Chapter 2
Indigenous Native Epistemology as a Model in Environmental Humanities in India

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Abstract The article proposes a reflection on the contribution of the *ādivāsī* issue in the broader debate on Environmental Humanities in India. The theme of indigeneity on the one hand and the ontological turn in anthropology on the other have highlighted the centrality and importance of the ecological message in the theoretical approach of these disciplines. However, the paper investigates a possible originality of Indian thought in a debate that too often, even in postcolonial studies, has been manipulated by the West. Through the case study of some indigenous cultures of central-eastern India, the paper proposes some original examples of indigenous ontologies and shamanism conveying an idea of respect and consubstantiality of man with other non-humans and with an earth that is mother for everyone. The essay concludes by mentioning the pioneering vision of two of the first Indian anthropologists who understood the importance of the man-spirits-nature connection and of a holistic vision of the cosmos among the native cultures of the Subcontinent.

Keywords Indigeneity · *ādivāsī* · Environmental humanities · Ecology · Munda · Santal · Chhota Nagpur · Ontological turn · Personhood · Shamanism · Baidyanath Saraswati · Sarna · Kalahari debate

2.1 Premise: A Still Open Issue

The question of indigenous people in South Asia today appears extremely complex. In fact, each of the features that the Indian government recognizes as fundamental for the recognition in the categorization of the so-called Scheduled Tribes—such as geographical isolation, backwardness, distinctive culture, marginalization—deserves a separate discussion. A troubled history has characterized these minorities, who constitute just under a tenth of the Indian population. This significant social entity of more than a hundred million people interface regularly with problems such as

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inclusion, development, and respect for human rights. Since the years of Indian independence, the so-called Ghurye-Elwin debate (Guha, 1996; Srivatsan, 2005), which only on the surface concerned opposing positions between integration and isolationism, in depth implied a much more complex question on the degree of diversity and/or cultural continuity of these communities with the Hindu background (Tewari, 2002). In contemporary times, this fits into the broader debate on cultural diversity and Indigeneity, which in recent decades has animated the debate both in anthropology and at international institutions such as the United Nations forum and UNESCO (Friedlander, 2022).

The concept of being an original inhabitant of a place, an idea perfectly expressed by the neologism *ādivāsī* applied today to Indian tribes, soon proved problematic according to a dogmatically scientific approach. Excellent scholars such as the sociologist Béteille (1998) and the historian Guha (1999) have deliberately abstained from designating the Ādivāsīs as aborigines precisely because in many well-known and specific cases an idea of prior settlement in the Subcontinent is at least vague, questionable, and not historically provable. While for other groups, such as some communities in the Northeast, there is even a certain historical memory of ancient migrations making them inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent certainly not *ab origine*. The question fades into the broader political rather than scientific debate on the degree of autochthony of the ancient Arya, or other Asian populations who settled in the Indian Subcontinent in historical times and on their real cultural contribution to Indian civilization. In the rest of the world, the watershed of European colonialism becomes decisive in the attempt to provide a more precise definition of indigeneity. Here we clearly allude to the processes of conquest, expropriation of territories, exploitation of resources, marginalization or forced assimilation of previous inhabitants occurring in the modern world, particularly in Africa and the Americas. It is clear that in this regard the Indian framework is much more complex. In this regard, Barnard (2006) had emphasized the fact that the definitions of "first comer" and "cultural difference" should probably not be the most decisive criteria for determining indigeneity: rather he considered it more appropriate to emphasize the concepts of "non-dominance" and "self-attribution".[1] Going into more detail, the Canadian anthropologist Lee (2006: 134) proposed two different notions of indigeneity: one for peoples subject to European colonial invasion and another for peoples not directly involved in processes of colonial domination, but equally subjected to oppression within local agrarian policies. The *ādivāsī* scenario fits perfectly into this definition, also including processes of marginalization and repression, as well as ruthless industrialization practices (Behera, 2013; Padel, 2008). These phenomena are typical of contemporary neocolonial practices and of the dynamics of globalization itself: Barnard and Lee's descriptions take us in this same direction. Although they are known for their studies in Africa and in particular for the so-called Kalahari Debate,[2] they also adapt very well to the Indian scenario.

[1] See also Devy et al. (2009).

[2] This is a heated debate among scholars regarding the social dynamics of hunter-gatherer groups in this area of South Africa. On one side, there are supporters of the geographical and cultural

