Pardhans, which is a true reflection of their culture. It is the traditional art of decorating and sculpting on mud walls of their houses. This art is mostly practiced by elderly women of the community, who have learned it from their ancestors. What makes this art special is its honesty and purity? These women do not create art to show off or to earn money. They do it out of love, passion, and a deep connection to their tradition. Their art is a natural part of their daily life, not a performance for others. Through this wall art, they depict their world, their beliefs, and their surroundings. Their wall paintings creatively represent their close bond with nature. The birds are shown through the wings, the forest through the leaves, and animals through their natural movements. As Elwin writes, “Soon the walls were covered with tribal heroes, birds, animals, scorpions, mountains, dancers, and deer with enormously long legs to symbolize their speed (Elwin, 50).” In these simple figures, we can see their observation of nature, their folklore, and their imaginative power. This art, therefore, is not just decoration; it is a cultural expression rooted in earth and lived experience. In these seemingly simple figures, one can discern a profound observation of nature, a rich repository of folklore, and an unbounded imaginative power. This art, therefore, transcends mere decoration; it is a profound cultural expression deeply rooted in the earth and in lived experience. In stark contrast, the so-called civilized or modern worldview has alienated human beings from the natural world, fostering an ethos of detachment and

domination. It is, therefore, imperative to rethink our contemporary predicament by turning to the Gond way of life. This ethos, which may be termed a 'mud-hut philosophy', offers a compelling counter-narrative to modern excess. As Verrier Elwin observes:

This Mud-hut philosophy bids us not to demand too much from life, not to set too much store on things, not even to expect too much from the immortal gods, but to love most where love will be returned, in the charmed family circle, in the friends who will stand by you till death A gay freedom of spirit is the most precious of possessions, and simplicity of heart the greatest treasure man or woman knows.
(38)

This philosophy encapsulates the core of Gond ecohumanism — a life of contentment, affective rootedness, and spiritual freedom, grounded in simplicity and community.

Conclusion: Relearning Coexistence

A few glimpses of Gond art and culture compel us to re-evaluate the paradigm of modernity through the lens of Gond ecohumanism. Rooted in an intricate and symbiotic relationship with nature, Gond artistic expressions and cultural practices articulate a worldview where human and non-human worlds are not dichotomous, but co-constitutive. In contrast to the anthropocentric and extractive logic of modernity, Gond ecohumanism offers an alternative epistemology — one that foregrounds relationality, reciprocity, and reverence for all forms of life. It reminds us that coexistence is not merely a pragmatic strategy for survival, but an ethical and aesthetic principle of being. Revisiting Gond art and culture, therefore, is not an act of nostalgic retrieval, but a critical intervention to reimagine a more sustainable, inclusive, and humane future.

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