

Advocacy for Environmental Justice and Indigenous Rights in Jacinta Kerketta's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Jacinta Kerketta was originally a Hindi poet from the Oraon community residing in the heart of Jharkhand. As an activist and courageous journalist, she chronicles the plight of the dispossessed Adivasi people. With honest portrayals of stark truths, Jacinta has earned recognition in literary circles for her unique style of depicting the hardships faced by the Adivasi community. She fiercely advocates for the existential fears and marginalization faced by Indigenous peoples experiencing oppression, deprivation, injustice, othering, and unimaginable misery due to unsustainable development, ruthless industrialization, uncontrolled urbanization, and unprecedented environmental degradation threatening their lands and livelihoods. Her poetry expresses their ongoing struggles and trauma alongside the chaos within Saranda Forest. In collections such as 'Angor', 'Jadon Ki Jameen (Land of the Roots)' and 'Ishwar aur Bazaar', she vigorously speaks out against the looting and destruction of the natural resources and means of sustenance relied upon by the Adivasi community. This research aims to highlight how Jacinta seeks environmental justice for Adivasi people through her verse. It also advocates for protecting their inherent rights regarding jal-jangal-jameen. Furthermore, it explores how her poetry exposes the constant exploitation of the ecologically sensitive Saranda Forest and the authorities' indifference to addressing these important issues.

Keywords: *Environmental Justice, Indigenous, Deforestation, Development, Oppression, Displacement, Degradation, Disenfranchisement, Marginalization.*

Introduction

Working as a freelance journalist, Jacinta Kerketta has garnered enviable recognition as a passionate activist and a fierce poet in the literary world. She belongs to the Oraon community

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in the heartland of Jharkhand. She believes in the “art for life's sake” principle and shares an intrinsic connection with her native land and roots through her creativity. Her poetry chronicles the plight of the dispossessed Adivasi populace. Being known for her unapologetic style, she provides a literary canvas for the portrayal of existential fears, struggles, traumas, and chaos of the natives of Saranda Forest. She admits that her poetry is not limited to highlighting the cultural and artistic reflections of the Adivasi community. Besides, talking about atrocities and injustice committed against marginalized communities in tribal regions, her verse “infused with activism” also goes beyond that in covering various seething matters and struggles of humanity with honesty and truth:

“My poetry constitutes both nature and resistance. The Adivasi approach takes into account not only nature, but also looks into the well-being of the entire humankind. My work takes into account not only the struggle, the pain, the history, realities of land, dreams, and the attitude to life of Adivasis but also that of all other marginalised communities. There is also an effort in my work, to critically look into religion, politics and the lives of women” (Kerketta, *TBR Interviews Jacinta Kerketta*).

Her poetry portrays the plight of the dispossessed Adivasi community facing inequity, misery, deprivation, oppression, and othering under the guise of development. “Her poems deal with issues of displacement, violence against women, hunger, apathy of governance” (Yadav). She is sensitively vocal about the issues of the plundering of their natural resources, gender-based violence, conflict about the usurpation of the land of the forest, and the indifference of the state machinery towards the miserable situation in the tribal belt of India.

“Kerketta has propitiously captured the emotions that run deep within the delves of their rich, diverse culture and has successfully recorded the feeling of everyday terror experienced by her people experienced by her people who are waging a perpetual battle against the land mafias and mining giants. The unanticipated loss of their cherished rivers, forests, and hillocks left them in extreme trepidation which became habitual in due course” (M).

Jacinta Kerketta's poetry depicts the miserable state of the Adivasi folks who are constantly facing the threat of losing their livelihood and means of sustenance because of the loss of their *Jal-Jangal-Jameen* – their very own ecosystem. The collusion of the capitalist forces, affluent people, state apparatus, and mining giants, has been aggravating their uprootment and dislocation. Mining of coal, stone, sand, copper, and bauxite, as well as large-scale construction activities, private and public enterprises, and projects, have led to the immense degradation of the environment in tribal areas.

