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## Protest and Resistance in Selected Poetry of Jacinta Kerketta and Anuj Lugun

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**Abstract**

Resistance and protest have been integral to Adivasi history, particularly following colonial rule. Resistance to British colonial dominance is well documented, and some of the most notable Adivasi leaders of that period continue to serve as sources of inspiration for indigenous populations. These leaders are commemorated for their courage in confronting a formidable foe and for their resilience in opposing imperial tyranny. Against this historical backdrop, this paper critically analyses selected poems by Adivasi poets Jacinta Kerketta and Anuj Lugun. Both poets from Jharkhand have persistently voiced opposition to systemic neglect, societal marginalisation of Adivasis, and the cultural and environmental exploitation of their land and resources. Their work continually records the struggles and resilience of the Adivasi communities, despite opposition from hegemonic structures. The purpose of this paper is to explore the defining features of resistance literature and poetry, and to evaluate the works of these two poets within that theoretical framework. An examination of their poems is undertaken to understand how their writings support indigenous communities and foster a movement of protest against the atrocities of the nation-state.

**Keywords:** Adivasi, protest, resistance, slow violence, exploitation

### Introduction

Protest is regarded as a means of articulating disapproval towards actions, policies, or individuals. When sustained, it evolves into resistance. Protest not only communicates dissatisfaction with the prevailing conditions but also functions as a catalyst for change. Among the autochthonous or indigenous or Adivasi populations of India, protest and

resistance have historically constituted a way of life, dating back to colonial times, owing to persistent threats to their existence. Even after independence, their condition has not improved significantly. Several laws have been enacted in their favour; however, the benefits of these laws have not been realised by them. In the book *A Nomad Called Thief,* G. N. Devy lists the things that we have given the Adivasis:

> Forest Acts depriving them of their livelihood; Criminal Tribes Act and a Habitual Offender's Act; taxes and the tax collectors; alien languages for education; chemical fertilizers; a severe penal code; the compulsion to subscribe to a religion and to enter it in their birth certificates; existence as bonded labour; forest guards and private moneylenders; mosquitoes and malaria; Naxalites and ideological war groups; the Greyhound police Academy; a schedule of their identity defined from outside; and perpetual contempt (6-7).

The Adivasi worldview is primarily eco-centric, wherein their identity is intrinsically linked to the immediate environment. In mineral-rich states, development initiatives have frequently resulted in displacements, landlessness, migration, poverty, hunger, erosion of cultural identity, and cultural amnesia among indigenous populations. Jacinta Kerketta, Adivasi poet and activist, highlights environmental violence in an article, "How Adivasi Livelihoods in Odisha Were Ruined by 'Development'". She elaborates on how a refinery established in Kuchaipadar village of Odisha brought in deep-seated changes- distrust, violence, theft, sexual harassment, migration, and cultural erasure. Environmental degradation within Jharkhand, too, can be conceptualised as a form of "slow violence," a term introduced by Rob Nixon in his work *"Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*." Nixon characterises this as a violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). He further associates this "assault on resources" with an escalation in resistance (4). Deeply embedded in their ancestral history and cultural practices, Adivasi resistance is expressed through political activism and literary endeavours aimed at asserting their rights over *Jal, Jungle, and Jameen* (water, forest, and land). Over time, numerous writers from tribal communities have addressed the trauma associated with environmental deterioration and resource exploitation in their literary works. This analysis takes into account Jacinta Kerketta's poems "Bloodstained River" and "The Mystery of the Forest Bamboos" from the collection *Angor***,** alongside Anuj Lugun's "Should You Decide to Come" from the *Selected Poems of Anuj Lugun*, translated by Pragya Shukla. Both poets are members of Jharkhand's indigenous tribes and prefer to compose in Hindi. Their works offer a counter-narrative that challenges the exploitative structures of the nation-state.