2.2 Ādivāsīs and Environmental Humanities

Assuming a long insurrectionist tradition against colonial rule, India's indigenous peoples have been protagonists of revolts aimed at claiming land rights and against economic exploitation. This sort of resilience remained, in a certain sense, constant even in the period following Indian Independence. After 50 years of hesitation on the development and integration policies of these minorities, the Indian Government found that to support a constantly growing economy it would be necessary to get its hands on the natural resources of the soil and subsoil of the indigenous territories. And to do this it is necessary either to accelerate the forced process of assimilation of distinctive cultural minorities that would have deserved to be preserved instead, or even to resort to the brutal method of displacement with the risk of violating the human rights of the Ādivāsīs. Paradoxically, on the other hand, the strenuous struggle of indigenous peoples to defend their ancestral territories and their most basic rights takes on the characteristics of a struggle against capitalism, multinationals, the indiscriminate exploitation of the territory, in which the ecological discourse today acquires a paramount significance. Precisely because they lived for centuries in close contact with the forests or in the most impervious Himalayan valleys, the Indian tribals today seem to be the last custodians of the secrets of nature and of a territory with which contemporary people seem to have now lost real contact. Furthermore, indigenous religiosity, often characterized by forms of animism or shamanism, seems in a certain sense to still be able to "dialogue" respectfully with the non-human dimensions of the surrounding flora and fauna. In a somewhat romanticized vision, we tend to think that a pillar of that indigenous resilience is a notion of sustainability that the rest of the planet has lost. But is this really so?

Some authors[3] disagree, asserting that in the Anthropocene, thinking that the earth, or part of the planet, rightfully belongs to a minority, however indigenous, is absurd. Banerjee (2016: 140) emphasizes that Ādivāsīs appear to enjoy a kind of political hyper-visibility today. A more than incipient notoriety, capable of impacting the political debate, but quite disproportionate compared to their number. In any case, the success of the term *ādivāsī*, where it has been adopted, is today radicalizing among indigenous communities the image of a "native self" as opposed to the rest of Indian citizenship, understood as "colonizers," or descendants of the same. In this chapter, I would therefore like to investigate some questions that are not easy to resolve. Is there a pure ecological thought (i.e. free from idealization) in indigenous India? What value does indigenous culture (also explored through the tools of anthropology and ethnography) have in Environmental Humanities and in rethinking the concepts

isolationism of the indigenous populations, while others argue that they played an important role in the exchange economy with neighboring communities, although over time they were increasingly marginalized and driven out of their lands. The debate involves different disciplinary approaches such as ethnography, anthropology, archaeology and history and in a certain sense it can be paradigmatic, given the necessary distinctions, also of Indian discourse.

[3] See Ingold (2022) on a possible global paradox; see Jairath (2020) for a reference specifically to the Jharkhand debate.

of sustainability? Is there an ecocritical approach to these disciplines that is part of a unique intellectual Indian tradition, and not merely derivative of Euro-American environmental ideas?

Even just the first of these questions is abstruse. In the current debate, many have emphasized that *ādivāsī* lifestyles could have been considered sustainable in the past, but it is realistic to think that they are no longer so today. The classic example is *jhum* cultivation, or the proto-agricultural technique of slash and burn. While many indigenous spokespersons accuse the government of wanting to replace these basic subsistence techniques with more productive but high-impact mining activities, it is nevertheless undeniable that the *jhum* method, yielding little fruit and requiring a great deal of energy, worked in the past for semi-sedentary microcommunities, but following the demographic boom in many villages it does not meet today the sustainability requirements at all (Ranjan & Upadhyay, 1999).

But it is precisely in the Indian ecological movements and in the effort to protect the environment that short circuits with indigenous lifestyles have often occurred. During the colonial era, aware of the importance of the Indian jungle as a resource, the state arrogated to itself absolute control over the forests, which was then aimed largely at satisfying the demand for timber. The Indian Forest Act of 1927 provided a legal framework for such control, but the exclusive production of a certain type of wood proved detrimental to biodiversity, which gradually came into crisis. After independence the situation has not changed much: but both the government and the Indian ecological movements seem to have forgotten that the forest was a significant source of subsistence for the Ādivāsīs over the centuries (Munshi, 2015). In addition to food, animal fodder, and fuel, the forest has also been the source of medicine, building materials, materials for making agricultural tools, etc. It has been forgotten that due to this dependence, Ādivāsīs have generally always protected the forest and its biodiversity: the consequence of this misrepresentation of the indigenous role is that they have now become increasingly vulnerable. To rebalance the neglected forest management rights and land tenure to the forest-dwelling communities, the Indian government passed the famous recognition of Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006 which, however, is not free of criticism, or skepticism on the results obtained (Jha & Upadhyay, 2023; Singh, 2021). In the Northeast, for example, there are many indigenous movements that oppose institutional projects for the control and development of water resources. In the Mishmi Hills, locals are protesting against the establishment of national parks for the protection of wildlife and big cats. The paradox lies in the fact that they consider themselves the ancestral protectors of the territory and its beasts, by virtue of an ancient totemic bond and kinship with some animals, such as tigers or leopards; but they find themselves actually excluded from all this today (Agarwala, 2023). I could give examples ad libitum, without coming to terms with any theory: therefore, I believe it is necessary to look for a common philosophy among the indigenous people of India, in which to possibly find the root of a concept of sustainability.

