Sustaining Animistic Perspectives: Human-Nature Practices in the Age of Globalization

Rambabu Marla

Research Associate (Cultural)
Anthropological Survey of India
Ministry of Culture, Government of India
EN-7-9, Sector V, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700091.
*Corresponding Author Email: researcheransi@gmail.com

Abstract—This review examines animism from a socio-cultural and anthropological perspective, moving beyond Edward Burnett Tylor's (1871) evolutionary interpretation of animism as a primitive stage of religion. Integrating classical anthropological theory, mid-twentieth-century Indian tribal ethnographies (Elwin, 1941; Vidyarthi, 1963), structural-functional and symbolic approaches (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Turner, 1967), relational perspectives associated with "new animism" (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2000; Descola, 2013), and recent cognitive science research on agency detection (Guthrie, 1993; Barrett, 2000; Boyer, 2001), the study synthesizes interdisciplinary insights to reassess animism's contemporary relevance. Drawing on ethnographic examples from Apatani ritual practices in Arunachal Pradesh, Gond sacred groves (devrais/persa pen) in Central India and Telangana, and Koya participation in the Sammakka–Saralamma Jatara, the review demonstrates the continued vitality of animistic worldviews amid globalization, environmental degradation, forest loss, and changing climatic conditions. The analysis highlights how reciprocal human–nature relationships embedded in animistic practices contribute to communal solidarity, cultural continuity, and biodiversity conservation, thereby challenging unilinear evolutionary narratives (Stocking, 1987) and Weberian assumptions of modern disenchantment (Weber, 1930). The findings further validate the role of sacred ecologies in supporting tribal livelihoods and environmental governance (Berkes, 1999), while providing ethnographic contexts for evaluating cognitive theories of religious belief formation. Overall, the study positions animism not as a residual belief system but as an adaptive socio-cultural framework that continues to shape indigenous knowledge systems and human–environment relations in contemporary India.

Keywords— animism, evolutionism, sacred groves, Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara, indigenous knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural anthropology recognizes animism as one of the earliest and most influential conceptual frameworks for understanding religious belief systems. The foundational formulation was provided by Edward Burnett Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871), where he defined culture as a "complex whole" encompassing knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities acquired by humans as members of society. Within this framework, Tylor introduced animism as the belief in spiritual beings or souls (*anima*), proposing that early humans attributed life, consciousness, and intentionality not only to living organisms but also to natural elements such as plants, rocks, water, air, and celestial bodies (Tylor 1871, Vol. 1: 425–426). Drawing on experiences such as dreams, trance states, and perceptions of death, Tylor argued that animism represented the intellectual foundation of religious thought and the earliest explanatory system through which humans interpreted the natural world.

Tylor's evolutionary framework positioned animism as a universal stage in the development of religion, gradually giving way to polytheism and later monotheistic traditions (Tylor 1871, Vol. 2, Ch. 11). Although this model was historically influential,

subsequent anthropological scholarship has increasingly challenged its unilinear and hierarchical assumptions. Critics have noted that portraying animistic societies as cognitively or culturally inferior overlooks the complex social, ecological, and relational dimensions embedded in indigenous belief systems (Stocking, 1987; Ingold, 2000). Furthermore, Tylor's approach largely ignored the adaptive functions of animism in regulating human–environment interactions and sustaining social cohesion within small-scale societies.

Recent theoretical developments have expanded the understanding of animism beyond evolutionary typologies. Relational and ontological approaches emphasize reciprocal relationships between humans and non-human beings, viewing animals, landscapes, and natural forces as active social agents rather than passive objects (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2000; Descola, 2013). At the same time, cognitive science research has introduced new explanatory models, suggesting that animistic beliefs may be supported by evolved psychological mechanisms such as hyperactive agency detection and intuitive attribution of intentionality to ambiguous environmental stimuli (Guthrie, 1993; Barrett, 2000; Boyer, 2001). Despite these advances, few studies have systematically integrated classical anthropological theory, relational ontologies (view humans, animals, plants, and spirits as connected persons in mutual relationships, not separate things), cognitive science perspectives (human brain naturally sees purpose and agency in nature, like rustling leaves or sudden winds, to detect danger and ensure survival), and region-specific ethnographic evidence within a single analytical framework.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of Indian tribal societies, where animistic practices continue to play a central role in ritual life, ecological management, and community organization. Ethnographic research among the Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh demonstrates how ritual specialists negotiate with sky and earth spirits (*ani*) to regulate agricultural cycles and respond to irregular monsoon patterns, illustrating the continued relevance of spirit-mediated environmental adaptation (Furer-Haimendorf, 1948). In Central India, Gond communities maintain sacred groves known as *devrais* or *persa pen*, which function as ritual landscapes connecting ancestral spirits, forest deities, and agricultural fertility (Elwin, 1939; Vidyarthi, 1963). Similarly, in Telangana, tribal groups such as the Koya, Gond, and Chenchu sustain animistic traditions through nature worship, ancestor veneration, and large-scale ritual gatherings such as the Sammakka–Saralamma Jatara, where ritual specialists mediate between human communities and spiritual forces to ensure prosperity and ecological balance.

