

Article

# New Roles for Indigenous Women in an Indian Eco-Religious Movement

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**Abstract:** This article aims to study how a movement aimed at the assertion of indigenous religiosity in India has resulted in the empowerment of the women who participate in it. As part of the movement, devotees of the indigenous Earth Goddess, who are mostly indigenous women, experience possession trances in sacred natural sites which they have started visiting regularly. The movement aims to assert indigenous religiosity in India and to emphasize how it is different from Hinduism—as a result the ecological articulations of indigenous religiosity have intensified. The movement has a strong political character and it explicitly demands that indigenous Indian religiosity should be officially recognized by the inclusion of a new category for it in the Indian census. By way of their participation in this movement, indigenous Indian women are becoming figures of religious authority, overturning cultural taboos pertaining to their societal and religious roles, and are also becoming empowered to initiate ecological conservation and restoration efforts.

**Keywords:** India; sacred natural sites; indigenous; women; new religious movements; mobilizations

## 1. Introduction

This article examines a new religious movement with strong ecological articulations that is gaining ground among the indigenous or Adivasi<sup>1</sup> people of east-central India. The movement accords a uniquely pivotal role to women—as legitimately channeling the Earth Goddess via possession trances. As a result of this movement the sacred groves in which the Earth Goddess is believed to reside are being rejuvenated, the Adivasi women who function as her mediums are being given a new and elevated status, and Adivasi religiosity as a whole is gaining a platform from which it can voice demands for politico-legal recognition. For clarification, a sacred grove is a small patch of forest that is protected for the reason that it is believed to be sacred (see [Gadgil and Vartak 1975](#)) and it is often a site of ancestral or deity worship (see [Ramakrishnan et al. 1998](#)). This article will examine the various elements of this movement in detail. It contends that the movement intersects with the important political issues of the day—be it environmental conservation, women’s empowerment, or the recognition of indigenous people’s rights, demands, and ecological agency. The movement is aimed at internal and external reform—external reform is solicited by the voicing of demands for rights and recognition, and internal reform is facilitated by overturning taboos related to the role of women in Adivasi society, spearheading small-scale, socio-economic development in villages, and by sensitizing the Adivasi population in general to the dangers of ecological destruction. The linking of different issue areas has been noted in other social movements involving indigenous people—for

<sup>1</sup> Indigeneity is a contested identity in India (see [Karlsson 2003](#)), though one claimed by almost 10% of the Indian population (see [Rycroft 2014](#)). The term ‘Adivasis’ (which this paper will employ), derived from Sanskrit and meaning ‘original dwellers’, is generally used, to denote what are argued to be India’s indigenous peoples (see [Kela 2006](#)).

example, linkages of this kind are reported to have taken the form of the “‘ethnicization of ecological destruction’ as well as the ‘ecologization of ethnic subordination’” (Parajuli 1996, p. 16). In India, the role of women in environmental conservation movements is well established, and was first legitimized by way of the Chipko Movement in which many rural women famously protected trees from being felled in Himalayan forests (see Jain 1984). However, within Adivasi society, traditionally, political roles for women have been delegitimized, and this has been coupled with a suspicion of women’s ethno-botanical knowledge, for the reason that it is understood to be superior to that possessed by men.

The article contends that the legitimization of the new roles for Adivasi women as legitimately channeling the Earth Goddess, and as spearheading an ecological movement, is the result of an act of geographic imagination. It will examine this act of imagination in the context of the emphasis that scholars of Adivasi mobilizations have placed on the application of non-rationalistic interpretative frameworks to arrive at an understanding of Adivasi social movements—for example, in many of the Adivasi peasant insurgencies against British rule, the insurgents expressed that they felt motivated by a God (see Chaudhuri 2010). Ranajit Guha, an important postcolonial studies scholar, cautions against ignoring ways of understanding the self and the world that may not necessarily fit into rational discourse (see Guha 1988).

The fieldwork for the exploration of women’s issues in this movement, which combined participant observation and interviews, has been conducted intermittently for over a decade since 2008 primarily in the Indian state of Jharkhand in east-central India—and the article will relate its arguments and empirical findings mostly to this geographical context. It was possible for the researcher to conduct research that spanned such a long period of time for the reason that the researcher grew up in a rural area in the state of Jharkhand and returns to the area on a regular basis. This, as well as the fact that the researcher maintains close contacts with participants in the Sarna Movement, has facilitated the study that this article presents. In every instance of an individual movement participant or supporter being cited, names have been changed, except for those cases in which the speaker held or has sought public office.

