
Guardians of Nature: An Ecocritical Exploration of Tribal Spirituality and Wisdom through Documentaries*

Sanjoly Paliwal, Research Scholar, Department of English, Janardan Rai Nagar Rajasthan Vidyapeeth University, Udaipur (Raj.)
Email: sanjolyplwl7@gmail.com
DOI:

Abstract

Due to increasing modernization on Earth, the basic needs of humans have increased. Considering themselves as centers, humans are excessively exploiting the valuable gifts received from nature without thinking. Due to which there has been an increase in comparison between modern materialistic development and sustainable development. Ways of sustainable development are being explored. Tribal people are a living example of this sustainable development. The spirituality and ecological wisdom of tribal people develops eco-consciousness within them due to which they consider it their duty to protect nature from those who harm it. The research paper explores ecological wisdom and spirituality in the lives of two tribes, Dongria Kondh Tribe and Yanomami Tribe, through the lens of two documentaries Niyamgiri: The Mountain of Law and The Last Forest. The research paper shows how these tribes respect nature not just as a resource but as a living spiritual entity. Through the documentaries, mythology, traditional ecological knowledge and beliefs of the tribal people that have been passed on from one generation to the next have been highlighted. After studying both these selected documentaries and through the research paper, an attempt has been made to know that the role of tribal spirituality is very important in maintaining the ecological balance. This study emphasizes on rethinking the relationship of man with nature.

Keywords: Tribal, Documentary, Tribal Spirituality, Ecological Wisdom,

Spirituality is fundamental in human life. Regardless of the circumstances, spirituality provides support. Individuals embrace spirituality in their lives by adopting traditions and culture. The paths to experiencing spirituality are also aligned with the religion that a person believes in. Some consider scriptures to give spirituality the highest place, while others worship God in the form of idols to stay on their spiritual path. Tribals are particularly different in this regard. They worship nature, considering it the centre, and live close to nature. They respect and worship every component of nature, including mountains, rivers, land, forests, and trees. Therefore, their love and respect for nature remain inherent, and they focus on conservation and protection rather than exploitation. In tribal culture, nature leads to spirituality, and this knowledge is passed down from generation to generation “Long before the word ‘conservation’ was coined, tribal peoples developed highly effective measures for maintaining the richness of their environment ... their traditional values and practices of stewardship, reciprocity and integration with nature ... confirm a highly advanced knowledge of how to be in this world— the rules, limits and practices of sustainability.”⁽¹⁾ Tribal literature primarily exists in oral forms such as folk songs, storytelling, poems, etc. The written literature they created is negligible, making documentaries a helpful medium for understanding the lifestyle and spirituality of tribes. Spirituality is a key that leads to the ultimate goal of living by connecting the body with the mind and the soul with God. It is a path in which many virtues are developed in a person by following many traditions and practices. Among all those virtues respect, love, kindness, faith, compassion and companionship have a special place. Love also has an important place because love done selflessly is an indicator of spirituality. Those who have love and spirituality in their hearts do

Article History : Received: 27 July. 2025. Accepted: 10 Oct. 2025. Available online: 25 Oct. 2025. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Copyright**: © 2025 The Author(s). **Licensing** : This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) **Conflict of Interest**: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