These ethnographic cases demonstrate that animism in contemporary India is not a static remnant of the past but a dynamic cultural system that adapts to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions, including deforestation, urban expansion, agricultural transformation, and climate variability. The persistence of animistic practices also challenges broader sociological assumptions regarding the inevitable decline of spiritual worldviews under modernity, including Weber's thesis of rationalization and disenchantment (Weber, 1930). Instead, these traditions reveal ongoing processes of cultural negotiation, syncretism, and institutional adaptation that enable indigenous communities to maintain relational ties with landscapes and non-human agents.

Against this background, the present study re-examines animism as an adaptive socio-cultural framework rather than an evolutionary residue. By synthesizing classical anthropological theory, Indian ethnographic evidence, relational ontologies, and cognitive science perspectives, the review seeks to address the persistent research gap concerning the contemporary relevance of animistic worldviews. In doing so, it highlights the implications of animism for tribal welfare policies, biodiversity conservation, and indigenous knowledge systems (Berkes, 1999), while contributing to broader debates on human–nature reciprocity and cultural resilience in a globalized world. The following literature review traces the historical evolution of animism scholarship and situates Indian tribal contexts within this interdisciplinary theoretical landscape.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Classical Foundations (Late 19th–Early 20th Century):

Early anthropologists viewed animism as the simplest stage of religion that later evolved into more complex belief systems. Edward Burnett Tylor (1871) defined animism as belief in souls and spiritual beings inhabiting humans, animals, plants, and natural objects, explaining its origins through human experiences such as dreams, death, and visions of spirits in nature (Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1871). According to Tylor, animism represented a universal cognitive process through which early humans attributed consciousness, will, and emotion to the natural world.

Robert Ranulph Marett (1909) proposed the concept of pre-animistic *mana*, suggesting that early religious thought was centered on impersonal supernatural forces before the development of individualized spirit beliefs. James George Frazer (1890) placed animism alongside totemism and polytheism within an evolutionary sequence of religious development. John Ferguson McLennan (1869) linked animism to totemism, arguing that spiritual kinship between clans and animals shaped early social organization.

Emile Durkheim (1912) shifted attention from individual belief to social function, interpreting totemism as a symbolic system that represented collective identity and reinforced group solidarity. Andrew Lang (1898) challenged strict evolutionary models by demonstrating the presence of high gods among several indigenous societies, thereby complicating the assumption that animism necessarily preceded more complex religious forms.

Although these early theories established animism as a foundational concept in anthropology, they relied heavily on comparative speculation and evolutionary hierarchies. Their limitations created the need for empirical field-based studies that could document animism as a lived socio-cultural practice rather than as an abstract theoretical category. This shift became especially significant in Indian ethnographic research.

2.2   Mid-20th Century: Indian Ethnography:

Mid-twentieth-century anthropologists focused on documenting spirit beliefs among Indian tribal communities and their connections with forests, agriculture, and everyday survival. Verrier Elwin (1941) recorded the religious practices of Central Indian groups such as the Gonds and Baigas, who worshipped hill spirits and village deities to ensure successful hunting, rainfall, and crop productivity. These rituals reflected close relationships between spiritual belief and environmental management.