## 2. The Power of Geographic Imagination

Gayatri Spivak, a postcolonial scholar who has studied the processes by which development may create marginalizations, indicts mainstream developmentalism as a cartographic practice resulting in the exclusion of pre-capitalistic and indigenous communities to “make way for more traditional geographic elements of the map and the world today” (Spivak 1998, p. 338). To counter this, what would be needed is a new cartographic practice—one that imagines the geographic elements of the world differently. Spivak’s understanding of mainstream developmentalism and the exclusions it perpetuates, is relevant to the situation in Jharkhand as the state was conceived as a homeland for the Adivasi communities of east-central India who claim an indigenous identity and some of whom continue to be oriented towards a subsistence model of economy rather than the production of surplus.

The power of geographic imagination is evinced by several ecological struggles from around the world. In the United States of America, native Americans protested against the geological burial of nuclear wastes at the Yucca Mountain in Nevada, with the explanation that they understood radioactivity to be an ‘angry rock’: “a spiritual being that has been taken from its home without its permission, used in ways it does not agree with, and is being returned to the land without reducing its anger” (Stoffle and Arnold 2003, p. 235). Another example of how geographic imagination can fuel environmental protest is the struggle of the Columbian U’Wa tribes-peoples against Occidental Petroleum’s oil mining project on their territory—they argued that oil was the blood of the Earth which they held sacred. Consequently, mining the Earth for its blood would be a violation of the deity which they venerated (see Martinez-Alier 2004; Arenas 2007). It is interesting to note that these acts of geographic imagining that oppose mainstream developmentalism, do not just imagine the Earth alternatively, they also make use of an alternative rationality while doing so. Such a strategy has in fact been recommended by the theorist Jean Baudrillard. According to him, the solution to the

problems caused by mainstream development is to make use of non-rationality and the imagination to posit critiques and alternatives, till a point where a breakdown in mainstream thinking is achieved (see Coulter 2004).

The power of geographic imagination does not stop at its capacity to inspire protest—it has been the basis for high-level environmental policy reforms in several states as well as at the global level. At the state level, two such examples would be the enshrinement of the rights of Nature in the Ecuadorian constitution in 2008 and the passage of the ‘Law for the Defense of Mother Earth’ by the Bolivian government in December 2010. The championing of eco-centric rights by the Ecuadorian constitution is an affirmation of the importance of ‘Buen Vivir’, a Spanish term that can be translated as ‘a good way of living’ and which is based on the eco-communitarian cosmovision of the Andean indigenous peoples. The president of Ecuador’s Constituent Assembly, Alberto Acosta, is reported to have stated, in relation to the inclusion of the concept of Buen Vivir in the constitution, that “only by imagining other worlds will this one be changed”<sup>2</sup>. In fact, postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak has also advocated a reimagination of the planet. According to her the challenge of the Anthropocene requires a new planetary consciousness—this would be an act of radical imagination, requiring humans to see the Earth the way an alien would, and to see themselves as planetary beings rather than as global agents (Spivak 2003, p. 73).

#### *Jharkhand—Conceptualization of the State*

The state of Jharkhand was conceived, by the leaders of the Jharkhand Movement (the movement for the formation of the state of Jharkhand), as a homeland for India’s Adivasis and as a place where human relations with the environment could be restructured along ecological lines, in keeping with the express Adivasi understanding that Nature should be accorded primacy in human activities (see Munda and Mullick 2003). This conceptualization was an act of geographic imagination—i.e., it was aspirational and has in fact met with criticism for the reason that it did and does not correspond with lived realities that Adivasis experience (see Shah 2007) and perhaps do not unanimously aspire to. Nevertheless, after the formation of the state of Jharkhand in 2000, many would agree that its ecologically-oriented conceptualization has not manifested in state-level policy reforms that have been implemented to initiate ecological restructuring in a concrete manner. The conceptualization of Jharkhand as ecological does however continue to inspire. Jharkhand is a state that has witnessed undeterred resistance to mining. The slogan Jal-Jangal-Jameen (Water-Forests-Land) which was used to rouse support for the creation of the state of Jharkhand, continues to reverberate in its villages today, as struggles to maintain a sustainable livelihood on its natural resources remain undiminished. The politico-religious movement that this article will go on to describe and discuss, derives from the school of Adivasi ecological conceptualization and political strategizing that the Jharkhand Movement represents.