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**History of Resistance in Chota Nagpur Region**

The poetics of resistance, as articulated in the works of contemporary Adivasi writers, has its foundational roots in the prolonged socio-political struggles of the Chota Nagpur region. Well-documented acts of resistance against British colonial rule characterise this region's history. Violent uprisings targeted the East India Company, its policies, and the atrocities committed by outsiders, commonly known as *dikus*, including jagirdars, zamindars, and money-lenders. Such resistance movements were primarily defensive measures undertaken by the Adivasis to safeguard their dignity, sovereignty, and self-governance. Resistance to colonialism is understood as the manifestation or eruption of "oppressed anger" (Dey xiii). Many of these resistance efforts took the form of armed rebellions.

In the early eighteenth century, an escalation in tribal unrest was observed. In certain regions, Adivasis, driven by desperation, engaged in acts of plunder. As documented by K. S. Singh in *Tribal Society in India*, a case in point is the Chuar rebellion, which reached its zenith between 1795 and 1800, with reports of "Chuar dacoities" persisting until 1816 (121). Moreover, the tribes residing in the Jungle Mahal area initiated rebellious activities in response to socio-economic upheavals within the region. During this period, tribal territories were placed under the administrative control of the East India Company, accompanied by the imposition of excessive taxation. The Great Bengal Famine of the 1770s further exacerbated the situation.

From 1771 to 1785, Tilka Manjhi and his Santhal followers rebelled against British exploitation and atrocities. Some historians regard this as the first war of independence, a development that subsequently inspired other major rebellions.

The next major revolt was the Kol Rebellion (1831-32) in the Chotanagpur region, led by Budha Bhagat. "It was a spontaneous upsurge against the outsiders- the thicadars, moneylenders, traders, and petty officials" (Singh 126). Also known as the Larka Rebellion, it involved several tribes, including the Bhumij, Oraon, Munda, and Ho. The Bhumij Revolt also surfaced soon thereafter in the Manbhum and Jungle Mahal areas.

The Santhal uprising, also known as Hul, occurred during 1855-56 within regions predominantly inhabited by the Santhal community. It represented a revolt against the dikus, or external exploiters who appropriated tribal lands and resources. Under the leadership of brothers Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, along with other figures, the uprising was forcibly quashed by British colonial forces; however, it later led to notable administrative reforms. This historic event has significantly influenced Adivasi political consciousness, with anti-diku sentiments manifesting in literary expressions of resistance that persist to the present day. The Mundas led the subsequent notable insurrection in 1899-1900. This movement

encompassed socio-religious, economic, and political dimensions, primarily advocating for tribal autonomy, land rights, and cultural preservation. The impact of this movement was profound, with the heroic acts of its leader, Birsa Munda, becoming ingrained in folklore. The uprising, referred to as the *Ulgulan* or the "Great Rebellion", has since become emblematic of Adivasi aspirations for self-determination.

Most of these uprisings were attributable to underlying grievances; the tribal communities' identities were being systematically denied, their cultural fabric dismantled, and their pride and individuality suppressed. The dikus exploited the illiterate Adivasis by seizing their land and employing them as bonded labourers. Furthermore, the Adivasis were impoverished and lacked official land inheritance documentation. With their very survival at imminent risk and no viable solutions available, they resorted to armed resistance against all exploitative forces. Through their rebellions, they exercised agency and sought to rupture the vicious cycle of bonded labour, excessive taxation, starvation, poverty, and landlessness. These movements generally shared common causes and functioned as symbols of resistance and resilience against British tyranny, exploitation, and victimisation.

Following India's independence, the colonial paradigm of exploitation persisted, albeit it became internalised. The Indian government, pursuing a policy of accelerated industrial development, initiated projects within mineral-rich regions that necessitated the expropriation of tribal lands. This phenomenon marked the inception of internal colonialism, whereby the central authority exploited the resources of the region predominantly inhabited by tribal communities, thereby marginalising them further. The existential distress experienced by the Adivasis is evidenced through their writings. Ghassan Kanafani articulates that there exists an "integral relationship between armed resistance and resistance literature" (qtd. in Harlow 10). In essence, armed resistance is translated into voices of opposition, with writers functioning as representatives. Such expressions acquire greater authenticity when the voices come from "within" the community, as their struggles are tangible lived experiences.

In Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's short story "The Adivasis Will Not Dance," the protagonist Mangal Murmu asserts, "But we Santhals are fools, ¿aren't we? All of us Adivasis are fools. Down the years, down generations, the Diku have exploited our foolishness. Tell me if I'm wrong" (Shekhar 170). Murmu condemns the actions of large-scale corporations and merchants who have usurped their land, leaving the communities impoverished. His advocacy for their rights results in his incarceration and torture. Similarly, Nirmala Putul, in the poem "Utni hi Janmegi Nirmala Putul" from the collection *Nagade ki Tarah Bajte Hain Sabd,* describes how an entirely ineffective administrative system incites her outrage. She explicitly states that she will not be silenced. Should any attempt be made

to suppress her, her voice of protest will be amplified. Later in the poem, she declares the emergence of numerous such Nirmala Putuls, whose voices would resist suppression (90-91).

**Resistance Literature**

Barbara Harlow, in the preface to *Resistance Literature,* writes that this literature emerged in the twentieth century as a struggle for national liberation and independence in countries seeking to free themselves from the clutches of colonial rule. She further states that "…Resistance Literature continues to wage a struggle for liberation on many levels and in many arenas. This ongoing struggle is part of its political and cultural agenda" (xvii-xviii). She further calls the poets "the guerrilla leaders of the resistance movements"(33).

In the preface of the anthology *Angor,* authored by Oraon poet Jacinta Kerketta, the poet writes, "From childhood there was something like a piece of ember trapped inside me" (9). A considerable portion of Kerketta's poetry employs this ember as an allegorical device representing protest. The poem "Bloodstained rivers" can be interpreted as an incisive critique of the destruction of Adivasi habitats and livelihood sources, including land, forests, and watercourses. Blood becomes the central metaphor to depict the gradual or slow violence inflicted upon the environment, specifically the Saranda forest; it also symbolises the blood of the Adivasi martyrs who lost their lives defending their homeland. Moreover, the river bearing the blood functions as a conduit linking historical and contemporary contexts. It mourns the death of the "slaughtered trees," even as perpetrators cleanse their hands in the rivers of Jharkhand's Saranda forest, polluting it with their criminal acts in the process. The poet's voice, here, aligns with that of Saranda, serving as an act of resistance.

The title takes on greater significance as it highlights the desecration of natural resources sacred to the Adivasis; the aftermath of which is portrayed through imagery such as "waters drenched in blood bewail, / Weeping on the shoulders of riverbank" (41). In the third stanza, the poem addresses complex themes of memory, historical injustice, and politico-legal failure. The Sakhua tree, a sacred symbol of Adivasi religion and culture, serves as a repository of memories from pre-industrial times, helping to counter the state's attempts to erase cultural traditions. Apprehension of reprisals is evoked by the trembling voices of protest, thereby fostering the perception that justice remains elusive. Furthermore, the extended analogy of the courtroom symbolises the trauma experienced by witnesses and reflects the hegemonic nature of the state. The fate of the Adivasis appears inevitable as "Hope fades, heart sinks, in the evening's shroud / When the seal on fates bargained on dry papers / Roars with laughter out loud" (41). Ultimately, the Sakhua tree remains a mute witness to both historical and contemporary eras. This poem underscores the systemic denial of justice to Adivasis and the consequent erosion of their trust in the judicial system.

Harlow asserts that "Poetry is capable not only as a means for the expression of personal identity or nationalist sentiment. Poetry, as part of the cultural institutions and historical existence of a people, is itself an arena of struggle" (pg 33). This poem operates as a battleground where the repercussions of violence are felt not only by Adivasis but also by humanity at large. Issues such as deforestation, environmental pollution, declining water tables, and global warming exemplify global crises. Therefore, these poems eschew aesthetic superficiality in favour of a potent critique that awakens human conscience.

Harlow further contends that resistance poems do not conform to conventions; they are neither intended for "pleasure of the text" nor treated as "recollections in tranquility" (35). Instead, they serve to challenge readers and awaken them from complacency. These poems function as acts of protest against dominant powers that attempt to suppress them. They embody the voices of marginalised communities often sidelined and ignored by wider society, constituting the micro-narratives that reflect the diverse realities of the world.