not harm others but have a feeling of protection and security. There are many species of people in whom spirituality is highly considered but the tribal is prominent in loving nature and giving it a spiritual respect. The spiritual foundation of the tribal people is an awareness of being one with the creation. Their perspective is based on their understanding of creation. A vital role in their life is to live in close contact with nature. All the necessities like water, food, shelter, medicines, fuel, etc. derive from nature. Through their spiritual belief, they develop the virtues of satisfaction, love, respect, and harmony. They considered all they had with them to be a great blessing from God. Robin Wall mentioned tribal connectedness with nature in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* “We are showered every day with gifts, but they are not meant for us to keep. Their life is in their movement ... Our work and our joy is to pass along the gift and to trust that what we put out into the universe will always come back.”(2) For them, God is not only in the form of a statue but also for them God is in the form of nature whether it is a mountain, river, tree, forest or land. Reflections of these can be seen in various aspects from their daily practices to cultural expressions. Spirituality plays a significant role in the life of tribal. Whether it is the journey from sowing to harvesting crops, all the rituals from birth to death, auspicious or inauspicious events, or all the customs from birth to marriage, spirituality is paramount in all of these. There are many mediums to express spiritual thoughts. One way in which tribal worship is by considering the idol form of God as a deity like others. The second is that they seek blessings from their ancestors through their prayers. They believe that their ancestors will guide their community and protect them from adversities. Shamanism or spiritual healers are those who are similar to priests. They attempt to act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. They use chants, drumming, and herbal medicines for rituals and healing processes. Some tribal communities consider certain animals and plants to be very sacred, taking them as symbols of their identity and giving them a spiritual connection. Food, fruits, and other items are also offered to receive blessings from spirits. Some rituals are related to fire and water, through which they purify themselves and the environment to connect with the divine. In some tribal traditions, dreams or visions are also used to seek guidance from spirits or ancestors. One can visit indigenous communities or tribals of the world through documentaries. One can be happily surprised to look at the new vision of life which can be helpful for human civilization. It is different from those civilized world who think of themselves as the masters of the Earth but these Indigenous communities think that Earth is in the center not man. They believe the ownership of nature-given gifts belongs to the entire community; it is not for individuals but for everyone. They oppose the capitalist principle of producing surplus and believe in the use of nature's components sparingly just to fulfill their needs. This thought process comes from their spiritual belief system. That is passed on from generation to generation mostly in oral form be it through storytelling, folksongs and teachings. They worship nature, sun, moon, trees, rivers, ancestors and sometimes even certain animals. These natural components are not merely physical places but are spaces that mean something more to humankind. If we talk about tribal nature is central to their spirituality. Land, forests, and rivers are living creatures with has its spirit and mind. In their oral traditions, their physical and spiritual worlds are inseparable. The decisions made by people regarding nature for development and construction reflect their feelings towards nature. Ecological wisdom serves as guidance in the decisions made by people, which demonstrates a deep understanding and respect for their ecosystem and nature. Nature has existed for many centuries due to an efficient sustainable system. This understanding of the efficient sustainable system can be referred to as ecological wisdom. Under this wisdom, humans can provide solutions to the environmental crisis. This wisdom

illustrates the interconnectedness of humans and nature, which gives a holistic approach to problem-solving. On one hand, while humans harm the environment considering short-term economic gain, this wisdom leads to the sustainability of every component of nature. This wisdom ensures that natural components are preserved for future generations. This will save nature from excessive exploitation and there will be no ecosystem collapse. Every species present in nature has this wisdom that plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological stability. Ecological wisdom provides an understanding of the efforts to adopt conservation that can protect ecosystems and their inhabitants. This ecological wisdom is naturally transferred from generation to generation among tribals. The important thing is that it occurs as an oral tradition and the role of spirituality is paramount. To transfer ecological wisdom and keep it alive from generation to generation, it has been linked to spirituality. The modern world generally views nature as a resource that can be exploited, but the tribal community's perspective is to see nature as a sacred living entity that deserves respect and whose protection becomes a responsibility. Many tribal lands remain untouched by deforestation and industrialization because the indigenous people consider them sacred and divine. They also regard rivers as lifelines, providing spiritual beliefs that sustain water sustainability. Even during changes in weather or harvesting of crops, they pray to God to give thanks for the crops and the land. Most tribal communities practice organic farming because they understand that the land is a blessing given by their ancestors, which they do not spoil by using chemicals and pesticides. Globalization, industrial projects, and deforestation are threatening the land of tribes and their spiritual ecological tradition. This research paper attempts to understand the ecological wisdom and spirituality of tribal communities through documentaries.