Jacinta is one of those activist poets who honestly understands the dichotomy of languages and the fascinating power of poetry in shaping the narrative. She belongs to the Kurukhar

community which is recognized alternatively as Oraon. She converses fluently in Kurukh, her native language. But for poetic creativity, she brilliantly utilizes Hindi, the language of bourgeois discourse in Northern India. In Hindi, she voices the indigenous people's concerns, angst, and misery without any guile. Hers is the poetry of anguish, hope, and resistance. She acknowledges the threat to the identity of the Indigenous people, their culture, and languages in her homeland:-

“The name Oraon was given to us by the Hindu mainstream society to degrade us. I would like to identify myself as belonging to Kurukhar community...People are never worried about why my mother tongue is disappearing but when I say I write in Hindi, they have questions. I write in Hindi because I want to speak to the perpetrators of injustice and violence on my community in their own language. I write in their language so they will know what we think of them...” (Muralidharan).

Jacinta's first collection of poetry, *Angor* comprises forty-one poems, weaving subjects of both gender and the world of nature throughout its pages. In the preface to this collection, Jacinta credits her poetry's essence to the profound impact of her firsthand experiences while traversing Adivasi villages and the Saranda Forest in her capacity as a freelance journalist. Her poetic perspective is shaped by the injustices and discrimination observed in her school, the specter of domestic violence at home, and the misrepresentation of the Adivasi community's struggles in the mainstream media. She confesses that “From childhood, there was something like a piece of ember trapped somewhere inside me” (Kerketta, *Angor*).

Jacinta's poetry provides poignant insights into the deep connection between Adivasi communities and nature. She illuminates the profound reverence and symbiotic relationship that tribals share with their natural surroundings. For her, the Adivasi ethos embodies a profound respect for the *jal-jangal-jameen* and all living creatures that inhabit them. They are the custodians of *Jal-Jangal-Jameen*. Their sustenance and culture are in perfect sync with the cycle of nature. Their lifestyle is interwoven with their immediate environment. They all share an umbilical cord with nature which preserves and nurtures them like a mother. For them, nature is a living and spiritual entity that is meant to be protected and worshipped. In one of her interviews with Groundxero, Jacinta talks about the deep-rooted bond between Adivasis and their environment – highlighting their attachment to the rivers, land, and forests: -

“Adivasis believe that humans are just one part of nature, and they should just take only that amount of natural wealth that they need to live their lives. Everything is part of nature, like rivers, mountains, birds and animals etc. Human beings should be concerned about the lives of these other entities also. This belief keeps Adivasi communities in close contact with nature and strengthens their belief in the life and the right of others to live” (Kerketta, *In Conversation with Adivasi Poet Jacinta Kerketta*).

Jacinta portrays Adivasis as the custodian of the land which vehemently challenges the meta-narrative of the hegemonic mainstream culture that often depicts indigenous people as primitive, backward, and subhuman.

“The outsiders perceive Jharkhand as the abode of uncivilized, uneducated and the most backward people i.e. Adivasis therefore the region was mostly neglected in terms of the development but its natural resources were highly exploited. The Adivasis were alienated from their resources, exploited and injustices were done to them in the name of development, civilization and nationalism” (Dungdung).

So, unlike the “sophisticated urbanites”, she portrays Adivasis as people with unique culture and history. Her writings highlight their collective wisdom, cultural practices, and knowledge systems that contribute a great deal to preserve and sustain their ecology. Her poetry also provides a creative outlet for their spirit of resistance in the face of encroachment of their lands and forests. She vociferously advocates the rights of Adivasi people in the decision-making process, especially, when it directly concerns their lands, forests, and environment. In this way, her poetry serves as a counter-narrative that seeks environmental justice and the preservation of indigenous rights.

Jacinta’s poems are deeply rooted in her native environment. She has been the firsthand witness of murders and daytime lynching of Adivasis by the encroachers in the forest of Saranda who are motivated only by greed for usurping their forest, land, rivers, hillocks, and mineral wealth. The post memory of the violence wreaked for generations by the capitalist forces, is very much evident in her writings as they become the mouthpiece of resistance. In the preface of her first poetry collection, she recollects her personal experiences and acknowledges her immediate concerns about the collective trauma of Adivasis in their homeland: -

“During my childhood I had also seen how in our village, innocent, close relatives were murdered by Non-Adivasis in their greed for the land. Later, working as a free-lance journalist and roaming the villages and forest tracts, I could feel that the leaves of the jungle dripping instead of dew, were dripping blood that flowed spontaneously into my poems” (Kerketta, *Angor*).

Her remarkable poem “The Weapon in My Hands” also captures the pain of plunder and violence in these lands which the mainstream media and people fail to see:-

“But their eyes fail to see
My centuries-old agony,
Wounds afflicted ages ago,
Still fresh, still raw,
And scars running through`

My body and soul,
Left by claws, dipped in poison,
As they plundered and robbed” (61).

