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To cite this article: Armin Chiocchetti (2026) Eco-Local and Eco-Global: Some Literary Interventions in Adivasi Hindi Short Stories, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 49:1, 250-267, DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2025.2600225](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2025.2600225)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2025.2600225>



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Published online: 19 Jan 2026.



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Eco-Local and Eco-Global: Some Literary Interventions in Adivasi Hindi Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

The present article investigates how three Adivasi writers from Jharkhand engage with issues relating to environmental exploitation and ethnic/class subordination. Starting from a rough overview of ecological writing and ecocriticism in Hindi literature, the article shows how these authors relate social injustice to ecological issues, demonstrating that eco-writing is a regular presence in Adivasi literature. Further, it suggests that notwithstanding the specifically local identity of the authors as Adivasis in the Indian state of Jharkhand, the ecological concerns expressed in their short stories must be placed in the broader frameworks of environmental global crisis and discourses on indigeneity. Finally, the article discusses how the authors' social advancement is reflected in their representation of Adivasi characters, and the implications this bears for the 'we/they' dichotomy present in the Adivasi literary discourse.

KEYWORDS

Adivasi literature;
ecocriticism;
environmental
degradation;
globalisation; identity;
pollution

Introduction

The past years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in ecocritical readings in the context of South Asian literature.¹ However, such interest appears to be mostly limited to literature written in English, while it sporadically turns to other languages of the subcontinent. In the case of Hindi,² although attempts to investigate the literary representation of nature have been made since at least the 1950s,³ a focus on

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1. See Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Shazia Rahman, *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism: Pakistani Women's Literary and Cinematic Fictions* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019); Sundhya Walther, *Multispecies Modernity: Disorderly Life in Postcolonial Literature* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2021). Consider also the special issue of *South Asian Review*, edited by Shazia Rahman, 'The Environment of South Asia', *South Asian Review*, Special Issue, 42, no. 4 (2021).
2. Including the literary dialects Braj and Awadhi.
3. Valerie Ritter, in her study on nature in Hindi poetry and criticism, refers to the critical works of Raghuvāṛś, Rameśvarlāl Khaṇḍelvāl 'Taruṅ' and Gulāb Rāy: see Valerie Ritter, *Kama's Flowers: Nature in Hindi Poetry and Criticism, 1885–1925* (University of New York Press, 2011), 262, endnote 5. Although more recent, her work itself provides an analysis of nature writing in Hindi in the period, 1885–1925. In particular, Ritter points to the Western and Bengali influences on modern Hindi literature through

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ecological concerns seems to be still quite limited in modern and contemporary literary criticism.⁴ The novelty and scarcity of these attempts speak for a yet under-developed research line. The lack of an ecological perspective on Hindi literature might lead one to assume that in Hindi literary production, ecological concerns are marginal. However, although explicitly environmental writing might be less developed in mainstream Hindi literature in comparison to, for instance, East Asian literatures,⁵ in more regional contexts, authors dealing with environmental issues are neither rare nor novel. For example, it appears that Jharkhand,⁶ on the outskirts of the Hindi belt, has produced several authors, especially among Adivasis,⁷ who have been engaging with environment-related themes since the early 1980s.⁸ Adivasi authors then offer a study case going beyond the themes of social injustice and sufferance typically found in the literature of marginalised groups, particularly present in Dalit writing.⁹

English Romanticism and the poetry of Bankimchandra Chatterji and Rabindranath Tagore on one side, and the literary traditions indigenous to the subcontinent such as Braj devotional poetry on the other.

4. See Danuta Stasik, 'My Intimate Neighbour: Kunwar Narain's Poetics of Trees', *Pandanus '14: Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual* 8, no. 2 (2014): 21–36, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345388061>; Alessandra Consolaro, 'Dying Trees in Globalizing Hindi Literature: Environment, Middle Classes, and Posthuman Awareness', *Kervan—International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies* 20 (2016): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.13135/1825-263X/1942>; Mukul Sharma, "'My World Is a Different World": Caste and Dalit Eco-Literary Traditions', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1013–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1667057>; Joya John, *Nature Displaced: Postcolonial Hindi Literature and the Environment* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2020); Joya John, 'The American Indian Adivasi: Writing Adivasi Indigeneity in Ranendra's *Lords of the Global Village*', *South Asian Review* 42, no. 4 (2021): 380–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2021.1966235>. Some scholars have engaged with Hindu religious texts and traditions from a deliberately ecological perspective: see Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, ed., *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (Harvard University Press, 2000).
5. This is, however, difficult to evaluate. Thornber gives ample demonstration about how prominent ecological concerns are in Chinese, Japanese and Korean literatures: see Karen Thornber, *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* (University of Michigan Press, 2012). The works elicited in the previous note provide several examples from mainstream Hindi literature. More recently, the collections of poems, *Nadiyārṁ Baḥtī Raheṁgī* and *Kuṁṁvarvartī Kaise Bahe*, by Rakesh Kabir (b. 1982) have provided new poetry that surely can be considered a conscious form of eco-writing: see Rakesh Kabir, *Nadiyārṁ Baḥtī Raheṁgī* (Agora, 2018); Rakesh Kabir, *Kuṁṁvarvartī Kaise Bahe* (Prabhat Prakashan, 2020).
6. Formerly part of Bihar, from which it separated on November 15, 2000, Jharkhand (literally 'land of forests') extends over the hilly regions of the Chota Nagpur Plateau and the Santal Parganas, reaching up to the Ganges basin at its border with Bihar and West Bengal. As the name suggests, until relatively recent times, it used to be covered in large part by thick tropical and subtropical forests (at present 30 percent of the total area), home of a great biodiversity including wild elephants and tigers.
7. Adivasi is the term commonly used in India to designate those communities officially recognised by the Indian Constitution as 'Scheduled Tribes' (*anusūcit janjāti* in Hindi). Literally meaning 'first inhabitants', it was coined in the 1930s as a calque of the word 'aborigine', also used by early ethnographers together with 'tribe'. Nowadays, Adivasi is also coterminous with 'Indigenous'. See below.
8. The first traceable works are perhaps the novels and short stories by Peter Paul Ekka: see, for instance, Peter Paul Ekka, *Palās ke Phūl* (Satya Bharti Prakashan, 1982); Peter Paul Ekka, *Partī Zamīn* (Satya Bharti Prakashan, 1983). At that time, other Adivasi authors were also writing short stories, possibly touching the same themes, publishing them in mainstream magazines (e.g. *Prabhāt Khabar*, *Hindustān*, *Rāhīcī Ekspres*, etc.) or broadcasting them on radio (personal communication of Franciska Kujur and Walter Bhengra 'Tarun'). For a summary on the emergence of Adivasi authors in Hindi literature, see Armin Chiochetti, *Digging into Anubhūti: Explorations in Hindi Adivasi Short Stories Writing* (published PhD thesis, Uppsala University, 2025), chap. 1.
9. Dalits, previously known by the term 'untouchables', occupy the lowest stratum in the Indian caste system. For a discussion on the themes of Dalit literature, see, for instance, Laura R. Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