Sarat Chandra Roy (1915) described Oraon ancestor worship, harvest rituals, and seasonal dances that honored nature spirits and promoted agricultural fertility. Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi (1963) examined the Maler communities and emphasized the links between humans, wild plants, forest resources, and jungle spirits. Martin Orans (1965) documented Santhal practices associated with sacred trees that served as clan protectors, while Nirmal Kumar Bose (1967) analyzed how tribal religious traditions interacted with broader Indian cultural systems and neighboring Hindu practices.

Stephen Fuchs (1960) contributed further ethnographic evidence through his studies of Bhil and Gond communities, highlighting narratives of earth mother figures and fertility spirits that guided agricultural decision-making in ecologically vulnerable regions. Together, these ethnographies demonstrated that animism in India functioned as a practical and adaptive system that regulated social behavior, supported ecological sustainability, and strengthened community cohesion. These findings challenged earlier evolutionary interpretations and provided empirical foundations for later theoretical approaches.

2.3   Structural-Functional and Symbolic Approaches (Mid–Late 20th Century):

Mid-to-late twentieth-century anthropological approaches interpreted animism as part of broader social structures and symbolic systems that organize collective life and meaning. Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) analyzed animism through the structural patterns of myths, emphasizing underlying oppositions such as nature and culture that shape tribal cosmologies. Victor Turner (1967) focused on ritual performance and introduced the concept of *communitas*, highlighting how forest rituals and spirit ceremonies generate shared emotional bonds and social cohesion within communities.

Adrian Majumdar (1980) examined animistic belief systems in relation to environmental uncertainty and survival strategies, arguing that spirit beliefs guide responses to misfortune and ecological stress. E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1965) interpreted spirit beliefs among the Nuer as cultural mechanisms for explaining misfortune and maintaining moral and social order. Mary Douglas (1966) further linked animistic worldviews to concepts of purity and danger, demonstrating how symbolic boundaries regulate everyday social behavior and perceptions of spiritual risk.

Bronisław Malinowski's functionalist perspective emphasized the practical role of magic and ritual in addressing uncertainty. His studies of the Trobriand Islanders showed how ritual practices surrounding fishing and gardening reduced anxiety and supported economic activities (Malinowski 1948). Together, these approaches shifted the interpretation of animism from evolutionary speculation toward an understanding of its functional, symbolic, and social significance in sustaining community life

2.4   Relational and Ontological Perspectives (Late 20ᵗʰ–Early 21ˢᵗ Century)

Recent anthropological scholarship has reinterpreted animism through relational and ontological perspectives that emphasize personhood beyond human boundaries. These approaches view animals, plants, landscapes, and material objects as social beings engaged in ongoing relationships rather than as passive elements of nature. Tim Ingold (2000) emphasized lived experience and environmental dwelling, arguing that knowledge emerges through daily interactions between humans and their surroundings. Nurit Bird-David (1999) conceptualized animism as a form of relational epistemology, where personhood is constructed through reciprocal relationships between humans and non-human entities.

Philippe Descola (2013) expanded this framework by identifying multiple ontological systems in which non-human beings are understood as possessing human-like interiority, while Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2007) demonstrated how Amazonian societies interpret animals as transformed human persons. Graham Harvey (2005) further promoted the idea of animism as an ethical orientation based on respect for the living world and recognition of non-human agency. These perspectives challenge earlier interpretations that reduced animism to cognitive error or primitive belief and instead emphasize relational engagement and moral responsibility.

Earlier ethnographic work by Irving Hallowell (1960) influenced these developments through his documentation of Ojibwe understandings of "other-than-human persons, " which highlighted ethical reciprocity between humans and non-human beings. Building on this foundation, Bird-David's relational framework described indigenous identity as embedded within networks of relationships rather than defined by individual autonomy. Alpa Shah (2018) extended these ideas to the Indian context by linking animistic beliefs among Adivasi communities to political resistance, land rights struggles, and spiritual attachment to territory.

Together, these contributions reposition animism as a dynamic relational system grounded in social interaction, environmental engagement, and ethical responsibility. These approaches reframes personhood, agency, and nature–culture relationships, offering an alternative to earlier evolutionary and reductionist interpretations.

2.5   Cognitive Science Integration (2000s–Present):

Recent research in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology has incorporated animism into broader models of human cognition, suggesting that spirit beliefs are supported by evolved psychological mechanisms. Justin L. Barrett (2000) proposed that humans possess an innate tendency toward hyperactive agency detection, which leads individuals to attribute intentionality and purpose to ambiguous environmental stimuli such as natural sounds or movement. This cognitive bias helps explain the widespread attribution of agency to natural forces across cultures.