In a different poem from the same collection, "The mystery of the forest bamboos," Kerketta reflects on the ancestral wisdom, elucidating to the reader why the ancestors cultivated bamboos, nourishing them "with their very blood" (87). Bamboo plants, chiefly used for housing, fencing, and the making of bows and arrows, are integral to Adivasi culture. Bows and arrows hold a profound historical, cultural, and economic importance in the Adivasis world. Revered and regarded as sacred, they are employed in hunting, ceremonial rituals, and as weapons of defence.

In the first line, Kerketta situates the poem within Adivasi culture by using the term *kuruwa*, which denotes hilly terrain where Pahariya aboriginals cultivate crops (155). The poem depicts the usurpation of tribal land, with the speaker awakening from a deep slumber only to realise that excavators are at work on their ancestral land. The excavator is portrayed as a symbol of exploitation and violence inflicted upon the Adivasis, severing the field from its very "roots." Roots here serve as a compelling metaphor, symbolising the power of the ancestors residing in the land and representing the essence of *Adivasiyat*—the culture, philosophy, and Weltanschauung.

The excavator resembles a noose, symbolising a death sentence for the speaker. From that noose, the speaker gains a perspective on the pain, trauma, and suffering endured by his ancestors; it serves as a reminder of the Hul, the hanging of Sido from a banyan tree, and the ideals they fought for. The speaker observes that "The body of my (his) ancestors/ Was being rent and dismembered" (85). Given that the Adivasi worldview considers nature and the environment as living forms and extensions of their own being, the speaker experiences his own body being cut apart and sold in the bazaar. This highlights the deep connection between Adivasis and the elements of nature, and how their loss represents not

only a loss of livelihood but also of culture, identity, and existence. Ram Dayal Munda, in his book *Adi-Dharam,* states, "To separate the Adivasi from his land is to stop his breathing" (9).

In the penultimate stanza, it is observed by the speaker that a group of young people are preparing to sell the bamboo patch at the foothills of the mountain. The bamboos, when sold, serve as a means of livelihood; however, the speaker perceives a more profound mystery in their cultivation, thereby making the ancestral vision unequivocally clear. The blood and sacrifice of the forefathers cannot go to waste. Drawing inspiration from them and their struggle against injustice, the speaker decides not to sell the bamboo. It is posited that bamboo would be utilised to craft bows and arrows, the traditional hunting tools, which could also be employed as instruments against various forms of injustice and oppression. Therefore, the poem establishes a connection between the past and the present, deriving lessons of resistance from history and forefathers.

Anuj Lugun, a Munda poet from Jharkhand, advocates for the rights of indigenous populations. The language employed in his poetry reflects his strong response to years of oppression and domination by external forces. In the poem "Should You Decide to Come," the poet critiques the economic gaze of outsiders who enter Adivasi territory to evaluate the exploitable resources. The poem asserts the community's ownership of the land, with residents establishing the terms and conditions for visitors. The poem's tone, polite yet firm and assertive, serves as a warning to outsiders contemplating entry into the territory with potentially malicious intent. The poem is an assertion of Adivasi sovereignty.

The use of nature imagery in the initial four stanzas signifies the symbiotic relationship between tribal communities and the natural environment. "The most distinctive form of nature (hills, rivers, forests, and others) are accepted as the best dwellings of God" (Munda 45). It is nearly inconceivable to dissociate Adivasis from *Jal, Jungle, and Jameen,* rendering the incorporation of these elements into their poetry inherently natural. An alternative objective here is to foster a shared veneration for the sacred terrain, flora, and fauna, among outsiders, thereby implying that ecological awareness is a prerequisite for visitation.