The documentary shows the truth of life in its raw form without any filter. Whether it is in the materialistic world of urban life or in the area of calm, simple life connected to nature of rural life, it presents it just as it is. John Grierson coined the term documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” arguing that film can transform raw reality into a more expressive, socially engaged art form.⁽³⁾ The documentary has the ability to open the eyes of the viewer and connect him with reality and can even change his heart. This is a method of documentary making in which he enters life with a camera in his hand where he can capture life exactly as it happened. He records movements which are completely raw and without a script. It is important to note that documentaries not only inform viewers about specific events or issues but also seek to evoke an emotional impact on the audience.⁽⁴⁾ A documentary tries to tell a story as if a painter has presented a true picture. The real colors of life are seen in the documentary, which gives the viewers a chance to get closer to reality.

Interview plays a major role in documentary filmmaking, where the filmmaker asks questions. Here it is expected that the interviewee will either answer them or not. Rather than asking them excessive questions, they are provided with a medium of conversation so that the subject of the documentary can be understood better. Documentary makers set a relaxed atmosphere, so that the interviewees feel comfortable and present their views and feelings clearly by feeling free and open. The answers of the interviewee and the conversation give a new direction to the narrative of the documentary. Putting together the narrative of a documentary is similar to putting together all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In this, all the segments, interviews and footage are put together which forms a complete story. The documentary film has traveled a long journey from its inception till now in which it has evolved from fact reporting into an art form. Film theorist David Bordwell gives a somewhat

standard definition but focuses on the authorship of the filmmaker: "Every documentary aims to present factual information about the world, but the ways in which this can be done are just as varied as for fiction films." (5) There is ability in documentary to show real life in an artistic form. Through this, it resonates with life as a story and deepens the understanding of reality. At the center of documentary filmmaking is the creative process of storytelling, which is similar to the fictional counterparts of any film. To keep the audience engaged with the documentary and to ensure that it does not become like a TV news story, documentary filmmakers use their visuals as narrative techniques. This creates a deep connection with the subject that promotes a wonderful human experience. When a documentary presents an art, it also has the ability to evoke emotions and empathy. It makes the audience face the life of the subject due to which a deep connection is established between the subject and the audience. Because of this connection the audience is able to relate to the life of the subject, their different cultures, struggles and experiences are understood deeply. Apart from touching upon its artistic merits, the documentary promotes social change and helps in raising awareness. It provides a platform to those unheard voices that are neglected by the society and through this the issues of those unheard voices are highlighted before the society. When artistic forms, storytelling, narrative are included then it is specially given attention to ethical representation and truth representation so that it does not take a fictional form. Because of the digital revolution, when there was an increase in gadgets, phones and drones and high quality camera lenses, the quality of documentaries also increased. The digital revolution has helped in giving a new structure to documentary by transforming the traditional media that was going on in the past. Literature is now available in document form as video. It shows detailed observation. Because of the digital revolution, awareness can be raised about many important issues by showing its artistic merits. At the same time unheard voices can be heard who are being treated unfairly and are continuously trying but nobody is paying attention to their words. The documentary evokes emotions and empathy for them and also creates awareness towards their problems which can bring about social change.

With the increase in industry and material consumption, it is having an adverse effect on nature. Due to which dire efforts are being made to maintain the sustainability of nature. Tribal are among those castes which are at the forefront in protecting nature. They consider protecting nature as their duty. In this, belief in ecological wisdom and spirituality and their traditional knowledge system is in being prompt to protect nature. Considering nature as supreme, it prepares them to struggle with industries and materialistic mindset. An attempt has been made to show this struggle through these two documentaries. An attempt has been made to show in what way the tribal are on the front line in protecting nature. This research paper studies tribals' ecological wisdom, spirituality, and their belief in the traditional knowledge system which is making them guardians of nature.

The first documentary is *Niyamgiri: the Mountain of Law*, directed by Surya Shankar Das. In this documentary, the Dongria Kondh tribe living in Orissa province of India has been portrayed. Through the documentary, director showcases the rich culture of the Dongria Kondh tribe where their spiritual belief, faith, traditional knowledge system inherited from their ancestors and the ecological wisdom developed in them due to considering nature as God has been highlighted, through which their struggle with the big mining companies to protect nature and to ensure that it does not suffer any harm in the future has been presented. Dongria Kondh tribe mainly lives around Niyamgiri Hills of Orissa, India. They worship Niyamgiri Hills as their deity. They call the hill as their God to whom they named as 'Niyam

Raja'. In which Niyam means law and Raja means king. According to them only the rules of Niyam Raja the law of the mountain is applicable in nature. And it is their duty to follow those rules. The name of this tribe, Dongar, also means hill, hence they consider themselves royal descendants of Niyam Raja.