### **3. The Empowerment of Women in Indian Religions—A Focus on Adivasi Religiosity**

Within Indian religious traditions such as Hinduism, there are numerous examples of women exercising authority as female gurus—these women are often from social backgrounds that would not ordinarily accept a woman in an authoritative role (see Charpentier 2010). In Adivasi society, women occupy an ambivalent position. On the one hand Adivasi women are accorded status—and several examples of this have been documented. For example, as per tradition, which is still in place in some areas, when Mundas go from one village to another, their wives lead them. The knowledge of the admixture of the roots used to brew rice beer, which is a sacred drink, is kept by women, and a woman’s ethno-botanical knowledge, particularly as pertaining to healing, is highly valued, and yet simultaneously suspect (Mullick 2000, p. 344). In case of the Saoras, Verrier Elwin describes the

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<sup>2</sup> (Buen Vivir 2018): <https://www.rapidtransition.org/stories/the-rights-of-nature-in-bolivia-and-ecuador/>.

legitimized, indeed valued healing role of the female Saora shaman—a role, however, that is prohibited for women by most other Adivasi groups:

... it is in the treatment of the sick that the shamanin, or the female shaman finds her greatest scope and fulfilment. Her methods of diagnosis and cure are varied and ingenious—she uses the fan and the lamp, the bow and the sword, handfuls of rice and pots of wine. Now she dances in ecstasy, now lies lost to the world in trance. When she has found the cause of disease or tragedy, she is at infinite pains to heal the wounds; she sucks infection from her patient's body, burns it with flashes of gunpowder, bites and kisses it, massages it to expel the evil, orders the sacrifice of goat or buffalo, speaks healing and consoling words.

(Elwin 1955, p. 148)

At the same time, any discussion of Adivasi women's religiosity cannot be de-linked from the issue of witchcraft beliefs and related accusations that are prevalent in Adivasi society. Belief in witchcraft is currently widespread in Jharkhand—a report suggests that it is as high as 75% in the state's population (Sahu 2018, p. 86). Crimes derived from the belief that a certain woman is a witch are also not uncommon. Jharkhand is reported to have witnessed 414 murders of suspected witches from 2001 to October 2013 (Sahu 2018, p. 85). Addressing the widespread belief in witchcraft among the Adivasis of Jharkhand, Madhuparna Chakraborty has argued that it is derived from the relatively high status that women are accorded in Adivasi society, and that in relation to women, belief in witchcraft is an “acknowledgement of their power and a reflection on the fundamental illegitimacy of that power” (Chakraborty 2014, p. 81). She goes on to argue that Adivasi culture, with a particular emphasis on Oraon society, evinces a firm belief in the dichotomy between black and white magic—witchcraft is associated with black magic, whereas white magic is associated with shamanism. Nevertheless, practitioners of white magic, i.e., shamans, are understood to be exclusively male (see Chakraborty 2014). According to Samar Bosu Mullick, belief in witchcraft is derived from a fear of the female principle. He also argues that belief in witchcraft is a new phenomenon in Adivasi societies and that it is derived from Hinduized ideas of female spiritual power, overlaid with a fear of this very same power (see Mullick 2000). A Santhal folktale describes a gendered spiritual contest, whereby knowledge of witchcraft was supposed to have been transmitted from the Adivasi supreme being to men, but by way of trickery women managed to learn it instead (see Bodding 1948). W. G. Archer described how Santhal women were excluded from the sacred grove (jaher than) and were prohibited from being present when sacrifices were offered there (see Archer 1974)—this is still the case today in several Adivasi groups, as per orthodox norms (Mullick 2000, p. 353).

The widespread perception of witchcraft in Jharkhand is particularly striking in the context of the Adivasi religious-political movement which this article will go on to describe. By their participation in this movement, Adivasi women overturn many of the taboos instituted to exclude women from an active religious/spiritual role—ordinarily this would have earned them charges of witchcraft (see Mullick 2000). Furthermore, the women who participate in the movement are outspoken, as Adivasi women who are branded as witches are reported to be (see Skaria 1997). In fact, an important aim of this movement seems to be a facilitation of this outspokenness. In relation to the movement, many of the participating women function as shamanesses—a role that is prohibited for women among all Adivasi groups except for the Saoras, Koyas and Kondhs (see Chakraborty 2014). Perhaps most interestingly, they conduct regular worship ceremonies in sacred groves, where, as mentioned earlier, their presence is prohibited, and claim to be possessed by a goddess who is known as Chala Pachcho among the Oraons and Jaher Era among the Santhals. In popular depictions of the goddess in poster art she appears as an old woman wrapped in a white cloth. Finally, this movement is explicitly political and by participating in it as religious authority figures, women are playing a legitimized political role.