My 25-year experience of research into the religiosity of tribal India leads me to positive considerations. Almost everywhere, with the necessary regional cultural differences, in indigenous thought, I have found the idea that collective and individual

well-being depends on the propensity for relationships, collaboration and reciprocity between human beings and the environment. I therefore believe that in the study of ecology and Environmental Humanities, supported of course by ethnographic and anthropological tools, it is fundamental to configure an ecological-relational network and its concrete effects on the present. There is an element common to many native knowledge systems: the sense of trust towards the environment, which allows them to act and react to changes and in interaction with other organisms producing variable and negotiated responses. This disposition translates into a sense of respect and sacredness of places, even geographically understood. Custodians of the past, they are at the same time an expression of the present and paths towards imagined futures. In the shamanism of the *ādivāsī* cults, where it has survived, there are not only dialogues with non-humans, understood as the complexity of flora and fauna, but there is a lively relationship with rivers, hills, paths and subtle channels of energies becoming cosmic in a holistic and non-anthropocentric vision of the world (Beggiora, 2003). For this reason, in native knowledges a series of prescriptions and taboos are often handed down: in addition to their varied narrative and practical motivation, they essentially seem to center the environmental discourse on the responsibilities of communities towards places and nature in general. It is a sort of ontology that Guzy (2021) have defined as indigenous eco-cosmology. Or rather eco-cosmologies, considering the plurality of the *ādivāsī* cultural kaleidoscope however often merging with this principle.

In the following paragraphs, after a clarification on the importance of the notion of person beyond the ontological turn and towards the ecocritical debate, I will try to answer the remaining questions using a case study among the indigenous populations of the Chhota Nagpur plateau in India. Also called Ranchi Plateau—since a large part of it extends around the capital of the same name in the state of Jharkhand—it is characterized by a dry tropical and subtropical broad-leaved forest, as well as gorges and peculiar hilly reliefs. The latter are mainly made up of schists and metamorphic rocks of ancient orogeny: personified as archaic deities and guardians of the territory, since the dawn of time their ancient presence has contributed to shaping the myths and religiosity of the numerous indigenous ethnic groups. Expression of a wild nature, which is also mother earth, hills and mountains are actually considered as 'people', or deities, by local populations. However, the vegetation, caves, springs, every particular rocky conformation of this landscape is populated by a number of subtle entities and spirits with which local shamans are still able today to communicate. Like a child who does not perceive the difference between his body and that of his mother, in the same way, the nature surrounding the villages can be metonymically understood here as a sort of maternal womb, for which the community has a profound sensorial—even more than emotional—bond. And yet a hard and daily struggle for survival also requires consideration of the 'wild' aspect, that is, not tamed, chaotic, dangerous, of that same nature.

2.3 Territoriality and Agency in Indigenous Cultures: Turning Points in the History of Studies

The overview that we outlined in the *incipit* aims to emphasize the fact that, despite the diversity of visions and past definitions, much of the previous anthropological studies would seem to have denied the recognition of an epistemological dignity to indigenous Indian cultures. Indigenous metaphysics, visions of the cosmos and ritual practices would therefore appear not to have been able to enjoy their rightful autonomy, forced—at least until the last century—into epistemological paradigms delimited and constructed by a univocal apparatus of social, relational and psychological sciences. A construct with which the European culture has generally measured itself and the otherness of other subjects. If this were true, this would mean that a certain good part of the sciences of our era has tragically missed the objectives of post-colonial theory, in particular by blunting the gap between contemporaneity and what was the civilizing, evangelizing modern world that developed starting from the "discovery" of the Americas and the new commercial and colonial routes to Asia.

For this reason, those scholars who have tried to break this pattern are extremely important, because they are trying to restore dignity—to the extent of an ontological and epistemological specificity—to the perspectives of indigenous populations. In this sense, shamanism stands out precisely for its cosmological gaze. Indeed, the work of Hallowell (1960)[4] was crucial: through a conversation with an elderly Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was the first to question the different forms that the concept of person took in indigenous thought and on the consequences that this different conception revealed for the understanding of the way in which reality was perceived and valued in the native culture. It is no coincidence, however, that his considerations remained on the margins of anthropological reflection for much of the twentieth century, until the concepts of "person/personhood" became central. It was almost a starting point, including the perspectives on materiality and rationality, for the various authors of the various so-called "ontological turns": primarily for the research carried out in the Amazonian field by authors considered in turn to be milestones of the genre, such as Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2005) and Descola (2005). The theorizations of Hallowell—and probably of other authors of the last century which it is necessary to overlook only for reasons of space—are undoubtedly at the basis of that idea of the specific physiognomy of Amerindian cosmologies, which we know today under the definition of perspectivism (*perspectivismo amerindio*), suggested by Viveiros de Castro (Harvey, 2017: 481–497).