The relentless exploitation, misuse, and overconsumption of the mineral resources associated with the large-scale deforestation, poses a severe threat to the very essence of mother nature. For the Adivasis, nature is more than the physical entity. She is their supreme deity and they worship its hills, forest, rivers, and springs. degradation and enslavement of nature means the jeopardization of their spiritual traditions, and rituals as well as the endangerment of their means of livelihood and employment. In her iconic poem, "The River, The Mountain, and The Bazaar", Jacinta with evocative imagery, reflects upon the degradation and commercialization of nature, destruction of biodiversity, cultural erosion as well as on loss of the tribal heritage in modern times, that is aggravated by the land mafias and mining giants. Drawing the attention of the readers to the harsh realities of environmental degeneration, she forces them to think seriously about their inherent bond with mother nature as well as the repercussions of human greed on their immediate surroundings:

“Amidst dry and withered trees,
I said to little Posterity,
Look, 'tis where the village river used to be.
A deep furrow in the ground ahead,
Swallowed all the mountains, I said...
.....
What would you like to buy, the shopkeeper asked?
Brother, a little rain, a handful wet earth,
A bottle of river, and that mountain preserved
There, hanging on that wall, a piece of nature as well.
And why is the rain so dear, pray tell?
The shopkeeper said - This wetness is not of here!
It comes from another sphere.
Times are slack, have ordered just a sack” (29).

The disenfranchisement and dislocation of the tribal people from their ancestral lands are aggravated to satiate the “ravenous appetite” of the privileged classes. They are the only ones who pay the price of the progress and have to sacrifice their “luscious green fields” and “fertile

land". This leads to the collapse and dilution of the agrarian Adivasi culture. Thus, the rat race of industrialization holds a threat to their existence as they stand utterly oppressed and marginalized. Their uprootment finds an expression in Jacinta's short poem, titled "O, City": -

"Leaving behind their homes,
Their soil, their bales of straw,
Freeling the roof over their heads, they often as,
O, city!
Are you ever wrenched by the very roots?
In the name of so-called progress?" (27).

Displacement does not include only the relocation of people from one place to another. It destroys their means of livelihood and sustenance. It endangers their cultural identity cherished for generations. "The system offers to provide services to people but it can do nothing to keep tribal people from being uprooted, from being displaced. It can't stop tribals' languages, culture and values from being hijacked" (Kerketta, *Why the Adivasis Must Seek to Redefine Themselves*). The Adivasis' lifestyle and existence are indisputably linked with their *Jal-Jangal-jameen* as they share an unquestionable bond of coexistence with nature. Jacinta's poetry exposes this current model of development that causes their forced eviction. It also threatens their constitutional right to dignity, freedom, and equality.

The indigenous people are paying a heavy price for the jeopardized development, plaguing the ecology of the tribal areas. The people of this area suffer from various ailments and are doomed to face a "silent death". The perilous effect of rapid industrialization, air, land, and water pollution, and subsequent environmental degradation, on the health of Adivasi men, women, and children, is referred to again and again in Jacinta's poems.

"Breathing in the dust of progress
Day and night life coughs in distress.
The heart has aged before its time,
And eyes once with hope alive
Are now counting their numbered days...
.....
When asked by Truth,
"What was as compensation paid?"

Sitting in the corner,
Old Experience could only say,
Breathing in the dust of progress
Day and night life coughs in distress.
The heart has aged before its time,
And eyes once with hope alive
Are now counting their numbered days” (82-83).

The disadvantaged, dispossessed, dislocated, and disenfranchised people of Saranda are pushed to the periphery by the ruthless forces of so-called development. Being the victims of oppressive apparatus, they have lost their symbiotic relationship with nature. The excavation and mining on a large scale, have done irreparable damage to the ecology in these parts of Jharkhand. Both adults and children face the consequences of health hazards. Various types of life-threatening diseases are the result of the mining dust:

“Agents of mining corporations
Knock on every villager door.
And no sooner is uttered A desperate sigh of hunger,
Disease, unemployment, and helplessness” (73).

