Protecting Sacred-groves: Community-led Environmental Organizing by Santhals of Eastern India

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ABSTRACT

In the face of widespread degradation of natural resources (including deforestation), and socio-economic disparities, underserved populations from rural and indigenous spaces of the global south face challenges to conserve environmental resources. Many of these spaces, such as sacred-groves, are important to indigenous people and are deeply intertwined with their identity, worldviews and existence. This research, embracing principles of critical/cultural environmental communication, examines how indigenous people of eastern India mobilized collectively to protect their sacred environmental resources, thus improving community members’ well-being. Paying attention to engaged environmental action; critical listening and dialoguing; and local-centric participation, this research argues that contextually meaningful and community-led environmental initiatives help motivate and raise consciousness among future generations as well as among wider indigenous (and marginalized) populations.

In recent years, various places of the global South have experienced environmental degradation and socio-economic disparities, especially in the rural and indigenous spaces (Jorgenson, 2006). Rural India and tribal populations of the Central Indigenous Belt1 are no exception. Moreover, externally driven/dictated interventions remain largely unilateral and top-down, where the disenfranchised communities and their voices and experiences are excluded from, and co-opted in decision-making spaces (Walker, 2007). Marginalized communities of the global South not only face the largest burden of inequality, but also bear the most severe consequences of environmental damage (Dutta, 2016).

Cox and Depoe (2015) note that it is crucial to understand how local/indigenous people constitute space through communication, and how they respond to their physical surroundings by participating in environmental research. The idea of participation was originally meant to make environmental actions engaged, inclusive, and legitimate (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Dominant participation practices, however, often exclude underserved people rather than include them by defending pre-defined decisions, privileging hegemonic perspectives and overlooking diversity of viewpoints (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Moreover, Tipa (2009) opines, participation of tribal people in research is often limited by scholars’ lack of respect for and poor understandings of indigenous knowledge, and local environmental consciousness/relationships. For instance, in eastern India, where this research was conducted, indigenous people, particularly the Santhals, considered nature as inseparable from their identity and worldviews (Mathur, 2001). Consequently, they expressed collective commitments to preserve environmental resources to ensure survival of their values and existence.
Environmental communication research calls for an eco-centric, sustainable and humane approach where community members are situated at the center of the intervention; and where their socio-cultural and ideological worldviews shape and guide environmental practices (Milstein, 2009). Embracing the principles of engaged environmental action (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013) and communication-driven transformation of environmental space (Cox & Depoe, 2015), this research attempts to demonstrate how indigenous initiatives and ownership can be instrumental in leading/mobilizing collective action for natural resources conservation that improve communal well-being. Thus, by paying attention to the processes of environmental decision-making, deliberations, and active participations of indigenous people, this research seeks to reach three goals. First, attentively listen to, and learn from the unheard environmental discourses from an under-researched non-Western context. Second, foreground local indigenous environmental consciousness, knowledge productions, and problem-solving abilities. Finally, third, create academy-community solidarity through collaboration and reflexivity, to study how indigenous villagers organize a local-centric environmental initiative on their own by carefully using available material and cultural resources.

**Place and place-based local organizing**

Many indigenous communities across the globe conceptualize human societies as intimate and at one with nature/ecological systems (Tipa, 2009). India’s rural/indigenous communities, whose identities and practices are fundamentally grounded in inseparability and harmony with environmental resources, value such resources for both physical and spiritual sustenance (Torri & Herrmann, 2011). One such entity, sacred-groves, hold major social, cultural, religious, spiritual, political, economic, and psychological significance for these indigenous people (Singh, Agnihotri, Pande, & Husain, 2013). Hence, many South-Asian communities collectively conserve sacred-groves without expecting any direct economic return, which demonstrates their spiritual commitments and environmental consciousness (Deb, 2007). Dominant perspectives, however, do not recognize such alternate conservation practices, and often label them as superstitious and culturally backward (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006).

Owing to anthropogenic pressures and practices such as deforestation and industrialization, environmental resources such as sacred-groves are rapidly disappearing (Khan, Khumbongmayum, & Tripathi, 2008); which poses threats to spiritual and political identities, cultural tapestries, and the very existence of indigenous people. In context of this research, Santhal communities consider that their physical/psychological health and well-being as well as their economic prosperity (e.g. agricultural productions) are intertwined with their engagement with and commitment to protect sacred-groves (locally referred to as *Jaher-Thaan* or home/place of their Gods) and other environmental resources.

**Place and subaltern agency**

Cantrill (2012) notes that places (such as *Jaher-Thaan*) serve as resources, where people develop attachments/bonds, and conduct social activities that fulfill social needs. Scholars have conceptualized places as non-passive entities, and as the locus of production of socio-cultural diversity (Massey, 2013). Accordingly, this research envisions place-based agency as the central force for building alternatives and impacting wider global-spaces. Questioning the earlier binary distinctions (i.e. place is local, grounded, and *real*, whereas space is global, abstract, and something *out there*), modern scholars argued that space and place should not be counter-posed (Ingold, 2009) as they continually produce, constitute and impact each other in broader power-relations (Massey, 2013).

Critical environmental-communication scholars conceptualize communication as *emplaced action*, which is situated, applied, and socio-culturally grounded in place (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013). Lewicka (2011) opines that place-attachment, and place-based local/indigenous identities and agencies are the precursors to community members’ willingness to undertake environment-
protection actions. Such environmental actions, as opposed to top-down externally determined/driven approaches, embrace the concept of “locality” (e.g. local values, practices, knowledge, aspirations), and are intertwined with their long-term association with nature, their deep-seated environmental consciousness, and “experiences bound to local settings” (Cantrill & Seneca, 2001, p. 186). Espousing community-inspired and humane perspectives, a place-based approach, therefore seeks to create transformative possibilities through communication (i.e. listening and foregrounding subaltern voices and promoting diversity) as well as through reflexive, responsible and enduring engagements (Carbaugh, 2007).

