

Toxic Grounds, Stolen Lands: The Anthropocene, Industrial Dispossession, and Adivasi Resistance in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Wil Not Dance*

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Received: 26 Aug 2026; Received in revised form: 24 Sep 2026; Accepted: 29 Sep 2026; Available online: 02 Oct 2026
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Abstract— *The extractive logic of modernity has always rendered the landscapes and communities as sites of exploitation and destruction. Anthropocene, industrial capitalism and environmental destruction converge most smoothly at the margins, subjecting both the landscapes and the communities to the worst possible effects of this inextricable trio. This paper examines the convergence of anthropocene, industrial capitalism and environmental destruction in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi will not Dance*, arguing that the Anthropocene as a category of planetary crisis can be best understood in the post-colonial context where industrial extraction for human advancement takes the space of prime importance. Reading these two texts through the frameworks of Anthropocene theory and post-colonial ecocriticism, particularly Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' and subaltern studies forwarded by Gayatri Spivak and others, this paper argues that both these narratives cannot be exclusively defined by anthropocentrism; rather can be best understood by the concept of 'stratified anthropocentrism' where the ecological catastrophes are borne by the marginalized castes and communities of the society. Both these texts stage the Adivasi and subaltern bodies as the site where the violence of industrial capitalism become visceral. Based on these frameworks, this paper contends that the 'toxic grounds' and 'stolen lands' are not incidental settings but active protagonists featuring the sad story of dispossession spearheaded by corporate and state powers. The paper also intends to explore how the texts resist reducing the communities to ecological ruins. Drawing on the theories of Anthropocene, environmental justice and Adivasi studies, this paper argues that these texts reframe the epoch not as a story of undifferentiated human agency but one of industrial dispossession, where resistance becomes a means of reclaiming land, story and selfhood.*



Keywords— *Anthropocene, Industrial extraction, land dispossession, slow violence, ecological catastrophes, marginalized castes and Adivasi communities.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism as a theoretical perspective is based on the assumption that literature does not merely reflect environmental crisis but also actively participates in the cultural imaginaries that produce and sustain it. Where earlier literary criticism had nature as a backdrop or a metaphor, ecocriticism insists read nature as a space of contested meaning that is shaped by and continuously

shaping the material relationship between human and non-human world. This paper studies this relation to examine how anthropocentrism, environmental destruction and industrial capitalism converge as both a lived crisis and a crisis of representation.

Anthropocentrism, in this context, can thus be read as a narrative habit that keeps the human world at the centrality and celebrating its superiority over non-human

world. Ecocritical scholarship has always argued that the narrative habit of prioritizing human world over the non-human is inseparable from the material logics of industrial capitalism which requires nature in its most passive form for its extraction. The clear forest and the voiceless landscape are, in this sense, twin products of the same imaginative failure to grant the non-human world the space of superiority and agency.

Both the texts under consideration explicitly depict industrialization's dependence on resources for its continuation. Chemical feedstock and cheap labour in *Animal's People* and coal mines and land in "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" serve as the fuel for the rapid industrial progress as depicted in these texts. However, the texts work in binaries; they beautifully bring forth the resistance that the industrialization provokes in the community of the dispossessed. In this context the paper addresses composite theoretical framework combining Anthropocene with postcolonial studies and subaltern theory. It also offers a close reading of *Animal's People* as a narrative of slow violence and 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' as a narrative of land, extraction and the politics of refusal. The study finally attempts to conclude with the converging and diverging points in these two texts' approaches to environmental destruction and resistance.