It must be specified that Hindi is not the only language of this endeavour. Several Jharkhandi Adivasi authors write in local languages (also called tribal languages) such as Mundari, Kharia, Santali and others, as the collection, *Lokpriya Ādivāsī Kahāniyām*, edited by Vandana Tete amply demonstrates.¹⁰ However, it is Hindi (being the official and educational language of Jharkhand and thus, together with English, the prestige language) that develops more than any other vernacular into a lingua franca among Adivasis from different linguistic and identity backgrounds, becoming thus the major vehicle for creative writing.¹¹

Several authors (in fact both Adivasi and non-Adivasi) can be read under the lens of ecocriticism, namely the study of ‘the ways in which we portray the relationship between humans and the environment’.¹² Among the literary genres, poetry has been perhaps the most successful so far.¹³ In a recent publication, I tried to provide a picture of how Adivasi authors from Jharkhand represent the environment in their short stories.¹⁴ By bringing attention to some rather marginal voices, part of my aim was to show how ecological concerns, which in the local context of Jharkhand constitute central tropes, are approached as part of the dynamics of social injustice and identity questions, and how, in turn, this necessarily widens the framework of Hindi/Indian literature. Here, I will address three short stories by three Adivasi authors, Peter Paul Ekka (1953–2018), Rose Kerketta (1940–2025) and Sikra Das Tirki (1954),¹⁵ and while starting off from the ecological concerns expressed in the short stories, the analysis will shift focus from the local/regional scale to the global scale and reveal how these two are linked together.¹⁶ It will be seen that the

10. Vandana Tete, ed., *Lokpriya Ādivāsī Kahāniyām* (Prabhat Prakashan, 2017).

11. The linguistic complexity of Jharkhand and the dynamics driving the scope of language choice for creative writing are beyond the scope of this article.

12. Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2011), i.

13. The most notable case is the Adivasi poet Jacinta Kerketta, who is now widely known in and outside India, and whose collections of poems have been translated into several European languages. Another case in point is the non-Adivasi author Ranendra, who has recently gained popularity especially after his two Hindi novels, *Gāyab Hotā Deś* and *Global Gārv ke Devtā*: see Ranendra, *Gāyab Hotā Deś* (Penguin Books, 2014); Ranendra, *Global Gārv ke Devtā* (Bharti Gyanpith, 2009).

14. Chiochetti, *Digging into Anubhūti*, chap. 4.

15. The choice of authors was largely dictated by the dynamics intrinsic to their emergence in the public sphere and the accessibility of their publications on the market. By this, I simply mean that these authors (especially the former two) are among the—still few—figures to have gained more prominence in the niche of Jharkhandi Adivasi short story writing in Hindi, their works being readily available in Ranchi’s famous Satya Bharati bookshop and often quoted in the theoretical books and essays on the subject. In the case of Rose Kerketta, this is certainly motivated by her intensive career as an activist. In the case of Peter Paul Ekka, it might depend on the fact that he has been one of the first and most productive authors. Regarding Sikra Das Tirki, I was intrigued by the possibility of accessing texts originally written in Mundari. The choice of the short stories followed the idea of investigating different causes of environmental disruption in order to cover a broader thematic space. The choice of Sikra Das Tirki’s story felt as an imperative for the reason that will be elaborated more in detail in the analysis, i.e. the conscious ecological reflection that characterises its narration, which is a very rare occurrence even inside an underdeveloped line of Hindi literature as eco-writing. Peter Paul Ekka’s story was chosen for quite the opposite reason, i.e. because it seemed a particularly representative case, its plot development being almost prototypical for Adivasi short stories. Lastly, the inclusion of Rose Kerketta’s story was motivated by the fact that it lifts in a much visible and straightforward way the ‘we/they’ dichotomy typical of Adivasis/Indigenous people discourses.

16. The focus on environmental degradation and the widening of the analysis from local to global are both aspects encompassed in what Hubert Zapf has labelled the ‘third wave’ of ecocriticism: see Hubert Zapf, ‘Introduction’, in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (De

ecological disruption in Jharkhand and the human exploitation derived from it are intimately bound to the construction of Adivasi identity and the idea of indigeneity. As noticed by Parajuli, in Adivasi politics, ecological destruction comes to be read in ethnic terms, and vice versa, ethnic subordination becomes itself an ecological issue,¹⁷ a line that will be further explored later on. It shall be kept in mind that indigeneity is also a political issue both at the Indian regional/state level¹⁸ and internationally, as the entrance of Indigenous voices in the UN through the WGIP (Working Group of Indigenous Populations), established in 1982, demonstrates.¹⁹ Indeed, the Adivasi discourse found in the UN group a global platform, where 'being indigenous,' in addition to its literal sense, became related to environmentalism and the experience of marginalisation and exploitation²⁰ and created a 'we/they' dichotomy similar to those at the base of any ethnic nationalism that compelled Niezen to address this newly emerged phenomenon with the term 'indigenism'.²¹ Then, I maintain that just as the political discourse of indigeneity widens the horizon of Jharkhandi Adivasis, taking them from their local contexts to broader arenas (e.g. the United Nations and the discourse on Indigenous rights), the same occurs on the literary plane. In the same way as romantic nature writing puts Adivasi literature in the broader framework of Indian literary movements, *châyāvād* in particular (see note 16),²² the lens of ecocriticism intended as 'concerns for the ecology' brings Jharkhandi Adivasi literature in the global dimension of ecological disruption and Indigenous identity. This is an important point because it indicates that the alignment between Hindi literature and the global phenomenon of environmental exploitation does not manifest itself only through mainstream Hindi writers (where the phenomenon is equally unresearched) but also through marginal voices.²³

Gruyer, 2016), 6. I will leave out other aspects that Zapf enumerates inside the third wave of ecocriticism and also considerations regarding the romantic nature writing that in Adivasi literature often coexists with ecological concerns. Elsewhere, I have engaged with the latter issue, pointing to the traces of the Hindi *châyāvādi* tradition and even from the English romantic tradition in the writings of Alice Ekka, another Adivasi author active in the 1960s: see Armin Chiocchetti, 'Alice Ekka and the Question of Authenticity in Hindi Adivasi Literature', *Orientalia Suecana* 70 (2021): 114–28, <https://doi.org/10.33063/diva-462544>.

17. Pramod Parajuli, 'Ecological Ethnicity in the Making: Developmentalist Hegemonies and Emergent Identities in India', *Identities* 3, nos. 1–2 (1996): 14–59, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240536782>.
18. In the case of Jharkhand, it is deeply connected to the formation of a separate state from Bihar: see K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India* (Manohar, 2020 [1985]), chap. 10; Louise Tillin, *Remapping India: New States and Their Political Origins* (Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 3.
19. Andrea Muehlebach, "Making Place" at the United Nations: Indigenous Cultural Politics at the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations', *Cultural Anthropology: Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 415–48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/656683>.
20. Besides these broad and somewhat vague aspects, no agreement exists on a specific definition.
21. Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (University of California Press, 2003).
22. *Châyāvād*, from *châyā* ('shadow') and the suffix *-vād* ('-ism') (hence, literally, 'shadowism'), was a literary movement (particularly in Hindi poetry) roughly comparable to the neo-romanticism in vogue between the 1920s and 1930s.
23. The case of Ranendra (see note 13), who is not an Adivasi himself but employs themes bound to the Adivasis, seems to confirm rather than contradict this thesis. The propensity of Adivasi authors to engage with the environment can also be appreciated in English language writers from the Northeast, such as Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai (both receivers of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 and 2017, respectively): Sayantan Chakraborty, 'Naga Pastoral? The Post-Pastoral Possibilities in Temsula