Subaltern studies also question the hegemonic intentions and practices of marginalizing and silencing underserved people (e.g. indigenous people) and portraying them as devoid of agency. Emphasizing the cultural aspects and inextinguishable characteristics of local agency (Chakraborty, 2000), this scholarship envisions subaltern enactments as independent and autonomous from elitist politics (Guha, 1988), and conceptualizes subaltern agency as the “primary organizing principle for political mobilization” (Chaturvedi, 2007, p. 15). Espousing diversity and resilience at the core, the scholarship (as well as critical environmental-communication) legitimizes the relevance of creative and local-centric organizing for bringing about social change.

Environmental actions and communicative engagements

By embracing indigenous and de-colonial perspectives, environmental communication scholarship (as well as environmental anthropology, social geography, ecological sociology, and sustainable development) calls for culturally humble, empathic, and engaged environmental action/practical solutions (Carbaugh, 2007; Kopnina & Shoreman-Ouimet, 2013; Tilt, 2011). Attending to cultural diversity, freedom, autonomy, and emancipatory aspects of community engagement, such a contextually grounded and applied approach would potentially create a possibility where local people are inclusively involved in deciding environmental actions, and also feel confident to collectively own and lead the processes (Cantrill, 2012).

There are three important components to such communicative engagements. First, bottom-up decision-making requires that local communities have transparent access to information (preferably in their local languages/dialects), resources, and have the right to unobtrusively identify issues/goals; and decide preferred solutions/approaches (Depoe, Delicath, & Elsenbeer, 2004). Second, dialogic deliberations potentially enable local people as a collective to critically examine ideas, discuss the feasibility of options, and jointly monitor/evaluate implementations, oftentimes by embracing the values of egalitarianism (Richardson & Razzaque, 2006). Scholars suggest that “early and ongoing, informed and empowered public participation” (Depoe et al., 2004, p. 3) can promote local acceptability of environment-decisions, and can “lead to less litigation, fewer delays and generally better implementation of decisions” (Richardson & Razzaque, 2006, p. 166). Third, in marginalized (e.g. indigenous) contexts, critical listening aids in creating spaces for inclusivity, participation, and dialogue. Such engagements seek to open avenues for oppositional and transformative perspectives, and ensure that voices are heard and differences are recognized (De Sousa Santos, 2007).

Another key component of meaningful environmental-organizing is participatory actions. Such actions can potentially open discursive spaces and empower the less-privileged through mobilizing capacities and resources – i.e. by means of identifying, analyzing, and solving local problems (Duraiappah, Roddy, & Parry, 2005). Espousing the overarching principles of participatory action research as a guiding-orientation, this research acknowledges that researchers’ reflexive and long-term engagement and local members’/communities’ inclusive participation are instrumental for capacity-building, developing solidarity as well as co-creating alternate knowledge/solutions to common problems (Agunga, 2012). Thus, this project examines how one indigenous community in rural eastern India collectively decided, mobilized and implemented preservation of precious natural resources towards enhancing overall quality of their life.
Context

Indigenous people in India, about 104 million (2011 census), are typically considered as the lowest socio-economic strata. They are often portrayed as demons (ashura) and untouchables by the mainstream. During the prolonged colonial rule, indigenous views and agencies were systematically ignored, and their access to material and communicative resources were restricted (Guha, 1988). This curbed their participation and representation in decision-making (Dutta, 2016). These peoples’ social, political, and economic marginalization continues to this day. Consequently, their demands for improved quality of life and recognition of indigenous causes, remain largely unheard and/or unaddressed.

Globally, India has the highest concentration of sacred-groves; however, constant erosion causes serious concerns. On the Indian sub-continent, the nature of, and cultural practices surrounding, sacred-groves are diverse. For example, in many north-Indian sacred-groves (e.g. Kullu and Nepalese devbans and devithans), entry of women and lower-caste people are restricted and Hindu-pantheons are primarily worshipped (Vasan & Kumar, 2006). In contrast; sacred-groves in southwestern districts of West Bengal are smaller in size and are managed primarily by lower-caste and indigenous people (e.g. Santhals). Residents practice animism and worship community-specific indigenous deities. Entry of women is not restricted in the sacred-groves of West Bengal; they play important roles in organizing and performing during festivities in Jaher-Thaan (Deb, 2007). While menstruating, however, women rarely enter the Jaher-Thaans.

Unlike most of the pristine sacred-groves in South-Asia, Deb (2007) showed that continuous and “active human intervention” (p. 13) primarily from local/indigenous communities are typical in sacred-groves of West Bengal. Deb and Malhotra (2001) noted that most sacred-groves in Southwestern West Bengal are dilapidated. In many cases, the tree’s natural regeneration process has been disrupted, which often catalyzes human activities including planting trees by the local people (Deb, 2007).

Similarly, kinship-related land politics, noticed in some sacred-groves in India (e.g. in Sikkim4), is not evident in southwestern West Bengal, where the Jaher-Thaans are as old as the history of tribal settlements. While land/property and/or leadership-related disputes are not uncommon in indigenous communities, the narratives of divine punishments to offenders and violators have worked as social measures to avoid/overcome intra-group conflicts (Basu, 2000). However, in modern times of eroding traditional values and faiths, as well as intensification of sanskritization,5 and its influences (which is visible in some sacred-groves in southwestern West Bengal), it is difficult to predict how long such social-norms would be effective in indigenous contexts.