As is known, it is a multi-naturalist system, where a unity based on the concept of culture is accompanied by a diversity of bodies and material substances of the different categories of existence. What emerges from this ethnographic research, carried out mainly in South America, is a general tendency of Amazonian indigenous

[4] See also the previous work (Hallowell, 1955) and the most recent volume (Hallowell, 2010) collecting most of the works on the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes, published during his work as professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.

groups to see the world as inhabited by different types of people, human and non-human: what is interesting in this is the perception of reality and the way in which they observe each other. In essence, spirits and animals see themselves as human, live in human-like homes and have a social organization with leaders, councils of elders, shamans, rituals and marriages. Their food is perceived as human food: the example of the jaguar which perceives blood as manioc beer is particularly well-known and cited. Along this same line, the bodily attributes of animals are seen as ornaments or cultural instruments: skins, feathers, claws are seen as parts of costumes and clothing, or sometimes as masks. All the theoretical developments that start from the multi-naturalist assumption have therefore fundamentally had the advantage of undermining the dominant epistemological model in previous scientific thought based on the nature-culture distinction, with all its annexes and connections, and above all of providing infinite alternatives to the anthropocentric cosmological perspective. The discussion of shamanism in this perspective is of great importance because, thanks to trance and altered states of consciousness, the shaman can be considered a special, trans-specific being. As such, he is able to break down that perceptive boundary between different genres, going beyond the visible form of each species which, like a sort of wrapping or dress, hides a collective internal form that in turn is invisible to the common person. However well-known this form may be, it becomes explicit only through the knowledge, vision and ability of the shaman (Viveiros de Castro, 2005: 42). Consequently, shamanism in general (not only the Amazonian one) can be defined as the ability of certain individuals to cross bodily boundaries and adopt the perspective of specific other subjects, in such a way as to weave complex relationships between these non-human beings and their human community. In other words, they are active interlocutors in trans-specific dialogues, precisely because they are able to interface with these other non-human people, grasping the similar perception that they have of themselves.

Salmond (2014: 167) suggests an excellent development of that ontological turn which, however necessary, has been fashionable in academies all over the world for too long in the past 20 years and proposes overcoming it by leveraging the concept of person and his perception. The appropriate subject of ethnographic analysis should therefore not necessarily concern people, or rather not only them. But it could unexpectedly concern all sorts of entities, relationships or beings. For example, artifacts might be included here that we might intuitively think are simple objects, only to later discover that they perform the roles and functions of subjects. The scholar cites as an example wooden idols representing the ancestors; but also relics or collections of objects giving meaning to catastrophes or dramatic moments of change.

Therefore, on the basis of a certain relational physicality, not only plants, animals and spirits can form relationships with humans, but also some apparently inanimate objects. The theme of physicality could be very important in future studies, at least to dissuade scholars from interpreting, through abstract concepts or overly theoretical visions, indigenous metaphysics which—at least as far as our field experience is concerned—translate instead ontological perspectives: although articulated, these are often very concrete in theorizing both the material and the immaterial.

2.4 A Journey Through the Hills in Ranchi Plateau

What we have explained so far finds an interesting field of application in the tradition of the indigenous communities of the Chhota Nagpur plateau, where we recently carried out research, near the city of Ranchi in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Among the best-known indigenous groups, Oraon, Munda, Santal, Ho, etc. is venerated a multifaceted "pantheon" of ancestral entities, moving the manifestations of nature as well as the cyclical alternation of the seasons. At the same time, the idea of a superior divinity remains in a certain sense latent, abstract: a more theoretical concept materialises itself in a differentiated multitude of spirits, or "people," each with their own characteristics, presiding over sacred places in the forest, along the waterways and paths, and making explicit with their presence the mapping of the villages and the surrounding nature. This idea, at least quite widespread in many indigenous cultures, is intertwined with a feeling of profound intimacy and belonging to the territory that the different Ādivāsī groups celebrate as a traditional value. On the one hand, the question is authentic; it is not a stretch or generalization: making the necessary distinctions regarding local regional cultures, the link with the land of origin expresses an ancestral relationship with it, often expressed through the cult of the ancestors who inhabited it for generations. On the other hand, the entire area is now affected by projects of land speculation and economic exploitation of underground resources: therefore, the indigenous presence in the territory could be a break in this sense. For indigenous communities, therefore, recovering, or in some cases reinterpreting, or reinventing, a symbiotic relationship with the sacredness of the territory is today extremely profitable in the processes of resilience and affirmation of the rights of local micro-identities (Ghosh, 2020: 93–104; Carrin, 2015: 21–31).

As regards the world of spirits or more commonly the dimension of everything that populates the subtle world, or the extra human, there is a precise terminology whose meaning goes far beyond the simple etymology of the terms. Definitions in common use such as Mahādeo (Śiva), Iśvara or Bhagvān (Lord, God), Śakti (Goddess, feminine power of the divine), *bhūt/bhūto* (spirit), testify to a linguistic process of simplification of the complexity of indigenous religiosity, the fruit of a centuries-old dialogue with the wider Hindu background. But moving into the linguistic context of Mundari, spoken here mainly by the Santal and Munda groups (there are indeed many dialect variants spoken by different groups), the most used term returns to being *bonga.* This is an umbrella definition which, in ancient times as today, indicates the deities of the hills dotting the plateau and characterizing each place with their specificity. Also known by the theonyms of Buru/Maran Buru, or widely Buru Bonga, equally indicating one or more hills, the mountains, the reliefs, are understood as the personification of the deities presiding over nature and its manifestations. From this, it follows that the Santal worldviews and cosmology reflect a *bonga*-based awareness of the universe. To give an example, in not too ancient times when there was a certain flexibility in the permanence of settlements, a certain science was handed down regarding the foundation of a new village, considered the more crucial moment for the community. A suitable space was identified through shamanic practices aimed