Of course, the present discussion cannot eschew the fact that Adivasi politics and literature are part of the broader debate, much animated in the last decades, on the relationship between Indigenous people and ecology. Beginning in the 1970s, scholars of cultural ecology have suggested the idea of Indigenous people being natural conservationists,²⁴ strongly promoted also by Indigenous spokespersons: ‘In the world of today there are two systems, two different irreconcilable “ways of life”. The Indian world—collective, communal, human respectful of nature, and wise—and the western world—greedy, destructive, individualist, and enemy of nature.’²⁵ Indigenous people all around the world have thus come to be understood as the incarnation of an ecological alternative to the capitalist industrial globalisation promulgated by Western countries. Such ascriptions have however also been criticised,²⁶ as the trope of the ‘ecological Indian’ living in harmony with nature resurrects the Rousseauian myth of the ‘noble savage’²⁷ affixed upon the natives of North America,²⁸ later extended to include Amazonian Indians,²⁹ which saw in ‘primitive’ people a quintessential non-European ‘Other’.

This idea also finds its way into fictional literature. Thus, back in the context of Jharkhandi Adivasis, Joya John, commenting on the re-interpretation of the tale of the Asur³⁰ in ecological terms in Ranendra’s *Lords of the Global Village*, observes the ‘emergence of the Indigene as an ecological subject *par excellence*’,³¹ a line loosely

Ao’s Hill-Poems’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 3 (2016): 358–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989415608904>; Paban Chakraborty, “The Hidden Valleys of My Home”: Home, Identity, and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai’, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (2019): 53–60, 10.35684/JLCI.2019.5206.

24. See Howard T. Odum, *Environment, Power and Society* (Wiley, 1972). Similar stances regarding the Indian context have been strongly promoted by activists such as Vandana Shiva: e.g. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (Kali for Women, 1988); see also Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Madhav Gadgil and Kailash C. Malhotra, ‘The Ecological Significance of Caste’, in *Social Ecology*, ed. Ramachandra Guha (Oxford University Press, 1994).
25. From a report to the International NGO Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Land, 1981, quoted in Kent H. Redford, ‘The Ecologically Noble Savage’, *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (March 1, 1991), accessed June 4, 2024, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/15-1-romanticizing-stone-age>.
26. See Terry A. Rambo, *Primitive Polluters: Semang Impact on the Malaysian Tropical Rain Forest Ecosystem* (University of Michigan Press, 1985); Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (W.W. Norton, 1999). For a similar line in the Indian context, see also the discussion offered in Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 160–74.
27. For an account on the rise and evolution of the term, see Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (University of California, 2001).
28. See Redford, ‘Ecologically Noble Savage’; Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 129–30.
29. Candace Slater, ‘Amazonia as Edenic Narrative’, in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (Norton, 1996); Elmar Schmidt, ‘Latin American Environmental Discourses, Indigenous Ecological Consciousness and the Problem of “Authentic” Native Identities’, in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Zapf Hubert (De Gruyter, 2016).
30. The tale of the Asur is a mythological tale describing how the Sun God (Sing Bonga) punished the Asur people (an Adivasi community) for burning the forests, from which heavy smoke rose, reaching up to the sky, in order to keep up with their occupation of ore-smelters. Sing Bonga, after some attempts to warn the Asurs, descended on earth disguised as a boy with a skin disease and tricked the Asurs into the burning furnaces where they burnt to death.
31. John, ‘American Indian Adivasi’, 380.

suggested also by Paban Chakraborty.³² A similar stance has also been put forward regarding Dalit eco-literary traditions. Thus, Mukul Sharma has argued Dalit eco-literary traditions to be different due to a different, 'Dalit' relationship with nature, making their experience a different world altogether.³³

Moreover, the idea of 'difference' in terms of cultural ecology regarding Indigenous communities briefly exposed above intertwines with the discussion about authorship present in Adivasi literary criticism. Such discussion, building itself on the dichotomy of Adivasi and non-Adivasi, has produced a discourse of literary 'authenticity' that reflects the idea of a 'group-based truth', or 'insider doctrine',³⁴ contraposing Adivasi authors' self-perception or self-experience (*anubhūti* or *svānubhūti*) as the source of authentic representations to the sympathy or empathy (*sahānubhūti*) of non-Adivasi authors.³⁵

In the narrative of oppression moulded by Adivasi authors, typically built on the exploitation of Adivasis by the *dikū*,³⁶ the theme of environmental degradation presents communities embedded in nature as the victims of such environmental degradation by the hand of external exploiters. However, in addition to this, the ecological sensibility exposed in the short stories speaks for the global dimension in which they are produced and, together with other elements such as some stereotypical characterisations, reveals the relation to mainstream middle-class perspectives that such a global dimension presupposes. Thus, I will argue that Adivasi authors are not foreign to mainstream perspectives, but, on the contrary, they can be, and often are, informed by them, which will also lead to a further reflection on the idea of 'difference' that sustains the discourse of authenticity and identity in the Adivasi literary discourse. The next main section will present the authors and give a summary of the stories, which afterwards will be closely analysed against the points of the discussion started here. Before addressing the material, it is important to expose briefly the ecological context of Jharkhand, where the short stories are set.

Ecological exploitation in Jharkhand

Due to the abundance of mineral resources, Jharkhand is an important mining hub and the home for a large number of industries concentrated in cities such as Ranchi,

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32. Paban Chakraborty, "The Hidden Valleys of My Home": Home, Identity, and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (2019): 53–60, <https://doi.org/10.35684/JLCI.2019.5206>. This opens up a discussion about the re-interpretations of a mythological tale according to the frame of our days, which from a philological point of view seems to be problematic. However, such a discussion eschews the limits of this article.
 33. Sharma, "My World".
 34. Robert K. Merton, 'Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge', *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 1 (1972): 9–47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776569>.
 35. See Heinz Werner Wessler, 'From Marginalization to Rediscovery of Identity: Dalit and Adivasi Voices in Hindi Literature', *Studia Neophilologica* 92, no. 2 (2020): 159–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2020.1751703>. For a longer discussion, see Chiochetti, *Digging into Anubhūti*, 68–92.
 36. *Dikū* (etymologically from Hindi *diq karnā* ('to irritate, tease'), and thus *dikū* ('trouble maker') is a term that refers to exploiters, especially moneylenders and contractors. For a discussion over the meaning and use of the term *dikū*, see S.C. Sina and Jyoti Sen, 'The Concept of Diku Among the Tribes of Chotanagpur', *Man in India* 49, no. 2 (1969): 121–38.