The indigenous community that took part in this research project resides in Purulia in the drought-prone southwestern region of West Bengal. Purulia is one of the least-resourced districts of eastern India. The cultural participants were from Saloni (also known as Saluni), a village located in Santuri block of Purulia. There were about 700 residents in the village (approximately 105 families), all of whom are Santals.6 In everyday communication, the Santhals use the Santali language, but to communicate with outsiders they also speak a local Bengali dialect (a version of Simantararhi and Jhahrkhandi Bengali, which includes Santali words).

Because of their uncertain socio-economic situation, villagers depend largely on natural phenomena (e.g. monsoon rain) and forest resources including trees and animals. Embracing the notion of human-nature inseparability, and expressing their indebtedness and gratitude, they consider many of the natural-elements such as earth, hills, trees, and rivers as their deities. As per local practice, they are respectful and committed to protect/conserve sacred environmental resources and make regular offerings at places like sacred-groves. Santhal worldviews guide the community to embrace a deep-rooted environmental consciousness and dutifulness, which motivates them to participate, lead, and own an environmental action.
Methods

I initiated the research after receiving necessary approval from the university’s institutional review board (IRB). I visited Saloni, an indigenous village, eight times between May 2011 and August 2015. Each visit lasted 15–30 days. Research interactions occurred in two-phases (four visits in each phase). Phase I involved participant-observation and three focus-group interviews that included 33 villagers. Focus-group interviews were conducted to identify and discuss locally situated social, political and economic needs and contextual realities, and to collectively deliberate on plausible intervention options to address those issues. During phase II, six more focus-group interviews were performed, involving 65 participants. In those focus-group sessions, villagers assessed the situational realities, planned and finalized the intervention (including collective decision-making, resource planning, and supervision and coordination of participation) based on available resources. Thus, across two phases, nine focus-group sessions included 98 male and female community-members. These focus-group sessions took place at a central location where the villagers gathered and socialized every evening. During three of the focus-group sessions, refreshments were served.

I was, and will remain, largely an outsider to the community-members because of my social privileges (i.e. middle-class, educated, patriarchal elite from urban society) and because exploitation of marginalized people has been historically associated with my embodied privileges. After focus-group sessions and numerous interactions with villagers during both phases, however, we grew more familiar during phase II. It is worth noting that, during my fourth visit, i.e. in the last phase-I focus-group, a very senior member of the village expressed his concerns about my research-practice of collecting data primarily through listening to the narratives of marginalization. He said, You were interviewing us, we are spending time with you. Collecting our stories and information about our lives will fulfill your purpose. Now, tell us, what all are you going to give us in return? What would be your contribution in developing the indigenous people in this village?

In other words, he suggested that I needed to take initiative in providing resources to indigenous communities like his own to bring about meaningful change. In response, at the end of that conversation, I publicly took an oath – if I cannot gather/bring any useful resource to these indigenous communities, I will never visit the tribal villages again. Accordingly, during phase-II, I brought monies from a summer-research scholarship (approximately, US$800, equivalent to the combined monthly income of 16 families), which was unconditionally donated entirely for the villagers to spend on an initiative of their collective choice that would improve their lives. The decision for undertaking an environmental initiative was made solely by community members during one of their internal (or sholoaana) discussion where outsiders (like me) are typically not allowed to attend. The collective decision was conveyed to me the next day. However, a few community-members, especially those unfamiliar with academic research (particularly when no material and/or political return was mentioned or expected), were skeptical. This skepticism was resolved during the aforementioned sholoaana meeting. To build trust and ensure transparency throughout the research, I regularly spent time with the villagers to respond to their questions and thoughts. I sincerely tried to create a non-coercive environment to ensure free and open decision-making and implementation of the project.

Conforming to traditional cultural practices, I met village heads and senior community members first, and sought their consent and support for initiating and conducting my research. With their help, research participants were recruited through the snowball technique. Interview protocols were initially developed through conversations with villagers. They were continually revisited and refined to ensure they were culturally appropriate and meaningful. Focus-group sessions began with discussions of local issues and possible avenues for interventions, which provided entry points for additional probes.

The focus-group conversations, which were digitally recorded, ranged from approximately 65–135 min in length. Focus-group and day-to-day interactions were conducted in a local dialect of
Bengali (a variation of Simantararhi and Jhahrkhandi Bengali). As I was conversant with both the Bengali dialect and English, I translated and transcribed the recorded- conversations as a next step. When transcribing local proverbs and colloquial expressions, local people and scholars were consulted to ensure authenticity and accuracy. Then, the transcriptions were checked by another scholar who was conversant in both Bengali (and the dialect) and English (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I obtained informed consent from all participants before the focus-group interviews were initiated. Following IRB guidelines, digital-recordings were destroyed when transcriptions were completed. Also, pseudonyms for the interviewees were used so responses could not be traced back to individual interviewees.

This research used focus-group discussion, as it can be used as a tool to empower participants, monitor interventions, and understand combined local perspectives. In analyzing the data, I carefully read the translated transcriptions line by line, and highlighted keywords and phrases. After examining the associations and relationships within and among initial phrases/keywords, I grouped them to identify patterns and then inductively developed themes. A thematic analysis of focus-group dialogues on the topics and questions posed, and excerpts from field-notes on key issues, are presented in the next section.