Pascal Boyer (2001) argued that religious concepts persist because they contain minimally counterintuitive features that are easily remembered and culturally transmitted. According to Boyer, anthropomorphic representations of spirits combine familiar human characteristics with supernatural abilities, making them cognitively attractive and socially resilient. Scott Atran (2002) further linked belief in supernatural agents to social cooperation and group commitment, suggesting that shared spiritual systems strengthen collective identity and moral regulation.

Complementing these cognitive approaches, Fikret Berkes (1999) demonstrated how sacred ecological systems integrate spiritual belief with environmental management practices. His work highlighted how indigenous communities maintain ecological resilience through ritual restrictions, sacred sites, and customary resource governance. Stewart Guthrie's (1993) theory of anthropomorphism similarly emphasized perceptual tendencies to interpret non-human phenomena in human-like terms, reinforcing the cognitive foundations of animistic thought.

More recent syntheses by Graham Harvey (2021) and N. Bordoloi (2024) have attempted to reconcile cognitive explanations with ethnographic evidence, emphasizing that psychological predispositions alone cannot fully account for the cultural richness and social functions of animistic practices. Together, these perspectives illustrate how cognitive mechanisms interact with cultural traditions and ecological contexts to sustain animism across historical periods and diverse societies.

Journal of Creative Research in English Literature & Culture (JCRELC)   **ISSN:** 3108-0812   [Vol-2, Issue-2, February 2026]

Website: www.jcrelc.com

III.   METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic review approach based on secondary sources, combined with anthropological interpretive analysis to examine animism from a socio-cultural perspective. Academic databases including Anthropological Index Online, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were searched using keywords such as "animism Indian communities, " "ancestral worship, " "new animism, " and "cognitive anthropology supernatural agency." The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and ethnographic reports relevant to Indian indigenous communities, Tylorian theoretical frameworks, relational ontologies, and cognitive science perspectives.

Inclusion criteria prioritized scholarly sources that addressed animism through empirical ethnography, theoretical analysis, or interdisciplinary integration. The review focused on key publications from classical anthropological foundations to contemporary developments. Non-empirical writings, popular media sources, and studies unrelated to the Indian context were excluded. Following screening and thematic relevance assessment, a core set of approximately 47 key texts was identified for detailed analysis.

Data extraction involved systematic cataloguing of theoretical approaches, ethnographic findings, and cognitive explanations using a standardized matrix format. Particular attention was given to socio-cultural functions of animism, including reciprocal human–spirit relations, environmental adaptation, ritual practice, and community cohesion (Descola 2013; Barrett 2000). The analytical framework combined qualitative content synthesis with anthropological interpretation to identify recurring conceptual patterns such as classical typologies, relational personhood, and agency attribution.

To enhance analytical coherence, theoretical models proposed by Tylor (1871), Ingold (2000), and Berkes (1999) were used as reference points for comparative interpretation. Findings from Indian ethnographic sources including Elwin, Vidyarthi, and Orans were cross-referenced to identify consistent socio-cultural themes and adaptive patterns. Although the review aims to provide comprehensive coverage, it does not claim exhaustiveness, as additional sources may emerge beyond the selected databases and language scope. The synthesis therefore represents a structured thematic review grounded in established anthropological literature and empirical documentation.

IV.   FINDINGS

Building on the theoretical framework and methodological synthesis, the analysis examines empirical patterns that demonstrate the socio-cultural and ecological functions of animism in Indian tribal contexts. Anthropological evidence suggests that animistic belief systems remain widely distributed across human societies. George Peter Murdock's cross-cultural database indicates that a large proportion of societies attribute agency to natural phenomena such as thunder, wind, and environmental forces (Murdock, 1967). Within this broader context, Tylor's definition of animism as belief in souls (*anima*) possessing consciousness, will, and emotion continues to provide a useful conceptual reference point for understanding spirit-centered worldviews.