So, rendered to lead a demeaning and deprived life, these Adivasis tend to lose their faith in the state machinery, constitutional authorities, and judicial system. Thus, they adhere to militancy to oppose the unjust development funded by corporations that threaten to wipe out their existence. The “mutually reinforcing alliance” of capitalism with other hegemonic and supremacist forces employs a specific pattern of interrogation, humiliation, and incarceration for silencing the voices of dissidents in Adivasi regions:

“It justifies violence and propagates a strong narrative against resistance. The philosophy and community that oppose this hegemonic worldview are labelled anti-development. The dissident tribals are branded as Naxalites and the imperatives of development and religion dictate that they be eliminated” (Kerketta, *The Adivasi Way Of Life At Stake*).

Employing vivid imagery in her poems, Jacinta protests against the degradation of the environment caused by the corporate-funded development projects that render millions of Adivasis destitute. She vehemently criticizes this current model of human progress that not only aggravates the depletion of forests but also mocks the very ideals of sustainable development. Her poem “Vulturous Eyes” symbolically portrays the destructive act of plunder

in the name of progress, seeking to devour everything that is nurtured for ages by these
Adivasis:

“...It began to pour.
Alas! ‘twas no rain, but burning acid.
And no sooner did it stop
Then began the vultures their dance of death.
Holding the singed seeds to their bosom
The fields lamented –
Lying in wait with bated breath
To rip the remains, stiff and dead,
Those hunting, greedy, vulturous eyes
Can only in the sight of death rejoice” (25).

In her poetry, Saranda Forest frequently occurs as a center of environmental hazard and destruction. This forest was once a place marked with vibrant wildlife, waterbodies, rich biodiversity, and ecological harmony. This “magnificent landscape” was an untouched heaven, harboring many critical species and intricate ecosystems. With an abundance of unique flora and fauna, It was also renowned for hosting the largest high-grade Sal tree forest in India. But in present times, unscrupulous extraction, “systematic killing of forest” and bulldozing activities have seriously impacted its fragile ecology. Now, this region and its surrounding biodiversity stand “brutally mutilated”. Now, Saranda Forest encapsulates all the environmental issues and grave challenges in tribal areas, facing unsustainable exploitation and dreadful injustice across India.

“The extraction of iron ore, while a source of economic advancement, poses a palpable threat to the delicate ecological equilibrium of the Saranda forest. Mining activities, if undertaken without meticulous consideration for environmental safeguards, risk irreversible damage to habitats, soil erosion, and the depletion of water resources. The dichotomy is further exacerbated by the potential for deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and the concomitant loss of biodiversity, which threatens to undermine the very ecological foundation that renders the Saranda forest invaluable” (Mukherjee).

The unrestrained mining of iron ore, manganese, and other valuable minerals, as well as the large-scale deforestation and economic activities, have restricted the movement of the nomadic tribes (like Ho, Munda, Bihors, etc.) and wildlife in this zone. Massive mining activities are devouring the rich biodiversity and “pristine glory of Saranda”. The detrimental impact of both unscrupulous mining and ruthless felling of trees threatens the sustainability of life, as it has

contaminated even the groundwater. With unbridled deforestation, all the perennial water resources like rivers, springs, natural lakes, and ponds stand exposed and are on the brink of disappearance because of the flying mine dust. With all authenticity and sincerity, Jacinta's verses vividly depict the widespread devastation and degeneration of rivers of the Saranda Forest through the mining of iron and other valuable minerals. Giving paramount importance to the preservation of biodiversity in the region, she simultaneously exposes the ruthless attack on the forest and relentless contamination of the freshwater resources. She considers it an annihilating act against a community. Jacinta understands this grim situation and portrays this stark reality in her poem titled "Bloodstained Rivers":

"Hands stained with the blood
Of thousand slaughtered trees
Quietly wash themselves clean
In the rivers of Saranda.
And the waters drenched in blood bewail,
Weeping on the shoulders of riverbanks,
And the entire forest sees red" (Kerketta, *Angor* 41).