**Discourses of environmental-organizing from the margins**

Based on the identified themes from the analyzed data, discourses from indigenous spaces are presented in the following sections. They are (i) indigenous realities and discourses about Jaher-Thaan; (ii) initial stage of the initiative; (iii) collective decision-making, and community participation; and (iv) post-project conversations and future plans.

**Subaltern realities**

For many centuries, rural indigenous people of India have lived in isolated geographical regions. Spaces like sacred-groves are seen as shared cultural and spiritual spaces, and as socio-political spaces for performing community identity and solidarity. They are also spaces for praying for health, fertility, well-being, and for better quality of life (e.g. good monsoon and crop production).

**Situated adversities**

Recent data suggests that in West Bengal, 82.5% of rural households earn less than Rs. 5000 (US$83) per month, and 49% indigenous populations are still below poverty line in rural Bengal (World Bank, 2017). The situation of indigenous villagers of Saloni is no better. They mostly follow a traditional life-style and regularly face acute drought (Haldar & Saha, 2015). Their domestic economy, primarily agrarian, depends on the monsoon, as described by Sontu, a villager, during a focus-group interaction:

> Our agriculture is dependent on God’s will, on monsoon. This is a drought-prone zone and our land is taanr or high land. For the last three years we are facing major problems in doing agricultural work and feeding our family members.

Thus, nature/Gods and their blessings, the foundational blocks of their spirituality, help them in their everyday negotiations with hardships. Local indigenous people visited Jaher-Thaan with a hope of overcoming situated adversities.

**Jaher-Thaan and indigenous discourses**

Jaher-Thaan, according to Santhals, is the home of their Gods. Sal (Shorea Robusta) trees of Jaher-Thaan are considered as incarnations of the important deities, which they worship. During their festival of flowers, “Baha Parab,” they gather in Jaher-Thaan and sing.11

> Who will locate the forest land,
Who will erect village for generation!

*Maran Buru* will locate the forest land,

*Jaher-era* will erect the village for generation. (Mathur, 2001, p. 124)

According to *Santhal* worldviews, *Marang-Buru* gifted forestland and *Jaher-Era* created village settlements. Thus, *Jaher-Thaan* (*Thaan* = a place of) is residence of these two, and other, deities. Therefore, villagers always try their best to protect the residence of their deities, i.e. *Jaher-Thaan*.

**Indigenous commitments**

Indigenous discourses revealed villagers’ collective urge to build a protection wall in *Jaher-Thaan* to conserve sacred Sal-trees, and other environmental resources. During a focus-group, after my first visit to *Jaher-Thaan*, Nilu described the significance of Sal-trees; he said,

> These are not simple trees. We worship them as our Gods. Our relationship with them is a spiritual one. We consider some of them as main deities and rest as their companions. Cutting or damaging these trees is strictly prohibited. If you believe in them, then these sacred objects are Gods; otherwise, there are only trees. Many years ago, our ancestors identified them as our Gods. We are following their path.

According to the local/traditional belief, their success in agrarian activities, their individual and collective health and well-being, is contingent upon their care, commitment, and respect for their sacred environmental resources, which they considered as their Gods.

**Initial stage of the project**

In most sacred groves, conservation efforts are carried out voluntarily through local participation; also known as social-fencing (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006). In West Bengal, most sacred-groves are very small, and often (due to huge demand) surrounding forests are cleared for agricultural (by tribals and non-tribals) and developmental activities¹² (Deb, 2007). This is the case for Saloni, whose total area was 0.24 acre. The exposed sacred land is often abused by local non-tribal people (i.e. local scheduled-caste and upper-caste, including Brahmins). In Saloni, non-tribal people from nearby villages were commuting through the *Jaher-Thaan*, creating a dirt-road, despite objections of villagers. Moreover, villagers expressed concerns about increased animal-feces inside their sacred space (i.e. activities on the new dirt-road). Therefore, the villagers felt the need for a physical wall to bolster social-fencing. To fulfill their long-pending aspirations, they made a collective decision to build a protection wall.

**Long-standing aspiration**

Like most of the *Jaher-Thaans* in southwestern West Bengal, this grove was dilapidated and consisted of a handful of trees. Its geographical location (i.e. proximity to the catchment area of a small local river and sloped ground) caused soil erosion, which affected the overall health of the sacred-grove. In addition, agricultural activities by local people including by indigenous communities (who are mostly small and marginal farmers), are also responsible for accelerating soil erosion. Villagers described how, for more than two decades, they had been asking local government for help in protecting the *Jaher-Thaan* and the environmental resources, but their demands were ignored. Silu, during a focus-group conversation, narrated,

> As this *Jaher-Thaan* is an open space, animals and people can go there without any restriction and can destroy or pollute the place. We, the villagers, are thinking that if we can construct a protection wall, then our sacred-place will be protected properly, and we will be greatly benefited. Moreover, we will be able to stop soil erosion, which will also protect the old sacred trees from falling down. For the last 25 years, we have been demanding for a protection wall. We requested the local government (*panchayet*); so far, we have not heard anything from them. In the meantime, we have seen five elections. The political parties gave their usual assurances; they were void, all the time. Now, that we are getting financial assistance to accomplish the task- all of us are interested to contribute to this work.
Dominant stakeholders such as local government-officers and mainstream politicians, with their rational outlook failed to recognize the significance of protecting sacred-groves, which prompted the villagers to prioritize their long-standing demand for purpose of this research. Moreover, Baske (2006), a renowned Santali scholar, opined that Santhal leaders were largely unsuccessful in representing tribal matters in state Assembly and national Parliament (p. 222). He was particularly skeptical about their lack of courage, initiative, and commitment to indigenous issues. Consequently, more than seven decades after Indian independence, most sacred-groves in Purulia are still in dilapidated condition, even when the district has 18.5% indigenous population. Moreover, gradual decay in intra-community unity, and sometimes conflicts between traditional heads (morols) and political heads/leaders (backed by various political and economic forces), also muted representation of indigenous issues in formal decision-making spaces.

