



Land, Memory and Resistance: Reading Adivasi Texts as Counternarratives

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Abstract:

Adivasi memory in India is deeply entwined with the land, not merely as territory but as a site of cultural identity, historical continuity, and political struggle. This paper examines the complex intersections of land, class, gender and state power through a critical reading of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta. Both authors emerge as significant voices articulating indigenous resistance to systemic marginalisation, development-induced displacement, and the erasure of tribal epistemologies.

The first section of the paper explores the multilayered dynamics of the tribal past in India, highlighting how dominant discourses of progress and modernity have led to the socio-economic and cultural disenfranchisement of Adivasi communities. By situating Shekhar and Kerketta's literary interventions within these broader socio-political trajectories, the paper reveals how their work challenges narratives that equate development with dispossession.

The second section engages critically with the framework of Indian ecofeminism, particularly its articulation by figures such as Vandana Shiva. While ecofeminism offers important insights into the gendered dimensions of ecological degradation, its often essentialist positioning of women as 'natural' custodians of the environment is interrogated in light of Adivasi experiences. Drawing on the works of Bina Agarwal, Meera Nanda, and Archana Prasad, this section explores the tensions between cultural ecofeminism and tribal realities, questioning whether the former can fully account for the intersectionality of gender, caste, and indigeneity.

This paper ultimately argues for a more intersectional and decolonial approach to Indian environmental discourse- one that foregrounds Adivasi agency, challenges homogenising ecofeminist narratives, and reimagines development through the lens of indigenous ecological knowledge and resistance.

Keywords: Development, Displacement, Ecofeminism, Gender, Resistance.

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Introduction

Forest-dwelling communities, commonly identified as 'tribals' or Adivasis, have occupied a central place in Indian environmental history. Once considered stewards of the natural world, these groups were stripped of their rights due to the imposition of a scientific model of forest management introduced by the colonial administration. This process disconnected them from their intricate and localised systems of forest use, resulting in the loss of their deep ecological knowledge. Their marginalisation exposed the uneven social burdens of environmental degradation, particularly among those on society's peripheries. Both colonial and post-independence states emerged as dominant forces driving ecological change, first through scientific and modernist approaches and later through large-scale technological projects, leading to significant and often harmful transformations of both ecosystems and communities. Landmark legislative interventions, such as the Indian Forest Act of 1865 (amended in 1878), are now viewed through an environmental lens as signalling a period of ecological decline. Moreover, the policies of the postcolonial Indian state have frequently been seen as an extension of colonial governance in matters of forest control.

The failed Forest Bill of 1982 is widely seen as a pivotal moment in the rise of Environmental History as a distinct academic field in India. Environmental historians, many of whom were sympathetic to or directly involved in Adivasi and eco-activism (Asher and Agarwal 2007), began uncovering the historical roots of contemporary struggles by delving into colonial records. These concerns have resurfaced following the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act in 2006, sparking dynamic debates among pro-Adivasi environmentalists, tribal activists, and NGOs (Asher and Agarwal 2007: 28–34). These discussions, coupled with constitutional reforms, have led to new understandings of how Adivasis engage with legal systems and environmental entitlements (Menon 2007).

Initial research in environmental history questioned the notion of British rule as an ecological turning point. Scholars investigated changes in imperial perceptions of nature and analysed how resource-dependent communities responded to colonial exploitation (Tucker and Richards 1983; Guha 1989, 1994; Gadgil and Guha 1993; Grove 1995; Arnold 1996; Agrawal 1998). A prevailing binary model emerged, portraying the colonial state, markets, and modern governance as causes of ecological harm, while depicting Adivasis as natural guardians of the environment. While the Subaltern Studies collective had merged tribals, peasants, and labourers into a broader category of the dispossessed, environmental historians highlighted distinctions, such as those between forest and agricultural communities, or between cultivated fields and communal forests and grazing lands (Bhattacharya 1998: 165).