Jamshedpur, Bokaro Steel City and Dhanbad.³⁷ The tremendous industrial development that took place after India's Independence and that has continued until today has led some to call Jharkhand the 'Ruhr of India'.³⁸ Mining and industrial activities have, however, led to massive deforestation, displacement of Adivasi communities,³⁹ and pollution of rivers and groundwater. Thus, for instance, Kumar et al. do not hesitate to say that the Damodar river, whose valley is rich in coal, has turned into an 'industrial effluent channel' due to the discharge of large volumes of untreated or semi-treated industrial waste.⁴⁰

Jharkhand's territory is also particularly rich in terms of water resources, which have made it a suitable place for the establishment of massive dams, some of which are the legacy of the Nehruvian era (e.g. Maithon Dam, Khandoli Dam, Konar Dam, Tilaiya Dam, Panchet Dam). The construction of dams also comes with a toll and it is estimated that that alone is the first cause of displacement in India, accounting for 75–80 percent of the cases.⁴¹ Several have been the movements in India that emerged to fight against new dam projects, among which it is worth mentioning the Narmada Bachao Andolan⁴² and the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan (KKJS).⁴³ However, scholars have started looking more critically at dams not only because of their environmental impact and ethical implications but also from an economic point of view.⁴⁴

Lastly, resulting from the above-mentioned activities, deforestation is another important concern in Jharkhand and India altogether. Its history goes back to at least the middle of the nineteenth century, when wood was extracted in great quantities for the building of railway sleepers. Adivasis and peasant communities have ever since been in continuous disputes with the Forest Department and its officers. Colonial rule first, and the Indian government later, through several Forest Acts (the first of which goes back to 1865), have gradually eroded and made illegal the traditional forms of forest usage characteristic of Adivasi communities.⁴⁵

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37. At present, Jharkhand counts 26 mega industries and 106 large and medium industries: see 'Industrial Development of Jharkhand', Government of Jharkhand, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.jharkhand.gov.in/home/AboutIndustries>.
 38. Uday Kumar, Kalpana Prasad and Binay Kumar, 'Status of Environment in Chotanagpur—Santal Pargana Region of Jharkhand', *Social Change* 29, nos. 3–4 (1999): 201–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004908579902900413>.
 39. Mathew Areeparampil, 'Displacement due to Mining in Jharkhand', *Economic & Political Weekly* 31, no. 24 (1996): 1524–28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4404276>.
 40. Kumar, Prasad and Kumar, 'Status of Environment', 201.
 41. Amrita Patwardhan, 'Dams and Tribal People in India', in *Forest Peoples Programme: Dams, Indigenous People and Vulnerable Ethnic Minorities*, Thematic Review 1.2, prepared as an input to the World Commission on Dams, ed. Marcus Colchester (Cape Town, 2000).
 42. For a comprehensive overview, see Baviskar, *In the Belly*.
 43. See Kaushik Ghosh, 'Between Global Flows and Local Dams: Indigenousness, Locality, and the Transnational Sphere in Jharkhand, India', *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2006): 501–34, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2006.21.4.501>.
 44. Satyajit Singh, *Taming the Waters: The Political Economy of Large Dams in India* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (Zed Books, 2001).
 45. See Gadgil and Guha, *This Fissured Land*; Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860–1914* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

Three authors, three stories

High chimneys and black skies: A tale of oppression

Peter Paul Ekka was born in Samtoli, a village near Simdega (in the homonymous district) in a Kurukh family. He was a Jesuit priest and studied theology and chemistry at various universities. He was a professor of chemistry at St. Xavier's College in Ranchi and later on at St. Xavier's College in Tezpur, Assam. Since a young age, Ekka also cultivated a strong interest for literature. He read many of Premchand's works and became fond later on of Anthony de Mello, whose succinct style he appreciated, readily adopting it himself.⁴⁶ He wrote in Hindi and authored several collections of short stories and novels. Many of his short stories are based in rural areas reflecting his humble background. One such story is 'Sāyran' ('Siren'), where the author narrates the construction of a steel factory in an unspecified rural location, described as a barren land suitable only for pasturing and small-scale agriculture.⁴⁷ As the land is expropriated in exchange for a small monetary compensation, the village is dismantled and a slum grows in its place. The nearby mountain turns into an open mine where raw material (iron, copper, mica and coal) is extracted and brought to the factory to be processed. This causes the transformation of what once was a seemingly natural and uncontaminated environment to an industrial and heavily polluted one. The inhabitants, originally small cultivators and cattle farmers, become industrial labourers. As the people and the environment are exploited, no benefits come from the mining of the mountain. Villagers are confined in a slum characterised by poverty: a single channel serves as the only supply of drinking water for all the villagers who warm their households with pieces of coal they collect in the slag depot of the factory. Amidst the widespread destitution, a liquor shop opens where men go to spend their scarce money to consume alcohol, often leading to verbal and physical violence, while local women fall under the gaze of the munshi.⁴⁸

Contraposed to the slum, separated by fences of barbed wire, are the quarters for more well-off people (inferably the office workers and the managers of the factory with their families). This wealthy quarter consists of nice bungalows, air-conditioned apartments and all facilities such as shops, a company club, a school and a park, ironically described as 'delightful', 'smiling' and 'beautiful'.⁴⁹ Ironically, the destroyed natural environment of the area seems to be restored for the pleasure of its rich inhabitants, calling upon the inequality with which improvements have been brought to the area. The life of the villagers, now turned into factory workers, is dictated by the noise of the siren that calls them to work. One day, Sarju, an irregular worker in the factory, severely injures himself and, being unable to receive adequate medical treatment, becomes crippled. He becomes a guard and spends his days looking at the factory that has done so much harm to him.

46. Anand Kumar Patel, *Ādivāsī Saṁvednā aur Pīṭar Pāl Ekkā ke Upnyās* (Catholic Press, n.d.), 73–74.

47. Peter Paul Ekka, *Rājkumārōṁ ke Deś Merṁ* (Satya Bharti Prakashan, n.d.), 133–40.

48. Accountant, clerk.

49. 'Harṁstā, muskurātā, khūbsūrat-sā': Ekka, *Rājkumārōṁ*, 137.

Dams and the displacement of a noble farmer

Rose Kerketta was one of the most prolific among Adivasi writers and activists in Jharkhand. She was the daughter of Pyara Kerketta, a renowned Adivasi scholar, activist and himself a writer. Born in Murhu village in Khunti district, she published her first short story in the Kharia language in the journal *Prabhāt Khabar* at the end of the 1970s or early 1980s. She has translated some of Premchand's short stories into Kharia, and in 1992, she wrote her PhD thesis about Kharia folktales, *Khariyā Lok Kathāom̄ kā Sāhityik aur Sāmskr̄tik Adhyayan*.⁵⁰ She has written several works, including collections of short stories, poems, folk tales and essays. The short story discussed here, 'Fikṣḍ Dipāziṭ' ('Fixed Deposit') is taken from her Hindi collection *Biruvār Gamchā tathā Anya Kahāniyām* published in 2017.⁵¹ The story looks at the unlucky life of Manohar Da and his relationship with his brothers Nirmal and Kiti. Manohar Da has abandoned his studies to live on farming while the latter have moved to the city to become educated. Due to the construction of a dam, the land of Manohar Da is expropriated.⁵² After losing his house and fields, Manohar Da, thanks to the Indira Awaas Yojana,⁵³ receives one lakh rupees in compensation and manages to build a new house on the shore of the dam. However, the money is soon spent, in part also by his son Junas, who wastes it drinking and gambling. He is also violent and beats his parents and his sister Mina. As Manohar Da's health deteriorates, Mina seeks help from Nirmal and Kiti. The two brothers follow Mina to Manohar Da and discover his precarious condition. All that is left of the compensation is ₹50,000 with which they now decide to open a fixed deposit in the name of Mina. Meanwhile, Junas has stolen ₹5,000 and left for the city. Later on, Mina reaches out again to Nirmal and Kiti and declares she is leaving for Delhi in order to run away from Junas. One week later, Nirmal and Kiti are called again to the village (this time by Mina's mother) where Junas, returned home, is demanding more money, but not finding it, has beaten his parents. Manohar Da, sick and debilitated, finally dies before their eyes.