**Decision-making processes**

To discuss community matters, such as overcoming situated adversities and/or critically examine any proposal, the indigenous villagers refer to their traditional collectivistic decision-making process, sholoaana meetings. Participation of outsiders (like me) is restricted in those meetings. Pintu, a villager, discussed the sholoaana process during a focus-group session,

> According to our traditional system, all the villagers (i.e., sholoaana or 100%) participate and make collective-decisions. It is a good idea to do something collectively and sharing the outcome with everyone, be it success or failure. If sholoaana decides to do a job, then every one of us will be accountable.

In sholoaana system, community-members ensure that at least one representative from every family attends those meetings. During a focus-group discussion, Jugal explained how they decided to build a protection-wall,

> Usually, a kotal (convener) officially convenes such meetings. After receiving necessary consent from the morol (village-head) and the seniors, he goes to every house, and informs villagers about the meeting. At the meeting, the kotal talks about the agenda and overall purpose of the meeting. Morol presides over the meeting and representatives from all the families attend.

**Me:** How did you interact? Did you ask questions, specifically in this case?

**Jugal:** Yes, we asked many questions, such as, what is the research all about? Why the research is relevant for us? What are the conditions and rules of the research? Do we have to pay any money for this research? Kashi, the main liaison, replied that this one is neither a government project nor involves any political connections. Then we discussed the matter and took collective decisions.

**Me:** Is there any provision for recording the proceedings?

**Jugal:** No one writes or records anything. It is more of an oral communication. We interacted for almost one and half hours before arriving at a collective decision. You can only start any such collaborative work if all the villagers give their consent.

**Me:** Did someone oppose any proposal?

**Jugal:** Although, we are saying that representatives from all the families agreed to this proposal; one or two families had some initial doubts. They were suspecting that there could be some hidden agendas in your proposal. Then, through the process of dialoguing, we arrived at a common decision.

Through dialoguing and deliberations, the indigenous villagers made decisions acceptable to all families. To ensure this outcome, sometimes they had to participate in multiple sholoaana sessions. During the aforementioned sholoaana meeting, they critically examined the proposed outcomes, estimated cost and other obligation on the villagers’ part. Situated queries, skepticism, and disagreements were negotiated through conversation. As Jugal reported, initially one/two families were skeptical, primarily because they had not previously participated in an academic research project, or were unsure of whether I had any hidden profit-making or political agenda. After a detailed intra-community conversation, which addressed families’ skepticism, they expressed their collective-consent, and thereafter participated in the project. I wrote in memo:
The structure/arrangement of sholoaana meetings (i.e., restricting outsiders) gives them more control and freedom for making decisions unobtrusively. In this case, they carefully decide to undertake an environmental intervention after critically examining (and de-prioritizing) other proposals such as building a community hall, organizing craft training, etc., which were previously discussed during focus-group sessions.

The next morning, the villagers called me to communicate the outcomes of their sholoaana discussion.

**Ritual before initiation of work**

According to indigenous practices, the villagers were not allowed to touch any stone or tree of Jaher-Thaan without observing appropriate rituals. I witnessed one such incident on the first day of the project implementation. In a memo, I wrote:

> Before initiation of the project work, villagers gathered outside the Jaher-Thaan. They offered “pooja” (worship) and collectively sought permission from their Gods to begin project work. They also apologized to their Gods as they were going to dig the sacred soil of Jaher-Thaan with their iron instruments. For them, digging soil means hurting the “mother-earth,” which is very sacred to them.

The act of seeking apology from the mother-earth and other deities demonstrated their empathy, care, environmental cognizance, which represents the core of Santhal spiritual worldviews.

**Decision-making and community participation**

During the implementation phase, the villagers made several planning and strategic decisions on a regular basis so that the project would run smoothly. For instance, villagers made decisions about purchasing and storing construction materials, measuring the land, and finalizing the shape and size of the wall. They made human-resource planning decisions; and based on their schedule, participated in the implementation process as volunteers.

**Project planning and related decisions**

Based on intra-community discussions, the villagers distributed the workload equitably among the families. Experienced skilled laborers, who had previously worked as a group, organized villagers to ensure efficient implementation. They carefully planned the schedule based on individual availability and skill sets. They also assigned substitutes to ensure efficient project-flow. Hari, a focus-group participant and one of the senior skilled-laborers, shared,

> Me: How did you all distribute the duties and responsibilities?

> Hari: After measuring the site, we discussed among ourselves and decided about our work responsibilities. Then, we decided to devote two free man-days [person-days] per family for the construction work. We have total 76 families in the village; so, a total of 152 man-days were used. We mutually determined the roles based on previous experience of volunteers; for example, those who have some past experiences handled the construction matters, and those who are novice became helpers.

> To ensure equitable distribution of work responsibilities, they made case-specific decisions by attending to individual participants’ previous experiences, age, and gender. Women volunteers participated equally as volunteers and also played important roles in leading and supervising the progress of the construction-work during the project’s advanced and final stages.