at exploring the territory and having an exact perception of it both from a physical and a subtle point of view. Therefore, on the one hand, a geomantic tradition also implied the careful evaluation of materials and resources available in the area, in order to have a clear awareness of the potential of the land. On the other hand, rituals and sacrifices have always been celebrated to appease the spirits of the places with a view to converting them into guardians and protectors of the new settlement. This process is repeated in the construction of individual huts or houses, where the correct use of local resources becomes for these reasons an integral part of the ritual act. There is therefore a sort of symbolic architecture, expressed through the Santal cultural matrix, articulating the human-nature-spirits complex that is at the basis of the village structure (Mitra & Jha, 2015: 47–58). It seems to be an ecological thought *ante litteram*, in reality, everything revolves around the functional and relational sphere of the settlement. The foundation of the village, therefore the good of the community, is superior to the good of the individual; similarly, brotherhood, mutual support and respect for elders, much praised in many old ethnographies as a romantic paradigm of tribal life, should instead be read as group survival strategies. The relationship with the environment and related plants, animals and other invisible forces is fundamental. In the songs and nursery rhymes that I also had the opportunity to record (Beggiora, 2014), a sense of authentic passion and emotion emerges, personifying the surrounding space and the entities inhabiting it.

Although today a large percentage of Santal groups define themselves as Hindu, even among those who live closer to large urban centers a local form of shamanism is still widespread. As elsewhere, also in Chhota Nagpur this relational, empathic form between human beings and the sacredness of the surrounding environment culminates in the phenomenology of trance, which is a known and commonly accepted fact almost everywhere, although specifically elective in society. Alongside an ordinary type of ritualism officiated by the village priest (*pahan* or *pūjārī*), figures capable of fulfilling that function which we have defined as interlocutors of trans-specific dialogues are traditionally recognized: among the Santal, the shamans, known as *ojha* (or *mati*), are chosen by the spirits, and enjoy great charisma among their communities. Incidentally, we will observe that in the past the other Hindu castes in the area recognized the Santal *ojhas* as having great knowledge in the field of magic and witchcraft. This was due to their reputation as healers: they administered various herbal medicines to treat illnesses or wounds. This ethno-medical/botanical learning occurred during apprenticeship, which in various sources took place through intermittent expeditions into the forest, a probable allusion to shamanic abduction. In fact, the old *ojhas* I met always reported learning traditional "indigenous forest knowledge" directly from the *bongas*.

Precisely in Chhota Nagpur, formerly at the beginning of the past century, the Norwegian folklorist, linguist and missionary Paul Olaf Bodding (1865–1938) had collected from Santal shamans a list of more than three hundred pathologies with related traditional medicinal remedies (Bodding, 1925). It is interesting to note that they did not only treat human beings, but also farm animals, such as cattle, goats and sheep. This non-ordinary interaction with men, spirits, and animals, which could in some cases turn evil, contributed to creating an aura of mystery and ambiguity

around them: the ability among the *ojhas* to instigate some *bongas* against a potential enemy is known, interpreted as a sort of evil eye, if not a practice of magical death. In common language (such as Hindi), in fact, the term *ojha* refers to the exorcist, but also to the magician, the sorcerer, often in a negative sense. This meaning is not absent in the Santali language: these potential abilities were however recognized in these operators, but the original meaning of the term was precisely that of shaman, who actually as an exorcist and medicine man, is the intermediary of the balance between the community of humans and that of *bongas.*

Coming to the phenomenology of trance, known here as *rum* (*rumuh* or *rumok* depending on the area), this is locally interpreted as a case of possession and, consequently, as the elitist way of communication with the subtle world. The theme of possession, also understood as the incorporation of different agents of a non-human otherness, can be understood as the opposite of the well-known process of shamanic dismemberment (Eliade, 1964: 53–66). Much historical ethnography, in particular from Siberia and North America, has brought us the paradigm of shamanic initiatory death, experienced as an ordeal of dismemberment and re-composition of the body. It is a subtle metaphor for a decomposition of the cosmos (represented here by the shaman's body) into the minimal alchemical constituent elements. Its rebirth is a re-composition of the shamanic universe, or better a sort of palingenesis, just to use analogically a characteristic expression of European ancient classical thought. Returning to analyze the question in terms of perspectivism, the shaman, by virtue of his initiatory experience, is the one who is even able to incorporate the many "natures" making up those multiple worlds theorized by scholars of the ontological turn.

