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Research article

Ritual Landscapes of the *Sukan Buru*: Munda Cosmology and Sustainable Living Practices

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Abstract

Sukan Buru occupies a central place in the ritual geography of the Munda community, functioning not merely as a sacred hill but as a living landscape where cosmology, ecology, and everyday practices intersect. Celebrated annually in the Khunti district of Jharkhand during the winter months, the *Sukan Buru* festival represents a Buru-centered ritual system embedded within a sacred ecological terrain. The hill is revered as the abode of *Buru Bonga*, the mountain spirit, and serves as a site where ancestral memory, spiritual belief, and environmental ethics converge. This paper examines *Sukan Buru* as a ritual landscape through which Munda cosmological beliefs actively shape sustainable modes of living. Drawing upon oral traditions, local narratives, and ethnographic observations of ritual practices, the study highlights how seasonal worship, collective offerings, and ancestral invocations articulate a reciprocal relationship between humans and forests. The festival reinforces community cohesion, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and a moral responsibility toward ecological balance. Rather than viewing sustainability as a modern developmental concept, this study situates it within indigenous epistemologies that inherently integrate spiritual reverence with environmental stewardship. By analyzing *Sukan Buru* as both sacred geography and lived cultural practice, the paper argues that Munda cosmology offers a framework for understanding sustainable living rooted in relational ethics and collective belonging. The ritual landscape thus emerges as a dynamic space of cultural resilience, ecological consciousness, and indigenous knowledge preservation.

Keywords: Culture, Ecology, Sukan Buru, Munda Cosmology, Sustainable Living, Jharkhandwomen, indigiqueer.

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Introduction

Named after the hill where it is held, the *Sukan Buru* festival is an important annual ritual of the Munda community, one of the oldest indigenous communities of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau. Celebrated during winter (December–January), the festival coincides with the completion of the agricultural cycle and functions as a post-harvest thanksgiving ritual. More than a festive gathering, *Sukan Buru* articulates the Munda relationship with land and ecology. Ritual landscapes are not merely physical sites but culturally produced spaces where memory, cosmology, and ecological ethics intersect. Among the Mundas, nature is not viewed as a passive resource but as a living entity imbued with spirit and agency. Hills, forests, rivers, and land are central to cosmological imagination and social organisation, and ritual engagement with these elements reinforces ethical obligations toward the natural world.

This paper explores *Sukan Buru* as a ritual landscape that embodies indigenous sustainability. It argues that the festival functions as a cultural mechanism through which ecological values, communal responsibility, and intergenerational knowledge are reproduced. By foregrounding lived practices, such as collective ascent, ritual offerings, and kite flying, the paper situates *Sukan Buru* within broader discourses on indigenous knowledge systems, commons, and environmental stewardship.

Methodologically, this paper draws upon ethnographic observation, informal conversational interviews, oral narratives, and secondary sources, including the writings of Dr. Ram Dayal Munda and contemporary researchers working on Indigenous knowledge systems, Munda cosmology, and sustainability. The fieldwork was conducted during visits to Burhadih village, Khunti district, Jharkhand, beginning on 30 December 2024, with further field engagement in 2025. During these visits, I stayed in the village and engaged with community members, observing the cultural practices, ritual activities, and forms of collective participation associated with the Sukan Buru festival. Informal, conversational interviews were conducted with Abhijit Munda, Oman Manki, and Gunjal Ikir Munda, members of the Rumbul organisation and participants in the festival. These conversations provided insights into the cultural significance of Sukan Buru, the transmission of ritual knowledge, and the relationship between Munda cosmology, community life, and environmental consciousness.