**Volunteering**

Villagers understood that available resources were limited for their project. Therefore, they decided to volunteer to ensure its success. Focus-group participants discussed volunteering:

> Sidhu: Everybody realized that it was an opportunity for us to fulfill our long-cherished dream. That urge was there inside each one of us. We had to accomplish this project with limited funds. We made it possible because everyone was interested to volunteer for this project, without taking any monetary benefits. Each and every family sent volunteers.
Me: But, when you were volunteering, you were losing daily wages. What was the motivating factor?
Mukul: It does not matter, because the wall is a permanent asset for all of us. Generation after generation, we will get benefits from it. We will die, but our next-generations will be able to pay homage to our sacred objects. It is not at all a loss for us; rather we gained from it. We are born in this village; it was our duty to do something for our own village.

Villagers considered that participation in protecting the sacred-space as homage to their Gods/nature. They considered such actions as their gift and message for their children. Therefore, they volunteered for the project, without expecting any material return, even when they were experiencing extremely weak economic conditions.

Figure 1. “Jaher-Thaan” or sacred-grove at Saloni village: Location of the environment organizing.
Post-project conversations and alternate environmental visions

After learning about the villagers’ environmental organizing, many local elites and practitioners were reluctant to recognize such initiatives as a legitimate/meaningful intervention because it did not yield any tangible or economic returns on investment. However, villagers firmly expressed their strongly held convictions that protecting the sacred-space was an important accomplishment.

Non-materialistic perspectives

Embracing indigenous ideologies and worldviews, Sukhram, a senior community member, commented on the initiative’s intangible benefits during a focus-group session,

Benefits from such initiatives cannot be seen materially. This project is spiritual in nature, because it helps in improving our psychological and social well-being. If we can protect this space, our overall health and well-being will be improved; diseases will be controlled. We embrace such beliefs.

Collective cognizance of, and deep gratitude toward, the environment inspired the villagers to participate in environmental organizing. Such culturally driven initiatives demonstrate villagers’ commitments for improving their quality of lives and for fulfilling collective aspirations.

Post-completion interactions

During a post-completion focus-group session, senior men and women and youths (particularly those who assumed key roles) collectively discussed various aspects of the environmental organizing, and reflected on their overall experiences. Santa and Suku, two senior villagers shared their thoughts,

Me: What does this environmental initiative mean to you?
Santa: Over the years, overall environmental resources of the village have been reduced. We had a lot more trees in and around the village as well as in the Jaher-Thaan. Owing to soil erosion and other causes many trees died. If such trend continues, the forests and the Jaher-Thaan will soon be deserted. This is deeply tied to our identity. If those trees die, we will be also ruined.

Me: Why is protecting those environmental resources so important?
Suku: Our ancestors worshipped those sacred trees for ages. They are our collective asset. We could not provide any protection to them so far. Now that we have accomplished our goal; our joy is limitless. This will be beneficial for our future generation. They will realize that our ancestors did their duty. It would be an example for our neighboring communities too.

Sure, it is not a monetarily-profitable proposition, but we gained much more from it. By constructing the wall we have finally protected the sacred environmental objects, our deities. We believe that the deities will bless us, as they always do. If you want to understand it materially, you might face difficulties. You will never understand it by using mathematical formulas like 1 + 1 = 2. We are not interested to calculate mere material gains here, spiritual and psychological peace is far more important to us. We do not have much money to survive; still we wanted to protect our environment and deities first. We cannot show you the "return" externally, you have to realize it internally. Mainstream science may never appreciate such interventions. For us, acts of protecting the environment and worshiping natural elements are interconnected. We consider trees as living entities. In some sense, human being and trees are the same - both are alive. Both of us take food, feel pain. We consider the trees as parts of our lives; they have every right to live. We, the villagers, have our own home; but, so far, our environmental resources and deities had no shelter, they were unprotected. For years, they lived in open-space and many outsiders abused and disrespected the sacred-objects. Now, none will go inside to pollute the space. By constructing the protection wall, we offered our Gods a better shelter. The profit is spiritual in nature; we all have felt it deep inside. The mere material gain is nowhere comparable to such spiritual peace.

According to the villagers, modernist/materialist mindsets would never fully realize the nuances/significance of the initiative. They rejected dominant conceptualizations of economic-centric interventions. Instead, villagers’ deep-rooted environmental consciousness legitimized alternate rationalities in protecting natural resources.
**Future plans**

Villagers of Saloni discussed their future plans during the final focus group. Despite the intervention/wall, the sacred-grove still faced several threats. First, it was located in an open-space surrounded by cultivable land. Local (including indigenous) agricultural activities were responsible for further degradation of the land and groves. Second, non-indigenous people tried, on several occasions, to cut trees, for commercial benefits, from *Jaher-Thaan*. In Figure 1, the diagonally oriented tree-trunk is a victim of one such attempt. Although the outsiders were never successful, the villagers wanted to be cautious. Third, due to natural decay, several trees had died and as no new tree regenerated in the recent past, density of trees was reduced. Fourth, due to natural formations (i.e. sloped ground and its proximity to the catchment area of a small river), soil-erosion affected the trees in *Jaher-Thaan*.

Deb (2007) showed that indigenous communities in southwest West Bengal often actively intervene and manage sacred-groves to ensure their sustenance, as *Jaher-Thaan* and its existence is deeply tied to their identity. In this way, during execution of the protection-wall project, villagers saved some of the resources for use in future environmental protection work (e.g. planting new trees) at *Jaher-Thaan*, as described by Gonsha during the focus-group session, “We will do more earthworks to level the ground inside the premises; then we will plant new trees. For that reason we will call another *sholoaana* meeting in the near future.” Discussion about future plans showed villagers’ sustained commitment and engagement to make the space greener. Independent implementation of the environmental organizing boosted community members’ confidence and motivated them to undertake future local initiatives as a collective.