Poison in the soil and climate change

Sikra Das Tirki, a native of Bhandra, a village in Khunti district, is a Kurukh by birth but his mother tongue is Mundari. He belongs to the Kurukh community, but his family has lived among the Mundas for generations, making Mundari his first language. Tirki did his MA and PhD on Mundari language and literature. He has published several books written in both Mundari and Hindi. He later graduated in Khunti and did an MA in Mundari at the Department of Tribal and Regional Languages of Ranchi University. He worked as a lecturer in Mundari until his retirement in 2019. The short story considered here was originally written in Mundari

50. Rose Kerketta, *Khariyā Lok Kathāom̄ kā Sāhityik aur Sāmskr̄tik Adhyayan*, 3rd ed. (Notion Press, 2021).

51. Rose Kerketta, *Biruvār Gamchā tathā Anya Kahāniyām* (Prabhat Prakashan, 2017), 53–72.

52. The dam and the village in question are Kansjor dam and Kewnddih (Simdega, Jharkhand), respectively.

53. Name of a welfare social programme launched by Rajiv Gandhi in 1985.

with the title ‘*Navā Sarā*’, accompanied by the Hindi translation ‘*Nayā Khād*’ (‘New Fertiliser’) done by himself, published in the bilingual (Mundari/Hindi) collection, *Kāni Sargir (Kahānī Prapāt; Short Stories’ Waterfall)*.⁵⁴ This is a very brief short story dealing in a very straightforward manner with the theme of soil pollution due to agricultural techniques. The story is placed in a Munda village where farmers used to be poor, and for their survival, in addition to small-scale agriculture, they gathered forest products. This situation takes a sudden turn when one day the government delivers a chemical fertiliser⁵⁵ to replace the traditional fertilising techniques based on manure, ashes, leaves and other organic materials. This happens, as the narrative voice explains, in order to bring development to the farmers and the poor or backward people through governmental support. A village-level worker⁵⁶ is in charge of the distribution of the fertiliser (partially free of charge and partially against payment) among the farmers. The new fertiliser is used at first in the less productive fields (*tāmṛ* in Hindi, *gorāpīṛī* in Mundari),⁵⁷ where, luckily, rains are abundant and the harvest of *gorādhān*⁵⁸ turns out particularly rich. The fertiliser is therefore applied also in the millet fields with equal results and, as the story goes, ‘people really believed in the power of the chemical fertiliser’.⁵⁹ However, with time, the effect of the fertiliser diminishes and new, stronger ones are implemented. In the end, the usage of chemical fertilisers proves to have a deleterious impact on the fields, whose fertility is compromised, at the same time as the increased cost of the fertilisers leads many farmers to contract debts. The story ends with the mention of a yet newer kind of fertiliser, called *kemcūā khād* in Hindi and *lenḍad sarā* in Mundari,⁶⁰ which appears to be cheap, without side-effects for the fields and ultimately resembling the fertilisers traditionally used by the farmers.

54. Sikra Das Tirki, *Kāni Sargir (Kahānī Prapāt)* (Pyara Kerketta Foundation, 2012), 95–104.

55. Although the chemical composition of the fertiliser is never specified, it is presumable that the author refers to nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium or urea-based fertilisers, which are commonly used in India: see ‘Fertilizer Policy’, Government of India. Department of Fertilizers, accessed June 6, 2023, <https://www.fert.nic.in/fertilizer-policy/phosphatic-and-potassic-pk-policy>.

56. The village-level workers are public sector employees who act as first mediators between the block and villagers. Their work is finalised to the improvement of the conditions of rural people: see Ashima Ahmed Saikia, ‘Role of Village-Level Workers in the Political Structure of India’, *International Journal of Health Sciences* 6, no. S3 (2022): 1388–93, <https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS3.5587>.

57. Cf. Tirki, *Kāni Sargir*, 95, 100. According to Sarat Chandra Roy, in the traditional Munda agriculture, fields are divided into three categories based on their location. Thus, there are the upland fields, or ‘*pīri*’ (Hindi *dānr* or *tānr*), the lowland fields, or ‘*lōyōng*’ (Hindi *dōn*), and the midway fields, or ‘*tariā*’. It can be inferred that the ‘*pīri*’, being on the slopes of hills and mountains, are the less productive ones due to the less favourable terrain. However, Roy also reports that the ‘*pīri*’ are more fitted to host dry cultivation, while ‘*lōyōng*’ are more suited for wet cultivation and ‘*tariā*’ for earlier and lighter varieties of lowland rice: see Sarat Chandra Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country* (The Kuntaline Press, 1912), 389–90.

58. Roy describes *gorādhān* as a kind of upland paddy: see Sarat Chandra Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their History, Economic Life, and Social Organization* (The Brahma Mission Press, 1915), 130.

59. ‘*Sac merh hī log māne rasāyṅik khād kī guṅ-śakti*’: Tirki, *Kāni Sargir*, 102.

60. See Tirki, *Kāni Sargir*, 99, 103. Literally, ‘earthworm fertiliser’, it designates an organic fertiliser also known as vermicompost. For an overview, see Asha Aalok, A.K. Tripathi and P. Soni, ‘Vermicomposting: A Better Option for Organic Solid Waste Management’, *Journal of Human Ecology* 24, no. 1 (2008): 59–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09709274.2008.11906100>.

Environmental degradation and social injustice

Each of the three short stories summarised above started from some case of environmental degradation and the social and economic repercussions for the rural communities. ‘*Sāyran*’ is a crude and concise example of how the natural environment is transformed by the opening of a mine and the rise of a steel city, while the local Adivasi community suffers worsened living conditions. Similarly, the vicissitudes accompanying the troubled Manohar Da expose the consequences of dams on the rural Adivasi population. Both stories stand in opposition to the view traditionally promoted by the Indian political class, which regards industries and dams as symbols of modernity and development (*vikās* in Hindi).⁶¹ Sarju and Manohar Da come to represent the millions of rural Adivasi farmers who, due to the expropriation of their lands, lost their houses and their sole source of income, i.e. the fields and pasturages. Both stories also criticise the policy of monetary compensation (the second more explicitly so), which proves not to be an adequate means to balance out the loss and the disintegration of the social structures governing the rural community swallowed by the capitalist monetary economy. A more pervasive monetary economy fosters in turn other dynamics such as alcoholism and violence, which in the second story are exemplified by the character of Manohar Da’s son, and migration, embodied by Mina. In ‘*Nayā Khād*’, an ecological reflection is built on the development of fertilising techniques through the years and the impact that they have on the environment.