According to them, whatever they are getting has been given to them by Niyam Raja. There is dense forest all around the hill and many rivers flow along it. According to them, they have got the right to do farming on the slopes of the hill from Niyam Raja. They have complete knowledge of the flora and fauna available in the forest. They collect big jackfruits and other fruits from there. They also have knowledge about different medicinal plants obtained from the forest which are capable of treating various diseases. According to the Dongria Kondh tribe, their God Niyam Raja situated in Niyamgiri hills provides all the needs of a person. Apart from this they do not need anything else. This spiritual belief generates a feeling of respect for nature in their hearts. It generates a feeling of how to maintain harmony with nature. At the same time, the virtue of being content with whatever is there is also visible as they have the wisdom to keep nature sustainable always. This is the reason why they do not exploit nature excessively for profit. Many river streams flow from the Niyamgiri hills. The Dongria Kondh tribe consider themselves as Jharnia which means protectors of the streams. Tribal people consider these river streams as sacred. And hence their spiritual belief of not polluting these rivers leads them to not cause any harm to these rivers in any way. Along with the rivers, they do not hunt any wild animal. Many wild animals roam in the hill area but they are not afraid of them nor do they hunt them because they believe that whatever exists in Niyamgiri hills is blessed by their mountain God Niyam Raja so they do not even think of harming any nature element.

At the very beginning of the documentary, a comparison was shown between materialistic development and natural balance. In this, the fast growing life in urban life was shown. In which development means establishment of big companies and industries to earn profit from the increasing demand of products. While in sharp contrast to this, tribal life was shown in which everything was calm and peaceful, where instead of noise there was the sound of sweet sounds of nature. A simple and understandable tribal life in which without causing any harm to nature, and being one with it, this example of living a very simple tribal life was presented. These tribal Dongria Kondh tribes protest against these big companies which are illegally established in the sacred mountain areas of these tribes. They were well aware of how much damage these big industries would cause to their sacred mountains and their motherland. In this struggle for nature protection, efforts were made to have their voice suppressed even by the administration. "Indigenous communities suffer from slow violence — long-term environmental harm that erodes their spiritual and ecological existence." (6) False allegations were leveled on the tribal people and they were thrown into the jail. Without any allegations they were caught and harassed. Still their protest continued. And finally, after struggling for several decades, the Supreme Court gave orders that there should be no mining in their sacred mountain area. Instead of giving financial benefits to individuals from a big mining company in their area, they all chose such a life by living in a small hut on their sacred land and surviving on vegetables and fruits provided by nature.

The thought process and ecological wisdom of the tribal can be understood when in the documentary a tribal said, "We can't leave this soil, cannot let go of our trees. If this beautiful jungle remains, the ecology will sustain. Everyone will live, the Gods will live, the biodiversity

will thrive. All our cattle, poultry, everything depends on this ecosystem. Our life depends on this air and water. We won't let the monster take our big mountain."

This happened during a casual conversation in the documentary when that tribal man, while doing his work, expressed his wisdom very simply. He expressed the feelings and thoughts of the entire tribe. According to him, human life will continue to exist if nature remains intact. We want to remain fundamentally connected to the soil. They feared that big mining companies would harm their forests, trees and soil, due to which the entire ecosystem would be affected. Their complete life was dependent on that. For them soil, trees, water, jungles all hold great importance. According to their wisdom, if forests, trees, soil and their sacred land sustain, only then will human life sustain. Therefore, we will not allow the big mining companies to harm their sacred mountain and motherland and this and other activities were carried out. They have got this spirituality and ecological wisdom from their ancestors. This fight is not only for their own benefit but for the preservation of the entire ecosystem. For the tribals, their motherland is supreme and no one can separate them from it. They maintain a loyalty towards it.