#### 4. The Sarna Movement

The movement that this article is concerned with, is known as the Sarna Movement, as since the 1990s, sacred groves, which are known as sarnas by an Adivasi group known as the Oraons, have become the focus of devotional worship by Adivasi women. The movement is strongest in the state of Jharkhand and it is reported to have been initiated by a series of cases of divine possession among Adivasi women (mostly Oraons, but also Mundas). The women would believe themselves to be possessed by the sacred grove goddess, whom they commonly referred to as Sarna Mata. When possessed, these women claimed to experience a trance-like state during which they would be led to sacred groves—in some cases, these were places that the women claimed were forgotten sacred groves which had fallen out of worship. Such sites were subsequently sacralized. While experiencing trances, the women would whirl their heads at high speed or fling their hair from side to side. The worship of sacred groves in connection with experiences of possession by Sarna Mata has taken on the character of an eco-religious movement, and by way of it several sites have been sacralized, have been planted with saplings and have become the weekly focus of the religiosity of Adivasi women (see [Borde and Jackman 2010](#)).

The central feature of this movement is a weekly worship ceremony which is conducted on Thursday in the sacred groves. The ceremonies are highly structured and include a prayer and hymns that are sung each time the ceremony is enacted—there are in fact even hymn books in print. Interestingly, the prayer is made to Dharmesh, who is the supreme being according to the Oraons, and is understood to be a sky-God (see [Xaxa 1992](#)), as well as to Sarna Mata who is known more traditionally by the Oraons as Chala Pachcho. The rituals also include the circumambulation of a tree (which is usually of the *shorea robusta* species) growing out of a central earthen platform, and the offering of rice grains and incense. It seems that the offerings are made both to Dharmesh and to Sarna Mata. The women also bring pots of water to the sacred grove and pour some of it onto the tree which they circumambulate. The women express that this is a religious-symbolic act and that while enacting it they imagine that they are cooling the Earth in which they understand great heat to have accumulated at the current time (Fieldwork Notes 2008). It seemed that this expression of the heating of the Earth was the women's own understanding of the climate change which they had been witnessing. In the course of the ceremonies, the women also water the saplings which they have planted as part of their efforts at the ecological restoration of the sacred groves. It is interesting to note that in Adivasi society certain trees are considered auspicious while others are seen as being inauspicious. The women make efforts to plant tree saplings such as those of the *shorea robusta* species for the reason that it is considered to be highly auspicious.

It is not uncommon for men to be present at these ceremonies, though they do not have as active a role as the women, apart from playing a drum known as a mandar while hymns are being sung, and participating in the offering of rice grains, incense, etc. However, on some occasions the village priest or pahan may also be present, and when this occurs he leads the principal prayer, and may add a speech/sermon on socio-cultural matters to it. These weekly ceremonies are known as Sarna Prarthana Sabhas. Spontaneous and often mass possession is commonly witnessed during the ceremonies. These usually occur when hymns are being sung. In very rare cases, men are reported to have become possessed—in almost all cases however, it is women who experience possession, and it not uncommon for teenage girls to get possessed as well. While possessed, the women approach the central earthen platform, sometimes on their knees, as they whirl their heads. A range of articulations can be heard to be made by the possessed women, in most cases relating to their own empowerment or the empowerment of women in general. Some of the articulations that have been recorded during fieldwork are presented below:

“Where is my rope? Mother, where is my rope? I have lost my rope!”

“Why do men hate women? If it wasn't for women, how would men be born?”

“Mother, give me wisdom, give me wisdom for my studies!”

“Mother, I have no interest in eating or drinking. No interest in eating or drinking!”.