Research Objectives

The study aims to explore how both the texts under consideration depict anthropocentrism in post-colonial settings. It also endeavours to investigate how the marginalized sections are the worst affected because of such environmental exploitation, extensive mining and deforestation. It further aims to study how the marginalized communities face these challenges and respond to them. The study also aims to make a comparative study between the two texts to show how the marginalized and affected communities stage resistance against such exploitative postcolonial practices.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Anthropocene as an area of study has increasingly turned toward postcolonial literature, interrogating the concept's universal implications. Dipesh Chakrabarty's foundational essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2009), frames Anthropocene as a phase that demands human beings to be considered as a single geological species. However, postcolonial eco-critics strongly challenge this inequality and aim at erasing this historical inequality. Ron Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), argues that environmental harm in the Global South is usually 'slow violence', the impact of environmental harm is gradual, graded, slow and dispersed

and hence hardly becomes visible to the naked eyes. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, in this context bears the witness of slow violence of the tragic industrial disaster and the leakage of toxic gas, the impact of which is still visible in the people and society even after two decades of the tragic incident.

Scholarship on Adivasi literature, however, approaches Anthropocene from a different disciplinary angle that is strongly rooted in subaltern and indigenous studies rather than ecocriticism as such. Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), remains the main theoretical bedrock for the critical interrogation of the impact of land mining and deforestation for a power plant in Hansda Shekhar's "The Adivasi Will Not Dance". Virinius Xaxa and Ramachandra Guha's extensive work on Adivasi land rights and the political ecology of Jharkhand provide the historical and material context for Sowvendra's short story. Contrasting Xaxa and Guha, the scholars of the North East Adivasi literature argue that Adivasi literature engaging with the land rights of the Adivasis can not be categorised as 'nature writing', rather they should be read as assertion of 'cosmological and territorial sovereignty', the roots of which can be traced to Walter Dignolo's account of coloniality.

Comparative treatments of the two texts remain relatively sparse. Studies had been focused on urban industrial disaster as in Bhopal gas tragedy and rural land dispossession and Adivasi displacement as a part of postcolonial ecocriticism's engagement with corporate accountability and the latter into subaltern and indigenous studies' concern with land, cosmology and cultural erasure. This study tries to examine the impact of modern industrial progress that turns the human body as the site of slow violence, land dispossession and resistance against them.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study uses a qualitative comparative research design to analyse industrialization's dependence on resources for its continuation and evaluate how nature becomes a space of contested meaning that is shaped by and continuously shaping the material relationship between human and non-human world. The methodology that the study adopts is a comparative study of two texts to examine how anthropocentrism, environmental destruction and industrial capitalism converge as both a lived crisis and a crisis of representation and diverge in their ways of resistance.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 Anthropocene and its Dissatisfaction

The term 'Anthropocene' as coined and popularised by Paul

Crutzen, is concerned with an epoch in which human industrial activity has left a permanent ecological imbalance. It highlights how industrialization, urbanisation, deforestation, fossil-fuel consumption, pollution, intensive agriculture and mass production have affected the natural eco system. Anthropocene scholarship also believes that while humans are responsible for this imbalance, it's the affluent population that owns and controls industrialisation have contributed disproportionately to the environmental change. In this sense, as postcolonial ecocritics have mentioned, 'stratified' or 'differentiated' Anthropocene becomes an important point to consider. Both the texts indicate this stratified Anthropocene where it is not only Man extracting natural resources but also how human driven state and capital structures extract resources and land from tribal populations.

3.2.2 Subalternity and Epistemic Resistance

Subaltern theory examines the experiences, voices that are continuously suppressed and forms of resistance of social groups and their relation with dominant power structures. It deals on the key areas of voice and representation and enquires 'who gets to speak, who is heard and who represents whom'. The seminal essay of Gaytri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" questions whether marginalised people can genuinely be heard by dominant power structures. Both the texts address this issue but stages them in different patterns. In *Animal's People*, the narrator, Animal's first narrative of the subaltern experiences that he addresses directly to the unnamed 'Eyes' is mediated, whereas in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, the narrator Mangal Murmu's voice is not mediated by any external interlocutor.

Besides these, Walter Mignolo's theory of coloniality and the 'colonial matrix of power' and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's account of partial representation of the dispossessed by research and representation further inform both the texts' attempt to decolonize narratives of environmental harm.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1 *Animal's People*: Toxic Embodiment and the Grammar of Slow Violence.