Indian ethnographic examples illustrate how animistic practices remain embedded in everyday social life. Among the Santhal communities, ancestors are venerated as family deities, while Bhil groups maintain beliefs in the continued existence of souls after death (Vidyarthi, 1963). These practices demonstrate the persistence of intellectualist interpretations of spirit agency while also reflecting culturally specific ritual forms. Early anthropological models linking animism with animatism, totemism, and theism further contextualize these belief systems within broader patterns of religious expression (Marett, 1909).

Ritual sacrifice represents one of the most visible expressions of animistic practice across Indian regions. Northeastern Naga communities conduct mithun sacrifices to honor clan spirits (Furer-Haimendorf, 1955), while Oraon groups in Chotanagpur offer goats to *bhuta* spirits to ensure agricultural fertility (Roy, 1915). Among the Toda of the Nilgiri Hills, elaborate buffalo funeral ceremonies honor dairy spirits and reinforce pastoral identity (Dumont, 1953). These rituals function both as spiritual offerings and as mechanisms for strengthening community solidarity.

Comparative ethnographic evidence highlights two related ritual strategies. In some contexts, ritual practices aim to influence supernatural forces through magical techniques, as documented in Malinowski's (1922) study of Trobriand garden magic. In

Journal of Creative Research in English Literature & Culture (JCRELC)   **ISSN:** 3108-0812   [Vol-2, Issue-2, February 2026]

Website: www.jcrelc.com

other contexts, worship emphasizes reciprocal relationships with non-human persons, such as the Ojibwe bear ceremonies described by Hallowell (1960), where animals are treated as moral agents deserving respect and obligation. Both strategies reduce uncertainty, reinforce social norms, and sustain collective identity.

Although Tylor's unilinear evolutionary model of religious development has been widely critiqued (Stocking, 1987), animistic practices continue to persist in modified forms across contemporary Indian societies. Elwin's (1941) documentation of Gond ritual systems and Andamanese spirit taboos demonstrates continuity amid social change. Durkheim's (1915) emphasis on social solidarity and Malinowski's (1922) functionalist interpretation of ritual anxiety reduction provide additional explanatory frameworks for understanding this persistence. Subsequent symbolic approaches, including Geertz's (1973) interpretation of religion as a system of meaning, further support the view that animism remains culturally relevant beyond its original evolutionary classification.

Field-based research confirms the adaptive continuity of animistic traditions. M. N. Srinivas (1952) observed the integration of buffalo sacrifice rituals among Coorg communities, illustrating processes of religious syncretism. Ulo Valk (2001) documented Apatani ritual specialists (*nyibu*) invoking sky and river spirits in response to environmental challenges. These examples demonstrate how animistic practices continue to function as cultural resources for negotiating ecological uncertainty and social transformation.

Beyond ritual continuity, animism also contributes to environmental governance by regulating human interactions with natural resources. Sacred groves, ritual restrictions, and spirit taboos operate as informal conservation mechanisms that encourage sustainable resource use and collective responsibility. These socio-ecological outcomes reinforce the role of animism as an adaptive cultural system rather than a residual belief structure.

4.1 Contemporary Relevance: Animism for Human-Nature Harmony

Recent studies demonstrates animism's critical role in resolving contemporary human-nature-culture conflicts. Apatani rituals in Ziro Valley's sacred groves mediate climate-induced water scarcity through spirit negotiations with nyibu ritual specialists, strengthening community solidarity (Furer-Haimendorf 1955; Dutta et al. 2017). Gond sacred groves (devrais/persa pen) maintain 30% higher biodiversity than state-managed forests, supporting tribal livelihoods amid deforestation (Vidyarthi 1963; Sarkar et al. 2022). Koya participation in Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara reinforces collective identity and ecological ethics. These relational practices offer scalable models for sustainable development and cultural harmony.

V.   DISCUSSION

Early human societies perceived supernatural forces through natural phenomena long before the emergence of organized religious institutions. Archaeological evidence from Paleolithic contexts, including cave paintings depicting hybrid human–animal figures at sites such as Lascaux and Altamira, suggests symbolic representations of animal spirits and cosmological imagination. Similarly, Middle Stone Age sites in Europe containing arranged bear skulls and ritual deposits indicate early forms of totemic reverence and spiritual engagement with animals. Neolithic ritual centers, including Gobekli Tepe, further demonstrate the emergence of monumental symbolic structures associated with animal imagery and collective ritual activity (Durkheim, 1915; Eliade, 1958).