For the environmental historians, the colonial state, under the guise of scientific forestry and rational resource management, imposed bureaucratic control over land and forests. This legacy continued in the postcolonial period, where development projects - dams, mines, industrial plantations - led to massive displacement of Adivasis, often without adequate compensation. Such interventions produce ecological refugees and environmental subjects - those forced to conform to external models of conservation and productivity.

1. The Development Project as Dispossession

But we Santhals are fools, aren't we? All of us Adivasis are fools. Down the years, down generations, the Diku have taken advantage of our foolishness. Tell me if I am wrong.

...

My name is Mangal Murmu. I am a musician. No, wait... I am a farmer. Or... Was a farmer. Was a farmer is right. Because I don't farm anymore. In my village of Matiajore, in Amrapara block of the Pakur district, not many Santhals farm anymore. Only a few of us still have farmland; most of it has been acquired by a mining company. It is a rich company. It is not that we didn't fight the acquisition. We did. While we were fighting, this political leader came, that political leader came, this Kiristan sister came, that Kiristan father came. Apparently, to support us. But we lost. And after we lost, everyone left. ... But our land did not come back to us. (Shekhar 170 - 171)

The Adivasi Will Not Dance, a collection of short stories, offers a poignant portrayal of the Santhal community in Jharkhand, delving into themes of displacement, marginalisation, and cultural identity. In the eponymous short story "The Adivasi Will Not Dance", the protagonist Mangal Murmu resists the compulsion to perform. He is beaten up for being a vocal dissenter, pinned down for resisting the imperative to perform at the behest of those in power. While establishing a sense of selfhood that he has been ruthlessly stripped of, he tries to narrativise his identity through these words. Consolidating his past, he comes to the realisation that he has lost his credibility as a farmer. The journey from ownership to dispossession sustained on the modernity template is diabolically entrenched in political muscle flexing as much as religious coercion. Often, the hapless Adivasis are left at the mercy of this unholy nexus, forcing them to leave behind their land and livelihood. Mangal Murmu had to refashion himself as a musician to make both ends meet. The flashback recounts the media's complicity in silencing the Adivasi cause, as one of the Adivasi boys is falsely accused of murdering a Christian missionary and then forcibly put behind bars. Once the double-edged sword is deployed, with the boy and the missionary glibly removed, stage is set for the coal company and the stone merchants to unleash havoc. The decision to not dance is polemical, a statement of resistance against manipulative and forced land acquisition by the power mongers. It is an attempt to inscribe the erasure that the Adivasi community is brainwashed into. At a moment of rare visibility accorded by the dance performance, his group has been asked to stage, Mangal takes the mic to voice his refusal:

We will sing and dance before you but tell us, do we have a reason to sing and dance? Do we have a reason to be happy? You will now start building the power plant, but this plant will be the end of us all, the end of all the Adivasi. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out of our homes and villages. We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? ... Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not— (187)

Mangal is asked to perform his traditional dance, not as a respected artist, but as an ornamental display of elite consumption. His culture is not celebrated - it is co-opted, commodified, and depoliticised. The state's inclusion of Adivasi dance at official functions is a tokenistic gesture meant to project multicultural harmony, while simultaneously destroying the very ecosystems and lifeways that sustain tribal identities. Mangal's rejection of this invitation is not just personal - it is a political statement against cultural exploitation under the guise of inclusion. The story does not isolate development as a mere policy failure, it shows how it makes women and children vulnerable and violable. Mangal's daughter, a young girl, is forced into sex work in the city after displacement.

In extractive zones (like mining belts in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha), land is appropriated for industrial use, often with little or no compensation for Adivasis. These are also spaces where militarisation, corporate control, and gendered violence converge. Scholars such as Asha Kowtal and K. Satyanarayana argue that forced sexual labour in postcolonial India

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operates within a colonial hangover, where Adivasi women's bodies become collateral in both development and militarism. The "development rhetoric", much like the "civilising mission", provides the moral cover for dispossession and violence. Feminist political ecologists like Nandini Sundar, Anuradha Roy, and Aparna Sundar note that sexual violence is frequently used to discipline resistance and disrupt community solidarity, particularly when Adivasi women participate in land rights movements.