(Fieldwork Notes 2008, 2019)

While the possessed women are making these articulations, in most cases while gathered around the tree in the central earthen platform, and sometimes even circumambulating it while on their knees, if a pahan is present, he stands to one side without intervening in the women’s possession experiences. If however, the possessions go on for a very long time (roughly more than 15 or 20 minutes on most occasions), the pahan may intervene by instructing the possessed women to come out of their trances by touching their foreheads to the ground—this instruction is always followed, with the desired effect (Fieldwork Notes 2019). On special occasions such as when a new site is being sacralized, or when the women participating in the ceremony have been fasting for long periods of time prior to it (this does occur and in one instance a teenage girl is claimed to have fasted for three weeks), no attempt is made to intervene in the possession trances even when they go on for longer than an hour. Another aspect of this religious movement is the prohibition of alcohol consumption and the promotion of vegetarianism (Fieldwork Notes 2008).

#### 4.1. *The Evolution of the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas*

The answer to how the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas have acquired their structure lies in a trend of socio-cultural introspection among Adivasis that can be traced to the post-independence period in India and which was interlinked with Gandhian ideas of politico-religious mobilization. A prominent leader vis-à-vis this trend was Kartik Oraon, a parliamentarian from Jharkhand. He initiated a practice of holding weekly prayer meetings called Parha Prarthana Sabhas at which Adivasis would pray, solve legal disputes and discuss rural development issues—it can be argued that this was not dissimilar to the institution of the Atmiya Sabha which was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1815 and was later renamed the Brahmo Samaj (Jones 1989, p. 33), and as such Adivasi assertion movements can trace a legacy (if they would want to) to Hindu revivalist movements of the 19th century. Unlike the Brahmo Samaj, the institution of the Parha Prarthana Samaj did not survive the death of its founder and after Kartik Oraon’s death in 1981 the institution became dysfunctional. However, a little over a decade later, when, as mentioned earlier, the spontaneous possession of Adivasi women started occurring, and when this led to the gathering of women in sacred groves, the revival of the institution of the Parha Prarthana Sabha was initiated. The emerging Adivasi political leaders of the time gave the phenomenon of possession by Sarna Mata a new context. They incorporated the experiences of possession by women into the earlier Parha Prarthana Sabha structure and started what is now known as the Sarna Prarthana Sabha. The Sarna Prarthana Sabha is therefore structured along the lines of the older prayer meeting but includes primarily large numbers of Adivasi women as active participants, and legitimizes the women’s experiences of possession by providing space for it, both literally and metaphorically. Instead of holding the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas in the akhras (meeting grounds) or dunkurias (dormitories) as the Parha Prarthana Sabhas were, they started holding them in sarnas (and sometimes newly instituted ones), in an acknowledgement of the significance of the sites to which the women experiencing possession believed to be led—this was of course, also an acknowledgement of the significance of Adivasi women’s religious experiences and of their legitimate religious role (see Borde 2016).

#### 4.2. *The Movement for an Adivasi Dharam Code*

The Sarna Movement must be viewed within the context of an important contemporary development within Adivasi society in India which is the demand for a ‘Dharam Code’ i.e., a religious code in the census that would allow followers of Adivasi religions to claim their religion under a particular name. A code of this kind did exist in Indian censuses that were conducted in colonial times. Followers of Adivasi religiosity were counted in the various censuses from 1871 to 1941 under a separate category that was termed differently from one census to the next—such as

'Tribal Religions', 'Animists', or 'Aboriginals'. However, in 1951 the government of independent India dropped the practice of counting the followers of Adivasi religions under a separate category (Oddie 2016). Since then, Adivasis who want to emphasize that they do not follow Hinduism can choose to be counted under a category known as 'Other religions and persuasions'. In the census of 2011, 7,937,734 people were counted as belonging to this category. Most numerous of the followers of the various religions listed under this category, were the followers of 'Sarna'—4,957,467 people chose to express their affiliation to this religious group (Census Data 2011). This is not to say that 'Sarna' is being claimed as the official religion of the Adivasis across India. In fact, it is reported that a consensus had been reached vis-à-vis the possible names under which the claim for religious recognition would be made—the three options being 'Prakriti Dharam', 'Adi Dharam', or simply 'Adivasi' (Interviews 2018). In the conceptualization of what the religion of Adivasis is, and how it would be represented, Adivasi leaders have been emphatic on the point that sacred natural sites and their worship are an important aspect of Adivasi religiosity. They have also been emphatic on the point that Adivasis have protected Nature for all Indians and that they should be rewarded for this effort. At a protest in New Delhi aimed at gaining recognition for the distinctiveness of Adivasi religiosity, one Adivasi leader declared that the day there is not a single Adivasi left is the day there will not be anyone else left on planet Earth because it is Adivasis who ensure, by their acts of environmental care, that water and air are preserved for all other human beings (Fieldwork Notes 2019). Adivasi leaders have in fact been keen to emphasize the Nature worship aspects of their religiosity from the inception of political articulations surrounding it. In the mid-fifties, Jaipal Singh Munda, the leader of the movement for the formation of the state of Jharkhand, encouraged Adivasis to stress their spiritual/religious difference from Hinduism by emphasizing its naturalistic and pantheistic elements, coupled with the significance it granted to sacred natural sites.