Sukan Buru is located in the Khunti district of Jharkhand, approximately 70 kilometres from the state capital, Ranchi. Surrounded by the villages of Totada[1], Dulmi[2], and Sukandih[3], the hill is accessible through multiple forest trails, with the Totada route most commonly used due to its gentle slope. In Mundari, *buru* means mountain, underscoring the intimate relationship between language, landscape, and cosmology. According to Padmashree Ram Dayal Munda, one of the defining features of Munda culture is the recognition of all components of nature, air, water, hills, trees, and forests, as abodes of the Supreme Being (Munda, 2012). Each element is believed to be animated by a protective spirit or *bonga*. The

[1] Totada (or Thotada) is a small village in the Khunti block and district of Jharkhand

[2] Dulmi village is located in the Khunti block of Khunti district, Jharkhand

[3] Sukandih is a small rural village located in the Khunti district, Jharkhand

spirit of the hill, known as *Bir*[4] *Buru* or *Buru Bonga*, is venerated at Sukan Buru. This cosmological framework aligns with what scholars describe as animistic or relational ontologies, where humans exist in reciprocal relationships with non-human beings (Descola, 2013). Within this worldview, ritual acts are not symbolic gestures alone but ethical engagements that sustain balance between human communities and the natural world.

Natural Commons and the Munda Worldview

Within Munda cosmology, the sacred is not distant or abstract but socially embedded and ecologically grounded. As Ramdayal Munda (2012) observes in *Adi-Dharam*, the divine assumes a "socialised" form, intimate and relational, comparable to the affectionate bond between grandparent and grandchild. This kinship metaphor situates God within everyday social life and binds the human community to the sacred through reciprocal obligation rather than fear or transcendental distance. The divine presence is experienced most vividly in the distinctive forms of nature, hills, forests, rivers, and ancestral landscapes, which are regarded not merely as physical environments but as living abodes of spiritual power.

This cosmological orientation forms the philosophical foundation of what may be understood as natural commons in the Munda worldview. The Mundas do not simply share economic resources but also sacred trusts that sustain livelihood, social cohesion, egalitarian relations, and a bio-centric ethic. Land, forests, and water bodies are collectively accessed, ritually protected, and morally regulated. Ownership is secondary to custodianship; use is governed by custom and ritual rather than commodification. Munda belief holds that primordial land was created by the Supreme Being and entrusted to human communities for collective care. This theological framing transforms ecology into responsibility. The commons are not inert property, but a living inheritance sustained through moral discipline and ritual reaffirmation. In this context, ritual practices become mechanisms of environmental governance. The sacred hill of Sukan Buru exemplifies this integration of cosmology and commons. As a shared ritual landscape, it belongs simultaneously to everyone and to no individual. Its protection is ensured not through formal legal structures but through collective memory, ritual obligation, and ancestral reverence. The annual observances at Sukan Buru sacralise the land, reinforce communal responsibility, and symbolically prohibit extractive excess. Thus, sustainable living practices emerge not as modern environmental interventions but as embedded outcomes of cosmological belief and kinship ethics.

This indigenous governance model resonates with broader theoretical discussions on commons-based sustainability. Elinor Ostrom (1990) demonstrated that community-managed commons can function effectively without centralised control, while Fikret Berkes (2012) highlights the role of traditional ecological knowledge in sustaining socio-ecological systems. The Munda case illustrates that such governance is not merely institutional but cosmological: sustainability is secured through sacred obligation, relational ethics, and ritual practice.

In this way, the ritual landscape of Sukan Buru reveals how natural commons are embedded within Munda cosmology. Ecology, kinship, and spirituality converge to produce a system of

[4] *Bir* means Jungle in Mundari

collective stewardship that challenges modern paradigms of private ownership and resource commodification.

Ritual Landscapes and the Living Mountain: Cosmology and Ecology

In Munda cosmology, landscapes are not passive backdrops to human activity but living entities animated by spiritual presence. Hills, forests, rivers, and groves are understood as abodes of *bonga* (spirits), shaping a worldview in which nature and culture are deeply entangled. Sukan Buru, revered as the dwelling place of *Buru Bonga*, exemplifies this relational ontology, where the mountain is perceived as alive, protective, and morally responsive to human conduct. Such perceptions align with broader Indigenous cosmologies that emphasize reciprocity rather than domination in human–nature relationships.

Amitav Ghosh's reflection on the "living mountain" resonates strongly with this Munda understanding of sacred landscapes. He writes, *"of all the world's mountains ours was the most alive; that it would protect us and look after us"* (Ghosh, 2022, p.7). This notion of the mountain as a sentient guardian parallels the role of *Sukan Buru* in Munda ritual life, where the hill is not merely worshipped but engaged with as an ancestral presence that sustains both ecological balance and social harmony. Ritual observances during the *Sukan Buru* festival, such as collective offerings, abstentions, and seasonal prohibitions, function as ethical practices that regulate resource use and reaffirm communal responsibility toward land and forest.