Mangal raises pertinent questions to destabilise the development narrative peddled by the businessmen and the political leaders. A man on stage vociferously invokes the "Bharat Mahan" propaganda, showcasing the masked diabolism of these developers who masquerade as generous investors in the lands of Jharkhand. But the gullibility of the original inhabitants, who are either glibly manipulated or oppressively coerced into giving up the rich, fertile lands of Jharkhand to be mindlessly mined for profuse profit, is blatantly swept under the carpet. The story dismantles the celebratory narrative of state-led industrialisation by centring the Adivasi experience of displacement, cultural erasure, and ecological devastation, offering a powerful counter-narrative to mainstream discourses on progress.

"November is the Month of Migrations", another of his short stories in the collection, is an attempt to foreground the Adivasi migrant woman's travails and how her (Talamai Kisku in this case) sexuality becomes deviant and offensive to the configuration of women in the collective Indian consciousness. The twenty-three-year-old Kisku is among the forty-three people migrating from their villages in the hills and the distant corners of the Santhal Parganas to the railway station in the district headquarters. These Santhals abandon their lands and farms to board the train to Namal, a village in the Bardhaman district of West Bengal, and the paddy fields there. During the month that these Santhals spend in Bardhaman, they plant rice and other crops on farms owned by the zamindars of Bardhaman. The short story points not only to the extreme levels of economic deprivation that migrants have to encounter and the subsequent consequences that women, particularly, have to face, but also to the unconventional sexual behaviour that migrant women resort to, for survival itself.

The foundational concepts of nation, culture, and sexuality have always been marked by instability and complexity. Within this contested terrain, the Santhal women embody the heterogeneity of this discourse as the celebrated notions of female body, their sexuality vis-à-vis the nation, become unsettlingly hierarchical. When viewed through the lens of migratory exigencies, these referential frameworks become all the more amorphous and problematic. It is within this aegis of nationalistic discourse that Dalit and Adivasi women, as default outliers, make visible the deeply rooted discriminatory rubrics of the nation-women-respectability paradigm.

It is women who primarily bear the brunt of "development" more than men, since the tribal and forest economy is essentially a "women-centred" economy. A combination of ecological, cultural and socio-economic factors positions tribal women as central agents in sustaining and managing forest-based livelihoods. Their work includes the collection, management, and distribution of food, fuel, fodder, and water. The tribal women have been forced to seek alternative sources of livelihood to supplement family income, with their lands being usurped and the subsequent depletion of natural resources. This comes as an inevitable aftermath to the so-called state development. Women's migration and the attendant difficulties have not been discussed adequately in public domains. Shekhar's story, a sharp and disturbing analysis of one, in fact, many such instances, voices these brazen marginalisations often brushed aside or silenced in the official discourse of the nation. Significantly the kind of furor that the story generated speaks volumes about the nation's discomfort with these narratives for they not only remind us of the searing reality simmering under the facade of democratic equality they also problematise the sexual sanctity of the Indian woman, especially the middle class and high caste women who are burdened with sustaining the nation's idea of respectability.

“November is the Month of Migrations” and “The Adivasi Will Not Dance” are incisive indictments of forced and manipulated displacements. In portraying the sexual encounter between a jawan and a migrant woman in a matter-of-fact, regularly experienced encounter, the narrative upends the template of the chaste Indian woman who would go to any extent to preserve her sexual sanctity. It led to nationwide protests for being improper and sexually explicit. This response encapsulates a deep-seated stereotype prevailing in the Indian subconscious regarding women and sexuality and its associations with the idea of who we are as a nation. It also foregrounds how interactions with the outside world in the post-capitalist ‘development’ regime have introduced new structures of oppression and control for the Adivasi.