However, in relation to the new roles that women are finding for themselves in the Sarna Movement it is important to note that to obtain an official recognition of Adivasi religiosity as distinct from Hinduism, the first step is obviously a consolidation of this religiosity and the strengthening of communal expressions of it. With this objective in view, it is easy to see how a sacrificial religiosity that is performed by a religious specialist such as a priest on only a few occasions every year, may be understood to require augmentation. The fact that women had shown themselves, quite spontaneously, to be able and willing to perform the "cultural labor of ritual" which involves time, attention and effort (Smith 1978, p. 88), may have been seized upon as an opportunity to supply the necessary augmentation. Furthermore, Adivasi women have also been actively involved in the ecological restoration of sacred natural sites. In this regard, it is also important to keep in mind the "role of place in the construction of community" (see Kong 2001)—the specificity of the place that has become the locus of Adivasi religiosity must not be ignored. In a climate of political contestation over space for Adivasis (both secular and sacred), in which the slogan Jal-Jangal-Jameen has become synonymous with the assertion of Adivasi rights, it is perhaps not coincidental that patches of protected forest that are claimed as sacred, are playing an increasingly important role in strengthening Adivasi communal life.

#### 4.3. *The Empowerment of Women in the Sarna Movement*

An important question that still remains is how Adivasi politicians facilitated the participation of women in ceremonies in a sacred space where their presence is traditionally understood to be taboo. Additionally, what are the intersections between the legitimization of Adivasi women's religiosity as expressed in this manner, and the widespread belief among Adivasis that women are capable of witchcraft. Lastly, since this Adivasi religious-political movement is not aimed at the empowerment of Adivasi women per se, the question remains as to what extent it has facilitated the empowerment of Adivasi women. The article will take up each point, one by one.

In relation to the overturning of the taboo related to the presence of women in sarnas, Adivasi leaders use a language that is reminiscent of the introspection that occurred during the Indian independence movement, i.e., of the necessity of purging society of the 'social evils' that have crept into

it over time. The taboo against the presence of women in sacred groves is constructed as one of these 'social evils' and the active involvement of women in regular worship ceremonies in sacred groves is seen as a return to an original and uncorrupted Adivasi tradition (Fieldwork Notes 2008, 2009).

Adivasi leaders such as Birender Bhagat who instituted the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas do speak out against witchcraft, but not in such a way as to deny its existence (Fieldwork Notes 2008, 2009). What must be remembered is the strong notion that is prevalent among the Oraons, of the dichotomy between black and white magic. It seems that the experiences that Adivasi women are now having in sacred groves are legitimized for the reason that they are seen as being beneficial to society—indeed a form of white magic.

As for the empowerment of women within the Sarna Movement, or the enhancement of their status, it is important to take note of the following points. The Sarna Prarthana Sabhas are held every Thursday morning. As per Adivasi customs, Thursday is significant in its being the one day in the week when it is prohibited to give brides away, plough the land or cut trees. It is considered the day of the Mother. The villages in which Sarna Prarthana Sabhas are held regularly have also instituted Sarna Prarthana Samitis. These are bodies with formally elected members and heads. These Samitis have initiated several community welfare projects, including agricultural development, cottage industry development, the installation of common stoves and a successful mushroom cultivation program. Many of these welfare projects target women specifically, and indeed Adivasi women have added to their incomes by participating in these projects (Fieldwork Notes 2008). Moreover, the Sarna Movement's stance against the consumption of alcohol has implications vis-à-vis reduction of the domestic violence that Adivasi women suffer. In fact, if one of the women known to the Sarna Movement participants is reported have been beaten by a male family member, large numbers of the women gather outside that particular house and publicly and collectively shame the offender. Several of the young women who participate in the Sarna Movement have been encouraged and supported by their older counterparts to enroll for university degree programs (Fieldwork Notes 2008)—one Adivasi woman was emphatic that girls needed to 'go ahead' (Rajmuni Toppo, April 2008).