This belief system of theirs towards nature is being passed on from one generation to the next. Due to which their culture is being formed. Their belief system is different from many aspects of science and technology but their faith and belief reflects the feeling of respect towards nature which gives the assurance that no harm will be caused to nature and it will always remain in its original form. In this way the Dongria Kondh tribe is protecting the nature by keeping it in its original form with spirituality and ecological wisdom without thinking about their economic benefits and comforts. They will always give priority to nature and protect it.

When it comes to rapid development, the demand of industries for production of products increases. Whatever is produced by humans gets its original form from nature only. In the growing global environmental concern, this is also a major reason that with the growth of industries, dependency on nature has increased and those humans are causing harm to the balance which nature always maintains. Another documentary on the negative impact of increasing development on nature is *The Last Forest* directed by Luiz Bolognesi.

The documentary completely reveals the damage caused to nature due to illegal entry of gold prospectors in the Amazon rainforest. The Amazon rainforest is situated between Brazil and Venezuela. It is largest forest area in the world. The title of the documentary itself hints at the danger that may occur in the future and that soon such a situation will arise that perhaps this last forest will be saved. Due to the losses being incurred from waste mining because of the invasion of the gold prospectors that are going on, even this last forest will not be saved. The indigenous Yanomami tribe people live in the dense forests of this Amazon rainforest. It has been shown in the documentary that the Yanomami tribe is dedicated to protecting the forest. Davi Kopenawa, the leader of the tribe and cowriter of the documentary, explained the intention behind making the documentary is not to show the tribal people as weak or to show their struggle with gold prospectors; in contrast, the main intention was to show the life of the Yanomami tribe which mainly had rich culture, traditional knowledge, healing practices, hunting practices, myths and spirituality which leads to sustainable life. In one of the interaction with the director specify his objectives of the representation of the tribe. The director *wanted to make a movie about the invasion of gold miners*. But Davi told him they didn't want to make a movie about them. They desired to make a film about themselves, to

show to the world how beautiful tribal are how strong they are and, along the way, they would also talk about gold miners.

Yanomami tribe lived on the border between Venezuela and Brazil in the Amazon Rainforest. The word Yanomami means “human beings”. This tribe is known for its rich culture. They have many rituals and art forms. They have immense faith in super natural powers and spirits. Even in this modern age, they live their lives in a traditional way in harmony with nature without any physical comforts. They have great respect for nature. They are dependent on the natural resources. They earn their livelihood by fishing and hunting. But they take care that there is no excessive consumption of animals. To maintain their natural balance, they share the prey with the whole community. Ever since gold has been found in the Amazon rainforest, it has become difficult for them to live a normal life because of the illegal gold prospectors. There are many such scenes in the documentary where the existence of gold prospectors has been told and these tribes are shown fighting them in the traditional way. According to the scenes shown in the documentary, they do not attack on their own but take up weapons to catch them so that those gold prospectors do not come again in excessive numbers in their dense forest as those gold prospectors had already done in history and this dense forest can be protected. The feelings, thoughts, dream-power, faith and traditional ecological wisdom behind the conservation activities carried out by tribal is their love, respect and spirituality towards nature. “Indigenous education is rooted in relationships — with the land, the cosmos, and the community. This is the core of ecological wisdom.”(7) As shown in the documentary, many times the youth of the tribal community were attracted by the modern dazzle and wanted to enter the world of gold prospectors, but Davi Kopenawa presented his own experiences to them and made them understand the importance of the forest while telling them about the ancestors of the Yanomami tribe. To tell this story in the documentary, the director used dramatization. The reenactment of characters from Yanomami myths was performed by community members themselves. The Yanomami tribe has the unshakable faith and belief that this world was created by their ancestors. They consider themselves Omama's inhabitants. They believe in mythology which talks about the creation of the world. According to their mythology Omama and Yaosi were two brothers. Omama was the one who created everything in the world and Yaosi is considered a symbol of destruction in contrast to him. According to this mythology, the form of nature as it is seen now was not like that in the beginning. Earlier water used to flow under the ground. Once Omama dug up the forest floor and made a hole in it through which water came up and rivers and lakes were formed. He grew all kinds of plants in the forest. When those plants grew big, he created the wind. And when that wind was blowing from everywhere in the forest then everything started smelling good. This is how the smell of the forest was created. Even after everything was made, both of them used to experience alone. Davi further explained in the documentary how the Yanomami tribe came into existence. The Yanomami tribe considers themselves to be the children of Omama and Thueyoma. Once when Omama threw a rope in the water, as he pulled the rope, he found someone slowly appeared in front of him from the water. Thueyoma was a fish who took the form of a woman. Omama and Thueyoma talked and spent some time together. When he returned to his brother, Yaosi recognized from his scent that he had found a woman. Yaosi now went to the water but he mistreated Thueyoma. When Omama came to know about this he became angry and told his brother to go away. Yaosi was expelled to the sea where he created death. After that Omama and Thueyoma lived together. Yanomami considers themselves as their children. Just like Omama protected the forest, they too will always protect the forest. Just as Omama saved them from destruction by stopping the Yaosi