In *Animal's People*, Sinha indicates the worst possible harm that a chemical factory can subject on the human world. Animal, the narrator, was affected by the release of the poisonous gas in the Bhopal Gas tragedy when he was in his mother's womb. Pre-natal exposure to the poisonous gas has crippled him so badly that he just manages to walk on his four limbs and that's how he is known as Animal. His very presence in the novel indicates the reach of the harmful gas and how man-made factories and industries can cause

damage to the very fabric of human world; damaging the very foundation of human body, its cells, tissues and bones, thereby collapsing the difference between human and animals. Animal's story takes place in an imaginative land called Khaufpur that replicates the city of Bhopal where the gas tragedy had taken place. The novelist refrains from naming the central antagonist, Union Carbide, rather indicates it as the "Kampani", a generic name indicating the corporate capital. However, the Kampani abandons the factory, escapes any legal accountability and avoids all the responsibilities of the population that is affected by the poisonous gas.

The novels plot is organized around the survivors' battle for compensation and the American doctor who tries to conduct a survey on the health of the surviving population. The structure of the plot itself echoes Rob Nixon's slow violence, as the aftereffect of the one-day gas leakage lingers even after two decades of the incident in the form of contaminated water, unresolved litigations and new births with congenital or other perennial health issues.

4.2 Resistance in *Animal's People*

Resistance in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* does not emerge through conventional heroism but through the body that becomes the site of colonial exploitation. Animal's body is twisted, degraded and has lost the mobility to have an upright posture that otherwise humans possess. Animal, whose spine is fused because of his exposure to the poisonous gas when he was in the womb, faces exile from humanity since his birth. In his conversation with others, he often mentions that he is not a man but an animal. Though to many who had interactions with him, it appears as his acceptance of his situation but that finally emerges as his refusal to accept sympathy and mercy that would indirectly categorize him as a victim of the gas tragedy. Animal, by claiming animality rather than disability, he negates to be pushed to the center of pity and suffering. His body emerges as the living indictment of the corporation whose negligence produced the tragedy, a walking archive of human led slow violence that can not be gathered in statistical data or compensation claims.

The novels' resistance also operates collectively, through the community's sustained struggle against the "Kampani" for not bearing the responsibility of the tragedy and provide them with clean drinking water and other adequate compensation. Though Animal stages a completely different order of resistance, Zafar becomes the voice of political resistance. He mobilizes all the victims of Khaufpur and organizes protests and hunger strikes against the Kampani induced damages that have stalled their everyday life. The novel beautifully presents the nuances of resistance in the novel. The community is divided in its

ways of resistance. Their demands are realistic and range from monetary compensation to safe rehabilitation and justice. However, they refuse to take token settlements and aids as they feel that their wound cannot be compensated by these petty offers made by the NGOs. The resistance as depicted in the novel is not an individual one but a collective one that is marked by presenting witnesses for unresolved issues and a refusal to have a closure. The resistance as framed by Sinha is not about victory but about their endurance; their resistance indicates their refusal to accept the industrial disaster to be forgotten, erased and have a closure.

4.3 The Adivasi Will not Dance: Environmental Destruction, Land and Mining Extractions

The Santhals, of the Chottanagpur plateau constitute one of the biggest Adivasi community. Belonging to have an area rich in minerals and forests, this Adivasi community also has a rich heritage of cultural identity. Their rich oral heritage is rooted in music, dance, storytelling and mythology. Their performances are deeply interlinked with seasonal festivities. They celebrate the festivals, agricultural cycles, religious traditions with their communal dances accompanied by *tundak* (drum), *banam* (bowed instrument). However, in postcolonial India, the mineral rich land and the dense forest become the site of extraction and industrial development. Shekhar Sowendra's story *Adivasi Will Not Dance* captures the tension, between the indigenous communities of the place, the modern industrialists, commodification of the indigenous body and heritage and ultimately the resistance to this fast paced post-colonial development.