However, perhaps the most significant contribution that Sarna Prarthana Sabhas have made towards the empowerment of women is the conferral of authority onto them. Women and teenage girls have expressed this in terms of the manifestation of Sarna Mata's power. They believe that when the goddess possesses them, they are able to address public gatherings and speak at length on topics they had not known they would be able to—and these speech acts are legitimized. It is certainly true that some of the women and girls who participate in the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas are later able to speak with eloquence and confidence. This was perhaps most evident at a dharna or sit-in protest that had been organized in New Delhi in February 2019. The dharna was aimed at rousing support for the official recognition of Adivasi religiosity by the Indian government. Adivasi representatives from many states were present and speeches were made by Adivasi women from Jharkhand—and these women played a prominent role at this high visibility event (Fieldwork Notes 2019). Many of these speeches contained strong political assertions, and Phulmani Oraon (name changed), a young Oraon woman from Jharkhand, speaking from a lectern on a dais, even threatened the Indian government with serious consequences if it risked denying the official recognition of Adivasi religiosity—"if they do that then they will learn that it is blood and not water that flows in our veins" (Phulmani Oraon, March 2019). She went on to state that Adivasis were no longer suppressed. That they had the means to travel to New Delhi to show their strength to the Indian government. Another young Adivasi woman from Jharkhand asserted that Adivasis would boycott the next election and the next census if their demands were not met (Fieldwork Notes 2019). For outspoken women, who overturn taboos and enact roles of religious and indeed political authority that were earlier denied to them, to be publicly legitimized—this can be seen as a concrete example of the empowerment of women within the Sarna Movement.

#### 4.4. Backlash—The Sarna Movement, Sacred Groves and Gendered Conflicts

An important issue that must not be left unaddressed relates to the backlash provoked by the reworking of tradition on the scale that the Sarna Movement has engaged in. After a speech against the consumption of alcohol, in the village of Boreya in the Kanke block of Ranchi district in Jharkhand, local manufacturers of country liquor decided to put a stop to the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas that were held regularly in the sacred grove in the village—the reason being that the Adivasi leader who made the speech was involved with organizing the ceremonies. The manufacturers initiated this by prohibiting women from entering sacred groves, reinstating the Adivasi taboo against the presence of women in sarnas. The women attending the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas attempted to counter this move and on the 12 November 2009 this led to an outbreak of violence in the area outside the sarna in the village of Boreya. This conflict was situated within a larger political dynamic which is described subsequently.

In 1995, the Bible Society of India published a Bible in Kurukh (the Oraon language)—known as the ‘Nemha Bible’. It was reported to contain derogatory references to non-Christian Adivasis and sarnas. These remarks were publicized by Hindutva-influenced activists at a village in the district of Gumla in Jharkhand state in 2008, contemporaneously with the outbreak of violence against Christians in the adjacent state of Odisha. However, in recognition of the imminent crisis, a united front was formed between the Church, the Adivasi Students Union and other Adivasi institutions, after a Catholic cardinal apologized for the remarks in the Nemha Bible, citing errors in translation. Nevertheless, after this was over, some Adivasi leaders saw the act of joining hands with the Church as an unnecessary compromise and broke off from others with whom they had been previously involved in organizing Sarna Prarthana Sabhas, to start a splinter group known as the Sarna Raksha Manch which is reported to be supported by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a pan-Indian Hindu right-wing organization. The Sarna Raksha Manch is understood to be emphatic on the importance of maintaining orthodox Adivasi traditions including prohibiting the presence of women in sarnas.

The Sarna Raksha Manch is reported to have provoked the violent gendered conflict in the village of Boreya. Women who wanted to enter and worship in the sarna in the village were attacked by men and women who were involved in local liquor businesses—the Sarna Raksha Manch is understood to have co-opted local anxiety provoked by the anti-alcoholism propaganda of the organizers of the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas. The local pahan’s (priest’s) resentment of the increasing (secular) authority of the women who were attending the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas also played a role. This resentment is understood to be related to the pahan’s role in liaising with the Block Office to ensure that village development schemes were being properly implemented. According to the villagers, the pahan was known to be ineffective and as the women who participated in the Sarna Prarthana Sabhas in the village of Boreya started gaining prominence and confidence, they began to circumvent his authority and liaison with the Block Office themselves (Borde 2016).