Through these ritual engagements, cosmology becomes an ecological ethic. The worship of *Sukan Buru* reinforces sustainable living practices by embedding environmental care within religious duty. The hill's sacred status discourages over-extraction, deforestation, and disrespectful behavior, thereby ensuring long-term ecological resilience. Thus, *Sukan Buru* operates as a ritual landscape where cosmological beliefs are translated into everyday practices of conservation, collective memory, and sustainable coexistence.



Figure 1. Sunset at Sukan Buru. Photographed by Hare Krishna Kuiry, December 30. 2024.

Myth, Memory, and Ritual Performance: The *Sukan Buru* Narrative

Myth plays a central role in sacralizing *Sukan Buru* and legitimizing its ritual significance within the Munda community. One prominent oral narrative recounts a primordial conflict between *Sukan Buru* and Korang Buru. According to the myth, Korang Buru attacked first by shooting an arrow at Sukan Buru. In response, *Sukan Buru* bowed his head, thus evading the attack, and the arrow returned to Korang Buru, ultimately defeating it. This victory established Sukan Buru's supremacy and affirmed its protective power over the surrounding landscape.

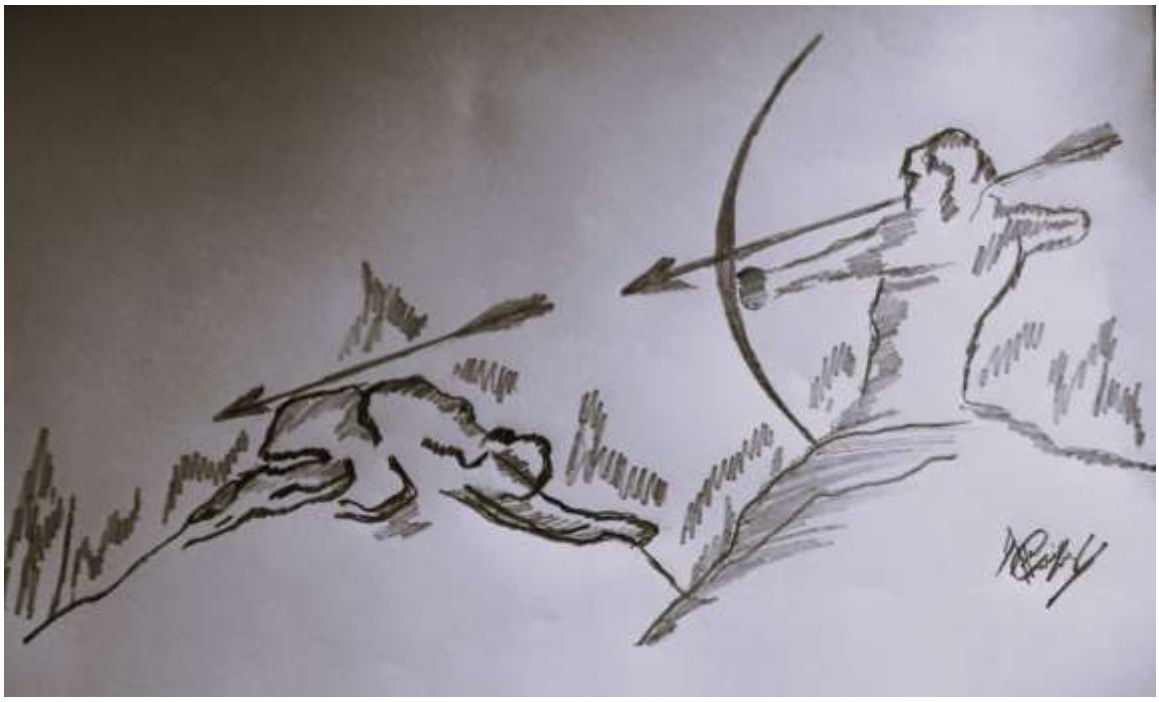


Figure. 2. Conflict between *Sukan Buru* and Korang Buru. Sketched by Hare Krishna Kuiry, Oct. 23, 2026.