A consistent pattern appears in the first four stanzas, each setting down a proviso. In the first stanza, a greeting is extended to all visitors of the mountains, yet this invitation is conditional; it is only offered to those able to visit "like the ascending sun/On the mountains" (11). In the second, visitors are welcomed to the forests, with the condition that their entry should resemble a fresh spring breeze, which ushers in new life to the sprouting buds of the trees. The words used evoke the imagery found in P. B. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," where the poet describes the "azure sister of the Spring" whose clarion call fills the earth

with spring colours (Shelley). This vivid imagery briefly captures the reader's attention, but the conditional "If" emphasises that these are merely possibilities being discussed. In the third stanza, an invitation is extended to strangers to come to the land if they are willing to arrive like rain-laden clouds, fully draining themselves and thereby providing new life to Mother Earth. The underlying message suggests an emphasis on giving rather than taking; visitors should possess altruistic motives. In the subsequent stanza, visitors are invited to the rivers on the condition that they come like doves, with peaceful and pure intentions, bringing with them the harmonious music associated with love and coexistence.

The volta is situated in the fifth stanza, indicating an evident shift in the poet's attitude. The threat becomes more tangible, imparting an ominous tone to the poem. Any intent to deceive, cheat, or exploit could lead to the descent of Adivasi Gods from the mountains, thereby unleashing their wrath. Such actions might also trigger the awakening of their "pure-hearted ancestors" (12), compelling them to confront the strangers and halt their advance using the stones placed on their chests as weapons (these are either memorial stones or flat stone slabs, a burial practice followed by the Mundas). This ancestral awakening alludes to the well-known Ulgulan, or Munda rebellion, against British colonial policies in India. Birsa Munda is frequently regarded as a symbol of indigenous resistance against injustice and tyranny. An oblique reference to this historical rebellion underscores the attitude of indigenous peoples, emphasising their assertion of rights and rejection of exploitation and oppression.

The subsequent lines further reinforce this concept. It is stated by the poet that, should the aforementioned not occur, women would be prepared as warriors, equipped with traditional bows and arrows, to confront any intruders. The mention of female warriors is important, considering the active role of Adivasi women in resisting British colonial rule, a contribution often overlooked. A connection is once again established between the past and present within the poem, as armed resistance looms large. The poet, moreover, foregrounds the significance of honesty and transparency within Adivasi culture, emphasising the community's simplicity and absence of deception. Essentially, it is implied that materialism and greed for wealth have not impacted their lives, thereby clearly distinguishing them from mainstream communities.

A deep distrust of outsiders is evident in this poem. In the essay "The Question of Integration", K. Bhuria and V Bhuria write, "The exploitation and displacement endured over the years have given rise to mistrust, which characterises the relationship between the state and the Adivasis today" (Xaxa and Devy 48). It stems from a history of deception, distrust, and centuries of marginalisation and neglect. In the essay, "Representation of Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Selected Short Stories", Arundhati D. Choudhary and Prof.

D. Das write, "In the context of indigenous tribal resistance in India, the political upheavals, down from the days of the British Raj to the present day, unearth sagas of deprivation, exploitation and political suppression where resistance becomes a historical truth" (Dey 295).

**Conclusion**

In the Adivasi context, resistance poems are regarded as political and social compositions that address the dominance of corporations, institutions, policymakers, and contemporary neo-colonial forces. These poems are typically not intended for recreational reading. Characterised by a stark, direct style, they convey their messages explicitly, without concealment or embellishment. The poetry often constitutes a direct denunciation of exploitative practices, with the vocalisation of resistance emphasising that the Adivasis are unlikely to be subdued. Additionally, frequent references to historic resistance movements appear to bolster their determination.

Furthermore, collective resistance is evident in the previously discussed poems, with opposition primarily stemming from external forces beyond the communities. Generally, these poems do not depict a solitary voice of protest against the injustices faced by the Adivasis. Instead, resistance is seen as originating from the masses, who present a unified front against oppressors. In this context, the selected poems of Jacinta Kerketta and Anuj Lugun may be classified as poems of protest and resistance. Such works serve as expressions of the bitter realities experienced, lived, and witnessed by the poets, arising from frustration, anger, resentment, and dissatisfaction. They function as outlets for grievances and as means to communicate their voices to the wider world.

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