## 5. Conclusions

This article has explored how a new religious-political movement may be facilitating the empowerment of Adivasi women in India, specifically in the state of Jharkhand. It has described how several socio-religious taboos were overturned to allow this to take place. However, it has not explored why Adivasi women started participating in this movement in the first place i.e., why they started experiencing possessions. It is by refraining from doing so that the article demonstrates its alignment with Ranajit Guha’s injunctions—the article will not attempt to rationalize the Adivasi women’s experiences of possession (see (Smith 2006) for similar injunctions), rather it will bracket them off, or remove them from consideration, out of respect for the interpretation of these experiences that the Adivasi women themselves have. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there has been important scholarly work on the interweaving of eco-political movements and spirit possession (see Beban and Work 2014). David Hardiman’s study of the Devi Movement which arose among the Adivasis of the state of Gujarat in the 1920’s also documents instances of possession by a goddess and he discusses how this was interwoven with social reform (see Hardiman 1987). The Sarna Movement

gains added significance in light of the widespread belief in witchcraft in Jharkhand, and the historical propensity of Adivasi societies to cleanse witches out of the body politic before a major rebellion or movement (see [Kelkar and Nathan 2001](#)).

The article has also described how this religious-political movement is constructing itself along ecological lines. As such, the movement is aligning indigenous religiosity in India with its legitimized, even celebrated, international image. However, it is important to note that scholars have cautioned against an international eco-politics that freezes indigenous peoples as ecologically moral—particularly the self-construction of indigenous peoples in ways that fit into this discourse (see [Grande 1999](#); [Conklin 1997](#)). It has been argued that an eco-politics such as this offers indigenous peoples ecological rights and agency as incentives for adhering to standards of ecological stewardship that may not in fact be theirs (see [Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2013](#)). At the same time, scholars argue that these discourses are useful as they provide indigenous groups room for maneuver, as well as a means for articulating and legitimizing their concerns (see [Agrawal 1997](#); [Li 1996](#)). This is precisely what the participants in the Sarna Movement seem to be doing. According to Alpa Shah, the representation of indigenous people as opposed to modernity and “as representing the core values of the eco-community” is problematic ([Shah 2007](#), p. 1824), as this may not correspond with the realities of Adivasi lives. However, by representing themselves and their religiosity in ecological ways, Adivasis are carving a space for themselves, from which their voices gain legitimacy and strength.

This brings us to question whether the Adivasi women who participate in the Sarna Movement are in fact ecofeminists. The term ecofeminism is one that these women would not be familiar with, and the same can be said for the concept of ecofeminism as it has been theorized. However, the women do act in favor of their empowerment as a collective and do often voice this push for empowerment in gendered terms. The women are also ecologically oriented and are acting in practical terms to protect and nurture the environment. Ecofeminism can be argued to be an amalgamation of agendas and the term is often voiced from an ethic perspective. Some strands of ecofeminist thought theorize a psycho-biologicistic connection between women and nature—Susan Griffin states: “We are Nature seeing Nature” ([Griffin 1978](#), p. 226). Others theorize a connection derived from women’s ecological labor and engagement: “We saw that the impact on women of ecological disasters and deterioration was harder than on men, and also, that everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction” ([Mies and Shiva 1993](#), p. 3). This article contends that the women who participate in the Sarna Movement act as ecofeminists, but without necessarily seeing the linkages between their actions which empower women and those that protect or restore the environment. It is also important to note that their identity as challengers of the status quo (an identity they express pride in claiming) is centered more on their role as activists for an Adivasi cause—that of obtaining official recognition of the distinctiveness of Adivasi religiosity.

For the larger Adivasi society within which the Sarna Movement is contextualized, the legitimizing of the participation of Adivasi women in worship ceremonies in sacred groves can be called an act of geographic imagination—a space where the presence of women was understood to be prohibited is now accepted as one they can legitimately claim. Furthermore, it is by the claiming of this sacred space by Adivasi women that Adivasi society as a whole is aspiring towards the official recognition of its religiosity. Additionally, the space that is being claimed is a natural site and an important part of the claims-making process that the women engage in, is the ecological restoration of these sites—this has implications for the manner in which Adivasi religiosity is constructing itself nationally and it also has implications vis-à-vis its perception at the international level at which the linkages between indigenous religiosity and ecological conservation are both established and celebrated (see [Rode 2015](#); [Verschuuren et al. 2010](#); [Lee and Schaaf 2003](#)). Further research into the nuances of this act of imagination is certainly needed and must be conducted with the sort of open-mindedness Ranajit Guha advocates.

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