In different ways, the short stories employed the dichotomy of victim/oppressor already embedded in that of Adivasis vs. *dikū* to develop further a dichotomy between ecological subjects vs. nature exploiters. The first two fall closer to the ‘narrative of oppression’ (quite typical of Hindi literature) in as much as they clearly tell about the intrusion of outsiders in a rural area in order to exploit its resources at the expense of the inhabitants. The third story presents, in somewhat less dramatic tones, an element external to the village that is brought into it and eventually reveals itself as something calamitous. In all of them hovers thus the implicit idea of a deceit coming from the outside, converging on the idea that development, despite coming as a promise of better days, turns out disastrous for the Adivasis.

From local to global

The critique these Adivasi authors move reflects some of the typically global concerns of the late modern age. This is an important point: firstly, because it projects Hindi (and Mundari) literature in the framework of an ecocritical reflection, which, while having emerged forcefully in the West and in East Asia, is less prominent in Hindi literature at large; and secondly, because it gives further proof of how the

61. This is indeed a trope in Adivasi literature. For a comparison with poetry, one can consider the poem by Jacinta Kerketta, ‘*Vikās kī Dhūl*’ (‘Dust of Development’), which succinctly articulates the argument: see Jacinta Kerketta ‘*Vikās kī Dhūl*’, in *Aṅgor* (Adivani, 2016).

'extra local' dimension of the rural village is interconnected with national and global politics and dynamics.

This is perhaps more evident in the last example, where the ecological reflection explicitly addresses the late modern global debate about sustainable agriculture and the question of how to produce enough food for a growing population in a sustainable way. In the last lines of the story, the village-level worker raises precisely this point: 'Just as the population is growing, the share of fields is becoming smaller'.⁶² This global dimension is further accentuated by the awareness of how climate change negatively influences agriculture in a Munda village. As a villager says, 'Nowadays, the climate is changing. It does not rain properly. Because of less rain, farming is not going well and poverty has come to the villagers',⁶³ which also alters the way farmers utilise different kinds of terrain. Due to the dryer climate, cultivation in the upland fields becomes impracticable while the 'pit fields' (*garhā loyong* in Mundari and *gaddhā don* in Hindi),⁶⁴ which used to be too watery for proper agriculture, turn out to be the best ones. Interestingly, in the same paragraph, the villager also refers to 1979 as roughly the year after which the winter rains started to fail. This and the events described allow collocating the narrated events in a more defined time frame, and specifically one close to the Green Revolution, which further merges the local dimension of the story with national and global dynamics.⁶⁵ The same aspect is left untouched in 'Sāyran', while in 'Fikṣā Dīpāziṭ', there is mention of the continuous droughts suffered after 1952 and the construction of dams and channels for irrigation.⁶⁶

Similarly, and tellingly, towards the end of 'Nayā Khād' (Hindi version), the fertiliser is regarded as a form of pollution, from which villagers must be saved.⁶⁷ To speak of 'pollution' in the sense of contamination of the environment (especially that caused by human activity), necessarily implies some kind of awareness about the global debate about human impact on the earth. This tells something about the broader perspective of the author, who is familiar with that debate, unlike perhaps a rural farmer. Indeed, there is a substantial difference between observing the deterioration of your fields and speaking about 'pollution' referring to what scientists

62. 'Jaise-jaise jansamkhyā meṁ vṛddhi ho rahī hai, vaise-vaise zamīn jāyadād kā hissā choṭā hote jā rahā hai': Tirki, *Kāni Sargir*, 103.

63. 'Vartmān yug meṁ jalvāyu meṁ parivartan ā gayā. ṭhik se varṣā hī nahīṁ hotī hai. Varṣā kam hone ke kāraṅ khetī nahīṁ ho rahī hai tathā gārhv ke logoṁ meṁ garībī ā gai hai': *ibid.*, 103.

64. See *ibid.*, 98, 103.

65. The Green Revolution designates a series of agricultural innovations involving mechanisation, modernisation of cultivation techniques and the introduction of fertilisers, pesticides and high-yielding variety seeds that started in the West and spread all over the globe. In India, it lasted between the 1960s and early 1970s. Notwithstanding an increase in food production (particularly in the cultivation of wheat), scholars have now pointed out how in the long run, the Green Revolution had a negative impact on the ecosystem and small farmers (particularly small ones), who, in order to afford the new techniques and variety of seeds, contracted debts that they were later not able to pay back: see Biplab Dasgupta, 'India's Green Revolution', *Economic & Political Weekly* 12, no. 6/8 (1977): 241–60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4365324>; D.N. Dhanagare, 'Green Revolution and Social Inequalities in Rural India', *Economic & Political Weekly* 22, no. 19/21 (1987): 137–44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4377016>.

66. Kerketta, 'Biruvār', 59.

67. The line reads, 'To save [us] from this pollution...' ('is pradūṣaṅ se bacne ke lie...'): Tirki, *Kāni Sargir*, 103. But see below.

have discovered about it. Of course, the term ‘pollution’, in the sense here under consideration, became widespread in relatively recent times. In the 1960s, there was a huge increment in its use in modern written English.⁶⁸ At the same time, the concept has acquired importance cross-linguistically and cross-culturally precisely due to its global relevance, which makes it a shared, indeed global, conceptual knowledge. This, as said above, does not need to be necessarily the case for a rural farmer 40–50 or so years ago, which is why the author needs to mediate not only between languages but also between different perspectives and knowledge: those of the rural Adivasi villager and those of an educated Adivasi exposed to global knowledge, as he is himself. Of course, this argument remains somewhat speculative, as it is difficult to reconstruct the actual knowledge of farmers in the specific context, and it is also possible that such information reached rural areas, perhaps brought by the village workers.

This interplay between narrower and broader perspectives is evident also on the purely linguistic level, with substantial differences between the two versions. For, whereas in the Hindi version, the author does not hesitate to use the word *pradūṣan* (a Hindi neologism based on the somehow homophone English word), in the original version, this was not the case, as Mundari, being less influenced by English, lacks a specific term, and expresses the concept through a phrase roughly translatable with ‘degradation of the environment’.⁶⁹ Similarly, it is interesting to note that the concept of ‘climate’, which by definition also implies a global perspective (against that of ‘weather’, which instead is a local phenomenon), appears as *jalvāyu* in Hindi (see above) and as *hoyodaā* in Mundari.⁷⁰ *Jalvāyu* (from *jal* ‘water’ and *vāyu* ‘air’) is indeed the Hindi word for ‘climate’, against *mausam* usually indicating the weather. *Hoyodaā*, from *hoyo* ‘air’ and *daā* ‘water’, is the commonly used word for weather in Mundari.⁷¹ Thus, again, whereas the Hindi version adopts a more technical vocabulary regarding the phenomenon concerned, i.e. the climate and not merely the weather, in the original version, the author did not adopt a more specific term, perhaps the Mundari language lacking one. The result is that in the Hindi translation, global awareness emerges more explicitly than in the Mundari original, arguably bringing the perspective further away from that of a rural farmer.⁷² This marks a difference with ‘*Sāyran*’, where pollution also plays an important role but references to it are conveyed entirely through images, such as the ‘slag depot’⁷³ (i.e. the heaps of mining waste situated close to the slum) and the ‘venomous, black smoke’⁷⁴ that comes out from the factory chimneys that ‘keeps colouring the blue sky’.⁷⁵

68. ‘Pollution’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed May 31, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/pollution_n?t=true&tab=frequency.