After several years of field studies, particularly in South Asia, we can affirm that this metaphor of dismemberment (and re-composition) is perhaps expressed with greater force in the Himalayan area, while in sub-continental India, as among the Santals, an analogy all in all more nuanced is certainly not absent. In fact, there is a sort of overlap between indigenous traditions and many myths widespread in the major Asian religious traditions about the sacrifice of cosmic man, of a primaeval form of the divine, of a giantess, etc. (one for all: the famous hymn X, 90 of the Rigveda, also called *Puruṣasūkta* of the Hindu tradition). The well-known Hindu myth of the dismemberment of Satī/Pārvatī, the consort of the god Śiva, seems in turn to echo some aspects in which the Santal tradition has been able to recognize itself (Rahmann, 1959: 681–760). Beyond the consequent formation of the places of the sacred power of the goddess (*śakti pīṭhas*), precisely marking the sacred geography of the Indian territory with the fragments of her body, the myth can be considered of a cosmological type in a tantric perspective. The dismantling of the boundaries of the body, which paradoxically constitute its apparent entirety, is here a process of pluralization. In philosophical terms, the fragments of the goddess' body actually imply the vibratory expansion of the primordial energy which is represented by Satī in Hindu religiosity. In ordinary life then, the scope of the body as a means of expression is clearly limited by its very nature, as well as by the controls exercised by the social system. But through the initiatory experience, the shaman is able to transcend it,

going beyond, or calling to himself, through the knowledge of the *bongas*, every element of the cosmos.

In many groups of Chhota Nagpur, the myth of the first *ojha* who was dismembered so that his power was then fragmented and distributed among his disciples returns, with some slight local differences. This legend is not only widespread among the Santal, but is also found among other communities: it is evidently a narrative topos. More in detail, the various fragments of the *ojha*'s body are ingested by fish or various other animals, which—after being fished or hunted—will in turn be swallowed and assimilated by the initiates into the shamanic secrets (Murmu & Pramanik, 2018: 39–44). Furthermore, the important festival of Dasae Daran marks the end of the apprenticeship of one or more shaman initiates and their formal presentation to the community by one or more elderly *ojhas*. Among the Santals, the name derives from the month in which it occurs, coinciding in the Hindu calendar with the months of *kārtik* (October–November).[5] The celebration over time overlapped with the festivity of Durgā Pūjā, one of the major recurrences in Hinduism. The celebrating *ojha* and his group move from forest to village, or from village to village, and the older shaman is typically dressed as a woman (with a sari knotted backwards) because in some way he embodies the power of Chala Pachho or Sarna Devī, a sort of mother earth. Following the master, as in the aforementioned myth, the initiates enter a state of trance. I was told that the shaman should be able to metaphorically dismember the disciple's body, recomposing it in heaven and bringing out his sensitivity, his empathy or that particular strength of the self which is commonly understood as feminine, in particular linked to the earth. The ascent to heaven is experienced by the initiate as a metamorphosis in the form of a spider: the theme recalls the myth of the first shaman who managed to ascend to the other dimensions of the cosmos by weaving a web as thin as a spider's. This sort of introspective journey coincides in the community with a well-defined set of sublimated gestures and ritual symbols in which, once again, body, person and cosmos take on a crucial value. In fact, during the celebration, various animals are represented through trance: the monkey, the leopard, the deer, the crocodile, the vulture, etc. The mimetic process of the attitudes and movements of each animal during trance translates into Santal culture as a process of incorporation of what are already defined in Hinduism as "vehicles" (*vahana*) of the *bongas*. Overall I find these narrative and ritual representations extremely interesting, since they illustrate the motifs of shamanic initiation, the dismemberment and re-composition of the body, the importance of nature and the entities populating it. And, last but not least, the theme of ancestral knowledge transmitted by spirits is also mediated at the same time by a human master.

[5] Santali: *dasāyn* (October–November).

2.5 Return to Mother Earth

It seems appropriate now to move on to the analysis of the local cult of the mother goddess which we previously called Sarna or Chala-Paccho. It is necessary to start by saying that among the major deities of the indigenous groups of Chhota Nagpur, the Sun—known as *Sin*, *Sing* or *Singa Bonga*[6]—is considered to be the supreme deity. He created the universe in many local cosmogonies, however almost in parallel with the tantric and śākta visions of the Indian tradition his qualities of absoluteness seem to abstract him—like a *deus otiosus*—from the play of the creative and destructive power of his female counterpart, who is goddess/nature and mother of all manifestation, including the beings and *bongas* of each species. She is also known by the name of Sarna Devī (or Sarna Bhuria/Sarna Maa), or even Chala-Paccho in some areas: she is the protector goddess of villages, associated with the sacred grove of *sal* trees (*Shorea robusta*), like many of the *bongas* that are considered her hypostases. Only white animals (goats, chickens, etc.) or, frequently, gifts of the same color (sugar, milk, flowers, fabrics, etc.) are offered to her as sacrifices. Together with her consort Darmesh/Sing Bonga, she is venerated in the spring festivals and in celebrations of renewal of time through the cycle of seasons and harvests (*sarhul*, *khaddī*, etc.). But ultimately Sarna, a benevolent deity who embodies the feminine power of the divine (*śakti*), is both a sort of protective mother-goddess, and in her wrathful form keeps ghosts and negative entities at bay. In this, there is a limpid mirroring of the function of the *ojha*, of which the goddess is clearly the guide. What by extension we could define as the *sancta sanctorum* of the divinity, known as Sarna *śtal* or *jaher*, is not found inside a temple or a building, but rather outdoors, in nature: it is a magical place, a small forest of natural *sal* (sometimes grown for this purpose), which becomes the place of collective worship for the villagers. Almost all the most important socio-religious ceremonies take place here; the shamans enter into communication with the spirits, and animals are sacrificed (often even buffaloes) in honor of the goddess and to propitiate well-being and abundance in the coming season.