The annual celebration of the *Sukan Buru* festival is deeply rooted in this mythic memory. The festival does not merely commemorate a past event but ritually reenacts the moral order established through the victory of Sukan Buru. By recalling this narrative, the community reinforces values of resilience, humility, and rightful authority, all of which are symbolically associated with the mountain. The ritual performance thus transforms myth into lived experience, renewing the bond between the community, their ancestors, and the land.

Furthermore, the myth situates *Sukan Buru* as a site of both cosmological power and historical continuity. Oral transmission of this narrative across generations ensures that ecological knowledge, ethical norms, and collective identity remain embedded in ritual practice. In this way, myth functions as a cultural mechanism through which environmental ethics are remembered, embodied, and sustained. The *Sukan Buru* festival, therefore, emerges as a convergence of myth, ritual, and ecology, affirming the mountain as both a sacred ancestor and a living landscape central to Munda sustainable living practices.

Ritual Practices and Collective Ascent

The day-long *Sukan Buru* festival is held on a date fixed by the *pahan* (village priest) in consultation with village elders. As a post-harvest ritual, it provides an opportunity to thank *Buru Bonga* for agricultural abundance, flowing rivers, forests, and collective well-being, while also seeking blessings for the coming year. The ritual ascent of the hill is itself a performative act of devotion. As the *pahan* leads the way, villagers gradually join the procession, transforming the slope into a moving congregation of song, prayer, and embodied reverence. Such collective movement through landscape reinforces social cohesion and shared identity (Turner, 1969).

Historically, *Sukan Buru* also functioned as a crucial site of social reunion. In periods when communication and travel were limited, the festival ensured annual gatherings of dispersed kin. Mothers could expect to meet married daughters, families exchanged news, and social bonds were renewed. While modern communication has altered these dynamics, the festival continues to operate as a space of togetherness and communal reaffirmation.

The Tradition of Kite Flying

The most visually distinctive feature of the *Sukan Buru* festival is the flying of kites. These kites differ markedly from the commercial, competitive kites associated with urban festivals elsewhere in India. Their forms, often compared to gliders or butterflies, reflect individual creativity within a shared aesthetic tradition. Historically, kite making relied on locally available natural materials, including organic adhesives and grass-fibre strings. While contemporary makers may use market materials, the principle of self-making remains central. Kites are never sold. As Gunjal Ikir Munda observes, to own a kite one must make it, reinforcing values of labour, creativity, and self-reliance (Gangopadhyay, 2022). Importantly, kite flying at *Sukan Buru* is non-competitive. There is no cutting of strings or rivalry. The kites are allowed to soar freely, symbolically mirroring ideals of harmony, coexistence, and respect for natural forces such as wind. From an ecological perspective, this practice represents a non-extractive, celebratory engagement with nature, aligning ritual joy with environmental ethics. Though the origins of this practice are not fully documented, oral traditions suggest that kite flying has been an integral part of the ritual for generations. Each year, while the basic design is retained, makers introduce subtle innovations, reflecting continuity as well as creativity.



Figure 3. After Buru Puja, a kite is being flown. Photographed by Hare Krishna Kuiry, Dec. 30. 2024.



Figure 4. A unique kite is being flown. Photographed by Hare Krishna Kuiry, Dec. 30. 2024.

Contemporary Challenges, Cultural Revitalisation, and *Sukan Buru* as a Living Carnival

Like many indigenous practices, the tradition of kite making and flying faced decline in recent years due to dwindling numbers of skilled elders and reduced interest among the youth. Recognising this, efforts have been made to revive the practice. In December, 2021, Rumbul, a Ranchi-based organisation dedicated to the protection and promotion of tribal language and culture, organised a kite-making workshop. The initiative created a space for intergenerational knowledge exchange, where elders shared techniques and stories with younger participants.

Researchers and cultural practitioners such as Gunjal Ikir Munda and Deep Lakshmi Munda have voiced concerns about cultural erosion while also highlighting such revival efforts as signs of resilience and adaptation.