69. Author’s personal communication, November 2022.

70. Tirki, *Kāni Saṅgir*, 98.

71. I must thank Walter Bhengra ‘Tarun’ for clarifying this detail.

72. Indeed, it might be argued that the Hindi translation overstates what back then could have possibly been the awareness in rural Jharkhand about the global dimension of the issues here described, as even in the West, such awareness was not that diffused yet.

73. ‘*Slaig ḍipo*’: Ekka, *Rājkumāroraṁ*, 134.

74. ‘*Zhrilā, kālā dhuṛṇā*’: *ibid.*, 135.

75. ‘*Nile āsmān ko raṅgte rahte*’: *ibid.*, 136. In ‘*Fikṣḍ Dipāzīṭ*’, there do not seem to be references of any kind to pollution.

Thus, although less straightforwardly and somehow hidden behind the theme of social injustice, the same interconnection can be grasped also in the first two stories, where it appears even clearer regarding the issue of energy production. The opening of coal mines and the construction of dams are but different examples of how governments face the desperate need to produce enough energy to satisfy the demand of energy-intensive industries and a growing population, even at the cost of environmental hazards and at the expense of rural communities. In ‘*Sāyran*’, this is suggested by the mention of the production of electric power, which, however, is used to illuminate the well-off quarters and not the slum where the factory workers reside: ‘at twilight, the strong electric lights used to flow while people played tennis and badminton.’⁷⁶ This motif appears to be recurrent in Adivasi literature and finds a close parallel in a stanza by the poet Jacinta Kerketta:

The city has been dazzling since the construction of the dam

And she is shocked to see

Her reflection in the dark night

Forming in the light of a small lamp.⁷⁷

In ‘*Fikṣḍ Dīpāzīḍ*’, the same idea is implicit in the construction of ‘multipurpose water reservoirs’,⁷⁸ which in addition to irrigation also serve the purpose of producing electric energy, albeit in the manner elucidated in Ekka’s story and Jacinta Kerketta’s poem.⁷⁹

Thus, whereas the widening of the horizon results ‘immediate[ly]’ to the reader in ‘*Nayā Khād*’, due to its explicit link to the phenomena of climate change and pollution, it occurs ‘between the lines’ in the other cases. Those too, however, are but instances connected to the large-scale industrial development in Jharkhand from the Nehruvian era onwards (recall the section ‘Ecological Exploitation’), speaking for the global rush towards energy production and economic growth. In this way, the short stories’ omniscient narrators reflect the authors’ particular position as mediators between the local rurality and the global dimension, revealing their connection with mainstream values. Conklin and Graham called this position the ‘middle ground’, where ‘native people’s views of nature and ways of using natural resources are consistent with Western conservationist principles.’⁸⁰ For, it is precisely these concerns, coherent with the awareness about the global ecological crisis, that build what might be called a modern and global sensibility, i.e. a shared awareness about living in a period of ecological disruption. Indeed, all three short stories are

76. ‘*Śām ke dhuṛṁdhlake meṛṁ bijlī kī zordār rośnī bahtī—log ḥenis, baidmiṅṭan khelte*’: *ibid.*, 137.

77. ‘*Sahar cakācaundh hai bāṛṁdh ke ban jāne se/aur vah cauṛṁk uṭṭhī hai dekhkar/ḍibrī kī rośnī meṛṁ banti/apnī hī parchāī ko andherī rāt meṛṁ/*’: Jacinta Kerketta, ‘*Bāṛṁdh se Barṁdhī Dhān kī Bāliyāṛṁ*’, in *Aṅgor* (Adivani, 2016).

78. ‘*Jalāśya bahuddeśiyā*’: Kerketta, *Biruvār*, 59.

79. Other collateral aspects of these activities are deforestation and the smuggling of wood, briefly mentioned in ‘*Fikṣḍ Dīpāzīḍ*’: ‘A vast smuggling of fabulous jungle wood had begun’ (*Jaṅgal kī umdā lakṛiyorṁ kī khūb taskarī hone lagī thī*): see Kerketta, *Biruvār*, 56–57.

80. Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham, ‘The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics’, *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 4 (1995): 695–710; 696.

‘ecologically’ quite far away from the motive of traditional Adivasi songs that celebrated the clearing of the forest by the hand of the ancestors:

The people of bygone days

Sing hail, for the established villages

Sing hail, for they cleared the fields and also constructed plots.⁸¹

The authors’ perspective and the moulding of the Adivasi ‘other’

The last observation leads to further considerations regarding authorship and more specifically about the relationship between the authors and their characters. In ‘*Sāyran*’, the tone of the narration discloses the author’s sympathetic attitude toward the oppressed villagers that, at times, develops in a paternalistic inclination and slightly stereotyping tendencies. This occurs through the attribution of certain physical and innate features to the characters fused to their conditions as paupers. Consider the following line: ‘Who cares about the dignity of the life of these innocent, dark-skinned women and rural young people?’⁸² The innocence of the villagers, whose skin colour seemingly indicates a tribal ethnic background, is reinforced shortly after when these are again described as ‘*nirih*’ (‘innocent’) and ‘*bebas*’ (‘helpless’).⁸³ In addition, an early comment of the narrator also ascribes villagers a lack of intelligence, which, together with poverty, were the reasons for the low fertility of the area: ‘but then there was neither that much intelligence nor the economic means’.⁸⁴

Something similar is also noticeable in the characterisation of Manohar Da and his problematic relationship with his brothers, Nirmal and Kiti. There is in fact a visible social and cultural distance between Manohar Da, the rural farmer, and his brothers, the city clerks. This distance is at one point expressed very explicitly: ‘We had become city people. Our soul had shrunk. There was no necessity for us to be bound to the villagers.’⁸⁵ Evidently then, the dichotomy of village and city also bears a moral weight. Thus, Manohar Da is represented, perhaps exaggeratedly so, as a kind and indulgent sort of *noble savage*, who helps and brings gifts to his brothers and parents and never asks for anything for himself, even though Nirmal and Kiti disrespect him in different ways, for instance, not attending his wedding and not inviting him to Kiti’s wedding. This much can also be appreciated in the ways in which these characters relate to the village and nature. In fact, there is a moment when Nirmal and Kiti, visiting their brother, appear to be incapable of living

81. Collected and translated by Sem Topno: see Sem Topno, ed., *Musical Culture of the Munda Tribe* (Concept Publishing Co., 2004), 521.

82. ‘*Bholi-bhālī, śyāmvarṇ auratorṁ, grāmīṇ navyauvanorṁ kī jīvan-izzat kī parvāh kaun kartā*: Ekka, *Rājkumārōṁ*, 139.

83. *Ibid.*, 140.

84. ‘*Par tab na utnī buddhī thī, na rūpaye-paise kī liyākat thī*’: *ibid.*, 135.

85. ‘*Ham sāharī ban gae the. Hamārī ātmā sikur gai thī. Gāthv ke logorṁ se hamārī koī zarūrat jurī nahīrṁ thī*’: Kerketta, *Biruvār*, 59.

according to the way of conduct of the village and are ultimately asked to leave. On another occasion, the two of them are walking at night through the forest together with Manohar Da and other villagers. But while the villagers keep naming the trees they pass, Nirmal and Kiti do not show the slightest sign of interest for this kind of knowledge.