Due to her importance in the Ranchi district, especially among the Oraon groups, Sarna/Chala-Paccho is considered the village goddess (*gramdevī*) par excellence. *Sarnaism* indeed (a term translating the expression "Sarna Dhorom" or Sarna *dharma*) is recognized here as the religion of the indigenous populations, who in particular intend to distinguish themselves from Hinduism and Christianity. The symbol of this new religious movement, which in reality is a revival of ancient traditions, takes the form of the numerous red and white striped flags (Sarna *jhaṇḍi*) fluttering festively over the sacred places in the area, at the entrances to the villages and during public holidays. The white and red color is inspired not only by Sarna, but in particular by traditional Oraon clothing. It is interesting to note that the Oraon belongs to a Dravidian linguistic group, profoundly different from the context of the languages spoken in the Ranchi area, namely Munda and substantially Hindi-Bihari.

[6] In the same area, it is known as Dharam among the Kharia, Bhagvān among the Korwa, Sin Cando (counterpart of Ninda Cando, the Moon) among other Santal subgroups; in the Kurukh language, among the Oraon, he is known as Dharmesh, or the Lord of *dharma* (Beggiora 2014: 24).

Nevertheless, they contributed to creating a certain continuity in the Jharkhandi identity, which tends to culturally consolidate the indigenous populations of the place. The issue is very complex and would imply deciphering the intricate network of relationships in the fragmented socio-political reality of local ethnic minorities, so much so that it requires a separate discussion. For the moment it is enough to say that the image of Sarna, as the ideal of Mother Earth, is here an important element of attraction also in the identity discourse.

The contemporary iconography of the goddess depicts her as an elderly woman with flowing white hair, standing on the riverbank or at the edge of a village with a young man prostrate before her. The image is inspired by a series of traditions describing Chala-Paccho as a form of the same goddess, while Sarna would be the corresponding abstract principle of the divine feminine. A legend has it that Chala-Paccho was the intermediary and mediator of the union between Sarna and Darmesh/Sing Bonga and is therefore venerated as a goddess of the environment (Xalxo, 2007). Another version reports Chala-Paccho as the hypostasis of Sarna, in the form of the spirit of a widow who welcomed Darmesh/Sing Bonga into her home in the form of a boy, who arrived there exhausted and wounded, after the cosmic battle against the *asuras* (a sort of anti-gods as in the Hindu tradition). The sexual union between the two, seen as a marriage between heaven and earth, provides the basis for the growth of woods and forests (Baa, 2017: 84–117). In addition to the myth, pictorially represented by modern artists, it is interesting to note that in the cult Sarna, like the other *bongas*, has always been aniconic, symbolized at most by the wooden pole or the red-white banner.[7] In this case, the Hindu iconographic taste has also influenced tribal traditions, but is also absorbed by them, including Sarna in the pantheon of the multiple Indian deities here crowding sacred places, temples, stalls, and shops.

As we mentioned earlier, these types of cult flexibility and hybridization phenomena are important in the resilience processes of local communities, seeking to form a common front against a state that, on the one hand, has always neglected the rights and development of ethnic minorities. On the other hand, today it seems to revalue the entire territory, especially for the mineral resources it contains (Beggiora, 2015: 163–174). The paradox lies in the fact that shamanism and animism have always been fluid, flexible religious apparatuses, multifaceted in their forms, refractory to any paradigmatic theorization. However, today Sarnaism seems to have taken on an institutional structure: supported by various local indigenous associations and movements, it has become for many the banner of the identity of the Ādivāsī communities of Jharkhand and Chhota Nagpur. At the same time, we had the opportunity to document the rise of new local movements, flowing into the broader scenario of Indian eco-feminism. Starting from the assumption that Jharkhandi society, whether

[7] The *śtal* where she is believed to live. My informants reported that she also resides in the winnowing fan used to hull cereals. This agricultural instrument is widely used in South and Southeast Asia as an idiophone musical instrument with shaking internal indirect percussion, generally with the aid of rice, wheat or other cereal grains or seeds. The sound produced when the fan is shaken induces the *ojha* into a state of trance: in summary we could consider it a ritual substitute for the Siberian or Himalayan shamanic drum.