The action takes place in an Adivasi village where their fertile land is acquired for setting up a coal based thermal power plant. Unlike Sinha's novel, Shekhar's story does not showcase any catastrophic event but the environmental destruction is marked by slow, legitimated transfer of agricultural and forest land of the Adivasis to a power company. The Santhal pargana's water tables and soil composition is badly compromised because of the mining, the community is left disintegrated and most of them displaced. The compensation offered to the Adivasis like in *Animal's People* is just an eye wash. The false hope of employment of the Adivasis in the power plant is never honoured, rather the displaced Adivasis are left uprooted trying to seek their connection with their land and culture in the new displaced space. Hence, many young men like Mangal's son leave the village to work as waged labour in the thermal plant. Besides this land and resources extraction, there is another layer of extraction and exploitation that Shekhar hints at. The Adivasi song and dance that is known for its cultural vibrancy, is used as a

trope to celebrate the indigenous culture of the dispossessed community. However, the anger, feelings of betrayal show up in the inaugural function of the new project.

4.4 Resistance in "The Adivasi Will Not Dance"

Resistance in "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" is staged quite unexpectedly by Mangal Murmu in the presence of the dignitaries at the plant's foundation programme. An old man known for his indigenous music shows, was always critical of the Dikus who controlled the resources of the state of Jharkhand and have a dominating influence on the planning of educational and administration of the state. While Mangal Murmu, who had been invested with the responsibility of preparing for a cultural show on their folk tradition for the inaugural programme of the power plant, he realizes he cannot put the show when his own community people are evicted from their land in eleven villages in Godda district, beaten and put behind the bars. When the programme anchor announces the dance by the Adivasis as the opening item, Mangal Murmur comes forward, holds the microphone to speak, asks himself: How can Adivasis dance on a stage that is celebrating the displacement of Adivasis? (— *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* (Shekhar, 155). Soon he stages his resistance by declaring vehemently that the Adivasis will not dance. By a nuanced portrayal of Mangal and his community people who refuse to dance, Handa demonstrates resistance in the form of withholding their dance performance, as Mangal continues saying,

We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We adivasi will not dance. (187)

The resistance is double layered as it is not only a resistance against the state sponsored eviction from their land but also against commodification of the Adivasi culture and body that will be soon exploited as waged labourer.

4.5 Convergences and Divergences in *Animal's People* and "The Adivasi Will Not Dance"

Both the texts under consideration share a common objective of protest and resistance against the intruding elements, Kampani in *Animal's People* and the power plant in "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" that act as anthropocentric agents. Both the texts also stage the extraction of resources in the form of either chemicals or mineral and land. *Animal's* refusal to narrate his sufferings and mangal's refusal to perform the community dance stage their resistance against the dominant power structures. Both the narratives are also concerned with the intergenerational transmission of the hazards of anthropocentric actions. *Animal's* twisted body carries the evidence of the effects of

the leak in generations after the disaster and Mangal's son's migration to city as waged labour indicates the aftereffect of dispossession and eviction for generations to come.

In spite of the many convergences, both the texts diverge in many different ways. *Animal's People* is built around the disaster of one fateful night when the gas leakage had occurred, whereas the plot in "The Adivasi Will Not Dance," is not developed around any one particular catastrophic event. However, both the texts display Nixon's slow violence and its aftereffects on the survivors and the generations to come. The exploitation, slow depletion of the land resources and the destruction of the eco system in both these texts lead to resistance in the forms never before thought by the capitalist sections of the society.

V. CONCLUSION

Sinha's *Animal's People* and Shekhar's "The Adivasi Will Not Dance," are narratives of exploitation and resistance, in spite of having a major difference in their authorship, one that emerges from the close observation of an empathetic person and the other by someone who had been a part of the community, reflect the anthropocentric nature of a developing country and the associated modes of resistance against anthropocentric commercialization and appropriation.

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