**Discussion**

This research, grounded in the principles of critical/cultural environmental action, and communication-driven transformation of environmental spaces, demonstrates how environmental organizing, centered on wellness and social change, can address community needs and aspirations in culturally and contextually meaningful ways. Such a framework, being cognizant of indigenous values and practices, pays close attention to subaltern identity; knowledge and experiences; committed attachment to and relationships with nature; and local-centric approaches to interacting with environmental resources. A place-based lens and research design addresses the environmental matters from the perspective of the cultural participants (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013), places subalterns and their agencies at the center of the initiative and, envisions them as change-agents, leaders and owners of the environmental intervention (Chaturvedi, 2007). Embracing these principles, this research sought to ensure that community aspirations were recognized, local voices were heard in the decision-making spaces to ensure environmental sustainability within limited scope and availability of material and cultural resources.

Rapid disappearance of sacred groves (and associated natural resources) poses challenges to indigenous existence, spirituality and worldviews. Moreover, non-recognition of traditional conservation practices by the mainstream threatens the legitimacy and sustainability of community-driven initiatives. Unlike most South-Asian sacred-groves (e.g. Kullu *Devbans*, Nepali *Devithans*, Marathi *Devrahatis*, Rajasthani *Jogmayas*), many *Jaher-THaans* of southwestern West Bengal are gradually becoming small-patches of dilapidated natural habitat surrounded by land that has been cleared for cultivation (Deb, 2007; Deb & Malhotra, 2001). In this context, the environmental-organizing effort sought not only to materially protect natural resources, but also attempted to sustain indigenous spiritual and socio-political identities and rich cultural tapestries symbolically (Mathur, 2001). Throughout the process, the economically impoverished community members transcended narrow self-interests and monetary gains. As co-researchers and visionary leaders, they became mutual exemplars, where their deep-seated ecological consciousness and foresight necessitated collective environmental action to bring about meaningful change.
**Communicative engagements of local people in decision-making and implementation**

This environmental communication research sought to attentively listen to and understand emerging voices and community aspirations by recognizing differences/different perspectives through dialogue (De Sousa Santos, 2007). In the remote, underserved space of the global south, this research experienced several material and cultural obstacles. These obstacles included socio-economic disparities and communicative barriers/impairments, which stemmed from dominant oppression and negligence as well as from marginalized peoples’ habitual muteness and cautious skepticism. To overcome situated barriers and facilitate interactions, a three-pronged approach was espoused; i.e. (i) community-led decision-making and deliberations; (ii) critical/reflexive listening and dialoguing; and (iii) active local engagement and solidarity to foster participation. In addition, to improve the quality and legitimacy of environmental-organizing, it was important to ensure participatory engagements of the cultural participants in every phase of the research (i.e. from need-identification to implementation of the initiative). Moreover, to ascertain the research processes remained inclusive, reflexive and organic, it was crucial to create an open, accessible, non-coercive, and culturally appropriate communicative environment so that indigenous participants could feel informed, unthreatened and engaged. Also, as a researcher, it was important for me to (i) be constantly vigilant about my own privileges, ethnocentrism, and (taken-for-granted) assumptions (e.g. indigenous practices are superstitious), (ii) be willing to learn and respect alternate/indigenous conceptualizations and local ways of knowing, and (iii) diligently work towards questioning/de-centering hegemonic perspectives, and reducing power-difference between myself and cultural-participants.

**Alternate environmental visioning**

Recognizing the local community’s spiritual/ideological integrity was crucial as they valued nature as both divine and inseparable from their existence. Empathic understanding of these local conceptualizations and commitments were key to this research context; particularly when local practices are shaped and constituted by deep-seated indigenous values and worldviews. Even if such indigenous spirituality and conservation practices were depicted as pseudoscientific/unworthy by the local elites (and their west-centric perspectives), a profound environmental respect and involvement marked the commitment of the subaltern agency as the driving force for taking collective action to protect sacred environmental resources. For instance, seeking apology to nature before digging the soil and interpreting benefits of the environmental initiative in spiritual and non-economic/non-material terms demonstrated alternate environmental conceptualization and visioning in the indigenous spaces. Moreover, the ownership and leadership from within the Santhal community challenged hegemonic depictions of subalterns as lacking agency as well as demonstrated indigenous people’s independent abilities in protecting/preserving environment. Their initiative also served to raise environmental consciousness among both future generations and wider indigenous communities. Therefore, instead of often (unintentionally) appropriating indigenous culture and agency, it is crucial for researchers (and other stakeholders) to respect and pay close attention to indigenous practices, commitments, and local/de-colonial ways of knowledge production.