when he wished to start the destruction, in the same way the Yanomami tribe will protect from all those destroyers who wish to go ahead with the destruction of the forest. The way this mythology is passed on to the youth by the tribal leader is their traditional wisdom which is being passed on from one generation to the other. Along with this wisdom, faith, love, respect and the feeling of protecting nature by keeping it as their own, is also passed on. The question here is not whether the mythology is real or not, but what matters is the impact it has on the lives of the tribals. Nanthini Balu and Maya Rathnasabapathy note, “Mythological narratives among the Yanomami are not mere folklore, but mechanisms of environmental education and governance.”(8) Because of the mythology, they develop a permanent bond with nature which they never break and this keeps them connected to their motherland forever. Once this connection is formed, these tribes provide living examples of sustainable ecological behavior. Through this myth it is also realized that not only the life of these people is at stake in nature but their entire existence is at risk. “In tribal cultures, the world is alive and full of spirit. Nothing is inanimate. Earth is sacred.”(9) The stories passed on to them by their ancestors transform their ecological practices into sacred duties. They consider it their sacred duty to protect nature and this will continue from generation to generation.

Through both these documentaries an attempt was made to give the message that modern civilization needs to pay more attention to its relationship with nature. It is important to shift the focus from products and excessive consumption to becoming more aware of nature and giving primacy to the efforts for its conservation. Emphasis has been given on reimagining development and progress. It has been told through documentaries that the tribal people respect nature by maintaining a balance instead of dominating it. Instead of considering it a useful resource, they live as one with it. All humans should also live in the same way. “Social justice is only possible in a context of ecological justice .We have to move from a shallow, human-centered ecology to a deeper all-species centered ecology.”(10) The documentaries portray the tribal not as a people of the past but as the visionaries of future. In both these documentaries, tribals have been portrayed powerfully as protectors rather than just as struggling victims. By highlighting their rich culture, traditional knowledge and ecological practices, they can be seen as a reference to sustainability in the future.

Works Cited:

- Balu, Nanthini, and Maya Rathnasabapathy. “Tribal Migration and Livelihood Status in Thiruvannamalai District, Tamil Nadu.” *Studies in Tribal Livelihood and Tribal Medicinal Opportunities*, edited by S. Udhaya Kumar, Dr Vidya Publications, Jan. 2023, pp. 67–89.
- Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light Publishers, 2000.
- Fernández-Aguilar, Luz, et al. “How Effective Are Films in Inducing Positive and Negative Emotional States? A Meta-Analysis.” *PLOS ONE*, vol. 14, no. 11, 21 Nov. 2019, e0225040.
- Grierson, John. “First Principles of Documentary.” *Grierson on Documentary*, edited by Forsyth Hardy, Faber and Faber, 1966, pp. 143–48.

Hogan, Linda. *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*. W. W. Norton, 1995.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Mander, Jerry. "Indigenous Nations ... Traditional Values and Practices of Stewardship, Reciprocity and Integration with Nature..." *Redefining Knowledge from an Adivasi Standpoint*, *TICI Journal*, 2004.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Orton, David Keith. *Dandelion Times: A Left Biocentric Journal*. *Left Biocentrism Primer*, 1998.

Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 9th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2008.