Such a tendency to stereotype rural Adivasis (be it positively or negatively) mirrors the attempt to seek in Indigenous people qualities lacking in the modern industrialised and capitalistic society. This suggests how the perspective of the well-educated Adivasi author is itself embedded in that process of making the Indigenous 'other'. It is precisely observing this dynamic that Niezen wrote, 'Indigenous identity both struggles against and is implicated with popular stereotyping' and:

Many of the ecological, spiritual, and egalitarian ideals associated with indigenous identity have thus been distorted by pseudosympathizers [sic]. ...Indigenous leaders must struggle against a temptation to take both libels and outrageous flattery as the truth about themselves and their peoples.⁸⁶

Although less explicit and devoid of stereotyping descriptions, '*Nayā Khād*' bears a similar implication. Throughout the discussion of different fertilisation techniques, the tale displays a more evident effort to draw a relationship between Adivasi identity and ecological sustainability. In this way, the representation of Adivasis converged with the idea of the Indigenous as an ecological alternative to disruptive technologies. In fact, the head of the village appeals to scientists' call for the use of organic fertilisers and vermicomposting, both of them being scientifically approved as 'ecologically sustainable' techniques. Consider the extract below:

Now, over time, the promulgation of the fertiliser has finished. As the price of fertiliser has increased and its quality has fallen. New and new fertilisers have come out. Several kinds of fertilisers must be used in the upland fields and in the other fields. Gradually, especially the lowland fields are being ruined. The fertility of the soil is destroyed. The new, governmental, chemical fertiliser is being proven harmful to men. To save [us] from this pollution other fertilisers such as the earthworm fertiliser have recently come out. Scientists are urging for the use of manure, and ash flowers of the Karanj tree⁸⁷ as fertiliser, as in the previous times.⁸⁸

The reflection moved forward by the author is then functional to draw a parallel between Adivasi rural agriculture and modern forms of environmental sustainability, on one side, and between pollution and unwise/outdated agricultural methods and

86. Niezen, *Origins of Indigenism*, 10–11. Arguably, other elements also could be read in the same vein as the ascribed incapacity of handling money in '*Fikṣḍ Dīpāzīl*'. In this respect, consider the brief discussion on the primitivism behind the supposed incapability of handling money drawn by Ghosh: see Kaushik Ghosh, *Between Global Flows*, 510–13.

87. Indian beech.

88. '*Ab to dhīre-dhīre se khād kā pracār ho gayā. Vaise hī khād kā dām bhī baṛh gayā aur khād ke guṇ meṛ girāvāṭāte gayā. Nayā se nayā khād nīkalte gayā. Nānā prakār kā khād ṭāṛh aur khetorṁ meṛ lagānā paṛ rahā hai. Dhīre-dhīre im khādorṁ se viṣeṣkar don khet bigaṛte jā rahā hai. Zamīn kā urvar naṣṭ ho rahā hai. Manuṣya ke lie nayā khād yā sarkāri khād athvā rasāyṁnik khād hānikārak praṇit hote jā rahā hai. Hāl meṛ is pradūṣaṇ se bacne ke lie dūsrā khād jaise kerṁcūā khād nīklā. Pahle yug kī tarah gobar, rākh, karāṁj-phūl aur khali jaise khādorṁ ko khet meṛ lagāne paṛ zor jānāi log de rahe hairṁ*': Tirki, *Kāni Saṛgīr*, 103–4.

the outer non-Adivasi society personified by the government, on the other. Yet, while doing so, the author does not seem to be idealising the state of affairs prior to the coming of the fertiliser when, as it is stated, farmers lived in poverty.

The stance of the author is once again made clear also in the language. The negative connotation of the chemical fertiliser, eventually regarded as a pollutant, is transparent from the very beginning through the use of the Hindi verb *parṇā* ('to fall', but also similar to the English 'befall'), which gives the story a quite marked didactic tone. The narrative voice states: 'The effect of the chemical fertiliser fell on/befell the villagers'.⁸⁹ Suggesting a negative implication of the event from the beginning, the author discloses his stance, i.e. the stance of someone who can write (in fact with hindsight) from a broader and more informed perspective.⁹⁰

Thus, although bound by a shared Adivasi identity and a rural background, as all the authors were indeed born in villages, the latter seem to be in some sense dissociated from their characters. Such distance can be ascribed to social factors such as higher education and having been exposed to ideas and knowledge that they could absorb residing in urban areas, where much of the mainstream culture is available, unlike the remote parts of the state where people are/were precluded from education and social advancement. Further, through their education, they must also have been exposed, at least to some extent, to Hindi mainstream literature, where the trope of social injustice is a well-established one. It shall be recollected that at least Rose Kerketta and Peter Paul Ekka revealed a profound acquaintance with Premchand, the 'father' of social realism in Hindi literature.

Taken together, all these considerations demand that we refer briefly to the discourse of literary 'authenticity' building on the dichotomy of Adivasi and non-Adivasi,⁹¹ as it seems that the idea of a clear-cut division of perspectives between Adivasi and non-Adivasi authors is challenged by the present analysis. In fact, it has been seen that these authors are much influenced by those features of mainstream society (education, circulation of global ideas, etc.). Thus, rather than between Adivasis and non-Adivasis, the crucial gap seems to be the one between educated, middle-class, urban or urbanised authors and people living in remote areas, who lack the mentioned attributes.

Conclusion

This article has shown how three Adivasi authors from Jharkhand engaged with different kinds of environmental degradation and aspects of social injustice bound to it. The three short stories analysed here, and eventually perhaps Adivasi modern literature in general, indicate a dynamic relevant and ubiquitous today as

89. *'Is tarah se rāsāyṇik khād kā prabhāv gāṁv ke logon par parā'*: *ibid.*, 102.

90. In an interview during my visit to Jharkhand in November 2022, the author explained he had personally witnessed the narrated events, which compels one considering the story and its dialogues as a reworking of memories from the author's standpoint at the time of writing. This also helps to explain the specific terminology and the awareness conferred (if not superimposed) by it to the characters in the Hindi version.

91. Chiocchetti, *Alice Ekka*.

environmental exploitation finds its way into literature through traditionally marginal voices. Of course, this phenomenon is itself dependent on the dynamics of intellectual globalisation, which imposes its dynamics on the local, but above all historically marginal realities at the outskirts of the world, and contributes to the emergence of voices from those very margins. Given the present relevance of the discourse on natural resource exploitation, it is perhaps not that surprising that it is precisely the Adivasis from Jharkhand (and other states of India) rather than New Delhi-based writers who engage systematically with such concerns. Therefore, rather than a marginal phenomenon in the realm of Hindi or Indian literature, environmental literature written by Adivasis must be placed in the broader frame of the transnational discourse of eco-writing, where the phenomena of indigeneity and Indigenous modern literature(s) also fall. Adivasi environmental literature of the kind analysed here represents the Indian variant of this global phenomenon. For these reasons, and given the authors' implication in the operations of stereotyping and othering tribal characters, instead of seeing Adivasi literature as 'other' and different due to a different experience of nature, I have suggested that Adivasi writers enter an arena that is as global as the environmental crisis itself.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the two anonymous readers of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* for their feedback and many suggestions for improving this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.