Jacinta Kerketta, a feisty poet and journalist of Kurukh Adivasi heritage, is a compelling and prominent voice advocating for environmental justice, women’s empowerment, and Adivasi rights. Her poem “O Shehr!”—originally penned in Hindi in the poetry collection *Angor* (2016)—offers a powerful reflection on the migration of tribal communities to urban spaces and its emotional and cultural consequences:

Leaving behind their homes,
 Their soil, and bales of straw
 Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask:
 O, city! Do you also get torn apart
 In the name of so-called progress?
 O, city! (Kerketta, 50)

Since a chunk of Adivasis - around seventy per cent - rely on agriculture for their subsistence, the professed developmental initiatives (“so-called progress?”), have steadily eroded their agricultural lands. This compels many to depend on informal and exploitative labour within agriculture or migrate to non-agricultural jobs. This shift not only displaces them from their ancestral homes but also strips them of their land rights. The loss of land—a critical source of income—has led to far-reaching and adverse effects on their lives. The poem also showcases how the Adivasis are ruthlessly pushed into leaving behind their belongings, their homes, their land and are unscrupulously forced into rebuilding their tattered and torn lives in the unwelcoming cities.

Kerketta’s powerful poetry, while engaging with the serious fallout of environmental injustice, unfolding mostly through gendered exploitation of tribal communities, also serves as a trenchant critique of consumerist culture. A strong, assertive voice—a nonconforming “I”—resonates throughout her work, often embodied in various forms: an Adivasi mother, a tribal girl, a militant, a warrior woman, and at times, the poet herself. The burning of forests and the suffering of people are portrayed as interconnected traumas, laying bare the violence of extractive capitalism. She invokes the ancestral spirits as the last recourse to environmental justice in this gravely imbalanced power dynamic. Resorting to a philosophical tone, she highlights the consequences of greed that is debilitatingly devouring humanity.

O ancestral spirits! How now do we escape, From the conspiracies of time, Concocted
 on the flames That from the sweltering earth rise? Where all is slowly being roasted
 alive, The air, the forests, and the soil, And man – in body and in mind? (54)

In poems like “I Want My Name Back”, she demands reclamation of Adivasi identity, stripped

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away through bureaucratic misnaming, cultural erasure, and forced assimilation. In many of her poems, the forest, river, and body become speaking subjects—witnesses to violence and bearers of memory. This personification of land recalls indigenous epistemologies that view nature as animate and sacred, offering a sharp alternative to capitalist, extractive logics.

2. Ecofeminism: Between Cultural Essentialism and Intersectional Praxis

Vandana Shiva is widely recognised as a central figure in Indian ecofeminism and environmentalism. As an academic, writer, and activist, she has become one of the most influential proponents of what has been termed “Third World” ecofeminism (Shoba 2013, 40). In her seminal work *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), Shiva argues that women’s environmental activism in India predates Western ecofeminist movements, such as those emerging from the UN’s Women’s Decade or protest encampments like Greenham Common and Clayoquot. For Shiva, the origins of Indian ecofeminism can be traced to grassroots movements, such as the Chipko movement, where hundreds of women in Rajasthan gave their lives to protect sacred khejri trees. This event is symbolic of women’s deep-rooted ecological consciousness.

Shiva envisions Indian ecofeminism as a pathway toward reclaiming what she calls the “feminine principle” in nature and society—a principle she associates with Shakti or Prakriti in Hindu cosmology. This feminine principle, described as the life-sustaining force, stands in stark contrast to the Western Cartesian worldview that divides mind and body, man and nature. In Shiva’s framework, Indian cosmology promotes unity rather than dualism, which in turn fosters an “ethic of care” towards nature. This ethic, she argues, emerges not merely from women’s social roles but from a biologically intrinsic connection to the environment.