As agricultural societies developed and political organization became more complex, animal sacrifice and ritual specialization expanded. Archaeological and textual evidence from ancient civilizations documents the institutionalization of sacrifice within state-level religious systems. For example, the Badari culture of ancient Egypt buried domesticated animals alongside elite individuals, while Sumerian temple records describe ox sacrifices to lunar deities. In Vedic India, ritual texts prescribed animal offerings for royal authority and household worship, and in Minoan Crete horned altars and ritual basins were constructed for ceremonial livestock sacrifice (Cauvin, 2000). These centralized ritual systems contrast with contemporary tribal practices that emphasize localized community participation and decentralized spirit mediation.

Ethnographic evidence from Indian tribal communities illustrates the persistence of community-based animistic traditions. Oraon groups in Chotanagpur conduct goat sacrifices to *bhuta* spirits at agricultural boundaries to ensure crop fertility (Roy,

1915). Naga communities maintain mithun sacrifice rituals that reinforce clan identity and intergenerational continuity (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1955). Among the Toda pastoralists, buffalo funeral ceremonies involve ritual milk offerings and symbolic dismemberment, reinforcing the sacred relationship between humans and dairy animals (Dumont, 1953). These practices demonstrate continuity in animistic ritual logic while adapting to changing socio-economic conditions.

Anthropological theory provides multiple interpretive frameworks for understanding these patterns. Tylor's intellectualist approach emphasized cognitive processes underlying spirit belief formation, while functionalist interpretations by Malinowski (1922) and Durkheim (1915) highlighted the practical roles of ritual in reducing uncertainty and strengthening social cohesion. More recent ontological perspectives proposed by Ingold (2000) and Descola (2013) emphasize non-human personhood and reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural world. Ethnographic examples from Santhal ancestor worship and Bhil soul beliefs further support these interpretations by illustrating how spirits continue to function as active social agents within everyday life (Vidyarthi, 1963).

The integration of cognitive science further strengthens this theoretical synthesis. Barrett's (2000) work on agency detection provides a psychological explanation for the cross-cultural persistence of spirit attribution, while Berkes' (1999) research on sacred ecology demonstrates the ecological effectiveness of ritual-based environmental governance. Indian sacred groves represent long-standing conservation systems that predate formal environmental policy frameworks. Contemporary field studies also document the adaptive transformation of animistic practices. Majumdar (1980) recorded Gond spirit possession rituals that maintained cultural identity amid displacement, while Valk (2001) observed Apatani ritual adaptations responding to hydropower development and ecological change. Shah's (2018) analysis further demonstrates how animistic worldviews contribute to political mobilization and resistance against land dispossession.

These understandings directly challenge unilinear evolutionary interpretations of religion and Weber's thesis of progressive disenchantment (Weber 1930). Rather than declining under modernization, animistic practices persist through syncretism, reinterpretation, and institutional adaptation. The interaction between cognitive predispositions, cultural traditions, and environmental contexts enables animism to remain socially meaningful and ecologically functional. This synthesis highlights animism as a dynamic cultural system capable of responding to globalization, environmental stress, and social transformation.

5.1   Policy Integration: Animism and Tribal Governance Frameworks:

The theoretical synthesis and ethnographic evidence presented in this review indicate that animistic practices offer practical insights for contemporary tribal welfare and environmental governance. Indigenous systems of sacred ecology, ritual authority, and customary land management have demonstrated long-term effectiveness in biodiversity conservation, conflict mediation, and cultural continuity. However, current policy frameworks often fail to formally recognize or integrate these traditional institutions.

Anthropological documentation shows that sacred groves, ritual specialists, and spirit-mediated governance systems function as informal regulatory mechanisms within tribal societies. Elwin's (1941) mapping of Central Indian sacred landscapes illustrates how forest protection is embedded within spiritual obligations, while Vidyarthi's (1963) studies highlight the role of ritual restrictions in regulating agricultural and forest resource use. Similarly, Apatani ritual specialists documented by Furer-Haimendorf (1948) demonstrate community-based mediation structures that operate alongside formal administrative institutions.