As the day progresses, *Sukan Buru* takes on the atmosphere of a carnival. The air fills with music from *dhol*s and other traditional instruments. Women dance in groups, men sing, and established cultural troupes from nearby villages perform. A large *mela* extends from the base of the hill across its slopes, with stalls selling local delicacies. Designated spaces on the hilltop become centres of social interaction, performance, and rest. By sunset, people begin their descent. Some return home, others linger at the fair or gather at *akhras* for more singing and dancing. That dancing ritual is known as *raas*. The hill gradually quietens, but the resonance of the ritual continues in memory and practice.



Figure 5. Raas at Village Akhra. Photographed by Hare Krishna Kuiry, Dec. 30. 2024.

Anuj Lugun, in *"Gua–Noamundi,"* explores the trauma of displacement through a deeply personal, first-person voice that echoes the lived experiences of many Adivasi communities.

The speaker articulates a persistent fear of being uprooted from one sacred hill to another, a cyclical movement that ultimately leads to a barren, lifeless space:

Yesterday, my village was in Gua-Noamundi; today it is in Hatna Buru.
Tomorrow, it will take refuge on some other hill,
and the next day, on yet another.
In this way, one day, I will be ultimately cast onto a desert. (Lugun 41)

This poetic journey across hills is not merely geographical; it signifies the erosion of ritual landscapes that sustain Munda cosmology, where hills (*buru*) are living entities, abodes of deities, ancestors, and ecological balance. A similar anxiety underlies the *Sukan Buru* incident, where villagers collectively resisted the cutting of the sacred hill for the construction of a road and the installation of a mobile tower by private organizations. Understanding the Buru not as inert land but as a sacred, sentient presence, the community protested against this intervention. Multiple legal cases were filed against the villagers for defending the hill, yet their resistance prevailed. The eventual legal victory was marked not as a political triumph alone, but as a ritual reaffirmation, celebrated through collective worship of the land and its presiding deity, reinforcing the inseparability of landscape, faith, and community life.

In *"Gua-Noamundi (to the Martyrs (1980) of Gua-Noamundi),"* Lugun further documents the violent transformation of sacred hills under industrial expansion:

The peaks of Gua-Noamundi, Kiriburu,
and Hatna Buru
are drifting away from their neighbours,
sinking deeper into the earth... (Lugun 41)

The imagery of hills "sinking" and "drifting away" powerfully conveys not only environmental destruction but also the spiritual disintegration of tribal worlds. The devastation of *Gua* and *Noamundi* villages, alongside the demolition of *Kiriburu* and *Hatnaburu* hills, becomes a shared trauma, both personal and collective, for the poet and his community. These losses parallel the existential threat faced by the Munda people when ritual landscapes like *Sukan Buru* are targeted for development projects that disregard indigenous cosmologies.

Lugun's poems thus resonate strongly with the *Sukan Buru* incident, as both foreground the struggle to protect sacred ecologies against industrial encroachment. The speaker's movement from hill to hill mirrors the condition of tribal communities who, despite remaining within their ancestral regions, are rendered refugees in their own land. Industrialization, in this context, does not merely displace people physically but dismantles ritual continuity, ancestral memory, and sustainable modes of living. By situating the *Sukan Buru* resistance alongside Lugun's poetic testimony, the paper underscores how ritual landscapes function as sites of cosmology, resistance, and ecological ethics, central to Munda notions of sustainable living and cultural survival.

Conclusion

Sukan Buru is more than an annual festival; it is a ritual articulation of the Munda relationship with land, nature, and community. As a sacred landscape, the hill of *Sukan Buru* embodies cosmological beliefs, ethical obligations toward nature, and the principle of shared

commons. Through collective ascent, ritual offerings, music, dance, and the distinctive practice of kite flying, the Mundas reaffirm their reciprocal relationship with *Buru Bonga* and with one another.

The festival also functions as a living institution for intergenerational knowledge transmission. Elders pass on ritual knowledge, ecological values, and artisanal skills to younger generations, ensuring cultural continuity despite socio-economic change. Contemporary revival initiatives, such as kite-making workshops, demonstrate the adaptive resilience of indigenous traditions.

In an era marked by ecological degradation and cultural homogenisation, *Sukan Buru* offers valuable insights into indigenous models of sustainability rooted in reverence, restraint, and collective responsibility. Recognising and documenting such ritual landscapes is crucial not only for cultural preservation but also for reimagining sustainable futures informed by indigenous knowledge systems.

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