With no environmental safeguards, Adivasis' forests and lands are paying a heavy price for rapid industrialization and unplanned urbanization. Jacinta's poetry recurrently questions the profit-centered vision of the Indian state that guarantees no sustainability plan for addressing the environmental complexities in this region. Lack of inclusiveness in forest management and non-demarcation of the forest land as per the legal protocols have endangered the lives and sustenance of these vulnerable tribal communities. They are unable to sustain their traditional way of living, which ultimately results in their displacement, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. "The ruling class and the media, portray the Adivasis as being against the 'development of the country' or as Naxalites. People then raise the question, why are Adivasis against development?" (Kerketta, *How Adivasi Livelihoods in Odisha Were Ruined by 'Development'*). They resist this "maldevelopment" because it has placed them at a disadvantage in claiming the ownership and rights of the habitat, where they have been located since time immemorial. Her poem "The Mystery of the Forest Bamboos" aptly captures the destruction of the pastoral landscape that is being transformed into a site of jeopardized development, which utterly disregards their traditional means of livelihood and sustenance:-

"On the sweeping claws of an excavator

My field from its very roots severed.
On that machine hung
Not just that piece of land, but I as well,
And I realized then
The agony of being uprooted from one's soil.

The body of my ancestors
Was being rent and dismembered,
And I watched the pieces sell for millions.
The crowd of buyers
Turned into a teeming multitude,
And I felt as if my own body
Were torn into a million pieces and sold." (Kerketta, *Angor* 85).

She often uses the term “vultures” for the encroachers, poachers, miners, “buyers”, “bidders”, brokers, contractors, and “auctioneers” of the rich Adivasi forest, rivers, and land, who are hell-bent on snatching away these natural resources. In the 2nd poem of the collection *Angor* titled “The Blossoms of Saranda,” Jacinta describes the hazardous effects of ecological disruption caused by indiscriminate mining, bulldozing, and deforestation activities on these lands:

“Yet gathering all strength, it begins
To pick up the withered remains
Of its roots
Blown up into fragments
By exploding dynamites.
The corpse of rain
Hung by the neck
Dangles on a tree.
Right above the forest
In the oval sky,
Vultures gather on a feasting spree.
And streams of bloody tears
Run down the cheeks of rivers” (22-23).

Hunger is the constant motif in her poetry that spells a life marked with deprivation, squalor, malnutrition, and starvation in tribal areas. The construction of hydroelectricity projects, dams, widening of roads, and infrastructural and developmental activities on the forest land, have spelled disaster for the underprivileged natives. Without a source of sustenance like forest produce, village markets, pastures, farming land, and water resources, these displaced Adivasis are rendered destitute. Mainstream media and discourse do not provide any coverage to their agonies. Their death does not get any headlines when they die slowly and silently out of hunger. Their voices remain unheard, unnoticed, and undiscovered. So, many of them are adhering to suicide to draw the attention of the authorities to their dire situation. Jacinta takes the onus in herself to portray the pain and misery of these hopeless voices in the poem entitled “A Madua Sprout on the Grave”:

“They will take their own lives instead.
For dying of hunger, they know too well,
Stirs up no storms, does not sell.
A suicide, on the other hand,
Guarantees their corpse will make headlines,
And probes into the whys and wherefores
Will lead them to many more doors
With stoves unlit and ovens gone cold” (49).

The apathy of the system makes their situation even more pathetic when they are not provided with enough food, proper shelter, and medical facilities. The indifference of certain institutions, agencies, MNCs, and so-called agents of development plays havoc with their lives:

“Holding on to a few scraps of paper,
Standing helpless on the banks of the dam,
In every rain, Salo’s Mother
Searches frenziedly for her lost farmlands.
Today Soma starves
For his fields are now massive reservoirs.
The cage of his ribs protrudes through the skin,
The innards shrink and shrivel within” (69).

Thus, it can be said that Jacinta focuses on the marginalization of Adivasi voices with tangible proof. Her poetry expresses her disdain for dreadful injustices and victimization faced by the indigenous groups. Her poetry serves as a beacon to highlight the serious threat to the very existence of Adivasi people in her homeland. As a poet, she represents the struggles of oppressed beings across the nation. She questions the colonization of natural resources by the hegemonic powers. Her verses attempt to burst the threatening ghosts of encroachment looming over the rich landscape of the Saranda region.

Jacinta does not mince her words while depicting the ruthless disenfranchisement of tribal communities who are stripped of their ancestral land and human rights by the giant nexus of bureaucratic and corporate power structures. Her poetry exposes the unspeakable violence and perpetual anguish endured by the natives, while simultaneously displaying the deep wounds inflicted upon the ecology of the region. Her verses portray the effect of a vicious carnage of the greenery, wildlife, and biodiversity by the “culture of profiteering” under the garb of development. She shows how the apathy and highhandedness of the bureaucratic and political structure, have contributed to isolating and muffling the voices of protest against the human rights violations by the corporate forces.

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