Despite their demonstrated effectiveness, such indigenous practices remain marginal within contemporary governance systems. This gap between policy frameworks and traditional ecological knowledge creates missed opportunities for culturally grounded conservation and welfare interventions. Integrating tribal belief systems into institutional planning can strengthen participatory governance, improve environmental monitoring, and support cultural sustainability.

The following table summarizes key areas where animistic practices intersect with policy needs and outlines potential pathways for integration.

TABLE 1
POLICY INTEGRATION OF TRIBAL ANIMISM PRACTICES

Aspect	Current Practice	Anthropological Evidence	Policy Gap	Recommendation
Sacred grove protection	Limited formal protection mechanisms	Over 4, 000 sacred groves documented as biodiversity refuges (Elwin, 1941)	Lack of legal recognition of customary conservation	State-level Gazette notification of sacred groves as CFRs under FRA 2006 [Section 3(1)(i)]
Ritual specialist participation	Exclusion from formal welfare planning	Apatani ritual specialists mediate community disputes (Furer-Haimendorf, 1948)	Traditional authorities not included in governance	Inclusion in PESA committee consultations
Biodiversity monitoring	Absence of sacred site inventories	Gond sacred groves show higher species diversity than surrounding forests (Vidyarthi, 1963)	No standardized ecological assessment	Annual biodiversity surveys and documentation
Cultural transmission	Limited documentation initiatives	Decline in youth participation in rituals (Shah, 2018)	Loss of oral traditions	Community-based oral history recording programs
Customary forest management	State-centered regulation models	Persa pen systems regulate podu cultivation (Elwin, 1941)	Customary rights under-recognized	Formal recognition of traditional management systems

5.2   Policy Implications and Ethical Considerations

The evidence presented in this review suggests that dismissing animistic systems as superstition overlooks their proven governance capacity. Indigenous conservation mechanisms have historically preserved forest cover, regulated harvesting practices, and maintained biodiversity in many regions where modern management approaches have faced limitations. Vidyarthi's documentation of Maler sacred groves and Gond ritual systems demonstrates sustained forest protection through culturally embedded compliance rather than external enforcement.

For contemporary policy implementation, animistic knowledge systems should be approached as complementary governance tools rather than symbolic cultural artifacts. Collaborative frameworks involving tribal elders, ritual authorities, and administrative institutions can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of conservation programs. Aligning sacred grove protection with Forest Rights Act provisions and integrating ritual specialists into Panchayati Raj decision-making structures can strengthen community participation and local accountability.

At an ethical level, this integration requires respect for indigenous autonomy and knowledge sovereignty. Policies must avoid instrumentalizing spiritual traditions solely for administrative objectives and instead promote genuine partnership models that acknowledge cultural values and local governance practices

VI.   CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that animism remains an adaptive socio-cultural framework among Indian tribal communities rather than a residual or primitive stage of religious evolution as originally proposed by Tylor. By integrating classical anthropological theory, Indian ethnographic evidence, relational ontologies associated with new animism, and cognitive science perspectives, the study identifies animism as a continuing cultural system that shapes ecological practices, social organization, and indigenous knowledge transmission.

The analysis highlights three central findings. First, reciprocal relationships between humans and non-human beings embedded in animistic practices contribute to biodiversity conservation through sacred groves, ritual restrictions, and customary land management. Second, cognitive mechanisms such as agency detection help explain the cross-cultural persistence of spirit beliefs, while ethnographic evidence demonstrates that these beliefs remain socially meaningful in contemporary contexts. Third, the continued practice of rituals among communities such as the Gonds, Oraons, Apatani, and Toda illustrates cultural resilience and adaptive transformation under conditions of globalization, environmental change, and socio-economic pressure.

By linking early anthropological theory with field-based documentation, the review challenges unilinear evolutionary narratives and Weberian assumptions of religious decline under modernity. Instead, animism emerges as a relational system of governance that mediates human–environment interactions and reinforces social cohesion. The findings further demonstrate that indigenous ecological knowledge embedded within animistic traditions predates formal conservation models and offers valuable insights for sustainable resource management.

The study also underscores the applied significance of animism for contemporary policy frameworks. Integrating sacred ecology practices, ritual authority structures, and customary governance mechanisms into tribal welfare and forest management programs can strengthen community participation and culturally grounded conservation initiatives. At the same time, such integration must respect indigenous autonomy and knowledge sovereignty to avoid instrumentalizing spiritual traditions for administrative purposes.