indigenous or otherwise, despite venerating various forms of mother goddesses, has always been strongly patriarchal, predominantly in the past the accusations of witchcraft almost always fell on women who had tried to make their voices heard or had tried to break the rigid social patterns of the villages. Today, however, the phenomenon of groups of women going alone to the *śtal* or *jaher,* experiencing phenomena of trance and spontaneous possession by the goddess, is increasingly frequent. There is no shortage of shamans among them called to the *ojha* function and protected in particular by Sarna. This is a particular case because in the past, while admitting the possibility of female shamanism, even in local tribal traditions the presence of women in sacred places had begun to be less accepted or even a taboo. Therefore, the female voice rising from these ecstatic gatherings is that of Sarna/Chala-Paccho and the *bongas*, who first of all lament the degradation of the social scene: the values and lifestyles of the rural societies of the past have been forgotten, as well as the fundamental position of women in their indigenous communities. This discussion is part of the revival of a tradition that re-emerges in an ecological key: as in other environmental movements of the past, the ancestral bond between women and Mother Earth becomes the key to rethinking today's crucial issues such as the exploitation of the territory. In the defense of the sacred forests by Santal and Oraon women, it is, therefore, possible to read a very broad discourse including the themes of emancipation, equality, human rights, environmental protection, and sustainable development. It is extraordinary to think that a reflection on these themes, so important and crucial for the entire planet, reaches us through shamanic dynamics, having their roots in indigenous cults and based on processes of communication, identification, incorporation of the multiplicity of "people" inhabiting the multiple worlds of our universe.

2.6 *Prakṛtiḥ Rakṣati Rakṣitā:* An Indian Paradigm?

In conclusion, it is interesting to observe that in anthropology the ontological turn is, for many, outdated today (Argyrou, 2017). Some have criticized the "scholars of the turn" for being too generalizing or for having replaced old theories with new ones, but always from the same point of view, or essentially for not having really emerged from the dilemma of ethnocentrism. But having at least moved the center of gravity of our analysis from a certain anthropocentrism of modern science towards a position more in line with indigenous visions is an important goal that will bear future fruit. In a recent article, I tried to demonstrate how the Indian contribution to environmental humanities becomes more intriguing the more 'native' it is, i.e. the more directed to the rereading and reanalysis of the sacred literature of Hindu doctrines (Beggiora, 2021). Indigenous cultures are also involved in this debate in various ways: for example, the Ādivāsī is often considered the topos of the inhabitant of the forest or mountains (*vanavāsin*, *girijan*) and, therefore, protector and knower of its secrets. His holistic vision of nature has been interpreted, more or less questionably, as a sort of non-duality (*advaita*) in its local declination. This perspective is summarized today in

an ecological slogan taken from Hindu scriptures and which is becoming increasingly popular: *prakṛtiḥ rakṣati rakṣitā*, or literally 'nature, protected, protects'. It is in truth a sort of alteration (*vikṛti*) of a more well-known reference of the Manusmṛti, which in turn was previously mentioned in the Mahābhārata,[8] but which today stands as a common platform for those who recognize themselves in an ecological thought in which indigenous cultures have a key space.

The topic is sensitive because it is vulnerable to political exploitation: a certain inclusive discourse of Ādivāsīs in the Hindu substratum is propagated today by the Indian right. But ultimately a certain continuity between the concepts of caste and tribe (Nathan, 1998), and a certain degree of cultural permeability between groups was also theorized by anthropologists with a Gandhian perspective. Among the many scholars I want to mention here Baidyanath Saraswati,[9] who was a disciple of Nirmal K. Bose, considered the father of Indian anthropology. He emphasized how through non-linear discourses, ecological, and climatic vocabularies, the Ādivāsīs handed down an ontological vision of multiple worlds whose values today are not at all distant from the famous goals of sustainable development (Saraswati, 1995, 2004; Saraswati & Kapila, 1998). His teaching is not too far from the path traced by Vidhyarti (1963) who rejected certain European preconceptions, mainly relating to religious sentiment in India, but above all he defined the interdependent and mutually complementary complex of spirits-human-nature in the Dravidian tribal communities. And all this happened well before the French ontological turn or the theorization of Amerindian perspectivism. But even by accepting to validate the absolutely unique and distinctive character of the oral culture of the Ādivāsīs or the aforementioned communities of Jharkhand, I hope to have managed to explain how a theoretical root and discourse typically Indian can be found here. South Asia is not just a scenario on which to attempt the application of already known academic paradigms, but, vice versa, it is a mine that can inspire the global ecological debate.

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[8] *Dharmo rakśati rakśitaḥ*: Dharma, when protected, protects; Manusmṛti 8.15 (Jha, 1932); Mahābhārata 3.313.128 (Pandey, 1994); Mahābhārata 3.312.128, 13.145.2 (Dutt, 2008).

[9] I had the honor of having him as co-supervisor of my Ph.D. thesis.

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