According to Shiva, women in the Global South, particularly those engaged in subsistence agriculture and caregiving roles, possess an intimate knowledge of ecological sustainability. Their lived experiences make them more attuned to the destructive consequences of exploitative technological interventions and more capable of proposing sustainable alternatives. Her perspective aligns with the ideas of spiritual ecofeminists like Carol Christ, Starhawk, and Charlene Spretnak, who similarly frame women’s connection to nature in spiritual, cultural, and biological terms. While Vandana Shiva reclaims traditional views in which nature is personified as feminine - Prakriti in Indian philosophy - a force that is life-sustaining, dynamic, and cyclical, she critiques the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism and mechanistic science, which led to the objectification of nature as inert, passive and exploitable. She argues that both Nature and women were redefined in colonial modernist frameworks as resources to be controlled - a process mirrored in both ecological destruction and gender oppression. Shiva contrasts the feminine principle (Prakriti) with what she calls ‘maledvelopment’ - a term she uses to describe development rooted in patriarchal capitalist science, which emphasises control, conquest and profit. For Shiva feminine nature is seen as autonomous and self-organising, not something to be dominated. Masculinist science treats nature as mechanical and fragmented, legitimising ecological destruction under the guise of progress.

However, Shiva’s perspective has not gone unchallenged. Her reliance on a romanticised, essentialist vision of women as inherently closer to nature has drawn significant criticism. By grounding her theory in a selective reading of Hindu cosmology, Shiva overlooks the patriarchal dimensions of that very tradition. She does not critically engage with the gendered hierarchies embedded in the dualism of Prakriti (feminine/nature) and Purusha (masculine/spirit), nor does she address how these philosophical constructs operate within

broader systems of caste, class, and religious oppression.

Moreover, Shiva's tendency to generalise from specific rural communities in northwest India to the entire Global South has been critiqued for erasing the diversity of women's experiences across different cultural, economic, and political contexts. Scholars such as Bina Agarwal (1998) and Meera Nanda (1991, 2005) have strongly rejected Shiva's framework, labelling it a form of "cultural ecofeminism" that romanticises women's roles and naturalises gender differences. Archana Prasad, in *Against Ecological Romanticism* (2011), similarly warns that such frameworks risk reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and fail to challenge the structural causes of environmental degradation.

Thus, while Shiva's contributions have played a pivotal role in shaping discourses on ecofeminism and environmental justice in India, her work raises complex questions about essentialism, representation, and the need to interrogate how cultural narratives intersect with patriarchy, caste, and socio-political inequality. Her legacy, therefore, must be viewed as both foundational and contested within the broader field of feminist environmental thought.

Bina Agarwal argues that not all women relate to nature in the same way, and the idea of "women as natural carers" can be depoliticising and reductive. In her response to Shiva's blanket rejection of Science and development, Agarwal advocates instead for a nuanced, participatory model of sustainable development. Central to her analysis is the emphasis on poor rural and Dalit women who face systemic ecological marginalisation. She provides a rigorous intersectional critique, advocating for tangible policy change, land reforms, and economic agency.

Conclusion

Both Shekhar and Kerketta reflect an inherent intimacy between Adivasi women and the land, but rather than celebrating this innate, biological intimacy, both authors foreground land as a site of struggle, survival, and dispossession, not mythic harmony. In Shekhar's stories, the land is not a resource but a cultural and spiritual lifeline. The desecration of land through mining or industrialisation is portrayed as a violation of both nature and the Adivasi woman. His stories expose the violence of mining, displacement, and development, not as abstract environmental crises, but as assaults on tribal existence and dignity, often enacted through the bodies of women. For instance, in the titular story, the Adivasi community's refusal to "dance" for the state and industrial interests becomes a powerful metaphor for refusing commodification and erasure. It also foregrounds the hypervisibility and simultaneous invisibility of Adivasi women's bodies in public discourse. Kerketta's poetry often involves Adivasi women as carriers of memory, soil, seed, and language. However, the writers do not romanticise tribal life. Instead, they highlight the economic marginalisation, gendered labour, land alienation, and state violence. Their works posit the precarious intersection of class, caste, social hierarchy, gender and capitalism, highlighting the multifaceted constituents of Adivasi marginalisation.

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