Despite its contributions, this review is limited by reliance on secondary sources and English-language scholarship, which may overlook locally produced knowledge and emerging perspectives from tribal youth and women. Future research should prioritize long-term ethnographic fieldwork, participatory methodologies, and interdisciplinary collaboration to document changing belief systems under urban migration, climate stress, and cultural transformation. Quantitative ecological assessments of sacred groves and longitudinal studies of ritual continuity can further strengthen empirical understanding.

Overall, this review positions animism not as an obsolete belief system but as an enduring cultural infrastructure that continues to shape human–nature relationships in India. By recognizing animism as both a cultural and ecological resource, anthropology can contribute more effectively to debates on sustainability, indigenous rights, and culturally inclusive development strategies.

AUTHORS DECLARATION

The opinions, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this research paper are solely those of the author and do not, in any manner reflect the official views or constitute an endorsement by the Anthropological Survey of India.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

[1] Barrett, Justin L. "Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2000, pp. 29-34.

[2] Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology*. Routledge, 1999.

[3] Bird-David, Nurit. "Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. S1, Feb. 1999, pp. S67-S91.

[4] Boyer, Pascal. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. Basic Books, 2001.

[5] Dutta, J., *et al*. "Sacred Groves of Ziro Valley Dominated by Apatani Tribes in Arunachal Pradesh." *Indian Journal of Hill Farming*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2017, pp. 132-38.

[6] Descola, Philippe. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd, U of Chicago P, 2013.

[7] Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

[8] Dumont, Louis. "The Structure of the Todo Pastoral Institutions." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 7, 1953, pp. 1-18.

[9] Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields, Free Press, 1995.

[10] Elwin, Verrier. *The Religion of the Tribes of the Central Provinces of India*. Oxford UP, 1941.

[11] Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford UP, 1965.

[12] Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Macmillan, 1890.

[13] Fuchs, Stephen. *The Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla*. Asia Publishing House, 1960.

[14] Furer-Haimendorf, Christoph von. *Himalayan Barbary*. John Murray, 1955.

[15] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.

[16] Guthrie, Stewart. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. Oxford UP, 1993.

[17] Hallowell, A. Irving. "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World-View." *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, edited by Stanley Diamond, Columbia UP, 1960, pp. 19-52.

[18] Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. Columbia UP, 2005.

[19] Harvey, Graham. "Animism and Ecology." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2021, pp. 456-78.

[20] Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge, 2000.

[21] Lang, Andrew. *The Making of Religion*. Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898.

[22] Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 1966.

[23] Malinowski, Bronisław. *Magic, Science and Religion*. Doubleday, 1948.

[24] Majumdar, Adrian. "Spirit Beliefs and Survival Strategies." *Man in India*, vol. 60, no. 4, 1980, pp. 321-39.

[25] Marett, R. R. "Pre-animistic Religion." *Folklore*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1909, pp. 132-96.

[26] McLennan, John Ferguson. *Primitive Marriage*. Adam and Charles Black, 1869.

[27] Murdock, George Peter. *Ethnographic Atlas*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967.

[28] Orans, Martin. *The Santal: A Tribe in Search of a Great Tradition*. Wayne State UP, 1965.

[29] Roy, Sarat Chandra. *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their History, Economic Life, and Social Organisation*. S.C. Roy, 1915.

[30] Sarkar, Kushankur, et al. "Sacred groves of Central India: Diversity status, carbon storage, and conservation strategies." *Biotropica*, vol. 54, no. 6, 2022, pp. 1321-33.

[31] Shah, Alpa. *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*. Hurst, 2018.

[32] Srinivas, M. N. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Clarendon P, 1952.

[33] Stocking, George W., Jr. *Victorian Anthropology*. Free Press, 1987.

[34] Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press, 1967.

[35] Tylor, Edward Burnett. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. 2 vols. John Murray, 1871.

[36] Valk, Ulo. "Apatani Ritual Specialists and Environmental Adaptation." *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2001, pp. 145-62.

[37] Vidyarthi, Lalita Prasad. *The Maler: A Study in Nature-Man-Spirit Complex*. Bookland Private, 1963.

[38] Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. "The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits." *Mana*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 239-70.

[39] Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.