While this study witnessed local members’ inclusive participation in all stages of intervention research, it also noted that the community deprioritized the role of external experts and knowledge as essential factors in decision-making processes. For instance, they prioritized their internal or sho-loaana meetings over the research-meetings/focus-groups for making key project decisions, and emphasized community culture, knowledge and aspirations as central organizing forces (Chaturvedi, 2007). Such communicative practices, by challenging/de-centering hegemonic top-down approaches and knowledge-production practices, posited indigenous voices and agencies at the forefront of the environmental-organizing processes. In a way, this research, through exploring and foregrounding indigenous organizing at the margins, adds to the rich volume of existing environmental communication scholarship that recognize the potential of subaltern agency.
Disenfranchised indigenous populations across the globe are facing various crises including environmental degradations; they are seeking to protect environmental resources such as forests, groves, caves and lakes, which are often sacred to them and deeply tied to their identities/existence (Torri & Herrmann, 2011). This study calls for more research (both disciplinary and interdisciplinary) on counter-hegemonic environmental visioning and indigenous/de-colonial voices, actions and aspirations so that more interventions can be organized in underserved spaces of the global South. This suggestion is consonant with environmental communication scholars (e.g. Carbaugh, 2007; Cox & Depoe, 2015), and contemporary critical/cultural, feminist, post-structural and postcolonial scholars, who go beyond capitalistic and/or Western discourses, expectations and (top-down) approaches, and emphasize the need for listening to, and learning from, local aspirations, and alternative worldviews and spiritualities. In addition, researchers need to go beyond conventional economic-centric practices of interventions and espouse community-centered/led environmental interventions, which are fundamentally grounded in culture and communication. Such research practices would legitimize the centrality of communicative and cultural aspects in environmental interventions, which would essentially question the dominant power-structure/practices, and superiority of outside-experts and their predetermined solutions to solve local environmental issues.

Notes

1. Central Indigenous Belt of India stretches from Gujarat in the west, up to West Bengal in the east, and comprises the states of Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand. It is one of the poorest regions of the country. 79.4% of the indigenous populations (i.e. approximately 82.5 million) of India live in this region. Nearly 90% of the tribal people of the belt live in rural areas.
2. The term subaltern refers to the "name for the general attribute of subordination … in society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1988, p. 35).
3. PAR: An experiential research process that pays attention to action and reflection, theory and practice, and concerned with developing practical knowing towards bringing about social change and empowerment, where people are involved on an equal basis in collective action.
4. In Sikkim migrant Nepalese population use the narrative surrounding sacred-groves to legitimize clan’s history of settlement and thereby establish their citizenship claims; in the recent past significant increase in the number of sacred-groves is noticed in places like Biring. Interestingly, most of the families claim that their sacred-groves are the proof of their local family history of countless generations (Acharya & Ormsby, 2017).
5. A term refers to the replacement of customs, rituals (including deities) and ideologies of “low”-caste and tribal people with Hindu/Brahminical norms/ways of life; due to Sanskritization, temples have been constructed within many sacred-groves.
6. In the 11th national five-year plan, like most indigenous peoples, Santhals are described as “living below the poverty line, the landless, with no productive assets” (Planning Commission, 2008, p. 114).
7. Apart from Saloni, to learn about sacred-groves and associated local-values and practices, I visited ten nearby villages: Manjuri, Shushunidangada, Jiathol, Nimtikuri, Salberia, Kherat, Kendthol, Kharbar, Tilabaid, and Ambari. All the indigenous/Santhal-majority villages have their own Jaher-Thaan.
8. He was one of the first (very) few indigenous people from that tribal region, who attended school. Later, he worked with government officers and development professionals for many years.
9. In West Bengal, more than 80% of rural households earn less than Rs. 5000 (US$83) per month (World Bank, 2017). The domestic economy of indigenous peoples is worse than the rural average. During focus-groups, participants reported that their average monthly household income was approximately Rs. 3000 (US$50).
10. Simantararhi and Jhahrkhandi Bengal are local dialects in southwestern West Bengal, which are significantly different from formal/urban-version of Bengali. Several Santali words are included in this particular dialect (Karan, 2002). Santhal population including children and women use this language while communicating in school, market and other spaces of colloquial interactions. As my Santali language proficiency-level was not high, I requested the villagers whether it was appropriate to converse in the local Bengali dialect. After getting their consent, I conducted focus-group sessions in that local dialect.
11. Original Santali song:
   
   Akoy Mai Chiyaiya Ho Bir Disom DoAkoy Mai Chiyai – Ya Ho Atore PairiMarang Budv Xru Chaiyai – Ya Ho Bir Disom DoJaher-era Akoy Mai Chiyai – Ya Ho Atore Pairi

12. Historically, sacred-groves in West Bengal became scare in three phases: (i) Permanent settlement act 1793, which called for capturing all "unproductive" land to maximize for land revenue; which affected many pristine
forests including sacred-groves particularly in Bengal, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar (Rangarajan, 1994); (ii) Forest act of 1876 brought sacred-groves under “Forest Working Plans” to extract valuable timber; consequently many sacred-groves disappeared; (iii) finally after independence, the processes of industrial development, including establishing factories and constructing large dams caused disappearance and degradation of many sacred-groves in eastern India (Deb, 2007).

13. An incident in nearby Bankati region illustrate the helplessness of indigenous communities, where the forest department unilaterally cut down an entire sacred-grove in spite of several request/resistance from local Santhal community; at the end, they kept only one tree alive as a token remembrance of the sacred-grove (Deb, 2007).

14. Local Elites: Local elites are the local stakeholders who either dominate/control the spaces of decision-making or monopolize public resources/benefits, or both (Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013). Their presence and influence routinely reproduce and reinforce subordinations, and oftentimes obstruct subalterns in taking meaningful roles in local organization/government (Balooni, Lund, Kumar, & Inoue, 2010). In this context, indigenous communities and their leaderships were largely ineffectve in overcoming/resisting domination of mainstream politicians and local elites, and mostly failed to discursively challenge the dominant depiction of sacred-groves and their conservations as superstitious, culturally backward and anti-development.

15. Suku is a culturally informed community member, and his words are often philosophical and poetic. He is well read, and his grasp on Santali literature is respected in the village. Even if all the dialogues/quotations presented in the article are representative of community voices, the words of Suku are an exception. Although his words are atypical, but his voice, in essence, reflects the aspirations and perceptions of the community.

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